Semiotics of Communication

New Media, New Literary Theory, and New Literature from an Interological Horizon

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Abstract

This article discusses new developments in the field of literary theory and literary praxis in the era of new media from the perspectives of media theory and interology. It takes new media as a McLuhanesque formal cause and holds that a conspicuous characteristic of literary works in the era of new media lies in the salience and normalization of interality. This development means art forms like mosaic and Pointillism have acquired a paradigmatic significance as a result. In revealing this new paradigm, the article also points to some current social maladies that have come with new media. It holds that literary writing should go beyond the mere embodiment of symptoms and make an intervention in media-induced maladies. The article affirms the irreplaceability of experimental literature and serious literature in an era of attention deficit, and points out that form should occupy a paramount position in literary theory, literary criticism, and literary praxis.

Keywords
interality – Deleuze – Burroughs – McLuhan – Kafka – Pointillism
Revolutions in media change people’s sensibility and eventually lead to innovations in literary genre, form, style, and texture. Compared to philosophy, literary theory, and other theoretical discourses, the serviceability of literature lies in the fact that it can grasp the pulse of the times, the collective sentiment, and novel affects more sensitively and in a timelier fashion. In a sense, literature can do what philosophy cannot. Literature exceeds philosophy in the sense that it can grasp and give expression to preconceptual percepts and novel affects. Literary praxis always precedes literary theory and literary criticism. New media environments trigger new literary praxes and aesthetic tastes; they induce revolutions in literary theory and shifts in the preoccupations of literary criticism. In our new media environment, the relevance of formalist literary theory will become increasingly salient. For the media theorist, formalism has a lot to do with pattern recognition. Attention to form also creates an opportunity for new literary theory to emerge. As is well known, new media bring with them the acceleration of the pace of life; the compression of space and time; the diffusion and shortening of people’s attention; the simultaneous occurrence of numerous events; the extreme proliferation of communicative acts; the synchronization of people’s affect; the tendency for thinking to become in-the-moment, instantaneous, and impulse-like; the tendency for literary works to become miniaturized, fragmentary, and immediately outdated; the juxtaposition and mutual entanglement of contexts; the tendency for titles to become imagistic, sensationalistic, or even pornographic; the propensity for reading to become mobile, impressionistic, cursory, jumpy, momentary, and aleatory; the pluralization of interpretation; and the tendency for influence to become subliminal.

The heuristic and orientational value of media theory for the development of literary theory is not to be underestimated. The reception of media theory is indissociable from opportunities rooted in karmic forces in the host culture (e.g., age-old orientations and fateful interventions). For example, the translation praxis of HE Daokuan (何道宽) greatly facilitated the dissemination of Marshall McLuhan’s thought in China. The media theory implicit in Gilles Deleuze’s works, including his assemblage-orientation, is yet to be distilled further. With its elegantly schematic style, Vilém Flusser’s media philosophy deserves more uptake and even emulation on the part of literary theorists.1 Paul Virilio’s dromology, techno-ethics, and grey ecology will motivate new existential questions and inspire new theoretical observations within the

1 Flusser (1920–1991) was a Czech-born phenomenologist and media philosopher who lived in Brazil for many years because of the Nazi invasion. He died in Prague, his hometown, in a car accident.
literary community. Apparently outdated art styles and corresponding art theories also have nonnegligible revelatory value for the development of literary theory in addition to the refinement and deepening of literary criticism. The significance of mosaic and Pointillism to literary theory in the age of new media is not to be overlooked. Micro-interality characterizes both art forms. The implications of nomad art, Lego games, and even surfing for literary theory also deserve consideration. In the digital age, the artistic method of Pointillism is bound to be absorbed and utilized in the creation of literary works and even in theoretical discourses. Overall, literature in the age of new media has the tendency to relatively downplay narrativity, unilinearity, continuity, climacticity, and catharsis, and to put more emphasis on affectivity, jumpiness, musicality, openness, inclusiveness, impressionism, stimulation, arousal, and intensity. Eric McLuhan (1998) put forward the notion of ‘electric language’; in the twenty-first century, we should start to discuss the issue of ‘digital language’. The present article takes the above train of thought as the point of departure to discuss the interplay between new media, new literary theory, new literary criticism, and new literary praxes.

Pervasive and infiltrating, digital media exert imperceptible influences upon literary praxis. The characteristics of the digital storm can be summarized by ‘the Penetrating’/Xun (Hexagram 57 of the Yi Jing). Its power is gentle and yet irresistible. Under the erosion of the digital storm, the myriad things all seem to get pulverized, only to recoalesce under conducive conditions (that is to say, when the right pratyaya is in place) and to reappear in an apparitional guise at terminals of digital megamachines. On the screen, mountains are not mountains, and water is not water. Like opium, digital media have a hallucinatory effect. Like a shoji, the screen can trap the viewers’ attention between its dots and intervals so they forget about the boundless world. Intervals absorb people’s attention, vitality, energy, and spirit. Although the screen gives off energy, neuro-physiologically speaking, the intermittent, impulse-like micro-sprouts of energy it gives off function more like a catalyst, seducing neurons into releasing electrical charges frequently. As such, the screen feels very stimulating. In a technical sense, words on the printed page are dead, whereas words on the screen are alive. When the same content appears on a digital screen, it will bring about a leak in people’s vitality and energy, and make people tirelessly addicted, proving again McLuhan’s famous declaration: the medium is the message. As reading on the smartphone becomes widespread, the size of the bent-head demographic group is increasing by the day. Digital megamachines are perfect instruments for capturing people’s attention. As a result, public spaces that used to be fairly cacophonous have become exceptionally quiet.
The influence of digital media on literature is comprehensive and not limited to literary works or literary works based on digital media. The influence reaches everything from literary writing to reading, literary theory, literary criticism, genre, style, format, length, how much content a text holds, the speed and texture of the text, and so on. In an era when people's attention is totally encroached upon and harassed in real time, people's mental habits have gone through irreversible changes. The kinds of readers out there determine what kinds of works get made. Therefore, the style of popular works reflects the so-called zeitgeist. Mosaic-like, Pointillist, montage-like literary works are bound to emerge. On the other hand, we should also pay attention to phenomena that embody the reasoning behind a well-known line from one of XU Hun's (许浑) poems: 'When a mountain rain is about to come, the tower is full of wind'. Put differently, coming events cast their shadows before them. Initial signs indicating the direction of digital-age literature had already appeared in the predigital age; as an art form, literature also portends the birth of new media.

