The "New Alliances" in the Digital Age: the Book, the Science and the Bite

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My paper focuses on the strained dynamics of contemporary literary studies, identifying the "new alliances" between the book, the science and the bite, the spectacular "turns" or the intensive trading of models in the area, as unmistakable symptoms of their self-induced status crisis and of academic visibility. It maps out these developments in a general perspective and finally takes a look at the Romanian case study.

Both scientific and speculative structuralisms have underpinned projects aiming to draw metaliterature into an overarching theory of all the human sciences put together. In the wake of structuralism and post-structuralism, the discourse of literary studies has made a radical shift from the models and metaphors borrowed from empirical, mostly natural, sciences, towards abstract speculation, ideology and social discourse. The traditional "organic" perspective and the "agricultural metaphors" in the study of literature have been cast away.

Starting with the 80s, literature herself has been credited as a cognitive discourse on the real world, on society, on politics, on freedom, race, age, and sex, on social values or choices. An equal status to any other intellectual discourses in the area of social sciences and the humanities has been called for on her behalf.

Over the last decades, we have frequently seen the professionals of literary studies take risky plunges into the very avant-garde of science – such as quantum physics or the theory of chaos – in an attempt to spice up their hypotheses on the loose nature of the artistic experience or to single out any possible homology between literary genres and scientific vocabularies. At least on the speculative level, an intensive two-way traffic of concepts and methods is right now under way.

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From an all-encompassing perspective, we cannot ignore the fact that the steady endeavor of literary theorists to blur the limits between metaliterature and science has also been boosted by the so-called *aesthetic turn* in post-modern sciences. Nowadays the fuzzy boundaries between disparate types of intellectual discourse enhance the fusion and confusion between the hard sciences and the humanities, giving birth to the so-called "weak epistemologies".

In this general trend, we can include the strongly appealing thermodynamics of Ilya Prigogine, Isabelle Stengers and their *La nouvelle alliance*; the fashionable mathematics and physics with Heisenberg's equations, fuzzy logic and fuzzy systems; the uncertainties of quantum physics or of non-Euclidian geometry. To take just a well-known example, Lyotard as a practitioner of postmodern science practically canonized Mandelbrot, a famous mathematician specializing in non-Euclidian geometry. Mandelbrot's fractal theory challenged the Euclidean strategy of approximating the ideal and unchanging forms of the world, replacing them with a new geometry of endless change and differentiation. Consequently it inspired the study of cultural topographies and of the realm of values, becoming an epitome of the chaotic processes that sum up the endless fragmentations of post modernity in all areas of creation and a genetic impulse towards the so called "aesthetic of chaos".

The phenomenality of the "New Alliance" between science and literature, in the so-called digital age, bears an obvious performative stamp, due to the new technological patterns of production/consumption in the age of media culture. The vigorous genesis of many para scientific and para literary genres can be seen as a follow up to the "commodification" of scientific discourses, turned into products of cultural consumption mediated by new communication technologies: TV formats, advertising (the narrative and pseudoscientific turn in advertising), popular press, film and the virtual communication (the internet)

Due to its technologies and to its particular relationship with its audience, Television gained a well-established reputation as an innovating forum in contemporary culture. TV output is a main processor of scientific discourses and of their models and norms, assimilated by the current TV audiences to the cultural/literary conventions. (For instance, a new type of verisimilitude – *the scientific verisimilitude* – is now emerging beside the traditional well known types (referential, topic/ideological, and genre verisimilitude).

Apart from this, literary theorists have constantly been fascinated by the cultural output of the new media: the so-called *mediagenic reality*, the *cyberspace*, the *virtual reality*, the *hypertext* which even now seem to be in bad need of appropriate analytic categories.

One branch of late post-structuralism was making constant efforts to keep up with the boom of computer based intellectual production. As a mater of fact, some of the venerable "gurus" of deconstruction tried very hard to be perceived as early prophets of the particular type of culture crafted by the new media.

Up to a certain point, the development of the so-called electronic writing was mistakenly considered a consequence and an illustration of the earlier deconstructive hypotheses regarding textuality, representation and the media. In this context, particularly Derrida and Baudrillard emerged as self-appointed theorists of the new technologies.

