



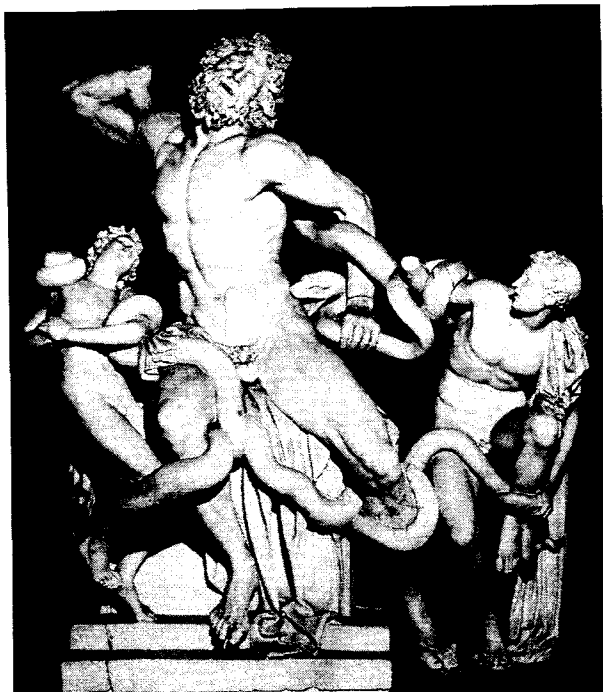
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## LOST AT SEA? READING AND READING PROMOTION IN A PICTORIAL CULTURE

### INTRODUCTION

What chances do reading and reading promotion stand in a culture dominated by (audio)visual media? I will try to show that an effective reading promotion can no longer work outside or against but must operate *within* the dominant paradigms of our media culture. In other words, reading promotion should acknowledge other media while emphasizing the *exclusive* potentials of literature and gratifications of reading.

Let me start out by looking at the question of reading versus watching from the vantage point of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766). In this study, Lessing (1729 – 1881), most prominent advocate of the literary Enlightenment in Germany, delineates the boundaries of painting and poetry in an interpretation of the Laocoon-Group. Laocoon meant to warn the Trojans of what was to go down in history as the Trojan horse; yet his intentions were thwarted as he and his twin sons were killed by sea snakes sent out by the irate goddess Athena. Fatally deluded, the Trojans pulled the wooden horse inside their walls. The Greek sculpture, roughly dating between 50 B.C.E. and A.D. 50, embodies the most intense moment in Laocoon's deadly struggle (fig. 1):



**FIGURE 1** LAOCOON-GROUP (SOURCE: ETSCHMANN, WALTER, HAHNE, ROBERT & TLUSTY, VOLKER (2004): KAMMERLOHR. KUNST IM ÜBERBLICK. STILE – KÜNSTLER – WERKE. MÜNCHEN: OLDENBOURG, 65)

Lessing's main point concerns the difference between the visual arts and poesy.<sup>1</sup> In modern terms we might say that Lessing explored the range of two symbolic codes. It is characteristic of the visual arts to place colors and forms side by side (*nebeneinander*) in space. Due to that semiotic make-up, sculpture and painting are structurally limited to representing objects (or parts of objects) existing side by side. Poesy (literature) arranges sounds or words sequentially (*aufeinander folgend*) in time. That is why literature focusses on 'objects' whose components follow one after another. In short, the realm of painting is to render *things*; the prerogative of literature is to represent *actions*.

1 Lessing's *Laocöon* was a response to Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauer-Kunst* (1755). Winckelmann had strongly advocated the emulation of ancient by contemporary art. His treatise, also dealing in depth with the Laocöon-Group, was to become seminal for German classicism around 1800.

From there it is but a small step towards a plea for the promotion of reading. Since actions can only be represented in language and best in writing, every benefit that derives from experiencing (fictional) actions can best be obtained from reading. This idea is confirmed by the benefits typically ascribed to reading (for the following cf. Spinner, 2001): Reading helps us acquire knowledge about the world and makes us think about fundamental human questions; reading allows us to transgress the boundaries of our empirical experience and to develop a sense for the fantastic and the possible (what Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities* called *Möglichkeitssinn*). Reading fosters our imagination, our capacity for empathy, and our awareness of cultural and historical relativity; reading helps us deal with the challenges of growing up and of shaping our identity. Obviously, these effects involve processes much more than events: we build knowledge and think about problems; we transgress boundaries and develop mental capacities; we grow up and find out who we are. If, however, these processes are to be steady and their effects lasting, they cannot be sustained by momentary acts of visual perception of static objects; rather they require reading as a prolonged mental involvement in fictional actions.

