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Literature and devices: writing and reading in a digital world Introduction

Bertrand Gervais

Sophie Marcotte

Translated by Tresi Murphy

Full text (PDF file)

(all texts in this issue were meant to be both seen and read!)
Rudy Vanderlans [1]

To declare that all literature depends on a medium is indeed a truism. Nevertheless, the development of literary studies and, on a broader scale, critical thinking on the subject often ignores the material dimension. It took the vast sea-change from paper to the screen, even connected screens (computers hooked up to a network), for this dimension to resurface and catch the attention of literary specialists and academics in related areas.

As it stands, the medium conditions the very practice of writing and reading, as well subsequent analysis and theory. It is no longer enough to merely state that this is the case, it is time to consider the effect digital devices now have on our habits and practices. How do writers use new media and digital devices? How do readers themselves use these media? Can we evaluate the way in which these media and digital devices are changing the way we write and read?

Digital textualities

When we talk about the digital, we mean all of the devices and transmission platforms that have been made available due to recent developments in information technology, in as much as they constitute a semiosphere. [2] According to this definition, digital culture means all cultural, artistic and literary manifestations that these devices allow, and, over time, are redefining.

We are well aware that text, in a digital context, no longer exists on its own: it appears onscreen alongside pictures, sounds and video clips; and is integrated with features that can animate, erase or render it opaque accordingly. The form and texture of writing is substantially changed, and a new form of criticism is required to take this into account.

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1. Rudy Vanderlans, *Emigre*, n° 15, 1990, p. 3.
2. Youri Lotman, *La Sémiosphère*, Limoges, Presses Universitaires de Limoges (PULIM), 1999.

In general, we can establish that a text corresponds to *an organised collection of elements that have meaning for a given community.* This definition is a relative view of the status of the text, relating it to prior adjustments made by a given interpretive community, meaning those who share the same strategies for reading and writing texts, in order to establish their properties and assign their intentions. Following on from this, we can, more precisely, stipulate that a text is *a language entity that is fixed on a medium and placed in a location.* By *language entity* we mean a collection of statements that shape a certain content. Placing in a location, refers to the fact that a text only exists in relation to an author or a reader, only once it has been integrated, therefore, into a writing and reading location—one that is determined by a context and that updates itself in diverse ways. This means that a text never exists alone. It is what we do with it, its only authority is that which we confer upon it in our diverse ways.

This definition overlaps with the one proposed by François Rastier, for whom a text is an "empirical, attested linguistic series, produced within a determined social practice, and fixed on a given medium."[3] Again, the question of the medium is essential here to the establishment of the status of the texts. What is identified here, through the medium, are the concrete means through which the texts come into being, as well as how they participate in the handling and input process. What physically props up this language entity? Does it appear on a screen or is it printed on paper? Is it presented alone or in relation to other signs? In what context is it read? Based on these preliminary definitions, we can determine that our relationship to a given literary text works in three distinct dimensions, three complementary layers, the definition of which allows us to outline the analysis in this dossier on three levels. Those levels are media, semiotics, and symbols.

The media dimension represents the material relationship between a text and a medium, a relationship that is characterised first and foremost by physical handling. Writing a text, reading a text implies physical activity by the body, by the eyes and the hands. Pages must be turned, text must be scrolled down on screen, a pen or a keyboard must be used, piles of paper or data must be sorted through, strategies of preservation and transmission of the texts must be worked out, etc. This dimension is essentially endo-semiotic in nature in as much as the material that implements the signs, the texts, is contained within it. Mediology, the study of cultural transmission and the archaeology of media examines the material and technological aspect of the text.

The semiotic dimension deals with the comprehension aspect of a text, with the way a language and its codes are mastered, whether in producing or reading the text. Writing a text, reading a text implies a cognitive effort. Whether we are interested in the prefiguration, the configuration or the refiguration to go back to Paul Ricœur's[4] triad, each time, the real issue is the immediate connection with signs and meaning, with sentences and the different ways they structure information, with texts and the way they are deployed, from plotting to various narrative devices. This is at the core of our writing and reading practices.

