Edward Balcerzan's Multimedia Theory of Genres

Its Conditions and Perspective

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Edward Balcerzan announced his "multimedia theory of genres" project in September 1999, during the Twenty-Ninth Literary Theory Conference in Cieszyn. A paper that took the form of an outline for the project appeared in print in 2000, and was then included in Balcerzan's book *Literackość* (Literariness) in 2013. The name for the proposed new discipline would, Balcerzan announced, be "a metaphor for the present," but he also called it "a certain branch of semiotics", "analyzing and systematizing the consequences for genre studies of the existence of many different media in the space of culture."[1] The present-time of the metaphor is here of course evoked by the concept of multimedia tools, differentiated by Balcerzan from media "identified with institutions of mass communication."[2] In his understanding, the meaning of the proposed term refers to binding language custom ("today's expansive, freighted word"):

> People talk nowadays about educational multimedia tools, such as computer textbooks and encyclopedias (of the universe, of history, of nature), which in the course of opening up virtual reality communicate with the written word, illustrations, photographs, reproductions, quotations from documentary or feature films, still and animated images, speak with a human or animal voice or that of instrumental music, or the roar of the big bang.[3]

Multimedia productions, Balcerzan adds, citing the definition from the *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, "have been called artistic works *par excellence*," including as they do "presentations that simultaneously use means from various artistic disciplines and diverse forms of communication; combining music, poetry, theater, and the plastic arts, and making use of techniques and technologies from film and television; slides; sound, light and electronic equipment; me-

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[1] E. Balcerzan, "W stronę genologii multimedialnej" (Toward a Multimedia Theory of Genres), in: *Genologia dzisiaj* (Genre Studies Today), ed. W. Bolecki, I. Opacki. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2000, 88.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

chanical appliances; mobile figures, mirrors, and screens; cranes; trapdoors; and more.)"[4] In the same year that Edward Balcerzan's outline appeared, an expanded edition of Władysław Kopaliński's *Dictionary of Foreign Words* was published which linked multimedia phenomena strictly with computers. In its formulation, multimedia would refer to: "the use of a various number of various means of relaying information by means of a computer equipped with appropriate peripheral devices (speakers and an optical disk reader)." Like Balcerzan, Kopaliński gives the example of a multimedia encyclopedia which "allows the user simultaneously to listen to a composer's music while watching the screen display photographs of him, the musical score being played or the orchestra performing, or reading his biography."[5]

Adhering to these definitions, which quickly become obsolete, especially in terms of the technical aspects they refer to, would not permit us to grasp the essence of Balcerzan's concept. A powerful "metaphor for the present" is more important than the precision of the scholarly term incorporated within it. So what lies at the root of the term? Above all, the historical poetics of the author of *Literackość*, understood as "the story of a search for new neighboring countries"[6] for the borders of literature. Balcerzan in fact professes to believe in these "borders of literature." Nevertheless, he knows that to believe in the possibility of demarcating these boundaries in language would be a mistake: "purely linguistic criteria turn out to be inadequate, and that is due to the double affiliation of literature: with language, but also with the world of the arts."[7] Thus, just as the "material distinctions" among various semiotic orders are obvious, as determined by the suggestiveness of the "energy of the material" out of which "signs are made," so "their particular functions demand theory and interpretation – always contentious."[8] Already earlier in his influential "situational" genre studies project, Balcerzan pointed out the limits on linguistic models of genre as a factor in the creation of forms:

Sometimes, as anthropological analyses of surviving primitive cultures show, the poetic text itself, seen in relation to natural language, has no meaning; it is composed from meaningless words, from foreign borrowings, contains compound constructions that are, so to speak, unrecognizable in the system of colloquial speech – and yet its meaning can be 'understood,' because we can understand a situation in which it is acceptable to speak that way, to use precisely that form of utterance.[9]

The perception of meaning is thus dependent on a comprehension of the situation in which a work arises, rather than comprehension of its words. The situational origin of genres, demonstrated by Balcerzan with the example of genre transformations in interwar poetry, simultaneously creates

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[4] Ibid. The passage quotes the definition of "multimedia" from the third edition of the dictionary, edited by Janusz Sławiński and published in 1998.

[5] W. Kopaliński, *Słownik wyrazów obcych*, Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, 2000, 339.

