

Liberature or Literature in the Electric Age

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The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which a new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-narcosis. The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses¹.

—— The article proposes a media-oriented approach to *liberature*, a literary trend born in Poland at the end of the 20th century which aims at reconsidering the physical body of the book as an integral part of the literary work. The idea of *liberature* is not only a contemporary literary programme, but it has also helped in redefining phenomena from the past hitherto considered to be marginal. The thesis of the article is that this corporeal turn is directly connected with what Marshall McLuhan has called the electric age – a time in which electrical media have put an end to print culture and consequently to the predominance of sight over other senses, to standardisation, specialisation, and linear thinking in favour of a new audio-tactile sensibility. *Liberature*, if considered from this point of view, turns out to be not a form of resistance of old print culture in a digital world, but the natural consequence of a change of paradigm we can trace also in other fields such as physics and linguistics where the concept of embodiment has occupied a central position for several decades. Hence, far from being a curiosity at the periphery of contemporary literature, it ought to be considered as an important expression of present times.

Keywords: *Liberature*, Electric Age, Media Ecology, Polish Contemporary Literature, Bookishness.

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon. Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2017, 80-81.

It is a trivial claim that coining a new word allows us to see something that has always been obvious or speak of something that we have been silent about. After more than twenty years since its coinage, the success of the term *liberature* proves that the word was needed. The word made its first appearance in Zenon Fajfer's manifesto *Liberature. Appendix to a Dictionary of Literary Terms*, released on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition of unconventional books organised by the Jagellonian Library in Cracow in 1999². The neologism alluded both to the Latin word for book and to the notion of liberty. The manifesto pleaded for the category of space, both in its physical and visual aspect, to be brought into force again in literary theory and above all in literary consciousness. Its material and visual component is not so much the space *in* the literary work but the space *of* a literary work. I specifically used the verb "to bring into force again", but I could also have written "re-establish", or "reintroduce" as the things Fajfer was writing about were not new, quite the opposite – they were as ancient as human literacy. By introducing the term and concept of *liberature*, Fajfer claimed for a regeneration of literature from the ashes of postmodernism by means of paying attention to the physicality of the book to the same degree as to the pure text.

From the beginning, *liberature* was meant to imply both what Fajfer himself and other writers who share his approach wrote, as well as everything written in the past which met *liberature's* requisites: the inseparability of the visual and material aspects of the literary work (book or poem) from the literary text itself, and the principle of a single authorship: the author of the text must be the same as the author of its material side. At the level of conception, teamwork is not allowed, whilst of course the realisation of part of the project can be technically delegated to someone other than the author. At the outset, the fertile ambiguity of *liberature*, intended both as a historiographic category and a literary programme, as well as the idea of *liberature* as an autonomous literary genre, seemed quite problematic and aroused a debate which only seems to have settled down in recent years.

Within the liberatic milieu, a narrative has been established, wherein proto-liberatic literature is supposed to be in western culture a kind of subterranean stream, flowing parallel to main stream literature and

² Zenon Fajfer, "Liberatura. Aneks do słownika terminów literackich", *Dekada Literacka* 5-6 (30 June 1999), 8-9.

from time to time coming to the surface, e.g. in late antiquity with Hellenistic visual poetry, in the Middle Ages with the *carmina figurata*, in the baroque era with emblems and visual poetry in general, and then, since the time of Laurence Sterne and William Blake, more and more present in modern western literature with the giant peaks of Mallarmé at the end of the 19th century, and of Joyce in the 20th century. This narration is not false, it truly reflects the literary landscape one can see when approaching the history of literature / *liberature* from a phenomenological point of view. However, here I would like to propose another approach, the one related to media studies – I believe – it could bring new insights to the topic. I will take as a reference Marshall McLuhan’s theory of media ecology as a working hypothesis and a framework which, in my opinion, can still give an account on the contemporary cases of similar phenomena and provide a background for the emergence of *liberature*.

I would like to begin with a blow to Plato – who is, regarded by Fajfer as the initiator of the divorce between body and soul in the Western tradition, and consequently between the container and content, which has allegedly led to a disregard for the material aspects of literary work (in addition to the disregard for the body and the material world as such, both considered as mere transient shadows of the immaterial world)³. Indeed, there is no doubt that Plato’s metaphysics along with its different later

