Cultural Literacy: An Outline of Total Research into Literary Culture

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Foreword

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Public opinion in Poland seems to be galvanized exclusively by three types of statistical data: political polling data, the number of arrested drunk drivers, and the results of nationwide readership surveys. It is possible that the demand for these sorts of figures is driven by our desire to view our country with incredulity and to confront how many of our fellow citizens fail to satisfy this or that cultural norm, which we ourselves consider highly significant.

Every two years, the National Library's Book and Readership Institute publishes the results of its readership surveys and journalists across the country try hard to outdo each other in lamenting their compatriots' lack of schooling, and the agony of culture as we know it. Curiously, similar jeremiads published on the other side of the Atlantic tend to identify and demonstrate the more practical aspects of this growing illiteracy. In the first decade of the 21st century, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), an American federal agency supporting and funding culture and art in the United States, published a series of three reports investigating the state of readership in the country, their titles spelling out a rather interesting narrative: *Reading at Risk* (2004), *To Read or Not to Read* (2007), and *Reading on the Rise* (2009).[1] The first report offers a diagnosis of the

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1   All quoted NEA reports can be accessed online at http://arts.gov/ publications, accessed June 15, 2015.

problem (i.e. a dramatic decline in readership numbers since the 1980s), the second explores the worsening of this problem (and rounded out the narrative with other readership and literacy studies), whereas the final report provides a much needed "catharsis": a small but perceptible growth in readership numbers observed for the first time in twenty-five years, giving the report its apt yet pompous subtitle *A New Chapter in American Literacy*.

The first report in the series emphasizes the devastating effects that poor literacy has for democracy, as those who cannot read are unable to consciously participate in the civic life of the nation and in the economy, specifically the publishing industry. The second installment (using a variety of contextual statistics, including the fact that illiteracy is prevalent in prison populations, whereas the majority of active voters are also readers),[2] attempts to outline the negative influence illiteracy has on the lives of individuals. In the preface to the report, the chairman of the NEA framed the issue in the following words:

> How does one summarize this disturbing story? As Americans, especially younger Americans, read less, they read less well. Because they read less well, they have lower levels of academic achievement. (The shameful fact that nearly one-third of American teenagers drop out of school is deeply connected to declining literacy and reading comprehension.) With lower levels of reading and writing ability, people do less well in the job market. Poor reading skills correlate heavily with lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement.[3]

How can a phenomenon like declining readership rates still exist in the early 21st century? The most frequent and simplest answer ("Blame the Internet!") is wrong, but more on that later. Our current state of affairs is a product of a tangled web of factors. In the National Library's 2010 report, Izabela Koryś identified a number of them, including "changes to our daily time budget" (increasingly blurred lines between work and leisure and a significant drop in the amount of free time at our

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2   Curiously, according to a 2014 report released by the National Library, readers are a minority among Polish voters, making up only 44-45% of the overall pool of voters. See Izabela Koryś, Dominika Michalak and Roman Chymkowski, *Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2014* [*The State of Readership in Poland in 2014*] (Warszawa: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2015), 50. The document is available online at http://bn.org.pl/download/document/1422018329.pdf, accessed June 15, 2015.

3   Dana Goia "Introduction," in *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2007), 5; the document is available online at http://arts.gov/publications/read-or-not-read-question-national-consequence-0, accessed June 15, 2015.

disposal),[4] competition for our attention from other media (particularly television),[5] and structural social problems, those strictly linked to the cultural capital of Poles: "In Poland, the social map of literacy and illiteracy basically overlaps with that of social exclusion."[6] The scholar also pointed out that in the early 1920s – a time when illiteracy was either significantly reduced or eliminated in some countries (including England, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden) – nearly a third of Poles were still illiterate; in other European countries (including Greece, Spain, and Portugal), however, the problem was at least as pressing as in Poland, or even worse.

Koryś also points out that these disproportionate figures are still visible in international readership rate surveys (see, among others, the results of a special 2013 Eurobarometer study, no. 399).[7] Readership and literacy surveys clearly demonstrate that family, rather than school, is still the primary provider of contact with literature – the so-called "reading socialization." Thus, one's upbringing determines lifelong interest in reading and whether one is capable of reaping its benefits.

These results point us in a very interesting direction: maybe readership rates and literacy were never all that high in the first place. Koryś seems to agree with the notion, a sentiment reflected in her conclusion: "It is difficult to ascertain whether Poles truly stopped reading books *en masse*, because it is not clear whether they actually were voracious readers at any point in the past."[8] In her analysis, Kathleen Fitzpatrick concludes that the popular fear of illiteracy is rooted in two misinformed premises – the utopian idealization of the past (which was supposedly characterized by mass readership) and a rather gloomy view on the present which sees "the novel

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4   Izabela Koryś "O (nie)czytelnikach – społeczna mapa czytelniczego zaangażowania," ["On (non)Readers—a Social Map of Reader Engagement"] in Izabela Koryś and Olga Dawidowicz-Chymkowska, *Społeczny zasięg książki w Polsce w 2010 roku* [*The Social Reach of Books in Poland in 2010*] (Warszawa: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2012), 96. If not otherwise specified all translations of referenced works are provided by the translator of the respective article.

