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From Surfiction to Hypertext: Interview with Raymond Federman

By Roberto Simanowski

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Abstract

Raymond Federman, born in France (1928), emigrated to the U.S. in 1947 (after he survived deportation to Auschwitz as the only person of his family), is one of contemporary literature's most radical thinkers and influential authors and critics. He was a Distinguished Professor of French, English, and Comparative Literature at The State University of New York at Buffalo (he is now retired) but considers himself primarily a fiction writer. Federman has published several books of criticism on the work of Samuel Beckett as well as contemporary literature, numerous essays and articles, four volumes of poems and ten novels, written in English or French, translated into German, Italian, French, Hungarian, Polish, Serbian, Rumanian, Hebrew, Dutch, Greek, Japanese, and Chinese. Federman has received numerous awards, and was a fellow/artist in residence in France, Israel, and Germany. There he gave his poetic lectures in 1990 (published in 1992 in Edition Suhrkamp) about Surfiction and the prospects of literature. Roberto Simanowski talked to Raymond Federman about contemporary aesthetics of spectacle, the concept of surfiction and critifiction, and its relation to hyperfiction and realfiction.

RS: In your manifesto The Real Begins Where the Spectacle Ends you are giving an disillusioning and alarming report on how the world is represented today: "Now, and without any doubt more than ever, the derealizing flux of media images runs away with our powers of discernment, our conscience, our lives, and of course our writing. It forces us to surrender to what can only be called, in a strict sense, the fabulous and seductive grasp of spectacle." How does the aesthetics of spectacle take over current life and what are the consequences for us and our culture?

RF: Let me first say that I greatly admire and sometime enjoy what television does, even if it does it badly. My point is that television (and all the other electronic media that bombard us with images and verbal delirium) is what prevents us to see the reality of our world, however troublesome this reality may be. Everything that is happening in the world is filtered through television (and the other electronic media,

including the internet). There is nothing wrong with that, except that reality (and what happens there) comes to us second-hand, one might say. It comes to us transformed, manipulated, glorified, sublimated, distorted of course, interfered with. In the process, the truth of an event never reaches us directly. But indirectly. We must now learn to live with this condition. Television is here to stay.

My argument is that literature (or what passes for literature in our decadent culture) too often tries to imitate what television does. Functions like television both in form and content. Most novels written these days are mere imitations of what television shows us, and of how it is shown. The problem with this is that television thinks with the mentality of a six year old. As a result, the novels that function like television lack intelligence. And worse, they present themselves as being realistic, but in fact they give a false representation of reality. This does not mean that I am asking for a return to good old 19th century realism. On the contrary. I would like the novel to be again the region of great *fabulation*. But this requires imagination and intelligence. Yes what makes great literature is imagination and intelligence. Or to put it in simpler terms. Writing is imagining while thinking.

The consequences of this for us and our culture? Gradually we will forget to think, because television is doing our thinking. Gradually will stop imagining because television will imagine for us. Of course when I say television I really mean the big businesses that control television with their advertisements. And if it is not the businesses, then it is the government which imposes its rules and regulations and even dictate or censure what television can say and show. The ideal situation would be for each one of us to control a television channel in order to have direct access to the world. As long as television will be controlled by the few who are in power (politically or economically) reality will always be falsified.

Have I answered your question? Probably not. I am known for being evasive and ambiguous, and even contradictory. But at least I answered. That much can be said. Now to the next question.

RS: You made your point very clear. It makes me wonder what role the Internet is to play in this setting. I remember Robert Coover complaining about the increase in the number of images on the web. According to him, the web has not been very hospitable to serious hyperfiction, but rather has supported superficial, opportunistic events, since "it tends to be a noisy, restless, opportunistic, superficial, e-commerce-driven, chaotic realm ... in which the quiet voice of literature cannot easily be heard." (article in FEED) Is the Internet the paradise of spectacle?

RF: I would rather say the purgatory of literature. Yes literature (whether called surfiction or hyperfiction) has not yet found its way into the internet. It is stranded in the antechamber of technical gimmicks. It cannot decide if it wants to become totally iconic or if it wants to preserve what is essential to literature, language. Literature has its place on the internet - but as literature and now as spectacle only.

But already there is some real internet literature in some not yet discovered corners of cyberspace. Who knows this fabulous avant-garde zine, THE DELUXE RUBBER CHICKEN. Who knows the very smart zine called ELECTRONIC BOOK REVIEW [ebr], and then of course there is ALTX.

