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## Poetics and e-literature

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**Abstract:** Following the development of e-literature and the state of research on the subject both in Poland and abroad, the author attempts to outline research perspectives for e-poetics. This discipline, barely over twenty years old, concerns the study of literary texts that are created with the use of digital technologies. Hypertextual works available online and via digital carriers are characterized by intermediality and interactivity, and they differ from printed literature in that computers are indispensable tools for their creation, existence and reception. What are the consequences of this change of medium for literature, its structure, the process of communication with the reader and the interpretative possibilities? How can one describe the relationship between the old and the new form of a literary text? Finally, why is it important to introduce research on electronic literature into academic education?

**Keywords:** electronic literature, intermedial poetics, hypertext, remediation, verbal-visual signs

After structuralism, which developed solid and comprehensive foundations for the autonomous study of the ways in which a literary text is constructed (poetics), no other 20<sup>th</sup> century approaches to literature followed that would stand the test of time. Judging from philology curricula in Poland, poetics is still the basic approach to literature. Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska's 2011 textbook<sup>1</sup> is an excellent testimony to such thinking: the author managed to combine skilfully the accessibility of the description of issues discussed, with the presentation of their interpretative character determined by numerous factors, all of which is necessary for any beginner philologist. Korwin-Piotrowska manages to avoid simplifications and to create a functional philological resource by focusing on the creative dimension of poetics: always just a preliminary stage of reading a text if a helpful one, yet still insufficient to understand the complex and diverse worlds of literature. Education in the field of poetics thus becomes a way to shape a reader's sensitivity to the nuances of literature. This publication skilfully avoids methodological controversies, omitting the influence of lit-

<sup>1</sup> D. Korwin-Piotrowska, *Poetyka. Przewodnik po świecie tekstów*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2011.

erary theory on the way literature is understood. Thus, Korwin-Piotrowska deliberately does not include the main reasons for the deadlock which this area of literary studies is experiencing today: the fact that a single poetics does not exist.<sup>2</sup>

In order to demonstrate how dependent poetics is on a specific methodological tool, it would be necessary, following in the footsteps of Burzyńska and Markowski,<sup>3</sup> to rename the textbook “The multiple poetics of literature.” Every single poetics is brought to life by a distinctive method of literary theory which specifies its interpretative tasks. Therefore, its cognitive functions are never universal, but defined within previously accepted interpretative assumptions.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, Korwin-Piotrowska welcomes different points of view during the process of reading. Students are thus gently introduced into the world of problems in contemporary humanities, and at the same time equipped with tools that will allow them to adopt a critical approach in the future.

Let us now transfer the dispute over poetics into the area of literature that makes use of newer media. Nowadays, literature encompasses much more than just texts printed on paper. The subject matter of literary studies has been extending its limits for over a quarter of a century now, to constantly include new media. This intermedial phenomenon requires a new poetics, since none of the tools of contemporary humanities, based on traditionally understood typographic culture, are sufficient to describe it.

The traditional medium of literature is the book. It was the book that we used to identify literature with, but before it became a printed word it passed through the manuscript stage, and earlier – through the oral stage. Today, when a paper volume is more and more often replaced by a computer screen (or a screen of a tablet, an e-reader, or even an iPhone), it is necessary to consider how this change of the medium affects literature.

Students are used to functioning in virtual reality, they more and more frequently read texts from a screen (all types of texts: both scientific and literary ones, scans, PDFs, e-books). Although students admit that reading a traditional book is still a special experience for them (one which also causes a lot of difficulties, requiring long-term concentration and focus on the linear, “flat,” and completely static printed text), it is a cultural fact that

<sup>2</sup> This situation is diagnosed by the expression coined by Anna Burzyńska: “Multiple poetics instead of a single poetics.” Of course, this refers to numerous poetics that have nowadays taken the place of the universal theory of a literary work. (A. Burzyńska, “Poetyka po strukturalizmie,” in: *Poetyka bez granic*, edited by W. Bolecki, W. Tomasiak, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 1995, p. 73.)

<sup>3</sup> A. Burzyńska, M. P. Markowski, *Teorie literatury. Podręcznik*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> As Stanisław Balbus put it: “[...] the task of poetics is to provide an analytical and explanatory description of the work in terms of the interpretation possible within the given theory, which is to include its subject as a semantic whole.” S. Balbus, “Granice poetyki i kompetencje teorii literatury,” in: *Poetyka bez granic*, p. 31.

electronic media have entered the world of literature and are likely to stay for good, redefining the world of words, thus far subordinated to the logic and semiotics of the verbal code. The Gutenberg era is slowly becoming a thing of the past, and our culture is entering the Turing era, in which the computer has become an indispensable extension of human intelligence and creativity. Therefore, if literary scholars do not wish to be left behind, they need to accept the changes brought about by this new culture and embrace them in their research activities.<sup>5</sup> Particularly when working with young people who, from their natural digital media environment, are to enter the area of professional reflection on literature, their competences, aptitudes and needs have to be taken into consideration. One of the tasks of the new poetics should be to provide students of philology with tools that will allow them to distance themselves from self-evident forms of new media content and learn to spot rhetorical mechanisms that govern attention and users' understanding.

