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## QUEERING THE CANON IN *MIDDLEMARCH THE SERIES*. COLLABORATIVE DIGITAL CREATION AND THE CRISIS IN THE HUMANITIES

QUEERING EL CANON EN *MIDDLEMARCH THE SERIES*. CREACIÓN DIGITAL COLABORATIVA Y LA  
CRISIS DE LAS HUMANIDADES

QUEERING LE CANON DANS *MIDDLEMARCH THE SERIES*. CREATION NUMERIQUE COLLABORATIVE  
ET LA CRISE DES HUMANITES

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**Abstract:** In “The Crisis in Culture” (*Between Past and Future*), Hannah Arendt argues that moments of rupture from the tradition can have a revitalising force by pushing individuals to become politicised. In the contemporary world the crisis is everywhere and humanities colleges, often seen as the last bastions of a declining world, are hamstrung by underfunding when not scrapped altogether. In this context, Rebecca Shoptaw’s *Middlemarch webseries*, a 70-episode video-blog, aired on Youtube from March 15th to December 1st, 2017, takes on a particular significance. Firstly, because it is an appropriation (Sanders) of a nineteenth century novel, from the periphery of academia – the director and actors are a group of Yale students who draw from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72) moments of emotional and affective tensions or existential questio-

ning which find a direct echo in their personal lives. Secondly, this digital collaborative creation disorients (Ahmed) the traditional practice of textual exegesis to serve a queer agenda. Thirdly, it exemplifies the process of “computational subjectivation” (Citton). Indeed, in *Middlemarch the series*, individuation is attained through media ecology, progressively as the characters film themselves, and each other. Finally, the series is worth analysing because it replaces representation by “resonance” (Rosa). In doing so, it widens the scope of textual reception and makes of literature a necessary human experience in the age of crisis.

**Keywords:** Crisis in culture; George Eliot; *Middlemarch*; Rebecca Shoptaw; *Middlemarch the series*; Vlogging; Computational subjectivation; Queer; Resonance.

**Resumen:** En «La crisis de la cultura», Hannah Arendt sostiene que los momentos de ruptura con la tradición pueden tener una fuerza revitalizadora al empujar a los individuos a politizarse. En el mundo contemporáneo, la crisis está en todas partes y las facultades de humanidades, a menudo consideradas como los últimos bastiones de un mundo en decadencia, se ven lastradas por la falta de financiación, cuando no son desmanteladas por completo. En este contexto, la *webserie Middlemarch* de Rebecca Shoptaw, un videoblog de 70 episodios, emitido en Youtube del 15 de marzo al 1 de diciembre de 2017, adquiere un significado particular. En primer lugar, porque se trata de una apropiación (Sanders) de una novela del siglo XIX, desde la periferia del mundo académico: el director y los actores son un grupo de estudiantes de Yale que extraen de *Middlemarch* (1871-72) de George Eliot momentos de tensiones emocionales y afectivas o de cuestionamientos existenciales que encuentran un eco directo en sus vidas personales. En segundo lugar, esta creación digital colaborativa desorienta (Ahmed) la práctica tradicional de la exégesis textual para ponerla al servicio de una agenda queer. En tercer lugar, ejemplifica el proceso de “subjectivación computacional” (Citton). De hecho, en la serie *Middlemarch*, la individuación se consigue a través de la ecología mediática, progresivamente a medida que los personajes se filman a sí mismos y entre sí. Por último, merece la pena analizar la serie porque sustituye la representación por la «resonancia» (Rosa). Al hacerlo, amplía el alcance de la recepción textual y hace de la literatura una experiencia humana necesaria en la era de la crisis.

**Palabras clave:** Crisis de la cultura; George Eliot; *Middlemarch*; Rebecca Shoptaw; *Middlemarch the series*; vlogging; subjectivación computacional; queer; resonancia.

**Résumé:** Dans «La crise de la culture», Hannah Arendt affirme que les moments de

rupture avec la tradition peuvent avoir une force revitalisante en poussant les individus à se politiser. Dans le monde contemporain, la crise est omniprésente et les facultés de Lettres et Sciences Humaines, souvent considérées comme les derniers bastions d'un monde en déclin, sont paralysées par les manques de financement, quand elles ne sont pas purement et simplement supprimées. Dans ce contexte, la *websérie Middlemarch* de Rebecca Shoptaw, un vidéo-blog de 70 épisodes, diffusée sur Youtube du 15 mars au 1er décembre 2017, prend une signification particulière. D'abord parce qu'il s'agit d'une appropriation (Sanders) d'un roman du XIXe siècle, depuis la marge du monde universitaire ; la réalisatrice et les acteurs sont un groupe d'étudiants de Yale qui puisent dans *Middlemarch* (1871-72) de George Eliot des moments de tensions émotionnelles et affectives ou de questionnements existentiels qui trouvent un écho direct dans leur vie personnelle. Deuxièmement, cette création numérique collaborative désoriente (Ahmed) la pratique traditionnelle de l'exégèse textuelle pour servir un programme queer. Troisièmement, elle illustre le processus de «subjectivation computationnelle» (Citton). En effet, dans la *websérie Middlemarch*, l'individuation est atteinte grâce à l'écologie des médias, au fur et à mesure que les personnages se filment eux-mêmes et les uns les autres. Enfin, la série mérite d'être analysée parce qu'elle remplace la représentation par la «résonance» (Rosa). Ce faisant, elle élargit le champ de la réception textuelle et fait de la littérature une expérience humaine nécessaire à l'ère de la crise.

**Mots clefs :** Crise de la culture ; George Eliot ; *Middlemarch* ; Rebecca Shoptaw ; *Middlemarch la série* ; vlogging ; subjectivité computationnelle ; queer ; resonance.

The title of this article may sound provoking as, broadly speaking, from Nuccio Ordine to Byung-Chul Han, both mentioned in the call for papers, there has been a tendency to hold digitalisation more as partly responsible for a crisis in the humanities than as a boon. Ordine praises the usefulness of the useless and the attendant necessity of slowness in total opposition with the time-saving utilitarianism commonly associated with the digital revolution and, more pointedly, Han in *The Swarm. Digital Prospects* (2017) blames digitalisation both for the disintegration of community and public space and for slowly eroding political discourse and action. These arguments are undoubtedly solid and cogent and their authors may be usefully regarded as precious whistle-blowers or eye-openers. That said, the purpose of the following study is to address a spontaneous, makeshift appropriation of media technology by students who are not acting under

the supervision of their institution. The experience took place in 2017 when a group of sophomores from Yale used a Victorian novel as a trigger to articulate their personal reflections on existential questions and initiate an exchange with internet users via media technology. So, in this instance, what is often summarily described as the Third Industrial Revolution did not erase classical texts, which Ordine rightfully values, nor did it condemn this bunch of students to the status of isolated islands, alienated from their contemporaries<sup>1</sup>. Yet the experience in and of itself may be symptomatic of a *crisis*, in Hannah Arendt's acceptance of the notion.

