

Reseña de Susana Patricia Ruiz  
Espinosa. *La obra literaria  
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In the book *La obra literaria abierta: del soporte digital al impreso*,<sup>2</sup> Mexican scholar Susana Patricia Ruiz Espinosa revisits Umberto Eco's 1962 concept of the *open work* under the light of the current digital developments that have been used for the presentation and configuration of literary texts. Nevertheless, as the author makes clear even from the subtitle of the book –which, interestingly enough, suggests a reversion of what would otherwise be the logical, diachronic development from print to digital technologies– her intention is not merely to analyze to what an extent Eco's idea of a particular type of texts fits in the twenty-first century, but actually to explore how new platforms help modify the ways in which literature is being read and written. Thus, Ruiz Espinosa focuses not only on examples of what has come to be termed digital literature, but also on print materials that are clearly approached in ways that have to do with the concept of hypertextuality, which is core for her research.

Given that Ruiz Espinosa's objective deals with a side of literature that is still undergoing development, her book does a very good job at presenting an overall state of affairs in these respects. Following Eco's identification of certain literary texts that demand a higher degree of involvement from the reader –who has to interpret the text not only in hermeneutic terms, but also in regards to its “execution”, as an actor would interpret a role–, Ruiz Espinosa introduces other concepts from the literary theory of the past five decades that, altogether, amount to a complex network of terms that are closely related to one another. In this way, the author supports her views that, even in a pre-computerized period of literary development, many theorists and writers were already working in ways that anticipated the procedures and effects of the multimedia, even suggesting that, unconsciously, these technologies are a product of what was already happening on paper.

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<sup>2</sup> [The open literary work: from digital to print supports]

Through the different literary works that Ruiz Espinosa mentions to back her ideas – all of them, it is worth noting, from the 1960’s onwards– she manages to present instances of texts that would change in effect or meaning if adapted to a different medium, that would easily fit any other platform without gaining or losing any significance, and that would actually attain deeper dimensions if transformed in terms of their physical presentation. The question that this arises and to which the research keeps going back to, then, is whether indeed it would be possible for books to be substituted by e-readers, tablets, or computers, as a next, perhaps necessary step in the clichéd idea of the death of the novel. While it is clear from Ruiz Espinosa’s thesis and analysis that this is not the case (just as the printing press did not eradicate handwriting, she comments), the author addresses other important notions that pertain to a broader discussion on the transformation of literature.

*La obra literaria abierta* is structured in a progressive, if at times too reiterative manner. In the first chapter, Ruiz Espinosa sets out to explore to what an extent the new ways of reading enrich and modify the conventional methods that have guided and conditioned our literary interpretations. With the revision of the concepts of “reversible literary texts”, “cybertexts”, “ergodic literature”, and “technotexts” the author develops a distinction between the open works that interest her and the ones that, according to her, are of a more traditional note (something she clarifies, for example, through Roland Barthes’ definition of *readerly* and *writerly* texts). As explained before, this is not meant to equate a difference between print or digital works, but to illustrate the fact that both a digital and a print book can be either open or closed: that a text be presented in a digital support does not mean that it will immediately be categorized as digital literature or as an open work; this can only be determined through an exploration of how the text *asks* to be read and of how much of its execution depends on the reader’s decisions, or of those books that, though of a narrative nature, require a more material consideration of their existence within their plots—as happens with Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) or Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000),

for example. This also refers to the very important distinction that Ruiz Espinosa makes between texts that were originally conceived for electronic consumption and those that have merely been digitized for an easier distribution. In other words, when the author talks about *technology*, she also considers the printing press and the straightforward literacy of writing as such.

