Reading and New Technologies: Some Possible Futures

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> Es claro que por muy diferente del real que se imagine un mundo debe tener algo – una forma- en común con el mundo real.
>
> – Ludwig Wittgenstein (1918)
> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

When I was invited to be part of this meeting of experts, I thought I should avail myself of the general topic "reading and new technologies" to share some of the uncertainty that these words cause me still or maybe I should say doubts. And, I hope receive in return a lesson on the speeds of modernization and, of changes in society, and a journey through the spaces of the future.

Given that – as human beings – the meaning of our words can only really be understood when we consider the position of the speaker – that is, the place of enunciation – I introduce myself by saying that there are four ways to explain my position: I am a writer of poetry and essays on literature and social issues; I am a Spanish teacher who has worked for 10 years with students from junior high schools; in addition, I am a librarian; and, finally, I am a researcher who has worked for almost another 10 years – as a specialist of the Cuban National Reading Program, and who

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wrote a manual on the subject for use by reading advocates. To this I can add the simplest of explanations: I am a reader.

Just as if we were dealing with an electric machine, or as in that image oft repeated on film of the discovery of a gigantic bomb, to know the reasons why someone – despite their displays of humility – is considered authorized or trained to talk about a topic is important because it reveals the tributaries that flow and feed that brain, the cables that allow that hypothetical device to run.

The Time Machine

> Well, mace in one hand and Weena in the other, I went out of that gallery and into another and still larger one, which at the first glance reminded me of a military chapel hung with tattered flags. The brown and charred rags that hung from the sides of it, I presently recognized as the decaying vestiges of books. They had long since dropped to pieces, and every semblance of print had left them. But here and there were warped boards and cracked metallic clasps that told the tale well enough. Had I been a literary man I might, perhaps, have moralized upon the futility of all ambition. But as it was, the thing that struck me with keenest force was the enormous waste of labour to which this somber wilderness of rotting paper testified. At the time I will confess that I thought chiefly of the *Philosophical Transactions* and my own seventeen papers upon physical optics. (Wells, 1895)

You may recognize that quote as one of the most famous moments in the novel *The Time Machine* by the English author Herbert G. Wells. At this moment, Weena, a young woman of the Eloi race, accompanies the protagonist – the Time Traveller who is almost a million years in the future – into a huge building that he calls the Palace of Green Porcelain, which happens to be the ruins of an old museum. Dark and charred rags, damaged books, a dark jumble of rotting paper – this is how the author describes the horror of the room: the end of the book serves to announce the end of civilization as we know it.

David Duncan's screenplay for the 1960 film

David Duncan's screenplay for the 1960 film of *The Time Machine* is not only an elegant adaptation of the novel, it also makes an intelligent contribution to our conversation. This time around, just before facing the disappearance of book culture, the Time Traveller speaks with one of the young Eloi and discovers the terrible consequences of abandoning the practice of reading for generations:

> MAN IN WHITE – You ask many questions.
>
> TIME TRAVELLER (annoyed) – Yes! And I'm not ashamed of it. That is how man has learned and bettered himself. I must learn about you and your civilization. You have books, don't you?
>
> YOUNG MAN (recognizing a half-forgotten word) – Books! Yes, we have books.
>
> He rises and beckons. The Time Traveller's brow clears.

Fowler, Victor. (2014). Reading and New Technologies: Some Possible Futures. *Scholarly and Research Communication, 4*(3): 0201173, 13 pp.

TIME TRAVELLER – Books will tell me what I want to know. Books will tell me all about you.

He too gets up and follows the Young Man.

AT THE WALL – LONG SHOT (193)

The Young Man leading. He reaches the wall and seizes an ancient curtain which covers it. A cloud of dust rises as he tugs it aside and the curtain falls, almost crumbling. Shelves and shelves of books are disclosed. The books are old even though many of them have futuristic designs. The bindings of once proud volumes hang in brown tatters. The Time Traveller steps to the books.

