

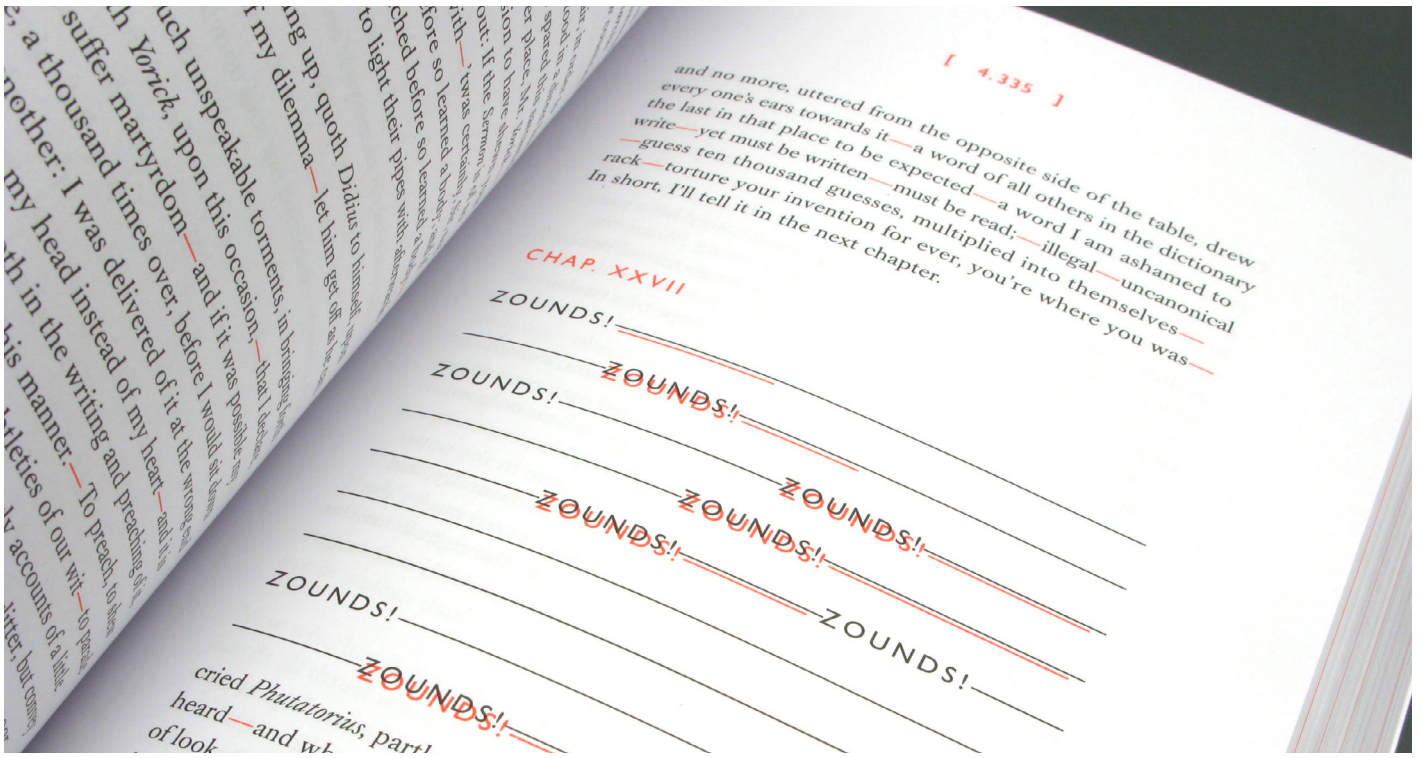
Text and Internext: the Literary Shift to Fluid texts and its Effect in Contemporary Fiction

Vicente Luis Mora

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WHAT IS LITERATURE NOW?

In the same way that for artists such as Philippe Parreno an exhibition is no longer the logical and only end of the creative process, the publication of the literary work in the form of a book is just one of the many possible “happy endings” available for writing these days. Phenomena such as blogs, e-literature, text processors and digital readers allow writers to express themselves in new ways which are now making the old concepts of text, writing, authorship and distribution shake. But also the main field, Literature itself, is experiencing deep changes. Katherine Hayles (2009:3) reminds us that, for the committee of the Electronic Literature Organization, the definition of what can be tagged with the term “electronic literature” is broad: “work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer”. For Hayles, “although tautology is usually regarded as a cardinal sin by definition writers, in this case the tautology seems appropriate” (ibidem). One of the problems we are left with is that today all forms of electronic and traditional literature use computers in many steps of the creation, design, editing and / or publication processes. In fact, as stated by digital artist Eduardo Kac, our ‘connected condition’, the “broadband network ubiquity (the eventual ability to process and exchange messages in any media anywhere) [...] will undoubtedly contribute to expand the poet’s creative media and will affect the writing/reading process in stimulating ways” (Kac 2007:8).

