DO DIGITALLY INDUCED TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE BOOK MEDIA SYSTEM ESTABLISH A 'NEW LITERATURE', REQUIRE A 'NEW LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP'?

A BOOK / MEDIA STUDIES VIEW

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ABSTRACT   *This paper is driven by two fundamental questions: which are the major transformations that the book as a medium and the book industry as a whole are undergoing through the advent of digitalization? And in how far can the products of this new digital environment be understood as an altogether new sort of literature. If this new literature is on the rise, as this paper argues, then the analytical practices of literary studies as well as book/media studies must answer this new challenge with adequate new theories and methods.*

INTRODUCTION

Starting from a 'materiality'-oriented media / book studies point of view (in a comparative literature context), this paper follows the research questions, 1) which relevant transformations of the book media system and the book industry are associated with digitization and 2) in how far all or parts of the output of the transformed book media system can or must be seen as a new literature. Not least, the latter might have bearings on the (scholarly) methods used to approach it.

In a turn that sounds like an oxymoron, but—as will be seen—does make sense, namely seeing the digitization of the book media system as an aspect of its 'materiality' (which does not seem to be an adequate category for bits and bytes, really), book studies are the discipline to take this up systematically. Book studies see themselves not exhaustively, but certainly to some extent as media studies of the book.

> „Book studies as a university discipline see themselves primarily as a humanities and cultural studies subject with corresponding methods and book historical, book management and media theoretic focusses. Taking the paradigm of the materiality of communication as a starting point, the book as a medium is the object of book studies as carrier of linguistic and pictorial signs and in its production, […] management and cultural contexts […]. The concept of book is a wide one and encompasses the various book forms including the distribution of book-like contents with the help of new media […]." (Rautenberg 2003: 125–126; translation C. B.)

Taking 'materiality' as a marked starting point for scholarly work on books and literature is what differentiates book studies as a discipline from typical literary studies or comparative literature approaches.

In the following, I will focus on fiction, literary and trade; I will, however, also be mentioning digital forms of books from other segments of the book communication, i. e. non-fiction, b2b, scholarly, etc. Among the fictional texts, I will concentrate on works beyond pure experiments, i. e. on such works that have a significance for the mainstream literary communication and the book market (as an economic construct), that are not unique prints, artefacts etc., but goods that are tradable and in fact traded. In book trade categories, we will be talking about e-books and in particular enhanced e-books, be they realised as e-books in a narrow sense (as EPUB 3 files etc.) or as book apps.

THE DIGITIZATION OF THE BOOK MEDIA SYSTEM

The beginning of the digitization of the book media system—a system that of course goes beyond the works of literature themselves—goes back many decades

and concerned the digitization of various process steps in the book production. From the mainframe digital typesetting of the 1960s to desktop publishing from 1984 onwards, the effects of these changes could typically not be detected on the output, the 'product' level. In particular, these effects—among them shorter times to market, lower costs, better conditions for content reuse and multiple exploitation—have not been and are not in the focus of literary studies. That digitization effects cannot be seen on the output is also true for online bookselling, the trading of printed books with the help of e-commerce, from the mid-1990s onwards. Not taking into consideration earlier experiments with texts on computers from the time they started to get used, books have been differently, digitally 'packaged' to a market-relevant degree only since 2007 or 2010, respectively: in 2007 Amazon introduced its Kindle e-reading device to the US market and in 2010 the world saw the advent of Apple's iPad. Up to concepts and metaphors, an old medium, the book, was emulated in a new meta-medium, the computer (in this case mostly computer-like mobile devices). The increasing use of such devices had measurable effects not only on book distribution, but of course also on some reading conditions and habits: reading from screens appears to require less mental effort (Kretzschmar et al. 2013) and seems to support the tendency to read in smaller chunks (Bläsi / Kuhn 2011). In particular, however, looking at the industry as a whole, a transition from a value creation chain to a value creation network can be observed: the author-publisher-book distributor-bookseller-buyer / reader chain, quintessential for many centuries, is being replaced by a more complex industry landscape, in which authors can turn to their readers directly by way of (digital) self-publishing, where IT companies such as Apple and Google play an important role etc. (Janello 2010). The latter developments as such, however, are again not visible on the product level, either, and are, therefore, not accessible to a purely text-based literary studies approach. Another—less noticeable—top-level transition are the changes in the communication space around the book. Important phenomena in this respect are the increasingly important and effective digital assistance for the customer orientation on the complex book market (e. g. Vogel 2010) as well as books as points of departure for the exchange of ideas and the communication of identities in the digital sphere (all the way to social reading, which can also have effects on the products themselves [Pleimling 2012]).

