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poetopology: folded space, traversal machines and the poetics of 'emergent text.'

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poetopology: folded space, traversal machines and the poetics of 'emergent text.'

By Hanjo Beressem

Abstract

Rather than providing a fully worked-out argument, the paper advances some propositions about a number of questions concerning the 'hypertextual field.'
The first proposition has to do with space. It concerns the fact that the discussion of the affinity between space and hypermedia has suffered from the fact that it relies on a static, Cartesian rather than a dynamic, topological concept of space. Drawing on Deleuze, I propose the figure of 'folding' , - rather than 'linking', 'surfing' or 'navigating' - as a way to think of textual movement:s within topological space.
My second proposition concerns the dynamics of hypertext in the context of its 'eventuality', 'performativity' and 'interactivity'. Aarseth's definition of cybertext as a 'text that involves calculation in the production of its scriptons', especially when it is coupled with the spatial metaphor of folding, can offer new insights into these fields.
The third proposition concerns what might be called 'emergent text'. Drawing on examples from print- as well as digital literature, philosophy (Deleuze), hypertext theory (Aarseth) and complexity theory, I consider some of the problems and possibilities surrounding the creation of 'autopoietic texts' through specific programmings (such as built-in 'chance operations') of the 'traversal' hypertextmachine.

Let me recapitulate my arguments by way of folding a text onto my discussion of hypertext that, certainly at first sight, has absolutely nothing to do with the topic. This text, written by the architect and designer Bernard Cache, concerns a new mode of producing architectural objects. [This is already a first link to my paper, which highlights the relationship between hypertext and architecture in terms of structure and in terms of theoretical backdrop, such as Gilles Deleuze's book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*]. What I want to talk about specifically is Cache's term 'objectile,' - Deleuze uses this term in *The Fold* - which I will map onto what I propose

to call the 'textile,' or better: [hyper]'textile.' Note, however, that the term 'textile' in this context does *not* refer primarily to the metaphor of weaving.

In his book *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*, Cache describes a new mode of the production of objects – and please, whenever you hear the term 'object,' let the term 'text' reverberate through this 'object.' The new mode of production concerns "systems in which objects[texts] are no longer designed but calculated" (88). [This is a further link to my paper, in which I stress the importance of a textual calculation as the main, and maybe the only, structural difference between hypertext – whatever that is - and printtext – whatever that is. As Aarseth notes, introducing, for good reasons, his own terminology, "I suggest the term cybertext for texts that involve calculation in their production of scriptons" (75), with scriptons being "strings [of signs] as they appear to readers" (62) as opposed to textons which are "strings [of signs] as they exist in the text" (62). The important point is that a 'traversal function' operates in-between these two plateaus: "the mechanism by which scriptons are revealed or generated from textons and presented to the user of the text" (62). This computational machine, which takes the place of the more static bookmachine or, more generally printmachine, intrudes into the logic that formerly played itself out predominantly between the signifier and the signified [stable signifier, fluid signified]. The stability of the field of the signifier causes printtexts to be 'designed' in the sense of 'plotted' – and this means both that they have a plot and that their structural diagram can be plotted, as in drawn. A necessary caveat (amongst many others): of course printtexts are also calculated if they are written on or transferred to a computer. Only hypertexts, however, are machinically calculated in terms of structure rather than, say, in terms of storage or presentation. Their form of calculation is 'stronger' than that involved in 'mere digitalisation.' It involves a higher intensity of calculation, such as the one that concerns the shifting, dynamic positionings of signifiers].

But back to Cache: The new, *calculated* mode of production differs essentially from that in which objects were *designed* in earlier systems. In these earlier systems, complex objects were built up from simple, basic forms. In opposition to this mode, the new form of production "allows complex forms to be designed that would be difficult to represent by traditional drawing methods [modes of plotting]. Instead of compositions of primitive or simple contours, we will have surfaces with variable curves and some volumes" (88). With this method, you start from the complex rather than from the simple. The result is "a non-standard mode of production. In fact, the modification of calculation parameters allows the manufacture of a different shape for each object in the same series. Thus unique products are produced industrially. We will call variable objects created from surfaces "subjectiles," and variable objects created from volumes "objectiles" (88). [This is the most direct link to a theory of hypertext. Hypertextiles, I argue, are produced precisely according to a 'non-standard mode of production.' If a book edition

consists of a series of identical objects, a hypertext edition creates, from a modifiable discursive matrix or reservoir, 'a different shape for each text of the series.'