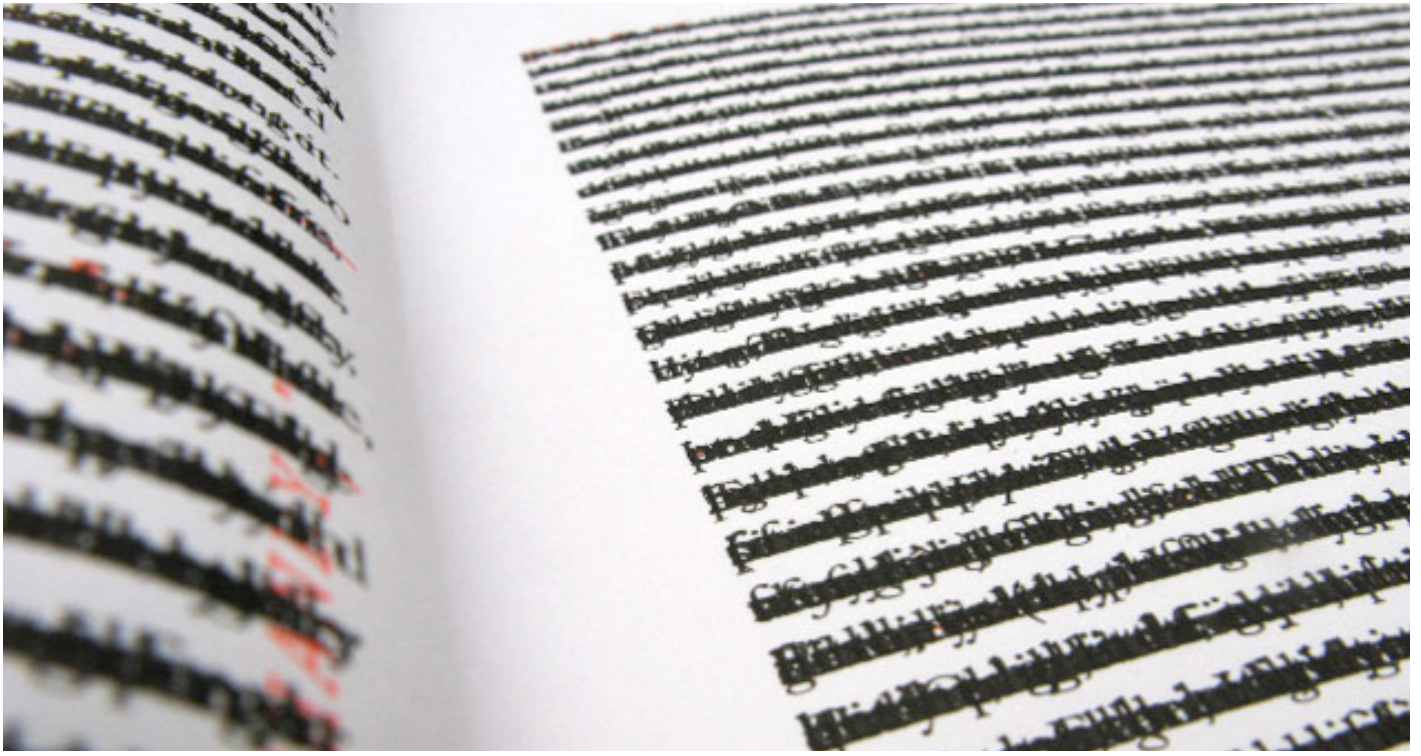


FLUIDITY

All these changes have to do not only with what relates to the writing of the books, they are also operating in the minds of readers. In this regard, Gregory L. Ulmer explained (2003) that the common reader has the temptation of reading the screen as if it were a page. Our question is now: have common readers begun to read the page as if it were a screen? I believe the answer is yes. A number of writers have been preparing us during the last centuries for these new perspectives: Lawrence Sterne with “The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy” (1759-1767), Mallarmé with “Un coup de dés”, Apollinaire and his calligrammes, Julio Cortázar and the comics inserted in “Fantomas”, Octavio Paz and his “Topoems”, the Brazilian and Swiss concrete poets, W. G. Sebald and David Eggers with the photographs interspersed in their novels, and so forth. Images have never been strangers to fiction readers, and now even dynamic images can be an integral part of the same vision of the world and the arts, part of the same Weltanschauung.

