

ALTERNATIVE FORMS IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF LITERATURE

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Summary

Since the 15th century, the printed book has been in Europe, then the world, the mainstream form of diffusion of literature. Since then, it has coexisted with 'alternative' forms, which were in fact previous forms: the oral and manuscript tradition of literature was millennia old. Subliterary forms and 'popular genres' found their 'alternative' way to 'special interest' groups, thus constituting special readerships through the daily press, small magazines, private printings, and many 'under the counter' forms of diffusion. New 'alternative' forms, either printed (tracts, booklets, pamphlets, flyers) or manuscript (samizdat, graffiti) were mainly the result of counter-cultural (and then counter-canonical) political choices in the West and of political exclusion from the 'legal' publishing process in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, as well as in China, and many Asian, African and Latin-American countries. The blog and electronic media challenge previous preconceptions about the book and the future of print-oriented societies (as opposed those who read an always moving and moveable text on screen).

1. Ends and Means: Under the Empire of the Book

From the standpoint of the 21st century we may consider a wide panorama of traditional and well established forms, which are the central and privileged means of circulation and distribution of literature. Since the invention of the printing press (1456), *the* medium, without doubt, was the book. As a consequence, in due time writers were able to begin a professional career: books were commodities. New trades emerged, and the literary agent helped the author, for a fee or percentage, to get an editor who acted as middleman with an invested interest between public and artist. And as a backdrop, there

are the also printed epiphenomena that have accompanied -and praised- books until today: newspapers, magazines, tracts, cultural supplements and pamphlets of all sorts.

As well as book about books, *Tageskritik* and *Literaturwissenschaft*, *pastiches* and *mélanges*, running commentaries and heretical paraphrases, in the always growing constellation of a ‘second degree’ literature which doubted the fallacy of almost all writerly intentions. Literary Criticism and all forms of so-called ‘second degree’ literatures come as well under the heading of alternative forms in the distribution of Literature. Here we may heed to Paul Valéry, T. S. Eliot and Jorge Luis Borges conceptions of writing as a form of creative reading that modifies and mobilizes, sometimes just sparingly, but always meaningfully, the texts that precede it.

Will this literature be growing for ever? The question sounds bombastic, but it is legitimate. The reasons of this legitimacy are to be found in both in the past and the future, literature may claim. Literature is millennia older than the printed book, and the *vexata quaestio* of oral literatures is not that easily disposed of (in this sense, ‘literature’ is roughly equated to ‘fiction’). The very existence and agency of forms of ‘literature’ firstly preceding the widespread use of writing devices, and then thriving in a parallel form to written texts is the first questioning of the mainstream / alternative binarism considered as a books / non-books one.

The future of literature is foreseen by many critics in the electronic media. In the past, in the long centuries previous to the success of the progenies of Gutenberg, literary texts were conveyed in the West by manuscripts and other concurrent forms of manual inscription, or confided to memory. Recitation or public reading was the main forms of the ‘consumption’ of literature. The general diffusion of private and silent reading, which in the 4th century Augustinus realized with awe in the practice of his master Ambrosius, went *pari passu* with the spread of printed books and Reformation: free consciences were, if not the result, at least the obliging companions of free readers.

At this stage, some questions are unavoidable, because otherwise the juxtaposition of ‘alternative’ and ‘literature’ would be begging the question. The stability of the book form as central or mainstream, and the labeling of the other forms as ‘alternative’ ones are inescapably historical phenomena. On the other hand, books are the medium of many decidedly non-literary publications, and literature is a concept perpetually under revision. Also, as theoreticians like Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan and Jacques Ellul have emphasized (it is more of a serendipity than of a haphazard event their being all Christians), the printed book has shaped our understanding of what literature is. The printed book entailed the abandonment of an ear-oriented community and the world emergence of an eye-oriented society: you did not listen to the tradition anymore; you had to look afresh with your own eyes. The *sapere aude* of Immanuel Kant’s definition of Enlightenment was a necessary climax in this visual culture.

2. Past and Future Alternatives: The Forms of Sensoriality from Oral to Hypertext

Since neither the book, nor ‘literature’, are concepts free of vagueness, it was felt sure to assume, at least, that the core of the literary tradition was well preserved in books. In 1962 Marshall McLuhan published what still was a book that would definitively alter

his cultural course and career as an Anglicist and Comparatist literary scholar whose 'field' was in a very 'highly literary' subject, the Elizabethan period. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* opened up Professor McLuhan's path to fame, from a 'central', but minority book world, to an 'alternative' but mass oriented view of literature in the context of electronic media.

The central idea of McLuhan's sounded then as unusual as it was controversial. It can be summarized in these terms: books and writing will fade away as the principal and only forms of cultural dissemination and they will be replaced by more varied and comprehensive forms of communication.

The book, against what has been uncritically accepted until the 20th century, is not the only medium for spreading ideas; on the contrary, it was necessary to repress our other senses so that the written word could reach its current hegemony. Oral civilizations were not familiar with the restriction of human capacities that has limited human beings for centuries since the invention of the writing systems, and even more in the latter, print-oriented age: their relation to the world was manifold and involved all of the senses. Their approach to thought included the use of metaphoric and perceptive methods to explain reality.

Socrates and Christ both distrusted the written word and preferred to orally impart their doctrines. With the emergence of writing, which quickly became the main method of cultural and learned interchange, the variety of senses was blocked and everything seemed limited to visual perception. In the wake of this capacity restriction, the way of conceiving reality was profoundly changed: thought became closer to logic and metaphor became mere argumentation. In particular with the alphabetic writing system, which assigns a segment to each symbol, the world was perceived linearly, in the same order that the written word was read, and time and space, equally linear, returned.

With the invention of moveable type printing this tendency was even more marked, giving birth to the 'typographic man': a man specialized in the visual sense, who more than ever interpreted the world according to data obtained through sight. The ebbing of this man was helped in the sixties with the emergence of new communication media. The followers of McLuhan pointed in the digital nineties to the hypertext and allied forms in the world wide net as an entirely new way of literature transmission which would, at the same time, modify our perceptions of 'old' literature as well as ensure the emergence of a potentially 'new' one.

The rise of new technologies modified our thought habits and the characteristics of our communicative interchanges because 'the medium is the message'. The tools created by man constitute true extensions, 'limbs' of the body, that allow for a more dynamic relation to the world. The discovery of the empowering and resourceful electricity –that more than a limb became a new rendering of the entire central nervous system– increased the complexity of human transactions, a complexity enhanced later by the so called digital revolution. A 'cool medium' (McLuhan distinguished between 'cold media', which involved a plurality of senses and 'hot media', which referred to just one), television took advantage of the contribution of electricity to appeal to the viewer. Writing was, in the words of McLuhan, 'high definition': its messages were clear, well-

articulated, and logically comprehensible; the televised message derived its richness from its jumbling of images. Television may stand as a synecdoche for all forms of distribution and adaptation of literature that involve images, sound and even movement.

McLuhan's predictions and his slightly uncritical defense of the media became objects of attack and cause for argument, above all because of the consequences that his characterizations had on interpreting world political evolution: the eulogist of mass media was a eulogist of the sense of History. The growing dissemination of media that allowed intercommunication at an international level –one must only think of news links and television *networks*–, was driving humanity once again to a tribal fate, but a huge and technological tribe, that McLuhan dubbed the “global village”. Up-to-date McLuhanites, as Professor Roger Silverstone of London University in *Why Study the Media?* (2000), offer a nuanced perspective of the new global community of writers and readers the World Wide Web has produced, and of how is it becoming increasingly central, not any more an ‘alternative’ to the book world.

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Biographical Sketch

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