

*Who Chooses, What the Reader Reads? (The Cybertextual Perspective)/Kdo izbere, kaj bralec bere? (Kibertekstualna perspektiva)*

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*The utterance and the speech communication (Mikhail Bakhtin)*

Mikhail Bakhtin studied literary phenomena by focusing on the dialogue taking place within and beyond the boundaries of particular literary works. The fundamental element in Bakhtin's theories is "an utterance" (vyskazyvanie)<sup>1</sup>. An utterance is a unit of the speech communication. It is always concrete, undistinguishable from its context of culture and from the context of a particular individual personal situation of the living speaker. In respect to the speech communication as the never ending exchange of utterances structured as dialogue it is constitutively defined by the change of speaking subjects. When a person produces an utterance it is endowed with energy that functions unambiguously on the level of power-knowledge<sup>2</sup>.

*The »normal« publication of a printed book – writing and choosing*

If the boundary between the utterances is the end of the act of enunciation, then the »speaker« of a book is a person, who accepts the responsibility for the published book as a complex utterance that is being read by its readers. To produce this type of a »secondary utterance« three

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<sup>1</sup> It is determined by four characteristics: (i) interchange of speaking subjects, (ii) consummation (it has to be thematically accomplished through the speaker's intention), (iii) expressiveness (speaker's subjective emotional-axiological relation towards the object and meaning of the content of the utterance) and, finally, (iv) the utterance has to be addressed to somebody (a particular addressee is being taken in consideration).

<sup>2</sup> In this sense Bakhtin's utterance corresponds to Foucault's statement (l'énoncé).

institutional subject positions are required: (a) the author, who fixes the textual material on some material medium, e.g. ink on paper, (b) the author-editor, who (critically) reads the prepublication versions of the text and (c) the editor-publisher, who mediates between the »privately« finished text and the existing state of the literary system, its economical and political aspects (both in the broadest meaning of the term). The aforementioned roles can be construed as Foucault's subject positions and can be embodied in a single person, however as activities they necessarily exist separately (e.g. the author funding, publishing and promoting her text). It is usual that an editor after choosing a text for publication influences its modifications, whereby the acts of reading, choosing and (re)writing form a dynamic field of interactions that in the end produces the final textual object<sup>3</sup>, which defines the boundary to its addressee, the reader (by, of course, also anticipating her response).

### ***Scheme of communication in a textual adventure game***

Espen J. Aarseth in his book *Cybertext* uses the terms cybertext and ergodic literature as a theoretical perspective that points to the ways in which dynamic texts construct the versions of text that the reader concretizes in the literary-aesthetic experience (Ingarden). What Aarseth emphasizes with his methods is the crucial difference between on the one hand a text that in its material existence doesn't change and where the readers always read the same letters, and on the other a cybertext, which is a textual machine consisting of (i) textons, an archive of text fragments, (ii) traversal functions, the algorithms regulating its functioning and (iii) scriptons, the elements that the reader actually encounters,

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<sup>3</sup> The material foundation for the literary aesthetic experience in Ingarden's theory of literary art work, the »stratum of linguistic sound formations«.

because the traversal functions selected them from the archive of textons and arranged them in a particular order. Textual adventure game is an example of a single-user cybertext, which is at the same time a game. The user navigates a character (avatar) through labyrinths by means of textual inputs. A typical example of the genre is *Adventure* (1976) by William Crowther and Don Woods<sup>4</sup>.

(Image 1)

The following scheme shows three different levels on which the addressee comes in contact with the cybertext. (In the reading of the book, the reader e.g. reads it and, additionally, may also ponder the ideology of the publishing house.)

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<sup>4</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ADVENT\\_-\\_Crowther\\_Woods.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ADVENT_-_Crowther_Woods.png)> (30. 8. 2009). The first example is *Hunt the Wumpus* (1971) by Gregory Yob.

(Image 2 – The scheme of communication in a textual adventure game)

dialogic existence (subject positions)	points of contact with the utterance	dialogic process of understanding		
READER	scriptons	literary-aesthetic experience (Ingarden)		/
	implicit reader – implicit author: interpretation (mutual influence of text and reader)	active voices (narrators)	voices as objects	
	<i>cybertext</i> »punishes« tmesis (Barthes) <sup>5</sup>	<i>avatar</i> (embodiment of the reader) as a character in a narrative	<i>passive image of the avatar</i>	
GAME PLAYER	- game scriptons - documentation: traversal function, textons	gaming experience		
	<i>implied player – implied creator: playing (user's action, possibility of failure)</i>	<i>intriguee - intrigant</i>	<i>intrigue</i>	<i>ergodic log</i>
		<i>understanding of the game</i>	<i>strategic action (negotiation with the intrigant by means of the game voice and the avatar)</i>	<i>sequence of game states (partial success or failure, »sated desire for closure«)</i>
ERGODIC READER	game algorithms – programmer	critical reflection on the ideology of the game	/	/
	unpredictable »emergent behaviour«, noise, cyborg author, techno-imagination (Flusser)			

<sup>5</sup> A figure of reading. »La tmesè [je] source ou figure du plaisir [...]; elle ne se produit pas à même la structure des langages, mais seulement au moment de leur consommation; l'auteur ne peut la prévoir : il ne peut vouloir écrire ce qu'on ne lira pas« (Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* 20-1).

