

## THE PLEASURE OF THE HYPERTEXT

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper I examine the relation between textualism and eroticism and how this relation evolves in the digital age. The point of departure is Roland Barthes' works on the notion of text and especially *The pleasure of the text* (1973), where we find enough evidence that the attitude of the French semiologist is of fetishistic character with explicit erotic connotations. Such attitude is quite representative for the whole epoch of both structuralism and post-structuralism. The age of the hypertext (and the internet in general) changes the textualists' culture in new forms of intertextual exchange where the pleasure itself becomes object of communicative exchange. The eroticism of the hypertext is more explicit compared to the text and it is getting a myriad of forms, difficult to be put in a general model. The last chapter examines the consequences of the hypertextual reality for the educational institutions and their role in the digitalized societies.

**Keywords:** Text, Eroticism, Hypertext, Textualism, Semiotics, Pleasure

### The eroticism of the text

In Barthes' *The Pleasure of text*, allusions to the fact that reading is similar to sexual act are numerous. Some of these references are direct, but most are implied and achieved with the virtuosic use of the French language, as well as a highly erudite intimation of the message's intertextuality in the intellectual age. The translator of the English edition interprets this important aspect of the work and allows some vulgarization to compensate for the English language's relative lack of erotic vocabulary (Barthes 1975: v). In many cases, the translator translates the key concept of "jouissance" not as the literal "enjoyment", in which there is little eroticism, but as "bliss", which connotes both "delight" and "ejaculation". In other cases, he translates the word explicitly as "orgasm" (ibid.: 7, 41). In many languages, including Bulgarian, "orgasm" has become synonymous with a lively and enjoyable experience, including in the form of "spiritual orgasm". I think, however, that Barthes goes much further into his analogy between reading and sexual pleasure than this brief examination of his verbal rhetoric suggests. In his richly referenced, fragmented exposition, perverse and fetish topics occupy an important place. This connection is particularly evident in the extensive interview that Barthes gave to French television about the release of this book. In that interview he says that "the text is in principle a fetish, if we assume that we are in an erotic relationship with it"<sup>1</sup>. It should be said that feeling sexual enjoyment while reading, though unusual, is not impossible, and one need simply *Google* the phrase "orgasm while reading" to come across both videos and endless forums where the experience is described in detail.<sup>2</sup> But in most cases, these are examples of what Barthes terms the "pleasure of the consumer" (59), an effect that comes from "relating the text to the pleasures of life" (58) or when the text's content explicitly directs one's imagination to sensory delights. For Barthes, the imposition of such an aesthetics could lead to harrowing effects (59): this is one of the most profound prophecies in his book, as we will see later. Delight, for Barthes, comes from quite different texts by authors like Bataille and Sollers, authors who break the established rules. The bliss-text, according to these criteria, "unsettles the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUgJd2mS3LY> (last visited 10/03/2019).

<sup>2</sup> I was particularly surprised by this post on the subject *Did you ever get an orgasm from reading?* "No, but I got pretty close while reading *The Name of the Rose* when Eco described a really fancy door. I just f\*\*king loved that door." ([http://4chandata.org/lit/Did-you-ever-get-an-orgasm-from-reading,\\_not\\_available\\_anymore](http://4chandata.org/lit/Did-you-ever-get-an-orgasm-from-reading,_not_available_anymore)).

reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (14). It is this type of text that Barthes calls the "fetish object", specifying that "*This fetish desires me*" (27, author's emphasis).

It is important to emphasize what degree of intercourse between an individual and an intellectual culture must be achieved in order for literary texts to evoke such a remarkable range of euphoric experiences and metamorphoses for the reader, as described by Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*. This takes place primarily thanks to the text's literary stylistics. The degree of this intercourse should be sought in the reader's *habitus* (in a Bourdieu sense). This embodied system of predispositions to socio-culture was built over many years, through purposeful practices like the exercise of a loved profession, high recognition, and successful cohabitation in a stimulating community of colleagues, and intellectual environment in the family. In Barthes' case these factors have worked in a specific direction, and it is no wonder that they transformed his literary and humanistic erudition into something like a "textual erogenous zone," being highly reactive to provocative works of global importance and their effects upon the overall structure of culture. In the terms of interpretative semiotics, this interaction between author and reader (in the case of Barthes' euphoric pleasure of the text) requires much more than a shared encyclopedic competence. It also requires formal innovations encoded in the text that do not only validate that shared encyclopedia, but also prescribe the virtual destruction of established systems of expectation in the culture/intertext. Barthes facilitates our reading of the prerequisites for the text's pleasure/bliss with his open hatred of the stereotype, which we also have reason to believe goes beyond figurative speech and spills into physiology. In *The pleasure of the text* Barthes mentions the word "nausea" three times only on a single page about the stereotype; Dosse develops this relationship in more detail in his *History of Structuralism* (Dosse 1991: 75). Barthes positions bliss and nausea as the extremes between which the hyper-erudite reader embodies the era's intertextuality, just as the "chosen One" in the film *The Matrix* eventually merged with the code of the repressive computer program and gained control over it. *The pleasure of the text is an emanation of the literary academic culture, which, though it spans all forms of discourse, carries within it the matrix of the verbal code, the structure of the primordial abstract system, and the prototype for all others.*

