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Scripta Classica 11, 101-110

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2014

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## Mechanisms of Ancient Literature Reception in Digital Media Methodological Context

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is a description of the basic mechanisms of ancient literature and culture appearance in digital media regarding the three-layer analysis of the research subject: computer-medial (syntactic), semantic (content) and pragmatic (utility). The interdisciplinarity applied in the following work, is based not so much on combining various methodologies and sciences, but on finding a common research platform, which would help to answer the question what is antiquity in the digital media and in a broader context, in popular culture.

**Key words:** reception of ancient literature and culture, new media, popular literature and culture, new media mechanisms in the context of ancient literature appearance and reception

### Methodological Puzzles

The basic issue unfolding from the analysis of hundreds of examples of ancient literature and culture appearance in the digital world is a question about what antiquity in the new media is. It might seem that the answer to this question is simple especially if we take into account both quantity and scope of those instances: professional online services devoted to ancient Greek and Roman culture, various forums and blogs, websites such as YouTube or Dailymotion, social web services, projects such as Wiki, films, games, and many more. If we wanted to describe ancient literature by means of forms of its appearance in the

digital environment, then the discussion about this subject could actually finish. In fact, each of the above examples is different, not only from the point of view of ancient culture itself but also of the medium.

It is the first time we are dealing with researching the reception of ancient culture which takes place on the border of, sometimes, remote academic disciplines. The consideration of antiquity in the new media resembles in fact a jigsaw puzzle – a form of entertainment popular among children and adolescents. In order to get the right picture we need to join all its elements. It is worth to mention that each and every piece of the puzzle is equally important and must not be omitted.

The basic element of “ancient puzzles” is, undoubtedly, the methodological context. Antiquity, becoming a part of the digital world, remains significant in various media-oriented discussions, for example inspired by the Canadian school – Harold A. Innis (*The Bias of Communication*), Marshall McLuhan (*Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*), Derrick de Kerckhove (*The Skin of Culture; Connected Intelligence; Kody McLuhana. Topografia nowych mediów*).<sup>1</sup> Thanks to these we can depict how ancient culture has changed at the background of transformations which were happening in the media alone, starting from the 1980s (birth of personal computers) through first computer networks, the Internet and its services (Usenet, WWW) down to social media. Presently, at the times of Wikipedia and Facebook, it has an enormous meaning. There is a huge difference, though, between the materials published on the web in the 1990s and those put on the Internet recently. The discrepancies refer not only to the content as such but also to the rules of their functioning in a specific medium, sender-receiver relations, range of the phenomenon, popularity of particular authors and their works, etc.

Another crucial element of the puzzle is its computational and mathematical mechanism. Understanding the rules of functioning of mechanisms and algorithms in the digital media yields in fact very important conclusions. We are able to distinguish those media features which directly influence the meaning and becoming the message in itself, replacing a particular motive or text. Bearing this in mind, it would be proper to characterize the algorithms of internet browsers with which we acquire access to a vast number of materials. A separate issue could be the creation of a map presenting the centre of ancient world on the Internet, specifically websites, services, programs, which attract (are quoted) the largest number of materials. For that purpose, we could use the theory of scale-free network.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H.A. Innis: *The Bias of Communication*. Toronto 2008; M. McLuhan: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Berkeley 2003; Derrick De Kerckhove: *The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality*. London 1998. Idem: *Connected Intelligence: The Arrival of the Web Society*. Somerville 1997; *Kody McLuhana. Topografia nowych mediów*. Eds. A. Maj, M. Derda-Nowakowski. Katowice 2008.

<sup>2</sup> A.W. Mikołajczak, K. Dominas, M. Kaźmierczak: *W cyfrowym labiryncie*. Gniezno 2005, pp. 81–85; D.J. Watts, S.H. Strogatz: “Collective dynamics of ‘small world’ networks.” *Nature* 1998, vol. 393, pp. 440–442.

