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Radical Continuities: Hypertextual Links to a Textual Past

Summary: When we say multimedia – whether old or new – we mean a combination of words and images, spectacle and sound, three-dimensional spatiality and temporality. One of the more curious – though by now one of the most common – cases and phenomena of "multimediality" is the hypertext. It has become an essential feature of computer applications, especially the world wide web. No matter how modern and how advanced it looks at first sight, as I shall point out, its roots reach back far in the pre-electronic textual past. – In my present paper I shall concentrate on that feature of hypertext – and its predecessors – that express an age-old dissatisfaction with the rigid linearity of the written text. The ideological implications of this dissatisfaction will be also briefly assessed.

Zusammenfassung: Wenn man "Multimedia" sagt – egal ob alt oder neu –, meint man eine Kombination von Worten und Bildern, von Darbietung und Laut, von dreidimensionaler Räumlichkeit und Zeitlichkeit. Eines der interessantesten – aber zur Zeit auch gewöhnlichsten – Beispiele der "Multimedialität" ist der Hypertext. Er ist zu einem wesentlichen Kennzeichen von informatischen Anwendungsprogrammen geworden, besonders im Falle des Netzes (World Wide Web). Egal wie modern und wie fortgeschritten der Hypertext auf den ersten Blick aussehen mag, seine Wurzeln reichen, wie ich hier nachweisen möchte, weit zurück in die prä-elektronische textuale Vergangenheit. In meinem Artikel werde ich mich auf jenes Merkmal des Hypertextes – und auch seiner Vorgängern – konzentrieren, das eine uralte Unzufriedenheit mit der starren Linearität des schriftlichen Textes ausdrückt. Die ideologischen Bedeutungen dieser Unzufriedenheit werden ebenfalls kurz besprochen.

When we say multi-media – whether old or new – we mean a combination of words and images, spectacle and sound, three-dimensional spatiality and temporality. One of the more curious – though by now one of the most common – cases and phenomena of multimediality is the *hypertext*. It has become an essential feature of computer applications, especially the world wide web. No matter how modern and how advanced it looks at first sight, as I shall point out, its roots reach back far in the pre-electronic text epoch.

If we try to define or, at least, describe hypertext, we have to highlight two aspects, both of which refer to textual/pictorial combinations that appear there. The simpler case is when images – thanks to the capabilities of computer technology – are inserted in the text in a new, mobile way. The second aspect is the concept of the text and/or the reading process as a 3D spatial object as opposed to a simple time-sequential operation. As we know very well, in such 'three dimensional' texts readers can jump from one significant unit to another without restricting themselves to a chronological reading procedure. From my present, ideology-oriented vantage point the most interesting fact is that in both cases one can detect the expression of an age-old dissatisfaction with the linearity of texts and the desire to subvert its rigid time-space structure.

In my present paper I shall concentrate on this latter aspect, together with its ideological and political implications. My survey is primarily based on George P. Landow's *Hypertext* (1997[1992]), complemented by other critical reflections on hypertext, by works of poststructuralist criticism, and, lastly, by examples of devices invented as products of the culture of books since the early modern era.

From text to hypertext

Let us begin by looking at the quantitative and qualitative changes that have contributed to the emergence of hypertext from 'ordinary' text. If we examine the idea and the technology of hypertext, we find that its basic foundations are old and rather conventional, at least in the sense that they had already appeared in book technology. As far back as the time of medieval codices we see a great variety of ways to combine text with images and devices that help the shifting from one aspect to another. In the latter category one should recall running heads and pointers most commonly appearing in encyclopedias or referenced Bible editions.

The first step toward hypertext seems just a quantitative change on a mega-scale. Computer technology allows the electronic linking of multiple parallel texts/images, and these electronic links actually map a text's internal and external allusions and references. Consequently, we can turn intertextuality into a graphic layout.

The second step, although it logically follows from the first, has more far-reaching consequences. As hypertextual reading becomes a natural habit, it influences and in the long run changes not only cognitive techniques and epistemological classifications but ultimately our general world picture, as well.

