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Literary discourse at the crossroads of digital references: A socio-discursive approach

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Abstract: The proliferation of digital literary discourse has led to a competitive, and often times antagonistic, relationship between this new form and its traditional paper-based counterpart. The success of this new critical literary media has come as a result of major global changes to social consciousness and societal pressures to utilize communication systems that can keep pace with the speed of social action. Discussions on the legitimacy of digital literary discourse are often limited by the use of conciliatory debates that merely present moderate viewpoints. This research addresses the issue using a socio-discursive lens, focusing on a critical exploration of the underlying reasoning for the technological wariness of paper-based literary practitioners. Contrary to the views of many traditionalists, digital literature does not derive its discursive identity, nor its legitimacy, from a combative relationship with paper-based criticism. Instead, this analysis indicates that the use of digital media marks a significant turning point in the institution of literary discourse, formed as a response to shifting individual and collective needs of an accelerating pace of life. Therefore, digital literary discourse is not simply a form or idea that can be accepted or rejected. Rather, it is a forced formation of a new and constantly evolving expressive and inferential space, created by the combination of existing and innovative media, producing new meanings that were impossible to generate under the dominance of old media.

Keywords: discourse; digital literature; written; oral; legitimacy; paper-based; digital revolution

1. Introduction

1.1. Preface

In its general sense, literature is a lens through which we view our own existence. Much like philosophy and the sciences, literature allows us to understand the complexities of the human condition, depict human imagination, and interpret various psychological and social events that characterize human existence. Although literature's contributions are often minimized, it would be unfair to fail to recognize its vast contribution to facilitating an understanding of individual and collective life.

With this in mind, it can be said that literature is a human craft linked to historical conditions and circumstances. Its initial emergence was not the result of an individual's genius but a response to individual and collective human needs. This reflective link between literature and society, despite causing disagreements among critics and researchers who do not trust the interpretations of literary sociology, explains the instability of literary production in fixed forms and the lack of stability in the evaluation criteria of techniques. It also justifies the aging and decline of genres and the rise of others to take their place.

This paper attempts to shed light on literary activity from a socio-discursive perspective, allowing for an exploration of the stability of literary genres associated with each written era, and whether these genres possess enough legitimacy to withstand the ongoing transformations within modern societies, leading to an ontological reflection on the ongoing developments in literary discourse with the emergence of competing media and types. This is happening amid the powerful digital revolution that has brought about significant changes in how literary and aesthetic needs are met, involving a host of supporting institutions and literary stakeholders (such as authors, cultural figures, consumers, publishers, and event organizers). These global changes are particularly visible through the rise of digital literary platforms, which have opened new avenues for creativity and interaction, significantly transforming the literary landscape. In China, for example, platforms like Qidian have revolutionized the production and consumption of serialized novels, enabling readers to influence storylines in real time (Hockx, 2015). In the West, platforms such as Wattpad and Archive of Our Own (AO3) have introduced participatory storytelling models where readers become active contributors to the narrative process (Thomas, 2011). These cases underscore that digital literary discourse transcends regional and cultural boundaries, affirming its role as a complementary force to traditional literary forms.

1.2. Importance and objectives of the research

The importance of this research lies in its exploration of a living subject whose effects and consequences are evident in contemporary life. By questioning the evolving need for literary discourse in its entirety and the ways of fulfilling it, the core subject of this research is the discussion of some conservative views that perceive digital literature as (The topic of nomenclature raises numerous disputes among critics and researchers; however, the context of our discussion keeps us from delving into it and explaining its backgrounds and points of divergence. Therefore, we will suffice with a conciliatory definition that states, “Digital literature is that which relies on information media, combining letters and numbers, and is still in the stage of construction and development; meaning it is still a young literature growing in the digital environment, crawling in its virtual worlds, and shaped by its modern technical mediums.” (Hamdawi, 2016, p. 15.)) nothing more than a passing trend. These purists also believe that traditional written forms—both creative and critical—will remain firmly rooted in the literary production and consumption market, involving the same practitioners, evoking the same responses, and fulfilling the same functions, regardless of the major global changes affecting human experience and communication.

