Between the Real and the Hyperreal: A Study on the Emerging ‘Hyper’ Texts in New Media

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Abstract: The non-hierarchical, non-linear, neo-textual utopia which came up under the rubric of postmodernism has been often seen as a ‘pharmakon’; a threat to memory as well as its extension. This paper tries to show, in the name of an enhanced support to memory and a base for hyper-fiction, a kind of discourse is developing specially in new media, which subfuges the underlying nexus between power and freedom.

Index Terms: Hypertext, textuality, postmodern, technology.

...Some things you know all your life. They are so simple and true they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme, they must be laid on the table beside the salt shaker, the glass of water, the absence of light gathering in the shadows of picture frames, they must be naked and alone, they must stand for themselves.”

-Phillip Levine (The Simple Truth)

But for the technologically, innovative societies of post-modern times, Jean Baudrillard contended that the profusion of signs and their meanings in this ‘global’ society had led to the obliteration of reality. This “hyper reality” developed by Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, was a fantastic creation of the mass media and often emerged as a more valid, accurate, “real” reality than the one we observe around us. An instance would be the significant movement seen in the art of the 1970’s and early 1980’s known as “Hyper-Realism”. In his statement, “From medium to medium, the real is volatileized...”, Baudrillard points to the most authentic and responsive means for the reproduction of reality, such as photography, cinema, and television:

The era of miniaturization, of remote control, and of a micro-processing of time, bodies, and pleasure has come...The body as a stage, the landscape as a stage, and the time as a stage are slowly disappearing. The same holds true for the public space: the theatre of the social and of politics are progressively being reduced to a shapeless, multi-headed body. (Baudrillard, The Ecstacy of Communication, 23-24)

Paradoxically, the more *truthful* the methods of representation, the more dubious the category of *truth* becomes. Hyper-reality is seen to replace reality as truthfulness and makes truth inaccessible. Often the narratives regarding cyber space see technology as a tool for the conception of a new cultural and hyper real space, as an effect of this technological implosion.

The term hyper-fiction is often a misinterpreted one. It readily raises the attention of those who ponder over the existence of literature in the ‘new’ age. The term needs to be redefined perhaps, since it literally extends the influence of science upon literature. As Barthes had once opined, literature has to be treated as science, relating it on the cultural scale. Barthes’ notion when read along with Marshal McLuhan’s affirmation of Pope Pius XII’s statement which says, “The future of modern society and the stability of its inner life depend in large part on the maintenance of an equilibrium between the strength of the techniques of communication and the capacity of the individual’s own reaction” (McLuhan, 10), leaves it well-assured that the emergence of a new kind of text that validates the functions of literature in the new age is inevitable.

User’s access to information by linear or hierarchical arrangements of discourse (as in books) is not limited in hypertexts. Its prime concept as propounded by Vannevar Bush in 1945 had been to organize and make easily accessible disparate sources of knowledge. With Memex, Vannevar Bush laid the seed for a concept which was to later emerge as the World Wide Web and integrate people across the world. Bush identified Memex as an “intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain...a future device for individual use... a sort of mechanized private file and library” in the shape of a desk.” (Fruin, 36)

For David H. Jonassen (1990), hypertext is relevant because “[it] mimics the associative networks of human memory”(McKnight, 65). During the1960s, Theodor H. Nelson hailed hypertext as a novel device of information technology and publication. Nelson defines hypertext as, “nonsequential writing- text that branches and allows choices to the reader. [...] this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader pathways.” (“What they say” , Ted.hyperland.com ) Hypertext brings together blocks of text- termed by Barthes as Lexia - and electronically links them.