The way in which Baudrillard assimilates VR (Virtual Reality) as a hypostasis of hyper-reality is obviously becoming more and more abusive. Starting with his book *America* (1986), the French theorist has described television and theme-parks such as *Disneyland* as ideal types of a distopic non-reality or of a third degree imagined reality, a view which remains highly questionable (*Simulacres*). Likewise, Derrida redefined the category of virtuality for his own use, especially in his various comments on spectral realities or on hallucinatory substance of some political representations, in a manner than could, and did, stirr sarcastic reactions from some professionnals specializing in the area (Ryan).

Even more dangerous seems the temptation to infer axiomatic affinities between electronic writing and postmodern aesthetics, in other words, to postulate an unmediated relation between the postmodern theories and the electronic textuality.

It could seem quite appealing to approach literature in the perspective of such dichotomies as linearity versus spatiality; the text as an experience of depth versus the text as an experience of surface; the hierarchical versus the free structure of the text; order versus chaos; continuity versus fragmentation and so on and so forth. Nonetheless the next inevitable step is to claim the equivalence of every second element of the oppositions above as converging symptoms of post modernity and of the electronic textuality.

Unfortunately, on a close scrutiny, the assumption that the border between modernity and the printed text, on the one side, and post modernity and electronic textualism, on the other, is located between these two antinomic series is as inaccurate as it is deceptive: a mere fallacy. In fact, the new means of communication are playing on both terms and, when examined from this point of view, they appear to be rather complementary.

At this point a *Chicken or Egg?* dilemma becomes unavoidable: are the new concepts generated by the new technologies best fitted to the preexisting postmodern literature? Or is this type of literature particularly stim-

ulated by the devices of modern technology – as the novels of Thomas Pynchon or of Don DeLlilo, among many others, seem to suggest?

Talking about *Mediascape, Mediagenic Reality, Information Superhighway,* we have to bear in mind that every time new faces of very old dilemas of language and literature re-emerge automatically (Landow and Delany 1993). In this respect, the very concept of *virtuality* (VR) provides an example. Its destiny bears the mark of an old manicheism, whose roots descend towards a scholastico-aristotelian polarity: *in actu* versus *in potentia*, both present in the two faces of the reputedly postmodern virtual space. On the one hand, the latter one is a counterfeit (the product of "to fake") and, on the other, the outcome of endless generation (the product of "to make").

Another slipery concept newly appropriated by literary studies, *Cyberspace*, has already had a spectacular carrier in the most unexpected cultural areas, starting with art theory and finishing with advertising or with the columnist discourses. In a widely known reader edited by David Bell one of the tentative descriptions of cyberspaces provided by Michael Benedikt reads as follows:

> Cyberspace: a common mental geography, built, in turn, by consensus and revolution, canon and experiment: a territory swarming with data and lies, with mind stuff and memories of nature, with a million voices and two million eyes in a silent, invisible concert to enquiry, deal-making, dream-sharing, and simply beholding. (Bell 7)

However, very few of us know that here we are dealing here with a mere epistemological *metaphor,* coined by the writer William Gibson in the early eighties, in a famous paragraph of 33 words, placed on the 3rd page of the first novel of the"sprawl trilogy" that includes *Neuromancer* (1984) *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). The aesthetic dimension of cyberspace is neatly captured by Gibson in the following passage from *Mona Lisa Overdrive*:

> All the data in the world stacked up like one big neon city, so you can cruise around and have a kind of grip on it, visually, anyway, because if you didn't, it was too complicated, trying to find your way to a particular piece of data you needed.