### **Cult of the text and textual semiotics**

Barthes' textual euphoria comes after decades of developing the semi-

otic paradigm, which, *with the notion of text, comes to its most mature phase*. Barthes is one of the great “prophets” of the second half of the 20th century’s most prominent intellectual currents, and it is not accidental that he reserves a fundamental role both for the rise of structuralism and for its poststructuralist decline. In this sense, Barthes places great merit in the well-established use of the text as a tool for analyzing processes in culture. Originally, he uses the term text as a synonym for a work or a linguistic text. The first steps leading to mature textual semiotics start from several directions. Some of these steps represent the “struggle” to conquer the sense of autonomy of the work or text from the declining “queen,” philology. Significant contributions in this movement come from the *Prague linguistic school* and later from the American *New Critique*. In both cases, the emphasis within these approaches gives priority to the internal mechanisms of meaningful organization in a work, at the expense of the author’s historical context, intentions, and biography. Another angle in which the concept of text becomes the center of methodological debate is in linguistics, where a number of researchers (including Petöfi and van Dijk, who are among the most cited by semioticians see Marrone 2010: 19) offer it as a standalone level of analysis, regardless of the phrase. Previously, Louis Hjelmslev performed another great step in releasing the notion of text from identification with verbal language. In his hyperformal theory of signification, Hjelmslev developed the Saussurean sign model globally, postulating an arbitrary relationship between the general levels (or plans) of expression and content. His model states that the articulation of meaning does not depend on the substance of expression, and that arbitrary excerpts or sensible stimulus of matter can serve for both sides of the semiotic process according to the pertinence of the semiotic system chosen for analysis. This extension of Saussure’s formal principle inspires Barthes’ study of ideologies in mass culture (published in 1957 in *Mythologies*). At this point Barthes is still far from what will later be his concept of text, though he uses the language/myth dichotomy in a very similar fashion.

The glorious years of textual semiotics are yet to come. Paradoxically, two post-structuralism’s stars are the first to contribute to the textualist cause, but this still takes place at the height of structuralism. Newly arrived in Paris in 1966, Julia Kristeva puts a concept into circulation that will have a glorious future – the *intertext* (Dosse 1992: 55). This concept is so influential that it is first used by other authors prior to its publication. It allows the structural perspective to enter the “forbidden” zone of historicity without losing its methodologically necessary immanence. The term is a skillful adaptation of Bakhtinian concepts for the intellectual trends of Paris. The

texts that make up culture do not represent any other reality, they simply refer to other texts; their interpretive fate is a meaningful carousel because every meaningful text “speaks” to other important texts, and so on and so forth unto infinity. A variant of this idea is solidly and seductively proposed by Jacques Derrida in 1967, in one of the era’s “slogans” – “there is nothing outside the text” (Derrida 1997: 158).

The similarity between Derrida’s slogan and that of structural semiotics’ premier proponent, Algirdas Greimas, which reads “outside the text, there is no salvation” (Greimas 1974) supports my thesis that *the cult of the text* is the era’s common denominator, despite the seeming “fierce struggle” between structuralism and deconstruction. But in order to arrive at Greimas’ complete method, the evolution of textualism goes through several further phases, including the “execution” of the author, whose authority is first undermined by the contributions of the *Prague school* and then by *New critique* several decades earlier. In 1968, this step was taken in a much more radically and “straightforward” way by Barthes himself. In “Death of the Author” (Barthes 1989), his main thesis is that in texts the language is speaking more its own genre conventions, and other texts (or intertexts) than any text itself with its supposed personality-author, who knows what he or she means to say.

We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture (53).

What is more important, however, is that the death of the author comes at the expense of the “birth” of the reader (55). This refers not to the average reader of quality literature, but about the new wave of academic textualists who “colonize” new territories and thus legitimize an exponentially growing textual production. The next year another star of the epoch – Michael Foucault – takes up the subject of authorship, in which the French philosopher analyzes the function of the author and the interpretive fate of texts in a similar vein (Foucault 1969). He introduces the term “founder of discursivity”, which distinguishes types of authorship, but again focuses on the production of followers – the academic textualists.