5   Ibid., 15, 95.

6   Ibid., 136.

7   Curiously, Poles fared better in this study (56% declared to have read at least one book in the twelve months preceding the 2013 study) than in the one conducted by the National Library. The 2014 report states that "in 2014 41.7% of respondents declared to have read at least one book in the past year, that is 2.5% more than in 2003 and 2.3% less than in 2010." Koryś, Michalak and Chymkowski, *Stan czytelnictwa,* 6. Maybe when Europe is asking the questions, we try to stand as tall as possible. The full text of the *Special Eurobarometer 399. Cultural Access and Participation*, November 2013 report is available online at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_399_en.pdf, accessed June 15, 2015.

8   Koryś and Dawidowicz-Chymkowska, *Społeczny zasięg*, 139.

[…] being forced out of its culturally central position by newer, image-based media forms."[9] The scholar also emphasizes that complaining about the decline of literacy may actually blind us "to signs of literary culture's continued proliferation, including the increasing number of devices and platforms and services through which we read today."[10] "Reading," Fitzpatrick concludes, "has not declined in significance in contemporary Western culture, but it has increasingly moved online, where it has taken on an increasingly social, increasingly active form."[11] Although such optimism might be unwarranted (we will return to the notion that the two groups – readers and Internet users – mostly overlap in the later part of this essay), the assertion quoted above perfectly encapsulates our prior deliberations: apart from acknowledging the decline in readership rates, we should not forget that reading is still held in very high regard by many, although the contemporary face of literacy has been significantly reshaped by the Internet. In this essay, I would like to invert the perspective and instead focus on the group of people actually doing the reading or, more broadly, on the people involved with literacy. The concept of "reading class," coined by Griswold, McDonnell, and Wright, will be highly useful to us in these deliberations.[12]

If we take another look at the aforementioned studies conducted by the National Library and the NEA, three issues will manifest themselves: firstly, there is a group of heavy Internet users who are also voracious readers; secondly, that particular group often uses the Internet and consumes a high number of written texts;[13] thirdly, there is considerable correlation between being a member of this group and getting involved in other forms of civic life (e.g. Polish readers were more inclined

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9   Kathleen Fitzpatrick, "Reading (and Writing) Online, Rather Than on the Decline," in *From Literature to Cultural Literacy*, ed. Naomi Segal and Daniela Koleva (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 166-167.

10   Ibid., 168.

11   Ibid., 178.

12   Wendy Griswold, Terrence E. McDonnell and Nathan Wright, "The Reading Class," in Wendy Griswold, *Regionalism and the Reading Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

13   For example, the 2002 National Library report includes the following assertion: "Already among the respondents who declared to have read at least one book, the proportion of internet users (33%) was 11% higher than in the entire population (22%)." Sebastian Wierny "Co czytają Polacy, czyli uczestnictwo w kulturze druku w Polsce na progu XXI wieku" ["What Do Poles Read or Participation in Print Culture in the Early 21st Century"], in Grażyna Straus, Katarzyna Wolff and Sebastian Wierny, *Książka na początku wieku: społeczny zasięg książki w Polsce w 2002 roku* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2004). Ten years later, scholars are observing a cumulative effect of reading practices: "Statistically speaking, regular exercise of one of the practices (e.g. reading) facilitates taking up others (consuming long-form press articles online)." Koryś, Michalak and Chymkowski, *Stan czytelnictwa*, 4.

to support charity organizations and sign petitions. Curiously, reluctant readers figure significantly among political party members and volunteers.[14]) The group we are talking about constitutes the reading class as defined by Griswold – the term describes active readers who routinely consume long-form texts. Elsewhere,[15] Griswold and Wright termed the relationship between these reading behaviors and other activities (particularly Internet usage) as "more-more pattern": "The answer lies in the emergence – or, historically speaking, the re-emergence – of a reading class. An elite segment of the general population, one that is highly educated, affluent, metropolitan, and young, has produced both heavy readers and early adopters of the Internet."[16] A similar relationship can be observed in Poland, and this is clearly visible in the National Library study and Internet user surveys mentioned above.[17]

The reading class, therefore, comprises citizens that are well-educated and well-read, commanding considerable cultural capital which is to a large extent a product of their provenance and upbringing. As illiteracy grows among the general population, the reading class replicates and grows. The goal of this essay is to invert the perception of readership surveys: instead of trying to analyze the entire population, I suggest focusing on the reading class and the multitude of ways they participate in literary culture – many of those ways elude traditional, albeit more comprehensive literacy surveys.

Such a perspective on reading would portray it as a social practice and situate it within the everyday lives and biographies of readers themselves. In his essay about "the sociology of literature after the sociology of literature" – a sweeping attempt to organize and structure the field – James English demonstrates how this approach has been shaped through interaction with other concepts, particularly the history of the book itself, which in turn reveal that our reading habits are not the only way of consuming the written word nor are they sociological practices connected to literary value and canonical literature (here, English puts particular emphasis on Bordieu's *Distinction*). What's at issue here is shifting the approach to examining reading practices, a shift from focusing on literacy (and illiteracy) towards investigating reading

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14   Ibid., 40.

15   Wendy Griswold and Nathan Wright, "Wired and Well Read," in *Society Online: The Internet in Context*, ed. Philip N. Howard and Steve Jones (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004).