As an interim result, it can be concluded that in the wake of the digitization of the book industry or the book media system, respectively, there is a whole range of interesting phenomena to be picked up and to be analyzed by media / book studies scholars. Up to this stage of observation, nothing hints at the emergence of a new literature, however: the ongoing processes can be described as a 'black box industry' which merely produces some of their products in a different packaging (with respect to digital forms of books in the fiction segment, we are talking about e-books without enhancements here). This new 'packaging' might indeed influence some dimensions of reading habits, facilitate an easier access to works of

art and strengthen the move to additional research tools and possibly even modified research paradigms (cf. Digital Humanities), but it does not seem to trigger or even require a genuinely new literary scholarship.

There are a few complications to this, however: reading from screens might not only require less effort, it might be different in more profound ways (Wolf 2008). To give one example: the display on a screen is typically not oriented on a double-page spread arrangement, which might have contributed to a specific impact and meaning. Also, among literary studies scholars, there are considerations that indicate an increasing awareness for the importance of 'material' factors—in the case of Murray e. g. for adaptation relations (i. e. relations between different manifestations of original contents: hardcovers, paperbacks, films, etc.).

Murray's own "[…] model aims at capturing the complexity of the adaptation industry and thereby to contribute to a long overdue materialising of adaptation theory" (Murray 2011: 12). To come up with an example for the potential fruitfulness of materiality-informed approaches that also connects to the digitization of the book media system, it suffices to look at the current ebook market: since Apple and Amazon fence off their respective e-book 'ecosystems' with the help of non-interoperable e-book formats, restrictive digital rights management measures, etc., the set of e-books available to users of a certain viewing technology is (unlike the case of printed books) to a certain degree controlled by US corporations, which connects aspects of economic power to aspects of the literary world—via aspects of (digital) 'materiality' (Bläsi / Rothlauf 2013).

(REALLY) NEW "PRODUCTS", ZOOMING IN FROM THREE TRADITION LINES AND NEIGHBOURING GENRES

Coming from literary theory / comparative literature, Beebee sees three dimensions of computerization, namely the hardware / physical one, the memory platform / digital one and the semantics / cyberspace one. He claims, "the third, semantic cyberspace dimension has relevance for the production of literature, whereas the second, digital dimension has relevance for the archiving and distribution of literary texts new and old" (Beebee 297, based on Floridi). These categories are not ours, but it seems possible to connect them to the transformations described so far: the transformations in production and distribution processes do not have such a significant effect on the product (i. e. the quiddity of literature) as they operate in hardware and memory dimensions. This would mean that, in Beebee's terminology, we will be talking about the above mentioned third, the "semantic / cyberspace" dimension in the following.[1]

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1   See also I. Krzywkowski's contribution to this volume.

At this point, it is appropriate to think about the nature of the (additional) expressive options for an author—the creator of a text-based piece of intellectual property in the book media system—if, with respect to the artistic means, he turns against the book as a printed medium, deliberately going beyond the possibilities of print. These additional options form groups that can be labelled with the terms 'multimedia' and 'interactivity'. 'Multimedia' now usually means the integration of media elements other than text and image (from pictures to maps), i. e. of elements from time-based media, audio, video and animations. Manifestations of 'interactivity' range from active links via effects of geo-localization and interface alternatives all the way to virtual collaboration and social reading. In the form of augmented reality, the potentials of multimedia and interactivity coalesce.

To give an impression of what is possible with (some of) the additional expressive options mentioned, I will give a few examples from beyond the focus of this paper. Motivated by the fact that there is no explicit 'poetology' of enhanced e-books yet and the fact that different e-book "ecosystems" make cross-ecosystem solutions difficult (see above), Jürgen Neffe has proposed a concept he calls „Li-broid" and applied it to the e-book version of his non-fiction book on Darwin (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sj8pAF9ikzc for a promotional video). A truly extreme manifestation of the idea to form a complex hypertext network of information chunks that can be navigated individually depending on the interest of the user is the concept of 'Semantic Publishing' by German start-up PAUX (https://www.facebook.com/paux.de/), where the information chunk granularity is down to single sentences or even concepts. These information chunks are connected by typed links. This enables better traceability and allows for an extended exploitability, e.g.—according to PAUX—the straight-forward reuse of content as computer-based training units. A similar idea from a different strand of research is to strip down content from book communication to basic triples as they are used in the Semantic Web, starting with metadata, data about books. This information is then integrated into the huge amount of information in the Linked Open Data cloud through coreference, or by way of ontologies. Users can then retrieve the data through software agents and use it for automated reasoning. Eventually, such a representation of texts from the book universe can be extended from metadata to object propositions, which would make book content available to agent reasoning (issues of intellectual property and revenue models left aside at this point).

