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NARRATIVE AND INTERACTION IN ROMANIAN FICTIONS

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SUMMARY

The dissertation "Narration and Interaction in Romanian Fictions" aims to explore the dynamics of narrative production, theorization, and reception after the emergence of the digital, using qualitative and quantitative methods. The main aim of this research is to describe the mutations that happened in the socio-cultural field of literature immediately before and after the large-scale spread of devices and analytical tools that allow connection to the World Wide Web, paying special attention to Romanian literary production. Thus, my approach maps at the macro level the changes in the humanities and the state of the printed and digital book since the 1990s, together with the structural changes brought with them by the networked configuration of the Internet regarding society and the self. It also indexes and comparatively analyses the terminological web devoted to narrative in the digital environment and proposes a dual analysis – meta discourse and production – of the autochthonous space in the terms described before.

The need for such an undertaking in Romania arises from the gap that has emerged in the production of digital artefacts between the local and global literary spaces, the gradual fading of the discussion of literature in digital terms, and the failure to include areas that are extremely popular among young people in terms of production (online platforms) and reception (YouTubers, bookstagrammers) as topics of interest of recent philological research in Romania. Thus, the present work complements the analytical efforts of the last ten years, which focus on the digital humanities[1], and at the same time cover a theoretical space that seems abandoned after Ion Manolescu's early attempts at theorization[2].

The analytical parts of the current research are twofold: it makes the first comparative overview of the concepts proposed, described and applied by theorists of digital narrative literature, and it also makes a brief alternative history of experimental or atypical narratives in Romanian literature, starting from the properties associated with digital narratives: interactivity understood as the reader's possibility to influence the course of events, the integration of referential techniques involving leaps from one element to another, the integration of

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[1] See the special issues of *Caietele Echinox* („Literature in the Digital Age", 2011), *Transilvania* („Muzeul Digital al Romanului Românesc", no. 10/2019, 2020, and 2021), *Transylvanian Review* („Romanian Literature in the Digital Age", 2019) or research projects such as INTELLIT (https://intellit.ici.ro/) or ARCAN (https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/arcan), alongside the Digital Humanities MA started by University of Bucharest in 2019 (http://admitere.unibuc.ro/noul-program-de-masterat-digital-humanities-la-facultatea-de-limbi-si-literaturi-straine/).

[2] See Ion Manolescu, *Noțiuni pentru studiul textualității virtuale* (București: Ars Docendi, 2002) and *Videologia: o teorie tehno-culturală a imaginii globale* (Iași: Polirom, 2003).

multimedia elements (image, sound, video), the possibility to collectively create vast and constantly changing fictional universes.

The first chapter of this work is devoted to the digital and to digital narrative in general. It begins with a brief overview of the field just after the advent of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s. Then, it was Robert Coover who proclaimed the death of the printed book[3] with the emergence of what he called hyperspace, using the argument that printed objects can become digital and digital objects cannot become print. The explosion of storage and processing capacities in the digital environment led to a rethinking of strategies for text archives, which were slowly beginning to go digital. This period is a pioneering one for digitisation, with the emergence of projects such as the US government's Digital Libraries Initiative[4] and DELOS[5], funded by the European Union, along with online research archives such as the e-print archive (*arXiv*) and archives of fictional texts (*Project Gutenberg*). Building on these, I describe the chronological evolution of digital object storage, proposing and inventorying three categories of archives containing such objects: archives with digitised objects, archives with objects that are *born-digital* and archives with mixed objects. Also, as part of this exploration, I propose a brief comparative analysis of the types of artefacts according to the medium in which they manifest themselves and according to the mode of production and that of reception/distribution. Returning to the evolution of artefacts in the digital age, I focus on their preservation, which seems much more difficult in the case of *born-digital* objects (especially complex *born-digital* objects such as interactive or hypertextual fictions) and, following Marshall McLuhan[6], I suggest that the digital medium, unlike previous media, whose stability over time is greater, has a property I call intra-media obsolescence. Next, however, after seeking to demonstrate statistically the idea that print and the printed book have by no means 'died' in the last thirty years, the research traces the causes of the general reluctance to digital reading and consumption of digital and textual narrative artefacts (e-books or other types of long-form textual digital artefacts), identifying four types of factors that might contribute to this: cultural-psychological, socio-educational, the break-up of the digital *entertainment* industry into several sectors, and intra-media obsolescence.

