

Book review

Alexandra-Monica TOMA, *Forme și structuri literare în comunicarea mediată de calculator: interferențe între virtual, ficțional și real.*

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Alexandra-Monica Toma has been a university lecturer at the Cross-border Faculty of the “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galați since 2019. Having pursued her studies in philology at the same university, she successfully defended her doctoral thesis in 2011. Actively engaged in academic pursuits, she is affiliated with the “Limba noastră” Research Center. Her research interests primarily revolve around computer-mediated communication, pragmatics within the digital environment, and the pedagogy of teaching Romanian as a foreign language.

The volume **FORME ȘI STRUCTURI LITERARE ÎN COMUNICAREA MEDIATĂ DE CALCULATOR: INTERFERENȚE ÎNTRE VIRTUAL, FICȚIONAL ȘI REAL (LITERARY FORMS AND STRUCTURES IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION: INTERFERENCES BETWEEN VIRTUAL, FICTIONAL, AND REAL)**, Galati University Press, 2020, is based on the author’s doctoral thesis with the same title. The work comprises four chapters: (1) *Virtual Reality and its Literary Perceptions*, (2) *The Email and the Revitalization of the Epistolary Style*, (3) *The Narrativity of Computer Games*, and (4) *Blogs as an Extension of the Traditional Diary*.

Before embarking on a discursive journey aimed to reconcile the discrepancies between reality and virtuality, a duality that has kept us engaged for more than two decades, presenting us with both redemptive or detrimental dilemmas, the author Alexandra-Monica TOMA invites us to a brief discussion *About Being Connected*, explaining that “this paper stemmed from the simple idea of reconciling the disparities between reality and virtuality. Essentially, this is an endeavour of a literature enthusiast who observes the accelerated changes brought about by the new forms of computer-mediated communication and seeks to understand their profound mechanisms, employing both established and contemporary theoretical frameworks” (p. 7).

The author boldly questions the future of literature, introducing from the outset the concerns raised by the “technocentric” universe and the ambiguity surrounding the concept of reality, susceptible to duplication and identity crises. The initial impression of defeatism is balanced by an expression of confidence in the unique open spaces offered by computers and the Internet, suggesting they are neither inherently superior nor inferior to traditional avenues. Rather, they are distinct and delicate, potentially eroding the conventional understanding of values, which

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is either way controversial. The remark which deters us from the start is that the astonishing spread of digital texts leaves us without landmarks, and we can thus become lost in a world where nothing is unquestionable or absolute anymore. However, there is always a *but* that juxtaposes the benefits of the digital space. In practice, the concept of being *here* and *there* simultaneously is taken to extremes through the expansion and distortion of limits. This partial, intriguing, and conflictual form of ubiquity generates both ruptures and continuities. This paradox stimulates the transformation of literature in the virtual environment.

In the first chapter, *Virtual Reality and its Literary Perceptions*, the author aims to define the scope of the volume and explain specific terminology. Thus, she mentions that “(...) in this context, the concept of virtual reality construed broadly, thus referring to ‘accessing any cybernetic space and immersing oneself into it. In this loose sense, any Internet user becomes, by connecting to the network, a user/consumer of virtual reality,” citing Ion Manolescu (2003, Videologia. O teorie tehnoculturală a imaginii globale, Iași, Polirom). Drawing from established authors, Alexandra Toma defines virtual reality as being “completely immersed in a fictitious world that is intelligibly synthesizable and, as such, possible” or as “the real-time creation of a computerized multisensory perceptive intelligence” (Vince, J., *Virtual Reality - Past, Present, and Future*, Bucharest, Technical Publishing House). The author concludes that this experience equates to “entering a parallel universe with reality, facilitated through a computer connected to the internet.” The perspective further developed refers to virtual reality as not just a cultural space but one that holds a significant literary dimension. Thus, Alexandra-Monica Toma revisits, after the terminological incursion necessary for such an undertaking, the research area outlined in the title, namely - the literary discursive space. However, she notes that this space “no longer remains the exclusive domain of an elite or the outcome of a protracted process of creation and editing, (...) because “in the immense, unfathomable global network, speed, ephemerality, heterogeneity, interculturality, and transdisciplinarity have emerged as the defining parameters of a space with an indestructible allure.” In this scenario, the computer emerges as an individual mediator characterized by preset options, a symptomatic identity construct, and a communication channel in a novel guise.

Chapter II, *The Email and the Revitalization of the Epistolary Style*, explores the emergence of a new, contemporary, condensed form of the epistolary style as humanity transitions into a new era of communication. Epistolary novels serve as a precursor to modern “emails”, with the “obsolete letter” being redefined in the context of cyberspace, borrowing several characteristics from the virtual world: enhanced freedom of expression, avoidance of redundant forms, increased speed in letter transmission/reception, and modifications in the epistolary ritual and intertextual dialogue (p.67). These new forms of virtual communication are also integrated into the literary writing process. Interactivity transforms and adapts to the rules of cyberspace, even if it remains at the level of literary novels.

