

**From Virtuality to Actuality:**

**Representations and Enactments of Critical Theory on the World Wide Web**

[Presented at the Congress CATH 2005 “Ethics and Politics of Virtuality and Indexicality”, Bradford, 29 June -3 July 2005, hosted by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory & History at the University of Leeds]

Hypertext has often been described as *embodiment*, or *fulfillment of the prophecy*, of much poststructuralist theory about textuality. In this sense critical theory, and particularly poststructuralism, would seem to enjoy a privileged relation to the hypertextual structure of the World Wide Web. A decade into the development and ever-increasing use of the web, this might be an appropriate moment to ponder on the state of critical theory in the new cultural reality.

Besides participating in the conceptual fundamentals of the web, poststructuralist theory is also present in more obvious manifestations, such as websites that are dedicated to its presentation, explanation, or promotion, and also in hypertext fiction, a field often discussed in terms of de-centered textuality and intertextuality, dissolved hierarchies and rhizomatic non-linearity. Although this paper focuses on open (i.e. free-access) electronic resources, which are obviously far more heavily used than pay-sites, we hope to offer some more general remarks on the present state - the status and use - of theory on the web. Nevertheless, as the sheer size and potentials of the World Wide Web are expanding out of proportion and in directions whose impact on our notions of status and use are hard to predict, this discussion can only mark the present, transitory moment.

The sheer abundance and inevitably variable quality of websites dedicated to critical theory, as well as a number of factors related to electronic credibility, make the entry point (i.e. the place from which a user starts looking for what she/he is after) particularly important. The absence of conventional quality markers (such as the names of author, publisher, or series editor), the disregard for (or creative transformation of) scholarly conventions characteristic of much electronic publishing, in addition to the sheer cognitive demands made on the reader who browses a site,

have led to the formation of an intricate net of signposted routes, which tends to replicate conventional power structures at work across the academia. Web guides such as Alan Liu's 'Voice of the Shuttle' (<http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2718> <27 July 2005>) or Jack Lynch's 'Literary Resources on the Net' (<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/theory.html> <27 July 2005>), to mention just a couple, serve as major gates for the exploration of critical theory, and the sites they include, or comment upon favourably, have strong chances of becoming main sources of information for great numbers of users internationally.

Excluding from our discussion those destinations (websites or electronic libraries) that provide articles and other scholarly resources of a more or less traditional kind, we will focus on the great range of sites that serve as introductions to the various strands of critical theory and major theorists. These sites, mostly hosted by English Departments, constitute in themselves entry points for many students.

A first observation on these introductory sites – also reflected on the portals' catalogues of individual theories' sites – concerns their focus. Despite the claims of scholars such as Bolter and Lanham on the subversive potential of the electronic media vis-à-vis canonization,<sup>1</sup> webpages of this kind clearly perpetuate the current dominant hierarchy of theories in the academia; for example, New Criticism, Russian Formalism, Cultural Materialism, the Frankfurt School or Levinas' theory are far less represented than Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies or Postcolonialism.

Although the hypertextual structure of introductory sites may be more or less sophisticated, with links offered in a catalogue, or within an evolving narrative of sorts, or sometimes a combination of both, they characteristically present critical theories in terms of clusters of main concepts. The typical module is a short definition or description, sometimes accompanied by a brief reference of principal works and chronologies. When this information is engulfed in a larger narrative, the context of a seamless summary discussion to which these main concepts are made to fit can potentially be more misleading than the complete lack of framework. This form of presentation is also concurrent with a 'cult' approach to theorists, whose names tend

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<sup>1</sup>Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext and the Remediation of Print* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), pp.165-170; Richard A. Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.31.

to become shorthand for their work. In spite of the alleged undermining of the pre-eminence of author brought about by hypertext, theorists like Derrida, Deleuze, and Barthes, among others, are clearly becoming icons of a largely uncritical 'hype' – and this is very much a result of their representation on the web.