In order to assess the colossal significance of this methodological paradigm shift it is enough to remember the similarly significant turning points that led from orality to written culture, or, later, from manuscript culture to the age of print. Recalling just the latter: it has been described how the slow, intensive and loud reading of manuscripts gave way to quick, extensive and silent reading with the advent of printed texts (on orality, literacy and the shift between the two see Cavallo/Chartier 1997; Goody 1987; LeGoff 1977; Ong 1982; and Vansina 1965; on the changes in reading techniques see Ortega y Gasset 1959; Poulet 1969; Saenger 1987).

I am suggesting that we observe a comparable paradigm shift with the rise of hypertext. Hypertext reading is contrary to linear, discursive and logic-based explication which reveals the content or argument step by step in a sequential order. Since hypertext reading permits arbitrary jumps in the text, it results in an even more extensive information exchange than with the printed text. At the same time, it contributes to the fragmentation of texts within a steady flow of information. This fragmentation is by no means exclusive to hypertext in postmodern culture. In fact, we can say that hypertext has only adapted itself to the general features of our contemporary multimedial culture which can be instructively demonstrated by the 'revolutionary structure overhaul' of MTV, or Music Television (on the contextualization of hypertext in a multimedial cultural system see Löser 1999). As we all remember, a few years ago MTV shocked viewers by bombarding them with short, fragmented video clips, thus creating a new television genre. If one, however, digs deeper among the inspiring motivations to create such video clips, two phenomena come in mind.

The first is related to the general psychology of postmodern subjects who, bombarded by an extensive range of superficial information while jumping from topic to topic, can hardly focus their attention on the same thing for a

long time. The other is simply a technical invention. We can safely say that the remote control units of television sets that have conquered the world from the 1970s onward have proved to be the perfect device to satisfy the needs of the impatient cultural consumers by allowing them to 'zap' from one source of information to another. At this point we can add that the remote control is not only an aid to adapt the information source to the intellectual state and psychology of the viewer, it is also a suitable technical accessory as well as a powerful symbol to demonstrate how the addressee overcomes the addresser and becomes 'the master' (and in another sense, of course, 'the slave') of the message.

Viewed critically, hypertext in reading is the equivalent of the TV remote control that institutionalizes readers to master the text and exercises their power over it by zapping from one component to another at their own discretion. Hypertext and its promoted 'zapping technique' have naturally led to the reorganization of the text in terms of its argumentation and rhetoric. Hypertext links open up the text, and in this framework the notions of 'beginning' and 'ending' have to be redefined. As Landow emphasizes, the boundaries of hypertext are increasingly difficult to establish (1997: 64-75).

The status of the author

The rise of hypertext has enforced the redefinition of not only the organizational units of the text, but also of the author, the reader, and the narrative itself. As for the author, hypertext in the long run erodes the self. As the text appears to be less and less finite, the integrity of the author also disappears. It seems that this process had already started with the advent of word processing machines. Even without hypertext, the very possibility of unlimited rewriting (without the previously inhibitive physical effort of copying, or retyping) actually generates an urge for rewriting again and again, thus turning the text into an unfinished and unfinishable venture. The product (text) has transmuted into process (writing). There are many anecdotes about authors who, when first acquiring their word-processing machines in the 1980s, became (at least temporarily) unable to finish anything according to their previous habits of writing, because the capabilities of the machine – instead of providing them with a strong grip on the text – have actually led to uncertainties, undecidedness, and an erosion of their self-identification (see Bolter 1990).

This phenomenon is very interesting and would need further investigation in a wider context of the present information-technological revolution. It is enough to think of the capabilities of photocopy machines, scanners, character-recognizing software and the whole arsenal of virtual-reality-generating devices. In these very complex processes collaborative writing emerges more characteristically than ever before: the text bears the virtual presence of all authors (correctors, reviewers, editors – see "Hypertext and Theories of Scholarly Editing" in Landow 1997: 68-73) who contribute to this material.

Hypertext makes this collaborative nature of authorship graphically emphasized, since nothing is easier than adding a new hyperlink to a text, or linking hundreds and thousands of texts to our own writing on the world wide web. But again I would like to point out, that hypertext represents only the latest and most dramatic development. The ambition for collaborative writing and text-linking goes back as far as to the beginnings of orality, then it continued in manuscript and printed culture in the form of marginal notes, paratexts, editorial apparatus and other devices that allowed the presence of an author in the text of another (on strategies of authoring and writing in the pre-computer age see Chartier 1992, especially the following chapters: "L'ordre des livres," 7-13; "Bibliothèques sans murs," 69-95; on general questions of paratext see Genette 1982 and 1997).

