Contemporary cultural consumption – perspectives and challenges

Eva-Nicoleta BURDUŞEL, Mirela PETRAŞCU

Universitatea "Lucian Blaga" din Sibiu, Facultatea de Litere şi Arte
"Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, Romania, Faculty of Letters and Arts
e-mails: eva.burdusel@ulbsibiu.ro, mirela.petrascu@ulbsibiu.ro

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The major aim of the authors is to undertake a reappraisal of the contemporary "story" of the book as an item of culture and commerce, in its transition from print to electronic, in addition to paper versus digital reading; thus having cultural, artistic, economic and technological characteristics. Our goal shall be attained by performing a thorough analysis of the state of reading nowadays, particularly the role of books in promoting cultural diplomacy with particular reference to Cultural Institutes (Romanian Cultural Institute) as facilitators of intercultural communication as well as renown international Book Fairs (e.g. Paris – Salon du Livre, London Book Fair, Frankfurter Buchmesse) enabling not only the survival of the book but also their travel worldwide mediated by literary translations.

Keywords: cultural consumption; cultural institutes; book fairs

Paradigm shift in cultural consumption

Cultural creation and artistic innovation have undergone tremendous changes and coped with unprecedented challenges in the context of a paradigm shift from paper to electronic, especially regarding their consumption. The gradual though revolutionary transition from the printing press (1454) to the digital press (1993) has triggered ample controversy about the status and the unpredictable future of the book industry – increasingly observing business norms, especially in terms of marketing and promotion, evinced by: a reshaping of the traditional concept of the book (e-books); the accessibility and appeal of blogs as facilitators of online interaction (cultural and literary blogs); as well as the emergence of technological novelty (i.e. new reading supports: tablet, e-reader). [1]

Cultural, artistic and literary products, as well as education, have moved from a private ownership, and protected area to the public sphere enabled by social media tools, substantiating the fundamental right of individuals to freedom of communication, information and artistic expression.

According to the Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning (2005), "information literacy extends beyond current technologies to encompass learning, critical thinking and interpretative skills across professional boundaries and empowers individuals and communities." [2]

Denis McQuail provided a witty epitome of the progress of communication from "*suppression* (in the name of state and religion), to *prohibition* (selectively applied), to *permission* (of a limited kind, in the name of liberty and of business), to *prescription* (encouraging educational and cultural goals), to *libertarianism* (a market-based claim to unhindered freedom of operation)." [3]

As communication is fundamentally a cultural phenomenon, it will connect not only individuals, but also the past and the present of larger communities, restoring and preserving heritage, reviving tradition, enabling the dialogue of cultural diversity. In times of crisis, culture will heal broken ties, bridge polarities and overcome conflicting perspectives. [4]

Moreover, "in today`s interconnected world, culture`s power to transform societies is clear. Its diverse manifestations – from our cherished historic monuments, and museums to traditional practices and contemporary art forms – enrich our everyday lives in countless ways." [5]

Culture is an invaluable and intangible asset with a profound impact on the survival of a nation, promoting

its image worldwide, by means of public and cultural diplomacy, and a prerequisite for economic development, no longer a benefit and a privilege granted to authorities or people in power.

Martha Nussbaum – influential 21st century intellectual and philosopher, professor of law and ethics – set out her pertinent and thorough argument in favour of and plea for liberal education, currently at a disadvantage in a profit-oriented society, in her book *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs Humanities*. Furthermore, in her essay "Skills for Life", she encourages the need of training 'narrative imagination', defined as "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person`s story, to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. The cultivation of sympathy has been a key part of the best modern ideas of democratic education, in both Western and non-Western nations." [6]

The UNESCO *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression* (2005 represents a fundamental document aimed at raising awareness about cultural as the living soul and the most enduring component of a nation, as it "emphasizes the need to incorporate culture as a strategic element in the national and international development policies as well as in international development cooperation." [7]

Contemporary challenges to Communication: a shift from connection to alienation, triggered by the consequences of social media

T S Eliot, in his landmark "Notes on the Definition of Culture", calls attention to three meanings of the term culture:

