New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression

Reflections on a Thematic Project Sponsored by the Coordinating Committee of ICLA

di Marcel Cornis-Pope

In the past, literacy has chiefly meant alphabetic literacy. That meaning has dominated because the chief technologies of literacy, especially the early printing press, have privileged the written language over all other forms of semiosis. [… Today's definition of literacy] includes visual, electronic and (for want of better terminology) non-verbal or gestural or social literacies.
Nancy Kaplan, «E-literacies» (3, 13, 15, 28)

We […] are in a period of transition, a moment when the modes and the technology for cultural reproduction are shifting, this time from print to electronic environments which opens new possibilities for freedom as well as oppression.
David B. Downing and James J. Sosnoski, «As the Culture Turns: Postmodern *Works and Days*» (10)

1. Literature and Multimedia, East and West

The 1993 ACLA report on the state of literary studies at the turn of the century, known as the "Bernheimer Report," described the changes that the discipline of comparative literature had undergone during the previous few decades, emphasizing relationships between «Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures; between the pre- and postcontact cultural productions of colonized people, between gender constructions defined as feminine as those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; [and] between racial and ethnic modes of signifying» (Bernheimer 19). Conspicuously absent was the interaction between literature and other media and the expansion of literature into electronic and multimedia spaces. "Hybridity" was mentioned in some of the responses to this report, but it was linked to multiculturalism rather than to multimedia.

In 2004, Haun Saussy ends his new decennial reflections on the state of the comparative discipline by contrasting what Bernheimer and his respondents saw in the early 1990s with a new view afforded by the «age of information.» In place of an earlier «data-poor, low bandwidth era of communication,» which explain for Saussy the «paradoxes of traditional literary criticism» that gave «disproportionate attention to small things,» reading in the information saturated twenty-first century «is a journey into a different epistemological world» (32). The new writing and reading technologies make diverse media texts more accessible, without privileging or aestheticizing any of them. They also encourage, according to Saussy, a more «positivistic style of reading» (33), which may lead to flattening the engagement with the texts of a cultural period. We, therefore, need literature to «slow down to its speed, quibble over every word,» and frustrate "the economy of information in which more data and

faster access is always better.» For Saussy, «literature is a kind of resistance to information's charm. An internal; resistance, to be sure» (33).

Historically, textual study meant writing and reading verbal texts in the medium of print. The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of new media forms, expanding the concept of 'texts' far beyond the printed word. 'Texts' now include web publications, advertising, film, television, video and digitalized sound, graphic media, mixed media texts, and even installations. These massive technological shifts have inspired enthusiastic encomiums but also appropriate caveats. The editors of the 12.1-2 issue of *Works and Days* (1994), David B. Downing and James J. Sosnoski, warned that "technology has created not only a new division of society between onliners and offliners but also a new form of 'capital.' Social status may soon be marked by access to information" (14). Other theorists like Mark Prensky have differentiated 'digital natives' (people 'born' and acclimatized in the digital age) from 'digital immigrants,' those who are compelled to adopt at a later stage in their development the mannerisms of the Digital Age (see http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf). Theorists are also divided over the effects of the new technologies. Cyberutopianists like Ted Nelson, George P. Landow, and others, believe that the new electronic technologies will liberate us, advancing our cognitive and expressive horizons through borderless multisquential texts. By contrast, «[c]yberdistopians […] fear that the use of technology will destroy the cultures that we inhabit» (Downing and Sosnoski 16). Most other theorists have articulated a more balanced position, between the claims of «liberation» from «all arbitrary fixity and stability of the print culture» and the awareness of the «constraints of the computer system and the constraints of the writing system the computer embodies» (Jay Bolter 59-60). The text itself is seen as bifurcated, with the «text-to-be-seen» complementing and challenging «the-text-to-be-read».