3 Zenon Fajfer, “Joyce: Unwelcome Guest in Plato’s Republic”, in *Liberature or Total Literature. Collected Essays*, ed. Katarzyna Bazarnik (Kraków: Ha!art, 2010), 68-79. Fajfer quotes Plato’s condemnation of literacy (Phaedrus 274 e-276 a) in relation on the oral (i. e. immaterial) conception of literature so characteristic of the Western culture. In fact, there is no continuity between these two questions, as the it is an entirely Platonic position to refuse printed books as in the case of the leading personalities still attached to manuscript culture at the end of the 15th century (e.g., Duke Federico da Montefeltro), or the case of contemporary *laudatores temporis acti* who point the finger at the damages caused to learning by the digital environment. This Platonic position is, if anything, the harbinger of a concern that will persist throughout the history of Western culture: it is the fear of culture turning into a prosthesis through gradual extrojection – a process which, with the advent of electricity, has reached the scale Plato could never have imagined. If we understand medium as an extension of human body, then it is the fear, as ancient as human culture, of the emergence of a new medium. However, one could even half-jokingly suppose that Plato’s suspicion toward literacy (provided it is legitimate to attribute to Plato what Socrates is saying, and keeping in mind that: 1. in Plato’s time, literacy was not big news; and 2. Plato himself wrote) originates in his insight that this would lead mankind toward the increasing isolation of sight from other senses. Of course, this possibility is rather paradoxical. Although it is not the topic of the present article, it would indeed be rather interesting to combine the terminologies of McLuhan and Fajfer. Paradoxically, what Fajfer calls ‘oral’, McLuhan relates to print, and what McLuhan calls ‘oral’ is quite close to the audio-tactile qualities that – liberature – itself wants to rescue. In Fajfer’s understanding, orality refers to the literary aspect whose written expression is indifferent to its content. When he writes: “In the beginning was the Ear. The Eye remained in exile for a long time”, and then, after the visual qualities

interpretations, underlie the beginning of a dualistic tradition of Western thought. I will not discuss here whether the application of metaphysical categories to media (soul: body = content: container / form) has any relation to Plato's thought (dualistic ontology is older than Plato and the relation between Plato and these traditions is not the topic of the present article). It is the perception of such a relation as broadly related to Plato, as in a broad sense – *Platonic* in a broad sense – which is of interest for us here.

Be that as it may, it is not until the advent of Humanism and the subsequent invention of print (itself a developmental continuation of the phonetic alphabet) that the dualistic thinking, borrowed by the Western Christian culture from older traditions, establishes itself in literature. In the Middle Ages, the circulation of manuscripts (in the codex form established since late antiquity) favoured an interactive approach to the text. The book was an object that often contained multiple works not necessarily related with each other; its content was perceived more as common good than as the original and unchangeable opus of one author. The scribe was often better known than the author himself. It was a content- and reader-oriented rather than the author-oriented culture like that got established with print. The possibility of adding lines or whole texts to the already existent one and the extensive use of glossing turned each book into a potential field of interaction. Producer and consumer were potentially one and the same person. The strict relationship between texts and images (if there were any), being both the result of manual skills, involved more than one sense. The very way of reading a book – less frequently in the quiet of solitude and in front of other people, as literacy was much less widespread back then – sets it at the boundary between orality and writing. Moreover, the rarity of books (due to their extreme expensiveness) entailed the identification of a literary text with the physical book which contained it and often could be the only copy the reader would come across throughout their whole life. At the same time, different versions of the same text with the same rights would be in circulation too. Of course, it was not that the medieval readers (especially the ones

regained their importance, the “Eye and the Ear became allies” (Zenon Fajfer, *How to distinguish between liberature and literature (selected anatomical details)*, in Ivi, 81-82). Here he has in mind the exact opposite of the standardised culture of print. In this sense, orality is a synonym immateriality. In McLuhan, orality refers to the immersive quality of perception that involves all the senses as opposed to the separateness of the senses established by the predominance of sight in the culture of print. Despite this curious oclarcenrism, both discourses have much in common and their dialogue, as I am trying to show here, can be rather fruitful.

belonging to the monastic milieu) were totally unaware of other possible versions of the text, but this problem was rather irrelevant as only relatively few secular readers were truly interested in the reliability of texts; besides, the embodiment of text in the manuscript tradition made the existence of an abstract text beyond its physical realisation rather pointless⁴.

The turn was prepared by the emergence of early modern philology which sought to establish the true *facies* of a given text as accurately as possible by means of the sophisticated process of confronting its different versions. The idea that a text could be corrupted by tradition with the consequent aim of restoring its genuine *lectio* is strictly connected with the humanist utopia of restoring antiquity, in the sense that the restoration of antiquity meant also implied the restoration of the glorious school of philology of the Hellenistic period. Therefore the textual philology ushers in the age of print, and technology follows thereon.

With the advent of print, the increased speed of reading (with the consequent definitive perpetuation of endophasic reading – i. e., the internal, unvocalised reading), as well as the standardisation of sizes, fonts, and layout of the page, and the potentially endless replicability of the same matrix led to an increasingly individual way of bringing the book to fruition and to the predominance of sight to the detriment of audio-tactile values.

