

# Ex Libris. Literature in Media Urbanity

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## Abstract

An abstract of Søren Pold's (Aarhus Universitet) doctoral dissertation.

The dissertation examines the relations between literature and the development in media during the last two centuries. The starting point in the introduction is the current situation of the computer challenging literature and, in the opinion of some, presenting a threat to literature in general and in particular to the book. Instead of primarily searching for sociological or media-theoretical explanations of this possible crisis of the book, my focus is on readings of literary works that thematise how literature reflects the media situation, and at the same time integrates this critical reflection in the litererary form of the works themselves. In short, my primary interest is literary rather than sociological or economic, and even though I use a mediarelated perspective, nor is my interest primarily media theoretical, but how a media perspective is able to update a literary perspective and how literature can be read as a critique of media and as a way to comprehend modern mediated reality.

The dissertation is in four parts in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first part of the dissertation contains a methodical and theoretical description of the field of the dissertation and its media-realistic perspective, in which I in detail account for the structure of the dissertation. Subsequently the dissertation is structured in three thematic parts or media-literary spaces (Paris, Los Angeles and the scripted space of the computer). In conclusion I discuss how a media-realistic understanding of literature and media-realistic literature can help us read modern mediated reality.

## I. Media-realistic Spaces

The first part is structured in three chapters. The first chapter considers the relationship between literature and space, and I point out some convergence points

between on the one hand rhetoric, text, and literature and on the other space. Even though at first glance the text could be considered one dimensional, linear, chronological, it turns out to be spatialised through its rhetorical and literary staging. I explore how literature deals with space, incorporates space, and can be spatial itself through its rhetoric, figuration, form and technology. The focus is not on the denotative space, the space to which literature refers through its content and its descriptions, but rather a connotative or formal space that belongs to literature itself and is separate from spatial manifestation in more sensuous art forms, with architectural space as the extreme counterpole. In this chapter the characteristic spatiality of literature is explored and defined as a manifestation of the mediality or composed nature of modern space.

In the second chapter this literary, textual space is laid out against the modern urban spaces in which the dissertation resides. Here it becomes clear that urban space and literary space challenge each other and lead to a dynamic, mutual development, which leads to the other main track of the dissertation, literature and the history of media. Literature is challenged by the visual mass media that gathers momentum from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and at the same time urban space is increasingly mediated and thereby also symbolically organized with reading in mind. From the linear perspective city-as-artwork the panoramic city is developed, which is being organized according to a mass perspective more than from the linear perspective single point of view. With the panoramic city the individual's perspective of the city is mediated by the panoramic mass perspective, which functions both visually and spatially and is furthermore implemented in the city's architecture and plan. The city and its perspective exceeds the scale of the individual perspective and the urban resident slowly becomes accustomed to integrating a super-individual mass perspective to orient himself in space. This is also underlined in the cinematographic city, where movement is added as a significant factor together with the architectural and spatially constructed mass perspective of the panorama. The city is increasingly perceived (as) in motion, either through screens and projections or through the mobile windshield perspective, and the movement is controlled by infrastructure and signs. In the scripted space that also gradually affects the forms of modern cities, the control of space is not only visual and spatial but also directly coded in writing. Space is controlled through a written representation, it is scripted, and by means of computer power the script can be integrated directly into the walls and roads. Architectural urban space and the perception of it are combined with a new way of writing and thus inherit the mediality of writing as it was discussed in the first chapter.

In the third chapter I discuss how literature and literary history can be read in the light of this spatial and medial development. First I suggest that literature should be studied as a medium and in coherence with media history. Then I sketch out some consequences for the history of modern literature, especially regarding modernism,

after which I present the literary historical constellation of the dissertation. Here I propose the current digital media revolution as a perspective in which to read literature and literary history. In the dissertation this leads to an updating of realism in Balzac through a panoramic media perspective, concurrently with a reading of current Los Angeles literature and digital literature in a media-realistic perspective. In conclusion I discuss the combination of media and realism in my concept of media realism as a critical perspective stemming from the work of Walter Benjamin.

## II. The Panoramic Novel: Balzac - Paris - Panorama

The second part of the dissertation falls into four chapters, the last of which serves to conclude the section. The first two chapters are readings of two novels by Honoré de Balzac: *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and *Ferragus* from the collection *Histoire des Treize*. The third chapter deals with the panorama and the mediated urban context in which the novels take place.

