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**THE PHYSICAL REVENGE OF THE BOOK:
THE ROLE OF PHYSICALITY IN LITERATURE**

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Introduction: The Revenge of the Analog

Back in 2016, a book entitled *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* by a Canadian journalist, David Sax, reached bookshop shelves, achieving moderate success (and receiving mixed reviews). By no means exceptional, Sax's text has the merit of casting light upon a contentious and fascinating aspect of contemporary society, mainly, the resurgence of older analog forms of media, such as vinyl, celluloid film, and print, in a world that for the past twenty years seemed determined to move away from analog in favour of its digital counterparts. Largely inspired by the ideas of Marshall McLuhan, Sax's text attempts to restore the dynamic role of the medium in the mainstream discussion. For example, the Canadian journalist describes in great detail the sense of pride and attachment that the consumer has toward their meticulously built vinyl collection and the extent of their engagement and emotional connection with a board game, especially when compared to videogames. Streaming services and ebooks might be cheaper and efficient, but the exact same content seems to gain an intrinsic value when stored in a tangible medium—in a form that can be touched, weighed, shown to and shared with friends. The recent resurgence of this sensibility reveals more about the consumer than the media, as it unveils a deeper complexity that exists between different forms of media and their users. This connection cannot

simply be reduced to ownership and current consumer culture, but rather demonstrates a necessity for touch, smell, and other sensorial stimuli that traditional media promote by underlining their absence in the screen-dominated world.

However, there are some contentious points in Sax's theory, namely, approaching the analog in terms of revenge. While reading *The Revenge of Analog* one might be misled into thinking that the phenomenon is just a recent and unprecedented affair, the result of dualistic contraposition between digital and analog. But this cannot be further from the truth. There is, in fact, a long and vast tradition of literary experimentation that has been aware of the inherent communicative possibilities offered by the choice of a medium. For example, the term *metafiction*, popularized by Patricia Waugh in the 1980s as a way to describe the conscious emphasis of texts towards their fictive nature as a narrative strategy (Waugh 2), often pays attention to the employment of paratextual elements such as book covers, layouts, fonts and so forth as valid communicative strategies. Another interesting perspective is offered by the Polish word *liberatura* (Eng. *liberature*), proposed by Zenon Fajfer in the late 1990s, where paratextual awareness is not something optional, but rather mandatory both during production and fruition (Fajfer 8). In Fajfer's perspective, the physicality of the book becomes a stylistic choice in its own right—a choice that, due to the omnipresence of the material, can be overlooked, but not evaded. Thus, the traditional form becomes a choice within a plethora of choices.

The care for paratextuality is as ancient as human literacy: whether to emphasize the constructed-ness of a literary work or as a stylistic choice to incorporate the object in the narration. This is not to say that Sax's position is completely incorrect, as his book is a concrete proof of the (re)emerging awareness for the role of the physicality of the media in general. Yet, there is a more complex and dynamic relationship between analog and digital that should be explored. In any case, the intention is not to dismiss Sax's work for its

shortcomings, but rather to use *The Revenge of Analog* as a starting point to further discussion of what has been a (re)emerging trend both in literary production and literary studies in the last few years.

The Role of the Book in Storytelling

The awareness of the paratextual elements of the book has steadily increased in recent years. Fostered by the transformative force of digital media, many writers have started to rediscover a peculiar sensibility for the physical and typographical organization of their books and the role these parts can play in narration. Novels such as Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007), Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow!* (2012), or Jedediah Berry's *The Family Arcana* (2015) hint at an awareness that is only increasing as time goes by. However, despite a long literary tradition of experimentations with paratextuality and a few recent powerful voices such as Aarseth's perspectives on *ergodic literature* (1997), Zenon Fajfer's concept of *liberature* (1999), Hayles' book *Writing Machines* (2002), Alison Gibbons's (2014) research on fictionality, Barton's investigations on visual devices in contemporary prose fiction (2016), and Côme's attention toward the topic of *shuffle literature* (2017), the most widespread perception of those unfamiliar with the world of literary theory and media studies still tends to propose the archaic dualistic dichotomy between content and form. This particular perspective tends to reduce media to mere vessels containing messages, envelopes that at best have no meaning and at worst gain arbitrary value.

