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Use of Feminist Literary Theory in Developing a Critical Language for Hypertext

Introduction

The Writing 2000 Conference highlighted an urgency for discussion of the role that contemporary critical theory will play in the acceptance of hypertext narratives. The modernist view of the importance of the permanence of fixed recording in black and white and the predominance of an heroic narrative structure conflicts with the concept of hypertext as a text that is never fixed with the possibility of infinite versions.

The question that needs to be addressed is, whether this infinite flexibility is a problem for the writer/reader of hyperfiction or if it could offer possibilities that recorded, fixed, linear print cannot.

I intend using a feminist focus to explore the interface between contemporary critical theory and fictional hypertext in order to develop a tool for discussing the production and appreciation of hypertext fiction. The theoretical language employed by feminist theorists will be used to describe the altered experiences of writers and readers when producing and receiving non-linear electronic hypertext fiction. Feminist literary theory has long recognized the value of language, not just as a linear hierarchical chain of fixed constituents, but also as a web of relationships. The flexibility offered by hypertext is compatible with the decentred, fluid, recursive webs of feminist writing by Monique Wittig in *Les Guérillères*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and the work of feminist critics, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva.

My aim is to bring what I believe is an eminently suitable body of theory, current feminist literary theory, to critique a range of hypertexts.

Critique of hypertext fiction has tended to be comparative, i.e. what it can and can't do better than linear print text. However, the problem that emerges is how to write about a non-linear style of writing in a line or text. A new terminology is needed to describe a text that is dynamic and volatile; a virtual text that has no concrete reality for either writer or reader. As Michael Joyce, author of the electronic texts, *Afternoon* and *Twelve Blues* says, 'print stays itself, electronic text replaces itself.' (Joyce 1992: 87)

Writing on a computer encourages different ways of thinking; non-linear, modular, malleable, cooperative and a different writing process that allows recursive planning, composing, and revising. But it is only hypertext that fully realises the potential of the computer to provide a writing space that creates a text so fluid that it is only apparent in the act of reading during the interaction between reader and textual structure.

The reader of hyperfiction, compared to print text, 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.

My argument in this paper aims to demonstrate how critique of modern and postmodern women writers has developed a response to literature that can appreciate the idiosyncrasies of hypertext fiction. Feminist literary theory has evolved from the premise of the 'other'. It has long ago, as Landow, a hypertext theorist describes, '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. 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).

Women writers such as Virginia Woolf, Monique Wittig, Jeanette Winterson and feminist theorists and writers such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have all written against the norms of traditional narrative structures from a consciousness stirred by a political feminist resistance. The resulting writing is in many ways hypertextual in organization and related to hyperfiction as it appears on the world wide web. Metafictive elements, the reflexive writing about writing; parallel texts that can be read concurrently; recursive fluidity that emulates the rhizomatic middlelessness of Deleuze's and Guattari's narratives; disruption of linear or historical time; the exploitation of intertextuality; the embracing of contradictory positions, ambivalence and incongruity; risks, erasures and illusions, offer the reader opportunities to construct a personal story within the written narrative. As Joan Retallack says, 'it provides an invitation to the other's discourse' (Retallack 1994: 347). 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 these 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)

Elements and Strategies common to hyperfiction and to women's writing

I have selected a small sample of common elements and strategies from current critical theory to demonstrate how feminist literary theory may facilitate a theoretical discussion of hyperfiction.

- Rhizomatic or Middle Narratives
- Parallel Narratives
- Pattern/Randomness

Rhizomatic or Middle Narratives

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.

Gilles 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'. They give textual examples: '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).

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 sex; she is able to use language to subvert the boundaries of gender for women. Wittig uses language cleverly in the structure of *Les Guérillères*, juxtaposing poetic language and prose to draw attention to the differences between the sensory, organic immediacy of the alternative discourse and the abstract, symbolic theoretical discourse.

THE BIRDS THE SWIMMING SIRENS
THE TRANSLUCENT SPANS THE WINGS
THE GREEN SUNS THE GREEN SUNS
THE VIOLET FLAT GRASSLANDS
THE CRY THE LAUGHS THE MOVEMENTS
THE WOMEN AFFIRM IN TRIUMPH THAT
ALL ACTION IS OVERTHROW

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)

A Deleuzian framework also supports a refusal 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)

In contrast to centred (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and pre-established paths, the rhizome is an acentred, nonhierarchical, non-signifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton. (520)

Like Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*, Michael Joyce's hypertext fiction *Afternoon* (1996) 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 *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.

Parallel Narratives

Another French feminist writer, Julia Kristeva, has used a technique embodying parallel narratives in her treatise on the maternal entitled, *Stabat Mater*. In this discussion of motherhood and femininity she uses parallel narratives or a split text to handle the complexities of her content and to offer a wealth of possible interpretations to readers, through a sensual, evocative, poetic stream of consciousness, juxtaposed with an objective, linear, historical narrative. The sensory input can be processed by the reader alongside the previously known data, both to be incorporated into the individual reader's experience in a coherent manner.

FLASH - an instant of time or a timeless dream; atoms swollen beyond measure, atoms of a bond, a vision, a shiver a still shapeless em- bryo, unnameable. Epiphanies. Photos of what is not yet visible and which lan- guage

Christianity is no doubt the most sophisticated construct in which femininity, to the extent that it figures therein - and it does so constantly - is confined within the limits of the *Maternal*. By 'maternal' I mean the ambivalent principle that derives on the

necessarily surveys from a very high altitude, always too remote, too abstract to capture the subterranean swarm of seconds, insinuating themselves into unimaginable places.

one hand from the species and on the other hand from a catastrophe of identity which plunges the proper Name into the 'unnameable' that somehow involves our imaginary representations of femininity, non-language, or the body. Thus, Christ the Son of man, is in the end 'human' only through his mother.

(Kristeva 1985:134)

In a linear text, parallel narratives are quite difficult to handle, both for the writer, and for the reader. However, Michael Joyce in his hypertext fiction *Twelve Blues*, (1997) 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 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 of the presentation of the text becomes a part of the text itself.

Pattern/Randomness

Katherine Hayles has been investigating the relationships between order and chaos, and literature and science, especially technology. She 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).

The 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.

Katherine 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 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 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 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 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, 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). In her hypertext fiction, as in Virginia 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 *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.

Feminist literary theory can provide a bridge between current critical theory and hypertext fiction. It exposes an understanding of the ways in which groups as 'other' to the prevailing political systems have operated to have a voice. This voice has been facilitated recently by postmodern movement in literary theory and practice. Hypertext fiction can provide positive altered experiences for writers and readers to help them embrace new ways of using and communicating knowledge, of intervening in political discourses and of providing new and exciting opportunities for narrative in the twenty-first century.

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