The Book in Collective Representations and Images

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1. On the (eternal) present of books

On the 25th of July 2017, Dieter Zetssche, director manager of Mercedes-Benz, stated in a Linkedin interview that 'software will destroy traditional industry in the next 5–10 years'. His projections describe a future world in which Artificial intelligence (AI) will play the main part in society. The predictions he made in the same interview show that computer intelligence will outclass human intelligence by the year 2030. This will affect labour market, goods consumption and production, life styles, human culture and interhuman relations to the same extent.

On the other hand, the issues tackled in the Davos meetings in 2017 and 2018 draw our attention to the importance paid by the world's leaders to the implications the new technologies have upon society in the short and medium run.

All the signals show that we are at a turning point and that twenty years from now the world will look different. What will happen to the book in such a world? What will be our relation to it and what will be the main coordinates of culture in such a world?

Three types of answer can be identified, and those may herald three kinds of looking at the matter: pessimistically, neutrally and optimistically.

1.1. The twilight of the Gutenberg era

A pessimistic answer will give the book no chance in the face of the challenge of technology and AI. In this scenario, changes are dramatic. The human mind, culture, way of thinking and perceiving reality will follow suit. Modern culture, as we know it today, is a culture rooted in books. The axiological benchmarks, knowledge, the individual and social mindset rest on the books that feed them. In the context in which the book becomes reduntant in a digitised world, and in which things miraculously happen at the mere touch of a button, the face of the world will change. The old dream of the magicians of the past (Culianu 1994; Frazer 1980) will be fulfilled by the new technologies at last. Due to the technologies of the present, time and space could be conquered. Thus, the miracle iteself will be democratised, and in that garb it will slip into the realm of the ordinary, the banal,

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the everyday. Thus, our lives will become more simple, the sense of mystery will disappear, any sense of curiosity will be annihilated, analytical thinking will become useless, there will be no point in abstraction. Critical ideals and perspectives will be refuted and useless as long as reality and fiction intertwine in a dazing whirl. Curiosity, the mystery of plunging into another imaginary world which happens when we read a book would be reduced to the contact with a digitised universe in this hypertechnological version.

The use of a technology that we do not know or master in its entirety, the use of real and virtual images on an ever larger scale will result in a kind of knowledge that reminds us of the aboriginal populations for which the image plays a defining role in their entire cultural creation. Progress in human civilization is involution in human culture. As a matter of fact, Nicholas Carr stated the following, in a rather pessimistic note: 'Externalise memory, and culture will wither' (Carr 2012: 262). Research in the field of neurosciences confirms that excessive use of the new technologies brings about functional illiteracy, transforming us into beings that work with disparate pieces of information, unable to do complex reasoning, reducing our capability of making fast decisions, and rendering us unable to stay focused and to communicate face-to-face in any authentic way. Deprived of books, authentic culture, and solid values, people face the risk of becoming the slaves of a new civilisation, of rendering their existence superficial (Lanier 2010), of swimming in the murky waters of a collective imaginary saturated with images and fiction (Turkle 2009).

1.2. Books surviving beyond their materiality

A more temperate answer figures out a future in which the book, in its classical version, continues to exist besides its new digitised and virtual embodiments. The book continues to be itself beyond its materiality. In the opinion of most people, this can only be an upside which makes the book more accessible in its electronic format and through the presence of virtual libraries. This sounds like a fairly familiar scenario. However, despite a certain accessibility and despite this fabulous availability of book culture to the large public, there are no spectacular shifts in the people's culture and knowledge. In the academic sphere, for instance, this accessibility also brings about a certain superficial approach, an incapacity of selecting the profusion of the material contained in the virtual media. Today's students are less and less inclined to dwell on books than the generations who had an access to books in a classical format. Now they read fragments, sections, passages in order to get a gist. Paradoxically, this extraordinary access to books will not necessarily produce people with a better level of eduction, more addicted to reading, more culturally refined (Carr 2012).

Reading, be it e-reading, needs a higher capability of staying focused, a certain patience, testing some memory and knowledge-related skills, thus being much more demanding than other activities. An American sociologist speaks about a subtle connection between the *intellectual technologies* that we use and the way in which we start to think and to reason. According to the well known sociologist, we practically end up borrowing the qualities of the technologies we create (Bell 1999).