Cache approaches such objectiles:subjectiles – and I won't further differentiate between the two terms - from a number of vectors. All of these, I argue, can shed light on the [hyper]textile, which, in this light, is understood as a truly 'industrial' object. What are the vectors? Modeling, Production, Representation, Function, Marketing and Consumption. Let me tick these off:

1. "*Modeling*: the primary image is no longer the image of the object but the image of the set of constraints at the intersection of which the object is created" (97). This I take to mean that the image of the object – considered as a diagram within an empty, infinite modelspace – does not lie at the origin of the object. Rather, the origin of the object lies in its relative position within an inherently complex, dynamic spatial con*text*. This space defines the parameters within which the object can be modelled and as such it is, and will remain, an integral part of the object. Like the objectile, the [hyper]textile is not a stable textual object that can be separated from its spatial con*text*. This characteristic refers to the difference I have developed in my essay between what I call topology1 and topology2, as well as to the idea of folding, which I propose as one mode to conceptualise the movement of and within the hypertextual continuum, and which, I think, captures the spatial movement of and in hypertext more adequately than for instance 'linking' or 'navigating.'

2. "*Production*: digital machines and productive technologies in general allow for the production of an industrial continuum. From the mold we move toward modulation. We no longer apply a preset form on inert matter, but lay out the parameters of a surface of variable curvature ... the design of the object is no longer subordinated to mechanical geometry; it is the machine that is directly integrated into the technology of the synthesized image" (97). Here, I would propose to read 'mechanical geometry' as 'plot' or 'narrative structure.' Rather than providing a fixed story, the traversal *machine*, by intervening into the plotgeometry, turns it into a plottopology.

3. "*Representation*: henceforth, the image takes precedence over the object" (97). Thus, the image of the object is more original than the object itself. Apart from being a concise comment on the temporal logic of post-structuralism, this statement proposes that its representation is more originary than the 'original' textual object itself [the scriptons are more originary than the reservoir of textons]. There are, then, only versions of a merely virtual object, which is considered as a field of possibility. Rather than a *massive* object, the original is a set of probabilities and topological, machinic diagrams. In a hypertext, a fluctuating discursive landscape produces ever-changing discursive geographies.

4. "*Consumption*: … the purpose of the norm is not to stabilize our movements; on the contrary, it is to amplify the fluctuations or aberrations in our behaviour. Changes are the mode of the norm" (96). Cache develops his concept of the norm in opposition to that of the fixed and unbendable law. The norm is malleable. It defines a dynamic forcefield. It fluctuates in time and space, and, more directly, it is not so much a vector that one always has to travel on, as it is a vector that defines every line of inclination that swerves away from it. In relation to the hypertextile, the law of 'linear' narration [at which point my discussion of linearity and non-linearity enters the foldspace] is only a measurement against which to define what I have called, in a variation on Douglas Coupland, deNarration.

5. "*Function*: a field of surfaces thus governs the object that has now become the set of possibilities of their intersection. But the surface of the object also becomes separated from its function when the latter is no longer mechanical but electronic. Just as Leibniz had conceived it, texts, information, images, and sounds are now all the object of numerical manipulation" (97-8). This numerical manipulation is precisely what Aarseth has defined as the 'traversal machine.' It also designates, I think, the idea of a 'neo-material' poetry of the code, although this poetry functions on a very 'low' plateau of the text.

6. "*Marketing*: an alea puts form in a state of fluctuation that offers us a true image of the norm. … it is this quasi-object that is but a fragment of a surface of possibilities where each exemplum is different. Yet it is not a personalized object … it is an ordinary object that may well entertain singular relations with a user" (98). This characteristic of the objectile opens up a further vista onto the hypertextile. Although a hypertextile produces a new 'singularity' every time it is 'done' – as in 'doing hypertext' - it is not customized. Rather, it provides a fluctuating textual field that, through its machinics, 'may well' come to 'entertain singular relations with a user.' The alea - which can be read as any randomisations that may traverse a hypertextile, as the catastrophic logic of bifurcation or as the field of probability opened up by the machinic interventions into the field of scriptons – make the hypertextile both singular and at the same time, completely 'alien.' It is here that the tenets of complexity theory – as well as those of Artificial Life - may become important postologically.

I hope this mapping has brought back some of the arguments developed in more detail in my essay: the importance to think hypertextual space as topological, the idea of the hypertextle as a folded text, as well as the idea of an emergent – and therefore immensely 'alien' text, which is not really covered by Cache, but which I feel might lie at the point at infinity of a hypertextual poetics.

see extended Hypertext-Version