We must pause here to note a remarkable irony. In Lessing's time, reading was by no means held unanimously as a cultural good. Towards the end of the 18th century educators denounced the hazards of excessive reading, especially for young women. Viewed from today, the zealous discourse about reading fury and reading addiction (*Lesewut* and *Lesesucht*) (cf. Glück, 1987, 178ff.; Kittler, 1995, 180; Beisbart & Maiwald, 2001) looks preposterous, if not absurd. In any case it should make us more than cautious in passing judgments on today's media culture and today's "Adolescents and Literacies in a Digital World" (cf. Alvermann, 2002).

Apart from that irony it seems doubtful that reading promotion can actually be based on Lessing's distinction between painting and poesy. For one thing, reading is no longer a culturally exclusive symbolic practice and the Laocoon-Group hardly a typical case of visual perception. In 1992, W.J.T. Mitchell coined the expression *pictorial turn* to describe a contemporary culture largely dominated by pictures; at about the same time Norbert Bolz (cf. 1995, 228) proclaimed the "end of the Gutenberg-galaxy" in a giant shift from verbal to visual communication. A more recent publication, edited by Christa Maar & Hubert Burda in 2004, testifies to the continuing relevance of the phenomenon: *Iconic turn. Die Neue Macht der Bilder* (the new power of images). Looking at Greek sculptures in art museums is not typical of what people do in their daily lives. As pictures have become ubiquitous, decoding pictures has become a constant task. Now, from a merely quantitative point of view, our case for reading vs. watching still holds. Although appearing in large quantities,

pictures might not do what literary texts do. (Regardless how many engines pull it, no train will ever fly.)

But quantity is not the only issue here. So far reading has been held against watching static artefacts. As soon as *motion* pictures come into play, there is a new ballgame, of course. It has been said, so by David Bordwell (1985), that film lacks a narrator and that there is a basic semiotic difference between showing and describing an action. Still, there are categories that literary and cinematographic narratives share. On the level of *histoire* (or story) there are characters, setting, time and action; on the level of *discourse* (or plot) there are time structure and point of view (cf. Leubner & Saupé, 2006, 218–220). Beyond all theoretical considerations: What is a movie, if not – in Lessing’s terms – a sequential arrangement of objects to represent an action drawn out in time? And what is the cinema, if not the mighty 20th century successor of 19th century literature in telling stories to mass audiences?

But as films tell stories, do not all the claims associated with reading apply to watching as well? In watching films, can’t we learn about the world? Can’t we develop empathy with characters and reflect on their actions? Can’t we encounter the fantastic and the unthinkable? Can’t we grow and mature in doing all that? Think about the infamous perfume maker Jean Baptist Grenouille. His story is a gripping and touching one in Patrick Süskind’s novel (1985), but also in Tom Tykwer’s movie (2006). Why should we want or have to read a novel, if there is the option to watch a film?

#### THE READING PROCESS

In search for an answer to that question we can turn to media theory and media history. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century consciousness becomes the main subject matter of literature, and novels come as all kinds of “confessions,” “effusions,” “diaries” and “letters.” Prime examples are Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1739) and *Clarissa* (1748), Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) or, already into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jane Austen’s novels. As literature discovers *Sense and Sensibility* (Austen, 1811), extensive reading becomes a mass medium for the emergence of subjectivity. This is not only due to the “psychological” subject matter of the literary texts but also to the very nature of the act of reading. In following a linear succession of letters, words and sentences, a reader permanently recodes digital symbols into mental images and concepts. This brings about an ambiguous effect: A readers conjures up a fictional world which by definition is separate from the empirical world; yet in doing so, the reader constantly experiences his or her own subjectivity. In short, reading is the privileged medium for blending social perception and self-

reference and thus for the formation of consciousness (cf. Jahraus, 2003 and 2008, 172-175; Kittler, 1995).

Much the same idea can be developed from the perspective of cognitive science and reading research, which have provided us with basic insights as to what happens when we read. First, there seems good reason to assume that people transform everything they experience into *mental models*. According to Johnson-Laird (1983, 165), mental models are “structural analogues of the world,” that is, symbolic representations of experience and knowledge. If we have been to a number of restaurants, we develop a mental model of what happens there. We take a seat; we study the menu; we order drinks and food; we eat, request the check, pay and leave. Storing knowledge and experience, mental models also provide us with conceptual frames and scripts for dealing with new situations. (A mental model of driving a car or eating at a restaurant allows us to drive many different cars and eating at many different restaurants.) Mental models are interconnected, with smaller models being embedded into larger ones. And they are constantly being re-modelled as a new experience is being integrated into our mental make-up (cf. Maiwald, 2005, 81-90). Comprehending a text then means that we transform what we read into a mental model.

