CONTEXTUALIZING HYPERTEXT: ITS LITERARY STATUS

CONTEXTUALIZANDO EL HIPERTEXTO: SU ESTATUS LITERARIO

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ABSTRACT

Hypertext refers to the electronic links of texts. In the traditional texts, readers have to follow the linearity, and fixity of the book they are reading. Now computers give them a chance to escape this sort of restriction.

Computer is a medium for the creation and the reading of texts. Hypertext or digital text, as we know, takes the form of a series of links. These links are adaptable, flexible, and interactive. They question the unity of the text, and the roles of both the reader and the author. Hence, hypertext requires redefining the concepts of author, reader, text, and structure--concepts of great importance to postmodernists. In addition, hypertext consists of fragments, pastiches, different styles and genres. It ignores boundaries, and addresses the mass.

In brief, hypertext develops and brings to live many postmodern concepts such as decentering, intertextuality, writerly text and rejection of linearity and fixity of linear narrative. My paper is about hypertext in the light of postmodern theory.

Keywords: hypertext; postmodern; computer; digital; reading; linearity.

RESUMEN

Hipertexto se refiere a los enlaces electrónicos de textos. En los textos tradicionales, los lectores tienen que seguir la linealidad y la fijeza del libro que están leyendo. Ahora las computadoras les dan la oportunidad de escapar de este tipo de restricción.

La computadora es un medio para la creación y la lectura de textos. El hipertexto o texto digital, como sabemos, toma la forma de una serie de enlaces. Estos enlaces son adaptables, flexibles e interactivos. Cuestionan la unidad del texto y los roles tanto del lector como del autor. Por lo tanto, el hipertexto requiere redefinir los conceptos de autor, lector, texto y estructura, conceptos de gran importancia para los posmodernistas. Además, el hipertexto se compone de fragmentos, pastiches, diferentes estilos y géneros. Ignora los límites y se dirige a la masa.

En resumen, el hipertexto desarrolla y da vida a muchos conceptos posmodernos como el descentramiento, la intertextualidad, el texto escrito y el rechazo de la linealidad y la fijeza de la narrativa lineal. Mi artículo trata sobre el hipertexto a la luz de la teoría posmoderna.

Palabras clave: hipertexto; posmoderno; computadora; digital; lectura; linealidad

RESUMO

Hipertexto refere-se aos links eletrônicos de textos. Nos textos tradicionais, os leitores têm que seguir a linearidade e a fixidez do livro que estão lendo. Agora os computadores lhes dão a chance de escapar desse tipo de restrição.

O computador é um meio de criação e leitura de textos. O hipertexto ou texto digital, como sabemos, assume a forma de uma série de links. Esses links são adaptáveis, flexíveis e interativos. Eles questionam a unidade do texto e os papéis do leitor e do autor. Assim, o hipertexto requer a redefinição dos conceitos de autor, leitor, texto e estrutura – conceitos de grande importância para os pós-modernistas. Além disso, o hipertexto consiste em fragmentos, pastiches, diferentes estilos e gêneros. Ele ignora os limites e aborda a massa.

Em suma, o hipertexto desenvolve e dá vida a muitos conceitos pós-modernos, como descentramento, intertextualidade, texto escriturístico e rejeição da linearidade e fixidez da narrativa linear. Meu artigo é sobre hipertexto à luz da teoria pós-moderna.

Palavras-chave: hipertexto; pós-moderno; computador; digital; leitura; linearidade.

INTRODUCTION

Language is used for the purpose of communication. Whenever language is mentioned, one will think of two forms: oral and written. Orality prevailed in the ancient Greek. From that time till now, writing passed through different stages. Each stage represents a form of technology for writing has never been and cannot be separate from technology. In other words, writing is impossible without the tools of writing which are technologies. Writers do not notice most of the technologies they use, simply because these technologies are there, and writers become used to them. All these technologies (handwriting, printing, and electronic writing) serve the idea of communication and transferring knowledge.

Hypertext refers to the electronic links which readers have to follow for the sake of reading. Now computers give those readers a chance to escape this sort of restriction and invent their own way of composing and reading something they are usually interested in. Hypertext or digital text, as we

know, takes the form of a series of links. These links are adaptable, flexible, and interactive. These links question the unity of the text, and the roles of both the reader and the author. Hence, hypertext requires redefining the concepts of author, reader, text, and structure--concepts of great importance to postmodernists. In addition, hypertext has a lot of things that appeal to postmodernists. My article discusses postmodern concepts such as decentering, intertextuality, writerly text and rejection of linearity and fixity of linear narrative.

Postmodern literary theory will be used in order to analyze hypertext. This literary theory addresses issues like fragmentation, mixing genres, and intertexuality; such charateristics will work wih hypertext and help readers to understand it. All postmodern characteristics are found with clear examples in hypertext. In the following argument examples and analysis will show how hypertext belongs to the postmodern era.

TEXT AND ARGUMENT

The computer technology offers us new spaces where we can create electronic texts. The new spaces signal a new move from page to screen. With the emergence of the new writing technology, as Snyder (1998) points out, "the future of writing is not a linear progression" (xxi) as it has been with the printed text. Also our idea of the printed text will be no longer that of a closed and protected text but that of an open object which can be copied, edited, pasted, etc. without limits.