The digital divide – or the lack of both digital literacy and access to technology – was more pronounced in the 1990s, at the beginning of the transition from «a predominantly print environment toward a predominantly electronic one» (Downing and Sosnoski 18). Today, a literate public is more accustomed to

write and read in multiply-defined textual media. As Mads Rosendahl Thomsen argues, «the future of writing and reading looks much better with these newly blended media, as opposed to the once dominant dichotomy of text versus images» (30). Writers from various cultures have taken advantage of the current computer-saturated environment producing hypertexts, hypermedia installations, and animated works that stretch the very definition of textuality, moving beyond the verbal to the visual, aural, and kinetic.

Critical and theoretical discourse has kept up, at least to some extent, with these developments, emphasizing the need for literary studies to become involved with the new media. In Chapter 22 of his co-authored book, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* (Berry and Epstein 277-89), Michael Epstein introduces his *IntelNet* ('Intellectual Network') project, an «interactive site and virtual community devoted to the discussion and promotion of interdisciplinary ideas in the humanities» (276). Based on the avant-garde technique of collective improvisation, this interdisciplinary and multimedia site seeks to generate new "thinklinks" among already available ideas, and integrate perspectives from the various disciplines. The IntelNet project provides also an electronic forum for their display and discussion. The «Conceptual Provocation» (292) offered by this project is enhanced when it cuts across national boundaries, interfacing divergent traditions and projects. Epstein's own philosophic and multimedia work unfolded in two related stages: one Russian (1982-89), as leading member of the Moscow Center for Experimental Creativity, the other American (1990-98), after Epstein's transplantation to the New World. The work of the original members of the interdisciplinary Moscow circle was continued later by a new group of «co-thinkers» (ix) in the US, led by Ellen E. Berry who worked with Epstein on testing «new modes of intercultural communication» at Bowling Green and Emory University (*Transcultural Experiments* 2, 214-28).

Despite their transcultural drive, the new media have at times developed differently in various parts of Europe and the postcolonial world, being more responsive to hybrid regional interests and agendas. Certain of the divisions that we highlighted in relationship to film in the East-Central European History project (between North and South, Central Europe

and the Balkans; see Cornis-Pope and Neubauer), also apply to the new media, even though the latter are assumed to follow globalist interests, under the impact of worldwide technologies and messages. We should be careful to question the construction of a world system that relays Western multimedia technologies to non-Western and postcolonial peripheries, as in the «Hollywood-centrism» that Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (29) attribute to global film. But we should also acknowledge that the 'peripheries,' including those of Eastern Europe, have reacted in contradictory ways to the new media, both resisting and embracing them, turning them into political tools to propagate «the authoritative voice of the nation» (30), but also into tools of transnational resistance and innovation.

2. A New Paradigm Shift? "Digimodernism" vs. Postmodernism

The electronic and global networking technologies have mediated a quiet revolution in the humanities and the arts, introducing new forms of scholarly and creative production and reception. A «new paradigm for textual analysis» (Kaufman 11) has been made available, with powerful text-based search engines, multiple layers of indexing, and multi-media contextualizations. Similarly, digitalization has brought about a new form of «fluid-bounded text» (Kirby 52), a «digimodernism» characterized «in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship» (Kirby 155). In Alan Kirby's definition, «digimodernism is the successor to postmodernism: emerging in the mid-late 1990s, it gradually eclipsed it as the dominant cultural, technological, social, and political expression of our times» (2). While Kirby overstates digimodernism's parricidal separation from postmodernism and theory (one subsection of his book is called «Burying Postmodernism: Post-Theory,» 27), he is right to talk about a new cultural environment that he dates from Pixar's *Toy Story* (1995), the first entirely computer-generated film (8). It is not very clear, however, how the range of digimodernists texts that followed – from TV shows like *Big Brother* to the film *Timecode*, Web 2.0 forms like Wikipedia, blogs, chat rooms, message boards, and social networking sites, as well as You-Tube, Facebook, videogames such as Mass Effect, radio phone-in, etc. (51) – fit together conceptually. While it is true that digimodernism has weakened the distinctions between literature and other media, not all the forms mentioned by Kirby are equally relevant to our discussion. Kirby admits that some «texts,» for example those that fuse «high» and «popular» cultural traits, «can be sites of resistance to and subversion of hegemonic forces» (125). They enhance the reader's agency, emphasizing his/her participation in «text-making» rather than just «meaning-making» (55).