Nevertheless, our relationship with texts also involves a symbolic dimension. The texts that we write and read are not only complex entities to understand as themselves and for oneself, they are also constructions that are linked to other constructions, to other semiotic and cultural practices, aspects of which they feature, or cite, imitate, comment, complete, etc. Writing a text, reading a text, means connecting that text with other texts that are present or easily accessible in a given semiosphere. It means interpreting the piece of writing, so as to determine its meaning and value, even its importance. It is not a question of just programming or having a particular experience, but a question of making that experience resonate in a cultural space. Obviously, these three dimensions give rise to various levels of balance and imbalance. When balanced, the whole thing is transparent, utterly clear, be it in terms of media, semiotics or symbolism. On the other end of the scale, imbalances can be extensive and connect with various aspects of the way we relate to the text. Transparency is replaced by opacity and illegibility can spread to all three dimensions. We don't know how to handle it, we can't understand it, we don't know what we are supposed to think. Since the advent of new means of cultural transmission, these imbalances have multiplied and habits and

3. François Rastier, *Arts et sciences du texte*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France (PUF), 2001, p. 21.
4. Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, Paris, Seuil, 1983, t. 1.

usage have had to adapt. We believe that new devices are always more effective than those that went before, that the representation they allow is unequalled, and that this effectiveness happens spontaneously. But, this is not the case at all. Their effectiveness does not depend on their complexity, their power or their newness, but on the practices and conventions that they allow to develop and that slowly take over as they are used over time. Thus, literary processes have, for a long time, depended on reader expectation for their general effectiveness. Their long-term survival is the guarantor of their power as their effectiveness depends on the overdetermination or even cirvcumvention of previously established habits.

Writing and reading practices

In this context, what of writing and reading practices in the age of the screen? Where is the tension, where is the imbalance? What do they tell us of the increasing presence of devices made available by information technology? In what way has the literary experience, in its broadest sense, been reconfigured? It is clear to all that literary practice has changed. The place literature occupies in the social space is constantly shrinking. Other narrative forms, from cinema to video games to television series, are showing themselves to be extremely effective and have easily dethroned the novel from its place as the best way to tell a story. New writing practices oscillate between the page and the screen, in an ever-more complex system of back and forth between media. Hybrid literary forms have appeared, augmented reality books and book apps, projects that shift between platforms, indifferent to the traditional pragmatic limits of fiction. In a situation where online identity is no longer fixed, autofiction is no longer a writing and reading contract, but a strategy of statement, another tool in the box of plotting processes. A number of trends influence the way work is produced and received. Examples include the brevity favoured by platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, the accessibility of encyclopaedic and lexical resources provided by the big search engines, the increasing importance of images as they become an intrinsic part of our knowledge acquirement strategies. Other reasons include the collapse of our frames of reference that has undermined our understanding of the world, the effervescence evident in all creative sectors, be they artistic, cultural or literary, and the process of remixing and sampling in which we are immersed, that overdetermine all intertextual and interdiscursive relationships. It is no longer enough to state that everything has speeded up: we also must understand, having observed this, how the literary experience, in this context, finds new paths, both up and down stream.

The articles in this collection are separated into three sections that are far from airtight. The first presents an intensive examination of devices and their impact on the processes of creation and reading. The second studies the textual forms that are emerging within the digital system. Finally, the third brings together the analysis on the symbolic effects and consequences of hypermedia production. The three sections overlap in terms of the three dimensions outlined above.

In the light of these devices

The section entitled "In light of these devices," opens with an article by Bertrand Gervais, who examines the reading machine that was invented in 1930, and brought up to date by emulators in the 21st century. The story of the Readies, invented by Robert C. Brown, allows him to retrace the attempts to find new ways to record, keep and transmit text, that eventually, with more recent developments in information technology, led to the tactile readers and tablets we have today. Pierre-Louis Patoine explores the numerous connections that have been made between literature and videogames, especially in narrative terms, from a media archaeology angle. He focuses on the fantasy genre and attempts to define a structure of influence organised around the exploration and habitation of secondary worlds, at the heart of an immersion environment. Claire Swyzen, in a study of post dramatic texts, shows that this new artistic practice undeniably changes the status, materiality and function of writing and writer alike. The status of the author is dispersed, making room for different versions of the author, who becomes, in a way, a data processer. She describes *A Piece of Work (2013)* by