Secondly, in reading two processes intertwine: bottom-up and top-down. Reading sets in with decoding letters and words, that is, with mentally reconstructing incoming data “bottom up” from the text. Almost simultaneously the reader starts to activate knowledge he or she already has about the world, including knowledge about texts, and feeds it “top down” into the reading process (fig. 2):

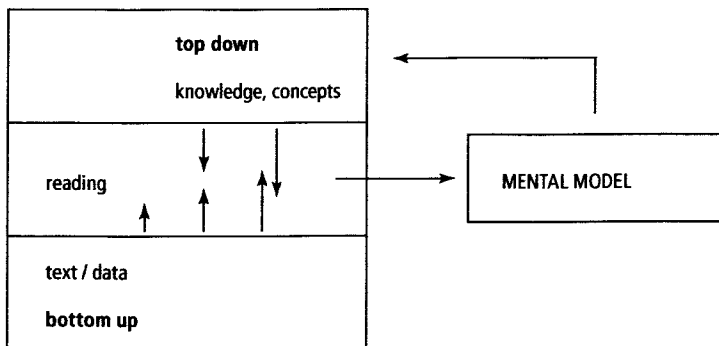


FIGURE 2 READING AS A BOTTOM UP AND TOP DOWN PROCESS

As we read into a text, a mental model begins to emerge and becomes one of the concepts that instruct the further reading process. In the course of reading we establish semantic relations, formulate hypotheses and develop expectations. Let us read, for example, into the following text:

Once upon a time in the middle of winter, when the flakes of snow were falling like feathers from the sky, a queen sat at a window sewing, and the frame of the window was made of black ebony. (<http://www.fln.vcu.edu/grimm/schneeeng.html>, 30 November 2008)

The phrase *Once upon a time* indicates a narrative of past events, more specifically, a fairy tale. [*F*]lakes of snow [...] falling like feathers from the sky hint at supernatural things to come; the adjective *black* is a foreboding of sorrow. In any case we do not expect the queen to be sitting at the window forever if the story is to become a story.

As the example shows, reading entails typical cognitive and textual operations. Among these are the identification and discrimination of central and peripheral elements; the selection of important and the inference of missing data; the synthesis of wholes and the analysis of parts; the interpretation as the act of assigning meaning (cf. Aust, 1996). In performing those operations, the reader moves from decoding letters and words via establishing local and global coherence to realising superstructures (i.e. the formal organisation of the text) and contexts (e.g. the newspaper in which an article appears or the larger discourse of which it is a part) (cf. Kintsch, 1998).

To sum it up, reading can be described as an elaborate cognitive process in which text data and previous concepts are transformed into mental models.

#### THE COMPLEXITY OF VIEWING

If we regard elaborate cognitive abilities and a rich store of mental models good things, then reading is a good thing. But what about the complexities of viewing? Cannot watching a film be mentally very demanding, too? Steven Johnson (2006) has claimed that modern TV series like *Seinfeld*, *The Sopranos* or *24* make us more intelligent because their intricate plots, multithreaded narratives, and rich intertextuality severely challenge the intellectual process of the viewer.

Another of Johnson's examples is the cartoon series *The Simpsons* – and rightly so. The opening sequence of *the Simpsons movie* (2007), for example, is a brilliant collage of witty intertextuality and ironic self-referentiality: It starts out with a gruesome story of heinous murder and intrigue acted out by Itchy and Scratchy, the heroes of the cartoon series within the series. After a hard cut, there is Homer

Simpson standing up in the middle of a cinema denouncing the boring film and the stupid people who pay to see something they could get for free on tv. Yet another reality shift occurs when Homer first speaks to his fellow spectators but then directly addresses the viewers of *The Simpsons*. From there we move swiftly into the well-known *Simpsons* intro with Bart writing the penalty sentence “I will not illegally download this movie” on the blackboard (Bart having to stay after class is a *leitmotif* of the series). The action proper starts out with the rock band Green Day performing from a barge on Springfield Lake. Since the lake is heavily polluted, the band wants to say “a word about the environment,” whereupon the audience hoots and pelt them with rocks, tomatoes, and bottles. The water starts eating into the barge, which is sinking, Titanic style. The singer assures his comrades, “Gentlemen, it’s been an honor playing with you tonight,” whereupon they take out violins and play “Nearer My God to Thee” (fig. 3).