So, for the purposes of this brief review, it is possible to talk about two main directions in which the *cult of the text* evolves. We can call them the *euphoric* and *methodological* directions. The euphoric direction already drawn by Barthes in “*Death of the author*” evolves in his next important text – *From Work to Text* (1989b [1971]), culminating two years later in *The Pleasure of the Text*. In the 1971 essay, many of his ideas overlap with

the other two texts, but one very original comparison stands out. The work is an object that can be identified, possessed, etc., while the text is constituted by any and every reading, just as a musical work is a book-score but *de facto* lives within any real text-interpretation (Barthes 1989b: 63). In general, all of Barthes's pathos moves to conclude that reading the text is a kind of creative process commensurable with that of authorship. However, this is not the reading of the average bourgeois reader, but of the trained academic textualist, as the musical work is interpreted by professional musicians. Listening to a musical work and reading, believing that the true meaning is what the author wanted to say about Barthes' consumption, is something like reading a book on a train (62 ff.). With these few contributions, Barthes expresses a whole ethos of euphoric textualism that literally floods academia around the world. The Yale School and Deconstruction are only the most visible markers of this trend, but its expansion is significant enough to provoke the famous "science wars" of the 1990s. The critics of textual postmodernism quite insightfully describe the different dimensions of this phenomenon, despite the negativity of the science wars.<sup>3</sup>

For the present paper, however, the other direction in which the cult of the text develops – methodological textualism – is more interesting. Although in *From Work to Text* Barthes is far from developing a concrete methodology, he formulates this "program" too. In reference to the opposition of the work and the text, he says: «The difference is as follows: the work is a fragment of substance, it occupies a portion of the spaces of books (for example, in a library). The Text is a methodological field.» (57). Barthes, of course, also has plenty of contributions in which he attempts a systematic textual analysis, which might dispute this statement, but he will hardly be remembered for them.

The most authoritative attempt to define the text and its methodological specificity is made by Ricœur in his 1970 essay "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding". Here, the French philosopher synthesizes many circulating ideas of the era, beginning with the definition of the text as "any discourse fixed by writing." (Ricœur 1991: 106) Then, in his typical pedantic style, Ricœur explores the many consequences of this "fixation". The most important direction of his analysis comes from opposing the oral form of expression (speaking) to the written, fixed text. Though he was not the first to argue that the letter is not a neutral transcription of orality, but a profound change with a fundamental impact on the overall structure of culture, Ricœur designed these implications from the perspective of the text's meaning-making mechanisms. For him, staging discourse

<sup>3</sup> Maybe the page with the most papers around the debate: <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/#impostures> (last visited 10/03/2019).

in a textual form means “the small death” for the author, since the latter is

de facto eliminated from the speech situation: “For it is when the author is dead that the relation to the book becomes complete and, as it were, intact.” (107). The shared situation of the speakers (their general circumstantial milieu, 108) is the prerequisite for a referential attenuation that does the “hard work” of the verbal message. The rhetorical creativity of live speech exploits this communicative resource. In fixed discourse, this dynamic fades away, replaced by other kinds of meaningful processes. The author is forced to give the text an expressive universality to “immunize” it from the arbitrariness of the interpretive situation. Such expressive universality is a prerequisite for an *interception* of the reference function, and so “in virtue of this obliteration of the relation to the world, each text is free to enter into relation with all the other texts that come to take the place of the circumstantial reality referred to by living speech.” (109) According to Ricoeur, this inner feature of the text reflects the overall status of writing civilizations, whose world ceases to be what can be verbally pointed out, but is postponed in much more complex cultural constructions that only the texts of those cultures unfold. In this sense, there is for example a Greek World or a Byzantine World (*ibid.*).

Textual semiotics, one of the forms of methodological textualism, starts from similar prerequisites but does not take the hermeneutic line towards the understanding and the interpretative horizons of the author and reader, but instead opens a program for the transposition of strict linguistic methods onto discursive units that go beyond the phoneme and the phrase. The text becomes a methodological field as long as the scientific rigor of description requires that it be divided into different levels of pertinence, and to relate elements of the same order at each level. “Text” thus becomes synonymous with a “semiotic organization of signifying elements” in which the principle of immanence is important, and the choice of pertinence level depends on the ambitions of the research program. For example, we can trace all levels of sense generation in a tale of Maupassant – from the fundamental syntax at the level of Greimas’ semiotic square, to the discursive syntax on the textual surface. In another case, the analytical apparatus could focus on the textual function of modalities or passions, to bring out their narrative grammar. A third type of textual analysis might concern the narrative strategies that mask or expose the instance of enunciation, when the live connection between the addresser and the addressee is suspended. In Greimas’ terminology these strategies are called *debrayage*, and through such analysis one can trace how the instance of the narrator

can be delegated formally to an explicit narrative self, or to a complex polyphony of voices / characters / actants, or to aim at a complete obliteration of narrative subjectivity, as in scientific texts. Here, to the highest degree, a scientific method is available to analyze the difference between speaking and the written fixation of discourse.

