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# Hypermedia and the Question of Canonicity

By Astrid Ensslin

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## Abstract

This article is concerned with the question to what extent literary hypertext and hypermedia are compatible with the concept of canonicity. The discussion centres around ideologies surrounding canon and censorship, the causal relationship between canon and the curriculum and, finally, the role and possibilities of digital literature within traditional and innovative notions of canonicity. I argue that the traditionally static concept of the literary canon (including alternative canons) needs to be replaced by an inherently dynamic one, which follows the principles of avant-garde aesthetics. The article closes with an exemplary 'rule canon' for literary hypermedia.

## 1. Introduction

A major concern of this article is to investigate literary hypermedia's potential for canonisation, but also to investigate at what stage of a possible canonisation process hypermedia finds itself at present. To do so, a workable concept of 'canon' – a polysemic and semantically malleable term – needs to be identified. Such a concept needs to take into account postmodern social structures, literary practices and the dictates of the digital medium. The theoretical section of this paper (2. to 7.) therefore discusses the meaning(s) of the term, the social implications of having either one or indeed multiple, competing canons, and, finally, the relationship between canon and curriculum. Reference is made primarily to relevant chapters in Assmann and Assmann (1987), Arnold and Detering (1997) and John Guillory's (1993) seminal study, *Cultural Capital*, which takes a Marxist approach to the relationship between canon and power. Section 8 presents an attempt to create a 'rule canon' tailored to the idiosyncracies of digital literature, which may serve as a basis for selecting an inherently dynamic hypermedia 'text canon'.

## 2. The literary canon

The etymology of the word 'canon' suggests a logical connection between definitions of literature and the canonisation of literary works. Derived from the Sumeric word for a straight cane, or bar, used as a measuring rod, 'canon' (Greek) means 'rule', 'standard', 'list', and 'catalogue'. Applied to literature, the term refers to a compilation of literary works which, during a certain period, are considered 'seminal, normative and timeless' (Schweikle and Schweikle, 1990: 232; my translation). Knowledge of these works is regarded, institutionally, as a requirement for academic progress and, socially, as a sign for a certain level of education as well as, in meritocratic political systems, membership of a higher class.

Viewed socio-critically, canons are text collections which are considered culturally valuable by a certain group or society and therefore 'worthy' of being handed on to posterity (Winko 1997: 585).<sup>1</sup> They are fixed, self-contained, closed, exemplary and prescriptive in nature. Assmann and Assmann (1987) claim that the term is best defined by ways of institutionalised permanence, presence, propriety and resilience to temporality; 'institutionalised' because canons are *per definitionem* imposed by governmental institutions, with the aim of 'constructing' cultural unity and identity. Guillory explains the driving power of canonisation in Marxist terms: 'Judgments with canonical force are institutionally located' (1993: 29), and are most strongly driven by the decisions of educational bodies, which, in turn, are subject to higher organs of power.

Canons are selected by institutional authorities to stabilise a common ground and to highlight certain elements of tradition which, according to an elitist world view, help create and sustain identity within a certain community or peer group. Indeed, canons have a considerable psychological and social(ising) effect in that they enable discourse and a sense of belonging among members of those social groups who are familiar with the works in question. Having said that, imposed, 'top-down' canons can only operate successfully in rather small, totalitarian societies. In large, multi-layered societies, alternative catalogues frequently undermine imposed canons, as was the case with the German 'Klassikersturz' during the 1970s (Grübel 1997: 618). Alternative canons arise from 'situations of need' (Hahn, 1987: 33), where minority social groups are jeopardised by subjugation, discrimination, marginalisation, expulsion, or exile. Similarly, the recent empowerment of marginalised social groups across Western societies has subverted mainstream ideological unity, resulting, for instance, in alternative canons of feminist, gay and lesbian, African American and Caribbean writing.

The correlative instrument of the canon is censorship, which is motivated and controlled by the canon. As a matter of fact, canon and censorship stand in dialectic opposition to each other, as their existence and effectiveness are reciprocally conditioned. Underlying both canon and censorship is a catalogue of intra-literary

and extra-literary values, pertaining to intrinsic and extrinsic features of a literary text. Not belonging to a canon implies censorship of varying degrees, ranging from being neglected by readers or critics to being banned by law.

From an aesthetic perspective, canons are traditionally considered catalogues of works that are exemplary, admirable, and worth emulating, and thus create patterns of artistic excellence. Implicitly, a canon follows as well as represents an implicit or explicit set of rules, which may be used as restrictive and generative principles of production and reception (Hahn, 1987). Ultimately, therefore, canons are manifestations and concretisations of literary concepts, which reflect the 'tastes' of dominant social groups. The Western Canon (Bloom, 1994), or indeed any other 'traditional canon', therefore, connotes normativity as imposed by oligarchic elites of literary criticism.

Literary value judgements can occur either implicitly (through tacit acts of exclusion and inclusion) or explicitly (by means of verbal criticism), and pertain to all areas of literary interaction: production, reception, distribution, and application to pedagogy and criticism (Winko, 1997: 586-589). Needless to say, selection always implies the exclusion of the majority, which is not only precarious from a scholarly point of view. It has in fact a fundamental educational disadvantage: Students who are given lists of 'must-reads' that are largely unaccounted for are prevented from forming their own, subjective critical stance in distinguishing good from not so good literature.

