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THE IMPACT OF THE BOOK ON ASYMMETRIC CIVILIZATION

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ABSTRACT

To what extend books and reading can be included in the project of the "asymmetrical civilization"? The point is, that the book by nature is politically active, because of the fact that along with many other functions the reforming

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function is inherent to the book. Often it has invisible, but definite role in the personal, public and global projects. In global aspect it turned out that reading will present the overall surprises.

Keywords: literacy, reading, asymmetric information, book studies, asymmetry, reading habits, social separation, class distinction, literary reading on paper and screen, the impact of new media in the reading culture

INTRODUCTION

“Book readers are optimists. However, do we have sound reasons to declare still that people should read books?” Those words were used at the opening of the Frankfurt’s book fair 32 years ago (1974). Today I could begin the same way. The reason is that now we face once again the risk of wiping out books and reading as well. But I will say something else: to persist on defending the cause of books and book reading is only in the power of the winners, it is the cause of the successful and the lucky.

Even if there is only one reader left in the world, Life itself will call him for help.

A similar metaphor was used in the twice aired on the TV channel bTV* movie “Stream of consciousness” (from the TV series “The Outer Limits” – 1997, aired on the 6th 2002 and on 23th march 2003). People live “plugged in” in the Information stream, created 50 years ago in order to allow everyone’s access to the global network. In this apparently symmetrical society of working individuals with computer chips implanted in their brains, there is one that is “crippled” or more correctly “defective”. Ryan, the one who creates the asymmetry in this world is the only one, who is surrounded by books, because he has no chip – on account of a trauma in his childhood. Everyone around him feels sorry for him because he is “struggling”, because he is a remainder from the time when reading has been a token of intelligence. Those with chips read

* A private national Bulgarian television.

without their eyes directly from the Stream, and if one of them picks up one of Ryan's books he asks "How does it work?" Because all of the books in all the libraries are "poured" into the Stream at the time of its creation, the useless printed versions have been destroyed in order to save space. On the other hand there were "dangerous" books, which were destroyed without being "honored" by digitalization. In one unfortunate moment, however, the Stream overloads, which causes "brain tsunami" in peoples' heads and one by one they begin to die, bombarded by all the data. In a way that is natural for us – by references in his familiar books, indexes and catalogs Ryan begins to search for the book, which contains the programming code for the Stream – in the deserted neighborhood of "Nothingness". There, in the ruins of the house of Jessie Koll, a bank manager and the smartest man in the world, who lived before the Stream, Ryan finds the "dangerous" book, which Koll forgot to return to the library, and which contains the schematics for the interruption of the Stream – and he shuts it down. Until civilization returns to normal, i.e. while the schools are being refilled with books, the hero of the story formulates the new principles of survival: "The only thing worse than burning books is not reading them."

CONCEPT THE "ASYMMETRICAL INFORMATION"

If today we can speak about a changing reality, which is far from the one in the movie but it also seems to be asymmetrical, how is it expressed? What can asymmetry mean in our civilization?

Let us take as initial concept the "asymmetrical information" phenomenon. The scientific interest towards it has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics three times – in 1996, 2001 and 2005. One of the Nobel Prize winners – Professor Joseph Stiglitz¹ explains the asymmetrical information thus: this is a situation of access to uneven, unequal amounts of information among two or more "players" and the winner is the one that is correctly informed, who knows more, better than the others, and the most important

information for the moment. According to Stiglitz our society is under the power of “economics of information”. According to this tendency the society restructures itself by the indicator “knowledge” and from an open and harmonious it becomes asymmetrical. The redistribution of power and influence in the social-economical environment is realized by inalienable resource – knowledge. Those who know much and have the necessary information gain a higher status than their “ignorant” colleagues and fellow-townsmen.