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[3] Robert Coover, „The End of Books", *New York Times*, 21 iunie, 1992, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/specials/coover-end.html.
[4] Edward A. Fox, „The Digital Libraries Initiative: Update and Discussion", *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science* vol. 26, nr. 1 (October/November 1999), https://web.archive.org/web/20180403103609/http://www.asis.org/Bulletin/Oct-99/fox.html.
[5] See Constantino Thanos and Vittore Casarosa, „The Key Role of the DELOS Network of Excellence in Establishing Digital Libraries as a Research Field in Europe", *Liber Quarterly* vol. 26, no. 4 (2017): 296-307.
[6] Marshall and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1992).

Next, the first chapter maps the new characteristics of society, the self and communication in the digital age, starting with the network-society models proposed by Manuel Castells and Jan van Dijk[7], on the premise that the structural parameters of the new society, one of concurrent experiences and the relativization of space and time, are essential for understanding any specific literary phenomena. I thus explore, in a first stage, the concepts of *space of flows* and *timeless time* proposed by Castells and the networked structures proposed by van Dijk, then I address networked audiences and the self as theorized by danah boyd and Sherry Turkle[8] and, finally, networked communication and how social networks are felt by the networked self/selves, with the help of texts by Zadie Smith and László Barabási[9]. In doing so, I arrive at the implications these changes have on the production and reception of fictional artefacts and even what Patrick Jagoda names network aesthetics[10]. The last part of the first chapter examines, in an operation that may risk appearing somewhat didactic, some over-used concepts, because, as I will demonstrate, the shift to the network society implies a reformulation and resizing of seemingly unanimously known and "traditional" frameworks and concepts. Thus, I explore the terms narrative and interaction, their relationship to each other, and the narratology-ludology debate of the early 2000s. In order to provide as broad a picture as possible of the general meaning of narrative, I inventory, as a starting point, some definitions (in Romanian and English) from various generalist and literary dictionaries[11], analysing and grouping them according to the chosen approach, and then set out the way this study understands narrative. The same is then done with interaction, which is explored mainly from the perspective of its relationship with narratives, finally focusing on interactive narrative and the four levels of interactivity identified by Marie-Laure Ryan[12] and taking stock of one of the most relevant disputes in the field, that between narratology and ludology (narratives vs. video games).

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[7] See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd edition (Chichester: Wiley, 2010) and Jan van Dijk, *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media*, 2nd edition (Londra: Sage, 2006).

[8] See danah michele boyd, „Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics", PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2008 and Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together. Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

[9] See Albert-László Barabási, „Introduction and Keynote to A Networked Self", in *A Networked Self. Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites,* ed. Zizi Papacharissi (New York: Routledge, 2011) and Zadie Smith, „Generation Why", *The New York Review* (25 November 2010), https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/11/25/generation-why/

[10] See Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[11] Appendix 1 is the result of this research work.

[12] See Marie-Laure Ryan, „Interactive Narrative", in *Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson and Benjamin J. Robertson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 292-298.

The next chapter of this thesis delves into a critical and comparative analysis of some of the most popular terms used to define narrative artifacts in the digital environment, thus also providing a brief history or chronology of their evolution. The need for such an exploration arises for two reasons: first, we are dealing with a heterogeneous panorama with multiple features, and my position is that if we are confronted with such a terminological web, the best way forward is to probe them in detail and fix the relationships between them, and second, that Espen Aarseth's 1997 statement ("a major problem in recent discussions of computer media is a lack of rigorous terminology"[13]) unfortunately remains valid even today. Thus, starting from three models – which I call the hypothetical, the technical and the cultural - described by Vannevar Bush (Memex)[14], Ted Nelson (hypertext)[15] and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (rhizome)[16], I analyse six others, which I will also briefly present in this introduction, because they provide an overview of the evolution of narrative in the digital environment.

Interactive fiction, investigated by Nick Montfort and Emily Short[17], is the first digital manifestation of narrative, which emerged with the so-called *text-adventures* of the 1980s, computer programs that involved two elements: a *model-world*, a kind of virtual map that could be navigated, and a *parser*, a code that allowed commands received scripturally from the user/player to be understood, retrieved and executed. These types of narratives reached their peak in the pre-World Wide Web period and are now considered the precursors of video games. Hypertext fiction is probably the best-known form of digital literature because it makes use of the main technology also used by web browsers, the hyperlink, a clickable link, as a way to get from one node of the web to another. There is enough production of hypertextual artifacts for a canon to even be proposed by Astrid Ensslin[18], and the practice is one of the most theorized in the early days of digital fiction, claiming direct claim to a postmodern tradition of literature[19]. *Cybertext* is the first broad textual model designed to define the new form of virtual textuality

[13] Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 59.

