

“Electric Literature”: cultivating a renaissance of the short story

Angela Teatino

New technologies are constantly transforming traditional notions of discourse as well as communicative practices. While new possibilities of virtual settings concerning both writing and reading experiences are calling for a re-invention of cultural artifacts, new media encounters are ready to stage the scenarios of the future of digital literature as well as the invention of writing and of the printing press had major consequences for textuality and narrativity. The aim of this paper is twofold: a theoretical introduction explores the concept of *remediation* in terms of literary and textual conventions, as reshaped by various and innovative modalities, while in the second part of the essay, a structured interview with Andy Hunter, co-editor with Scott Lindenbaum of “Electric Literature”, a new quarterly literary magazine, sheds light on a challenging and original literary project, which aims at revitalizing short fiction and writers’ professional role by enhancing the dialogue between form and content with an impressive tech-forward approach and appealing promotional marketing strategies.

Key words: remediation, short fiction, new technologies.

Le nuove tecnologie stanno trasformando le nozioni tradizionali di discorso e di pratiche comunicative. Mentre le nuove possibilità offerte da ambienti virtuali relativi alle esperienze di scrittura e lettura richiedono di reinventare gli artefatti culturali, nuovi incontri tra media differenti appaiono pronti a creare nuovi scenari sul futuro della letteratura digitale, così come l’invenzione della scrittura e della stampa hanno influenzato le forme testuali e narrative. È duplice l’obiettivo del presente articolo: un’introduzione teorica esplora il concetto di *remediation* in termini di convenzioni letterarie e testuali rimodellate secondo modalità molteplici e innovative, mentre nella seconda parte del contributo, un’intervista strutturata con Andy Hunter, co-editor con Scott Lindenbaum di “Electric Literature”, una nuova rivista antologica trimestrale, presenta un nuovo e originale progetto letterario che si propone di dar nuova vita alla narrativa breve e valorizzare il ruolo professionale degli scrittori, promuovendo il dialogo tra forma e contenuto attraverso un approccio tecnologico e interessanti strategie di marketing promozionali.

Parole chiave: remediation, narrativa breve, nuove tecnologie.

Articolo ricevuto il 20 agosto 2010; versione finale 15 ottobre 2010.

Margie even wrote about it that night in her diary. On the page headed May 17, 2157, she wrote, «Today, Tommy found a real book!». It was a very old book. Margie's grandfather once said that when he was a little boy his grandfather told him that there was a time when all stories were printed on paper.

They turned the pages, which were yellow and crinkly, and it was awfully funny to read words that stood still instead of moving the way they were supposed to on a screen, you know. And then, when they turned back to the page before, it had the same words on it that it had had when they read it the first time. «Gee – said Tommy – what a waste. When you're through with the book, you just throw it away, I guess. Our television screen must have had a million books on it and it's good for plenty more. I wouldn't throw it away». «Same with mine» – said Margie. She was eleven and hadn't seen as many telebooks as Tommy had. He was thirteen.

I. Asimov, *The Fun they had* (1951)

Written for the children's magazine "The Boys and Girls Page", Isaac Asimov's story about telebooks might have seemed quite unconvincing when first published in 1951, the same year that the first business computer was launched. Margie, aged 11, and her friend Tommy, aged 13, live in 2157: what they discover is somewhat surprising if compared with their technology-based reading and writing habits. For the two far-future children, the real book – a very old book with paper pages, «yellow and crinkly» – appears as a curious relic, which tells of a remote and static world. And yet, similar electronic books, or e-books, are now readily available. Important developments of reader devices and improvement of screen technology have made e-books part of a new publishing revolution, which is forcing the whole cultural enterprise to re-think the traditional modes of production and diffusion of printed documents.

When it comes to literature, the "book-is-dead" debate leads inevitably to some considerations about the relationship between the writing space and the new media technologies. Discussing the effects of the Gutenberg revolution, Marshall McLuhan has pointed out that «when technology extends one of our senses, a new translation of culture occurs as swiftly as the new technology is interiorized»¹.

¹ M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1962, p. 40.

The electronic writing space breaks the hierarchical conventions that characterize the discipline of writing for printed publications, but at the same time provides the opportunity to redefine cultural ideals and remediate genres and forms. Understanding with J. D. Bolter the concept of remediation as the process of «borrowing and reorganizing the characteristics of writing in the older medium and reforming its cultural spaces»², the investigation and analysis of literary practices and textual conventions cannot but take into account the significant and challenging impact of the advent of Web-based technologies on traditional forms of production and distribution of cultural contents as well as the outcome of innovative intermedial relationships, which cut across multiple domains of media history and practice.

While new possibilities of virtual settings concerning both writing and reading experiences are calling for a re-invention of cultural artefacts, new media encounters are ready to stage the scenarios of the future of digital literature, a broad concept under which the digital medium intermixes with electronic literature, humanities computing and new communication paradigms. As an emerging popular medium practice, the electronic reading format has shot to prominence thanks to the strong interest by authors and publishers in exploring the e-book domain as the newest publishing trend.

