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Contents

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Teaching Reading in Instalments: An Experiment

This is a report on an experiment in teaching reading in instalments which we conducted jointly at the Universities of Freiburg and Gießen. During the winter term 2010-11 we taught a class called "Serial Reading/Serial Watching: From Dickens to Quality TV." This class had three major goals. First, we wanted to trace developments in serial narration from the Victorian novel to the television series of the twenty-first century. Second, we were interested in how the interpretation of a novel or TV series is affected by the mode of reception. Do serial reading and serial watching generate interpretations that differ from those that we arrive at when we read a novel as we usually do today or watch a whole season of a TV series during one weekend? Finally, we wanted to simulate how communities of readers and watchers communicate about serial narratives during the breaks, how they react to what has happened and speculate about what might happen next.

Experiments in serial reading have, of course, been conducted and documented before. David Barndollar and Susan Schorn describe two attempts at recreating nineteenth-century audiences and their serial reading habits in their essay "Revisiting the Serial Format of Dickens's Novels", and Joel Brattin reports on teaching Dickens's novels in instalments to his college students in MLA's recent handbook on *Approaches to Teaching Dickens'* Bleak House (2008). Since 2008, the blog *Serial Readers* has become a forum for a small but dedicated community of aficionados who read Victorian novels serially and discuss their observations and expectations online. Over the past three years, the "serial readers" have worked through numerous novels, usually at the rate of one monthly instalment per week. In planning our class, in which we wanted to stress the parallels between our students' habits of serial watching with serial reading habits of nineteenth-century audiences, we could draw on the studies mentioned and also on the "serial readers'" reports on their experiences.

In the first part of this report, we describe our class-design or what one may call the "experimental set-up" for this joint class. We offer rationales for our set-up and reflect on what this set-up achieved and also on what it could not achieve and how it could be improved. In the second part of this report we move from these didactic questions of how to teach serial narrative effectively to a more theoretical reflection of observations about how serial reading and watching affected our reactions to the stories that unfolded in front of us. Drawing on our own as well as on our students' reactions we wish to argue that closure becomes less important when texts of all kinds are consumed in instalments, at least in the subplots.

1.   Course Design: "Serial Reading/Serial Watching: From Dickens to Quality TV"

Due to time constraints in a standard university classroom setting, the main challenge for any class that tries to re-create serial reading or serial watching as a communal activity is the selection of texts, in particular if the goal is to read more than one text and TV series and compare the experiences of reading/watching serially and reading/watching in "one sitting" or rather, in individually spaced and fewer "sittings". Ideally, we would have liked to read one Dickens novel in instalments with our students from week to week, following the model of the *Serial Readers* blog, in order to recreate, as closely as possible, the nineteenth-century experience. However, since we did not want to dedicate the whole term to Dickens but wanted to trace his legacy to its most prominent contemporary form, the TV series, and trace habits of consumption from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, reading a complete Dickens novel during the term was impossible. The average Dickens novel is too long and there are too many instalments; even shorter novels such as *Great Expectations* appeared in about twenty instalments while our average semester goes on for about fourteen or fifteen weekly sessions.

We therefore devised a different scheme: our students would read Dickens in their own time and spacing during the summer break. During the first part of the winter term they would then, together with us, read a non-Victorian, shorter novel which appeared serially in monthly instalments. During the second part of the semester, we would watch one half of one season of a TV series at the rate of one episode a week, and the other half in one single sitting. As we could thus devote only six or seven weeks to watching the first half of a TV series' season, we were limited to choosing a TV series produced in the half-year production cycle, featuring twelve to fourteen episodes, such as *The Sopranos*, and not TV series produced in the full cycle, featuring around 22 episodes, such as *The West Wing*, or even 24, as in *24*. Another aspect became important for the selection of the TV series: while in common conversation, we are subsuming all sorts of serial shows under the label of the TV "series", there is a decisive difference between the form of the "series" and the "serial" which constitute polar opposites on a dynamic continuum of current TV productions. Episodes in the *serial* feature one central incident, story or "case" which is closed at the end of the episode, as in most hospital TV serials, for example; *series* feature a central story arc that extends over the whole season; only partial closure, or closure of subplots, is achieved at the end of the episode, if closure is achieved at all (cf. Allrath et al. 2005, 5-6). The Dickensian serial novel, in this sense, is clearly a series. Hence, in order to compare nineteenth-century serial reading experiences with twenty-first-century serial watching experiences and to be able to reflect on the form of reception's impact on understanding narrative, it made sense to select a production which follows the conventions of the series rather than the serial.