Antiquity in the new media means also advertisement and internet marketing. Promotion of particular brands and services using multifarious ancient themes and motives makes us wonder about functions which Greek-Roman culture performs in the contemporary world. An example of that can be the Taiwanese corporation ASUS – one of the biggest computer producers – referring to the myth of Pegasus.<sup>3</sup> The company founders joined the myth of a winged creature with the philosophy of Asian corporation, giving life to the so-called 5 ASUS Virtues – Humility, Integrity, Diligence, Agility, Courage – which make up ASUS DNA.<sup>4</sup> These virtues pertain to the basics of Confucianism (Five Virtues of Confucianism): Rén (仁 Humaneness), Yi (義, Righteousness or Justice), Lǐ (禮, Propriety or Etiquette), Zhì (智, Knowledge), Xìn (信, Integrity). ASUS provides evidence, that one can refer to antiquity in order to enter the European and American market, with the help of the known and verified, functioning in collective imagination in a form of myths, threads, motifs, etc. The Taiwanese corporation resigned, however, from using the first three letters of the word PEGASUS. The reason for that is the fact that the name ASUS begins with letter A, which in the context of first internet catalogues of the 1990s had an enormous meaning. It was marketing that served for this myth as a mechanism changing its content and meaning but most importantly its functions. Thanks to this, the myth begins a new life on the Internet, which we can call a new internet reception.

It is worth to point out, in this context that the internet marketing, as opposed to its traditional forms, works actually in the reverse way.<sup>5</sup> Advertisement campaigns are not created solely based on market research, but on the observation of what is at a given time interesting or exciting in the new media. If it appears in the commercial spot, it cannot be a matter of coincidence according to new marketing, as it has been chosen on the basis of the latest observations and not on the general reference to the archetypes or ancient roots of the European culture.

The final elements of the ancient puzzles should be thorough research of users – senders and receivers – responsible, on the one hand for viewing the materials with ancient Greek-Roman culture and, on the other hand, for their completion, edition, comments, etc. These activities embrace all that we recognize as interactivity in all its forms.<sup>6</sup> Not less important are studies on statistics showing particular data, scope of topics, number of internet users interested in specific projects and participating in them. Finally, there is the classification of research material and the methods of its presentation.

<sup>3</sup> K. Dominas: "Internetowa recepcja mitu na przykładzie wybranych podań grecko-rzymskiej literatury." In: *Studia mitoznawcze. Współczesna obecność mitu*. Eds. I. Błocian, E. Kwiatkowska. Toruń 2012, pp. 143–153.

<sup>4</sup> Source: [http://www.asus.com/About\\_ASUS/ASUS\\_DNA/](http://www.asus.com/About_ASUS/ASUS_DNA/) (accessed 26.8.2013).

<sup>5</sup> T. Frontczak: *Marketing internetowy w wyszukiwarkach*. Gliwice 2006, pp. 16–17.

<sup>6</sup> M. Lister, J. Dovey, S. Giddings, I. Grant, K. Kelly: *Nowe Media. Wprowadzenie*. Trans. M. Lorek, A. Sadza, K. Sawicka. Kraków 2009, pp. 33–34.

Just as the primary goal of completing puzzles is the specific image, the secondary goal of research on ancient culture and literature in the new media should be presenting the changes and the scope of their functioning as well as presenting the mechanisms (medial, digital, marketing, and so on) responsible for those changes. Antiquity must not be, however, a mere proof for the transformations taking place in the contemporary culture. If we focus on media, users, computational-mathematical apparatus, then the Greek-Roman culture will be in this context only a background. This is exactly why various examples of ancient motives and threads ought to be placed at the centre and ought to become the heart of research, whereas the above-mentioned elements should work as ways for their description and a wide interdisciplinary analysis.

## Appearance and Reception in the New Media

Bearing in mind the character of media, I suggest two, in a way complementary terms: appearance and reception. The first one consists in a simple placing a given ancient message in the digital world. Such messages can be described mostly at the level of space in which they were placed – a film, internet site, social online service, Wikipedia, etc. – and the objectives which they fulfill in this space. These objectives include such aspects as educational, promotional or other similar.

Reception is a process in which the appearing element of ancient literature becomes influenced by particular mechanisms of digital environment. These mechanisms allow the message to be influenced by numerous transformations, for example changing its primal meaning. The onset of such process is arbitrary and depends by large on the perspective of the researcher who begins the analysis. Moreover, once started, cannot be stopped and resembles an irreversible chemical reaction. Such reaction may spark rapidly, e.g. due to the popularity of a given thread or motive, or may initiate slowly with the limited number of mechanisms and users participating in them.

Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray in their introduction to *A Companion to Classical Receptions* use the term of reception in plural form: “By ‘receptions’ we mean the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented.”<sup>7</sup> If we agree on such a definition of reception, we should appreciate in this context those interesting mechanisms of the new media which underlie those methods of transmission, interpretation and rewriting.

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<sup>7</sup> L. Hardwick, Ch. Stray: “Introduction: Making Connections.” In: *A Companion to Classical Receptions*. Eds. IIdem. Malden 2007, p. 1.

