Literary Life on the Internet: Writers, Institutions and Readers Facing Technological Changes
[Summary]

This study concerns the ways in which new communication technologies have reshaped literary life, understood as the social institution of producing, publishing, reading and evaluating literary texts. The field of online literary life remains unexplored in literary scholarship. This situation seems to stem from the lack of an adequate methodology – one that would allow for a more or less equal treatment of both actual and virtual literary worlds. Such a methodology should target not only the novelty but also the continuity of cultural phenomena. Online literary life does not exist in a vacuum, far removed from the 'traditional' communication patterns of print (sender-institution-receiver). On the contrary, it has become an indispensable component of literary communication today. In this work I propose an anthropological approach to literary practices, which, I argue, helps us bridge the gap between those two worlds.

   This book consists of four parts ('Literature and Technology', 'E-Writer', 'Text and Communication', 'Moderation and Participation'), in which I approach the main issue from different angles. Firstly, I present a historical survey of relationships between literature and technology, in order to present ongoing processes in a broader perspective. Secondly, I describe the transformations of literary life from a writers' viewpoint. In the third part I use the framework of remediation to shed light on how contemporary literary institutions have changed, while in the last part I give an account of reading practices today.

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Part 1 ('Literature and Technology') serves as a general introduction to my study's problematics and a starting point for the discussions to follow. In chapter 1 ('Technologies of Literature: The Influence of the Carrier on the Form and Functions of Literary Texts') I analyze the relationships between literature and communication technologies, spanning literary history from pre-writing forms to electronic literature. Using the framework of remediation I present an evolutionary approach to the transformations of literary carriers. Although any new medium introduces new potential, I argue, it also preserves vital characteristics of the previous one. Thus, my analyses focus on the status of literature amongst other word-media in a broad historical perspective. Chapter 2 ('Vandals and Luddites: Literature versus New Communication Technologies') takes up catastrophic visions of literature's future from Plato through Victor Hugo, to George Orwell, Ray Bradburry and contemporary criticism. New communication technologies (writing, print, television, computer) have always been met with harsh criticism and an apparent need to juxtapose a negative view of the new media with an idealized picture of their predecessor. I suggest that contemporary elegies on the death of literature should be understood as an inherent part of technological change. In the third chapter ('Literary Life on the Internet: Concepts and Methods') I apply those discussions to the field of literary life on the Internet. Firstly, I focus on relationships between technological transformations and the forms of literary communication. Secondly, I present a critical survey of sociological studies of literature, proposing an anthropological approach towards literary life on the Internet. Thirdly, I define online literary life as a research subject, outlining a methodology of online research.

Part 2 ('E-Writer') focuses on writers' online presence (motivations, strategies, communication with readers). The discussion is based on an analysis of the websites of 85 Polish authors. In chapter 4 ('What is a Writer [Online]?') I argue

that technological changes provide new tools that simply give a new shape to existing processes of literary life, such as a reversal of hierarchies, diversification or personalization of the reading matter. The Internet presents no threat to traditional ('printed') hierarchies, but rather serves as a supplement and a gateway for authors who aspire to the mainstream. Furthermore, the Internet introduces a new model of the writer to the literary scene – a model that employs web tools to compete with established authors (Author 2.0). The next chapter ('Writer on the Web – Writer's Web') provides a network analysis of the relations between writers and literary institutions. I analyze writers' online presence from two perspectives: the writer on the Web and the writer's web or network. The former outlines the role of the writer in the network of various connections (links, reviews, fan pages), while the latter deals with the webs crafted by the writers themselves by linking to other webpages. In the first perspective writers function as objects of the network, whereas in the second they are subjects – creators of various connections. To illustrate my theoretical discussion I create visualizations of writers' networks on the basis of outbound links from the websites analyzed.

Part 3 ('Text and Communication') is dedicated to new textual forms, broadly understood as platforms for communication between writers and readers. Chapters 6 ('Convergence and Communication: Genres on Writers' Websites') and 7 ('The Writer's Website as a Hybrid Text') are dedicated to inter- and trans-media analyses of writers' webpages. I analyze texts available on those webpages as well as the webpages themselves as texts. The shape of the website depends primarily on the tools and forms of electronic communication that writers use to transform offline genres. Writing online has become an electronic, multimedia practice that uses various semiotic systems. New forms of texts are hybrid both rhetorically and in their use of multimedia, and the writing itself is no longer confined by the medium of the printed word, as it is

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supported by a variety of media forms. Chapters 8 ('What is a Literary Blog?') and 9 ('The Blog as an "Electronic Journal": A Genre Analysis of Writers' Weblogs') offers a few final remarks on writers' websites. Integrating literary studies with a technological perspective, my genre analysis of blogs focuses on those that their creators describe as 'literary,' as well as the online journals of three Polish writers (Sylwia Chutnik, Jarosław Klejnocki, Jerzy Sosnowski). I argue that this specific commingling of a personal document and electronic discourse results in a new form of writing. Its uniqueness, compared to classic personal documents, stems from the participation of an audience that co-authors the text and influences its shape. The blog is a result of a personalization culture in which the reader influences the writer.

The last part ('Moderation and Participation') takes up the question of new institutions of literary life and contemporary reading practices (although both issues were partially addressed in earlier parts). Chapter 10 ('Moderators and Amateurs: New Institutions of Online Literary Life') presents the results of my analysis of the webpages of 100 literary institutions. Firstly, I discuss old institutions (publishers, journals) that adjust to contemporary communication practices by trying to attract new readers on the Internet. Secondly, I look at new institutions, such as online journals, websites dedicated to authors, as well as literary portals. I argue that new institutions take on predominantly 'moderating' functions, i.e. they provide a space for discussion and encourage users to contribute. The often-discussed role of amateurs is of great importance, since they shape those institutions and provide content unavailable on professional portals. Chapter 11 ('Reading the Romance Online: Collective Interpretation Online') draws on Janice Radway's influential study *Reading the Romance* (1984) to examine a romance readers' forum. While discussing the difference between online and offline reading communities, I argue that the former serve mostly

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to help readers personalize their reading matter. The last chapter ('Personalized Text') consists of several 'lexias' bound together with hyperlinks, which imitate the problem in question, i.e. reading online.

To explore both individual and collective dimensions of the reading experience, I first discuss the results of an original experiment on the differences between reading a literary text in print versus on a computer screen, which leads me to analyze how literature is interpreted collectively on discussion boards. I argue that the Internet creates favorable conditions for 'horizontal' reading, which entails loose associations and finding connections between the reading matter and other texts available online.

In the Afterword ('Abraham's Phonograph: Towards an Archaeology of Literature') I recapitulate the main threads of this book, addressing the relationship between communication technology and the form of literary texts through the lenses of contemporary media theory (Vilém Flusser, Friedrich A. Kittler and Siegfried Zielinski). In conclusion I call for an archeology of literature that would focus on the relationships between textuality and practices of interpretation on the one hand, and storage and communication technologies on the other.