The reconfiguration of narratives: story into plot

Perhaps nowhere else can one see the powerful potential of hypertext than in the reconfiguration of narratives (cf. Landow 1997: 178-215). Arbitrary hypertextual jumps in a story seem to be in diametrical opposition with Aristotle's concept of plot: "a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end" (*Poetics* 50b[27], in Aristotle 1943: 426). Furthermore, he said:

> Of all plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot "episodic" in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence. Bad poets compose such pieces by their own fault, good poets, to please the players. [...] They stretch the plot beyond its capacity, and are often forced to break the natural continuity (*ibid.* 428).

These observations, however, do not mean that the literary ideal of narration would be a simple and chronological plot. In fact, literary studies differentiate plot from story suggesting that the former is considered to be the organized and structured presentation of the latter. Aristotle himself acknowledged:

Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist of having a single man as the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life which cannot be reduced to unity (*ibid.* 427).

The history of narrative literary genres seems, from the beginning, to be a conscious effort to subvert the linearity of texts through a stockpile of ever-developing devices to achieve this goal. One can go back to classical epic poems, such as Homer and Virgil who employed the *in medias res* structure to jump into the middle of the story and from there offering flashbacks and recollections. The coordinated, multiple plots of Renaissance epics, such as Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* or Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* further developed this technique only to be surpassed by the monumental, dynamically subordinated time sequences of Tasso's and Milton's Baroque epics (on the varieties of classical and early modern plot structuring see Parker 1979).

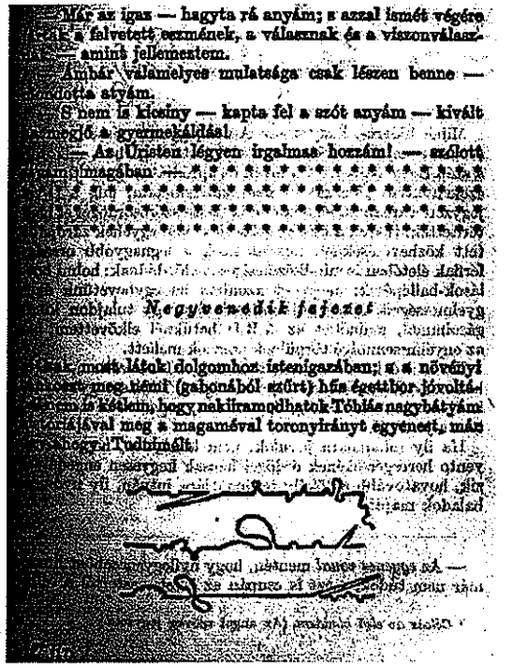


Fig. 1

The new narrative, the novel, since its rise in the 18th century has not ever stopped to explore the limits of the complication and disintegration of the unified story. One of its first masters, Lawrence Sterne, proved to be ingenious in doing so in *Tristram Shandy*. In that novel he even offered a graphic diagram showing the intricate non-linearity of his narration (*Fig. 1:* a page from the Hungarian edition). The page is not only surprising because of the diagram, but because of other typographical features (empty lines, series of asterisks, etc.) which all contributed to Sterne's program to turn the printed page into a visually engaging *Gesamtkunstwerk* effect.

Sterne in many ways is considered to be the forerunner of twentieth-century modernist fiction, the archetypal master of which was James Joyce. With Joyce, the modern dissatisfaction with the linearity of texts introduced cyclical sequences in plots, as *Finnegan's Wake* testifies, the last sentence of which repeats the first sentence of the novel. Postmodern fiction went even further: from the 1960s onward we have been getting used to completely randomized plot sequences. It is easy to create such a plot with the help of a computer, especially using hypertext jumps, but in the pre-computer age writers also invented structures that randomized the reading sequence. Two famous models are the boxed novel and the encyclopedia novel (on "Quasi Hypertextuality in Print Texts" see Landow 1997: 182ff.).

