

LITERATURE AND MASS-MEDIA-THE SPECTACLE OF WRITING

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Summary

This chapter aims to be a reflection on the relation between literature and mass-media in our mediatic age. The first part deals with the displacement that has taken place in our times, both in the fields of literature and writing, towards other semantic fields, both literary and non-literary. The second part analyses an instance of this phenomenon, namely photography as a narrative-aesthetic paradigm. The third section turns towards the soap opera as sequel to the serial novel, which was at its heyday towards the end of the nineteenth century. A fourth part questions the role of the archive in mass culture, and the way in which it could better satisfy the new demands of present-day cultures. Emphasis will be placed on the figure and the fiction of Manuel Puig. A fifth and final section will deal with the need for a new verbal-visual literacy through a brief analysis of a recent animated movie.

1. At First Sight

At first sight, it might seem that the semiotic relationships between writing and seeing, between literature and music, are privy to the present, media-centered age. However, the Baroque has also been regarded as “a passing spectacle” from Wolfflin’s felicitous perspective, fusing visions and temporalities, perplexities and historicities. A similar preoccupation drives Stanley Cavell’s philosophical investigations on the aesthetics of cinema and opera: to find out to which extent the media reflect and transfigure the concerns of the subject, “without splitting the audience, between high and low, or between advanced and philistine” (2005: 14). In the American philosopher’s view, Fred Astaire’s triviality —the object of a curious and fascinating study— is only apparent, since “no event of the public street, or of the private apartment, is unworthy of philosophy”. (2005: 3)

The main Russian Formalist thinkers (Tynianov, Eijenbaum, Yakubinski, Vinogradov, Zhirmunski, Shklovski, Bernstein), attempted to merge scientific reflection on culture and art in a single, actualized process of aesthetic debate, thus freeing literature from its rigid and elitist academic isolation. The Formalists considered the word both in its concrete, phonic aspect, and in its figurative character (*obraznost*), enriching and enhancing the polysemy of discourse as imagetic, live, and throbbing matter.

In the 1920s, the appearance in Russia of the cinema and other new media laid the foundations for a wider study of the literary phenomenon, from the perspective firstly of the budding sociology of literature, and later of the theory and semiotics of culture. Between 1920 and 1930, Tynianov and Shklovski energetically contributed to the development of silent movies and to a nascent theory of cinema, where both critics saw, “visually” transposed, the motifs and plots (*siuzhety*) of literature. Eijenbaum (*Poetika kino*, 1927) proposes a semantics of cinema, in which the same rules of the syntax of poetry and text are applied to the cinema. The characteristically cinematographic semantic signs which make up the images and the structure of montage are, insofar as rhythmic language, the foundations of the theory of an artistic grammar (*graphma* as letter, written, writing) which articulates semiotics as science of communication and of philosophical reflection.

2. The Ubiquity of Literature, or Writing, Lies and Videotapes

Jacques Derrida devoted himself to penetrating the deepest recesses of the original sources of verbal-linguistic communication, reflecting on the place “where writing begins”. Writing, according to the philosopher of Deconstruction, always arises and develops as a continuum. Writing is, it exists, has always existed. It is articulated as the incomparable archive of memory, and it is precisely due to its mnemonic capacity and power to recreate experiences that the biological gesture of preservation of human wisdom and subjective experience is extended to non-temporal, subject-transcending dimensions.

Writing informs, by accumulation, and allows the writer (the author or the man in the street) to survive, to be known (and recognized); in short, to be perceived as a living and existing sign. Even though it persists in its natural, essential, *scriptural* (so to speak) character, the hermeneutic conception of writing has changed substantially, and both its value and propagation have spread towards other semantic fields of knowledge, leading to a transformation not so much of its ontological core (the being of writing and its property), as of its phenomenological effect.

The age foreseen by Marshall McLuhan—who, unfortunately, did not live to see the era of the Internet—has dawned, with the advent of the society of the mass-media, hypertexts and various screens, variously conceived or imagined (cellular phones, television, videogames, etc.).

From this perspective, writing gives place to two thorny questions, which demand careful consideration: on the one hand, a new discussion of the word “writing” and the theory which accompanies the philosophy of writing; on the other, the experiential value of writing *qua* reading, that is to say, the addressee’s use of its psycho-pedagogic attributes. Without separating these two lines, we shall consider the becoming and the transformation of writing and its variations on reading.