### **3. Canons as processes**

Contrary to most definitions, canons are by no means as stable as their 'selectors' would wish them to be. They are indeed highly subject to paradigm shifts within a particular society. To give an example, the emergence of the vernacular English primary-school curriculum in the 18th century was closely connected to a new image of literature, which not only included the Ancient classics but was extended to English writing and thus began to follow the purpose of bourgeois nationalist education. The subsequent inclusion of the realist and modernist novel in the 19th and early 20th century was as inevitable as that of film since the 1960s, which naturally resulted in a gradual reduction of the number of works from Greek and Roman Antiquity. In other words, due to the dynamic nature of human culture and society, the stability of tradition, which has often been taken for granted by supporters of the traditional canon, is as wrong an assumption as the eternal gospel truth of 'great' works (Assmann and Assmann, 1987).

Canonisation processes are evolutionary in nature. This implies, in Darwinian terms, a permanent process of adaptation to changing environmental, i.e. social,

parameters, or values. According to Assmann and Assmann (1987: 16), literary works 'return' to enter a canon after a process of initial 'renunciation', or censorship, which often verges on iconoclasm. Returning to previously censored works is motivated by an emerging historical interest in periods gone by and their artistic and literary output, precisely because they were previously renounced. Günther (1987) elaborates this idea by proposing five stages that make up the process of canonisation. First, a preparatory 'protocanon' evolves, in which texts of a certain type accumulate. This is followed by the actual stage of canonisation, in which a canon is selected and formulated in opposition to other, existing canons. During the subsequent stage of implementation, the canon is used, e.g. for educational and socio-integrational purposes. The last two stages are revertive in that they reflect the gradual disappearance of a canon. During de-canonisation, a canon ceases to be binding and, subsequently, becomes obsolete. Finally, the postcanonical stage describes the existence of decanonised texts, which still exist but have vanished from curricula and reading lists.

## 4. The role of materiality

One of the most controversial aspects of previous canonisation processes is their contingency upon the materiality of the written work, i.e. its physical manifestation and preservation in script and print. As Assmann and Assmann (1987) argue, the ideal medium for canonisation and thus preserving cultural heritage is the book as primary means of consolidating script. Books symbolise coherence, density, closure, completeness, unity, and physicality, all of which are essential for immortalising a literary work. Nevertheless, the authors concede that ultimate belief in the preserving power of script is treacherous, as written documents are, under adverse circumstances, nearly as much prone to oblivion as orally transmitted text.

Hypermedia oddly inhabits a niche in-between physical presence and oral evasiveness. It is, by definition, non-printable and thus cannot be turned into concrete, material objects. Whether or not this renders it more prone to evanescence than print literature is an intriguing question. Clearly, the permanence of its existence is far more in the hands of the author-programmer than in the case of print literature. After all, one mouse-click suffices to remove the all-important link which connects a piece of digital literature to the WWW. Publication, therefore, literally hangs by an (electronic) thread. On the other hand, the hypothetical storage potential and economy of digital literature clearly exceeds that of print literature. In other words, the question of whether or not a code can have a stronger preservative power than binding, cardboard, and paper is indeed a delicate one.

From a commercialist viewpoint, institutionalised canonisation is most efficiently enhanced by means of literary anthologies. By creating different types of anthologies, authoritative editors perform two simultaneous tasks. On the one hand, they re-emphasise the cultural importance of previously canonised texts, in other words 'the historical canon' (Schmidt, 1987: 337). They do so by re-adopting canonical works into new editions of, for instance, the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* or *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. On the other hand, they have the power to establish and promote 'alternative' (Guillory, 1993: 29) or 'acute' (Schmidt, 1987: 337) canons, which are thus made to compete with the traditional Western Canon without, however, undermining it altogether. Examples of such alternative compilations are *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, *The Norton Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, and indeed *The New Media Reader*. The culturally or sub-culturally seminal works contained within those anthologies are chiefly directed at an academic or scholarly audience, some of whom are, *N.B.*, aspiring anthology editors-to-be.

## 5. Closure or openness?

The concept of the canon as a closed, fixed, prescriptive catalogue of set texts has met with a great deal of criticism. The most compelling reason for this is given by Hahn (1987), who, referring to Tenbruck's (1986) tripartite typology of society, comes to the conclusion that an imperative canon becomes only necessary and indeed feasible in 'civilised societies' ('Hochkulturen'), where unity can only be achieved at an abstract level, by imposing an obligatory canon on a stratified, divergent society.<sup>2</sup> Our modern, contemporary Western society is, by contrast, 'complex' in that it organises itself in terms of functional differentiation. Every individual refers to a variety of peer groups, for each of which he or she fulfils at least one distinct role. Similarly, art and literature form subsystems among other subsystems within a highly diversified society. Cultural coherence no longer derives from a holistic world picture, but rather from an 'interplay of functionally differentiated subsystems' (Hahn, 1987: 36; my translation). Each of these subsystems propagates its own canon, thus contributing to the contemporary trends of pluralisation, partialisation, and functionalisation (Schmidt, 1987). In view of that, it is plausible to assume that each individual follows a variety of rule and text canons, which, in itself, are flexible and dynamic and are used in an eclectic manner.

The divide between supporters and enemies of a unified, traditional canon, has, since the 1980s, led to the so-called canon debate. Traditionalists (e.g. Kermode [1985, 1990] and Bloom [1994]) follow in the wake of earlier renowned critics such as Arnold, Palgrave, Eliot and Leavis. They argue against members of the so-called

'School of Resentment' (Bloom, 1994: 4), who are trying to deconstruct the concept of the canon for the sake of a higher degree of social and ethnic egalitarianism (e.g. Gramsci, 1957; Blackledge, 1994; Richardson, 1998)

Harold Bloom's monograph *The Western Canon* (1994) seems particularly anachronistic as it obstinately insists on the retention of the traditional canon, with Shakespeare at its centre. Bloom adopts Vico's term 'Chaotic Age', which 'will amalgamate with the Computer Era, already upon us in early versions of 'virtual reality' and 'the *hypertext*' (Bloom, 1994: 310; emphasis mine). His greatest concern is that technological advances will 'cancel the literary canon once and for all. The novel, the poem, and the play might all be replaced' (*ibid.*: 310). I would consider this concern as hyperbolic and ungrounded. As has been shown elsewhere (e.g. Schnierer, 2000, 2001, 2003; Ensslin, 2007), hypertext and hypermedia do not abolish traditional genres like the novel, the poem, and the drama but expand them medially.

