

# The *Erlebnis* of New Reading

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**Palavras-Chave:** leitura online, *Erlebnis*, médium, tecnologia, experiência estética

*“Every reader, if he has a strong mind, reads himself into the book, and amalgamates his thoughts with those of the author.”*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



<sup>1</sup>Literature is an element of culture that throughout times has changed and adapted itself to the different technological media in a slow though profound way. Each medium that has sheltered literature (voice, papyrus, heavy paperbacks, pocket or electronic books) has changed not only the way we read but also, and essentially, our own relationship with knowledge and the world.

In a time when reading habits have been deeply transformed, we want to discuss how the use of new technologies translates aesthetic innovations into the every day most sensitive reading experience. In this paper, there is no intention to argue about any nostalgic forecast of a possible disappearance of the “old” book, as we have known it for centuries, but to enhance characteristics of this new liaison between technological means and literature under Walter Benjamin’s concept of *Erlebnis*.

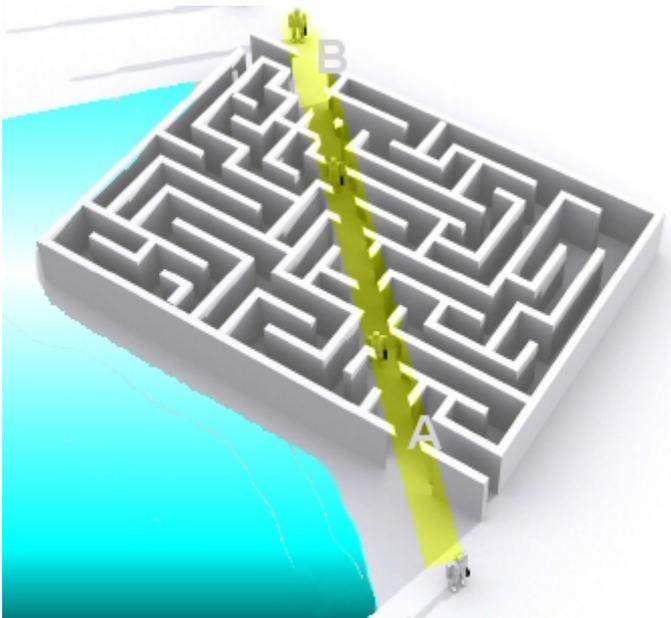
The approach is to the electronic and digital media not as sources of innovation themselves, yet as mediators of new perceptions of the world. This new practice of reading stirs the equation of old issues linked to literacy theory and criticism under the redefinitions of the writing and reading concepts. Reading in a computer presents complexities of an experience lived through a communication mechanism, therefore demanding the articulation of old and new types of principles that enable practice. On the other hand, this media

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<sup>1</sup> Este texto é uma versão da comunicação apresentada na Conferência *Re-Mediating Literature* – Universidade de Utrecht, 4-6 Julho de 2007.

literacy continuously strengthens reading volatility and allows a coexistence of different languages that so far we have not fully understood.

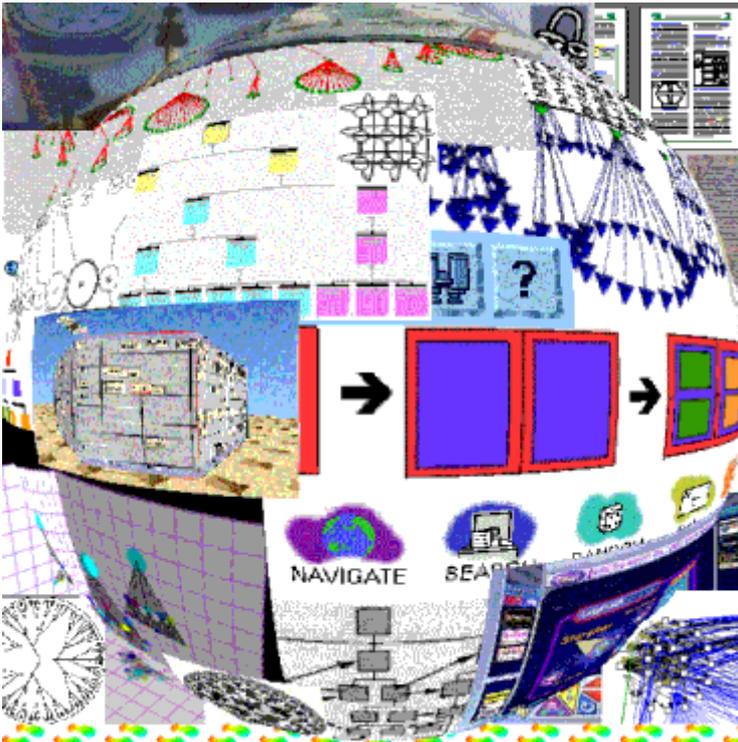
The innovation and variability of online reading, together with the denial of limits, challenge the reader to disclose rhizomes or nodes whilst tracing personal paths to walk on (read). The rejection of material (and immaterial) boundaries with the change from print to virtual, and the elimination of the printed page sequence, invite the reader to a simulated experience of his own mind, where (from stimuli answer) narratives, readings and individualized knowledge networks are developed. Without a proper or single body (the text on paper), online literature gravitates through various media devices in an interactive exercise, which oblige access (with mouse clicks on hyperlinks) in a proposal of rapid continuous selection to the reader's way.