For us, the information is a continuum, and literature is in itself a form of information. Roy Ascott coined the concept of ‘aesthetics of communication’, highlighting that the communication process itself has acquired aesthetic value and inviting us to think that shared information is a breeding ground for new ways of creation, a new Art and a new Fiction. First, we have to focus on what Literature and information have in

A Laurence Sterne, “The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman”, with an introduction by Will Self and designed by APFEL, Visual Editions, Londres, 2010.



common: the fluidity of discourse, the liquid stream of sounds and words that inform the current of our voice, the river in movement of the communicated thoughts. This stream can be shared. We can displace it; move it from one person to another, from writer to reader. This is something we've always been doing, historically, but today we have the means to put it in motion in many fantastic new ways. Literary information can be metaphorically and literally scrolled, in printed, compressed or virtual form. As Terranova points out, electronic resources can help us in this new movement: "This feature of the Net space, movement, permanent divergence, differentiation, is what makes electronic textuality unstable and fluctuating, subjected to the dynamics of open physical systems" (Terranova 2006:143). We can hence rethink the notion of text, which have always been imbued with a subconscious element of written or printed formats, and create a new word to which the idea of movement would be consubstantial. We posit to talk of the 'internext' –text + internet–, the text plus its possibilities for travelling, being shared or transferred. The internext as a fluid textual concept. We need a neologism opposed to former flux models based on old descriptions of text as a traveler meme which in fact could not leave the Net. On the contrary, the internext is indeed portable and fond of travelling, going from computer hard disks to the Web, and then from the Internet to digital readers, phones, tablets or whichever other electronic devices, or even a different hard disk. At any given moment the inter-

B Laurence Sterne,
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next can be read, forwarded or printed without leaving its virtual form. While the traditional text could be read, and the electronic text could surf the Net, the intertext can do everything, simultaneously shaping the different formats in which it is read. Like other fluids, intertext is channeled. What is being discussed here is not a new model of textual form but a new way to look at text, to consider it, in order to understand its infinite possibilities and accept the latest changes in the processes of creating, reading and distributing books. New perspectives do need new names sometimes. Hermogenes explains this need of name-givers in Plato's "Cratilo". We have to become proto-poets to create the new names of things, as Auden said in "Making, Knowing and Judging" (1956), interpreting the Genesis (2007:396).