Both novels, *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and *Ferragus*, contain a criticism of the epistemology that is constituted by the classical, abstract overview as it is depicted by the linear perspective or the camera obscura, and they dramatise its crisis in the meeting with the modern metropolis, Paris. *La Fille aux yeux d'or* demonstrates how the gaze and the visual are destabilized and detached from stable perception - how the visual is virtualized and at the same time mobilized; that is, made an object of exchange, mirroring and projection. The novel illustrates how through this modernisation the visual becomes a drama with severe consequences all the way into the intimate sphere of the boudoir. A development that in the novel is connected to how gold works as a medium; how it structures perception and through virtualisation and mobilisation potentially creates new structures of meaning. *Ferragus* demonstrates how the place (which not by accident is Paris) is no longer a stable frame for perception, but initiates a dynamic where perception and knowledge are made contingent and where perspectives and communication are mediated in a circuit of information that develops its own autonomous, cybernetic logic. In *Ferragus* the focus is on how the place is doubled in a body of social information that operates beyond the control of the single individual and that is partly driven by the individual protagonist's unsuccessful attempt to stage himself as a linear perspective observer.

Both novels thus dramatise the crisis of the classical linear perspective observer confronted with the modern urban city; how the abstract overview comes up against difficulties when meeting the materialism of the city and its new dynamic social reality. In different ways they demonstrate how the urban social structures are constructed and function as mediations of visual perception, which thus on the

one hand are destabilised and on the other hand are valorised in a new visual economy (*La Fille aux yeux d'or*) and informational structure (*Ferragus*). This visual and informational (statistical, cybernetic) structure that the novels formulate in a literary way means that the novels can be read as literary manifestations on the threshold of a modern urban media reality. *La Fille aux yeux d'or* formulates through its rhetoric, constellations of characters, points of view and narrative structure a literary experience of the valorisation of the visual. *Ferragus* represents through its intrigue, points of view and its mediated space an abstract, cybernetic information circuit and demonstrates how this circuit affects social and material space; how it redefines the city as a mediascape.

In the third chapter I trace this media character and how it was expressed in Paris around the panoramic media. The aim of this discussion of the panorama is to contextualize the media discussions of my readings in respect to the time of Balzac, and to interpret and make explicit the implied media-realistic formulations in the novels. The panorama is used as a perspective that unfolds a reading of realism in relation to media. The panorama summarizes cognitive innovations that from the beginning of the nineteenth century have affect on a large number of areas ranging from the individual sensory perception and orientation in the modern world to the organization of modern society. As the first culture-industrial mass medium, the panorama opens a process of mediation that has an effect on both the conception and the construction of reality.

I view this construction of reality from different angles. In relation to the social or political construction of modern reality, I discuss the panorama as a democratic mass perspective versus the panorama as a panoptic disciplining of the masses. Drawing on Stephan Oettermann I discuss the panorama versus the panopticon as a model for the division of the world into pleasure and work respectively. I also discuss the 'panoramisation' of the world through tourism and train travel, point at mediatechnological aspect and list the sisters and heirs of the panorama; the diorama, phenochistescope, stereoscope, cinéorama and digital 3D VR media. One of the most important points, together with the already mentioned political, social, infra structural and media technological changes, is that the panorama marks a radical commercialisation of the visual. One paid an entrance fee - an economic transaction that also influenced what was shown and resulted in a change from biblical, allegoric motives to more commercially marketable motives. The panorama developed into an actual cultural industry and was even exploited for propaganda and commercial purposes. The commercialisation influenced not only *what* people saw but gradually also *how*, the audience sought the dizzyingly spectacular, the phantasmogoric forms spread in the city scape and entered into an intimate connection with things, as described in Marx's concept of goods.

This *how* can also be approached by discussing how the panorama was perceived; how the panorama resulted in changes in sensory perception. In respect to

individual sensory perception, I describe the panoramic changes brought about by the introduction of a breach between the seen and the cognitive as well as between vision and the other senses, a situation in which one sees the phantasmagoric mediation and is nevertheless transported into a virtual media space. The panorama introduces an oscillation in the cognition between representation and simulation and this oscillation leads to a modern ontological confusion between the levels of reality in media reality; between empirical representation that claims to bring us closer to an underlying reality and a spectacular simulation of a phantasmagoric dream reality that is adapted to consumption. In the case of train travel the panoramic observer steps out of the continual space where the near and the far are connected and into a mediated space that enfolds him. Moreover, the panoramic perspective is a mass perspective, which indicates that changes in individual sensory perception are connected to social and political changes. The panorama thus illustrates central aspects of bourgeois society that are on one hand related to sensory perception and the individual and on the other to the structures of society. Both aspects - vision and society - are connected dialectically and are to be seen as inseparable in my presentation of the panorama as an epistemological visual machine for early bourgeois society.

Through my reading of Balzac in relation to the panorama, Balzac becomes topical as the founder of a media-realistic literature that is far from the naïve realism with which various avant-garde and modernist movements claims to take issue. Balzac demonstrates how literature can be timely and critically stage modern media reality by incorporating, reflecting and demonstrating the presentational forms of the media in its own literary form. Thus, the media-realistic novel contains important critical potentials for rendering the forms of media visible and readable through literary staging.

