

Astrid Ensslin, Julia Round, and Bronwen Thomas, editors. *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*. Routledge, 2023, pp. 576.

<https://doi.org/10.26262/exna.v0i8.10192>

Diogo Marques
(University of Porto, Portugal)

For us scholars and creative practitioners who seek valuable educational tools to aid us in teaching, learning, and staying up to date with the latest academic developments and trends, having a Companion on our actual or virtual desktop is a *de facto* necessity. These companions serve as comprehensive reference resources, offering detailed overviews and critical analyses of specific academic fields or subfields. They also feature contributions from leading experts—including cutting-edge reviews of current research, guidance on future directions, and standardized terminology and concepts—ensuring a shared understanding of key ideas and broad accessibility. *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*, edited by Astrid Ensslin, Julia Round, and Bronwen Thomas, is all of the above, as it presents an open window for those seeking a bird’s-eye view of the current intersections between literature and various media forms, offering a comprehensive examination of how literature is shaped, mediated, and consumed in contemporary society. As its cover image—a glitched composition made of fragments and multilayered surfaces—already attests, this Companion is, above all, an exploration of how media ecosystems shape literary production, reception, and circulation. This first impression is confirmed by Jim Collins’s Foreword, in which the digital culture and media theorist highlights the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of literary experiences in a landscape where “traditional” modes of literary engagement are no longer the sole means of participation.

Understood at its core as “an interdependence of the literary and its diverse forms of mediation that is increasingly apparent in this era of global late capitalism,” the term “literary media” extends well beyond traditional “notions and connotations of art” for the editors and challenges the ongoing emphasis on “literature proper” (Ensslin et al. 1). Accordingly, their “formulation derives from and has particular resonance for scholars” who engage with both literary and media studies, but it also “reflects wider shifts in both institutional structures and the long-established boundaries or silos of traditional academic disciplines” (Ensslin et al. 1). This definition of literary media is instrumental in guiding the subsequent discussions, as it provides a clear framework for understanding the two intertwined dimensions of the concept: the literary and the media.

Amid the growing trend of blending disciplines, there is broad agreement on the importance of this approach. It is essential both for analyzing the evolving nature of literary practices in the digital age and for integrating sociological perspectives with traditional literary criticism. However, one of the key strengths of this volume lies in a seeming contradiction: it maintains a distinct identity for the literary—one that is somewhat separate from that of literary art—despite the prevailing push for integration, with interdisciplinarity as the buzzword of the moment. The

merit of this undertaking can be ascribed, at least in part, to the editors' backgrounds provided in the introductory chapter that blends their personal histories with academic insight. The first of these histories sheds light on how Thomas's early fascination with TV adaptations of literary works shaped her scholarly focus on adaptation studies and media theory, bridging theoretical discussions with real-world practices. The second history focuses on Round's journey from a childhood immersed in comics to her academic work on their histories and production practices, in which she challenges traditional views of authorship as well as highlights overlooked aspects of the comics industry. The third personal history presents Ensslin's diverse early media experiences and her research into digital fiction and literary gaming. All three personal histories reveal how different media forms interact and evolve, and in doing so offer innovative perspectives on narrative and audience engagement.

Building on N. Katherine Hayles's call for a broader category that includes various creative forms of literature, this Companion argues that not only electronic and digital literature, but also popular cultural texts, paratextual materials, and works typically excluded from the literary canon, fall under the umbrella of literary media. Yet, this diversity does not mean that the discussion of "new" technologies and their impact on literary forms is not one of its most critical aspects, especially given the ubiquity of digital mediation. The rise of digital-born fiction, locative media, and immersive theater, to mention a few, are examples of how technology pushes the boundaries of what we usually consider literature, as these forms of literary expression enable us to place emphasis on the materiality of (textual) media—"media is material in nature," as Julie Rak notes in the Companion's Afterword (538). Since this materiality is intrinsically connected with both technological and economic conditions of literary production, with NFTs and AI-generated art representing two of the trendiest topics, it becomes even more crucial to raise important questions about the nature of creativity in the digital age, including key issues such as the exploitation of creative labor within a market-driven economy.

Accordingly, the Companion is organized into five thematic sections that follow a logical sequence, each delving into different dimensions of literary media: historical context, theoretical frameworks, creative practices, economic considerations, and audience engagement. Beginning with "Literary Media in Context," this first section provides essential historical, cultural, and theoretical frameworks that lay the groundwork for the subsequent sections. Exploring the evolution of literary forms in the digital age, the materiality of intermedial practices, and the historiography of e-books, its three foundational chapters are particularly valuable for establishing explicit connections between historical contexts and current media forms, thereby enhancing the readers' understandings of continuity and transformation within the field.