The scheme integrates reading and game playing. Aarseth uses the term ergodic (from »action« and »path« in Ancient Greek language) to describe the user's actions, decisions that influence the appearance of the text. If in the case of a book the user confronts a static fact of the book and in it the choices of the author and the editor, the user of a textual game »plays« the text - her choices influence the outcome and the progression of reading. It is important to note, that the two activities can not be considered separately, because the gaming aspect modifies the act of reading.

### ***Multiuser discourse***

Singleuser cybertext is an utterance that nevertheless evokes the images of the traditional authorship. What is added are the layers of authorship: the narrative layer, and the gaming layer. (However, the last row of the table points to issues of emergent behaviour that need to be considered separately.) Aarseth describes an interesting early example of the multiuser discourse, the Multi-User Dungeons (MUD), where multiple users are invited not only to play the same game together and to »chat« in order to communicate with each other, but also to build intrigues and narratives in the space of MUD for themselves and other users<sup>6</sup>. Here the authorship radically changes.

Aarseth uses the term »netiquette« to describe the rules that the users participating in a multiuser discourse have to follow in order for the project to function. The duality of the language layer and the game layer of the textual adventure game is replaced by the focus on building a community of users by any means possible.

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. *TinyMUD* by James Aspnes (1989–1990).

### ***Digital communities***

In 2004 the Ars Electronica festival introduced a new category called Digital Communities. In 2007 the parallel Net Vision category (i.e. internet art) was abolished and the new Hybrid Art introduced instead. The Interactive Art as a constant of the festival is less telling, whereas it is important to note that the dividing of the field into not-internet and internet based projects has shifted towards a divide between building of societies and hybridizing of media. The former has in fact included all the works that used the internet as a key ingredient (hybrid art in turn began to compete with the obsolete interactive art). Slogan of this programmatic change was: »the reclaiming of the internet as a social space.<sup>7</sup>« The authorship of a multiuser discourse is thus determined by its effect, the digital community as a new form of society.

### ***Alvar Freude, Dragan Espenschied: Assoziations-Blaster (1999—)***

(Image 3)

An example of a multiuser discourse that constructs a textual experience with literary qualities is *Assoziations-Blaster* by Alvar Freude and Dragan Espenschied. There are two interesting issues to consider. *Assoziations-Blaster*<sup>8</sup> invites the users to write associations on given keywords or even suggest new keywords. A system of control is implemented to maintain literary quality: the user has to show interest in the project in order to be given a privilege to rate other user's texts or to be allowed to add new keywords, which depends on the user's activity. If one writes longer texts, she gains more power to control the project as a whole. A special filter exists, so that the user can avoid reading texts that other users found »worthless«. The second

<sup>7</sup> (Cyberarts 2004 196, Cyberarts 2006 192)

<sup>8</sup> <<http://www.assoziations-blaster.de>> (30. 8. 2009)

interesting point about this particular project is that the German language version of the project successfully builds meaningful streams of textual fragments, whereas the English one is a failure - this points to the importance of the literary and new media art systems in specific language regions for the existence of a new media literary art work such as *Assoziations-Blaster*.

What is needed in the case of a multiuser discourse is to establish a social network that can support it. The personalistic theoretic approach proves to be productive to explain multiple authorship, which involves (a) the author of the system of collaboration, (b) the rules of its functioning that usually need to be constantly under revision (roles of system administrators, a hierarchy of users) and (c) the users that actively participate.

### ***Emergent properties of a cybernetic system?***

The emergentist paradigm from the sciences is often used to explain the features in new media objects that the programmer of the algorithms hasn't foreseen. However, the emergentism in the field of computation could not be considered in its »strong«, ontological aspect but only in the »weak« epistemological meaning of the term. In addition, the homogeneous continuation of knowledge from physics to chemistry to biology and beyond, which follows the scientific paradigm (e.g. the nonreductive physicalism), is inappropriate for describing the unusual artistic use of language, because there is no conceptual foundation to do it. In his theoretical analysis of a »poetry automaton« (*Poesie-Automat*) Hans Magnus Enzensberger attempts to bridge the gap between primary structure of language and secondary poetic structure - which opposes the primary one - with a compromise. Nevertheless,

art, as a rule, is not the result of an artist's struggle to survive.