## 6. The end of the canon as we know it?

It has been argued by many canon critics that, ever since the advent of Modern Age individualism, a singular, prescriptive, normative canon has come under threat. A recent *New York Times* article stipulates the futility of the canon debate *per se* 'in an age where there's no canon, where there are so many other forms of information, and where we're returning to medieval-like oral culture based on television.' (California State Librarian emeritus, Kevin Starr, quoted in Weber, 2004). Although Starr's opinion can only partly be accepted, he does have a point in mentioning the crucial impact of television. However, this is not so much because of the orality it reinforces but because of the visuality it has reintroduced into society.

The postmodernist paradigm has subjected the canon to the segregation of diverse cultural value systems, each of which sets out to establish their own rule and text catalogues. The 'atrophy of pan-cultural thinking' (Assmann and Assmann, 1987: 24; my translation) is indicative of a somewhat post-historical situation, which has resulted in canon apathy, yet has not been able to eliminate canonicity altogether. Evidently, it is becoming increasingly difficult to establish a common foundation for literary scholars and lay readers alike, and it would seem as if egalitarian and equally-informed scholarly discourse might become an increasingly utopian ideal.

Contrarily, the past few decades have seen new canons emerge, e.g. in women's writing, postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and working class writing. The major argument in favour of them is that they represent pluralist, quasi-egalitarian Western values. As such, the canon functions as an instance of 'imaginary politics' (Guillory,

1993: 7), as 'cultural capital' (Pierre Bourdieu's coinage) mirroring stratified societies. At the same time, however, the promotion of alternative canons paradoxically implies an acceptance of the traditional canon. Ironically, alternative canons epitomise exclusion by calling themselves 'non-canonical', and therefore strengthen policies of discrimination and hegemony. On the other hand, discrimination and hegemony are pervasive symptoms of our so-called multicultural Western societies and cannot be denied or 'canonised away'. Hence, alternative canons carry an enormous symbolical weight and are likely to trigger heated classroom discussion.

The connection of the canon to identity and culture raises the question of whether and how *virtual*/culture has hitherto been utilised to reflect social strata. Particularly the younger generations are strongly influenced by the expansion of digital media, such as video game, digital television and film, 'Skype' (digital telecommunication), as well as, of course, the Web with all its communicative, entertaining, creative and epistemological facilities. What is more, the human body itself is increasingly merging with technology. Human-machine hybridity, embodied by cyborgs (Haraway, 1991), avatars, and androids, which we encounter in science fiction and cyberpunk film and literature, as well as gaming environments, is evolving in cyberspace as a working alternative to human fleshliness and vulnerability. Virtual communities are arising from internet chatrooms, (Massively) Multi User Dungeons, video conferences and other virtual networks. Digital environments offer to many of their users a more flexible, experimental, secure environment than real-life communities, and subjects discover other, potential existences by adopting and exploring various sexual, cultural, economic (e.g. *Second Life*) and historical identities (e.g. Turkle, 1996).

Bloom's (1994) monstrous elegy on the fall of literary studies and the rise of 'Cultural Studies' is in line with Weber's aforementioned pessimistic outlook. I largely disagree with these prognoses, because, although we do indeed listen and watch more than we used to before the age of hypermedia, we also read more than we used to. Reading different media requires different reading techniques and flexibility in applying them according to what medium one is dealing with. Hence, what contemporary educational theory and practice needs to do is embrace the affordances of New Media and expand their didactic toolkit accordingly.

## 7. Canon and curriculum

With respect to the educational function of the canon, we have to differentiate between the concepts of 'canon' and 'curriculum' (or, more narrowly, 'syllabus' in the sense of a 'synecdochic list' [Guillory, 1993: 34] used as part of the English



curriculum). 'Curriculum' does not simply equate to 'teaching practice'. It is indeed a fallacy to assume that the curriculum is a manifestation of an imaginary construct called the 'canon'. Contrarily, it is the curriculum, or rather curriculum makers, that produce the canon. Along with reading lists and anthologies, these syllabi are the only way of accessing the imaginary list of literary works which represents, materialises, and, not least, commodifies the English canon.

In logical consequence, a revision of the canon is only possible through a revision of the curriculum, particularly when it comes to the creative use of New Media. Taking a closer look at the National Curriculum for England, the question arises whether a potential for integrating literary hypermedia is indeed in place.

Since the arrival of the National Curriculum of England and Wales in 1989/90, questions of canonicity and curricular selectivity have become central: 'To list or not to list became one of the main questions in the politicisation of English teaching' (Benton, 2000: 273). Eventually, the prescriptivist camp, who supported the Saidian notion of 'self' as being English and therefore distinct from the 'other', outnumbered the anti-prescriptivists, who advocated a culturally more diverse and open curriculum. Consequently, the only allowance made in the 1995 version of the English Curriculum was an apologetic invitation of works from 'other cultures and traditions' (Benton, 2000: 275), but the heritage model was institutionalised all the same.