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The specialists draw our attention to the fact that some of today's children's problems such as lack of focus and their incapability of solving complex tasks, the decline of their unmediated interaction and socialising capacity are the consequences of their early contact with technologies based on images, on fast task solving algorithms. Therefore, the interaction with the book forms a series of skills, reasoning processes, behaviour and cultural patterns (Larchet 2016: 112–159).

In its classical version, the book may remain an important tool in education or a means of personal escapism from a fairly technologised everyday reality. Thus, a survival of the book in its classical format would be due to a certain conservatism in the educational system or it may be the expression of a certain nostalgia for a *lost paradise*. Therefore, for some, the book in its classical format may become either a luxury or a museum artifact they would browse once in a while.

1.3. Books are immortal

Against the odds of the fast technological transformations, a much more optimistic approach gives us an extremely optimistic scenario, which valorises the book in its classical format. This is the approach of a few idealists (Hugo, Borges, Flaubert, etc.) who bet all their horses on the classical culture and on the survival of whatever may be valuable and authentic. One cannot help putting this optimism down to an elitist and, of course, conservative spirit. In this case, the survival of books would be due to our natural need of surviving as a species, perpetuating a culture that formed us. The very materiality of books indicates a certain attachment to data concerning identity, normative, axiological or relational values.The presence of the book invested us with a certain way of *being* in the world, it inspired respect, it created elites and certain social patterns.

Such a scenario will not, and indeed it could not deny the technological developments. In fact, they are the argument for the survival of classical books. Why is that so? The reason is that the new technologies, despite being accessible, will prove to be rather limited when it comes to shaping and refining the human spirit. This may be one of the failures of technology in its interaction with the humans. At most, technology could be, in this plea for classical culture, a solution for the formation and education of the masses. As a matter of fact, Ortega Y Gasset reinforces in his writings that the masses will take what is medium, mediocre, facile and accessible (Gasset 1994). In this context, the survival of books would be the exclusive property of an elite (as it happenend in the past), able to dedicate enough time and energy to the study and reading of books and to classical education. Although not democratic, this approach saves the book from a problematical situation. It is a hypothesis, and not a certainty. The future may have many surprises in store.

Various images and representations of the book which still visit the collective imaginary knock at the door of the three answers. At least in the ethnological and sociological research I carried out in the Romanian space at certain moments in time (2003, 2007 and 2017), a series of collective representations of books seem to be fairly well preserved.

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2. The book in collective images and representations[1]

The images and representations of books in the Romanian space cover a fairly large range of versions. The quantitative sociological research carried out in the city of Iaşi targeted a segment of people who are especially interested in books and reading. In 2003 and in 2007 I questioned people who visited the Librex Book Fair, and in 2017 the sample consisted in students of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi, the oldest university in Romania. Although the research was carried out at different intervals, the figures are approximately the same. They show a particular interest in books on the part of those questioned. As I argued in my recent book *The negative of everyday reality*, our relation with the book goes beyond its status as an object. The negative of our experiences with the book stores images and representations with much more profound implications. They express our searches, dilemmas, desires, the relation with what is human within us, but also with the absolute.

The ethnograpic and historic data, together with the results of the quantitative research, demonstrate that there are several types of valorising books. They show that, ever since the advent of the book, there has been a special relation between reader and book, and the motivations that make us attached to books are accompanied by different representations. Furthermore, our relation with the book implies certain gestures, it induces emotions, challenges the mind and develops thinking. In other words, the encounter with the book engages our whole being:

> The rhythm of reading follows that of the body, the rhythm of the body follows that of reading. We read not only with the brain, we read with our whole body and that is why, when we read a book, we cry or we laugh or, when we read thrillers, they make our hair stand on end. For, when it seems to talk only about ideas, a book talks about the emotions and experiences of other bodies (Eco 2008: 26).

2.1. The book as salvation through knowledge

For 30% of the students questioned in 2017, the book is a means of acquiring knowledge. It becomes a key to the vast universe of knowledge. This valorisation of the book as a means of acquiring knowledge has fairly old roots in the Romanian mindset. A series of proverbs and sayings express a strong inclination the traditional individual has of representing the book as a storage of knowledge. The saying 'Knowledge is power' is just one example of it.