E-literature has undergone a profound metamorphosis due to the increasing number of people using technology. The computer (both as a tool and as a device connected to the Internet, offering additional possibilities of online interactivity and communication between recipients) has generated new, specific genres and textual forms. The most well-known and best-described among them are: hypertext novels (including the first Polish hypertext novel *Blok* by Sławomir Shuta and the computer-animated *Koniec świata według Emeryka* by Radosław Nowakowski), tweet stories limited to 140 characters (this is a quasi-genre, created by the so-called 'new new media',<sup>6</sup> i.e. social media), kinetic poems (e.g. *Primum Mobile* by Zenon Fajfer), blogs and cybernetic poetry (for example, the hypertext volume of *czary-i-mary* by Aneta Kamińska, networked by David Sypniewski) and its numerous unique author-specific subgenres, such as multimedial bromboxes by Roman Bromboszcz, who is also a programmer:<sup>7</sup> Bromboszcz is a type of a total creator, freely crossing the boundaries between various art forms, involved simultaneously in artistic practice and theory.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting that Bromboszcz uses animation techniques, computer graphics, sound and words to create extraordinary designs of a metaphorical and philosophical character. The interaction of several media leads to the creation of cybernetic, experimental, unique, interactive works in motion, yet still referring back to the tradition of visual poetry, such as calligrams, and thus activating the semiotic relationship between the meaning of words and their appearance.

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<sup>5</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin write about the role of literature carriers and problems of remediation in one of the most important books devoted to the issues of the new and the old media: *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> See P. Levison, *Nowe nowe media* [*New new media*], translated into Polish by M. Zawadzka, Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> <http://perfokarta.net/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://bromboxy.proarte.net.pl/>

It must be pointed out that the concept of electronic literature is very broad, and its manifestations are difficult to judge only in terms of and in accordance with the criteria of traditional literary aesthetics, since it crosses the boundaries of the textual art towards such areas as: image, film, computer game, graphic programming and related computer animation, as well as music. Obviously, language and the way in which literary worlds are constructed remain the subject of literary research. However, it is clearly noticeable that these worlds are also visualised, and language is subjected to the pressure of other means, which are not a simple illustration of the verbal message. The word itself also functions differently in the virtual space.

The history of electronic literature begins in the late 1980s when poetry and hypertext prose arose. Sometimes, text adventure games are also ascribed to this category, as well as digitised library resources, literature found on the Internet, and e-books for e-readers (tablets).<sup>9</sup> But including the term in the sphere of poetics makes sense only if we accept the influence of digital technology on the areas of ontology, aesthetics and the communicative situation of the work created with its use.

Literature creators and theoreticians emphasise the difference between texts that are only mediated by a computer (digitised) and those that could not exist without electronic media (digital). Stephanie Strickland – an American poet, researcher and expert on the very issue, who uses new technologies in both traditional and experimental formats in order to create new forms of poetry, explains the specific nature of literature created using digital technologies in the following way:

E-poetry relies on code for its creation, preservation, and display: there is no way to experience a work of e-literature unless a computer is running it—reading it and perhaps also generating it. [...] What is meant by e-literature, by works called born-digital, is that computation is required at every stage of their life. If it could possibly be printed out, isn't e-lit.<sup>10</sup>

The participation of a machine in the creative act is therefore one of the determinants of e-literature. This significantly changes the ontic status of the work, as well as the cognitive approach to it, since its reading and understanding requires competences beyond the limits of the discipline. The rule of co-presence of electronic technology as a condition for the existence of a work is important because it excludes the following from the research area: e-books, digitised versions of printed works and other documents made available on the screen.

Jay David Bolter's two strategies of remediation; immediacy and hypermediacy,<sup>11</sup> prove useful for distinguishing what happens to a medium: all cases of

<sup>9</sup> More information on the history of hypertexts can be found in: P. Marecki, M. Pisarski, "Introduction," in: *Hiperteksty literackie. Literatura i nowe media*, Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> S. Strickland, *Born Digital*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/182942> (accessed 10. 05. 2013).

<sup>11</sup> J.D. Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext and the Remediation of Print*, 2nd Edition, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001.

changing the medium as a carrier can be included in the first strategy, while whenever the medium participates in the process of creation, existence and reception of the work, this is referred to as the strategy of hypermediation.<sup>12</sup> This way of building relations between literature and technology should become the primary area of interest of e-poetics, so called in order to distinguish it from the discipline that deals with traditional texts. The study of electronic literature (cybertexts) is also called digital poetics<sup>13</sup> and i-poetics<sup>14</sup> (after the iPad and its applications, offering almost unlimited possibilities to its user). It is worth remembering that digital literature can be found on digital media (e.g. a DVD), while network literature works only online and offers the possibility of simultaneous access to a larger number of readers. Both varieties of electronic literature take the form of a hypertext.

Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska mentions hypertext several times in her textbook, treating it as a method of linguistic communication that is equal to other methods, though much younger. She does not mention the phenomenon of e-literature (which may misleadingly suggest that 'hypertext' is its synonym), but she discusses the specific character of the construction of a hypertext which, to a much greater extent than works created in printed technology, demonstrates the "event-driven nature of the text, and also the multi-directionality of our perception."<sup>15</sup> The idiosyncratic character of the hypertext consists of "its structure and software which makes it possible to jump to other parts via links."<sup>16</sup>

These elements are not combined with each other grammatically, nor is the plot always coherent. It is the reader, who makes individual choices and has a greater or lesser ability to form cohesive links, who decides whether or not the plot is coherent. Accustomed to the hierarchical structure of the text, the recipient has to adapt to new ways of constructing meaning. This undoubtedly affects his/her way of thinking, understanding, cognitive, reflective, perceptual processes, the ability to infer and perform logical reasoning. But at the same time, hypertext is, after all, characteristic of all writings existing within the virtual space, only some of which aspire to be literary texts. Hypertext, as a synecdoche of all new, interactive forms of cultural activity mediated by digital technology, provokes a discussion about the role and the tasks of poetics. The way poetics has so far approached hypertexts turns out to be insufficient. The question about the possible meanings generated by a text, which are activated in the act of reading,

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<sup>12</sup> Maciej Maryl calls the first group of works digitized literature, while the second one - electronic literature or, alternatively, cyberliterature. M. Maryl, "Reprint i hipermedialność – dwa kierunki rozwoju literatury elektronicznej," in: *Tekst w sieci 2*, edited by A. Gumkowska, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> M. Maryl, "Literatura i e-społeczeństwo," *Teksty Drugie* 2012, No. 6.

<sup>14</sup> J. Pluciennik, "Sylwiczność nasza powszechna i metakognicja," *Teksty Drugie* 2012, No. 6.

<sup>15</sup> D. Korwin-Piotrowska, *Poetyka...*, p. 71. All the quotations from the Polish sources have been translated by Karolina Puchała-Ladzińska, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

should be replaced with a catalogue of questions about the functional, pragmatic possibilities and consequences of using a text, in particular an e-literary text, which is never simply given in material form, but rather appears and disappears, sometimes never again appearing in the same form.

At the level of building electronic literature, which appears and co-exists, developing, criss-crossing and interacting with the printed code, we can observe what hitherto seemed natural, neutral and – sometimes – irrelevant in literary culture: the media of culture are not only a testimony to civilisational progress, but they also affect the already present media.<sup>17</sup> That is why digital poetics is part of a larger whole which is cultural poetics: the knowledge about the relationship between cultural texts and historical and anthropological determinants. Thus, research on literature has a chance to be revived; it offers an insight into culture and anthropology, which is increasingly aware of its relationship with modern technologies (cyberculture, bio- and nanotechnologies, bio- and cyberpoetics).

According to Korwin-Piotrowska, “multi-directionality and the possibility of getting lost in a web of references fascinates the creators of online literature.”<sup>18</sup> However, it seems that the problem is much more complex. This entangled web of references has already been created by modernist literature and it was dealt with successfully by intertextual research. Meanwhile, the contemporary researcher faces a question about the role of technology in the humanistic act: both in interpretation, and before that, in the creative act, which has now been reduced to precise programming of specific capabilities and graphic interface design.

Hypertext, therefore, requires us to rethink all the components of the communicative act: the roles of author and reader, as well as the process of constructing meaning. It is a valuable experience, permitting a better understanding of the specific nature of electronic literature, to look for genealogical and structural relationships, analogies and prototypes in literary tradition, in order to understand the differences between old and new principles of the construction of a literary work. Korwin-Piotrowska drew the reader’s attention to the new, hypertextual type of textuality, which determines the research procedure, the way of reading and constructing meaning. However, is the transition from text to hypertext just a simple change of the type of textuality? While in the case of proto-hypertexts (authored by, e.g. Borges, Calvino, Perec, Cortazar, Queneau) it is possible to agree with this way of thinking, it cannot be denied that the change of medium affects the ontological status of the work. It concerns what a literary text actually is and how it functions. I believe that at the early stage of the development of hypertextuality, which we are currently experiencing, we predominantly observe the medium, i.e. aspects of the presentation itself,

<sup>17</sup> See H. Jenkins, *Convergence culture. Where old and new media collide*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> D. Korwin-Piotrowska, *Poetyka...*, p. 72.

and not what is being presented (the meaning). Perhaps, however, in a few years the situation will be completely different. It may already be noticed that hypertext users are also transferring their reading habits to printed literature. This new way of reading can probably be explained thusly: it is fragmentary and selective, a kind of “poaching” in Michel de Certeau’s sense,<sup>19</sup> in which one does not ask about the meaning and the message of a text, but about how it works and how it activates the reader.