16   Griswold, McDonnell and Wright, "The Reading Class," 66.

17   See e.g. Jan M. Zając, Arkadiusz Kustra, Piotr S.M. Janczewski and Teresa Wierzbowska, *Motywacje, zachowania i poglądy autorów i czytelników blogów. Raport z badania polskiej blogosfery* [*Motivations, Behaviors, and Beliefs of Blog Authors and Readers. Report from a Study of the Polish Blogosphere*] (Warszawa: Agora SA, 2007), the document is available online at http://pliki.gemius.pl/Raporty/2008/2008_Gemius_Blox.pl_Badanie_blogosfery.pdf, accessed June 15, 2015.

as a social practice. To reinforce his point, English also brings up the work of Janice Radway, Elizabeth Long, and Wendy Griswold, among others.[18]

I have discussed this approach in *The Anthropology of Literary Reading – Methodological Issues*.[19] This essay supplements and builds upon that article, further exploring the notion of contemplating reading itself, akin to humanist sociology, which always has included cultural contexts and actor motivations in its reflections. In Poland, such a perspective is present in the works of Stanisław Siekierski and Roman Chymkowski.[20] The essay is also greatly indebted to Marek Krajewski's relational approach to cultural participation.

Paradoxically, the objective of these deliberations will be somewhat similar to the goal of classic readership surveys – if we establish what certain people do with texts, we may begin to think about the methods that would allow others to develop similar skills. The suggested approach may very well help us devise new indicators which could be later used in quantitative studies to determine the distribution of these variables in the general population.

The overriding question of the work before us is: How should we research all these issues?

1. The Problem with "Readership"

We have already somewhat explored the problems of readership. Therefore, now we can focus on issues with the term itself. In the words of Roman Chymkowski, the head of the National Library's Book and Readership Institute, literacy scholars "usually focus on statistical data analysis about readers across categories such as social status or level of literary engagement."[21]

Generally speaking, we may say that "reading" and "readership" apply to different aspects of the same phenomenon. A focus on detail and qualitative methods of collecting and analyzing materials correspond to "reading",

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18   James English, "Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After the Sociology of Literature," *New Literary History* 2 (41) (Spring 2010): x-xi. A good introduction to this particular research perspective can be found in Elizabeth Long's, "On the Social Nature of Reading," in *Book Clubs. Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

19   Maciej Maryl, "The Anthropology of Literary Reading – Methodological Issues," trans. Benjamin Koschalka, *Teksty Drugie* Special Issue 2 (2012): 181-201

20   See Stanisław Siekierski, *Czytania Polaków w XX wieku* [*The Readings of 20th Century Poles*] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa UW, 2000); Roman Chymkowski, *Autobiografie lekturowe studentów* [*The Reading Autobiographies of Students*] (Warszawa: Biblioteka Narodowa, 2011) and Roman Chymkowski, "W stronę antropologii praktyk lekturowych," ["Towards an Anthropology of Cultural Practices"] *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 2/3 (2011).

21   Chymkowski, *Autobiografie*, 14.

whereas a focus on the general picture and quantitative techniques correspond to "readership." We may even say that "reading" and "readership" are emblems of two separate movements emerging in the study of literature reception, parallel to the extant division of sociology into scientific and humanistic sociology.[22]

Describing the condition of literacy entails identifying readers and then establishing what demographic group they belong to. Thus, the population is split along the lines of participation in a given cultural practice (in this instance: the number of books read) and the degree of identification with the practice. Scholars working in the field have identified different types of cultural participation (e.g. the National Library assumes that there are three types of readers: *omnireaders*, *monoreaders*, and *non-readers*[23]). The goal of these studies is to identify the potential problem, which in turn would allow the experts to draft appropriate recommendations for policymakers and/or alert the public to those findings.[24]

Several objections have been raised over the years against traditional studies examining cultural participation, including readership surveys. In his review of both past and more recent research work in the field, Marcin Jewdokimow points out that voices critical of such studies often focus on value judgments made in them or the necessity of getting definitions and concepts to correspond to cultural change.[25] Marek Krajewski also brings attention to the fact that traditional studies of cultural participation are often asymmetrical in nature, presuming a hierarchical division between "those who create and those who consume."[26] Participation in culture, therefore, is understood as "doing something with cultural resources," resources external to the participant, who, in turn, is perceived as a consumer satisfying specific needs.[27] The aspect of power and conferring value judgments onto specific practices

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22   Ibid., 15.

23   See e.g. Koryś and Dawidowicz-Chymkowska, *Społeczny zasięg.*

24   The scholars are aware of the limitations of surveys based on respondents' declarations, and this is why they consider answers as an expression of their identification with reading culture. The fact that a "consistently decreasing number of people feel socially pressured to present themselves as readers" is also a very significant bit of information on the condition of literary culture. Ibid.

25   Marcin Jewdokimow, "Nowe koncepcje uczestnictwa w kulturze – od władzy symbolicznej do negocjacji i partycypacji," ["New Concepts of Cultural Participation – From Symbolic Power Towards Negotiation and Participation"] *Zoon Politikon* 3 (2012): 83.

26   Marek Krajewski, "W kierunku relacyjnej koncepcji uczestnictwa w kulturze," *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 1 (2013): 46.

