THE ART OF WRITING, READING AND LIVING – BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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Abstract: The aim of the present study is to investigate and appraise the art of writing, reading and living, as challenged by the amazing speed of life, new patterns of society and most recent technological changes and advances, and subject to a law of diminishing returns. What is the function of literature nowadays in an increasingly hyper-connected (technologically) though alienated and disrupted (individually) society? The transition and adaptation of culture production and consumption from the printed age to the digital age, from Gutenberg to Google, has triggered ample and heated debate about: the recent challenges addressed to the book industry – which has turned into a business, especially in terms of marketing and promotion; the traditional concept of the book which is undergoing essential reshaping (e-books); the encouragement and dissemination of cultural interaction (cultural blogs); the accessibility and appeal of new forms of communication nowadays (blogs as an alternative and/or substitute for direct communication); as well as the emergence of technological novelty (i.e. new reading supports, IPAD tablet computer, IMAX Digital Theatre System).

Keywords: art of writing and reading, function of literature, books and the information age

The aim of the present study is to investigate and appraise the art of writing, reading and living, as challenged by the amazing speed of life, new patterns of society and most recent technological changes and advances, and subject to a law of diminishing returns. Knowledge is the key to the understanding and preparing for the future, in a knowledge-based society, but what is our approach towards knowledge, what the various arenas for ideas, who are the audiences of intellectuals and their ideas, and who are the readers of contemporary writers? What is the function of literature nowadays in an increasingly hyper-connected, technologically, though alienated and individually disrupted society?[1]

Unlike a few decades ago, when the availability of books was rather scarce, the major problem nowadays confronting any reader or scholar is the information overload and identification of selection and relevance criteria, as well as critical thinking skills. In other words, "We see what we are prepared to see. We see what we want to see. We see what we are used to seeing. We see what our emotions have sensitized us to see. {…} We are excellent at analysis but not nearly so good at design, because design needs a very different sort of thinking."[2]

[1] "To have access to everything is to have nothing in particular" (Nicole Krauss, "The End of Bookstores", *New Republic*, 24 March 2011 <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/84531/end-bookstores-amazon-e-book-borders>)

[2] Edward de Bono, *New Thinking for the New Millennium*, London: Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 158, 194.

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What is required is a paradigm shift from analytical to critical thinking, from analysis and synthesis to selection, interpretation, creativity, innovation and design. Furthermore, what is the role of humanities, especially in an age defined and subject to market-drive considerations, economic competitiveness and profit-oriented society. "Citizens cannot relate well to the world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone. The third ability of the citizen … is what we can call narrative imagination."[3]

Nicole Krauss seems to be highly aware of the current discrepancy between literature as "engaging with life and a conversation about what it means to be human" and life as "disengagement with ideas, the world, other people, their own feelings". Very much in keeping with Edward de Bono`s idea, she also deplores the lack in "the poetry of thought that finds connections between remote things to bring us symbols, ideas, meanings, metaphors. And nowhere is this practice more highly refined than in the realm of art and literature."[4]

Communication has undergone two major revolutions: print took about six hundred years to get from China to Europe in 1440; and almost six centuries later, cca 1970, the first e-books appeared, heralding a new age of communication: from print to digital, from private to public. The book as a format has been subject to radical changes recently, as electronic reading devices tend to become obsolete themselves rather than sustainable, they provide quick access and mobility, however any claim regarding the "death of the book" (Marshall McLuhan) is doomed to failure. Reading has turned mobile since new devices provide both appeal to technology literates and interaction – in terms of form and content. There is a change of strategy or technique and reading habit instead of a radical shift; the transition from Gutenberg to Google might have dulled our mental astuteness, and turned individuals into passive consumers of information. "The proliferation of technology and the media is radically altering or perception, our sense of time and space and motion."[5]

The current status of the book is the premise and the essence of an enlightening dialogue between Jean-Claude Carriere and Umberto Eco who, very convincingly, advocate the survival of the book, despite widespread opinions upheld by some futurologists or journalists`s rumours that books shall disappear or become obsolete; the transition from paper and ink to digitisation should not entail an either/or perspective.[6] Instead, it has triggered ample and heated debate about: the recent challenges addressed to the book industry – which has turned into a business, especially in terms of marketing and promotion; the traditional concept of the book which is undergoing essential reshaping (e-books); the encouragement and dissemination of cultural interaction (cultural blogs); the accessibility and appeal of new forms of communication nowadays (blogs as an alternative and/or substitute for direct communication); as well as the emergence of technological novelty (i.e. new reading supports, IPAD tablet computer, IMAX Digital

[3] Martha Nussbaum, "Skills for Life", *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 April 2010, p. 15.
[4] Nicole Krauss, "Interview with Nicole Krauss", *Bold Type Magazine*, Random House, [2002] <http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0502/krauss/interview.html>
[5] *Idem*.
[6] Jean-Claude Carriere and Umberto Eco, *Nu sperati ca veti scapa de carti*, Bucuresti: Humanitas, 2010.

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Theatre System). Reading has turned mobile since new devices provide both appeal to technology literates and interaction – in terms of form and content.