While it has become a rather common practice to emulate old products onto the new medium / meta medium, in the meantime wholly new products have also been developed in the fiction realm. In our context, we have to limit the focus to enhanced e-books as traded goods. We have seen above that it is comparatively easy as well as inevitable to extend the scope of book studies to digital manifestations of books—especially once you have determined more generally what should be considered a 'book'. As long as there are no agreed criteria to be fulfilled specifically by book content—possible candidates for such criteria are

length, argumentative complexity, aesthetic pretension—, statements like the following constitute a challenge to the limited focus: "The direct literary impact of the internet has been most noticeable on minor genres and sub-genres, such as the epistolary novel, reborn as the e-mail or cell-phone novel, and the diary, which on the internet becomes a weblog or blog" (Beebee 301) and "'With the internet we face the paradox of writing without 'différance,' writing that is almost as instantaneous as speech, and privacy with no inside, since everything seems to be outside immediately'" (Lejeune according to Beebee, 301). The instantaneousness of internet writing tends to abolish common literary practices like a prolonged reflection on formulations, and the maturation of a text in the course of a more intricate editing and publication process. I cannot make a statement for literary studies here, but—as the name suggests—book studies are too much connected (not unconditionally, of course) to the book as a medium to be defined in a way that transcends purely 'material' manifestations. Blogs / web diaries and similar forms of expression are typically not in the scope of book studies, as things stand. Maintaining the chosen focus on enhanced e-books will, therefore, help to avoid the complex discussion on disciplinary limits in this context.

It is instructive at this point to have a look at the medial developments that lead to enhanced e-books, different tradition lines, we could say. A very important point in history with respect to the top-level content structure is of course the apparition of hypertexts as formations or networks of 'text chunks', which you sometimes can, but are not obliged to, traverse via a recommended 'linear' order among a variety of possible paths. If some of the content nodes in the network were not texts, but other media elements (e. g. images or videos), such hypertexts were sometimes referred to as hypermedia. There were numerous experimental implementations (by far most of them in the non-fiction realm, for notable exceptions see below), and, not least, in 1991, this idea became the cornerstone of Tim Berners-Lee's World Wide Web. For fiction hypertexts, Beebee claims that the "[h]ypertext has shown itself to be more suitable for lyric, especially lyric that explores the reader's relationship to the graphemes of language, than to narrative" (Beebee, 300). A product category that made hypertexts / hypermedia accessible to consumers were multimedia CD-ROMs, as they were assessed to be the spearhead products of the media development of the time and very popular around the mid-1990s; there are no representatives of this strand of considerable significance in fiction again, however. Text adventures can be seen as another important tradition line—one that can only be found in the fiction realm. They were constituted by texts with a certain kind of interactive intervention option, put very prosaically: depending on user input, different chunks of text or other media get displayed. If computer games proper can be generalised as adventures, in which, with the help of a more iconic use of sign systems (images, video, audio), user immersion is intentionally evoked, must remain open here: they can at least be seen as a parallel development. A stronger statement defining computer games as one of the

origins of enhanced fiction e-books right away is complicated by considerations like the following: "The demarcation line between electronic literature and computer games is far from definite; many games have narrative components, while many works of electronic literature have game elements" (Hayles 2008: 8). But saliently and more seriously also "[h]ow to maintain such conventional narrative devices as rising tension, conflict, and denouncement in interactive forms where the user determined sequence continues to pose formidable problems for writers of electronic literature, especially narrative fiction" (Hayles 2008: 16). And then there is a third line of tradition, 'electronic literature' (Hayles) proper, as it were. 'Electronic literature' as a genre has the distinctly experimental character of non-traded goods—and includes some of the early (fiction or literary) hypertexts. Consequently, Loss Pequeno Glazier (according to Hayles) sees electronic literature as best understood as a continuation of experimental print literature. "Hypertext fiction, network fiction, interactive fiction, locative narratives, installation pieces, 'codework', generative art, and the Flash poem are by no means an exhaustive inventory of the forms of electronic literature, but they are sufficient to illustrate the diversity of the field" (Hayles 2008: 30).

