

In Search of the Lost Aura*

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In his well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (first published in 1936), Walter Benjamin claimed that a work of art is characterised by an aura, which the viewer perceives as a sublime spell or devotion. In the age of mechanical reproduction this aura, according to Benjamin, is lost, because the work of art is no longer unique but reproduced, and the necessary distance for the aura to emerge between the work of art and the viewer has vanished.

Benjamin writes: „One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.” (Benjamin 1968: 223.)

And continues: “The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.” (Benjamin 1968: 224.)

Benjamin’s major examples are photography and cinema, where the aura has disappeared unlike, say, in for example a unique painting or sculpture.

When Benjamin wrote his essay, the film and photography were indeed the most recent innovations of technology. Today’s computer technology was unknown to Benjamin. His ideas can nevertheless be adapted and generalised in modern technological and cultural situations. Although Benjamin in his essay talks about the lost aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, the analogy is valid also about the current, digital age. We could claim that in digital age, too, the aura of a work of art has been lost, being destroyed by digital multiplicity.

This claim is primarily true in works of art in digital form, which mainly spread over the Internet. The present paper neglects other art forms and focuses on digital literature on the Internet.

Digital literature spreading on the Internet is a wide notion containing many different sub-categories. In addition to literature in traditional form, the Internet has cybertexts with

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complicated structure as well as phenomena that shift the borders of literature, the fringes of literature, including for example fan fiction and blogs.

We can consider fan fiction and blogs as an example of postmodernist democratisation of literature, of the so-called ‘everyman’s literature’, which is connected with the term „participatory culture”, i.e. culture created not only by professionals but by all interested people and amateur authors. (See also Jenkins 1992, 2006.) And the Internet is a perfect place for such kind of culture.

Fan fiction mostly represents texts created as a so-called pseudo-sequel to a book, comics, TV series or film. These are not written by professional authors, but fans. The characters are usually from the relevant book or film, and the location could be the same too (although not always); fan fiction author simply adds new plot lines. The main reason why fan fiction is produced is love for the objects the fan authors fancy and a wish to see their favourite characters in more scenes than the real authors of the books or films have foreseen. The other reason is entertainment and relating to the fan community who all like a book, film etc. A separate fan fiction sub-group contains texts written by fans of various pop or rock bands – this is the so-called real person fiction. Pop or rock idols in such stories act according to the author’s wish in a totally new environment; or sometimes the stories are connected with their activity in music. The authors’ fantasy is completely let loose here, only preserving the idols’ personal image, characteristics and appearance, to make it easier for the reader to grasp the plot. In fan fiction, the usual author’s role as well as the reader’s role has changed – on Internet forums the readers directly interfere with their comments in the writing process. Here we can recall the definition of an “active reader” by Espen Aarseth. While generally a reader’s traditional role is limited to interpretation, then in terms of digital literature a reader serves four functions. A reader has an active role – in addition to interpretation he navigates, configures and writes (Aarseth 1997: 64). So, in the case of fan fiction the readers are “active readers” – instead of mere reading, they interfere with the author’s creative process. Researching fan fiction is a relatively new area, although a lot of work has been done in recent years (see also Busse, Hellekson 2006).

In the recent years also blogs have spread vastly over the Internet and have quickly acquired the status of alternative journalism or alternative publishing place, but most of the blogs describe their authors’ daily lives. As Henry Jenkins has put it:

“Blogs are thus more dynamic than older-style home pages, more permanent than posts to a net discussion list. They are more private and personal than traditional journalism, more public than diaries” (Jenkins 2006: 179).

However, the current paper focuses on blogs that could be connected with literature. Literary blogs can be those produced by writers themselves, where they express their opinions also about cultural or social events or publish their work (e.g. the blog of Estonian writer Kivisildnik¹) or there are blogs by amateur authors with literary ambitions who use blogs to spread their work.

Returning to Benjamin and the aura of a work of art, we could claim that fan fiction and blogs as phenomena of literature lack aura in Benjamin's sense – after all, these are freely accessible, endlessly reproduced works. The Internet fan fiction or blogs are by no means unique; the texts are accessible to thousands of people, thousands of computers reproduce the same work of art simultaneously. There is also no longer any distance between the reader and the work, no devotion and ardent respect for a work of art.

Today's digital literature is a widely spreading and quickly developing phenomenon. Besides the emerging of new literary forms, also the texts previously published in print form continue to be digitalised and made available via Internet. At the same time also the unique archive materials are being digitalised and spread on the Internet. It would thus be possible to say that the general tendency nowadays is replacing the printed culture with digital culture and the printed texts with digital texts on the Internet.