27   Ibid., 42.

is equally important – in this model, culture is "perceived as [...] a relatively con-
solidated whole, controlled by the state and its institutions, tasked with regulating
the behavior of the citizenry."[28] Drawing inspiration from Foucault, Jewdokimow
puts it more bluntly:

> Studies in cultural participation have never analyzed existing cultural prac-
> tices; instead, they have always served as a political means of manufacturing
> them, subordinating them to the logic of population management, which,
> in turn, means that the research agenda has been subordinate to the objec-
> tives of the state's cultural policy (either explicit or not).[29]

Thus one can discern in statistics a tool for managing the population – ostensi-
bly objective indicators become a means of conferring value judgments on certain
cultural practices.[30]

As far as the incompatibility of old categories with new cultural phenomena is
concerned, the primary charge against it revolves around the fact that many new
forms of cultural participation elude outdated conceptualizations. Krajewski as-
serts that contemporary research into cultural participation does register the shift
in the value of indicators devised in other cultural contexts, but that it is afterwards
mistakenly interpreted as proof of the transformation of the process of participa-
tion itself:

> They capture the decrease in the number of books read by Poles, but they
> are unable to register the metamorphoses of reading practices spurred by
> the emergence of mobile phones, global computer networks, and e-books,
> or how the relationships between publishers, book vendors, and readers, as
> well as between readers and authors, have changed in the past decades.[31]

Therefore, in the case of traditional cultural participation studies, a portion of
cultural activities may fall "under the radar" of generic research questions. This is well
demonstrated by analyses authored by Balling and Kann-Christensen who reviewed
Danish studies of cultural participation conducted between 1964 and 2012. They
observed a gradual shift away from investigating how people spend their free time
(citizen-oriented view) towards asking about their participation in specific cultural

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28   Ibid., 44.

29   Jewdokimow, "Nowe koncepcje," 88.

30   Ibid., 86.

31   Krajewski, "W kierunku," 48.

events (customer-oriented view).[32] Framed in such a way, the studies begin to re-semble attendance lists for cultural events rather than examinations of genuine cultural participation (e.g. NEA studies count anyone who has managed to read even a single line of a poem during the past twelve months as a reader, which means that people who have read nothing beside a poem stuck to a bus window in order to promote poetry are counted as readers).[33]

The scholars quoted here seem to agree that in order to prevent research studies from turning into rote inspections of attendance (not) satisfying certain cultural norms, the perspectives, roles, and motivations of social actors should be taken into consideration. In the words of Balling and Kann-Christensen:

> Surveys should not just ask "what," "how much," but also "with whom," and "why." We should investigate not only whether people visit cultural institu-tions, play video games, and participate in social networks online, but also what they do during these visits/activities.[34]

In his analysis, Jewdokimow examines and identifies a common thread running through all the novel approaches to cultural participation: their intention is to "pre-serve an open or, more precisely, a partially closed definition [of cultural participation – author's note], and to have the definition of a cultured person open to negotiation."[35]

The perspectival shift suggested in this essay – a response to these above-men-tioned postulates – is inspired by the relational concept of culture as proposed by Marek Krajewski. Let's begin with a definition:

> The relational concept of culture offers a specific understanding of culture wherein culture is the effect of linking diverse elements into an aggregate and is simultaneously a factor determining the course of that particular process. I presume, therefore, that it is neither an object nor an aggregate of objects, but a property of the linkages comprising a specific aggregate, a specific configuration therein.[36]

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32   Gitte Balling and Nanna Kann-Christensen, "What Is a Non-User? An Analysis of Danish Sur-veys on Cultural Habits and Participation," *Cultural Trends* 2 (2013).

33   See Tom Bradshaw and Bonnie Nichols, *Reading At Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America. Research Division Report #46* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004), 2; the document is available online at http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/ReadingAtRisk.pdf, ac-cessed June 15, 2015.

34   Balling and Kann-Christensen, "What Is a Non-User," 75.

35   Jewdokimow, "Nowe koncepcje," 93.

36   Krajewski, "W kierunku," 37.

Such a definition implies shifting the perspective away from "what we usually consider to be the chief actors in the social life of a nation (the state, the institutions, the system of government) towards actors we heretofore have ignored: objects, products of popular culture, fashions, trends, online crazes, niche snobberies, and the actions of individuals."[37] In other words, this change in perspective means that rather than paying attention to how many cinema tickets someone bought or how many books they read, we are more interested in what pictures they took with their mobile phone and what they wrote on Facebook about a book they read. It is in the use of such media that cultural participation manifests itself.

A similar thread runs through another report entitled *Korzystanie z mediów a podziały społeczne. Kompetencje medialne Polaków w ujęciu relacyjnym* [*Media Use and Social Divisions: A Relational View of the Media Competences of Poles*]: contrary to the universalist approach employed by traditional cultural participation studies, a relational definition of media competence implies seeing it as an ability to "use the medium in support of something that the subject considers important or spends a lot of time on (i.e. is identified by the individual as an important part of their lives)."[38]

Such an approach presumes that there is no single pattern of media use (or, more broadly, of culture use) and these patterns are contingent upon – to invoke Alfred Schütz's phenomenological sociology – those spheres of life considered significant by the individual:

In line with our assumption, the skillful employment of media involves their successful use in an area that the surveyed person considers significant. Every person who identified a given area as significant for them was also asked whether the use of a given medium makes it easier or harder for them to enjoy that sphere of their life.[39]

What does that mean for research into readership? Well, it offers a different perspective on literary culture:

Reading books provokes the emergence of new social relationships based on book recommendations we receive, the purchase, borrowing, or

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37   Ibid., 38.

