

Reading in Slow Motion

“Here is a place of disaffection,” the speaker of *Burnt Norton* declares at the opening of the pivotal third section of Eliot’s meditation on time, itself written in what can be understood retrospectively as a pivotal time both for the author, who was moving from writing poetry to writing essays and plays, and for Europe, which will come to look back on 1935 as falling in the period *l’entre deux guerres*. And this is the very problem that preoccupies the poem’s speaker: How to stay in the moment? How arrest the urges, anxieties, hopes, and fears that draw one back into the past and that propel one forward into the future? In the first section of *Burnt Norton*, the speaker has glimpsed something lasting in the garden and glimpses it again in section two, in the slow sweep of the stars across the night sky. But how hold on to this unchanging now? How to resist the call to find meaning in times past and times yet to come and to rest, instead, in the ceaseless unfolding of the present? How stay with the words themselves? The speaker struggles to remain in the present but, caught in the dim light between daylight and darkness, sees only the faces of those “distracted from distraction by distraction....”

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In his much referenced opinion piece, [“Is Google Making Us Stupid?”](#) Nicholas Carr ruminates on the effect the Internet has had on his habits as a reader and a writer. Acknowledging how ready access to information and online resources has increased his productivity, Carr nevertheless has this nagging concern that something vital has been lost now that his time is filled by clicking the links suggested by the companies that run the online search engines: “The last thing these companies want is to encourage leisurely reading or slow, concentrated thought. It’s in their economic interest to drive us to distraction.” Carr has gone on to grab national attention with his book-length version of this argument, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (Norton, 2010). The subtitle here is more subtle than the blunt question posed in the *Atlantic* article, but Carr’s thesis remains the same: as useful as the Internet is, it is fundamentally altering how we perceive the world:

If the slow progression of words across printed pages dampened our craving to be inundated by mental stimulation, the Net indulges it. It returns us to our native state of bottom-up distractedness, while presenting us with far more distractions than our ancestors ever had to contend with (118).

Squaring off in the other corner is Clay Shirky, whose *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in the Connected Age* (Penguin, 2010) showed up in bookstores just three days after *The Shallows*. Shirky sees the same Internet that Carr sees but defines the challenge differently: for Shirky, the beauty of the Internet rests in its potential to allow its users to work together on projects that were beyond imagining just a decade ago. He notes that *Wikipedia* was built using roughly one percent of the time Americans spend *annually* watching TV. If Americans could pull themselves away from their televisions, their playstations, their on-demand home theaters, the cognitive surplus that would be unleashed could result in a dramatic improvement in the quality of life for everyone.

The choice we face is this: out of the mass of our shared cognitive surplus, we can create an Invisible University—many Invisible Colleges doing the hard work of creating many kinds of public and civic value—or

we can settle for Invisible High School, where we get lolcats but no open source software, fan fiction but no improvement in medical research (180).

The Internet: good or bad? On your mark. Get set. Go.

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I think arguments about the virtue of the Internet are like arguments about the virtue of gravity. Gravity: for or against? The passage of time: for or against? Careful readers of Carr's and Shirky's work will quickly see that pouring these two thoughtful writers into the binary of techno-pessimist and techno-optimist does a disservice to both. We are not doomed to wade in *The Shallows*; we are not destined to wander in the Elysian Fields of the Invisible University. What happens next is up to us.

Barring a cataclysm of extraordinary proportions, the Internet is here to stay. Unlike gravity or the passage of time, however, the Internet has no predetermined vector; the Internet is a tool humans have created and like all our other tools it is pure potential. Indeed, the Internet is most like the greatest tool humans have ever created—writing, for it, too, has virtually limitless potential and has the same capacity to respond to the inventiveness of its users.

So understood, the challenge for educators is straightforward: how does one get students to use the Internet as a tool for thinking new thoughts? That the Internet caters to, welcomes, invites, encourages, requires distraction—the strength of the verb one prefers matters not—is a point I'm happy to stipulate. I'll stipulate as well that reading a book and reading on the Internet are different activities and that the books are less actively distracting than the Internet is.

What follows from such stipulations?

Not much, I'd say. For teachers interested in literacy, the challenges remain what they have always been: how to cultivate curiosity; how to foster attentiveness; how to encourage inventiveness; how to lay the foundation for the mind to have a life beyond the gated community of the classroom.

What has changed, however, is the role the teacher plays in this process. When I entered college thirty years ago, the learning conditions were roughly continuous with the conditions that governed my teachers' educational experiences when *they* entered college: information was scarce; it was warehoused in libraries and, through arduous study, it was transferred to the minds of students under the watchful gaze of the teacher, who was master of a given content area. In my Shakespeare seminar, for example, everyone in class bought the same edition of the collected works, which we all carried to class three times a week for our fifty-minute discussions. To help with the reading experience, I would go to the Reserve Desk at the library and check out the audio version of whatever play we were working on that week, get a set of headphones, put the first record in the set on the turntable, and follow along.

