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1999-12-12

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17333>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Simanowski, Roberto: Hypertext in Russia: an interview with Inna Kouper. In: *Dichtung Digital. Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien*. Nr. 7, Jg. 1 (1999-12-12), Nr. 7, S. 1–7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17333>.

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Hypertext in Russia: an interview with Inna Kouper

By Roberto Simanowski

Nr. 7 – 12.12.1999

Abstract

Inna Kouper is one of the first russian PhD students who's dissertation is devoted to "Hypertext as a form of discourse representation". It will be published part of it on her homepage in about 6 months. In 1993 when Inna started to study hypertext theoretically nobody even spoke about hypertext in Russia. Now, there are hypertexts and hyperfiction in Russia as well as cell phones and Dollars. Roberto Simanowski talked with Inna about the Russian Internet, Dmitry Galkovsky's masterpiece "Endless dead-end", about the Russian Queneau, and why it is incorrect to take postmodern theory as a basis for hypertext.

dd: What is the state of art of Hypertext in Russia?

First of all, there are no bears on the streets in Russia. I mean the development of digital literature and Internet is quite similar in Russia and in Europe or USA. May be with some peculiarity. The general difference is that we advance by giant bounds. In 1990-1991 there were few enthusiasts of the Net, electronic literature existed off-line in text files (illegal, of course). In 1994-1995 there were still big problems with the encoding of cyrillic alphabet, but in 1997-1998 RuNet (Russian Internet) was a quite developed and wide-spread system.

All experiments with multimedia we can ever imagine exist in RuNet. But the evolution of hypertext and hypermedia is different in Russia and I think it depends on historical and cultural patterns. There is a strong tradition of hypertext in computer science, russian hypertext systems are close to expert systems or intellectual agents. Unfortunately, there are too few theorists of hypertext and no theoretical publications about literary hypertext. The latest materials I saw were in very serious and high-qualitativ literary journal but articles were quite ordinary and just describing some obvious things.

There are no off-line fiction and non-fiction hypertexts like those "published" by Eastgate Systems although there are lots of encyclopedias, manuals and guides on CDs. Most of the texts exist in the Internet, but are not always of good quality.

dd: Can you think of some examples of authors and texts?

IK: RuNet is big and diverse so here I can't give an exhaustive review of digital literature. I'll give some distinctive examples. The most famous attempt of a collaborative hypertext novel is the novel in Russian ROMAN (all links lead to sites in Russian). It is written with latin letters and awful to read, I should say. The initial fragment was written by author of the idea, the subsequent fragments could be written by anybody. The author of the idea and the initial fragment is Roman Leybov. This fragment is about a young man who loves a girl and can't tell her about it. He writes a letter and when he came to put it into mail-box he hears her speaking and kissing with another man. But he sends the letter. Then when the girl took the letter and read it she called him and said that she loved him too. So, the fragment is of doubtful literary quality. More interesting is D. Manin's article "How to write ROMAN". So, after a year of activity this novel became a system of more than 1500 interconnected fragments with no plot but many associations, flashbacks, side stories. One day something happened with the main server and now ROMAN exists as a monument for heroic efforts of collaborative writing.

Collaborative writing is quite popular in RuNet, especially in poetry. There are several well-known sites with such projects. For example, Les bouts-rimes, Garden of forking hokku, RenguRu. Depending on rules and type of poetry users may suggest verses, stanzas of whatever. Eventually they create interesting pieces of poetry with no author.

A very wide-spread activity I can't drop out is creating "electronic libraries" (in special sense of the word). Volunteers worked on digitalizing of fiction, scientific and special literature (and unfortunately part of this work connected with modern literature has been done illegally). Such "libraries" exist without catalogues or search engines, there are only the collected texts but I'm sure that the Gutenberg Project would never collect so many texts.

Modern (young) writers who write in postmodern tradition sometimes put there works in Internet themselves. These works live their own lives different from printed analogues. They become hypertextual, intra-, inter- and extra- connected.