French writer Michel Butor's book *Mobile* (1962) was written before the advent of the digital age. As a foreboding exemplar, it foreshadowed digital-age literary works. In his early career, Butor made a name for himself through the nouveau roman. Generically speaking, *Mobile* is already sharply distinct from the nouveau roman. It constitutes a literary criticism of American geography. The method of composition is fragmentary. Structurally speaking, it is modelled after Alexander Calder's kinetic sculptures; as such, the book is highly experimental and characterized by the kind of chance and uncertainty typical of such sculptures. In terms of content and format, it has the texture of a collage or a patchwork quilt. The jumpiness between fragments produces the same effect as that produced by the typical Facebook page. The mingling and juxtaposition of disparate contents has an arousing effect on readers, prod- ding them to draw active connections between mutually segregated verbal fragments to derive meaning. The diverse, open textual strategy embodies the diversity, vitality, and contradiction of American society. The sense of disconnection between fragments indicates that diverse as it is, American society is nevertheless segregated. The form and textual strategy of the book performatively display the pattern of American society. Butor dedicated the book to Jackson Pollock, the American abstract expressionist painter known for his 'drip technique' of splashing paint onto the canvas. This indicates that Butor drew his inspiration from abstract art. Butor's book has characteristics of both

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2 My attention to and view of the book were inspired by exchanges with KOU Yuanyuan (寇媛媛).
the electric and the digital age. Flowing from the former and initiating the latter, it served to bridge the two periods and pioneered digital language.

Marshall McLuhan, the metaphysician of media who published influential works at about the same time as Butor, holds that there is correspondence between abstract art and the electric age (McLuhan, 2005: 217). Cubist painting, Symbolist poetry, jazz, and the detective story are examples (of abstract art, broadly understood) he mentions often. For McLuhan, abstraction means pulling out visual connections so as to foreground acoustic resonance. Visual discontinuity is a shared characteristic of abstract art. Brion Gysin, the poet and painter born in Scotland, holds that if there is abstract art, there should also be abstract literature, for which delineation of the real and storytelling are merely secondary functions (Hibbard, 1999: 66). One should pay close attention to the form of such literary works, not just their meaning (Lotringer, 2001: 177–178). One thing we can learn from McLuhan’s works is that there are deep connections between media, literature, and art. To be more specific, as a formal cause or environmental cause, media influence the form of literature and art in a subconscious way; the connections among media, literature, and art are formal ones; the content of literature and art only plays the role of holding the audience’s attention; form is what really impacts the audience. Friedrich Nietzsche made a similar point much earlier: ‘One is an artist at the cost of regarding that which all non-artists call “form” as content, as “the matter itself”’ (1968: 433). Art is a method of imposing form on what is formless (Flusser, 2011b: 124). From the electric age on, between ‘what’ and ‘how,’ the latter has become increasingly important. It should be warrantable to say that the method is the message. The ‘cut-up method’ to be discussed below is an example.

The mission of writers and artists is to create new forms through which to retune and update the audience’s sensibility and to help them adapt to new media environments or technological environments. Put otherwise, the contribution of literature and art to society lies in the creation of new forms to reveal and call attention to imperceptible changes, and to render invisible forces visible. Those with a sharp intuition tend to pay particular attention to the forms of literature and art, since secrets about societal change are embedded within them. Usually there is a lag in the thinking of the masses, who are often blind and deaf to new signs. Writers and artists who are at once serious and playful can ‘writ[e] a detailed history of the future,’ to use a phrase that McLuhan (2005: 14) attributes to Wyndham Lewis. They are the sensory organs of society, the antennae of the human race, and professional prophets (McLuhan, 2005: 49). Many years have passed since the initial publication of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, but the book is by no means outdated. What is
the significance of this predigital-age work for the digital age? The number of people who have realized this question is probably quite small.

Pointillism is another great example. The following understanding can be extrapolated from Flusser’s work on media theory: digital images and Pointillist paintings belong to the same paradigm. The idea is to first grind everything into zero-dimensional dots (a process Flusser calls ‘granulation,’ ‘pulverization,’ or ‘calculation’) and then reassemble them into recognizable forms (a process he calls ‘composition’ or ‘computation’) (2003: 51). In the eyes of the interologist, micro-interality is a characteristic shared by both digital images and Pointillist paintings. The cut-up method used by William S. Burroughs thoroughly embodies this paradigm and realizes the idea of fragmentary writing in a literal sense. The process is like this: the author cuts a preselected paper-based text into fragments, recombines them randomly, does a little selection and editing, and then calls the new text finished. Burroughs holds that by introducing chance, the cut-up method realistically reflects how perception actually works; it is the application of the collage method in painting to literary writing, and a means of creating short circuits along the usual linguistic path (Hibbard, 1999: 93). The difference between the original text and the recomposed one lies in the destruction of old interalities and the random generation of new ones. What is harvested are novel, unpredictable juxtapositions. The tensions and clashes between words and phrases give the text unlimited vitality, which is precisely what the cut-up method releases. The method is intrinsically at one with vitalism and serves the same purpose as Deleuzian-Guattarian schizoanalysis. Like montage, the cut-up method shows that the meaning of words lies more between them than within them. It implies the concept of ‘interdictionality’, and reveals that the existence of words is a kind of field existence. English is a highly logical, continuous language that is filled with redundancy. In comparison, Chinese is more imagistic, poetic, and more suitable for montage. The cut-up method as used by Burroughs constitutes a species of violence against English and marks a significant breakthrough for and liberation of the language. Philosophically speaking, the cut-up method recovers a virtual oneness equivalent to the mother text, thereby releasing multiplicity and permutations. ‘One origin, ten thousand permutations’ means precisely this.