For the final, Dr. Nordstrom required a research paper with a minimum of five sources. I chose to look into the history of how *Iago* had been interpreted and spent hours every weekend in the stacks pulling books off the shelves, trying to get a sense of the range of possibilities. During Dr. Nordstrom's office hours, I'd update him on my progress and he'd make suggestions about other critics I should consider. And then I collected all my

notes together and spent days at the typewriter getting the footnotes to fit on the right pages, the argument to hold together, and the bibliography tidied up. Then Dr. Nordstrom read, commented on, and graded what I'd written and that was that.

This past spring, my older daughter, who is in the eleventh grade, was assigned the dual task of interpreting the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* and performing the "Alas, poor Yorick" speech. That night, up in her room, she went out to sparknotes.com ("When your books and teachers don't make sense, we do"), grabbed a summary of the entire play, and then went to YouTube and searched for versions of the monologue. There she watched "Alas, poor Yorick" performed by Richard Burton; Kenneth Branagh; Kevin Kline; Laurence Olivier; The Metal Shakespeare Company, a "power metal band that performs the works of the Bard;" and even an animated "postmodern revisioning of the Gravedigger scene" posted by andydragonfisher6900. From information scarcity to information overload.

What does this shift mean for teaching? When students have at their fingertips more information than their teachers can ever have considered, the need is no longer for someone to provide access to content but rather for someone to assist with managing all that inbound data. "Inbound data" is, admittedly, an off-putting way of describing an encounter with Hamlet, variously incarnated, skull in hand. But I use the phrase advisedly. Hamlet's questions for Yorick,

Where be your gibes now? your
gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment,
that were wont to set the table on a roar?,

approach the young modern reader in a context that is likely to include one or more of the following: the buzz signaling the arrival of a text message; the ding of the ongoing chat session; status updates from one's friends on Facebook; emails announcing the latest hilarious YouTube video is just a click away; notification that it's your turn in virtual Scrabble; your on-demand queue with Netflix out there, just waiting.

Getting information used to require movement, effort; now, it takes a constant act of will to keep all the inbound information at bay long enough to think anything at all. Regardless of whether their elders are plugged into all these virtual conduits to other worlds, the students are. And so, reading is, inalterably, a different experience for them than it was for those of us who had to walk to the library during operating hours to access the OED to find out the meaning of "gibes" and "gambols."

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There is no single appropriate response to this fundamental change in the experience of literacy. As I've come to better understand the full significance of this change over the past few years, I've been approaching the challenge of developing a pedagogical practice responsive to these changed times in two complementary ways: I co-teach highly mediated, immersive courses in composing idea-driven visual essays about the

most pressing problems of our time;¹ and, I regularly teach a course I call “Reading in Slow Motion,” where students spend an entire semester reading one book-length work of nonfiction. I have taught “Reading in Slow Motion” to entering students, to returning students, to final-semester seniors. I’ve yet to teach a student who had extensive experience reading with care or who thought of reading itself as an intimate experiencing of another’s thoughts. Reading as downloading, main-point gleaning, bullet-point grabbing, gist getting, plot summarizing: yes; reading as an unrestricted zone for anything-goes interpretation: yes; reading as the act of identification and gratification: yes. But reading as the creation of a mental space for deliberation, speculation, reflection, meditation: no.

Can you learn to read without rereading? Can you learn how to think without experiencing thought? “Reading in Slow Motion” is convened with the specific goal of making time for students to have the embodied *experience* of learning. Content is everywhere; information is ubiquitous; the ability to focus, to follow a long argument, to know in depth are all on the table. If we lose this educational opportunity, then we could well end up in the “The Shallows,” where the top Google hit is the unquestioned truth, Wikipedia is the only source, and understanding and insight have been entirely replaced by factoids, viral tweets, and the twenty-four-minute news cycle. While all these negative outcomes may seem inevitable, it is certainly possible that, if we capitalize on this opportunity, we could end up gaining access to at least some of the cognitive surplus that previous generations squandered watching *Hogan’s Heroes*.

The only thing that is certain is that the Internet doesn’t care about the outcome.

The hammer doesn’t either.

As always, the tools have their ears covered.

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The Five Rules of Reading in Slow Motion

- One book, fifteen to twenty pages a week;
- No reading ahead;
- Meet once a week;
- No technology in class;

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What book? For the course to work, I choose a work I don’t know well, one with a project that interests me but that I don’t endorse in advance. I am meant to be reading along with the students, according to the same rules, asking questions myself about where the argument is or might be going. I am not modeling what it is to know, but rather how it is that one comes to know.

Why no reading ahead? The project is to read in slow motion, to attend to thought

¹ Examples from courses of this kind, which I co-teach with Dr. Paul Hammond, Director of Digital Initiatives in the Plangere Writing Center, may be found on our YouTube portals: [newhumanities](#) and [Plangere Culture Lab](#). Our most recent work may be accessed on our Vimeo portal: [text2cloud](#).

unfolding in time, to develop a sensitivity to nuance, to cultivate curiosity. All these goals are compromised by the performance of knowingness--mine or some eager student's. The point is not to know ahead of everyone else but to experience the drama of an idea coming together.

So, I say to the students, no matter how excited you've become about Susan Sontag's theory of representation, Thomas Paine's discussion of monarchy, Elaine Scarry's exploration of the relationship between aesthetics and justice, you're only to read x number of pages next week. And to understand the new pages, you are invited to *reread* the pages we've discussed this week and the pages from the weeks before that.

