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40125 Bologna, Italy
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www.mulino.it
www.rivisteweb.it
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Empirical research, literature and film

Abstract. Although validation criteria are not the same in different areas, in order to be taken seriously in a scientific community, professional observation of literature is expected to meet the same standards as all other scientific procedures. Projects that do not make their working procedures explicit are likely to be judged as being less credible: ways and tools of problem solving must be open to intersubjective inspection (Schmidt 1999, 2000). Empirical research allows us to try to understand changes taking place in different areas of communication. Book reading has shifted from a form of socialization, when books were commonly read aloud, a practice that was widespread in the whole of antiquity, to forms of solitary reading. This change is related to the spread of literacy and the availability of books at low cost. It is possible that at the beginning of the third millennium we are now witnessing a similar evolution in the use of films, due to the availability of technologies that make personalized film watching of films easy and inexpensive. Data were collected in order to study changes in film watching related to new viewing technologies.

Keywords: empirical research on texts; act of reading; film studies; research methods; cultural studies.

1. Empirical research on texts

Even in recent times, when comparison and also forms of competition among different areas of academic research are becoming increasingly pressing, some sectors of textual studies seem very slow in acknowledging the need to provide a solid and explicit foundation to their research work. They seem more willing to import ephemeral and rather inappropriate instruments (like counting pages, Impact factor, or H index), rather than accepting the most useful contributions coming from other areas of research: explicit methods and verification of the validity of results.

This is especially evident in literary studies, as Bourdieu remarked:

I would simply ask why so many critics, so many writers, so many philosophers take such satisfaction in professing that the experience of a work of art is ineffable, that it escapes by definition all rational understanding; why they are so eager to concede without a struggle the defeat of knowledge; and where this irremissible need to
belittle rational understanding comes from, this rage to affirm the irreducibility of the work of art, or, to use a more suitable word, its transcendence (Bourdieu 1996: XVI).

Obviously, validation criteria cannot be the same in different areas, but areas that do not make their working procedures explicit are likely to be judged as being less credible (Nemesio 1999, 2000, 2014, 2015). Literary studies have a longer history than many contemporary sciences, with the risk of being prisoners of their illustrious past. Many operations performed today in relation to literary texts are based on traditions that date back to a rather distant time, like the tradition of sacred texts: here literatures rival with religions, in offering similar experiences in a similar way by means of a suspension of disbelief (momentary in the case of literatures, long-lasting in the case of religions) toward narratives that do not correspond to the perceived world. In this case, literary scholars seem to assume the role of priests of canonical texts.

It also seems that literary studies devote great effort to details, with the risk of losing control of the entire project of knowledge of which each detail is a part. Literary researchers often collect very interesting data (which constitutes a necessary preliminary operation), without making use of them in a full-scale explicit project. They often forget that, at the beginning of a research project, it is always necessary to make explicit the questions addressed, the methods used and the reasons why the project deserves priority. The work done by literary scholars often seems rather casual: some research work seems to be devoted to only one author, often on the occasion of an anniversary, while there is no reason to think that our observations are more valid, urgent, appropriate, useful, or interesting if the author of the texts we are studying was born or died (or the texts were written) 100, 200, or 500 years ago, rather than 74 or 319. This appears to be celebration and not research: it does not seem to make any sense to determine a research program by looking at the calendar. Also the widespread habit of limiting the scope of a research project to only one author seems to lead to isolated results, not well integrated in more general projects.

The research strategies and methods of literary scholars are often repetitive. A new operation that is analogous to previous ones is often considered acceptable: it is on these premises that many texts dealing with literature are produced. But there is a point where it is unnecessary to repeat the same operation on new data, because the result has already been established: rather than additional confirmation of what is already known, it is the exploration of what is still unknown that deserves priority. Contemporary literary research seems to be based on habits that originated in the past and that bear little resemblance to research projects as they are intended now in other fields. If our main aim were the proposal of some
objects as cultural models, then it would be useful to our purpose to try
to direct our society’s attention toward these objects and the persons who
produced them. It would also be reasonable to perform our actions on the
occasion of anniversaries, because we would not be doing research, but
celebration. Celebration aims at confirming certitudes and at strengthen-
ing bonds of solidarity among the participants: it does not produce new
knowledge, but it confirms what is already known.

But these operations have little to do with research because, as research-
ers, our main task is to attempt to understand human literary behavior by
examining samplings of several texts produced by several authors. This
type of comparative investigation tries to understand the working of the
human activities that are related to writing, distributing, and reading objects
which – in ways that differ in different cultures – are called literature.
Work concerning single authors is a preliminary operation that is necessary
in order to have enough data on which to ground our literary research
but, once we have gathered enough data, we are expected to make use of
them in our research project.