Gysin, Burroughs’s coauthor and the inventor of the cut-up method, says, ‘Fate is written: “Mektoub”, in the Arab world, where art has always been nothing but abstract. “Mektoub” means “It is written”. So ... if you want to challenge and change fate ... cut up the words. Make them make a new world’ (Hibbard, 1999: 67). The following point made by Deleuze takes the cut-up method a step further: ‘You have to open up words, break things open, to free
earth’s vectors’ (1995: 134). When writing with their individual consciousnesses, writers may feel they are thinking. In reality, they are being thought. No mind (i.e., wuxin) is better than having a mind. The cut-up method is a means of reaching the spiritual realm of wuxin. Dadaism, which appeared in the history of twentieth-century art, was a harbinger of this method of literary writing. This kind of writing constitutes a performative teasing and criticism of traditional writing. It also reveals the discontinuous, aleatory, and quantic nature of thinking. “Thinking “quantizes” is an important idea of Flusser’s (2011a: 144). An apparently seamless text is actually full of interality (or discontinuity and jumpiness). As far as reading is concerned, the interality ubiquitous in a literary work is not a problem; rather, it is precisely what makes the work enticing. Interality is what the mind desires. The more interality there is, the more participative the reader is. The so-called seamlessness of traditional works is no more than a deliberately produced surface effect. It bears noting that although the cut-up method is an innovative artistic method, it easily lends itself to being employed and has already been employed by advertisers and propaganda apparatuses. In the realms of advertising, music, film, and television, it has become standard practice to mix commercial or political messages among literary or artistic fragments so as to shape the audience’s emotion, attitude, desire, and behaviour through subliminal influence.

To conduct mosaic-like or staccato-like agglomeration on the basis of analysis is a common practice in the digital age. A sculpture of Abraham Lincoln composed of pennies may win a top award at an art festival. A computer keyboard pieced together with tiny metal squares can be installed on the wall of a hotel lobby as an artwork to leave a cool impression. Nowadays, there are too many works like these to enumerate. Writing can evolve into a program-controlled combination game. The work is then no longer the outcome of the writer’s consciousness, but the result of the fusion of chance and necessity intrinsic to the program. The content of such works is only of secondary importance. The real message is the zeitgeist revealed by the form of the work: we have entered the age of fragments and interality. From literature to music, from life experience to the modality of knowledge, from time to attention, fragmentation seems to have become an abstract principle that governs everything. Democritus’s atomism acquired a new life in the digital age. The thinking proper to the digital age is dot-interval thinking (Flusser, 2007: 20). The sensibility constituted by the digital technological environment is double-sided: functionalism on one side, nomadism on the other. Between the two, the former corresponds to control; the latter corresponds to resistance and becoming. The logic of nomadism is paradoxical, just like Zhuangzi’s notion of sinking on land (陆沉). The trip is inner rather than external, inscape rather
than escape. What is transformed is the mind rather than the circumstance. To borrow the phraseology of the Zhong Yong, the mind method of nomadism is: when under control, act within control. Or, as the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment has it, there is neither bondage nor deliverance.

Back in the book-dominated age, people consciously or subconsciously equated linearity with rationality, especially in the West, which was founded upon alphabetic languages. Burroughs’s method of literary writing fundamentally challenges the difference between so-called rationality and irrationality. Thinking craves leaps. Fragmentary works gratify, to a larger extent, thinking’s yearning for leaps. They also lay bare the artificial and fabricated nature of the so-called continuity in seemingly continuous works. There is an inkling of bricolage in both Butor’s and Burroughs’s works. Such works are characterized by the creative appropriation of materials at hand so they enter into new assemblages and serve new purposes. This kind of practice was lauded by French thinker Michel de Certeau (1988: 174). Nowadays, innovation departments in the corporate world are fairly enthusiastic toward sticky notes. The rationale is no different than that behind Burroughs’s literary experimentation with the cut-up method and the fold-in method. What is in common between corporate innovators and Burroughs is the subversion and transcendence of linear thinking, as well as the conscious or subconscious affirmation and employment of interality as an inexhaustible wellspring of creativity. As far as this article is concerned, even though there is plenty of interarity between the lines, the article remains an article. As such, it fails to break free from the constraints of the linear paradigm.