"Excited by Sontag's theory of representation" or any other example I offer seems an impossibility at the beginning of the course. What would it mean to be excited by an idea? What do readers who have been lit up by an idea do that distinguishes them from readers who are skimming, grinding it out, baffled, bored, preparing for a test, writing a paper?

A corollary to this rule is that the pace never quickens. There isn't a point where I say, well now you've got the gist of Sontag, Paine, or Scarry or whomever I teach next time, so read the next fifty pages, the next one hundred. Slow reading isn't a prolegomena to skimming, nor is it reading with training wheels; it's a practice that we practice for the whole semester.

Why only one meeting? The division of learning time into chunks of whatever length is an arbitrary affair. In the death march of time that was my high school education, it was every subject, five days a week. In college, most of my courses were four days a week for fifty minutes. When I started as a teaching assistant, it was three days a week for fifty minutes. At Rutgers, it's two eighty-minute classes. You can try to teach on Friday if you want, but most students elect to go to school Monday through Thursday, for obvious reasons. The utter incoherence of the elective curriculum, the bus system, a faceless student body, and a general indifference to timeliness: everything colludes to create meetings where everyone is half in the room, if they're there at all.

Serious learning requires sustained encounters with unknowing, ambiguity, frustration, boredom. One three hour meeting, once a week, provides the time and space for such encounters. It gives us time to have silence stretch out after a difficult question; allows for reading a challenging passage together and then reading it again; makes room for all the essential ingredients for bringing ideas to life—spontaneity, digression, immersion.

Why no technology in class? Having said that the Internet is like gravity, isn't this requirement the equivalent of saying sessions will be held in deep space—a place infinitely distant from the lived realities that govern the students' reading? No technology in class does not mean the students can't use technology. In fact, with the entirely manageable weekly reading assignments (ten to fifteen pages, recall), there is ample time outside of class for the students to take advantage of the Internet's tremendous research power. When something is referenced in the reading that is unfamiliar, all the reader has to do is turn to the computer, type whatever it is that's stalled the reading process—Plato's cave, Wittgenstein, the King James version of Judges—and see what happens. Getting started is that easy.

But in class, the search engine is a world away. It's an artificial constraint, surely, but

one that isn't so different, at least initially, from the self-imposed constraint students apply while reading for class: read once, come to class, see what happens. Don't know what Plato's cave is? Maybe the teacher will explain it. If not, must not've been that important anyway.

There's a world of information out there just waiting to enrich, thicken, and complicate what is being read—inert information waiting to be set in motion by curiosity. And once the students get a hang of what reading in slow motion entails, they start to seek that information out, post their findings to our shared research site, come to class ready to talk about places where they got stuck, not because of an unfamiliar reference, but because of the turn the argument took. But without the Internet there to provide that ready access to information in class, what remains in the classroom is the encounter of the reader with the words on the page.

Those first classes are remarkable. So, what'd you think of the opening of *Common Sense*? Boring. The Sontag? Pretentious. The encounter with the words on the page seems to call for a judgment of some kind. Of the experience of reading, in some cases. In others, of the author's writing style. And after the judgment, silence.

Tick, tick.

Boring, is it?

Three hours is a long time, time not adequately filled by the observation: "I find political theory boring."

What follows from the determination that "x is boring"? Not much, which is why it is such a comfort. In "Reading in Slow Motion," however, the work is not to settle on a judgment that brings the reading to a close but rather to come to see reading itself as an expression of agency. To say the assigned reading is boring, in this context, is to say, "I don't know how to make what I am reading interesting."

With no technology in the classroom, limitless resources and distractions are both placed out of reach. What remains are the resources the readers bring with them to class and the mind's inclination to wander.

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The students know how to decipher the words on the page; what they lack is experience moving out from those words to the host of possible contexts—real and imagined—that give those specific words weight and meaning. They know how to read; what they don't know how to do is to use reading as a tool for discovery.

What does the experience of discovery feel like? If we imagine the challenge of research to be, in the first instance, experiential rather than procedural, the work of the classroom changes. The pedagogy of research as procedure has remained virtually unchanged since I was a child. In tenth grade English, we were introduced to the MLA Handbook, note cards, the outline, and, of course, the engine of the entire enterprise—the research question. Research in this incarnation was a series of arbitrary requirements to be checked off: five sources, two from reputable academic journals, the others from book-length studies; this many pages, this many words-per-page; bibliography with the

semicolon here not there. In this realm, the “research” “question” is just the force that frog marches each writer to the inevitable encounter with the formula for equanimity: “While some think X and others think Y, on balance, it’s best to think Z about fill-in-the-blank.”

No one sets out to solicit a stack of vacuous, half-hearted ventures into the archive, but this is what the procedural pedagogy generates. Real research has a different feel to it. But how to trigger this experience has been a challenge that has long bedeviled teachers of the research paper. How ignite the flame?