By establishing these standardised patterns, book print also introduced to the minds of Western men and women a definitive idea that the technical realisation of a book and its content are two separate things. The text is an immaterial thing which can be instantiated in different material carriers. A single material instantiation of a book is a mere attribute of the text, which means it can be, more or less arbitrarily, changed, just like clothes. It is the material attribute of an immaterial substance. The ultimate coherent outcome of this way of thinking is the e-book, where page breaks, font and size of the character can be adjusted by the readers themselves. A book is thus nothing but information, – a free flow of information. Hence, the book has followed a similar path to that of money: from material goods, to the symbol of currency (first as valuable metals, then paper), right up to the immaterial currency of the present day.

⁴ See Claudia Brinker-von der Heyde, *Die literarische Welt des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2007). See also: Marion Janzin, and Joachim Güntner, *Das Buch des Buches. 5000 Jahrgeschichte*, 3. Auflage (Hannover: Schlütersche, 2007).

It is well known that McLuhan situated the beginning of this process much earlier, namely in the invention of the phonetic alphabet which first isolated sight from sound, as well as meaning from sound: “the visual code always has the ‘content’ that is the speech recreated by the person engaged in reading”⁵. This divorce of semantics from information will return in the 20th century as one of the theses of information theory⁶. The phonetic alphabet is responsible for the greatest achievements of Western civilisation (cultural and political), but also for the way we conceive time and space, the relationship between cause and effect, logic, and consequently geometry and mathematics, the general methodology and history. The distinction between subject and object, – hence the idea of scientific objectivity, that presupposes there is an observing subject who does not influence the observed object (what McLuhan put in relation with the suspension of immediate reaction intrinsic to the phonetic alphabet), is a direct consequence of the predominance of sight over all other senses. In an oral environment people are plunged into the medium, this is the reason why orality is connected to tribalism, whereas literacy creates civilisation and individualism. However, what the system gains in velocity, it loses in complexity. The greatest achievements of Western civilisation are the consequence of this switching off of other senses in communication. Movable type printing leads to its extreme consequences the process that once began with the invention of the phonetic alphabet. With it begins what McLuhan calls the mechanical age – a time of homogenised specialism, fragmentation of knowledge, thorough standardisation, and dematerialisation of information – the time of Reformation and Enlightenment, of individualism, nationalism, industrial revolution, assembly line, mass production and universal education.

It is an interesting fact that by the time the mechanical age came to an end after the emergence of the electrical media, literature play with the shape of the book, and this happened long before *liberature* made its appearance. The first harbingers of a new sensibility could be found in the

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 77.

⁶ See the classical Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1949). For a general and up-to-date introduction cf. James Gleick, *The Information. A History, a Theory, a Flood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011).

typographical achievements of the avant-garde⁷, preceded in turn by individual prophets like Stern and Blake, and then by the Symbolists. As rich and amazing as these explorations were, they limited themselves to the page or the centrefold (Stephan George, Stéphane Mallarmé, Ezra Pound amongst others)⁸. They involved experiments with the graphic layout, with the colour of print and page, with tactile values, although the structure and the material shape of the book remained untouched. Joyce was the first one to think coherently in terms of the book as “the highest, the most comprehensive spatio-material form of arranging discourse”, – in other words, a punctuation mark⁹.

With the exception of Joyce, it is not until the second post-war period, more precisely in the 1960s, that the book became the base unit of this change of mind. It is both my opinion and the main thesis of the present article that this change of perspective cannot be understood without referring to the parallel media revolution – the advent of radio, television, computer, and the World Wide Web which subverted the predominance of sight and abolished the division of senses with the consequent re-tribalisation of society. The idea of *liberature* and its accompanying narrative, which dominated in the first decades after its invention, even if paid due attention to a phenomenon hitherto neglected in traditional literary history, were still bi-dimensional in so far as they were limited to the contraposition of a purported mainstream literature (dualistic in its approach to the literary work) to a marginal “protoliberatic” one. The proportions between them could change (the further back in the past, the more the liberatic it gets), but the picture was predominantly binary. And indeed, if we take as a criterion the definition of *liberature*, we cannot help but form such an image. The question is whether it is meaningful to stretch out the concept of *liberature*

7 An aspect we cannot develop here is that of the audial dimension of avant-garde typography. Being tightly connected with the perceptual change of the electric age, this topic still waiting for a comprehensive treatment, even if for every avant-garde scholar and lover of the audial-visual-tactile interaction of futurist *parole in libertà* and other achievements of avant-garde typography is without doubt. See: Beata Śniecikowska, “Visual field = Sound field. Perceptual Entanglements of Avant-Garde Visual Arts”, in *Maszyna do komunikacji. Wokół awangardowej idei nowej typografii* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2015), 129-142.