> We may be thinking of refinement of manners – or *urbanity* and *civility*: if so, we shall think first of a social class, and of the superior individual as representative of the best of that class. We may be thinking of *learning* and a close acquaintance with the accumulated wisdom of the past: if so, our man of culture is the scholar. We may be thinking of *philosophy* in the widest sense – an interest in, and some ability to manipulate, abstract ideas: if so, we may mean the intellectual … Or we may be thinking of *the arts*: if so, we may mean the artist or the amateur or dilettante. But what we seldom have in mind is all of these things at the same time … we must conclude that no perfection in one of them, to the exclusion of the others, can confer culture to anybody. We know that good manners, without education, intellect or sensibility to the arts, tends towards mere automatism; that learning without good manners or sensibility is mere pedantry; that intellectual ability without the more human attributes is admirable only in the same way as the brilliance of a child chess prodigy; and that the arts without intellectual context are vanity. … People are always ready to consider themselves persons of culture on the strength of one proficiency, when they are not only lacking in others, but blind to those they lack. … The person who contributes to culture, however important his contribution may be, is not always a 'cultured person'. [8]

Raymond Williams, author of groundbreaking writings on culture and society, explained the difficulty of the term culture mainly due to its complexity and wide use: "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is partly so because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought." [9]

One of the greatest challenges and paradoxes of our contemporary society is to overcome the dilemma and reconcile the paradigm shift from 'cultural intelligence' to a 'civilization of illiteracy'. Elisabeth Plum, Danish scholar with expertise in cultural sociology and main author of *Cultural Intelligence – the Art of Leading Cultural Complexity,* expertly defined the recent concept of 'cultural intelligence as

> … a broad concept which is related to emotional intelligence and social intelligence, but cultural intelligence is wider than wither of these because it sees both feelings and human relations as culturally determined, and not as identical across cultural boundaries. … Seen as a broad concept of intelligence, cultural intelligence is a set of abilities/skills which can be developed throughout life. … Cultural intelligence has three dimensions: intercultural engagement, cultural understanding and intercultural communication. This tripartite division follows the classic division into emotion, cognition and practice. [10]

On the other hand, Mihai Nadin, scholar and researcher of Romanian origin, author of *The Civilization of Illiteracy*, originally published in English in 1998 and recently translated into Romanian, most amply dealt with this concept. Society`s unrelentless pursuit of scientific advancement might affect the preservation of humankind`s memory.

> No other time than ours has had more of the future in it – and less of the past. The civilization we are entering is no promised land. It is a realm of challenge, with hurdles to overcome and frustrations to live with. … The literate heritage might not be perfect, but it protects from the often disquieting changes that we all – enthusiasts, pessimists, critics – experience. In the palace of printed books, we were promised not only eternal truth and beauty, but also prosperity. Well, prosperity is here, even if not equally distributed, but truth and beauty are increasingly elusive. … We are experiencing the conflict between forces corresponding to a literate structure of human activity and the emerging post-literate structure. One of the results of the conflict is that the visual has already surpassed the written, though not always for the better. [11]

To endorse this previous statement about the visual overtaking the written, we recommend paying special attention to Mario Vargas Llosa`s recent book *The Civilization of Entertainment* – originally published in Spanish in 2012 and subsequently translated into Romanian in 2016 [12] – who warns about the decline of cultural values in their interaction with other phenomena of social, economic or political life, paving the way for the transition from an elitist culture to mass culture, whose most prominent characteristic is the dominance of image and sound over word. Culture is a powerful and reliable companion to knowledge and it also shares an interdependent relationship with communication – i.e. communication keeps culture alive and culture shapes communication.

Books have become mere commodities, in tough competition with movies, video games and all forms of uploaded information or entertainment materials. By way of consequence, they have become less appealing, more demanding in terms of intellectual challenge and, at the same time, less rewarding in terms of immediate gratification – by comparison, they fail to provide either instant pleasure or a rush of adrenalin, but demand an increased intellectual effort. Anyone might then wonder why one should strive for the knowledge offered by books, when the knowledge has already been stored, synthesized and offered readily as information.

It is an idea discussed by Mario Vargas Llosa, who, in *Civilization of the Spectacle (La civilización del espectáculo* invoked Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy's sintagm of ‚screen world' *(La culture monde. Response a une societe desorientee,* 2010). According to them, the screen world has dislocated, de-synchronised and de-centered the space-time concept of culture.