The term crisis daily flagged in the news has seen its meaning progressively eroded and trivialised. It may therefore be helpful to turn to Hannah Arendt who in her works, principally *Between Past and Future* (1954), propounds a meticulous analysis of the concept, and instead of seeing it solely as an affliction common to modern societies, also underscores its revitalising force. Put simply, the crisis by breaking oppressive norms or exploitative systems, forces individuals to become political beings. More especially, Arendt turns her attention to the etiology of crisis, to suggest that it arises whenever habitual responses and cumulated knowledge, drawn from previous experiences, are no longer efficient to cope with a new, unprecedented situation: "A crisis erupts when the social system is at a loss to come up with solutions to permit its survival in its present conditions" (Norberg 134). Thus, on the negative side, the crisis sets an unheard-of challenge which at first sight appears as unsurmountable, but on the plus side, it also affords an unparalleled opportunity to think on different terms, by getting out of one's comfort zone, as it were. It entails the necessity for reassessment and reorientation, which is not a path that is usually chosen, since people as a rule tend to favour the comfort of habits and well-grooved routines. This is the reason why "orientation", or its inflected version as *reorientation*, is central to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*.

According to Ahmed, orientation only becomes visible when the norms of the majority are not followed, incidentally this is why the term sexual orientation hardly ever applies to heterosexuality. In her perspective, phenomenology, i.e. the corporal relation to the world as constitutive of identity, is central. Movement in space and the proximity or distance of objects within the field of perception and interaction, play a decisive role. Therefore a "queer phenomenology" implies that sexual orientation not only determines desire, but also the way in which our physical relation to our environment is conditioned. The apprehension of space depends on the way we inhabit it, or in what

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1 This echoes the title of Nuccio Ordine's book *Gli uomini non sono isole. I classici ci aiutano a vivere*. Milano, La Nave di Tesseo, 2018. Ordine took up the first few lines of a poem by John Donne, the Metaphysical poet: "No man is an island,/Entire of itself,/Every man is a piece of the continent,/A part of the main."

capacity we occupy it: “each Ego has its own domain of perceptual things and necessarily perceives the things in a certain orientation.” (Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining* 165-166). To quote but one example Ahmed mentions the alienating experience of sitting at the family kitchen for a young queer daughter. Because the room is cluttered with objects which are her parents’ wedding presents, they are bound to be perceived differently by her and her siblings: “the family home puts objects on display that measure sociality in terms of the heterosexual gift” (Ahmed 90). These objects call for an assent which is, by the same token, an endorsement of the heterosexual family. They are an invitation for the children to pursue in their turn the family line. But, as Ahmed demonstrates, life is not always linear, and crisis results from the rupture with lines of continuity. This is what happens whenever one cannot occupy the place one has been ascribed, as supposedly corresponding to what should be expected according to standard norms and values. According to Ahmed, a typical case occurs whenever the intergenerational transmission of the vaunted heterosexual romance, as the first step towards marriage, is suddenly interrupted, because one of the children is not in line with this predetermined pattern. However, like Arendt, Ahmed also sees such moments of crisis, which render the process of decision indispensable, as an opening rather than a definitive exclusion. After all, crisis is derived from the Greek *krinein* meaning to separate, decide and judge. But the break from the sequence of expected events, the disorienting switch from the pre-written narrative, need not be a gaping hole: “‘the loss’ itself is not empty or waiting; it is an object, thick with presence” (Ahmed 158).

The purpose of the following analysis is to study Rebecca Shoptaw’s “appropriation” (Sanders) of George Eliot’s classic Victorian novel *Middlemarch* through vlogging (Lange) as an instantiation of crisis. In this case, crisis should be understood in the Arendtian acceptance of enacting a vulnerable moment of questioning and confronting an experience of rupture. Through Shoptaw’s series of video clips, freely inspired by a nineteenth-century three-decker<sup>2</sup>, there is an attempt to (re)constitute a community by holding together a canonical heritage, albeit in a fragmentary form. Moreover, the contemporary interrogations articulated by adolescents, who mostly improvise from a selection of scenes from the novel, record what is potentially a moment of crisis in a lifetime—adolescence in a changing world. This in turn contributes to invigorating literature and endowing it with “response-ability” (Haraway *Sraying with the Trouble*, 28). The favoured angle of the series resides in how to achieve a form of sincerity and faithfulness to oneself and in one’s relationships with the others in a media-saturated world, in which

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2 Novels in the Victorian era were first serialised in journals before being published in three volumes, hence the appellation “three-deckers” which allowed editors to make more money than if they had sold one single book.

public confessions are staged as theatralised self-representations on social networks. The paradox lies in the fact that the ethical commitments that Eliot embraced in the nineteenth century, such as the need for empathy, or art as an extension of the self,<sup>3</sup> are now viewed with a form of critical distance tinged with irony.<sup>4</sup> They are dismissed as cheesy and meretricious and out of touch with what the majority of internet users search for. So Shoptaw's challenge lies in opting for a medium which privileges instantaneous, attention-grabbing messages to probe into the complex psychological motivations of adolescents in the grips of an existential crisis. Admittedly, the genre of the novel, that allows for time and the lengthy exposition of complicated mindsets, would have been a more congenial medium as it is best suited to broach what cannot be reduced to straightforward statements.

Crisis is at the core of this reflection. The way a canonical text is reoriented through vlogging may be testament to a crisis in the humanities, i.e. a disaffiliation of the generation Z of so-called "digital natives" with a traditional approach to literature, and possibly also with the way it is still largely taught nowadays.<sup>5</sup> Then the question arises of how a digital environment can serve to express subjectivity in crisis. It may also be wondered how media technology is used to serve a queer agenda. Indeed, what Paul B. Preciado writes in *Countersexual Manifesto* about the emancipatory fusion between the organic and the technological can be seen at work through the production of these video-clips aired on Youtube. Preciado contends that "the promiscuous relationship between technology and bodies" (*Countersexual Manifesto* 130) blurs the essentialist dichotomy between masculinity, traditionally associated with *techne*, and femininity irretrievably linked with nature. And according to the philosopher, Internet counts amongst the "examples of biopolitical artifacts" (*Countersexual Manifesto* 130) allowing for the effacement of this age-old dichotomy. Thus vlogging, in the present case, affords an extension of a non-binary self, through technology, and permits a counterdiscourse to the standard representation of adolescence in the mainstream media. The iterative nature

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3 The fact that for George Eliot the aesthetic and the moral were entirely intertwined has often been noted by critics. This is poignantly stated in her 1856 essay "The Natural History of German Life" through a quotation that has become almost iconic: "The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist is the extension of our sympathies." (Pinney 170)

