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Hyperfiction: A New Literary Poetics?

Introduction

Hypertext has been hailed as a successful medium to realise poststructuralist views of the reading and writing process. The author/text/reader relationships that result from the connective synthesis of eye-to-screen have allowed texts to be organized in an immediate, interactive, non-linear fashion across interdisciplinary networks. This has provided a vehicle to reconfigure concepts of print-based narratives including the linearity of beginnings, middles and ends, metafictional elements, parallel texts that can be read concurrently, the disruption of linear or historical time and the exploitation of intertextuality, allowing readers opportunities to construct individual stories within the written narrative.

The modernist approach to writing as a process with a separate end product that contains a fixed immutable message, the author's, has been losing favour since Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author' and Derrida's dichotomous oppositions of 'différance'. Barthes sees the aim of literature as to put meaning into the world, not a particular meaning. Barthes' and Iser's views of the reading process as constructing meanings that take into account both reader and writer contexts, suggest the possibility of multiple meanings from a single inscribed text. Roland Barthes along with Hélène Cixous sees this as an opportunity to view writing as an instrument of opposition and subversion, an opportunity for the continued renewal of individual assertion, an essentially political response to the world.

Gillies Deleuze and Felix Guatarri have advanced postmodernist views of writing by suggesting that the producing and the product in writing are involved in a perpetual cyclical process where there is no clear definition between the process and the end product. This fits in with Barthes idea of 'literature as already a posthumous affair'. Barthes (*S/Z*) is quoted by Susan Sontag as saying that, 'Literature is like phosphorus it shines with its maximum brilliance at the moment when it attempts to die.' (Sontag 1987:426) Hypertext being inherently unstable and in a process of perpetual change, provides an immediacy for the text in support of the views held by Barthes, Deleuze and Guatarri.

However, we can't necessarily equate hypertext directly with the poststructuralist movements in language. Use of metaphor, parallel narratives, intertextuality and metafiction, are ways that writers have attempted to communicate complex ideas, beliefs and emotions that were not able to be communicated through traditional linear narrative structures. Here the author relied on the perception and ability of the reader to bring meaning from the outside to a complex decoding of the text, a decoding that involved the reader and his/her experiences as a whole person.

Whether the use of hypertext provides the ultimate in freedom of choice for the individual reader to encode meaning remains open to question.

What follows is a discussion of the arguments for and against the value of hypertext to the author/text/reader relationship in literature, particularly narrative.

Reconceiving Narrative

A new literary form called 'hyperfiction' results when a writer uses the medium of hypertext to produce a fictional narrative. Hypertext is a term that refers to the systems and contents that operate on a computer to organise information in a non-linear manner. The information is arranged in chunks or 'lexias' and stored in a network whose 'nodes' are connected by electronic links. As the lexias contain multiple links, the reader has the choice of navigating multi-linear paths. Hyperlinks are used in literary fiction to facilitate non-linear readings, many examples of such narratives have already been available to readers of novels in print form. Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and Cortazar's *Hopscotch* are some examples.

Compared to print text the reader of hyperfiction has a number of freedoms/advantages/privileges.

- The usual sharp distinction between author and reader is blurred.
- Readers have a choice of reading paths.
- Readers are free to navigate in a non-linear fashion to construct an individual personalised text.
- Readers may respond collaboratively to enhance communication, knowledge acquisition and appreciation.

George Landow, a hypertext theorist, describes hyperfiction as having 'abandon[ed] conceptual systems founded upon ideas of centre, margin, hierarchy and linearity and replace[d] them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links and networks' (Landow 1992:2). Derrida's 'deconstruction', Barthes' 'death of the author', Iser's and Fish's reader response theory, all important elements of postmodern literary theory, are seen to be vindicated by hypertext. Jay Bolter suggests that 'hypertext is a writing technology well suited to the contemporary view that nature is not a hierarchy but a network of interdependent species and systems' (Bolter 1991:105). Barbara Page in her article 'Women Writers and the Restive Text: Feminism Experimental Writing, and Hypertext' in Marie-Laure Ryan's recent book, *Cyberspace Textuality*, supports hypertext as a tool for political intervention and points out parallels between hyperfiction and feminist theory:

In all the works I have been discussing, the conscious feminism of the writer animates her determination not simply to write but to intervene in the structure of discourse, to interrupt reiterations of what has been written, to redirect the streams of narrative and to clear space for the constructions of new textual forms congenial to women's subjectivity. And all of these writers have understood that their project entails both the articulation of formerly repressed or dismissed stories and the rearticulation of textual forms and codes. It is for this reason, perhaps, that feminist theory and textual practice can be of particular pertinence to theorists of hypertext who recognize a radical politics in the rhetoric and poetics of hypertextual writing. (Page 1999:130)