38   Mirosław Filiciak, Paweł Mazurek and Katarzyna Growiec, *Korzystanie z mediów a podziały społeczne. Kompetencje medialne Polaków w ujęciu relacyjnym* [*Media Usage and Social Divisions. A Relational View of the Media Skills of Poles*] (Warszawa: Centrum Cyfrowe, 2014), 5, the document is available online at http://ngoteka.pl/bitstream/handle/item/215/korzystanie%20z%20mediow%20a%20podzialy%20spoleczne.pdf, accessed June 15, 2015.

39   Ibid., 38.

downloading of books from websites, conversations about books, pondering about the lives of the authors and the lives of their characters, lending out one's own books, treating books as props in status games, or treating them as means of separating ourselves from others, etc.[40]

Adopting the relational concept of cultural participation in order to reflect on the act of reading itself will allow us, on the one hand, to look at our prior practices from a different perspective and, on the other, allow us to notice new, emerging practices and phenomena.

2. Cultural Literacy

Given all of the reservations outlined above, particularly the multitude of practices comprising literary culture which still elude readership surveys, I would like to suggest employing a different category of l i t e r a c y in order to describe the anthropology of reading outlined in this essay. Here, I am referring in particular to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of using the term literacy to describe writing skills.

As a starting point for introducing the concept of literacy, we shall use the studies conducted by the National Library which employed this notion. The authors of that report determined that merely coming into contact with a book hardly exhausted the subject of readership,[41] and decided to employ the literacy category to expand the field of examination: "We are not interested in investigating whether a person has reading and writing skills – competencies which we nowadays consider absolutely essential – as much as assessing the degree and scope of their actual use in contact with the foremost incarnations of the written word: books, newspapers, and magazines."[42] Although the report talks of "active participation in print culture,"[43] its actual understanding of literacy is quite narrow and covers reading books and newspapers. Devised by the Book and Readership Institute for the purposes of the study, the literacy index is based on the premise that the "complementary practices of reading books and readings newspapers [are] two distinct forms of participation in print culture."[44] The literacy index, therefore, seems to be drawing the limits of the reading class we discussed above.

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40   Krajewski, "W kierunku," 49.

41   Wierny, "Co czytają Polacy," 12.

42   Ibid., 11.

43   Ibid., 24.

44   Ibid., 15.

I would like to suggest a wider understanding of this concept, firstly by broadening it beyond print culture to cover digital, online, and handwritten practices (the latter somewhat less popular nowadays), and secondly by applying it to diverse (i.e. not necessarily written) products of culture. In this instance, the concept of cultural literacy, operationalized by Naomi Segal within the context of diagnosing contemporary cultural and literary studies, should be particularly helpful.[45] (The context of this proposition itself is interesting as an attempt to outline a path along which contemporary enquiries into literary criticism may develop). Segal defines cultural literacy as "an attitude to the social and cultural phenomena that shape and fill our existence – bodies of knowledge, fields of social action, individuals or groups, and of course cultural artefacts, including texts – which views them as being essentially r e a d a b l e."[46] The heart of the matter, therefore, is looking at social and cultural issues from a literary perspective, focusing on those artefacts and their qualities such as textuality, fictionality, rhetoricity, and historicity.[47]

Such an approach to literacy allows us to transcend beyond readership and embrace all practices involving the written word. This, in turn, stems from the belief that the research potential of the asymmetric modeling of participation in literary culture, which guided prior readership studies, has been exhausted. Focusing purely on the reception of a given work of art in the course of investigating cultural participation is artificial and tends to exclude a wide range of creative practices from consideration. The alternative approach is further justified by the emergence of new forms of expression. To quote Fortunati:

> Social networks, forums, blogs, listservs, chat rooms, discussion boards, instant messages and emails, to name but a few, have enabled forms of discourse that challenge the boundaries outlined by print culture between the private and the public, the author and the reader, the aesthetic and the instrumental.[48]

It would be cliché to assert that new media require us to develop new media skills. Thus, we are not talking here about literacy as a functional skill, but rather combining a range of cognitive, motivational, neuropsychological, and sociologi-

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45   Naomi Segal, "Introduction," in *From Literature to Cultural Literacy*, ed. Naomi Segal and Daniela Koleva (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). This essay is deeply indebted to diagnoses collected in that book, particularly in texts by Segal, Fitzpatrick, Fortunati, and Schreibman.

46   Segal, "Introduction," 3.

47   Ibid., 7.

48   Leopoldina Fortunati, "Electronic Textuality: Introduction," in *From Literature*, 143.

cal processes,[49] in so far as it is relevant to harnessing the skill to accomplish specific objectives or to participate in print culture. In other words, this particular skill is a foundation on which we can build cultural literacy, that is participation in a broadly defined literary culture. Additionally, from the perspective of social actors, contemporary net-based writing and reading practices often blend and permeate one another. To describe the feedback cycle between our online activities and the things we end up reading, Lori Emerson devised the concept of readingwriting.[50] It is a product of the "filter bubble" we live in – our collected search queries, reading materials, and online behaviors determine what we see on the screens of our computers, smartphones, in search engine results, and even what news we get served.[51] Technology wields an increasingly greater influence over what and how we read.

