BOOK COVERS – DIACHRONIC SIGNS OF INTERTEXTUALITY[1]

***Abstract**: Intertextuality should not be understood as a means of putting together textual slices, but as pieces of a discursive puzzle which might coexist. This coexistence is closely linked to the cultural, social and political context where the cultural object is to be de/reconstructed. Starting from Greimas's narrative semiotics, we will provide a theoretical pattern of intertextuality.*

The book covers of Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" *that were released throughout the years constitute our empirical data. All the short stories included in this volume are postmodern variants of traditional fairy-tales. A book cover is the first cultural object that a reader decodes as a semiotic process. The analysis of this cultural object implies the visual fragmentation (Barry 2002: 84) of the original cover, the change of the visual setting, the insertion of new elements that define the newly-formed narrative situation, all of them as part of a signifying system. Thus, the designing of different book covers for the same narrative throughout the years places us in postmodernism. This "contradictory phenomenon (...) that uses and abuses, that installs and then subverts" (Hutcheon 1996: 3) will be provided a social semiotics approach (van Leeuwen 2005).*

***Keywords**: Angela Carter, social semiotics, book covers, intertextuality, relatedness.*

Introduction

While searching for the editions of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, we came across J. Orme's review (2009) of Gemma Lopez's critical book *Seductions in Narrative: Subjectivity and Desire in the Works of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson*:

> The sexy title, *Seductions in Narrative*, and the sexy cover, a deep purple background with a larger-than-life red lipstick kiss and swirly yellow, white, and black type, drew me to this book immediately. A cool title, bold cover, two of my favorite authors, and some of my favorite words - a seductive text indeed.

This is a paragraph containing key paradigms, such as 'title', 'cover', 'author', 'word' and 'text', and, indirectly, 'reader and the act of reading', of the age of consumerism which makes us reconsider such critical terms from another perspective: the semiotic field of relatedness. The cultural object, traditionally known by the name of 'book', should be viewed as a complex signifying system where triangles of visible relationships hide – like in a rubik cube (Cmeciu, C., 2010) – a net of less visible systems of related processes of significations when signs are (re)used and (re)constructed by other encoders and decoders along diachronic and synchronic axes, almost simultaneously.

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*[2], constitutes the empirical data of our study as it illustrates the game of temporal and spatial overlapping of related "signs in use" (Johansen, Larsen, 2002).

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[2]This "collection of short fiction", as the author herself characterized it, was first published in the United Kingdom by Victor Gollancz LTD in 1979 and won the Cheltenham Festival Literary Prize. In the United States it was first published by Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., in 1980. It was published in Penguin Books in the UK in 1981 and in Penguin Books in the USA in 1987. This collection of short fiction, based on traditional fairy tales, was reprinted in more than 15 editions with different book covers.

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The first questions arising to a critical reader's mind encompass the "territory" of:

1. What is a book? The material, palpable, graspable form of a text; sheets of paper bound together; metaphorically speaking, "as a former Dean of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology" said, a book is "tree flakes encased in dead cow" (Mitchell, 1995, *apud* Finkelstein, McCleery, 2007: 2).

2. What is a text? A written message, either in verbal or non-verbal signs meant to be read/ decoded, whose function is that of giving information, asserting something, narrating, entertaining. Starting from the etymological definition, we consider that a text is a "woven fabric", whose 'borders' are traced by dimensions such as the paratext, intertext, hypo- and hypertext and the metatext, dimensions that mark a text's limits and possibilities.

3. What is the relation between book and text? A book is the physical form which a text may take. Finkelstein and McCleery (2007: 3) consider that "a book is a medium; a website is a medium; a screenplay can also be a medium. The word 'medium' contains the strong sense of 'mediation'."The transmission and decoding of a text's message, rendered through a net of discourses, is a process which involves the strategies of social semiotics (Kress, van Leeuwen [1996] 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005), strategies which foreground not only the relations between maker/creator and reader/decoder, but also the relations establishing themselves at the level of producer – consumer, production – advertising – marketing structures as well, in an age dominated by a proliferation of cultural artefacts which are 'sold' under a variety of different material forms. The same text, then, can be sold and bought, and, consequently, 'consumed'/read/understood in diverse ways. Thus, the book as a finished product is the 'medium' bordering "the socialization of texts" (Jerome McGann, *apud* Finkelstein, McCleery, 2007:3).

