
The New Elite: from Digital Literature to a Printed Book

PIRET VIRES

In his well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (first published in 1936), Walter Benjamin claimed that a work of art is characterised by an aura, which the viewer perceives as a sublime spell or devotion. In the age of mechanical reproduction this aura, according to Benjamin, is lost, because the work of art is no longer unique but reproduced, and the necessary distance for the aura to emerge between the work of art and the viewer has vanished. Benjamin writes:

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. (Benjamin 1968: 223)

And continues:

The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. (Benjamin 1968: 224.)

Benjamin's major examples are photography and cinema, where the aura has disappeared unlike, say, in for example a unique painting or sculpture.

When Benjamin wrote his essay, the film and photography were indeed the most recent innovations of technology. Today's computer technology was unknown to Benjamin. His ideas can nevertheless be adapted and generalised in modern technological and cultural situations. As a comparison we could recall J.-F. Lyotard, who in his *Postmodern Condition* (1979) described a computerised society and stressed the role of computers in the circulation of knowledge (Lyotard 1999: 4). However, in the year when the work appeared, 1979, there were no computer networks or Internet; these began to spread only since 1989. We can thus say that although Lyotard lacked any knowledge of the Internet, the World Wide Web, he nevertheless predicted a development towards such a society. One of his calls is nothing less than prophetic – the public should be given access to databases, because in a computerised society information is power (Lyotard 1999: 14–17). Ten years later, with the emergence of Internet and especially the spread of World Wide Web, Lyotard's call was answered.

The same could be said about Benjamin that in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" he emphasised several points that characterise the role of a work of art not only in the age of mechanical reproduction, but also in today's high-technology info-technological society.

Although Benjamin talks about the lost aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, the analogy is valid also about the current, digital age. We could claim that in the digital age, too, the aura of a work of art has been lost, being destroyed by digital multiplicity.

This claim is primarily true in the works of art in the digital form, which mainly spread over the Internet. The present article neglects other art forms and focuses on digital literature or cyberliterature on the Internet.

Cyberliterature spreading on the Internet is a wide notion containing many different sub-categories. In addition to literature in the traditional form, the Internet has cybertexts with a complicated structure as well as phenomena that shift the borders of literature, the fringes of literature, including for example fan fiction and blogs.

Fan fiction and blogs are an example of the democratisation of literature, of the so-called ‘everyman’s literature’, which is connected with the term “participatory culture”, i.e. culture created not only by professional culture producers but by all interested people and amateur authors. (See also Jenkins 1992, 2006) And the Internet is a perfect place for such kind of culture.

Fan fiction, one of the best examples of participation culture, mostly represents texts created as a so-called pseudo-sequel to a book, comics, TV series or film. These are not written by professional authors, but fans. The characters are usually from the relevant book or film, and the location could be the same too (although not always); the fan fiction author simply adds new plot lines. The main reason why fan fiction is produced is love for the objects the fan authors fancy and a wish to see their favourite characters in more scenes than the real authors of the books or films have foreseen. The other reason is entertainment and relating to the fan community who all like a book, film etc. A separate fan fiction sub-group contains texts written by fans of various pop or rock bands – this is the so-called real person fiction. Pop or rock idols in such stories act according to the author’s wish in a totally new environment; or sometimes the stories are connected with their activity in music. The authors’ fantasy is completely let loose here, only preserving the idols’ personal image, characteristics and appearance, to make it easier for the reader to grasp the plot. In fan fiction, the usual author’s role as well as the reader’s role has changed – on Internet forums the readers directly interfere with their comments in the writing process. Researching fan fiction is a relatively new area, although some work has been done in recent years (see also Busse, Hellekson 2006).

In blogs or weblogs people usually write about their daily doings, putting up the texts to be read and commented upon on the Internet. Blogs have quickly acquired the status of alternative journalism, although the current article focuses on blogs that could be connected with literature. Literary blogs are those produced by writers themselves, where they express their opinions also about cultural or social events or publish their work (e.g. the blog of writer Kivisildnik¹) or

¹ <http://kivisildnik.blogspot.com/>

there are blogs by amateur authors with literary ambitions who use blogs to spread their work.

Returning to Benjamin and the aura of a work of art, we could claim that fan fiction and blogs lack aura in Benjamin's sense – after all, these are freely accessible, endlessly reproduced works. The Internet fan fiction or blogs are by no means unique; the texts are accessible to thousands of people, thousands of computers reproduce the same work of art simultaneously. There is also no longer any distance between the reader and the work, no devotion and respect for a work of art.

