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SIGHTLESS READING: CASES OF PARANORMAL TEXT CONSUMPTION

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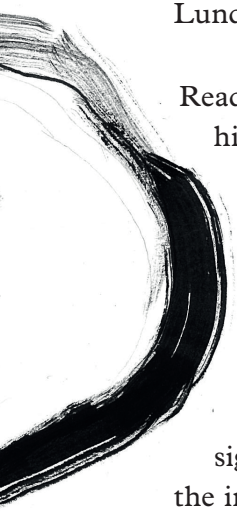

Reading is probably one of the most influential activities in the history of mankind, and sight is its most basic prerequisite. The sense of sight has intrigued philosophers and scholars of all periods. The theory of Democritus (ca. 400 BCE), for example, held that objects emitted atoms that carried impressions to the eye, so that seeing was effectuated by means of copies or images of objects received by the eye.[1] In the nineteenth century, the knowledge of optics had reached an advanced stage but the relation of sight, and the eye, to the visual perception of the world—to the images produced in our heads—still needed further clarification. This left room for continued investigations, and speculations. Today, not only the sense of sight but also other discrete abilities required for reading, like perception and cognition, are well researched. Yet, the complex nature of reading as such remains quite uncharted.[2]

Existing knowledge builds on previous learning, some refuted, some accepted. That holds true for all prior periods. What we consider as ignorance or humbug might once have appeared to be accurate and indisputable, even regarded as sci-

[1] N.J. Wade, *A Natural History of Vision* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), p.11.
[2] J. Holsanova, *Myter och sanningar om läsning: Om samspel mellan språk och bild i olika medier* (Stockholm: Norstedts & Språkrådet, 2010), p. 15.

entific facts. Each period has been perceived as the most up-to-date, and the knowledge of each has been the latest, the most contemporary knowledge.

Besides bygone times' ongoing contemporaneity, another historical constant is man's proneness for deception. The blurred border between fiction and "fact", between science and humbug, and between different ways of reading is a theme in this article wherein some unexpected modes of consuming texts will be presented.

Transposition of the senses: The case of Mademoiselle Melanie

In an article by the French physician Dr. Duvard in *Provincial Medical Journal and Retrospect of Medical Sciences* in June 1842, "Case of catalepsy, with transposition of the senses", the rare phenomenon of *transposition of the senses* is described in detail.[3]

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *transposition of the senses* belonged to the fields of study of animal magnetism, somnambulism, hypnosis and hysteria. Some of these areas would advance into modern scientific work, for example in studies on the function of electromagnetic impulses in the human body and brain, while others would move in more esoteric directions or turn into entertainment or simple trickery.

Transposition of the senses meant that the faculty of one sense moved to a part of the body where it normally did not belong. The faculty of smell could thus be transposed to the toes or fingertips, just as the faculty of sight could be typically transposed to the toes and fingertips or to the stomach. Transposition of the senses is not to be confused with clairvoyance.[4] While

[3] C. Duvard, "Case of catalepsy, with transposition of the senses", *Provincial Medical Journal and Retrospect of Medical Sciences* 4, no. 11 (1842), pp. 212–213.

[4] For my contemporary reader, the most well-known example of clairvoyance is perhaps Madame Yamilah in Hergé's *The Seven Crystal Balls*. In a very dramatic scene, she sees the Sanders-Hardmuth expedition's film photographer Clairmont fall victim to the curse of Rascar Capac. See any edition.

a clairvoyant can see things without sensory contact, someone who sees, or claims to see by means of the stomach or the toes, needs physical contact with the text or other objects in question.