FIGURE 3 TITANIC REFERENCES IN *THE SIMPSONS MOVIE* (2007) (SOURCE: SCREENSHOT FROM DVD VIDEO NO. 3462508)

Finally we see a church service with the organ playing the Green Day hit “American Idiot – Funeral Version.” The media images cited in this opening include the first moon landing (to the soundtrack of *Zarathustra* from Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: *A Space Odyssey*), a careworn John F. Kennedy bent over his desk during the Cuban Missile Crisis, *Tom and Jerry* and – of course – *Titanic*.

To appreciate this kind of audiovisual text requires vast cultural and intertextual knowledge and elaborate cognitive activity. Watching is by no means simple, let alone simplistic. What is more, complexity as encountered in *The Simpsons*

is no exception. Over the past 10 to 15 years audiovisual texts have entered the cultural mainstream which 30 years ago would have been rejected by larger audiences as too complicated. Films like *Twin Peaks*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Matrix (I)*, *Run Lola Run*, *Vanilla Sky*, and *Mulholland Drive* play on the precarious ontological status of reality (what we experience as reality) and demand an aesthetically and intellectually astute viewer.

It is a popular prejudice that written texts are intrinsically superior to visual texts. Let me give you an example of the ambivalent relations between literature and film to prove that this is not necessarily true. *The Graduate* is a story about a young man who has just finished college and is bound for a business career. Benjamin Braddock's life, however, falls apart as he embarks on an affair with Mrs. Robinson, who is not only considerably older than Ben but also the wife of his father's business partner.

The 1967 film by Mike Nichols starring Anne Bancroft and Dustin Hoffmann has become a classic while the novel by Charles Webb (1963) has rightly faded into oblivion. Webb's novel is a very dry piece of prose which reads like a film script; the movie, on the other hand, draws fully on the means of the medium (for example by including the Simon and Garfunkel hits "Mrs. Robinson" or "Scarborough Fair"). The contrast shows very markedly in the endings. After Ben has disrupted the wedding of Mrs. Robinson's daughter, he and Elaine run from the church and escape on a bus. Here is the ending of the novel:

Elaine was still trying to catch her breath. She turned her face to look at him. For several moments she sat looking at him, then she reached over and took his hand.

"Benjamin?" she said.

"What."

The bus began to move. (Webb, 1987, 165)

This is not a bad ending. It is poetically just and aesthetically satisfying. It leaves to the reader's imagination to picture how Elaine looks at Ben, and it leaves open what Elaine is going to ask or tell Ben. Although it is a happy ending, it remains an open one, too.

Where the book comes to a satisfactory ending, the final scene of the movie is truly brilliant. A few stills may help to illustrate the point (figs. 4-7):





FIGURES 4-7 FINAL SCENE OF *THE GRADUATE* (SOURCE: SCREENSHOTS FROM DVD VIDEO NO. 500177)

The shot-countershot perspective (5/6) creates a much more comic effect than could be achieved in a written narrative. In addition, the film masterfully renders the transition from adrenalin-fuelled euphoria (5) to quiet happiness to subdued pensiveness (7). Last but not least, the film's parting shot (8) is rich in symbolic meaning: Ben and Elaine are moving ahead, away from the viewers, but mainly away from their parents' rigid and shallow lives; surrounded by ordinary people, they ride on a bus passing modest homes and trees, leaving behind artificial status symbols (swimming pools, sports cars) but also the privileges of their upbringing. And, in a highly symbolic act, they are crossing a bridge.

In short, there is good reason to see *The Graduate* as a movie, but very little reason to read the book (cf. Frederking, Krommer & Maiwald, 2008, 146-150). Films like *The Graduate* or *The Simpsons* raise the question of whether the benefits ascribed to reading cannot equally (and more easily) be obtained from watching.

One might be tempted to say "yes". For one thing, the mental operations we perform when reading are not categorically different from the ones executed when watching a film. We start out with limited audiovisual data, activate our ideas about the world and films and gradually try to make sense out of what we see (i.e. to construct a mental model). As far as content is concerned, films and books share the potential to tell stories that may stir our imagination, foster our empathy, expand our knowledge or tickle our nerves. Needless to say there are many films that will not do anything like that; but let us not forget that there are plenty of pointless and boring books.