8 Katarzyna Bazarnik, *Introduction: Modernist Roots of Liberature*, in *Incarnations of Material Textuality. From Modernism to Liberature*, ed. Katarzyna Bazarnik & Izabella Curyłło-Klag (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 1-14.

9 Katarzyna Bazarnik, *Liberature or on the Origin of (Literary) Species*, in Zenon Fajfer, *Liberature or Total Literature*, 156. See also: Katarzyna Bazarnik, *Joyce & Liberature* (Praha: Univerzita Karlova, 2011).

to the epochs dominated by manuscript culture which was to a great extent intensely audio-tactile. Antique and medieval visual poetry were not peripheral phenomena, but expressions of a common paradigm.

The concept of *liberature* starts making sense only after the invention of print. You need a standard, and a mechanical one at that, to break it. You need the separation of senses and the primacy of sight over all other senses engendered by print to make the act of rescuing synaesthesia meaningful. Moreover, the need for such a retrieval is in itself the reaction to a new situation in which the ratio of the senses has changed. It is not the simple recollection of something that has allegedly been forgotten and lost (of course, this too), but first of all it is the direct reaction to a completely new state of things. Not the worship of ashes but the preservation of fire, as Gustav Mahler would say. For this purpose, it is useful to look back on the above mentioned ambivalence of the term *liberature* intended both as a genre that transcends centuries, and a literary movement. The first meaning, if limited to the registration of the occurrences throughout the history of the Western culture of such hybrid media works that could be formally defined as liberatic, can have at most the heuristic value of a catalogue, but still does not necessarily provide the real understanding of such phenomena, for the function of a visual poem in the late antiquity or the Middle Ages is something completely different from *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. In other words, the formal key risks lumping together very different things not necessarily related with each other precluding their real understanding. Still the proposal of understanding *liberature* as a distinct literary genre retains its sense especially if applied to the literature of the last centuries. The discussion around the genre belonging of *liberature* is interesting also for other reasons as we will see further.

Understanding *liberature* as a contemporary literary trend on the contrary points out the relevance of its premises and makes of it a significant expression and a momentous statement about present times. I propose here to consider *liberature* in the context of what McLuhan called the electric age, namely, a time when electric media, after having blown up the civilisation of print established a new form of tribality, this time on a planetary level – an

age of the reassessed of audio-tactile experience, of melting boundaries and simultaneity. By doing this I do not want to suggest that literature is a straightforward consequence of media, this would be a mere application of the old idea of efficient causality which is still related to the linear thinking of classical physics (and of phonetic literacy / printing): unidirectional cause-effect relationship, severe distinction between subject and object, and their unchangeability through time. The situations in which literature anticipated technical innovations and media revolutions are not uncommon at all. Print itself has been seen, and for good reason, as a by-product of humanism, as we saw earlier. In this regard, Jean-François Vallée recalls the Aristotelian “formal cause” – what which gives an object its form and structure¹⁰. We could also resort to the concept of field which is, as we shall see shortly, is at once a metaphor, a paradigm and a model, and in which “the usual distinction between cause and effect breaks down because linear sequences of causality depend upon being able to define a one-way interaction between the event regarded as a ‘cause’ and that considered as an ‘effect’. But when the interaction is multidirectional – when every cause is simultaneously an effect, and every effect is also a cause—the language of cause and effect is inadequate to convey the mutuality of the interaction”¹¹. Consequently, there is no point in determining the unidirectional causal chain in this new landscape, we can only try approaching it from different views, which in this case is that of media ecology, and notice some structural regularities.

One of them is already the concept of the field itself. It is quite impressive to see, how coherently different environments that call for alternatives to the classical model deriving from age of print arrive at such a paradigm independently of each other. For the field paradigm is connected not only electricity but also with the topics of embodiment. In a kind of *mise en abîme*, the field concept turns out to be both the frame and grid that enable the conceptualisation of present time and the way how different fields of human activity in turn describe their object – the container and the content at once, as it were, keeping in mind that there is no distinction in container and content anymore.

¹⁰ Jean-François Vallée, *L'image globale: la pensée électrique de Marshall McLuhan*, in *L'ère électrique / The Electric Age*, ed. O. Asselin, S. Mariniello, A. Oberhuber (Ottawa: Les presses de l'Université d'Ottawa / University of Ottawa Press, 2017), 85-11. Also available online: <https://books.openedition.org/uop/396#ftn2> [last visited 30/01/2021].