Today's Internet literature is a widely spreading and quickly developing phenomenon. New literary forms emerge, the texts previously published continue to be digitalised and made available via Internet. Probably one of the biggest projects of digitising printed texts is the one carried out by Google. At the same time also the unique archive materials are being digitalised and spread on the Internet. It would thus be possible to say that the general tendency nowadays is replacing the published culture with digital culture and the printed texts with digital texts on the Internet.

There are cases, however, where on the contrary to the dominant trend, virtual literature has been transformed back into printed culture. Although these cases can be quite different the current article views two – in the first case it is fan fiction that is transformed into printed culture, and in the second the blogs. These cases differ also because fan fiction usually remains in the expanse of the Internet and is turned into books very rarely, whereas this is more common in blogs.

The first example is fan fiction by a Thai author called Linna Wongwantanee. Linna was a fan of the Russian girl band t.A.T.u. and published fan fiction on forums dedicated to the band in 2003 under the username of Uhaku. The fiction was titled "666".² Linna's fan fiction belongs in a sub-group of real person fiction; the main characters were t.A.T.u. singers Lena Katina and Julia Volkova. t.A.T.u. was largely known because it carried out its marketing via pseudo-lesbian images, thus acquiring fans mainly among young lesbian and bisexual girls. As a marketing trick this worked very well, although it had nothing to do with the real sexual inclinations

² E.g. <http://www.tatu.us/forum/>

of the singers. Typical t.A.T.u. fan fiction also focused on Julia and Lena's possible love affair.

Although Linna's fan fiction "666" was the usual t.A.T.u. fan fiction in a sense that it focused on Julia and Lena's love affair, it nevertheless differed from others by its sheer bulk, maturity, strong visual power in depicting the scenes (Linna had studied at a film school) and its entirety. Linna published her fan fiction at forums, a typical place to do it. She published her story by chapters, depending on how she got on with her writing. The readers on the forums reacted to every published chapter, commented them, expressed their appreciation, and made their own suggestions about how the story might continue. Linna replied to the comments and occasionally followed the advice; there was a continuous active discussion about what she was writing.

By the end of 2003 Linna had finished her fan fiction. The fan fiction authors who finish their work usually embark on a new project or find another hobby. Linna, however, decided to publish her work in book form.

For that purpose she wanted to abandon the canons of fan fiction; the first step in that direction was to lose contact with the real t.A.T.u. singers – Lena and Julia. So Linna changed the protagonists' names, thus disrupting the connection with the t.A.T.u. fan community. As a result, fan fiction became ordinary fiction, with fictitious characters. This change of names was by no means simple. One of the prerequisites of real person fiction is the fact that the appearance and character of the protagonists are known to the readers, i.e. a fan fiction author has no need to create a wholly new character, but only has to vary on the given theme. Linna's changed novel now required that she worked more on her characters, made them more precise and profound. The text was additionally thoroughly edited, the style was polished and verbal excess was abandoned. The book appeared in 2004 (Wongwantanee 2004a) and is being sold in respectable on-line bookstores such as Amazon and Barnes and Nobles.

Why did Linna Wongwantanee do this? One of the reasons was the fact that fan fiction has its limits and the author is not free when writing about real people. She also argued:

And then one moment I realized that I was no longer writing about my pop idols, but about myself. I discovered feelings and thoughts in myself that I did not know existed in me and that I was then pouring in my writing. This moment I realized that I was no longer writing fan fiction. Fan fiction is entertainment. Literature, the true art, is what touches you deeply and actually. So I gave up fan fiction and turned my novel into literature. (Wongwantanee 2004b).

Answering the question why she decided to publish it as a book, she said:

As to why I want to see it in book form? Well, wouldn't it be nice to see what I wrote on my shelf? (Wongwantanee 2004b).

This was then a case where digital literature was directly transformed into printed literature. The author was restricted by the rules of one of the sub-groups of Internet literature – fan fiction, and she wished to see her work in a form which she considered typical of the ‘real literature’ – a book that would be “nice to see on my shelf”.

This also shows that the author had a firm idea of the book’s symbolic value and that fan fiction on the Internet held no such meaning for Linna as her novel in the form of a printed book.

