

DAVID TREND

THE *End*
OF *Reading*

FROM Gutenberg TO *Grand Theft Auto*



Big changes have been taking place in reading in recent years. While American society has become more visual and digital, the general state of literacy in America is in crisis, with educators and public officials worried about falling educational standards, the rising influence of popular culture, and growing numbers of non-English-speaking immigrants. But how justified are these worries? By focusing on “reading,” this book takes a serious look at public literacy, but chooses not to blame the familiar scapegoats. Instead, *The End of Reading* proposes that in a diverse and rapidly changing society, we need to embrace multiple definitions of what it means to be a literate person.

DAVID TREND is Professor of Studio Art at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of over 100 articles and essays in such periodicals as *Art in America*, *Cultural Studies*, and *Social Identities*, among others. Trend is the former Dean of Creative Arts at De Anza College in Cupertino, California, and past editor of the journals *Afterimage* and *Socialist Review*. Trend’s books include *Everyday Culture* (2007), *The Myth of Media Violence* (2007), *Reading Digital Culture* (2001), *Cultural Democracy: Politics, Media, New Technology* (1997), *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State* (1996), *The Crisis of Meaning in Culture and Education* (1995), and *Cultural Pedagogy: Art/Education/Politics* (1992).



THE *End* OF *Reading*



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INTRODUCTION

THE END OF READING

BIG CHANGES have been taking place in reading in recent years. While American society has become more visual and digital, the general state of literacy in America is in crisis, with educators and public officials worried about falling educational standards, the rising influence of popular culture, and growing numbers of non-English-speaking immigrants. But how justified are these worries? *The End of Reading: From Gutenberg to Grand Theft Auto* is titled provocatively to address current debates about the state of literacy in the United States and around the globe. By focusing on “reading” this book takes a serious look at public literacy, but chooses not to blame the familiar scapegoats. Instead, *The End of Reading* proposes that in a diverse and rapidly changing society, we need to embrace multiple definitions of what it means to be a literate person.

These new definitions of literacy require an inclusive approach to “reading,” which validates the many languages and forms of communication that define a democratic society in the contemporary age. Embracing these diverse forms of reading entails a recognition of differences in the origins, forms, contexts, and cognitive processes of expression and reception. This broadened perspective requires us to look beyond established paradigms of media and cultural studies—though these remain crucial—and examine the sources of language, the field of perception, and the history of visual expression. Put another way, this means looking past disciplines of education and

media studies to also consider recent scholarship in anthropology, art history, linguistics, and psychology, among other areas.

As the digital revolution has made media part of everyday life, the way we take in information about our world has changed. Messages, entertainment, and learning come to us from our phones, televisions, and laptops in a variety of visual and aural formats. Some of them arrive as written texts, some present themselves through images and sounds, others combine all of these elements. *The End of Reading* acknowledges our culture's reliance on reading as a central vehicle of communication, recognizing that literacy is the cornerstone of learning. At the same time, *The End of Reading* talks about the many new forms of communication that have grown up around reading and the importance of those new media forms. In older discussions this might suggest a call for "media literacy." But in today's world that isn't enough. Simply saying that people are entranced by movies or influenced by the nightly news doesn't suffice. After all, mainstream media critics like Jon Stewart, Bill O'Reilly, and Rachel Maddow are already there any time you need them. But in today's communications infovrese we are charting new territory. Advances in interactive entertainment, social networking, mobile communication, texting, video sharing, "quality television," and the ubiquity of iPods—all of these things show us that people now face a world where one form of "reading" really isn't enough.

The age-old divide between the word and the image plays a big role current literacy debates. This separation of language from visual expression has shaped cultures across time, providing coherence to our thinking and expression, but also generating controversy over the influence of words and pictures. *The End of Reading: From Gutenberg to Grand Theft Auto* examines the long standing opposition of language and vision in human culture. The book explores the pre-historic origins of language as well as ways that people develop language abilities in childhood. *The End of Reading* similarly looks at humanity's earliest non-linguistic picture-making inclinations and traces their parallel development with speaking and writing. Following these trajectories to the present day, the book offers a diverse approach to literacy compatible with evolving discourses in technology, multiculturalism, and gender and disability studies. In personal terms, *The*

End of Reading is informed by the struggles with the written word I've observed in my own child. Like many other facets of development, reading accrues to kids at different rates—and a surprising number of children these days experience delays in this process. As I've observed difficulties in literacy development in my own family and others, I continue to wonder how our kids are going to do in a world that requires reading while it is increasingly made to seem irrelevant. Each chapter begins with an anecdote about a fictional child named Emily, developed from my general observations as a parent.