Certainly one cannot doubt the usefulness of basic definitions and summaries for many readers. However the obvious reductionism of several web presentations of critical theory also carries the limitations of a gestation period far shorter than in the case of printed guides and dictionaries, in which the limited possibilities for updates and corrections (and the price demanded from the reader) support more meticulous editorial procedures. This combination of reflective reductionism and editorial slackness acquires greater significance in light of the particularities of the web's function as a medium for the transmittance of information.

As web culture is only beginning to be formed, we still lack the clear demarcation of web genres and the accurate grading of quality that would advise the reader on the specific uses and limitations of different sites. This absence of a system of expectations impedes the evaluation of information, and so one might think it would hinder its use. However, the contrary seems to be the case: concise information that is offered quickly, conveniently, in an attractive layout, and for free, is ultimately overused and therefore practically crystallized, in a manner that has no precedent or equivalent in print culture. It is difficult, for example, to imagine a student who would consider herself familiar with the major concepts of a theory by the sole use of a printed dictionary of terms; yet it appears that use of web glossaries and similar sites allows the abundant cultivation of such illusions.

Another related characteristic of the World Wide Web, as Haas and Wearder have noted, is that it tends to be self-referential. Even when users understand the need to verify web information, they often do so by checking other, related sites.<sup>2</sup> This increases the risk of readers shying away from actual theoretical texts, a tendency imminent in all popularizing and encyclopedic approaches to theory, and familiar at least since the widespread use of textbooks and dictionaries of terms. The Web environment, with the endless information that it can yield through multiple links within and outside a particular website, creates a compelling impression of

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<sup>2</sup> Christina Haas and Stanley T. Wearder, 'E-credibility: Building Common Ground in Web Environment', *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature* 3 (2003), p.177.

sufficiency, significantly supported by the ease of access. Furthermore, as Bolter stresses, the age of electronic writing does away with the ‘inescapable great books’ characteristic of the age of print, fostering instead readings that will be more and more tailored to individual needs and tastes.<sup>3</sup> And of course, the ever-increasing use of electronic media and hypertext tends to obliterate documents that do not partake of the network of links, as Landow has remarked.<sup>4</sup>

What we witness, then, is a paradoxical situation, as the unprecedented proliferation of information on critical theory goes hand in hand with the more or less casual reduction of theory to its core concepts. This shrinking of theory to sketchy representations of its contents severs its polemical aspects as well as its pragmatic potential. For example, reports on the deconstructionist attack on logocentrism fail to register the upsetting impact that results from the unveiling of the intricate workings of logocentrism written in its very language. Similarly, précis on truth as intricately linked with power tend to conceal their own conditionality, while summaries of dialogism become possible through a firm assumption and perpetuation of monologism. In this manner critical theory appears to become a conveniently simplified branch in the history of ideas, whose currency is only nominal and which lacks any real performative potential.

We may now turn to examine a field that we might expect to counterbalance this picture, since it has often been described as the ‘embodiment’ of critical theory (particularly poststructuralist, Bakhtinian and reader-response theory).

In his seminal study of hypertext, George Landow relates hypertext to critical theory in terms of convergence, which in his analysis is understood in terms of embodiment, test, prophecy fulfilling and similarity. Locating in hypertext a

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<sup>3</sup> cf. Bolter, *ibid*, p.240: ‘In the world of electronic writing, there will be no texts that everyone must read. There will only be texts that more or fewer readers choose to examine in more or less detail. The idea of the great, inescapable book belongs to the age of print that is now passing’.

<sup>4</sup> cf. George P. Landow, *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.287: ‘Since hypertext promises to make materials living within a hypertext environment much easier to obtain, it simultaneously threatens to make any materials not present seem even more distant and more invisible than absent documents are in the world of print’.