The first type can be illustrated by B.S. Johnson's boxed novel, *The Unfortunates* (1969), in which the chapters are printed in separate booklets all of them neatly packed in a box. The reader then can set up a reading sequence by rearranging the chapters and this, of course, can any time be changed, too. Although Johnson's work has been curiously overlooked by Landow, he has discussed the encyclopedia novel, which turned up in the 1980s. Best known among them is Milorad Pavic's *Khazar Dictionary* (1984, briefly mentioned in Landow 1997: 188), in which various pieces of information, anecdotes, legends and other story elements are arranged into entries of a dictionary. The reading order in this case is even more randomizable than in Johnson's boxed novel. An interesting Hungarian example of the encyclopedia novel is Ferenc Temesi's *Por* (*Dust*, 1986) which offers a comprehensive story of a whole city (Szeged) through thousands of fragmented pieces of information (again from historical accounts to personal memories and anecdotes) in the form of a giant, two-volume encyclopedia of alphabetically ordered entries.

The randomized reading order donates the reader the experience of being a/the author! This program is stretched *ad absurdum* by the hypertext technology. As Robert Coover, the American minimalist writer, said,

[t]he hypertextual space is now multidimensional and theoretically infinite, with an equally infinite set of possible network linkages, either programmed, fixed, or variable, or random, or both (quoted by Landow 1997: 184).

The politics of hypertext

It is very instructive to look at those consequences of the technological capabilities of hypertext that make up for the ideology and politics of these randomized texts. As Landow has clearly pointed out: hypertext is basically democratic (1997: 285). It provides the reader with great autonomy in establishing the reading order as well as even allowing additions or 'new links' to the text. Thus the reader literally becomes a co-author to various degrees. These characteristics of hypertext are well matched to the needs of the so called 'conversational society' (Richard Rorty, see 1979: 377ff.) that started rising just a few decades ago in the so-called postmodern cultural era.

We cannot fail to notice to what extent the technological development and social changes have been mutually affecting and inspiring each other. In television, for example, we have been witnessing the ever growing role of the viewer: flexible soap operas and talk shows have grown into dialogical discussion programs and 'reality' shows. These new genres have been boosted by the new technical capabilities of telecommunication and certainly continue to utilize those very consciously; at the same time, the transformation of Western democratic society into 'conversational society' has fostered those technical inventions by the force of imperative social need and demand.

Hypertext has perfectly fitted itself into this social and ideological framework. Hypertext has a built-in bias against 'hypostatization' and against privileged descriptions. As poststructuralist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty have emphasized: the conversational society has an edifying philosophy: to keep the conversation going rather than to find an objective truth (on hypertext and poststructuralist critical theories see Landow 1997: 33-45, 267-85; and many of the essays in Landow 1994).

Let us briefly review some of the important implications of the rise of hypertext in some specific areas of social dialogue. First of all, one has to recognize the radical changes that hypertext can induce in education, including the teaching of literature. For millennia, education has been based on sequential reading and the analytical interpretations of the reading materials. The new

style of information flow, the 'zapping,' the fragmented but very extensive multimedial experiences are simply changing the psychology, even the physiology of the younger generations, in such a way that education cannot help but take these changes into consideration.

Not only the teaching materials are changing but the teacher-student relationship, too. The old style 'take home' essays are gradually being replaced by interactive collaborative work at computer keyboards and screens, and hypertextual techniques play a key role in these exercises. These changes, of course, are not simply surface reconfiguration but they vitally pertain to the backbone elements of human education: the canon and the curriculum.

The emerging new technology not only backs ideological changes, it also radically subverts old ideologies. Hypertext dramatically raises the question: who controls the text? As Paul Saenger pointed out: "At 14th-century universities private silent reading was forbidden in the classroom" – for obvious ideological reasons (Saenger 1987: 155; commented by Landow 1997: 268). No matter how enthusiastic teachers of the humanities sometimes become about the new technology, it is also often seen by educators as something dangerous because it threatens the established order of canons, methods of instruction, and, last but not least, the bread and butter of educators.