¹¹ N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web. Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 19-20.

One of the reasons for the collapse of cybernetics was the failure of the behaviouristic approach and black box model applied to both machines and organisms. Turing's test was based on the assumption behavioural identity presupposes functional identity. Behaviourism turned out to be the resurgence of traditional ontology insofar as it was a disguised version of the ancient rule *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, and as such in the classically Western thought it is connected to the linear chain of cause-effect, according to McLuhan, is a direct consequence of the adoption of both phonetic alphabet systems and print. This is especially evident in the attempt at describing the human mind in terms of computing machine. Walter Pitts and Warren McCulloch with their brain model set themselves the objective of explaining how logic and mathematics could emerge out of this mess we call human mind. In order to achieve that, they assumed that neuron firing was tantamount to the 0/1 decision of a computing machine. As is known, this assumption was doomed for failure, even if the analysis of the implications of the failure was useful to John von Neumann in building what is today considered to be the first computer¹². Von Neumann was one of the first to realise that in order to really understand what is going on, you have to open the box, and that it is much easier to build a functioning machine than to give an account of the way the brain works. For von Neumann, opening the box meant to abandoning the research on models and observing the way real organisms function, beginning from with simplest ones, such as bacteria¹³. Hence opening the box, means abandoning the model of disembodied information in favour of an embodied one.

A similar approach to the way the brain works is that of traditional cognitivism, functionalism and generative grammar which strive to give a precise and univocal definition of semantic categories independently from their use and contexts of application by revisiting the old categories of classical logic (all-or-nothing categories). In the opinion of its critics, the generative approach fails to give an account of polysemy. The first to question such

¹² For more on John von Neumann see: George Dyson, *Turing's Cathedral. The Origins of the Digital Universe* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

¹³ For an analysis of the reasons of the failure of cybernetics' project from a transhumanist point of view see: Aleibiades Malapi-Nelson, *The Nature of the Machine and the Collapse of Cybernetics. A Transhumanist Lesson for Emerging Technologies*, Pallgrave Macmillan, London 2017. See also N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999.

an approach was cognitive semantics with its critical revision of the theory of categories. This led to different alternative proposals such as that of family resemblances (descending from the later Wittgenstein philosophy), general and radial categories (George Lakoff) and the theory of the prototypes (Eleanor Rosch). All of them are actually built the variants of a field model. Prototype theory assumes that categories are motivated, therefore prototypes are not logical categories based on the necessary and sufficient conditions, but gradual structures reacting to the context. Some categories are more central than others because they share more features which the speaker acknowledges as significant. And the decision as to whether a certain element and the degree of its possible belonging to a category depends on the context, and by context we understand human experience which is inseparable from the body. To abstract from the context is to conceive the body as a mere output device. Here the link between the field theory and the theory of embodiment becomes evident.

As I mentioned above since the beginning of *liberature*, there has been a debate about the possibility of understanding it as an autonomous literary genre. This question has already been raised by Fajfer in his very first manifesto and led to the debate that lasted for more than a decade. In 2015, Agnieszka Przybyszewska was forced to deny *liberature* the status of genre and proposed in return a rather generic and vague notion of “liberatic character”, understood as a progressive quality¹⁴. In the meanwhile, already in 2009¹⁵, Katarzyna Bazarnik had resorted to the prototype theory in order to propose a solution to the *vexata quaestio*. She returned to that proposal in her monograph from 2016¹⁶, perhaps the most mature and decisive theoretical reflection about *liberature* so far, thus answering Przybyszewska’s objection. Bazarnik recalls the fuzzy set theory applied to literature¹⁷ and, following Fowler,¹⁸ proposes to understand the genre as “a

¹⁴ Agnieszka Przybyszewska, *Liberackość dzieła literackiego* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2015).

¹⁵ Reprinted as: Katarzyna Bazarnik, “Liberature or on the Origin of (Literary) Species”, in Zenon Fajfer, *Liberalure or Total Literature. Collected Essays*, ed. Katarzyna Bazarnik (Kraków: Halart, 2010).

¹⁶ Katarzyna Bazarnik, *Liberalure. A Book-bound Genre* (Kraków: Jagellonian University Press, 2016), 145-156.

¹⁷ The first to do it were: Dirk De Geest & Hendrik Van Gorp, “Literary genres from a systemic functional perspective”, in *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1999: 33-50

¹⁸ Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature. An introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

framework within which works are compared synchronically and diachronically for shared characteristics [...] rather than being tested for their purity and eliminated if they do not fulfil specific criteria”¹⁹. The status of a prototype in the set named *liberature* could be attributed to *Oka-leczenie*, the work written collaboratively with Fajfer, “as it was the first book deliberately referred to with this term and for which it was, in fact, coined”²⁰.

