

Frederik Tygstrup

After Literature: The Geographies, Technologies, and Epistemologies of Reading and Writing in the Early Twenty-first Century

The notion of culture, as it circulates in contemporary studies of culture, combines two distinct meanings. On the one hand, culture designates an anthropological field of life forms, social relations and living conditions, and the habits, modes of interaction, and infrastructures that support them. On the other hand, there exists a more restricted notion of culture, as artistic and symbolic production: ‘high’ culture in its different forms as they have been examined and conceptualized by scholars of images, literature, and performative and spatial forms of creation. Traditionally, there has been a quite strict academic division of labor along the lines of this distinction, leaving the first for historians and social scientists of different specializations, and the second as the subject of aesthetic disciplines, heralded by an idea of ‘the aesthetic’ that parallels those notions of politics and economy at work on the other side. Against this backdrop, a recurrent and perhaps even defining feature of the study of culture as it has developed over the last decades has been to contest this distinction and its corollary distribution, between a realm of social phenomena on the one hand, and one of artistic objects and experiences on the other, to be understood and researched independently by scholars of different skills. As an academic endeavor, the study of culture has aimed especially at bridging these two approaches to culture (or indeed at criticizing the reifying consequences of the divide), and at developing a conceptual framework to gauge the relationship between the corresponding two levels of what we call culture.

If we think of these levels as pertaining respectively to the way we live and to the ways in which we picture this life, the relationship between them can be conceptualized as one of representation. Artistic and other symbolic forms represent the way we live, our conditions and experiences, our modes of seeing and our structures of feeling: in short, they display a menagerie of ways of inhabiting the world. But they are also, at the same time, *representative* of this world and the way we inhabit it; they respond to it, examine it, and, in the final analysis, provide it with intelligible, symbolic expressions. “A society,” Émile Durkheim noted in 1912, “is not constituted simply by the mass of individuals who comprise it, the ground they occupy, the things they use, or the movements they make, but above all the idea it has of itself” (Durkheim 1995, 425). Cultural representations

cater to society with images of itself and thus suggest “[how] individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it” (Durkheim 1995, 227). To Durkheim, there is no culture (in the broad sense) that does not nurture its cultural artefacts (in the narrow sense), and inversely, there are no such artefacts that do not in some way or other contribute to building and consolidating the self-fashioning of culture and society at large.

The study of cultural representations thus necessarily shuttles back and forth between the social and political aspects of culture and the aesthetic artefacts and events it produces, reassessing, as it were, the constant process of suturing through which a society culturally reproduces itself. It lays bare the images that a society produces of itself, the “obscure yet intimate relations” that bind its members together, as well as the social dynamics, conflicts, and crises they represent. The future of the study of culture, understood in these terms, is of course contingent upon the recognition of the societal relevance of such an undertaking. On a more analytical note, it is also contingent upon the framework conditions of the practices and media of representation it scrutinizes. As some of its academic predecessors in the aesthetic disciplines have occasionally been accused of doing, cultural analysis cannot restrict itself to study the forms, imageries, and historical lineages of artistic works and events. To understand the cultural work of representation, we need to pay equal attention to the institutional scaffolding of its practices, and to the conditions of possibility of its *modus operandi*: the framing, in short, of its representing and representative activity.

This essay is an attempt to gauge some of the specific conditions of possibility that presently undergird the practice that we call ‘literature,’ and particularly the contemporary challenges and transformations that arguably confront it. A starting point for this enquiry can be found in the Nobel Laureate lecture given by Svetlana Alexievich in 2015:

So what is it that I do? I collect the everyday life of feelings, thoughts, and words. I collect the life of my time. I’m interested in the history of the soul. The everyday life of the soul, the things that the big picture of history usually omits, or disdains. I work with missing history. I am often told, even now, that what I write isn’t literature, it’s a document. What is literature today? Who can answer that question?
(Alexievich 2015, n.p.)