Whether pure texts as a way of organizing thoughts will become obsolescent in the digital age is a question that deserves further discussion. Perhaps the real questions are: What kinds of mutations will texts undergo in the digital age? Which mutations are an overcoming of the limitations of texts in the pre-digital age, especially the book age? Which ones are new symptoms that have appeared in the digital age? Which ones are antidotes to the cultural syndrome of the digital age? It is true that the value of symptomology is not to be denied, but the real value of literature lies not in describing or embodying symptoms but in offering antidotes. In the digital age, antitradi tional waves come one after another. The problem is that they mostly go no further than the negation of tradition. If tradition is the action, then they are the reaction. Their nature is not active, but reactive. For Nietzsche, this is a crucial distinction (Deleuze, 1983: 40–42). The active is advisable whereas the reactive is not. The early days of the digital age are bound to be an era that delivers a mixture of everything. We need forward-looking works. We need creations. We need what Deleuze (2004: 139) calls ‘a little new music’.
In the digital age, there is the likelihood for the jumpiness intrinsic to thinking to be fully displayed in literary works, and for the texture of literary texts to gain a new attraction. Such an attraction does not come from beauty in a traditional sense, but from the interalities that pervade the entire work. Unexpectedly, literary works are evolving into Pointillist paintings using words as their constituent elements. This viewpoint mainly concerns literature in Western languages. Chinese is largely an interological language, especially before the rise of writings in vernacular Chinese. There is no need for a copula between the subject and the predictive expression; every sentence feels like a montage composed of multiple frames of images. The Kuleshov effect is an organic part of the reading experience. Western texts have more redundancy. As such, they are more soporific and ideological. By comparison, Chinese texts are more aesthetic, suggestive, inexhaustible, and hallucinating. Compared to Western languages, Chinese is a cold medium (as McLuhan understands the term). In the digital age, Western languages have shown the tendency to cool down. From a purely media-theoretic perspective, the digital age should be an age for the revival of poetic language.

The problem is that the digital age is not that simple. The excessive proliferation of texts and the drastic acceleration of writing and reading have led to another scenario: while expecting the revival of poetic language, we get large quantities of kitsch instead. This is digital media’s way of mocking and betraying us. Over the years, the way best-selling literature is created has become ever closer to the way agile development works in the software industry. The basic principle is to collect feedback from the target audience in real time during the process of writing and to give the audience what it wants. This practice is essentially an application of cybernetic thinking to literary writing and has two characteristics. First, a closed feedback loop is formed around readers to ensure that they get what they want. As a result, readers are firmly imprisoned within their predilections. Second, a separate feedback loop is formed around the author. Its function is to correct the numerous decisions the author makes during the process of writing according to the readers’ likings. The two feedback loops have detrimental cultural consequences. On the one hand, the reader ends up wallowing in an indulged ego. On the other hand, the critical function of literary works will atrophy. Overall, cybernetic thinking is a powerful weapon employed by the publishing apparatus to impede the appearance of new ideas and to keep the culture stagnant. Its function is entropic and reactionary. Objectively speaking, digital media allow for the perfect realization of such a control mechanism. Fortunately, digital media have a nonnegligible duplicity. Clear recognition of the control mechanism allows people to resist and break the two feedback loops, thus making dialogue and the generation
of negentropy possible. Revolutionaries in the digital age must arm themselves with cybernetic thinking so as to find strategies to counter control. They inhabit a tactical position. It is worth pointing out that dialogue is an interlogical activity and an important source of negentropy. Used properly, digital media can facilitate dialogue.

The superabundance of content means the scarcity of attention. Present-day businesses are exploiting all available avenues to grab and violate people’s attention. The rise of technical images means that the masses are bewitched by the five colours, so much so that their souls no longer seem to hold on to their bodies. This is a pathology of the times. In a sense, concentrated, undistracted reading is a cure in and of itself. All writers face the challenge of making the printed word enticing again. As such, the aesthetic, artistic, imagistic, sonorous, rhythmic, and musical dimensions of literary works are becoming increasingly important. The capacity to suspend time or make the reader oblivious of the elapse of time is a touchstone of the vitality of a literary work. In the digital age, writers especially need to resort to the enchanting power of style, and to alchemize words into an artistic medium. The value of art does not lie in echoing the zeitgeist. Rather, it lies in retuning the collectivity’s sensibility, in awakening people, and in performing surgery on our civilization. The notion of ‘art as shock therapy’ is by no means outdated. This is the essential difference between literary works as art and best-selling works. The latter are perfect materials for symptomological studies; the former are antidotes. The latter give the audience what it wants. The former are the equivalents of Zen-style stick strikes and shouts. In our age, writers and artists should take digital media as an etiological agent, in the same way print technology should be taken as an etiological agent in the print age. To couch it in Nietzsche’s vocabulary, the mission of writers is to create ‘untimely’ works. The purpose is not so much to go against the propensity of the age as to create the virtual. This is precisely the real meaning of the Bergsonian concept of fabulation.

If the typical symptom of the pathology of our age is flippancy and impetuosity on the part of the masses, can we imagine a literature that helps collect the mind, that affords pratyahara, and that functions like a mantra? If this question is valid, plot and content are indeed only secondary. In Chinese, music (樂) and medicine (藥) share the same root. Music is medicine. Phonology is probably the primary issue to which writers need to pay attention. Allegedly, reciting the Dao De Jing has the life-nourishing benefit of conditioning one's breath-energy. This understanding directly leads to the issue of the untranslatability of ‘medicinal literature’, and the necessity of transliterating key phrases. In our age, what we need is no longer rapid technological development, but embodied intuition of the Dao, and a return, especially a return to the spiritual
realm where qi or spiritus functions as the medium of communication, or a return to ‘spiritual communication’ in the true sense of the term. In the case of Chinese characters, there is a high degree of unity among sound, form, and meaning. This is a characteristic unmatched by phonetic languages. Flusser (2011a: 61) points out that digital images are ideographic in nature. As such, their effect as a medium should be similar to that of Chinese characters. But ‘similar’ is not equal to ‘identical’. In a sense, what digital images can give us, Chinese characters already gave us long ago. This viewpoint lays focus on form and meaning but overlooks sound, which is at least of equal importance. Visual orientation, by the way, is at once a characteristic and a shortcoming of Flusser’s media theory. Sighing the ‘xu’ (吁) sound soothes the liver. The care of the heart needs to be performed through the ‘he’ (呵) sound (based on pinyin). Exclamation words (most of which have the mouth radical 口 in them) in ancient Chinese literary works have marvellous benefits, which need to be savoured when practicing recitations. Poetry gives expression to aspirations (志) or the qi of the heart-mind (the word ‘aspiration’ has qi or spiritus in it).