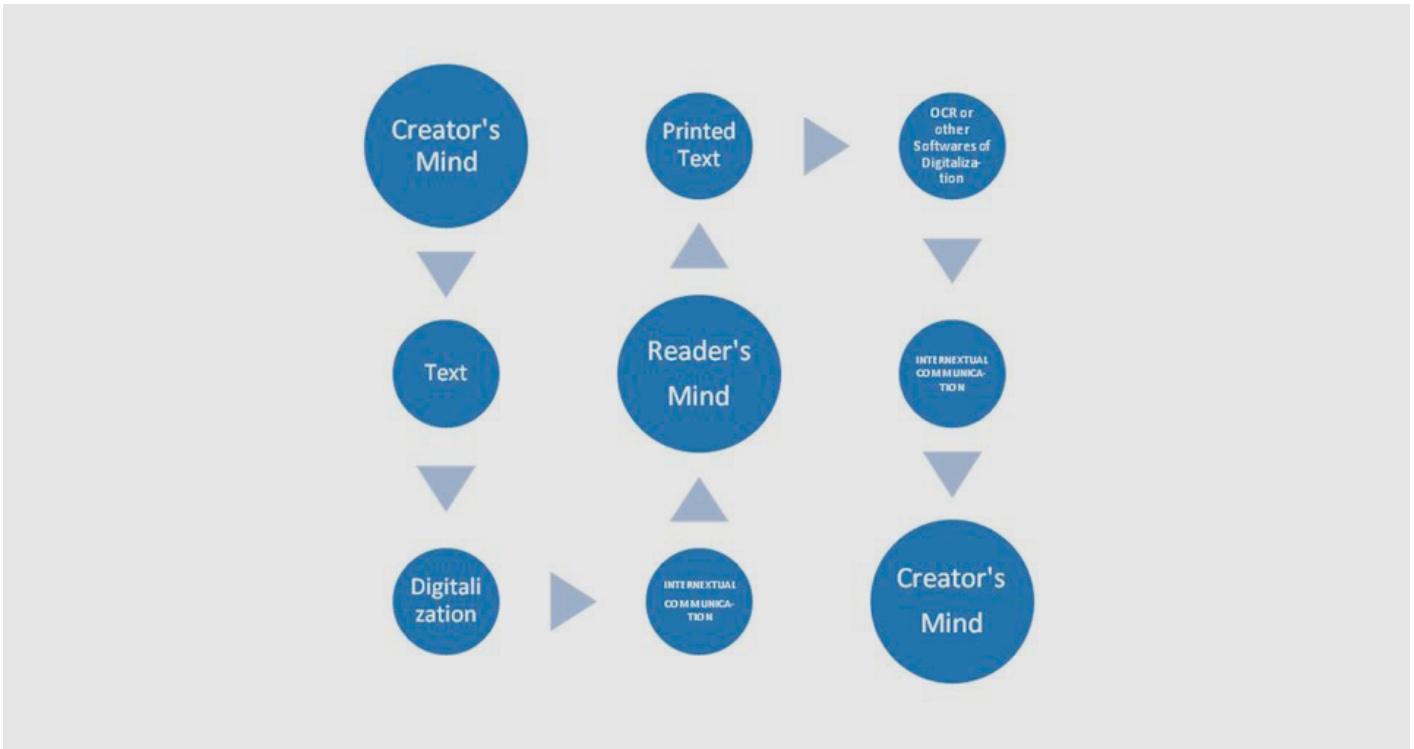
This textual fluidity has far flung consequences that need to be analyzed. For one, the transition experienced is not pure; elements of the older forms persist in the new ones. Hayles accurately states so: "When literature leaps from one medium to another [...] it does not leave behind the accumulated knowledge embedded in genres, poetic conventions, narrative structures, figurative tropes, and so forth. Rather, this knowledge is carried forward into the new medium typically by trying to replicate the earlier medium's effects within the new medium's specificities" (Hayles 2008:58). But our "Liquid Modernity" is also a new reality, as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman wrote (2003), addressing us questions we need to manage to be able to keep our course without troubles. To Bauman's eye Information, relationships, trends and institutions in our era are liquid and changeable, and this affects everything, our consideration of arts and literature included. It also distorts our idea of the subject, our image of ourselves as individuals. We think of ourselves as liquid too. We can change, we are mutable, adaptable to new realities and spaces and ways of living. And new fiction is highly conscious of that mutability. Let's see an example of this: analyzing Judd Morrissey's "The Jew's Daughter", Hayles remarks that: "Possessing a fluidity and mutability that ink durably impressed on paper can never achieve, it simulates the illusion of a coherent self producing the narrative (and by implication, a coherent self producing the narrative) while also making visible on the screenic surface the temporal discontinuities, spatial dislocations, and narrative ruptures that subvert the premises underlying traditional ideas about consciousness, thereby pointing toward another model of consciousness altogether" (2008:81). Novels like "The Jew's Daughter" respond artistically to this new form

of subject, in the same way that non electronic books as D. F. Wallace's "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" (1999) or Dave Eggers' "You Shall Know our Velocity" (2002) portrayed the liquid Self and enacted the same kind of crisis of subjectivity.

Another interesting effect of the internext is that it erases the distinction between creation and channel. As thinker Steven Shaviro noted, "The ideal of modern aesthetics is thus ironically realized: in the digital realm, form and content are one" (Shaviro 2005:47). The Net is no more course, pipe, conductor, channel, medium; it is now a raw material to be cooked, it is a bank of creative tools to be used, like landscape was for the renaissance painters or the music of the spheres for baroque poets. The cyberspace is creation and distribution at the same time, oozing his principles everywhere. Art essayist Nicolas Bourriaud delves into this through his idea of 'postproduction', by which, the new artists "who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work. The material they manipulate is no longer 'primary'. It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on the basis of a raw material but working with objects already in circulation on the cultural market, which is to say, objects already informed by other objects"(2007:13). Here we see together again two main signals of the internext: information and circulation. Contemporary art may be considered like the sum of each particular work plus the interactions, references, and hidden quotes among all of them. The 'internext' is 'infocirculation'. Those concepts obviously effect the ideas of authorship, intellectual property and individual creation, unfortunately we don't have the time or space here to go deeper into these matters.