Several studies (Carroll 2004, 2006; Boyd 2009; Oatley 2011) show that
literature plays an important role in human evolution, because it involves us
in possible worlds that are far distant from our habits and our certitudes,
thus training us and making us more prepared to deal with environmental
changes. It is a kind of cognitive game that presents a simulation of situa-
tions, in which we find patterns of behavior that allow us to get inside the
experiences of other people. This contributes to our personal and social
development and helps us respond to changing circumstances, encouraging
and training our mental flexibility and creativity that goes beyond what is
already known. Before the development of the human sciences, literature
was considered to be the greatest repository of information about human
nature. Literature exists in all human societies and presents common forms
in different cultures. It can generate strong emotional involvement and
attracts large investments of time, energy and resources.

Empirical research on texts is a complex interdisciplinary project, requir-
ing different skills and the contribution of researchers trained in different
specialties such as (listed in alphabetical order) anthropology, linguistics,
literary studies, philosophy, psychology, semiotics, sociology, and statistics.
Knowledge of several languages and cultures is necessary.

As Siegfried Schmidt (1999, 2000) correctly argued, scientific empirical
theories can be defined as systematic and explicit programs, whose results
are temporary and open to revision. Their validity and reliability are judged
according to their ability to solve problems. Scientific activities are explicit:
they must be teachable and learnable; they study intersubjective experiences
that can be empirically tested; they maintain reasonable rational standards
of argumentation and are relevant for individual and social needs.
Cultural objects, such as literary texts, are not autonomous and objective: we can talk about them only in relation to individuals acting within social contexts. Consequently, the smallest units under investigation in literary studies are not isolated texts, but textual actions, that is actions concerning phenomena that are deemed literary: "literary actions can be subsumed under four basic types of activities: production, distribution/mediation, reception and post-processing of literary items" (Schmidt 2000: 332). Literary systems are components of society and are in constant interaction with other component systems of a society like politics, economy, education, religions, sports, etc. Traditional literary texts are only a part of a set of literary items, while other media events are continuously gaining ground. Concepts of literariness and literary value differ in different sociocultural groups.

Meanings are not entities residing in texts, but they are the result of socioculturally oriented cognitive operations taking place in contexts. Texts can be regarded as highly conventionalized triggers of cognitive operations: what happens in the individual's cognitive domain, on the occasion of the perception of a text, not only depends on the text read, but upon the individual's whole state of mind. Recipients make use of texts to produce meaning in their cognitive domain: texts do not automatically trigger cognitive processes in a strictly foreseeable manner (Schmidt 2000: 336-338).

In order to be taken seriously in a scientific community, professional observation of literary phenomena must meet the same standards as all other scientific procedures. Literary scholars' theories and instruments of observation must be explicitly formulated, their concepts well defined and their argumentation must be rational. Research has to start with a clear formulation of a problem in relation to knowledge that is already available. Ways and tools of problem solving have to be explicit, solutions must be open to intersubjective inspection and possible practical applications of results has to be taken into account: rationality and intersubjectivity are well established criteria of scientific procedures.

It is possible to list a number of requirements scientific literary research is expected to meet: explicit definition of the terms used, clear determination of aims and methods, explanation of the reasons that underlie the choice of an object of study, examination of a representative sampling of the objects of study chosen, definition of the position of each research project within the scientific community concerned, clarification of all operations. It is very important to present the state of previous research, objectives, materials (texts) used, methods, details of the procedure, possible limits, results, verification deemed necessary, proposals for future research and future developments.

Empirical research on texts studies human behavior in producing, distributing and using texts. Traditionally, textual studies focused on pro-
posing rules of interpretation rather than trying to understand empirically observable events, while empirical observation shows that the same texts can generate different effects in different historical times and socio-cultural sectors. Even the permanence in time – the possibility of being considered a classic – depends on a sufficient amount of polyvalence and versatility, that make it possible for a text to be read differently, according to the symbologies and the interests of readers in different historical periods. In addition, in times of great contacts between different cultures, it is very easy to see how the same texts can be read differently by people belonging to different cultures.

In past societies, when only a very small group of people were able to read, reading behavior was likely to be more uniform and it seemed unnecessary to do empirical research with different people in order to study it: the researchers’ introspection seemed to be adequate. On the contrary today, in large parts of the world, we find great numbers of different potential readers: this makes it necessary to produce new research methods that help us to understand how a text works with a large number of culturally different readers.