4 Overall, there has been a tendency, going back to Henry James up to the present time, to take issue with George Eliot for expressing her moral views in her fictions. This is expressed humourously by Patricia Duncker, a great admirer of Eliot herself, in *Sophie and the Sibyl. A Victorian Romance* (2015), her last novel to date: "That high moral purpose championed by the Sibyl doesn't cut much ice now." (30)

5 As was argued by Simon Head in an essay for the *New York Review of Books* (2011), faculty governance is rapidly being replaced by a new corporate consumer model, based upon managerial techniques. This involves the introduction of a utilitarian terminology with criteria such as "student credit-hour production" or "profit and loss account." This is needless to point out that it contradicts Ordine's plea for giving time the place it rightfully deserves in the learning process, as mentioned above.

of vlogging shows up states of crisis, not as a transitory stage in the process of adult formation, but as a permanent given of the human condition, which does not necessarily call for a resolution. Finally, Harmut Rosa's diagnosis of an existential crisis caused by the dictates of speed and productivity, alienating humans from the benefits of their immediate environment (*Social Acceleration*), may prove useful. In this respect, it could be argued that *Middlemarch the series*, by being a haven for improvised exchanges, which is not funded or monitored by the entertainment market economy, affords spaces of "resonance".

### **The data of a case study**

Rebecca Shoptaw's *Middlemarch webseries* is a 70-episode video-blog (or vlog) interactive series, aired on Youtube from March 15th to December 1st, 2017. It is a free interpretation of a classical Victorian novel, *Middlemarch. A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-2), by George Eliot (a pen-name for Mary Ann or Marian Evans), skewing the reception of the canon through a queer agenda. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sarah Ahmed establishes the centrality of the body – more precisely the physical, sensory, emotional and affective experience of inhabiting, if only temporarily, a body – in the process of orienting oneself. Drawing from Husserl's opposition between *Körper* (the body as object) and *Leib* (the living body engaged in intersubjective relations with the outside world) (Husserl, *Cartesian Mediations* 108-109), Ahmed postulates that orientation may be achieved only after undergoing the experience of disorientation. She further points out that phenomenology is interspersed with queer moments, i.e. moments of disorientation, simply because in a predominantly heterosexual environment what is taken for granted by the majority of the populace may be disconcerting, if not forbidding, for the queer minorities. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for his part, accounts for this somatic and mental experience of defamiliarisation in the following terms: "The instability of levels produces not only the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our contingency, and the horror with which it fills us" (295). Here contingency entails the loss of fixed bearings, the realisation that there are no fixed incontrovertible rules guiding the apprehension of the surrounding world, which often reveals itself through erratic, haphazard phenomena likely to induce moments of crisis.

In what follows the orientation/disorientation tandem, which is consonant with the logics of crisis, is broached through different perspectives. Broadly speaking, the area of study which is invested is the reception of a paradigmatic Victorian novel, George

Eliot's *Middlemarch. A Study of Provincial Life* by a group of Yale students. The traditional orientation of book reception prevalent in academia is blatantly altered, as no high-brow, sophisticated research shedding new light on this classic text, is actually sought for. Precisely, disorientation first stems from this students' attempt to inhabit both physically and emotionally the space of a seemingly remote text, by acting out extracts in short clips with a view to interacting with internet users. Therefore, the relation to the text is reoriented, in so far as it is neither geared towards the production of cutting-edge analyses nor limited to mere consumption, i.e., reading for pleasure. The aim is to afford an embodied interaction with fiction *via* technology, chiefly video cameras and internet. For obvious reasons, Eliot's daunting prose is not transcribed *verbatim*. Shoptaw, the eighteen-year old director, opts for what she calls "adaptation by circumstance" (Shoptaw in Bell n.p.) which is both a cinematic technique and a way of reading probably befitting digital users. It consists in drawing from *Middlemarch* moments of emotional, affective tensions or existential questioning which resonate with teenagers, confronted to choices in their personal lives, generally appertaining to prospects of their future careers and more individual orientations. *Middlemarch's* ramifying plots have therefore been pruned down to the embroiled relationships between Eliot's main characters. Dorothea Brooke, a young, high-brow, middle-class woman in *Middlemarch* becomes Dot, a black bisexual sophomore. After dating Casaubon, Eliot's pompous, ineffectual scholar, who features in the series as a snotty graduate student writing a dissertation, titled *Being and World: Transcendental Otherness and Identity*, she falls for Billie Ladislaw, a girl, who plays the part of Will Ladislaw, the Byronic young man in *Middlemarch*. Rosamond Vincy, the novel's seductress, is Rosie who lives an IRL rom-com<sup>6</sup> with Thomas Lydgate (i.e. Tertius Lydgate, the doctor, in Eliot's novel), an up-and-coming pre-med student in the series, who rapidly turns out to be a bore. The other major couple, the one formed by Mary Garth and Fred Vincy in *Middlemarch*, is played respectively by Kai Nugent, a handsome African American who becomes Max, and his boy-friend Fred, played by Oliver Shoulson, who confesses to having loved Max ever since childhood. For anyone familiar with *Middlemarch* the interpersonal dynamics between the characters has been preserved, yet adapted to take on board the reality of an American college in the twenty-first century. Thus Eliot's so-called "study of provincial life", which pioneered the proto-sociology of Auguste Comte in fiction, is re-oriented towards a microsociological investigation of the affective bonds and interactions within a peer group.

Space (in contradistinction with place in Lefebvre's terminology) is, of course, se-

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<sup>6</sup> In real life romantic comedy.

minal: a pre-Victorian fictitious town in England's Midlands in one case, a contemporary Connecticut city, named Lowick (a wink at Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*), in the other. But through the web, space in the series is extended to a whole digital environment, as internet users could respond with only a short temporal delay to the clips when they were aired. Interestingly, though, this reticular structure of information circulation, relying on digital network, also reorients the web series back to the original novel, based upon webs of affinities or interconnectedness between characters and places (Tipton Grange, Stone Court, Freshitt Hall or Lowick Manor in *Middlemarch* the novel). In *Middlemarch the series*, space is reconfigured through a succession of zooms on characters shut in dorm-rooms, with Dot and her friends shooting each other in turn. There is even a brief allusion to the Victorian novelist's treatment of traditional economy in the early nineteenth century, when Stone Court, the dwelling of the miserly Featherstone in *Middlemarch*, is transposed as an on-campus pizzeria where Max Garth serves customers and bussés tables in the series. Yet these closed-in spaces open out onto the multitude of inner spaces of the internet participants, principally teen-agers, likely to watch the clips from the intimacy of their own bedrooms.