In this sense, Sax's book is guilty of this mainstream problem, namely, of reducing the discussion to a mere conflictual division between analog and digital, as if the digital was solely content, detached from the physical media used to access the web, and analog a mere container that only has value for its price or personal reasons. This sterile dualism quickly loses its steam when confronted with novels like Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2007) or graphic novels such as Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012) that showcase a thriving

awareness of physicality in literature that has been present through the entire history of human literacy. Examples of this practice can be found in Hellenic calligrams, in the medieval *Carmina Figurata*, the emblematic literature of the renaissance and baroque periods, and then, since Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767), it has been a growing trend in the Western literary production, rising towards its peak in the 19th century with Mallarmé and later in the 20th century with Joyce. Peculiarly, the last two literary figures will later inspire legions of writers, further propelling these experimental tendencies. Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961), Saporta's *Composition n°1* (1962), Italo Calvino's *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969 and 1973), B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), Georges Perec's *La vie mode d'emploi* (1978), and Milorad Pavić's *Hazarski rečnik* (1987) prove to exhibit a particular kind of attention for this topic both in the post-war avantgarde of the 1960s and onwards.

Another enthralling example of the ongoing trend for the material and spatial awareness of the book is the aforementioned concept of liberature. Coined by the Polish poet Zenon Fajfer in 1999 as an influential concept in his literary manifesto *Liberatura. Aneks do słownika terminów literackich*, the term plays with the Latin polysemy of the word *liber*, which may mean both book and free (Fajfer 9). Inspired by Mallarmé's and Joyce's literary production, Fajfer revendicates the inseparability of literature from the category of space both in its physical and visual form. This claim has proven productive, especially when confronting Fajfer's theoretical position with his literary output. For instance, *Oka-leczenie* (2009) written in collaboration with Katarzyna Bazarnik—who published extensively on the subject of liberature (Bazarnik, 2016)—is a fascinating example. Starting with its accordion shaped structure (Figure 1), the book effectively unites its form with the presented content as the two external parts (black text on white) contain two different conversations: one of a family surrounding a dying father and another of a couple that is having a baby. The central part (white words on a black

background) simulates the heart rate and perhaps represents the consciousness of both the dying man and the baby. The third part is not in plain sight but rather hidden to the reader, which is probably the most enrapturing aspect of *Oka-leczenie*. This hidden layer of text is hinted at by the instructions that can be found on the front (in Polish) and back (in English) pastedowns of the book:

This book contains two kinds of texts: a visible and an invisible one. The visible one takes on several various shapes: from commonly objectionable words to words-objects. No optical device is necessary to read most of them. The invisible text can emerge only after the first letters of all the visible words printed on the white pages have been put together. The same procedure should be followed to recover further layers of invisible texts until one has reached the lowest/highest layers consisting of a single word. This word emanates new texts. Alternatively one can read all these layers simultaneously, if one is capable of that, of course. The number of invisible words (321+40+321) constitutes approximately one-sixth of the whole text and is inversely proportional to the number of invisible layers. The words printed on the black pages are governed by a different kind of physics. (Fajfer and Bazarnik 2009)

The invisible text can only be accessed through the active participation of the reader, who must arm themselves with a pen, piece of paper, and patience, as the constant variations of fonts, the alteration between black and white, and the disposition of text further enriches the reading experience on a sensorial level.

A possible interpretation of the text looks at the extremes of the book as representing the opposing ends of human life. These two intense moments are divided by the nature of their emotions and, at the same time, indissolubly connected both conceptually and physically by the architecture of the book – an architecture that offers multiple access and exit points and showcases dynamics that can only be grasped through the communicative potential of the analog medium.