[6] E. Balcerzan, "Granice literatury, granice historii, granice granic" (Borders of Literature, Borders of History, Borders of Borders), in: *Polonistyka w przebudowie* (Polish Studies Under Reconstruction), vol. 1, ed. M. Czermińska. Kraków 2005, 319.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] E. Balcerzan, "Systemy i przemiany gatunkowe w polskiej liryce lat 1918-1928" (Genre Systems and Transformations in Polish Poetry 1918-1928), in: *Problemy literatury polskiej lat 1890-1939* (Problems of Polish Literature in the Period 1890-1939), ed. H. Kirchner, M. R. Pragłowska, Z. Żabicki. 2nd Series. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1974, 154.

an advantageous perspective for examining the newest developments in literature. The "situational theory of genres," open to "new verbal situations" (newspaper, radio, film) and to the need for "studying the connections between different genres of communicative systems,"[10] undoubtedly constitutes the starting point for understanding the concept of a New Theory of Genres called multimedial. Its designer intended for it to be "a theory and simultaneously an art of interpreting three basic intentions that are present in the inexhaustible abundance of written forms: the reportorial intention, the essayistic intention, and the feuilletonistic intention."[11] The genres thus constituted (reportage, essay, feuilleton) are treated as models designating the range of properties in which diverse artistic utterances take part. In developing this idea, Edward Balcerzan acknowledged that the generic paradigms he differentiated "go beyond the monomedial borders of writing (or speech) and can be treated as having pursuing parallel development within other codes and media."[12] Because the constitutive traits of the multimedia quasi-genres named " are present not only in texts that fit into the genres of reportage, essay, or feuilleton,"[13] but the energies that form them also operate in music, painting, architecture, and so on. These energies are both "constructive particularities, as well as implied content, comprising the image of the subject, or defining (each time in a dramatically different way) the relationship of the 'I' within the text to the world, the cultural code, and finally, to the audience."[14]

Balcerzan distinguishes the features that decide whether a cultural text is dominated by "feuilletonistic ambition," "reportorial direction," or "essayistic impetus." He finds that: "the basic form of a text that matches the reportorial intention is the bulletin […] informing about the factual state of affairs";[15] "the essence of the essayistic intention" is defined, for its part, with a quotation from Szymborska: "questions posed to oneself," whereas the embryonic form of texts with an essayistic bent is the aphorism;[16] "the element of the genre called the feuilleton is language as a storehouse of stereotypes," and the substance of texts belonging to the feuilletonistic paradigm consists "of cultural customs and the common creeds contained therein," "the simplest form here is the language joke" and other kinds of humour.[17] The reportorial intention can most easily be grasped in the many different manifestations of veristic, naturalistic, and realistic art (for example painted portraiture or historical scenes), or more generally in all struggles with mimesis, whereas it is hardest to recognize in music (Balcerzan here gives the examples of "roots music," "musique concrète," and "reportage from the phonosphere")[18] He sees the essayistic intention carried out "both in expository prose, dramas, or novels full of 'essential conversations' in Witkacy's words," as well as in the films of Federico Fellini and the paintings of Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, and Jerzy Nowosielski.[19] In the feuilleton category,

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[10]E. Balcerzan: "W stronę genologii multimedialnej", 86.

[11]E. Balcerzan: "Nowe formy w pisarstwie i wynikające stąd porozumienia" (New Forms in Writing and the Resulting Understanding) in: *Humanistyka przełomu wieków* (The Humanities at the Turn of the Century), ed. J. Kozielecki. Warszawa: Żak, 1999, 376-377.

[12]Ibid, 97.

[13]Ibid, 98.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid, 99.

[16]Ibid, 99-100.

[17]Ibid, 101.

[18]Ibid, 99.

[19]Ibid, 100.

the author names, among other things, graphic jokes, caricatures, film gags, burlesques, and all types of parody, whether in the plastic arts, theatre, film, music, or forms of advertising.[20]

Edward Balcerzan poses a rhetorical question in the field of genre studies: "Will this multi-medial triad of quasi-genres encompass all cultural forms and texts, without exception?"[21] In their encounter with empiria, he observes, certain texts "fall outside" the system, and "force us to multiply exceptions from the rule, to set aside problematic forms of existence."[22] In reflecting on the completeness of Balcerzan's proposal, it would be worthwhile, I think, to raise a question concerning the place of traditional generic paradigms in his program for a New Theory of Genres.[23] The main question is whether the "multimedial triad" is intended to replace the traditional triad entirely, or is merely a supplement to it; or perhaps they intersect? Or whether one of the chosen traditional literary genres, treated again as a "model," cannot be seen to complete the set of intentions he designates (reportorial, feuilletonistic, essayistic)? In my view, poetry would have the most to offer in this regard, as it designs "particularities of construction, and implied content," seemingly barely present in Balcerzan's multimedial triad. An argument in favour of such a solution can be found in, for example, the work of Seweryna Wysłouch, who examines the influence of multimedia phenomena on literature from a perspective somewhat opposite to Balcerzan's. His perspective suggests that we "not resign from the traditional generic triad, but de-historicize it," in view of the multimedia sphere's attack on literary genres. Wysłouch illustrates the "erosion of genres under the influence of multimedia" using the example of the drama, which "crumbled" first, presaging in some measure the fate of the epic. "It seems," she continues "that poetry got the least painful treatment from the [new] media."[24] Looking in the other direction, from a point of view concurring with that presented in *Literackość*, poeticism or "lyricism" remains the clear ambition, intention, and driving force of many nonverbal cultural texts. To illustrate, I will cite a phrase often used in musical criticism: "lyricism in its purest form." The lyrical nature of Chopin's music, for example, is unquestioned and indisputable. Similarly, we often speak of encountering lyricism in painting or photography. No one is surprised to see a feature film called a "lyrical story."

