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Twittering Critics and the Impact of Social Media on Literary Criticism

Twittering critics i wpływ mediów społecznościowych na krytykę literacką

ABSTRAKT

Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie tzw. *twittering critics*, czytelników, a zarazem zwykle nieprofesjonalnych krytyków literatury, którzy swoje opinie wyrażają w mediach społecznościowych. Ich interpretacje opierają się głównie na poglądach politycznych oraz społecznych. Kwestie te są przez nich również poruszane w odniesieniu do autora, co sprawia, że jego poglądy stają się poniekąd nieodłączną częścią dzieła. W artykule zjawisko to zostaje zbadane w odniesieniu do teorii reprezentacji społecznej, indywidualnego doświadczenia (*lived experience*) oraz konfliktu pomiędzy prawdą społeczną a literacką (w ujęciach, kolejno, Johna Deweya oraz Romana Ingardena). Główny cel artykułu to wskazanie na wpływ tej formy nieprofesjonalnej krytyki literackiej na literaturę jako dyscyplinę.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: media społecznościowe, prawda literacka, prawda społeczna, polityka tożsamości, krytyka

Introduction

With the rise of social media, a definition of a reader has been broadened and it strongly merged with the term *critic*. Over the past years readers have joined platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram (some sections of the latter two have even gained their distinct names connected to literary material

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published on them – *BookTube*² and *Bookstagram*³), where it is easier to voice one's opinions and criticise certain aspects of books or their authors. Authors themselves are now more visible than ever, their biographies, political views and even *likes* in social media are being discussed with the connection to their works. Political and social issues are immensely important for readers, which is strongly mirrored in a form of modern literary criticism voiced in social media.

In this paper, my aim is to analyse interconnections between social beliefs, literature and its criticism, especially in the context of *social representation theory*, which constitutes a part of psychological and social discourse. Nonetheless, this theory is useful within the area of literature, especially in the context of social media criticism, which regards social representation as one of the most valued literary merits. This theory provides us with tools to not only analyse the text itself from the perspective of the social problems it touches, but also to discuss its content in relation to reviews by social media critics.

According to Serge Moscovici, a Russian social psychologist, social representations are “the contents of everyday thinking and the stock of ideas that gives coherence to our religious beliefs, political ideas and the connections we create”⁴. These representations, as Moscovici claims, inform our knowledge about both people and objects and help us to classify the⁵. For representation to be accurate within literature, it is believed that authors should write only ‘what they know’. The tendency is to focus on so-called *own voices* in literature, i.e. authors writing solely about their *lived experience*. If they wish to represent experiences of other people, they are expected to consult so-called *sensitivity readers* – people who are part of the group the author describes and who can suggest certain changes to the text (sensitivity readers should not be confused with twittering critics, as a sensitivity reader is an existing profession within publishing world: a person who has a possibility to influence the manuscript prior to its publication, while twittering critics discuss the finished novel). It led to tensions between those authors who see these changes as limitations to their literary freedom and critics voicing their opinions usually in social media.

I will discuss the above in the context of contemporary literary criticism in its non-professional form, the one that is concerned around reader's experience more than informed by the opinions of educated literary critics. I will focus on the literary representation of one of the most debated topics of recent years, i.e. transgender identities. The discussion concerning them entered politics, media and literature, being raised daily by television, newspapers and the literary world. The topic has

² M. C. Doulami, *A new digital phenomenon: the rise of the Booktubers*

³ P. Bock, “Booktubes”, “Bookstagram”... *les critiques littéraires, ces nouveaux influenceurs*

⁴ S. Moscovici, *Notes towards a description of social representations*, “European Journal of Social Psychology”, 1988, vol. 18, p. 211-250.

⁵ *Ibid.*

been raised by numerous authors writing in the wide range of genres, i.a. JK Rowling, Philip Pullman, Margaret Atwood or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Within literature, the broader discussion about social representation begun with *young adult* genre. Thus, in this paper, I will solely focus on a YA novel written by John Boyne, *My Brother's Name is Jessica*, which was – in social media discourse – regarded as one of the most controversial books of the recent years.

