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## Recensioni

### REVIEW OF RICHARD MÜLLER (EDITED BY), *THE EMERGING CONTOURS OF THE MEDIUM: LITERATURE AND MEDIALITY* (BLOOMSBURY, 2024)

COMPREHENDING MEDIA AND INTEGRATING LITERARY AND MEDIA STUDIES:  
AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK?

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#### ABSTRACT

Review of Richard Müller (edited by), *The Emerging Contours of the Medium: Literature and Mediality* (Bloomsbury, 2024).

**Keywords** – Literary Studies; Media Studies; Intermediality; Materiality; Technics; Digital Realm.

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*The Emerging Contours of the Medium: Literature and Mediality*, edited by Richard Müller, is a work which, as the title suggests, examines the different versions of the medium from the viewpoint of its various, seemingly countless perspectives. Prior to reading the text, a scholar familiar with the issues of the phenomenon, with its perception of considering a stable definition of it an impossible task, might argue that this is yet another attempt to generate a definition of the term, with which every single academic discipline would agree upon and which is destined to fail. This, of course, is not what the book desires to achieve. The main aim of this work does concern the medium, but in the context of following the goal of a mutual integration of literary and media studies.

As suggested in the introduction to the book, the history of these fields is particularly interesting since they initially had a common basis, but then separated. In fact, many media scholars began as and were trained as literary scholars. The consequences of this separation, of course, was alienation and a mutual lack of understanding of the other. This must be comprehended in the context that media studies attempted to define themselves as an independent discipline, namely, one which is not constantly compared to literary studies. As we can read later in the work, there is a certain analogy to the concept of intermediality, the representatives of which tried to distinguish the field from comparative arts studies and interarts studies as well as the notion of intertextuality. Of course, the integration of the medium, which the listed fields largely neglected, was a definite and plausible point of distinction. However, after the intermediality had been established as a household name in academia and a division had been overcome, the introduction of the medium as one of the significant traits of the discipline generated a further dichotomy, now largely one between the literature-centered and media-centered intermedialists. What was their point of division? Of course, the comprehension of the medium, which brings us back to the central goal of this book. In the course of this work, the medium, thus, should be considered as an extended metaphor for the strife between the fields of literary and media studies. The contributors to the chapters of this book well perceived that the point of reconciliation lies precisely in a profound discussion of the actual obstacle to the potential harmonious relationship, namely, the notion of the medium.

In order to understand how complex and relevant the term 'medium' actually is, it suffices to explore the perception of it in our everyday lives: Who is not acquainted with 'mass media', such as television, radio and the internet, which attract massive audiences or users? Within that group, an arguably even more powerful group of 'social media' platforms, such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, WhatsApp and Signal have developed. Although often included within 'mass media', we might not associate 'communication media', such as letters, the telephone, the fax machine, mobile phones, emails or web conferences, which enable a communication between a sender and a receiver, as part of 'mass media'. It is also possible that someone would associate media with 'tools', such as a hoe or the shovel, which helps one, for instance, to carry out garden work. This is how Marshal McLuhan's widely acclaimed, but still controversial

comprehension of media as the extensions of the body is convincingly explained in the book. Finally, why would we not consider media also in culinary terms as something that transmits flavor, as something that takes on the taste of another ingredient, such as milk adapting the flavor of herbs and spices, when it is cooked or heated?

With the exception of the final example, in the first chapter of *The Emerging Contours of the Medium: Literature and Mediality*, Tomáš Chudý thoroughly examines these and many more possibilities of the medium, investigating its development (from ancient times to new media), analyzing whether we should consider it in environmental (in what media operate?) or instrumental (by what means media operate?) reality, looking into what the aesthetics of its social/cultural functions signify as well as whether we should investigate media according to their functions. The functional approach appears to be the most crucial throughout the chapters of this book. The reason for that is that it is in these principles that both common ground and distinctions appear. Indeed, as the contributors imply, a medium is not restricted to a specific function, but can fulfill multiple ones. In addition, different media may fulfill one and the same task. Hence, defining media according to their conceptual, communicative or social development will lead to constantly novel definitions, especially as a consequence of the constant reinvention of older and the creation of new, digital media. This, of course, hinders a consensus in defining the phenomenon. Therefore, since these functions of media remain or at least do not undergo such a radical shift, I would agree with the authors that a solution to the media puzzle and also to the literary/media studies dichotomy lies in considering the functional principles.