Retyping and correction fluid gave way to word processors, memos and gossip were substituted by e-mail, and searching through library stacks gave way to searching on-line databases and the Internet. Electronic texts and documents can be readily moved and copied. And depending on the software used, many comments and responses can be attached. Indeed, computers make print, in Haas's words, "a more vital medium" (1996, 219). The computer offers its users multimedia and hypertext spaces. Hypertext (a non-linear representation of information on a computer) and multimedia (any representation involving multiple kinds of media: sound effects, color graphics, animation, and music) take us beyond the traditional book by creating new modes and ways of writing and reading. In the next few pages, I will discuss how hypertext could be theorized in the light of what has been mentioned above.

Indeed, hypertext brings to live what postmodernists argue for. It rejects traditional conventions such as linearity, fixity of meaning, boundaries of genres, and styles. It also blurs the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture. As a matter of fact, postmodern discourses challenge the fixing of boundaries between genres, between art forms, between high and mass media culture. Connor (1997), on his part, argues that "postmodernist fiction is a carnivalesque interweaving of styles, voices and registers which disrupts the decorous hierarchy of literary genres" (131). Studies emphasize that postmodern world is, in Hawthorn's words, "one of increasing fragmentation" (1994, 110) as well.

On the other hand, according to Childers and Hentzi (1995) of *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, hypertext

> emphasizes the ways that computers allow the reader to escape from the constrictions of linearity, fixity, and boundedness that characterize traditional written text. (142)

Electronic text is fluid. It gives readers a chance to create and restructure their own texts. Tuman (1992) argues that

> the fluidity of electronic text gives it a status closer to the spoken word than all other kinds of 'written' texts, since it can be reconsidered and restructured [by the reader] in much the same way spoken text can. (89)

Unlike the printed book, hypertext is interactive. It is literally not there until the reader turns on his/her computer and rebuilds the hypertext, and starts connecting links of that hypertext.

However, connecting ideas in the hypertext depends on the links or paths that are chosen by the reader. Indeed, there is a variety of links that get the reader involved in creating the text, and hence answering his/her questions and interests. In addition, Hypertext is not like the traditional typed text that is intended for a particular level and class of people. Hypertext addresses the mass.

On the other hand, "most postmodernist works attempt to subvert the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture and accordingly to address the public. The result is often a blending or pastiche of techniques, genres, and even media" (*Columbia Dictionary...* 235). Usually it is hard to know what kind of literary work one is reading. Genres are mixed: history, fiction, literary criticism, biography, etc. For example, Julian Barnes' <u>Flaubert's Parrot</u> contains different genres. Biography, fiction, and literary criticism meet; the borders among these genres dissolve.

However, while dealing with hypertext as a web or blending of links, one finds it hard to avoid talking about structure and form that play an important part in the traditional printed text. Readers before postmodernism become accustomed to books that have such a structure where there is a narrative (argument) that has a beginning, middle, and an end. A traditional printed text is believed to include a convincing sequence of linear argument. Thus in a traditional printed text, the writer controls his/her readers. They have to follow the sequence put by the writer in that text where the writer is powerful and active, and the reader, to some extent, is passive. The text becomes a readerly text. Postmodernists, in turn, argue against what is called a readerly text. For them, the reader is the author of his/her text.

While reading a postmodern printed text, one finds that both author and narrator of postmodern texts become aware of the reader's status as a creator of his/her own text in the postmodern world. Thus, in some cases the reader is called to draw or write something on a blank space or page left for this purpose. In other cases, the narrator asks the reader to forgive his digression. And we end up with the idea that we, as readers, are the authors of our texts. As we are reading a text, in fact we are creating our own perspective and interpretation of that text. Generally, for postmodernists printed texts become "writerly texts" where the reader is, in Webster's words, "no longer a consumer, but the producer of the text" (1996, 98).

In many texts, postmodern narrators keep communicating with postmodern readers. It goes beyond mere communicating to leaving blank spaces and pages, and inviting the readers to fill in, and draw something. In Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy, the narrator, Tristram, leaves blank pages and invites the reader to draw or write some descriptions. In Donald Barthelme's Snow White, there are questions for the reader in the heart of the novel. In addition, there are many spaces left where the

reader can write some notes. It is the same case with Todd Andrews, the narrator of John Barth's The Floating Opera. He keeps reminding the reader of his/her status as a reader, and trying to communicate with the reader through calling upon him/her many times in the novel. These are just examples.

In hypertext, on the other hand, there are many branches and pathways that the reader may choose to follow in many different ways. The readers of a hypertext are encouraged to add their own text and links, which become integerated into the overall structure of the database. Their contributions have the same status as the 'original' text for the next reader. For Landow (1992), "the functions of reader and writer [in the electronic age] become more deeply entwined with each other than ever before" (71).

What is important here is how these commands of connecting links make sense. This point takes us to the so-called "intertextuality" which is important to postmodernists as well. Landow (1992) points out that

> within a network of electronic links, a document no longer exists by itself. It always exists in relation to other documents. (89)

Being intertextual, hypertext will be of great value for both reader and writer who will be able to take up, cite, parody, refute, and/or generally transform.