(Re)orientation also takes on the gender acceptance put forward by Ahmed, both through gender swapping and gender bending, for example Max plays Eliot's Mary Garth and Billie, Will Ladislav, but viewers rapidly understand that sex and gender change does not alter fundamentally the nature of the links between the characters in Eliot's novel. Mary Garth and Fred Vincy in *Middlemarch* are childhood friends, who later become lovers, suggesting the possibility that the innocent paradise of youthful loves may morph into adult passion. And the very same model of early attachment developing into live-long passions applies unchanged to Max and Fred in the series, regardless of the fact that it is a same-sex bond.

After this brief survey of the two works under study, a first definition of crisis seems relevant: "What is a crisis? [...] It forces us to ask fundamental questions and demands fresh attention to matters previously passed by." (Norberg 136) Crisis would thus play a role in initiating a break in our reception of a classic Victorian text, by upsetting our common expectations as readers familiar with this kind of corpus. Going one step further, some aggrieved specialists could be shocked by what they might consider as a reductionist, and ideologically biased, treatment of a profoundly rich novel that has stood the test of time. To such objections one could venture the hypothesis that a crisis in textual reception, i.e., a radical shift of perception and methodology, can foster an empathetic response to a nineteenth-century novel, through an ecology of shared, communal attention, made possible by digital technology. It also allows for an in-depth investigation

of what effects are induced by a radical transformation of classical texts' reception, both on expert readers and those who have a looser take on this sort of fiction. How can we probe into the question of (inter-)subjectivity and individuation, through shared textual reception, in a digital environment? Finally, what is also at stake is the connection between queering and technology, forming what Bruno Latour would designate as "hybrid assemblages" or "tangled objects" because there are "no clear boundaries, no sharp separation between their own kernel and their environment" (Latour 24). Indeed, Eliot's text is disseminated through digital media and thus reactivated in another language, so to speak. Consequently the physical barrier between the original book and its technological appropriations become somehow intangible, as may be seen from the study of a specific episode.

### **Reenacting as critical textual reponse<sup>7</sup>**

The scene stages an exchange between Rosamond Vincy, the coquettish daughter of a local manufacturer, and her cousin Mary Garth, a plain girl who upholds values dear to the Victorian novelist, such as empathy, truthfulness and determination. In the series, Rosie, played by Eliot S., is faithful to her model by simpering in front of the camera, however Mary is no longer an unprepossessing girl as in the novel, but Max, a cool-headed, attractive boy who is mixed raced and wears dreadlocks. In the novel, self-awareness is conveyed through the presence of a mirror which Rosamond stares at contentedly and Mary shuns. In the series, self-reflexivity is signaled at several intervals, at one stage Rosie even exclaims "It's a documentary after all!" (3'35) to deliberately make the distinction between fiction and life unclear. Besides, the characters in the vlog overtly get into the role they have to play, acknowledging their role acting directly on screen in front of the camera. The fact that the non-professional actors do not disappear totally, behind the characters' parts that they are acting out, could be put down to some post-modernist artifice. But, in fact, this does justice to the innovative remark Eliot made about her character Rosamond as early as 1871: "(Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her *physique*: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own)" (109. Original emphasis). Yet, paradoxically, in the web series, which belongs to an age when self-representation through social media somehow blurs the individual's ontological definition,

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7 This section focuses on a parallel exploration of the seventh episode of *Middlemarch the series*, titled "At first Sight" ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ig\\_rj15gQo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ig_rj15gQo)) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Book II, Chap. 12.

vlogging gestures towards a form of immediate relationship with viewers-participants, which creates the illusion of suppressing all filters and interferences. This may come as a result of Shoptaw's method of "adaptation by circumstances", the fact that what is kept from the original text is only the essence of a situation that is liable to find a direct echo in the adolescents' affective or emotional life. This concerns complicity through the exchange of confessions, teasing each other to get as close as possible to absolute sincerity and circling round the formidable subject of love, which is both daunting and fascinating to young people.

By eliminating the stilted codes and veneer of the social forces at play, which constitute the mainstay of Victorian realism, Shoptaw lays bare the psychological motivations that remain universal and largely unchanged across time. Yet the type of speech used is modified, so when Rosie mischievously addresses to Max the following remark: "Maybe you have a shot after all!" (0'48")", it is her way of updating Rosamond's more formal "You may have an offer" (105). The first comment is based on a situation in which forming a romantic attachment is an end in itself, the second on a context in which relationships between men and women were always ultimately ruled by the laws of the marriage market. Barring these inevitable adjustments between two time periods, the overall dynamics of the dialogue, including speech tempo, bears close resemblances. Rosamond/Rosie feign an interest in Mary/Max, the better to return the attention to themselves after, thus the former say: "there is a gentleman who may fall in love with you, seeing you almost everyday" (105) and the latter: "There is a certain person who might start to develop feelings for you, if he saw you almost everyday" (0'54"-0'61"). And in either case, Mary's or Max's scepticism on the matter of seeing someone regularly as leading to love, proves to be the very response awaited by Rosamond/Rosie to return to their one and only subject of concern: "Not when they are interesting and agreeable. I hear that Mr. Lydgate is both" (105) and "Not if one of them is as charming as I hear Lydgate is" (1'11"- 1'14"). And when it comes to their work, Mary and Max both speak almost in the same embittered terms: "I? Oh, minding the house—pouring out syrup—pretending to be amiable and contented—learning to have a bad opinion of everybody" (105) and "You know the usual. Bussing tables, trying to avoid customers" (0' 34"- 0'37"). Where anachronisms would be a hindrance, some shifts are introduced, so instead of complaining about Fred's failure to comply with his father's wish by becoming a cleric, the series mentions his lack of skills to become a doctor, which is in fact Tertius's profession in the novel.

The effort to update a canonical text by bringing it closer to the experience of today's adolescents should be put into perspective by confronting it to the "Crisis in

the Humanities” (Perloff). Marjorie Perloff, in one of her essays, deplored the fact that literature’s decline in the field of the Humanities was probably due to its lack of a clear definition and its intrinsic heterogeneity.<sup>8</sup> According to her, whereas other disciplines tend to have well-defined epistemological contours and are endowed with a clear identity, literature is too often used as merely a conduit for meaning above and beyond itself. Writing at the end of the twentieth century, Perloff’s attention was of course directed towards the cultural and critical studies in full expansion at the time. As she sees it, these new expanding disciplines relegate literary works to an ancillary function. Literary studies only prop up various historical or cultural theories, instead of being appreciated on their own merits, as an end in and of themselves. With *Middlemarch the series* the situation seems to be different as it is not the literal content of a fiction which is harnessed to serve other disciplines. If anything, literature, here a piece of fiction, is possibly simplified to be rendered meaningful for twenty-first century adolescents, but without its significance being in any way altered in the process. It is perhaps the work’s holistic dimension that is marginally affected: the vision of a whole society in the novel, when the attention is exclusively turned on the interrelationship between a limited set of characters in the series. However, what could be more controversial for some critics is the mediation of communication technology. In a series of articles and interviews, the English novelist Will Self addressed what he provokingly called the death of the novel, as a result of the spread of digitalisation. He also denounced a growing tendency in the reading public to shy away from demanding texts, by which he meant mostly the fictions of High Modernism, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*.