CLOSE ON TIME TRAVELLER (194)

The realization of the true state of affairs shows on his face. He is appalled. Carefully he pulls a volume from the shelf. Its binding breaks as he opens it and, when his hand touches the pages, they crumple like ashes and drift to the floor. He drops the book. His voice is a shocked WHISPER.

TIME TRAVELLER – Yes ... they do tell me all about you!

With sudden violence he slams his fist into a whole shelf of books. His hand plows through them and the dust swirls into the air. He turns back in anger.

TIME TRAVELLER – What have you done? Thousands of years of building and rebuilding, creating and recreating so that you can let it crumble to dust.

—David Duncan, *The Time Machine* (script, 1959)

Pay attention to the young Eloi, who is overwhelmed by the number of questions asked by the Time Traveller, questions that are not even complex or entirely logical within the context of the novel, but seek only to establish the Eloi's own history. Also, pay attention to the subtle connection the script offers us between the ability to question (characteristically human), the notion of autonomy, and the democratic character of societies. In this cultural construct, answers are contained inside the books and when human beings neglect books, they are penalized with a life in which the present becomes a totalizing absolute that devours the remains of temporality. In this accumulation of disjointed presents – without a past (memory) or future (forecast) – human life is diminished to the level of mere animal survival. Despite "having it all," to the extent that now none of the film's humans need to work in this future scenario, the hypertrophy caused by their leisure brutalizes, dehumanizes, and recasts them as a "pleasant" kind of animal.

This is why we are surprised that in Duncan's script the Eloi not only stopped reading books but they also abandoned the artifact that replaced them, which would have allowed them to preserve their collective memory: the highly technologically sophisticated "talking rings" that Weena shows the Time Traveller. The narrator

describes them as "golden rings a few inches in diameter and one inch wide, lined with minutely spaced grooves." What is fascinating is that when Weena rotates one of the "talking rings," a voice gushes out, speaking, as Weena explains, of "things no one here understands." Although, within the flow of the story, we are witnessing a moment approaching the sacred – the recording you hear is probably "the last recorded voice of civilized man" – and the Time Traveller listens in fascination, Weena remains in a state of "disinterested detachment."

According to this episode, the neglect of books is just the prelude to the complete devastation of humanity, for from that moment forward – in what amounts to the present of the novel – we find that the Eloi are not only unable to interpret written language, but that, in general, they have lost the ability to work with complex ideas, and therefore no longer understand what the "talking rings" have to say. As if this was not tragedy enough, the "story" told by the rings is that of the war that pushes humans to the brink of destruction, which has the immediate consequence of dividing the species into two groups of survivors, one of which, will become the Eloi.

John Logan's librarian

The latest screen adaptation of *The Time Machine* was made by director Simon Wells in 2002 and presents a completely postmodern variation of the "talking rings" that Weena shows the Time Traveller. In this screenplay, John Logan replaces the coldness of the rings with the more personal experience of a semi-destroyed, but still functional robot: Vox the librarian, who is described to us as follows:

> He is a truly horrifying sight. A human-shaped robot of sorts. A twisting, hideous collection of circuits and wires, pistons and metal. A gaping face-plate. Bits of ashen skin grafted uneasily to rubber and metal. And one very human eye peering from his wretched visage.
>
> The glowing red light comes from deep within his incomplete chest cavity. A power source of some kind.
>
> — John Logan, *The Time Machine* (screenplay, 2000)

Those who have seen this version of film will remember that instead of the semi-destroyed robot described in Logan's script, the director chose to make the librarian into a computer with an inexhaustible supply of power (possibly a combination of nuclear, wind, and solar), artificial intelligence (that lets it talk to visitors), and a built-in projector that forms the holographic figure of a librarian.