In other cases priority has the one, who has assured himself with the maximum amount of preliminary knowledge – when he knows what is happening before the others. Examples of the fatal outcome of the game for those, who don't have the informational superiority, can be derived not only from the pressing “asymmetrical war” with terrorism, but can be traced back to the victories of Attila (in the period 441–451 year against Byzantium and the Western Roman Empire), or even further back in time – to the “The Art of War” in Ancient China. The strategy of the commander of the Chi country (400 BC) for example is the possession of preliminary information: “If the educated ruler and the wise general defeat the enemy and their accomplishments exceed those of the ordinary man, the reason is in the preliminary knowledge.” There is another rule – to have the right channels of information: “The preliminary information can not be gained from spirits, or from deities, analogies with past events or calculations. It has to be gained from people who are familiar with the state of the enemy.”² Or in the current conditions, from the extensions of these people – written documents.

The contemporary consequences of the asymmetrical information can not be erased by someone's capitulation. The reason is that they reflect on the whole civilization. And the battles are led on the “silent front” of education and literacy. Currently according to data from the statistical institute of UNESCO there are 771 million illiterate³ people in the world, and only in Bulgaria there are 200 000 (according to “Mediana” – January 2005). And if we bear in mind

that illiteracy now is defined as the inability to use reading in your line of work, although you received formal education. Even more, illiteracy now is considered a “slight mental retardation”. In our country* for the first time illiteracy became the reason for unfitness for service in the army (with regulation N^o N-4 from 11th march 2005 for the military medical expertise of the army service in peaceful time). In the “medical standards” of the military the inability to read, write and speak in Bulgarian are included in chapter “nervous and psychological disorders”, because they cause serious problems in the execution of orders. In addition to the actualization of the meaning of illiteracy in the 21. century UNESCO legitimized a definition for informational illiteracy: “Lack of skills abilities for critical perception, evaluation and usage of information in professional and private live.”⁴

The new illiteracy⁵ is not just not knowing anything, but: 1) knowing badly the things that everybody else knows; 2) not knowing what you should know; 3) not wanting to utilize the old and new forms of presentation of written information. And those are enough for new situations for asymmetry.

CONCEPT THE “ASYMMETRICAL CIVILIZATION”

To what extend, however, books and reading can be included in the project of the “asymmetrical civilization”? The point is, that the book by nature is politically active, because of the fact that along with many other functions the reforming function is inherent to the book. Often it has invisible, but definite role in the personal, public and global projects. In global aspect, for example, it turned out that reading will present the overall surprises. And this happened with the most impressive survey of the European Union (the grant political project of the old continent) about the “culture of reading”, conducted in 2003⁶. It reiterated an unbelievable asymmetry – the EU is divided into a reading majority in the North and a non-reading majority in the South. The northern

* Bulgaria – translator`s note.

countries (Sweden, Finland, UK) have more clearly expressed reading inclinations than the south ones (Greece, Spain, Portugal) and that is not because of higher incomes or cheaper books. It turns out that the reading resistance in the European South is routed in history. The countries that read most are those with protestant tradition, where liquidation of illiteracy of the population began the earliest – as a result of Reformation and Enlightenment. The tragedy of the South and South-East countries (among which is Bulgaria) is, that liquidation of illiteracy began a hundred years later, and compared with Sweden (which liquidated illiteracy in 18. century) began two hundred years later. And the reason is that in the south, neither the Catholic, nor the Orthodox Church was seriously threatened by the Reformation. The masses should read The Bible? It would be politically incorrect.

If today we castigate ourselves in long lasting passive readers' mentality, we make a mistake. Simply for us – the peoples of the European South, it is harder to be readers. Before the EU, however, there lies a serious historical problem and it appears to be of an asymmetrical nature: instead of uniting, Europe is dividing.

The consecutive surprise was delivered in the beginning of last summer (June 15, 2005) by the marketing agency NOP World after it announced the results of its research of “readers' ratings” in 30 countries⁷.

We face a new asymmetry and a new intrigue. The most reading country turned out to be India – the country with the biggest share in global illiteracy (34%)⁸. The lowest readers' ratings were registered in the USA (23th place), UK (26th place) and Japan (29th place). The question is how did the most developed countries manage to drop to the bottom of the chart for the time spent on reading? The answer is again in the field of asymmetry.

