

## Literature and reading under the light of intermedial and multimodality studies

Interview with Dr. Grzegorz Maziarczyk (KUL, Poland) to Professors Dra. Elaine Indrusiak (UFRGS) and Dra. Miriam Vieira (UFSJ/CNPq)

Professor Grzegorz Maziarczyk specialises in contemporary English and American literature and culture as well as transmedial narrative theory. His main research interests include textual materiality, intermediality, relations between literature and new media, multimodal storytelling, utopia and dystopia. He has been a recipient of fellowships and research grants from the University of Notre Dame, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and European Society for the Study of English. He is the author of two monographs – *The Narratee in Contemporary British Fiction* (2005) and *The Novel as Book: Textual Materiality in Contemporary Fiction in English* (2013) – and the co-editor of five collections of essays, including *(Im)perfection Subverted, Reloaded and Networked: Utopian Discourse across Media* (2015) and *Explorations of Consciousness in Contemporary Fiction* (2017). He has published widely in edited collections and peer-reviewed journals, including *Word & Image*, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, *Utopian Studies*, *Interfaces: Image, Texte, Language and Slavia* amongst others. Since 2019 he has been Director of the Institute of Literary Studies at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin.

**Rizoma. Intermediality as a practice may be as old as communication and the arts, but as a field of studies it is fairly recent. How did you become a scholar in this field? Tell us a little bit about your education and career paths.**

**G. Maziarczyk.** First of all, let me thank you for an opportunity to become involved in such a though-provoking, fascinating project as this special issue of *Revista Rizoma* and to share my reflections on the topics related to its theme. When I studied English back in the 1990s, I became very much interested in contemporary fiction, both British and American. I especially liked postmodern novels that went beyond the established realistic conventions - my MA was about the relationship between the author and the reader in Salman Rushdie's magic realist masterpiece *Midnight's Children*. I continued my research on the communicative aspect of contemporary British fiction in my PhD, which was devoted to the narratee, that is the addressee the narrator directs his or her story to. So my background is in narratology and formal rather than thematic or philosophical approaches to the text. After I completed my dissertation, I started looking for something different, something that would go beyond the literary devices I already knew. A friend recommended Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. This book – and I use this word on purpose – blew my mind. Different fonts and page layouts, images and parallel storylines, the outer cover smaller than the inner one – all these devices made me realise that the material form of the text can be as important as the verbal content. I started looking for other books like that and quickly discovered that there is a whole literary continent, if you like, of texts that endow their material form with meaning and that rely on many semiotic resources, not just words. I try to map out the field of multimodal textual materiality in my post-PhD monograph on the novel as book. Even though devices like that date back

to ancient shape poems, they are especially visible in contemporary fiction as they respond to the impact of other, especially electronic media. It is not really possible to think about literature without taking into consideration other media, so it was only natural for me to become interested in intermedial relations between the word and the image or the novel and the film or literary conventions and video games. So, I am still a narratologist, but with a transmedial bias – intersections between different media are for me where the most fascinating things happen.

**Rizoma. In Brazil intermediality is a relatively new line of research. Literary Studies are still quite text-centered, and approaches to the relationships between literature and other media are often unsystematic and superficial. What is the status of intermedial and multimodal approaches to literature in Poland?**

**G. Maziarczyk.** I would say that the situation is basically similar in Poland. Literary studies focus primarily on the verbal content and often treat the material form as a transparent container or disregard the relation between literature and other media. On the other hand, there are, of course, scholars who explore in their research precisely these aspects and who try to do so in a systematic way. Again, just like everywhere else, research on intermediality has a much longer history than the multimodal approach, with such scholars as Jerzy Pelc, Seweryna Wysłouch and Andrzej Hejmej exploring in their works various aspects of the relation between literature and other media or rather arts. In Polish studies intermediality is often conceived in terms of intersemiotic translation and approached from a comparative perspective. Intermedial studies understood in this way are a recognised sub-field of literary and cultural studies, on a par with other approaches. The multimodal perspective, on the other hand, is relatively new and has been adapted by few literary scholars so far. It seems to be more popular in media studies, perhaps because modern media, from the press through television to the Internet, by and large combine multiple semiotic resources and multimodal categories help grasp major forms of modern communication. But then of course they are also equally applicable to literary texts going beyond the purely verbal means of expression. While I originally applied them to print literature, they are perhaps even more useful when it comes to digital literary works, which not only combine words and images but also exploit tactile or locative potential of mobile electronic devices. Given that, the multimodal approach will certainly grow in significance in the future.