The debate between the two Polish scholars resembles the one between representatives of generative grammar and cognitive linguistics: on one side, the genre is understood as an all-or-nothing category (therefore it is proposed in return to describe such hybrid works at the boundary between different fields), and on the other side it is a gradual category depending on the context (diachronic, in relation to tradition, and synchronic, in relation to present culture). It is “an instrument not of classification or prescription, but of meaning”²¹. This does not presuppose the objective existence of something like a literary genre we can unequivocally describe, like a triangle in Euclidean geometry, and with which we can compare all the multifarious literary products in order to establish whether they fulfil the prerequisites of the genre. The field concept applied to literary genre entails that which we actually perceive as a genre, and it is a question of negotiation between author and reader, however not a completely arbitrary one, as it is based on the values of the whole system (the interplay between tradition and innovation, the reader’s experience, the *gestalt* of the book). For example, if we could visualise *Oka-leczenie* in a different set which we could simply call a book, its position would be quite marginal, as it violates in more than one way the expectations provoked by the name of the set. This means that there is no world of literary genres as such, but the literary genre is the result of an interaction, in a similar way as in quantum physics what we see is the result of the encounter of our observation tools with what we are observing at a given moment in a given place and – what is most important – and where the act of observation influences and modifies the observed. The observer is not external to the system he is observing – he is part of it.

Apart from theory, this interactive aspect (being a feature of the field concept as one of the possible understandings of multi-directionality of

19 Bazarnik, *Liberature. A Book-bound Genre*, 145.

20 Bazarnik, *Liberature or on the Origin*, 159.

21 Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, as cited in Bazarnik, *Liberature. A Book-bound Genre*, 151.

the cause-effect relationship) is evident even more in what has been considered since the beginning as one of the key features (but not an indispensable one) of *liberature*, namely its ergodic character²², – i. e., the way many works considered to be *liberature* are usually supposed to be enjoyed by the reader. In *Oka-leczenie*, for instance, the reader is expected to notice on a separate piece of paper (or any other medium) the first letters of each single word of the two narrative parts of the text to reach its deeper, invisible layers – a form Fajfer calls ‘emanative’ and employs also later on in several other works²³. As a matter of fact, ergodicity did not first appear in Fajfer’s work, on the contrary, there are several narrative texts (and at least a poetic one) preceding the outbreak of *liberature* (today they are included in the extended, that is genre-oriented, canon of *liberature*) which since the 1960s began to question the traditional linear narrative and involve the reader in determining the actual shape of the novel. I am referring to Raymond Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961), as well as the novels such as Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* (1961), Julio Cortázar’s *Ranyuela* (1963) and *62/modelo para armar* (1968), Italo Calvino’s *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969 and 1973) and *La taverna dei destini incrociati* (1973), Brian Stanley Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* (1969), Georges Perec’s *La vie mode d’emploi* (1978), Milorad Pavić’s *Hazarski rečnik* (1987). If on one hand they have been regarded as an anticipation of hypertext before the invention of the World Wide Web, it is because at least two of them, namely the novels of Saporta and Johnson, which fall into the so-called Shuffle Literature which requires the reader to literally shuffle its distinct elements (pages in Saporta, instalments by Johnson), contained in a cover-box, and build their own story²⁴. And that this

22 Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

23 Ergodicity can be understood in different ways. For Fajfer, it does not mean open work. The avant-gardist idea of co-authorship is alien to him. As he wrote: “[...] I mean that the readers should perform a particular role or roles prescribed by me depending on their point of view (literally)” *Liberature or Total Literatur (Appendix to the “Appendix to the Dictionary of Literary Terms”)* in: Zenon Fajfer, *Liberature or Total Literature*, 38. In his work, we have a full range of possibilities of participation for the reader: from the total passivity of *Ars poetica* to the extreme freedom of movement provided by *Powieki*’s digital version, which is the poetic equivalent of a shuffle novel, as there is no established path, but an almost countless possibility of paths. Hence each reader reads their own book, even if all of them have been written by Fajfer.