The question "Who controls the text?" refers to a number of diverse factors and phenomena. Technology always empowers somebody through the possession, the utilization and the accessability of that technology. It is not by chance that socialist and communist regimes have always been so afraid of technology spreading uncontrolled among their population. Even as late as in the 1980s one could see such extreme examples how the Soviet Union curbed the sale of satellite dishes, or how Nicolaie Ceauşescu's Romania obliged her citizens possessing mechanical typewriters to register them at the police, in case a writing sample had to be identified for political reasons. I recall an American university professor friend of mine who in 1985 said: Ronald Reagan's intention to dismantle communism would be best served by distributing free computers among the citizens of the socialist countries. The flow of uncontrolled information would soon undermine those regimes without any outer military or economic-financial action. And indeed, this is what happened: the digital revolution represented by satellite TV networks, video machines, computers and the world wide web has greatly contributed to the collapse of state socialism which could not maintain its false appearances and propaganda slogans any more.

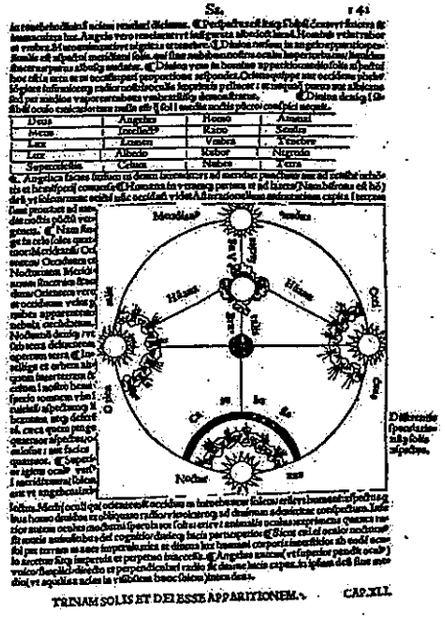
Hypertext and critical theory

One of George Landow's most important findings is the diagnosis, how hypertextual technology and (post)modern critical theory go hand in hand. As we know, poststructuralist literary and cultural theory has brought about a major critical paradigm shift which has undermined the fixed notions of author, meaning and existence of cultural representations (including literary texts). Instead, a pragmatic turn has lead to the realization of the importance of the interpretive community and the purposes for which that community uses the representations in question. Poststructuralist theorists, such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Stanley Fish, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Frederick Jameson, Edward Said and others have taught us to abandon our conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy and linearity – as opposed to multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks. These are terms directly related to computer technology and the capabilities of hypertext. In cultural theory these notions are completed by intertextuality, multivocality and de-centeredness, the realizations of which can also be found in the logic of hypertextual linkages (further comments and bibliography on hypertext and critical theory in Némedi 2001).

The archetypal hypertext

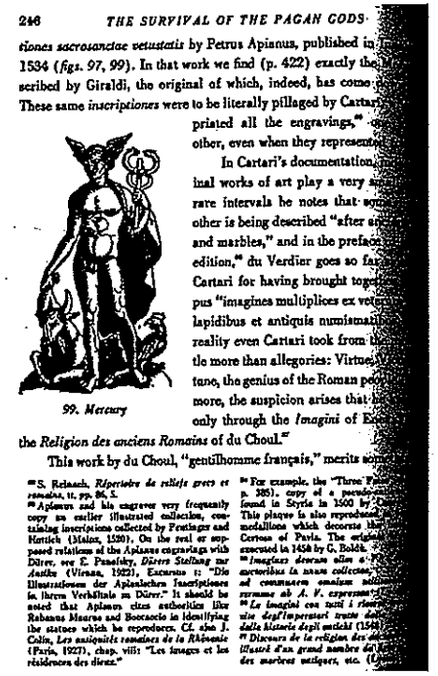
All this seems very modern and contemporary but, as I have pointed out, the dissatisfaction with the linearity of the text is very ancient, and efforts to subvert this rigid structure are age-old. While Landow has paid attention to "quasi hypertextuality" in literary works, he has not examined those structures of handwritten and printed texts that can be considered as 'archetypal hypertextuality.'

In fact, the processing and arranging of texts in order to achieve the best possible efficiency of usage have always produced 'revolutionary' devices to subvert textual linearity – naturally, always on the level of available technology. Until the advent of computers these possibilities were limited, but we have ample evidence about how the written and printed text was reconfigured on the page to break up linearity and foster multiple cognitive processes. Let us see a few examples of these early 'archetypal hypertext' functions.