There exist cases, however, where on the contrary to the dominant trend, virtual Internet literature has been transformed back into printed culture. Although these cases can be quite different, the current paper views two – in the first case it is fan fiction that is transformed into printed culture, and in the second the blogs. These cases differ also because fan fiction usually remains in the expanse of the Internet and is turned into books very rarely, whereas this is more common concerning blogs.

The first example is fan fiction by a Thai author called Linna Wongwantanee. Linna was a fan of the Russian girl band t.A.T.u. and published fan fiction on forums dedicated to the band in 2003 under the username of Uhaku. The fiction was titled „666”.² Linna's fan fiction belongs in a sub-group of real person fiction; the main characters were t.A.T.u. singers Lena Katina and Julia Volkova. t.A.T.u. was largely known because it carried out its marketing via pseudo-lesbian images, thus acquiring fans mainly among young lesbian and bisexual girls. As a marketing trick this worked very well, although it had nothing to do with

¹ <http://kivisildnik.blogspot.com/>

² E.g. <http://www.tatu.us/forum/>

the real sexual inclinations of the singers. At the same time, typical t.A.T.u. fan fiction focused on Julia and Lena's possible love affair.

Although Linna's fan fiction „666” was the usual t.A.T.u. fan fiction in a sense that its focus was on Julia and Lena's love affair, it nevertheless differed from others by its sheer bulk, maturity, strong visual power in depicting the scenes (Linna had studied at film school) and its entirety. Linna published her fan fiction at forums, a typical place to do it. She published her story by chapters, depending on how she got on with her writing. The readers on the forums reacted to every published chapter, commented them, expressed their appreciation, and made their own suggestions about how the story might continue. Linna replied to the comments and occasionally followed the advice; there was a continuous active discussion about what she was writing.

By the end of 2003 Linna had finished her fan fiction. The fan fiction authors who finish their work usually embark on a new project or find another hobby. Linna, however, decided to publish her work in a book form.

For that purpose she wanted to abandon the canons of fan fiction; the first step in that direction was to lose contact with the real t.A.T.u. singers – Lena and Julia. So Linna changed the protagonists' names, thus disrupting the connection with t.A.T.u. fan community. As a result, this fan fiction became ordinary fiction, with fictitious characters. This change of names was by no means enough. One of the prerequisites of real person fan fiction is the fact that the appearance and character of the protagonists are known to the readers, i.e. a fan fiction author has no need to create a wholly new character, but only has to vary on the given theme. Linna's changed novel now required that she worked more on her characters, made them more precise and profound. The text was additionally thoroughly edited, the style was polished and verbal excess was abandoned. The book appeared in 2004 (Wongwantanee 2004a) and is being sold on respectable on-line bookstores such as Amazon and Barnes and Nobles.

Why did Linna Wongwantanee do this? One of the reasons was the fact that she was in the position that fan fiction has its limits and the author is not free when writing about real people. She also argued:

“And then one moment I realized that I was no longer writing about my pop idols, but about myself. I discovered feelings and thoughts in myself that I did not know existed in me and that I was then pouring in my writing. This moment I realized that I was no longer writing fan fiction. Fan fiction is entertainment. Literature, the true art, is what touches you deeply and actually. So I gave up fan fiction and turned my novel into literature” (Wongwantanee 2004b).

Answering the question why she decided to publish this as a book, she said:

„As to why I want to see it in book form? Well, wouldn't it be nice to see what I wrote on my shelf?" (Wongwantanee 2004b).

This was then a case where digital literature was directly transformed into printed literature. The author was restricted by the rules of fan fiction, and she wished to see her work in a form which she considered typical of the 'real literature' – a book that would be „nice to see on my shelf”.

Another example I would like to tackle here are the blogs of two Estonians - Epp Petrone and Dagmar Reintam. Both have been active bloggers for years; especially Epp Petrone who wrote blogs all the time when she lived in America. In their construction, blogs slightly resemble fan fiction. Although the stories mostly concern the authors' daily life, and not fiction as in fan fiction, the common feature is that the blog, too, offers a chance to comment that the readers eagerly use. Thus the reader interferes in the author's writing process, expresses an opinion, adds something, and sometimes suggests what the author should write. So, in this case, we can see the "active reader" again. And like on fan fiction forum, the blog author also replies to his or her readers, explains facts, argues and occasionally meets the wishes of the readers. The blog author like fan fiction author thus receives the readers' reaction directly, unlike a book author who has to wait for the critics' opinions or meet the readers on a special evening.