Let us recapitulate the most important characteristics of cultural literacy as a research subject (possibly to nail them to the front door of the Staszic Palace in Warsaw).

First of all, the field is focused on investigating activities practiced by people participating in culture, that is actual social actors. All conclusions are to be based on empirical data—we are not interested in speculation, introspection, or theoretical inquiries.

Second, literacy is, at its core, a social activity. Following Elizabeth Long, we reject the figure of a "solitary" reader and writer.[52] People write and read texts within a web of mutual relations, and these activities become the reasons and the pretexts for establishing and maintaining relationships (often serving as their catalyst).[53]

Third, our area of interest includes various writing practices and literary behaviors, regardless of their canonical or non-canonical (popular) status. Both writing and reading, as forms of cultural participation, are of equal interest to us.

Fourth, from the perspective of these social actors, there is continuity between offline and online practices which, nowadays, seem to coexist or even merge and complement each other. Therefore, we consider them interchangeable and do not

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49   See Patricia A. Alexander, "Reading Into the Future: Competence for the 21st Century," *Educational Psychologist* 4 (47) (2012).

50   Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces. From the Digital to the Bookbound* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 163-164.

51   See Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin, 2012).

52   See Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs. Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

53   See Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo "'And Then We Went to the Brewery.' Reading as a Social Activity in a Digital Era," *World Literature Today* 3-4 (88) (2014); the document is available online at http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2014/may-august/and-then-we-went-brewery-reading-social-activity-digital-era#.VWmRIM_5cgs, accessed May 30, 2015.

differentiate between the two. We are also interested in hybrid practices,[54] emerging at the intersection of the analog and digital world (e.g. online libraries lending actual printed books).

Fifth, we investigate purely "literary" writing practices – neither functional nor utilitarian. We are, therefore, dealing with broadly defined literacy transcending traditionally defined literary texts, including both digital literature and blogs, specific genres of journalism, as well as other forms of acquiring knowledge about the world and the experiences of others. We look with equal interest at all cultural products that somehow reference the literary tradition (broadly defined, from novels to non-fiction) and contribute to it. We are not interested in the user manual for a washing machine, but a blog reviewing washing machines is right up our alley. Given the convergence of genres and discourses, it is difficult to draw distinct lines and even more difficult to justify them. Neither is it possible, for reasons outlined earlier in this essay, to embrace the category of leisure time as a space in which to perform writing practices. Essentially, only additional research and the creation of a dynamic catalog of literacy would allow us to outline a framework – dynamic and evolving – for literacy as postulated here.[55] Leaving a definition somewhat open is not without its advantages.

Sixth, the research applies only to people participating in literary culture, that is all those who Griswold considers the reading class. We are not interested in people who remain outside literary culture. In this sense, the approach runs close to the perspective of the Polish school of literary communication, the difference being that – in line with the first and second postulates outlined above – we are interested solely in empirical entities, while our definition of literary culture is more than the circulation of high culture and the opinions of so-called experts.

Seventh, we examine cultural literacy in reference to literary behaviors and practices based primarily on linguistic record in the context of other cultural texts such as movies, television series, video games, exhibitions, garbage, or steak and chips. We are not postulating that literacy research should become the new media studies. On the other hand, however, we need to embrace a broader definition of text itself, one that would take intersemioticity, transmediality, and the convergence

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54 I borrow the term from Anouk Lang "Introduction: Transforming Reading," in *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anouk Lang (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 4.

55 The difficulty in capturing the "non-functional" or "autotelic" forms of cultural participation are well illustrated by Pierre Bordieu in his conversation with Roger Chartier: "I said earlier that there is no need to read, but I might say now, perhaps playfully, that this need in its most basic form—before it constituted socially—shows up in train stations. Reading arises spontaneously when a person has time with nothing to do or is stranded somewhere all alone." Todd W. Reeser and Steven D. Spalding, "Reading Literature/Culture: A Translation of «Reading as a Cultural Practice»," *Style* 4 (36) (2002), 668.

of media (e.g. a film featuring the statement of a blogger posted on YouTube can be analyzed as a remediation of an essay or a manifest) into account. From this perspective, the objective of the studies will be to diagnose why these particular behaviors are preferred by the users over other (e.g. multimedia) forms of cultural participation.

Eighth, I postulate commencing upon a project of total research – more on this soon. As the Internet still remains primarily a text-based medium, analysis of literacy may very well be one of the more interesting forms of exploring cultural participation – investigating Text as defined by Barthes, that is as an infinite network of connections and relationships from which a visualization of the culture of the written word emerges.