2. Reading films

Empirical research allows us to try to understand changes taking place in different areas of communication. Book reading has shifted from a form of socialization, when books were commonly read aloud, a practice that was widespread in the whole of antiquity, to forms of solitary reading (Cavallo and Chartier 1995). This change is related to the spread of literacy and the availability of books at low cost. It is possible that at the beginning of the third millennium we are now witnessing a similar evolution in the use of films, related to the availability of technologies that make personalized film watching of films easy and inexpensive. Traditionally (and, in the case of films, “traditions” are located in a time that is not far from the present), films were watched entirely in a single session, at specific locations used for this purpose, in the company of others and with the invaluable help of people equipped with specific technical skills. The availability of films on videocassettes and then on optical discs, that can be watched on low-cost portable machines, makes individual film watching possible to everyone, everywhere, without the need for complex machines or special technical skills: it is now possible to adjust the pace of watching to the preferences of each individual, in a way that is similar to reading a book. It is now possible, for example, to stop watching a film because we are tired or have other things to do (and in this way we can see a part of a film, even when we have little time, while beforehand it was necessary to go to a theatre at
a pre-determined time and stay for the entire duration of the projection). Film viewing can be segmented according to the viewer’s preferences. We can also view a scene again, as we can reread a paragraph in a book. We can go ahead, skipping scenes, or go back to the beginning: operations that are familiar to readers of books.

Before the widespread use of videotape and then DVD players, access to films was subject to several limitations: even large cities had at most a few dozen theaters, presenting mostly very recent films. The situation was similar to a society in which libraries and bookstores offer almost nothing but recently published books. It was television that made it easier to have access to older films, watched however in a way that was similar to going to the theatre (at a pre-determined time and in a single session), but on smaller screens and in private places. From the last part of the Twentieth Century, access to films has become much easier, thanks to the possibility of recording TV programs and of purchasing or renting films on videotapes or optical disks.

At the beginning of the third millennium, books and films are readily available with a broadband internet connection: in a very short time books and films can be bought and downloaded to our computer. While books in digital format are sometimes perceived as unnatural objects, because for centuries we have been used to reading on paper, films are stored in our computer in a format that is perfectly suitable for immediate use. Thanks to these new instruments, films of any time and language can be available to us.

These changes are very recent¹, and so far they have affected only a limited number of viewers. With a greater diffusion, they can also influence film production. In particular, these resources allow the creation of more complex products, encouraging the viewer to see some scenes more than once, in the same way as poems often require re-reading at a slow pace.

Fraisse (2001) emphasizes the distance between viewing a movie at the cinema and on a DVD, especially as regards the active participation of the spectators. Gasetti (2009, 2011) writes that cinema, while expanding its borders, risks losing its identity. Riva (2006) notes that the DVD player gives the viewer the possibility to take control of film watching, interrupting scenes, viewing them again, or skipping them quickly: in this way, film watching is similar to reading novels.

Fanchi (2006) writes that the viewer can control the timing of film watching, adapting it to his/her needs. According to Bordwell (2008), DVDs offer a possibility of interaction with the filmic text that was completely unknown: DVDs allow and encourage interruptions, accelerations,

¹ I am grateful to Silvio Alvisio (University of Turin) for useful bibliographic information.
subdivisions, jumps to specific points of the narrative, changes in the order of the scenes and even watching backwards. As a consequence, it is reasonable to ask whether contemporary directors should consider these “alternative” ways of enjoying films, being receptive to these technological opportunities. Bordwell points out that DVDs allow us to enjoy the filmic text in a highly nonlinear way: in particular, films can be used in a manner similar to books.

The changes are remarkable. While traditional spectators once modeled themselves on films, spectators now model films: the effect is that the spectators become the active protagonists of the game. As a matter of fact, a great freedom of use is also one of the strongest features of the current format of books. In addition to the shift from reading aloud to silent reading, there have been other important changes in the history of written texts: until the second or third century AD, “reading a book” usually meant “reading a scroll”. A scroll was held in the reader’s right hand and was progressively unrolled with his/her left hand, which held the part that had already been read; after reading, all the scroll was rolled up in the reader’s left hand (Cavallo 1995). It was therefore possible to read at one’s own pace, but it was uncomfortable to jump to different parts of the text. The shift to the codex format, with pages bound together, made it much easier to consult books and make a non-linear use of them.

Over the past 20 years, the use of electronic formats has allowed rapid distribution of texts and offered very powerful instruments for textual analysis: some research projects would not be possible if texts were not available in electronic format. However, to this day (2016), the use of electronic media for simple linear reading is still marginal, although different products have been tested. Screen reading is not considered functional in the case of long texts, like novels or essays. In fact, as Landow (1997) pointed out, books are already advanced technological objects.

A questionnaire was devised in order to collect empirical data concerning changes in film watching related to new viewing technologies. Participants were asked questions concerning their film viewing habits (frequency, technology employed, preference, interruptions while watching)².