In all of the three cases, the absence of reading leads to a social catastrophe that ends in the disappearance of that which distinguishes us as humans, and no "machine" created for the transmission of ideas (however sophisticated) is sufficient to prevent the disaster. Think of the progression between the three versions of the same event: from the fictional character in the Palace of Green Porcelain, who is faced with the confusing ruins of what was a written culture, to the character in the 1959 film script (who discovers, along with the demise of books, the obsolescence of the "talking rings"), and finally the character in the 2002 adaptation, who encounters a holographic image of a

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librarian with auto-learning (and a virtually infinite database to provide answers from), and finds that even he is not considered interesting enough to keep the desire for knowledge alive.

The lesson in all of this seems to be that technology is at the service of a desire and a will that is found elsewhere than the technology itself. As extraordinary as our applications, appliances, or discoveries may be, for example, the act of reading itself is the same as the principle of free will, something that depends on our inner dialogue, on what we need, search, and find in the spaces of social interaction. Actually, the different actors involved in providing density to the field of practice and research we call "reading" each has their own question – even if these sometimes intersect – and each adheres to their own highly specific interests.

Educators, promoters, writers

According to the above, for the teacher (especially the language teacher), the main thing is to determine exactly what reading is: the stages into which it can be divided; how to identify weaknesses in the process and what to do about them; and, finally, what understanding a text is, how to extract information from it, and (eventually) how to convert the act of reading into a permanent source of pleasure.

Librarians, meanwhile, work with people who are patrons of the institution that employs them, people who generally approach the site guided by the desire to satisfy some specific information need (often for study or professional reasons) or to comply with the demand that comes from the simple pleasure of reading. The difficulty here, at least the most obvious one, appears unrelated to people knowing "how to read," but rather has to do with the their ignorance of both the structure of information in libraries as well as how to use catalogues or other resources – at least in the case of those visiting the library for the first time or who visit irregularly. Along with this, even in the case of "expert" users (whether we're talking about an "information seeker" or a "reader for pleasure"), librarians' knowledge of the collections with which they work and the depth of their cultural knowledge allows them to be "one step beyond" the readers/users, and to talk, listen, and lead/accompany them in their search, perhaps even to suggest or recommend new authors, titles, or even connected fields of knowledge.

At school, the word "read" is directly related to the teaching-learning process. For librarians, (even more so for those working in public libraries) "reading" is an action split between so-called "user instruction," which aims to raise people's skills in information management; "library extension," or bringing the book to those who, for reasons ranging from time constraints to a physical condition, cannot attend the institution; and the "promotion of reading," meaning the set of strategies that promoters develop to encourage a general love of reading in one or more segments of the population, and to promote the reading of a particular set of books. Promotion campaigns range from television advertisements to discussion sessions on a particular book, public appearances by authors, and much more.

There is a strict mathematical relationship between the existing number of books in a library (funds) and the actual amount that anyone can consume (read) in a given unit

of time (say, one year) – as well as other factors such as the reader's age, education level, gender, race, religious or political beliefs, income and living standards, geographical distribution, nationality, etc. As such, in choosing a specific and relatively insignificant number of books (from a quantitative perspective), promoters operate as cultural agents meeting the function of the ideologue. In other words, their actions and survival are justified only on some qualitative register that certifies whether they have chosen the very small group of "right" books. Hence the ambiguous role of the promoter: in practice they could be encouraging spiritual freedom or repressing it.

In this arrangement, writers adopt a function that borrows elements from teachers, librarians, and promoters, but also add questions appropriate to their office. Put another way, they question the understanding of literature as a vehicle for reading instruction and of writing as a practice that produces texts that form patterns of taste. Literature would not be what it is if it was not also a creative practice that develops in permanent opposition to what schools understand as "reading." Indeed, it also opposes what the literary establishment understands (and normalizes) as "literature," and, which, in its own development, literature challenges. In this regard, I take as an obvious fact that each writing involves a certain reading (whether we're talking about the legendary James Joyce's convoluted *Finnegans Wake* or the false transparency of Ernest Hemingway's short stories), as if literary writing – as a process that develops in opposition to an archive of previous writings – continuously moves toward increasing conceptual, syntactic, and compositional density.