In the age of new, post-print media, the publication of a bi-monthly anthology of short fiction specifically designed for distribution and reading on a variety of platforms, ranging from paperback print version to print-on-demand, from eBook and Kindle format to the most sophisticated application for iPhone, smartphones and iPad tablet, may represent tomorrow's headline of the revival of storytelling.

The new quarterly literary magazine "Electric Literature" took off on summer 2009 and was very soon welcomed with enthusiasm and expressions of approval by literary reviews and new media criticism³. The structure of the anthology is very basic: each issue collects five stories. More precisely, short stories since – as the EL editors state – these are «particularly well-suited to our hectic age». Each issue also features eminent voices from the literary world as Pulitzer Prize-winner Michael Cunningham, Jim Shepard, Lydia Millet and many others.

² J. D. Bolter, *Writing Space. Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New York 2001, p. 23.

³ A list of links to reviews and articles on "Electric Literature" is available on the News section of EL website: <http://www.electricleadership.com/electric-literature-news.html>

What is important to highlight is EL business strategy: first, authors are paid for their stories – definitely a countertrend model when confronted with the general status of writers' career as professionals; secondly, the magazine subscription, based on delivery formats, helps to cut down publishing and production costs.

High quality content, innovative marketing distribution, multimedia and genre cross-pollinating are the main ingredients of a challenging and innovative literary project that aims at revitalizing short fiction not just exploiting the opportunities of the new media but enhancing the dialogue between form and content. Not only are EL (e-)readers provided with electronic versions of the short stories but what they can enjoy is an impressive tech-forward approach: book trailer videos and single sentence animations of the short stories, integrated with the reading material, are available both on EL website and on EL YouTube channel. Such new ideas show how thriving and rich the digital media chances can be in terms of promotional marketing and creative efforts and might suggest new paths to explore the writing space.

The present interview is the result of Andy Hunter's stimulating and resourceful responses to a set of written questions submitted to him by e-mail.

ANGELA TEATINO (AT): Quoting the incipit of the anthology project presentation, «Electric Literature's mission is to use new media and innovative distribution to return the short story to a place of prominence in popular culture». You also highlight that writing fiction is a unique creative act, which «carries within it an implicit belief in the future». Past and future attitudes seem to coexist in a liminal space between tradition and experiment. Would you like to comment on this?

ANDY HUNTER (AH): Every tradition has to have begun as an experiment; traditions were not born fully formed into human cultures. If an experiment is successful, it may evolve, be repeated, and eventually grow into something traditional. Literature is a form that was made possible through the technology of printing. That form must now change. Why? Because for hundreds of years, the best way to disseminate information (and literature is information) was to cut down a tree, convert it to pulp, dry the pulp in sheets, print symbols on the dried pulp, and physically distribute it. That is no longer the most efficient way to disseminate information – compared to digital, it seems hopelessly primitive. Thus, it is inevitable that the traditional form of literature – the book – will be marginalized in importance. It

will likely become an art object, existing in a niche of well-designed limited editions. But the content of literature – its unique ability to capture the essence of a subjective human consciousness – is too precious to allow to be marginalized along with the form.

AT: In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, his landmark and monumental contribution to the study of the inward effects of media and technology on popular culture, Marshall McLuhan pointed to the electric light bulb as the medium of electricity that allowed people to get out of darkness and to change their social life habits and cultural spaces. He referred to the electric light bulb to demonstrate his famous and much quoted dictum «the medium is the message», meaning that the medium and its characteristics, more than the content, influence the way the message is perceived. To what extent does the adjective electric that you have chosen for the anthology title echo McLuhan's illuminating theory?

AH: We certainly appreciate McLuhan and thought of him often when we conceived of this project, but the title is not a direct homage. We like "Electric Literature" because it describes the project, but it also has a double meaning: electric is synonymous with exciting. In an environment where many different types of media are competing for people's attention, we feel it is important to emphasize that reading literature need not be stuffy or dull. It can, and should, be immersive, indulgent, and a pleasure.

AT: By using print on demand, Kindle, iPhone apps and audiobooks, "Electric Literature" is available in different formats anytime and anywhere. What are the potential effects of the digital medium on promoting literature?

AH: The potential effects are massive. It will be years before we know what they are. I think it is certain that new literary forms will evolve. Non-linear narratives, video and audio content, collaboration, books that continue to evolve with time – anything is possible. The most obvious effect of the digital medium right now is there are far fewer barriers between an author and his or her audience. That means there is a higher level of interaction, and it also means that self-publishing and small-press publishing will experience a massive boom. There is going to be a democratizing effect due to the technology. However, it also means that a lot of material will be published that is not worth reading, and publishers and editors will still have a role to play in filtering content for readers who are dismayed by the abundance of media.

AT: In collaboration with writers, visual artists and musicians "Electric Literature" project produces also single sentence animations

from the short stories collected in the anthology, available on EL YouTube channel. What does this mean in terms of creative effort and audience reception?