[14] Vannevar Bush, „As We May Think", *The Atlantic*, July 1945, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/.

[15] Theodor H. Nelson, „A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate", *Proceedings of the 20th National Conference* (New York: Association of Computing Machinery, 1965), 84-100.

[16] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[17] See Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003) and Emily Short, „Interactive Fiction", in *Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson and Benjamin J. Robertson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

[18] Astrid Ensslin, *Canonizing Hypertext* (Londra: Continuum, 2007).

[19] George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

and pave the way for the founding of the discipline of game studies, and in the volume in which he theorizes it, Espen Aarseth adds another element, that of ergodic literature (the two only partially overlap), which is meant to include as many artifacts as possible, regardless of the medium in which they are produced, that cause the reader to "perform in an extranoematic sense"[20]. The Danish professor's model is a complex one and is updated by Markuu Eskelinen in 2012[21]. Technotext and network-fiction are probably the least used of the terms analysed. Proposed by N. Katherine Hayles[22], the former refers to artifacts that question their own medium of distribution, and the demonstrations are largely conducted on printed artifacts (from object-books to oddly spelled volumes such as *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski). Proposed by David Ciccoricco[23], the latter considers artefacts that make use of hypertext technology to describe emergent narratives that can be recombined. In addition to the umbrella terms of digital fiction or electronic literature, some highly inclusive, the chapter also dwells on the concept of the interactive digital narrative, whose theorist is Hartmut Koenitz. The most recent of these, and the one that encompasses most types of artefacts (from art installations to films to online communities to textual digital narratives), IDN requires that technology be involved in the 'artistic vision' and that the reader/user participate directly in constituting the narrative.

Considered a necessary *overview*, especially as it is currently missing from international research, the second chapter culminates in a final part that proposes a comparative analysis of the concepts presented above, starting from the narrative artefacts included in their models by the theorists and analysing the interferences and trends in the case of each, by aggregating the results in Appendix 2 and illustrating them in *user-friendly* data visualisations.

The third chapter of this work is dedicated to the digital, interaction and narrative experiment in Romanian literature. After setting the framework in the first chapter and cross-examining the concepts that make up the terminological canvas of the field in the second part, I make the transition to exploring autochthonous production. Before moving on, however, a survey of commentaries on the subject is necessary, and I thus review how the influence of the digital was viewed in Romanian literature since the early 2000s, the establishment's scepticism and the few disparate attempts to import an international theoretical framework and promote digital writing practices locally, and, at the same time, a brief overview of new Romanian

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[20] Aarseth, *Cybertext,* 1.
[21] Markuu Eskelinen, *Cybertext Poetics* (Londra: Continuum, 2012).
[22] N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).
[23] David Ciccoricco, *Reading Network Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

research interests in the digital humanities. The first section of this chapter focuses on the analysis of metadiscourse and, entitled "The Operationalization of the Experiment in Romanian Literary Criticism", has a double structure, investigating at first various models of experimental literature, proposed by scholars such as Gerald Prince or Warren Motte, as well as theoretical attempts to define and analyse experimental literature in Romania. The second part focuses on the quantitative analysis of key words related to what is considered "experimental", found in Romanian literary histories written by E. Lovinescu, G. Călinescu, Nicolae Manolescu and Mihai Iovănel, as well as in the *General Dictionary of Romanian Literature* and the *Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel*. By simply searching several carefully chosen terms in the corpus, a cartography of what is considered to be experimental clearly emerges, alongside its relation to the canon, to the dynamics of literary genres and to the temporal evolution of Romanian literature. Through this section I attempt to cover what can be called a chronology of the Romanian 'literary experiment' as it appears in the main literary histories and which, in the absence of the vocabulary explored in the second chapter, represents the most suggestive parallel tracing of narrative artefacts that might fit (a posteriori) into proto-hypertextual or interactive categories.