3. Research Areas

A brave new world is on its way, but contrary to what optimists believe, it still has a long way to go before it gets here. Maybe it never will and will forever remain *en route*, that is it will never fully come to pass, forever sentenced to taking shape before our eyes – we are in a transitional period during which we can examine how the processes of remediation affect our understanding of literature.[56] Let us try to identify the most important areas of research into cultural literacy. All of these issues have already been explored in the relevant literature – I am bringing them up solely in the form of broad research questions which will help us draw up individual areas of investigation.[57] These are:

   a. Reading online and offline: What are we reading and why are we reading these particular texts (books, blogs, articles, electronic literature, etc.)? Why do we read in the first place? What is the point and motivation of such an activity? What do people do with these texts? How are they of use to them? How do they assign value to them? Do they return to them for repeated readings? Where do they store them? How do they share them? etc.

   b. Forms and functions of literary behaviors: How do old and new forms of literary work function nowadays (e.g. traditional genres, as well as blogs, fan fiction, creative writing, letter-writing both online and offline)? What motivates writers? What strategies do they employ? What is the role of the sender in the communication process inscribed into a given genre? What does the interaction with the audience look like? How are literary groups constituted nowadays? etc.

   c. The infrastructure of literacy: What objects and instruments do we use to read and write nowadays? How do the media we use (both hardware and soft-

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56   See Jay D. Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print (*New York: Routledge, 2001) and Lang "Introduction."

57   See e.g. Anna Kowalska, *Nowy Odbiorca* (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2014), 166-184, 194-205.

ware varieties) affect the comprehension of text? What is the impact of increased mobility and synchronization? What texts exists today only because of them? How do algorithms – using the multitude of traces we leave behind as we browse the Web – affect the selection of our reading materials and our opinions? What does the distribution and the price of text look like nowadays? What are the ethical implications of using illicitly distributed reading material? etc.

d. Network of relationships: How did the relationships between all the members of the literary scene (senders, recipients, institutions) change? How is literacy used as pretext for the establishment of new relationships? How do opinion networks drive our reading choices and the distribution of our own opinions? What do processes of collective reading look like, both online and offline? etc.

The economy of literacy: How is the contemporary literacy market developing? Who are the contemporary writers in the broadest sense (i.e. people who write for a living)? Who makes money off writing? To what degree does the economy affect all of the above-mentioned elements? etc.

4. The Project for a Total Literacy Study

Shifting theoretical conceptualization in order to capture newly emergent phenomena produces the need for new methodologies. This is all the more important given the fact that new phenomena always produce new data that we can harness to better flesh out the complexity of these processes and gain ever more insight into the behaviors of individuals. The point of the matter, therefore, is to facilitate a wide-reaching integration of as many diverse research projects as possible and then triangulate the methods at the largest scale possible – put another way, to launch an all-encompassing, comprehensive study.[58]

It is still a preliminary postulate, one that requires work and development. It may be somewhat utopian, but it is not beyond the realm of possibility; it draws on the methodology of prior studies and on capabilities offered by data generated by electronic-based culture. Similar projects, conducted under the "mixed methods" umbrella, have already been launched to investigate a vast amount of phenomena, including the Beyond the Book project, dedicated to mass literary events[59] – data

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58 Here, I am expanding on the postulate of integrated research put forward in Fay Sudweeks and Simeon J. Simoff, "Complementary Explorative Data Analysis. The Reconciliation of Quantitative and Qualitative Principles," in *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*, ed. Steve Jones (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999).

59 See Danielle Fuller, "Reading as Social Practice: The Beyond the Book Research Project," *Popular Narrative Media* 1.2 (2008) and Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, "Mixing It Up: Using Mixed Methods Research to Investigate Contemporary Cultures of Reading," in *From Codex to Hypertext.*

sourced from surveys allow scholars to determine which types of readers appear at certain events (and which types do not); establishing their motivations is accomplished through observing the audience, interviewing attendees and the organizers, and analyzing available event materials.

The project for a total, that is all-encompassing, study presumes expanding the scale of diagnoses by integrating a range of diverse anthropologically-oriented research projects, which would allow us to shape the investigation of literacy in a way that would reveal much more about our practices than any survey-based readership study.

Postulating the need for an all-encompassing research project is to suggest taking a step forward and attempting to integrate data streams flowing from various levels and systems – "soft" and "hard," quantitative and qualitative. Naturally, I am not proposing the development of a consistent methodological system, but rather a shift toward the anti-hierarchical (anarchic?) coexistence of different methods and techniques which, in turn, would reveal different areas of a very broad phenomenon.

We should, therefore, start with actual readers as it is their behaviors we are interested in. We can identify them using various data, existing records of their creative efforts and completed books. Research materials can be divided into several groups: creative efforts, reactions to others' work, writing and reading communities, literacy discourse, existing data, and created data.

First off, we have texts, which are the products of diverse "literary behaviors," regardless of whether they appear as niche publications or receive prestigious literary awards (as mentioned before: that is not necessarily important from the perspective of social actors themselves). Therefore, we have to take into account all nonfunctional texts, such as literary work (i.e. the products of traditional literary efforts), blogs, fan fiction, memes, as well as functional forms, which can be used as a basis for literary output, such as e-mail, IMs (instant messaging), social network platforms and so on. We should attempt to devise a definition of such creative output and catalog them, in order to subsequently analyze corresponding types of reading.