4. What is the hidden relatedness between book and text?

Texts and their discourses are, thus, the result of a process of signification involving, on the one hand, visible relationships of production and reception, and, on the other hand, less obvious ones, supporting and structuring a system of related and relating signs incorporating the bridging up of a message's content and form, of active and passive participants to the making and delivering of a specific semiotic object, of modalities meant to weave all these elements into a coherent whole illustrative of spatio-temporally rooted cultural practices. We call such cultural objects – discourses (made of invisible threads) within a text within a book (made of visible threads) – a 'product-sign'.

5. What is the message intended by the discourse of book covers?

Book covers are not only the first visible vehicle of the 'product-sign', containing the relationships between maker – producer – consumer; they indirectly turn into "a seductive text" which asks for the consumer's response by rousing the curiosity of the decoder of the complex verbal and visual message.

Book Covers as Signs

The book cover, considered in Peircian terms as a "sign-vehicle", standing as the "mediation" between the visible relationships and the hidden relatedness

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establishing themselves at the level of production – promotion – consumption/ (re)production, constructs a different kind of message with each and every act of rereading. Under the impact of the printed medium, the book-cover, in its quality of 'product-sign', has a double function:

a. it shows that a text's message is the result of "a collaborative process", contained only in

> [...] a new and comprehensive sociology of the text"[1], which "moves beyond the interpretation of texts solely as the product of an author's intentions, or even solely through quantitative, macro-historical examinations of book publishing and printing trends, towards a study of texts as mediated products within which one could find traces of economic, social, aesthetic and literary meaning. (McKenzie, 1981: 236, *apud* Finkelstein, McCleery, 2007:11)

b. it works as an agent of (social) change, as it registers – through repeated reprintings – the transformations taking place at the level of reception; a new act of reading coincides with a new process of signification, which leaves its visible marks through visual signs, and its apparently invisible traces through reinterpretations of textual dimensions, particularly of the paratextual and intertextual threads.

The reader perceives these two functions as forming a complex semiotic web promoting a very specific kind of sign-system which differentiates one way of reading from another.

Book Covers as Paratext[2]

Within this semiotic web, the book cover, with its verbal and visual textualisation, creates a system of relationships between the inside and the outside of the text, between what is present/near and past/distant, between similar and new, different interpretations.

The paratextual space, whose architecture is designed on simultaneity, foregrounds the Peircian "interpretant" as a complex sign-system, allowing the

[1] Referring to McKenzie's concept of "the sociology of the text", Roger Chartier comes with arguments that stand against some of the concepts that dominated the theories of textual criticism at the end of the 20th century: "Against the abstraction of the text, it shows that the status and interpretation of a work depend on material considerations; against 'the death of the author', it stresses the author's role, at the side of the bookseller-printer, in defining the form given to the work; against the absence of the reader, it recalls that the meaning of a text is always produced in a historical setting and depends on the differing and plural readings that assign meaning to it." (in Finkelstein, McCleery, 2007:11).

[2] According to Gérard Genette (1997: 1), paratexts are those "liminal devices both within the book (peritext) and outside it (epitext) that mediate the relations between the text and the reader". "More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold." It is "a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that . . . is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it." The prefix 'para', coming from Greek and meaning 'beside', 'beyond', 'amiss', 'aside', signifies "at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority... something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in 'para,' moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside". (Genette, 1997: 1-2).