Actually, it is the interactive potential that constitutes one of the most alluring and remarkable innovations of online reading. On the one hand, there is the promise, or maybe the illusion, of reaching farther and ever mounting knowledge; on the other hand, when we are reading on a screen we are constantly making choices, for there is always much more on it than we have access to, since it is impossible to access it all: *“Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed.”* (ibidem)

It is then necessary to be aware that in the present, rather than in former times, and particularly because of the strong coexistence of various types of possibilities, storytelling is never finished, plots are always incomplete, endings are always and controversially open. The reader has become simultaneously audience and actor, consumer and producer, dictating the result both of reception (reading) and of production (writing/creation). The wider the preparation, the wealthier and more fulfilled will the scope of the reading experience be. The result then can only but be an original form of sensitive integration through which the reader has to deal with multiple sensations at once, whilst making use of his intellectual ability and memory background, giving way to a simultaneously cognitive and perceptual practice.

Yet, this reading dimension is ultimately a desirable or utopian one not easy to reach given its constant transformations and novelties. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Walter Benjamin says: "*Historically, the various modes of communication have competed with one another. The replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation, reflects the increasing atrophy of experience*"(1992:155). When we are talking about the essence of what it is to be in front of a portable computer interpreting that semiotic universe that develops on the screen, we can make use of Benjamin's words again and state that "*This is the nature of something lived through (Erlenis) to which [the reader online] has [to give] the weight of an experience (Erfahrung)*" (1992:190). The reader is expected to participate in a performance, not as a patient lonely receptor gazing astonishingly over the message, but as a creative actor, who is simultaneously the producer and the artist who fills in empty spaces, finds answers and formulates new questions. Words online (, which are nothing but inked shapes!) create the need of a reader who adopts new idiosyncrasies to understand this complex experience. It is based on a dynamic attitude that reading online can be defined as a high experience of the senses where the past Genette's *architexts* or the actual multiple literacy skills are put together at work in a context of assorted relations of mutation, adaptation, aggregation, or hybridisation.



Moreover, the dialogue resulting from printing, writing, sound and media, usually called “hypertext”, drives the reader to an exercise of appropriation of the digital media. When facing the screen, the reader is beyond the printed book, further away the common level of reading, in a constant transaction between technology and man, trying to establish negotiations that imply past and present social practices embedded in the same experience (Chartier, 2002). To know how to read books and images but, at the same time, understand sounds and movements, feelings and subtleties - all in one - makes it all very demanding, to say the least. We are not talking about merely new literacies, but about different literacies interrupting each other in the same space and time, and which are simultaneously necessary to understanding and decoding (or encoding) the message. The hypertext becomes itself the medium, as John Slatin already defended back in the 90’s (Slatin, 1995:167), since authors and system designers are required to discover new ways of establishing links, representing and constructing knowledge and achieving the necessary coherence.

Olga Pombo, in a very interesting project called “Enciclopédia e Hipertexto” argues that due to all these circumstances *“the writer of hypertext becomes a space maker, the editor corresponds to the typographer, the reader is supposed to have space and cognitive spatiality understanding, cartographic orientation*

*and navigation skills, thus, the text becomes, more and more, an object to read and to see” (Pombo, 2006:15).*

We should not disregard the way all reading practices across history have developed according to man’s participation in the world evolution and the consequences from these changes. In his essay “The Work Of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Benjamin states that: “*During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence” (Benjamin, 1992:216).* Thus, the new role of the reader both as an interpreter and as a moody conscious or unconscious user mirrors the non-linear course that can easily be overplayed and denied by the present state of affairs. We are talking about a phenomenon of presence-with, reciprocity, adjustment, where meaning is only possible through intense speculation, proximity, intertextuality, all determining the intimate meeting between the reader and the reading object that grounds this more *aesthetic*<sup>2</sup> than aesthetic experience.