Thinking about the book as a medium in terms proposed by Fajfer and Bazarnik inevitably paves the way for a reconsideration of paratextuality: not a space on which literature can be done, but rather the space of literature, where form and content are directed towards the same goal. This awareness scales

back the “revenge” proclaimed by Sax’s title, delineating a more complex, long, and dynamic relationship not only between literature and the book as a medium, but also between analog and digital media. After all, if something never really goes away, how can it then come back for revenge?



Figure. Fajfer & Bazarnik, *Oka-leczenie* (photo: R. Cipollari)

Cognitive Prototypes and Conceptualization in Literature

If the relationship between older and newer media is not so clear-cut as the binary opposition might lead one to believe, a more sensible approach to the subject might be a holistic one, where both forms of media are conceptualized as being part of the same ecosystem. Perhaps, an interesting starting point for this type of perspective could be Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* (1994), where the Canadian scholar states that “a new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them”

(174). Thus, the introduction of new media forces individuals to filter older media, highlighting attributes that were latent but might now be employed in order to keep them relevant. Mobile phones are a perfect example that helps to illustrate this as they have been reshaped into a form that has made the phone function secondary. Yet they are still generally perceived as the same thing—people might now refer to them as smartphones, but the change of the name has not really shifted the categorization of the object—while the people’s interaction has drastically changed with its introduction. This phenomenon finds its explication within the principles of *Gestalt theory* (*Gestaltpsychologie*)—a theory in the field of psychology which emphasizes that perception is never singular and independent from sensory stimuli, but rather holistic and indivisible (Hornbostel 85).

In the case of literary production, the introduction of digital media such as ebook readers and other reading devices has had a radical effect on older paper media. With almost unlimited memory and lightness (carrying around a paper copy of *War and Peace* is not a small endeavour), digital devices have claimed the primary function of the book medium, namely, the ability to store and carry information efficiently. This inevitably forced a recontextualization of the book as a medium, shifting from being an abstract *container* to a more concrete and meaningful object both in terms of practicality and aesthetics. The digital is not only cheaper, but it also has an instantaneous reach that paper cannot match. This poses the question of why people use paper at all. Well, although it might seem trivial, the paper is still good at what it does (which makes it economically valuable) and offers a sensorial experience of touch and spatiality that is still precluded from the digital. This realization has reinvigorated the latent physical properties of the medium into something that can be experimented with for both artistic and economic reasons.

Interestingly, some more recent paratextual works (both prose and poetry) tend to employ their physicality as a *reactive* impulse towards the digital. A revindication of space and style in spite of digital dominance can be observed,

for example, in Chris Ware's works, which are critical of digital technologies both in the larger social context and, particularly, in the way comics are now produced (Roeder 74). This clashes with the experimentations of the modernist period, such as Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, or the avant-gardes of the 1960s, like Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* or Marc Saporta's *Composition n°1*, where experimentation was more preoccupied with formal innovation connected with an *emergent* awareness for the object.

A possible explanation for this shift towards a reactive attitude towards digital media can be tied to the process of *recategorization* which started due to the progressive dissemination of digital texts and e-readers. Eleanor Rosch describes recategorization as the mechanism where the human mind understands objects by categorizing them into *cognitive prototypes* which define our *Perceived World Structure* (Rosch 29). This process aims to provide the maximum amount of information with the least cognitive effort. Cognitive prototypes, according to Rosch's experiments, are the results of the categorization process that define objects and group them through empirical observation. For example, small flying singing birds, like sparrows and robins, are *prototypical birds* because they share common features that North American speakers tend to associate with *birdiness*. Penguins, chickens, and ostriches are still considered birds as they share some key bird features, but nonetheless, they are non-prototypical. Of course, the same process applies to objects as their functions are inevitably tied to the prototypical understanding people associate with them (Rosch 30-34). This process of recategorization of the book medium offers a sensible explanation for the increasing interest in paratextuality in recent literary production. It involves the recognition of such an object as an *organizational principle* within the structure of the work of art (Shklovsky 15). Snatched from the rigid patterns of efficient production the book has rediscovered the plurality of its forms, turning what was once understood as a simple container into a key component of literary production.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this newfound sensibility is not necessarily the result of breaking away from artistic traditions, as it happened during the 1960s, but rather the recognition of its unique existence as a direct answer to the transformations brought about by digital media. In this sense, similarly to the mobile phone that turned into the smartphone, the book too has adapted, shifting its goals and functions to the paratext as a way to keep its relevance.