To get back to the topic at hand: the role the internet can play to accommodate good interesting imaginative experimental innovative out of this world literature. It's easy. Let the real writers in, and not just the technicians. Offer them space, time, retribution even, and you'll find a flock of writers making great literature on the net.

RS: In your manifesto you ask whether it is possible for fiction to "survive the kind of reduction, the kind of banalization that mass media imposes on contemporary culture". Some answers are provided in your lectures on poetics in Hamburg in 1990, where you call for *surfiction* and *critifiction*. What is behind these new terms?

RF: I knew you were going to ask that question. Do you know how many people in the world have asked me to explain what is Surfiction, that by now were I to give another definition, I would probably contradict myself. So, to be on the safe side, what I can recommend for those who are still in the dark about surfiction and how it functions, is to suggest that these people go to the library and check out the book entitled *Surfiction: Fiction Now... and Tomorrow...* and read the essay "Surfiction: Four Propositions in the Form of an Introduction" [pages 5-15]. A slightly different version can also be found in *Partisan Review* (1973, Volume XL, no. 3). For those who do not read English, that Surfiction essay has been translated into seventeen languages.

As for Critifiction, again I can only suggest that those interested consult the collection of essays by that title published by SUNY-Press, in 1993. The essays are self-explanatory and illustrate how fiction becomes criticism, and how criticism become fiction, or how criticism and fiction create a new genre.

But without being facetious, let me try once more to give a brief definition of the terms Surfiction and Critifiction.

Surfiction: All fiction is written on top of another fiction, and that's because language itself is a fiction. The fact of telling or writing a story, the fact of relating an event (even an historical event) always distorts, or rather fictionalizes that story or that event -- fictionalizes it, in the sense that it displaces the story or the event from reality into the realm of the imaginary. Or to put it differently. Surfiction makes not distinction between memory and imagination. Surfiction makes not distinction between what really happened in the world in the past and what it imagines happened. As such Surfiction liberates itself from the conventions of realism, and erases the lines between past, present and future. Since language is what get us where we want to go while preventing us from getting there, since language is both a vehicle of communication and an obstacle to communication, or, as the great

Samuel Beckett once put it, "Language a rumor transmissible ad infinitum in either direction", the truth of an event can never be told or written. Therefore, Surfiction no longer pretends to tell the truth, but rather it denounces the lie of realism, but tells the truth about its own fraudulence.

Critifiction. Just as Surfiction erases the lines between memory and imagination, between the real and the imaginary, between past, present, and future. Critifiction erases the line between genres. A piece of critifictional writing brings together fragments of fiction, poetry, theory, criticism, quotation, misquotation, play[yl]gicism, or whatever is available to the writer. As such, Critifiction becomes digressive and discontinuous. So one can say that Critifiction invented intertextuality and hypertextuality.

RS: Thanks for not really sending our readers away to the library but supporting them with a first idea of what Surfiction and Critifiction mean. For further and future reading, one may turn to the next edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, were both terms will appear, since both are now widely used by critics. Next question.

In your poetic lectures you give four proposals for the present and future of literature. The first is to break with the concept of syntax as we know it: to start first page at the top left and to finish last page bottom right. You complain that this syntax reduces the polyvalence of words and demand that we rethink and alter the concept and position of word, sentence, paragraph, chapter, page number and punctuation in order to open up new ways of reading a book. However, what you are saying reminds me of hypertext in digital media rather than of book literature. And your second proposal- non-linear writing - reminds me also of Ted Nelson's definition of hypertext as non-sequential writing. Therefore it comes as no surprise that your novels "Take It or Leave It" and "Double or Nothing" sometimes mentioned as precursors of hypertextual writing. What is your relation to hypertext, especially in these novels?

RF: I made these proposals in 1973, soon after the publication of my first novel, "Double or Nothing" (Alles Oder Nichts), a novel which has now been recognized by a number of critics as a precursor of hypertext and hypertext. Of course, in the early 1970's, the terms hypertext and hypertext were not known, and yet a number of novelists (I was not alone in trying to invent a new way to write fiction) were already transforming traditional syntax, and undermining narrative linearity. My proposals were perhaps more radical than most because they also asked not only for a new way to write fiction, but also a new way to read fiction. And so, I invented what I called *paginal syntax*, and the *leap-frog technique*.

