



THE SPECULAR NARRATIVE IN HYPERTEXT: THE CASE OF *FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT "HYPERTEXT"*, BY RICHARD HOLETON

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ABSTRACT:

The present work addresses the presence of *Mise en abyme* in the electronic literature. It focuses, especially, on how the HTML language can facilitate and enable the creation of fictions that duplicate themselves to infinity. It starts from the assumption that self-textuality, as a phenomenon that presupposes the connection of a text with others, gains new contours from the possibility of building a hypertextual narrative, since the hyperlink allows texts of different materialities to be linked, promoting a rhizome, a-linear, multimedia and interactive network. To address this issue, references that articulate theories about hypertext, digital literature and autarchic intertextuality are articulated. In addition to a theoretical approach, the work also includes a practical part, through the analysis of the work *Frequently asked questions about "Hypertext"*, by Richard Holeton. In summary, this narrative is constructed from nine frequently asked questions (FAQs), arranged in hyperlinks, that try to explain the mysteries that surround the creation and the criticisms received by "*Hypertext*", a poem-anagram, made up of all the words that can be formed from the letters of the word hypertext.

Keywords: Mise en abyme. Hypertext. Electronic Literature

The advent of digital media has provided artistic creations with new possibilities for expression. The mixture of languages, the integration of different resources, interactivity, the

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dissemination through social networks, the exposure in alternative spaces, among other factors, demonstrate that information technology, associated with the virtual world, has effectively influenced the modes of production and reception of aesthetic objects.

In the field of literary art, this scenario has been no different. The impact of the new media has been so fruitful that the works created and / or executed from them have been classified as electronic literature, among other names, in order to be differentiated from the printed texts.

As defined on the website of the Electronic Literature Organization - ELO (Electronic Literature Organization), “Electronic Literature, or e-lit, refers to works with an important literary aspect that use the capacities and contexts provided by an independent computer or in a network” (our translation). Therefore, this type of text should not be confused with those digitized, with e-books (electronic books), or with works that, although they are published on internet sites, do not depend on the computer means for their creation and enjoyment, and can be printed without losing its original characteristics. To make this difference, Hayles (2009, p.20) emphasizes that

electronic literature, generally considered to be excluding from the literature printed material that has been digitized, by contrast, 'born in the digital medium' is a first generation digital object created by the use of a computer and (generally) read on a computer screen.

The brands that characterize electronic literature come largely from the use of resources inherent to computer media. Among these features, the use of HTML (HyperText Markup Language, in Portuguese) stands out, a standard language for creating hypertexts to be published on the World Wide Web, including literary works configured in this format, called fictions. hypertextual.

In a simple and clear way, as Landow (2009, p.25, our translation) does, a hypertext can

be defined as “text composed of a fragment of text [...] and the electronic links that connect them to each other”. In a more detailed way, emphasizing characteristics such as multimodality and the unusual path of reading, as does Lévi (1993, p.33), hypertext can be conceptualized as a

set of nodes connected by connections. The nodes can be words, pages, images, graphics or parts of graphics, sound sequences, complex documents that can themselves be hypertexts. The information items are not connected linearly, as in a knotted rope, but each, or most, extends its star connections, in a reticular way. Navigating in a hypertext therefore means designing a route on a network that can be as complicated as possible. Because each node can, in turn, contain an entire network.

Hypertextual fiction, according to Gaggi (2015, p.122, our translation), is a hypertext like any other, that is, “a variety of nodes or lexias are connected by several links, creating a web or network that the reader navigates in different ways”. Therefore, a hypertext, fictional or not, is a network composed of different texts or separate blocks of the same text, which can be accessed, at random, through points that connect to each other. Thanks to this structure, the hypertext guarantees autonomy to the reader, allowing him to trace his own reading path.

This type of hypertext should not be confused with that defined by Genette (2010) as a work that derives from another, through a transformation or imitation. In the case of the phenomenon Genette called hypertextuality, hypertext refers to the genres parody, travesty, transposition, pastiche, charge and forging, which result from the modification of a previous text, classified as a hypotext. Of course, nothing prevents the Gennetian hypertext from being configured in the hypertext format as a network formed by interconnected texts.

It is also necessary to make the reservation that, even in the sense of associated text blocks, hypertext is much earlier than the development of electronic supports. Indexes of glossaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias and other reference works, as well as footnotes or endnotes, present in monographs in general, are the most mentioned types of hypertexts in non-

fictional printed works. In the field of literature, the examples are also varied, thanks to creative experimentalism, responsible for the construction of combinatorial works. An example of this is *The game of the hopscotch*, by Julio Cortázar, a work in which the reader, at different times, must choose between two or more possibilities of sequence for the text.

However, in printed hypertexts, cross-references prevail, which leave the job to the reader to search for the indicated part. In the electronic hypertext, as indicated by the name, the connections are electronic, so that one click is enough to access other content. In addition, the printed medium limits the possibilities of combinations, both in terms of variety and quantity of the associated elements. In contrast, hypertext in digital media can encompass lexias as diverse as a sound and an image. The web, due to its scope, allows connections to be expanded exponentially, since a website can contain links that refer to other sites, which in turn refer to others, and so on.

Because it is a text that contains or connects with many others, hypertext can be associated with the phenomenon known as *mise en abyme*, a term derived from the French that literally means *placed into abyss* and that refers to the sensations of depth, infinity and vertigo caused by the act of placing one or more works within another(s). Given the similarities of both, it becomes interesting to inquire about the possibilities and modes of occurrence of *mise en abyme* in works of hypertextual fiction.