The Materiality of Media and Its Architectonic Role in Narration

According to Bachtin, formal elements of a literary work achieve aesthetic relevance only when they are axiologically ordered in a precise structure (or architecture) that fulfils its aesthetic ambition (15). Physical attributes of the book can be employed with the same aesthetic function. Thus, an alteration of the form can exert a significant influence over both the content it carries and its users. Such a process results in a dynamic structure carefully constructed to highlight some features rather than others. This can be done with multiple purposes in mind: it can be performed in order to estrange the reader and force them to recognize the fictionality and the arbitrary structure of the object they are holding. By altering the form of the book or the layout of the page, the author can provoke their audience's creative way of reading these changes, questioning the writer's own ability to exert control over their craft and turning the conventional into the unconventional.

The texts mentioned so far try to work in this direction, employing and altering their form to reinforce the unity between form and content. Therefore, the form of the literary work should be understood and analysed as an architecture that is constructed for the content it is presenting, and where the various techniques employed by the artist are there to actually construct such structure (Bachtin 51). These perspectives shed light on Sax's biggest shortcomings, namely, the validation of analog media just for being analog. The discussed literary panorama demonstrates that the analog media have more to do with the principle of organization for the overall experience of the content

rather than being intrinsically valuable as an escapist outlet from the digital. The analog becomes valuable because it requires a different kind of participation, a relationship that not only depends on the understanding of the message but also on its form, a material that can be actively manipulated by a creator for their communicative goals.

Theory in Practice: B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*

A compelling example that further illustrates the theoretical intervention presented above is B.S. Johnson's 1969 book, *The Unfortunates* (Figure 2).



Figure 2: B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (photo: R. Cipollari)

The novel is composed of twenty-seven loose chapters, which span in their length from a single paragraph to twelve pages. Leaving aside the two sections labelled "FIRST" and "LAST," the other twenty-five are unnamed and can be read in any order. Every single one of these twenty-five chapters can be

perceived as an individual memory emerging from the narrator's mind. All of them are related to Tony, one of Johnson's friends who died of cancer. Each memory constitutes a separate chapter, marked with a distinctive symbol that the reader can rearrange in any order. The interesting aspect of this book is that it relies on the creative use of its physicality. Johnson's objective is to simulate the chaotic nature of mnemonic processing with paper, turning each chapter into a single memory that has neither order, nor relevancy.

By consciously disrupting the traditional form of the book, Johnson deconstructs the prototypical expectations most readers have of the object, incentivizing the creation of a new cognitive prototype and new metaphorical associations. In other words, the British writer estranges and defamiliarizes the reader from the very object he or she is holding in favour of his own metaphorical vision. This use of the metaphoric association between book and mind arises from the overlapping of the same *structural metaphor* (Lakoff & Johnson 30) that, in the case of Johnson's book, can be related to the designation of the book as a container that overlaps with the perception of the mind in the same metaphorical terms. In short, according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, structural metaphors are "structuring one kind of thing or experience in terms of another kind, but the same natural dimension of experience is used in both" (15). The sharing of metaphorical understanding between the book and the mind can be showcased by the following sentences, e.g. "I can't *get her out* of my mind" or "I wrote it *in my book*." Both examples demonstrate how books and minds are often conceptualized as containers where ideas and words can be inserted or removed. Of course, objects are rarely described by one single metaphor, but in *The Unfortunates* the overlap between the mind and the book is evident.