The people from the “reading three” – India, China and Thailand are politically motivated to say, that they read, because there now is the peak of interventions for liquidation of illiteracy. An Indian, who wishes to go to collage

would answer the question how much time does he spend on reading with the maximum given answer. It is just because that both collage and reading are socially prestigious and represent his high self evaluation.

Exactly the opposite is valid for the West and the modern countries. Here you can't impress anybody with literacy. The man in the developed world hardly will put himself on airs with the time which he spends in routine reading of technical texts, reference books, textbooks and manuals. He will hardly calculate as specially spared time which he spent receiving information from the press, which he consumes silently all day long. The western citizen doesn't even count reading from the monitor, web-surfing which don't yet qualify as reading. Subconsciously the modern man excludes anything mentioned above as "text noise", and about the question of reading he filters out only the time, which he spends on purpose for reading "prestigious genres", for books imposed on him by tradition or by bestsellers' charts. In other words, the foe of the rating of the traditionally reading nations, among which is Russia, is not at all a cause for worry. It is exactly the contrary. The downward movement in the charts of such surveys – on the quantity of reading, is in fact "rising" up to the level of the club of the chosen ones, where reading is not just courtesy, but it has cultural and economical cover.

Although Bulgaria is not included in this most recent research I think, that this tendency is valid for us too. The more "normal" country we become, the more we will consider books and reading as something routine and instrumental. If we report low levels of reading time and buying of books, this may grieve the statisticians, book publishers and book sellers, but as a whole it is not pessimistic.

The adult Bulgarian is busier and busier and it seems that he is more teased than happy when somebody asks him how much he reads, what he reads, when he reads and why he reads. The research of ASSA-M^{*9}, which had broad

* Bulgarian private agency for research and analysis. – translator's note.

response this year, showed in fact, that we may not want to read a lot of fiction books, but there is a rise in the target reading, reading out of necessity and reading for a career.

Shortly both we and the man from the West, now “use” books, while in the undeveloped countries people are still learning to decipher them. And this is the latest paradox in the asymmetrical civilization. If we want to react to this new caprice of civilization in the most rational way, we have to forget several clichés and to admit several mistakes: about our vision of the future of the book, about the future of reading and about our fears about both.

First we have to admit, that about the worry we seem to be under some sort of autosuggestion. With refrains like “the end of the book”, “the destruction of reading” and the “death of the reader”, we press on our psychological space catastrophism, fatality, entropy and helplessness. It is true – the future has to be dangerous. But fears lower our sensitivity threshold, they cause rational blindness for the positive signals of the healing of society.

We have to admit secondly, that we created “book negativism” in the young people and thus we placed ourselves into a retrograde position. Some of the people who are engaged in the sphere of books probably look better in the luxury of despair, but in fact this is the luxury of another conflict between generations. Our moaning over the fate of the book is in a state of trench war against the generation which reads not necessarily paper books and not necessarily dictated by the “canon”.

There has been a serious change in the perception of the book in the reading practices and the readers' profile.

If we don't want to find ourselves in the losing illiterate side of our asymmetrical reality, we have to state that the future of the book already happened, but some of us hadn't reached it yet.

The book is leaving its new material “reincarnation”, it's modifying, adapting to the new digital environment. In fact the electronic book is still just a

book, which forms will never stop developing. The technical revolution changes neither the meaning, nor the mission of the “objects” of first necessity. The book, like the mason symbols the “angle” and the “compasses” today physically have technical analogs. But those analogs continue to respect the original form by just helping men to act, to own and to read better.

The wiser men already put an end to the requiems and dithyrambs about the fate of the books¹⁰. But still remains the curiosity about the word, with which it will be named, even if it is the expression “the next big thing in the exchange of ideas”. It’s more mature to say that the question “does the book have a future” is not highly convertible. When, for example, Astrid Lindgren was asked the same question she exclaimed: “And does bread have a future, does the rose have a future, does the lullaby have a future?”

It would be more rational to concentrate over the question “what is the future of reading”. It’s painful and inconvenient for a lot of people in the outlining asymmetrical civilization.