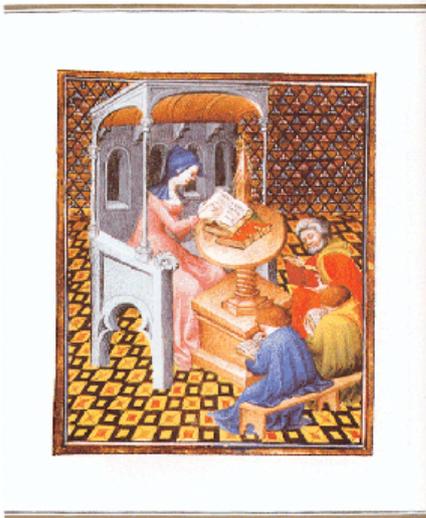
The complexity that this relationship accomplishes may be illustrated by the prosperous discussion on interactivity, focusing the issue on its various perspectives: from its process and features to perception (Steuer, 1992; Jensen, 1998; McMillan, 2000; 2002). The debate has been so fruitful that Lev Manovich goes further stating that “*As with the digital I avoid using the word interactive (...) without qualifying it, for the same reason – I find the concept to be too broad to be truly useful (Manovich, 2001:55).*

However, although different dimensions of interactivity may be pointed out, we should stand out the hermeneutic one when considering virtual environments. The reader is responsible for understanding the world as it is assembled by technology, and knowledge results of a hybrid association lived via different and mutant data. Interaction with hypertexts compels readers to make continuous efforts to understand what is happening. On this challenging reader engagement depends all information acquired; and thus the consequent and craving need, not for developing new literacy skills but for conceptualizing a combination of all of them in a transliterary approach.

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<sup>2</sup> *Aesthetic*: referring to perception, interpretation, and appreciation.

This approach does not focus on a fixed type of text, but on a type of text performed in fluid and wide-ranging platforms, which permanently insist on seizing reactions of either adaptation or refusal. These different responses to new media are not in themselves original, for since Plato that writing, press, or text processors have always been technologies into which readers have moulded or from which they have deviated.



However, despite the continuous historic transformations, when we witness the present relation between readers and digital environments, there is another completely different text experience worth mentioning: one of high sensitive nature that boosts its faculties with new media, which, for the first time, are part of textual fruition.

The importance of media participation in reading raises interesting issues as the one that views the medium as a prosthesis of our own body, or as Maria Augusta Babo defines: “*extensions that favour and empower the performance of man*”(Babo, 2004:29). Hence, the limit of the human body is amplified by devices, which are not merely “*substitutions of amputated body parts*” but apparatus that enhance life experiences. Technological devices as human prostheses are visible in different media by monitors, keyboards, mice as substitutes of the traditional paper, books and pencils, for example. How technology has increased human efficiency through simulation, virtual creation or the materialization of imagination abilities (Baudrillard, 1991) is what makes reading so different today.



The technological means selected by the reader online, work as mechanisms, which may be there to facilitate our daily routine and to register and transmit past history. The possibility of recording events allows human experience to be eternal, i.e. beyond the inexorable death of the body or of our capacity to remember things. Through the availability of an “*external archive or memory*” (Babo, 2004:32), knowledge will only come back to life throughout human decision and consequent handling of devices. The organization of reading online resembles the organization of our own memory: working discontinuously and being *associative by nature* (Slatin).

What is happening today is that by taking advantage of new technologies we are able to blend various art options in the same reading experience. All process is both technical and aesthetic and thus possible to be named through multiple compound expressions such as: *mediated/remediated* reading, *metamorphosed* reading, *penetrated* reading, *interrupted* reading or *technical* reading; or even all missing terms identifying the presence of technical devices working both as mediators of reading practices and in charge of reproducing those same practices.

Just as Walter Benjamin predicted many years ago, the first consequence of this state of affairs is the crisis in the aura of work of art. In the case of the art of reading, this crisis allows it to receive a plural and multifaceted dimension characterized by fruition - opposite to the auratic environment of that elitist activity of some centuries ago. In “The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction”, Benjamin defends that the mechanical reproduction has created a fundamental change in the nature of art, which has lost its “aura” by separating it from the ritual and traditional context where it has always been placed: “*And if changes in the “medium” of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura, it is possible to show its social causes. (...) To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose “sense of the universal equality of things” has increased to*

*such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction” (Benjamin, 1992:216,217).*

This revolution in the status of art has become relevant to the new ways of exercising the art of reading today. Walter Benjamin, back in the 30s, had already forecast the present communication idiosyncrasies, by trying to understand the connections among historical, political, aesthetic and technological forces. Wondering about the consequences for art experience and for art itself when its reproduction becomes so easily available, the author argues that the age of mechanical reproduction has changed forever the political functions, social relations and the value built around art, but also our own art experience.