Other features of electronic hypertexts include: the multi-linearity of the narration of choice, which creates an ambiguous, aporetic structure that is constantly looping and leads the reader multiple times to the same place; the reader’s involvement in shaping the form of the text; randomness in the selection of plot elements, as well as engaging the computer’s generative capacity, independent of the author’s and the reader’s will, in the process of plot creation. The latter results in multimodality (intermediality, which is a modern variant of intersemioticity or hybridity) and visual traits of digital e-literary messages that find themselves in between imagery and discursiveness, using the imaginative and the semantic potential of both. It is here that the revolutionary nature of the phenomenon of digital literature seems to lie: the computer becomes a co-creator, a performer, and even the only sender during the text reception (we should, however, remind ourselves that this term does not adequately reflect the character of what a hypertext reader does). It is, therefore, the works which are experimental, difficult, not obvious, demanding a new approach from the reader, as well as cognitive competence and perceptual skills other than those required by printed literature, which one should consider a new literary phenomenon, demanding its own place within the area of literary studies.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the digital coup in literature is connected with twentieth-century humanistic reflections and study of the impact of new technologies and machines on man and culture. E-literature research should, of course, take into consideration the traditional branches of poetics: stylistics, genology, composition, and in the case of electronic poetry, also versification, indicating at each of these levels the similarities and differences between the new forms and the literary tradition, but also go beyond these. The possibilities offered by new technologies are important for literature when they are used to create aesthetic qualities, when they expand the scope of expression through the potential of formal solutions that remain unavailable to printed texts, when they provide context and commentary to literary works, portray them in a different light, help to see the problems that have been overlooked so far. Poetics should be involved in the process of discovering and explaining these metamorphoses.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> M. de Certeau, “Reading as Poaching,” in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 166–177.

<sup>20</sup> It should be emphasised that research on these issues is becoming more and more popular among literary scholars. Particularly noteworthy is the research-related, educa-

Hypertext is a common way in which we communicate with the world today. Literary hypertexts only constitute a special instance of a wider phenomenon. New possibilities offered by the medium are consciously used for aesthetic purposes, which is why they are a laboratory example of cultural transformations. Therefore, the traditional research subject of poetics should include these new phenomena, without building an artificial barrier between printed literature and the elusive sphere of creativity contained within digital resources. Instead of underestimating and downplaying these irreversible changes, an approach much more beneficial for literary studies would be to accept the fact that book and hypertext are just two stages of the evolution of literature, by no means competitive ones. Digitisation of the book is not tantamount to its annihilation. Literary works in their previous form (though popularised through various communication media: books, audiobooks and e-books) are still being created and will continue to be in the future. Literature, on the other hand, is entering into a dialogue with new communication technologies that have permitted the advent of new forms. They are developing together with literary tradition and literature.

Stephanie Strickland precisely indicated the differences between printed literature and e-literature. In the following sections, I am going to collect and organise examples from Polish e-literature by adapting Strickland's model: some of the features listed will be more obvious, others less. There are some features for which I could not find examples in Polish e-literature. Despite this, I am going to discuss these as well so as to provide a complete description of digital literature.

## 1. Digital literature as an activity

E-poetry *does things rather than says them*. Reading e-works also means playing (with) them. It is closer to the playing of an instrument, the production of hidden sounds and the creation of new melodies, rather than playing a game with its own rules, although some electronic texts do contain game-like elements. Unlike a printed book, e-literature remains unavailable

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tional and popularising activities of several scholars. One of them is Mariusz Pisarski – the author of the website [tekhsty.art.pl](http://tekhsty.art.pl), a translator of hypertext novels, as well as a researcher and expert in the field, who for years has been persistently disproving the myths and misunderstandings concerning the new phenomena in the digitised world of e-literature. The second specialist in the poetics of the online text, intermedial poetics, is Ewa Szczęśna, an author of books (*Poetyka reklamy*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2001; *Poetyka mediów*, Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski. Wydział Polonistyki, 2007) and articles on the issue. An interesting testimony to the multi-perspective attempt to embrace the complexity of the new phenomena are post-conference volumes: *Tekst w sieci 1*, edited by D. Ulicka, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2009 and *Tekst w sieci 2*, edited by A. Gumkowska, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2009, as well as *Teksty Drugie* (2012, No. 6), which are entirely devoted to these issues.



as a material object before the reading process begins. Therefore, Espen J. Aarseth,<sup>21</sup> while describing cybertext, notes that it is primarily characterised by the complexity of the message and the specific situation of the reader who physically participates in the literary process of text constitution. The reader is required to make an effort to implement a cybernetic literary project. These texts differ from literary ones in that, in addition to the usual aesthetic qualities typical of literature, they produce a “paraverbal dimension”, because their main property is the multi-facetedness of expression.

According to the American researcher Janet Murray,<sup>22</sup> the author plays the role of a choreographer, devising various rhythms, contexts, and steps to be performed. However, it is the reader that is the main actor in the performance prepared by the author. It is the reader – not as an author but as a performer, an activist, a navigator, an interactor, a protagonist, an explorer and a builder – who undertakes meaning-reconstructing activities and observes their effects. By experiencing the creativity of the material, the reader changes the environment of the text and his/her actions are much more physical and real than the intellectual activity of a book reader. This is due to the fact that the act of reading becomes synchronized with the action of the hand, which, by clicking, brings the text to life.