As a first step towards an answer, one should note – however truistically – that the word ‘literature’ itself has two different meanings. In a broad sense, it refers simply to letters and written texts: This literal sense of the word literature still prevailed in the eighteenth century, and it is still the usage of reference in, say, scientific literature, or opera literature. But by now we are also accustomed to a more restricted sense of the word, referring to artistic texts: *schöne Literatur*, *belles lettres*, or fiction as opposed to nonfiction. Such texts have become objects

of scholarly scrutiny in academic studies of literature where they are read not only as texts, but as artworks, presupposing that they possess a particular kind of aesthetic value and consistency. Literary scholars have scrutinized such works individually and comparatively with a particular interest in their form and structure, their meaning and function, and how their forms and themes have developed historically, and the scholarly community has tailored specific concepts and approaches to address these questions of literary analysis, literary interpretation, and literary history.

Our modern idea of literature, and the academic protocols for studying it, thus focuses on a particular and delimited set of texts, which are given a particular status, and which are produced, circulated, and consumed in particular ways. This specific literary realm is situated in a wider context of other texts. So what is literature? How is its realm constituted, and when it interacts with other realms of making and using texts, how is this metabolism regulated? The definition of literature is a distribution of the sensible, identifying a subset of texts and assigning those texts to a particular societal sphere where they are understood and used in a special way. This distribution has been in place from the mid-eighteenth century until today. Answering the question “What is literature?” along these lines does not put any considerable emphasis on the proper characteristics of the ‘literary’ texts, moving the focus instead to understanding the distribution of the sensible – or the systemic differentiation – through which the particular realm of ‘literature’ in the modern sense of the word has come about. The “what” of literature hence becomes an institutional issue, a question of *framing* that enables us to distinguish between literature in general from literature as artistic texts.

The institution of literature has emerged over three centuries as a system of social conventions and protocols for the production, circulation, and consumption of a select set of texts. Michel Foucault famously identified a literary “author-function” (Foucault 1994) radically distinct from the scientific author-function; and similarly, we have developed a notion of the literary work with a specific juridical status and concomitantly a particular attitude we are expected to observe when understanding and interpreting it. And around this is built a corresponding economy and system of handling procedures executed by publishing houses, schools, newspapers, libraries, and so on. This entire institutional frame, ranging from social expectations and habits to very tangible principles for categorization and canonization, executes and reproduces the existence of this social thing that we call literature. We don’t recognize the ‘whatness’ of literature in well-defined textual qualities, but rather in that small tag that this system has attached to it declaring it to be literature. This mode of being is of the same nature as Marcel Duchamp’s famous urinal becoming a work of ‘art’ from the moment it is installed in the gallery space. The idea of literature in the

modern, restricted sense stems from what Jacques Rancière in a different context has baptized “the aesthetic regime” (Rancière 2000, 31) where different artefacts retain a homogenous appearance by circulating in a particular economy.

Answering Alexievich’s question in this way, i.e. by not identifying some essence of the literary thing as that which assures its identity to itself, but analyzing it as a product of an institutional framing of the historical production, circulation, and consumption of texts, we are in turn also invited to ask how the modern framing of literature might change over time, contingent on political, technological, and cultural transformations at large. We also eventually must consider if Alexievich’s question indicates that literature might be in the process of changing its historical guise. In the following pages, I will try to make this question a bit more tangible by discussing some recent changes within three seminal aspects of the institutional framing of literature – what, in the title of this piece, I have referred to as the geographies, technologies, and epistemologies of literature.

1 Geography: After the Nation State

That the geography of literature is changing has been clearly indicated by the new relevance and wide circulation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s concept of world literature, developed nearly two hundred years ago. The concept itself is still somehow contested, and although many definitions have been suggested – ranging from a new understanding of literature in general to an exclusive canon of allegedly world-literary works – none have really won a general consensus. Nonetheless, this does not preclude a widespread acclaim for the concept as seminal for the present time. In this sense, ‘world literature’ has become something like a fetish among scholars of literature, a still ambiguous expression of the feeling that something important is happening to the relationship between literature and the nation state that will hold consequences for our profession. What is happening, then, is probably first of all that a historic and otherwise solid alliance between national languages and their literatures is being demounted. The bland observation that literature is written in a national language was an important instrument for the forging of ideologies based on the nation state that accelerated after the Napoleonic wars. “Imagined communities,” using Benedict Anderson’s famous title, provided a shared cultural identity and political adherence to the national territory that were imperative to the consolidation of the modern nation states (Anderson 1991). Here, literature eventually came to play a prominent role, partly as a medium for cultivating the particularities of the national tongues, and partly as a repository of national mythologies, not

least through the canonization of a literary pre-history that could contribute to the process of what Eric Hobsbawm has aptly called “the invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992).

