

Mediations

Journal of the Marxist Literary Group



Volume 28, Number 2, Spring 2015 • **Dossier: Surface Reading**

Editor's Note

The Proxemics of Reading

The recent "groundswell of support for new ways of reading...seems like good news," Elizabeth Weed argues in a recent issue of *History of the Present*, because "no critical practice can maintain its vitality without continually questioning its theories."¹ But the calls for different reading practices — she has in mind Eve Sedgwick's call for reparative reading and Stephen Best's and Sharon Marcus's "Surface Reading: An Introduction" — only "seem" new because they "rely on rather familiar indictments of the practice of critique."² This doesn't mean, however, that Weed thinks the various reconsiderations aren't of critical interest. "What is noteworthy, perhaps," she suggests, "is that the very sources of the indictments are not honed opponents of theory but, rather, former fellow travellers."³

One could quarrel with a number of points that Weed makes here: are Sedgwick and the various proponents of surface reading merely offering up versions of "familiar indictments of critique"?⁴ Even if this is true, does familiarity necessitate their arriving at the same conclusions? And isn't it just a little uncaring, at this point in theory's history, to divide critics neatly into pro- or anti-theory camps? These matters notwithstanding, Weed's framing of the question in terms of "vitality" characterizes accurately one of the primary reasons why reading practices have (again) become the focus of critical concern: at the core of these reconsiderations of how we read is a deeply felt worry that critical energies have stalled if not become altogether stale. Indeed, one can see both in her invocation of "familiar[ity]" and in her conclusion — which queries whether the "fetishistic thinking" Weed identifies with Sedgwick, Best, and Marcus is the only option available for critics — that what's driving the interest in reading practices is a deeper concern with whether criticism might not be routing such that it ruts itself as fast as it covers new ground.

What Weed captures nicely by connecting up the renewed interest in reading with critical dispensations towards theory is, then, a generational shift underway in literary criticism, one that Best and Marcus acknowledge fully when they note that the contributors to the "Surface Reading" volume all "received doctoral degrees in either English or Comp. Lit after 1983."⁵ For in the calls for a renewed approach to reading practices we can see a kind of frustration with both the status quo and the

tried-but-true. If too often one feels a sense of déjà vu while reading literary criticism — the sense that one knows where an argument is headed without having to read too far into it (and without regard to the object under scrutiny) — then the renewed attention to reading strategies has, at the very least, offered up ideas about how we might shake up our practices going forward.

Critics with a materialist bent need not be terribly troubled by thinkers like Best and Marcus pointing out that ours is a different historical moment than the previous generation's, or by their reminding us to pay attention to questions of surface. For even the most dialectical thinker would, I think, agree that there has been a greater concern with the less obvious than the readily discernable. And there is certainly something to be made of their claim that ideologues have become increasingly comfortable with making the consequences of their ideas transparent.⁶ So while one might quarrel about the degree to which “deep” readings disregard the obvious and the pervasiveness of this new forthrightness, their point is to be taken.

One might take issue, however, with the style in which their points get made. Best and Marcus are rather breezy in their dispensing of modes of criticism that are a little more varied and thoughtful in approach than their characterization in their “Introduction.” They are careful to say that the essays collected in the “Surface Reading” special issue represent “neither a polemic against nor a postmortem of symptomatic reading” but the critical response — traceable in the footnotes of the essays in this dossier — suggests that relatively few readers have taken this claim as seriously (despite its being on the surface).⁷ One of the many virtues of the essays in this dossier is that they resist the temptation to adopt a defensive stance and instead take up the challenge of attempting to sharpen materialist reading practices. And for this surface readers should be grateful. Just as Franco Moretti's distant readings require many close readings to make the analyses pop, surface readings will pay only when positioned against equally adept critiques working at various “depths.”⁸

So although we work in institutions that demand and reward work that garners the most attention — either by repudiating the critical past or by insisting on a particular future — these essays show why we might be at least as well served by work that patiently and modestly incorporates ideas past and present, dormant and current.⁹ Contributors were not charged with taking up any of the recent discussions about reading nor were they asked to incite radical transformations.¹⁰ Rather, they were asked simply to write short essays about materialist reading practices without constraint. To this end, the hope has been that their efforts will not only ensure that critics with a materialist bent are part of the larger conversation about reading but also the reshaping of critical practice going forward.

Jason Potts, for the *Mediations* Editors

Notes

1. Elizabeth Weed, "The Way We Read Now," *History of the Present* 2:1 (2012): 95. I'm grateful to Mathias Nilges, Emilio Sauri, Nicholas Brown, and Jen Hedler Phillis for their assistance in bringing this dossier to print.
2. Weed, "Way" 95.
3. "Way" 95.
4. It is worth noting that though most discussions of surface reading treat the idea as though it is uniform in practice, there are considerable variances in the reading practices of the contributors to the *Representations* special issue. Best and Marcus deserve a little leeway for having to write an introduction that has to account for these differences. In short, we could all be better (and more generous) readers.
5. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108:1 (2009) 1.
6. Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading" 2.
7. "Surface Reading" 3.
8. For all the interest in reading at the surface, in depth, close up, far away, and at different speeds, no one, to my knowledge, has explained how this translates into a pedagogical practice. The teaching of close reading had a deeply democratic impulse behind it. That impulse, it seems to me, hasn't been sustained subsequently (or at least as intensively).
9. Dan Stout and I make a longer version of this approach in *Theory Aside* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014).
10. It should be noted that Jason Baskin's essay's origins did come out of an MLA seminar devoted to materialist responses to the questions the *Representations* issue generated. Charles Sumner's revised contribution to that seminar is now in print in *Diacritics* 40:3 (2012): 26-55.