Hyperfiction offers a number of forms of collaboration. Readers participate in the making of a story by controlling the branching of events, writers set up the possibilities for the readers. Notions of readership and authorship are juxtaposed. Bolter describes a hyperfiction as, 'not a story, but the sum of all its readings' (Bolter 1991:124). Hyperfiction encourages the use of interdisciplinary mediums, blurring the boundaries between the differing skills of writing, photography, graphic design, animation, digital audio and typography. Hyperfiction is seen

as providing a new form of writing, that is not so much replacing the linear print text but adding to its ability to strategically apply many of the poststructuralist claims to the author/text/reader relationship. For the poststructuralists, what was 'only figuratively true in print becomes literally true in the electronic medium' (Bolter 1991:158).

For Bolter hypertext as a system 'has become the social ideal' (Bolter 1991:233). Is this a rather frightening idea? In hyperfiction are our narratives controlled by machines? How contingent are the choices available in hyperfiction?

Limits and Constraints of Technology for Narrative

Danger of ultimate control arises if the means encoded in a machine that is controlled by a system through programs appears to allow complete freedom and choice, but really only provides a guided democracy that allows 'freedom from', but not 'freedom to'. It allows freedom from the strictures of a linear book bound text and there may be choice, but it is always contingent on the author having been there before the readers. Hyperfiction does provide an immediacy and flexibility for the narrative, but only in terms of the programmed networks provided by the author. Language is directed by coded programs - software, and the reader is restricted to navigating the literal space between the program and the chunks of language that appear on the screen.

These programs operate via the computer in a virtual space called 'Cyberspace'. Gillies Deleuze and Felix Guatarri have coined the terms 'striated' and 'smooth' space to describe two different ways of moving around 'Cyberspace'. In 'striated' space the movement is described as 'cruising'. 'Cruising' involves a linear motion within a bounded or allocated space that has defined directions and definite points of contact, whereas 'surfing' through 'smooth' space incorporates 'lines of flight' across unstable ground that involves a form of nomadic movement likened to vectors. Jay Bolter describes the 'writing space' of hypertext as 'not the writing of a place, but rather the writing with places, spatially realised topics' (Bolter 1991:25). In contrast to the allocation of virtual 'striated' space, the WWW distributes and displaces 'smooth' space by providing a 'rhizomatic' structure in which web sites point to, rather than define, a terminal point. The metaphor for movement across 'smooth' cyberspace is that of 'surfing', catching the wave and seeing where it takes you. Most hyperfiction engages with both forms of movement.

In traditional linear structures of narrative the author relies on the perception and ability of the reader to bring meaning and analytical skills from outside to facilitate a complex decoding of the text. A decoding that involves the reader as a whole person. A body with organs that sweats, excretes, feels and desires, not the 'body without organs', the computer that sanitizes and homogenizes all response to a clean, seamless, unreflective 'point 'n' click'. The danger lies in the ability of the machine to operate on the level of thought. It has the ability to assimilate and domesticate difference, to homogenize response and to locate and redirect any messy bits that smack of autonomy. As the unreflective 'point 'n' click' replaces all other bodily responses, the reader engages in what Michael Joyce calls 'the myth of emerging order' where each reading of a hypertextual document is a 'quest to progressively reveal a hidden meaning' (Joyce 1995:191). Fuller and Pope see this 'perpetual process of playing with process' (Fuller & Pope 1993:4) as merely complicating the feedback process between the computer and the user's body, not as providing interaction as conversation. The continual response to and re-invention of direction and logic that occurs in real conversation is not available to the reader in the electronic writing space.

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the binary oppositions disturbs the relationship between the surface signification of the sign, its signifier and its signified. His explanation of difference as the continual deferral of difference (*différance*) suggests a norm that can never be fully internalized, a surface signification that lies continuously in the space between the signifier and its signified, a space of free play not captured in the binary categories. The sign

is a deferred presence. A presence that only takes on meaning in relation to the absence of all other signs. The dialectic of presence and absence is one such binary dichotomy that has ceased to operate effectively within written communication as manifested in an electronic form. Language is no longer a finite presence or absence. The infinite deferral of meaning sets up flows of signs that are encoded by programs that develop patterns or meaning from randomness.