Methodology

In the first section of the paper, I will propose the notion of a *twittering critic*: a critic bearing certain characteristics common for numerous Internet users who share their opinions about literature. To describe this phenomena, I will refer to phenomenological approach and to pragmatics as it was described by an American philosopher, John Dewey. I will also place *twittering criticism* in its relation to social representation.

In the second part of the paper, I will analyse twittering critics' reviews of the novel *My Brother's Name is Jessica*. I will compare two definitions of *truth*: one referring to *social truth* in Dewey's view, and the second one – *literary truth* as examined by a Polish philosopher and literary scholar, Roman Ingarden. My attempt is to show that within *twittering criticism* social and literary truths are in conflict.

As the paper constitutes an attempt to regard a modern, arising problem, it should be read as an encouragement for a discussion. For this reason, in the last section, I will point to the possibilities for further research.

Twittering criticism and its consequences

The term *twittering critic* is one I coined for the purpose of this paper. While I used the reference to Twitter for its, indeed, 'twittering' nature (the service allows its users to write quick and short messages to discuss nearly every issue), *twittering criticism* may be related to any critic who is using social media such as Facebook, Instagram or YouTube to analyse literary texts. To provide a broader definition, one may say that a *twittering critic* is any reader who uses social media or review platforms (e.g. *Amazon* or *GoodReads*) to share their experience with the text. Nonetheless, as these critics may be motivated solely by their hobbyist interest in literature, for the purpose of this paper I would narrow the definition of *twittering critic* to those who are mainly interested in social and political impact of books, and whose attitude is informed by *social representation* and *identity politics*. That is the main reason why I decided to refer to Twitter while coining this term: Twitter is a service known for its political impact (it is a platform often used

by politicians to communicate with their voters and opponents), and political aspects are immensely meaningful for this analysis.

It is also important to add to the definition of a *twittering critic* that they are not educated in the area of literature or – if they are – they do not use this experience as the main source informing their approach. Naturally, professional critics often use social media to provide reviews, yet it is important to distinguish them from *twittering critics*: firstly, professional critics use social media solely as one of the methods to communicate their critical approach; secondly, and more importantly, they are expected by readers to provide professional critical pieces instead of the ones built around social experience. In other words, a professional critic is somehow limited by the literary merits of the text, but the social media, *twittering*, critic considers social and political values presented by the author. For numerous modern readers and publishers, these are much more important than purely literary factors.

Politics and social discussions have not become more essential than they were before. In fact, claiming that literature and politics have always been interconnected seems to be a truism. However, what changed in the span of the last years, with the social media usage and the broader access to the Internet, is that ordinary people's opinions have become voiced more often and they are much louder. As Internet users started to discuss every area of social and cultural life, it was natural that the discussion around literature would change. In one way, it seems to be an extension to Roland Barthes's reader-response theory. Both Barthes and Wolfgang Iser saw readers as active agents⁶ in the process of 'making of a text'. Barthes even claimed that the 'goal of literature is to make the reader [...] a producer of the text'⁷. But Barthes could not have predicted that social media would even broaden reader's response possibilities, because while before the common access to the Internet, a reader could connect the text with their personal experience, now they are able to share this experience in a broader way, influencing other readers' understanding of the text. It has both positive and negative effects. What is positive in the fact that nowadays readers are given a wider platform to voice their opinions is that now their so-called *lived experience* (which is subjective, and thus it adds to the objective reality and should be analysed in connection to it⁸) is being discussed, which can broaden other people's understanding of the text. One of the possibilities to analyse the *lived experience* in literature is to focus on how it refers to both phenomenology and pragmatism. *Lived experience* has its roots in phenomenological approach and as such it represents experiences a certain subject gains in their life and the knowledge that

⁶ C. T. Mart, *Reader-Response Theory and Literature Discussions: a Springboard for Exploring Literary Texts*, "The New Educational Review", 2019, vol. 56 (2), p. 84.

⁷ R. Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller, Blackwell, New York 2002, p. 4.