I say all this in order to convincingly contend that the cult of the text is ritualized no less successfully by the followers of the methodological approach than those of euphoric textualism. This is not only the conclusion of the vast volume of literature applying the generative semiotics of Greimas (and more generally of the *Paris School*), but also the large number of semiotics and semiology departments that opened in the 1970s and 1980s, mostly in Italy and France. The academic institutionalization of semiotics is almost entirely due to the influence of methodological textualism, and it should be made clear that methodological textualists' "pleasure of the text" comes to fruition with the development of *sociosemiotics*. The rigorous method of analysis in the first phase having been successfully exported to written texts, its usage then gets applied to other important nonverbal manifestations of culture. The method produces good results in the analysis of architecture, cinema, theater, fashion, music, political discourse, television and, above all, the complex of discursive behavioral practices within consumer culture. The leading prerequisite for this type of sociosemiotics, formulated by Gianfranco Marrone, is that the social life of each community is the result of culturally codified configurations that enable individuals to have a meaningful worldview in synchronicity with others. Henceforth, the furthest horizon of the discipline aims "to serve as a critical (even in the Kantian sense) reconstruction of the conditions for the possibility of society as a subject of scientific knowledge, the reproduction of procedures, through which certain human and social phenomena appear to be interesting, important, and pertinent for analysis, the establishment of the semiotic reasons for the presentation of something as a socially relevant subject." (translation from Italian by the author, Marrone 2010: 32-33). In the 1970s, Eco successfully introduces some of Charles Peirce's primary ideas regarding the semiotic method of textual analysis, especially those in textual pragmatics related to the role of the reader (see Eco 1994 [1979]). In the panorama to textual semiotics and its projection on cultural phenomena, Marrone also points out the contributions of Yuri Lotman and Clifford Geertz as significant manifestations of textual methodology that complement the academic frame of the times.

Examples could continue indefinitely. For the purpose of this paper, it is important to emphasize that we have good reason to believe that the main



modus of propagating cultural content during the times of the *Pleasure of the text* is actually the written text. Literary intertextuality is, therefore, the main source of meaningfulness for the other aesthetic forms. Authors like Fellini and Buñuel, for example, inscribe their works so deeply in the literary context that although they are essentially outstanding visual achievements, the ultimate interpretive enjoyment would hardly be possible without the decryption of the literary references within them. Accordingly, we can summarize that the intellectual habitus of the era was dominated by the written culture, and not only for Barthes. “*The pleasure of the text*” was the leading ethos of cultural professionals, as it was key to the growing diversity of all cultural expressions.

### **The digital turn and the pleasure of the hypertext**

Now I will forward a few hypotheses about why Barthes’ book would hardly bring pleasure to modern readers, those typical carriers of the new digital culture. Through this rhetorical technique, I will formulate a socio-semiotic hypothesis about the profound changes in the formats of cultural content which today cause a growing gap between academic professionals in the humanities, social sciences, etc. and the leading sociocultural reality of the contemporary world.

For many authors of the 1960s and 1970s, the most popular among these being McLuhan and Baudrillard, electronic media have caused the most significant cultural changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. My hypothesis starts from the assumption that the culture of written text remains very resistant to electronic media, especially as an academic environment shaping cultural professionals. It is not by accident that many of the textualists cited in the first part reach the peak of their influence in the 70s and 80s of the last century when the electronic media also dominated. However, the culture of the written text is in serious crisis with the recent expansion of new digital media. Among the thousands of writers on this topic, I find good enough arguments in Lev Manovich, Milad Doueihi, Jeremy Rifkin, Dany-Robert Dufour, and Ivaylo Dichev. If the previous “revolutions” in cultural communication have affected distribution (print) or content (photo / cinema / video), “computer media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulating, storage and distribution; it also affects all types of media – text, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions.” (Manovich 2001: 43).<sup>4</sup> Digital culture not only absorbs the

