

LiteraMorphosis. Digital Technologies and the Transformation of Literary Culture

Lucia Esposito, Emanuela Piga, Alessandra Ruggiero

Digital cultures and the search for new theoretical frameworks

The special issue of «Between Journal» on *Technology, Imagination, Narrative Forms*, published in 2014 and presented at the *Mechanic Reader* conference, originated from the idea to investigate the relationship between literature – or narrative forms in a broader sense – and technology, which is at the core of the debate fostered in recent years by the development of both new technologies and electronic literature.

In the last decades, especially since the inception of digital culture, the impact of new media and technologies on narrative forms has been increasingly discussed: from George P. Landow's seminal works on early hypertexts¹ to N. Katherine Hayles' s ruminations on how we write and think in posthuman times². State of the art enquiries growingly consider the way in which texts interface with technologies in a continuous process of 'remediation' (i.e. the 'refashioning' of old media by new media theorised by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin³), and the 'radiant' textualities⁴ which are the outcome of this process, as well as the focus of a more 'media-conscious' narratology⁵. Aimed at proceeding along the route marked out by these and other key theoretical works, this quite large journal issue (containing, only in the monographic sections, thirty-nine essays) has gathered a number of proposals focused on the contemporary forms of narration and the theories that characterize our digital culture.

Within the framework of digital humanities specifically intended as the use of digital tools for textual analysis or literary criticism, only few essays actually address the subject, focusing on the impact of digital technology on contemporary academic practice. The one by Fabio Ciotti⁶, in particular, moving from the need to find new methods to deal with cultural artefacts and texts, identifies two promising and interesting research fields: Big Data and distant reading on one side, and the Semantic Web and Linked Open Data on the other. He argues that Big Data in the Humanities, although very promising, present some critical issues, and proposes the idea of a Semantic Cultural and Literary Web, a collaborative infrastructure based on ontology-driven semantic annotations of primary resources.

However, the varied and prismatic vision offered by most essays has reinforced our conviction that speaking about digital humanities means taking more practices and perspectives into the picture. In fact, the topics on which the authors' attention has been mainly drawn on are the thematic or metaphoric representations of new or futuristic technologies; the interaction between digital culture and more 'traditional' literary forms (e.g. digital versions of classics, or the use of IT technologies to facilitate experimental narrative techniques); the transformation of narrative under the influence of new mediascapes; the growth of intermedia or transmedia storytelling as a typical expression of the new convergent and participative culture⁷.

Some essays have actually helped define the contours of theoretical frameworks for a wider consideration of digital humanities. The beautiful essay by Giovanni Ragone, for example⁸, discusses what he identifies as the two main trends in the humanities that are interested in the relationship between technology, media and metaphors: «media science» on one side, with its initial core in Marshall McLuhan and its current development; and a longer and more complex theoretical tradition on collective imagination on the other, which dates back to Georg Simmel, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss. Ragone states that the integration between mediology and the theories on collective imagination justifies the hypothesis of a possible «mediology of literature». McLuhan's work is also central to Elena Lamberti's discussion⁹, which looks at his form of critical writing, that can be defined 'mosaic-like', as a strategy to recompose bits of information into a complex yet intelligible pattern, a 'digital' form *ante-litteram*, which is deeply rooted in his experience as a professor of literature. Fabrizio Deriu¹⁰, instead, concentrates on Derrick de Kerckhove's neuro-cultural hypothesis¹¹, according to which digital culture has inaugurated a radically different epistemological system characterized by virtuality and digital networks. Within this context the practice not only of theatre but of performing arts in general can acquire the value of a potential 'accelerator' of the re-sensorialization of knowledge, after the de-sensorialization occurred with the decline of the oral and tribal ear and the increasing value of the eye in print culture.

The impact of digital culture on our system of knowledge, on our experiences, and on the 'environment' constituted by the media that, far from being mere tools, define our «constantly changing ecosystem»¹² is actually the centre of interest of a number of scholars. Laura Di Michele¹³, for example, discusses literature's persistent diffidence against electronic productions, wrongly perceived as on the verge of erasing the print world of the literary. Contrarily, the essay suggests how the perspectives belonging to these two worlds might give major contributions not only to the creation and study of new media literature, but also to the exploration and understanding of the full implications of what the transition/transformation/translation from page to screen may signify.