⁸ M. Lichtman, *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide*, Thousand Oaks, California, SAGE 2010, p. 79.

these experiences provide them with. In art (which literature constitutes a part of) *lived experience* is strongly connected to pragmatics. John Dewey claimed in his *Art as Experience* that “underneath the rhythm of [...] every work of art there lies [...] the basic pattern of the relations of the live creature to his environment”⁹. In the context of social representation, environment should be understood particularly as social surroundings. In this sense, phenomenological idea of individual social experiences as constituting a form of *truth*¹⁰ should be located within the context of broader social environment.

To use an example for the above claim: a white author, such as Yann Martel (the author of the famous *Life of Pi*) may present a history of an Indian character. However, critics of Indian heritage may discuss the novel to point both its merits and shortcomings, which consequently will add to its interpretations for other readers who have not gained the same social experience. The issue of lived experience has been often raised by critics in social media. Finally, in 2010s, the institution of a so-called *sensitivity reader* has emerged. A sensitivity reader is one working similarly to the copy editor, but instead of correcting grammar mistakes or ‘plot holes’, he or she is searching for *problematic* or *insensitive* fragments of the text in order to provide the author with a feedback about how to improve them. A sensitive reader is allowed to interfere with the text much more than a usual reader, as publisher hire such readers before publishing a novel. In this way, sensitivity readers gained a possibility to influence the text, according to their lived experience: their role is much more powerful than the role of mere critics. However, this status would not be given to these specific readers without the activity of social media critics. It is Internet critics who pushed towards inclusion of sensitivity readers in the publishing process. A sensitivity reader is one, who – according to them – may become an instance to which the author should refer to if the author wishes to be respectful towards social representation. In this area, the second factor, politics (namely: identity politics) is incorporated into the process of making of a literary text, because social beliefs standing behind this form of politics are to be mirrored within literature.

Identity politics¹¹, a form of politics based, among others, on the idea that any social group (especially minorities) should be represented by a person who belongs to this group. In literature, it is seen on the example of previously-mentioned ‘write what you know’ approach. Often, authors who have not gained certain experience, are being criticised for describing this experience, which leads to detrimental consequences of the social media criticism.

⁹ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Penguin, New York 2005 (1934), p. 156.

¹⁰ In the next section, I will discuss the term *truth* in its relation to *accuracy* in literary context.

¹¹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

There are numerous negative effects of twittering criticism. On one hand, as it was discussed before, their contribution may lead to better understanding of a text. However, at the same time it may – paradoxically – limit its comprehension for other readers. I will discuss it further on the examples in the next sections, but here it is important to note that the problem seems to lay mainly in the fact that critical, Internet reviews (often in a form of a short tweet) are often repetitive. Twitter tends to transform into an *echo-chamber*: some critics repeat the allegations of those who had voiced their opinions before, with some even doing it purely for the reason not to offend other critics (especially those from minority groups, who could also work as sensitivity readers). It seems that individual opinions are dictated by the social group, to which an individual relates to.

Above all, the main effect of social media criticism seems to be the maximal conflation of authors' views with their texts. The text no longer exists as a separate entity, but it becomes dependent on the author's beliefs expressed outside of the literary piece. This conflation is strongly seen in the case of John Boyne and his novel, which will be presented in the next section.

John Boyne's *My Brother's Name is Jessica*

John Boyne is an Irish author known mainly for his novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. As a gay man, he considers himself a part of LGBT community, and he outspokenly touches topics concerned about sexual orientation and identity. In 2019, he published a novel about a 13 year old boy whose brother, Jason, comes out to his family as a trans woman¹². The perspective in the book is focused on how the main character, Sam, struggles to understand his sibling's identity. Almost in each instance when the sibling is discussed, Sam refers to her as 'my brother Jason'. The constant return of these words throughout the narration might be seen as a form of fixation of the main character who is unable – especially at the beginning of the novel – to understand not only his sibling's identity, but the entire concept of transsexuality. A reader may have an impression that Sam attempts to negate Jessica's identity as it feels as though her being transgender meant a personal loss for him – a loss of his brother. The first person narration, in which Sam's character is a lens for a reader, may allow the reader to understand the foundation of the plot. In other words, a reader may understand Jessica's identity better only if they follow Sam's thought process. As John Boyne claimed himself, he wrote the book out of "compassion and empathy"¹³.