<sup>4</sup> In general, this author gives the most in-depth analysis of the major differences in communication systems that came with the new media compared to the previous model (Manovich 2001) and how today software has become the main medium of social inter-

whole "archive" of existing culture, but also changes the structure of its usability. This automatically means that the collectively-articulated content we call "culture," and which forms the fabric of each community's social life, ceases to perform its fundamental function in the same way as it did in the era of verbal intertextualism. It is very important to emphasize that, unlike the previous communications revolutions that have taken place across many or several generations, the current revolution is happening within just one. This is also the main reason for the coexistence of two "active" generations, programmed with a completely different socio-cultural habitus. One of the most important concepts in Doueïhi's book is "digital competence" (Doueïhi 2011: 39 ff.), which he explores in all major facets of social life. It is clear that the individuals who originally embodied this new digital competence (the Internet natives) are inhabiting a different world (in the sense of Ricœur, cited above) compared to us, the bearers of the written culture/habitus. The main categorical differences characteristic of this differently constructed socio-cultural reality, according to Doueïhi, are related to "concepts such as identity; location; relations between territory and jurisdiction, between presence and location, between community and individual; ownership; archives; and many others." (17). Rifkin develops his hypothesis about the new type of identity of the .com (dotcom) generation with socio-economic arguments and empirical data (Rifkin 2000: 201 ff.). The development of the new economy exploits the features of this habitus, deepening the differences with the old culture, transforming the new format of cultural content into paid-for access to experiences. Dufour (2007) examines the reasons that the new generations form their cognitive habits so early through the wide variety of internet entertainment offered to them and the market of smart devices. Through this analysis he argues that, at the moment of their institutional education, new generations are no longer able to receive the established "Textual" formats of the "standard" (for us) cultural capital.<sup>5</sup> Doueïhi, Dichev and especially Bankov (see Bankov 2017; Dichev 2012) conduct an in-depth analysis of the function of authorship in digital culture, with results confirming new attitudes and practices, ones incompatible with the old.

So, the "pleasure of the text" – but for whom would Barthes' book and favorite books would be a pleasure? Following what has been said so far, it is clear that the typical representative of the .com generation does not possess

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action (Manovich 2013).

<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of this subject and a hypothesis on new forms of encyclopedic competence, see "Cultures of Navigation versus Cultures of Erudition" (Bankov 2010).

at the moment of reading neither the cultural capital to identify Barthes'

intertextual references, nor the textual habitus to understand and experience Barthes' euphoria from his encounter with the texts of bliss. And what about the commonly observed inability of internet natives to pay attention for the longer time demanded to read any text longer than few pages? Some authors go further: according to Nicholas Carr (2010), a person from the old generation who actively uses the internet may begin to noticeably lose the ability for in-depth reading. Scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (see Sparrow & Co. 2011) identify changes in our cognitive attitudes and memory when we use the computer to access information. The principle of saving mental effort makes our brains remember, completely without conscious intervention, the procedure for reaching given information instead of the information itself. Respondents have remembered the content of the text much more successfully when they were not shown where the file is, compared to those who knew how to find it on the computer. In the same way as Carr, I can share my own experience that, though having thousands of books in electronic format on my computer, I have not read any of them from the beginning to the end. Thanks to the search function I locate the exact parts of the text that interest me. Once I was able to remember the most important thoughts in all the books I had read, and I used to open the book just to avoid mistaking the quote; today I have a glimpse of one or few important thing in thousands of books, which, when I begin a research project, I find and then copy/paste. The pleasure of the text, and the subsequent meeting with the authors, is gradually being replaced by the fleeting joy that I have managed to locate exactly what I was interested in. To conclude this discussion, I will say that even though I am not a typical representative of modern academic textualists, I observe the tendency described quite clearly by the above-quoted authors, and I am sure that with the new generations of humanitarian researchers, the pleasure of the text will be further diminished. This is a trend that, as we shall demonstrate shortly, academic education must strongly oppose.

### **The eroticism of hypertext**

We can add the sociosemiotic account of digital cultural to the cultural-logical one. Through it, we can better understand the communicative mechanisms behind the pleasure of the text and the pleasure of hypertext (a figurative way to refer to the new forms of communication in digital culture). As we have seen from Ricœur's analysis of the main features of those discourses fixed by writing, the texture of the signs takes on functions that

are performed in live speech by gestural indications and the shared circumstantial reality of the interlocutors. In general, we can say that cultural codification and decoding in communication via written text is of a superior order than in oral communication. The work of fixing discourse entirely in formalized written language is significant, and qualitatively modifies the communicative action. Figuratively, we can imagine that to pass from oral speech to real writing skills, our thought sends its signs to the barracks, wherein they break the emotional relationship with the "family", and with hard work and self-sacrifice they acquire the ability to synchronize their action into complex, structured formations. Written expression disciplines thought and makes possible the unfolding of complex creative worlds and ideas of a completely different order, when compared to all other forms of expression. The "Gross textual product" of writing civilizations is marked by typical verbal text structurality. Following Lotman's concept of the nucleus of the semiosphere (Lotman 1990: 129) we can call language a "normative structuring device" that gives meaning to all other processes in the culture.