At this point, it is of crucial importance to address the main methodological approaches employed throughout the chapters of the book, namely, the historical and genealogical perspective. While the former is often applied in theoretical works to examine the history of a specific term or notion in a coherent manner, it is in the genealogical comprehension of the medium, which makes this book special, demonstrating how simple historical discussions and descriptions are often insufficient, especially when considering such complex and ambiguous concepts and terms. As the contributors demonstrate, the significance of discussing the medium and all of the field of studies thoroughly examined in this book is not in the listing of solely who said or did something, what was invented at a certain temporal and spatial point in time and place, but rather how these concepts, developments, inventions and notions have developed in the course of history, how these ideas have changed over time. Indeed, to put it simply, the contributors understand that it suffices not to state and describe the developments, but to critically examine them and determine how they have evolved. I believe that this is the only approach that can effectively highlight, why the concept of the medium has reached its present levels of intricacy and has led to disputes between various fields, notably literary and media studies.

What the genealogy of media also makes us aware of is one of the most important concepts discussed in the book, namely, the notion of 'media evolution'. Although this is a widely used

term, it is often rather mistakenly comprehended as ‘media revolution’ in writings on media, neglecting what happens to the means that are replaced. Indeed, the world of media is involved in a constant process of modernization, regardless whether we consider their technological or their functional (as communication, environment, representation, tool) development. As the authors concisely state at the end of the book, the process of development of technical and communication media as increasingly significant means that fulfilled social, communicative and cultural functions resulted in the intricacy of definitions. However, regardless of this constant development, what the chapters in this book simultaneously demonstrate is the fact that even though media develop and are replaced by their modernized counterparts, the original ones do not disappear or cease to exist, but undergo a shift in function and conceptualization. As the first chapter of the book suggests, older definitions of the media do not become obsolete, but add to the intricacy of the concept of the medium. What I consider as particularly remarkable in the development of media is how the phenomenon has developed from an environment, an in-between and a middle to modern mass and social media, even AI, which visibly govern our everyday lives. In fact, it is only fitting that the book asks the increasingly significant question in this age of rapid technological development: Do humans control media or do the media control us?

As is notably stated at the beginning, *The Emerging Contours of the Medium* is a meticulously crafted book, which was only published after careful consultation, preparation and after receiving interdisciplinary feedback at numerous international conferences. In my view, this approach, which some scholars might consider pedantic, is in fact what renders the book a collective, coherent work. Collective, firstly, in the sense of the cooperative work from interdisciplinary contributors, but, secondly, also in the sphere of reception since the received feedback on the book and the inclusion of comments on it in the completed work makes the readers or listeners at conferences indirect contributors to the book. What I also find significant about the work is that it may be read as a collection of essays or as a book that throughout its chapters adds to the fulfillment of its initially stated goal. The outline in the Introduction contains detailed descriptions of what the readers may find in the separate chapters. Personally, I would argue for the second approach since the chapters demonstrate that the authors’ intention is to read the chapters of the book with the goal of finding answers to the stated research questions. As proof, it suffices to point out the various cross-references in all of the chapters to other parts of the book, guiding the readers to previously read material or foreshadowing future terminology, arguments and discussions. This is a further argument for the fact that the book is genuinely a collective effort. Additionally, it provides the work with cohesion which I consider a necessary element in books that follow a certain thesis or goal.

After the Introduction and the general discussion of the medium in the first chapter, the collective and interdisciplinary approach of the work is then followed and demonstrated in the next ten chapters of the book, which introduce the readers to various fields of study that deliberately

or not, directly or indirectly engage with questions concerning the notion of the medium, literary theory and/or the study of media. In chapter two, Richard Müller and Pavel Šidák reflect on the ideas of the Prague School, whereby the focus is largely on the thoughts of Jan Mukařovský, and their attempts to adapt the models of structural linguistics to literary theory, which is tightly connected to the emerging avant-garde in the arts and society. Interestingly, as the authors argue at the end of the book, while one would consider the avant-garde with its agenda of blurring distinctions between media, democratizing the production of art and the adaptation of new media technics, the movement did little work to promote the notion of the mediality of art and literature. The reason for that is their preference for how the technical, artistic object represents modern times and the social question of how the individual acts as part of this new reality.