However, the author's intentions were not read as such by readers, who – using especially Twitter – begun to express their discontent with the book even before it

¹² J. Boyne, *My Brother's Name is Jessica*, Puffin, London 2019.

¹³ R. Ingle, *John Boyne: 'I am not a provocateur. I don't seek to hurt people'*, "The Irish Times", 2020.

was published. The foremost problematic issue was connected to the title. To the Internet critics, calling Jessica 'a brother' was an act of *misgendering* (using wrong gender pronouns towards a person). If Jessica came out as transgender, she should not be called Sam's brother. Another problem is connected to the fact that Jessica is referred to as Jason through almost entire book. This practice is called *deadnaming* (using a name, which is no longer used by a trans person, typically a name bearing connotations to their biological sex). These were two most criticised aspects of the book. Below, I present several quotes from the Twitter critics:

I'd say I can't believe this book passed through the whole publishing process without anyone picking up on it's [sic] problems ...¹⁴.

John Boyne's book My Brother Jessica is transphobic and inappropriate ...¹⁵.

Even its front cover is transphobic misgendering¹⁶.

The book "My Brother's Name is Jessica" is every bit as horrible, transphobic, and full of stereotypes as I thought it would be just from hearing the title¹⁷.

Most of the criticism repeats similar accusations, but some critics tended to personally attack the author, who decided to suspend his Twitter account for several weeks in 2019. In an interview with *The Irish Times*, he said: "I've been called vulgar names and mocked for my appearance, my looks, my weight, my sexuality, and even for the crime of being bald"¹⁸. While these forms of critique might seem to be – at least – excessive, it is important to notice that they rarely refer to literary merits of the novel. As it was mentioned before, *twittering critics* are not professional, which presumably means that they are not equipped with tools of a critic educated within literary studies. For instance, they seem to dismiss the idea that author's choice to use deadnaming and misgendering may be a carefully chosen narrative strategy. The social media critics' approach may be read as though the critics attempted to enforce political attitude on the author, so that he wrote a novel that fulfilled their expectations – which is not, obviously, a role that literature must, or even should, fulfil.

In analysing the criticism of the book, expressed in social media, the theory of social representations seems to be especially meaningful. One of the reviews, from the *Amazon* platform, reads:

When the majority of the community this novel is intended to "represent" says it's trash, then it's trash ... Buy a book written by and for trans people instead.¹⁹

¹⁴ JayHulmePoet, Twitter.

¹⁵ disasterlich, Twitter.

¹⁶ oatc, Twitter.

¹⁷ reneemctavish75, Twitter.

¹⁸ A. O'Connor, *John Boyne deletes Twitter account after trans article backlash*, "The Irish Times", 2019.

¹⁹ Erin schulte, Amazon.

These words are the essence of the social representation and ‘write what you know’ theory. As a gay and presumably cissexual (cissexual is the opposite of transsexual in the gender discourse) man, John Boyne was not expected to write a book about a trans person²⁰. But if he wished to, he should have – as another Amazon critic suggests – “do everything in [his] power to get it right”²¹. Only if he was authentic, the social representation would be adequate. If literature could mirror this reality, it could – as Wolfgang Iser claimed – lead to having an “impression of life-likeness”²². In this way, a reader might experience what they read as though it was their own experience.

Notions such as accuracy, authenticity or truth are especially meaningful in this context. Firstly, it is crucial to point to the differences between social and literary truth. Again, I would like to refer to John Dewey’s understanding of truth, which he described as “things as they are”,²³ but, as he added, “not as they are in the inane and desolate void of isolation from human concern, but as they are in a shared and progressive experience”²⁴. Because of the role of ‘human concern’ in this definition, this truth could be described as *social truth*: society is not in ‘desolate void’; it is indeed changing, and its experience is ‘progressive’. Following this understanding, truth is being experienced, and – as we may assume – can be best represented by those who have experienced it²⁵. Hence, lived experience and truth cannot be separated, even if the former is subjective, and the later may be constituted of both subjective and objective factors.