Overall, there is a superabundance of texts in the digital age, which is a sign that texts are obsolescent. On the other hand, what is obsolescent will not disappear right away but appear in great quantities. In such a media environment, the amount of information that people consume is rising at an accelerating pace, but the amount of digestion is falling sharply. The more inexhaustible the flood of information is, the harder it is for meaning to take shape. On social media, phatic communion and headings alone are enough to keep people occupied. With the addition of energy wasted through narcissistic behaviour, it is easy to imagine that deep reading can hardly occur. Opening and forwarding a trivial WeChat message seems harmless. In reality, however, one is creating a micro-karma by doing so. With a swipe of the finger accompanied by a smile, precious time turns into wasted time. A message of a few words, once sent, immediately creates a sense of attachment, expectation, or even anxiety in an otherwise calm mind. To the receiver, it usually means disturbance and distraction. The thumb or rose icon sent back is mostly a perfunctory response given out of consideration for the relationship and is seldom a response to the content. Lu Xun (鲁迅) once said that wasting other people’s time is the equivalent of robbery and murder, and that wasting one’s own time is the equivalent of a slow suicide. By this logic, aren’t the vast majority of WeChat users collectively committing both a slow suicide and a slow murder? Independent thinking is gradually superseded by the hive mind. The individual’s existence feels increasingly superfluous. Who is benefiting from all of this, though? Life and death are a serious matter. Impermanence befalls one only too fast. Are we paying too high of a price for the numerous conveniences offered by digital
media? Those who have been awakened to these ethical questions are already self-consciously resisting these so-called conveniences to extricate themselves and others. The following words are attributed to Confucius in Chapter 4 of the *Zhuangzi*: ‘To learn the Dao, one should concentrate one’s mind, aspire for one thing alone, and not clutter one’s mind. If the mind is cluttered, then one disturbs oneself with too many things. Disturbance makes one worried and worry is incurable’. To risk being anachronistic, these words can be usefully misinterpreted as Zhuangzi’s prophetic criticism of social media through the mouth of Confucius. The more unselective one is in making social connections, the farther away one is from the Dao.

An outstanding ancient text gives one the feeling of wanting to stop, or not wanting to read anything else for a while, since the lingering flavour is inexhaustible. As the saying goes, after coming back from the Five Great Mountains, one does not look at other mountains anymore; after coming back from the Yellow Mountains, one does not look at the Five Great Mountains anymore. To stop is an inner desire, an organic link in the process of sense making, and an interological phenomenon. But in the digital age, there is no end to forced reading and compulsive reading. Myriad modicums of information flow by one’s eyes nonstop, making appreciation and savouring impossible. Reading basically becomes quasi-reading and micro quantities of habitual, subconscious labour. In ancient times, if a single word does not seem to belong, the poet or writer would pace back and forth for ten days or even a month. To settle a single word, one might break one after another piece of beard by twisting it for too long while thinking. Nowadays, people rely on automatic suggestions when drafting a piece of writing. The writing style tends to be generic and mediocre. One starts to write before having thought things through. Quantity overrides quality. The misuse of homonyms has become a lesser concern. Content is making room for emojis. Writing is no longer a vehicle for the Dao. Authors write absent-mindedly and readers are often half awake. There is no comparison between such writings and ancient texts when it comes to nourishing the reader’s *qi* (i.e., breath-energy).

Theoretically speaking, during the transition period between an old and a new dominant medium, a hybrid energy will be released and an exquisite style of writing will emerge. Literary language will be sublimated. So will theoretical language. In the digital age, multiple factors may lead to such an outcome, including in-depth encounters and interfusions between Eastern and Western cultures, dialogue and interanimation between multiple languages, all-out absorption and borrowing of cultural gems from all nations and all ages, the revival of orality, the dissolution of the hegemony of vision, the reawakening

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3 This translation is based on the interpretation of Master Hanshan (憨山).
of magical and mythical consciousness, and so on. Whether mainstream language is unbearably vulgar or not, we should believe that a new generation of writers is already preparing for the creation of a new style and that an unprecedented new literature is about to emerge. We might as well imagine what characteristics such a new literature will have, even though it is bound to go beyond our expectations and surprise us. It bears mentioning that what is being discussed here is not the multi-mediation of literary and artistic works, or their tendency to appeal to multiple senses, but what mutations pure literature itself will undergo in a digital environment.

Deleuze (1995: 131) holds that syntax is style. The question of style is not merely an aesthetic question, but also an ethical and political one. The contact zone between different languages is conducive to syntactical innovations, which are an interological phenomenon. In the digital environment, the contact between different languages is becoming increasingly frequent, thus providing favourable grounds for syntactical innovations. Such innovations mark the birth of a minor sensibility but will not happen automatically. Writers need to work hard to turn impossibilities into possibilities. The motive absolutely cannot be the pure pursuit of novelty. Rather, difficult existential circumstances force writers to rework the major language with the sensibility of a minor language, thus creating within the major language an Other language that has the quality of a foreign language and that is essentially characterized by syntactical novelty. Logically speaking, creating a foreign language within the major language strongly resembles disengagement within engagement, going beyond ‘walking, standing, sitting, and lying down’ (also known as the four dignities) while ‘walking, standing, sitting, and lying down’, transforming the circumstances in-situ, being a hermit on a busy street, and experiencing the sensation of nomadism while living a settled life. In the final analysis, syntax is a vehicle that carries a sensibility, or a sequence of mental postures. The example Deleuze and Guattari (1986) had in mind was Franz Kafka. The sensibility sedimented in and kept alive by Yiddish allowed Kafka to minorize Prague German.