## 2. Reading as multitasking

In a culture that uses programming and networked media, reading has been redefined. E-literature brings a reading mode adapted to new social conditions. Today it is a multitasking activity. Surfing, sampling, navigating, accompanied by animations, sound effects or background music, are new ways of interacting with the world presented in the work, which is well known from interactive online games. During this complex act of active perception, strategic skills such as the ability to memorise, predict, form associations and solve problems all become indispensable. The readers of the printed book have already been trained in attention focus: reading, associated with the process of understanding and interpretation, develops not only along the text, but also deep inside it, aiming at revealing the dialogic meanings and intertextual connections that build up within it. Now, however, attention has become a combination of deep and extensive knowledge (*hyper*, in fact).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> E.J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> J.H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, New York: The MIT Press, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Numerous examples of e-literary works that require such multilateral competences can be found on the website of the American Electronic Literature Organization: <http://eliterature.org/>. This association, which aims to promote, publish and read literature in

According to media experts and psychologists, hypertext favours distraction rather than concentration of attention, and multitasking causes superficiality of perception.<sup>24</sup> Senses are bombarded with a considerable number of various stimuli, and the mind cannot cope with their analysis and interpretation. Instead, what dominates in the virtual world is immersion. This characteristic, however, does not take into account the specific nature of e-literature, the reception of which requires increased attention and concentration.

### 3. Intermedial character

In literary studies, the categories of sound-imitation, musicality, iconicity, and picturesqueness of the word left a margin of interpretative freedom to readers, and provoked researchers to dispute the possibilities and limits of intersemiotic translation. Furthermore, synesthesia, as a set of means aimed at making a verbal text influence different senses in printed literature, was predominantly a metaphorical term referring to the subjective feelings of the reader, his/her competences and sensitivity. In the digital medium, this poly-sensory, synesthetic and architectural character (convexity, spatiality) of language has acquired a literal sense. Words on the screen move, change their colour, sound, are three-dimensional calligrams visualising their sense. In this way the phenomenon of the sign's reference acquires a new problematisation. While analysing individual examples, it is worth conducting a thorough examination of Joyce's bold statement that in the digital medium the word triumphs over the image:

Hypertext is the word's revenge on TV, because under its shimmering surface the image on the screen is subjected to the laws of allusion and association which characterise written language.<sup>25</sup>

Above all, however, e-literature requires new reading skills because it is composed of intermedial performative signs. Any media type can be represented as a number on a computer, and each number can become any type of media. Sound appears in the form of image, image as print, diagram as sound. Not only is the diversity of the media important, but also the intensity of attention they arouse. Literary scholars, therefore, rightly observe that reading e-literature leads to the adoption of an aesthetic attitude towards the

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the electronic media, has prepared two e-editions compiling the most interesting works of digital literature, available at the following websites: <http://collection.eliterature.org/1/> and <http://collection.eliterature.org/2/>.

<sup>24</sup> See N. Carr, *The Shallows, What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> M. Joyce, "Ciasto Trzech Króli." A conversation with Michael Joyce, in: *Michael Joyce. Polski pisarz. Michael Joyce, Czesław Miłosz i hipertekst. Postgutenbergowskie nadzieje księgi różności*, edited by M. Pisarski [e-book].

*textscape* as an object that stimulates the senses. Such an attitude requires viewing words as three-dimensional objects, using a mouse or clicking on a link to activate a programme, software operation skills (decoding, operating an application, using an interface), mastering the skill of instantaneous snapshot-like perception, listening coupled with observation (*soundscape*), navigating spatial patterns and animations, etc. Such a multilevel, multifaceted construction necessitates that the description of a hypertextual project – should it aim to encompass its semantic totality – follows two rules: first of all, the description needs to constitute a meta-comment to the rules of e-literature, which excludes the coherence and finiteness of its own construction, and secondly, it needs to come to terms with its own helplessness at the inability to find a comprehensive interpretation of the philosophy of cybertext.

#### 4. New ontology

E-literature is based on the aesthetics that stem from the practice of network programming. It requires human reading and machine reading to be compatible with each other. The human programmer's code and the computer's processing steps encompass many levels, on which the information is transferred up and down. Complex encoding and decoding processes take place at each of these levels. The programmer and poet (who might be the same person) want to present these levels, as well as transitions and disturbances between them. Sometimes the machine takes control over the reader, but it also frees itself from the control of the poet and generates unpredictable, random, unique and asemantic effects. Of course, this is true only of programmes that are sufficiently advanced.

Although the reader's activity is a characteristic feature of every reading act, in the case of hypertext literature it is an interactive relationship, that is, the reader undertakes a physical action (clicks on a link, choosing one of the reading paths), and the text reacts in an equally tangible way, literally moving the action to another place. The reader subjects the way of reading to his/her own needs, but he/she also is seduced by words, clicking with curiosity on the link, not necessarily in order to follow the story, but to check what space-time, associations and threads lie behind the distinguished word. And at the same time he/she tries to guess why this particular word was chosen by the author of the hypertext. Thus, hyper-reading has a metatextual nature: unlike reading a printed novel, navigation through a hypertext is much more conscious and critical. By its very nature, it encourages observation of the formal, structural solutions used by the author, which is definitely facilitated by the reader's familiarity with the software. What is important, therefore, is what we read from, as aptly pointed out by Aarseth.<sup>26</sup> The hypertext reader is a potential specialist who,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

if he/she wants to understand the specific nature of the medium and the poetics of hypertexts, must constantly refer to literary and media-related knowledge.

