**Diana Holmes****, ‘The Everyday Miracle of Reading Fiction’**

Partial Transcript\*

\*With apologies from the chair for failure to record this opening part of the presentation.

When you think about it, reading fiction is an everyday miracle – one of those extraordinary feats of human invention so familiar as to be invisible. We look at – or perhaps if using braille we feel with our fingertips – a lot of squiggly signs on a sheet of paper, and transform these through a glorious mix of perception, memory and imagination into a fully realised imaginary world that can seem so real that it suspends perception of the lived reality around us. This is the experience of becoming ‘lost in a book’, though actually we don’t get lost but somehow continue to maintain a low-level, functional awareness of our lived place and time, so that (for example) a call for help or the doorbell ringing will duly jog us back into reality and into action. Marie-Laure Ryan describes immersive reading as an *amphibian* activity:‘the reader capable of pleasurable immersion maintains a split loyalty to the real and the textual world’ (97), immersed in the ‘ocean’ of the fictional universe yet ‘taking oxygen from the surface’ – it is what another theorist of reading calls ‘dreaming when you know you are dreaming’ (quoted M-L R 97).

Fiction in any medium performs this sort of magic, when it works, but reading in certain senses is especially remarkable. In other narrative media – film, theatre, television for example – the art itself, as Elaine Scarry puts it, ‘has immediate sensory content’ (7) - colour, sound, movement – but oral or written narrative has no such content, consisting rather of a set of instructions for how to imagine the scene, the person, the event (Scarry 2001:7; Corner & Taggart 56).

So to take the example of the text I mean to return to later, Leila Slimani’s *Le Pays des autres*, the first paragraph opens like this: ‘La première fois que Mathilde visita la ferme, elle pensa “c’est trop loin”. À l’époque, en 1947, ils ne possédaient pas de voiture…’ and we learn (still within the first 12 lines) that she and her husband Amine are being driven in an uncomfortable rattly cart through the dusty landscape towards a farm that Amine has inherited. The world of the book is situated in place, in time, in an atmosphere of heat and dust, and in both Mathilde’s mind as she finds the farm’s location too far from civilisation, and in Amine’s mind – focalisation switches – as he feels impatient to arrive at ‘les terres que son père lui avait confiées’. Two people, a place that has emotional weight but also threatens hardship and isolation, are conjured up by words that mobilise our probable extra-textual knowledge of mid-twentieth century history, as well as of the contrasting cultural origins of the names ‘Mathilde’ and ‘Amine’. Mobilised too are the reader’s own sensory experience of discomfort and heat, and their emotional experience of hope and anxious apprehension.

In this paper I want to:

1. Examine some of the theory on what actually happens in our brains and bodies when we read – in other words the material grounding of immersive reading
2. Briefly explore some of the narrative techniques that produce the effect of immersion in a fictional world
3. Suggest why narrative fiction matters
4. And think about which narrative genres are especially conducive to immersivity, focussing on one that has seen signs of revival recently in French women’s writing – the family saga, taking as my main example the Slimani text already cited but with reference also to other recent novels.

I will then try to conclude.

1

Combining study of the brain as a physical mechanism with study of literature and reading is not new, but it has seen a surge of interest over recent years. Clearly a physiological process is involved in the perception and interpretation of literary texts – particular parts of the brain being activated by different sorts of linguistic catalyst. I’m not competent to give a scientifically accurate account of how the brain functions, but the complexity and dynamic connectedness of cerebral activity during reading is certain. One Charles Sherrington captured this in 1940 in an appropriately poetic account of the brain as an “*enchanted loom* where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern always a meaningful pattern though never an abiding one; a shifting harmony of subpatterns” (Sherrington [1940] 2009,225; Comer & Taggart 95).

I want to pull out just three aspects of what happens in the brain that are particularly relevant to immersive reading:

1. The imagining of scenes or people or objects produces neural activity in exactly the same area of the cerebral cortex as the perception of these things “in real life” – that is, we do see “in the mind’s eye” as the saying goes, and to extend the metaphor touch with the mind’s skin, feel with the mind’s heart. The virtual experience produced by immersive reading has the same physical effect on the brain as direct experience – and the corporeal effects of reading a gripping, compelling piece of fiction (tears, butterflies in the stomach, shortness of breath, sexual arousal for example), or in other words sensory mimesis, seem to confirm this.
2. The parts of the brain engaged by virtual – as by direct – experience are multiple and multiply connected as Sherrington’s “loom of millions of flashing shuttles” suggests. Apparently, the brain is composed of 100 billion neurons and 100 trillion connections. Broadly, the left hemisphere is the area that deals with thinking in words, sequencing, logic, facts whereas the right hemisphere is more the site of imagination, intuition, rhythm, feelings. Words of course, especially in a literary context, both denote and connote, so that both hemispheres are constantly engaged and the ‘flashing shuttles’ weave between comprehension, memory and emotion.
3. The brain and its different components are not fixed entities but are constantly shaped and re-shaped by neural activity – alterations in how the brain is engaged and activated change the brain itself, or in more precise language: “alterations in the use of synapses translate into enduring changes at molecular and cellular levels” (90) so reading can in quite a literal sense change us. Also, the plasticity of the brain is such that while “sensorimotor and cognitive structures occur at more or less predictable sites”, they are nonetheless “idiosyncratically organised and reflect our unique personal history” (Comer & Taggart 90). Every reader is a slightly different reader. The experience of reading a particular book (let’s say a novel) is likely to be recognisably similar in different readers, but also unique to each one.

So when we learn to read, we learn to translate the signs on the page into mental images that closely resemble actual perceptual acts, so that the storyworld is experienced haptically (through touch), visually, and aurally, despite its purely virtual nature. Because perception is inextricably linked to emotion, sensory mimesis is inseparable from emotional mimesis and an effective piece of written fiction can thus produce “an empathetic investment in entirely invented personalities and their fates” (Comer & Taggart, 44). Indeed, the imagined image can achieve greater vivacity (to use Scarry’s term) than the perceived image: the sea described for me in a strong fictional context (let’s say by Virginia Woolf or Colette) may strike me with an intensity at once sensory and emotional that is greater than when I actually stand on the shore and look out at the ocean, and a fictional character may move me more deeply than a person encountered in real life.

**Remainder of presentation available as a recording.**