In chapter six, Richard Müller attempts to consider information theory and cybernetics as fields of study, which offer an updated and arguably improved model for the comprehension of literature and the arts, stressing the openness of the creative process and its semantic content as well as the significance of the perceiver as the starting point of the literary process in what we could understand as an instance of reader-based analysis. In this way, DeSaussurian aesthetics and Roman Jakobson's basic model of the sender-channel-receiver is updated into an elaborated and more intricate one. This can, for instance, be exemplified with Claude Shannon's model of *information source (with possible entropy)-transmitter (encoder)-channel (with noise)-decoder-destination (the received message)*, which I find a more suitable and helpful model of comprehending literature. In terms of experimental poetry with its often-ambiguous content of information as well as its reception, the complexity of the model might explain why these kinds of works result in numerous interpretations. Connected to this kind of literature and to this model in particular, Mukařovský's concept of unintentionality of an artwork may be of particular importance since there is a discrepancy of what the information source (the artist) attempts to convey and what the receiver eventually perceives. This is why the 'feedback loop' seems crucial for the comprehension of the system, which is not a stable entity, but in constant development. Connecting these thoughts to the basic questions of the book, it is not dissimilar to the concept of the medium itself. Does this mean that, if literature can be seen as the subject, a representative entity of this communication model, that it is in fact mediated, even from the viewpoint of media studies? Additionally, the focus in chapter six is on the relationship between the technological development and art in the wake of the second-wave of the avant-garde, whereby Umberto Eco is in favor of a 'techno-aesthetic optimism', whereby he argues that art rather than technology leads to novel ways of thinking and feeling or that, in other words, technology is discovered by means of artistic experimentation. In chapter eight, in which Josef Šebek focuses on the oeuvre of Raymond Williams, similar notions regarding the rejection of technological determinism are discussed. In his ideas, not only the artistic, cultural practices and applications determine the development of technology, but in his Marxist reading also the social context and practice. This

social aspect of the medium is elaborated in the following chapter, in which Tomáš Chudý deals with the medium and mediality as comprehended in social systems theory by scholars, such as Niklas Luhmann. One of the major concerns of this field of study is centered on the information source of the information model, particularly on the notion of redundancy and how to effectively reduce it. Indeed, media make communication possible, but the iteration of the system may be one of the consequential concerns. The solution or the means that make communication probable/acceptable is seen in the SGCM (Symbolically Generalized Communication Media). These are not connected to a particular function and do not adhere to a general medium of significance, but are plural media, which take the functional intricacy of society and communication into account. Furthermore, in his eponymous 1986 article, Luhmann introduces the concept of the “medium of art”, arguing that “all art, including literature, developed or evolved in a process of functional differentiation”, later stating that “all media, including technical media, serve as ‘fodder’ for the escalating demands of art” (315). While the first statement returns us back to the notions elaborated in the first chapter, namely, that media should be described in terms of their function, the latter echoes Eco’s thoughts on the rejection of technological determinism. In chapter ten, in which Richard Müller discusses the cultural semiotics of Yuri Lotman, the notion of the noise of the communication channel as disturbance is questioned. In this way, interference can lead to the creation of new messages and additional semantic value.

As this brief trajectory of some of the concepts of this book demonstrates, the notion of the medium is most often connected to its communicative function. This seems to be a logical consequence of the historical and genealogical development of media studies. As chapter three, written by Martin Ritter, with its focus on the development of Walter Benjamin’s thought shows, the focus curiously lies on the earlier, lesser-known works rather than on his influential *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935). However, this has a specific purpose since the genealogical trajectory of Benjamin’s work leads to the concluding comprehension that it was his initial reflections on language (the basis of communication) which resulted in his thoughts on media and mediality.

In chapter eleven, written by Stanislava Fedrová and Alice Jedličková, which focuses on the development of intermediality studies, the dispute between literary and media studies is, at least in my view, most overtly discussed. At the beginning of this review, I have addressed the fact that the conflict between literary studies and media studies lies in their comprehension of the medium. The different approaches to the sphere of intermediality exemplify this dispute. Werner Wolf, one of the most significant literature-centered theorists of the medium, defines it “primarily as a *communication dispositif*, which is distinguished by the specific use of one or more semiotic systems” (395). The definition as it stands could partially overlap with the comprehension of it by media scholars since the medium is understood in terms of its communicative function and capacity as well as in semiotic terms, if it implies that the actual material of the