It seems that *twittering critics* operate from the point of view of social truth. An effect of that can easily be seen in how they value representations of certain minority groups in literature. It is the social truth they wish to be reflected in literature. In this context, truth can be understood as Richard Rorty, an American philosopher of neo-pragmatic school, described it (referring to Donald Davidson’s philosophy) in his essay *Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth*: “a term of praise used for endorsing, rather than one referring to a state of affairs”²⁶. Truth becomes a form of approval, which seems to be especially true in social context, where some

²⁰ The critics seem not to understand the fact that the book is actually written not from the perspective of a trans person, but her sibling’s.

²¹ Pi, Amazon.

²² W. Iser, *The Reading Process, The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach*, “New Literary History”, 1972, v. 3, n. 2, p. 279-299.

²³ J. Dewey, *A Short Catechism Concerning Truth*, [in:] *The Middle Works: 1899-1924. Volume 6: 1910-1911*, Jo A. Boydston [ed.], Southern Illinois University Press, London and Amsterdam 1978, p. 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ It is worth notice that the expression ‘to live one’s truth’ is often seen in the discussions regarding trans people. It is interesting how *truth* can be understood as individual rather than collective in this context. This *truth* can either adapt to, align with or interfere with social norms depending on the time. As society progresses, the ideas and understanding of individual truths can be expanded or shaped by the cultural norms.

²⁶ R. Rorty, *Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth*, [in:] *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, E. LePore [ed.], Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1986, p. 334.

beliefs may be cherished and other ones – rejected. However, *literary truth* is not the same as *social truth*. While both of them may be understood in numerous ways, *literary truth* is even broader and can be much more abstract than the *social* one. Above all, in a fictional, literary world, truth is being depicted for the purpose of the text, and it can be called factual within this text. Roman Ingarden described truth represented in literature as consisting of so-called *quasi-judgements*²⁷. These are judgments created by the author of a literary work that are real within the work itself, but their realness in the world outside of the text is meaningless for the nature of the text. It becomes clearer while quasi-judgements are being compared to judgments. Judgements are objectively true and as such they are used to describe phenomena occurring in the material reality, e.g. judgements are presented in scientific research. As Ingarden says, “[judgements] may not all be true [...] but all claim to be true”²⁸. Their claiming to be true is, in Ingarden’s view, what differs them from *quasi-judgements*. In fiction, truth is subjective, enclosed in the frame of a text. The role of *quasi-judgements* is not to mirror the reality, but rather to create the individual reality of a literary piece.

Both social truths and literary truths are ambiguous. What differentiates them is the fact that the former one is collective, created by social, progressing beliefs, and the latter is being created by an individual, the author. In the context of *twittering criticism*, these truths are conflicted: the social truth (based on social beliefs and opinions at a time) that is represented by the social media critics may not align with literary truth created by the author. With the tendency to strive for representation and political correctness, literary works are read with a new approach that could be named ‘aspiring for *accuracy*’. Literary truth is being replaced with the social one, which, in turn, leads to creating a textual work that is accurate to the social beliefs. This accuracy can be ensured by consulting sensitivity readers and certain groups described in the text: the more accurate to social reality the text is, the more valued it becomes.

Because of the accuracy approach, critics’ understanding interferes with authors’ aims. The author imagines the plot and the characters to further use them as a means to achieve certain literary goals, within the literary truth they create. The accuracy to the social truth or sensitivity may not constitute a part of this truth. Twittering critics tend to regard author’s opinions as inseparable from their works. These views are often used by them as a lens to interpret the text, disregarding a novel as an entity by its own. It happened in case of John Boyne, who was criticised for his political views, especially for the article in which he opposed to using the word *cis* to describe himself.²⁹

²⁷ R. Ingarden, *Szkice z filozofii literatury*, Znak, Kraków 2000, s. 119–174.

²⁸ R. Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ruth A. Crowley, K. Olsen, Northwestern University Press, Illinois 1973, p. 147.

²⁹ J. Boyne, *Why I support trans rights but reject the word ‘cis’*, “The Irish Times”, 2019.

