

BOOKS

Mihaela Ursa, *Indisciplina ficțiunii: Viața de după carte a literaturii*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022, 312 p.



In an increasingly apocalyptic climate in which the death of literature is loudly proclaimed, Mihaela Ursa refuses a nostalgic and melancholic reflection on the decline of the culture of the book. Instead, she chooses to investigate the ways in which the current media landscape has shaped the reception of fiction and how these mutations can be used in order to “revive” the classics and literature in general for a new generation of digital natives. Therefore, although this book is focused on canonical texts, the author does not intend to discuss their canonicity or their aesthetic value, but the way in which they are reappropriated through their transmedial circulation.

The introductory chapter starts with the important assertion that literature is no longer the privileged road towards accessing narratives. However, instead of either mourning or praising the end of the literature-centric era, the author proposes a more useful activity: reflecting on how this change may impact our relationship with

fiction. Since cultural and artistic revolutions do not manifest themselves as a destruction of previous practices in their field, the new technologies and media that are developing very rapidly do not signify the end of the book as a material support or the end of literacy as an ability, but instead their mutation and integration in a new network of narrative media. After all, as Mihaela Ursa argues, transmediality has been a trait of artistic productions since the very beginning, the rise of literature being the phenomenon actually responsible for narrowing the narrative space to its strictly written manifestation.



As opposed to being limited to monomedial study fields, the remedial approach promoted by the author means using the preferences and habits of digital natives, in their role as consumers of transmedial cultural franchises, for creating a network of hybrid cultural artifacts in order to spark the interest in a new, multimedia form and reception of fictional narratives.

In the second chapter, "Crisis and Literariness" (*"Criză și literaritate"*), the author investigates the fetishisation of literature, which created an artificial opposition between the aesthetic and the ethical. This gap between ethics and aesthetics has been the foundation of the autonomy of the aesthetic, a principle very popular in the 20th century which still engenders debates today, especially in the cultures from the former communist block where literature has been heralded as one of the main pillars of resistance against totalitarian oppression. However, exactly this phenomenon helps Mihaela Ursa deconstruct this myth, since the aesthetic autonomy has worked as an ideological and political project during communism, when writers fictionalised their identity as the quintessential dissidents and the keyholders of the truth. In addition, the critic also highlights how the superficial understanding of concepts coined by the Russian formalists has fuelled the fetishisation of the literary text. For instance, defamiliarisation and literariness have long been seen as the possessions of literature alone, even though the formalists described them as characteristics typical of all forms of artistic expression that are aware of their own techniques of representation, while also making them visible. In order to counteract this limited view of fiction, the transmedial approach requires researchers to surpass the boundaries of their own discipline by gaining a very good grasp of its instruments, while also being able to adapt and rethink them critically.

The following chapter, "Imagined Colonisations" (*"Colonizări imaginate"*), discusses the ways in which monomedial prejudices of readers and viewers can be overcome and the benefits a transmedial approach would bring to the reception and analysis of hybrid artifacts, which function as cult objects. These are texts that have generated such an influential memetic network that they have become almost autonomous from their content and meaning, existing in a fetishised form through their referentiality. Mihaela Ursa notes that the new technological developments have opened new avenues for accessing a particular "storyworld" (a term Marie-Laure Ryan uses to refer to the world generated by a particular story, serving as a setting in which other subsequent stories may also take place) other than the primordial canonical text. This, in turn, has revealed that storyworlds are shaped by the specific semiotic techniques of their medium, which makes remediation a process that can no longer be ignored. However, it does not mean that the old media will be replaced by the new. On the contrary, the old semiotic systems have to be adapted in order to profit from the possibilities opened by the new ones. Thus, remediation can contribute to dispelling the illusion of a medium's semiotic transparency, leading to the development of a more critical consumer. The author concludes the chapter by underlining the two major advantages of bringing the classics into the realm of popular culture. First of all, as mentioned before, the original texts will be perceived self-reflexively, since transmediation requires a good understanding of the mutations a storyworld suffers when being adapted to a new semiotic system.