In this network of forces, the amount of things the writer weighs in the balance is so huge that simply enumerating them is amazing: a simple meaningful verse or a single sentence suffices to make the reader feel that *there*, so the choice of words acquires the urgency of a struggle – their order, their meanings, and senses; the relationships they establish with each other; the words or the sentence/verse in relation to the paragraph or stanza, the chapter or section, and the book as a whole. Similarly, we arrive from the book to the earlier texts of the author, to his generation, his country, to world literature, to the present and the past, even to all of history. For these reasons, reading for pleasure, which also happens to be an "informed" reading made with a varied selection of critical instruments, is not only a rhizomatic, forked joy, but it points to something almost entirely different from the reading that primarily attempts to satisfy information needs and is equally distanced from the trained reader proposed by cognitive psychology. This "literary" reader we speak of possesses such sensitivity and knowledge that he or she is able to rebuild (by reliving) nothing less than the process of writing itself.

Lezama's theory of reading

Can something like this be taught in school? Where can you learn to read like that? Who teaches it? What curriculum? What good is the most delirious technology here? I do not think any writer has referred to these issues more intelligently than the Cuban poet, novelist, and essayist José Lezama Lima, who is the creator of one of the most exciting theories and programs to encourage reading I have known. I am referring the so-called Delphic Course, as it appears sketched in the novel *Oppiano Licario* (1977), where he gave it a theoretical formulation, and it exists in the memories of its participants, as he developed it with a small group of young writers. *Oppiano Licario*

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was published the year following Lezama's death, and in it the encounter between the characters Fronesis and Editabunda, Lezama's reading theory reaches its clearest form:

> Licario tenía el convencimiento de un conocimiento oracular en el que cada libro fuera una revelación, con eso se evita el fárrago de lecturas innecesarias en que caen los adolescentes. … Cada libro debe ser como una forma de revelación, como el libro que descifra el secreto de una vida. La primera parte del curso délfico se llamará obertura palatal, tiene por finalidad encontrar y desarrollar el gusto de la persona.
>
> —Cada uno de esos estantes comprende una parte de la sabiduría- dijo Editabunda—… El segundo estante comprende lo que yo llamo el horno transmutativo, el estómago del conocimiento, que va desde el gusto al humus, lo que los taoístas llamaban la transmigración pitagórica con burla de los budistas, a la materia signata de que hablaban los escolásticos, a la materia que quiere ser creadora. … La tercera parte que trata del espacio tiempo, con lejanas raíces en las bromas lógicas de los megáricos o en el mundo aporético o eleático.
>
> —Esa tercera etapa—volvió a decirle—, el paso del horno transmutativo al tiempo aporético se precisa por aquello que ya tú le oíste a Cemí, de que al chocar con pasión de súbito dos cosas, personas o animales, engendran un tercer desconocido.

The inspiration for this amazing step-by-step pedagogy of reading comes, I think, from a short essay by the German novelist Hermann Hesse published in 1920. In the text, titled "On Reading Books", Hesse classifies book readers into three groups (they are not definitive, one could belong to them at different stages): the naïve reader, the playful reader, and the last, which we dare to call the "free" reader. Despite the amount of detail that separates the three types of readers, Hesse, who primarily speaks and thinks as a narrator in this essay, binds his triad around the attitude his readers adopt vis-à-vis form, the plot, and the story; in particular, the extent of autonomy they maintain when confronted with the proposals (in short, the various forms of ideology) of the author. Naïve readers, for example, would not relate to the book as "a person, but as the horse to the manger or the horse to the coachman: the book guides, the reader follows. The plot is taken objectively, it is accepted as reality." On a higher level, spontaneous readers do not consider "the topic or the form the only or core values of a book," they are able to maintain a critical distance from the continuous text and its author. In Hesse's words, this reader contemplates with a smile "how the author or philosopher strive to convince themselves and their readers of their interpretations and evaluations." Appealing to a finer figure, "they do not follow the author as the horse the driver, but as the hunter his chase … ."