Annie Dorsen, where Shakespeare's masterpiece *Hamlet*, is rewritten by algorithms, making it undergo a form of crash-test. In the final piece for this section, Garfield Benjamin takes an interest in webcomic software and its overall impact on the comic book. He examines how the experimentation and interaction that these digital systems allow leads to the creation of new comics, on both a narrative structural level and in relation to the medium in general. His investigation into experimental modes of creation and reading proposes that we view webcomics mathematically, according to the figures and properties of fractals. It becomes clear, from reading these four articles, that new devices and systems are leading to the development and adoption of new languages and new artistic approaches.

Textuality in transit

The second section, "Textuality in transit," focuses on the textual dimension of new writing and reading practices that are essentially hybrid in nature. Enrico Agostini Marchese attempts firstly, to establish the ground rules for a definition of geolocated literature linked to the invention and massive use of smart phones and other mobile devices. He wonders, as more and more writers take advantage of the potential these devices offer, how their innate mobility and portability influences our reading and writing practices. In their reading of the fluid fiction of the Quebecois writer Daniel Canty and Patrick Beaulieu, René Audet and Charles-Antoine Fugère take an interest in the transmediatisation process of literary fiction. Through the various manifestations (exhibitions, websites, literary works), created using data and samples collected during their American roadtrips, Canty and Beaulieu remediatise their experiences in their fiction, organising them in an original form that shows the extraordinary changeability of contemporary literary practices. Sophie Marcotte takes an interest, in a study of *Document 1* by the Quebecois novelist François Blais, in the intersection between the novel and the digital, and in doing so, exposes the way in which digital devices are increasingly taking over the contemporary imagination. Emails, text messages, Facebook statuses and comments, tweets and blog posts abound in the narrative of novels and short stories. The devices themselves intrude in fiction, and mobile phones, tablets and computers play a part in an ontology that is becoming increasingly technical. The final piece in the section, by Laurence Perron, examines two surprising rewrites of Moby Dick by Herman Melville. Moby Dick in Pictures, by Matt Kish, is a visual rewrite of the novel where each page is replaced by a corresponding illustration, and Emoji Dick, by Fred Benenson, a participative, semi-automatic translation of the original novel into emojis. Both versions transform a monument of world literature into a work that where the readable is replaced by the visible, where the text disappears in favour of a partly illegible *ersatz*.

Digital aesthetic

The final section entitled, "Digital aesthetic," explores the symbolic and interpretative dimension of projects that are anchored in current digital practices. Anaïs Guilet, first of all, takes a look at Clara Beaudoux's *Madeleine Project*. On moving into a new apartment, Beaudoux came across the papers left behind by a previous tenant, Madeleine, that she revealed slowly, on Twitter at first, then in a book published in 2016. She built what amounts to Madeleine's diary, and in doing so, became a writer herself. Myriam Watthee Delmotte looks at the role played by hypermedia creations in the literary practices that accompany mourning rituals. In her analysis of *Remembering the Dead* by John Barber and *Paroles gelées* by Françoise Chambefort, she reveals what the digital leads to, in symbolic terms, in both works, and, in doing so, insists on the performative aspect that results from the unique way time is formalised. Corentin Lahouste then outlines the seven characteristics of the anarchic aesthetic of *Désordre*, by Philippe de Jonckheere, a hypermedia piece that focuses on existentiality. He underlines the fact that *Désordre* does not rely only on media devices, but on other, poetic or symbolic, devices. Finally, the journal's closing article from Arnaud Regnauld questions the extent to which the online production of artist Gregory Chatonsky is contributing to the emergence of a new imaginary world in fiction. Following on from

the experiments of the postmodernists, Chatonsky questions the notion of viewpoint and narrativity, the endgame being fiction without narration, in as much as it lacks any diegesis or narrative act, as it is anonymous, machinic and collective. What do these flux-pieces depict, theoretically and practically and, what do they tell us about contemporary imagination?

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