AH: Our first videos were trailers, following standard conventions for the form. They were successful, but we felt on the whole that there is an inherent weaknesses to book trailers: that books shouldn't be selling themselves by pretending they are films. The miracle of reading is how a series of symbols on a page can conjure an entire, unique world in the reader's mind. In the case of film, an imagined world is no longer unique – we share in the filmmaker's vision. So book trailers that are strictly literal seem to miss the point. But video is a powerful creative medium that can easily reach many people, and we did feel it could be potently combined with literature if done in the right way. We came up with the idea of our writers picking a favourite sentence from their stories (being writers, they often become obsessed with them) and giving that to a talented artist, filmmaker, or animator as a source of inspiration. The videos are not literal, so instead of homogenizing the reader's experience of a story, they work as self-contained pieces of imagination, complementing but not supplanting the writer's work. As a creative process, the process is like musical collaboration, where one artist riffs off what the other artist does. This is also more exciting for the animator, who doesn't have to follow a script. Often, these videos are given to a musician to create a score, adding a third creative twist in the process. We believe strongly that literary writing needs to leave the ivory tower and interact with the world. Collaborating and cross-pollinating with other genres is a great way to do this. The videos draw new readers to the story, and they also compliment the reading experience on devices such as the iPhone/iPad, where we feature the videos and the stories together on our app, ElectricLit.

AT: Given the critical situations of publishing industry, especially as regards emerging writers and literary fiction, one of the most impressive and ambitious challenges of your project is being able to pay your authors a thousand dollars per story. How do you manage to do that?

AH: A typical journal pays about \$ 6,000 to a printer to create perhaps 2,000 copies. Of those, perhaps 700 are actually read. We do print books, but we use print-on-demand: we print them as they are ordered by individuals and bookstores, instead of printing a mass quantity up-front. The other versions of our journal – eBook, iPhone, Kindle, and Audiobook – have no printing cost. So, simply, we have taken the money traditionally paid to the printer and given that money

to our writers instead. The message we are trying to spread is that the content is valuable, writers deserve to be compensated for their work, and there are viable ways to ensure that can happen.

AT: Closely connected to the aforesaid considerations is the question regarding the making of literary fiction and, broadly speaking, literature more accessible. The fact that "Electric Literature" is not a free literary magazine shifts the question of accessibility from free access and quantity of available information to quality and media related issues. What is your opinion on it?

AH: This is related to the previous question. My opinion is that writers should be able to make a living through writing, and the work they do is as valuable to our culture. We don't want a future where hamburger chefs and stockbrokers are paid, but writing has to be a hobby for all but the independently wealthy. That means readers need to pay for good writing. They don't have to pay a lot – digitally, our stories cost just \$.99 each – and we think that's a bargain. Free content online is certainly more accessible, but it is not sustainable for writers. Publications such as "Narrative" magazine, who support themselves by charging writers a submission fee and give away the writing for free, are pushing a model that we feel is bad for the future of writing, even if they believe they are doing it for the right reason, i.e. to make literature more accessible. Writing is a craft that can take a lifetime to master, and literature will suffer if all writers have to have day jobs to support their creative efforts.

AT: What are the main criteria that you follow when selecting the stories to be published?

AH: We select stories that capture our attention, that are entertaining or moving, but do so without sacrificing literary qualities.

AT: Do you think that the writers who submit their stories to your anthology are in some way influenced by the media format of EL?

AH: Not yet. People are still writing very traditionally. But we are extremely excited about the idea of publishing writing that creatively exploits the potential of digital forms.

AT: Could you estimate the reading public's response to your project? Please, if possible, give details on the format that subscribers have chosen.

AH: Subscriptions are 75% digital. It's half the cost of the paperback journal, so it is very affordable. Most of these are PDFs. For single copies, paperback is still the most popular format. For us, the big surprise has been the iPhone. ElectricLit, our app, has been extremely

successful. It is our second most popular format, and it far outpaces the popularity of the Kindle version. That was unexpected for us, but considering there are over 50 million iPhones, it makes sense. And if people are reading literature on them, rather than playing videogames, we are all for it.

References

- Bolter J. D. (2001), *Writing Space. Computers, Hypertext and the Remediation of Print*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New York.
- Lee F. R. (2009), *Serving Literature by the Tweet*, in “The New York Times”, online: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/28/books/28electric.html?_r=2&partner=rss&emc=rss.
- Lee S. H. (2007), *Print vs. Digital. The Future of Coexistence*, Haworth Information Press, Binghamton (NY).
- McCrum R. (2009), *Plug in to Electric Literature*, in “The Guardian”, online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/nov/02/publishing-ebooks>.
- McGann J. (2001), *Radiant Textuality. Literature after World Wide Web*, Palgrave, New York.
- McLuhan M. (1962), *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Schreibman S., Siemens R., Unsworth J. (eds.) (2004), *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Striphas T. (2002), *Book 2.0*, in “Culture Machine”, 5, online: <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/248/231>.
- Thompson J. B. (2005), *Books in the Digital Age*, Polity, Cambridge.