This amalgamation between territory, tradition, and language has been under progressive liquidation since the Second World War, under pressure from the increasing circulation of people, commodities, technologies, capital, and information usually conveniently wrapped up in the notion of globalization. As the nation state and its genealogies become contested as a relevant frame of reference for the still more cosmopolitan space of our everyday experiences, this inevitably affects the ways in which literature is produced, circulated, and consumed. Stuart Hall coined the concept of “epistemic spaces” to portray the connections between our localization and our ways of thinking and feeling, how a spatial position also serves as a frame of reference for our expectations and predispositions, our patterns of agency and ways of seeing the world (Hall 1996, 396). During the nineteenth century, the nation state was the prime epistemic space for literature, but throughout the twentieth century we have seen the advent of more differently organized spaces. Thus, postcolonial epistemic spaces emerge from the conflictual superposition between imperial and local orders, and new urban spaces emerge as global and relational spaces with completely different geometries than territorially bundled spaces. Such epistemic spaces function on a different scale than the ancient national territorial spaces and gradually outline a new context of experience. Concomitantly, we tend to focus more on strictly local or regional epistemic spaces than on national territorial formations, and on trans-local spaces – using Arjun Appadurai’s helpful term (Appadurai 1996, 192) – where different local horizons merge without any need for the coordinates of the nation state, like Bangladesh and East London, or Anatolia and Kreuzberg.

Such post-national epistemic spaces gain still more importance as a backdrop for contemporary literary creation, ranging from Salman Rushdie to Kamila Shamsie, and from Junot Diaz to Gary Shteyngart, where different versions of globalized epistemic spaces are evidently more relevant than the spaces of national communities. These four writers all write their books in English, but it is a globalized kind of English, which in stunning and effective ways captures and articulates the codes of globalized communication. Or to put it differently: even when the nation state is no longer the primary epistemic space, literary texts are still written in languages that have a national index, but this language is also shot through with lexical and idiomatic hybridizations to a degree where literary writing itself already seems to be partly also a work of translation. In turn, this is probably also why precisely the idea of translation has occupied such a prominent position in the cultural and literary studies of the latest decades. Translation, traditionally considered as a craft of transposing a work from one

national language to another, is no longer a mere matter of post-production, but becomes an intercultural literary force of production in its own right with a steep increase in significance. Literary creation has increasingly become a question of *tele-poesies*, as suggested by Gayatri Spivak in her farewell to literary studies from 2003, *Death of a Discipline*: Creation by way of transpositions in time and space exactly mirrors the complex and layered time-spaces of our globalized epistemic space (Spivak 2003, 29).

The vitality of the contemporary literary scene surely testifies to the fact that it does indeed thrive beyond the epistemic space of the nation state, and that it is an ideally suited companion to getting a sense of direction in a globalized culture. It is questionable, however, if literature will be able to retain the central role it had in national culture and education under these new circumstances. The consecration of literature to become a privileged medium for culture and education – the proper word in this context is the German *Bildung* – does actually stand out as something quite extraordinary, in the educational system, where the teaching of language and of literature have been inseparable, in the propagation of national canon formations, in the endowments for public libraries, and in the leading public media. In this sense, the institution of literature has been intimately entangled with the political project of the nation state as an important point of reference for a shared tradition and a shared language. And to the extent that literature and the nation state actually come to parting ways – as literary creation encroaches itself in differently organized epistemic spaces, and as the weight of cultured literacy withers away from the societal sectors of education and of culture – literature eventually risks being left behind, devoid of the underwriting it has been privileged with, as a ghost in want of its blanket: another marginalized art form afloat on an aggressive global marketplace for mass-produced text.