24 One may also come across the terms Book-in-a-Box or Reader Assembled Narrative (RAN), which are however wider in their meaning, as Book-in-a-Box must not necessarily be a book you need to shuffle, and RAN also implies digital media. For an extensive treatment of Shuffle Literature, I am forced to refer to a still unpublished dissertation: Riccardo Cipollari, *Shuffle Literature. The Meaning of Space and Materiality in Written Literature* (Udine: Università degli Studi di Udine, 2020).

physical shape that involves the reader's motorial response and intellectual engagement is not a curious gimmick from a time when such an effect could not be achieved otherwise, is shown by the renewed popularity of this sub-genre in the present day, for example, Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012) and Jedediah Berry's *The Family Arcana* (2015),²⁵ or by the fact that one of the founding fathers of Polish liberature, Radosław Nowakowski, is both an author of book-objects (that require the highest degree of interaction from the reader) and of a hypertext novel titled *Koniec świata według Emeryka* (The End of the World According to Emeryk, 2005²⁶). Fajfer himself never shunned the digital medium as such, on the contrary, he published the first collection of hypertext poems in the history of Polish literature, *Powieki* (Eyelids, 2013), which was recorded in a CD that came with to the paper version of the same collection²⁷. It is precisely the coexistence of both media which proves to what degree the electric age has developed a new need for physical books and that the re-emergence of the book as an object is all but a matter of conservative nostalgia for the past; on the contrary – it is the very essence of the electric age, as predicted by Michel Butor²⁸ and Marshall McLuhan²⁹. Let it be said in passing that none of the most iconic and liberatic works of Fajfer and Nowakowski would have been possible without the aid of personal computer, the very continuation of the revolution initiated by the type machine that overcame the whole hierarchy of specialised roles³⁰. The computer has installed in the private home of the writer the equivalent of both a printing press and a publishing house, thus making the writer – at least at the level of the project – potentially completely independent from an editor. The case of Nowakowski who started literally making his own books already in the early 1980s with the aid of a simple printer machine is

25 Cipollari compares these two texts with the novels of Saporta and Johnson's.

26 Now also available online <http://www.liberatorium.com/emeryk/brzask.htm>

27 However, not every work written for the digital medium must be interactive. See for example Fajfer's *Ars poetica* where the role of the reader is reduced to that of a passive spectator. This is partly due to Fajfer's peculiar, aesthetic and deep entrenchment in high modernism. Emiliano Ranocchi, "Liberature & Person: An Anthropological Question", in *Incarnations of Material Textuality*, 107-118. For a comprehensive survey of (Polish) cybernetic poetry see: Urszula Pawlicka, *(Polska) poezja cybernetyczna. Konteksty i charakterystyka* (Kraków: Ha!art, 2012).

28 Michel Butor, "Le livre comme objet, in *Essais sur le roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 130-157.

29 Also see: Zenon Fajfer, "Liberature: hyperbook in the hypertext era", in: *Liberature or Total Literature*, 10-1.

30 Cf. the chapter: "The Typewriter: Into the Age of the Iron Whim," in: *Understanding Media*, 345-354.

exemplary. Not to mention the first nine prototype versions of *Oka-leczenie*, projected in the smallest details on a personal computer and then printed in a printing house, long before the editor dared to publish it.

In view of all this, the corporeal turn of the book becomes a metaphor we are allowed to interpret in parallel with the plethora of embodiment theories born from the broad stream of cognitive linguistics. In fact, embodiment is a sort of umbrella term which covers different theories having in common almost only the critic of traditional cognitivism and generative grammar³¹. Nevertheless, one can take as a leading principle in all these theories the idea that intelligence cannot be reduced to cognitive mechanisms as in the case of traditional cognitivism and, with consistent differences, in generative grammar, but rather must consider the interaction between mind, body, and environment.

Now, *liberature*'s refusal to separate the physicality of a literary work from its verbal content brings up associations with these parallel tendencies in linguistics which dismissed the modular model of the mind (which McLuhan would describe as a relic of print age thinking) with dedicated areas not related to each other in favour of a unified model in which, as experiments show, the same areas are responsible for movement and speech.

One of the chief topics of cognitive linguistics is a metaphor understood as the projection of different bodily configurations on the linguistic and conceptual levels. The idea that metaphors are motivated (a key concept of embodiment theory) has its parallel in the idea that the physicality of a book or, more broadly, of literary work, insofar as it is a meaningful metaphor is and therefore cannot be left to the inertia of tradition. What distinguishes cognitive linguistics from *liberature* is of course the intentionality of the latter. Therein lies the difference between a scientific model and an aesthetic paradigm. The bibliographical code, as Bazarnik has called it³², turns the act of reading into an act of experiencing. Following McLuhan's distinction of media into repartition in hot (poor in participation), and cool (rich in participation) Cipollari argues that, in the electric age, the book as an object has become a cool medium, as it requires a higher degree of

³¹ For a compendious presentation of different conceptions of embodiment cf. Patrizia Violi, "Le tematiche del corporeo nella Semantica Cognitiva", in: *Introduzione alla linguistica cognitiva*, ed. Livio Gaeta & Silvia Luraghi (Roma: Carocci editore, 2003), 57–76.