Paginal syntax allows the words to float freely on the page and organized themselves visually and typographically in such a way that the shape of language becomes more important than the meaning the words are trying to convey. Paginal syntax allows improvisation in writing as well as in reading. Each page is more or

less self-contained. In this sense then, the relation of the pages to each other becomes unpredictable, in the same way that the elements of an hypertext are unpredictable in relation to each other. Paginal syntax engenders a sense of free participation in the writing/reading process. Both "Double or Nothing" and "Take It or Leave It" exemplify this method

The leap-frog technique is primarily a succession of narrative digressions. Each page, each paragraph of the narrative digresses in relation to the next. Consequently, linearity and sequentiality become obsolete and irrelevant. In a digressive narrative structure the overarching plot-line is no longer important as the individual page anticipates the power of the single hypertextual lexia. Digressive narrative will not have a beginning, middle, and end, it will not lend itself to a continuous and totalizing form of reading. It will refuse resolution and closure, it will always remain an open discourse, and this, of course, is also true of hyperfiction. Hyperfiction progresses by leaps and bounds.

In this sense then, my novels "Double or Nothing," "Amer Eldorado" (written in French) and "Take It or Leave It" prefigure the hypertextual instant in American fiction. So, to answer the final sentence of your question. My fiction of the early 70's harmonizes conceptually with a number of other currents on the contemporary scene, especially Hyperfiction.

RS: Did you ever consider employing all the new writing tools of digital media and work on the web?

RF: I have already done a number of pieces of fiction using and abusing the tools of digital media, some of these are on the net - but more important I am currently writing (in collaboration with another writer) a novel literally invented on the internet by using email and instant messages, besides telephone tapes video letters conversation etc. The book is called "In Search of Mona, a Love Story Improvised on the Spot." Weidler Verlag in Berlin will publish in June (I will be there for the occasion) the first volume of email correspondence between the editor and the author. The book is called "Mentir ou Mourir / Lie or Die: Naissance des livres dans l'esprit e-mail" (the book is mostly in French though there are some emails in English and in German too.)

And George Chambers and I started another collaborative project via e-mail - interlacing our words. George Chambers and I wrote "The Twilight of the Bums" (*Penner Rap*, in German) which will be launched as an e-book in July by AltX.

RS: Your manifesto, "The Real Begins where the Spectacle Ends," was published in 1996. One year later Mark Amerika finished his project GRAMMATRON, one of the most famous and award-showered hyperfictions on the World Wide Web. Is this multimedial hyperfiction surfiction?

RF: I believe I have already answered this question in my preceding answer. Personally, I see little difference between Surfiction and Hyperfiction – only a minor difference in technique. Mark Amerika has often acknowledged the influence of my work on his work and on his thinking. GRAMMATRON uses different technical means to arrive basically at the same result as SURFICTION. But let me take this opportunity to clarify what a manifesto means to me.

At its most endearing, a manifesto has madness in it. It is peculiar, sometime angry, quirky, or downright crazed. A manifesto is always opposed to something – explicitly or implicitly. It usually starts out as a credo, but then gradually develops a persuasive argument to convince the reader to join in.

Unlike an essay, a manifesto is by nature a loud genre. It calls for capital letters, loves bigness, demands attention, even indulges in contradictions. It makes an art of excess. This is how it differs from rational standard self-congratulatory *ars poetica*. A manifesto is an act of *d'emesure* that goes past what is considered to be proper, sane, rational, and literary. It demands extravagant self-assurance. One cannot argue against a manifesto. One accepts it or rejects it totally.

A manifesto draws the reader into the belief of the writer, by hook or by crook. The present tense always suits the manifesto. My Surfiction Manifesto of 1973 goes even beyond the present tense. It is written in the future tense. It projects itself forward into the future of fiction, or what Maurice Blanchot calls *Le Livre à venir*. The 1996 manifesto is also turned towards the future as it demands a reconsideration of what literature can do to survive in the world where spectacle has taken over.

A manifesto is generally, by mode and form, an exhortation to a whole way of thinking and being rather than a simple command or definition. In a way, it is a poem in heightened prose.

I am giving this definition of what I believe a manifesto is so that my so-called manifestoes can be read for what they are. Somewhat preposterous positions which, over the past three decades, have been the occasion of heated discussions and controversies in the literary world.