#### THE SPECIFICITY OF READING

Nonetheless, I still want to make a case for reading and reading promotion. My first argument pertains to the cognitive aspects of reading. In basic categories of mere perception there is no fundamental difference between reading a book, watching a film or, for that matter, eating at a restaurant. All our sensory experiences are first transformed into semantically neutral neuronal data before our brain computes cognitive realities out of those data. The range and the complexity of our cognitive world, however, depend very much on terms and concepts we acquire. Yet the acquisition of terms and concepts and the formation of mental models are deeply grounded in language. Language is the arbitrary, symbolic, discursive and potentially recursive code we rely on to think and to communicate. (There is no way to express *if*, *perhaps*, or *I was mistaken* in a picture.) A mental model after having seen Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* on stage might look like this:

Romeo ♥ Juliet

Romeo † → Juliet †

⊗

But surely we cannot rest satisfied with that. When dealing with the most famous love tragedy in world literature, we should want an extended and more sophisticated mental model, which might include knowledge about other works of Shakespeare, the Elizabethan era and Renaissance theater, adaptations of the subject (e.g. by Gottfried Keller, Leonard Bernstein & Baz Luhrmann) and also the awareness that *Romeo and Juliet* is a timeless fictional model of the conflict between family loyalties and love in particular, society and the individual in general.

It is obvious that developing elaborate mental models requires terms, concepts, and cognitive operations that cannot possibly be gained from viewing pictures. A child growing up in a rich verbal and communicative environment is more likely to develop rich cognitive faculties than will children left to themselves in front of a tv set. Literacy events such as book sharing, talking about books, visiting a library or bookstore do not guarantee such an environment, but of course they are integral to it. It is no real surprise that competent readers generally also make competent users of other media. To put it bluntly: If you are smart, watching can make you smarter; but in order to get smart, you will have to read.

Having to read to get smart seems a good point in favor of reading, but it sounds somewhat utilitarian and slightly joyless. Therefore my second claim concerns the intrinsic value of literature. Films may be able to tell great stories in great ways. Yet there are things literary texts do which films cannot (and vice versa) and experiences available from reading which cannot be obtained from watching (and vice versa). Erich Kästner's children's novel *Emil and the Detectives* (1929), for example, has been adapted in three films (1931, 1954, 2001), which tell the story in a rather straightforward, conventional way. The novel, in contrast, intriguingly displays and plays on its status as an aesthetic artefact. The text starts with a poetological reflection on writing and literature as the presumed author tells the young readers why and how he came to write a book about Emil, and not a South Sea novel. Subsequently the text introduces ten main characters and locations before the actual narrative sets in: "So, nun wollen wir aber endlich anfangen!" (Kästner, 1999, 27). The story proper is told by an extradiegetic narrator who largely abstains from commenting the action but divides it into 18 chapters with catchy titles such as "A spy sneaks into the hotel" or "Do we learn anything from that?" Most importantly, the empirical author suddenly appears as a character in the novel when a journalist named Erich Kästner invites Emil to his newsroom for an interview.

Ironically and playfully drawing attention to itself as a fictional construct, Kästner's novel provides a reading experience that is categorically different from watching a movie.

When the novel *Emil and the Detectives* was released, Kästner had but little to fear from audiovisual competitors. But even today a literary text may very well hold its ground, as is demonstrated by the remarkable debut of *Life is Funny*, published by E. R. Frank in 2000. What makes *Life is Funny* special would largely be lost in a film. The novel is a sequence of 13 narratives by New York teenagers about their precarious and often barely tolerable lives. Their talk ranges from rough to gentle, from funny to fearful, from silly to wise, yet it always sounds true. The reader listens to voices from contemporary Brooklyn which despite their authentic ring can be quite complex. "Sonia" for example unfolds a multi-layered narrative to recount her troubled friendship with a young man (which as an Indian girl she is not permitted to pursue) and to convey her attempts to cope with his suicide (cf. Frank, 2000, 29-44.). In addition, the reader, as the novel progresses through seven chapters and seven years, gradually realizes how the teenagers' stories weave together and build up to startling climaxes. Reading, and reading only, can convey that kind of experience.

My plea in favor of reading, then, is twofold: Reading is crucial for cognitive development, and reading grants us particular aesthetic experiences. That being so, reading promotion requires no further justification. But in a media culture like ours reading promotion should follow certain routes while steering clear of others. Let me make three suggestions:

#### THE PROMOTION OF READING

First, we should not condemn or ignore other media but consider audio books, films and interactive CD's as stepping stones to reading and books (cf. Bertschi-Kaufmann, 2000). This applies especially to children growing up in social environments remote from print media and the reading culture.