medium is central, such as words, sounds, paint or visuals. However, Wolf “narrows his concept of the medium, relegating the material vehicles of the media product and the technological necessities for distributing it to the margins” (395-96). Hence, the communicative notion is basically restricted to what the medium transmits and not to how it communicates, the latter being one of the main concerns of media studies. Therefore, largely, the interest of literature-centered intermedial studies lies in the discussion of the relationship of either artworks that include two or several media within a single product (intracompositional intermediality), such as the references of music in a literary work, discussing film as a plurimedial product or examining literary works that are structured according to musical or filmic techniques, and between different works of art (extracompositional intermediality), such as the transpositions of a work or media-specific elements in a source medium towards a target medium and transmediality. As we can see, there is a basic disagreement between the fields in terms of the dichotomy between the central importance of the content and relationship between the arts in literary studies and the importance of form, the materiality of the medium as well as its technical aspects, which are of central interest to media studies. For the latter, the study of content or what the different semiotic signs signify is not what they would consider as mediality. In addition, turning to new media and as Richard Müller already explains in the introduction to this book, literary scholars “remain focused almost exclusively on the questions of digital and network forms of literature” (1), seemingly neglecting all the other changes that new media have provoked. In other words, the focus lies only on how, for instance, books get transposed into an eBook format or can nowadays also be read using apps and services, such as Kindle. Hence, as Müller’s question clearly demonstrates, for media scholars and their focus on the materiality of literature, due to the audience’s preference of digital forms “to print forms, has literature become an obscure medium?” (1). Finally, the question of audience and the process of reception is a further point of conflict between the literature and media domains. All in all, we can see that the fields in their views on the medium and mediality represent opposite poles and the efforts of this book to find reconciliatory aspects appears as an arduous, if not impossible task.

However, there were some attempts at reconciliation. Fedrová and Jedličková, for instance, mention Uwe Wirth’s distinction between “*soft and hard intermediality*” (403). The former refers to the literary studies-based approach and the latter to “*technological aspects of differences between media*”, thus referring to one of the concerns of media scholars. In its three levels of intermedial relations, Wirth’s model attempts to combine aspects of literary and media theory to discuss intermedial phenomena, elaborating on Wolf’s and Rajevsky’s typology by considering the technical aspects of the medium.

Arguably the most significant attempt of integrating the two opposing fields of study in this book is Lars Elleström’s concept of “*media modalities*” (413). As opposed to solely considering media in terms of distinct semiotic systems, which neglect the medium’s material aspects, Ell-

elleström believes that the gestation of each medium depends on a set of “basic properties”, which are “intermedial in the sense that” they are “*evident and explainable in relation to other types of media*”. Hence, he “defines general criteria that can help determine the constitutive traits of media and which at the same time create the preconditions for communication and cooperation between different media”. In this context, he distinguishes between the material, sensorial, spatiotemporal and semiotic modality of media. Accordingly, “individual *basic* media are determined by the constellation of these four modalities” and are comparable to other kinds of media with the potential similar or distinct types of modes. Significantly, his model refrains from including a technological modality, but rather names “*technical media* as devices that display and distribute products of individual media” (414). The relationship of these two kinds of media is labeled as mediation in his system. Finally, his model includes a historical, diachronic dimension and an implication of a social one, which depend on how “certain historical, cultural and technological circumstances” resulted in “institutionalized media with a relatively fixed structure of functions”, which he labels as “*qualified media*”. As Fedrová and Jedličková argue, “Elleström does not say what a medium is per se, but he does say how to determine if *something is a medium*”. Although certain scholars claim that the social aspect of media and its importance particularly in the context of digital media is underrepresented, calling for the addition of social modality to the model, the authors of the chapters are skeptical concerning its inclusion since social factors depend on the analysis of individual media products and not individual media and their basic properties as such. All in all, I believe that Elleström’s model has considerable potential of at least generating an eclectic typology of intermedial relations since it includes criteria that are crucial for literature-centered academics, such as semiotics and comprehending art forms as media, and media scholars, such as their focus on the materiality of the medium as well as its technical and digital, new media aspects. In this sense, it adheres to the functional approach to media, which is addressed in this book, highlighting the fact that media may fulfill different and similar functions. What, however, this model does not guarantee is a basic mutual understanding between literary studies and media studies, of the other discipline’s comprehension of what the concept of the medium signifies for them. While Elleström succeeds in integrating a typology of media, he is not able to theoretically integrate the various meanings of the concept of the medium of the discussed fields.

Although the ongoing discussion of this review suggests the arduousness and impossibility of integration between literary and media studies, at least in theoretical terms, may we find practical evidence of reconciliation in the actual (experimental) literary/media products? Bolter’s and Grusin’s concepts of remediation and “*repurposing*” (408) or “*franchising*” of media might be of interest in both fields since they demonstrate how media evolve and migrate as well as become relevant in different media products, regardless whether they are physical or digital objects of study. For instance, if we have a novel (literary work) as a source product, its financial success de-

termines its use across the media sphere. In this way, the novel becomes the subject of movies, musicals, operas, posters, theme parks, action figures, board games and websites, among other media products. These matters seem not only to be concerning media, but culture as a whole. In 2006, Henry Jenkins coined the concept of “*convergence culture*” (408). As Fedrová and Jedličková explain, Jenkins describes it as “the flow of content between different media platforms that adapt to each other and are also adapted by audiences, which cease to consist of passive consumers and actively contribute to circulating content and optimizing these platforms (*participatory culture*)”. While the notions of interactivity and reception, the digital in the sense of website creation and the materiality as exemplified by action figures, posters or board games potentially could be of interest for media studies, the problem for the field will probably be the inherent connection, dependence and focus of the discussed material on the content of these products.