In 2000, Benton postulated a 'less dictatorial structure' (*ibid.*: 276), which focused on the teaching of 'literature in English' rather than 'English literature' and introduced limitations only in terms of genre and literary history, not in the choice of textual material. Similarly, the 2000 and, to a greater degree, the 2003 and 2006 Curricula show a much higher demand for ICT (Information and Communication Technology) as well as what is called 'media and moving image texts'. ICT is propagated mostly as an environment for autonomous learning (Clarke *et al.*, 2004: 353), and 'ICT-based information texts' are read in comparison with print to learn to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant, biased and quasi-objective information.<sup>3</sup> ICT-based learning further includes the use of electronic whiteboards, specialised presentation and lay-outing software (PowerPoint, Clicker, Publisher), and the internet as an information resource, as it contains a vast range of canonised paper-under-glass literature, which pupils can engage with as they learn basic IT skills such as cutting, pasting, drag-and-drop as well as the reflected combination and presentation of various digitised media (image, text, and sound). 'Media and moving image texts', on the other hand, cover mostly film and prevalently expository texts found in newspapers, magazines, on television, and in advertising.

The emphasis of media and ICT education appears to be focused on the development of critical skills in terms of using *informative* multi- and hypermedia sensibly and reflexively. It therefore does not come as a major surprise that *literary*

hypermedia is not mentioned anywhere in the National Curriculum. That said, the inclusion of other media, which are not perceived as literary media in the conventional sense, in the literary classroom suggests that, in all likelihood, it is only a matter of time until other 'narrative' media such as computer games and hypertext will be integrated. Meanwhile, however, even the leading teacher training manuals fail to interpret the National Curriculum in such a way as to include literary hypermedia in their interpretations (e.g. Pike, 2004 and Clark *et al.*, 2004) although, admittedly, they use expressions that evoke associations with hypertext and hypermedia terminology. One is thus tempted to suspect that literary hypermedia simply has not yet been popularised among English teachers and curriculum planners.

In sum, it may be argued that the major steps towards facilitating an inclusion of literary hypermedia have been taken. In fact, the increasing importance of ICT on the National Curriculum may (tacitly) reflect the need for alternatives to literature in print.

## 8. Canonising hypermedia – an 'apologetic crusade'?

Literary hypertexts and hypermedia have been written for two decades yet still cannot be considered 'canonised', neither in the sense of representation through individual specimens in anthologies or university readers, nor in a generic sense, as an abstract phenomenon in the minds and discourse of the reading public, as Shakespeare, Milton, and James Joyce are. In fact, as Gates (1997) cogently argues, whereas the traditional English and American canon has quite readily adapted to the new (digital) medium, works written *in* and specifically *for* New Media are by no means as easily adopted by the canon. This is hardly surprising, as we are dealing with a form of writing that became materially possible only a few decades ago, through the evolution of personal computing, software applications and, not least, the Web as the primary medium of communication and research in the First World.

Nevertheless, unlike many other web genres such as portals, discussion and chat rooms, online magazines, wikis and blogs, internet-based creative writing of any kind has not entered mediatised public discourse in the UK. A database search of *Lexis Nexis*, a leading international digital newspaper archive, proves the virtual non-existence of the term 'literary hypertext' and other related expressions across the British press media landscape, both broadsheet and tabloid. As a matter of fact, over the period of the past fifteen years (1990-2005), a timespan which approximately corresponds to the existence of literary hypertext and hypermedia,

no instances of 'literary hypertext' and only eight occurrences of 'hyperfiction', two occurrences of 'hyperdrama', and two occurrences of 'hyperpoem' are retrievable.<sup>4</sup> The distribution of those instances across various British newspapers is demonstrated in table 1. Perhaps not surprisingly, only 'serious' newspapers are represented, as the database search did not yield any tabloid occurrences. This observation may support the fact that literary hypertext has, from the outset, been associated with academic and scholarly rather than popular interest. A certain 'peak' of discursive engagement – if, in the face of the generally low number of occurrences, one may use such an expression – happened around the mid 1990s, which was the time when the internet was experiencing its first surge in popularity among a wide public sphere.

Thematically, the eight tokens of 'hyperfiction' are used in either marginalising or even pejorative contexts. They typically occur in book reviews, for instance in a discussion of the labyrinthine *Shadow of the Wind* by Carlos Ruiz Zafon, where 'the same old self-deconstructionist hyperfiction shuffle' (Jones, 2004: 8) is assigned a derogatory connotation, to highlight that Zafon has managed to avoid the confusion typically associated with reading hypertext structures. Only three out of the eight instances of 'hyperfiction' present the genre in a more informative, less partial way. Interestingly, it is an article in the *Financial Times* (Griffith, 1996) which gives the most exhaustive detail about 'hyperfiction', characterising it as a 'slowly expanding volume of narratives' (15). Griffith mentions Nelson's (1984) widely acknowledged definition, provides a short historical overview of hypertextual phenomena, outlines the major structural and thematic principles of Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, and does not fail to draw attention to the perceptive challenges evoked by hypertext structures without, however, condemning the genre for precisely this propensity.

