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NEW POSSIBILITIES BROUGHT ABOUT BY HYPERTEXT

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Abstract: This paper explores the new possibilities of the novel in the context of technologies of computer hypertext. One of the central arguments of the paper is that the operational logic of the novel can be made to approximate that of a web of hypertext links. The author also argues that the hope of the renaissance of the novel lies in the technologically enhanced speed of the traffic in models between smooth space and striated space.

Key words: hypertext, renaissance of the novel, smooth space, striated space, approximation
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IS THE NOVEL DEAD?

There has been no lack of prophecies of the death of the novel since the beginning of the 20th century. Many prestigious critics, such as T.S. Eliot, Ortega Y. Gasset, Alberto Moravia and Cyril Connolly, have relentlessly pronounced death sentence on the novel. Although thousands of novels are still being written and millions are being sold today, Leslie Fiedler's following view is still quite prevalent:

> ...the novel is dying if not dead. ... To be sure, some writers... continue to write as if that death had not occurred, but so do certain men and women continue to attend church services despite the well-advertised Death of God (Fiedler, 1974).

Is the novel really dead? If yes, in what sense has it died? A typical answer is that all the traditional or "realistic" attributes of the novel (characters, story, atmosphere) no longer exist. In Ronald Sukenick's words:

> The contemporary writer...is forced to start from scratch: Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist (Sukenick, 1969).

All these elements no longer exist not because they cannot be found in contemporary novels, but because they are no longer new. In other words, all the possibilities of the novel have been exhausted. Christine Brooke-Rose has written cogently about this problem: "All then has been said, there is nothing new under the sun... And even scenes are labeled, the happiness sequence, the chase sequence, the scene of violence, the marital scene, the love-scene, the high society scene, the scene of diplomatic intrigue, the office sequence, the work sequence, with its appropriate music and lighting" (Brooke-Rose, 1991). Brooke-Rose here has actually echoed the views of Ian Watt, Anthony Burgess and Bernard Bergonzi, who have argued on various occasions that one of the defining elements of the generic identity of the novel lies in its being "new" (Yin, 1999). Bergonzi's following statement is another way of announcing the novel as dead: "If the novel is truly no longer novel, then many of our critical procedures for discussing it will need revision; perhaps, even, we shall do well to think of another name for it" (Bergonzi, 1972).

The death of the novel, however, does not exclude the possibility of its rebirth. On the contrary, it has to die in order to be reborn. Quite a few people have drawn blueprints for the renaissance of the novel, but most of them turn out to be more or less vague. Brooke-Rose, for instance, pins her hope on the electronic revolution which she believes will "enable us to create new dimensions in the deep-down logic of characters" (Brooke-Rose, 1991). The weakness in Brooke-Rose's argument is that she fails to specify the exact meaning of that "computer log-

ic" and the sense in which it is different from the old logic underlying novel writing. The present paper, therefore, proposes to explore the specificities of the above-said new logic and the extent to which the renewal of the novel might benefit from such a logic.

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What Brooke-Rose has left undone can be done by drawing inspiration from Stuart Moulthrop's theory on hypertext. In his seminal article "Rhizome and Resistance: Hypertext and the Dreams of a New Culture", which is acclaimed as " a moment of critical transition in the nature of discourse" (Davis and Schleifer, 1998), Moulthrop surveys the emerging nonlinear discourses of electronic texts and sees in hypertext the dawn of a new age. Although his purpose is to shed light on epistemological changes brought about by technologies of computer hypertext, the distinctions he makes between the printed text and the electronic text provide a context for exploring new possibilities for the novel.

Moulthrop's contribution lies in his effort to relate Michael Joyce's conceptions of electronic writing space, which he calls "constructive hypertext", to the distinction Deleuze and Guattari draw between smooth and striated cultural spaces (Joyce, 1998). As Moulthrop aptly sums up, striated space manifests itself in hierarchical and rule-intensive cultures, whereas smooth space is mediated by discontinuities. In striated space, which is defined or supported by books of the print-based text, the overriding principles are best characterized as routine, specification, sequence and causality, and those who follow the logic of striated space are "the champions of order, purpose and control --- defenders of logos, or the law" (Moulthrop, 1998). Smooth space, by contrast, is defined in terms of transformation instead of essence, and it "propagates in a matrix of breaks, jumps, and implied or contingent connections (Moulthrop, 1998). Ulmer's age of video and Mcluhan's electronically mediated global village constitute two good examples for Moulthrop, for they "both operate in smooth space, which is best served not by the linearizing faculties of print but by the parataxis and bricolage of broadcasting" (Moulthrop, 1998).