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interpretation of the *world* inside through different semiotic lens. Thus, as paratextual space, the book cover maps "the relationship between producer and receiver, the degree of authority, the force of the message, the quality of the contract established between artist and reader, the latter being invited to read the text according to some rules. The performative aspect of the paratext refers to the power and energy of doing what is described, this last form of paratextuality showing that 'saying' and 'making' coincide." (Cmeciu, D., 1999)

Book Covers as Intertext[1]

If a book cover as paratextual dimension sends towards the visible faces of the rubik cube, the intertextual element of the semiotic construct gradually foregrounds the attention towards the hidden complex net of related interpretants, where the author is simultaneously reader-creator-artist, read/interpreted and decoded by another reader, who may belong to a different cultural spatio-temporal context, accustomed to different cultural practices and, consequently, applying other rules to his/her act of reading. The intertextual space maps, then, the process of interrelatedness between "two or more signifying overt systems"; this process of searching for, establishing and recreating connexions between signifying systems takes the reader from the horizontality of the text to its verticality materialized in intensely experienced moments of vision. (Cmeciu, D., 1999). Postmodernism *weaves* these repeated acts of reading and reinterpreting other product-signs into a game where assimilation and transformations of signs are closely related to a well-defined goal of the artist's/new maker's creative powers and intentions. The intertextual process is the true genuine semiosis taking place within the linguistic wefts and warps of the text where signs work as substitutes for each other and where an intricate *dialogue* between interpretants is woven through and during the interpretative act.

The book cover, which is the visible result of the semiotic transformation/ digesting of "linguistic food", functioning simultaneously as para-and-intertext, ironically bears the marks of change emerging out of any new *dialogue* held among the social actants involved in the making of the 'product-sign'.

Starting from Greimas's actantial model, we have provided the way in which intertextuality works in the case of book covers (Fig.1). As the arrows show, there is a constant transaction of meanings between the reader and the producer. At the level of explicit or implicit narrative processes, book covers include helper and/ or opponent-objects as represented participants. These objects stir within the readers' minds and souls certain memories. The reader turns into an interactive participant once (s)he uses her/ his imagination to provide a critical macro-level text analysis of the inventory of semiotic resources used within the composition of the respective book covers.

[1] According to J. Kristeva (1969: 146), "[...] every text takes shape as a mosaic of citations, every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts. The notion of intertextuality comes to take the place of the notion of intersubjectivity."

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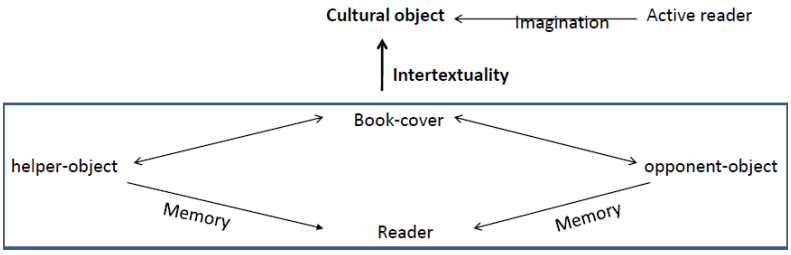


Fig.1

Re-Interpreting Texts/Fairy Tales through Book Covers

The function of the process of intertextualization and the use of book covers as a verbal-visual synthesis of the semiotic changes is to encompass the richness and depth of acts of reading and recreating simultaneously and offer them to other readers under the guise of impersonal detachment in a kind of collective participation.

Angela Carter herself characterizes her act of writing *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* in an intertextual semiotic "circuit":

> My intention was not to do 'versions' or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, 'adult' fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories. (Angela Carter in Haffenden, 1985: 80)

The traditional stories whose "latent content" she gave a new artistic life are the following: *The Bloody Chamber*, *The Courtship of Mr Lyon*, *The Tiger's Bride*, *Puss-in-Boots*, *The Erl-King*, *The Snow Child*, *The Lady of the House of Love*, *The Werewolf*, *The Company of Wolves* and *Wolf-Alice*. These stories are re-readings and reinterpretations of *Bluebeard's Castle*, *Puss-in-Boots* and *Little Red Riding Hood*.