As table 1 shows, 'hyperdrama' occurs only twice: once in *The Observer*, where it is used in the sense of the American family saga soap opera (e.g. *Dallas* or *Dynasty*). Even more deviant from the literary concepts of hyperdrama is the way in which the term is used by *The Guardian*, which refers to 'the hyperdrama of our futures' (Waters, 1992: 23), thus expressing a realistic, socio-political meaning. The sole instance of 'hyperpoem' also comes from *The Guardian*, where it features in an article which is, exceptional though it may appear, dedicated to the Apple-based hypermedia poetry written and displayed by artist and poet John Cayley at the Poetry Library in the London Royal Festival Hall (1992/1993). However, the author of the article implicitly denigrates the poetic potential of Cayley's art by quoting the poet's reply to the question whether he would refer to his poetry as 'art'. Cayley refuses to 'make any aesthetic judgments about the value of the work', leaving this 'up to other people' (Moody, 1992: 33). The fact that the statement stands uncommented at the end of the article is indicative of Moody's rather hesitant personal opinion, which is made to remain in his readers' memory beyond the reading event.

	'literary hyper-text'	'hyperfiction'	'hyperdrama'	'hyperpoem' <sup>5</sup>
<i>Guardian</i>	<i>none</i>	1 (2003)	1 (1992)	1 (1992)
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	<i>none</i>	2 (2001; 2004)	<i>None</i>	<i>none</i>
<i>Independent</i>	<i>none</i>	1 (1999)	<i>None</i>	<i>none</i>
<i>Observer</i>	<i>none</i>	1 (1997)	1 (2001)	<i>none</i>
<i>THES</i> <sup>6</sup>	<i>none</i>	1 (1996)	<i>None</i>	<i>none</i>
<i>Financial Times</i>	<i>none</i>	2 (1994; 1996)	<i>None</i>	<i>none</i>

*Table 1: Distribution of 'literary hypertext', 'hyperfiction', 'hyperdrama' and 'hyperpoem' across British newspapers between January 1990 and September 2005*

To give further evidence of whether and to what extent hypertext and hypermedia – despite or, in fact, in addition to the bleak picture presented by the press – have entered teaching practice in England, I conducted a telephone-based survey among secondary English departments in May and June, 2005. The results unambiguously reflect the impression given by the newspaper search. Out of 85 English teachers from secondary schools in and around two representative Northern English industrial cities (Leeds and Newcastle upon Tyne<sup>7</sup>), 70 (82%) had never come across the terms 'hypertext' or 'literary hypertext'. 15 (18%) were familiar with the term 'hypertext' as used in 'Hypertext Mark-Up Language'. None had ever heard of Eastgate Systems or any of their products. 42 (49%) said they were using the computer and internet to a great extent for student projects, e.g. SmartBoard, Interactive Whiteboard, and game-type software for analysing set texts such as *Of Mice and Men*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. 21 (25%) maintained they were using the computer solely for teaching basic word processing and graphic design, which was, according to the respondents, partly due to limited access to computers in some schools. 34 (40%) explained they were using the internet for literary research, e.g. to investigate WWI poetry at A-level, finding materials on Shakespeare for the SAT exams<sup>8</sup>, or downloading electronic versions of set texts. 8 (9%) replied they were using the internet only for weblogs. Another 15 (18%) stated they taught computer-based, yet traditionally linear creative writing. Finally, as few as 8 respondents (9%) had also experimented with creative writing in hypertext format, using, for instance the free internet service *think.com*.

The empirical data suggests that literary hypertext and hypermedia are, to use Günther's (1987) terminology, still in a 'protocanonical' stage. Simanowski (1999) specifies this stage, which has not moved on considerably since the publication of his article, in terms of a developing 'literary field' (a Bourdieuan term). This development is characterised by competitions, commercialisation, as well as the

emergence of reviewing platforms and scholarly expertise manifested by specialised academic seminars, research talks, publications and dissertations. The main dilemma of hypermedia criticism, however, surfaces particularly in competitions: the lack of evaluative criteria, which would, if they did exist, do justice to the vast range of different aesthetic phenomena and would help scholars, critics and editors to 'sift the wheat from the chaff'.

Coming back to Assmann and Assman's (1987) concept of renunciation and return, I would argue that, with respect to the situation in UK-based English studies, literary hypermedia is on the verge of passing the first stage of the two. Skepticism and wilful ignorance are gradually being replaced by acceptance or even curiosity, especially among stylisticians and discourse analysts. Furthermore, a recent trend within Arts and Humanities in the UK is the emergence of 'Creative Industries', a field which embraces productivity in as wide a range of areas as creative writing, journalism, film, New Media and drama. This new, practice-led approach to academic study endorses the cross-disciplinary use of critical theory and practice, which is exemplified *par excellence* by the study of literary hypermedia. Taking into account developments in 'hypermedia-friendlier' nations such as the U.S., Germany, Austria and Switzerland, one may thus tentatively speak of a gradual transition to a 'return', which manifests itself in a considerable number of university syllabi geared towards including hypermedia phenomena and their critical underpinnings.

Hypertext and hypermedia *censorship* is of an essentially cathectic kind (see Hahn, 1987), i.e. it is most frequently targeted at hypermedia's alleged failure to arouse aesthetic pleasure. In fact, readers' responses to first hypertext exposures tend to be radically divided and polarised. They are 'either delighted or annoyed' (Schnierer, 2003: 96). At the same time, critiques by first-time readers show a tendency towards premature, overgeneralising conclusions about hypermedia as a genre, rather than towards analysing individual works.

Reader bewilderment and resentment are due to a number of factors. On the one hand, most of them lack theoretical and practical media knowledge, i.e. the ability and confidence to use particular kinds of media text, as well as an awareness of typical macro- and microstructural features. Media knowledge normally comes with regular exposure and experience, and these are necessary prerequisites to processing hypermedia artefacts.

Clearly, hypertext's anti-linearity has an alarming effect on many readers insofar as there seems to be a lack of perceivable author intentionality. In fact, the most common complaints revolve around macrostructural complexity, semantic opacity and logistic impermeability. Furthermore, a lack of navigational guidance and macrotextual standards aggravates readers' impression of having lost or being incapable of gaining control of 'their' text.