In considering perspectives on Edward Balcerzan's multimedial genre theory, we should also refer to his concept of "transmutation" or "intersemiotic translation," which posits that "a text formed within the boundaries of one system (e.g. painting) and reconstructed in the material of another system (e.g. poetry) loses specifically painterly and acquires specifically poetic properties."[25] On the one hand, we have a "linguification of experiences" from other forms of art in the literary work (for example in the form of ekphrasis), on the other – a de-verbalization of,

[20]Ibid, 101.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]I raise some questions here that I have previously asked in relation to Balcerzan's proposal in another piece. See D. Pawelec, "Sytuacja gatunku – genologia sytuacyjna" (The Situation of the Genre—Situational Genre Theory), in: *Od tematu do rematu. Przechadzki z Balcerzanem* (From Theme to Rheme. Strolls with Balcerzan), ed. T. Mizerkiewicz, A. Stankowska. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2007, 513.

[24]See S. Wysłouch, "Nowa genologia – rewizje i reinterpretacje" (New Theory of Genres – Revisions and Reinterpretations), in: *Polonistyka w przebudowie*, 105-107.

[25]E. Balcerzan, "Poezja jako semiotyka sztuki" (Poetics as a Semiotics of Art), in: *Pogranicza i korespondencje sztuk* (Boundaries and Correspondences Between the Arts), ed. T. Cieślikowska, J. Sławiński, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1980, 28.

for example, poetry in the language of painting or music. An excellent example of the complexity of such an intersemiotic relationship is the "attempt at impossible music" in Witold Wirpsza's *Don Juan*, cited by Balcerzan; its poetic construction is governed by hidden musical models: "what is more, these were models both of sound structures and graphic images", "translation of sound into a graphic chart" and "of a graphic chart into a configuration of words and sentences."[26]

Many works' design aspire to more than merely being a translation between sign systems and using language as an intermediary. From ancient times, we have merely to think of the tradition of *technopaegnia* and *carmen figuratum*, continued with the development of concrete poetry. As we can see in the map of genres in, for example, "Podróż zimowa" (Winter Journey) by Stanisław Barańczak, which coexists with the eponymous Schubert melody that inspired it (the initial musical notation is placed above each corresponding poetic fragment); did not the author himself suggest that "readers will get the most out of the poem if, before or while reading it, they listen to one of the available recordings of *Winterreise*"[27]? Where would Witold Wirpsza's "Komentarze do fotografii The Family of Man" (Commentaries to the Family of Man Photographs), in which poetic documentation does not limit itself to ekphrasis and the accompanying photograph does not present a convenient "reading scenario" but rather creates a coherent whole with the poem, fit into the traditional theory of genres? These examples come from very traditional cycles and "transmissions." A separate and enormous problem is presented in this regard by works created using computers and the internet, including, obviously, games. That is why the challenge facing multimedial genre theory consists not only in studying "mechanisms of transmutation" (in both directions, in the relationship between literature and the other arts) or witnessing the intersection of genre forms from various planets of the semiosphere, but also in understanding works of literature and the multi-textured, heterogeneous "hermenutical phenomena" they represent.

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[26]E. Balcerzan, *Poezja polska w latach 1939-1965.* (Polish Poetry in the Years 1939-1965), Part 2, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagnew bne, 1988, 201.

[27]S. Barańczak, "Od Autora" (Author's Note), in: *Podróż zimowa* (Winter Journey), Poznań: a5, 1994, 7.

KEYWORDS

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LITERARY GENRES

quasi-types

multimedia theory of genres

Abstract:

This article discusses Edward Balcerzan's concept of a "multimedia theory of genres," intended by him to function as a "metaphor for the present," representing a division of semiotics that would analyze and systematize the consequences for the study of genres of many different forms of expression in cultural space. The concept of "multimedia" is given consideration in the context of this proposed application. The author of the essay presents Balcerzan's concept in the context of his earlier proposals within the sphere of genre theory and correspondences between or among the arts, at the same time contemplating some possible approaches to supplementing and further developing this theoretical concept.

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