Epp Petrone's American-blog³ describes the author's daily life, getting used to an alien cultural environment and her husband's family. Petrone is precise and has excellent style, and although her writing offers diary-like sketches of various situations, her blog could still be regarded as literature.

Dagmar Reintam's blog „daki.elab.siin"⁴ is also a witty description of her daily life presented with good style. The author is a journalist by profession in her twenties. Her experiences and impressions have been compared with the series „Sex and the City" and with „The Diary of Bridget Jones”.

In 2007 both Epp Petrone and Dagmar Reintam published their blogs as a book, Petrone's book was in two volumes titled „*Minu Ameerika*" ("My America", Petrone 2007) and Reintam's was called „*daki.elab.siin*" ("daki.lives.here", Reintam 2007). Just as with Linna Wongwantanee's novel „666", we have here again the question of why the blog authors were not satisfied with their work spreading only on the Internet. After all, the

³ <http://eppppp.tahvel.info/>

⁴ <http://daki.tahvel.info/>

Internet readership is infinitely bigger than for any printed book. We can thus guess that the authors did not undertake this because of readers or popularity. The business side could be discarded as well, because Linna, for example, paid herself for the publication of her novel (known as vanity publishing), without earning anything special from the sale. Both Petrone and Reintam published their books at Petrone's own publishing house; it is most unlikely that either has earned great sums of money in Estonia because of the small population and small print runs.

The answer to the question of why the authors wish to turn their popular writing on the Internet into books, must lie somewhere else. In both cases – Linna's and Petrone-Reintam's cases – the authors had a firm idea of the book's symbolic value and fan fiction or blogs on the Internet held no such meaning for the authors as their works in the form of a printed book.

Therefore, I would suggest that a printed book holds more symbolic value for the authors, and is more elitist than Internet literature. The book form, a printed work, is associated with the so-called 'real literature'. Having thus rejected the all-permissive and uncontrollable nature of Internet literature and the close interaction with readers, the book form has a meaning of a sign for the authors. They become more like Authors, their works are more like Books and thus more Literature.

Recalling again Walter Benjamin and his concept about the aura of a work of art, we could say that it is namely the **authors** who refuse to accept the disappearance of the aura of work of art in the digital age, and are trying to restore it instead. A book therefore becomes an elitist art form, distinguished from the Internet literature in mass consumption. This also indicates that the authors' way of thinking who transform Internet literature into books relies on the modernist elitist meaning of a work of art, and not on the postmodernist multiplicity of literary forms. Modernism sees the author as central, and the authors' singularity is emphasised by their singular works of art; postmodernism abolishes the boundaries between elitist art and mass culture, blurs the roles of the author and the reader, and regards literature as a mixture of different forms, multiplicity of various media. It could be thus said that digital literature on the Internet is essentially postmodernist and in case the authors wish to abandon this sphere and publish their Internet literature as books, they are trying to move from the postmodernist paradigm to the modernist one. This also confirms that despite the decades-long domination of postmodernist culture situation, some authors always associate 'real literature' with modernist elitist literature, expressed in a printed book.

So we can draw a line between Internet literature – mass literature, accessible to all and constantly changing – and book literature, which has become or is still becoming the mark of the elite.

At this point it should be appropriate to recall the science-fiction novel *Diamond Age* by Neal Stephenson. The book describes a future society based on nanotechnology and virtual reality, which is simultaneously Neo-Victorian class society. The entire humankind is using virtual, electronic, constantly changing information. There is, however, a difference: the lower classes, the masses, read electronic papers, where the information keeps changing. The higher class, aristocracy, reads papers that are static and never change. The most elitist class reads papers printed on paper. (Stephenson 1995: 36–37.) This science-fiction novel wittily predicts that society could develop towards a situation where the elite in an overwhelming virtuality could be marked by a book or a newspaper printed on paper.

We could thus claim that in the current age of digital multiplicity a book printed on paper acquires an elitist significance. A book offers a bigger opportunity to capture the lost aura of a work of art; besides, a book might also acquire a cult value in Benjamin's sense.

A printed book signifies the new elite. The authors who publish their books as books wish to belong among the elite and the readers reading printed books are elitist readers. We can thus say in conclusion that the aura lost in the digital virtual world has been found again in the world of printed books.

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