We associate reading with privacy. Sitting in the library, in a favorite chair, on a crowded bus: in your own world. Students come to class to learn a higher form of literacy, to move from decoding to discovery, but the activity remains a mystery. Where’d that come from? How’d the teacher get *that* out of *those* words? Making the private act of reading public: this is one way to define the work of teaching and its fundamental challenge. “Reading in Slow Motion” starts with this challenge and stays with it for the entire semester.

Although this tool wasn’t available when I started teaching “Reading in Slow Motion,” [social bookmarking](#) has proven to be immeasurably useful for addressing the two challenges I’ve been discussing: how to share the excitement of discovery and how to do a better job of teaching what is possible in the private realm of reading. I have used both del.icio.us and Diigo. Each functions in the same way: the teacher forms a group and invites the students to join; students then post the resources they’ve discovered to the site.²

The screenshot shows a Diigo group page for 'slow motion'. The group description is 'References, Inferences, interpretive footnotes emerging from and intersecting with Reading in Slow Motion Spring 2010'. The page lists several shared items, each with a view count and a 'More' button. The items are: (2) 'Age + Photo = Art' (2 views), 'NASA images of the day' (3 views), 'first photography -- Heliography' (0 views), (1) 'Blurring the lines between Photo + Picture' (4 views), 'Andersonville Aftermath' (1 view), and 'Everything exists to end in a photograph... or a book about photography?' (2 views). On the right side, there is a sidebar with 'Group Info' (Last active: on 04 May 10, Members: 10, Items: 189, Visits: 464, Owner: Richard Miller, Group type: Private, Group category: Schools & Education) and 'Most Active Members'.

² Diigo has the advantage of allowing students to annotate the web pages they share with the group—by highlighting passages they want to draw attention to, for example, or posing inline questions online.

In this screenshot of the earliest postings in the class where we read Sontag's *On Photography*, you can see some of the students' initial efforts to move out from the beginning of the opening chapter, "In Plato's Cave," to any one of the numberless archives on the Web. And, since these postings come from early in the course, it is not accidental that the citations include no summaries and no tags, despite explicit instructions to use these devices to indicate why the link is being recommended. In the beginning of the course, the students make no distinction between the letter and the spirit of the assignments they are to complete outside class. Three acts of research for the next class? Check.

Why, you might wonder, is it useful to head to "Keggars of Yore" after you have worked your way through the first half of Sontag's meditation on the proliferation of the photographic image? With the exception of the link to Andersonville, which Sontag directly references in her piece, the reasoning behind these shared links and the others that trail below them is opaque, mysterious, up to the reader to figure out. This isn't a bad thing; it's just a fact. Indeed, with just the first five citations, which take us from a spontaneous archive of college party pictures to the NASA image of the day to a page on the invention of photography to an undetected ruse about the web's compositional power to images from the execution of the camp attendant at Andersonville, we already have a sense of just how unpredictable and idiosyncratic the voyage from the words on the page to the world beyond the text is.

You could look up anything. Here are the first things that came to mind. What's the next assignment?

So, what does *real* research feel like? Not like the checking off of externally imposed requirements. Is it possible to move from the mysterious alchemy of the individual encounter with the words on the page and the words in one's head to the mysterious alchemy that begins to bubble away when curiosity is awakened within? When a question *out there* becomes a question *in here*? When a new idea begins to shift one's perspective, to reorganize all that inbound data, to alter one's sense of one's place in the world?

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We were in our fourth or fifth session (the course has no syllabus) and halfway through "America, Seen through Photographs, Darkly," where Sontag moves from a discussion of the democratizing impetus behind Walt Whitman's view of America to a sustained consideration of Diane Arbus's photography, where all the subjects are seen to be "inhabitants of the same village . . . the idiot village [of] America" (47). Although no photographs are included in Sontag's work, outside of class the students visit sites (such as www.photography-now.net) that provide immediate access to the images Sontag refers to including Arbus's shots of the circus freaks; the off-balance, bedecked socialites; the nudists; the giant towering over his miniature parents, and the twin girls who subsequently served as the inspiration for the children who appear in the corridors of Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Stephen King's *The Shining*.³

³ Throughout the semester, we returned to the issue of the difference between our reading practices and those of Sontag's contemporaries, who could not call up Godard's *Les Carabiniers*

“Well, how did people at the time react to these images?” Alice asked.

“I have no idea,” I said.

“That’s one for Diigo,” a group chimed in unison. By this point in the semester, the students saw that our three-hour discussions were meant to create opportunities for additional work outside class.