As a matter of cause, one of the major intricacies, if not pitfalls, of literary hypermedia is its inherent expectation of an 'ideal' reader, who will readily adapt to an unfamiliar reading situation, which introduces not only a new, bi-dimensional, in most cases even bulky medium, but a level of complexity and arbitrariness in textual organisation that defies the conventional *delectare* effect. As a result, readers may be tempted to develop a 'zap mentality' (Auer, 2004: 281), which is caused by a shift in attention from the text to the link and its target. Wingert calls this the 'centrifugal powers' (1996: 202) of hypermedia reception.

A further reservation relates to the incompatibility of operating systems and the resulting difficulty in accessing a great number of hypertexts. As Glazier points out, '[t]he most notable controversy here is the PC versus Mac conflict.' In fact, '[e]ven academically mainstream texts, such as *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Fun House* and Michael Joyce's *Twilight, A Symphony*, cannot at this writing be run on Windows' (2002: 156)). Nor, indeed, can they in spring 2007.

Further issues of concern are the so-called 'anarchy' of the web and the issues of authenticity and copyright it brings along. Walter Benjamin's (1977) famous tenet of the lost 'aura' of the original artwork in the face of infinite reproducibility, reinstated through digital encoding, almost inevitably springs to mind. As a matter of fact, duplication by copy and paste is a medium-inherent activity that categorically undermines authorship in the traditional sense and turns online documents into 'fair game', which is exposed to user's free will.

Another immanent problem of hypermedia is its resistance to anthologisation, especially when it does not come in the format of a handy-sized data carrier such as a CD-ROM or a floppy disk. The anarchic, dynamic nature of its main distribution channel, the internet, subjects it to ephemerality and evasiveness. Similarly, although some attempts have been made to capture the swiftly expanding body of literary hypermedia by means of exhaustive listings online, an explicit 'canon', operating on the basis of distinct selection criteria, has never been formulated (for an exception, see Ensslin, 2007).

By the same token, the past few years have seen the launch of a number of print compilations focusing on cyber-theory, hypertext criticism and hyperfiction. The process was initiated by Geyh *et al.*'s (1997) *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*, which features excerpts from Michael Joyce's *afternoon* and Jane Yellowlees Douglas' *I Have Said Nothing*. Further progress with regard to anthologising hypertext theory can be seen in the launching of Victor J. Vitanza's *CyberReader* (1996) and Neill Spiller's *Cyber\_Reader: Critical Writings for the Digital Era* (2002), the first compilations of theoretical essays about computer aesthetics, cyberculture and digital literature. They do not, however, contain any digital literature. On the other hand, Vitanza supplies a multitude of web addresses at which the keen reader may find related and supporting materials. The essential step

towards including creative digital media was accomplished by Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort in their *New Media Reader* (2003), which encloses a CD-ROM with selected hypertexts, most of which are, however, only readable on a Macintosh computer.

As previously discussed, postmodern Western society is characterised by plurality, globality and, perhaps most importantly, rapid change. It is also increasingly dominated by hypermedia, which are currently taking over the world of television, telephone communication, and epistolary writing. Arguably, therefore, the future literary mainstream will at least partly be situated in virtual space, which will retain its fluidity and thus create ever-changing forms of literary art. It will also (need to) integrate the visual to an increasing extent. For this reason, educationalists have to find ways of meeting the needs and interests of a new generation without, however, allowing the vanishing of the written word.

Therefore, to conflate the ostensibly conflicting concepts of hypermedia and canonicity, I contend that the very concept of canon can no longer be understood as it was in the 19th and 20th centuries. As a matter of fact, the situation experienced by Western society in the Digital Age curiously resembles that of late 18th century Europe, particularly France, when the *ancient regime* was struggling to regulate an oozing, anarchic mass of enlightenment writings. Such writings were naturally frowned at, however, not censurable as a whole – which correlates with the common scholarly attitude towards online publishing. Although the political situation is, of course, entirely different now, the dilemma of facing a virtually uncontrollable host of anarchically distributed documents is indeed comparable to that experienced by Louis XVI and his Conseil du Roi.

While departing from the traditional canon, a hypermedia canon must inevitably adopt components of radically subversive avant-garde canons, which have influenced poetry and art since the 1920s. Among their components are the claim for innovation (a derivative of technological progressivity and the concept of evolution), the concept of style as manifested subjectivity, and the use of (meta-)theory as an instrument of transforming art and literature (Schmidt, 1987). In fact, hypermedia writers generally adhere to those criteria, and the 'rule canon' outlined at the end of this section will demonstrate how they may be adapted to literary hypermedia. Rather than eliminating the canon idea entirely, thus, we have to part with its traditional self-contained, closed, and rigidly exclusive connotations. Instead, an inclusive, open concept has to be adopted, which works in terms of a continuous process of integration, modification and discharge.

The crucial problem with 'canonising' hypermedia in the sense of creating a catalogue of (subjectively) outstanding works is the question of how to 'judge, analyze, write about a work that never reads the same way twice' (Coover, 1992: 25). Clearly, the Aristotelian absolutes of beginning, middle and end do not hold true for hypermedia, as there are a number of possible middles and ends (even if all

readers start from the same lexia). In fact, a hypermedia canon can only work if we replace the idea of a unifying experience through reading 'identical' texts by the idea of unity through individual readings (see Bolter, 2001: 11). Paradoxically, as didactic implementation has shown, critical meta-discourse is not only possible but indeed lively and enriching, despite or precisely because readers are made to debate their personal versions of the same hypertext.