Within this framework of limitations, we eventually selected the following texts for our class: Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), Stephen King's *The Green Mile*, which was originally published in six monthly instalments in 1996, in a conscious and openly reflected effort to re-create the Dickensian publishing format, and the first season of the Fox series *Damages* (2007). We chose the texts because, first of all, they

share a thematic focus: they are concerned with literal and metaphorical imprisonment, class conflict, and – at least *Little Dorrit* and *Damages* – with financial fraud. Second, we selected them, because we assumed – correctly, as it turned out – that our students did not know them already. *Little Dorrit* would be unknown to them for quite obvious reasons; in the case of Stephen King, the 1996 novel is less well-known among German audiences than Frank Darabont's 1999 film version; and *Damages* had only been shown very late at night on a private channel in Germany.

In preparation of the class, both we and our students read *Little Dorrit* over the summer. Our students timed this as they chose, but the two of us tried to re-create a serial reading experience. We read one instalment each week and then wrote each other emails about our reactions and expectations. Our work as a group began in October 2010 with a weekend meeting in Freiburg during which we discussed the novel. We devoted ample time to situating *Little Dorrit* in its Victorian context and to exploring the serial form of the novel, discussing the economic context of this form of publication, the structure of instalments, cliffhangers and closure, and contrasting the way the students had read the novel with how it had been received by its first readers. Asking our students to read an 800-page novel for this first weekend seminar made it impossible to also assign secondary readings. Instead, we ourselves prepared interactive talks in which we treated our students to a crash course on the Victorian age, Victorian literature and Dickens' specific role, as well as to a crash course on the Victorian serial and literary market place that also featured images of the original chapbook and newspaper-instalment editions as well as the original illustrations of Dickens' novels, and of *Little Dorrit* in particular. Since this information could then immediately be applied to one specific text which everyone had read in full, this format proved extremely effective.

During the next six weeks, we tried to become original readers. Both the Gießen group and the Freiburg group read the six instalments of Stephen King's *The Green Mile* at the rate of one instalment per week, and discussed the novel during their weekly class meetings not only in purely analytical fashion, but also speculated about what might happen next. Moreover, the two groups discussed the issues raised in class and anything else related to the novel in an online forum that we had set up specifically for this purpose. With this forum we wanted to do justice to the way in which Dickens's readers communicated by letter with far-away friends about their readings, and that today people frequently go online to discuss their favourite books and TV shows. Hence, the forum was supposed to stress serial reading as a collective experience within a broader community of fans.

After Christmas, and after finishing Stephen King's *The Green Mile*, we continued with this format of weekly instalments, yet within the medium of television. For five weeks the Gießen and Freiburg groups watched one or two episodes of *Damages* together during class meetings and discussed them immediately afterwards. During this time, discussions online continued as well. Finally, the class ended in February with another joint meeting of the two groups, this time in Gießen. During this second weekend we watched the second half of the first season of *Damages* together on one very long Friday night. During the weekend then, we discussed various thematic and formal

aspects of the show, constantly relating them back to King and Dickens and the history of the serial form. In parallel fashion to our first weekend meeting, we ourselves prepared longer crash courses on the history and institutional structures of American television, the rise of "quality TV", common production cycles, economic conditions as well as on the formal elements and characteristics of the contemporary quality TV series. Again, this newly acquired information could be fed directly into hand-on close readings of scenes and the discussion of the series overall.

As an experiment in teaching, our set-up, we can conclude, worked rather well, and the final evaluation by the students confirms this impression. First of all, our class indeed proved an excellent way to help students relate to Charles Dickens. Through linking up their own habits of watching TV series with serial reading practices, they learned to understand patterns of literary consumption and the interest that Dickens's novels held for his audience. On the one hand, even if they continued to dislike *Little Dorrit*, as many confessed, they admitted that in comparison with King's novel and the TV series, they now understood how the novel must have worked for contemporary readers. On the other hand, at least some of them came to appreciate Dickens as somebody who handles the serial form much better than Stephen King. *The Green Mile* contains a number of rather obvious goofs between instalments, and its structure can be considered somewhat deficient as King comes up with the frame narrative for his story only in the second instalment. Moreover, for reasons that we cannot explore in detail here, the novel's narrative perspective and professed ideology are at odds. The students, as their term papers demonstrated, also learned a lot about the techniques and contexts of serial narration and its historical transformations. Most importantly, maybe, we could heighten their awareness for the fact that the way we read novels today is not natural and not the only one imaginable, and that what we consider today the great classics of literature were originally as much entangled in and determined by economic considerations as today's TV series are.