The third type of reader (against whom Hesse takes care to caution us because, in his opinion, no one is permanently at that level, and because they actually dissolve culture) is, despite being the highest in the hierarchy, also the most problematic:

> Tiene tanta personalidad, es tan él mismo que se enfrenta con completa libertad a su lectura. No pretende cultivarse, ni distraerse, no utiliza un libro de manera

> distinta que cualquier otro objeto del mundo, para él es punto de partida y estímulo. En el fondo le da igual lo que lee. No lee al filósofo para creerle, para adoptar sus teorías o para atacarlas o criticarlas, no lee al poeta para que le interprete el mundo. El mismo se lo interpreta. Es, en cierto modo, completamente niño. Juega con todo y desde un cierto punto de vista, nada es más fecundo y productivo que jugar con todo. Cuando este lector encuentra en un libro una sentencia hermosa, una sabiduría, una verdad, prueba antes que nada volverla del revés. Desde hace tiempo sabe que cada opinión es un polo con otro polo opuesto, tan bueno como él. Es un niño porque valora el pensamiento asociativo, aunque también conoce el otro. Y así este lector, o más bien todos nosotros en el momento en que alcanzamos este grado, podemos leer todo lo que queramos, una novela, una gramática, un horario de trenes, pruebas de imprenta. En el momento en que nuestra fantasía y capacidad de asociación alcanzan su máxima altura no leemos ya lo que tenemos delante, escrito sobre el papel, nadamos llevados por la corriente de sugerencias e ideas que recibimos.

Unlike Hesse, for whom the last stage of reading is both desired and a place fraught with dangers – where reading does not mean or provide anything more than the stimulus for infinite randomized games with the contents of culture – Lezama's (1977) reader behaves as an initiator and a guardian of knowledge. On the one hand, this is because the type of reading Lezama imagines is only possible under the guidance of a teacher; on the other, it is because – as Editabunda also teaches Fronesis – for the reader of the third stage, the aporetic reader, "any interruption or breakdown in communication happens as if to make it possible for us to live out our true enigma." Beyond the games or linkages between distant texts, Lezama's aporetic reader is a traveller to inner depths, a discoverer of himself, who is purified in the process.

Hypertext writing

When hypertext literary writing began to spread in the late 1980s, the authors and theorists of the new medium assured us that we were at the threshold of a political revolution in reading/writing: for the first time in the history of receiving texts it would be possible for the reader to design the text. Given that the materials would offer a huge range of possibilities, and that no two readings of the same hypertext are alike – every reader who entered the labyrinth could choose their own text – we supposed we had arrived at a space of freedom and emancipation. If one page, for example, presents ten links to different areas of the global text, and these ten areas all have links to other parts of the text, and so on, every reader has the ability to escape fixity or authoritarianism and design their own way of reading. Since there is little statistical chance that two people will read in exactly the same order, readers will never be reading the same book, especially when the number of links is high. This led to a kind of utopia in which hypertext turned out to be the space of true freedom, perhaps the only cultural product that would transfer the power from the hands of the author to that traditionally dispossessed figure: the reader. No more orders, only the freedom to choose paths, to become involved in the fabrication of the document. However, at least two limits restrict that freedom and cannot be avoided. The first is the fact that the links are finite because it is the same document that serves as a base. The second is that since the producer of the text makes the links, a new role is introduced, one we could call "the guardian." A link connects two nodes, but a guardian prevents certain linkages

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and, according to this new approach, the text begins to function as a kind of Chinese box with someone dictating how you navigate it. In practical terms, if you're reading, say, the third chapter of a work, and you have ten chances to continue, the guardian only lets you follow two. I hope that my clarification convinces you that instead of a chaotic place or anarchic freedom, a hypertext is a game between reader and author, a mathematical equation that will be solved according to the mastery of one and the training of the other – much in the way that literature has always worked.