Having no knowledge about the promises and possibilities offered by digital media back in his time, Benjamin has managed to raise the main questions of our times: copyright and publishing issues. The capacity of reproduction in photography, radio or cinema where his studies developed, could be widen to the possibilities of electronic and digital reproduction nowadays. Each reproduction, each writing representation has modified the experience of the original for readers but also for authors in a revolutionary personal usage and manipulation of the work of art that the so-called “empowerment” has made possible.



When faced with circumstances of absence of authority and blurred frontiers of action, the reader online has to deal with a problem of scale where there are not three, fifteen or twenty characters in a novel but availability of an infinite number of participants: *“And before a child of our time finds his way clear to opening a book, his eyes have been exposed to such a blizzard of changing, colourful, conflicting letters that the chances of his penetrating the archaic stillness of the book are slight. Locust swarms of print, which already eclipse the sun of what is*

*taken for intellect for city dwellers, will grow thicker with each succeeding year.*<sup>3</sup> (Benjamin, 1987:28)

The challenge lays in understanding these “*locust swarms of print*” that so stubbornly “pop up” in our daily pc routine. The new technologies get hold of readers through vital parts of their bodies (sense and intellectual organs). If, on the one hand printed books demand concentration, a careful and focused incursion in the print signs in order to grasp narrative meanings, together with a polite relationship with their guests, solitude and silence; on the other hand reading on various simultaneous and crossed semiotic environments demands dispersion and distraction. Reading online gathers documents of different interfaces (video, graphic, text) that circulate diluted through links in an unprecedented way. This places informality and instability in the present reading act in opposition to the past one (Steiner, 2001).

At this point, we should also stand out that, contrary to the print book, this question of mediation through technology is not a novelty to other forms of art as music, video or cinema. Their technical devices have always been intrinsic parts of video and musical fruition in audio, recording and reproduction activities. If the devices that mediate music and video have become so ordinary that it is meaningless to think about them as distinct elements (for they constitute a whole and do not survive without the other); reading, however, has lived through different apparatuses and through both harsh censure and delighted appraisal.

Despite all criticism and suspicion towards online routines, the Internet has offered reading the highest surge since Gutenberg, as data from latest statistics about Portuguese activities developed on the internet show.

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<sup>3</sup> *E, antes que um contemporâneo chegue a abrir um livro, caiu sobre os seus olhos um tão intenso turbilhão de letras cambiantes, coloridas, conflituantes, que as chances da sua penetração na arcaica quietude do livro se tornaram mínimas. Nuvens de gafanhotos de escritura, que hoje já obscurecem o céu do pretense espírito para os habitantes das grandes cidades, se tornarão mais densas a cada ano seguinte* (Benjamin, 1987:28).

**Table II.31 Activities developed on the Internet**  
2003-2006, (%) Individuals between 16 and 74 who have used the Internet in the first three months of the year

	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Communication</b>				
Send/receive e-mails	78	81	81	81
Phoning via Internet/videoconference	10	11	10	16
Creation of <i>blogs</i>	x	x	7	10
Other communication activities	40	37	37	39
<b>Information research and use of online services</b>				
Goods and services Information research	82	79	81	84
Play/download games, images, music	43	45	44	46
Reading/download of online papers/magazines	49	50	51	45
Pesquisa de informação sobre saúde	25	19	31	39
Use of services related to travel and accommodation	27	31	33	35
Listen to radio/watch TV	23	27	28	30
Research of information translated in offline shopping	x	x	25	29
Software download	27	28	28	26
Search for job/job application	x	11	12	14
<b>Buying and selling of goods and services, bank services</b>				
Internet banking	24	26	26	27
Buying and selling of goods and services	12	10	12	12
Selling of goods and services	2	2	2	2
<b>Links to public services and institutions</b>				
Withdraw information from Civil Service institutional sites	38	35	37	39
Civil Service portals with integrated administrative services	x	19	30	35
Official application forms download	21	26	26	30
Online filling in/sending of official application forms	20	26	28	32
Sending of suggestions/complaints/requests to public institutions	x	6	8	9
Participation in online public surveys	x	4	5	5
Participation in public affairs discussion forums	x	5	5	4
<b>Education/training</b>				
Formal training activities	23	20	19	18
After-formal education activities	4	4	4	3
Courses related to job opportunities	4	4	2	2