Setting up a canon of aesthetically, cognitively, spiritually and morally appealing hypertexts is in fact not an 'apologetic crusade', as Aarseth (1997: 22) calls any such theoretical or practical attempt. I also disagree with Aarseth in that, rather than not searching 'for traditional literary values in texts that are neither intended nor structured as literature' (*ibid.*: 22), I concentrate on texts that are maximally close to 'traditional' print literature and therefore do not require a complete redefinition of 'literature'. 'Good' hypertexts do not require an *apologia* but rather emphatic vindication, which may ultimately direct them towards curricular integration. For this purpose, I suggest, in what follows, a concise catalogue of aesthetic and conceptual criteria. This 'rule canon', or 'set of values', may form the basis of any expert's selection of 'canonical' hypermedia. In doing so, however, we must not forget that reading creative hypermedia has to be learned and practised in order to be able to appreciate their distinctive aesthetic potential. After all, some hypertexts exhibit deliberately intricate navigational systems, which form a constitutive part of their aesthetic programme.

Aesthetic value judgements of any kind are problematic in that they are not only highly subjective, but essentially dependent on the qualitative conceptions of different groups in society. Hence, venturing to suggest a hypertext canon single-handedly may seem hubristic if not downright impossible. Having said that, the digital medium facilitates two aspects of reception which, in print media, are, for pragmatic reasons, less feasible: direct, often even textually interventionist interaction with the product on the one hand and direct communication with the author on the other. To put it differently, the reading subject is autonomous in terms of being able to respond immediately to the individual reading experience – without even changing the medium of interaction. The author's email address is normally given on the website in question or, if not, can be 'Googled'. In my experience, hypertext authors tend to be interested in and swift to reply to readers' questions. Notably, this sense of reader autonomy does not imply an approval of Landow's (e.g. 1997) much-debated concept of 'wreader' empowerment. Rather, it supports the notion of personalised hypermedia interaction and, along with it, the plausibility of a single-handed canon.

Another pervasive argument in support of (alternative) canons is the mundane fact that reading time is short for the average member of the First World, and selections have to be made considering the sheer host of reading matter on offer. Therefore, I agree with Winko, who argues in favour of retaining canons, mainly because they



facilitate selection. Her only reservation is that, in order to compensate for subjectivity, relativity and changeability, any underlying 'axiological' value judgements have to be well-founded and explicated (Winko, 2002: 2).

With this in mind, I suggest a set of such 'axiological values' which may result in a hypertext/hypermedia canon as outlined in Ensslin (2007). These values have to be exclusive enough to bring forth a 'managable' selection of hypertexts. Simultaneously, they need to be sufficiently open to allow future additions, modifications and reductions. I propose four overarching categories, which are in alignment with the classical semiotic triangle as suggested by Bühler and echoed in a range of approaches to literary value judgements (e.g. Winko, 1997; Grübel, 1997). The categories are (1) production (relating to circumstances of authorship), (2) object (relating to the subject matter), (3) form (linguistic and other structural devices, including navigational strategies), and (4) reception (relating to the reader in the widest sense, which includes lay readers, critics, editors, and pedagogues alike).

Considering the productive element, innovation and originality, which Winko categorises as 'relational' values (Winko, 1997: 594), play an important part. An aesthetics of innovation implies, according to Fricke (1981: 209), a deviation from quasi-norms dictated by literary history and generic conventions. The innovation claim is, as mentioned previously, a central constituent of avant-garde canons and adhered to by most hypertext authors.

Another feature to consider with regard to production is the extent to which technology is used to reflect the subject matter. Clearly, technological expertise is perceived to be of less significance than poetic and narrative skill when it comes to assessing an author's potential for (literary) canonisation. Evidently, the mere ability to use sophisticated hypermedia software and mark-up languages does not necessarily result in a literary or multimodal masterpiece. Instead, a central formal concern will be transmedialisation, i.e. the meaningful combination of semiotic codes and systems (modes) within the digital medium, and, more generally, the implementation of intertextuality in the sense of implicit and explicit textual and semiotic cross-referencing.<sup>9</sup>

Thematically, the focus will be on the text's 'ability' to make readers reflect, to influence their word picture, or expand their horizon of expectation. This includes not only topicality and 'significance' of subject matter as well as reference to theories of philosophy, sociology, politics, psychology, ethics, and religion (Winko, 1997: 549). In fact, hypermedia's characteristic self-referentiality necessitates an engagement with metafictional, meta-hypertextual, meta-medial and meta-critical issues (Löser, 1999:1).

Formal-aesthetic values (pertaining to the sign-element of the semiotic triangle) pertain to macro- and microstylistic elements and are traditionally associated with

the beauty of sound, connotational density and ambiguity, completeness, coherence, and 'magnitude', as Aristotle puts it in his theory of tragedy. That said, formal excellence depends largely on the theory of literature applied to a text and the degree to which the text meets the requirements of such a theory. Hypertext theory specifically believes in the effects of narrative antilinearity and the resulting increase in reader responsibility; the lexia as the smallest and decisive textual unit; the absence of closure; rhizomatic infinity, as well as the tripartite structural interplay between link, node, and network. As linking patterns and navigational strategies are among hypermedia's most characteristic and unique formal features, particular attention should be paid to how authors use them to achieve distinct aesthetic effects.