Laurence Sterne, in his shocking novel *Tristram Shandy*, published between 1760 and 1769, mocked —quite modernly— his reader, by including (and forcing his editor to include) a black and a marbled page in the text which tells a variety of adventures, a text filled with numerous, necessary, almost infinite digressions, which never concern the hero of the title. The marbled page, which represents the most distinctive emblem of the novel, is not merely a mocking gesture but a paradoxical invitation to reading, an admonishment against high-brow criticism, which diabolically separates writings and readers; it is also a prophetic declaration of the perpetual modalities of narration.

For Sterne, the pleasure of reading goes hand in hand with cognitive curiosity, and the imagination does not stray far from the operation of reading; on the contrary, it becomes enriching and creative. For this reason, the great English author inserts in his text a series of curious visual signs such as asterisks, dashes, comic effects, onomatopoeias, minuscule drawings of indexes and pens, or figurative images which metonymically make explicit an object and its sense.

Sterne appeals to written strategies belonging to other systems of signs, hence modernizing the meaning of the *littera* and anticipating present-day narrative-visual resources: onomatopoeias enhance the verisimilitude and humor of the narration, or its proximity to the reader; the asterisks, on the other hand, leave room for an ad-lib or arbitrary interpretation of the reader, or what —maliciously— his curiosity, even to create an atmosphere of mystery; the dashes interrupt or suspend the narration, leaving some information outside the reader's imagination by means of the rhetorical procedure of *aposiopesis*, i.e., an improvised reticence of the discourse with the aim of appearing to leave aside discursive logic in deference to the reader's intuition. These literary omissions, designed to give the impression of having been censored by the author, fall in the category of the unsaid, which, as Italo Calvino remarked, say and inform much more than what is actually said, an attitude closer to the dry and contorted pages of medical or law treatises than to the apparent profusion and comprehensiveness of the information.

Taking a temporal leap in our time machine, let us fast forward to the present, and think about the transformation, the corruption of language, its elliptical use, its synthesis. The language of Microsoft Messenger or of the SMS (Short System Messages) runs parallel to Sterne's shocking proposals of almost three hundred years ago; needless to say, intentions have changed beyond the times.

It would be fair to say that writing has suffered a remarkable change, of which, to some extent, we are all aware. Suffice it to recall the function of complementarity we experience when watching television —a device which occupies the place of the book in contemporary society. Text and image are strongly linked, to the extent that characters of twentieth-century literature such as Jorge Amado's *Gabriela, cravo e canela* or *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* are recognized by viewers rather than by readers. We do not know if this is for the better, or if the magnetic monopolization should better broadcast only specters of banalities and common-places. The profusion of images carries the danger of minimizing the signs that those very images represent, i.e. their being, their condition of being, "media". Lisa Block de Behar warns about this risk: "the word, writing, the mass-media (...) have become ends: there lies the beginning and the end of the world, there is no beyond" (1990: 154).

High-brow literature has for some time questioned writing and its relation to the image and other communicative discourses. Several authors, Manuel Puig and Luis Rafael Sánchez among them, have reserved a prominent place to the study of literary language contaminated by elements from the language of the mass-media. Music, hybrid forms, comics (as is the case of the Canadian author Douglas Coupland or the tarot game in *Il castello dei destini incrociati* [*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*] by Italo Calvino, which populate the marginal columns of the pages of the novel) are incorporated into the literary text in a curious (half-bred, perhaps) agglomeration, thus transforming the concept of *text*.