Changing narrative, from print literature to the digital environment

Narrative as a flexible, contingent and extremely reactive system to what we could call 'the way of the world', or the mood of the times, is actually the core concept of a number of essays dedicated to the transformation of narrative itself in the passage from page to screen.

Storytelling has always responded to an anthropological need to make sense of the world and to impose an order on the otherwise chaotic and uncontrollable flow of existence, so no wonder that literature has always tried to come to terms with the unsettling mutations generated by the advent of new technologies and new means of communication. In some authors' imagination this is a world in which at worst machines could even appropriate what Lance Strate defines the «distinctively human characteristic» of storytelling¹⁴, maybe recalling what Salman Rushdie wrote in 2010 in *Luka and the Fire of Life*: «You of all boys should know that Man is the Storytelling Animal, and that in stories are his identity, his meaning, and his lifeblood. Do rats tell tales? Do porpoises have narrative purposes? Do elephants ele-phantasize? You know as well as I do that they do not. Man alone burns with books»¹⁵. Rushdie's is a book about the magic of human storytelling but also about how that power could wax and wane if seriously put in danger by modern world artificialities.

Fortunately, far from being overwhelmed by such fears, literature is reacting to technological changes and innovations and trying to adapt itself to the digital environment. Passages from one epoch to another, from one mode to another, and from one support to another are always traumatic, to the extent that some scholars such as Gabriele Frasca have talked about 'media wars'¹⁶, some others, such as Bolter and Grusin, about a 'competition' between old and new media¹⁷, and some others, such as Jenkins, about a 'collision'¹⁸. However new narrative modes and structures appear every time radical mutations occur within the technologies of production and transmission of culture, in the same way as new kinds of *mise-en-texte* translate the ongoing changes inside narrative form itself. Lance Strate's theoretical contribution to the issue¹⁹ clarifies from the beginning that within the framework of media ecology, originated by prestigious scholars such as McLuhan and Neil Postman, the me-

dia environment in which we are immersed conditions our way of thinking and perceiving the world (what de Kerckhove famously called the brainframes²⁰), but also our way of feeling, acting, and constructing our own culture. Furthermore, in the passage from orality to literacy, and then again to the secondary orality of electronic culture, also the way we construct stories – and by stories he means plots and characters – has dramatically changed. The new narrative goes back to the older idea of literature as an environment or a space in which episodic, multilinear, transmedia, interactive and participative narrations take place as social ‘events’ or activities that see the former collaborative transaction between performer and audience restored.

Also in Notaro’s essay²¹ the new narrative, which is defined as a moment of «boundless generative potential», seems to be better perceived as a process, as if it were a ‘live’ performance, much more than a definite and closed text. As part of the narrative and aesthetic chaos with which she identifies this narrative potential, the author specifically quotes some examples of twitter literature’s microfiction, interpreting them as a dynamic and interactive process.

The ‘text’ itself of traditional print literature is also being transformed into a more fluid and processual ‘event’. Often narrated in the first person and as if it were the gradual outcome of an action performed on the spot, a great bulk of print narrative is changing. In fact, it is reacting to the influence of new media and remediating its own grammar in order to be closer to digital literature, or just more competitive with it. In addition, it seems that the question of ‘the end of the book’ is being gradually superseded by an awareness that print literature can survive especially if it becomes a highly specialized form of art. On this aspect the contribution of Brendon Wocke²² on a recent politextual, multilinear and multimodal novel called *S*²³ helps us understand the ways in which print narratives, caught between a tension towards the immateriality and immediacy of the digital and an aesthetic of ‘bookishness’, is able to exalt the analogue powers of the book. Actually, as the American experimental writer Mark Z. Danielewski said in an interview: «Books are remarkable constructions with enormous possibilities. [...] And you can carry this magical creation with you, write in it, and never need to hunt down conversion software to find out what you wrote and read years ago»²⁴.