Following Nelson’s idea, a new kind of fiction developed during the last decade of the 20th century called hyper-fiction. Using software such as Story Space and Hyper Card and prior to the emergence of World Wide Web, the first hypertext fictions came to be published. Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon, a Story,* is considered one of the first hypertext fictions. *Afternoon* was followed by a series of other Story Space hypertext fictions which came from the Eastgate Systems. Hypertext writers created rhizomatic networks along the text: “Hypertext readers ‘navigate’ this network text by choosing among several offered paths leading to and through numerous text ‘nodes’ [...] a hypertext both conceptually and literally exists as an interconnected, multi-linear network of nodes and links.” (Eilola, 382)
N. Katherine Hayles in “Electronic Literature: What is it?” says, “these works enact literature not as a durably imprinted page but as a full-body experience that includes haptic, kinetic, proprioceptive and dimensional perceptions.” “Further”, she says, “more than any previous text technology, hypertext encourages both writers and readers-roles we might now provisionally combine under the label of hypertext ‘writer/readers’ - to confront and work consciously and concretely with deconstruction, inter-textuality, the de-centering of the author, and the reader’s complicity with the construction of the text.” In fact, no kind of non-linearity is drawn out, but a series of linear meanings are displayed at a stretch.

The detractors of hypertext literature are diverse. They claim that the theoretical background of hypertext literature is of no consequence as the average reader remains far removed from these theories. Laura Miller defines the experience of reading hypertext fiction as “a listless task, a matter of incessantly having to choose among alternatives, each of which, I'm assured, is no more important than any other.” (Kinnett, nocategories.net) Katherine Hayles in her essay admits that, “The enhanced sensory range that these works address is not without cost. CAVE equipment, costing upward of a million dollars and depending on an array of powerful networked computers and other equipment, is typically found only in Research universities and other elite research sites.” However, the East-Gate systems which created these sorts of fiction were not able to draw the public due to its non-linear narrative style and high cost (around 24 $).

Ideologies and norms of freedom and restraint are not recent and their intermingling as Deleuze says, “is a reaction to the increasing privatization of networks, public services and space, and to the corresponding encroachment of publicity and paranoia into everyday life.” (Deleuze, 27) The Internet broke away from media monopolies and enabled the free flow of information, breathing new life to free speech and democracy. This control led to the disappearance of reality, as Feuerbach in his “Preface to the second edition of The essence of Christianity” aptly opines, “But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to realm, the appearance to the essence...illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases...” (Feuerbach, 11)

But Jean Baudrillard states that their distinction has been blurred into that of a “double obscenity”: “Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when everything becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication.” The obscenity of the “too-much-visible” dissolves all events, spaces and memories into “the sole dimension of information.” (Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication, 23-24)

Lately, Internet has seen the spread of the You-tube culture, where the viewer remains glued to online videos which receive the highest number of hits. The freedom that the post-modern theorists had once promised its readers seem to be now helping media in turn, who end up exploiting the reader/viewer in the name of this promised freedom. They orient the reader towards a state of continuous clicking and after having extracted what they could have, desert the reader abruptly. The reader, on the other hand, has no clue that he has been left stranded. Here, it’s critical to ponder upon the concept of freedom. Is there anything called freedom, then? Or is it just an illusion for letting man feel that he is free when he is unconsciously and ‘always’ inside a system? Foucault’s notion of freedom in Discipline and Punish, defines it as a kind of discourse. Being free doesn’t mean that we are out of the existing power-structure.

So, the question still remains unanswered; If there is no text that will satisfy man’s imaginative self, and whatever that occurs all around is a mere play of virtual spaces, then, is there a scope of a new age literature? If yes, then it has to comply with the cultural restraints of the present age, thereby literally acquiring its second-order meaning as Barthes says. This happens gradually and we can perceive some glimpses of it in existing literature.

According to Barthes, any given text or term has a second order of meaning which locates itself in its present cultural fabric. The meaning changes according to the cultural perceptions of the reader. Barthes critiqued the romantic novels of Flaubert and Balzac for being traditional and not letting the reader go beyond a limited number of second-order meanings. He says: “second-order meaning of behaviour is its real meaning, that which is appropriate to a complete situation, including its deeper level; it is, just like the mythical concept, the very intention of behaviour.” (Barthes, Mythologies, 118) Emerging literature like hyper texts doesn’t capacitate the provision to the given text for having a meaning beyond the surface level. The reason perhaps lies in the inability of those who promoted the hypertext as hyper-fiction to find out the ‘second-order meaning’ of the term. Hyper-text theorists like Ted Nelson and George Landow took the Barthesian concept and proposed a digital version of fiction which comprised of multiple meanings. But those who tried to practice it and those works which some theorists had categorized under hyper-literature, fell short of implementing it. While making the text non-linear they were not able to give importance to the second-order meaning of these respective texts. But instead, the linear description of hypertext prevailed which led to an over-fledged deployment of online information which bear the notion of non-linear facts even if it was not so, that were promoted by theorists like Barthes. These hypertexts, when taken individually, cannot be ‘second-ordered’, as they are too linear. The non-linear, non-hierarchical version of texts which the theorists considered as the post-modern version to printed texts has now overcrowded the internet and mass-media. One reader (subscriber) is made to select information he requires from a sea of data displayed to him. He is made to consume things arbitrarily.