INTERNEXTUAL DYNAMICS

An object of communication can be altered in any of the steps described in the figure shown on the next page. The reader can comment, modify, fluctuate, highlight, expand or reshape the discourse, or share it with other readers. Once the text returns to the creator enriched with all this new information, the writer has the possibility of rethinking his or her work and resending it altered once again. The process can go on and on indefinitely. In each loop the internext accumulates information in the same way that an email

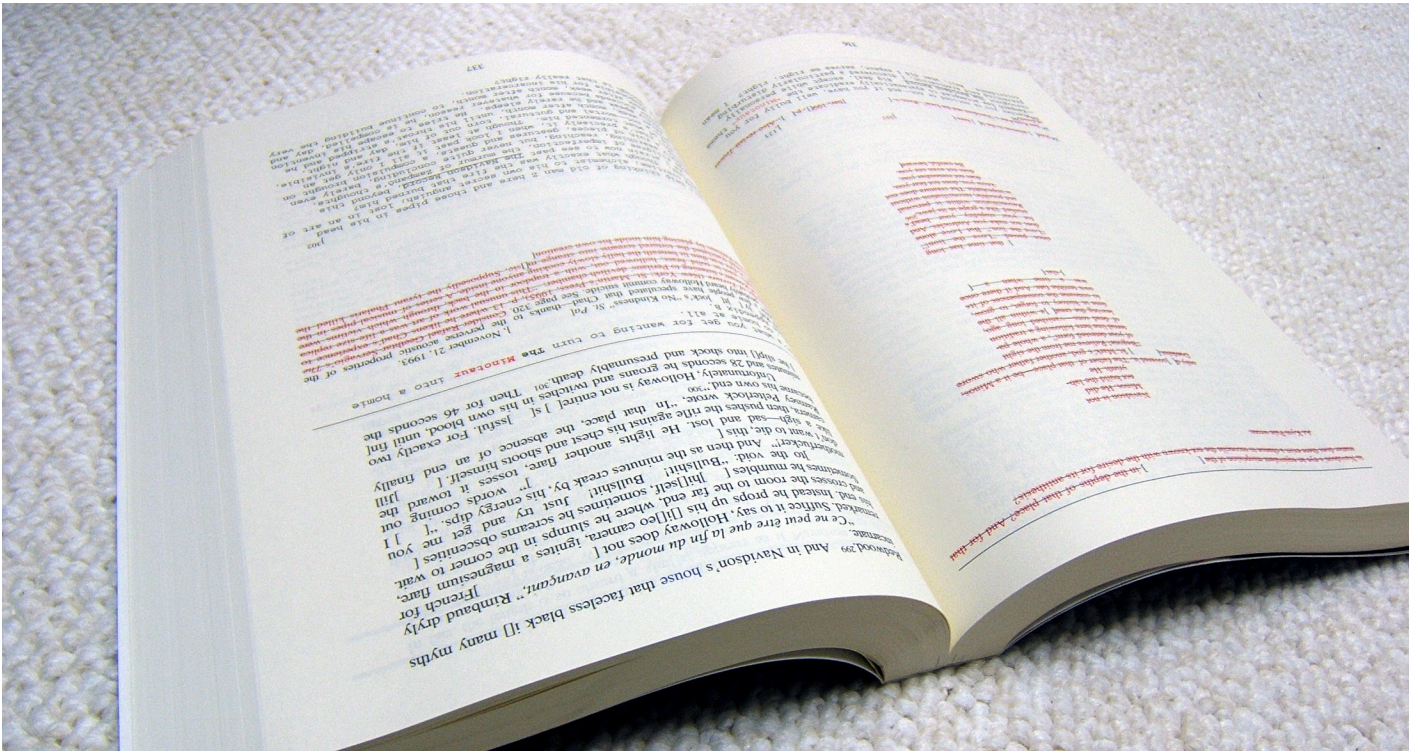


forwarded multiple times to many people incorporates all prior emails underneath the new text. Although we are not always able to see the information added to the intertext in every step, this information does exist. When a particular text is sent to the printer, the reading reports could stay hidden at the publishing house for years, but they may also be added (if they are literarily relevant) to a future electronic or critic edition of the book. Besides, all the emails referring to said work exchanged by writer, publisher, designers, correctors, critics and readers could be treated also as critical correspondence. The intertext is born in the very moment that an idea leaves the mind of the creator and proceeds to expand and diverge its paths in unpredictable and multiple ways.

VISUALITY

We will focus now on the importance of the Visual in the new fiction, since another significant dimension of the intertext is its lack of distinction between word and image. In 2006 writer and art critic Iván de la Nuez already explained in his article “Cuando el arte mata” [“When Art Kills”] that in the 21st century Visual Culture could be for literature a mere continuation of its aesthetic by other means, paraphrasing the famous von Clausewitz’s quote.[1] As a number of critics have pointed out, the inclusion of images in works of fiction is getting to be increasingly frequent in re-

^C Intertextual Dynamics. An object of communication can be altered in any of the steps described.



cent literature and, as Landow and Hayles demonstrated, the use of visual effects is structural in electronic literature. This new visual culture in fiction writing is now omnipresent in published books of the last decade in all countries. Novels such as “House of Leaves” (2000), by American Mark Danielewski, “Guerra ambiental” (2002), by Spaniard Javier Montero, “jPod” (2005), by Canadian Douglas Coupland, “Cero absolute” (2005) by Spaniard Javier Fernández, “The People of Paper” (2006), by Mexican-American Salvador Plascencia, “Madman Bovary” (2008), by French Claro, or “Bombarde-ro” (2008), by Peruvian César Gutiérrez, are just a few examples of a very widespread trend of literature which includes text and image at the same level.