Another problem connected to the Twitter and social media criticism is that it seems to waste its potential. If directed in a more moderate manner, this form of criticism could add meanings to the text, so that other readers gain its wider comprehension. As it was explained on the example of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, sharing one's lived experience in a review may influence other readers' response to the text, by taking into consideration certain cultural aspects. However, twittering critics may turn this positive factor into a negative one: they may, in fact, limit the possibilities for other readers to respond to the text, as in their reviews, they become highly aggressive, imposing their response on others. Thus, experiencing literature is being re-shaped in a political context that creates barriers for any reader who wishes to deepen their understanding and interaction with the text. Both reader's role in creating meanings and purity of the literary field are being disturbed.

Conclusion

It seems that *twittering criticism* is a concern of sociological rather than literary studies. These forms of social media activities are mainly concerned around political and social issues. However, literature is one of the areas especially influenced by social and political atmosphere. Publishers must sell books, which means they would consider criticism voiced in social media as one of the most crucial forms of criticism. This means that they would hire sensitivity readers who can influence texts. Thus, social truth is being incorporated into the author's work and literary truth.

There is a danger for literary studies in this approach: a possibility that literary criticism would be much often narrowed to political and social context. Moreover, it could lead to the shift of relation between the text and the reader to a one in which an individual reader's approach is filtrated by the opinions of a group of critic, i.e. it becomes more of a relation between a text and a group. On the other hand, as it was presented on the example of *social representations*, an opinion of a particular reader may help other readers to comprehend the text in a more meaningful ways. Because of that, *twittering critics'* approach may expand our understanding of reader-response theory to new, richer areas.

The occurrence of sensitivity reading is an interesting development within literature. As there exists a tendency to employ these readers, scholars will have to consider their impact on the text. Professional editors or copy editors' input was not considered in a broader way, because their contribution is of a different kind: they influence the more objective, factual (historical, etc.) aspects of texts, while sensitivity readers consider it from a subjective perspective: they act more like readers in Roland Barthes's theory, but their impact is greater as they have the

power to influence the text before its publication (and thus, before it is presented to wider readership). In this context, sensitivity reading may be examined from numerous approaches, e.g. the wider role of editing of a book, the role of the author or co-author, social influences reflected in modern literature.

The phenomena described in this paper is a new one. Because of that, any approach that may be taken towards it, must be embedded in conjectures and intuitions. The material to analyse is still changing. Literary studies have not yet discussed it in a deeply analytical way. Nonetheless, it is important to notice these occurrences, as they inform our knowledge about the role of social media and politics within literature and how literary criticism is being transformed by encompassing broader audience. The direction these changes will take in literature, may allow us to reflect on greater social and political changes that are occurring in the Western world.

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Twittering Critics and the Impact of Social Media on Literary Criticism

Summary

The paper *Twittering Critics and the Impact of Social Media on Literary Criticism* is concerned with readers-critics who use social media to voice their opinions about literature. The approach these critics use is based on political and social opinions and beliefs. Additionally, authors' views are considered as impossible to separate from their texts, which leads to changing approach in creating literary forms. The paper refers to the works by Roman Ingarden, Roland Barthes and Wolfgang Iser.

In the first section of the paper, the notion of the twittering critic is presented. It is a critic who uses social media, such as Twitter, to discuss literature. Most of these critics are not professionals in literary studies. The main factor they take into consideration is the text's adherence to the social norms and truths, and social representation of certain groups that the author describes. Twittering critics' approach is based on both phenomenological approach and pragmatics as presented by John Dewey.

In the second section, as example of a text criticised by twittering critics, the novel *My Brother's Name is Jessica* by John Boyne is presented. Problematic aspects of the book are discussed in relation to the reviews written in social media. In conclusion, it seems that there is a conflict between different kinds of truths: the social and the literary one. While they are both subjective, social truths are the ones that are believed by a group of people, constructed for the use of society. The literary truth exists individually within the text and is presented to the reader, so they can believe it while interacting with the literary form.

With its focus on social representation, twittering criticism may either add to the readers' experience, deepening one's understanding of the text, or limit it, so that solely social truths are being realised. Further research within this area is needed, as the concept of social media criticism and sensitivity reading described in connection to it are still being developed. The last section of the paper points to the possibilities for discussion.

Keywords: social representation, social media, lived experience, literary truth, social truth