Relationships between language and the subject differ across electronic and book writing spaces. For example, in typewriting the letter or word, the sign for the signifier is present or fixed; whereas in word processing it can be deleted, cut and pasted and does not have a presence, but appears as part of a pattern that relies on encoding from a program within the systems that run the computer. In an electronic space it is very difficult to define the real world behind the flow of signifiers and this changes the relationship through language, that the subject has to the real world. Deleuze and Guatarri describe subjects involved in electronic communication as 'rhizomatic nomads' as compared to the 'arborial beings' that are rooted in the time and space of print text. The physical body then is no longer an effective limit of the subject's position. The 'patterned individual' is developing in our society through such innocuous avenues as electronic banking, use of passwords, credit cards and data bases for housing, travel and other consumer products. Limitations of the physical body compared to the disembodied consciousness of cyberspace highlight the advantages of pattern over presence.

What I am interested in is how this change from a communicative language based on presence and absence to one that operates through pattern and randomness affects narrative.

The process of narrative, the plot structure of beginning, middle and end is linked to power, to the totalizing representation that integrates multiple and scattered events into one unified story. The narrative structures which are adopted in the text control the telling, and subsequently influence the personal story within the text that readers tell themselves. Linearity, plot, characterisation, point of view, textual coherence, resolution and closure are the elements that realise a strong print narrative. Hyperfiction exploits the electronic medium's capacity for multi-linear, open-ended fictions that allow the reader a measure of choice in the construction of an individual narrative.

Narrative as Hyperfiction

One of the elements of narrative that changes in an electronic text is point of view. In traditional print narratives point of view is most often synonymous with an embodiment, whether it be a narrator as character, author or an omniscient third person narrator. In hyperfiction the voice of the narrator is hard to pin down. It tends to be in constant flux and to drift abstractly through a complexity of networks. However, sophisticated readers have always been able to track and utilize rapidly changing points of view in print narratives. Patrick White in his short story, 'Down at the Dump', is able to make statements about class by juxtaposing points of view from a range of protagonists. Barry Humphries laughs with the audience over the head of his protagonist, Sandy Stone as Sandy delivers his monologue on 'Days of the Week' by offering simultaneous, yet conflicting points of view for interpretation. Michael Joyce in his hyperfiction *Twelve Blues* allows the reader choices of point of view. He does this by offering parallel narratives. In a linear text, parallel narratives are quite difficult to handle, both for the writer, and for the reader. However, in *Twelve Blues* Joyce demonstrates the relative ease with which he can deal with the often disparate lives of ten characters by using parallel narratives. Each screen confronting the reader has personal information about one of the characters from a differing point of view, whilst at the same time displaying a woven fabric of threads. Joyce uses a matrix of twelve horizontal coloured threads intersecting with eight imaginary columns. Each thread if followed from the start; tells the story, in a loosely chronological order from the perspective of one of the characters. Concepts of weaving and flowing water are used as metaphoric connections between the

two main stories - the accidental drowning of an unnamed deaf boy and a parallel story line concerning a bitter and disaffected young woman who murders her obnoxious landlord by stabbing and drowning him in a bath. *Twelve Blues* is not merely the words on the screen and the connections between them; it is also the web that is woven between these connections, and the way the meaning of the text is constructed in the mind of the reader. The control point of view and of the presentation of the text become a part of the text itself.

In hyperfiction the 'pov' (point of view) operates as a disembodied consciousness that is free to 'surf' the networks. William Gibson in his seminal cyberpunk text, *Neuromancer*, allows his subjects to roam through the digital landscape in the form of a pattern not as a physical presence. This gives the main protagonist Case, opportunities to "'jack" into other characters' brains through neural links. The resulting 'povs' are complex and transitory.

Pattern and presence

Katherine Hayles talks about textual spaces that encompass the processes of encoding and decoding, rather than texts as being generated by closed systems of signs. These spaces, if they are manifested on a computer, allow users to interact with the informational patterns of the computer. However, these patterns in true deconstructive form will only become evident in opposition to randomness. Hayles believes that as 'first-world culture moves from an industrial base to an information society, presence/absence is displaced by pattern/randomness as a generative dialectic for cultural forms' (Hayles 1999:209).

An important element that hypertext brings to literature is the opportunity for self-organization. Hayles points out the advantages that a computer offers in terms of speed of access for the human memory. The hyperlinks - by allowing words to cast off their material bodies, the black and white ink of print, and become information - facilitate this process of self-organization. Hypertext also includes the user within the feedback loops generated between the blocks of text, allowing them to experience the anomie of randomness before self-organization develops a pattern.