Back in her room, Alice sets off to answer her own question. Her path takes her to Florida State’s Art History department’s publication *Athamor*, which includes an article by Lauren Trainer entitled, [“The Missing Photographs: An Examination of Diane Arbus’s Images of Transvestites and Homosexuals from 1957 to 1965.”](#)

The screenshot shows a Diigo group page. At the top, the Diigo logo is on the left, and navigation links for 'What's New in V5', 'Richard Miller', 'My Library', and 'My Network' are on the right. Below the header, the breadcrumb trail reads: 'My Groups / slow motion / Diane Arbus: Early Reactions to Her Photography'. The main content area features a post by a user with a profile picture, titled 'Diane Arbus: Early Reactions to Her Photography - 16 views'. The post includes a timestamp 'started by [redacted] on 25 Feb 10' and a list of actions: 'Comment - Edit - Delete - Moderate - Disable Email Alert'. A comment by 'Richard Miller' is visible, stating 'Richard Miller liked it (Un-Like)'. The main comment, posted on 25 Feb 10, contains a link to a PDF document: http://www.fsu.edu/~arh/images/athanor/athxviii/AthamorXVIII_trainer.pdf. The comment text discusses the reaction to Arbus's images, mentioning 'intense anger, an emotional response prompted by the cultural war against sexual 'deviants.''. A highlighted section of the text reads: 'Yuben Yee, the photo librarian at the MoMA, recalls having to come early every morning to wipe the spit off of Arbus's portraits. He recalls that, "People were uncomfortable-threatened-looking at Diane's stuff. Even within the art world, Arbus was thought to be photographing subject matter that was ahead of her time. As Andy Warhol, who had seen some of Arbus's portraits commented, "drag queens weren't even accepted in freak circles until 1967." Arbus's images were not only disturbing to her audience on an aesthetic level, but her unabashed and unapologetic views of transvestites touched a deeper nerve in the people who viewed them.''. A follow-up comment starts with '>>This quotation makes sense to me, because looking at photographs of the transvestites and prostitutes she photos--today, I feel like the shock value of picturing people out of the "regular" realm of gender identity and sexuality is a little less big. In my opinion it seems that transvestites, transgendered people, and prostitutes are not 100% accepted today, but that we are more hung up on the topic of their experiences and definitely more used to their existence in our world. For example, I think of Real World (which had a season with a transgender? woman) and even America's Best Dance Crew where a season had underground, NYC cross-dressing male dancers, and I think that people in general talk about people with these gender identities with more interest/the expectation that they should be more accepting of these people.'

Alice posts the piece to Diigo, pulls out a passage that strikes her, and then considers the difference between a time when people spat on images of transvestites in the Museum of Modern Art and the current moment. How did people respond to Arbus’s

on YouTube or track down what turns out to be Sontag’s mis-citation of Whitman via a search for a string of words in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The very cosmopolitanism, which is assumed by the essays in *On Photography* composed during the seventies and eighties, has only been made available to the general reading public in the past five years by the online search engine.

work at the time? Well, some viewers were viscerally repulsed. Does this information alter Sontag's argument? Reinforce it? Recontextualize it?

By this point in the semester, the students are accustomed to the admonition to "drill down," to move from one source to another, sounding for depth the whole way. Already, though, Alice has found something that is new to her teacher and new to the class. And in this act, there is a glimpse of the experience of doing *real* research. Yes, it is just a piece of information. Yes, it is true that nothing has been done with it yet. But meaningful engagement with information can only happen *after* one has had the experience of posing an open, exploratory question, followed by the experience of moving into territory that is new for oneself and for one's community of fellow readers.

Alice drills down. Her next source is likely to raise the hackles of most readers: Wikipedia! It's an outrage!

Well, actually, it isn't. If we grant that students are going to use Wikipedia (and SparkNotes and YouTube and, and, and), we can focus on usage as opposed to unenforceable prohibitions.

So, Wikipedia. Is there a beneficial way to use an encyclopedia? How could the answer to that question be anything other than in the affirmative?

Second link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diane_Arbus

Taken from Wikipedia, but the information seems trustworthy enough since all quotations are given a source:

Norman Mailer was quoted in 1971 as saying "Giving a camera to Diane Arbus is like putting a live grenade in the hands of a child." [9][12]

Judith Goldman in 1974 was of the opinion that Arbus's photographs betrayed their subjects by portraying them as full of despair. [43] << rather than what Sontag says—that she portrays them with carefree joy

- * The father of the twins pictured in "Identical Twins, Roselle, N.J. 1967" felt that the photograph "was the worst likeness" of the girls he had ever seen. [24]
- * Anderson Cooper considers Arbus's photograph of him as an infant "great." [24]
- * Writer Germaine Greer, who was the subject of an Arbus photograph in 1971, criticized it as an "undeniably bad picture" and Arbus's work in general as unoriginal and focusing on "mere human imperfection and self-delusion." [44]
- * A taxi driver in New York who was the subject of the photograph "Boy With a Straw Hat..." reportedly said to Arbus about the photograph, without knowing her identity, "Picture of me! What a thrill! Wish I knew who the photographer was. Like to thank him." [9]

Some later reactions that I found intriguing and worthy to share:

Stephanie Zacharek wrote in 2006 "...when I look at her pictures, I see not a gift for capturing whatever life is there, but a desire to confirm her own suspicions about humanity's dullness, stupidity and ugliness." [51]

Wayne Koestenbaum asked in 2007 whether Arbus's photographs humiliate the subjects or the viewers. [60]

A 2008 essay characterized Sontag and Arbus as "Siamese twins of photographic art" because they both struggled with photography as art versus documentation (e.g., the relationship of photographer and subject). [54] A 2009 article pointed out that Arbus had photographed Sontag and her son in 1965, thereby causing one to "wonder if Sontag felt this was an unfair portrait." [53]

Richard Miller on 25 Feb 10 - Edit - Delete #2

Great work,  The MOMA reaction material is fantastic and the additional info on Sontag and Arbus really fills out the picture. Where's the Sontag picture?