Having made our way through products along the different traditions and from outside the genre (non-fiction), let me conclude with two recent German market examples of enhanced fiction e-books, the products I concentrated on for the key issue of this paper: Ken Follet's "Säulen der Erde" is the translation of "The Pillars of the Earth", the enhanced e-book version of a printed trade fiction book (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NUjMaMkvLA for a video blog review), and "Apocalypis" is a 'born-digital' enhanced e-book product (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFzjrIbyQTM for a promotional video).

NEW FICTION / LITERARY PRODUCTS = NEW LITERATURE? WHAT ABOUT A NEW LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP?

If this is a new kind of product in the focus of academics, what can be said about it from a narratological perspective, what in terms of literary theory?

Marie Laure Ryan holds that a combination of text, pictures, movement, music and interaction makes immersion easier.

> "The limited narrative power of non-verbal media does not mean […] that they cannot make original contributions to the formation of narrative meaning. The affordances of language, pictures, movement, and music complement each other, and when they are used together in multi-channel media, each of them builds a different facet of the total imaginative experience: language narrates through its logic and its ability to model the human mind, pictures through their immersive spatiality and visuality, movement through its dynamic temporality, and music through its atmosphere-creating, tension building and emotional power. […] [T]hrough collaboration with sensorial signs, lan-

guage-based narrative allows a fuller experience of the storyworld. In multi-channel media, the appreciator can directly see, hear, and maybe even interact with objects, and the imagination, relieved from the cognitive burden of simulating sensory data, can more easily immerse itself in the story." (Ryan: 29)

It is largely consensual that for many, if not all, works of art the medium adds significance and meaning, so that the so-called window metaphor of media is not adequate; this metaphor reads as follows: "[I]t is the function of a medium to disappear behind the content which it is to convey" (Urbich 2011: 17, trans. C. B.). With respect to literature, the view of the inadequacy of the window metaphor is given in a consolidated fashion by the following sequence of arguments from literary theory: "[…] [M]edia are—and this is the basic assumption shared by almost all positions of media philosophy—not so self-effacing in the execution of the transmission of content as they might appear in their transparency" (Urbich 2011: 17), "[…] 'because, in the process of the transmission, they mould the information in a constitutive manner'" (Münker acc. to Urbich 2011: 17): "[m]edia open up and format reality" (Urbich 2011: 17) and

> "[t]herefore, every medium adds to the matter it mediates dimensions of significance and enhances the texture of meaning with its own ontological, semantic and functional determinations. […] At the same time, the analysis of media is so urgent because it is informative with respect to the possibly unimagined preliminary conceptual decisions and ideological fundamentals, which are in the mental and technical machinery that help us to be in the world." (Urbich 2011: 17)

Urbich adds another interesting perspective relevant for this paper when he writes: "Artistic and literary work antagonize the tendency of every medium to make itself disappear by accentuating the technique of the formation and the process of its becoming form. […] Artistically moulded artifacts […] form as information how their medium yields meaning." (Urbich 2011: 120). "In this way, forms become the medium of their self-awareness and also the background against which new forms of the perception of reality can be obtained." (Urbich 2011: 121).

Thus, enhanced fiction e-books can and must be questioned not least about how their medial manifestation moulds the content and how they make their mediality an implicit or explicit object.

There are, however, also possible aspects of 'electronic media' on this side of mediality contributing meaning and a self-referentiality of the medium.

> "Much as the novel both gave voice to and helped to create the liberal humanist subject in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, so contemporary electronic literature is both reflecting and enacting a new kind of subjectivity characterized by distributed cognition, networked agency that includes human and non-human actors, and fluid boundaries dispersed over actual and virtual locations […]" (Hayles 2008: 37).

Moreover,

> "[f]orging connections between mind and body, performance and cognition, technical vocabulary and intuitive understanding, the works […] engage networked and programmable media not just as technical practices, but as integral components of understanding what it means to be human in a computational era" (Hayles 2011: 131).