The second section, and the first devoted to analogical Romanian literature, traces interactive strategies in pre-modern Romanian prose, addressing three large narrative texts: Dimitrie Cantemir's *Istoria ieroglifică*, Ion Budai-Deleanu's *Țiganiada* and Alexandru Odobescu's *Pseudo-Kynegetikos*. The narrative artifacts were chosen because, given their structure, there are all the prerequisites for elements that propose incipient forms of interactivity: the animal allegory in *Istoria ieroglifică*, the metatext of the *Țiganiada* or the complex intertextual network in *Pseudo-Kynegetikos*, together with the last chapter of the narrative. The next section, still in the area of analogue Romanian literature, no longer aims to explore interactivity or proto-hypertextuality, but, aiming to cover the beginning of the 20th century, surveys early Romanian SF novels. I have chosen this path because, in general, objects or digital technologies that allow for new narrative properties or discourse exposition are prefigured in SF universes. Starting from a brief exposition of the situation of SF in Romania over time and its status in the literary field, the case study undertakes, in a rapid quantitative approach, a quantification of the evolution of SF debuts in Romania, according to the Internet Speculative Fiction Database, and then thematically examines the limits of describing the future in terms of analogue and digital imagination[24], in terms of worldview, technologies and

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[24] The terms of analog and digital imagination are proposed and explained in this dissertation.

nutrition, and health. Also in this sub-section, the example of an adapted translation of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* is discussed, in which changes to the original fictional universe could be seen as a form of intertextual interactivity.

The fourth and fifth sections examine two works that can be categorized as proto-hypertexts: *Tablete din Ţara De Kuty*, starting from Arghezi's foreword and doing a reading experiment – reading the volume twice, the first time in the chronological order of the tablets, and the second time in a random order generated by random.org; Mircea Horia Simionescu's *Ingeniosul bine temperat* cycle starting from its structure and continuing with the types of interaction and connections that the text implies, even if analogically. Starting from the idea that the characters who "travel" between the entries in *Bibliografia generală*, *Dicţionarul onomastic* and who appear in the narratives of *Toxicologia* and *Breviarul* are the pillars of MHS's narrative, and using metadata mining and digital visualization tools, I propose to probe the character networks at the level of each individual narrative and at the level of the whole cycle.

The following two applications are done on narratives that fall into the category I call analogue-digital, by which I want to highlight that they existed, at some point (at the time of release, in this case), in both analogue and digital formats. The narratives chosen for these applications are those that are part of the prose volumes *Chei fierbinţi pentru ferestre moi* and *Stîngăcii şi enormităţi* by Adrian Oţoiu and *Generaţia pierdută* by Nicolae Matei. By their interface and structure, but also by the reception they had at the time of publication, Adrian Oţoiu's interconnected short stories are of major interest for my approach, especially considering the coordinates of the fictional world and the ending of the second volume. Nicolae Matei's text, presented as "the first novel in Romanian on the Internet", has been largely ignored by critics, and its discovery and the possibility of discussing it is one of the important endeavours of this research. This is especially so given the marketing of the novel as an interactive one, whose content can be modified by anyone by sending an email.

The last two sections of this paper deal with digital literature. In addition to the analysis itself, they propose to integrate into the object of study of Romanian literary research some unusual artefacts for the current state of the field: the online community *Lumea lui Harry Potter* and the fanfictions published on the Wattpad platform. This thesis approaches *LHP* as a collective interactive narrative, in which users' avatars participate in a shared fictional world, which they construct on-the-go. Exploring the structure of the community, the possible online activities, but also the offline component involving emotional attachment and personal involvement, the section tests to what extent such an "ephemeral" narrative can still be analysed

as such after the disappearance of the community. Also, in the case of Wattpad, the practices of collective text editing and real person fiction as a subgenre of fanfiction are addressed. At the end of the part dedicated to Romanian fictional artefacts, I propose a correspondence between the characteristics analysed in detail in the third chapter and the concepts compared in the second chapter.

Of course, my approach is not an exhaustive one, but rather one that aims at creating an academic interest in Romania for the study of digital literature, proposing some premises for its development by focusing on narrative artefacts. Also, even if I tried to cover a wide period including artifacts from the pre-modern period of Romanian literature (belonging to Dimitrie Cantemir, Ion Budai-Deleanu or Alexandru Odobescu), from the modern period (science fiction novels published in the first half of the 20th century and Tudor Arghezi's tablets), from the communist period (Mircea Horia Simionescu's cycle), from the period immediately after the advent of the Internet (Adrian Oțoiu and Nicolae Matei's narratives), and from the Web 2.0 period (the *Lumea lui Harry Potter* community, the Wattpad platform), they are not the only ones that deserve attention and, by analysing them, I am not trying to propose a parallel canon, but only to bring into discussion some of the artefacts that lend themselves to such a debate. Moreover, the conceptual inventory made in the second chapter does not claim to be a complete one either, but one of the most discussed models in the field. But given the heterogeneous nature of the field and the substantial terminological production, there are certainly many other architectures dedicated to narratives in the digital environment. Nevertheless, the present research represents a step towards integrating digital production and reception practices into the Romanian literary system.