Moreover, Johnson's estrangement goes beyond this. The British writer also follows Joyce and Proust by using the stream of consciousness technique to create the illusion of a mnemonic act as it can be seen in the following passages:

Again the house at the end of a bus-route (Johnson, "Again the house" 1)

Southwell, the Chapter House, the delicate, convoluted carving on the capital, foliage is it, yes, leaves the book *The Leaves of Southwell*, now I think of it (Johnson, "Southwell, the Chapter House" 1)

Cast parapet, pierced rondel design, the canal oiling its way under, under, and the great letters on the end wall of a warehouse BRITISH WATERWAYS, weathered flanking, the midland red brick sound it appears, the red strong enough to come through that amount of blackening, of discoloration, and the buses, I remember (Johnson, "Cast parapet" 1)

Away from the ground, the crowds gone, this rough forecourt littered now, not with the photos of the Heavy Mob, unfortunately, I look, but just with litter, programmes, I keep mine, still, I always used to keep mine. (Johnson, "Away from the ground" 1)

By focusing on the house at the end of a bus-route or the British Waterway's sign, Johnson intentionally connects his memories to what can be defined as a *triggering* effect that functions like Proust's *petites madeleines*. These recurring elements act as entry points in the protagonist's memories and create an additional fictive level in the novel that further promotes the illusion of mnemonic simulation.

Lastly, another fascinating tool that Johnson employs in his mnemonic simulation through the means of paper is the recurrent use of *textual gaps*. Textual gaps, as Barton points out, "often represent pauses in thought in the internal monologues of the character" (30). Regarding the use of textual gaps in *The Unfortunates*, Barton himself gives a captivating analysis of the following passage:

I know this city! How did I not realize when he said, Go and do City this week, that it was this city? Tony. His cheeks sallowed and collapsed round the insinuated bones, the gums shrivelled, was it, or shrunken, his teeth now standing free of each other in the unnatural half yawn of his mouth (...) because of what the treatment had done to his saliva glands, how it had finished them. Him (Johnson, FIRST)

According to Barton, the reader notes the extended blank spaces as a way to give relevance to the introduction of the subject, that is, Tony. His name stands out thanks to the blank spaces that surround it. At the same time, these very same blanks simulate the natural pauses in thought, hinting at the fact that the entire page is indeed a part of the reading experience (Barton 37).

Linking textual gaps with pauses in thinking confirms the proposed theory of imitation of the mind's mnemonic process through the physical reorganization of the book. The reading process is intentionally made more difficult and bothersome in order to generate active participation from the user. Johnson wants his chapters shuffled and read in a random order to force estrangement upon his reader, to transmit a peculiar aesthetic perspective that will prove his point, or as he would put it:

I want my ideas to be expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left. Indeed, I would go further and say that to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure. I want him to see my (vision), not something conjured out of his own imagination. (...) If he wants to impose his imagination, let him write his own books. (Johnson in Tew & White 60)

This implies a particular relation with the reader: one where the reader actively participates in the functioning of the work of art. Functioning being the keyword here as Johnson does not care for the reader's perspective in *The Unfortunates*, but rather aims to *prove* to his readers how original and effective his artistic creation is. To simulate the mnemonic process on paper, Johnson demonstrates how creative writing can transcend its reliance solely on words and creatively reshape not only the book but also its role in the overall reading process.

Conclusion: The Analog Pastiche

As stated so far, metafiction is not something new in literature. Nevertheless, awareness of the physical nature of the medium has only recently been given attention by the mainstream media thanks to the digital revolution of the early

2000s. By losing their efficiency, paper and other analog media have gained an emotional, if not luxurious, aura, as Sax noted in his analysis:

Meanwhile, the previous disadvantages of vinyl record now became attractive. Records are large and heavy; require money, effort, and taste to create and buy and play; and cry out to be thumbed over and examined. Because consumers spend money to acquire them, they gain a genuine sense of ownership over the music, which translates into pride. (16)

And in the case of printed material, his statement becomes even more relevant for the discussion of literary texts:

Reading on paper is highly functional and almost second nature for us. It engages those same five senses that Maria Sebregondi spoke about when explaining the appeal of a Moleskine notebook. Even though the content of an article in the print edition of *The Economist* is the exact same one I can read on the publication's website or app, the digital experience lacks the smell of the ink, the sound of the page crinkling, the texture of the paper on my fingers. These may seem irrelevant to the way the article is consumed, but they aren't. Read on an iPad, every article looks and feels the same. The haptic variation from one printed page to another helps stem the feeling of information overload. (Sax 111)