Another example I would like to tackle here are the blogs of two Estonians – Epp Petrone and Dagmar Reintam. Both have been active bloggers for years; especially Epp Petrone who wrote blogs all the time when she lived in America. In their construction, blogs slightly resemble fan fiction. Although the stories mostly concern the authors’ daily life, and not fiction as in fan fiction, the common feature is that the blog, too, offers a chance to comment that the readers eagerly use. Thus the reader interferes in the author’s writing process, expresses an opinion, adds something, and sometimes suggests what the author should write. And like on a fan fiction forum, the blog author also replies to his or her readers, explains facts, argues and occasionally meets the wishes of the readers. The blog author thus receives the readers’ reaction directly, unlike a book author who has to wait for the critics’ opinions or meet the readers on a special evening.

Epp Petrone's American-blog³ describes the author's daily life, getting used to an alien cultural environment and her husband's family. Petrone is precise and has excellent style, and although her writing offers diary-like sketches of various situations, her blog could still be regarded as literature.

Dagmar Reintam's blog "daki.elab.siin"⁴ is also a witty description of her daily life presented with good style. The author is a journalist by profession in her twenties. Her experiences and impressions have been compared with the series "Sex and the City" and with "The Diary of Bridget Jones".

In 2007 both Epp Petrone and Dagmar Reintam published their blogs as a book, Petrone's book was in two volumes titled *Minu Ameerika* ("My America", Petrone 2007) and Reintam's was called *daki.elab.siin* ("daki.lives.here", Reintam 2007). Just as with Linna Wongwantanee's novel "666", we have here again the question of why the blog authors were not satisfied with their work spreading only on the Internet. After all, both for fan fiction and blogs the Internet readership is infinitely bigger than for any printed book. We can thus guess that the authors did not undertake this because of readers or popularity. The business side could be discarded as well, because Linna, for example, paid herself for the publication of her novel (known as vanity publishing), without earning anything special from the sale. Both Petrone and Reintam published their books at Petrone's own publishing house; it is most unlikely that either has earned great sums of money here in Estonia.

The answer to the question of why the authors wish to turn their popular writing on the Internet into books, must lie somewhere else. I would suggest that a printed book holds more symbolic value for the authors, and this is more elitist than Internet literature. The book form, a printed work, is associated with the so-called real literature. Having thus rejected the all-permissive and uncontrollable nature of Internet literature and the close interaction with readers, the book form has a meaning of a sign for the authors. They become more like Authors, their works are more like Books and thus more Literature.

Recalling again Walter Benjamin and his concept about the aura of a work of art, we could say that it is namely the authors who do

³ <http://eppppp.tahvel.info/>

⁴ <http://daki.tahvel.info/>

not want the aura to be lost in the digital age, instead they are trying to restore it. A book can thus be seen as an elitist art form, which stands out from the Internet literature in mass consumption. This also indicates that the authors' way of thinking who transform Internet literature into books relies on the modernist elitist meaning of a work of art, and not on the postmodernist multiplicity of literary forms. Modernism sees the author as central, and the authors' singularity is emphasised by their singular works of art; postmodernism abolishes the boundaries between elitist art and mass culture, blurs the roles of the author and the reader, and regards literature as a mixture of different forms, multiplicity of various media. It could be thus said that digital literature on the Internet is essentially postmodernist and in case the authors wish to abandon this sphere and publish their Internet literature as books, they are trying to move from the postmodernist paradigm to the modernist one. This also confirms that despite the decades-long domination of postmodernist culture situation, some authors always associate 'real literature' with modernist elitist literature, expressed in a printed book.

This is how to draw a line between Internet literature – mass literature, accessible to all and constantly changing – and book literature, which has become or is still becoming the mark of the elite.

At this point we should recall Neal Stephenson's science-fiction novel *Diamond Age*. The book describes a future society based on nanotechnology and virtual reality, which is simultaneously a Neo-Victorian class society. The entire humankind is using virtual, electronic, constantly changing information. There is, however, a difference: the lower classes, the masses, read electronic papers, where the information keeps changing. The higher class, aristocracy, read papers that are static and never change. The most elitist class reads papers printed on paper. (Stephenson 1995) This science-fiction novel therefore predicts that society could develop towards a situation where the elite in an overwhelming virtuality is a book or newspaper printed on paper.

We could thus claim that in the current age of digital multiplicity a book printed on paper acquires an elitist significance. A book offers a bigger opportunity to capture the lost aura of a work of art; besides, a book might also acquire cult value in Benjamin's sense.

The printed book marks the new elite. The authors who publish their books as books wish to belong to the elite and the readers

reading printed books are elitist readers. We can thus say in conclusion that the aura lost in the digital world has been found again in the world of books.

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