The Act of Reading Angela Carter's Book Covers

It seems that Angela Carter's intention in her "other stories" is to articulate the singularity of an I-reader with the universality of cultures, an experience which "fictionalizes" the act of reading itself. The book covers of different editions, although containing the same *latent content* "extracted" and rendered in a new vision, acquire, thus new symbolical value *extracted* from possible re-readings of the same stuff. They create an intertextual space while designing *other* fictional narratives as reinterpretations of another act of rereading. This intertextual space, as if a multiplication of re-readings, makes up a synthesis of reinterpretations which gives the semiotic value of the product through an exercise of contrasting individual signs.

Such a cover becomes, then, a metaphorical way into an intertextual world, a kind of second degree act of communicating *other* signification.

Focused on diachrony, time, history, process and change, social semiotics (van Leeuwen, 2005) provides resources with a twofold potential: a theoretical semiotic potential (past and potential future uses) and an actual semiotic potential (uses known by specific users with specific needs in specific contexts). The linguistic choice of the word "resource" in social semiotics over the word "sign" lies in Halliday's definition of a signifying system as a resource of making meaning rather than as a set of rules (1994, p. 192).

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Our choice for visual elements as empirical data has a double motivation: on the one hand, the importance that the pictorial turn plays in postmodernism (Mitchell, 1994: 11), and on the other hand, the new state of prisoners that we have been experiencing, namely being fascinated by "the power of images" and "the images of power" (Mitchell, 1994: 324). The visual analysis framework provided below will use the four socio-semiotic systems: *represented participants* (a twofold representation of the actors: narrative representations through transactional actions and conceptual representations through socio-cultural categories); *interactive participants* (visual contacts, different frames); *composition* (vertical/ horizontal visual fields, colour, dimension, editing); *multimodality* (high/ low degree of realism).

The years that we have provided for the nine editions of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Fig.2-10) are a clear sign of a diachrony and change in representation of the same content. In order to understand these visual changes, we will provide a descriptive micro-level visual analysis (providing an inventory of represented participants) and a critical macro-level visual analysis (highlighting the type of reality represented).

At the level of represented participants, there could be observed two types of processes:

(1) four explicit or implicit narrative representational transactional actions between an Actor and a Goal (Fig. 2 – the wolf/ the actor embracing the girl/ the goal; Fig. 5 – three participants/ the actors watching over a little girl/ the goal; Fig. 6 – the lady in the tower/ the actor crying for help/ the goal; Fig. 7 – a girl (the high-heeled shoe being an indexical sign of a female participant)/ the actor running away towards a safer place/ the goal);

(2) five explicit analytical processes (a Carrier being assigned some Possessive Attributes): three animals (one wolf/ Fig.8; two lions/ Fig.1 & 9; one flower/ Fig.4; one girl/ Fig.10). The depictions of these participants are built on denotation (Fig. 4, 8, 9, 10) or on connotation (Fig.1), but all of them carry an information value about the characters from five stories: *The Werewolf*, *The Company of Wolves, Wolf-Alice, The Bloody Chamber*, *The Courtship of Mr Lyon*.

The nine images provide a salience of two colours (red and black), thus visually suggesting the tragic metamorphosis that the characters experience throughout Angela Carter's stories.

Beyond this inventory of semiotic resources, the visual decoding should also focus on the type of reality depicted by Angela Carter. From the very beginning, one should be aware of the fact that these book covers embed a meta-represented world. And yet, the author uses some communicative strategies which might suggest the illusion of a real world. The great number of iconic images (Fig.4-10), be they photos or drawings, relies on a denotative representations of participants as if trying to persuade us that they are real. Within these denotative representations, we might identify some thematic drawings as intertextual allusions: the lady in the tower (Fig. 6) reminds us of medieval love compared to erotic dreams.