### ***Techno-imagination (Vilém Flusser)***

Vilém Flusser approaches the problem of decoding the techno-images from the evidential fact that the majority of laymen cannot decode the technical images correctly (which includes the new media textual objects), because they don't understand how they were produced.

An example of technological image is the *Google* web search engine (1996) by Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page<sup>9</sup>. The *Google* system provides lists of appropriate links to websites to a quarry submitted by a user. However, the quality of the results isn't an »emergent« quality of the machine but a computational quantification of the values of the websites on the bases of the links as quotations. The unidirectional nature of a link in the current World Wide Web can, if one is able to reverse the links, reveal the values of the websites through the analysis of all the acts of all people that made web pages. The breakthrough of the *Google* was initially the application of the citation criterion from the domain of academic publications to the Web.

(Image 4)

A Slovene literary example is Vuk Ćosić's *Nation-Culture* (2000) that used the »search-stream«, the real-time input to the portal *Mat'Kurja*<sup>10</sup>, to project it in the form of a sonnet next to the Slovene romantic poet France Prešeren's book of poems, which is one of the key works of Slovene culture. Ćosić's title should be read mathematically as »nation minus culture«, since the search-stream yielded mostly obscenities. What is important, is to read Ćosić's work as a techno-image -

<sup>9</sup> <<http://infolab.stanford.edu/pub/papers/google.pdf>> (30. 8. 2009)

<sup>10</sup> <[www.matkurja.si](http://www.matkurja.si)> (30. 8. 2009), <<http://web.archive.org/web/20030401083528/www.matkurja.com/slo/>>, (2. 4. 2003, 21. 8. 2009)

not a traditional visual image nor a narrative text but an image of a theoretical concept. Vilém Flusser also suggests a theoretical view of the divided authorship - the programmer and the user of an apparatus.

### ***Computational transformations of verbal signs***

The new media artist and theorist David Link wrote a historical overview of the early computational production of verbal signs. However, after considering multiple attempts to build artificial intelligence Link concluded that there is a theoretical limitation that prevents the implementation of language. It is important to bear in mind that the information as considered by a computer or a Turing machine exists on a level before the differentiation of symbols into numbers and letters. The reason for it is that information can change into another information not considering any extrasystemic rules. The machine transforms the material states of a medium to artificially separate one amorphous materiality onto different but meaningless recordings.

### ***Conclusion***

The condition of mechanical systems points to two important conclusions. On the one hand the computational production of meaning has to be limited to creating relationships between singular unities (the computer can execute logical operations on the data very quickly, but cannot simulate consciousness or language). On the other hand, the analysis of a new media literary object should focus on the multiple subject positions that participate in its production and particularly point to the boundaries between utterances as exchanges of speakers that take part in the speech communication

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## Povzetek

Predmet literarne vede je področje, ki zajema avtorja, literarni izdelek ter bralca, literarna komunikacija pa se odvija v socialno-zgodovinskem kontekstu in v povezavi z njim. Za objavo knjige ali revialno objavo krajšega besedila je v institucionalnem smislu odločilen urednik kot subjektna pozicija, ki izbirajoč odloča, katera besedila bodo v natisnjeni obliki javno dostopna. To besedilo bo osvetlilo problem izbora na drugi ravni, to je na ravni, ki se posebej nazorno pokaže v okvirih računalniško podprtih literarnih del. Espen Aarseth pokaže na pomembno razliko v perspektivi kibertekstualnega – med različnimi literarnoestetskimi doživljaji (Ingarden) in različnimi materialnimi konfiguracijami materialnega substrata, npr. črk na ekranu, ki jim estetske konkretizacije šele sledijo. V primeru novomedijskih besedil je pogost pojav delo, ki se interaktivno prilagaja bralcem. Sami znaki, ki vstopajo v akt branja, so variabilni. Vtis, da se vnovič vzpostavlja substancialnost besedila, je napačen, posledica »tekstualnega stroja« (Aarseth) namreč ni »brezavtorsko« stanje, ampak razcepitev avtorja na dvoje, pogosto dobesedno na dve osebi, na konstruktorja aparata in njegovega uporabnika (Flusser). Izbira postane s tega vidika eden ključnih postopkov. Za literarno vedo se odpira več pomembnih vprašanj, ki jih besedilo zastavlja ob primerih: vprašanje »digitalnih skupnosti« in kolaborativnega avtorstva (Alvar C. H. Freude, Dragan Espenschied: Assoziations-Blaster), vprašanje možnosti strojnega generiranja besedila ali poezije (Hans Magnus Enzensberger: Poesie-Automat, David Link: Poetry Machine). Poseben problem so teksti, ki jih proizvajajo informacijske tehnologije same, vendar črpajo iz socialno-zgodovinsko specifičnih izjav (Vuk Čosić: Nacija - Kultura, ustroj iskalnika Google).