2 Technology: After Gutenberg

The technology of literature has long been an underrepresented topic in literary studies, most often relegated to a corner of literary sociology; it first really flourished with the young discipline of book history, whose materialist corrective to the traditional spiritual air of the discipline has been both provocative and benign. Moreover, this direction of research seems to have surfaced at exactly that point in time when its object, the material book, started to lose its perceived obviousness, and when literature started to become mediated through new small screen technologies. In not too many years, we have come quite a long way in the transition from book to screen, from codex to Kindle, from Gutenberg to Google.

It remains contested what this transition actually entails, and it is a favored subject of conversation between reading people to ponder what it actually means for the experience of literature. Friedrich Kittler once remarked that “the new literary recipe for success” in the nineteenth century was “to surreptitiously turn the voice or handwriting of a soul into Gutenbergiana” (Kittler 1999, 9). Making “Gutenbergiana” into a language of the soul, addressed to the dispersed national communities of readers, and consequently considering reading as a mode of being attentive to the soul’s voice, is probably an important albeit somehow intangible characteristic of how literature became institutionalized. It has been associated with a particular emphatic attitude, as observed by Georges Poulet, where one finds oneself thinking the thoughts and seeing the sights of somebody else: “The extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside” (Poulet 1969, 54).

In October 2014, the British writer Will Self published a piece in *The Guardian* entitled “The Transformation of our Gutenberg Minds,” arguing that the transfer from book to screen would erode a significant component of our attitude towards literature, namely what he called “deep reading” – the absorptive devotion to a made-up universe that requires seclusion and contemplation, something which network-connected screens negate almost by definition. Even if it is by no means obvious that he is right about this, and even if the argument has more than a taint of nostalgia to it, it does highlight something like a historical phenomenology of the reading human body by taking into account how an entire array of rituals, expectations, and experiences pertaining to reading keep resonating in our understanding of what literature is.

Digital text is also, on a different note, instrumental in changing the routines of academic literary studies. If ‘deep reading’ has been the so-to-say civilian attitude to the reading of literature, the hermeneutic scrutiny of literary texts in academia has been one of ‘close reading’ (not necessarily to be associated with the programmatic myopia that characterized the North American new critics, who originally coined the term). Contrary to this, Franco Moretti has forcefully launched the concept of “distant reading” (Moretti 2013), which is no longer based on the interpretation of textual finery, but on parsing and statistical metrics based on big textual data that now has become available thanks to the large data repositories of the written cultural heritage. This is of course first of all a methodological change of perspective, where we have been given control of a powerful apparatus that we might still not be completely aware of how to handle. But it surely contributes to a gradual reorientation in literary studies, away from analyzing literary works in order to analyze text, text in large quantities, which enables us to extricate precise and numeric acute answers to even the vaguest questions we might ask.

In addition to his observations on the changing phenomenology of reading, Will Self also points to the broader societal infrastructure built around the material book and the way it is inflicted by new technologies:

The relationship between words and revenue has become a debatable one – we can wax all we like about the importance of the traditional gatekeepers and the perspicacity of editors and critics in separating out the literary wheat from the pulpy chaff, but the fact is that these professions depend on the physical book as a commodity. It is the sad bleat of the book world that we'll be sorry once they're gone – and with them all the bookshops, literary reviews, libraries and publishing houses that supported their endeavors – but it was their mistake to assume their acumen to be inelastic. I mean by this, that a certain kind of expertise was understood to have a value to its consumers that was both constant and capable of being monetized at a fixed rate. The web has grabbed hold of this inelasticity and stretched it until it has snapped back in the myopic faces of the literati. (Self 2014)

Self here delivers a diagnostic of how the literary ecology is being rationalized by way of a more efficient and lean business model bringing the commodities directly to the consumers without costly intermediaries, and where whatever is saved is probably being shared in equal parts between the entire reading community on the one side and Jeff Bezos on the other. But this is also a potential eradication of the entire, ramified, and complex societal infrastructure that came with the historic technology and afforded the reproduction of what we called literature. Digitization and the substitution of the book with a file displayed on a screen emaciates the institutional eco-system around the literary thing. Moreover, this new apparatus also intervenes in the production of texts. In an industrial perspective, digital social networks open up a new production line: *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example, was originally a blog, which morphed into literature when it had rounded a critical number of hits; something similar seems to be the case for the increasing production of fan fiction. Content production now becomes veritabily industrialized in a way that short-circuits the slow grinding mechanisms of the historic literary system, partly by tapping into the immense text production that takes place on social platforms, partly by systematically (i.e. algorithmically) surveying the patterns of our purchasing and reading of electronic books and using this information for marketing as well as for literary production proper.