*Today, however, we observe the "liberation" of socio-culture from the written text – not only "quantitatively" as the main carrier of cultural content, but also structurally, as a "structuring device" for its other manifestations. Computers, mobile communication and the Internet, economic and political globalization after the end of the Cold War, and consumerism have made the world a completely different place where it is necessary for each one of us to adapt to new, much higher communication standards. For purely pragmatic reasons, for ever larger groups of people, disciplined linear linguistic expression became impossible, at least for lack of confidence in the system of expectations (competence) of those to whom it would be addressed. The new economy grew up around communications industries; the imperceptible daily life of modern man became communicatively facilitated, as in the 1950s the economy evolved around facilitating household chores. It seems that modern communicative euphoria finds its fullest expression in social media.*

But let's take a closer look at what's going on with the circulation of cultural content, or with the unifying fabric of our social coexistence. It seems as if the *information flows that flood us every day do not carry as much linguistically codified information as sensually recreated experiences*. In his typology of cultures, Lotman reports that some of them are more semiotic than others, depending on how secondary modeling systems refer to the sign function in principle. By such criteria, we can say that the new media are working hard on the *desemiotization of culture*. As paradoxical as it may be, today, when we communicate the most, the semioticity of our discourse

is the lowest. It is comparable to that of the caveman who spontaneously tried to share his experience without a conventional sign system. The new media make it easier for us to share our experiences, fantasies, and wit, and to gain access to the experiences, fantasies and wit of others without going through the “painful” process of language codification.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, the function of social fabric is performed not anymore by sign systems, but seems to be increasingly implemented by platforms such as *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Instagram* and operating systems like *Android*, *iOS* and *Windows* (or, more generally, the software, as Manovich notes in his latest book), where most common forms of self-expression are spontaneous and intuitive.

As it has been repeatedly said, writing literacy is resilient in generations educated by physical books, but our goal here is to give a model for the ongoing processes that make it harder to coexist with digital culture. For the Barthesian pleasure of the text, we saw the need for over-erudition and textual habitus. *Hypertext, on the contrary, makes possible the communication of the pleasure itself*. If we use Barthes’ terms, the new media develop the predicted “relating the text to the pleasures of life” (Barthes 1985: 58), in which fixed written discourse is impoverished by the hypertext. The new media are progressing on a daily basis in the ever more plausible simulation of sensory experience, which is ultimately the direct conduit of pleasure.

Let’s return to the topic of eroticism. Besides Barthes’ confessions of fetishism, his attitude to the text is also a kind of sublimation, or a redirection of the libido’s energy to creative or useful activities. According to Freud, the sublimation of those gifted in art and science leads to all civilization’s achievements (Freud 1930: 27). It is also not difficult to make the link between sublimation and the written textual form, which, to the greatest extent, suspends the living sensory relationship between the communicators through it. For thousands of years human communities have lived in conditions of constant inhibition of impulsive sexuality and regulation through socially acceptable manifestations. *Today the internet and digital industry are paving the way for life without sexual inhibitions* and without the need for sublimation. It is a well-known fact that the exponential growth of the Internet since its inception has been attributed to over 50% of pornography,<sup>7</sup> with the most common innovations in web design being in this sector. The phenomenal scale of Internet pornography is not “the same thing as before, but more”; rather, it brings a profound change in the social

<sup>6</sup> Speculation on this topic has one of the greatest visionaries of Virtual Reality – Jaron Lanier (1989) “Virtual Reality, An Interview with Jaron Lanier by Kevin Kelly”, Adam HEILBRUN, Barbara STACKS, *Whole Earth Review*, 1989, Sausalito, Ca., p. 108–119.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.extremetech.com/computing/123929-just-how-big-are-porn-sites>

fabric, most notably the disintegration of public sanctions on the impulsive

manifestation of libido. And this permission of impulsive libidinal manifestation is one of the leading dimensions of the pleasure of the hypertext.

The industry of Eros, of course, is not the only manifestation of digital culture. If we look at the semiotic mechanisms behind it, we will see that other forms of narrative are developing in the direction of increasing sensorimotor gratification. *Interactivity* is one of these principles, and even in many new media definitions it occupies the key role of distinctive feature, something like Lotman's structuring device, which, from the center of the semiosphere, distributes its semiotic regulation to all cultural manifestations (Bankov 2017; Arcagni 2016). According to Manovich (Manovich 2001: 40), interactivity existed long before the new media, but through them adopted a completely new status. Here follow some examples.