Although the starting point of this conversation was the hypertext and its potential for literature, "hypermedia" presents the possibility of a new mode of artistic and literary production, one that requires the integrated qualities of a writer, a musician, a composer, an artist, a cartoonist, and even a choreographer. It allows the creation of a synthetic art that – with the possibilities for non-sequential storytelling and for manipulating graphics and sound provided by computers – is unlike anything we have known. In a sense, we live in a time where the technological possibilities offered us are greater than our ability to use them. We are unable to translate textual materials like these to the world of books. We should hesitate to call it "text" unless we accept that all cultural production is legible and that the whole world is just one huge text. Perhaps we have yet to reach the point where technology has been fully integrated into our lives or those of our children. In fact, not even the first generation of people whose whole lives were spent in a digital space has passed; hardly any adults were born into social environments where the computer and its applications were a normal part of life. The extension of computing in today's world is such, and it has so much power, that we often forget that we are dealing with practices that did not even exist a little over a decade ago.

In 1994, a symposium was held at the University of San Marino called "The Future of the Book." Two years later, the University of California Press published a book of essays from the conference, with an afterword by Umberto Eco (Nunberg, 1996). During this symposium, Eco's confidence in the book was total. He said, "the book was the most perfect machine for the transmission of knowledge ever invented." The main advantage that the famous Italian thinker saw in the book was its quite handy form, because, well, you can carry it in your pocket. A machine, on the other hand, has a screen that, among other things, is extremely annoying to the eyes. Eco added, "I spend 12 hours sitting in front of the screen and I wake up with eyes like two soccer balls." However, when the Argentinean newspaper *Clarín* interviewed Eco on the phenomenon of books and hypertext writing, it seems that he understood more of what we are dealing with. He then said that the only real threat to the world of books is the hypertext, and added there is nothing left to do but wait for both forms of writing to coexist. Exaggerating the thesis – based on the break between sequential and non-sequential readings, between traditional and literary hypertext – he imagines that we will soon speak of a before and after in regards to libraries and writing.

All well said, but now we must think about the direct relationship between new information technologies, reading and writing, and the format of the book. The difference between a sequential and a non-sequential structure is not the only thing that distinguishes traditional books from hypertext. The fact that a story can, in principle, be accessed from anywhere subverts any notion of "highlight" or "privileged

entry" to the text, and the same can be said of the possibility that each reader has to make their own path through the material. Both imply that the higher the number of hyperlinks, the lower the possibility of two identical readings of the same text. In other words, particular books, fixed and closed, would cease to exist, to be replaced by a mutable environment where the key would be a rewarding reading experience established in permanent interaction with the content. In fact, without resorting to "bookmarks" to trace the path followed in a first reading, we would not even be able to have an exact rereading.

To make matters worse, even though some literary hypertexts lend themselves to a closed reading (in the sense of proposing a narrative tour with a particular goal), in others, especially in the case of those poetic in character, ends are less relevant than the experience itself, and it is the reader who must decide when to stop reading. In addition, a hypertext can be designed in such a way that it demands or includes the possibility for the reader to dialogue with the material by adding to the writing, that is, modifying the written text with small changes, mutations, or the inclusion of whole chapters. A written document crafted as such would come to be the joint work of the author and the reader/transformer. But if several readers change the original material, and if all these versions find themselves in a fixed spot (for example, on a website or in digital storage), and if in the future more stable (though equally open to transformation) readings emerge from these versions, it would be very difficult to decide who the author is and what original is**.** (What might occur, for example, if the text has upset a larger aesthetic value that the primary material?). This instability is one of the main points of contention in the debate about hypertext – the debate about the inherent value of this new way of writing and reading that produces products that are analyzed as aesthetic goods – and has led to some elaborations on the supposed principles of digital storytelling.