Furthermore, the importance of this research lies in its attempt to explain the existential dilemma surrounding paper-based literary genres, due to the gradual decline in reading and the emergence of new creative genres that combine different forms (visual, auditory, written). These new genres result from innovative interactions between these three mediums.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to take steps toward codifying the more realistic perspective that acknowledges the strength of this digital material and symbolic transformations occurring in the heart of modern societies. It calls for their

consideration in the preparation of educational and cultural policies, rather than ignoring or overlooking their powerful effects. Failure to do so could pave the way to unregulated or unstructured (ethically unmonitored) forces, which may lead to the creation of literary discourse that escapes all material and symbolic authorities responsible for fostering the values that guarantee communal coexistence.

1.3. Research problem

Digital literary discourse is often not recognized as a distinct genre. Traditionalists often prefer to describe it as a fleeting expressive adventure and as a temporary manifestation of the digital age, which will quickly fade away like other literary genres or trends that emerged during brief historical periods in response to sudden transformations.

Thus this research seeks to assert that digital literary discourse is not merely a transient expressive-discursive branch, but rather a significant and evolving component of modern literary practice. This view can be illustrated by the remarkable growth of digital literature in China. Platforms such as Qidian have transformed the literary landscape, offering serialized novels that allow readers to actively engage with and influence the narrative structure (Hockx, 2015). Far from being a fleeting trend, digital literary discourse in China has created a thriving market, democratizing both literary production and consumption. This case exemplifies how digital literature has established itself as a dynamic and enduring force in global literary culture, challenging the perception of it as a temporary or secondary medium.

A comparable development has unfolded in the West, where platforms like Wattpad and Archive of Our Own (AO3) have pioneered participatory storytelling. Readers on these platforms actively shape narratives by providing feedback, creating a more dynamic interaction between reader and text (Thomas, 2011). This shift redefines the traditional role of readers and emphasizes how digital platforms are altering literary consumption globally. These innovations show that digital literary discourse, far from being confined to specific regions, is a worldwide phenomenon that enhances the literary experience without displacing traditional forms.

This research will also establish an argument that proposes an alternative perspective, one that sees digital discourse as a quiet shift in the trajectory of literature, responding to evolving individual and collective needs amidst the intertwining forms of communication and the accelerated pace of life.

This research problem is one that embarks on a path of debate, aiming to confront different viewpoints without remaining confined to the comfort of compromise, which merely presents moderate opinions. In other words, it ventures into a road that is closer to being a discursive dead end—an approach that scrutinizes discourse through a critical lens. This means that it seeks to critique the direction that criticizes digital discourse. Here, “critique” refers to an attempt to uncover the unspoken underlying assumptions in the discussion surrounding the legitimacy of digital literature, its discourse, genres, and theories, rather than merely presenting arguments that invalidate conservative opinions.

1.4. Research terminology

This research revolves around literary discourse and its various forms and mediums, even though it fundamentally addresses the topic of digital literature. This means that the terminological framework required for this ontological reflection spans the field of discourse analysis, particularly its preoccupation with literature in its entirety. Specifically, it focuses on addressing issues related to the coherence of literary production, the legitimacy of its references, and its elements. Additionally, it encompasses the realm of social expression and action, considering that the study is based on the notion that the ongoing developments within literary discourse are necessarily a result of the transformations occurring within contemporary societies.

1.5. Research methodology

This research aims to conduct a critical assessment to determine the extent to which we can speak of a major shift in the realm of literary discourse, coinciding with the digital medium's entry into the traditional field of literary discourse. Therefore, the most appropriate methodology for tracking this development is the socio-discursive approach, particularly its branch that traditionally studies literary discourse in relation to the social structures that generate and embrace it. This approach provides analytical categories and frameworks that facilitate the interpretation of the digital literary transition, capturing the effects of the digital revolution on the content, techniques, and functions of digital literature.

However, the nature of the subject also necessitates a technical approach that places genre-related issues at the forefront of its focus and consideration. In other words, the specificity of the topic requires a dual methodology that combines an examination of socio-discursive structures and their shifts, while also addressing the characteristics and transformations of literary genres.

Are there threats facing contemporary literature?

The title chosen by Tzvetan Todorov for his book “Literature in Peril” came as a surprise, as one would not expect such a warning from a renowned academic critic. This type of headline is more suited to sensational journalism. However, the book itself quickly reveals an even greater surprise. According to Todorov, the danger threatening literature does not stem from ideology, nor from readers' disinterest in literary works, nor from emerging information technologies. Nor does it arise from competition with other genres and fields of knowledge. The source of the threat, quite simply, is the dominant schools of contemporary criticism. These schools have isolated literature from reality and the world, and from critics who now sanctify critical methodologies while neglecting the very act of criticism and even the texts being critiqued. They have transformed literary criticism into something akin to an exclusive club, where members exchange specialized terminology among themselves, writing for each other without regard for those outside their elite circle (Salman, n.d.).