Careful thinking reveals that Kafka’s writing praxis was also a process of Flusserian ‘composition’ or ‘computation’. Kafka used the sensibility peculiar to Yiddish to integrate German words into a minorized German, thereby inducing the mutation of German and creating a minor literature. During the process, he necessarily had to overcome resistance from German syntax. To couch it in Deleuze’s vocabulary, the minorization of language is a process of becoming, one that is not an evolution but an involution. When two languages encounter each other, a liminal or interological space (i.e., a linguistic contact zone) is created; in this space, the two languages involve each other and escape in a third direction. To escape is to become. Mutual influence at a lexical level
is only secondary. Syntactical mutation is more essential. Encounters with minor languages are opportunities for major languages to undergo mutations. The site for such encounters is the collective mind of those who inhabit the margins of the culture and whose sensibility has been constituted by a minor language. In the digital age, encounters between languages take place frequently. Yet only those writers who reshape the major language with the sensibility born of a minor language are capable of creating a truly novel style, especially those writers who have a deep and sharp feel for the oral version of the minor language. Those who are non-aesthetes and to whom the genesis of the mother tongue has not yet occurred are definitely not on the list. A new style indicates a new sobriety, a new confidence. It feels like drunkenness on water (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986: 26). Minorized language is truly the house of being.

In a short article, Deleuze (2004: 230–231) uses the image of strobe to characterize Hélène Cixous’s style of writing. This image captures well the characteristics of the symbolic environment in the digital age: each symbolic fragment is fairly eye-catching; the temporal interval between fragments is very brief; there is no obvious logical connection between fragments. Put otherwise, in the digital age, the default mode in which information reaches the audience is strong stimulation, fast tempo, and jumpiness. As a rule, whatever people have become habituated to comes off as being natural. Over time, this mode has become the audience’s expectation and authors’ tacit assumption. As the hidden ‘ground’, media serve the function of formal cause or environmental cause, and imperceptibly influence the form of the ‘figure’, to use the language of Gestalt Theory. It is only natural for literary works born of the digital environment to be stylistically different from works from the past. Inclusiveness, abruptness, compactness, strong impact, fast tempo, spontaneity in textual strategy, and so on will be normalized. Writers now tend to write with short-term memory, giving texts a freshness resembling that of wild cursive calligraphy. The implication is that those who are fixated upon phraseology will be confounded. Grasping authors’ thoughts depends on the acceleration of reading. The comprehension of the meaning of such texts is facilitated by the speedy, flashy appearance of words in the mind. The reader needs to go with the sense rather than the wording. Ordinary people are attached to words. The partially awakened are attached to interality. Readers who have attained ‘throughness’ are attached to neither, which allows them to follow the flow, grasp the meaning, and access the spirit. The point is that author and reader both need to downplay semantic thinking to an appropriate degree, put emphasis on pragmatic thinking, and reach the realm of fragmatics. In terms of both textual makeup and tempo, works in the digital age are fairly rap-like. Fragmentary
composition is not limited to literature alone. There are precedents in the fine arts, music, sculpture, and other fields. The wild cursive textual strategy has been marvellously employed in the field of philosophy. *A Thousand Plateaus* is an example. It should be totally fine to apply it to literary theory and other fields.

A literary work can be made up of numerous fragments and the interality in between, or a single fragment and the interality around it. In the latter case, we have a work in miniature. As an indispensable part of a literary work, interality holds in store unlimited virtuality. The miniaturization of literary works has a long history. In the Zen community, the meditator faces the challenge of penetrating everything using a single fragment (i.e., a huatou or a koan). Huatou and koan are holographic fragments that contain the relational whole at a lesser degree of resolution, but the whole, nonetheless. This practice pushes fragmatics to an extreme. Haiku and imagist poems are predigital precedents of fragmentary art. The digital age is the right time to turn fragments into art (the scarcity of attention forces the communicator to create the desired effect within the space of a single fragment). It is also an age in which fragmentary art is prosperous like never before. The emergence of duanzi (i.e., laughter-generating mini texts that can serve the purpose of folk criticism but do not always do so) and the wide circulation of one-sentence ads (e.g., the wine ad, ‘Bold character derived from stubborn patience’) are two well-known examples. These all count as literary works in miniature, and deserve attention from theorists and critics.

The phenomenon of the fragmentation of literary texts gives new meaning to the concept of textual interality. Its meaning is not limited to intertextuality in a traditional sense, the focus of which is on the relationship between texts. Fragmentary works give tremendous salience to intratextual interality and greatly enhance the relevance of the concept of textual interality. In the digital age, there is the tendency for intratextual interality and the interality between numerous mini texts to become indistinguishable from each other. To cope with the two kinds of textual interality has become the substance of innumerable people's mental life. Fragments have turned quickly from condiments for life into troubles and disturbances, and then into an ordinary part of life. Large quantities of mini texts combine with each other randomly in the audience's mind to form a dynamic, Pointillist open text. Connections between fragments appear in a flashy manner when the right pratyaya is in place. This open text is virtual but real. It has a striking similarity, or even isomorphism, with the human brain, which is an uncertain, probabilistic, interality-infused open system. The reader's brain is the real vehicle or medium of this open text, as well as its ultimate author. Quantum theory is the most fitting theory for both the open text and the reader's brain.
Literature in the predigital age was mainly interested in revealing the true face or form of the actual world and delineating on that basis the contours of the world that ought to be. Literature in the digital age shows a new interest: to offer a model for the probable world. Put otherwise, literature in the predigital age mostly focused on the actual; literature in the digital age is more and more inclined toward the virtual, and therefore holds an embracing attitude toward mythic, magic, fantastic, science fictional, and simulated worlds. In terms of cultural elements, literature in the digital age is not only all-inclusive but also highly generative. In this sense, it has a certain degree of Buddhist spirit. As the couplet below has it:

Womb of the Tathāgata
Both empty yet nonempty
Issues forth its limitless fragrant ocean.