As people get used to objects and their common properties in a certain way, they start to categorize them as cognitive prototypes. The object that stands in front of them is conceptualized, canonized, and crystallized as an immutable entity. Despite the fact that they are facing it, people cannot see the object anymore, only the conceptualized version of it with its conventional attributes. New media and art remove objects from the grasp of automatised perception by firstly turning the familiar into strange and, subsequently, forcing their users to reconsider in the process the object itself. In *The Revenge of Analog*, Sax, taking notes from McLuhan, comments on the latter part of the process. However, Sax seems to forget the former, reducing the digital to only its trivial and easily replaceable contents—as if the keyboard and the device attached to it were somehow less physical than a typewriter. What is to be expected as the fate of all objects is that once people get used to them, they are recognized by their main characteristics, their silhouettes, which implies the disappearance of unimportant attributes and, ultimately, even their original essence (like in the

smartphone example). Language is a treacherous ally of these processes as the preposition *on* fosters the dualistic misconception over digital media. Phrases like “I read it *on* my phone/ *on* my PC/ *on* the internet” offer the illusion of detachment between content and media that is purely ephemeral. The preposition *in* functioned (and still functions) in the same way for paper. Yet various research fields of the twentieth century observed this incongruity and rejected it. In the field of literary theory, this gave rise to the structuralist movement which, despite its limitations, produced fruitful results. In this sense, Sax’s book re-proposes the old dualistic separation between content and form. This is unfortunate and slightly ironic, as his book aims to underline how relevant form has become. Nonetheless, Sax correctly points out the reactive nature of the current resurgence of the analog:

The Revenge of Analog is occurring now precisely *because* digital technology has become so damn good. Digital computing has been with us for the better part of the past half century, personal computing for the past three decades, the Internet for two decades, and smartphones for one. Today, a digital solution is almost always the default: the most efficient, widely used, cheapest, and obvious tool to get the job done. (xvi, italics in the original)

The digital has become the dominant force due to its efficiency and cheapness. Digital books, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, are overall better storage devices than paper ones. Consequently, contemporary writers need justifiable reasons to use paper media rather than digital ones. This does explain the shift towards liberatic texts and the focus on metafictional aspects of literature as a way to generate estrangement in readers. The book, thus, becomes something relevant and integral both for the narrative and for the reading experience.

An amalgam of past traditions and new awareness results in the maintenance of a medium that should have been obsolete but still retains relevance despite the passing of time. Metafictional texts, such as *Kapow!*, *The Unfortunates*, *House of Leaves*, *The Raw Shark Text*, *Composition n° 1*, and *Building Stories*, are re-experienced not merely as objects, but rather as

events/performances. They try to reflect on the nature of contemporary society, creating universes that often leave the coordinates of space and time with the reader, who can twist and turn the object in order to create a unique experience. This peculiar use of the object often follows the postmodern tradition of the *pastiche*, where the very possibility of objective interpretation is questioned. Writers turn the book into a Rubik's cube where content and medium inevitably influence each other, challenging the trustworthiness of both entities. This combinatory game where the form of the medium plays an active role in communication satirises the mesmerizing passivity that screens now impose on us.

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Abstract

In recent years, analog media, such as vinyl, film, and board games, seem to have been experiencing a resurgence in popularity despite the overwhelming advances of their digital counterparts. The phenomenon emerges as so widespread that even mainstream media have started to notice it. An interesting example of this increasing awareness is David Sax's book *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*. Inspired by similar publications, this paper explores a topic omitted by Sax, mainly, the resurgence of the awareness of the physical characteristics of the book as a medium and its communicative force in storytelling. By looking at various examples such as B.S Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, Zenon Fajfer and Katarzyna Bazarnik's *Oka-leczenie* and other texts, this article tries to shed some light on a long tradition of literary production aware of the role of materiality in storytelling—a trend that predates the recent interest that the mainstream media have developed for the analog forms.