In 2008, the scale of the video game business surpasses that of the cinema industry (Chatfield 2009). In my opinion, this is an economic projection of an important trend in the evolution of narrative forms. *Interactivity* has a direct influence on the role of the reader/viewer in that it further transforms the system of presuppositions/assumptions on which interpretation is based. Interactivity makes the viewer more active and the fabula more open-ended. *Increased activity, however, is in favor of the experience rather than the interpretation of meaning.* If, in a linear narrative, the reader works actively with her imagination to suggest possible courses of the fabula on the basis of her generic and real life competence, in the interactive narrative she bears a certain "responsibility" for the final result. Interactivity renders the experience of the story more similar to real life, as events are influenced by our decisions and skills. In the linear narrative the reader presupposes while the author disposes, i.e. decisions are taken by the latter and the exposed content is always identical, though it gives grounds for different interpretations. In the interactive narrative, what is happening from the beginning to the end of the "read" is different, i.e. the actualized content itself varies. Therefore *the emphasis of communicative interaction shifts from the presupposition/understanding (writing culture) to the experience/achievement (digital culture).* If we compare a literary description of a hunting scene and a hunting video game with a real hunting experience, we can easily account for the two texts' different degrees of interactivity. In the first case, we, in the role of readers, will probably imaginatively create many variants of the hunting scene and its outcome, which will imply strong and varied emotions according to the author's ability to manage our interpretive activity. In the end, as a result of reading,

we will remain with the only version of the story actually described by the author. If the description is the work of a great master of literary expression, the reader's imagination will be open to new horizons of the hunting adventure and new associations and psychological nuances unachievable within her own imagination. As we have seen above, these linguistic descriptions have the capacity to lend a universal character to sophisticated psychological states. Such an experience would likely enrich our cultural capital, but it would hardly make us more experienced hunters.

A good *video game*, on the contrary, will aim to put us in a real hunting environment, and its creators will try to design the criteria for success to be as close as possible to the criteria for success in real hunting. According to *our skills*, "the actualized textual content" will vary, i.e. the better the shooting, the longer the game lasts (that is, the communicative interaction), and the more exciting *experiences* we will have the chance to acquire. Interactivity opens up the creative world of the work to the possibility of repeated immersion within it. Interactivity, realized with a simulation of the typical for the real life *principle of chance*, ensures that events happen differently with each playthrough. The world of the game will be interesting to us through the improvement of our skills as new scenarios and *new challenges* are revealed, including the possibility of competition with another gamer. Experience with such a game will not enrich our cultural capital in the sense of the previous example, but will enrich our sensorimotor skills with new levels of coordination between vision, hearing, and motor reactions. Actions that seem to have been difficult and even impossible in the first playthroughs have become easy – that is, we have achieved something. But most of all, we will remember the pleasant experience of achieving the goals of the game. The big difference between video games and real hunting is that in the video game everything is in a fully controlled environment, while in real hunting the degree of unpredictability and risk is vastly higher. These risks range from the possibility of nothing happening, i.e. the hunt becomes a walk in the woods, to the hunter being involved in a fatal accident. Accordingly, our system of expectations in the real world implies a radically different experience of seemingly identical situations to the video game. However, there is the possibility that entertainment designers of the future will work on the *suspension of disbelief* so as to reach levels in which gamers "forget" that they are playing and, accordingly, to confuse the fictional situations of the narrative with real ones and thus endanger their very lives.

It is also obvious how cinema, as the less dangerous medium, responds to this trend. According to Lotman's model, the dominant semiosphere transfers its grammar (the semiotic principle of organization) to the other

semiospheres. The cinema business is fully geared towards the spectacular special effects that automatically transform the narrated fabula into a secondary element of the work. At the expense of the narrated fabula, new cinematic hits with intricate special effects make viewing an immersive audiovisual experience. If the abovementioned Fellini and Buñuel created their works with the resources of literary and iconographic tradition, today's filmmakers are mainly committed to create a perfect audiovisual design for fantasy worlds through computer-generated images, closely reflecting the real laws of our visual and auditory perceptions (and the story, most simplified, is adjusted to the FX design; see Bankov 2011). In the first case, the interaction of author and spectator is based on a system of expectations determined by encyclopedic competence; in the second the effect of the impact is based on sensorimotor predispositions, the pre-cultural embodiment of the physical principles needed by everyone for motional adequacy. Obviously, the products of these industries are spreading globally much more successfully when their consumption (experience/understanding) does not have to rely on intertextual competencies belonging to one's culture, but on the human sensorimotor system of predispositions. On the other hand, the "old-fashioned" narrative cinema is becoming more and more a hobby consumed by a limited number of connoisseurs.