The second group comprises typical "proofs of reception," that is records of the reactions elicited in readers by literary works.[60] This group includes both traditional forms of expression (e.g. reviews, letters, recordings), as well as the more modern ones (e.g. blog commentary, social network posts, ratings, Internet comments). One particular form of such proofs would comprise attempts at reconstructing discus-

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60 The term "proofs of consumption" and a preliminary categorization have been suggested by Michał Głowiński in "Świadectwa i style odbioru," ["Proofs and Styles of Reception"] *Teksty* 3 (21) (1975). That particular subject, with regard to online sources, was explored by Andrzej Skrendo, "Nieprofesjonalne świadectwa lektury," ["Non-Proffesional Proofs of Reading"] in *Obraz literatury w komunikacji społecznej po roku '89* [*The Image of Literature in Social Communication Post-1989*], ed. Andrzej Werner and Tomasz Żukowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2013).

sions about texts rolling through different media – print newspapers, online news portals, social media networks; integrating the messages from all of these sources will allow us to analyze reception processes in a more comprehensive manner than before. Obtaining private communications – e.g. e-mail chains, IM logs – would also offer invaluable insights.

Reading and writing communities – both online and offline – are another source of research material that offers precious insights into the role of reading in the every-day lives of people participating in reading culture. Reading communities – such as book clubs – are excellent sources of material to study group processes and collec-tive negotiation of meaning.[61] Research should also cover writing communities – e.g. poetry and fan fiction portals – which often serve as a platform for the distribution and discussion of content.

The next group covers something I have broadly termed literacy discourse, that is statements and events testifying to the cultural role and status of literary texts in a given community. These include newspaper columns and op-eds about (non-) reading, as well as different events and initiatives promoting book reading (such as *I am Not Sleeping with People Who Don't Read*, *The Book Is Female*, and *Library Night*). In this case, research material should also include institutional forms of reader-ship promotion, such as materials on the operations of cultural institutions or the observation of participants in libraries, trade shows, and poetry readings. Our area of interest also covers the writers' own framing of their work and the readers' fram-ing of their motivations, as communicated through a variety of meta-literary mes-sages, for example blogs, forums, and social network posts. We should also strive to cover the book industry's marketing efforts (e.g. the values that they invoke or refer to).

Existing data, by that I mean data sets available in electronic form as well as the surfeit of metadata that can be acquired from the Internet, is another important group. An all-encompassing research project should strive for maximally integrating existing data resources, especially statistical data sets drafted by publishers, librar-ies, blogging platforms, bookstores and repositories. Examining data about book lending and sales across Poland against the backdrop of assessing online readership would allow us to base our study of reading on something more solid than mere declarations themselves. Additionally, we may try to obtain so-called "organic data," or metadata created by most of our electronic and online activities, which are stored

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61   See especially Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance. Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Long, *Book Clubs*. A broader discussion of the subject can be found in my essay, Maciej Maryl, "Czytanie romansu online. Kolektywny odbiór literatury w Internecie." ["Reading Romance Online: The Collective Consumption of Online Literature"] in *Tropy literatury i kultury popularnej* [*Literary and Popular Culture Tropes*], ed. Sławomir Buryła, Lidia Gąsowska and Danuta Ossowska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2014).

by a vast number of state or business entities and our devices.[62] Pertinent data also includes data created "unintentionally" (e.g. metadata on the number of posts or commenters on blogs, dates of publication, tweets on literary awards, browsing histories, etc.), as well as data created in the course of processing already existing text resources (e.g. linguistic analysis of a given text or discussion). One particularly interesting example of such data usage is the analysis of passages highlighted by users of Amazon's e-book reading platforms.[63] In this case, access is the biggest hindrance – much (most?) of this data is proprietary, belonging to commercial entities and obtaining it would require consent and collaboration from the owner.

The last group is created data, that is data collected by researchers in the course of interacting with people participating in literary culture. It is, therefore, mostly data sourced from surveys, individual and group interviews, as well as reader experiments conducted in the laboratory and in the home (e.g. in the form of book reading journal entries). Research efforts allow us to fill the gaps in the existing source data described in the preceding groups.

The aforementioned list and the examples above definitely do not exhaust all the possible research areas and tools, but they also indicate that there is great potential for further research. I have undoubtedly failed to mention a number of potential data sources here, including those that have not emerged from the wilderness of data yet.

The project of an all-encompassing literary study offers the opportunity to find a common denominator for different, scattered, and contributory inquiries taking place in many of the areas we outlined above (some of which are collected in this volume). It is a suggestion that has to be fleshed out and operationalized within a specific research project. Therefore, I am opening the subject up for discussion and inviting everyone interested to collaborate.

So, let us go back to the question posed in the beginning of this essay – Why do we read? Well, there it is.

Translation: Jan Szelągiewicz

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62 I borrow the term from the papers released after a 2014 research symposium: Mary Lou Rife, Damaris King, Samuel Thomas and Rose Li, *Measuring Cultural Engagement: A Quest for New Terms, Tools, and Techniques: Summary of a Joint Research Symposium Held at the Gallup Headquarters in Washington, DC, June 2-3, 2014* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts and the Arts & Humanities Research Council, 2014); the document is available online at http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/measuring-cultural-engagement.pdf, accessed June 15, 2015. One of the chief conclusions of the seminar was the suggestion to make the most possible use of organic data in order to measure cultural participation.

63 Tully Barnett, "Social Reading: The Kindle's Social Highlighting Function and Emerging Reading Practices," *Australian Humanities Review* 56 (2014).