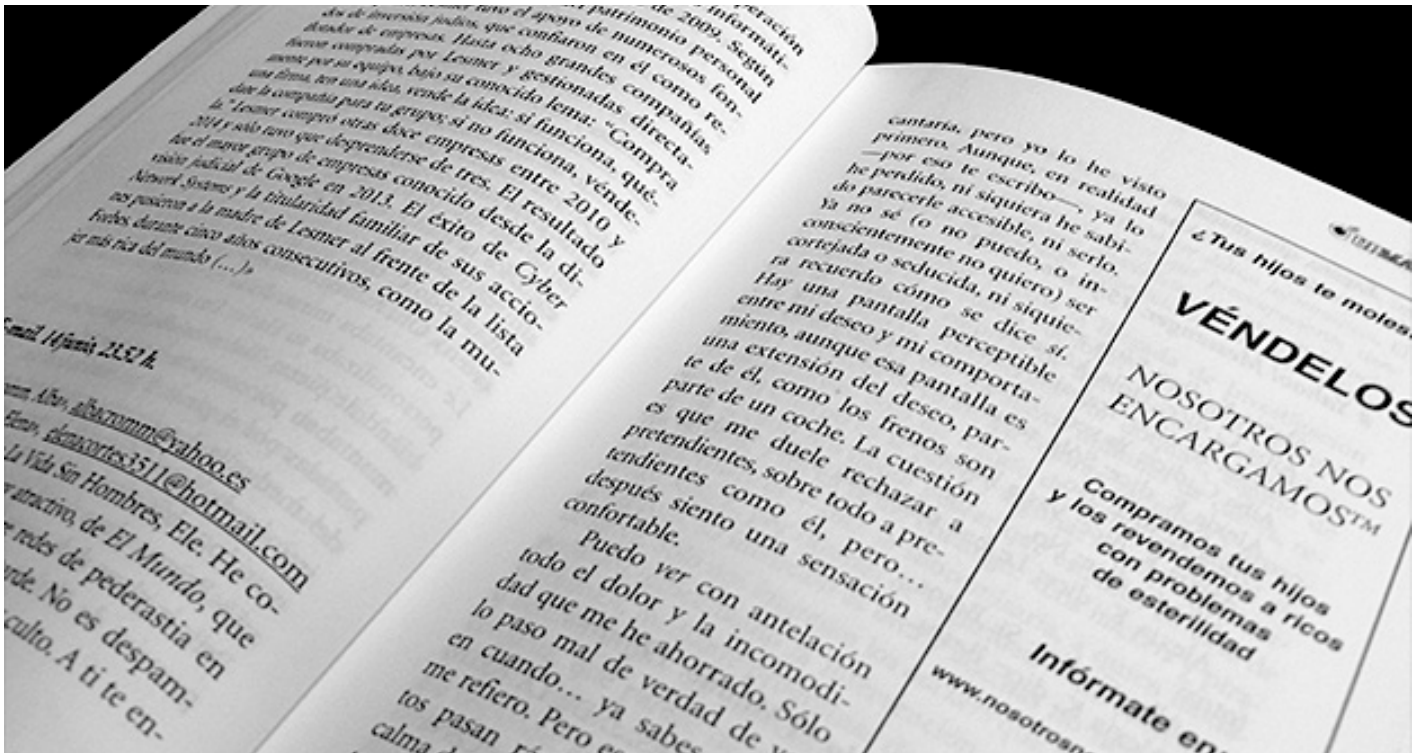
This ongoing change is one of the most important transformations ever experienced by Literature. We just examined some of its causes, now we need to define some of its consequences. One of them is its new proximity to a new sort of readers, digital readers. Barbara Warwick says: “By using an expanded concept of ‘text’ as content that includes overall design, graphics, and strategic use of links; one can see how these authors kept readers on their sites and encouraged return visits” (Warwick, 2002:112). Warwick’s words refer to visual literature on the internet, but we can extrapolate her conclusion to our purposes, including every manifestation of literature with a visual dimension. Young readers, digital native readers (Prensky 2001), are more than happy to receive and digest that sort

D Mark Danielewski, “House of Leaves”, Pantheon Books, New York, 2000
© Photo: Simon Scott

of broader literature, characterized by mixed media, because for them information is fluid, an indistinct continuum of words and images. We all are part of the cultural grid, which is an audiovisual one, making us nodes or neurons of an informational global brain.