The maṇi-jewel
Formed yet formless
Envelops all phenomena with its precious pennant.4

It bears pointing out that in the digital age, the predigital literary orientation will have a long period of afterglow. McLuhan would call it ‘rearview-mirrorism’.

The ecological thinking and global thinking born of the space age have been reinforced in the age of digital interconnectivity. With the proliferation of information and the expansion of data, the psychological control and manipulation of the masses have been aggravating. As one of the few vehicles of humanity’s conscience, serious literature’s importance is self-evident. McLuhan (1994: 28, 65) put forward the idea of adjusting the temperatures of specific cultures with various media, and reiterated the importance of Gustave Flaubert’s novel Sentimental Education. The two thoughts have much heuristic value for us. Present-day writers and artists have the responsibility to create new forms to address the numerous pressing issues of the new age, as well as to retune the audience’s sensibility and value orientation. We should hold a comic attitude toward the rich cultural legacy of each nation. It is true that digital media have produced many problems. Objectively speaking, however, they have also greatly facilitated our utilization of the spiritual wealth of the entire human species. In the digital age, attention is a scarce resource; spiritual

4 Translated by Richard John Lynn (林理璋), the renowned sinologist, philologist, and translator, upon request.
capital is the ultimate capital. It is perverse and pointless to exhaust our spirit for the sake of amassing low-end capital.

We might as well envision a new type of professionals and call them ‘mind tuners’ for the time being. The service they offer is to write mental prescriptions for individuals, groups, or even entire societies, and to impart corresponding methods of exercise. Those whose creativity is depleted can emulate Confucius and play with the Yi Jing. Those who are drifting away from the Dao can recite the Dao De Jing. Those who are worried about gains and losses can savour the Zhuangzi. Those who lack strength of character can model after the Seven Masters of the Jian’an Era. Those who have a tumultuous mind can chant a mantra. Ancients had this learning called the nourishing of one’s breath-energy through reading books. Mencius once said ‘I am good at cultivating my infinitely expansive vital energy’. This is where Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮) far exceeds Zhou Yu (周瑜). Those whose vital energy is insufficient can benefit from Han Yu’s essays. Those whose vital energy is blocked can unblock it with Li Bai’s poems. Those whose feelings are unrefined can savour graceful and restrained lyric poems. Those whose feelings are too refined can read unconstrained lyric poems often. Those who are not outgoing can study frontier poetry. Those who lack resourcefulness can learn from Three Kingdoms. Those who are too calculating can contemplate Vegetable Roots Discourse. Those whose heart fire flames upward can study closely Idle Talk on a Night Boat. Those who lack great love can make up their mind through Les Misérables. Literature is not a panacea, though. Literature therapy can be supplemented with life therapy. Those who wallow in sounds and forms (i.e., audio-visual media) can walk in the South Mountains once in a while. If the entire society wallows in sounds and forms, then a month-long fasting from media can be instituted. The best way to care for life is by caring for the mind. So far, more and more people have awakened to the life-nourishing function of sinology. If digital media are an etiological agent of contemporary society, then sinology is an effective antidote. It is more or less ironical to acquire the antidote through blogs or WeChat.

The digital age is an era when there is a surfeit of information. More precisely, it is an era when there is a surfeit of redundant and harassing information. The masses are liable to sink into a profound boredom or even depression, since such junky information deprives them of the time to participate in the creation of negentropy, or greatly reduces their capacity to create negentropy. Among all creatures, humanity has the most urgent yearning for negentropy and is also the most strategic when it comes to negating entropy. In the final analysis, humanity is a spiritual animal. It is human nature to pursue novelty and difference (the motto of Nankai University is in
In the long process of evolution, a neurochemical mechanism closely related to creation has taken shape in the human brain. In those creative moments, the brain secretes special chemicals, thereby generating a ‘high’ sensation. Strictly speaking, outstanding literary and artistic works are far more negentropic than other cultural products. In this age when there is a surfeit of information, humanity needs outstanding literary works all the more.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz once said, ‘The present is saturated with the past and pregnant with the future’. Literary works not only reveal the future embedded in the present but also participate in creating and shaping the future. In the digital age, reality is accelerating, and the world is renewed and becomes different with each passing day. Serious literary works have a futurological significance and can give those who excel at interpreting them a fair amount of lead time. To capture and distill the futurological messages easy to overlook in literary works is a mission of literary criticism. To couch it in a philosophical language, the futurological messages are nothing but the diverse world of virtualities enveloping the world of actuality. The virtual cloud made up of numerous futures is precisely what gives the actual world concreteness and vitality. The futures constructed by software engineers, for instance, are mostly technological and often manipulative. The reason is simple: software engineers are always at the service of various interest groups. The futures constructed by writers are more visionary and open. Writers are fellow travellers of philosophers and artists. Philosophy, art, and literature are probably the few means left by which humanity could pursue freedom, especially when they are experimental.

Deleuze (2007: 287–296) has an article entitled, ‘The Brain Is the Screen’. Arguably, the brain is the ultimate screen. Experimental writers should keep this in mind. Avant-garde works resort to the audience’s subconsciousness rather than their consciousness. Some works feel like delirium or somniloquy, precisely because they need to be processed by the audience in sleep or under hypnosis. Works that feel like nonsense are not worthless; more often than not, such works may retune the reader’s mind more effectively. Zhuangzi’s notion of the forgetting of language means going beyond language. More than one generation of Western writers has tried to bring about a similar effect through psychedelics. Although psychedelics are unlikely to induce the complete forgetting of language, perhaps they could usher in xenoglossia (i.e., alien languages), which is allegedly most suitable for the age of digital interconnectivity.