For the Romanian peasant, book learning meant knowledge. Therefore, those who knew how to read, those who managed to get access to the mystery of books became familiar with the mysteries of the world, of humankind, and in that way they would get close to God. In a world in which not many knew how to write and read, a world trained in oral culture, the relation with the book took those few who could out of their current status. They became people who knew things, educated and respected persons, people who came close to the mystery of the book. It is not accidental that the traditional Romanian world pays special respect to the priest, the

[1] The topic of the book image and representation was developed in the paper Cristina Gavriluță, *Negativul cotidianului / The Negative of Everyday Reality*, Iași, Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", 2013, p. 155–169.

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instructor or the teacher. They are social models. They are identifiable professionally, and this is not due only to their work with the book. In the past, and nowadays, knowledge had something mysterious about it, it is a *terra incognita* to be found in the pages of books. There are average curiosities and metaphysical apprehensions behind this knowledge. Whatever there is, it may save you.

After all, the 'power' is nothing else but the saving experience of knowledge through books. However, this salvation has a double meaning in the Romanian mindset: a social and a transcendental one. On the one hand, it becomes a means of social success, of acquiring a socially respected status. The book becomes a means of social improvement, it offers opportunities through the knowledge acquired. On the other hand, salvation has spiritual connotations as well. In this respect, the stake is divinity, a certain spiritual uplifting of the person interacting with the book. The ultimate goal of the secrets of books and of knowledge is transcendence, the answers to the tough questions of existence. That the first printed books were religious is crucially important.

The book is a kind of cultural memory of an individual or a community, and this idea falls into the same register of book valorisation as a means of knowledge. It is a condensed history through which people certify and build their identities. It becomes a guarantee and a source of trust.

Although the present day fashions of the young people have taken other shapes, at least for some of them, the book continues to be a form of salvation through knowledge. It does not matter if today's knowledge has utilitarian or metaphysical connotations. What really matters is that there is an intrinsic, indestructible connection between knowledge (of any kind) and the book, and that we bear that connection in mind wherever or whenever we may be.

2.2. Books are tools

For 27% of our respondents the book is a means. In the previous research, there were also many respondents for whom book purchase is dictated by the usefulness of books, be those professional standards or the need of a guide. Whatever the reason is, this indicates a pragmatic approach to the book:

> It may offer a better knowledge of the field, professional performances, and to a lesser extent a means of spiritual improvement through knowledge, *a way of courting happiness*, as Gabriel Liiceanu puts it, or of *living the fullness in time and eternity in history*, as Mircea Eliade suggests (Gavriluță 2017: 157).

This reaction can also be an effect of a long cohabitation with the book. The intimacy between intellectuals and their books induces a certain sense of naturalness, as Gabriel Liiceanu argues. This annihilates any sense of wonder, any exceptional emotion. In this case, the encounter with the book takes place in a precise setting, and it keeps less and less of the ineffable nature of an experience beyond time and history. For the intellectuals, this may also be a matter of professional pride, which dilutes the unique experience with the book, retaining only a certain pragmatism.

There are, of course, other categories of readers who build their relation with the book from strictly utilitarian positions. There is an ideology that impacts the book

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industry in a significant way. For instance, motivational books like *Ten steps to happiness*, *Becoming a leader*, *Communicating with the boss*, etc. sell very well. The concessions made by the book industry to market requirements and economic pressures only reinforce this representation of the book as a tool, and separate it from its cultural and spiritual dimension. Ultimately, as Liiceanu argues:

> The truth of it is that every book carries within it the promise of the life of the spirit and does nothing but aspire, out of the helplessness of initial inertia, to the chance of some future life (Liiceanu 1992: 192).

2.3. Leisure book

Despite contemporary pragmatism, the book continues to be an escape from everyday reality for many of us. It is one of our pastimes. In this case, the book is a literary work of its author's imagination, and it brings about the promise of transporting the reader to other social and human universes. This kind of encounter with the book should not be regulated by any rigid agenda or form of utilitarianism. The list of the 100 books to read in a lifetime can only be a pedagogical ambition, a rigid recipe for a span of time we claim we want to fill in with some sort of special joy. In fact, in this case, the book becomes the chance of an extremely personal encounter, in which our own time mingles with the time of the book, the time of the characters there. This is a way in which we take our share of freedom and joy in a hectic and nerve-racking world, full of constrictions and norms. As Borges confessed, 'I dedicated a part of my life to literature, and I think that reading is a form of joy' (Borges 2000: 390). Reading as leisure is such a personal experience that it will not let itself ruled by norms and constrictions.
Andrei Pleşu says:

> That is why, whenever they speak about 'the list of the 100 fundamental books,' I will decline to answer. There are no recipes. You cannot suggest a list of readings unless you know who the readers are, unless you know their 'kind,' their troubles, their searches and their tastes. Each age has its own fabric, each human individual has an inner chemistry which cannot be systematized (Pleșu 2011: 223).