In his 2014 Richard Hillary lecture, delivered at Trinity College,<sup>9</sup> Self commented on the “the interrelated phenomena of the web and the internet that are currently revolutionising human communications” (*Richard Hilary Lecture* n.p.). He then argued that the novel, by reneging on its democratic origins, is doomed to “become a marginal cultural form, along with easel painting and the classical symphony” (*Richard Hilary Lecture* n.p.). This line of argument is of course well-known, it implies that platforms like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram among others, offer space for the inside account of the life of others. In other words, they fulfill the function that was once the novel’s prerogative. Now

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8 From Perloff to Han there have been innumerable debates around the crisis in the humanities in the 20th and 21st centuries. Names such as Noam Chomsky, with his essay “The Functions of the University in a Time of Crisis”, published in *For Reasons of State*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1970 or Martha C. Nussbaum, with *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, spontaneously spring to mind.

9 These citations may be found in the shortened version of the speech which was published in *The Guardian* on 7th May 2014 and can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction?commentpage=1>. Accessed 31 Mar 2023.

with *Middlemarch the series* things are reversed, because what is at stake is not so much the risk of the novel being dethroned by digital technology as the possibility that a virtuous complementarity could be built up between novel reading and democratised audio-visual creation, facilitated by today's hypernetworked society. This entails considering the issue of textual reception from renewed perspectives.<sup>10</sup>

### **Intersubjectivity and individuation in a digital environment (subjectification)**

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* has an ethical dimension which has been underscored by many critics. More specifically, the foundational principle of the Victorian writer's fictions and essays lies in the capacity for sympathy, i.e. the "ability to imagine and understand another's state of mind" (Anger 218). Her definition of individuality is relational and her characters are faced with the necessity of making decisions which are bound to have repercussions on the others, near and far. Eliot, who translated Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*, was influenced by the Dutch philosopher's ontology. According to Spinoza's monist approach, there is only one substance, so humans are no different from the rest of the creation on account of being endowed with a soul, in other words they do not possess a separate substance: "By substance I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; in other words, that the conception of which does not need, the conception of another thing from which it must be formed" (Spinoza Eth. 1, Def. 3, 41). A special condition that would be the prerogative of mankind, premised on self-sufficiency and sovereignty, is precisely what is denied by Spinoza's monistic philosophy. This implies that the world is made up of one single substance to which all and everything partakes, and consequently that connectedness or relationality are essential. Spinozist monism was rehabilitated by post-1968 French philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who insisted on the importance of the link between individuals and their *milieu* and showed the complexity of this entanglement: "One of the essential points of Spinozism is in its identification of the ontological relationship of substances and modes with the epistemological relationship of essences and properties and the physical relationship of cause and effect" (Deleuze 91).

The Spinozist model of subjectivity disclaims Descartes's famous well-known mind-body distinction to postulate the oneness of substance having an infinity of attributes. This has many consequences, the most important for this analysis being the dismissal of a sovereign, rational subject who would stand above inorganic matter, as well as

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10 For a similar perspective on literary reception, see Beatriz Revelles Benavente, "Literature, Gender and Communication in the Making. Understanding Toni Morrison's Work in the Information Society", Thesis defended at the University of Catalonia in 2014.

technological and machinic artefacts. Said differently, the dualist, dialectical opposition between dominant consciousness on the one hand and machines on the other, in which the second, machines, occupy the negative pole, is replaced by a continuum between these two entities: “this means that matter is not dialectically opposed to mind, nor is nature opposed to culture and, with it nowadays, manufactured goods and technological artefacts, but rather continuous with them” (Braidotti 34). The video camera used by the different characters of the series in turn is not just an instrument passively recording their oral deliveries and facial expressions. It also determines their attitude, their mode of being, if only through the pressure that the very idea of being filmed puts on them. Besides, the camera partakes of a whole network of interconnectedness which expands their subjectivity, as the clips are aired with a slight temporal distance and elicit responses from viewers. As a result the set up including camera, computer and internet connection radically transforms the notion of subjectivity as the self is no longer isolated and confronted to solipsistic questionings but caught up in a web of relations, and therefore outward-bound rather than inner-absorbed. To quote Braidotti again, the subject is embedded in “transversal mediated relations” (38). The position of the young, non-professional actors of *Middlemarch the series*, as technologically mediated and interlinked, is indeed palpable in most of the clips. On several occasions they express their self-consciousness of sitting in front of the camera, acknowledge the presence of virtual viewers and even switch the camera off on screen. So no attempt is made to convey the illusion that they are within a fiction in which the necessary technical devices would be invisibilised. For this reason, it can be contended that the technological equipment is part of themselves, like prosthetic limbs, as it were, that are an extension of both who they are and pretend to be.

This is especially perceptible in episode 31, entitled “The interruptions”, when Dot (*Middlemarch*'s Dorothea Brooke) metaleptically stages an interview with Edward Casaubon, the notorious scholar character in Eliot's novel, who for his part betrays his awareness of playing a role, whilst not disappearing totally behind it. This entails that there are multiple aspects to his imperfect performance in this short clip. He is the young student who looks like a nerd, striving to impersonate a character from a nineteenth century novel who would anachronistically reply to the questions of his peer, acting as a twenty-first century interviewer. Moreover, Casaubon, played here by a non-professional actor, is alive to the necessity of interacting with the camera, and by extension internet users, whilst making a stab at giving a semblance of verisimilitude to impersonate a caricaturesque character, through the delivery of an abstruse speech. In the meantime, the performance also says something of the life of sophomores in colleges, by showing

Dot, a second-year student, falling for a grad student, even if he is a clumsy, diffident young man, going out of his way to impress her through clever-sounding words. The subjectivities shown in the series blend sincerity and pretence, or perhaps pretence allowing inexpressed-so-far sincerity to emerge, through the catalyst of the camera, which mediates a relationship between these Yale students and whoever will subsequently connect to Youtube.

Before *Middlemarch the series* was aired, Shoptaw planned to incorporate trans-media into the series and have viewers interact live. This proved unfeasible, though, so the series eventually unfolded in retrospect (the videos aired six months after the shooting of the story), consequently events could not unfold in real-time on social media, as happens sometimes with other series. But social media nonetheless played a role by having characters from the series react to watching the show as it aired, and also answer audience questions. What's more, Fred and Max did a Q&A on Twitter and Billie posted some of her poetry on her Tumblr.