Digital ecosystems: hyperdiegesis, transmedia storytelling, fanfiction

Apart from literary texts that while defending their own ‘bookish’ nature are growingly remediating digital modalities and categories, new ‘hyperdiegetic texts’ are in constant expansion. These remind us of Italo Calvino’s reflections on the hypernovel²⁵; they continuously expand and reinvent themselves on multiple platforms, originating what Veronica Innocenti and Guglielmo Pescatore call “narrative ecosystems”, with an emphasis on the environmental dimension of media ecology²⁶. Hyperdiegetic texts are also constantly open to new interpretations and, as such, are an incentive for the birth and proliferation of online communities and fanfiction, and foster the new creative audiences’ interactivity explored, among the others, by Manuel Castells²⁷.

Interestingly, the great classics are revealing themselves particularly prone to this new environment and are benefiting from a much wider circulation into the transmedia network. Donata Meneghelli’s study on Jane Austen²⁸ emphasizes that today Austen’s figure and works are very much present online, from social media such as YouTube and fan communities, to blogs, pop music and novels. Jane Austen is a popular myth of the 21st century to the extent that it represents a successful brand around which a tight net of economic interests revolves, and fan fiction testifies to this phenomenon, which renegotiates the relationship between producers and consumers, writers and readers. On the same discursive line also Simonetta Falchi²⁹ investigates how a Victorian novel such as *Little Dorrit* by Charles Dickens is revitalized by the evolution of technology. Together with visual interpretations such as *Xue’s 2012 Little Dorrit* and audiovisual ones such as the BBC adaptations, the role of fan fiction also appears to be crucial within this process.

With a particular attention to the widespread phenomenon of ‘retelling’, Claudia Cao³⁰ gives an overview of the main narrative forms risen from Twitter, examining the collective and authorial forms of retelling through the lens of media convergence. As a case study she analyses *Twitterature* (Penguin 2009), consisting of sixty retellings of literary classics as Twitter texts, which testifies to the circularity and reciprocity of the relationship between literature and new media.

Narrative forms at the intersection between literary production and multimedia textuality are also at the heart of Melina Masterson's essay³¹. Her work on Wu Ming's transmedia and counter-hegemonic practices focuses on their Pinterest account. Masterson highlights the collective's objective to give shape to a multi-sensory and environmental dimension, examining the relationship between the visual and the verbal in the formation of what Arjun Appadurai calls the «communities of sentiment»³².

On the whole, these examples highlight also how the principles of open source culture affect narrative forms, that are now frequently shaped according to the idea of copyleft and influenced by the dialogue between online communities. The sharing of narrative material on multiple platforms reminds us once again of Calvino's Norton Lectures³³, in which he explored the boundaries of the literary work, anticipating what is happening today. The novel is overflowing from its original medium to the web, and converging with other multi-modal narrative forms, thus becoming 'trans-media storytelling'. New stories are originated by the same imaginary universe as the master story, which functions as a source code, and meaning becomes a collective construction based on the idea that the plot is an *open* source code – just as in hacker culture – that every reader can use and modify by creating spin offs, alternative plots, soundtracks, comics, illustrations, audiovisuals, and so on.

The journal issue as a whole emphasizes the metaphor of the open work derived from Umberto Eco³⁴, which recurs constantly together with the concept of convergence culture. Narratives are social practices in which people share a story to construct meaning, and genres too become hybrid, in that they reflect the process of mediation based on a dialectic between old and new media. As many essays have underlined, it seems that narratives are not bound to end. On the contrary, they strive for an irrepressible survival, passing from a medium to another and adapting themselves to constantly changing environments. As Stefano Calabrese has beautifully suggested³⁵, recalling Aby Warburg's idea of survival as the binding presence of an anthropological function, we should not underestimate the global, ontological persistence of narratives – against all odds.