This has a clear impact on another concept of our interest: what are the skills that a writer needs today? Does he or her need to be a gifted illustrator, such as Mark Danielewski? Is he required to have deep programming knowledge, like Judd Morrissey has? Is it necessary to master design and advertising in the way of Douglas Coupland? Maybe. Or maybe not if he or she can count on being helped by someone who does have all these skills (with the corresponding effects this would have on the authorship of the work). The point here is that ignoring the requirements of an art form does not mean we are allowed to do just anything. As writers, our lack of expertise cannot be a cop-out. If we writers are thinking of using design techniques or sophisticated layouts in our books, we must be responsible for our decisions. We can't seek protection in the misunderstood "anything-goes practice" based on the freedom that new technologies provide us. This could create a worrying foible of our works.

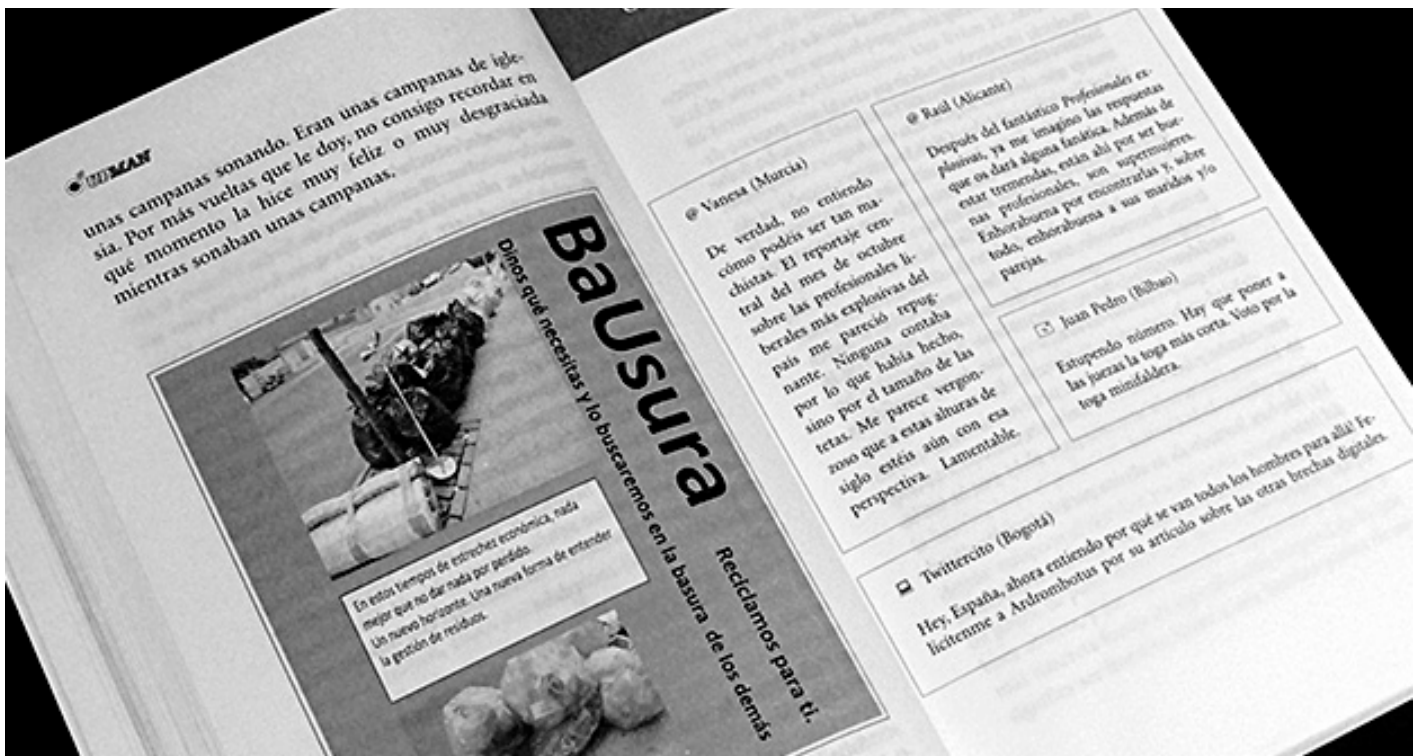
On the contrary, we are left with two alternatives: either acquire that design skills or ask for the help of an experienced designer. The following words from Jessica Helfand referring to web design seem only pertinent, and we can also extend her criteria to our broader purposes: "Design principles –like good sentence structure, editing techniques, or the ability to articulate an original idea –seem to have little if any tangible value here. [...] The Web, as a publishing platform, makes such distinctions seem arcane and unnecessary. But if we assume, for a moment, that design is perhaps obliged to identify broader communication needs to a wider audience, such qualifications may, in fact, be more critical than ever" (Helfand 2001:94). Now we need to complete our training; we must be ambitious and study other arts to complete ours. We ought to comprehend the implications of creating nowadays, which exceed the precedent art of writing. Some authors gave the name of "Lit[art]ure" to this new process of convergence between arts which is forced by technology (Borràs 2008). The result of this is that writers can now be called 'textual artists', they are creators who build books or e-books mixing various techniques, arts, tools and epistemes in order to express the fruit of their imagination, in the most complex and exact way.