## *Summary*

The subject of literary scholarship includes the author, the literary product and the reader; all of them are embedded in the social and historical context. The editor as a subject position – an institution – is crucial in deciding, what books or, in the case of a literary magazine, shorter texts will be published and therefore publicly available in printed form. This paper will consider the problem of selection on another level that emerges as an important issue particularly in literary works based on computer technologies. In the cybertextual perspective Espen Aarseth points out an important distinction between multiple literary-aesthetic experiences (Ingarden) and different configurations of the material substrate, e.g. the letters on a screen, which are only subsequently followed by aesthetic concretizations. In the case of the new media literary texts the works that adapt to users are common. The signs themselves that enter the reading act are variable. The impression of the re-emerging of the substantiality of the text is false, the consequence of the »textual machine« isn't an »authorless« condition, but the split in the author function, often literally into two persons, the constructor of the apparatus and its user (Flusser). The selection becomes one of the key methods. The text will point to the relevant issues for literary scholarship on illustrative examples: first, the issue of the digital communities and the collaborative authorship (Alvar C. H. Freude, Dragan Espenschied: *Assoziations-Blaster*), and second, the issue of automatic generation of poetry (Hans Magnus Enzensberger: *Poesie-Automat*, David Link: *Poetry Machine*). A particular phenomenon are the texts produced by the information technologies themselves that nevertheless draw on socio-historically particular utterances (Vuk Ćosić: *Nation-Culture*, the design of Google search engine).

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WELCOME TO ADVENTURE!! WOULD YOU LIKE INSTRUCTIONS?

yes

SOMEWHERE NEARBY IS COLOSSAL CAVE, WHERE OTHERS HAVE FOUND FORTUNES IN TREASURE AND GOLD, THOUGH IT IS RUMORED THAT SOME WHO ENTER ARE NEVER SEEN AGAIN. MAGIC IS SAID TO WORK IN THE CAVE. I WILL BE YOUR EYES AND HANDS. DIRECT ME WITH COMMANDS OF 1 OR 2 WORDS. I SHOULD WARN YOU THAT I LOOK AT ONLY THE FIRST FIVE LETTERS OF EACH WORD, SO YOU'LL HAVE TO ENTER "NORTHEAST" AS "NE" TO DISTINGUISH IT FROM "NORTH". (SHOULD YOU GET STUCK, TYPE "HELP" FOR SOME GENERAL HINTS. FOR INFORMATION ON HOW TO END YOUR ADVENTURE, ETC., TYPE "INFO".)

- - -

THIS PROGRAM WAS ORIGINALLY DEVELOPED BY WILLIE CROWTHER. MOST OF THE FEATURES OF THE CURRENT PROGRAM WERE ADDED BY DON WOODS (DON @ SU-AI). CONTACT DON IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, ETC.

YOU ARE STANDING AT THE END OF A ROAD BEFORE A SMALL BRICK BUILDING. AROUND YOU IS A FOREST. A SMALL STREAM FLOWS OUT OF THE BUILDING AND DOWN A GULLY.

east

YOU ARE INSIDE A BUILDING, A WELL HOUSE FOR A LARGE SPRING.

THERE ARE SOME KEYS ON THE GROUND HERE.

THERE IS A SHINY BRASS LAMP NEARBY.

THERE IS FOOD HERE.

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READER	scriptons	literary-aesthetic experience (Ingarden)		/
	implicit reader – implicit author: interpretation (mutual influence of text and reader)	active voices (narrators)	voices as objects	
	<i>cybertext</i> »punishes« tmesis (Barthes) <sup>1</sup>	<i>avatar</i> (embodiment of the reader) as a character in a narrative	<i>passive image of the avatar</i>	
GAME PLAYER	- game scriptons - documentation: traversal function, textons	gaming experience		
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		<i>understanding of the game</i>	<i>strategic action (negotiation with the intrigant by means of the game voice and the avatar)</i>	<i>sequence of game states (partial success or failure, »sated desire for closure«)</i>
ERGODIC READER	game algorithms – programmer	critical reflection on the ideology of the game	/	/
	unpredictable »emergent behaviour«, noise, cyborg author, techno-imagination (Flusser)			

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