On a short-term basis, it is no doubt the commercial exploitation of the changing media technology that draws the largest profits from this transformation (all while Will Self's myopic literati get snaps on their noses), but the digital production environments eventually also become an important spur for new and experimental modes of literary creation. Thus, Mark Danielewski's novels would be unthinkable without a thorough familiarity with the workings of digital media, just like the new, platform-specific formats of links, tweets, and real-time

postings contribute to altering our sensibility to the literature's media ecology and to the creation of new non-linear forms of composition and modes of reading.

These different and admittedly quite heteroclitic tendencies obviously interact in a number of different ways, but most notably, I will argue, they converge in denaturalizing the 'book' as a literary object and the 'work' as an aesthetic category. For one thing, we come to realize what book history has already attempted to teach us: namely that a text is actually a quite fuzzily delineated object that cannot easily be disentangled from what we have otherwise tried to contain as 'para-textual' features, i.e. the social and technological protocols and processes through which the text is materialized as a cultural object. This becomes increasingly evident when dealing with digital text, where the material and technological para-textual stuff we have become accustomed to over a long stretch of time is discarded and replaced by other features, now pertaining to hardware and software and providing scalability, searchability, linking, sharing, statistics, algorithmic parsing, and much more. Eventually, we might become less inclined to think about 'a' text and instead prone to recognize 'some' text that cannot ideally be separated from the material forms and temporal processes that undergird its actual appearance. To this effect, N. Katherine Hayles remarks:

Perhaps it is time to think the unthinkable – to posit a notion of text that is not dematerialized and that does depend on the substrate in which it is instantiated. Rather than stretch the fiction of dematerialization thinner and thinner, why not explore the possibilities of texts that thrive on the entwining of physicality with informational structure? (Hayles 2003, 275)

Literature as we have understood it rested on a certain regime of the text whose material form was the Gutenbergian codex and whose corresponding aesthetic form was that of an institutionalized work of art. With the denaturation of the inherited material form, a more generalized sense of textuality is unleashed: in terms of writing, in guise of processing a highly malleable scroll on a screen; in terms of processing by different forms of capture and postproduction; in terms of distribution based on data files; and in terms of reading, no longer handling a book object, but reading a fragment of text on a screen which is virtually surrounded by endless expanses of more text, as a haphazard spotlight flickering over an endless surface of written stuff.

In the early nineteen-seventies, Roland Barthes prophesized the transition from work to text; perhaps we are now witnessing a surprising version of this transition, where commercial producers no longer trade in works, but capture and repackage text, where reading is not confined to a volume with two covers but to patches of luminous flicker on a screen. In this situation, we are obviously still somehow dealing with literature; it is produced in unprecedented quantities

and is amazingly accessible, but still it somehow differs from the product we knew that had its material foundation in the ancient printing press. The technology of the book helped to frame that thing we called literature and the literary works we came to cherish; this thing is now coming unframed in the digital propagation of a new kind of generalized textuality that modifies the traditional modes of production, circulation, and consumption of literature and instigates new practices, new business models, and new sensibilities, eventually leaving us less with ‘literature’ and literary works than with much more generic forms of text that are captured, distributed, and used in slightly different ways.

3 Epistemology: After Fiction

Between 2004, when Michael Moore won the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival, and 2015, when Svetlana Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the question of how to distinguish reliably between documentary and fiction has gradually gained increasing importance. We have learned, throughout the modern history of literature, that literature belongs to the realm of fiction, where utterances are not supposed to – or rather, are supposed not to – have a real referent. Fiction, here, is really to be understood rather as a legal category: a particular discursive practice where beings that are designated do not have a referent. This is why Flaubert was not indicted in the trial on the morality on Madame Bovary, and why we so abhorred the *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie. Representations are not designations: Within the modern regime of literature, we have applied the *caveat* of fictionality to allow imaginary tales about our world to circulate as a testing ground for conjecture and speculation. The trade-off of fiction, magisterially condensed into a formula by Catherine Gallagher, is that it combines *non-reference* with *probability* (Gallagher 2006, 344).