Moving to "Forms, Media, Materialities," the focus shifts to emerging literary genres and forms, such as locative narrative, ambient literature, and autofiction, as well as specific unconventional forms of literary expression within diverse media environments, such as journalism, music, real-life experiences, and podcasts.

The next section, titled "Creators, Networks, Intermediaries," examines the individuals (both "scholars and creative practitioners") and relationships that facilitate the production and

dissemination of these forms, broadening the scope of literary authorship by exploring how the materiality of “networked and collaborative writing” reshapes and preserves literary creation.

The fourth section, “Markets, Economies, Industries,” delves into the economic dimensions of literary media, and explores topics such as web-based literature production models, independent publishing, reader behavior in digital economies, and the commodification of literary spaces.

Finally, “Audiences, Engagement, Environments” addresses the end-users and their interactions with literary media, exploring themes such as the immersive and interactive experiences of readers and viewers across digital fiction, film, and TV. The section also covers sociality, seriality, and performativity. This includes the growing influence of social media as literary spaces, as well as the socio-political, cultural, and epistemological contexts that shape literary media—such as Indigenous knowledge, postcolonial perspectives, and post-pandemic realities. Additionally, it examines how platforms such as Netflix, Wattpad, and YouTube offer new ways for audiences to experience literature.

Blending the literary with media implies, first and foremost, an examination of the impact of digital culture on literature, from production to reception and back again. On the one hand, this involves considering how digitalization has transformed both the creation and consumption of the literary, re-affecting its circulation through a flux-like movement across different platforms, audiences, and cultures, including bridging gaps between high and low culture. On the other hand, as acknowledged by the editors in their Introduction, the term “literary media” must adapt to its fast-evolving nature, whether through its prolific representability or the fleetingness of its conceptual frameworks. In both contexts, the boundaries between production and consumption, as well as writing and reading, become blurred, leading to concepts such as “prosumer” and “wreader.” Such terms encapsulate new understandings of participatory culture and have profound implications for literary theory, as they challenge traditional notions of authorship and originality, question the historical elitism of the literary canon, and consequently advocate for a democratized interdependence.

Nonetheless, while integrating media studies into literary analysis fosters democratization and inclusivity, as in the case of fan studies as a legitimate field of inquiry, it also necessitates a critical examination of the pervasive influence of capitalism on cultural production. As larger conglomerates increasingly absorb smaller publishers, this consolidation gradually reduces diversity and narrows the range of available options. Consequently, this shift limits the variety of literary voices and potentially restricts the perspectives and narratives accessible to readers. Although it is undeniably clear that this Companion constantly refers to the importance of inclusivity,¹ particularly in the context of global capitalism where media giants often dominate cultural production and independent creators, one might question what happens if we flip the

¹ It is worth noting, though, that the book’s high price (currently available in both hardcover and e-book formats) may limit accessibility for readers. This is particularly relevant in a context that emphasizes inclusivity and democratization within literary studies. Though the volume’s comprehensive content justifies its value for academic and research libraries, the cost poses a barrier for independent scholars, creative practitioners, or institutions with limited budgets. Addressing this issue could further broaden the reach and impact of this important work.

argument: Is this market-driven trend already being undermined by the very inclusivity and democratization that the term “literary media” implies? In other words, would the discussion benefit from a more pronounced focus on the tension between broadening cultural access and the monopolization of literary production and distribution?

One potential way to address this issue—the cherry on top of the intersections effectively mapped between literature, digital platforms, and new media—could be to weave together literary tradition and technological innovation (or, for that matter, literary innovation and technological tradition) in an even more critical way. This would involve analyzing how literature has adapted to technological and cultural changes and, conversely, how technological advancements reinterpret literature—an example of the latter being art installations incorporating literary heritage evolving from oral traditions.

In any case, the relevance of this Companion and its significant contribution to ongoing debates and discussions in the(se) field(s) far outweigh any aspect that each of us—scholars and/or creative practitioners with different yet seemingly similar backgrounds—might suggest as potential further development. The volume’s capacity to synthesize diverse methodological approaches and disciplinary intersections underscores its role as a critical resource for those navigating the evolving landscape of literary media. By engaging with both historical continuities and the epistemological shifts brought about by digital culture, the Companion exemplifies a rigorous effort to redefine the frameworks through which literary forms and media ecologies are conceptualized.

Works Cited

- Collins, Jim. Foreword. *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*, edited by Astrid Ensslin et al., Routledge, 2023, pp. xviii-xxiv.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. U of Notre Dame P, 2008.
- Rak, Julie. Afterword. *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*, edited by Astrid Ensslin et al., Routledge, 2023, pp. 538-546.