Dr. Duvard's report concerns the case of a Mademoiselle Melanie, who at the age of 21 fell ill and developed hysteria, catalepsy and somnambulism. In order to obtain a better understanding of his patient's state, Duvard carried out a number of experiments on her. They showed that the "senses of taste and smell were not exercised by their natural organs, but were very acute in the sensitive parts."[5] When tobacco and bottles of ammonia were placed under Melanie's nose, she did not sense any smell at all, but when the same substances, as well as currant jelly, orange-flower water, wine and vinegar were put on the palm of her hand, she immediately could tell what it was. Even more surprisingly, "[w]hen a few grains of snuff were placed on the sole of her foot, she sneezed at once, and thus easily distinguished common French snuff from English snuff."[6]

As Dr. Duvard performed advanced experiments, he found that his patient could recognize any object placed over the pit of her stomach. At a sitting in October 1841, when Duvard had been working on the young woman for about 10 months, he placed a document over the patient's stomach, a piece of paper with the word *commerce* written on it. The experiment produced "great fatigue", the patient complained, but eventually she correctly identified and spelled out the word.[7]

When subsequent attempts of stomach reading failed, Duvard came to the conclusion that only the senses of smell and hearing were transposed in Melanie, whereas her ability to "see" with her stomach rather was a result of "an exquisite sense of touch."[8]

[5] C. Duvard, "Case of catalepsy", p. 213.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

The making of sense

Medical and scientific explorations of the complex mechanisms of life progressed throughout the nineteenth century. Physiology developed into a distinct discipline, mapping the living system, part by part. The human senses, especially the sense of sight, attracted great attention. The anatomy of the eye had been studied for centuries, and some of the functions of the retina were already described in the seventeenth century.[9] Yet the exact relations between the wavelengths of light, the different parts of the eye, and the images produced in the brain remained undiscovered for the entire nineteenth century.[10] The fact that there *were* relations, and that a sense is a complex phenomenon that interconnects various anatomical and physiological entities and functions was known; nevertheless, many studies on the senses concentrated on the key organ of a sense as a separate unit. The sense of sight, for example, was often examined in experiments involving eyes from dead animals and humans.[11]

Despite its limitations, research on the senses with the help of separate organs was motivated by empirical science's ideal of objective measurability. Anatomists, histologists and physiologists were wary of entering the domain of the psyche.[12] This domain did not, however, frighten everyone. Alongside men of science, a growing number of people with interests other than scientific ones developed a fascination with the intriguing functions of the senses. The late-nineteenth century saw a craze for spiritism and the paranormal. Guided by not only leading figures like the Russian occultist Madame Blavatsky but also careless inspiration from scientific findings, a whole range of paranor-

[9] N.J. Wade, "A Natural History of Vision".
[10] J.E. Olsén, *Liksom ett par nya ögon: Frithiof Holmgren och synsinnets problematik* (Malmö: Lubbert das, 2004), p. 82.
[11] Ibid, p. 87, and passim.
[12] Ibid.

mal investigations, spiritist seances, occult performances and other abstruse specialties developed. Although not as popular as clairvoyance or talking to the dead by means of spiritualist media, transposition of the senses continued to attract interest.

In a popular introduction to "The World of the Undecipherable", published in Stockholm in 1891, the author G. Manetho (a pseudonym, probably alluding to an Egyptian priest from the third century BCE) presents a range of techniques and empirical examples from the fields of spiritism and hypnotism.[13] The third chapter deals with the phenomenon of sensitivity. Apart from clairvoyance, the magnetic sense, the dowsing rod and the *psychometrie*, we also find *transposition of the senses*. Special attention is given to the transposition of sight to the stomach. A photograph, taken during an experiment with somnambulism in Vienna of a blindfolded man reading a letter held at the pit of his stomach, illustrates the procedure.[14]

In order to assert the veracity of this unusual way of reading, Manetho claims that the German physiologist Rudolf Heidenhain (1834–1897)—renowned for his work on nerve and muscle physiology and for being the teacher of Ivan Pavlov who, with help of dogs, developed the theory of classical conditioning—defended the theory of transposition of the senses. This seems to have been a fairly common misunderstanding at the time, probably due to the fact that Heidenhain did study possible connections between nerves of the ear and the stomach, and that he had taken an interest in hypnotism after attending a show with the Danish public hypnotist Carl Hansen, who travelled

[13] G. Manetho (pseud.), *Från det outgrundligas verld: Hypnotismens och spiritismens fenomen framställda genom experiment* (Stockholm: Fröleen & Comp. förlag, 1891).
[14] Ibid, pp. 88–142. Transposition of the senses is treated in pp. 95–98, and the photograph in question is found on p. 97.

around Europe staging spectacular performances.[15] In any way, Manetho's claim and Heidenhain's interest in Hansen show that the demarcation line between science and parascience was not completely drawn—the senses were still in the making as discriminate capacities of the living organism.