However, in order to avoid focusing solely on the currents of the present era, it should be noted that the claims to save literature from the whims of the careless are not unique to this age; literary historians have recorded instances from the works of writers or their contemporaries among scribes and critics, in which their authors express fears about the state of literature and its writers, who have become

marginalized and overlooked due to the encroachments of the uninformed or the negligence of those in power regarding the care of writing. This raises alarms about the extinction of this art and the disappearance of its writers and readers. It suffices to recall the quarrels that have persisted among writers in every era, and the accusations they leveled against each other regarding various weaknesses in language construction, conveying meanings, selecting appropriate occasions, and achieving objectives. This leads to the risk of reinforcing weakness as a standard among the new influx of individuals entering the field of literature and writing.

These are, then, fears that transcend time and place, and it can be said that their impact on the formation of national literary discourse has been notable and strong in most cases. They have remained the driving force that prevents this discourse from falling into the traps of shallowness and weakness, even as they block the path for experiences of renewal and efforts to revolutionize established literary traditions.

However, the context necessitates that we acknowledge that the endurance of the major frameworks of literary discourse, and the persistence of literary theories and classifications—including the foundational principles of national literary genre, such as Aristotle’s tripartite genre theory (Which mandates the division of literature into epic, lyrical, and dramatic)—does not serve as proof of a fixed essence at the heart of literary creativity that cannot be altered or replaced. It is sufficient to recall what happened to oral literary discourse due to the advent of writing; it had to undergo major transformations within its fundamentals, leading to the emergence of new genres, resembling a Darwinian process of literary creativity that enacted the law of evolution and survival of the fittest, with the term “fitness” in the context of literary discourse signifying the fulfillment of desires and the response to emerging needs.

From all this, we arrive at a fundamental conclusion: literary discourse can endure as long as the contexts of its production and reception remain relevant, stable, and intact. Conversely, it begins to diminish as soon as those defining factors change or transform.

Anyone following the cultural action spaces linked to the field of literary discourse practice—both theoretical and creative—will notice numerous signs indicating a significant transformation occurring within these practices. Quantitatively, this is reflected in the declining interest in reading and the consumption of books. Qualitatively, it appears in the shift of focus to new media created by the ongoing digital revolution.

Thus, there are imminent dangers facing traditional (written) literature practitioners, necessitating an awareness of the strength of these transformations and an effort to think about inventing mechanisms for adapting to these emerging needs that have begun to take shape within the context of these media transformations. This may necessitate strict adjustments to writing standards and criteria, and even question the discursive identity of texts based on overcoming the components that have become barriers to engaging with certain literary genres.

2. Reasons for concern about digital literature discourse

Every new productive practice in thought, culture, and creativity raises questions about the legitimacy of its actions and its ability to create a broader space for

unleashing the energies of thought and creation. These questions are fortified by a philosophical principle that considers every civilizational transition as a transition in the questions of reality. This principle reinforces the idea of humanity's continuous search for the most suitable media possibilities that allow for expressing their perception of the world and their view of existence. This is what makes the idea of inquiry renew itself with the renewal of thinking tools (Karam, 2009, p. 12.).

For this reason, it seems natural that digital literature discourse raises concerns in various cultural and intellectual arenas. The digital revolution has led to the formation of a new societal reality in which "most institutions are rendered obsolete in the face of the authority of the individual, who is now able to manage their information, publish their ideas in their own way, and market their personality and style of thinking, provided they have an interest in technology culture and can navigate the World Wide Web."

The American journalist and publisher, Steve Wasserman, pondered in an article about the fate of books after the age of print, or the end of the print age, which he believes began with the German Johann Gutenberg (1398–1468): Is the printed book on the verge of extinction? Will the e-book prevail? Will writers, publishers, and booksellers still be able to make a living? Will readers remain in such a world? Is there life after the end of the print age? Finally, after noting the speed with which the new system is taking over and how the ground beneath us has turned into shifting sands, he asks: What will the future bring? (Al-Asaad, 2017).