³² Bazarnik, *Introduction*, 8 ff.

involvement from the reader compared to other media³³. Our eyes became opened as the study of metaphor has made opaque the apparent transparency of language as a medium by showcasing its deep relation to embodied experience, at the same time breaking the game of printing tradition, with all its rules aimed at transmitting a purportedly immaterial content and diverting attention from the material support by making it transparent (that is non marked). It was as if a contrast agent had been added to the image making the medium opaque and visible to our eyes.

The media revolution of the electrical age, quantum physics, the progress of neurosciences and their influence on linguistics, have all eventually consigned the linear, visual Western culture to the past. In this context, the bibliographical code has proved to be one of the ways to deal with this new awareness. It was already clear in the first pronouncement:

In the majority of works events are arranged linearly, which does not correspond to our simultaneous and multi-level perception (Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese ideograms are closer to reality in this respect). Despite this nature of the alphabetic writing, I am convinced that it is possible to overcome the difficulties resulting from it, to create real space within the text and to represent real simultaneity of events without resorting to graphic means. Yet this is much easier to achieve when we abandon the traditional model of the book, which, in fact, determines a particular way of reading (and consequently the perception of time and space) no less than the alphabet does³⁴.

It is now apparent why *liberature* is literature in the electrical age.

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³³ Cipollari, *Shuffle Literature*, 117-124.

³⁴ Zenon Fajfer, *Libérature. Appendix to a Dictionary of Literary Terms*, in Id, *Libérature or Total Literature*, 27. At the time when he wrote these lines, the statement sounded quite mysterious. In fact, as he would explain later, here he was referring to the emanative form was employed in the narrative parts of *Oka-leczenie*. He understood it as an alternative to the traditional visual devices considered to be a still superficial way to escape from the grid of standard print.

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Santrauka

Liberatūra arba literatūra elektros amžiuje

Emiliano Rannochi

Reikšminiai žodžiai: literatūra, elektros amžius, medijų ekologija, šiuolaikinė Lenkijos literatūra, knygiskumas.

Liberatūros terminu vadinamas Lenkijos šiuolaikinėje literatūroje susiformavęs judėjimas, kurio tikslas – atkurti semantinę pačios fizinės knygos vertę. Nuo pat pradžių 1999 m. judėjimo įkūrėjas Zenonas Fajferis liberatūros terminu vadino tiek naują savo paties literatūrinių ieškojimų kryptį, tiek ir bendrą literatūros traktuotę, siekiančią pačias raštingumo ištakas. Interpretacijomis gausus šios sampratos neapibrėžtumas tapo daugelio debatų tema. Liberatūros terminu net buvo siūloma pavadinti literatūros žanrą. Kadangi liberatūros ištakos siekia paties raštingumo pradžią, šiuo judėjimu siekiama atgaivinti vakarietiškoje literatūros sampratoje pamirštą literatūros supratimą. Šiame straipsnyje teigiama, kad liberatūros idėją galima geriau suprasti per Jessicos Pressmann knygiskumo sampratą, kuri akcentuoja naują knygų statusą elektroninių medijų laikais. Čia turimas omenyje Marshallo McLuhano „elektros amžius“, atėjęs po spaudos eros ir įtvirtinės percepcinės paradigmos, kurioje įsteigiama vizualumo pirmenybė visų kitų pojūčių atžvilgiu, tai turėjo įtakos visuomenės sandarai, filosofinei minčiai, moksliniams tyrimams ir galiausiai pačiai literatūrai. Išsivaduoti iš regėjimo burtų reiškia išlaisvinti vizualiniam linijiskumui nebepavaldžių garsinių ir lytėjimo pojūčių spektrą. Tai savo ruožtu yra naujosios epistemologinės ir percepcinės paradigmos dalis. Pagal Nancy Katherine Hayles, ši tyrimuose išvystyta samprata tinkamai nusako dabartinę situaciją ir yra pritaikoma daugelyje sričių – nuo fizikos iki lingvistikos ir literatūros. Katarzyna Bazarnik savo literatūrai taikomos žanro kategorijos interpretacijoje taip pat naudoja iš kognityvinės lingvistikos pasiskolintą prototipų teoriją. Straipsnyje taip pat teigiama, kad literatūrinio kūno atkūrimas nėra

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pavienė iniciatyva, o vyksta paraleliai su įkūnijimo procesais robotikoje, kognityviniuose moksluose ir kognityvinėje lingvistikoje. Tai reiškia, kad skaitmenybės amžiuje knygos neprivalo prarasti savo fizinės dimensijos, kone priešingai – bibliografinis kodas pasirodo esąs viena stipriausių elektros amžiaus išraiškų.