ALBA CROMM

In my current work I try to deal with some of the previous questions and the challenges that we face as writers of the 21st Century. As a literary critic I can analyze my own work, within the logical limitations, and realize how information and infocirculation are shaping my writing. Fragmentation in my novels, for instance, is a consequence of our relentless multitasking. As Shaviro remarked, when we are online our “attention fragments and multiplies as I shift among the many windows on my screen. Being online always means multitasking” (2003:7). Writing is for me a very similar experience to that of surfing the web. Then I navigate my own mental system which is too formed by words, sounds, dynamic images and texts of other authors. My mind is a Net, and I’m progressively becoming a keyboard author, reserving the fountain pens for the writing of poetry only. And writing on a computer means writing in a multitasking way, with different tabs of the net explorer showing the Wikipedia and the online dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy of the Language sites and also the Google browser, as writer and critic Jorge Carrión wrote in my blog years ago. Spanish Literature Nobel laureate, Camilo José Cela, once told an interviewer that he always wrote his books with a lot of dictionaries and encyclopedias sitting on his desk. In our creative work, we do need to have within arm’s reach the same amount of information he did, the difference is we can find it in the same place

E Vicente Luis Mora, “Alba Cromm”, Seix barral, Barcelona, 2010



where we write, and in the same format. The copy & paste tool is an irresistible temptation to us, and we use it frantically.

My novel “Alba Cromm” was published in Spain in 2002. From my point of view, the significance of a novel lies currently in the diversity and profundity of the questions it raises. In “Alba Cromm” I tried to look into (and, by extension, to ask my readers): when does a 21st century novel finish, in its final words, in the paratexts? Does it die at the conclusion of the story? Does it finish on the Web? The answer in this case is obviously the last one: the “novel” is not the “book” anymore, the work exceeds these formats. The characters in “Alba Cromm” have their own blogs, which were started in 2005, years before the novel appeared, and they also had previous and anonymous lives. “Alba Cromm” is a cross-media narrative, and it’s a good Internext example: it preexisted on line, it later flowed into a printed book maintaining its virtual essence and currently it is being prepared to be a digital text for eBook. The eponymous main character, “Alba Cromm”, has a blog but also a diary, a paper journal which I wrote longhand in a notebook and is partially reproduced in the novel (p. 140). This duplicity web / printed version is perhaps the less important aspect of “Alba Cromm”. The novel is not exactly written, rather than designed because it’s incorporated into the layout of a magazine, “UpMan”, a fictional magazine for males, and shows all the usual features of that kind

F Vicente Luis Mora, “Alba Cromm”, Seix barral, Barcelona, 2010

of publication: cover, logo, diverse sections and many examples of false advertisements. Some of these visual elements are of my own; other were designed by me and developed by Caravan Communication, the studio which did also collaborate on the lay-outs of my personal website and blog.

If I had to define “Alba Cromm”, I’d say that it is a novel without boundaries or limits. It takes advantage of the Web, computers, traditional narrative and thinking, advertisement, mass-media, the Theory of Information, conventional magazines, television, blogs and printed books. As a writer I look around and try to assimilate all the information and possibilities for expressing myself that I see in our reality. I use the Internet, the internext and the intertext. I create and I recycle. I believe in freedom. I believe that writers have to create a world using all the tools of their time and unfurl the possibilities of their imagination.

NOTES

1 “Ours is already perceived as a time in which art—or rather Visual culture—offers fiction the chance of carrying on its narrative task, or its task as a mailman of knowledge, from new alternative perspectives. The clash between both fields will likely give birth to the new poetics of the nascent century”, Iván de la Nuez (2006).

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