Alice cites the url to the Arbus entry, then excerpts from the section specifically on the reception of Arbus's work. She deletes material that is not of interest to her; separates reactions at the time from more contemporary responses; adds an inline comment that directly connects the Wikipedia entry to Sontag's argument; reorders the information, so as to place the introductory material in this section of the Wikipedia entry at the end of her own citation; and eliminates entirely the passage from the original, where it is observed that "Sontag's essay itself has been criticized as 'an exercise in aesthetic insensibility' and *'exemplary for its shallowness'*" (italics mine, all mine).

That's a lot of activity by a reader in the act of moving through one resource, activity that is easily distinguished from the act of clicking the "post to diigo" button on her browser. Alice has amassed many examples of how the subjects of Arbus's images responded to being photographed; how anonymous viewers at the MoMA responded when the photographs were first displayed; and how critics who were Arbus's contemporaries and how those who have come after her have responded to the photographs. And she's left hanging, at the very end of her entry, the news that Arbus photographed Sontag and her son.

Who is this news to? Alice. The other students in "Reading in Slow Motion." Her teacher. And, given that Sontag herself does not reveal this fact anywhere in *On Photography*, it's safe to say it's also news to most, if not all, of Sontag's readers.

With this find, Alice is done.

Until her teacher asks the next question, the one that is begging to be asked: what does the picture look like? This question is posed in public for all the other students to see on the Diigo site, just below Alice's entry. And, soon enough, Alice has tracked it down:



True enough, it's only a low-resolution image, discolored and hard to make out, but it's a start. Or rather, it's a continuation—of a process that began with the question, "How did others see Arbus?," and has led to an image of Sontag, with her son at her side, looking back at a photographer she describes as "not a poet delving into her entrails to relate her own pain but a photographer venturing out into the world to *collect* images that are painful" (40, italics in original).

Does a better reproduction of the image shed light on Sontag's relationship to her subject?



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This is what discovery feels like.

Proceeding in this way, week in and week out, the students use their writing to share resources and discoveries-in-the-making, with their teacher moving through the virtual space like a sheepdog, helping to guide concentration, focus, persistence—keeping things moving. Each week, some initiatives are more fruitful than others, some more valuable for the individual than the class as a whole, but it's never hard to tell whether the reading is triggering new thoughts: the quality of the questions posed in our three-hour sessions improves as does the quality of the discussion. Thomas Paine may be boring, Susan Sontag pretentious, Elaine Scarry hard to follow but, because these initial impressions don't lead anywhere (the course is "Reading in *Slow Motion*" not "Reading in Place"), the students have to develop new ways of engaging with what they're reading.

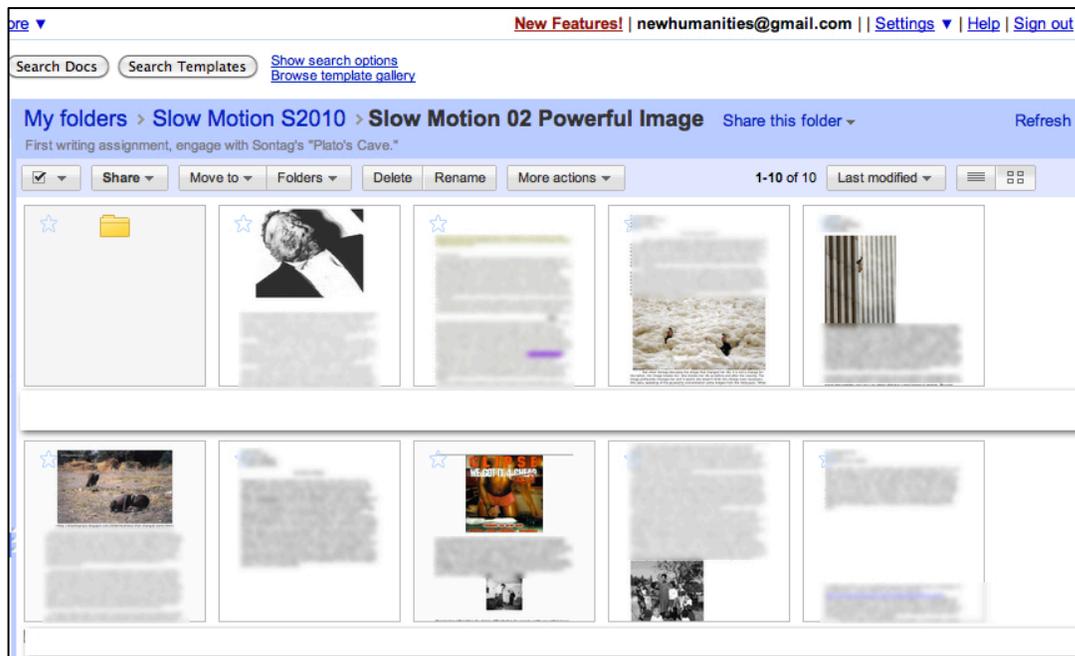
*

And just as social bookmarking has made it possible to move the acts of reading and of doing research into public, improvements in collaborative writing software now make it possible to share student writing in real time. Students use a free [cloud-based](#) word processor, (I have used both OneHub and Google docs) and thus have access to each other's works-in-progress and final drafts. All peer commenting is also visible to everyone. All in real time. Thus, from the moment the students take up their first writing assignment, they can see how their peers are making sense of their shared task.