This contract of fictionally, however, seems to have come undone. On June 21, 2013, at the publication of the American translation of the second volume of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*, the reviewer for *The New York Times* wrote: “immediately striking is the ways in which fiction is born of fact,” and then thoughtfully added, “and the question whether this is fiction at all.” This question has occupied literary scholarship and the literary public to a quite remarkable degree over the last years, not only in the case of Knausgaard, but in the panoply of instances where contemporary writers in different ways transgress the ancient contract of fiction, from W.G. Sebald to Michel Houellebecq, from Marie Darrieussecq to Rainald Goetz. All the prominent theories of fiction in store have been invoked to accommodate this new situation, and new sub-generic classifications have

laboriously been devised, but somewhat, it seems, in vain. In the different experiments undertaken by writers like these, we are no longer dealing with new, subtle negotiations of the contract of fiction, but rather with a practice to which the contract and the divide it implies is simply becoming increasingly irrelevant. With characteristic, unflinching perspicacity, James G. Ballard already in 1995 stated:

I feel that the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decades. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind – mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality.

(Ballard 1995, i)

Now, twenty years later, the tendencies spotted by Ballard have come to full-blown fruition, and we are presently dealing with a double-faced erosion of the threshold that used to separate fiction from the document. From one side, creative literary practices defy and provocatively transgress the borderline set down in the traditional contract of fiction, overtly juxtaposing and intertwining real references and invented things. And from the other side, we see media and political discourse flooded with 'alternative facts' and generally blending alleged accounts of states of facts with improbable figments of imagination, in the increasingly toxic conglomeration of storytelling and statistics, branding and bigotry.

The differentiation of the public sphere, as magisterially theorized by Jürgen Habermas, implied a thorough separation of discursive modes and their spheres of validity, combined with a gradual development of different rationalities for political deliberation, for the organization of production, for the market place, for art and literature, for scientific inquiry, and so forth (Habermas 1962). The institution of literature took place under the aegis of such a societal differentiation; the present situation, however, seems to be one of rolling back, of de-differentiation, inflicting the ability for – or the interest in – distinguishing between facts and fiction. Matters of fact are becoming rarefied, as Bruno Latour has noted, leaving us in an acute perplexity about how then to identify and negotiate the matters of concern we need to face up to (Latour 2005, 29). So one thing is that literature today seems still more preoccupied with toying with sometimes ludic, sometimes dead-serious references to mundane reality, and with blending discourses that we are accustomed to identifying as fiction and documentary, respectively, into new hybrid forms. But this also stands out as a reaction to the way in which our present reality is becoming saturated with what we would otherwise have expected to find only in the inoffensive realm of fiction. Referential stuff of all kinds now abounds inside this realm, and outside of it, reference is shot through with fiction.

This new distribution of discourses – and the hybridization of otherwise distinct rationalities it brings along – evidently has serious repercussions when it comes to how we (are to) understand what literature is. Literature no longer holds the privilege of being the one, specific discourse that could produce imaginary versions of the world and hold them up against the actual world outside. Within the new disorderly distribution of discourses in society, such properties now surface everywhere, whether in politics, advertisement, or journalism. In this sense, the new and sometimes confusing literary involvement with something we identify as documentary is not primarily an attempt on the part of literature to break out of the institutional enclosure it has found itself confined to, but more accurately a reaction to the undermining of the architecture of social discourses that upheld this enclosure. The divides that scaffold the epistemological *differentia specifica* of literature are coming down, not through pressures from within, but washed away from the outside. This can be regarded as a waning of the power that was once endowed to literature, as it now loses its privilege to be the discourse that can say something which is not true, but is still much more than a lie. But it can also be regarded as an unbinding of this very power, the speculative power of fabulation that has been bred within the confines of the literary institution for a couple of centuries, now eventually in a position to directly address – beyond analogy, beyond allegory – the narratives and imaginaries that make up our cultural space of experience.