I will remind you the forecasts of two people with the biography of “committed world readers” – Julia Kristeva and Umberto Eco. According to Julia Kristeva¹¹ we already have two classes unevenly spread all over the planet – one of them, the minority, is reading and creates goods for the others, and the others – the dependent, hardly read and hardly see.

Umberto Eco also outlines our asymmetrical present, unbalanced and segmented into three sectors¹². In one of them is “the proletarian majority”, like Orwell’s proles – the passive masses learning information only from television. They either don’t have access to the Network, or they do, but they don’t know how to use it (without reading in Internet you are lost). In the second sector is the “lower middle-class” – user of the new media, but also a passive one (like an accountant). The minority in this asymmetrical triangle are “the game masters” the internal hackers of the city, as well as their rich employers. The similarity

between them is the knowledge, gained by hard, selective and nonpublic reading – the knowledge that brings control¹³.

I think that there is no need for much empirical evidence, that in “the society of the asymmetrical information” one of the players in “the game” knows more, better and earlier than the others because he reads more.

Because, what basically different is formed in us through reading? Reading is a process of reduction of possibilities (this is the thesis of Frank Smith). The reason for this is that the more things we know the easier we can make a decision. The information from the “calmed” written exposition reduces in the maximum degree the doubts and uncertainty. For example, when children learn to read, it’s difficult for them to distinguish between different letters. In a tense situation the more letters the child knows, the easier it can orient in the recognition of the given word.

Besides that the information is equal to the number of the alternatives, which have to be eliminated. If the one, who has to take the decision, can eliminate all possible answers except one, then the quantity of information is equivalent to the degree of uncertainty, which existed. Information diminishes the uncertainty through the elimination of alternatives. But without understanding there can not be any reduction of alternatives. In this case, one of the most important features of reading as a skill is the presence of a “criteria”. The criteria is a term, which shows the quantity of information, which is necessary for the making of a particular decision. That’s the reason why the more information the reader has, the less will be the volume of the so called criteria, which is necessary for the making of a decision or the perception of the text. A selection of the used criteria is made during the process of decision making. Every next “decision” depends on the previous ones and activates the analytical centers of the brain.

Reading is thinking, which is partly focused on the visual information on the list it is thinking, which is stimulated and led by written language. A huge

advantage of reading over effective thinking in extreme and stress conditions is controlled, which it gives over the situations. Another good practical example gives again Umberto Eco. “There was a discussion about the last crash on Wall Street – says he – and most of all about why “the young stock lions” fell in the trap so foolishly. How was it possible for them not to know that there has been a similar crash, that the stock-market has its own dynamics, and a certain limit can not be surpassed? One of the answers was: but they don’t read! Apparently they don’t read. They didn’t know the fact of “the black Thursday” on Wall Street in 1929. Those Yuppies – comments Umberto Eco – these sassy successful urban professionals, educate themselves vacantly, they have weak memory and bad discipline of knowledge just because they don’t read enough and the right things.”¹⁴

Circumstantial evidence about the “guilt” of reading in the expansion of the asymmetrical reality can be found in every aspect of our “society of knowledge”. One of the sides of every business, bargain, discussion, education knows more than the other and that is not necessarily the side of the power, the money or the higher stature. The dichotomy “informed – uninformed”, “read – not read” multiplies the surprises and absconds.

For example an art critique, who doesn’t know anything about visual perceptions; an intellectual, who clutches only to history and is ignorant to the last scientific and technological achievements; a professor who knows less than his students about pressing issues in his field and so on. This is the wretchedness of the one who is convinced in his erudition a priori.

For the formulation of a core of people, who are always dissatisfied their erudition, of groups of highly educated and successful people, who have significant influence over the social, economical and political processes, we are convinced from a survey from the company for sociological research Roper ASW conducted in 2003. About 10% of the population of USA influence the opinion of the other 90%. This 10% consist of politician, journalists, business magnates,

professors in universities, experts in different fields, leaders of big social organizations and so on. Roper ASW found out, that “the group that influences”, prefers to get its information through reading in Internet and not through the mass media¹⁵. This sociological news gives us the opportunity to make the following conclusions. First, in the analytical field the two terms groups of influence and information can now be connected. Second, that the influential people restrain themselves from obtaining information through the mass media. Anyway Internet as a means of information and reading is a synonym of quickness, variety and a possibility to select.

