

Literature and hypertext : the reading act of literary works in hypertextual transpositions

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LITERATURE AND HYPERTEXT: THE READING ACT OF LITERARY WORKS IN HYPERTEXTUAL TRANSPOSITIONS

The exploitation in the field of literature and literary studies of the potentialities offered by hypertext began at the middle of the '80ies. Michael Joyce's "Afternoon, a story", the first hyperfictional work, is emblematic of this beginning. Since then, different kinds of online and offline hypertextual applications for literature were born: archives, hyperfiction, applications dedicated to authors, themes, literary works, periods of literary history, etc. Several professors of literature began to use hypertext to create applications used to teach literature in a claimed new way. One of the main novelties would be the increased opportunity students have to create connections between different texts and materials and, therefore, to create personal and new paths for reading a given text. George P. Landow's "The Victorian Web" and "The Dickens Web" are among these first examples of literary educational hypertexts. Their effectiveness in teaching and learning has been acclaimed, but also criticized (Smith 1996). One of the main claimed advantages offered by hypertext to literature and literary studies was the establishment of a new way of reading the literary text, in which the linearity of the literary text would be broken and substituted by a (virtually) infinite range of reading paths created by the readers according to their navigational choices (Landow & Delany 1991, Landow 1997; Bolter 1991). This claim, too, has been widely discussed, either in hyperfiction (Douglas 1994) or in educational applications. As regards educational applications, for instance, David Miall (1998) stated that hypertext doesn't represent the real nature of reading (as hypertext theorists claim), but it hinders a real act of reading.

Our research concentrates on one of the above mentioned different kinds of hypertexts for literature: hypertextual transpositions. Hypertex-

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tual transpositions are online or offline applications focusing upon a precise literary work. They usually present a literary work using multimediality and therefore they generally are hypermedia. They actually consist of the electronic version of a literary text with the addition of series of other materials (annotations, texts, images, videos, audio files), illustrating, showing or explaining linguistic, thematic, historical, representational aspects of the literary text. Their equivalent in the printed medium are annotated and illustrated editions of literary works.

Hypertextual transpositions are meant to be used in reading, enjoying and/or studying a given literary text. They help to understand the significance of the text and to enrich the reading experience. In this sense these applications are tools for teaching and learning. However in our research we don't directly consider how to teach or learn literature through this kind of applications. Our main interest is rather studying the reading act of the literary text. Reading the literary text is the basic activity for literature teaching and learning. Therefore, understanding how the reading of a literary text works when this text is transfused in hypertextual form is useful in order to improve the teaching and learning of literature through hypertextual and multimedial applications.

Our leading research questions are: is it true that the use of hypertext introduces a radical change in the way the literary text is read? In what would this change consist of? To which extent does this change improve the effectiveness of the communication in hypertextual transpositions? In order to answer these questions, we began to study some concrete examples of hypertextual transpositions¹ according to two complementary perspectives: a semiotic perspective and a hermeneutic perspective. Previously, these examples have been analyzed, following a checklist that describes some central features of hypertextual transpositions. This checklist has been elaborated on the base of Alexander & Tate's criteria for the evaluation of information quality on the web (Alexander & Tate 1999) and of USI Tec-Lab tool for content analysis for web sites (Cantoni & Bolchini 2001). However, we specified some further criteria in order to

¹ More precisely, we considered various web sites dedicated to the Divine Comedy (such as The World of Dante, Princeton Dante Project, Dante's Divine Comedy, Webscuola - L'Inferno dantesco, Digital Dante) or the CD-Roms and web sites dedicated to the Shakespeare's plays (such as Webscuola - Amleto; Hamlet on the Ramparts - MIT; *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, BBC Education; *Macbeth* - Voyager; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - BBC Education; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *Romeo & Juliet* - Bride Digital Classic).

take into account the peculiarities of hypertextual transpositions: the presentation of the literary text and the manifestation of the relationship between the literary text and the added materials. The analysis is then completed with the comparison of the considered hypertextual transpositions with the printed annotated editions from which (some of) their contents are drawn² or with other printed annotated editions of the same literary work.

Studying hypertextual transpositions from a semiotic perspective first allows us to clarify the origin of certain difficulties a reader encounters when reading such an application. It is quite a common experience that, though the aim of the application is to make the literary text clearer and closer to the reader, reading such an application is often hard and toilsome and that the reader can easily get confused. Secondly, it is possible to clearly identify the differences existing between hypertextual transpositions and printed annotated and illustrated editions and, therefore, to indicate where the added value of this use of hypertext resides. In applying the semiotic perspective in respect to the considered examples of hypertextual transpositions, we began by describing the signs that in a hypertextual transposition are added to the literary text and the way these signs are organized in the application. Among these added signs we distinguished:

- signs that convey a given content, whose aim is to enrich the reading experience of the literary text and to help the reader to understand the text. Videos, images, texts, audio files belong to this category. Among them we identified three different categories: representations (signs that represent an element or an aspect or a scene of the literary text or of the added materials themselves); cognitive correlations (signs that aim to induce the reader to draw a conclusion in respect to the text's interpretation and to her/his text's comprehension); instrumental correlations (signs that don't imply the drawing of a conclusion from the part of the reader; they don't directly lead to the text's comprehension; but access tools, additional tools).
- signs that allow the reader to access to this content. Navigational links, semantic associations, structural links, collections, collection centers belong to this category.