In the Sontag class, the students were asked to place their experience with images into dialogue with a brief moment from "In Plato's Cave," where Sontag pauses in her work with abstractions to point to first encounter with pictures from the concentration camps:

Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about (20).

The software also allows the students to embed images in their work, which makes the range of topics chosen in the class available at a glance: Emmet Till's cadaver; wet-suited boys swimming in Australia's "cappuccino sea"; the Twin Towers' "falling man"; starvation in the Sudan; the cover of a rap album; Jim Jones surrounded by devotees; Lady Gaga decked out in a Kermit the Frog outfit; and so on.⁴



⁴ This assignment was challenging in a way I had not anticipated. Fully half the class ended up writing about pictures that had been posted to the Diigo site earlier in the semester. And this, in turn, became a subject for us to discuss: with images everywhere, can images exercise the power Sontag fears? Or is the omnipresence of the image proof that Sontag's fears are now unwarranted?

Because we've been moving so slowly through Sontag, the students are positioned, perhaps for the first time in their lives, to consider their own experience in light of what they've read. We read their papers together and ask whether their experiences support any number of Sontag's assertions:

"Taking photographs has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events" (11).

"To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (15).

"In these last decades, 'concerned' photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it" (21).

"Only that which narrates can make us understand" (23).

To write their papers, they have to begin to have a sense not only for Sontag's argument but also for what it means to think like Sontag. What in what she writes is nuance? Blindness? Provocation? Humor? What does she let drop? What ideas haunt her? What, in sum, are her habits of mind?

*

After the students have spent a semester of shadowing the author in these ways, pushing the ideas from one frame of reference to another and being pushed back in turn; correctly anticipating argumentative moves; reading past important qualifications and returning to get them only after their importance has made itself known retroactively; feeling the long argument come together and watching it fall apart: after this sustained encounter with a mind at work on a problem, the students are given the final assignment. And the final assignment brings with it:

The Fifth Rule of Reading in Slow Motion

- The final paper can be on anything . . . except the assigned text.

*

Isn't this just deliberate contrarianism?

The entire semester has been spent exploring how the assigned text can be made to lead to other worlds, other questions; getting a handle on how the assigned author organizes information, makes connections, sees around corners. But the course hasn't been about the great mind or about whether, at the end of it all, one finds the author's sustained meditation on X to be compelling. Thus the work that remains is not Sontag: for or against? And it's not photography: good or bad? Furthermore, because we now read in a world of information superfluity, it is not a question of organizing a mini-archive on Sontag (five sources, two from respected journals, etc.) for a final paper.

The work that remains is the work of the course: to use writing as a technology for thinking new thoughts, ideally thoughts the author feels compelled to share with others. Here is the final assignment, in part:

As we discussed at length two weeks ago in class, for your final assignment you are to put together an essay that *does* what we have seen Sontag do—an essay that meditates, speculates, deliberates, explores. The work of such an essay is to open a question up and to keep it open for as long as possible, so that connections between the question and other issues can come to light. Your final project will be assessed on what it *does*. Have you used your writing to extend your thinking? To explore complexity? To generate insight and understanding?

The only way to produce a successful response to this assignment is to write at the edge of one's understanding. The goal here is, doubtless, a familiar one: what I find differs about soliciting this kind of writing after a semester of reading in slow motion is that the students bring to the assignment their own experiences of having searched with an ever clearer sense of purpose. And this is an invaluable addition to a classroom that also moves through the procedures of brainstorming, peer feedback, drafting, revising with real-time inline peer comments.

You might say the goal of the final assignment is to solicit prose that slows down, prose that rewards lingering and rereading.

*

As you might imagine, the final projects are all over the map. Like any other class, there are students who just fax it in and students who struggle mightily with the invitation to explore complexity. This ain't, in other words, Dr. Jed's Pedagogical Lightning in a Bottle to cure all your teaching ills. Nevertheless, what I find most encouraging about the end of the semester—and the reason I continue to offer this course—is the earnestness with which the students as a whole take up the challenge to veer from the straight and narrow.

What do I look for when I am reading the final papers? The course has sought to do the following:

- Foster speculative, deliberative, meditative thought and writing;
- Promote *rereading*, *revision*, *research*;
- Provide student-generated examples of insight arising from sustained acts of attention.

Typically, the questions the students want to tackle are gigantic—as big as trying to figure out the relationship between images and reality in contemporary society. The course has prepared the students with strategies for grounding such big questions in a series of manageable, if discordant, actualities, so: What is the source of compassionate feelings? Why is the sense of identity located in the face? Why is there a need to express identity at all? What idea of beauty, if any, animates works of abstract expressionism? Is social activism possible in virtual communities?⁵

⁵ Most of the students in the Sontag course were graduating seniors. If you find yourself dissatisfied with the fact that, at the end of their collegiate careers, the questions they cared about most were questions of how to establish a sense of self in the world, it's worth wondering what in

Should you graduate from college without having tried to work with questions of this magnitude? Can you have a life of the mind if you haven't experienced the discovery of new thoughts through your own initiative? Can you produce scholarship worth reading if you haven't struggled to resist the allure of knowingness in favor of inquisitiveness?