Notes

- ¹ G.P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore - London, Johns Hopkins University Press 1992. See also, among his other works, *The Digital Word: Text-Based Computing in the Humanities*, with P. Delany, Cambridge (MA) - London, The MIT Press 1993.
- ² N. K. Hayles, *How We Think*, Chicago - London, The University of Chicago Press, 2012. See also by the same author: *Writing Machines*, Cambridge (MA) - London, The MIT Press 2002 and *My Mother Was a Computer. Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*, Chicago - London, The University of Chicago Press 2005, among the others.
- ³ J.D. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, Cambridge (MA) - London, The MIT Press 2001.
- ⁴ J. McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web*, New York - Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2001.
- ⁵ M.-L. Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology", in M.-L. Ryan and J.-N. Thon (eds.), *Storyworlds across Media. Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, Lincoln (NE) - London, The University of Nebraska Press 2014.
- ⁶ F. Ciotti, *Digital Literary and Cultural Studies: State of the Art and Perspectives*, in «Between», 4.8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1392.
- ⁷ H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York - London, New York University Press 2007.
- ⁸ G. Ragone, *Per una mediologia della letteratura. McLuhan e gli immaginari*, in «Between», 4.8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1304.
- ⁹ E. Lamberti, *Vortexes, Spirals, Tetrads: McLuhan's Hyper-Language as a (Digital) Tool for (Old and New) Storytelling*, in «Between», 4.8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1362.
- ¹⁰ F. Deriu, *Forma sociale della psicologia alfabetica. Il teatro nell'ipotesi 'neuroculturale' di de Kerckhove*, in «Between», 4.8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1328.
- ¹¹ We have also had the opportunity to interview Derrick de Kerckhove and to have with him a long conversation on the topics of identity, narrative, and the overall condition of the arts in the digital world. The interview is published in «Between», 4.8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1826
- ¹² In *Ecologies of the Imagination: Italo Calvino's Six 'Memes' for the Digital World* («Between», 4.8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1364), Paolo Granata sees Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* as anticipating the current scene of media ecology analysed by Lance Strate in this same journal issue.
- ¹³ L. Di Michele, *Letteratura e mondo digitale*, «Between», 4.8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1803.
- ¹⁴ L. Strate, *Notes on Narrative as Medium and a Media Ecology Approach to the Study of Storytelling*, in «Between», 4.8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1406.

- ¹⁵ S. Rushdie, *Luka and the Fire of Life*, New York, Knopf 2010, p. 34.
- ¹⁶ G. Frasca, *La scimmia di Dio. L'emozione della guerra mediale*, Genova, Costa & Nolan, 1996; see also by the same author *La lettera che muore. La 'letteratura' nel reticolo mediale*, Roma, Meltemi, 2005.
- ¹⁷ J.D. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation*, cit.
- ¹⁸ H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, cit.
- ¹⁹ L. Strate, *Notes on Narrative*, cit.
- ²⁰ D. de Kerckhove, *Brainframes: Technology, Mind and Business*, Utrecht, Bosch & Keuning 1991.
- ²¹ A. Notaro, *How Networked Communication Has Changed the Ways We Tell Stories*, in «Between», 4.8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1341.
- ²² B. Wocke, *The Analogue Technology of «S»: Exploring Narrative Form and the Encoded Mystery of the Margin*, in «Between», 4/8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1313.
- ²³ J.J. Abrams and D. Dorst, S, Edinburgh, Cannongate, 2013.
- ²⁴ S. Cottrell and M.Z. Danielewski, *A Conversation with Mark Danielewski* (2002), accessed January 10, 2015, <http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0400/danielewski/interview.html>.
- ²⁵ I. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press 1988.
- ²⁶ C. Bioni, V. Innocenti, G. Pescatore, «Il concetto di ecosistema e i media studies: un'introduzione», in *Media Mutations. Gli ecosistemi narrativi nello scenario mediale contemporaneo. Spazi, modelli, usi sociali*, Modena, Mucchi 2013, pp. 11-26, on p. 12.
- ²⁷ M. Castells, *Communication Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009.
- ²⁸ D. Meneghelli, *Jane Austen: tra brand e desiderio*, in «Between», 4/8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1358.
- ²⁹ S. Falchi, «*Little Dorrit*'s Fourth Volume. Twenty-first Century Remediation of a Victorian Classic, in «Between», 4/8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1329.
- ³⁰ C. Cao, *Dai classici letterari a Twitter: alcuni esempi di riscrittura*, in «Between» 4/8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1330.
- ³¹ M.A. Masterson, *Towards a Collective Intelligence: Transmediality and the Wu Ming Project*, in «Between», 4/8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1305.
- ³² A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis - London, University of Minnesota Press 1996, p. 8.
- ³³ I. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, cit.
- ³⁴ U. Eco, *L'opera aperta*, Engl. Transl. *The Open Work*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press 1989.
- ³⁵ S. Calabrese, *Romanzi in realtà aumentata*, in «Between» 4/8 (2014), accessed June 30, 2015, doi: 10.13125/2039-6597/1334.