The End of Reading stakes out territory in three areas: education, media, and technology. In terms of education, the book discusses the trend common to both talk-radio alarmists and honestly concerned citizens to blame schools and teachers for declines in reading and public literacy.¹ It's an understandable reaction if one looks at the problem without much scrutiny. Why wouldn't one think that the fault lies in the one institution that's supposed to be teaching little Johnny to read? The flaw in this reasoning is part of what makes the whole issue so difficult to grasp. No single institution is entirely at fault and no one component of a child's experience (or an adult's experience) can fully correct the situation. Besides, K-12 education in the United States is extraordinarily complicated by the local character of school governance and funding, which results in little consistency in what is taught and creates great disparities in school quality. Important rejoinders to the assault on schools and teachers emerged from progressive traditions espoused by early thinkers like John Dewey and later focused in the field of critical pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire, as well as feminist and multicultural educators.²

Owing much to the traditions of critical pedagogy, *The End of Reading* emerged from my ongoing interest in the everyday things that occupy people's lives and often define them as human beings. In recent decades critical pedagogy's commonsense address of ordinary experience has brought it close to the media literacy field and its literature. In its engagement with media, the critical dimensions of *The End of Reading* would position it with such classic works on the media industries as Ben Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly* (1983). Yet, *The End of Reading* also embraces contemporary thinking that credits viewers with good judgment, thus assuming a more even-handed view. Tak-

ing care not to romanticize “the beholder’s share,” *The End of Reading* concludes that intellectual and popular culture need to come together in a technologically diverse and multicultural society.³ *The End of Reading* also seeks to expand the existing discourse on media literacy by discussing visual culture in artistic, anthropological, and neuroscientific terms.

It’s important to remember that until relatively recently, technology was regarded as a debased or simply non-essential category of academic inquiry, addressed by relatively isolated figures like Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams.⁴ As small computers became consumer goods in the 1990s, the discourse on technology grew robustly. Notable early examples include Donna Haraway’s, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1985), Manuel Castells’ *The Informational City* (1989), George Landow’s *Hypertext: The Convergence of Critical Theory and Technology* (1991), and Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* (1993)—each interrogating technology in a specific area.⁵ *The End of Reading* pays homage to such important works, but strikes a different chord in applying such critiques to fundamental issues of vision and expression throughout human history and across a range of non-technological disciplines.

The End of Reading reflects the evolution of my writing interests over the last three decades. With an early inclination toward visual studies, I worked from 1980 to 1995 for *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, which publishes articles and essays by figures in photography, film studies, and media theory.⁶ Actively engaged with the New York media art community during those years, I wrote news stories, reviews, and critical articles on photography, film, and video, as well as institutional critiques of organizations ranging from the American Film Institute to the National Endowment for the Arts. Moving to California in the early 1990s, I assumed the editorship of *Socialist Review* and was introduced to the intellectual legacy of the American New Left.⁷ At this time I also met Henry Giroux and discovered critical pedagogy. As these influences commingled, I came to recognize that artists and media producers were, in essence, teachers, in their efforts to communicate and inform. Thinking about education, I began writing about the creative aspects of teaching that might define educators as artists. My book *Cultural*

Pedagogy (Bergin & Garvey, 1992) emerged from this synthesis of ideas and helped in bringing the fields of critical pedagogy and art/media studies together.⁸ This work was followed by a number of books on education, media, politics, and technology.

The End of Reading was written for general non-fiction readers and students interested in current debates over literacy, popular culture, and education. The work is informed by the kind of teaching I do, which for much of the past 15 years has involved large undergraduate classes of hundreds of students. In what I say and write, I work continually to find ways to make my ideas accessible and understandable. This book seeks to be conversational, yet direct, conceived and written as an integrated and sequentially presented work, rather than a selection of essays. It follows a loosely chronological progression that begins with historical background, assesses recent and current ideas, and concludes with future projections. Each of its six chapters has three subdivisions, which are further divided into smaller units titled to inform readers about exactly what is being discussed.