### III. The Cinematographic Writing of Los Angeles

The third part is divided into four chapters, the last of which has a concluding form. The first chapter outlines a media-realistic history of Los Angeles literature based on the mediated character and mythology of the city. The city with no centre has in more than one sense Hollywood in its heart and its identity is built up from set pieces. My starting point is in the designation of the city as cinematographic and here I elaborate on how the cinematographic aspects affects the city and the perception of it, as well as how this is formulated in Los Angeles novels. I also include critical views and discussions of the city's mediated character and how this mediated character is related to a cultural economy of an almost mythological nature that is split up into the contrasts of *sunshine* and *noir*. *Noir* is the inversion

of the sunshine mythology that has very effectively sold the city to tourists, newcomers and cinema audience all over the world. However, *noir* was quickly appropriated by the movie industry and is selling just as well as the sunshine myth to which *noir* was a response.

After this outline historical outline of Los Angeles novels, I take a closer look at how the cinematographical perspective and *noir* sensibility is unfolded in the writing of Raymond Chandler and in his protagonist Marlowe. Especially *The Little Sister* demonstrates how Hollywood builds up and controls the presentation of reality. Through cinematic dialogues and metaphors, the mobile and superficial perspective, and descriptions resembling set pieces, as well as the general obsession with deceit, Chandler stages a detective who is totally immersed in a filmic reality, which in the end leads to a breakdown for the illuminating gaze of the detective. Thus, *The Little Sister* introduces a reading of Chandler's writing and the *noir* literature as a literary adaptation of the cinematic presentation and recognition of reality. Mediation is basic to Los Angeles and is therefore the closest one gets to the city's fleeting identity. Los Angeles has Hollywood under its skin and in the heart. *Noir* acts out this mediation and can thus be read as media realism that deals with how reality is mediated and produced in cinematographic urbanity.

The second and third chapters are analyses of two contemporary Los Angeles novels; Bret Easton Ellis' *The Informers* and Steve Erickson's *Amnesiascope*, which in different forms intensify the media-realistic tradition of the city. In Ellis's novel the cinematic anaesthetized observer is at the centre of a novel without a continuous narrative told by anti-narrators resembling surveillance cameras, who instead of narrating simply pass information on, which the novel primarily registers. However, the novel's form is filled with caesuras to a degree that one almost stumbles over them and it thereby invites to being read through its gaps. The narrative form of the novel is close to a point zero, which Ellis however shows a way out of through the humoristic leads he places in the novel and in his following novel, *Glamourama*. To this, of course, is added Ellis's mastery of literary form, which he uses in a media-realistic critique of a (post) modern, cinematic, urban reality.

Steve Erickson shows another course, which is far less *noir* and dystopical. Erickson's narrator breaks up the media metropole's space and time with its own measures, moving around on the city's "great non-sequitur streets" and taking advantage of the holes in the city's time zones. Whereas Chandler and Ellis concentrate on the cinematographic aspects as we know it, Erickson displaces the familiar media technology and overemphasizes the phantasmagorical-magical aspects. In *Amnesiascope* he even builds up his own fictive and fantastic media, which becomes the utopian-impossible perspective of the novel - the point which would gather its form and articulate its reply to what Los Angeles is if it is no longer a city. Through this fictive and phantasmagorical perspective, Erickson succeeds in telling a different story about Los Angeles, about its erotic city spaces and fantastic,

phantasmagorical dimensions. Even though in Erickson's novels Los Angeles is not clearly articulated, but is deferred and unfolded in a continuous narration, it is a narrative that thematises how media urbanity seduces and why it is seductive.

## IV. Writing the Scripted Space

The fourth part consists of three chapters and a conclusion. In this part of the dissertation I move beyond the safe covers of the book and into a digital field where I explore emergent literary forms. The starting point for exploring an emergent digital literature is the code and the fact that the computer medium can be seen as a writing technology, which supplies a basis for a literary perspective and some extraordinary literary possibilities. The first chapter discusses the relation between code and literature, in which I discuss some mediatheoretical definitions of the computer medium, after which I read Laurie Anderson's *Puppet Motel* as a staging of anecdotes of the code. My reading of *Puppet Motel* thus uncovers how the literary occurs in the anecdotic formulations around and in the coded space of the computer and the interaction with this. In the first chapter, after having explained my starting point in the code and in the understanding of the computer as a writing technology, I use this literary starting point to explore a range of interaesthetic and interdisciplinary points.