What do we mean by civilizaiton of the spectacle? The civilization of a world in which pride of place, in terms of a scale of values, is given to entertainment, and where having a good time, escaping boredom, is the universal passion. To have this goal in life is perfectly legitimat, of couse ... But converting this natural propensity for enjoying oneself into a supreme value has unexpected consequences: it leads to culture becoming banal, frivolity becoming widespread and, in the field of news coverage, it leads to the spread of irresponsible journalism based on gossip and scandal ... It is not surprising therefore that the most representative literature of our times is ‚light', easy literature, which without any sense of shame, sets out to be – as its primary and almost exclusive objective – entertaining. [13]

In a highly informative and thought-provoking conversation with sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky, held at Cervantes Institute in Madrid, on 24th April 2012, Mario Vargas Llosa stated that:

> [the book] is an attempt to express a feeling of concern, an anguish of sorts, on seeing what we understood by "culture" when I was young, changing during my lifetime into something very different, something essentially distinct from what we understood by "culture" in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. The book attempts to describe this transformation and examine the effects of the vagaries of what we call culture today on different aspects of human activity – social, political, religious, sexual and so on – given that culture is something that impregnates all we do in life. The book doesn't set out to be pessimistic, but it does aim to be disturbing and to encourage people to think about whether the hegemonic role [that] entertainment and distraction have assumed in our time have also caused them to become central to cultural life. I believe that this is the case and that it has happened with the blessing of wide sections of society, including those who traditionally have represented society's institutions and cultural values. [14]

Contemporary perspectives: how and why does one read a book nowadays?

In the preface to his latest book, *Quite A Good Time To Be Born: a Memoir 1935-1975* [15] David Lodge deplores, in an understated manner, the author's situation in the age of shifting paradigms, marked by the transition from printed books, typewriters and study in the library to PCs, laptops, the Internet, mobile phones and e-books. All of the latter, claims Lodge, have had a favourable, if ambivalent, impact on the writer's work. On the one hand, they have enabled writers to access information that they would otherwise have gotten only by long hours spent in the library. At present, word-processing programmes revise and correct texts (processes which, albeit minor, used to be part of the literary creation). On the other hand, the same technological advancements are threatening to destroy the link between writing as profession and the book as commodity multiplied mechanically (since the invention of printing) and to make obsolete the complex web of relations between editors, agents, publishing houses, librarians and the copyright legislation, all of which enabled writers to pursue their vocation and get a steady income. Lodge considers himself lucky to have evolved as a writer in a more stable system, which is nevertheless about to end.

A brief look at the way in which the most important book-fairs are advertized online will reveal, on the one hand, the fact that the idea according to which books are commodities among other commodities is no longer disputed, but taken for granted and assumed as starting

point and, on the other hand, that books have been integrated into the „global village" of ideas. In this respect, the 2016 **London Book Fair** ran under the heading „Making Words Go Further" [16].

Similarly, at the **Frankfurter Buchmesse** the most poignantly business-like approach is a section called the Markets, advertising the internalization of the publishing sector, which is to become „a cosmopolitan networking". During the Fair, 40 international conferences are to take place in the German Book Offices (GBO) and in the Book International Centres (BIZ). They are all advertized as conferences intended to „offer insight into the latest trends in global publishing", as well as „visionary business models" and „market analyses". [17]

Books thus prove to have become part of an advertising approach that functions according to very strict business paramaters, meant to integrate them into „the dynamic, relevant and global City of Ideas." Concepts such as „Travelling Books", „Books on Tour – Zero to Infinity", „Children's Books on Tour", „Books that Travel", along with Offices Abroad and a very own Business Club show that, in the case of the Frankfurter Buchmesse and not only, books are now perceived as ineluctably linked to business, as they can no longer escape encompassment into an ever-more engulfing business approach and online media, which might, ironically or not, be their salvation. [18]

Concluding remarks

To conclude, culture shapes communication in a continuous dynamic and effective attempt to build bridges between individuals and communities instead of widening the divide, furthermore, cultural products are promoted worldwide by means of translations, international book fairs (The London Book Fair, Salon du Livre, Frankfurter Buchmesse, Beijing International Book Fair) or European initiatives such as "Europe loves reading". In her address occasioned by the *Alliance of Civilizations,* Irina Bokova highlighted that:

> People are connected like never before. New opportunities are opening across the globe for exchange and cooperation. But these are also turbulent times – times of uncertainty and economic crisis, when societies are ever more diverse and vulnerable. This is why dialogue and mutual understanding are so essential. We need new forms of exchange between cultures, between societies and within them, on the basis of respect and equal dignity. Dialogue is the best way to strengthen the solidarity of humanity against the pressures of fragmentation. [19]

What is needed, now more than ever – when the welfare of society and the law of accelerating change entail an abundance of books or wealth of reading matter, threatened by the law of diminishing returns – is balance between reading and living, as epitomized by Robert Kaplan: "One book means freedom; to many books, though, act as a barrier to further discovery of the world. When you have a ready quote in your head for every new vista before your eyes, you can no longer see clearly ... Books are an act of resistance, not just to the distractions of the electronic age, but to our problems, and to our pretentions." [20]

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