Le sens paroptique – Jules Romains' discarded sense

In 1919, *La vision extra-rétinienne et le sens paroptique* by Jules Romains was published. Romains, whose real name was Louis Farigoule, is well-known as a poet, novelist and dramatist. His plays were the most performed ones internationally in the late 1920s alongside those of Shaw and Pirandello.[16] It is less known that Romains had attended courses in histology and physiology at the École normale supérieure in Paris, and that he put forward a theory of eyeless sight. At least, the Académie française, in their article on Romains, conceals this interesting part of his work.[17] To me it is unknown whether Romains was in contact with Robert Desnos and the surrealist group, but the correspondence between the former's theory of eyeless sight and the latter's experiments involving *automatic writing* deserves closer examination.

In *La vision extra-rétinienne et le sens paroptique*, Romains explains that the skin surface of a human being is capable of vision thanks to the existence of microscopic eyes—*ocelles*—under the skin, and that hence it is possible to read by means of the skin. He coins the term *paroptics* to denote the skin's capacity of vision, and he claims to perform his experiments in accordance with scientific methodology. His findings show that the

[15] Manetho on Heidenhain in ibid., pp. 95–98. For Heidenhain's interest in Hansen: A. Moll, *Der Hypnotismus* (Berlin: Fischer's medicinische Buchhandlung, 1895), p. 327.
[16] Académie française, "Jules Romains", <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/les-immortels/jules-romains>, (14 February 2019).
[17] Ibid.

parts of the body that see the best (apart, I assume, from the eyes) are, in descending order, the hands, the neck, the cheek, the forehead and the chest.[18]

Romains continued his paroptical research for some years. In the early 1920s, the neurophysiologist Louis Lapicque attended one of Romains' demonstrations of paroptical reading, and published a critical report on it in *L'Année psychologique*.[19] It immediately struck him, Lapicque states, that monsieur Farigoule (Romains) pointed out the opacity of the blindfold used for the subject, whereas he said nothing about the familiar difficulty of avoiding apertures in the blindfold on each side of the nose. Lapique discards *le sens paroptique* but declares that Romains' work was carried out in good faith.[20]

In 1924, Romains' work was translated into English by Charles Kay Ogden. A review in *The Lancet* states that "[t]here is no inherent impossibility in the idea that the skin is responsive to the wave-lengths in the ether," but the theory requires "more rigorous proof than the author advances."[21] "On his thesis in general", the anonymous reviewer concludes, "the only possible comment seems to be, 'It may be so.'."[22]

Met with ridicule, Jules Romains left academic life and devoted himself completely to literature. He continued working on his earlier theory of *unanimisme*, "a mixture," according to David Shew Wilson, "of a scientific materialism on the one hand and of a poetical idealism on the other." He probably found it easier to translate his philosophical ideas into fiction than into

[18] L. Farigoule, *La vision extra-rétinienne et le sens paroptique* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue française, 1920), p. 43.
[19] L. Lapicque, "Sur une prétendue vision extra-rétinienne. (Reproduction de la communication faite à la Séance du 17 mars 1923, de la Société de Biologie)", *L'Année psychologique* 24 (1923), pp. 449–453.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Anon., "Eyeless sight", *The Lancet* 203, no. 5246 (1924), p. 561.
[22] Ibid.

science.[23] I have found no indications of his own use of paroptics, and the term itself never gained ground.

Dermo-optical perception and the case of Rosa Kuleshova

In the course of the twentieth century, the designation *transposition of the senses* appears to have given way to the more scientific sounding *dermo-optical perception* (DOP), which in parapsychological literature is explained as the capacity to see with the skin. Transposition of the senses and DOP are similar but not identical—the former includes senses other than sight—and reading with the fingertips also appears to have been heard of far more during the twentieth century than reading with the stomach.