Secondly, an important part of reading promotion should be the unbiased reflection of inherent potentials and gratifications of different media. My remarks on *The Graduate*, *The Simpsons*, and *Emil and the Detectives* were to outline the general idea, which another example may illustrate:

In his 1971 novel *Krabat*, Otfried Preußler describes a 14-year-old orphan who is hired as an apprentice in a flour mill. It soon turns out that the miller is a practitioner of black magic who in return for his evil powers sacrifices one of his apprentices to the devil every New Year's Eve. Krabat undergoes a dangerous emancipation from his master and finally succeeds with the help from a young woman.

*Krabat* is a suspenseful fantasy thriller and at the same time a thoughtful novel of adolescence (which has also been read as a parable of the rise of Nazism in Germany). Blending fantasy action and a serious subject matter, Preußler's book has sold 1.8 million copies and been widely read in German schools.<sup>2</sup> In October 2008 a film adaptation came out, accompanied by a rather flashy website. *Krabat* has thus turned from a mere book into a full-blown media combination.<sup>3</sup>

Reading is often credited for giving free play to the imagination whereas pictures limit our perception. Many readers emphatically confirm that idea, so let us put it to the test by comparing the description of the mill in the novel to a picture of the mill on the website:

Krabat was groping through the forest like a blind man in the fog, then came across a clearing. When he prepared to step out from under the trees, the clouds opened and the moon appeared, shedding a cold light on everything.

Now Krabat saw the mill.

There it was in front of him, cowering in the snow, dark, ominous, a powerful, evil animal lurking for prey (my translation)<sup>4</sup>.

What certainly strikes us in this passage is the metaphor in the third paragraph, which conveys Krabat's subjective view of the mill as a menacing, sinister animal. In the picture of the mill on the website there is an open landscape, not a clearing; we see a decrepit building bearing little resemblance to a dangerous animal, however with a murder of crows soaring behind it (fig. 8).

2 Kirsten Boie's 1999 mobbing thriller *Nicht Chicago. Nicht hier.* testifies to that when one character observes that all seventh graders are going to read *Krabat* (cf. Boie, 2004, 12).

3 It is media combinations such as *Krabat* or, archetypically, *Harry Potter* which painfully call into question the meaning of reading and reading promotion. Media combinations present a wide variety of written, auditive, audiovisual and interactive versions of a story, and they provide attractive interactive options (guest books, votings, contests, shopping etc.). In contrast to what cinema, MP3-player and internet have to offer, reading a book at first glance seems a rather tedious activity.

4 The original text:  
*Krabat tappte ein Stück durch den Wald wie ein Blinder im Nebel, dann stieß er auf eine Lichtung. Als er sich anschickte, unter den Bäumen hervorzutreten, riß das Gewölk auf, der Mond kam zum Vorschein, alles war plötzlich in kaltes Licht getaucht.  
 Jetzt sah Krabat die Mühle.  
 Da lag sie vor ihm, in den Schnee geduckt, dunkel, bedrohlich, ein mächtiges, böses Tier, das auf Beute lauert.*  
 (Preußler, 1981, 14)



**FIGURE 8** PICTURE OF THE MILL IN *KRABAT* (SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.KRABAT-DERFILM.DE/INDEX\\_LIVE.PHP](http://www.krabat-derfilm.de/index_live.php), 15 JANUARY 2009)

In my view it would be pointless to prove the text superior to the image or vice versa. The picture shows a ramshackle mill-wheel, a flimsy water conduit, a warped roof and in doing so perhaps curbs our imagination. On the one hand the black birds and the eerie grey filter create a startling aesthetic effect. By contrast, the text allows us to picture the mill in our minds and thereby stimulates our imagination. On the other hand the metaphor of the lurking animal, even though aesthetically powerful, forces an interpretation on the reader, which the image does not. In a media culture like ours, comparisons of the means and potentials of different media should play an important role in reading.

Lastly, when books are concerned, reading promotion should not stay indiscriminate and indifferent but put special emphasis and a special premium on books that yield special gratifications. *Emil and the Detectives* and *Life is Funny* are such books. They should be highlighted since they prove that neither reading nor reading promotion need to be lost at sea in a pictorial culture.

#### SHORT BIOGRAPHY:

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