What certainly, then, should be a point of reconciliation between literary and media studies, the subject of research of both these fields, is the act of foregrounding the aspect of materiality in literary works or the inclusion of the digital sphere in the gestation of these cultural products. Of course, the transformation of a physical book into a digital form might not be sufficient in the latter context, but the question of which aspects of the original get lost in the electronic version might be of interest to some media scholars. In addition, what could be the subject of media studies is the concept of collaborative, participatory, interactive poetry on social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook or X. Why not post a one-line sentence that could function as a start of a poem, while the other participants might elaborate on that in the comments section? In chapter six, Richard Müller writes about digital poetry and Theo Lutz’s experiments of computer-generated poetry on “the seventh of Konrad Zuse’s computers, the Zuse Z22” by “inputting binary-encoded nouns and adjectives (sixteen of each) from Kafka’s novel *The Castle* into the memory cells (*Gedächtniszelle*) and adding a number of articles and pronouns to the program” (218). What about physical or electronic books that include hyperlinks, leading us to the Internet, thereby shifting the form and the content of the works? Could dramatic works, which juxtapose the physical and the digital realm, such as Quiara Alegría Hudes’ drama *Water by the Spoonful* (2012) be of interest to media studies? Therefore, we can see that the digital realm offers considerable research points of departure that transcend the content dimension of these works.

However, it is not solely the digital realm that may be of interest to media studies, but foregrounding the material aspects of literature in conventional writing. For instance, “exploring media products that return to their traditional materiality in response to digitization” (428), including the concept bookishness in the sense of celebrating the materiality of the book itself, the experience of holding and reading a physical copy as opposed to the alienation of the cyberspace. Foregrounding the materiality of the text is not an artistic invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, but was already part of early attempts of writing fiction. Works such as Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (1387), Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and*

*Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759) are works of metafiction, which, along with its content, highlight the structure, form and material aspects of the book. Of course, as postmodernism in literature and the arts developed as a movement and the lines of genre and media were increasingly blurred, this has resulted in the widespread inclusion of metafictional elements in literature. As a classic example, I can mention John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), which (to the superficial reader) could be interpreted as a modern version of a Victorian novel, but is, in fact, a work that foregrounds its materiality with its elaborate passages on structure (the narrator explaining, for instance, why the author decides for different endings) and the inclusion of detailed descriptions of historical documents into the narrative. Indeed, hence, the whole literary genre of what Linda Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction' might be the focus of media studies in the future. Finally, turning to a work that is described as a poetry collection, Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010) transcends the conventional notions of the genre by arguably making the materiality of the medium the center of the book's attention. Here, I am not only referring to the fact that the book, curiously, solely consists of a single page, which is shaped like a large accordion, but also to the unusual inclusion of manuscripts, scribbles, photographs, collages, letters. In addition, it is not sold in usual bound format, but in a large box.

All in all, the digital sphere and the act of foregrounding the material aspects of literature are becoming an increasingly significant part of literary production. These works, in my view, certainly offer considerable research intersections for collaborative work between literary and media scholars, but the success of such a reconciliation naturally depends on the mutual readiness of engaging in interdisciplinary work, of looking beyond one's field of study.

*The Emerging Contours of the Medium* is a multilaminated and complex work, considering aspects concerning the notion of the medium from various perspectives. Hence, the authors' decision to conclude a book with an epilogue, which due to the gestation of it as a consequence "of discussions by all the authors together" and the several "key findings of individual chapters" (16) is labeled as a Polylogue, is a fitting, summarizing conclusion to the work, which highlights the central arguments of the discourse discussed meticulously in the previous eleven chapters of this book. After reading this collaborative work, I believe that it is a well-crafted effort, which will slowly become a standard theoretical work in literary, media and intermediality studies. If the personal curiosity of scholars shall not result in this standardization, then certainly the increasingly changing media landscape will, forcing all the discussed fields in this book, but particularly the mentioned three, to adapt to the shifts in comprehending the modern experimental (among others, metafictional) focus of literature, the technical, material and digital focus of media studies and, generally, the social and cultural reality of our everyday lives.