Another outstanding work that deserved separate consideration is "Endless dead-end" by Dmitry Galkovsky. The author calls his work a philosophic novel about the history of Russian culture in the 19th and 20th century and the destiny of Russian mentality. This "masterpiece" consists of 950 fragments with a very complicated structure. I can't tell you what this novel is about but the list of names discussed in it includes God, Saint Augustin, Dante, Hamlet, Bakhtin, James Joyce, Hegel, Hitler,

many Russian and European kings, musicians, philosophers, writers, poets and others. I think it is the biggest Russian hypertext and the earliest one (the author began to write it in 1980-s).

dd: This work's contradictory title "Endless dead-end" seems to be a good symbol for what hypertext is. Could you tell us please a little more how Dmitry Galkovsky employs the hypertextual structure of endless dead-ends to mirror the destiny of the Russian mentality?

IK: First of all, I must say that I disagree with most of Galkovsky's ideas. Somewhere he wrote that endless dead-end means Russian nationality. But in some parts of the text I felt that the endless dead-end is the author's ego. The text is too emotional to be philosophical although it contains some original ideas. The structure is really interesting, some authors consider it similar to Nabokov's "Pale Fire". It is constructed as a multi-level system of comments to his unwritten text and other texts. Comments create other comments, etc. General ideas are concentrated on the author's thoughts about himself, his father, Russian philosophy, Russian language. Also he tries to understand his favorite philosopher V. Rozanov. I'll give you one fragment:

"Rozanov's life is an example and experience of actualization of Russian mentality and way of its existing in the world: solution (diffusion) but not obliteration in nothingness. He dissolved his logos and the reality was wrapped in a giant web of myths about Russian nationality. It is impossible to decipher it, to unscramble *ab extra* (externally) but it is possible to imitate ethnically identical experience *ab intra* (internally)."

In order to do this Galkovsky uses different associative schemes and invites the reader to fix associative fields in the flexible structure of his comments. Reading this text I can't get rid of the feeling that it was wrong to use the hypertext form. It allows to leave the material unorganized and gives freedom to the reader but it shows the author's inability to be philosophically consequent. The author must respect the reader and not throw him into the ocean of associations, thoughts, insights or whatever. If I read your text it doesn't mean that I have to solve a riddle without coming to a solution. It is my personal opinion but when I "fought" against M. Joyce's "Afternoon" the result (the pleasure I took from the text) kept in balance with the efforts to read it. In case of Galkovsky the efforts were too big and the result was the feeling of protest. Maybe I just disagree with his ideas and not with the form of representation.

Speaking about authors I think the situation concerning Russian writers in the Internet is the same as in other countries. Good authors need to sell their works because it is their bread, so they can't simply put texts into the Internet. But there are many graphomaniacs who write always and everywhere and don't need money for it. The Internet is paradise for them. That's why there is a lot of low quality

literature in the Internet and slow diffusion of good literature. In this situation I think the role of journals like this is invaluable.

dd: We try to find some criteria to evaluate and appreciate digital literature. You are mentioning the low quality of literature in the Internet. How do you evaluate digital literature and specially hypertext?

IK: I see at least two criteria (unfortunately unreliable). First one has nothing to do with real quality. It depends on how people will buy the book and it cannot be applied to the Internet. For publishers the bestseller is the highest quality book. Maybe it is not too bad because buyers are always right. Another criterion is about the real quality of the book. But it is so subtle . . . Several editors in one literary journal may have different opinions about one text. With hypertext the situation is even worse. I think hypertext literature is a kind of intellectual literature for a small group (It seems to me that M. Bernstein spoke about that in some of your previous interviews). So it can not be approved by masses of people. As for me I prefer good, beautiful and even subtle style like Nabokov's style, a plot and characters well thought out, no disorderly linking, which means that linking has its own meaning. Well I'm not sure these criteria are calculable. Speaking about pictures and animation in digital literature I think that a writer is not a painter, creating multimedia text seems to be a new profession. So maybe it is necessary to create digital text like manuscript with scribes and miniaturists or to learn more about creating images. For this moment I see only experiments, sometimes very successful.