The research referring to ancient messages appearance is defined by me as quantitative approach. They deal mainly with collecting and listing of numerous examples of functioning of antiquity in the new media. Even though the research fulfills its specific goals, showing for example the range and scale of the phenomenon, they are, however, too superficial to facilitate a discussion in a context of reception. Appearance is, to a great extent, averaged by two basic mechanisms: algorithms of web browsers and activities performed by internet communities (Facebook, Wikipedia, etc.).

It is worth to mention at this point that to the majority of “ancient materials” on the Net, we arrive by means of such tools as Google. Results of such a search are already filtered by diverse algorithms as well as personalization systems that adjust the content to individual users’ needs. This expression does not take into account, though, the media character and new technologies are becoming in this perspective a natural extension of the traditional media. Moreover, the described materials are rarely systemized and they show up quite often at the margin of many contemplations about widely understood ancient culture.

Instead of quantitative research I suggest reception research (qualitative approach), in which the main focus is moved from the cataloguing onto the analysis of the process of averaging of particular ancient messages. Therefore, in this research I concentrate on the process and changes in the Greek-Roman heritage. This shift from quantity to quality is happening mainly owing to the inability to extract and depict even a tiny part of ancient materials. Digital media is not only the quickest growing information repository but also the quickest upgrading and downgrading. Therefore, we are able to notice only the changes which take place in this space.

In thus understood reception, the starting point becomes the definition of new media, which allows for creation of research space meant for the analysis. Still equally important issue remains the question how we should interpret this space: if it is a new medium for the reception of ancient messages or merely a digital platform serving the function of posting and sharing the content.

## What is New Media in the Context of Research on Antiquity?

In the reference literature expressions are used to define the digital environment: new media, digital media, the Internet, the Web, the internet service, WWW, social media, Web 1.0, Web 2.0 and other. Many authors see no difference between the above terms and treat them synonymously. In this way, features of one

medium are transferred onto the subsequent ones, etc. Placing an equal mark may, therefore, stem from the lack of understanding of functioning of those services, which clearly are distinct from each other. Therefore, oftentimes there is in use the general term “digital media,” concluding that the common denominator for those media is the binary system.

Definition of new media in the context of ancient literature might help to extract particular research areas and observe the changes which take place in it under the influence of given mechanisms. At the same time, answering the question which medium can be preceded by the attributive “new” may cause quite a problem. Is the movie by Anthony Man, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* from 1964, then, an example of new or old media? If we take into consideration the very production, undoubtedly it is the old medium. On the other hand, the film is available on DVD, which will qualify it as new medium?

Paul Levinson introduces the term of new new media that include blog sphere, YouTube, Wikipedia, Digg.com, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, Podcasts and Videocasts.<sup>8</sup> He reckons that the basic border between new and the new new media is the transition of users from being consumers to producers.<sup>9</sup> The border is in this case very flexible and results mainly from Levinson’s suppositions. Periodization of the American researcher results more from the popularity of particular services and programs rather than from the real division of media. He does not indicate any clear differences between new and the new new media. The new new is therefore now and here, in some particular timespace. Will we witness, along with the birth of a new paradigm, new the new new media, etc.?

It seems that the most proper definition of new media was put forward by Lev Manovich in his work *The Language of New Media*: “The translation of all existing media into numerical data accessible through computers.”<sup>10</sup> In this light *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is partly the old and partly a new medium, depending on the information carrier: a celluloid tape or a DVD disc. Therefore, it is not the binary system itself which is pivotal but the fact that computer data creates huge possibilities of digital picture manipulation. The movie recorded only digitally does not change anything according to the features of new media suggested by Manovich, and it only means numerical representation. As far as other features are concerned – modularity, automation, variability, transcoding – it still remains an old medium.<sup>11</sup>

We are dealing at this point with the key issue referring to the reception of ancient literature in the new media. For the above instance, the media becomes merely a platform, thanks to which a movie becomes more accessible – we can play it on a computer, as well as on DVD, BluRay, PlayStation players, etc., and

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<sup>8</sup> P. Levinson: *Nowe nowe media*. Kraków 2010, pp. 25–35.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> L. Manovich: *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge 2001, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 27–48.



having copied it onto the portable memory, accessible through any other digital device. It looks similar with various professional online services devoted to ancient literature – The Perseus Digital Library, The Latin Library, Bibliotheca Augustana, Forum Romanum – as well as computer programs, such as MUSAIOS.<sup>12</sup> Thanks to them we gain access to hundreds of texts which we used to find only in a traditional library. It enables us to create alphabetical lists, trace diverse statistics, etc. Does anything change in the ancient messages, though? Materials like these, becoming hypertexts or sometimes hypermedia, are distinctive by such characteristics as: interactivity, multimediality, lack of fixed beginning and ending, dynamics, etc.<sup>13</sup> We can observe in this way the appearance of ancient messages and not the process of reception.

