The Validity of Reader-oriented Criticism in Electronic Media

Cătălin CONSTANTINESCU

Key-words: *reader-oriented criticism, reader's response, "Rezeptionsästhetik", productive reception, electronic text, hypertext, hypermedia*

Since the second part of the 20th century, the literary text is forced to encounter the occurrence of the new media that are shaping the general aesthetic thought and the cultural practices. Traditional arts – literature, painting, dance, music etc. – are undermined, but simultaneously they profit from two huge communicational paradigms: a) television and b) electronic text (on which is based the Internet). In this context, it is obviously perceived an increasing concern towards redefining the specificity of the literary text, its internal laws and its dynamics in such a competition between various media.

One of the most fruitful, disputed and controversial approaches of the literary text (Martin McQuillan entitled one of its chapters *There is no such thing as reader-response criticism* in his *The Narrative Reader*) it is *reader-response criticism*, with its German configuration – *Rezeptionsästhetik*, a refined, subtle direction of literary theory and hermeneutics, developed at the Konstanz University, beginning with '60s. Situated at the crossroad of hermeneutics, literary theory and phenomenology of the artwork, this field is insufficient known in Romania, with few notable exceptions of translations and descriptive articles (mainly translations from H.R. Jauss and W. Iser). It is a strong reason for initiating a research on concepts and contoversies originated in *Rezeptionsästhetik*, but in a new context: the age of multimedia[1].

Multimedia means electronic space (*hypertext* and *hypermedia*). Why reception theory applies

To the same degree as in criticism, where the reception theory was competing and even replaced by deconstruction, in the electronic space (electronic text) the theory of reception cannot be discussed and studied without the deconstructivist concepts, patterns and theories. *We insist upon the electronic text, as this is the most*

[1] *Multimedia* (all technologies used for communication, cultural practices and aesthetic set-ups) may be considered different from *Intermediality* even they are very close: intermediality is associated with the blurring of traditional generic and formal boundaries through *the incorporation of digital media* into all forms of cultural practice, and the presence of one or more media in the space and form of another medium. This has led to the creation of intermedial spaces in-between media and a proliferation of *texts*, *inter-texts*, *hyper-texts*, *hyper-fictions*, and acts of correction, *transmediality*, *multimediality*, *hypermediality* and a puzzling blur of associated realities.

BDD-A894 © 2009 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:53:56 UTC)

efficient pattern of the multimedia concept. All the cultural practices (film, theatre, ballet, for example) shaped by new media could be analyzed from the vantage point of view of *productive reception* – concept developed by *Rezeptionsästhetik* – and also could be seen as a continuum of addings, comments, reinterpretations: in fact, as a *hypertext*. A film based on a book or a dramatic set-up based upon a novel simultaneously mean productive reception, interpretation, creation, a process where the reader is simultaneous director and author.

In considering reception theory still useful to describe the contemporary literary text and as an approach still valid in multimedia space based on the *pattern of electronic text*, I got very productive suggestions from two important authors: Jay David Bolter (Bolter 1991), and of George P. Landow (Landow 2006).

George P. Landow suggested from which point should we theorize on deconstructivism (as a competitive paradigm for reception theory) and electronic hypertext: "Jacques Derrida, Theodor Nelson, Roland Barthes, Andries van Dam – all four argue that we must abandon conceptual systems founded on ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them by ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks. Almost all parties to this paradigm shift, which marks a revolution in human thought, see electronic writing as a direct response to the strengths and weaknesses of the printed book, one of the major landmarks in the history of human thought" (Landow 2006: 1). Similarly, Bolter underlines that:

> Reader-response criticism and deconstructivism[2] – which are radical literary theories – still assume that readers will be reading printed books. But in fact, the electronic medium is a more natural place for the irreverent reading that they suggest (Bolter 1991: 152).

It is possible to investigate the internal laws and the levels of significance of the literary text and also the general/public relevance of the literature in our days by assuming some concepts of reception theory and deconstruction questioning the authority:

> The end of authority is when the electronic medium threatens to bring down the whole edifice at once; it complicates our understanding of literature as either mimesis or expression, it denies the fixity of the text, and it questions the authority of the author. The electronic author assumes once again the role of a craftsman, working with defined materials and limited goals (Bolter 1991: 153).