**Rizoma. The ubiquitousness and appeal of audiovisual and digital media has been forcing school teachers to deal with intermediality and multimodality in language and literature classes regardless of their training and familiarity with such concepts. How can we bridge the theoretical discussions within Intermediality / Multimodality Studies and the daily practices of those who need to educate new generations of readers?**

**G. Maziarczyk.** Well, I think there is no other way but to educate educators. The notion of multimodal literacy, developed by such scholars as Gunther Kress or Maureen Walsh, seems to be fairly well established in education studies and there are even books for teachers on how to develop an appropriate set of skills in their students. However, I would go for an even more practical approach. For one thing, we as university lecturers can simply show our students, some of whom will become teachers, how to analyse and understand multimodal and intermedial dimensions of literary texts. For another, we can

point them to multimodal/transmedial/intermedial books they can use in their own teaching. Such books can be and often are much more attractive for young readers, digital natives immersed in the multimedia environment from the moment they watched their first cartoon, than traditional novels. I have been asked a few times to give a talk on multimodality to teachers of English in Poland and I usually recommend to them such multimodal books as Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* or Sean Stewart's *Cathy's Book*. The former is, for example, on the national curriculum in England and Australia, so many teaching resources are available online and can be used to develop proficiency in English and multimodal literacy side by side. The latter is accompanied by a website, recordings of voice messages and many other media texts, which appeal to 21<sup>st</sup>-century sensibility. There are also many beautifully designed multimodal digital works, which come together with some teaching materials. One title that immediately comes to my mind is *Inanimate Alice*. Come to think of it, a standard exercise in which students are expected to describe a photograph or a painting is an exercise in intermediality. To round it up, the better intermedial/multimodal skills our students develop, the more likely they will be to pass them on to their own students. Or perhaps we should consider writing together a textbook on the use of intermediality/multimodality in the classroom ...

**Rizoma. Film adaptations and other media products considered “derivative” have long been perceived as secondary and inferior to their literary sources. This attitude might stem from a combination of media illiteracy and a resistance to share with more recent media the prestige and centrality of literature. Do you believe that multimodality, transmedia storytelling and such hybrid phenomena pose a threat to “traditional” literature and book culture?**

**G. Maziarczyk.** The death of print and literature has been announced so many times that I can only use the phrase attributed to Mark Twain as his response to the rumours of his own death: these reports have been greatly exaggerated. There is no denying that in contemporary culture literature no longer occupies the dominant central position it used to have in the nineteenth century or earlier, but I do not think it is a reason for lamentation, not least because it is often a sign of class-based prejudice or nostalgia. Culture, the arts and the media simply develop and we cannot stop it, but I do not think it is a process in which one art form or medium completely replaces another but rather one in which more and more forms of expression come to co-exist and enter into dialogue with each other. I really like Robert Stam's idea that film adaptation, for example, could be understood in the biological sense of a particular narrative adapting itself to a new environment. New transmedial or multimodal literary forms could also be understood in such a way. On the other hand, traditional books still appeal to many people. The skilful use of words to weave an engrossing story and transport the reader to another world or another mind is an art that no other medium can easily emulate. Intermedial relations between literature and other media can only enrich our understanding of its meaning and our experience of the ways in which various media interanimate each other. The essays collected in this issue of *Revista Rizoma* are a perfect proof of that. The myth of Medusa resurfaces as an album cover, the silence in a literary text gets translated into the medium of the television screen, reading skills are re-conceptualised as cinematic literacy. Such projects are the best response to detractors of intermediality/multimodality and a great tool for development of true media literacy.

**Rizoma. Can you briefly share with us the main premise of your intriguing “Total Book” proposal?**

**G. Maziarczyk.** Thanks for asking about this idea of mine, which in a sense sums up the understanding of literature I have arrived at through my research on multimodality and intermediality. *House of Leaves* I have already mentioned is one of the best examples of what I mean by this term – a book in which apart from the verbal content, every single element matters: from the cover, through the title page and a provocative dedication (“This is not for you”), typography, page layout, images, footnotes and appendices to the sheer weight of the book itself. In a total book the verbal message becomes but one of multiple semiotic resources through which the author communicates with the reader. It is through the combination of all these verbal, visual and material aspects that the book becomes an object for the reader to experience on the conceptual, affective and even tactile levels. Total books embody what Jessica Pressman has called the aesthetics of bookishness – they work best, they only work as books. You cannot turn them into e-books, because they will lose a part of the meaning conveyed by their physicality; you cannot turn them into films, because they will lose their typographic and verbal dimension; you cannot turn them into audiobooks, because they will lose their visuality. But then of course what I have just said is not completely true: you can adapt them to a different medium, but it has to be a creative undertaking that will seek to do justice to the spirit rather than the letter of the original. We can find some predecessors of total books in the past - *Hypnerotomachia Poliphi* is a fascinating, anonymous total book printed in Renaissance Italy, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* is another example – but they became especially prominent in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They respond to the emergence of electronic media by demonstrating that there are things the book as a medium can do that no other medium can. Books like William Gass’s *Willie Masters’ Lonesome Wife*, B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*, Steve Tomasula’s *VAS*, Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams’s *S.*, Anne Carson’s *Nox* – these are just few examples – are a living proof that print is not dead and that literature can and will co-evolve with other media.