These show that there is no proof of an existing hypertext fiction as such. Then the question rises, is there any scope of an emerging hyper literature? Most importantly, in this hyper real world loaded with facts, which Baudrillard looked upon as sheer pornography, will there be even any kind of literature in the digital age? Barthes stated that the internet, even before, it evolved into a mass-medium as, “[an] ideal text, and in it the networks are many and interact, ... this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances” (Barthes, SZ, 5). But the hypermedia has taken his notion in the wrong sense and made people follow a new virtual world, wherein in the name of serving them whatever they want has finally led them into an endless search where the real ‘want’ is never fully satiated.
Taking up the Barthesian terminology, we can observe that the cultural perception of an individual may be different from the other. That’s why Barthes insisted on the existence of a reader-oriented literature. Consequently, Henry Jenkins, who propounded the theory of convergence culture says:

Patterns of media consumption have been profoundly altered by a succession of new media technologies that enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation of media content. Participatory culture refers to the new style of consumerism that emerges in this environment. If media convergence is to become a viable corporate strategy, it will be because consumers have learned new ways to interact with media content. (Jenkins, 362)

This offers an alternative meaning to what Katherine Hayles said about electronic literature. But her way of perception reflected how hyper generated literature affects the people, if it is taken as a product. Jenkins meanwhile stresses on how people try to converge things in their own way by taking those which they ‘require’. When people are not sure of what they require, the exploitation through media begins. But, again the ever exploiting capitalist society which the whole world is turning out to be, is in turn changing not radically but in a more complacent way which may even put forward the prospects of a newly emerging literature.

Though it is not conspicuous, in films, Henry Jenkins observed this new trend, where audience have started tracing out second-order (Barthesian) definitions of what they see on screen through their own imagination. It is this kind of second reading of texts which during the 1990’s led to the concept of Digital Cinema, as Jenkins says, “digitally enhanced versions of the original films, creating a separate newsgroup where fans could post and critique original fiction set” (Jenkins, 359) in popular films like Star Trek, Matrix etc. These amateur movies include The Jedi who loved me, George Lucas in love, Stooge Wars, The Quigon Show, Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars etc.

In this context Baudrillard’s judgement of this new hyper age as pornography of facts can be criticized. By stating thus, by making people believe that they are in a hyper real world, where non-linear random flow of facts happens, these theorists are deserting the readers like the media, making them accept the linear (first order) fact that they are ‘hyper’-real, devoid of the perception of the real. This ‘real’ remains relegated to the background forever as the subscriber/viewer/reader’s mind continues to be bamboozled by the numerous images paraded as truth. Before Postmodernism brought in its multiplicity of perspectives, truth in earlier centuries had mostly remained simple and unifocal. Truth and essence were often used synonymously and its search regarded as the ultimate quest for both the writer and the reader. Multiple views and polyphonic discourses did bring in the hitherto and much needed voicing of the silenced but this ultimately deteriorated into a rigmarole of images and notions which, as a result of continuous subterfuging of ‘truth’ has led to the unimportance of truth. So, we reach a point where terms like ‘art’, ‘reality’ and finally ‘truth’ have become devoid of meaning. The ‘new’ age culture, as Jenkins expects, may come up with alternative to these terms, which will have the tendency to be “naked and alone, [and] . . . must stand for themselves” (referring to Philip Levine’s poem). The internet brought in a sort of revolution in the dissemination of knowledge but how far can it go to serve us in this regard by providing substance to these terms, remains to be seen.

References