Electronic authors work with the necessarily limited materials provided by their computers, and they impose further limitations upon their readers. Within those limits the reader is free to play. The text is not simply an expression of the author's emotions, for the reader helps to make the text. Two subjects, author and reader, combine in the text (Bolter 1991: 153).

[2] Bolter uses the term *deconstructivism*, not *deconstruction*, which is *exactly* the same. Deconstructivism is the term used to designate the architectural style or movement known as well as. Deconstructivism in architecture, also called deconstruction, is a development of postmodern architecture that began in the late 1980s, and it is characterized by ideas of fragmentation, an interest in manipulating ideas of surfaces or shapes in order to distort and dislocate some of the elements of architecture. The visual appearance of buildings that exhibit deconstructivist „style" is characterised by unpredictability and controlled chaos.

BDD-A894 © 2009 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:53:56 UTC)

As for reader-response critics, it is clear that for Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser and others the only text worth studying is the figurative text. And what was only figuratively accurate in the case of printed text, becomes literally accurate in the electronic medium.

What we have traditionally called the structure of the text is the relationship between the linear experience of reading and the network of allusions among elements that are separated in the physical space of the book (Bolter 1991: 159). The new medium "make real" the metaphor of reader response. Because the reader participates in the making of the text as an order or succesion of words, the reader must call them up and determine the order of presentation by the choices made. As Bolter affirms, there is no univocal text apart from the reader; as far as the author writes a set of potential texts, from which the reader has the freedom to choose (Bolter, 1991: 158). The role of the reader in electronic fiction, for example, therefore lies halfway between the traditional roles of author and reader in the medium of print. These two roles are most clearly delineated in the traditional novel or essay, where the silent reader absorbs and reflects upon the words of the author (Bolter 1991: 152).

In the electronic writing space, all texts may be viewed as functioning similarly to dramas or musical scores. The reader performs the text, for himself or for another reader, who may then choose to perform the first reader's text for others, like in a chain. In this way electronic writing defines a new level of creativity. An electronic text is open to performance: its structure or design is realized in time as the reader reads. But this has also been true of printed texts.

Hypertext and *hypermedia* are most often used terms, and sometimes alternatively, to define the convergence of new media in shaping the electronic text in our times. The term *hypertext* was created by Ted Nelson: a "series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways"[3]. Literature is an ongoing system of interconnecting documents. He defined literature not only as *belles-lettres*, but he also included in literature the scientific and technical writing – any group of writings on a well-determined subject: "A literature is a system of interconnected writings. We do not offer this as our definition, but as a discovered fact" (Bolter 1991: 23). For Landow, *hypermedia*

> simply extends the notion of the text in hypertext by including visual information, sound, animation, and other forms of data. Since hypertext, which links one passage of verbal discourse to images, maps, diagrams, and sound, as easily as to another verbal passage, expands the notion of text beyond the solely verbal, I do not distinguish between hypertext and hypermedia. Hypertext denotes an information medium that links verbal and non-verbal information (Landow 2006: 3).

As the electronic writing is not limited to verbal text – elements may be words, images, sounds or actions, and any combination of these elements is possible. These combinations have come to be called *hypermedia* and are quite sophisticated

[3] In George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 4. Ted Nelson created (coined) the words „hypertext" and „hypermedia" in 1965 and worked with Andries van Dam to develop the Hypertext Editing System in 1968 at Brown University.

BDD-A894 © 2009 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:53:56 UTC)

(Bolter 1991: 26). In fact, hypermedia is the revenge of text upon television (as affirms Michael Joyce, author of *afternoon: a story*, 1987).

