Hypertext and the new book : (re) reading as (re)writing

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Abstract

Jay Bolter in <u>Writing Space</u> describes " hypertext " as a network of texts that allows the reader to choose any path—for all paths are equally valid readings… " and in that simple fact the reader's relationship to the text changes radically. The activities of rereading described by Barthes, Iser, Riffaterre, Ricoeur and more recently by Thomas Leitch and Matei Calinescu that focus on the reader's attention on the text's discursive ideology usually missed in first reading supports contemporary hypertext technology. In today's hypertext library, readers are invited to completely explore the relationship between text, culture, author and reader, intervening actively in the process of meaning-making and reconfiguring the world of the text from all alternative points of view.

Socrates' first impression of a book makes for quite an interesting read. He thought it had several weaknesses. A book could not adjust what it was saying, as a living person would, to what would be appropriate for certain listeners or specific times or places ; and furthermore , a book could not be interactive, as a conversation or dialogue between people naturally is. For him, in a book the written words "seem to talk to you as if they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever… it's been five weeks since the book was introduced, and I don't see that many people using it - books are so over." (Thomas West's Thinking Like Einstein).

I wonder , if the new hypertext and networked communication technologies developed over the past ten to fifteen years could have been a perfect answer to all his misgivings.

Jay Bolter in <u>Writing Space</u> describes " hypertext " as a network of texts that allows the reader to choose any path—for all paths are equally valid readings… " and in that simple fact the reader's relationship to the text changes radically. A text as a network has no univocal sense; it is a multiplicity without the imposition of a principle of domination" One might say that today's hypertext environment foregrounds a completely new aesthetic that involves a rapid transition from the linear, univocal , authoritative aesthetic of passive encounters to one of open , dialogic and nonhierarchical aesthetic of active encounters. It allows the readers to interact with the text more closely, enriching its structures with layers of annotations, linked inter-texts, and circulating signifiers and stimulates an interactive authorship where any contribution, any change in the web created by one reader, quickly becomes available to other readers .

Moreover, the activities of rereading described by Barthes, Iser, Riffaterre, Ricoeur, or more recently by Thomas Leitch and Matei Calinescu that focus on the reader's attention on the text's discursive ideology usually missed in first reading seems to be in support of hypertext technology. Barthes has suggested that in re-reading a text its rhetorical strategies are foregrounded and its hermeneutic code converted into more complex cultural codes that engage the reader in a new production of meaning.

From its conception, the temporality of reading and the possibility of an originary , pure or unmediated experience of reading has been questioned by the notion of rereading. In the richly provocative book by Matei Calinescu entitled <u>Rereading (</u>1930), as well as a chapter in Marcel Cornis Pope's recent book   <u>Hermeneutic desire and Critical Rewriting</u> (1992) , the act of rereading has emerged as a serious subject of enquiry.

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 In Rereading , Calinescu analyzes the fictional works by writers such as Borges, Nabokov, Proust, Robbe-Grillet, and Henry James, explaining how reading texts is related both to symbolic play or make-believe and to games with prounced rules. He reviews the history of reading in modern times tracing its history through the Reformation, that led to rereadings of Scripture to the proliferation of books during the Enlightenment that led to a shift from "intensive reading" to "extensive reading." Calinescu   sensitively looks at the distinctions between reading and rereading from the perspectives of the age, situation, and gender of the

individual reader and discusses the problems raised by secret or oblique languages and codes - devised to evade censors, communicate with a select audience of "secret sharers," or play games of hide-and-seek with the reader and shows   how that they naturally lead to rereading of a text.

Calinescu suggests that "under certain circumstances the first reading of a work can in face be a double reading 'consisting of 'the sequential temporal movement of the reader's mind…along the horizontal or syntagmatic axis of the work ' together with an attempt to "construct "the text under perusal , or to perceive it as a construction.(18-19) As both Calinescu and Cornis –Pope note, forms of rereading have, in face been central to the work of certain theorists of reading . Michael Riffaterre, , has developed a two stage model – a first "heuristic" linear reading and a second 'hermeneutic' or retroactive reading attending to the underlying 'matrix' or 'hypogram' . Summarizing the various figurations of rereading in the work of, Roland Barthes., Umberto Eco and Vincent Leitch , Cornis-Pope has suggested that in each case , a 'first reading depends primarily on the expectation of pleasure (of a vicarious or hermeneutic kind " while 'rereading draws on a critical (self) awareness. J.Hiils. Miller even argues that reading , 'if it is really reading as always , even the first time , a matter of rereading or re-vision ' because such "real" reading involves not only ' a knowledge of what the text says ' but also 'of what the text represents or allegorizes' .Pierre Bourdieu also has pointed out the way reading inevitably seems to slide into a theorization of reading and rereading as meta reading , when he asks "Can you read a text without wondering what reading is ? "

(Re) reading, in this perspective, must necessarily lead to (re) writing, i.e. a self-conscious critical performance that will negotiate the text's experiential and cultural propositions in relation to those of the reader.

Barthes wrote that reading must be plural and thought that rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology and contests the claim which would have us believe that the first reading is primary. The dialogic character of contemporary hypertext and digital literature; interactive and non-linear exhibits just that. Through re-reading the text is rendered plural, changeable and dynamic.

 This is the essence of hypertext literature, the possibility to approach it from various positions in time and space. Its plurality in form and content allows it to be re-read over and over again in new combinations and in a new synthesis of meaning.

References-

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