This goes beyond the mere recycling of discourses from distant semantic origins. Rather, it is the awareness that, when speaking about the *text*, it would be unfair and limiting to refer exclusively to the literary text. If *text* comes from *texere*, a metaphor that regards the linguistic complex of discourse as a fabric, then the text must be a linguistic structure which realizes a system (Segre, 1985). The text is the consequence of signs and codes that has a *plurality* by means of which something more than information is conveyed (or hidden), namely experiences, truths, signs that belong to the communicating subject and to the system on which she depends and from which she originates. Iuri Lotman remarks that “The text is an integral sign, and all the isolated signs of the linguistic text as a whole are reduced in it to elements of the sign. Thus the artistic text as a whole is created as a single sign, of particular content, composed *ad-hoc*”. (Lotman, 2002: 57). In this case, text and writing are not linked to the high-brow cultural sphere: a pictorial expression, a musical piece, or a soap opera, insofar as integral linguistic signs, are texts. What changes, of course, is the language, the codes, the presentation of these texts: however, there is still unity at the level of communication. The text communicates in the same way a *sms* or a ciphered message on the Messenger. Right now, the question is how to discern between communicative phenomena and their anthropological and cultural aspects. If indeed “every work is built from traditional elements” (Lotman, 2002: 57), what is modified is the reception value of the textual message. Thus the text is divided into new reading modalities, no longer appearing as a single, rigid model, but as a dialogic space where multiple actions and paradigms concur (language, fashion, technology, new demands). “Every text of culture is essentially heterogeneous. Even in a rigorously synchronic cut, the heterogeneity of the languages of culture makes up a complex multivocalism”. (Lotman: website).

In this sense, to say that there is less and less writing and more and more typing is only in part true: indeed there is less writing, but it is because the transfiguration that the concept of writing has suffered, its *dislocation*, as we have suggested at the beginning; to the original text hybrid elements have been added, alien elements, removed from their original context. This dislocation of writing, and, at the same time, of the cultural system, is a new form of communication that must be learned.

In our mediatic society, literature is leaving ample room to the concurrence of images. Rather than speaking of a postmodern age, one should speak of an *age of images*. The author of the message has changed, but so has its reader, who now perceives writing itself as image, such is the plurimorphic and polyphonic *capacity* of the text. Apropos this era of virtuality and images, it is worth recalling that Jean Baudrillard suggests reading the interaction between text and image:

From the moment we are in front of the screen, we no longer perceive the

text as text, but as image. Thus writing becomes a bona-fide activity in the separation of the text from the canvas, of text and image —never in its interaction. Likewise, the spectator becomes an actor when there is a strict separation between stage and audience. Hence everything concurs nowadays for the abolition of this gap. Heyday or end of the spectator? (Baudrillard, 1997: 146).

Baudrillard's invitation is as seductive as any image. Authors like Cortázar had said and shown before him that fragments of photographs had narrative dignity, in a new formula that *collects*, joins, unites in one and the same body, seemingly dissonant elements, in such a way that what is underscored is its *effect*, which dissolves the classical view of a single point of origin, promoting instead a renewed perception of the whole. In this way, texts are revitalized, actualized; in them, culture finds a particular space: clusters or even words –/si:/, /tu/; /iu/; /bi:/– are reduced to single letters or numbers, turned by youthful rebelliousness into a new creative writing, in a miraculous symbiosis.

The interference of signs is manifested as modernized *confluence*, recognizable by the new generations, making room for a new collective memory. In this arrangement of recycled and hybrid forms, the reader can become a true investigator and recognize, beyond the cultural high-brow discourse, that William of Baskerville (the main character of the celebrated novel *Il nome della rosa* [*The Name of the Rose*]) reminds us of the famous Sherlock Holmes or is perhaps his perfect copy. Umberto Eco, who knows the semiotic tricks of the narrator, defines semiotics as “the discipline that studies everything that can be used to lie”. Eco's opinion might be excessive: an algebra or chemistry text, in a formalized language, does not contemplate, for instance, this aspect of deception. Deception is certainly an important aspect of communication and meaning, but not always relevant for and dependent on the process and intentionality of the communicative action. Deception is certainly fascinating, and in the artistic text it frequently works as both concealment and revelation of the stuff of personal life experience. It might be more accurate to say that deception reveals the complicity of the addressee, his participation in the communicative attempt of the sender of the message.

Deception does not belong exclusively to the long suffering field of writing. It is possible to lie with photographs, pictures, by means of the big screen, through boleros or salsa. The word can no longer be considered as monopolizing lies; between the sender and receiver of a message a new gauge has been established, in the awareness that contemporary writing is also, and mainly, a visual experience. Imagetic resources represent artistic communication techniques that show changes in the areas of grammar and syntax, which are no longer purely linguistic but open to other semantic regions.

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