

# The medium is not the message

LEAH PRICE

David Mikics

SLOW READING  
IN A HURRIED AGE

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In the age of Slow Food, Slow Parenting, and Slow Knitting, it is no surprise that we should be presented with a Slow Reading manifesto. Just as some are giving up Hovis or Mighty White in favour of artisanal loaves, so data-mining and webcrawlers have provoked some human readers to stage a slowdown.

A high proportion of them are literary critics. If you care as much about form as about content, if noticing apparently insignificant details is a tool of your trade, then *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Speed Reading* (2008) may sound like a pleonasm. Ever since modern literatures were first taught at university a couple of centuries ago, their average professor has read at the same pace as her seven-year-old. But while the average holds, the spread is widening. At one end lies Franco Moretti's computer-assisted "distant reading", which multiplies by several orders of magnitude the number of texts that would count as evidence for any claim about literature. At the other, "slow" has begun to replace "close". After "A Movement for Slow Reading", an article by Lindsay Waters published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2007, came small-press essays (John Miedema's *Slow Reading*, 2009), pedagogical research (Thomas Newkirk's *The Art of Slow Reading*, 2011) and cultural history (Isabel Hofmeyr's *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in slow reading*, 2013).

The psychologist Daniel Oppenheimer recently showed that less legible fonts increase readers' ability to remember the text, presumably because it slows them down. In *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*, David Mikics explains how we can put on the brakes for ourselves. A decade ago, Thomas Foster compiled interpretive advice in a book called *How To Read Literature Like a Professor*; Mikics's much subtler volume could be subtitled "How to read literature like a student". Its best sections resemble a transcript of the iTunes U tracks that people nostalgic for long-ago university days use to while away an hour on the treadmill.

Mikics adopts the genre's pep-talk tone along with its guiding metaphors: reading as eating and reading as exercising. He compares Twitter to an unsustainable "diet", explaining that "Rather than gulping down our books, we must digest them with deliberation". He adds that "slow reading changes your mind the way exercise changes your body". What sets Mikics apart are not his precepts, but his examples. Fourteen rules such as "Find the Author's Basic Thought" and "Notice Beginnings and Endings" introduce chapters demonstrating how to interpret short stories, novels, poems, plays and essays. If you follow the rules, Mikics gently reassures readers, "you will be able to make detailed, insightful remarks like the ones I've recorded".

The rules themselves are sensible, and the examples grant a glimpse into the classroom of a gifted teacher. His only mistake was to shackle them to prematurely aged platitudes about the superiority of epics to emoticons.

Mikics posits that "literature, music and art express; computers, by contrast, lead you in a step-by-step way. You're not immersed in a reality, you're staring at a screen". To contrast art with computers, however, makes no more sense than to contrast truth with toothpicks. Does an MP3 count as "music" or "computer"? If you read Homer on your Kindle, does your "staring at a screen" mean that nothing is "expressed"? One might as well take Ikea assembly leaflets to prove that paper leads in a step-by-step way, making print incompatible with art. Software designers anticipated Mikics's model of the book when they made ereaders one of the few apps lacking an onscreen clock. Amazon and Apple both assumed that books, unlike websites, would make users lose track of time. Like Mikics, they were idealizing printed paper – for while great literature stops clocks and even hearts, the average book is no less topical or ephemeral or hastily edited than the even larger number of websites.

Take Mikics's acid-free hardcover volume. Page 16 explains that "slowness and concentration are needed to learn to do anything well that is worth doing well, from fly-fishing to electrical engineering to playing the violin. The same is true of reading"; page 19 that "there is no mastery of any skill or craft without time, dedication, and concentration. This is true for mastering the piano . . . and reading"; page 26 that "there's a technique to your choices about how to respond to a book, just as there's technique required in any activity that you need to learn, from ballroom dancing to playing music"; and page 41 that "reading well requires a skill born of technique, just as playing music or painting does". By the fourth iteration, it's hard to follow Mikics's first rule of reading, "Be patient".

Mikics sometimes treats his readers as if they were "slow" in the colloquial sense. No sooner has he typed a quotation mark than he instructs us to "note my skeptical quotation marks". Nor can we be trusted to answer even the most leading rhetorical questions: "Do you really want to listen to Beethoven while reading Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, whose thuggish characters constantly have 'Ludwig Van' on the stereo? The answer is no". No factoid is left to speak for itself: "The average teenager sends about three thousand texts a month – an astonishing, and dismaying, figure".

None of this is to say that *Slow Reading* is any less pithy or surprising than the average book. Whether in or out of print, most words end up on the remainder heap. Beauty can be found online, and banality lurks between covers. The medium is not the message.