² The questionnaire asked the following questions: How many films do you usually watch at the cinema every month? How many films do you usually watch on TV – without using CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes – every month? How many films do you usually watch on TV or computer – using CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes – every month? How many films do you usually watch on computer every month in online streaming without downloading files? Do you prefer to watch a film at the cinema; on TV without using CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes; on TV or computer using CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes; on computer in online streaming without downloading files; no preference? Do CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes increase the number of films you watch? When you watch a film using CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes, do you usually watch it all in a single session as if you were at the
Four hundred and thirty-five subjects (209 males, 226 females) participated in the present study. They attended either faculties of Humanities (N = 240; 71 men, 169 women) or of Applied Sciences (N = 195; 138 men, 57 women) at the university of Turin. Their average age was 20.8 (SD = 2.3).

Table 1 shows that self-timed film watching technologies are widespread: 38.5% of participants watch at least six films every month using CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes, more than on traditional TV (24.7%), in online streaming (22.7%) and much more than at the cinema (2.5%). Only 9.7% of participants do not use these technologies, while 19.4% do not go to the cinema, 21.1% do not watch films on TV and 35.6% do not use online streaming.

Table 1. Films watched every month and viewers’ preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Films watched every month</th>
<th>Cinema</th>
<th>Traditional TV</th>
<th>TV or computer with CDs, DVDs, files, VHS</th>
<th>Online streaming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred form</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even if self-timed film watching is the most common practice, film watching at the cinema is by far the preferred form, chosen by 55.2% of participants. CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes are a second choice (19.2%). PC streaming and traditional TV have very low scores (6.9% and 4.8%, respectively). As expected, the use of CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes increases the number of films watched for 68% of respondents.

New technologies change the way people watch films: almost half the subjects (42.5%) do not watch films all in a single session as if they were at the cinema, but sometimes they interrupt watching and then start again. Interruptions are due to practical reasons: 91.4% of respondents stop watching for an external cause (for example: they have no time left, they have to answer the telephone, somebody calls them, they must go to the bathroom). If possible, they would prefer to continue up to the end cinema, or do you sometimes interrupt and then start again? If you interrupt watching a film and then start again, what is the usual cause of the interruption? Is it important for you to be free to interrupt watching a film and then start again? How many books (essays or literature) do you usually read every month? Do you usually prefer reading books or watching films? Did you take film courses? How often do you use a computer? Do you usually prefer reading books or using a computer?
in a single session: only 8.6% find it normal to interrupt and then start again, following their own pace, as if they were reading a book. Subjects are overall divided in evaluating the importance of interruptions: they are "really very important" or "very important" for 44.1% of them and "not much important" or "unimportant" for 55.9%.

With the exception of film watching at the cinema (women go to the cinema significantly more then men: $\chi^2 = 19.46$, df = 3, $p < .001$), subjects’ preferences and film viewing habits are little related to gender. Women read more books (essays or literature) than men ($\chi^2 = 60.21$, df = 3, $p < .001$). Although women prefer books to films ($\chi^2 = 41.67$, df = 3, $p < .001$), they attend more film courses than men both at school and at the university ($\chi^2 = 15.40$, df = 3, $p < .005$). Men prefer computers to books ($\chi^2 = 47.21$, df = 3, $p < .001$).

Students of faculties of Humanities go to the cinema more frequently than students of faculties of Applied Sciences ($\chi^2 = 24.57$, df = 3, $p < .001$); when they use self-timed film watching, they interrupt and start again more frequently than students of Applied Sciences ($\chi^2 = 6.36$, df = 2, $p < .05$). More students of faculties of Humanities interrupt and then start again as a normal practice than students of Applied Sciences ($\chi^2 = 5.44$, df = 1, $p < .05$). Unlike Humanities students, Applied Sciences students prefer films ($\chi^2 = 29.17$, df = 3, $p < .001$) and computers ($\chi^2 = 41.81$, df = 3, $p < .001$) to books, and take fewer film courses ($\chi^2 = 42$, df = 3, $p < .001$).

This seems to be a picture of a complex situation. Almost all respondents make use of new self-timed film watching technologies, which constitute a common practice of film viewing, but going to the cinema is by far the preferred form. TV is the least preferred medium for film watching. The use of CDs, DVDs, digital files or videocassettes increases the number of films people watch. Although almost half the subjects do not watch films all in a single session, almost all of them say they would prefer to continue up to the end as if they were at the cinema. The possibility of interrupting and then starting again is important for almost half the respondents. Students of faculties of Humanities are more likely to watch films following their own pace as a normal practice than students of Applied Sciences.

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3 Lucia Ronconi (University of Padua) contributed to the statistical elaboration of the data in this paper.
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SCHMIDT, S.
Guido Ferraro and Aldo Nemesio, *Semiotics and empirical research* TEMI SEMIOTICI / SEMIOTIC THEMES: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN SEMIOTICS