Previously, in a lecture entitled "From Internet to Gutenberg", Umberto Eco pointed out the real problem that "visual communication as to be balanced with the verbal one, and mainly with the written one for a precise reason."[7] The book is both an object of culture and commerce; in the latter function, e-books seems to take the lead in the 21st century publishing industry; "the digital revolution offers so many new possibilities for that sector, possibilities that offer benefits for book-lovers, for the book industry, and for European culture."[8]

There is a significant difference, however, between browsing a book in a real bookstore and virtual browsing, where the Internet search engine performs a selection on our behalf and provides a customized response. "A bookstore, by contrast, asks you to scan the shelves on your way to looking for the thing you had in mind. A bookstore search inspires serendipity and surprise."[9]

Furthermore, the art of writing and the practice of reading are not only interdependent but they represent a mode of living, equally more sensible, more logical and than life itself, as illustrated by a fictional dialogue between writer and reader in Umberto Eco – *Confessions of a Young Novelist;* Orhan Pamuk – *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist;* Mario Vargas Llosa – *Lettters to a Young Novelist;* Milan Kundera – *The Art of the Novel.* As Orhan Pamuk briefly stated, a novel enables the reader access to a "second life", which though imaginary, seemed more real than authentic life. The act of reading is a transactional process between writer and reader, based on assumptions, subjective experience and creating ambiguity or uncertainty, generated by the elusive and unstable individual "mirror" that reflects a "fictional reality".[10]

The opening paragraph of Aldous Huxley`s *The Genius and the Goddess* reads as follows: "The trouble with fiction is that it makes too much sense. Reality never makes sense … Maybe form God`s point of view. Never from ours. Fiction has unity … style. Facts possess neither."[11] For some Huxleyan characters, especially intellectuals and artists, art might have been a refuge from the unpredictable and impossible-to-control nature of life. Denis Stone, for instance, created his own world of ideas, and, eventually chooses art over life: "Life, facts, things were horribly complicated; ideas, even the most difficult of them, deceptively simple. In the world of ideas everything was clear; in life everything was obscure, embroiled."[12]

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[7] Umberto Eco, "From Internet to Gutenberg", lecture presented at Columbia University, The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, November 12, 1996 <http://www.umbertoeco.com/en/from-internet-to-gutenberg-1996.html>

[8] Neelie Kroes, Speech at *Salon du Livre,* Paris, 25 March 2013 <http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-262_en.html>.

[9] Nicole Krauss, "The End of Bookstores", *New Republic*, 24 March 2011 <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/84531/end-bookstores-amazon-e-book-borders>

[10] Orhan Pamuk, *Romancierul naiv si sentimental,* Bucuresti: Polirom, 2012.

[11] Aldous Huxley, *Great Short Works of Aldous Huxley*, New York: Harper&Row, 1969, p. 272.

[12] Aldous Huxley, *Great Short Works of Aldous Huxley*, p. 17. See also: Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel Liiceanu, *Mario Vargas Llosa in dialog cu Gabriel Liiceanu*, Bucuresti: Humanitas, 2006: "literatura face ca, prin intermediul ei, viata sa fie mai usor de trait", p. 36; "viata nu-i facuta din cuvinte. Viata concretizeaza lucrurile, dar cuvintele nu concretizeaza lucrurile", p. 74.

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The approaches to and interdependence of life-art are various and complex, and the difficulty arises from language as a means of representation, a major concern of philosophers, writers, in general, and Modernists, in particular. The gap between the functional and creative roles of language was clearly highlighted by Mario Vargas Llosa in his conversation with Gabriel Liiceanu, during his visit to Romania in 2005, evinced by two oppositions: art / culture – politics; fiction – journalism; it is essentially the difference between being cultivated and being informed; language as communicating emotion and giving information. Words themselves cannot produce a longlasting effect on individuals and trigger imaginative or thinking abilities, they "possess no magical power and are incapable of propping or molding the mind of the reader"[13]; instead their careful selection and arrangement affect the reader.[14]

Writing also represents a way of giving coherence and clarity to the author`s inner reflection, based on the ability of individual memory to remember, collect and select experiences. For Nicole Krauss "writing novels has always been a way … to shine a light on, and give form to, certain enduring preoccupations, often ones that have been with me for many years."[15] Furthermore, the authorship-readership connection is subject to continuous change, in the sense that an author`s habits and preferences of reading will have an impact on the writing process; whereas the writing experience is also prone to changing a reader`s perspective. "The better your reading skills, the better your chance of writing well."[16]

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[13] Aldous Huxley, "Writers and Readers", in *The Olive Tree.* London: Chatto&Windus, 1936, p. 43.

[14] See also: Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel Liiceanu, *Mario Vargas Llosa in dialog cu Gabriel Liiceanu*: "politica lucreaza cu actualitatea, arta si literatura opereaza cu ceva mult mai durabil", p. 54; "... jurnalistica si literatura nu fac casa buna. Jurnalismul implica multe primejdii pentru scriitor, mai ales in folosirea limbajului, pentru ca cere un limbaj functional, care sa comunice, mai ales, si in spatele caruia jurnalistul sa dispara, adica exact contrariul limbajului unui scriitor, care pune pe hartie povestiri sau romane, ori mai ales poeme, in care limbajul trebuie sa fie nu numai instrument, ci si scop in sine, ceva prin care scriitorul se exprima, se revarsa si nu descrie lumea asa cum este, ci creeaza o alta lume", p. 21.

[15] Nicole Krauss, National Book Award Interview, [2011] <http://nicolekrauss.com/press.html>

[16] Nicole Krauss, "Interview with Nicole Krauss", *Bold Type Magazine*, Random House, [2002] <http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0502/krauss/interview.html>

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