*

After the Sontag version of this course ended, I heard from one of the students in the course—he'd revised his essay and submitted it to [The Millions](#), an online journal I'd never heard of. After a little Googling, I discovered that *The Millions* had published work by a host of writers and artists I greatly admire: Laurie Anderson, Jonathan Lethem, and Rick Moody, for example. And there was Sean's multimedia piece, "[Headphone Elegies](#)," for all the world to see:

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TORCH BALLADS & JUKEBOX MUSIC
Headphone Elegies
 By SEAN PATRICK COOPER posted at 6:29 am on June 2, 2010 4 Like

In March of this year, the writer **Steve Almond** penned a [brief article in the LA Times](#) waxing nostalgic about the 70s, when listening to music was an "activity in and of itself... and not just another channel on our ever-expanding dial of distractions." Almond attributes this evolution of our listening habits to the usual suspects, namely technology and the devices and software that fall under the iPod/iTunes umbrella. Because music listening, says Almond, has become less a "concerted sonic and emotional event" and more a pragmatic function of our increasingly digital lifestyles, we as a music listening culture are missing out on opportunities for a sacred and spiritual interaction with our music. For sure, Mr. Almond is right to say that our relationship with music has been profoundly influenced by taking our music out of the living room, away from the stationary turntable and component stereo system, and inserting it into nearly every activity and event of our days. However, it's grossly inaccurate to dismiss this impact as sacrilegious or impoverishing when what technology has in fact done for us as a music listening culture is quite positive, something close to liberating, and dangerously powerful.

Track 01: "Take Pills" by Panda Bear ← Press to PLAY

While the methods by which we now acquire our music have had an impact, to a degree, on our experience of music listening, they have remained markedly less influential than the evolutions in the design and application of what we use to listen to our music. In 2008 and 2009, close to 100 million iPods were purchased globally. The widespread use of personal mp3 players and, more importantly, the headphones attached to those players, have gone on to facilitate for a significant percentage of the population a kind of relationship that has never before occurred between music listener and music.

Join the public space and look around: It takes only a brief moment to locate an individual plugged in and headphoned up. Like using an umbrella, headphones serve a particular function, shielding us from the nuisances of the world. Hop on any form of public transportation, plug in, and no longer must you suffer the coughing, sneezing, dry throat clearing, cell phone texting, loud speaker announcing, sneaker squeaking, nervous leg tapping, neighbor yawning, Doritos eating, water bottle dropping and newspaper shuffling that is the shuttle, train, or bus around you. Step off and into the street and headphones continue to serve you well. Why subject yourself to the car honking, police whistle blowing and sidewalk chattering of the urban space when you don't have to?

SEAN PATRICK COOPER is the author of a novella that's not quite done, "If Only We Were Here To Stay." His work on music, culture, and art is forthcoming, ideally, from multiple locations. He is the recipient of the James Suydam Prize and Evelyn Hamilton Award and is online at www.seanpatrickcooper.com.

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the major, in the other four to five to six years of coursework, prepared them to think beyond the self.

Sean's meditation on music's ubiquity begins, serendipitously for our purposes, with Steve Almond decrying "our ever-expanding dial of distractions." In the nine sections that follow, each introduced by a playable embedded musical selection, Sean explores how the ability to provide a running soundtrack for one's own life is more involved than Almond imagines. His essay references Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, Michel de Certeau, Jean Baudrillard, Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer. Is it also in dialogue with *The Gutenberg Elegies*?

*

This outcome is atypical, but once the screen completely replaces the page as the assumed final destination for thought, the venues for publication will multiply beyond imagining, as will the possible forms of publication. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois began each chapter with a musical epigraph. While he could only allude to the sounds he was in conversation with in 1903, readers of his work now can hear the music he references, including two different versions of "My Lord, What a Morning," the hymn that precedes his opening statement in "[Of the Dawn of Freedom](#)," "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, -- the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." Readers of this online edition of *The Souls of Black Folk*, can also review an 1874 version of the sheet music for "My Lord, What a Morning," as well as the words in English and in German.

Writers have long dreamed of being able to bring the other arts into the reading experience. Now that a laptop is a movie studio, a recording company, an atelier, a study, a publisher, and a global distributor all wrapped up in one, the act of composition has changed. How well prepared will our students be, as readers and as writers, to confront such a world? How well prepared are we?

*

Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

As the speaker in *Burnt Norton* brings the meditation to a close, stillness amidst the distractions remains elusive. It is in "the form, the pattern" rather than in the content itself that the stillness may be glimpsed. Does thought itself have a form, a pattern? Countable forms and patterns? Reading in slow motion keeps such questions open and alive, in the belief that the work of the humanities is to spark an endless curiosity about the worlds in which we live.

Richard E. Miller
November 2010

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