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Detexting Hypertext

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Abstract:

Hypertext is that variety of text which is not constrained to be linear. It is in fact multilinear, open-ended and fragmented. It is composed of chunks of text that are connected through multiple links. The most common form of hypertext is the text displayed on our computer screens when we access Internet. Usage of hypertext for literary creations has given rise to a new genre of literature called hyperfiction. It has opened new avenues for literary innovations and textual experimentation. Renowned technocritic George P. Landow claims that hypertext is an overt practical manifestation of Poststructuralism. He further asserts that hypertext promises to embody and thereby test different aspects of poststructuralist theory, particularly those concerning textuality, narrative, and the roles and functions of reader and writer. The paper titled “**Detexting Hypertext**” describes the defining features of hypertext and illustrates how it literally embodies poststructuralist concepts like deconstruction, intertextuality, heteroglossia and rhizomatic structure. According to technocritics these concepts are inherent in the structure of hypertext and make it a dynamic text open to multiple interpretations and collaborations. They claim that this fluidity makes it a democratic text that defies the authority of author to pin down its absolute meaning. This demotion of author as the fountain head of meaning is also a poststructuralist propensity. An understanding of these poststructural concepts is also necessary to explain the process of hypertextual composition. This paper seeks to provide an insight into the relationship between hypertext and poststructuralist theory and thereby to explain the process of hypertextual composition.

Keywords: Multilinear, fragmented, open-endedness, dynamic, intertextuality, heteroglossia, deconstruction, rhizomatic structure

Technology has seeped into our lives to the extent that today it has become almost impossible to imagine our lives without it. Its intervention is not only extensive but also indispensable. In such a technology- oriented world even a discipline like literature cannot remain detached from such an all-pervasive phenomenon. The techno-savvy generation of present century is very keen on experimenting and tampering literature with technology. An outcome of one of such experiments on text is Hypertext.

Hypertext has been variously defined by different techno critics. Some technocritics define it as a poetic way of thinking that emphasizes analogy over analysis. It basically a technology that uses a logical device, a computer, for an illogical end, that is, for analogy and not analysis and its view of things being essentially poetic and irrational (Feustle Jr. Hypertext 2: 216). It is the electronic linking of text that we often find on the Internet. When we click on a linked word or image, we are able to access another place on the Internet (Patterson 90: 74). At a minimum, hypertext has the following three elements: multiple reading paths; text that is chunked in some way; and some kind of linking mechanism that connects the chunks together so as to create multiple reading paths (Hayles 9: 21).

According to George P. Landow, the renowned technocritic, there is a direct relation between hypertext and poststructuralism. In his opinion hypertext, by openly flouting the Western concept to base all thoughts around the idea of centres becomes the overt practical manifestation of poststructuralism as well Derrida's theory of deconstruction. He observes that "critical theory promises to theorize hypertext and hypertext promises to embody and thereby test the aspects of theory, particularly those concerning textuality, narrative, and the roles or functions of reader and writer" (The Convergence 3).

These relations are particularly manifest in the works of Jacques Derrida. The concepts of textual openness, intertextuality and the irrelevance of distinctions between inside and outside a particular text bear a direct semblance to hypertext. (Feustle Jr. Hypertext 2: 216). Hypertext is highly fragmented text. It is multi-dimensional also as it offers an opportunity to readers to interpret itself in the way they like. Hence it has as many meanings as the number of its readers. When Michael Joyce defines hypertext as "reading and writing in an order we choose where our choice changes the nature of what we read" ("Nonce" 43: 580-81), he is clearly delineating the main characteristics of hypertext which are nonlinearity and freedom given to users to interpret the text in their own ways. For him it is before anything else a visual form. It embodies information and communications, artistic and affective constructs, and conceptual abstractions alike into symbolic structures made visible on a computer-controlled display. In his opinion it offers readers/ viewers the ability to alter the original text through their choices- that is by shifting the way humans think (Of two 19-22). It is undoubtedly a dynamic text with inherent fluidity or the flux. It is a product of the postmodern era.