"Rezeptionsästhetik"

What we understand as *Rezeptionsästhetik* is a whole range of solutions, positions developed and theorized by *The Constance School* and its main theorists like Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Preisendanz, Manfred Fuhrmann, Jurij Striedter and Karlheinz Stierle, regarding issues like the act of reading, hermeneutics of art work, etc. H.R. Jauss (in *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*[4]) defined the concept of *horizon of expectations* (*Erwartungshorizont*) of a text. It is conceived as a *paradigmatic isotopy* (a patterning of different kinds of things), which is transferred to an horizon of expectations to the degree to which the message grows. And the *process of reception* becomes sketched in the development of a *semiological procedure* which arises between the development and the correction of the system. It is stated that a corresponding process of continuous horizon setting and horizon changing also settles the relation of the individual text to the succesion of texts which form the genre. The new text, underlines Jauss, evokes for the reader the horizon of expectations and known rules from precedent texts, which are then varied, corrected, changed or reproduced. Variation and correction determine the scope, alteration and reproduction of the limits and structure of the genre. So, the interpretive reception of a text always assumes the context of experience of aesthetic perception. In this way, it is possible to determine the artistic nature of the horizon of expectations by the nature and degree of its effect on a given audience. In his conception, Jauss affirms that if the *aesthetic distance* is considered as the distance between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception results in a *horizon change* because it negates familiar experience or articulates an experience for the first time, this aesthetic distance can be measured historically in the spectrum of the reaction of the audience and the evaluation of criticism. For Wolfgang Iser[5], who was influenced by Roman Ingarden (*Das literarische Kunstwerk*, 1957), a literary work is not an object in itself, but an effect to be explained. He asserts this response is controlled by the text. For the "real" reader, he substitutes an *implied reader*, who is the reader a given literary work requires. Within various polarities created by the text, this "implied" reader makes expectations, meanings, and the unstated details of characters and settings through a "wandering viewpoint". In his model, the text controls. The reader's activities are confined within limits set by the literary work.

The ideas developed by *The Constance School* must be correlated with those of relative contemporary reader-response critics: David Bleich, Tony Bennett (post-marxism), Stanley Fish (neopragmatism), Steven Mailloux (rhetorical pragmatism), Norman Holland. In 1960, Bleich theorized about the reading process (students in

[4] H.R. Jauss, *Aeshetic Experience and Literary Hermenutics*, 1982 and *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, 1982.

[5] W. Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte. Unbestimmheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa*, 1970; *Der Implizite Leser*, 1972; *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, 1976; *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre. Perspektiven literarischer Anthropologie*, 1990; *The Range of Interpretation*, 2000.

BDD-A894 © 2009 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:53:56 UTC)

class and associations) and about the classroom teaching of literature. Stanley Fish[6], in 1967 (*Surprised by Sin: The Reader in* Paradise Lost, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP), introduced the idea of "interpretive communities" that share particular modes of reading. The neopragmatism of Fish derives from its belief that a text's effects on a reader does explain its meaning. Like Jauss, Fish imagined the author as a normative force teaching the reader. Fish argues that the reader's views conform to with his interpretive conventions, rather than the text's structure or author's intention. Holland, in 1968, influenced by psychoanalytic psychology, introduced a model imagining a reader who incorporates an invention, an illusion *in* the text, then modifies it by defense mechanisms into an interpretation. Later, Holland's second model is based on his case studies (*5 Readers Reading*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975) – an individual has (in mind) a core identity theme (behaviours then becoming understandable like the themes and variations in music). This core gives that individual a certain style of being and reading. Each reader uses the physical literary work plus invariable codes (such as the shapes of letters) plus variable canons (different "interpretive communities", for example) plus an individual style of reading to build a response both like and unlike other readers' responses. In *Rezeptionsästhetik* (1975), Rainer Warning defined the field as "literatur-wissenschaftliche Forschungsrichtung" – which under various different aspects examines conditions, modalities and results of the meeting between text and reader.

We have to underline also the extensions: because it rests on psychological principles, a reader-response approach readily generalizes to other arts: cinema (David Bordwell) or visual art (E.H. Gombrich) and even to history (Hayden White). In stressing the activity of the scholar, reader-response theory justifies such upsettings of traditional interpretations as, for example, deconstruction or cultural criticism – as Karlheinz Stierle claims in one of his studies (*Interpretations of Responsibility and Responsibilities of Interpretation*, in "New Literary History", vol. 25, no. 4, 1994, p. 853–867).