Michael Joyce (1987) wrote in his hypertext novel, *Afternoon, a Story*, about the appropriate time to finish reading a literary hypertext. To paraphrase: when the story no longer progresses, when you are turning in circles, or when you get bored of its routes, there is the end of your reading experience, "in fiction, all ends are suspect." It is the reader who decides when the reading experience, not the story, is complete. The criterion for the decision is not the fulfillment of the action, but the fact that the story is going nowhere or the reader has become bored.

Meanwhile, in the first paragraph of *Reseña de siete ensayos de Stuart Moulthrop* (dedicated to Moulthrop's work on hypertext and the politics of interpretation), Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez, a professor at the Universidad Javeriana, writes:

> Moulthrop propone tres planteamientos con el ánimo de ir construyendo una "teoría social del hipertexto". La primera tiene que ver con la definición de hipertexto como sistema y no como objeto, lo cual lo aleja de la lógica del libro impreso. La segunda es la afirmación de que el hipertexto es un medio que debe facilitar la escritura además de la lectura, ya que la función del sistema hipertextual no es solamente diseminar información, sino mejorar las condiciones en que la gente puede intercambiar, desarrollar y evaluar ideas. Finalmente el hipertexto debe ser plural, debe convertirse en una red

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heterogénea de espacios textuales, cuya organización se podría hacer a través de zonas separadas del discurso, de manera que haya una mejor identificación de la información y por tanto un más rápido acceso, teniendo cuidado de que la división por zonas no constituya una atomización o un favorecimiento a determinados grupos.

Moulthrop en este artículo ya prevé el efecto desestabilizador del hipertexto y las luchas intelectuales que ocasiona en la medida en que no solo promueve la abundancia de nexos textuales sino que además cambia el uso social de estos nexos, forzando la reformulación de nuestras nociones de autoridad intelectual.

It is worthwhile to summarize, speaking now from the perspective of the writer, everything that makes a hypertext – for me – so different from a traditional text, so different that I can understand working with it as a new kind of writing and reading literature:

- The first major difference is that I can write a text whose development (and whose reading) is not sequential; that is, at any time of the writing/reading I can offer several choices for continuity without any hierarchical difference between them (you can choose any path).
- Each of these options provides a path of continuity to the text, which in turn, could also have different beginnings without hierarchical differences; that is, you can start reading at different points (after which, at any time during the writing, I can offer several options for continuity).
- Indeed the text can have multiple endings, all equally valid.
- Reading the full text – as if by occupying a specific number of pages and demanding an amount of time it contains some transcendental truth – is not even required. Instead, the true literary hypertext is a game, a contract between writing/reading during which the main thing is the flow of writing/reading.
- We can, we even want to, return to a starting point and restart again and again.
- I can leave open (for collaboration) aspects of my text or all of it. Thus, depending on what I (as author) plan during the act of writing/implementation, it is possible that either now or in twenty years, myself or any of the readers can change parts of the stories, be expelled from them, or programmatically "remake" the entire text. I can even introduce auto-poetic possibilities into the text.
- Indeed it is difficult to keep talking and writing text when dealing with a product that is potentially a textual-audiovisual document; that is, a written text or literary work that integrates sound elements (environment noises, voices, or music) and visual elements (still or moving images) into its narrative progression and construction of meaning. For such integrations, in addition to all the technical and compositional aspects of writing, we must obviously follow the proper ordinances of recording and film editing, as well as those of composition and sound editing.
- What if the "genetic" text progression turned out to be the text itself, not as an eccentric act or exhibitionism, but as a sincere desire to connect with readers in a more fragile way – on a more emotional level where you do not yet know the final solution to a creative crossroads? An example: Ezra Pound's famous pruning of half of T.S. Eliot's original poem "The Waste Land," which has