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dd: Can you describe the typical Russian hypertext reader?

IK: Official information about readers may be found on some servers. I can judge only by my personal impressions about the typical reader. As I've said before: when we are speaking about readers of hypertext we speak about Internet readers. I suppose that literary sites have a specific audience, mainly about 25-45 years old males. Most of them I think are interested in hypertext not as literature but as a new form of representation.

dd: What is to say about the conditions for dealing with hypertext in Russia? How many people have a computer, how many access to the internet? How much is it to dial in? What about universities and access to the Internet?

IK: As far as I know there are Internet connections in most universities in the country. And it is free of charge for students. Also big libraries give access to the Internet (some of them for money). Speaking about people I think the situation is different in Moscow and St.-Petersburg and other cities. In Moscow many people have computers at home but not all of them have access to the Internet. It costs approximately 1.5 dollars per hour and it is quite expensive (average salaries vary between 50 and 300 dollars). In other cities it is worse, so people cannot afford

computers and Internet and they even don't stop to think about it. But the situation is changing and the provinces advance slowly but steadily.

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dd: Forerunners of hypertext may be found in print literature: English examples include works by Laurence Sterne and James Joyce; French examples in the work of Raymond Queneau and Marc Saporta; Spanish examples include the work of Julio Cortázar and Jorge Luis Borges; German examples include the work of Georg Philipp Harsdörffer and Jean Paul. Are there forerunners of hypertext in Russian literature and to what extent may they be called forerunners?

IK: I don't think we must speak about forerunners of hypertext in print. It is the same as if we spoke about forerunners of printed book in manuscript. Of course, manuscript books couldn't be printed without changes and the press didn't necessarily demand linear representation.

I think we can speak about a tendency of non-linearization. The most famous Russian (and American) writer who sometimes is considered as a forerunner is Vladimir Nabokov with his "Pale Fire". But don't you think that his "Lolita" or "Invitation of a Beheading" are hypertextual too in a broad sense? The point is that now we can call hypertextual and non-linear any writing because our optics of perception (I use Iser's term) is NON-LINEAR. Russian literature never was realistic in European (especially French) tradition. Although in the 19th century it was necessary to give a unified plot line, Gogol and Dostoevsky used cut-ins with no apparent relation to the plot. The aim of that was to give a deeper understanding in comparison or juxtaposition, all in all their works mean very little without non-linear reading although they are written and printed with traditional techniques.

Speaking about forerunners I can give you one funny example. When I started my studies in hypertext I've written some text about R. Queneau's "Cent mille milliards de poèmes" where I argued that it may be taken as a print hypertext poem. Then I found a similar work by the Russian poet N. Markevich written in 19th century. Unfortunately, this work is not available in the internet. Both of them, Queneau and Markevich wanted to suggest a kind of game for readers who could write a poem. Markevich's verses were banal, as he said "here is nothing but metre, rhyme and passion". Something like (in free translation):

"Oh, goddess of my soul,
Can't live without my girl,
Parting is sweet sorrow,
I yearn for dear curls."

Queneau was more poetic I think. He used this technique because he explored the possibilities of poetic language. Markevich used it because he wanted to show that classical poems are sometimes ordinary and you may use a standard set of verses

and produce bearable poems. This "hypertext" poem showed the triviality of poetastery and the impossibility of multiplicity in real Poetry. And for the first time I thought about the importance of our perception and the way of thinking. In 18th - 19th century multiplicity couldn't be an advantage.

dd: There are very distinct sorts of German digital literature or digital art. We have to distinguish at the very least between pure hypertexts, projects driven by interactivity and collaborative authorship, and pieces focused on multimodality, 'written' just by one author (maybe with a little help of a friend who is a webdesigner). How would you characterize Russian hypertext design?