Yves Citton, the French essayist, known among other things for having edited a book on the ecology of attention, speaks of "computational subjectivation" in an article for the review *Multitudes* (48). What he means is that our singular subjectivities (mind, body, personal 'soul') result from our interactions with our natural, social and increasingly with our technological environment. The affordances of social media platforms determine more and more how we analyse or come to grips with our emotional or affective life through exchanges with other internet users. The limits of individuation are therefore extended as a whole range of participants join in a digital environment at any given moment. This is why the notion of "superject" thought up by Alfred North Whitehead (135-136), the English philosopher, is useful to help better understand the change undergone by the category of subject within a digital environment. For Whitehead, there is never a subject that preexists an occasion of experience. Whitehead affirms that there is no such thing as a fully constituted subjectivity existing prior to its confrontation with what is not itself. It is the occasions of experience which fashion the quality of subjectivity that is never a stable given, hence the idea of "subject superject" which points to the idea of the emergence of the subject from a set of circumstances. Said differently, a subject is always in-time, coming into itself in a particular way and in a particular set of conditions, only to change again if the set of conditions is modified. This dual concept of "subject superject" proves especially operative in the context of a media environment in which, through technology, different individuals find themselves interconnected and achieve together a form of completion through what could be called a temporary moment of transindividual "superjectivity". In this respect, the "superject" may be construed as the

expression of diffuse subjectivity.

In *Middlemarch the series*, individuation is attained through media ecology, in other words, progressively and relationally, as the characters film themselves, and each other. Their footages are aired via internet through a youtube channel and internet users react to them. Having her characters confide to the camera is the way in which Shoptaw renders Eliot's sophisticated use of "psycho-narration" (Cohn 21-57). And it can even be hypothesised that the diffuse subjectivity resulting from the digital setup is an apt equivalent for the narrator's use of "inward colloquy" (Eliot 189) in *Middlemarch*, in other words for the inner, polyvocal debates conveyed through a single voice in the original text.

The series is polytemporal in many ways, since the non-professional actors and actresses are cued by Eliot's original storyline and narration, but they use their own twenty-first colloquial American speech nonetheless. Moreover, this double temporal perspective, the hypotext's nineteenth century and the twenty-first century time of the shooting, is further complexified by the necessity of incorporating somehow or other the narrator's towering presence. After all, the presence of the narrator is ubiquitous in *Middlemarch*, even if is polyvocal and espouses different viewpoints, and Shoptaw's vision informs the series throughout. And since the characters may not be wise enough to express the narrator's insightful reflections on human nature, right from the beginning, Shoptaw opts for telling the story in slight retrospect. This probably reduces the potential of transmedia, by preventing viewers from being in perfect sync with the show in real life, but it heightens the benefit of getting one plural overarching, digital intersubjectivity, constituted by the director's initial project, the actors' own input and the viewers' contributions through their online comments and posts. So, ultimately, *Middlemarch the series* could be said to illustrate, on a minor scale, the so-called crisis of subjectivity which can be described summarily as the eclipse of the Cogito as unique source of knowledge, and in the same way, it also demonstrates the potential afforded by a collective process of subjectivisation.

### **Queering and technology**

The aspect which was probably the most commented about *Middlemarch the series* was its queering and gender-bending of what is commonly perceived as a classical novel of the Victorian canon. For example, the US Hispanic online magazine *Playground* came up with the title "Un joven cineasta ha convertido 'Middlemarch' en una webserie

con perspectiva LGBTQI".<sup>11</sup> As is well-known, the political drive of queer as a potentially disruptive force liable to cause a crisis in the established order was manifest at the inception of the Queer Nation movement, long before the placatory practices of pink- and queer-washing.<sup>12</sup> Some of this rebellious power is still perceptible in Paul B. Preciado's last publication to-date *Dysphoria Mundi* (2022). In this recent study, the philosopher hijacks the psychomedical notion of dysphoria, in gender dysphoria, from its original meaning of mental pathology, induced by the conflict between body and mind, or the masculine and the feminine within an individual, to make it signify the epistemological and political conflict between emancipatory forces and conservative movements of resistance in today's world. In other words, Preciado both disconnects dysphoria from psychopathological discourse, and connotes it positively connoted, by empowering it. The philosopher goes as far as to imagine how a historian in the future postpatriarchal era will assess the potency of dysphoria in bringing about radical transformations.

Admittedly, *Middlemarch the series* does not diagnose a crisis on such a scale, yet Preciado is interesting because in *Countersexual Manifesto* (2000) he treated jointly the revolution in sex and gender *and* the technological revolution, by emphasising the need to overcome once for all the age-old nature-culture divide. As for Shoptaw, she proposes a queer appropriation of a classic text through technology. In both cases, a state of crisis, i.e. the disruption of the stable order of things, is actualised through technological inventions. This points to a form of paradox signalled by Preciado: "[c]ontemporary biotechnologies and cybertechnologies are simultaneously the product of power structures and possible enclaves that resist that same power. They are possible locations for reinvention of nature" (*Countersexual Manifesto* 138). By contemporary modern standards, *Middlemarch the series* is a makeshift, amateurish production but its reliance on globally interlinked, technological mediation combats the isolation, which is still too often the fate of queer, non- binary people. It also erases the divide between high and low culture, by establishing how a novel, which commonly perceived as high brow and demanding, may actually prove relevant for contemporary youngsters. The queer message is in a sense both implicit and self-evident since the non-binary relationships, cross-gendering in the casting, or same-sex couples to render heterosexual pairs in the novel, do not warrant any specific attention. Such an approach testifies to the salutary design to be as inclusive as possible, by naturalising *any* forms of attachment, without bothering to label them. By not making any fuss about entering into the specifics of what

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11 For a list of the different reviews of the series in the press check <https://www.rebeccashoptaw.com/middlemarch-the-series>. Accessed 31 Mar 2023.

12 The inflammatory rhetoric of the 1990 Queer Nation Manifesto testifies to this desire to upset the social order.

is altered in this genre-blurring series, which designates itself as “documentary” whilst claiming its close affiliation with fiction, Shoptaw unwittingly endorses Michel Foucault’s reflections (1-14), relayed by Preciado, that the multiplication of taxonomies is a means of controlling and monitoring life, by starting from the most intimate:

The most powerful way in which sexuality is controlled, then, is not through the prohibition of certain practices but through the production of various desires and pleasures that seem to stem from natural predispositions (man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, etc.) and that are ultimately reified and put in objective terms such as “sexual identities” (*Countersexual Manifesto* 128).