Hayles suggests that hypertext supports a changed way of thinking: 'first, there is no central representation; second, control is distributed throughout the system; third, behaviours develop in direct interaction with the environment rather than through an abstract model; and fourth, complex behaviours emerge spontaneously through self-organizing, emergent processes' (Hayles 1999:213).

Virginia Woolf incorporates these changed ways of thinking in her novel, *The Waves*, in which she takes the reader on a journey that attempts to unite the individual with the universal. An absolute unity is achieved between the vision and content of the book and the medium or form through which it is expressed. This coherence results from an awareness by Woolf that there is a point at which disparate ideas, concepts and themes cohere and come together for the reader. The symbol of the ring or circle is used metaphorically and thematically for this coherence. All the characters try to make things come together in a sequence, or a globe, as a whole, a circle or a ring.

"I see a ring," said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light."... "I see a globe," said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill." "I see a crimson tassel," said Jinny, "twisted with gold threads."... "The birds' eyes are bright in the tunnels between the leaves," said Neville... "A caterpillar is curled in a green ring," said Susan, "notched with blunt feet." "The grey-shelled snail draws across the path and flattens the blades behind him," said Rhoda. "And burning lights from the window-panes flash in and out on the grasses," said Louis. (Woolf 1992:5)

The rhythms of Woolf's work appear more natural to her than her narrative. There is in *The Waves* a harmony in the cyclical rhythms of the stages of life for the seven developing characters, in the seven voices, in the rising and setting of the sun and in the movement of the waves.

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other perpetually. (Woolf 1992:3)

Patterns emerge from randomness through opportunities for self-organization by the reader as they interact with both the form and content of the novel.

Meanwhile the hats bob up and down; the door perpetually shuts and opens. I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation and despair. If this is all, this is worthless. Yet I feel, too, the rhythm of the eating-house. It is like a waltz tune, eddying in and out, round and round. The waitresses balancing trays, swing in and out, round and round, dealing plates of greens, of apricot and custard, dealing them at the right time, to the right customers. (Woolf 1992: 69)

Woolf allows important 'moments of being' for the characters to emerge through their interaction with the environment. The patterns that emerge are a result of 'self-organizing emergent processes' that are 'distributed throughout a system' that incorporates both inside and outside influences.

Carolyn Guyer, a writer of the electronic text, *Quibbling*, says that 'hypertext as a literary re-forming embodies this unreasonably logical creative urge...the rhythmic ability to create nothing from anything' (Guyer 1992 *Quibbling*) In her hypertext fiction, as in Woolf's *The Waves*, patterned states develop in and around the characters. They occur from seemingly random events, are repeated in differing situations until they coalesce as a pattern that is recognizable.

"What's wrong? You look in a daze." Wert eyed Heta across the top of his sandwich. They had taken her to eat the moment she had arrived for this, her first visit. "You don't seem yourself." (Guyer 1992)

Once while Agnes was visiting B.B., they were running some errands around the small New England town when Bea turned to Ag in snappish irritation and said "You seem to be in a daze. What's the matter?" And, indeed, Agnes had been lagging about a step behind, not attending very sharply. She was hurt by B.'s remark, and spent the afternoon alone trying to understand what a daze was. She finally came to think of it as being split among places. It was always hard to be in a new place with someone else, because new places require a little transitional adjustment, an exercise in orientation. If you could be by yourself in a new place, the known and unknown have a natural play, overlapping, merging into one synchronous experience. But if someone else is with you, the rhythm takes on a buzz, like static interference; thus the appearance of a daze. Do you see? (Guyer 1992)

There is a predictable rhythm about being in a daze for both Heta and Agnes in these separate excerpts from the hyperfiction *Quibbling*. Agnes elaborates on Heta's experience, although this is done in a completely different context within the hyperfiction. Agnes sees a rhythm of occupying space, like waves washing on a shore. Heta in another excerpt is watching the waves on Lake Michigan.

Waves coming in to shore can behave quite strangely. I suppose there are patterns, maybe even names for them, but they never seem quite the same to me. One time I saw them actually trying to leap backwards and forwards over each other like children tumbling, learning how to play that game. (Guyer 1992)

The 'self-organizing emergent processes' that Katherine Hayles speaks about as ways of organizing knowledges and developing complex behaviours are evident in the extracts from the hyperfiction, *Quibbling*. An added advantage for the reader of the hypertext genre is the support given to short term memory to weave these disparate incidents together so that the pattern becomes evident.