In chapter two the multimedial, primarily visual effects of the code are examined through *Myst*'s staging of the multimedia computer's ekphrasis and genre related discussions between text and image. My reading of *Myst* serves as a corrective to the prevalent view of the computer medium as an extension of the visual media, as is for instance the case within the Virtual Reality (VR) discourse. The VR discourse appears in its pure form as a repression of the scripted nature of the computer and the effect of this approach may at worst be a restriction of the readability of the computer medium, or at least a justification for a "user friendly" cover up of the its scripted nature and readability. *Blackout* thematizes the consequences of such a cover up of its readability and through an alter ego stages a schizophrenic user who when trying to read the scripted space is read and written himself to an extent that in the end the user is entangled in the cybertext's trap. This chapter thus demonstrates how digital literary works can formulate media-realistic understanding of the computer medium, which through literary stagings of the code builds up an understanding of the computer's significance that can function as a critical corrective to the prevalent more high-flying and commercial visions. At the same time the chapter formulates perspectives for a multimedia literature.

Whereas chapter two concentrates on multimedial, digital literary expressions, chapter three concentrates on hypertext. The central point is the link that makes the

text electric and whereby literature develops from a work to a network. At the same time, the concentration on hypertext gives the opportunity to critically discuss the influential hypertext theory and its juxtaposition or "convergence" (George P. Landow) of post structuralism, (post-) modernistic avant-garde and hypertext. As an alternative to transferring a literary theoretic tradition to digital media, the dissertation discusses how the scripted space of the computer can be seen in connection with the development of urban forms as described in the first part and in continuation of the media-realistic view of literature that the dissertation proposes.

In reading hypertexts I aim to uncover the new grammar of the link and to interpret what this new grammar has already generated. As *Hegirascope* demonstrates, the text has become electric and kinetic and has acquired its own restless temporality. *Etoy* demonstrates convincingly discursive economy of the link through its own popcultural irony, ironically appropriating the commercial rhetoric and aesthetics of the World Wide Web. *Jodi's* HTML-lyric is a deconstructive work with the basic linguistic nature of the code, thus undermining the interface and demonstrating the construction of the computer's mode of presentation. *Jodi* demonstrates how media reality is coded and at the same time they demonstrate how literary, absurd, hacker-humour still can lead the codes of media reality astray. At the end I present *The Web Stalker* as a textual parallel to the visual panorama. This is a parallel that not only demonstrates continuity, but also stages difference. As a parallel to how the picture with the panorama breaks the frame and leaves the canvas to enfold the viewer, *The Web Stalker*, as a hyper textual panorama, demonstrates how hyper- and cybertext leaves the book to enfold the reader. *The Web Stalker* is thus a literary corrective to the post-symbolical visual language of the Virtual Reality discussion.

My focus on the code of the computer aims to uncover and illuminate an emergent digital literature, to clarify how the literary arises around a formal exploration of the code, which gradually becomes a formulation of the code's significance. I end this exploration by suggesting *The Web Stalker* as a literary tool for understanding the forms of the Internet and the construction of a digital conception of text beyond the paper and the book.

## Conclusion

In my conclusion I sum up the salient points of the dissertation and put them into perspective in relation to a wider literary, aesthetical and cultural field. I discuss how art and literature is digitalized and how they reflect the digital; either as an outer reflection that easily becomes phantasmagorical and on the terms of the media and the industry, or as a media-realistic reflection that both keeps up with media



development and integrates media development in relation to the tradition and the formal reflection of the work. In the latter case digital and media development becomes an integrated part of the production of meaning in literary works. Media-realistic literature thus obtains an important role as a field that formulates media reality and gives us access to an interpretation of it through its formal reflection and in relation to traditional forms.

In relation to the general development of the media it is possible to observe two lines of development: On one hand, the development and importance of the visual media will continue and *the visual* will continue to be central; on the other, visual media will be integrated in and affected by the digital *scriptedness* - by the fact that the digital media are technologies of writing. Thus, in the first place we will see a continuous literary thematizing and processing of *the visual* and the visual media reality, which this dissertation has investigated from Balzac (primarily *La Fille aux yeux d'or*) to Chandler, Ellis and Erickson. Secondly, we will see a literary processing and exploration of the *scriptedness* or forms of the digital textuality, of which we see the antecedents in the literary processing of the statistical, informational and cybernetic in Balzac's *Ferragus* as well as in Etoy and Jodi.

The dissertation proposes a media-realistic concept of literature and history, in which the development of literature itself as well as the general media development are considered an integrated part of the literary. In view of the media-realistic concept of literature digital media does not present a threat to literature, but on the contrary the computer presents a new digital literary field, which is an obvious challenge to writers, to the literary field and literary criticism. Literature is engaged in making the mediated readable and this is not possible by standing outside the mediated, but on the contrary through a medial self-reflection and by passing through modern media. It is precisely by virtue of this literary media consciousness *ex libris* - from and out of the books - and the way in which it is constantly staged and put into play in relation to forms of new media, that literature has a critical potential. As a literary staging that makes possible a reading of the imprint of media and of media reality.

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