The main Gibsonian hypothesis is that we experience cyberspace at the interface of reality and fantasy. The symbolic is an important way of thinking about cyberspace. In an frequently quoted public statement, the novelist himself made a revealing remark concerning the spatial substance at which his concept was pointed: *There is no there, there.* (Gibson, *Mona* 33). Free of any cultural tradition, the empty recipient of this concept has,

since the very beginning, functioned as a pure virtuality or as a catalyst of dreams. Moreover, almost the completely terminological bunch that has its sources in Gibson's book has a rich ludic dimension. Its potential is to highlight the hidden theatrality of the world, produced by the computers, playing on the double meaning of the word *performance.*

Many theorists think that we understand cyberspace through cyber-punk and also try to square our experience of cyberspace with the ways it is imagined in cyberpunk. The so-called cyberpunk fiction, one of the main contemporary sub-genres of science fiction, it is sometimes seen as a distinctly 'post-modern" take on science fiction. In a way cyberpunk can enact a kind of social criticism of the future, and can read through the circuits of contemporary culture. Whether Gibson intended it or not in one of the main dimensions, his fiction can be read as social and cultural theory.

According to one of the leading figures of the "*Avant-Pop*", an al-leged successor of postmodernism, "most of the early practitioners of Postmodernism, who came into active adult consciousness in the fifties, sixties and early seventies, tried desperately to keep themselves away from the forefront of the newly powerful *Mediagenic Reality* that was rapidly be-coming the place where most of our social exchange was taking place. Postmodernism found it overtaken by the popular media engine that eventually killed it." (America and Olsen 11).

As regards Romanian literary studies, they are by no means deviant from the above-mentioned trends. For the sake of self-preservation on the intellectual market, they are constantly seeking partnership with theo-ries of visual discourse and of the new digital media. Paradoxically, mod-ern theories of film, that appeared by borrowing conceptual tools from literary studies, are now emerging as pristine sources of models for com-paratists alongside the fashionable applicative area of video-textual study in comparative literature and literary theory.

Film studies especially appeal to Romanian literary studies and com-parative literature, since the ideological analysis of film can concern itself with any social value that may be articulated in a given text or in a series of texts. This is firstly because as such a pervasive mass medium, film nowa-days provides a social education for many people beyond the parameters of formal schooling. There is hardly an issue that has not been covered by film. Secondly commercial cinema is so deliberately tailored to the tastes of the public at large. Thirdly as a complex narrative medium which in-cludes plot and dialogue in addition to visual content, film has a greater capacity for ideological loading than simpler visual texts. The ideological study of film is a heavily disputed field.

The most recent dynamics of Romanian literary studies could be seen as an embodiment of a more general movement of all peripheral European cultures to achieve visibility and recognition by the prestigious Centre, a movement analysed by Pascale Casanova in her well-known book *The World Republic of Letters*. In Casanova's view, this is a movement that flows from the periphery to the centre in accordance with the permanent effort of the so-called 'dominated' to incorporate themselves into the dominating nucleus of literary space, accepting the instruments that this nucleus offers them (Casanova 90).

Conclusion

Ours seems to be a time when literary studies are quickly moving towards extension. In this particular context, some theorists emphasize the dimension of comparatism as a discipline founded on the idea of *co-optation*:

> To co-opt is to appropriate a cultural space, by means of identification and characterization, and then to use it at a later time as a form of self-recognition. In other words, it is a way to incorporate something by recognizing and using it for one's own benefit. (Cabo Aseguinolaza 419)

In the above considerations, I preferred to unveil, beyond this move towards territorial conquest, a complex strategy of *new alliances*. The fact remains nonetheless that, in order to preserve her contemporary dignity and to counterbalance her indeterminacy, her incompleteness, her multilevel significant structure and her resistance to unidirectional deciphering, literature and her metadiscourses are fighting to overthrow the existing cultural configurations and to appropriate the other areas of the intellectual discourse: first and foremost sciences and the communication theories of the new medias,

We are also entitled to identify the astute tactic of contemporary literary studies as a steady endeavour to surpass the so-called *secondary* status of literature in the socio-cultural space. In a well known book, Virgil Nemoianu maintains: "Literature is itself secondary with respect tot the central concerns of human beings and the central motors of history." (Nemoianu XII).