Rosa Kuleshova, born in 1940 in the Urals in Russia, was a famous DOP reader whose abilities were examined by Soviet experts and were reported in a very lengthy *Life* magazine article in 1964. The *Life* reporter Bob Brigham, who met the psychic Kuleshova in Moscow, testified that he had seen her reading a very small text on his business card with her elbow.[24] Albert Rosenfeld, the author of the article, gives a detailed account of scientific tests concerning Kuleshova's and other subjects' powers. Scientific investigations were carried out by the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and a number of experiments were planned to take place in the US at the time of publication of the *Life* article.

According to Russian experts, Kuleshova could read newspaper headlines and children's books set in large type as rapidly as if she had not been blindfolded. Ordinary text sizes were not a problem but took longer. "She was also able to describe illustrations in popular publications like *Ogonyok* and *Krokodil* as well

[23] D.S. Wilson, "L'âme diffuse: The ethics of Jules Romains", MA thesis (Montana State University, 1958), p. 21.
[24] A. Rosenfeld, "Astonishing evidence of a new hidden sense: Seeing color with the fingers", *Life Magazine*, 12 June 1964, p. 102.

as on cigarette packages and post stamps."[25]

In 1966, the psychologist Walter Makous published an article in *Psychological Review* with "explanation and demonstration" of cutaneous colour sensitivity.[26] Thermodynamic analysis allowed him to show that it is possible to sense different colours with the tips of one's fingers and so "dermo-optical perception was finally freed from paranormal connotations", as a 2006 article on DOP has stated.[27] Cutaneous colour sensitivity, however, is distinct from being able to read with anything other than the eyes, and is obviously not a question of "dermo-optical perception" but of thermodynamics, and of—as Duvard explained it—"an exquisite sense of touch".

Making sense of reading

The cases of sightless reading that I have sketched here are bizarre, and it is easy to make fun of the belief that it is possible to see and read by means of the skin. Perhaps this is why paranormal reading hitherto has not been considered in the growing and diverse field of reading studies. Another explanation for the exclusion might be that the focus of reading studies within humanities often lies on ways of using literature, and of shaping literary cultures and book cultures, while the focus of natural science-oriented research is on cognitive and neurological dimensions of reading. Paranormal reading falls in between: it is neither about literature nor about brain functions. Still it might say something about the place and force of the written word within culture and about the admiration of the ability to decode it.

As I noted in the introduction, the complex nature of reading

[25] Ibid., p. 106.
[26] W. Makous, "Cutaneous color sensitivity: Explanation and demonstration", *Psychological Review* 73, no. 4 (1966), pp. 280–294.
[27] Ibid.; P. Brugger and P.H. Weiss, "Dermo-Optical Perception: The Non-Synesthetic 'Palpability of Colors'. A Comment on Larner (2006)", *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 17 (2008), pp. 253–255, p. 254.

is still largely uncharted by the natural sciences.[28] For us who work within humanities there are other problems. The lack of synonyms for "to read" and "reading" severely reduces the scope of meaning production exerted by (what we call) reading. The study of rapid eye movement, for example, is perhaps not necessarily a study of reading at all, and reading a beloved poem is very different from reading a timetable for the local bus. Yet all three activities go under the name of "reading". I have used "consumption of text" for want of a better word, but even though reading is a matter of consumption, it is also a matter of production and distribution. As Pierre Chantraine and Jesper Svenbro have shown, the Greek language has around a dozen verbs signifying "to read."[29] They date back to around 500 BCE. This is not the place to recapitulate their uses and various denotations, but for anyone interested in reading, Chantraine's and Svenbro's research will prove enormously rewarding. With this article, I wish to introduce the topic of the history of paranormal reading into the realm of reading studies, both because it is interesting in itself and because it reminds us that reading is not one thing—reading can be read in many different ways.

[28] J. Holsanova, *Myter och sanningar om läsning*, p. 15.
[29] J. Svenbro, "Archaic and Classical Greece: The Invention of Silent Reading", in *A History of Reading in the West*, eds. G. Cavallo and R. Chartier (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), p. 38, with further references.

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