What did not work to our satisfaction, however, was the discussion on the online forum where we tried to simulate a community of readers and viewers. Our students shared this impression, as became clear from the final evaluation where some of them commented on the function of the forum. As one student put it: "The discussions on the forum did not work as well as I expected." We had asked one team of students in Gießen and one team of students in Freiburg to summarize the week's discussion in class and post it on the forum, others were then – and at all times – invited to comment, elaborate and discuss other aspects they thought might be important. We would then take some of the questions posted during the week to class and feed them back into the discussion. And there was indeed a discussion going on there, yet students posted – when they did – rather carefully developed longer comments. What we – and apparently also some of our students – had hoped for was that people would take a look at the forum on a daily, if not hourly, basis, and just spontaneously post what would come to their minds – and thus interact with each other on the matter of books and TV series as they perhaps would in their "normal" lives as readers and watchers.

Barndollar and Schorn ascribe the failure of an online reading group of *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1998 to the fact that a community of readers did not exist because the readers

had never met in reality. But our students had met, and the Gießen and Freiburg groups continued to meet once a week. And the success of the *Serial Readers* blog shows that the lack of enthusiasm for exchanging views on the forum cannot be attributed to "the medium of discussions", as Barndollar and Schorn also suggest (Barndollar/Schorn 2002, 163). The actual problem with our forum becomes apparent in a student's comment: "[It was] difficult to find new ideas that had not been mentioned in the weekly seminars already [...]. You didn't want to say something 'stupid'." Our major fault, it seems, was that we did not strictly distinguish between the academic dimension of our discussions and the simulation of being a "normal" audience. We probably should have banned speculations about future developments and more emotional reactions to the novel and series from the weekly meetings as far as possible. And even more importantly, we should have created a strictly non-academic platform where students and teachers could have met as "fans" to discuss what was going on in the novel and TV series and where it was going. Our forum, by contrast, was part of the University of Gießen's online campus. It was thus part of an institutional set-up that our students associated with academic work and with being graded – which was of course completely justified since they were obliged to upload the session reports already mentioned, as well as pieces of secondary literature they found interesting, and this, of course, was part of what counted towards their grade.

Our lesson learnt in this regard is: keep the academic and the experimental strictly apart. In order to stimulate online discussion among fans, a university platform is less than ideal. Instead, one should use "social network" sites that have more of a leisure feeling to them. In addition, it is a bad idea to oblige students to use the platform; one should rather wait and see what happens. The broader theoretical point behind these observations is that reading in instalments, as Linda Hughes and Michael Lund have pointed out with regard to the Victorian novel, potentially becomes a collaborative interpretative endeavour only when serial stories are "intertwined with readers' own sense of lived experience" (Hughes/Lund 1991, 8) and when there is hardly a "transition between literature and life" (11-12). In using a university blog instead of a platform within a social network, we had placed hurdles between students' lives – which usually include being logged on to Facebook most of the day – and their engagement with literature. While we intended to integrate their discussions of literature into "what they do anyway", just as nineteenth-century readers would write letters "anyway", we had in fact removed literature from their everyday online lives. It might be interesting to note here that even our current undergraduates whom we might consider especially internet-savvy visit only a couple of websites regularly. Choosing a site that most of them habitually go to every day would thus help make visiting the forum part of their daily non-academic routines.

2.   Reading/Watching for Closure?

Over the course of our experiment, the most interesting observation about the impact that serial reading/watching had on our understanding and enjoyment of the novel/TV series was the following. We ourselves finished the last double instalment of *Little Dorrit* about four weeks before our joint seminar in Freiburg where we discussed it

with our groups. During our preparations for the class, it turned out that one of us, Birte Christ, had entirely forgotten that Mr Merdle is the main villain of the story and continued to describe him as a nice, shy and gentle man – as opposed to his showy wife. She could reconstruct that he commits suicide later in the novel, but assumed it was out of a general melancholia rather than due to the imminent loss of all his wealth and due to his enormous guilt. We would not have paid attention to Birte's bad memory if we had not observed a similar dynamic in our students. After watching the whole of the first season of *Damages* – and the last six episodes were watched in one sitting – many students continued to talk about Ray Fiske, an attorney and rival of the main character Patty Hewes, as the villain of the story. This is indeed a characterization of Fiske which the series suggests for the first half of the season. But, as it turns out in one of the last episodes, Fiske must in fact be understood as one of the most likeable characters in the story, or at least as the only one who is honest and who does not follow ulterior or economic motives – but simply makes stupid mistakes because he is desperately and secretly in love with a young man named Greg. Apparently, these slow revelations about Fiske and the dramatic scene of his suicide which occur in one of the last episodes had not lodged itself into our students' memory as permanently as the earlier characterization of Ray Fiske in episodes 1-7 did – episodes which we watched over a period of six weeks.