4 Literature After Literature

When studying the cultural practices of representation and their role and function in the life of society at large – and indeed when gauging the future of this academic endeavor – we need to factor in also the framework conditions upon which the representations under scrutiny are contingent and the particular historical transformations they undergo. In the case of literature, and admittedly based on a haphazard set of observations that does not allow for too far-reaching conclusions, I have nonetheless tried to sketch out how changes are underway that might eventually affect three fundamental pillars supporting our modern notion of literature and perhaps alter the representational regime of literature in the twenty-first century. Thus, with the new geographies, technologies, and epistemologies of reading and writing I have touched upon, literature as we have known it for some three hundred years could be morphing into something slightly different: a literature based on a new trans-local idiomatic, beyond the nation state and the national language; a new proteiform textuality, beyond the

book and the work; and a new art of fabulation, beyond the particular category of fiction as opposed to the referential.

The literary creativity of the present in no way seems to be impeded by these transformations of the framework within which it operates; on the contrary, it is stimulated by the new vistas that open up and the novel possibilities they entail. And literature remains, to be sure, a powerful medium of representation. Yet the cultural logic of representation it is about to develop has different coordinates than the one we knew from the classical modern regime of literature. The publics it caters to and to whom it offers the images it confects are less those who can be circumscribed by way of a geography of nations, but instead by dispersed communities engaged in intricate processes of translation and negotiation based on new trajectories and encounters. Moreover, literary representations are not only subjected to new and aggressive business models, they are also morphing beyond the book and the circuit of books as we know it. This textual practice in turn connects to other forms of live-ness and to the practices of the other arts, as it nests itself in ramified guises within a different media ecology, which in turn also facilitates new encounters and different platforms for producing stories and images of the way we live. And finally, the mimetic faculty of literature is bleeding into neighboring discursive practices of wording our experience within different forms of post-fictional fabulation, intervening in the discursive fabric of the present in more subtle ways, taking risks outside of the comfort zone of what is 'mere fiction' and renegotiating its legal and political interaction with a host of other representations among which it is increasingly enmeshed.

One challenge to the study of culture today is of course to chart such complex processes that presently affect the framework conditions for aesthetic representations. We should keep a broad outlook not only on what is happening to the cultural practices as we know them, but also on the social and infrastructural changes at work, in a continuous dialogue with an array of other sciences of society, technology, and culture. The trans-disciplinary horizon of the study of culture is going to expand further, and we will have to keep learning new disciplinary languages and research designs, and probably engage even more in collective research projects that are equipped to properly handle the polyvalence of the objects we are dealing with.

The social institution of literature does seem, as argued above, to undergo quite dramatic changes in respect to its inner geometry and its interfaces with the world around it. In this process, the relations it builds to its audiences are diversified, all while it aims to gain a different foothold in a mobile, ubiquitously mediated and de-differentiated discursive sphere. Literature, and the other arts, are becoming less distinctive as objects, more flexible in their articulation and their address, operating more transversally in an increasingly complex and

amalgamated sphere of social practices. As such, literature is about to become less distinctly identifiable as an object of scholarly inquiry, eventually also challenging our intellectual habits of object construction and scientific protocol. The study of culture will find itself increasingly in the position of a partner in dialogue and interaction with art practices rather than an impartial observer and interpreter. In this dialogue, artists and scholars are going to navigate the same waters, and most likely in a common endeavor of an ultimately political nature: to make sure that there remains sufficient room for maneuver for a creative and critical inquiry into the way we live now.

References

- Alexievich, Svetlana. *On the Battle Lost*. 2015. <https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/alexievich-lecture_en.html. 2015> [accessed: 22 October 2019].
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Ballard, James G. *Crash*. London: Micador, 1995 [1974].
- Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Transl. Karen E. Fields. New York: The Free Press, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel. "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" *Dits et écrits*. Vol 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1994 [1969].
- Gallagher, Catherine. "The Rise of Fictionality." *The Novel*. Ed. Franco Moretti. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1962.
- Hall, Stuart. *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16.2 (2003): 263–290.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence O. Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Transl. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Latour, Bruno. "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik." *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2005.
- Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Poulet, Georges. "Phenomenology of Reading." *New Literary History* 1.1 (1969): 53–68.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*. Paris: La Fabrique, 2000.
- Self, Will. "The Transformation of Our Gutenberg Minds." *The Guardian* (04 October 2014).
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.