In terms of reception, I will examine cognitive, emotive, and existentialist effects on the reader in general, insofar as they can be examined from published documents. These include, on the one hand, responses written by professional critics by means of reviews and critical articles, which have been published in (online) journals, books, and other electronic or print media resources. Of further interest are awards won in hypertext competitions, as well as the publishing situation in general. In terms of distribution, we need to ask, for instance, whether the copyright of a particular hypertext is owned by a registered publisher, such as Eastgate Systems, as this implies peer review and professional editing. Contrarily, a text may have simply been put on the internet, without there being any instance of peer review.

Another question with regard to hypertext dissemination is the degree to which it has been anthologised, i.e. integrated into readers (books or CD-ROMs). Such compilations are among the most suitable pedagogic tools as they may be set as prescribed reading for courses in Media Studies or contemporary literature.

Perhaps most importantly, but also most subjectively, the rule canon highlights aesthetic qualities which are likely to have a motivating effect on readers. Ways of making readers 'read on' are manifold, even though they are reading from a screen and cannot expect any sense of closure or completeness from the text in question. Aesthetic effects include suspense, surprise, playfulness, and 'intellectual exercise' (Schnierer, 2000: 544), i.e. the challenge of exploring and making sense – or well-grounded non-sense – of a text that may defy cognitive comprehensibility, both structurally and thematically. Table 2 summarises the axiological criteria explained in this section, which may serve as a catalogue of criteria, i.e. a 'rule canon' in note form for a hypermedia canon.

Production	Innovation and originality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· deviation from literary / hypertextual traditions</li> <li>· interrelation between technology and subject matter</li> </ul>
Object	Thematic depth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· topicality</li> <li>· thematic message</li> <li>· self-reflexivity</li> <li>· metatheoretical concept</li> <li>· intertextuality</li> </ul>
Form	Aesthetic foregrounding (microstructurally / macrostructurally)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· rhetorical devices</li> <li>· linking patterns</li> <li>· navigation</li> <li>· hypertext structure</li> </ul>
	Semiotic interplay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· transmedialisation</li> <li>· implemented intertextuality</li> </ul>
Reception	Criticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· critical acclaim</li> <li>· awards</li> </ul>
	Anthologization / curricular integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· readers (print / CD-ROM)</li> <li>· university reading lists</li> <li>· curricular presence</li> </ul>
	Effect on reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· suspense</li> <li>· surprise</li> <li>· playfulness</li> <li>· 'intellectual exercise'</li> </ul>

Table 2: 'Rule canon'

It is important to note that such a norm catalogue is creative rather than restrictive in nature. It legitimises and produces a dynamic, subjectively adjustable canon which nonetheless excludes works that do not sufficiently fulfill the criteria in question. In other words, it adds an element of 'scholarly control' to the anarchy of

the web as well as to commercially biased reviewers and editors as represented by Eastgate Systems. The dynamic character derives from the avant-garde canon's inherent openness, which facilitates the adoption of new and exclusion of 'dated' works. The criteria are formulated so as to yield to value-related paradigm shifts. Hence, rather than mapping out a limited number of 'exemplary' role models, the catalogue invites modifications of the works it brings forth, depending on individual opinion.

In a field as fluid as digital literature, new, groundbreaking technology as well as writerly creativity proliferate new works, most of which, sadly, do not meet the standards of an experienced literary scholar. Some exceptions, however, give evidence not only of technological expertise, but, more significantly, of a powerful combination of poetic eloquence, artistic skill and critical awareness. Such works should be integrated into a hypermedia canon, the sheer act of which will enable innovative scholarly debates and alternative, medially conscious methods of analysis.

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## Notes

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1. The problematic nature of this concept is evident, as it reflects the inherent contingency of the canon upon prominent socio-political and aesthetic ideologies, mostly represented by legislative, governing bodies and their executive administrative organs.
2. According to Tenbruck (1986), there are three types of societies: primitive, civilised and modern societies, which he understands in terms of a continuum, along which societies develop structurally. Tenbruck emphasises that the three types are developmental stages rather than historical periods. Therefore, earlier societies are not necessarily less developed than later societies. As opposed to primitive societies, which largely consist of peasant strata, civilised societies ('Hochkulturen') are characterised by stratification into higher and lower social levels, where the higher strata hold together the lower ones, thus defining a common culture (e.g. religious, legal, moral and linguistic parameters). Modern societies are the most complex of the three, as it is mainly determined by functional rather than local differentiation, institutional contingency and a plurality of roles assumed by each society member in a variety of functional contexts.
3. For more information, see [www.nc.uk.net](http://www.nc.uk.net) (02/04/2007).

4. The terms 'hypertext', 'hypermedia' and 'cybertext' were excluded from this survey, as the vast majority of occurrences appeared in the context of 'HTML' programming rather than literary discourse.
5. No occurrences of 'hyperpoetry' could be found in *LexisNexis*.
6. 'THES' is short for the weekly *Times Higher Education Supplement*.
7. Clearly, the evidence given in this survey cannot be considered representative for the whole of England or Great Britain. It would be interesting to see, for instance, whether the North-South divide traditionally assumed in relation to cultural progressivity might be confirmed or rather, which would be more desirable, refuted.
8. Altogether three sets of SAT exams are done in British schools at ages 7, 11 and 14 (after the pupils complete a 'key stage'). The SATs are national tests, which do not lead to a qualification but are intended to provide comparison between schools, help with applications to secondary schools and also for preparing streaming procedures for the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education).
9. For consistency's sake, the phenomenon of technological intertextuality can only be mentioned as an aside. Many author-programmers make use of previously written JavaScripts and Java Applets, which are sold or distributed freely on the web. This raises the questions of what true authorship really implies in an electronic environment, and where the boundary lies between radical instrumentalism and technological plagiarism.