In this respect, Fred Vincy’s jocular address to his audiences in the series is tell-tale: “Ladies, gentlemen and otherwise, allow me to...”. “Otherwise” playfully vindicates the freedom of doing away with reified sexual identities or fixed gender representations. At this stage, orientation and disorientation, which are seminal to investigate crisis, as already argued above, may be envisioned from two different perspectives, firstly by investigating the connection between queering and technology,<sup>13</sup> and secondly by pointing to the potential for queering that is already there in Eliot’s novel and which is given full expression in the series.

From the discipline of anthropology, which was her initial field of research, Donna Haraway has shown that the essentialist dichotomy between on the one hand technology, as associated with man, and on the other, nature intrinsically linked to woman, has been passed down from the colonial period to the present time (*Primate Visions* 13-15). Technology was indeed the criterion to assess the degree of culture, i.e. rationality and progress, achieved by a certain human community. This opposition between technology as a masculine, Western prerogative, connected to inherited power-wielding, and nature, as essentially feminine, and consequently inseparable from the condition of having been dominated through generations, can be overcome thanks to contemporary technoscience. Indeed, technoscience ignores the difference between the organic and the material: “It is impossible to determine where ‘natural bodies’ end and ‘artificial technologies’ begin; cybernetic implants, hormones, organ transplants, pharmacological management of the human immunological system in people living with HIV, and the Internet are just a few examples of biopolitical artifacts” (Preciado, *Countersexual* 130).

To return to *Middlemarch the series*, the use of Internet as biopolitical artifact is proof that the distinction between technology and the organic is not valid. The Yale stu-

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<sup>13</sup> To prolong the reflection on the link between queering and technology, and more specifically on the topic of counter visualities and queering the gaze applied to documentary films, see the publications of the publications by Orianna Calderón Sandoval and Adelina Sánchez Espinosa, for example “Feminist Documentary Cinema as a Diffraction Apparatus: A Diffractive Reading of the Spanish Films, *Cuidado, resbala* and *Yes, We Fuck!*”, *Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 7, 1-14.

dents shape and share an embodied experience of reader response, via media technology, and the web is instrumental in producing a democratised version of the “incandescent”, “androgynous” mind which Virginia Woolf saw as the condition for creativity (Woolf 148).<sup>14</sup>

When she chose *Middlemarch* Shoptaw had of course a clear agenda. The argument that this novel is her all-time favourite does not provide the full explanation. Indeed, her artistic and political choice consisted in queering the text, as a militant answer to what she regards as the erasure of LGBTQIA+ in literature:

I think part of the reason I loved the novel so much was the way in which its central relationships (Will/Dorothea and Fred/Mary) refused to fall into the heavily gendered tropes of Victorian courtship. Unlike a number of authors we'd read that semester (such as Dickens and Hardy), Eliot really made it possible for me to read my own experiences into the text. This made the gender-bending of central characters effortless, which is, more than anything, what made the adaptation possible. (n.p.)

Shoptaw does not so much force a queer agenda on a canonical Victorian novel, as she proves more receptive than most critics probably do, to non-binary elements present in the novel ever since its first publication, which have passed unnoticed over the years. The truth is that *Middlemarch*, unlike many other Victorian novels, does not fall squarely within the heavily gendered tropes and power dynamics of Victorian courtship. For example, the two main love relationships, between Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw and between Fred Vincy and Mary Garth, are much less cut and dried regarding gender roles than was common at the time. It may also be worth recalling that Will Ladislaw, Eliot's romantic, Byronic artist figure, was criticised by Henry James for “lack[ing] sharpness of outline and depth of color [...] he remains vague and impalpable to the end [...] roughly speaking, a woman's man” (426). Such scathing criticism, articulated by one celebrated American critic and author, bears witness to the deeply ingrained gender prejudices that Eliot transgresses. Indeed Ladislaw's failure to comply with gender expectations regarding masculinity; his absence of instant determination, his procrastinating attitude and dedication to artistic pursuit as well as, overall, a contemplative attitude at a time when his male contemporaries would engage in action, qualify him as an anachronistic queer character. There is also something of Virginia Woolf's androgynous mind in the process of narration itself. This is evidenced by the hesitancy between “he”, when the narrator is spoken of in the following terms: “the diligent narrator may lack space [...] though he may have a philosophical mind” (Eliot 320) and “she” in the many

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14 “the androgynous mind is resonant and porous [...] transmits emotions without impediment [...] naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (Woolf 148).

instances when the narrator's voice seems to espouse Dorothea's own inner thinking. Besides, this gender fluidity is vindicated at the beginning of chapter XXIX in a famous passage in which the narrator proposes to alter radically her point of view, by shifting from Dorothea's to Casaubon's: "Was her point of view the only one regarding marriage? [...] Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us" (Eliot 261). So, Shoptaw proves particularly attentive to the plasticity between ladies and gentlemen which was already present in the original novel to give space for a plural "otherwise" *via* the inclusive digital medium.

### **Minimalism as Space of Resonance**

Adapting a vast, panoramic novel like *Middlemarch* obviously calls for financial resources and material equipment far beyond the means of self-financing college students. This is the reason why *Middlemarch the series* is not so much concerned with faithful representation as with resonance. Hartmut Rosa's concept of "resonance", exposed in *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, provides a fruitful paradigm to investigate textual reception. This is also a useful prism to appraise the maverick way in which the *Middlemarch the series* youngsters approach a canonical novel likely to feature in their academic syllabus. Resonance is both existential and phenomenological and, as a rule, more centered on what could count as ethical reception, in so far as what is prioritised is the way of restoring our relation to the world. The fact that literature – here a text from the Victorian era and its reenactment through a vlog – can strive towards resonance, is what the following remarks aim to demonstrate.

Rosa starts from the paradox that, in the aftermath of an increase in scientific and technical possibilities, our access to the outside world, which should have been considerably extended, at least in theory, has in fact been impoverished. The modern logic of data increase and acceleration has led to a deregulated, pathological relation to the world, inducing burn-out in the worst cases. The way we relate to objects is for Rosa symptomatic of this chronic malaise. Indeed, our relationship to objects, which used to be founded upon reciprocal links in archaic, totemic or animist cultures, has been reduced to merely causal or instrumental purposes. The close bond with inanimate things used to be steeped in mystery, since their existence was perceived as constituting an intermediary passage between this world and the otherworld of ancestors, spirits or gods. Yet the current reification and objectification of things result in the severance between humans, carried along on a consumerist spree, and objects which are consumer goods rapidly disposed of—too long before any lasting connections can be established between people and things:

The firm separation between culture and nature, that is to say, between a human world endowed with life, soul and speech and a raw, mute material one which has to be tamed and controlled, is not only a necessary cognitive prerequisite for the progress of the techno-scientific domination of the world [...] it is also a depletion of the diversity of the possible ways in which to relate to nature and the world – a depletion which might well be one of the causes of the current ecological crisis (Rosa, *Résonance*, 258. My translation)<sup>15</sup>.