RS: In your manifesto you say that the kind of literature we need now is the kind that will systematically erode and dissipate the setting of the Spectacle, frustrate the expectation of its positive beginning, middle, and end, and cheap resolution. This perfectly fits with what hyperfiction is supposed to do. Now, for the sake of argument let me play the devil's advocate and ask whether hyperfiction doesn't actually *support* the setting of the Spectacle. Doesn't the concept of autonomous hypertextual lexia and the click gesture rather lead to sitcom aesthetics and 'clickativity', a kind of digital MTV, than to self-referential, deconstructive text? Not to mention the multimedialisation we were talking about before.

RF: You have answered your own question in a way. Yes the problem with hyperfiction as it is now developed on the internet is merely imitating the great spectacles offered by the internet, all the publicity that flashes at us is better than any of the hyperfiction I have looked at. Or even better. The porno site on the internet are so far ahead in terms of complexity and narrative structure than any hyperfiction I have seen. The problem with the hyperfictionists now working is that they have not done their apprenticeship with the writers of the 50's (le nouveau roman in France, Robbe-Grillet, Beckett, Butor, Pinget, and so many more), of the 60's (with Calvino, Barth, Vonnegut, Hawkes, Burroughs, Marquez and so many more), of the 70's (with Sukenick, Coover, Gass, Katz, Abish, Chambers, Federman and so many more).

The technicians who are trying to create hyperfiction need to explore the fiction written back then when writing fiction was starting all over again to enjoy what it was doing. The problem with hyperfiction: it takes itself too seriously, it whines, it's sad, it's not funny, and worse it does not know how to be self-reflexive.

RS: Well, those are harsh words for all hyperfictionists. I'll leave it to them to prove you wrong, and rather continue to our next question. You spell plagiarism as pla(y)giarism, arguing that 'stealing' words is a playful process, that we sometimes don't even know our sources and that therefore plagiarism is to a certain extent inevitable. However, there is an active pla(y)giarism where the transmitter does not pretend to be the author but rather the author pretends not to be the transmitter. I am talking about those artist groups like *ubermorgen.com*, *rtmark.com* and *theyesmen.org*, who fake and manipulate websites of corporations to tell their stories in a different way. Mark Amerika describes this concept of remixing as blurring "the lines between fiction and faction, the Truth and the truth," and remarks on the "(h)ac(k)tivist or interventionist role in the evolution of this new medium" (see [interview](#) in *dichtung-digital*) . One could say that this new genre of 'realfiction' employs the lie to question the 'truth': a quite interesting and even entertaining way of reflecting critically on writing and presentation. Does this fit with the demands of surfiction and critifiction?

RF: Absolutely. As I argued in my 1976 essay entitled "Imagination as Playgicism," language belongs to everyone in the same measure, language is democratic, therefore anyone can displace, borrow, and even steal pieces of language. All writing is done in relation to previous writing. To write then becomes a surplus, an excess of what has already been written, or what already exists as writing.

Thus, in contemporary literary all considerations of model, influence, causality, and of course originality, are rendered vain. This means that the act of plagiarism cannot come after a text given as initial or original, even if such a text were to exist, for it would itself have been priorly reproduced or imitated or plagiarized. There are no original texts because the first original text has been lost, misplaced, forgotten. In the light of this realization, Surfiction exposes the writer as a mere pla[y]giarist, one

who playfully and deliberately displaces language, and in so doing eliminates the idea of a central authoritarian dispatcher of the text and of its meaning.

Or to put differently. Playgiarism cannot be explained because its laws are unwritten. Like incest, it is a taboo. It cannot be authenticated. The great playgiarizers of all time (Homer, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Montaigne, Sterne, Diderot, Lautréamont, Proust, Beckett, Federman) have never pretended to do anything else. Inferior writer deny that they playgiarize because they confuse Plagiarism with Playgiarism. They are not the same. The difference is enormous, but no one has yet been able to explain it. Playgiarism cannot be measured in weight or size. It is as elusive as what is plagiarized.

Plagiarism is sad. It whines. It cries. It feels sorry for itself. It apologizes. It feels guilty. It hides behind itself. It lies about itself.

Playgiarism on the contrary laughs all the time. It exposes itself. It is proud. It makes fun of what it does while doing it with effrontery. It is cunning. It denounces itself. It tells the truth about itself.

RS: This encouraging plea for playgiarism can mark the end of our conversation for now and show us the way to go. Thank you very much for the interview.