Plot, beginnings, middles and endings

The concept of a narrative structure that doesn't conform to the standard predictable beginning, middle, and end, that doesn't have the linear direction of the heroic journey or chronology of history, frees the writer to express and communicate complex ideas, values and attitudes that may have been previously repressed. John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a novel that uses metafictional strategies to engage the reader actively in the construction of meaning by offering three possible endings. He causes the reader to question their suspension of disbelief, the fictional world, when he manipulates time frames and interjects as author in the fictional world of the text. Closure is indeterminate as is sequence when the Victorian era of the narrative is often commented on with the hindsight of a twentieth century sensibility.

Gillies Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* introduce a concept of a rhizomatic writing structure. They compare it with the commonly held metaphor of text as determined by a tap root structure. Deleuze and Guattari suggest a structure of language that relies on words having 'multiple roots'. But they are aware that this is not a new phenomena. 'James Joyce's words, accurately described as having "multiple roots" shatter the linear unity of the word, even of language, only to posit a cyclic unity of the sentence, text and knowledge' (Deleuze & Guattari 1998:516).

A Deleuzian framework refuses to identify a world of linearity, logos and binarisms. The following characteristics of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome may be used to draw theoretical parallels between Wittig's feminist narrative, *Les Guérillères*, and Michael Joyce's hyperfiction, *Afternoon*.

Principles of **connection** and **heterogeneity**: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be... (Deleuze & Guattari 1998:517)

Principle of **multiplicity**... Multiplicities are rhizomatic...they have neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature. (517)

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things... The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary it is where things pick up speed. (522)

Monique Wittig, a French feminist writer has used the concept of a cyclical or rhizomatic narrative structure to advance political ideas for women that could not be articulated within the constraints of traditional narrative structures. Wittig argues that language works in a material way to construct the social world and that it is possible to use 'literature as a war machine in this construction' [hence the title *Les Guérillères*], (Wittig 1992:5). Her novel *Les Guérillères* follows a narrative strategy that disintegrates and fragments the binary

formulation of gender. She uses the symbol 'O', thematically, in circles, spinning, rings, orifices, spirals and structurally through a circular form of text called a 'gesta' in which the chronological beginning of the narrative - the war - is found in the third section of the book and the textual beginning was in fact the end of the narrative or story. The circular structure of the narrative follows Julia Kristeva's concept of women's time as repetitive, eternal and perpetual, rather than linear, temporal and historical.

Their peregrinations are cyclical and circular. Whatever the itinerary, whatever the point of departure they choose, they end up at the same place. The paths are parallel, equidistant, narrower and narrower as they approach the centre of the figure...it is without limit, the juxtaposition of the increasingly widening circles configures every possible revolution... It is virtually that infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere, circumference nowhere. (Wittig 1985:69)

Like Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*, Michael Joyce's hypertext fiction *Afternoon* provides diverse pathways for the reader. There are no predetermined directions, no one central story, no organization through an abstract model. The reader has the option of a number of narratives depending upon their interaction with the hypertext. Hyperlinks offer the reader rhizomatic readings that emerge from the middle of a narrative to follow perpendicular paths that may be cyclical or recursive or that may offer a completely different, yet tenuously connected narrative. In the hyperfiction, *Afternoon*, Peter's son and wife both die and do not die. When the protagonist Peter tries to find out about his wife and son who have been in a car smash, the reader becomes involved in the phone calls as an integral part of the feedback loops that form the possible sequences of the text. All nodes are of primary importance. The possible permutations of pathways taken and narratives constructed by the reader are multiple, do not depend on any predetermined scheme and include the reader as an active agent. The hyperfiction, *Afternoon*, is rhizomatic, exhibiting the principles of multiplicity, connection and heterogeneity.

Monique Wittig has used her circular text or 'gesta' politically to offer discourses that would not be available to the reader in a linear predetermined text. Hyperfiction used in conjunction with a Deleuzian framework could offer the possibility of new ways of using knowledges in day-to-day life, of increasingly sophisticated forms of communication and freedom from the restraints of a hierarchical and rigidly structured language system.

Hypertext fiction can provide positive altered experiences for writers and readers to help them embrace new ways of reading and writing narrative. However, the systems of hypertext cannot be seen as ends in themselves. They build on and support changes that have been developing in critical theory during the postmodern era. We must continually go back to Derrida, Barthes, Cixous, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guatarri for theoretical constructs to support our investigation and use of hypertext.

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Letters and Debate

Letter from Moya Costello Vol 5 No 2

TEXT

Vol 5 No 2 October 2001

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

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