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5 Here is a slightly modified translation of the motto of Nankai University: Dedication to public interests (允公), development of all-around capability (允能), and accomplishment of novelty and difference with each passing day (日新月异).
The digital age is the age of liberal education. The Chinese equivalent for ‘liberal’ in this context is tongshi (通识), which, literally speaking, means exactly the same as McLuhan’s notion of sensus communis. In the book age, Western-style education had a strong visual bias, the symptoms of which include the isolation between the six (according to Buddhists) senses, the separation between the disciplines, and mental schism. If we think about it, synesthesia should be the way perception normally works. Yet it has degraded into an exception, and a figure of speech not so easy to think up. The transformation of vijnana (识) into prajna (智) is simply out of the question. Liberal education is a return to the ancient way, and the Orientalization of Western education. Digital media are integrative and inclusive, retrieve what was once rendered obsolescent, and point in the direction of the convergence of the six senses. Liberal education should have the following characteristics: wall-less classrooms, boundaryless disciplines, and horizonless explorations. The book age inculcated a possession-orientation; the digital age inculcates an experience-orientation (i.e., an aesthetic orientation) and, therefore, a nomadic sensibility (Flusser, 2003: 49). Etymologically speaking, experience and aistheton (from which ‘aesthetics’ is derived) are synonymous. Both have the same meaning as the second part of ‘synesthesia’. The digital age should be an affective age, or an aesthetic age. In the digital age, liberal education is the larger trend and the direction of the collective sentiment. Discipline-bound education is a symptom of rearview-mirrorism. In the realm of literature, encyclopaedic works, such as those of Thomas Pynchon, are already reviving. It bears noting that all sorts of feelings welling up simultaneously is also a characteristic of literary works in the digital age. Representative works from the digital age should be excellent raw materials for liberal education.

Like serious art, serious literature should provide people with a counter-environment, which can serve two functions: to intervene in the culture, and to render visible the invisible immediate environment through contrast or through pattern revelation. An open society will invest in such counter-environments. Otherwise, its self-renewal will be adversely affected. If redundancy is a big drawback of communication in the digital age, then serious literature should be highly informative, improbable, or negentropic, and give people a sense of freshness. Michel Serres points out, ‘Saturated with information, inexhaustible, the work of art not only resists time as it passes but also reverses it’ (1997: 94). But there is a crucial distinction between two kinds of information. Serres observes further, ‘As rarity, information runs [...] in the opposite direction from that of information as dissemination’ (1997: 95). The former is negentropic, whereas the latter smacks of fascism.

Informativeness and how many bits a work contains are two different matters entirely. A piece of redundant information may contain many bits but be
totally uninformative. During the Spring and Autumn period, the State of Jin (晋) borrowed a road through the State of Yu (虞) to attack the State of Guo (虢) but destroyed the State of Yu on the way back. The stratagem, devised by XUN Xi (荀息), was highly informative back then. During the Three Kingdoms period, ZHOU Yu intended to adopt the same stratagem to seize Jingzhou, but ZHUO Liang saw through it immediately. For ZHUO Liang, there was nothing surprising about ZHOU Yu’s stratagem, which was not negentropic at all. The Grand Canyon was highly informative for the initial discoverer, but it is far less so for somebody visiting the place as a member of a tourist group. The latter has learned something about the Grand Canyon in advance and therefore is less excitable. Whether something is informative or not is not independent of the audience; rather, it varies with the audience. Literary works with a high artistic value always surprise people, and exert an aesthetic impact upon the reader. Aesthetics is not reducible to information theory or entropy theory, but there are connections in between.

Apparently, the digital age is extremely rich in information. In reality, however, informativeness is harder to accomplish in this age. Therefore, form is even more important than in the predigital age. On the whole, there are two sources of informativeness: one is novelty of form; the other is substantiality, unprecedentedness, and pertinency of what is said. Put otherwise, informativeness is no different than creativity in form and content. In nature and the realms of literature and art, negentropy is indissociable from the emergence of new forms. As far as the emergence of a new form is concerned, the first instance is history and the second is farce. In the same vein, a new continent can only be discovered once. In the digital age, the half-life of new forms can be characterized by a line by LI Yu (李煜): ‘Spring’s rosy colour fades from forest flowers / Too soon, too soon’. The apparatus, which has a program embedded in it, is a black box, and a public enemy in the digital age. Its default tendency is to turn everybody into a functionary or a servomechanism, and to impede the generation of negentropy. Users are put in a position of being programmed; as such, they are actually being used. Substantial and informative are those literary works that reveal the workings of the apparatus, penetratingly analyze the human condition in the digital age, and offer the way to pursue freedom. Such works have philosophical and ethical significance, besides literary significance.

In the digital age, in the control society, humanity’s situation strikingly resembles an absurd game. The pursuit of freedom has become a game. The opponent in the game is an impersonal black box. Freedom more often than

6 Translated by XU Yuanchong (许渊冲).
not takes the form of tactical breakthroughs accomplished from within. The black box has the capacity to learn and the ability to update its program. Each tactical breakthrough the gamer accomplishes means an opportunity for the black box to upgrade its program. That is to say, each adventure or experience of freedom on the part of the gamer is absorbed by the black box as feedback. In the predigital age, Kafka revealed in advance the absurd logic of the digital age. The digital age has been around for quite a while, but who is our Kafka? This is at once a philosophical, ethical, and literary question that calls for and catalyses a new literature. The discussion of new literature is meaningful for our times only in this sense. Totally new works and thoughts will not be understood by society. Therefore, a truly new literature is predestined to be written for a people to come. Awakening is the way a people to come is born. New literature is a upaya or skillful means. The Sixth Zen Patriarch once said: ‘To transform others, you must have skillful means yourself.’ One may well say this line is a challenge for writers in the age of new media. With digital media becoming increasingly pervasive and artificial intelligence already penetrating the life world, humanity’s entanglements are deepening rapidly. The times are calling for the birth of a new literary theory and a new literature.

References