As Kirby warns, we should not overstate the political gains in this enhanced role. Chapter 5, on «Digimodernist Aesthetics,» emphasizes the «infantilizing» effects of the popular media (especially cinema), characterized by a «recurring tendency […] to fantasy, or to innocently juvenile sources of humor,» and the «marginalizations of genres (war, musicals, drama) that adults like – tellingly, the 'woman's picture' has given way to the 'chick flick'» (127). The use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) makes film resemble videogames, losing the distinct «authorial vision» of earlier cinema (176), as well as its «philosophic or political engagement» (177). On a larger scale, the age of digimodernism (and Kirby's last chapter lists several pages of phenomena associated with it, from the bombings of Bali, Madrid, London, and Mumbai, to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and Dan Brown's anti-Catholic *The Da Vinci Code*) brings back forms of grand narratives that promote hatred, oppression, and cruelty against rival systems. Fortunately, other sections in his book are less apodictic. In the previous chapter on «Digimodernist Culture,» Kirby allows that this age has produced a few exceptional works, like Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Ring* trilogy (2001-2003) which blends seamlessly CGI techniques, digimodernism, and mythology to offer a «trilogy [that] feels revolutionary,» «visually exciting» and «sonically mesmerizing» (181); or like Mike Figgis's *Timecode* (2000), a «digimodernist masterpiece» that resembles a «cubist cinema» (187), telling four different stories on a split screen that gradually bleed into one another, contaminating each other's story and exchanging characters between them until a number of larger themes emerge.

In examples like *Timecode* or the TV show *Big Brother* (2000-), digimodernism stretches itself to the point where its documentary intentions break

down as they borrow the devices of fiction. In some cases, this can create a disturbing effect in the viewer. As Kirby's own example of Cindy Sherman's «digimodernist» self-portraits suggests, the «apparent real» can take on self-ironic connotations. Cindy Sherman's series of photographs *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), in which the artist poses as a character from the movies of Goddard, Hitchcock, or Antonioni, the «narratives of anxiety and ennui, alienation and perversity» (139) undermine not only our sense of reality but also the «reality» of the movies themselves. The films her poses evoke are «invented fragments of what would be, if they existed, inventions» (140). The artifice of representing a woman is taken to the point of absurdity, denounced through its own excess.

In a number of ways, digimodernism follows in the footsteps of postmodernism, giving it a more realistic, post-9/11 definition. As Susan Suleiman reminds us, «Things are [no longer] so simple; the idea of a postmodern paradise in which one can try on identities like costumes in a shopping mall […] appears […] not only naive, but intolerably thoughtless in a world where – once again – whole populations are murdered in the name of (ethnic) identity» (54). But Suleiman and other theorists are willing to envision a form of «ethical postmodernism» (55) that interrogates essentialist concepts, emphasizing «interaction, interconnection, and exchange» (Friedman 3).

3. Overview of the Project on *New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression*

In what follows, I will describe briefly a new international project, published at the end of 2014, which draws on recent theoretical and applied work in the field of electronic and multimedia literature. An important emphasis in this project is on literary production and expression in multimedia environments. More specifically, Part One entitled *Multimedia Productions in Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, puts forth a number of questions and arguments concerning the definition, hybrid genre, and intercrossed forms of a range of multimedia products, from digital literature to more complex transmedial work. It also offers a brief historical overview of the development of multimedia productions, seeking the antecedents of the current

intermediatic synergies while also pointing out tensions and divergences among the various media.

Part Two, focused on «Regional and Intercultural Projects,» offers an explorative mapping of the recent multimedia cultures of Europe in relation to other geo-cultural areas that have impacted it, one that – while recognizing the global pressures and trends in the visual and performative media – also foregrounds the distinctive features of cultural subregions. Central Europe and Russia receive a particularly strong focus because of their alternative mapping and rewriting of paradigms from Western Europe. Other regions highlighted are Scandinavia and Southern Europe.