What Moulthrop has said can be regarded as a concrete complement to Brooke-Rose's "computer logic". The novel in a traditional sense, of course, is essentially based on the logic of striated space. But can it draw impetus from the logic of smooth space so as to be reborn? Does hypertext represent an entirely new textual model for the novel? Those who deny this possibility might rest their argument on the truism that nonlinearizing faculties are no novelty, for they are exactly the characteristics of postmodernist fiction, which has been active for several decades. It is interesting to notice that even people like Brooke-Rose, who themselves are often put under the name of "postmodernists", can see nothing new in such works as represented by Samuel Beckett's The Unnamable. The so-called postmodernist writings, in Brooke-Rose's opinion, are all "subject to a discursive expansion rule, almost a rule of proliferation" which is chaotic, cancerous, that is, obsessional, reflexive, autophagous (Brooke-Rose, 1991).

A close-up look at the transition from print-based literacy to hypertext, however, does reveal new implications for discourse technologies. By "new implications" I do not mean a total disruption of the established power of publishing institutions and a complete transformation of the traditional book-based novel into the form of an electronic text. It is true that we can now read a novel on the computer, but it is a common sense that the print-based novel is still in many ways easier to handle and enables us to read in a more comfortable posture. What I mean is, rather, that the novel may absorb new nourishment from the way of thinking and discourse technologies suggested by electronic texts and electronic literacy, while still remaining in a book form. As Moulthrop points out, current thinking about hypertext systems relates strongly to the idea of a discourse system founded on nomos as opposed to logos (Moulthrop, 1998). The writing system founded on logos follows the logic of the above-said striated space which is ordered, controlled, teleological, temporal and hierarchical, whereas the discourse system based on nomos, by contrast, suggests the logic of smooth space, which is dynamic, spatial and anti-hierarchical. What Moulthrop has in mind is Deleuze's and

Guattari's concepts of "Arbor" and "Rhizome". An arborescent book is assumed to have roots (hidden meanings) and a hierarchical structure that resembles a tree. It is founded on logos, namely, logocentric, hierarchically grounded truth. A rhizomatic book simply resembles grass, whose underlying logic is nomos or nomadism or nomadology, i.e., continuing movement, lines of flight and deterritorialization. Niall Lucy has once given us a lucid summary of the above-mentioned distinction: "Unlike a tree, grass is always on the move, always forming alliances with the world outside itself as it keeps on spreading across and across the surfaces of things. Grass doesn't grow up; it spreads out. Trees settle; grass roams" (Niall Lucy, 2000). Is it possible for a novel, then, to appear rhizomatic or grass-like?

If a novel is to be rhizomatic, according to Deleuze and Guattari, it has to contain within itself heterogeneous traits and should have "neither beginning nor end" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). But the novel, print-based as it is, is bound to have a beginning and an end. Besides, one of the great charms of novels is that they have to end. Frank Kermode, in his classic The Sense of an Ending, rightly points out that we human beings need fictive concords with origins and ends so as to make sense of our lives. The greatest function of the novel is perhaps to provide "a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain 'in the middest' " (Kermode, 1996).

In a metaphorical sense, however, the novel can appear grass-like and keep spreading across its own boundaries. This is where the notion of intertextuality comes in. As we all know, intertextuality means the collapse of boundaries --- textual or even generic crossovers. Although intertextuality is intertwined in the roots of the novel and can be regarded as the very condition of the latter, most traditional novelists tend to hide or suppress --- they may even fail to know --- the fact that their works are actually woven from tissues of other texts. Since James Joyce there has been an increasing tendency among novelists to openly exploit the principle of intertextuality, freely recycling earlier novels or works in other literary genres. Typical examples are James Joyce who tip off his readers by entitling his epic of modern Dublin life Ulysses, Jean Rhys whose remarkable Wide Sargasso Sea explores the "hidden" story of Jane Eyre, and David Lodge who begins his Small World with a prologue that is facetiously reminiscent of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. This sort of intertextual play at least resembles operations in the above-mentioned smooth space, for these books openly reach beyond their own boundaries and claim kindred with other texts or, more precisely, form an integral part of a "super-text." In other words, the novel can appear grass-like even without any impetus from electronic hypertextuality.

But the rhizomatic propensities of the novel can be and have been proliferated and made pervasive by the impact of the age of hypertext. Brian McHale has actually touched upon the extended possibilities of the novel as a whole while depicting the rhizomatic process of postmodern novels' borrowings from and overlappings with each other. In his "POSTcyberMODERNpunkISM," McHale manages to build a picture of cyberpunk that can be described as interactive or hypertextual. He sees in the 1980s the emergence of what he calls "postmodernist fiction of the cybernetic interface" or "texts which register the first, often traumatic encounters between 'literary' culture (high culture generally) and the transformative possibilities of computer technology". (McHale, 1991) Interestingly, he considers Christine Brooke-Rose's "computer trilogy" Amalgamemnon (1984), Xorandor (1986) and Verbivore (1990) to be exemplary in this regard. Although Brooke-Rose herself has failed to specify, as we have observed in the first section of the present paper, what she calls "the computer logic", McHale comes closer to what it specifically means by pointing out that in Brooke-Rose's novels "the literary repertoire has been reconfigured so as to begin to accommodate ---right down to the 'micro' level of verbal detail --- the realia of computer technology" (McHale, 1991). Brooke-Rose is of course not the only one who has responded to the advent of hypertext. Among the most directly responsive to the changes in technology of writing are such texts as Russell Hoban's The Medusa Frequency (1987), James McConkey's Kayo (1987), William Vollman's You Bright and Risen Angels (1987) and Umberto Eco's Pendolo di Foucault