Deconstruction

As the major opponent of reception theory is deconstruction we must watch the main claims, implications and consequences of it. The deconstructionists assert that the meaning of any written text is radically unstable, a vain attempt to fix meaning, when all writing is condemned to drift in a space of possible meanings. Traditional critics believe tacitly or explicitly in hierarchies (which means that some works are more important than others).

Deconstructionists affirm that not only the central can become marginal and vice versa, but the identity and the singularity of the work is questioned. Derrida's characterization of a text sounds very much like text in the electronic writing space (*Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976; *Limited Inc.*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977; *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1978). And when Derrida speaks of marginality or of the text as extending beyond its borders, he is in fact appealing to the earlier

[6] See also „Interpreting the Variorum", *Critical Inquiry* (1976) and *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980.

BDD-A894 © 2009 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:53:56 UTC)

technologies of writing. If the margins that concern Derrida and deconstruction are the borders of the printed page, what can they say about electronic texts? We see that a text in electronic space has no necessary margins, no fixed boundaries. The electronic writing space can support a network in which all elements have equal status. The author can extend and ramify this textual network limited only by the available memory. The reader can follow paths through the space in any direction, limited only by constraints established by the author. No path through the space be stigmatized as marginal.

Deconstruction in electronic medium

Electronic writing takes us beyond the paradox of deconstruction, because it accepts as strenghts the very qualities – the play of signs, intertextuality, the lack of closure – that deconstruction poses as the ultimate limitations of literature and language. In electronic text, authors may include as many dramatic moments or philosophical ideas or representations as they like, but they must admit with the fact that these moments may appear in a variety of contexts and can be explained by their readers in different ways on different readings. The author must be ready to accept for his or her electronic text the conditions that the deconstructionists have claimed for printed text. An electronic text that remakes itself for each reader and for each act of reading is not incoherent, even if it does not embrace its own contradictions. Bolter concludes:

> Deconstruction therefore tells what electronic writing is not. We will still need a new literary theory to achieve a positive understanding of electronic writing (Bolter 1991: 166).

As Bolter and Landow have suggested, the beginning of a positive theory could be found in Richard Lanham's (*The electronic word: democracy, technology and the arts*, 1989) plea for a "new rhetoric of the arts, an unblushing and unfiltered attempt to plot all the ranges of formal expression now possible". Lanham claims that computer can textualize all the arts: that is, it can incorporate sound and images into hypertext as easily as words.

Bibliography

Bolter 1991: Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space. The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing*, New Jersey, Hillsdale, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Cornis-Pope 1992: Marcel Cornis-Pope, *Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Rewriting: Narrative Interpretation in the Wake of Poststructuralism*, London, Macmillan.

Edwards 1994: Paul N. Edwards, *Hyper Text and Hypertension: Post-Structuralist Critical Theory, Social Studies of Science and Software*, in "Social Studies of Science", vol. 24, no. 2 (May, 1994), p. 229–278.

Landow 1992: George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.

Landow 2006: George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0. Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

McQuillan 2000: Martin McQuillan, *The Narrative Reader*, London, Routledge.

BDD-A894 © 2009 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:53:56 UTC)

Abstract

Our study tries to apply the *aesthetics of reception* to the multimedia space and to identify – on the basis the Hypertext – the borders of these theories within the multimedia space. Multimedia means, above all, *hypertext*. The term *hypermedia* is conceived as a relative term (to *hypertext*), used alternatively, and labels the creative reception of the artistic works as well as a suitability of various artistic spheres. In analysis of the creative act (and in the act of reading of the text) the concept of hypertext runs out from the ideas of two influential authors, Jay David Bolter and George P. Landow.

The aesthetics of reception require further, into the field of literary productions, the reference to Deconstruction as alternative theory of interpretation where the concept of authority is deeply (re)considered.

University "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" of Iaşi
Romania

BDD-A894 © 2009 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:53:56 UTC)