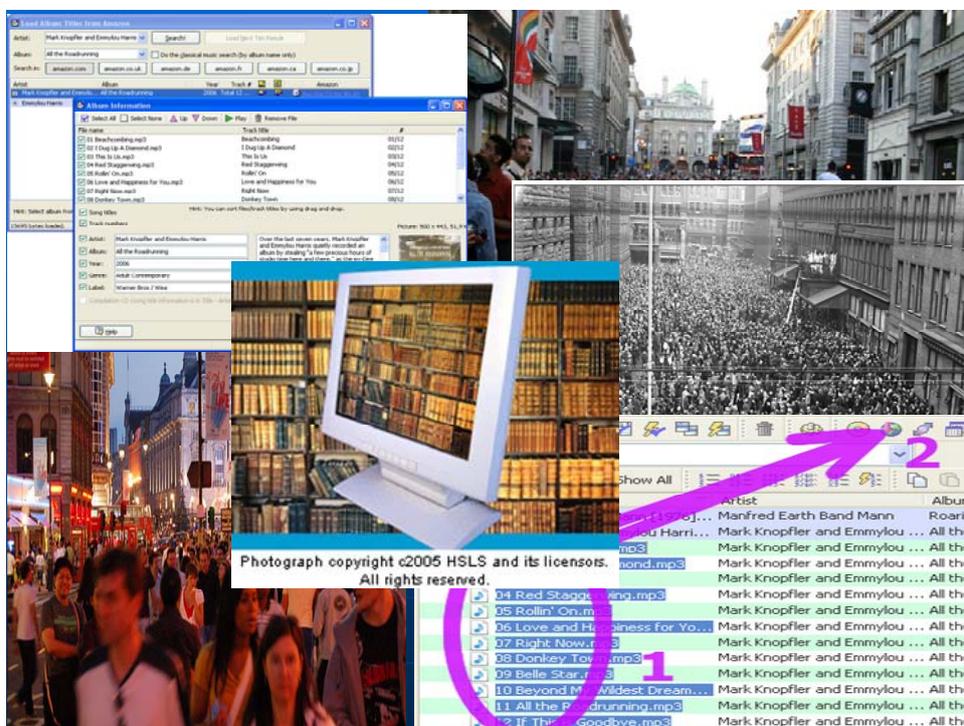
Source: INE(Instituto Nacional de Estatística)/UMC(Agência para a Sociedade do Conhecimento), Survey about the Use of Information and Communication Technologies by Families 2003 - 2006.

The ever-changing process that literature online has been going through created a kind of shifting literacy that nowadays does not establish any type of borders because it shelters several different languages, areas of knowledge and of life, all co-existing in the same space. The screen becomes the face of an intense experience where all senses are invited to participate in an immensity of shocks and stimuli testing and triggering our conscience and memory. And again Benjamin: *“The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (Erfahrung), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one’s life (Erlebnis)”* (Benjamin, 1992:159).

Consciousness proficiency as “screen against stimuli” is what dictates the result of our reading exercise. The more differentiated the hypertext, the more demanding the job of dealing with swelling “impressions” that sometimes are worth a moment and nothing more than that. Hence, despite the impetuous and intuitive type of reading that online literature may suppose, there is always the possibility of a much sharper and insightful reading that employs, impressions

undoubtedly, but, serious usage of prior knowledge of the digital environment as well. Above all, a past memory at hand that deals with the intricate stimuli shock dispute. Thus, we assume that depending on the reader preparation level and consciousness towards this original textual arena, will the cybernetic reading be outlined as an experience of life or a mere moment to live through: *“Without reflection there would be nothing but the sudden start, usually the sensation of fright which, according to Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defence”*. (ibidem: 159)

Reading online can be an activity of gathering fragments together, without a defined objective but with a personal and not, very often, transmissible path. A new concept of experience is created among differences, interruptions, unexpected relations available through choices made in details of, not a new language, but a new way of expressing that same language. Reading online may be made of feverish moments like those lived by Alan Poe’s maniac “man of the crowd”; or may be an experience of life, in all similar to a stroll in the centre of a capital city like Paris or London, all alone in the middle of the crowd, without local friends, maps or GPSs, without a traced destiny, merely with the desire to know, discover new places and create lifetime experiences.



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