In this case, the books 'call' you, they 'look for' you, they 'invite' you. They take you by surprise, they find you or they seem to be meant for you to read. This form of leisure may be the modern version of a *rite of passage*, undertaken on one's own and guided by the book as a spiritual master.

2.4. The book as a gift

In some religions, books are divine gifts. For instance, the tablets of stone were given as a gift to the Jewish people. The invention of print and the advent of book may be regarded as a gift of knowledge, an embodiment of it. Nevertheless, for our contemporary fellows, the book as a gift has other significances, too. When given as a gift, the book covers a wide range of social realities and relationships: for the child it is a magic world, for the teacher – a form of respect for his/her preoccupations, for the lover – a kind of saying 'I love you', for the friend – a token of friendship. The very gesture of choosing and giving a book as a gift always involves the relationship with the Other, their preferences, their 'way' of being, or the message we want to transmit.

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This time, the book carries more than just a story. It is a total social phenomenon (Mauss 1997) through its implications:

> If the *potlatch* theory survives in time, then every object, be it a temporary possession – even a book bought as a gift – is contaminated by our presence, or rather our spirit. Apart from the spirit of the book, we will thus manage to pass on something of our spirit, too. For the Other, it is a permanent presence through the gift (Gavriluță 2017: 160).

Maybe more than any other gift, the book holds a *secret memory* which preserves memories, moments, emotions, presences and special events. We can feel the odour of an absent presence in its leaves. This can turn the book into the perfect gift.

2.5. The book as an object

There are people who are less impressed by the symbolic dimension of the book. For them, the book is a mere object. 2% of the respondent subjects made this statement. In their case, the representation of the book does not go beyond its material, palpable and visible dimension. Even if we cannot separate the book from its materiality, we cannot help noticing that it goes beyond its status of mere object through its interaction with the reader. Gabriel Liiceanu contends:

> I shall say it right from the start, the book is an *imploring* object because, in the first place, its *fate* necessarily depends on the whims and moods of the reader. This is no equivalent of the way in which the fate of a chair depends on the mood of the person who chooses to sit or not to sit on it. The use of the chair does not alter its 'ontological status,' while the opening of a book is the early stage of its redemption from an improper state (Liiceanu 1992: 193).

This is why the materiality of the book is a state the book undertakes in relation to itself. It is the expression of a helplessness to be what it craves to be: a spiritual presence. It is the reader's task to redeem the book from its state of matter. The book ceases to be a mere object in the very moment when its leaves are touched. That is the moment when it becomes a living body which engages in a dialogue with the readers.

2.6. The book as 'the most perfect entity there is'[2]

One of the most beautiful representations of books, with profound spiritual connotations, can be found in the well-known book *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* written by Moshe Idel. The author's approach to the book starts from a series of religious writings which capture the direct relation of the book with divinity. In a metaphysical sense, it *is* divinity. This time, in the collective imaginary, the book has a totalising and inclusive character. It concentrates all there is, and as such it is the perfection of all there is:

[2] A more detailed approach to this hypostasis of the book can be found in Cristina Gavriluță, „Moshe Idel, cartea și hermeneutica negativului / Moshe Idel, The Book And The Hermeneutics Of The Negative", in *Journal for the Study of Religion and Ideologies*, volume 6, No. 18 ~ Winter 2007 (http:// jsri.ro/ojs/ index.php/ jsri/issue/view/21), p. 226–236.

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> According to a very influential midrash, God did not create the world by writing, but by contemplating the Torah as a paradigm of the world /…/. Therefore, the written Torah enjoys an intermediary status, one that makes it share a status of preexistence with divinity and to collaborate in the process of creation (Idel 2004: 68).