It clearly follows from these definitions that hypertext is that variety of text which transcends the boundary of the linear, and bounded traditional written text. Extrapolating from the definition of Landow one can deduce that the unique features of hypertext are multilinearity, open-endedness and flux. These features are inherent in its structure and are not only its unique but also defining features. These features make hypertext open to multiple interpretations as it offers a number of choices to its readers. The links that connect the chunks offer multiple pathways to a reader on whose discretion depends the shape that the text under navigation will take. The open-endedness of hypertext makes multiple collaborations possible. Its fluidity makes it a democratic text which wrenches out logo centricism and defies the authority of the author and not only of the author but of any particular nation, religion, ideology, sex, culture, society, caste or creed to determine the absolute meaning of any text.

Hypertext has provided a new medium to the text thereby freeing it from the constraints of print medium. According to Landow it has given a great blow to the conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and has replaced them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks (The Convergence 2). These are the concepts that eventually led to the emergence and formulation of Poststructuralist literary theory. This theory has a series of tropes which align around the idea of the demotion of the author as fountain-head of meaning ("Death of the Author"), the radical plurality of texts (multi-vocal, eclectic), and the decentered nature of some avant-garde literature. Hypertext, it was thought, would be the literal embodiment of these ideas (metabole.blogspot 14 July 2012).

Hypertext is an umbrella term that encompasses a number of postmodern concepts like intertextuality, heteroglossia, rhizomatic structure, and ergodic literature. These concepts have been enunciated by eminent poststructuralists like Kristeva, Bakhtin, Deleuze and Guatari. Any text according to Kristeva is an "intertext", which she further describes as a site of an intersection of numberless other texts which can exist only in relation to other texts. Citations whether open or covert, allusions, repetitions of substantive or formal features of

earlier texts make any text an “intertext”. In fact all texts are conceived from the discourses in which we are born and because of that they are bound to participate in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are “always already” in place (Abrams 325). Hypertext displays intertextuality as there is a continual ‘dialogue’ between the given text and other texts/utterances that exist outside it. Kristeva attempted to synthesize, while coining the term intertextuality, Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics, which is the study of how signs derive their meaning within the structure of a text, with Bakhtin’s dialogism which refers to his examination of the multiple meanings, or “heteroglossia”, in each text (especially novels) and in each word. For Kristeva, “the notion of intertextuality replaces the notion of intersubjectivity” when we realize that meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead is mediated through, or filtered by, “codes” imparted to the writer and reader by other texts. Roland Barthes conceptualises that the meaning of a text does not reside in the text, but is produced by the reader in relation not only to the text in question, but also the complex network of texts invoked in the reading process and this supports the intertextual nature of texts.

All hypertext documents have several links and clicking on a link or a *lexia* (word) immediately connects the reader with a new text. A novel can be linked to the critical commentary on it, for example. Cross-links enable the readers to jump between non-adjacent sections. This blurs the boundaries between different texts and brings them closer. This destroys the distinction between the inside and outside of a text as the documents connected to the main document that a reader is reading are also parts of it.

Landow uses one such hypertextual system “Intermedia” at Brown University. This system provides the readers of the given literary texts access to the complete historical, social, literary and biographical information that they may enrich their reading of those texts. He believes that literature should be read as a part of a broad, culturally informed and contextualized field of related texts and these “paratextual” references aid that way. In exploratory hypertexts the electronic annotations that have been once set cannot be changed or added to but in constructive hypertexts a reader can add, modify or delete his/her own references making explicit the connections to other texts perceived by him/her in the original text. Subsequent readers can also access those connections or links and can see intra or inter textual references of which they might not otherwise have been aware (msu.edu 14 July 2012).