(1988). In all these novels, as McHale notes, there is "an obvious extension of the topos to adapt it so as to reflect the newest writing technology, that of personal computers and word-processing" (McHale, 1991). So hypertext does have an important role to play in renewing writing technologies of the novel. It does not follow that the novel has to be turned into a hypertext but, rather, its operational logic can be made to approximate that of a web of hypertext links.

A good example can be found in the complex architectonics of Peter Ackroyd's Hawksmoor, in which the reader is confronted with six 18th century endings, each of which is qualified by a 20th century perspective, as well as six 20th century endings, each of which is contextualized by an 18th century vignette, and each of which anticipates the "future" development of the 18th century plot. The high number of endings naturally entails the multiplication of beginnings. Thus the novel is designed in such a way as to resemble a matrix of independent but cross-referential discourses which the reader is invited to enter more or less at random, regardless of the fact that the text itself arrives as a print artifact.

There should be many other ways of making a novel operate like a web of hypertext links, but the above-mentioned example alone sufficiently suggests that possibilities of the novel can be greatly increased by gesturing towards "an incunabular hypertext."

LIMITATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

It should be emphasized that what has been advocated above is a mere approximation towards or "borrowing" from hypertext. In a book-based novel, words are necessarily contained between covers. Moreover, we should not lose sight of the fact that hypertext systems themselves, after all, are essentially routinized. As Moulthrop observes, vastness and randomness are not particularly valuable per se. Even in a nomadic hypertextual culture some principles of regulation and constraints are indispensable. While reflecting upon the "hidden unity" underlying any discursive practice that is dedicated to multiplicity and flexible articulation, Moulthrop arrives at the following thoughts:

> That which purports to be a true multiple ---a rhizome, a nomadology, a smooth space ---may in fact be only a little world made cunningly, some deterministic system passing itself off as a structure for what does not yet exist. It may even be the case... that we are hopelessly bound to determinism as a consequence of our engagement with technologies of writing (Moulthrop, 1998).

Moulthrop has in fact been influenced by Martin Rosenberg who, in his "Physics and Hypertext: Liberation and Complicity in Art and Pedagogy", argues against the celebratory treatment of hypertext and its cultural possibilities. Both Moulthrop and Rosenberg hold the view that "anything produced out of a systemic relationship between lexias and links, cards, buttons, and fields also participates in the same geometrical episteme that produced Newton's laws and classical stasis theory, Freynman diagrams of subatomic particle interactions, formal logic, computer languages, and the fractal scaling of sea coasts, black holes, and chess" (Moulthrop, 1998).

By "anything produced out of a systemic relationship between lexias and links, cards, buttons, and fields" Moulthrop and Rosenberg actually mean hypertext which is characterized by the principles of "vastness and randomness." Indeed vastness and randomness cannot completely liberate us from geometry, rationalist method, or the logocentric thought.

The example set by Hawksmoor can again be used to illustrate our point: The nomadic play of the text does not really liberate Ackroyd's novel from the constraints of logos. To be sure, randomness, excess and short circuit are all in some way or other visible in Hawksmoor. As some critics have pointed out, the novel is in fact composed according to a circular logic, a logic which transcends the barriers of time and space. Cynthia J. Wheaton, for instance, states that "the novel lacks a focus that would make a point beyond the wealth of detail. As it is, tantalizing symmetries, provocative discussions of architecture, debates on ancient and modern lead nowhere and frustrate the reader" (Wheaton, 1986). But despite the randomness that creates such a strong sense of discontinuity, Ackroy paradoxically also succeeds in subtly creating a sense of continuity by weaving into his novel numerous symmetrical and parallel patterns. The multiplication of beginnings and endings, as observed in our second section, does create a sense of circularity and discontinuity, but a sensitive reader will not fail to perceive the symmetrical

relationship between the twentieth- century chapters of the novel and the eighteenth-century chapters of the novel. In other words, smooth space, characterized by the discontinuity principle, actually depends on striated space dominated by the continuity principle. The paradox lies in the fact that the very possibility of giving full play to smooth space presupposes the existence of striated space. The tension has to be there, or both spaces will vanish.

All this does not mean, however, that the age of hypertext has only brought a false dawn on the revival of the novel. Although the alternation between or mixture of striated and smooth spaces may have long been one of the fundamental conditions of the novel, the emergence of computer technologies is bound to increase the speed of the alternation between smooth space and striated space. In the technologically enhanced speed of the traffic in models between smooth space and striated space, in short, lies the hope of the renaissance of the novel.

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