### **The education of hypertext**

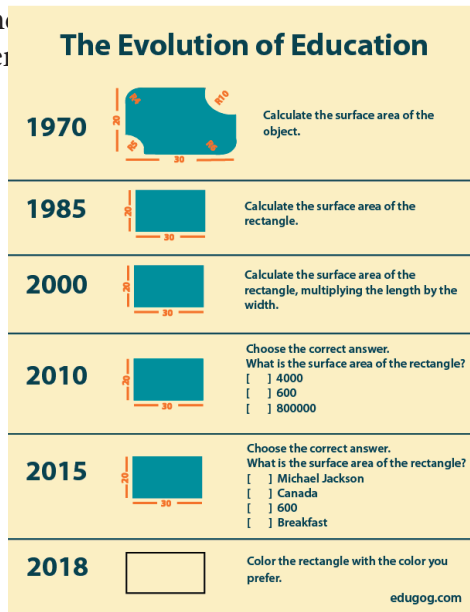
We could enumerate many further examples, but even with those few the sociosemiotic reading of the comparison between text culture and hypertext is sufficiently clear. To conclude, I would like to share some thoughts about the new challenges facing university education and what helpful contributions semiotics can make.

It is undisputed that the penetration of digital culture has caused a crisis in the functioning of all educational institutions. The superficial way to talk about it, although very funny as seen on Fig. 1) is that children are illiterate because they are lazy, and instead of learning to read and write they play on computer games and hang out on social media. This description in no way contradicts the above analyzes, but does not take into account the imminent dramatic deepening of the problem, and the ways that common-sense solutions based on it are also superficial. These solutions range from the nostalgic wish to restore old-school discipline to the utopian desire for teachers to use more advanced methods of teaching. Regarding school education, where my observations are partial, I have a strong skepticism that the standards of literacy when verbal language was the main way of self-expression could ever return. For most of the activities that teenagers will engage in there is no need for linguistic or encyclopedic competencies,



especially from the  
literacy rather alien

ctures on language



**Fig. 1:** The evolution of education (edugog.com)

*I believe that the struggle for language-based writing literacy will be fully transferred to higher education, where it is professors' goal to define the added value that such competence brings in the contemporary world. Defining this would constitute a long term cognitive-semiotic research program, but it is obvious that the same professional qualification, taught and actually acquired with writing/linguistic/textual exercises, is a prerequisite for managerial executive positions driven by long-term goals. While the same qualification inculcated by interactive audiovisual tools and workplace simulation creates ideal employees for today's corporate needs. Far from textual literacy meaning just proper speaking and writing, it determines a qualitatively different way of applying knowledge in the context of any professional culture, and, as Ricœur puts it, requires universalization of thought (see above). But such a goal is far from easy to achieve, and does not mean that the old forms of teaching should be encouraged. On the contrary, when a professor's mission is to upgrade the language-based habitus over that of digital culture (and here we are talking about the first two years of study when professional specialization has not begun), they will need a very good knowledge of the communicative characteristics of new media and possess the ability to actively use them to*

involve the student in learning objectives. And when I say that the communicative problem in education is going to be dramatically deepening, I mean that universities have not yet embraced the generations that have fully formed in digital culture beyond the Web 2.0 era. It is then that the perceptible tendencies of extinguishing the university's authenticity under free market conditions will be exacerbated.

Today, *for the first time since its modern constitution the university institution has been forced to cope with the reality principle*. This was not the case either in the era of constitution of nation states (when the university was the incubator of national culture), nor during the Cold War, when the competition of scientific achievement between the two blocks was driven by huge means, regardless of the real social needs.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays the "full professors cohort" carries the textual writing culture and sees in every vocation-oriented reform an attempt to profane and discredit the status of the scientist. And in this way, higher educational institutions are alienated from the public interest, and thus their functions are in jeopardy. The other unfavorable trend comes from the opposite direction. Businesses put pressure on the university to prepare qualified employees, with efficiency criteria gradually eliminating any form of education in general academic culture and critical thinking. Obeying this trend, universities will easily become well-paid subsidiaries for the professional qualification of corporations.

The third trend comes from market competition between the universities themselves, some of which develop a tendency to "meet the needs" of students with the tools of the service marketing and of the entertainment industry. If this trend prevails, it is easy to imagine the implications for learning standards and, ultimately, the sense of learning at all within the university.

As previously mentioned, semiotics has the potential to develop research in the field of new digital culture and the possibility of higher education in its inherent conditions, with the achievement of high educational goals. These goals should not reflect any of the listed trends, but should reflect on the new *institutional identity of the university* in keeping with the objective validity of each. A kind of new semiotics will need to develop new theoretical tools that build on the scientific consistency of textual semiotics, the better to extend the study of communication to vaguely codified sensory experiences, interactivity and computer assisted knowledge, kinetic interaction with smart devices, content generated on social media, and many other features of digital culture for which the text model is difficult to apply. Such a program cannot be semiotic only but would be necessarily interdisciplinary. Cognitive science and

<sup>8</sup> For a closer look at these phases of university development, Bill Readings' book *The University in Ruins* (Readings 1996).

anthropology are closest to the problem, but many other humanities and social sciences fields will have something to contribute. In general, this feature of modern digital culture is what I have termed the “pleasure of hypertext”.

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