## **5. Interactivity and team work**

E-literature is both written and constructed. One could call this new way of writing text engineering, but this should not be mistaken for applied text architecture. What is needed for its production are various types of knowledge, and sometimes, in addition to the creators, also a group of readers who are able to affect the work's current structure and are involved in the process of creation. Digital literature is a product of team work. In oral cultures – Greek or Indian, for example – this is how epic poems were created: from fragments repeated many times by successive performers. Many generators, reciters and receivers were involved in the creation of the work, which also allowed them to be constituted as members of one culture. Today, people who play online games might spend time in the virtual world, also called Second Life, have their avatars, virtual biographies and “real” friends in the virtual world. Members of such a virtual community formed around an interactive text can be scattered in various places around the world and never meet in person. The communication of readers of online literature has a similar character.

## **6. Instant communication**

In electronic literature the “affects” and “effects” are immediate and identical. Since the fundamental activity is doing, and not speaking, to affect the digital image is the same as to effect it, to make it present. If a text placed on the Internet allows online communication, the readers who are logged-in have the opportunity to observe the same things as others and introduce changes visible to others. However, when the number of users is too high, the changes become so complex and dense that the cybertext as a whole falls apart and becomes meaningless.

## **7. Performativity**

E-poetry describes or reflects the world by building it. This is its performative strength. Of course, traditional poetry and literature have always built worlds, but not in a way that the reader can physically change and transform by entering them as a cooperative agent.

## 8. Three-dimensionality

E-poetry explores three-dimensional space in various ways, turning the experience of motion into something very real.

## 9. A new perception

Hypertextual texts allow one to read them in any way: from front to back, from right to left, reading texts in motion or reading the overlapping texts.

The most significant, however, is simultaneous exploration of texts and their impact on human perception and neural processing. The specific feature of this new perception is that it necessitates, in a sense, simultaneous reading at two levels. The reader, while looking for meaning within individual components, simultaneously seeks cohesive rules and traces their relationship with other lexias. At the same time, the hypertextual character of the connections between them constantly hinders or even prevents this alignment, thus obliging the reader to try to understand the rules of construction. Observation of the unobvious structure (or anti-structure) of an e-text is therefore a reading act on the meta-level, which causes rapid fatigue and, contrary to popular opinions about the properties of electronic media, it prevents complete immersion in the presented world. On the contrary: e-literature brings an anti-immersion effect, losing, at least with the genres of novel prose, the battle for the reader's interest and attention. More important than picturing of what is presented is the very plane of the presentation. It is no wonder that in Michael Joyce's work *Afternoon, a story*, the most outstanding hypertext translated recently into Polish, in the manual provided in the *For the reader* file, one reads:

If you feel tired and annoyed by the course of your reading, if you would like to start again, we encourage you to restart your reading history. This is done by clicking on the history button (clock icon) and pressing the "clear" button. Then you can start again from the fragment "beginning" [file "begin"].

While they may appear open like any other online hypertexts, works created with the use of electronic media are not at all open. These are works with a precise, though complicated, non-linear structure, whose individual particles and lexias combine with others in a manner designed by the author/graphic artist. The perceptual difficulty lies in the fact that these works part with the idea of beginning, main body and ending. They are decentralised, rhizomatic, and the relationships between them are sometimes difficult or even impossible for the reader to detect.

In this way, the computer changes one's thinking: under the influence of the intermedial structure of the hypertext, our minds – used to orderly, hierarchically and linearly constructed information – adapts to these new

ways of acting. The computer interface encourages writing (and reading) in a non-linear manner. Hypertext and its reading recreate, repeat and update the manner in which the work is created: as a plan, a system of relationships, dependencies, connections of threads, characters, places and times. In traditional narration, this three-dimensional world was assumed to be linear and thus reduced to the artificial ordering of events. The author used to decide about the order of moving from scene to scene, from place to place, about the type of editing, according to which individual elements (motifs, themes, characters, protagonists) were combined into one coherent whole of the presented world. As a consequence, it was up to these constructional, and therefore form-related, decisions whether the end result was a novel of manners or an experimental novel. All formal attempts to broaden the repertoire of literary means for the authentication, complication and deepening of the characteristics of the fictional world were reflected at the narration level. The temporal and spatial editing, simultaneity, anticipations, delays, different variants of internal monologues and free indirect speech all helped to create a three-dimensional space out of the linear structure of the text. If, on the basis of the twentieth-century novel, one wished to draw a map, it would show the complexity and complications of the threads and relationships between these individual fragments. Today, due to the structure of hypertexts, the order of these tasks has become reversed. The construction of a fictional hypertext must be preceded by a precisely designed map, which helps to indicate all the connections between the individual fragments (lexias). Clicking on the link makes their selection random – a result of the individual decision of each reader and the technical features of a specific hypertext in which the author has provided one, several or numerous possible paths starting from one place.

However, the process of reading e-literature is not based on the plan of the whole. The reader wanders from fragment to fragment, repeatedly but unexpectedly returning to the same nodes, the narration is looped. At the same time, the relation of the fragment being read at the moment to other elements is never entirely clear. What role does it play in the whole puzzle? Which option should be chosen in order to discover the chronological (fictional, logical) continuity? This continuity, even though it may appear coherent, is something that the hypertext simply does not offer. Confusion is a state which should accompany the reading of any hypertext.