fundamentally decentered textuality, with no primary axis of organization or fixed endings, Landow describes the inherent intertextuality of hypertext with explicit reference to Derrida's reflections on textuality. Bakhtinian multivocality is also invoked in this description, as is the Deleuzian notion of rhizome.<sup>5</sup> Jay David Bolter, in his equally influential work on hypertext, *Writing Space*, makes similar observations; he argues for example that 'it remains striking how well the poststructuralists did seem to be anticipating electronic writing'.<sup>6</sup> Bolter adds to the array of theories he uses Barthes's distinction between work and text (which he finds analogous to that between printed book and writing on the computer) and also reader-response theory, as the reader's active role in conceptually filling the gaps and bringing together the strands of the text is seen as convergent with the necessary choices that are required on her part while processing a hypertext. In the same vein, Stuart Moulthrop finds in poststructuralism an important tool for the understanding of hypertext and also argues that Barthes' insights on the *Text* are 'literalized' in hypertext.<sup>7</sup>

These reflections, however, also share a common tendency to perceive theoretical concepts in their broadest sense. Hence they tend to flatten out differences between them and make ideas such as dialogism, intertextuality, multivocality and even writerly text almost interchangeable, a phenomenon also observed in critical theory websites. While we are certainly not implying that the main source of hypertext theorists' information on literary theory should be traced to the 'Introduction to Critical Theory' websites we mentioned just before, we do observe a certain common tendency at work. Strikingly, even critics who have not failed to notice the simplification of poststructuralism in hypertext theorists, contend, as

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<sup>5</sup> Landow, *ibid*, pp.33-48.

<sup>6</sup> Bolter, *ibid*, p.162.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Moulthrop, 'In the Zones; Hypertext and the Politics of Interpretation', in Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher (eds), *Evolving Perspectives on Computers and Composition Studies: Questions for the 1990s* (Urbana, Illinois, and Houghton, Michigan: National Council of Teachers of English and Computers and Composition, 1991) <<http://iat.ubalt.edu/moulthrop/essays/zones.html> 27 July 2005>.

Lunsford does following Landow, that ‘critical theory promises to theorize hypertext and hypertext promises to embody and thereby test aspects of theory’.<sup>8</sup>

Promise is probably the key term here, and it seems that for the sake of promise several critics are willing to oversee the reduction suffered by theory upon entering the electronic arena. Since the beginnings of their theorization, hypertext and electronic writing on the World Wide Web have been invested with visions of emancipation, pluralism, widespread and active participation, and open-endedness. Though these ideas are by no means exclusive to critical theory, the latter – in its many strands – provides a framework that connects them to an insightful understanding of the workings of textuality. Moulthrop describes his expectations in face of the new media as a postmodern ironic combination of, on the one hand, awareness of the failure of grand narratives and, on the other, desire for radical change.<sup>9</sup> A more concrete example of this general claim is offered when Moulthrop contends that ‘[b]ecause they require the reader to participate in the progressive unfolding of the narrative, hypertextual fictions necessarily undermine any singular fatalism, fostering instead an ethos of responsiveness and engagement’. A similar view has been proposed by J. Hillis Miller, who proclaims the ‘ethics of hypertext’ to reside in the fact that ‘a hypertext demands that we choose at every turn and take responsibility for our choices’.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, feminists of a poststructuralist bend such as Wendy Morgan, Donna LeCourt and Luann Barnes, find in hypertextual multivocality and fragmentariness a ‘homologous’ tool for conveying the subaltern knowledges of marginalized women without compromising them to the exigencies of academic hierarchical discourse.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Andrea A. Lunsford, ‘Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology. Review’, *Modern Philology* 92:2 (1994) p.274.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Moulthrop, ‘No War Machine’, in Joseph Tabi and Michael Wutz (eds), *Reading Matters: Narrative in the New Ecology of Media* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997) <[http://iat.ubalt.edu/moulthrop/essays/war\\_machine.html](http://iat.ubalt.edu/moulthrop/essays/war_machine.html) 27 July 2005>.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hillis Miller, ‘The Ethics of Hypertext’, *Diacritics* 25:3 (Fall 1995), p.38.