The book proposes the analysis of two epistolary novels, the first by Matt Beaumont, titled *e*, which presents a charmingly modern world, with the action taking place in an international advertising company, and “Blue Company,” by Rob Wittig, available online, in English. The first novel emphasizes the “contrast between the apparent rigidity and seriousness of such a company, illustrated by the excessively formal wooden language used in official emails, and the frustrations, vices, and subversive strategies that emerge beyond appearances, expressed in the informal

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language of personal emails, which abound in licentious words” (p.68). The second novel showcases Wittig’s role as a pioneer in numerous literary projects within the digital space. Wittig’s novel is innovative in form, content, and intertextual and hypertextual dialogue, proposing a strange, hallucinatory, phantasmagorical world accessible through the voice of a single character. The narrative unfolds within a virtual realm devoid of nuances and standards, prioritizing talent over obscurity, authenticity over imposture, and light over shadow. Thus, “(...) approaching a broader reading, Wittig’s monologic epistolary novel is a logorrheic discourse about replacing space with time in electronic communication, about the unstable relationship between reality and fiction, about modern virtual excesses and the burlesque consciousness of the 20th century” (p.74). The epistolary digital novel thus leads to a diversity of literary styles that blend the real, the virtual, and the fictional, ultimately yielding literary forms forcibly adapted to a space that it has not yet fully mastered.

In Chapter III, *The Narrativity of Computer Games*, computer games are brought into focus (“hybrid and captivating appearances in a world gradually transitioning, with all its complexities, onto the slippery and deceptive terrain of a mystified reality,” p.83). The allure of gaming is combined with the seductive power of the graphical interface and, above all, with the promise of an escape from the mundane universe of everyday life. As games transition into virtual spaces, they maintain their fundamental characteristics, including innovative elements such as interaction within a distinct environment from reality, along with diverse graphic and narrative elements. The literary forms and structures that emerge in virtual reality are explained through concepts such as narratology and ludology (p.91), with computer games operating on radically different principles from narratives, as the author mentions, citing Markku Esklinen, who explained that computer games are not narratives but a combination of means, rules, equipment, and manipulative actions. However, we could further complement the author by specifying that, beyond means, rules, equipment, and manipulative actions of programs, the games that have gained popularity are those that have woven a narrative thread, have climaxes, and (sometimes) a resolution. Therefore, we could conclude that the narrative persists in virtual games, but with non-linear and interactive characteristics. The narrative can progress in multiple directions and can be paused or abandoned at the player’s discretion. However, “when a computer game has a story to tell, it employs cinematic or literary methods, which implies that it does not possess the necessary tools to build the narrative on its own” (p.94). In such cases, the epic narrative receives evocative graphical interpretations (pp.97-98), and both the avatars of time and place undergo dynamic changes.

Chapter IV, *Blogs as an Extension of the Diary*, discusses the narratives of self-expression within the virtual environment (p.46), exploring the evolution of the diary (as a literary form) at the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. It examines the intimate diary as a space where reality and fiction intersect, ultimately leading to the “technologically advanced” form of the diary: the contemporary virtual blog (p.153). “Virtual diaries are a relevant part of a paradigm shift, which involves a transition from a culture dominated by mass media and one-to-many communication to the norm of many-to-many communication. On this note, Rettberg, particularly concerned with electronic literature, analyses the history and implications of these changes, related to communication, socialization, and behaviour in online lives” (p.154).

The author dissects blogs, describing the components of the blog, the editing processes, the structure, and the rituals associated with this type of electronic writing (p.159). The work brings

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to our attention the typology of fictional blogs, thus delineating from the blogosphere that area of interest, which extends from classical literature. The study's conclusions naturally concern the contrasts that arise between a diary and a blog (p.174), mentioning, among other things, the critical filter or preliminary critical judgment (p.175), but also the pre- and post-publication criticism, which turns into popularity, while literary criticism evolves into a statistics of access (p.176).

Virtual reality, broadly defined as any cybernetic space, is reshaping the reading and writing strategies, as well as the canonical premises that literary exegesis currently maintains. To confidently embrace the emerging fictional-virtual forms and structures, critical thinking must first liberate itself from both aesthetic biases and the theoretical confines of linear literature bound to static pages as an obedient object of hermeneutic inquiry.

The volume **LITERARY FORMS AND STRUCTURES IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION: INTERFERENCES BETWEEN VIRTUAL, FICTIONAL, AND REAL** presents a balanced critical attitude, navigating between utopian and dystopian techno-cultural narratives, fuelled by the apprehensions about technology's intrusive role. It asserts the belief that, despite the vastness of the virtual space, there exist established patterns that shape modes of immersion and interactive engagement within the network. This conviction characterises the analysis of the cyberspace presented within these pages. The book explores three distinct domains—electronic epistles, video games, and the blogosphere—to elucidate these dimensions.