Constructive hypertexts promote a wide range of collaboration and dialogic environment. Some constructive hypertext systems that allow the reader to add new link and new *lexia* to the original work (eg. commentary on a given work) and expand existing hypertexts by linking them together enable the emergence of a multivocal dialogue which does not privilege a dominant discourse. Instead they encourage hypertext readers to hear and engage all the voices which are present. This closely associates hypertext with heteroglossia as hypertexts are dialogic texts (msu.edu 14 July 2012).

Bakhtin uses the term heteroglossia to describe the inscription of multiple voices engaging in dialogue within the text. Paul Taylor points out that “heteroglossia focuses on the production of meaning through dialogue and avoids the emphasis on consensus and explicitly celebrates diversity” (msu.edu 14 July 2012). Hypertext also avoids a totalizing movement towards consensus and instead validates the diversity of values and voices that are produced by the variety of individuals.

Landow and J. David Bolter have worked to point out the congruence between the hypertext and the philosophy of Derrida and Barthes. Richard Smyth, a technocritic, opines that the poststructuralist philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari can also be helpful and perhaps even more than that of Derrida and Barthes in explaining the process of hypertext composition. Craig Saper also recognizes the significance of Deleuze and Guattari for

theoretical guidance on how to write electronically. He conceives of *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari as itself being like a hypertext document (qtd in Smyth). In order to recognize completely the role that the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari can play in theorizing an electronic rhetoric, Smyth proposes to call one possible genre that can be based on their work “rhizography” which suggests that hypertext writing is like their notion of the rhizome (anabiosispress.org 8 July 2012).

As hypertext “creates an almost embarrassingly literal embodiment” (The Convergence) of Derridian and Barthesian post structural tenets in words of Landow, similarly the World Wide Web creates a rhizomatic network. According to Smyth, “a rhizome is characterised by shoots and runners; its shallow roots do not achieve the degree of depth that a tree does, but, as a result, it runs along the surface of the earth, covering much ground.” Similarly the opening screen of hypertext may have any number of different directions that a reader can choose from. Rather developing in a linear manner like a printed book a hypertext can scatter as it shoots and runners going in many different directions. This multiplicity and randomness is very much in the Deleuzoguattarian spirit of the rhizome, as Kafka wrote-

We will enter, then, by any point whatsoever; none matters more than another, and no entrance is more privileged even if it seems an impasse, a tight passage, a siphon. We will be trying only to discover what other points our entrance connects to, what crossroads and galleries one passes through to link two points, what the map of the rhizome is and how the map is modified if one enters by another point (qtd. in Smyth).

The notion of affecting the “map”, according to Smyth, “depending upon a particular entry point parallels the talk among the hypertext theorists regarding the interactive nature of hypertext reading and readers co-authoring the texts which, in a sense, depend upon the decisions that readers make while reading”. So, he opines, that one has no choice other than to do these tasks as one enters a hypertext in the same way as one enters a rhizome. After entering the reader will discover “what other points” or nodes along the path are connected to an entrance into the text. Pointing out the similarities between hypertext and rhizome, Smyth says-

The connectivity of a rhizome also comes very close to the linking potentials in hypertext: “unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any point” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21). Hypertext, like the rhizome, has the potential of linking every node to every other node in its textual network. This, in fact, is the virtue of reading a (hyper) text from a computer screen: it provides ways of moving through the information stored within it that differ from book browsing. It might be said that hypertext internalizes an index and contents system that has a specific locus in a book, so that, rather than turning to the back of the book to locate the next page reference that appears under a given entry, a hypertext can provide immediate access to the passage with the keyword in it merely by selecting that keyword.

The advent of hypertext promised to revolutionize the field of information technology, communication, and literature as well. For Landow both hypertext and poststructural theories emerged out of the immense dissatisfaction with the related phenomenon of printed book and hierarchical thought. Hypertext sought to counter the objectified and particularized view of language. Technocritics are extremely optimistic about the ability of hypertext to bring about a social and cultural revolution. But before embarking upon any ultra-radical conclusions about this technology one must remember that hypertext and related technologies “mark not a terminus but a transition.”

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