become – among scholars – almost as famous a document as the final version of the poem itself. In order to appreciate the process of writing text today, we need specialized editions that give us access to genetic text scrolling, but what if it were possible with only a word processor? What if the author not only kept the final text, but also all the discards, variations, changes, comments from friends, etc., (as is now possible with "track changes," for example, in Microsoft Word)? And still further, what if we find authors who decide that this whole area, usually hidden, is also part of the text – that there is no strictly final text, that it encompasses all the madness, doubts, indecision, tantrums, and intuitions? Can I then show, stage – as in the theatre – the moment when an idea finds itself, stumbles, hits, or fights against its opposite(s)?

- Then, having arrived at this point, can I choose not only between the range of offers for storylines within a text, but also different readings according to different interpretations? A philosophical treatise, for example, would not only include the doubts of the philosopher – the times when he had to run to the library and review all of Plato because he did not know how to proceed, or when he called a friend and said, "I think what I am writing is trash," and instead of criticism he received a word of encouragement that gave him the will to continue and finish – but different levels of understanding, as if the worst parts of the texts were also a sort of "play."
- Even if we know that textual-audiovisual documents have to be traversed in compulsory mode, on an electronic screen (computer, tablet, phone, etc.), the concept of a screen-as-surface allows for an extra element since the screen could be public, not private. The idea of public display (either with electronic paper or by using projectors) implies that we can then imagine writing/reading textual-audiovisual documents as a kind of performance in urban public spaces, which are not even equipped for this yet. When we talk about reading textual-audiovisual documents in a public space, we mean a type of reading paradoxically similar to what happens when we find ourselves in an artistic work designed as an immersive environment. In this case, reading would be as much reading (letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, or whole texts) as decoding strings of signs, or simply traversing in between the narrative designs emanating from those screens as we walk the city, talking to their interpellations, and capturing their meanings.

Conclusion

Coming to a close, I must clarify that I know perfectly well that many of the aspects that make me feel enthusiastic about literary hypertext today are considered marginal, rare, or sterile, but we cannot calculate what will happen with reading/writing in a society where all living humans are digital natives (say in 200 years). Furthermore, if we consider the intrinsic logic manifested by the intense amount of research dedicated to creating hardware and software and developing it for the user, we must agree that there is an increasing tendency to simplify. In other words, it is increasingly possible to include much more functionality in machines, which, at the same time, are becoming more user-friendly. This allows us to assume that in 200 years, machines will be considered quite simple for digital natives, at least on a basic level, for operations that still seem complex to us today, such as sound editing or assembling video. Said

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otherwise, the management of audiovisual text will be equivalent to our learning to read today.

In 1965, during the Vigésima Conferencia Nacional de la Association for Computing Machinery, a young professor named Theodore Nelson read a paper entitled "A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate," and uttered what would become one of the founding phrases of a number of the applications that you can now use on the computer: "Let me introduce the word 'hypertext' to mean a body of pictorial or written material interconnected in such a complex way that cannot conveniently be presented or represented on paper." In 2005, Nelson wrote to someone inviting him to do a survey about new technologies and cinema. The man replied that he was grateful for the invitation, but he had work to do for the next hundred years. The great lesson to be learned from this episode is that we work for a future in which, due to the short duration of human life, we will not exist. I am the fool who wrote that message, which I should still have on some hard disk or DVD), and I regret having distracted, even if it was just for a second, the master from his thoughts. I stand in his shadow.

Everything I have said here speaks of the act of reading as a manifestation of freedom. In a 1941 article, in connection with the death of Joyce, Lezama writes:

> Si él había afirmado que a su obra le había dedicado su vida, y que por lo tanto reclamaba que el lector le entregara su vida también, deseémosle ese tercer lector capaz de jugarse su vida en una lectura …

Beyond the World Wide Web, Twitter, email, short message service (SMS), and any other form of transmission that may appear, may we be the ones to write the texts that deserve such loyalty.

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