In religious writings, in some Romanian folk creations, and also in other cultural spaces, the collective mindset bestows a preexisting paradigmatic status on the book. The book concentrates the very essence of Creation. God himself contemplated it when he created the world. A fragment from a Romanian folk poem relates it:

> In a monk's chamber/ Of frankincense/ And lemon-scented doors/ He sat/ And wove a thought/ And The Book of Gospels read:/ On how to raise tall mountains/ Tall mountains and deep glens.

Therefore, the Logos in its original form is presented graphically. As a matter of fact, all this is about the Book detaching from its Creator, with no filiation between the two poles of creation. In fact, folk beliefs preserve the idea of the existence of omniscient books. They have a founding role, becoming a tool due to which Creation is possible. In folk culture, *The World's Book*, *The Book of Destiny*, *the Book of Life* are the expression of the existence of books that comprise everything: the mystery of life and death, the miracle of this world.

Nevertheless, in some versions, the book itself is a form of creation. The divinity has a decisive role here. Moshe Idel argues that the Sefer Yetzirah cosmology makes this very clear: letters were created before the world was. Here,

> for the first time, the creation of the world was described systematically as a process preceded by the creation of letters. They were made from the primordial air or from ether, and after they appeared, God combined them to create the world (Idel 2004: 68).

In this version of representation, the book has a divine origin, and it is the Creator's primordial gesture. Ethnographic data identify in a variety of folk texts the motif of *writing on the sky* (Papadima 1967) but also *writing in stone*, which capture this primordial connection between the creator and the book. Furthermore, some folk versions suggest that the whole creation may be converted into a book: 'If only God let/The earth be dark ink/ And the sky white paper/ The sun a writer/ And the moon a quill...' (Tocilescu, Ţapu, 1981). Such folk verses may reference the original status of creation, which is the book, our world being just a material translation of a comprehensive book.

An equally interesting representation of the book can be found in certain Jewish mystical writings, in which the book neither precedes creation nor is a primary expression of the creative act. It is divine in itself. 'The Torah was written on God's arm. The term 'white fire,' onto which the black letters of the Torah were engraved, alludes to God's skin. The description of God as 'fire' is not new; we come across it in the Bible, where God is called *eş okhela*, 'scorching fire' (Idel 2004: 69). This representation heralds an *anthropomorphic* process undergone by the book. This perspective suspends the relationship between the Creator and the Book. They become one through the absorption of the divine into the text, and they

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play a cosmogonic role. Ultimately, creation turns into an *act of self-contemplation*, Moshe Idel states.

These representations of the book as the perfection of everything there is, with a defining status in the act of creation, account, to a certain extent, for the fascination, seduction and attraction exerted by the book in time. The collective images and representations built around the book are only more or less recent formulae which redeem the book in the sphere of culture and the spirit.

Such suggestions open up perspectives towards new ways of reading and interpretation. Thus, the encounter between the reader and the book may be more than just a democratic relation between the reader and the text, limited by the limitations of the text. What it claims for the encounter is an *integrative* process, going beyond the seen into the unseen/the negative of the text. In this case reading is closer to an act of initiation. For the reader, the end is a profound transformation:

> All the books written – or to be written – are for people to read, to stir, to draw their attention. Some try to evoke the past, others question the present, while others grope to open ourselves up to the future. Very few of them come from some other place, some other time of no time, to be an unflinching presence, overarching time to its consumption. If we know how to make our way, if we follow their course, these books take us to a place where eyes and hearts open at last to another space, whose nostalgia all of us share, close to where God is (Manolescu 2017).

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Abstract

This essay purports to bring to focus a series of collective valorizations of books in the Romanian context. Ethnographic data and quantitative research concerning the book consumption in various ages lie at the basis of cataloguing several representations of books. Of these we mention: *the book as gift*, the book as tool, the book as object, the book as a repository of knowledge, the book as salvation, the book as concentrated time, etc. Each of these hypostases of books applies both to those who use books in print and those who use e-books. This demonstrates that, irrespective of the technology put into publishing and print, social representations of books which offer them a special ontological status persist in the collective mindset. All this has consequences both in the social sphere and at the level of human attitude. The book represents access to knowledge and it implicitly confers formulae of social achievement or it institutes hierarchies and stirs respect, admiration and curiosity[3].

[3] All translations from the books in Romanian are Dana Badulescu's.

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