Birte and both our groups did not engage with facts they had learned about characters toward the end of serial narratives, but they were deeply engaged with the characters as they had encountered them throughout the narrative and over a long period of time as they learned about the character in weekly instalments. This different engagement with characters in serial reading corresponds with Joel Brattin's observation that students reading serially often develop a feeling for characters and an appreciation of their complexity which they usually do not if characters are discussed after reading the novel's conclusion (cf. Brattin 2008, 188). Further, and considering cognition rather than emotional engagement, remembering pieces of information about characters that have been received first better and more permanently than later ones may also be explained by the so-called "primacy effect", discussed with regard to narrative, for example, by Meir Sternberg (Sternberg 1978, 90ff.), or by the "Zeigarnik-effect" according to which interrupted tasks (and, by extension, story elements) are remembered better than finished tasks.

However, we wish to argue that such lapses of memory about final instalments or episodes that were, in addition, watched in one sitting rather than spaced out over several weeks, also tell us something about the role of closure in reading or watching serially. The principles of "resistance to closure" and "deferred gratification" have repeatedly been described as the main structural characteristics of serial narration. Recent studies such as Jennifer Hayward's (1997) and Robyn Warhol's (2003), which both focus on nineteenth-century serial fiction and contemporary TV series, link these structural characteristics to the ways in which serial forms enable audience engagement. What we would like to suggest is that the way in which we and our students engaged with the texts and how our memories lapsed with regard to particular plotlines and characters adds another dimension to the notion of "resistance to closure": the practice of

reading or watching in instalments over an extended period of time engenders a "resistance to closure" not only in the process of production, but also in the process of reception. In serial reading and serial watching, closure itself potentially becomes less important for the reader's or watcher's sense of gratification; the engagement with characters and riddles that surround them becomes more central than getting to a point of certainty about characters or their fates. With regard to the subplots around Mr Merdle in *Little Dorrit* and Ray Fiske in *Damages*, what is remembered and engaged with is what we as readers and viewers have come to know about them over the extended period of reception, and not what we learn about them briefly at the end of the narrative. In short: process is important, not outcome.

One may argue that this applies to subplots and minor characters only, because even if serial reading and watching makes readers emphasize process instead of outcome, the main incentive for reading and watching month after month and week after week is the promise of closure of the main plot lines. After all, "resistance to closure" usually works hand in hand with the audience's desire to reach that very closure – it is the constant deferral of closure which drives us to continue reading or watching. And, in fact, we and our students eagerly wanted to know if and how Arthur and Little Dorrit would get together and who is responsible for the murders central to the first season of *Damages*. And yet, we would like to suggest that at least with regard to contemporary TV series, even closure of the main plotlines may, in recent years, have become less important for the reception process than we usually think. The characters and plot constellations in recent American TV series have become so complex and multi-layered that many series can hardly achieve satisfying senses of closure anymore. Some series, like HBO's *The Sopranos*, openly acknowledge this and simply end when one of the many plotlines has been resolved. As a way of acknowledgement that closure cannot be reached, the last episode of the last season of *The Sopranos* famously ends with a black screen that stays for a couple of seconds and on which viewers can project their own ideas about how the story might continue. Other series, like ABC's *Lost*, still struggle for closure but fail to deliver it. The solutions proposed in *Lost*'s fifth and final season cannot satisfyingly resolve the mysteries set up during the preceding seasons. In such cases, focusing on process and its pleasures rather than on outcome might emerge as a reception strategy that saves viewers from disappointment. And as our experiments showed, this viewing strategy is more easily adopted when the series is watched week by week and episode by episode than when a complete season or large parts of it are watched on DVD during long and rainy weekends.

While it must remain open to further discussion and studies whether twenty-first century watchers, with a heightened ability to focus on process and the pleasure of story rather than on closure, are becoming – in certain ways – more Victorian than Victorian readers, our experiment certainly demonstrated one thing to us and to our students: experientially, it does indeed make a difference whether one reads or watches in instalments or not – and this has consequences for our readerly, but also for our scholarly, interpretations of Victorian novels or contemporary TV series.

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