We can search for foreign and local examples about how the status of the reader more and more merges with the status of the successful and the winning. Or at last for his plans for successes. Let’s remember the pre-election television clip of one of the potential winners of the elections for mayor of Sofia Milen Velchev from NDSV party*. With an open book in his hand and with a lot of books behind his back. The candidate suggested: “I know more than the others”, or at least “I know how to know more than the others”.

We have a real example for a project of the type “how to get out of the bad side of asymmetry through books”. It’s about practice “reading to get promotion” among the Mexican police officers, which was announced on BBC last spring (March 2005)¹⁶. In all the police departments in the Mexican capital there is an order: every employ must read at least one book a month, so he can hope for promotion. It’s a fact that the level of crime in Mexico is higher than any other capital, and the local police officers are accused not only of corruption, but of incompetence, illiteracy and laziness. According to the mayor whose idea was to issue the order, an educated employer of the law enforcement will be a better professional and a better person.

If we have to interfere resolutely in the orientation of the young Bulgarians toward “promotion”, toward “win in the duel”, toward “higher

* A liberal political party in Bulgaria founded as a movement in 2001 year.

income” or in general – toward the winning sector in the “society of asymmetrical information”, it is necessary to create a new image of the book and reading and to make more adequate messages towards the modern people. Something like: “Read, people – otherwise you are lost” (that was the motto of the Frankfurt’s book fair). Or something simple like: Read for success in life! Books are for the leaders! Reading is for the champions! And so on.

It would be hard for us to deal with those, who will laugh at us: “There is no place for readers in the rotation of money!” That means there is no place for writers, poets, scientists and teachers, for doctors and engineers. Yes, but without them there is no rotation. The number of similar collisions – caused by the asymmetry in our everyday life will increase.

CONCLUSIONS

Not long ago came another proof of the asymmetrical reality. The new chess world champion, the Bulgarian Vesselin Topalov, has collided with people of a suspiciously uninformed type, some of those who, when they take a book, ask how it works. Their curiosity was sincere: “Do you use stimulants? Why there isn’t doping control in chess?” Topalov answered, not without irony: “A doping for the brain has not yet been invented.” That’s right, champions keep their secrets. But we, if we wish through wisest of sports to make an advertisement for reading, had better wait the end of match between Topalov and the computer, in which the secret of the victory over the “chip” genius will be known to be “connected to books”.

If the world has to stay the same, then readers are dangerous. But if we want more Bulgarian champions, there, where others have been comfortably situated, we need, as the teenagers say, lots of reading. I wish everyone a constructive day, worth to be read about!

NOTES

¹ Joseph E. Stiglitz was born in 1943, a professor in the economical faculty of the Columbian University in USA. He was chosen for professor of the Massachusetts' Institute of Technology (MIT) at the age of 26, but in condition that he starts wearing shoes and stops sleeping in the university. A chairman of the Committee of economical consultants of US president Bill Clinton and economical adviser of the president of Bulgaria Georgi Parvanov, vice-president of the World bank (1997 – 1999). The author of “Globalization and its Discontent” (2002), “The roaring Nineties: a new history of World’s most progressive decade” (2004) and others. In 2001 The Central Bank of Sweden awards him along with George A. Akerlof and Michael Spencer The Nobel Prize for Economics for their “Analyses of markets with asymmetrical information”. Their researches show, that practically the participants on the market don’t have the same information, which excludes the possibility for just allocation and use of recourses. This fact changes radically the conclusions about the Balance theory. The asymmetry of information – a man applying for a job knows better the assets and liabilities of his employer than himself, the creditor knows better than his creditor what are the perspectives of him paying back his loan, the manager knows better than the owner or the shareholders what is the real state of the company and so on – leads to an unavoidable market failure and to adverse selection, which imposes the intervention of the state for correcting the status quo.

² Sun Tzu. The Art of War. Middlesex: Echo Library, 2006. 112 p.

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