Out of the nine book covers, there are two covers which do not follow this representation pattern. The first two editions (the 1979 and 1980 editions) use book covers built on a visual metaphor. The "in praesentia conjoined" metaphors (Groupe ì, 1992) combine parts of the perceived elements (the head of the lion/ Fig.1; the head and the body of the wolf/ Fig.2) and parts of the conceived elements (a girl's body; a human hand/ Fig.2, thus suggesting the outcomes of the transactional processes.

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With so many editions, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* may be considered a literary bestseller, and as such it is marketed – a marketing of the author, of the book, of the publishing house –. Books covers using different semiotic resources show that the text works together with its visual representation.

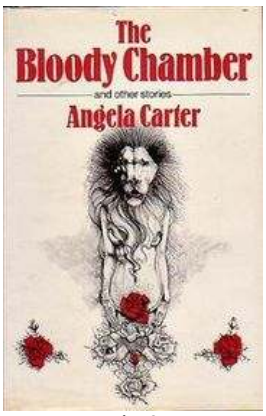


Fig.2
1979 – Gollancz
(publisher)

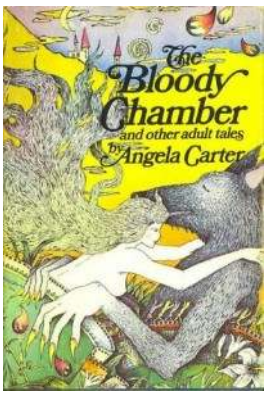


Fig.3
1980 – Harper Collins
(publisher)

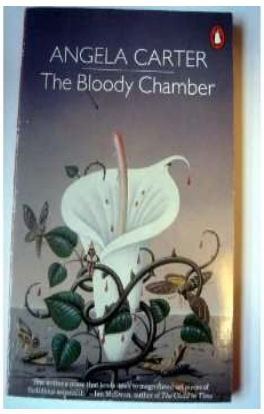


Fig.4
1981 - Penguin Books
(publisher)

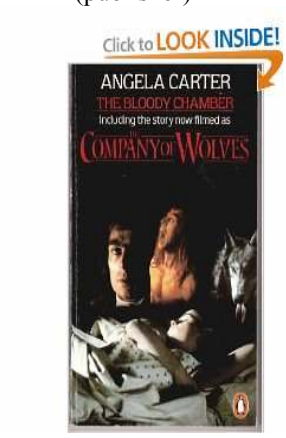


Fig.5
1984 – Penguin Books
(publisher)

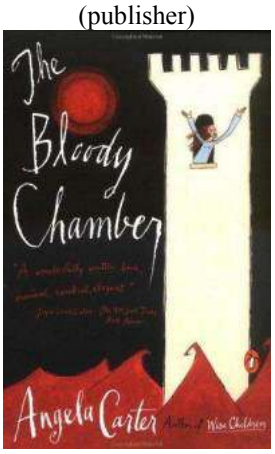


Fig.6
1993 – Penguin Books
(publisher)

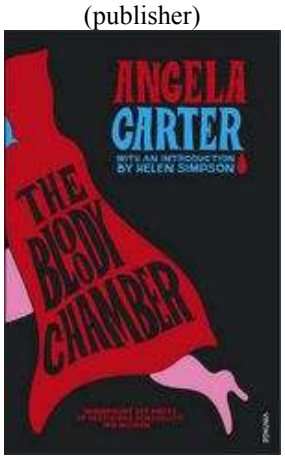


Fig.7
1995 – Vintage Books
(publisher)

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Fig.8
2007 – Vintage Books
(publisher)

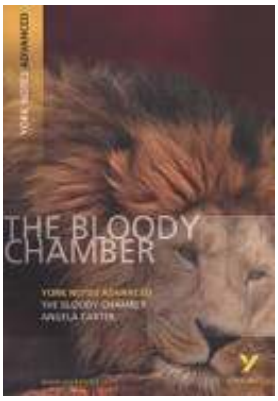


Fig.9
2008 – Longman
(publisher)



Fig.10
2011 – Penguin Books
(publisher)

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