Secondly, popular culture will enable the renewed circulation of these texts and their revitalisation, even if their canonical structure will not be able to remain wholly intact.

The next three chapters contain case studies of three canonical texts whose transmediation has influenced their historical and contemporary reception and durability. In “Before Consuming, Add Zombies” (“Înainte de consum, adăugați zombi”), Mihaela Ursa shows how the transmedial treatment of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* gives a new, “zombified” (p. 187) life to the source text in Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and in its cinematic adaptation by Burr Steers. Even if such a parody seems to do a disservice to the original, it actually generates more interest towards it, while also reviving a genre (even if in a comic manner) which had lost all of its vitality due to the formulaic and uninspired state it had arrived at. As such, both Austen’s text and the zombie genre are changed through this transmedial and intertextual semiotic transfer, since such a mash-up negates any attempt of immersion in the story, instead uncovering the generic conventions and the stylistic techniques that antithetically coexist in the final product.

The chapter “Don Quixote and the Chivalric Fandom” (“*Don Quijote și fandom-ul cavaleresc*”) builds on the argument that the hidalgo’s story was always part of a “transfictional system” (a term Mihaela Ursa also borrows from Marie-Laure Ryan) consisting of Cervantes’ novel in two volumes and the apocryphal continuation of the first volume, attributed to Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. As such, *Don Quixote* becomes a macro-text through its numerous intertextual references and because of its varied history of reception. For instance, the author mentions how the (often inaccurate) illustrations based on the novel, called *auques*, were part of the popular culture surrounding it, thus turning the now canonical text into a transmedial artifact even before the advent of the new media. Perhaps even more unexpectedly, the author integrates both Cervantes and Avellaneda into the equivalent of what today would be called a “fandom”, since the former is an enjoyer of chivalric romances, while also heavily criticising their degraded and formulaic nature during his time, while the latter attempts to make corrections in Cervantes’ text and to fill the gaps left by the original author. In turn, Cervantes reacts (and makes Don Quixote himself react) to Avellaneda’s continuation, thus generating a pluralistic authorship of the novel that comes in conflict with its static nature in the literary canon.

Last but not least, in the chapter “The Taming of Shakespeare” (“*Îmblânzirea lui Shakespeare*”), Mihaela Ursa discusses an interesting type of transmedial adaptation, the film poster. She emphasises the fact that promotional posters are less relevant for their accuracy in relation to the actual films, but more telling with regard to the values they express, often a result of the audience’s expectations. In the case of the adaptations of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, the posters also vary from culture to culture. They may either promote the reestablishment of traditional masculine and feminine social realities (as is the case in Argentina) or show the violence these rigid domestic hierarchies often encourage (for instance in France). Furthermore, the author highlights how different interpretations of the open ending of the play are reflected in the variety of cinematic adaptations, most of them choosing only a certain overall meaning mirrored in the ending preferred by the director.

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In the conclusion of the volume, the critic attempts to dismantle the idea that current transmedial artifacts always encourage an immediate, superficial perception, turning digital natives into people incapable of a slow-paced reception required for literary narratives. By choosing *Patchwork Girl* as an example of a digital reworking of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Mihaela Ursa demonstrates how the collaborative creativity needed for reconstructing the female character's textual body stimulates a slower, more methodical way of interacting with the hypertext generating the narrative, bringing the user closer to an experience similar to that of carefully reading a literary text. Consequently, the book ends with one of its essential ideas and perhaps its main takeaway point, now supported by the comprehensive theoretical excursus as well as by the concrete examples presented by the author: the literary and the postliterary will coexist in the future and they will influence each other's practices, since both of them are part of a semiotic web capable of opening different paths towards experiencing fictional narratives and immersing users in the storyworlds they create.

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