Electronic writing emphasizes the changeability of text, and it tends to reduce the distance between the author and the reader by turning the reader into an author at the time of reading. Thus, a hypertext decreases authority of the author that he enjoyed in the past. Kolb (1994) argues that "the roles of author and reader began to shift as being of the text changes" (323). This is a good point that deconstructionists and reader response critics try to focus on. In the last few decades, literary theorists have been trying to emphasize the role of the reader who, according to Bolter, "had in many ways been neglected ever since the Romantic Revolution (first in favor of the poet [as the author] and then of the poem [as the text] itself)" (1991, 156).

On the contrary, hypertext pushes the reader to become active to the extent s/he becomes the creator (like the author) of his/her electronic text. Bolter (1991) points out that "even if the author has written all the words, the reader must call them up and determine the order of presentation by the choices made or the commands issued" (158). Accordingly, an electronic text exists only in the act of reading; it is the reader who can combine in the electronic textual structure. Consequently, the computer technology may need us to redefine some terms such as writer, reader, text and structure. Connor (1997) argues that:

> What counts in the evocation of cyberspace is the invisibility of the structures that contain and connect information, and the projection of the imaginary spaces that lie behind or between what is given on the computer screen. (136)

In a hypertext, multiplicity is what we have to become familiar with. Hypertext differs from the traditional printed text by offering users multiple and flexible pathways through a web of information. Bolter points out that hypertextual structure is "embodied in the links between episodes" (1992, 40). It is the order of these links that determines the structure. According to Landow (1992), readers can

"fabricate their own structures, sequences, and meanings" (117). Instead of a closed structure, they have to learn a new concept of structure; a structure of open possibilities. Landow (1992) argues that "hypertextuality possesses multiple sequences" that provide "multiple beginnings and endings rather than single ones" (57-8).

Consequently, hypertext brings to application what postmodernists argue for. It is a web of links where the author cannot anyhow control which links the reader will pursue. There is some kind of balance maintained here. The computer medium encourages the writer to open a new kind of dialogue with the reader. Bolter (1991) argues that

> for writers of the new dialogue, the task will be to build, in place of a single argument, a structure of possibilities. The new dialogue will be, as Plato demanded, interactive: it will provide different answers to each reader. (119)

Instead of one linear argument, the writer of the hypertext is to present many arguments through the links s/he is to create. The reader is to connect these links in order to create his/her text. It is the same idea in postmodern printed texts where there are fragmented forms and discontinuous narratives left for the reader to make the connection and meaning out of them.

The idea of linking and connecting hypertextual information raises the issue of the instability of the text, which is the main focus of deconstructionists. They emphasize that the meaning of any written text is unstable. They believe that texts contain within themselves unavoidable contradictions, gaps, spaces, and absences that defeat definite meanings. To Bressler (1994), each reader creates his/her "own subjective picture [or image] of reality" because "truth itself is relative, depending on the various cultural and social influences in one's life" (118).

Indeed, hypertext demonstrates postmodern theory for it emphasizes the role of the reader, intertextuality, open text, fragmentation, instability, etc. Bolter (1992) argues that

> hypertext is a vindication of postmodern literary theory. For the past two decades, postmodern theorists from reader-response critics to deconstructionists have been talking about text in terms that are strikingly appropriate to hypertext in the computer. When Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish argue that the reader constitutes the text in the act of reading, they are describing hypertext. When the deconstructionists emphasize that a text is unlimited . . . they were describing a hypertext. (24)

At the end, referring to a hypertextual sample may make things clear. "Afternoon" by Michael Joyce is a hypertextual story. It is divided into short episodes: each episode may be a word, sentence, or a paragraph. The reader controls the movement between episodes by using the enter key, or the mouse. S/he may type a response, then use the mouse, or the enter key. There are many episodes and many branches in the story's network. Creating his/her text, the reader in all cases is pushed forward to follow the father in the story as he tries to establish the fate of his son.

Following the links of the previous story will raise questions about adapting books to hypertext and about the extent to which we as readers can explore others' opinions in a sequential way like books. However adapting a book to hypertext requires not only that one add hypertextual features, such as linking sections of the book and reconfiguring the endnotes, but also that one adds and includes

materials to the book, such as reviews, comments, etc. These added materials in turn inevitably lead us to a blending and mixing of genres, modes, styles, techniques, etc., a fact of great importance in hypertextual texts, and postmodern theory.

In conclusion, computer is a medium for the creation and the reading of texts. Digital texts take the form of a series of links. The resulting electronic text of these links is adaptable, adjustable, flexible, fluid, interactive, multiple, networkable, open, and virtual. Hypertext questions the unity of the text, and the roles of the reader and author. In brief, Hypertext develops and brings to live many postmodern concepts such as decentering, intertextuality, writerly text and rejection of linearity and fixity of linear narrative. It consists of fragments, pastiches, different styles and different genres as well. It ignores boundaries, and addresses the mass. Above all, hypertext requires redefining author, reader, text, and structure.

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