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GUILLORY, John. *On Close Reading*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025.

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John Guillory became an influential scholar in the 1990s with *Cultural Capital* (2023), a book that was crucial in the so-called Canon Wars of the period. Guillory turned to the sociology of literature to argue for the necessity of historicizing the concept of value of literary works, as well as recognizing that the history of literature "cannot be dissociated from the history of the school" (Guillory, 2023, p. 60). *Cultural Capital* sparked an interest among scholars in the institutionalization of literature and in understanding the role of academic institutions and practices in this.

This interest was shaped in many ways. One of the main forms was the necessity of understanding the practice of close reading, its first foray into Anglophone academia in the early twentieth century, and its consolidation as an academic practice in the postwar period – what Guillory (2022, p. XII) calls the "postwar settlement". The practice of close reading (though not the term, as he explains) is of particular interest because of what Guillory (2023, p. 45) understands as a shift in the locus of cultural capital from the "cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie" to the professionals working in graduate programs by the mid-twentieth century. In many ways, the New Critics attempted (and were mostly successful) to legitimize the English discipline by moving it away from what was perceived as a fruitless academicism of literary historians toward a scientific engagement and evaluation of the literary work through close reading.

In *On Close Reading*, Guillory is concerned with understanding why the term close reading only gained traction after the New Critical period, from the 1960s on, as well as why it is so difficult to define it. He tackles the first question by pointing out that, while the term was probably used in conversations during the New Critical period, it was not institutionalized until later, with the rise of the period of High Theory. At this point, close reading was assessed negatively by a younger generation of scholars – increasingly from a wider demographic –, and the term became relevant as the practice of close reading became something to be critiqued.

This critique, however, did not banish the practice, as it was variously absorbed by different theories, becoming a mainstay in academic textual practice until today. Here we can look at Guillory's own definition of close reading, understood as a cultural practice and defined in intentionally broad terms. For him, close reading must be learned by demonstration and imitation; it is not a method, in the strict sense, as there are no fixed rules to be followed; it is a mode of "explicitation," to use W. K. Wimsatt's words, and not interpretation. It is, indeed, "an infrastructure for interpretation" (Guillory, 2025, p. 59); what it does is to show "the work of reading," and "that *is* all" (Guillory, 2025, p. 60). Crucially, the definition Guillory brings is not

one aligned with that of the period of High Theory, which subsumed the New Critics' methods of interpretation with the practice of close reading. This allows a reframing of the history of close reading and its impact on reading practices. As his definition dismisses earlier theoretical engagements with close reading, it brings a powerful understanding of what close reading is nowadays, disentangling it from interpretation and ideological ties to New Criticism.

This definition could trigger the creation of a history of close reading, allowing us to understand its impact on the reception of literature as it became the default mode of engagement with literary texts in the academy, as well as its relation to a longer history of reading closely. Understanding close reading in this way might also bring pedagogical implications, helping teachers separate close reading from interpretation as much as possible in their teaching practices, and reflecting on the issues of demonstration and imitation inherent to this cultural practice.

For this enterprise, as well as for new developments in literary studies, Guillory is not averse to the use of neuroscience, using indeed neuroscientific vocabulary, and seeing as necessary an engagement with this growing field in literary studies, more specifically in the study of reading (Guillory, 2025, p. 22). This allows him to ground close reading in more than the socio-historical dimension, adding also a bodily and cognitive dimension that enriches the discussion. Furthermore, this is in tune with Guillory's current broader project of understanding – and tentatively addressing – the crisis in literary studies. The project is explored in more detail in *Professing Criticism* (2022), a book profitably read alongside *On Close Reading*.

In both books, though with different emphases, Guillory discusses the postcritical perspective. While he concedes that this brought a refreshing focus on lay practices of reading, he is categorical in his defense of close reading. For him, "the disciplinary technique of close reading has an important role to play in response to a media situation revolutionized once again by new technology," and is "well worth the effort" of its transmission (Guillory, 2025, p. 86). This is stated by the end of his text, and the more skeptical reader might be left wondering why the effort of the transmission of close reading is worthwhile, as well as how it can help respond to the new media situation. These are crucial questions that cut to the core of debates of the justification of our discipline but are left unanswered. We can understand the restraint of someone well-versed in these kinds of justifications – throughout almost two centuries of the history of English – in not adding yet another instance that will soon be criticized and surpassed. The problem is that, with an increasingly anti-intellectual *zeitgeist*, our discipline needs these kinds of justifications.

Even though Guillory's definition of close reading is refreshing, his account of its rise is problematic for being too Anglocentric. If, as scholars, we decide that we should understand close reading in Guillory's terms, we also need to understand its broader history, not only associated with the Anglo-American university, as he brings here, but as emerging in different parts of the world at different times. This, unfortunately, Guillory does not discuss as much: while he mentions earlier close readers such as Coleridge and Montaigne, he focuses mostly on the American New Critics. Since the book is intentionally short, this is acceptable, but the reader may close it believing that close reading – in the broad definition Guillory proposes – first became institutionalized in the Anglo-American academy, later to be exported to other countries. If this is the case, what should we think about Russian formalism and twentieth-century German philology? Even so, the book might invite scholars to assess close reading's relation with different academic traditions and open the door for comparative studies.

Despite this shortcoming, Guillory opens new ways of exploring a defense of the English discipline, as well as new perspectives for literary studies. We need to remember, furthermore, that Guillory is mainly speaking to the English discipline in the US. This puts this Brazilian scholar who is writing (and possibly his reader) in the situation of trying to understand the usefulness of his discussion in a very different context. For those working in Anglophone literatures, for whom close reading and its discussion are much closer, Guillory's book clearly explains the origin (or at least one origin) of this practice, and touches on topics of intense debate nowadays. For those working on other literatures, however, Guillory's discussion might seem distant, and his concept of close reading, while useful, is hindered by a short text that, though succinct, refrains from touching on points of contact with other traditions. For those, at least for now, the kind of research Guillory is calling for is still too incipient. An engagement with the history of close reading in the Brazilian academy, however, would be enriching, and scholars from different literary traditions might usefully adopt Guillory's definition and answer his call for further research. One hopes that more voices join the discussion of these issues to tackle a crisis in literary studies which, while having specificities in the American context, is global.

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