TRINAM SOLIS ET DEI ESSE APPARITIONEM. CAP. XLI.

Fig. 2



246 THE SURVIVAL OF THE PAGAN GODS

99. Mercury

Fig. 3

Fig. 2 and *3* show very complex pages. The first is from an early print, Charles de Bouelles' *Liber de intellectu* (Paris 1510), which combines the following interrelated systems of information: 1) the main text to be read linearly; 2) a table, condensing examples to illustrate the material; 3) a picture (including also some verbal elements), illustrating the text in a different way; 4) a gloss attached to the picture; 5) a footer at the bottom of the page to remind of the theme of the current chapter; 6) page numbering to orientate about the location in the body of the book. Until recently these devices – originally worked out already in medieval handwritten manuscripts – have not changed a lot. In a modern scholarly book we find a very similar apparatus to create multiple cognitive effects. *Fig. 3* reproduces a page from Jean Seznec's *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (1972[1953]) which mixes 1) the main text; 2) an illustration; 3) a reference in the text drawing attention to the illustration; 4) a caption to the illustration; 5) footnote numbers in the text to direct the attention to a differ-

ent section of the page; 6) footnotes at the bottom of the page (with corresponding note numbers); 7) a reference in the text directing attention to a different page in the book; 8) running head; 9) page number.

Fig. 4

Pointers have been another favorite device to trigger 'hypertextual jumps' in a (printed or handwritten) book. Naturally, no encyclopedia or dictionary could be imagined without some pointer system. An old, graphically pleasant example is a pointing human hand as we can see it in an old Hungarian calendar from the 17th century (see *Fig. 4*).

Fig. 5 and *6* show yet another type of printable and graphically arranged vehicle which assists multiple attention and requires non-linear reading. It is the kind of table of contents in a diagrammatic form so popular in the book

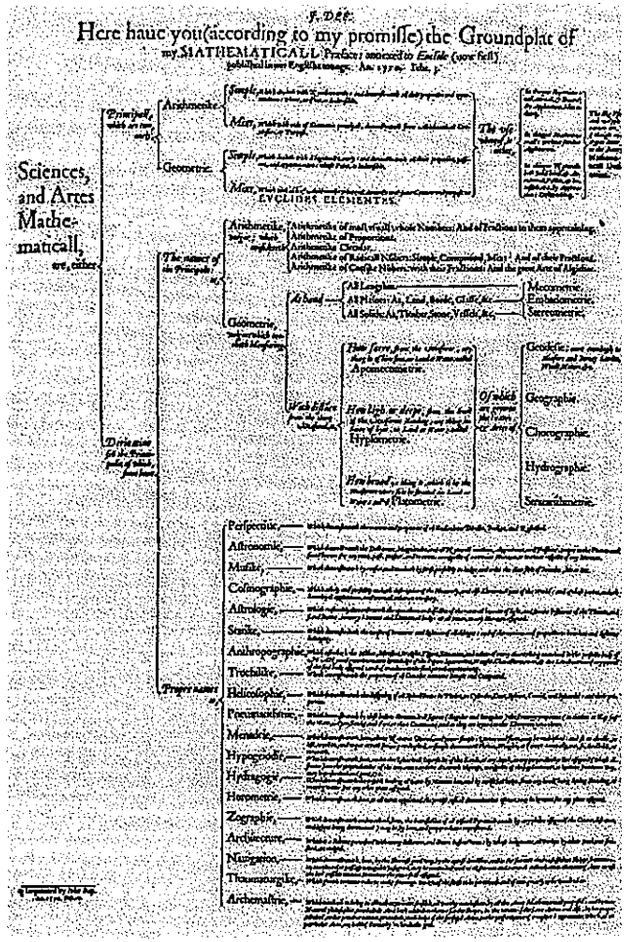


Fig. 5

culture of the 16th and 17th centuries. These diagrams were usually employed to explain the systematization or division of a subject, including the relationship of parts within a larger unit to each other. *Fig. 5* illustrates the division of mathematical sciences from John Dee's "Praeface" to Euclid's *Elements* (London 1570); *Fig. 6* is reproduced from a 17th-century Hungarian preacher-rhetorician's book to illustrate the gathering and arranging of materials for a sermon.