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Morgan, ‘Electronic Tools for Dismantling the Master’s House: Poststructuralist Feminist Research and Hypertext Poetics’, in *HYPertext '99, Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia: Returning to Our Diverse Roots, February 21-25,1999* (Darmstadt,

The strong claims of this tendency in hypertext theorizing clearly have prescriptive effects, and Moulthrop explicitly reiterates Barthes' distinction of 'work' from 'text' in his proposition that hypertext should not be an object but a system.<sup>12</sup> A lot of hyperfiction and other hypertext projects have caught up not just with this suggestion but also with the underlying implication of theorizing their enterprise in terms deriving from critical theory. Introductions or lexias with theoretical reflections on the nature of these projects are frequent and they usually function as reading instructions. Although this tendency may be on the wane, it clearly reflects the influence of hypertext theorizing in the development of hypertext.

In his important *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth refutes the idea of hypertext as a vindication of postmodern theories altogether, claiming that this idea conflates two separate conceptual levels; the aesthetic, constructed in the observer's mind, and the material, the physical reality of hypertext. The figurative, abstract quality of critical theory tenets (particularly poststructuralist ones) could not in this sense be thought of as 'translated', embodied, or reduced, to a literal (material) manifestation.<sup>13</sup> David Miall and Michael Riffaterre have expressed similar concerns with the notion that critical theory is literalized in hypertext practice, which they find distorting and reductive.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, and despite the valid opposition of it as a conceptual scandal or even as an objectionable scholarly practice, it seems that the literalization of critical

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Germany: ACM), pp.207-216 <<http://iet.open.ac.uk/pp/s.a.rae/Meno/morgan2.html> 27 July 2005>;

Donna LeCourt and Luann Barnes, 'Writing Multiplicity: Hypertext and Feminist Textual Politics', *Computers and Composition* 16 (1999), pp. 55-71

<<http://www1.elsevier.com/homepage/sal/ampersand/issue5/lecourt.pdf> 27 July 2005>.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Moulthrop 'In the Zones; Hypertext and the Politics of Interpretation', in Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher (eds), *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore and London : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp.82-84.

<sup>14</sup> David S. Miall, 'Trivializing or Liberating? The Limitations of Hypertext Theorizing', *Mosaic* 32:3 (1999), pp.157-171; Michael Riffaterre, 'Intertextuality vs. Hypertextuality', *New Literary History*, 25:4 (1994), pp.779-788.

theory in hypertext has ultimately been the object of a speech act. The function and value – or use and status – of a statement as act under certain circumstances, as in the case of the wedding ceremony, a bet, a promise, or the American Declaration of Independence, to mention a few of the most frequently discussed speech acts, has long been recognized and theorized by J-L. Austin, John Searle, Jacques Derrida, and Paul de Man among others. We propose that the way in which critical theory has been treated in relation to hypertext has facilitated its historical transformation from constative to performative, from speculation to promise, from supposition to declaration. This mutation has been brought about by the entire system of repeated evocations of critical theory for the description of the new electronic writing, by its use as inspiration source for the hopes of a ‘radical change’ or a paradigm shift signaled by the new media, and also by its regulatory inscription within hyperfiction and other hypertext projects. These factors have acted as necessary conditions for the establishment of critical theory’s performative function.

This interpretative framework can also accommodate the state of theory in introductory websites as we sketched it earlier, providing a ground for explanation of the reductive tendencies observed both in these sites and in some hypertext theorists. The decontextualization of critical terms and the concomitant ossification of theory in clusters of main concepts, as well as its relegation to a branch of the history of ideas, are typical results of the process that has attributed a ritualistic function to texts in ceremonial speech acts or mere historical significance to inaugural texts, such as the Declaration of Independence.

In this sense critical theory does become obsolete, as Bolter has noted, but not because it fights ‘a war against the traditions of print’ which is ‘long over’, as he claimed. Although it seems that performativity comes from a certain linguistic force or quality imminent in the texts themselves, at least as much as it is conferred upon them by circumstances, this does not necessarily imply that texts have the power to determine the way they act. What we witness on the Web today is just one realization of the many available possibilities inherent in the virtual mode of critical theory. One may only hope that the future expansion of the World Wide Web will do more justice to texts whose insights on the workings of power and language are much broader than their supposed application in hypertext and still pertinent in a cultural paradigm that will probably take some time to change.