² It is a quite common situation that contents of hypertextual transpositions are not created expressly for it, but that they consist (at least for a big part) of annotations, comments, essays, images, etc. elaborated for and included in previous printed annotated and illustrated editions.

In respect to the first category the central question we investigated is: which relationship does the added material establish in respect to the literary text? What does a given added material highlight in relationship to the literary text? In respect to the second category central questions are: how are the different kinds of added materials organized in the whole application? How is it possible to move among the different signs? Which tools or devices are available to the reader to perform the operations s/he needs in order to read or study the literary text? However, in the reading act of the text through the application, these two categories of signs are not separated one from the other, but they are intertwined. In fact, the most relevant questions we must answer in order to understand the way the literary text's significance is grasped through the application are for instance: to which kind of content does a given hyperlink or navigational tool give access? At which point of the navigation is a given content made available? Which kind of information can the reader access immediately from the electronic version of the literary text?

The consideration of such questions allows us to conclude, first of all, that the laboriousness of the reading act through hypertextual transpositions is caused by the fact that, when navigating, the reader has to go through different levels of interpretation at the same time. S/he has to understand to which element of the literary text the added content refers to; s/he has to understand in which sense this added content relates to the literary text (which kind of relationship it establishes with the literary text); besides, s/he has to interpret hyperlinks and various navigational tools. Secondly, we may conclude that the differences existing between hypertextual transpositions and printed annotated editions reside partly in the level of signs that convey content (because of the more powerful technological possibilities offered by hypertext in respect to print, in hypertextual transpositions it is easier to add significative representations and to make available instrumental correlations).

However, it is at the level of signs through which the reader can access to the content and even more it is at the level of the intertwining of the two types of added signs that the most striking difference between hypertextual transpositions and printed annotated editions turns out. In fact, considering these two levels we noticed that in hypertextual transpositions some reading strategies must be represented. Some aspects that are usually implicitly perceived or understood by the reader when s/he reads the literary text in a printed form have to be made explicit in a hypertextual transposition in order to let the reader successfully perform the read-

ing act. One of these aspects is the need to represent always the whole of the literary text and the relationship of each part of the hypertextual transposition to this whole.

This has not only to do with the widely explored topic of user's orientation within the application, and not only with the representation of the formal structure of the literary text (chapters, acts, scenes, etc.), but even with the constant making present to the user (that is, with the constant representation of) the connection of what s/he is reading in a given part of the hypertextual transposition with the whole of the literary text. In other words, the increased need of explicitation introduces in hypertextual transpositions a further level of representation which overlaps with the content's representation. Because of the presence of this further level of representation we defined second order representations the hypertextual transpositions of the literary text.

Thanks to the clarification brought by the semiotic perspective, it is possible to establish which features the application should have in order to sustain the reading and understanding process. In fact, what we highlighted through the semiotic perspective means that the use of some signs instead of others can suggest and induce a different reading strategy. Therefore, it is essential in respect to the goal of improving the reading act of hypertextual transpositions to verify whether the induced strategies are adequate. In other words, some "standards of readability" could be identified. In order to elaborate them we took as starting point the model of human comprehension elaborated in the classical hermeneutic, particularly the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), who dealt with the process of understanding of a piece of art. We are trying to verify if the signs and the signs' organization present in hypertextual transpositions allow the reader to approach the literary text respecting the principles of this model. Here are two very simple examples. One of the basic principles is that interpretation is the result of an encounter between the reader and the text. Considering hypertextual transpositions of literary texts, we can try to understand whether the application supports such an encounter. In fact, theorists such as Miall claim that the hypertextual form hinder such an encounter because of the presence of many links that constantly invite the reader to run away from the text itself. Therefore, we could conclude that in order to respect the need of an encounter with the text, the hypertextual transposition should present the original text free of hyperlinks. Another essential principle is that the reader has to evaluate the text s/he is reading. This implies that different texts have dif-

ferent values for a reader. Therefore, considering a hypertextual transposition where the literary text and many other different kinds of texts (comments, explanations, definitions) alternate or even appear simultaneously on the screen, we can try to understand if the application helps the reader to distinguish these different kinds of texts and their different values. In order to help the reader to understand the relationship between the literary text and the new added sign and in order to support the reader in her/his need to understand the different values of different texts, we could suggest that it would be better to differentiate from a graphical point of view the different kinds of texts included in the hypertext.

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