Part Three focuses on the intermediate «Forms and Genres» that literature has created or has become part of as it moved into the realm of digital expression, multimedia performance, the blogosphere, and the virtual. Part Four, the final section of the volume, foregrounds the enhanced interactive connection between authors, texts, and readers in multimediated forms of literature. This section focused on «Readers and Rewriters in Multimedia Environments» begins appropriately with a series of reasons for why we should engage with multimedia literature, proposed by a major theorist and practitioner in the field, Alan Bigelow (Medaille College, New York). This and other essays throughout this volume are examples of the kinds of projects and inquiries that have become possible internationally at the interface between literature and other media, new and old. They emphasize the extent to which hypertextual, multimedia, and virtual reality technologies have enhanced the sociality of reading and writing, enabling more people to interact than ever before. At the same time, however, they warn that, as long as these technologies are used to reinforce old habits of reading/ writing, they will deliver modest results. One of the urgent tasks pursued by the contributors to this volume has been to integrate literature into the global informational environment where it can function as an imaginative partner, teaching its interpretive competencies to other components of the cultural landscape. In turn, the interplay between literature and other media (visual, performative, electronic) has produced innovative literary practices that challenge monologic concepts of culture, emphasizing cross-cultural interplay and translation.

4. Situating the Project in the Current Intermedia Conversation

A major emphasis in this volume is on literary production and expression in multimedia environments. Literature remains an important focus of research, even as its modes of manifestation expand to include new hybrids that stretch the traditional definition of what is «literary.» Multimediatic literature includes a variety of forms, from emblem literature to a host of new genres such as concrete poetry, graphic novels, strips, hypertexts, multimedia performance, installations, and other «combined and simultaneously displayed artforms in which literary texts function as one component» (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* 1: 513). In my previous coedited work, from which I just quoted, the «criterion of simultaneity exclude[d] artforms in which literature merely serves as a point of departure or inspiration but does not appear in the final form; similarly, it does not include the various forms of *ekphrasis*, i.e., literary descriptions of visual art objects, and *verbal music*, i.e., verbal representations of real or imaginary music» (513). In the new volume on *New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression* we do include also forms of *ekphrasis* at least to the extent that they break down the boundary between arts, allowing the interpenetration of discourses as in the contamination of literary descriptions with elements of other artistic discourses.

A whole section in our project is dedicated to the interplay of global vs. local/regional emphases. Clearly, globalization is not something to be taken lightly. As Gayatri Spivak reminds us, while cyberliteracy may be «an excellent, enticing, and seductive wonderful thing,» the «invasion of the unmediated, so-called, cyberliteracy in the subaltern sphere is deeply frightening» (Hedge and Radha 285). The contributors to our volume are well aware of these globalizing pressures but they argue that the global messages are often filtered through regional or local interests that created hybrids, both thematically and formally. As D. C. Mc-Millin also argues, global channels have resorted, especially of late, to «strategies of hybridization, dubbing, cloning, and collaging» (103) in an effort to win over Third World markets. Conversely, Third World countries have employed new media with a postcolonial, regional edge to «build community and create spaces for subaltern empowerment» (197).

Our volume foregrounds various examples of creative «entanglements of the global, regional, national, and local» (Chopra and Gajjala 11), emphasizing regional developments in East-Central Europe, in Scandinavia, and in Southern Europe. Even pan-European projects like ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice), designed «both to study the formation and interactions of [the European] community and to further electronic literature research and practice in Europe,» take into account the hybrid roots of their object of study. Composed of seven European academic research centers (the University of Bergen in Norway, the Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland, the Blekinge Institute of Technology in Sweden, the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, the University College of Falmouth at Dartington, UK) and one non-academic partner (the New Media Scotland), this organization focuses on the electronic-literature community in Europe as a practical model of networked creativity (see http://elmcip.net/), but also as a source of innovative digital work that reflects creative regional alternatives.