It is quite difficult to provide a definitive answer to all these thorny questions, but the evident truth, based on the current results to date, is that digital publishing has become a fierce competitor threatening its paper-based counterpart, subsequently reducing its influence and impact. Robert Darnton expressed the depth of the crisis that print publishing is being led into by pointing to the complex dilemma facing the publishing industry. This is first reflected in the challenge that publishers face in adapting to digital publishing technologies, which transform traditional methods of production and distribution into outdated practices and reduce profit margins. Second, it is evident in the structural shift that is affecting the industry of publishing, distributing, and selling books in the era of blending and digitization. Third, the most troubling challenge lies in the widespread change surrounding the culture of reading and writing itself, to the extent that our culture—dominated by speed and visual elements—has rendered reading a superfluous need (Al-Asaad, 2017).

If these are the causes of publishers' concerns about the arrival of the digital publishing train, what about the group of writers and creators?

These individuals are naturally divided into different categories: one group views digital literary creativity as nothing more than a passing trend that will fade away, similar to various rhetorical (and genre-related) trends that failed to establish deep roots in the space of creative and literary production. A second group found no incentive to express an opinion on this new arrival. A third group considered digital literary discourse, and the related categories of institutional and descriptive publications, as an inevitable result of the new global reality, and they have committed to engaging in the wave of digital creativity, with all that entails, including the acquisition of digital skills and staying close to the latest developments in digital applications and programs.

In truth, the three aforementioned categories can be grouped together in contrast to a fourth category that persistently makes its voice heard in various educational and media platforms. This fourth group views all aspects of digital literary discourse with suspicion and condescension, for multiple reasons. They consider the digital author to be an intruder in the field of literature, seeking to strip it of its magic, which is tied to imagination, subjectivity, and creative imagery that transcends the dry and cold constraints of science. To illustrate their argument, one can look at the definition provided by the researcher Zahour Karam of the digital author. She explains that the person who composes digital texts—leveraging modern technological media, working with hypertext technology, and employing various forms of multimedia—not only relies on the desire to write and the inspiration that usually accompanies the process of creating print or oral texts. In addition to this, the digital author is knowledgeable about computer science, programming languages, and digital technology. Moreover, they skillfully apply these in relation to the art of writing or collaborate with technicians and programmers. This indicates that we are dealing with a writer who has scientific knowledge. This is something new in literary theory, which historically did not focus on the scientific background of the creator, but rather on the maturity of their imagination and the creativity of their text. The digital author is present as the creator of a digital fictional text. They combine various elements—language, sound, image, documents, programming languages—to produce a non-linear imaginative text whose genre and expressive form only materialize with the reader’s interaction and interpretation (Karam, 2009).

There are, in fact, many causes of concern regarding digital discourse, differing in their ideological motives but united in the conservative group’s desire to erect a thick barrier that shields them from the world of digital literature and its texts. Accepting this new discourse would also mean abandoning their pride in tradition, in yellowed pages, and ceasing to believe in the connection between talent and the printed word as embodied in a poetry collection or novel. Moreover, digital discourse requires accepting the idea that the reader participates in the creation of the text and interacts with it in various ways, such as adding to it or altering it. Therefore, breaking away from these conventions is seen as a departure from what their forefathers adhered to, a break that demands a revolutionary spirit of rebellion—something that many creators may lack, as they are not prepared to think in ways that embrace plurality, participation, and openness (Younis, n.d.).

3. Digital discourse in the field of literature as a response to urgent needs

Perhaps the first condition for engaging with the developments in technology is that one must rid themselves of the nostalgic tendency that resides within them and subject their longing for the familiar aspects of life to scientific scrutiny and investigation. Anyone who examines the topic of digital literary discourse, without succumbing to the retreat into what is known, stable, and tried, can confidently assert that the digital revolution has placed literature at the heart of an unprecedented challenge.

The book “The End of Reading” (Trend, 2010) by university professor David

Trend offers a thorough explanation of this challenge, drawing from his experience with his eight-year-old daughter. She was frustrated whenever told she needed to read a book or at least attempt to read one, to the point that she began to hate reading. As he would come to realize, the issue wasn't that she lacked intelligence or the ability to learn quickly; rather, she had what is known as a "mysterious problem with the written word." This problem led him to start thinking about reading within culture as a whole, prompting him to write his book.

He discovered that his daughter's frustration stemmed from the fact that, in most aspects of her life, she didn't need to read. The world she lived in was driven and animated by images, media, and interactive technologies—all of which were highly engaging and readily accessible. This environment made her feel as though learning to read was a conspiracy devised by adults and schools.