DOCE
PRÆDICARE, &c.
seu
METHODUS
CONCIONANDI
secundùm Artem.
TABULA I.
In Sacra secundùm Artem Concione, in genere attendenda
sunt, ejus idem Præparatio, ejus Promulgatio.
PRÆPARATIO CONCIONIS.
Præparatio fit per I. Preces. II. Formationem. III. Impressionem.
§ I. De Præparatione per Preces.
Preces sunt vel
Privatæ, quæ domi habendæ, ut Deus clavem intelligentiæ, efficaciamq; Spiritûs adjiciat sermoni promulgando.
Publicæ in coetu Ecclesiastico, quarum tum
Materia, sunt generalia quibus verbi & prædicationis.
finis
Usus
Indigentia
Indignitas
officium
gratiosa Dei promiss.
nostra
Forma, cujus respectu debent esse non
Battologicæ
Nimis prolixæ,
exsperantes
sed
pio zelo plenæ
oculis & manibus
ad cœli elevatis vel alia
conveniente gestu proditæ
Fuit harum est, ut excitari possint animi omnium ad voluntatem DEI humiliter
intendam & fideliter observandam.
§ II. De Præparatione per Formationem.
Formatio absolvitur 1. Textûs sumtione. 2. Prologo. 3. Corpore ipso. 4. Conclusione.
CAP. I. De Textu.
Textus ex Canonicis Scripturæ sumendus.
Qui perlegi debet totum atq; totum, lingvis
In quem sunt Commentaria
paucis
copiosis
vulgari
authentica.
CAP.

Fig. 6

Conclusion

I have been arguing in this paper that the very ancient dissatisfaction with the two-dimensional linearity of texts has finally led to the possession of such a tool like hypertext that can almost perfectly transform texts into three-dimensional, decentered, multilinear, non-hierarchical entities. At the same time, these embody the kind of democratic, interpreter-oriented ideal, which is also foregrounded in poststructuralist cultural theories.

I have also argued that hypertext has brought to completion the ambition and program that had already been experimented with in various ways in the pre-computerized era of handwritten and printed books. If we find a convergence between hypertext and postmodern philosophy, it is also possible to recognize similar dialogical relationship between the devices invented for rearranging the printed page and the philosophy, even theology of their period.

The following quotation, written in 1633 by a Spanish Jesuit, Juan Eusebio Nieremberg, refers to a famous poem of Porphyry, glorifying Emperor Constantine (early 4th century AD) that can be considered a strong ideological stance and a magnificent vision of the archetypal hypertext:

> The panegyric which the Poet Porphyry addressed to the Emperor Constantine is most cunning and incomparable. This panegyric consists of seventeen most artfully contrived labyrinths, where one verse joins and is knitted together with another in different manners, and the praises of Caesar are celebrated in all parts, by the beginnings, the middles and the ends of the lines, and crosswise, from the first letter of the first line to the last letter of the last line, and then, by combining crosswise the remaining letters of the lines between the first and the last, the second letter of the second line, the third of the third, etc. so as to form a thousand other sentiments in the praise of Caesar. So do I imagine *the world to be a panegyric of God* (Nieremberg, *Oculta filosofia*, quoted by Praz 1964: 19-20 – emphasis mine).

Finishing with a somewhat skeptical note, one should also remind the proponents of hypertext, that no matter how flexible and democratic the hypertextual information is, and no matter how 'zapping abilities' of cognition have developed in recent years, the physiological limits of human beings will continue to incline us to perform reading sequentially in a time flow. The linearity of texts cannot be entirely abandoned and will have to be maintained at least in smaller sections of the text. Landow also reminds us of the possible ambiguous outcomes of 'liberated,' non-sequential, hypertextual reading:

> Hypertext fictions always end, because readings always end, but they can end in fatigue or in a sense of satisfying closure. [...] If individual lexias provide readers with experiences of formal and thematic closure, they can be expected to provide the satisfactions that are requisite to the sense of an ending (1997: 192).

Note

Thanks to Jon Roberts for suggesting the title and for his corrections of the text.

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