In fact, literature's standing, in contrast to that enjoyed by hard cultural models, should be perceived as a privilege rather than a handicap. Literature's "secondary" status need no apology and provides no reason for humility. In a cultural economy, literature can take on unique endeavors. Its constant reactions to mainstream intellectual tendencies are functionally necessary to any symbolic economy. The converse is equally true:

the aesthetic dimension of exact sciences or their temporary passage towards *weak epistemologies* are not valid arguments in favor of turning the actual configuration of intellectual discourses upside down. Literary imagination plays an important part in linking the "*principal"* with reality. In the same way, the networking process made possible by literature results is therefore essential to highlight and to legitimate the specific differences of literature (Nemoianu 194–195).

Before I conclude, there is something else to ask ourselves about the recent strategies and the spectacular compensatory turns of literary studies. How really "new" are these *new alliances*?

Standing at the edge of expanding the frontiers of literary study and looking back at how much it has changed we cannot help notice how much it has remained the same.

We might perhaps agree that the effort to identify new patterns of significance in electronic literature can be seen as only the latest episode of a quest as old as European culture itself. During its different ages, European culture took on the mission of symbolizing the ideal Model of wholeness to one type of cultural product after another. In the Middle Ages it was *the Cathedral.* During the Enlightenment it was the *Encyclopedia.* For Modernity it was *the Book* dreamed by Mallarme and also the novel of Proust, in itself a verbal cathedral, as the author himself suggested in his essays on John Ruskin. For Postmodernity it was the *Endless utopian intertextuality,* where even the tiniest parts reflect the structure of the whole.

And there is more: Do the new media really demand new analytic strategies? Do they present new challenges to our assumptions about the relationship between reality, representation and culture?

Despite all the obvious snares and pitfalls, there remains an incredible amount of talk about the communications and media revolution through which we have to go. The hyperbole seems to increase on a daily basis. If we were to believe everything we read, write and hear the future should be unrecognisable by the end of next week. In reality, however we suspect that it won't be. In a real revolution there is sudden schismatic break with the past in which previous paradigms are rendered invalid and the future proceeds on altogether new assumptions. Talk of revolution today should be used with extreme caution. What we are experiencing is, for the most part, a period of rapid evolution rather than past-erasing revolution.

If our culture is indeed a compilation of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, than the story of the new media and of their relationship with literature are still very much in the telling.

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»Nova zavezništva« v digitalni dobi: knjiga, znanost in bajt

Ključne besede: literarna veda / primerjalna književnost / kulturne študije / literatura in znanost / novi mediji / komunikacijska tehnologija

Članek opozarja na napeto dinamiko sodobne literarne vede – »nova zavezništva«, spektakularne obrate, intenzivno menjavo modelov itd. – in v takšnih procesih razkriva simptome njene akademske neprepoznavnosti in statusne krize, ki jo je sama sprožila. Osredotoča se na dva različna vidika teh razvojnih teženj: najprej na njihov splošni mednarodni kontekst, nato pa pobliže na romunski primer. S širšega zornega kota ne moremo pustiti ob strani nenehnega prizadevanja literarnih teoretikov, da bi zabrisali meje med metaliteraturo in znanostjo, prizadevanja, ki ga spodbuja tudi tako imenovani *estetski obrat* v postmodernih znanostih. Dandanes zabrisane ločnice med različnimi vrstami intelektualnega diskurza krepijo približevanje med »trdimi« znanostmi in humanističnimi vedami in porajajo »šibke epistemologije«. V Romuniji kot ustreznem lokalnem primeru smo zdaj na spekulativni ravni priča intenzivnemu dvosmernemu prometu konceptov in metod. Znanost se je, izhajajoč iz novejših hipotez o neskončnem številu neprimerljivih paradigem znotraj nje, na hitrico uvrstila v isto kategorijo kot literarni metadiskurzi. Kar se tiče pragmatične ravni akademskih učnih načrtov, skuša romunska primerjalna književnost – v glavnem zato, da bi si zagotovila varnost na intelektualnem trgu – nenehno navezovati partnerstvo s teorijami vizualnih diskurzov, zlasti s teorijami filma in novih digitalnih medijev. Paradoksno je, da se moderne teorije filma, ki so se razvile tako, da so si sposodile pojmovno orodje pri literarni vedi, zdaj pojavljajo kot prvinski viri modelov za komparativiste na modnem področju uporabnih video-tekstualnih študij v primerjalni književnosti.

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