Here, the professor sets aside the peer pressure his daughter may have faced or the teasing she endured from friends due to her inability to decode reading. He believes the issue is simply her experience: a portion of her visual/auditory world seemed to her like a mix of hieroglyphic symbols, a world partially disconnected from a language that most people take for granted (Al-Asaad, 2017).

Inspired by this insightful example, we can say that the matter is not as simple as reductionist interpretations suggest. The shift to digital media is not a choice that can be either embraced or dismissed, nor can it be substituted by other options that may better meet needs. Rather, it represents a compulsory formation and transformation of a new space for expression and reasoning. As Vincent Luis Mora (2020) suggests, digital literature should not be seen as merely a replacement for traditional forms, but as a dynamic field that creates new ways of engaging with literary texts while building on established literary practices. This perspective positions digital literature as a complementary evolution of literary discourse rather than an adversary to printed forms. Similarly, Jorge Carrión (2017) highlights how digital platforms have expanded the boundaries of literary production, creating spaces where readers and writers interact in unprecedented ways, leading to the rise of global literary communities. These developments demonstrate that digital literature is not confined to specific cultural or regional settings, but is instead reshaping literary practices on a global scale.

However, a closer examination of the facets of new digital literary discourse might lead us to soften the abrupt view that focuses on the threads of continuity that bind them. Researcher Mohammed Aslim helps clarify these connections by stating: "It is important to remember that there is no sudden break between digital literary works and their non-digital counterparts; rather, there is continuity that has gradually and slowly transferred the literary matter. Since the beginning of the 20th century, various avant-garde movements have taken the text off the page by integrating it into tables and objects, significantly altering the relationships between the writer, the text, and the reader, as seen in the 'Happening' movement, for example. They worked on producing meaning by activating the relationship between letters, words, and the connection between words and other sign systems in general."

This gradual shift is what led Philippe Castellin, the publisher of one of the most important digital literature magazines, *DOC(k)s*, to declare that digital literature is a "completion" of the forms that the avant-garde artists had pioneered (Aslim, 2011).

It is also worth adding that the theory of literary genres does not suggest the death of a literary genre or the complete disappearance of an expressive form. Rather, it posits the idea of absorption into the succeeding genre because literature thrives on its own history. In other words, a literary form is not born out of nothing, nor does it vanish entirely. Instead, it persists as a textual background or enters into a new relationship with the emerging structure, continuing to exist as a memory of writing, text, and expression (Karam, 2009).

This phenomenon is part of a quiet media dynamic happening behind the strong polarization between those who defend written literature in print as a comprehensive and complete discourse, and its counterpart, which advocates for digitization and the ever-evolving creative forms it allows. One of the societal signs of this dynamic (or its repercussions) is the entrance of the audience into the creative arena, becoming a fundamental element, unlike in the era of widespread print literature, where the reader's interaction with texts was delayed and channeled through institutional and narrow communicative means with limited impact.

In digital creativity, the creator relies heavily on the recipient of their work and places a great deal of trust in them. Creativity is no longer closed off and confined to the creator alone, as was the case in print literature, where the creator's role ended once their work was handed over to publishers, leaving the audience unable to make any additions, modifications, or participate in the creative process (Al-Khatib, 1996). Creativity has become interactive, with the audience making choices and defining pathways in the narrative structure, the architecture of poetry sections, and the arrangement of their relationships.

4. Conclusion

In this research, we have addressed the topic of digital literary discourse from the perspective of the debates it sparks in literary and intellectual circles, specifically from a socio-discursive (identity-based) viewpoint, examining some of its components and relationships. Our aim was to critically and objectively analyze the viewpoint that rejects this new form of discourse, placing it under scrutiny and subjecting it to critical inquiry.

The key takeaway from this study is that the examined discourse is not merely a fleeting trend that will fade away like some past rhetorical movements noted in the creative experiences of different cultures. Rather, it represents a quiet transformation in the trajectory of global literature, advancing it toward the experimentation with new, complex mediums that have now become integral parts of the human communication system across the world.

Thus, the concerns expressed by a segment of literary practitioners and consumers of its foundational discourse are merely conservative reactions driven by nostalgia for the past, and a reluctance to take risks in those who are accustomed to stability and permanence. Consequently, it can be said that the future belongs to this new digital discourse—not as a sudden break or revolution against the history of oral and written literature, but as a natural and gradual shift in its trajectory, adapting to the most frequently utilized senses in today's world.

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