Chapter One, entitled “The Disappearing Word,” lays out the paradox of reading in today’s world. Reading is critical to learning and success, but in so many places it seems unnecessary. We read for information and functioning without thinking very much about it. Can we say that reading is a “natural” skill? New research tells us that pre-historic humans were more inclined to making pictures than words. Educators now agree that written language is more learned than instinctual. But Western civilization has always favored reading over seeing. Chapter Two, “The Crisis in Public Literacy,” looks at reasons to be concerned about reading in America. There are plenty of such reasons, but immigration isn’t one of them. Most newcomers learn to read as soon as they can. And while many people worry about educational decline, the real problem is that many schools in poor communities don’t get the money they need. When self-righteous politicians advocate budget cuts to failing schools, they fail to acknowledge that many such schools already get less money than their successful counterparts.

Chapter Three, “The Rise of Media Culture,” talks about what’s taking the place of reading in people’s lives. It’s no secret that we are

now an “information society” in which visual media, the internet, and computer games dominate our culture. The further we go, the more ingrained technology becomes in our everyday experience and our ways of knowing ourselves and our world. How do we address these changes? Is this transformation good, or bad, or both? Chapter Four, “When Machines Do the Reading,” examines in greater depth the implications of life informed more by media than words. There’s no mistaking the innate skills in media literacy that people possess, especially the younger of us. In fact, it can be said that many people “read” media with the kind of proficiency they have with print. But with so much at stake in the new information economy, media needs to become a bigger part of education. *The End of Reading* winds up with Chapter Five, “The Future of Reading,” concluding that the time has arrived to equally value written and media literacy. As information technology increasingly becomes our means of communicating and learning about the world, reading and seeing should be seen as equivalent. This will not signal the death of the printed word, but certainly the end of reading *as we know it*.

NOTES

1. Key works in these early criticisms of schools and teachers include Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage, 1988); Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1917) (New York: Gardners Books, 2007); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2000); Henry A. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988); Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*, 5th Edition (Allyn & Bacon, 2006); Joe L. Kincheloe, *Toward a Critical Politics of Teacher Thinking: Mapping the Postmodern* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1993); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Lather, Patti, “Feminist Perspectives on Empowering Research Methodologies,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 11, no. 6 (1988) 569–581; James A. Banks, *Multicultural Education, Transformative Knowledge, and Action* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education As the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge 1994); Christine Sleeter, ed., *Empowerment through Multicultural Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg, *Changing Multiculturalism: New Times, New Curriculum* (London: Open University Press, 1997).

3. The somewhat obscure expression "the beholder's share" is important to these discussions in offering early evidence in art history of what literary theorists would later term "reader-response" theory. See, E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Visual Perception* (Princeton: Princeton, 1960).
4. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: Toronto, 1962); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964); Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1975).
5. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism," *Socialist Review* 80, vol. 15, 2 (March, 1985) pp. 65–107; Manuel Castells, *The Informational City: Information Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban Regional Process* (Oxford, UK & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989); George Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1991); Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Perseus, 1993). See also, N. Katherine Hales, "The Seduction of Cyberspace" Verena Andermatt Conley, et al., eds., *Rethinking Technologies* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1993) pp. 13–28; Felix Guattari, "Machinic Heterogenesis," in *Rethinking Technologies*, pp. 42–58.
6. See Grant Kester, ed., *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Durham, NC: Duke, 1998).
7. See Socialist Review Collective, *Unfinished Business: Twenty Years of Socialist Review* (London: Verso, 1991).
8. David Trend, *Cultural Pedagogy: Art/Education/Politics* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1992).



CHAPTER ONE

THE DISAPPEARING WORD

Growing Up in a Wordless World

AS I'M THINKING about this book, my eight-year old daughter is mad at me in what has now become a familiar pattern. We haven't had an argument and she hasn't misbehaved in any way. Emily is frustrated because I've told her she needs to read a book. Or try to read a book. We're again at an impasse because reading is difficult for Emily and she's starting to hate it. This is really out of character for her. In just about every other aspect of her life, Emily is engaged, positive, and quick to learn—in other words a happy, intelligent, and altogether “normal” kid. But she has this mysterious problem with the written word, and it has started me thinking about reading in our culture. The real source of Emily's frustration is that in most of her life she doesn't need reading. The world she experiences is driven by images, media, and interactive technologies—all so inviting and easy to access that learning to read feels like a conspiracy invented by grown-ups and school. And I'm beginning to think the kid may have a point.

When I imagine myself in Emily's shoes I know this reading business is tough. I'm not talking about peer pressure, competition, or jibes from friends who can read the *Farmville* directions that she can't always decipher. It's the more subtle experience that Emily has when part of her world looks like a jumble of hieroglyphics. It is a life partly cut off from a language that most of us have long taken for granted, a