Interestingly, what constitutes the essence of the new form of literature, according to Christian Vandendorpe, is its ability to make other pages and other texts visible to the reader, and to move narration to other places and times, which is possible thanks to links, yet this is in fact the “weakest link of the new text layout”<sup>27</sup> as it does not allow the reader to foresee the scope of changes that will be caused by just one click.

<sup>27</sup> Ch. Vandendorpe, “Managing Hyperlinks,” in: idem, *From Papyrus to Hypertext: Toward the Universal Digital Library*, translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2009, p. 131.

At the level of text construction, the most important distinguishing feature of e-literature is the link. It is the link that transforms reading into hyper-reading. And although intertextual references to other texts are nothing new, the way in which these inter-text references are indicated is changing radically. Intertextuality is a phenomenon largely dependent on a reader's competence. Simply put, it is highly probable that the reader will fail to notice a reference to another text in the text he/she is reading. And although this deprives the work of a significant dimension, which could radically change its meaning, it usually does not disturb the text's coherence. However, in a hypertext, in addition to the presence of traditional intertextual references, a whole system of links literally transfer the reader to a different place and time.<sup>28</sup> One may agree with Mariusz Pisarski, according to whom the fundamental difference between a printed text and an electronic one is that the latter is divided into elements that, in the time-space of the work, are separated from one another by an unpredictable distance.<sup>29</sup> This impossibility to determine the mutual position of individual elements makes the link a magical place, sometimes connecting two elements on the basis of a metaphor, a synecdoche, a metonymy or a hyperbole. The lexias that come into contact with each other through a word-link start to interact, creating new, and sometimes surprising values. This, in turn, frequently produces the effect of surrealist incongruence.

## 10. Randomness and unpredictability

E-literature is the result of the relationship between man and machine, between human and artificial intelligence. The author can control the structure of the text, but he/she cannot control the processing of its code by the recipient on his/her own machine. Here the machine works automatically, performing calculations on the web. Therefore, the writer is never fully able to check and predict the effects and the way his/her project will work on a particular computer, not knowing its memory or screen resolution. The author creates an object: a book, a document, a code, but it is the machines that create a process and transform it into a 'final' product. The reader has only a transient screen state (image-text) to respond to, send commands or perform some interactive activities. And it is not at all certain whether it is the reader that causes the effects visible on the screen or the technology itself. There are many determinants that influence what readers see. Even if the recipient were familiar with the original code, while this would certainly improve his/her orientation in the world of cybertext, it

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. M. Pisarski, "Hipertekst a intertekstualność: powinowactwa i rozbieżności," *Porównania* 2011, No. 8.

<sup>29</sup> M. Pisarski, "Poetyka ruchomej kry. O ogniwach (w) sieci tekstu," in: *Tekst w sieci 2*.

would not do so entirely. He/she would have to become a meta-reader, to read his/her own reading, and he/she would still be unsure of where the code's creativity (determined by the computer's technical capacity) ends, and where the reader's interpretation begins.

## 11. Uniqueness

In printed poetry, the interface of the work (the reading surface) and the storage surface are the same, in e-literature they are not: thus e-literature resembles oral poetry and live performances. This strong awareness of the fragility and transience of the medium, as well as the social nature of the communication network and the presence of both sender and recipient, are important for orality, folklore, stage performance and e-literature. In all these cases, the word retains its oral value, as well as situationality and elusiveness, but in the new media a special type of orality is created: it is secondary and, however oxymoronic it may sound, it is mediated and conditioned by the medium.<sup>30</sup> A text can be read in different ways: via links, via images and via the navigation bar. The reader is unlikely to reproduce the same reading twice. Each time the reader loads the text into the browser (the equivalent of taking the book from the shelf), his/her interaction with the work will be different. Each reader will follow a different virtual path, because he/she will make different choices from among the available options. It is, therefore, difficult to say that they have all read the same text, since it does not exist in material form to start with.

## 12. Imaginativeness

E-literature permits and requires new ways of experiencing time and space, related to the specific nature of the web. Printed literature also allows various experiments with time: going back to the past and looking ahead, viewing past events from the perspective of different people, etc.

E-literature offers new possibilities: rotating objects, panoramic shots, zooming, scaling, moving, split screen, upturning, inserting, tilting or covering objects, controlling speed, moving freely in 3D space, highlighting, performing micro-movements or stratification of content.

Thanks to the screen options, one can also pace the text's appearance. It is possible to manage the reception time depending on whether it is the first or a subsequent act of reading. One can make time lapses, time

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<sup>30</sup> According to Walter Ong, on the Internet we witness secondary orality. See W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2002.



scans, sequences, replays, speed changes, resumption of text, interpolation-extension replacements (extending the duration in real time) and create a stroboscopic effect on the screen.

When one takes into account the way time is encoded, there are even more possibilities to interfere in the work's reception/creation. One can make keyframes and move from one frame to another using the *tweening* technique (generating intermediate frames between two images to give the appearance that the first image evolves smoothly into the second image) and the *morphing* technique (image transformation consisting in a seamless transition of one image into another). Both techniques, producing the impression of image permeation, serve to create computer animation, which is used by cyberart authors (also in e-poetry).