What follows from all this? Analytic and interpretative approaches to enhanced fiction e-books require a new literary scholarship (only) in the sense that existing considerations—like the ones that a medium does not fully disappear behind the content conveyed, that a work of art can reflect on its mediality or that literature can give a specific voice to being human in an era—have to be applied and transferred to the new developments. This, however, typically involves profound knowledge of modern media technologies and possibly—this is not specific to e-books and does not apply to all enhanced fiction e-books, however—of aspects of living in the digital age. The technological part is captured very well by Hayles: "[T]he conditions in which a work is created, produced, disseminated, and performed always mark it in distinctive ways that provide openings for critical interrogation and media-specific analysis" (Hayles 2008: 27), "code must be considered as much a part of the 'text' of electronic literature as the screening surface" (Hayles 2008: 35) and "[c]omputation is not peripheral or incidental to electronic literature but central to its performance, play, and interpretation" (Hayles 2011: 44).

This 'enhanced' kind of literary scholarship on the basis of additional knowledge, competencies and reflection is a prerequisite to understanding the products mentioned—quite independently of the fact whether particular enhanced fiction e-books like "Die Säulen der Erde" or "Apocalypsis" are considered manifestations of a new literature or not.

CONCLUSIONS

The effects of digitization on literary communication, the book market and the book media system as a whole are manifold—from desktop publishing via online bookstores to new content forms. Only some of them are directly relevant to literary studies. Enhanced (fiction) e-books are currently among the most important types of digital forms of books—and they should definitely be immediate subjects of literary studies, since they do have features that cannot be seen just in analogy to possibly connected printed products.

This is not necessarily true for e-books without enhancements. But also for those (and for printed literature!) there are not quite as fundamental, but still important, impacts of digitization on literary scholarship: the access to texts is often much easier digitally (not least as a consequence of retro digitization efforts) and enables the adoption of digital humanities approaches from visualization and

virtual collaboration to the application of data mining and artificial intelligence methodologies.

Interesting aspects of enhanced fiction e-books are the possibility to 'enhance' the story beyond language as a medium by additional narrative options (interactivity, multimedia). This opens up options to reflect on the aspects of the enhanced mediality as well as extended options to reflect on the *conditio humana* in the contemporary world.

This new literary space—the one of enhanced fiction e-books—that is potentially highly interesting for authors, publishers and readers / users does not seem to be appropriately conquered yet. Book studies can give at least some reasons for this: not least, there have been just too few products (or at least experiments) out there. This, in turn, is seen to be a consequence of too few technical product, production and target device standards. There are very few authoring tools that make a development of more complex products easy and cost-efficient. Also, there are too many non-compatible target platforms, a pre-condition which multiplies production costs. The latter compares to the situation at the end of the 1990s, when no successful business could be developed emanating from a number of very ambitious and attractive state-of-the-art multimedia CD-ROMs—primarily due to the lack of conditions for effective production processes. What we see in the enhanced (fiction) e-book market are mainly products with few and limited enhancements. And they stem primarily from the low- to middle-brow and genre segments of the book market and apparently they neither expose the changes that new media have caused in the lives of people of our time, nor do they choose to reflect on their own mediality at a degree worth mentioning.

Especially the former is particularly regrettable, since enhanced (literary) fiction e-books might have the unique chance to be an attractive art form between the text-only novel and a new type of quality TV serials. British novelist Ian McEwan and German literary critic Richard Kämmerlings comment upon the strengths of these art forms. McEwan writes with regard to the first:

> "The novel has evolved highly effective conventions for representing the flow of consciousness. We can't do that so well in drama or in movies; you cannot get that close-textured feeling. You can't have that analysis that novels give. We don't have any other art form that has that interior access, opening up one mind to another's." (McEwan 2013: 13)

Kämmerlings, on the other hand, praises the new (American) quality TV serials enthusiastically:

> "The Balzac for our time. The novel of the present time is a DVD box: American serials such as 'The Wire' prove the emancipation of an epic form from the entertainment industry and have become a serious competitor to literature. […] No novel has absorbed me as 'The Wire'—that has to be understood as: 'The Wire' is a novel. One of the best

ones. […] [There is] an audience valuing narrative complexity, self-reflection, dodgy tracks, and symbolic multiple encodings. […] More than cinema the new long-form narration poaches in its usual [literary, C. B.] terrain. […] We are witnesses of the birth of a new genre: a new epic large form is emancipating itself from the standardized formats of the media industry, which have produced it." (Kämmerlings 2010: 33, translation by C. B.)

It is between those two poles that the vanishing point of the enhanced (literary) fiction e-book might be—literary studies with the help of book / media studies will have to adapt and partly develop appropriately elaborated theories and methods to welcome this new genre.

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