In the second chapter, the author delves into the concept of hypertextuality to establish it as one of the key components of her open works. She develops this, in anticipation of the guidelines that later on she will delineate for the analysis of this kind of texts, from Julia Kristeva's definition of intertextuality, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the rhizome; nevertheless, this is perhaps the less effective section of the analysis. While the ulterior motive is apparent and the connections between these concepts somewhat hinted at, the author does not round it up with an actual explanation of what hypertextuality means to her; on the one hand she neglects Gérard Genette's key exploration of transtextuality –which is not even mentioned in this book as such and, it could be argued, actually expands on what Kristeva proposes–, and this is clearly problematic when realizing that such concept does address the notions of materiality (paratextuality) that interest Ruiz Espinosa. On the other hand, there is no clear distinction between the hypertext in computational and literary contexts; while this analysis actually touches on both fields –and is, for the most, developed through their meeting points–, perhaps it would be much more helpful if the author established her own definitions, rather than only connecting these very complex, and at times not clearly explained, ideas.

In the following sections of the book, which constitute the core of her research, Ruiz Espinosa proposes a paradigm for the analysis of open works; she structures it based on how the materiality (*materialidad*), structure (*estructura*), textuality (*textualidad*), and meaning (*sentido*) of a work interact with the reader, who by this point is also considered a user, or even a coauthor of the text. In this respect, she is very emphatic on how different aspects of a

novel –for example, its medium– can be regarded from the perspective of more than one category–e.g., the materiality that a medium presupposes, and the structure that is derived from it. Her intention is to explain that what she proposes is only one of the various ways in which a given text can be regarded; with her method as a model, the book manages to illustrate how each specific open work, in a way, suggests its own most suitable approach.

In order to do this, Ruiz Espinosa presents three different case studies to test the pertinence and viability of her proposed method: these are the novels *Juego de cartas* (1964), by Max Aub; *Nocilla Dream* (2006), by Agustín Fernández Mallo; and Jeff Gomez’s *Beside Myself* (2012). Although very different from one another, these texts do give an account of how the analyses of their different parts amount to a critical exploration of their reaches and what they might mean for the evolution of literary form, each of them in terms of how their own materiality—a set of playing cards with the text on the back of each, a book with several notes that interrupt and expand the narrative, a story conceived and planned as an iPad app, respectively—is tightly intertwined with their meanings and the reading processes they require. Nonetheless, Ruiz Espinosa leaves the aesthetic aspect of these works out of her analysis. She confesses to this on several occasions, for, as she points out, her intention here is only to wonder about the relationship between writer, medium, text, and reader, suggesting that the exploration of literary content is something yet to be addressed in further researches. Given that that, after all, should be a key consideration with any new development in the field of literary theory, her book would be much more insightful by including these key aspects, even if just in terms of value judgments from a literary scholar.

Very much like the works she talks about, Ruiz Espinosa’s book leaves the door open for more considerations and explorations. In terms of its practicality, *La obra literaria abierta* presents a glossary of the terms it addresses and a long list of literary texts that could serve as other examples of open works—again, both in digital and in print media. In this way, the author’s attitude towards the broad spectrum of texts conceived in ways different to the

traditional ones is comforting; on more than one occasion she alludes to the reticence with which these innovations are usually regarded by the academic and artistic communities, which tend to be very hermetic, but analyses like hers demonstrate that the whole panorama of what technology can do for literature is, if not of a crucial literary importance, at least complex enough so as to entice learned, relevant discussions around it –even more when considering that the book here discussed is found outside of Anglophone academia. This, of course, still needs some refinement.

Ruiz Espinosa suggests that, in due time and if writers venture to really exploit what the new technologies (again, digital or otherwise) can do for narrative, we may even reach a point in which literature accepts novels with forms different to the canonical ones; perhaps this could even be expanded so as to affirm that the open literary works are not only broadening the categories of literature, but that they are also, and in a more conclusive way, questioning the very notions of genres and of literature. In that respect, *La obra literaria abierta* would really benefit from an aesthetic dimension to its analysis: perhaps literature is already at a point in which, given the artistic innovation that seems to have been going around for the past fifty years, such basic definitions as novel, author, text, or narrative need to be revised and reworked.