IK: I don't think there are some special features of Russian hypertext design. Maybe there is less experience and more enthusiasm - these days more and more new sites and home-pages appear in the Internet.

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dd: In your contribution to the '99 Hypertext Conference you claim that it is incorrect to take postmodern theory as a basis for hypertext, as is done for example by George P. Landow and many theorists following him. What is wrong with this, and how should we think of hypertext?

IK: It is a very complicated question, in my dissertation I'm trying to explicate this.

First of all, I wouldn't say that the theoretical works of G. Landow, J. D. Bolter, S. Moulthrop and some others are completely wrong. In their pioneering and comprehensive works the fundamentals of a new field were established. They legitimated (literary) hypertext as a discipline and tried to include it into some general critical trend. But the times of first steps and experiments have passed and now it is time for concentrated and deep analysis. We can't equal hypertext and postmodern text because postmodernism means a way of thinking. The basis is to discredit the discourse. Hypertext does not mean discredit. If we speak about multiplicity, webs of signifiers, lexias, all this we can apply to externally linear texts. So non-linearity is not an external feature. In hypertext external form was mixed with internal content.

Borges for example didn't use any external technique except just writing and his texts we call hypertextual. Why? He brought his and our imagination in the text. No linking, no navigation, just imagination and you have a very powerful non-linearity. In my dissertation I'm trying to elaborate the concept of non-linearity as a broad historical term. It will include hypertext as well as postmodern texts. In any epoch the linear and non-linear co-existed and it depends on historical, social and cultural conditions why one of it dominates.

So linking is just one of many ways of representation. Hypertext may be more linear than any other text. I think we should restrict hypertext to what it really is: electronic

text with different kinds of links or we must consider as hypertext any digital text (even image) because any electronic text includes techniques of manipulation (cut&paste, drag&drop, sending via e-mail, convert into different formats, searching, etc.) and it is something more (hyper) than text. Maybe Ted Nelson wouldn't agree.

I hope I managed to explain somehow my position. It is very polemic question and I'm sure in Hypertext'00 we'll discuss it again and again.

dd: Your point of view is very interesting and, in deed, very polemic. I totally agree that hypertext does less deconstruction on discourse than some ambitious postmodern texts as far as the structure of hypertext does not establish any strong meaning that could be deconstructed at all. However, I am wondering whether one still has to distinguish between two kinds of non-linearity: non-linearity of associations (postmodern texts, and Borges' hypertextuality of imagination) and non-linearity of text-segements (hypertext). Maybe we can divide non-linearity in terms of connotation from non-linearity in terms of combination?

IK: Yes, maybe you're right. Although somebody may contradict that combinations cause connotations and vice versa. I think we must certainly divide non-linearity of hypertext and non-linearity of postmodernism in order not to mix hypertext as a *concept* and postmodernism. And connotation / combination is a helpful distinction. Hypertext work may be postmodern as well. It uses the language in which we doubt now, and reflects reality which is discredited. Even if we don't like postmodernism as a trend of art, we still live in discredited reality. So I disagree to mix the concepts. If we speak in terms of connotation and combination, the first kind of non-linearity is concerned more with content and the later one with form. But one of the general problems for contemporary literature is the disappearance of pure forms and content. So we must be very careful.

dd: You show an interesting reading of the term hypertext as "something more than text". This makes hypertext equal to hypermedia, that is something more than text as well. Do you consider hypertext a good equipped umbrella-term for what can be found in digital shape? Do we need terms like cybertext, netliterature, digital literature, electronic art?

IK: It seems to me that hypertext is quite appropriate for all that (except electronic art) but people don't like using terms invented by others. That's why they invent new terms. Maybe that's not too bad. Sometimes it stimulates discussions.

dd: Thank you very much for this interview and good luck for your research.