The ways of constructing time – creating, breaking and reassembling it – are issues of poetics and aesthetics known in the history of poetry as a game of metamorphoses. In e-poetry, which uses animation, experimenting with the construction of time also provokes one to ask philosophical questions. This stage of development of digital literature in Poland is still ahead of us. However, one should not dismiss the attempts which for years have been undertaken by innovators such as Roman Bromboszcz and Aneta Kamińska.

One may claim that strategies of this new spatial organisation are still waiting for their implementation in Polish works. However, the fact that the computer provides the creator with such possibilities already affects the status and the character of the product, which is, to a large extent, imaginative, sensual and extra-discursive. Phenomena so far unknown to traditional literary studies, which are of interest to film and media experts as well as computer graphic designers, designers and IT specialists, have met within e-literature, obliging language researchers to transgress verbocentrism and adopt a transdisciplinary and transmedial attitude. This should also be the nature of the new poetics. During the long period when books dominated, little attention was paid to the impact they had on the growth of reflexivity and critical thinking. It was only when electronic media appeared, developing in parallel to printed literature, that reflections on the impact of the media on people and the entire culture were significantly increased. Therefore today, within poetics, especially e-poetics, one needs to pay close attention to the specificity of the medium that co-shapes meaning. This technological dimension of a literary work is an absolute novelty, uniting humans with technology and requiring us to broaden our competences.

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The indicated differences between printed literature and e-literature make us aware of a basic analytical difficulty: how should we study texts which, by their very nature, go beyond any reader's literary competence?

And how can we describe such a research subject? For starters, one may begin with the use of *ekphrasis*, as in the case of images or films, although this is an extremely imperfect solution.

Another problem with research on the phenomena of new media is related to the loss of distance and boundaries between the subject and the medium. The media (transmission tools) penetrate the recipient's existence, becoming a part of it. Therefore, any analysis should take into account the fact that the researcher is simultaneously part of the research subject. The new medium shapes new apperceptions and new reactions. By researching, we ourselves become the object of influence. The new media radically change the way the senses work, disturbing the "natural" order.

If, therefore, I were looking for a chance to change the condition of poetics, it would concern its application in practices of interpretation, in explaining the mechanisms that take place in the interaction between text and recipient, which will allow a better understanding not only of a given text, but also of a given culture. I would also seek change in the multiplicity of its languages, in checking their functionality in creating descriptions of new phenomena, or even in creating new phenomena, influencing the directions of literature evolution, ways of thinking and developing readers' sensitivity.

In a culture based on community actions, a performative attitude based on the feeling that we do not predicate anything, but rather create new qualities, justifies the commotion within literary studies and yet it also might just restore sense and functionality to the discipline.

Poetics is a discipline that introduces students to the world of philology. Without this basic knowledge – even though it may sometimes simplify and essentialize phenomena whose complexity exceeds the operational capabilities of the tools offered by poetics, we would not have a common lexicon to talk about literature. Therefore, instead of a crisis in poetics, one should rather talk about a crisis in education, including academic education. If education sees poetics as a shameful and not very enlightened introduction to philosophical and methodological debates, it runs the risk of depriving students of tools that will help them understand and appreciate the complexity of literary and cultural codes, their significance and artistic qualities.

Therefore, let me conclude with the statement with which I started: there is no single poetics. Moreover, none of the tools used to explain the specific nature of the art of writing (and its relations with other arts) can or should be rejected. The area in which the texts are studied is governed by a law of accumulation of tools and reconfiguration of research instruments. Stanisław Balbus and Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska<sup>31</sup> both argue that poetics is the intermediary language between theory and interpretation. The meanings and possibilities that will be assigned to the particular elements

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<sup>31</sup> In the article "The Afterlife of Poetics," included in this volume.

of this language depend on the underlying theory. So let us not give up the old descriptive categories too quickly, since they are of historical and, above all, didactic value. However, it is worth diversifying the research, focusing more attention not only on the classification of phenomena, semantics and the syntax of verbal-visual signs, but also on their pragmatics.

The perspective of reception poetics seems particularly attractive today; yet their focus should shift from questions regarding the nature and meaning of studied components to describing the process of how meaning is created: how text works, what repertoire of possible realisations produces a specific state of dynamics of structural factors (type of medium, multi-medial and synesthetic character, physical mobility and not pre-prepared signs), which cannot be named or classified unambiguously. For instance, in a hypertext novel, instead of talking about the type of narration, what needs to be especially considered are the possible courses it may take. The most innovative aspect of electronic literature, the fact that it generates endless possibilities, should allow us to shift our attention away from what is given to the reader, but what may be given to/by each and every reader. This changes the way the work exists, the opportunities for readers to discover the possibilities inherent in a work of e-literature, as well as the process of shaping aesthetic qualities, relating it to pragmatics (real practice of using the text) to a much greater degree than in the case of printed literature.

Therefore, if today's poetics is to perform cognitive functions, it must be adapted to the realities of creative practice, i.e. it should be incorporated not only into a theoretical and historical literary school of thought, but also into the cultural, media-related, anthropological and philosophical spheres.

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