The above relations can be best illustrated with the example of texts written on the Internet by means of the so-called post-script texts (PDF), designed for publishing of traditional messages. On the website The Internet Archive in the section “Texts” we can come across *Diodorus of Sicily, with an English translation by C.H. Oldfather [and others]* dated from 1933.<sup>14</sup> The file is about 12 megabytes large, depending on the file format (EPUB, Kindle, Daisy, DjVu). Not so long ago, opening of such a file was extremely difficult, as the user needed the internet connection of sufficiently high speed, which meant obviously higher internet bill. Another problem was posting such a file on the website. Currently, it is not an issue to upload files even a hundred times larger. It means that the development of technology has opened to users gates to resources which could be accessed in the past only by few. Has anything changed in the area of perception, though? A PDF file is an electronic document meant for printing and as the name suggests, it has more to do with the Gutenberg Galaxy than with the Internet era, although it was written digitally.<sup>15</sup> So when we experience antiquity in the new media, or when antiquity becomes “new”?

Answer to that question is provided by the double dimension of the web service YouTube. A film uploaded on the internet site of one of the most popular Google services, referring to the specific thread of ancient literature, can function in it in the same fashion as *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, The Perseus Digital Library or Diodorus of Sicily’s text in the service The Internet Archive. It will be only an example of appearance of a particular motif in new media. There are hundreds of such examples on YouTube. This service is a typical social medium, both at the level of technology as well as content. In the context of technology, millions

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<sup>12</sup> Source: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>; <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/>; <http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/augustana.html>; <http://www.forumromanum.org/> (accessed 26.8.2013).

<sup>13</sup> E. Wilk: *Nawigacje słowa. Strategie werbalne w przekazach audiowizualnych*. Kraków 2000, pp. 38–45.

<sup>14</sup> Source: <http://archive.org/details/diodorusofsicily02dioduoft> (accessed 26.8.2013).

<sup>15</sup> K. Dominas, M. Kaźmierczak, A.W. Mikołajczak: *Antyk w cyberprzestrzeni*. Gniezno 2008, pp. 41–43.



of users from the entire world can upload films of any possible kind – the only limitation is access to the Internet. Depending on the content, a given clip may be widely commented on with posts placed under the movie. As a matter of fact only the number of posts can be meaningful. The posts may lead to various websites, social services accounts, entries in Wikipedia, etc. We can also deal with the situation in which a particular material will be used for the promotion of a product or a service (video marketing). In such case we come to observe one of the most meaningful mechanisms of new media – internet community. It is them who can start the above-mentioned reaction. This is the way in which the material placed, appearing in the medium, undergoes a process which can change its meaning and sense – it undergoes processes of reception.

It may happen, however, that it is the film from YouTube that becomes a comment of or an addition to the content that earlier appeared on the Web, in a movie, webcomic book, etc. The first dimension of YouTube, which I shall call appearance, can be referred to the applied by Manovich “computer layer.”<sup>16</sup> We gain unlimited access to the file, we can open the content, copy it, etc., however, the medium plays here a role of a digital platform. Manovich writes also about the “cultural layer” – a movie becomes a part of reception process by means of specific mechanisms.<sup>17</sup> These two terms – “computer” and “cultural” layers – accurately describe the situation in which a piece of media plays both the role of a platform and also of space for the reception of ancient culture and literature.

## Tree-Level Model of Analysis

The above presented examples of new media functioning show that the scope, size and diversity of materials averaged by media, but also published in them directly, can pose a clear hardship in their description, analysis and interpretation. How, then, objects which deserve a careful scrutiny can be distinguished? Will the meaning, in the context of internet websites, of social networks, blog sphere and other services be pinned to the message, or to something else perhaps, e.g. graphical layout of a website, its marketing, page rank in a web browser, number of hits or active users? One must not forget that an internet site is merely an image generated by an internet browser (Internet Explorer, Opera, Google Chrome, Firefox, Safari). Will it, therefore, make any sense to analyse its source code as well? Or perhaps the code could be omitted, supposing that it is the third dimension of

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<sup>16</sup> L. Manovich: *The Language of New Media...*, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

the message, which does not convey any meaning? Or probably it may all depend exclusively on the context chosen by the researcher?