*Middlemarch the series* opts for a minimalist approach which is immediately perceptible though the bareness of the decor. The students only use a few props here and there: a bunch of flowers; a book and the omnipresent dorm rooms with scant pieces of furniture. For example, Stone Court pizzeria, which stands in lieu of Featherstone's property in *Middlemarch*, is symbolised by pizza boxes on metal shelves. This dearth of decor to conjure up the realist setting of *Middlemarch* can, of course, be explained by the fact that this adaptation is an improvised initiative by students who have not looked for any substantial, financial sponsorship, before embarking on their project. But, interestingly, it also reinforces the impression that what matters is the inner resonance which the book has had on their daily life. Improvising from some of the novel's passages, chiefly those depicting the tensions between the characters, or introspective moments, gives the students the possibility to play out their own complicated relations. It also permits them to give shape and meaning to sensations which may have remained opaque to them before: "modern individuals seek for moments when their relation to themselves and the world is upset and fluidified, moments when they can be touched, moved, struck" (Rosa, *Résonance* 324. My translation).<sup>16</sup> Therefore, simplicity and reduced means are an incentive to focus on the book's core, essential message for these teen-aged students whose motivation is not geared towards academic achievements.

Reacting to critics who, following the publication of his book *Social Acceleration* (2005), suggested that deceleration might be the answer, Rosa replied that resonance was actually what he advocated, because it replaced the quantitative with the qualitative. The ever-growing demand for efficacy, productivity, competitiveness inducing a permanent rat-race, logically triggers a backlash, a counterreaction. The students from *Middlemarch the series* might be said to withdraw themselves from the exclusive quest for diplomas by dedicating themselves to an extra-curricular activity that is not sanctioned academically. Theirs is a private initiative aiming at cementing an enlarged community of interactants through the web.

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15 "La séparation stricte entre culture et nature, c'est-à-dire entre un monde humain doué de vie, d'âme et de parole et un matériau brut et muet qu'il s'agit de dompter et de maîtriser, n'est pas seulement une condition cognitive nécessaire au progrès de la domination techno-scientifique du monde, [...] elle est aussi un appauvrissement de la diversité de relations possibles à la nature et au monde – appauvrissement qui pourrait bien être une des causes de la crise écologique actuelle" (Rosa, *Résonance* 258).

16 "les individus modernes recherchent des mouvements de bouleversement et de fluidification de leur rapport à eux-mêmes et au monde, des instants où ils seront touchés, émus, saisis" (Rosa, *Résonance* 324).

The reach of the posts uploaded on Youtube is necessarily limited on account of the choice of a literary work, known for being demanding. However, the series managed to get over 100,000 cumulated views, which is both a small number compared with other posts, and a sizable one given the content. The technical treatment showcases its amateurishness as a warrant of authenticity. The target is actually to propose an off-the-beaten-track approach by refusing to cheat or create false illusions. But, in the meantime, privileging the commonplace and the ordinary both corresponds with Eliot's aesthetic agenda and Rosa's plea to restore a connection with the world that has been lost. In a very well-known passage from *Middlemarch* Eliot invites readers to turn their attention to what passes unnoticed because it is inaccessible to our perception as it relates to the infinitely small:

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart-beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk waddled with stupidity (182).

Through this panegyric on the value of the ordinary, Eliot seems to anticipate Rosa's argument. Paying heed to the unspectacular facts of life might be a way of reenchanting our relation to the world. The fast pace of activities and the exclusive attention directed only to what goes out of the ordinary dooms most of us to a form of alienation: "the quickest of us walk waddled with stupidity". In the series Billie riffs on this passage in episode 38, appositely titled "The Other Side of Silence". As befits an appropriation of the novel *Middlemarch* by adolescents, for whom the highest intensity of emotions is prompted by early incandescent passion, Eliot's quotation is morphed from prose into a love poem. However, the content applies equally to the renewed connection to the world, which Rosa advocates for its quality of being conducive to resonance:

The rhythmic pulse of our ordinary life [...]  
Ours is a story of instants  
The brushes of fingertips  
The meeting of rays from blue and dark orbs  
Light changes of colour  
Unfinished phrases  
Spinning a web of indefinite joys  
A story in scratches  
Orbiting in circles  
Around a flickering candle of a sun ("Middlemarch the series" 1'01"-1'48").<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Shoptaw, Rebecca. "The Other Side of Silence | Episode 38 | Middlemarch: The Series". *Youtube*, uploaded by Middlemarch: The Series, 14 Aug 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQoeECKiWBw&list=PLR4nSx-CP4ldsPGtXF-JMChQGavHf5zc48&index=40>. Accessed 31 Mar 2023.

## Conclusion

This study opened with a warning alarm on the devastating effects caused by the spread of digitalisation. A philosopher like Han sees in the replacement of knowledge by information and, ultimately, data, a crisis of culture. According to him, data have something pornographic and obscene about them, because they are utterly devoid of ambiguity. They lack interiority and are immediately transparent as they constitute surface phenomena. In this respect, they could be seen as antithetic to language which always presupposes some interpretive leeway. As the poet T.S. Eliot claimed in the chorus of his play *The Rock*:

Endless invention, endless experiment,  
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;  
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;  
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word (7).

The knowledge of silence was what George Eliot once invited her readers to turn their attention to, by cutting themselves off from the loud rumour of the world, to consider “the other side of silence”; a silence whose existence is probably not even imaginable but which, nonetheless, conceals a wealth of its own. This address to the reader is perfectly consistent with the writer’s aesthetics of the commonplace and ordinary. The interest in the unspectacular implies stepping away from the hectic, frenzied rush of contemporary life which for Rosa should be held responsible for the existential crisis of late modernity. Proposing an internet appropriation of *Middlemarch* could seem oxymoronic in a way, given the context of crisis in the humanities at a time when there is a growing disaffection with classical literature, deemed both difficult and useless. That youths should, of their own initiative, attempt to make sense of a high-brow novel by teasing out resonances with their own life is a way of restoring the relevance of what is sometimes summarily dismissed as patrimonial fiction. The classist argument should not be forgotten however, and it must be borne in mind that that these students are probably from a fairly affluent social background. That said, to geeks and nerds, this foray into the digital world must seem half-baked and amateurish. Yet, there is in this largely improvised technological adventure, which is not driven by market economy, a genuine effort to reach out to a larger community. This unpretentious creative effort is in close correspondence with Eliot’s artistic purpose: “Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bonds of our personal lot” (*The Natural History* 110). Of course today Eliot would probably abstain from using the phrase “fellow-men”, all the more so as it does not do justice to her often proto-queer approach to gender. *Middlemarch the series* is probably not a revolutionary exegesis of Eliot’s fiction,

but by bringing literature closest to ordinary life it might contribute, albeit in a modest way and with limited means, to addressing the current crisis of the humanities.

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