Genres themselves have been hybridized, replacing the traditional grand narratives that promoted national or ethnocentric visions with forms of intermediality that emphasize tensions between the global and local. Intermediality is a particularly useful concept since it defines complexity of form, medium, and technology. As several essays in this volume argue, one of the most important shifts in textual production has been the emphasis on «non- or multilinearity, its multivocality, and its inevitable blending of media and modes, particularly its tendency to marry the visual and the verbal» (Landow, *Hypertext 3.0* 220). Much of the earlier electronic work exemplifies the hypertextual structures that Landow theorizes, promoting not only textual but also cultural interactivity, «insist[ing] on the collaborative nature of its productions [… and] the distribution of authorship» (Hayles 161). For example, Geoff Ryman (born in Canada, educated in the United States and working in England since 1973) has produced work that mixes genres (science fiction, historical novel, fantasy) and media (verbal narrative, hypertext, performance). His *253: A Novel for the Internet about London Underground in Seven Cars and a Crash*, discussed in my own article on *Author-Reader Interactions in the*

Age of Hypertextual and Multimedia Communication, is an experiment in interactive electronic narrative. The reader is offered preliminary information about the 252 passengers in the seven carriages on a Bakerloo Line train and about the train's driver. The cast of characters includes a husband and a wife in separate cars, a comic ice-cream manufacturer, a mass murderer's former co-worker, Henri Matisse's heir, somebody named Geoff Ryman, a band of street actors called «Mind the Gap,» and a pigeon. From this preliminary information, the reader is invited to piece together their life stories, making hypertextual jumps from one character to another in a way that will allow them to relate to each other before the train crashes at the end of the narrative. The reader is challenged to fill in the gaps and make the characters' relationships meaningful, preventing the total annihilation of this narrative world.

By themselves, hypertextual and networked forms of writing do not guarantee an enhanced textual and cultural experience. Even the most experimental cyber-text runs – according to Robert Coover – the risk of being overly slack and unstructured, giving way to «that dreamy, […] lost-in-space feeling of the early sci-fi films» (*The End of Books* 25). We could, in fact, argue that a printed text can provide a well-trained reader with the experience of a «nearly endless narrative» more easily than an electronic hypertext where the complicated logistic of navigating multipaths and the pressure of «randomness and expansiveness might come to feel as oppressive to [readers] as linearity and closure did for modern and postmodern writers» (Travis 108). The challenge to older modes of reading «text» in the broad sense of the word is stronger in multimedia work that overlaps image, text, sound, and motion. For example, one of Alan Bigelow's digital installations, MyNovel.org (2006), takes six classic novels (*Moby Dick*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lolita*, and *On the Road*) and compresses them into four sentences each. These four-sentence novels play against a shifting series of Flash background movies. At any point readers can write their own short narratives by using the tools included on the site. MyNovel. org challenges our assumptions about traditional genre distinctions, interplaying novel, short story, and poetry, while also forcing the literary text out of the static page and merging it with other art forms. Writing becomes an event that redefines itself continually while also drawing on the reader/viewer's own creativity.

The new technologies have served the goal of en-

hancing the interactive component in the writing and interpretation of literature, giving authors and readers a better sense of the multilevel nature of literature. However, as long as these technologies are used to reinforce old habits of reading/ writing or to ask «fairly traditional questions of traditional texts» (Olsen 312), they will deliver modest results. Rather than tempering «the friction-producing differences of multiculturalism» with the «friction-reducing technology of informatics,» as Travis (118) proposes, we should use technology to enhance the dialogic aspect of our cultural transactions. One of our urgent tasks is to reintegrate literature in the global informational environment; the latter is inconceivable without the exigencies of creative authorship, critical rereading/rewriting, and cultural reformulation. In turn, the cross-fertilization between literature and the new media environment has produced innovative literary practices that challenge monologic concepts of culture, emphasizing «interference» and «translation» between the participating systems.

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