Along with the distinction between occurrence and reception process of Greek-Roman legacy in new media, it is wise to introduce a three-layer model of analysis of particular research objects. On the first – computer-media – there are operating mechanisms responsible for such processes as positioning and personalization of information, page rank among web browsers, source code and many other. It is the syntactical (device-related) dimension and its role in the context of ancient literature will mainly depend on whether we deal only with the occurrence or with the process of reception. If the former is the case, we can take into account such qualities as: number of website or film displays, number of users, the so-called network traffic and other.<sup>18</sup> Although these criteria are of secondary importance, they provide statistical information on the subject interest and show the scale of multiplication of a given content. If the latter is the case, we deal with the mechanisms whose functioning may have the primary importance as to the scope of content changes, building specific relations, rewriting of a given material onto a different one, etc.

The second layer is made of the true object's content, e.g. a website content, a social network post, an opinion on a blog site, a comment under the movie. It is a semantic layer which itself can be subject to particular media mechanisms, as well as a starting point in reception process.

The third layer – application – concentrates on the users of a topic, sometimes having huge influence on the content. Due to the character of new technologies, it is hard to speak in case of new media about senders and receivers, especially minding that one can become a sender unintentionally, for example by viewing internet websites. In such case, special software follows our every step, recording all the deeds on the Net. Therefore, more and more often we are merely information users, sometimes becoming senders in the interaction process and at other times receivers. This kind of role-switching is so dynamic that there are cases in which we are the former and the latter at the same time.

It seems that the most suitable for the reception of Greek-Roman texts in the digital media would be an analysis and interpretation of the content, semantic layer, in the form of the main website content, posts on blogs and social networks, and many others. The substantiation of this approach could be the perception that new media are only a supplement, a natural extension of reception which have already been taking place in the previous eras. Such approach questions the basic suppositions of the Canadian school of media theory, which put a medium in the centre of almost all cultural and civilizational transformations.<sup>19</sup> The analysis

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<sup>18</sup> K. Dominas, M. Kaźmierczak, A.W. Mikołajczak: *Antyk w cyberprzestrzeni...*, pp. 111–113.

<sup>19</sup> D. Mersch: *Teorie mediów*. Warszawa 2010, pp. 91–94.

of only the semantic layer testifies to the fact that a medium is but a technology (platform), thanks to which we acquire access to information. The ancient text becomes extracted from its natural environment and somehow squeezed into the Gutenberg galaxy – thus every internet website, every entry can be printed. At such moment there is no possibility for the reception of ancient literature in new media.

Concentrating on the syntactic (computer-media) layer we lose sight of what is the foundation of research, namely Greek-Roman texts. The basics of such analysis becomes the description of separate mechanisms and their influence on the changes in the contemporary culture and society. Antiquity becomes only an example of those changes which confirms particular assumptions.

Focusing on the application or pragmatic layer leads to the situation in which the user is the most important and, in a broader context, the community of new media, new technologies. In this way, the researchers such as Paul Levinson or even Henry Jenkins stress mostly the process of creation and community cooperation, leaving out the effect of this cooperation. At the same time, they approach Wikipedia, pointing mainly to the collective intelligence, a number of entries and users, mentioning the controversy around functioning of Encyclopedia.<sup>20</sup> There is a lack of reference to the technology and the nature of media thanks to which web services of this sort won such a tremendous popularity, among other, popularity algorithms and information positioning systems. Will it make sense to have a few dozens of amateur mechanics work on one car if it turns out that their model has lost its wheels after driving a few kilometers? Important is not only the size and character of this cooperation but also using the terms from the economics, the product which is created as a result of it.<sup>21</sup>

That is the reason why ancient literature reception in new media should rest on a three-level analysis, heeding particularly the ways in which the separate layers permeate and complete each other. Such research would allow to answer the question what ancient literature can profit from this analysis, and whether the new media are really within the space in which it takes on a new, so far unknown form.

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<sup>20</sup> P. Levinson: *Nowe nowe media...*, pp. 136–159. H. Jenkins: *Kultura konwergencji. Zderzenie starych i nowych mediów*. Warszawa 2007, pp. 31–35.

<sup>21</sup> K. Dominas: “Cezar w nowych mediach – recepcja literatury antycznej czy analiza wybranych tematów kultury popularnej.” In: *Związki i rozwiązania. Relacje kultury i literatury popularnej ze starymi i nowymi mediami*. Eds. A. Gemra, H. Kubicka. Wrocław 2012, pp. 203–209.