Forged by André Gide, using a typical heraldry procedure, which consists of reproducing a smaller image of the same coat of arms in the center of a coat of arms, the word *mise en abyme* started to cover the aesthetic effect produced by the similarity relations that they present, itself, a contained work and the other that contains it. Due to this characteristic of reflection, the phenomenon came to be also called specular reporting.

Lucien Dällenbach, after a systematic study of the origins and practical applications in *Nouveau Roman* works and studies of literary criticism, defined *mise en abyme* as “every internal mirror in which the set of reports is reflected by simple, repeated or illusory reduplication” (DÄLLENBACH , 1991, p. 49, our translation).

Simple reduplication occurs when a fragment is similar to the work that includes it. The repeated reduplication, or reduplication to infinity, manifests itself when a fragment, besides presenting a similarity with the work that includes it, contains another fragment that presents a similarity with the one that includes it and so on. Finally, the a priori or illusory reduplication is characterized by a fragment that supposedly contains the work that includes it. The first case can be well represented by the coat of arms within the coat of arms. The second for babushka, a Russian doll, hollow, which contains a doll inside itself, also hollow, which contains another doll ... And the third for urobóro, a mythical snake that bites its own tail.

Still according to Dällenbach, a *mise en abyme* can have as its object of reflection the statement, the enunciation or the code of the work that encloses it. The *mise en abyme* of the statement is characterized by the presence of a fragment that quotes or condenses the statement of the one that contains it. The *mise en abyme* of the enunciation reflects the context of production or reception of the artistic object, so that its protagonist will be a writer or a reader. The *mise en abyme* of the code mirrors the artistic technique, the structure and / or the functioning of the narrative.

It is worth adding that the typologies established by Dällenbach are not watertight, so that the same *mise en abyme* can reflect more than one element of fiction and nothing prevents, for example, that an a priori reduplication can be repeated within the same work, also becoming a reduplication to infinity.

From these definitions and classifications, it is possible to point out at least two possibilities of innovation for the manifestation of *mise en abyme* in electronic hypertext: the multiplication of the number of repeated reduplications and the diversity of the types of texts used as mirrors.

According to Dällenbach, reduplication to infinity is condemned to remain in a program or outline state, since the number of fragments contained within each other is restricted by the linear limits of a literary work. It so happens that Dällenbach addressed the presence of *mise en abyme* in texts with physical supports, such as books. In electronic works, available within the world wide web, even though the reduplications do not in fact become infinite, the number of fragments that maintain similarity relationships between them can grow exponentially. In other words, hypertext, due to the ability to connect texts in an unlimited way, can considerably increase the number of fragments embedded within the same work.

Regarding the types of internal mirror used in the phenomenon of reflection, Dällenbach mentions, in addition to narratives, music, monuments, paintings, etc. However, generally, these non-verbal elements appear allusively or through a description made by the narrator or another character. Electronic hypertext, due to the characteristic of multimodal text, allows the creation of literary works that, in addition to written texts, contain drawings, photos, sounds, graphics, videos, among other elements. In this way, the possibilities of intersemiotic dialogues related to the creation of mirror reports are expanded.

Having made these theoretical considerations, it is necessary to analyze concrete manifestations of *mise en abyme* in works of electronic literature, in order to verify whether electronic hypertext has facilitated and / or provided new creative possibilities for specular reports.

In order to contemplate this practical part, within the limits of this work, Richard Holeton's *Frequently asked questions about "Hypertext"* narrative was chosen. The choice of this fiction was guided, initially, by the fact that the title's reference to hypertext, combined with the hypertextual configuration of the work, suggested that it was an artistic production with internal mirroring. In addition, throughout the research, it was found that some of its elements allude to reduplication to infinity.

As the name implies, *Frequently asked questions about "Hypertext"* mimics the structure of a FAQ, which stands for the term Frequently Asked Questions, commonly translated into Portuguese as *Perguntas Mais Frequentes* or, simply, *Perguntas Frequentes*. According to the entry in the *Sawaya Computer and Internet Dictionary* (1999, p. 174), FAQ is an "Online document that answers the most frequently asked questions in UseNet discussion groups, posted at regular intervals and archived on different websites". It is, therefore, a set of questions, accompanied by their respective answers. FAQs are presumed to have appeared in internet discussion groups, in order to avoid the work of answering similar questions several times. However, today they are present on several types of sites and aim to answer the most common questions from Internet users about published content, products and services offered, among others.

In the case of Richard Holeton's fiction, the FAQ was created by the character Richard Alan Holeton to try to clarify doubts about "*Hypertext*". Contrary to what can be assumed by the title, the questions do not, at least directly, deal with electronic or Genettian hypertext. In the narrative, "*Hypertext*" designates a poem composed by the character Alan Richardson, which becomes a critical and public success, being the target of several interpretations and discussions in forums of internet users, fandoms, monographs, periodicals and congresses.

The name "*Hypertext*" derives from the fact that the poem is composed of 69 words formed from the combination of the letters of the word hypertext. In addition, each of the nine verses begins with one of the letters of the title (considering that the term Ex can be converted into X), forming a vertical acrostic.

The poem "*Hypertext*" is already presented on the homepage of *Frequently asked questions about "Hypertext"*. Along with it, aligned to the left side of the screen, are nine frequently asked questions, which constitute the main entries from the hypertextual web of fiction. By clicking on each of the questions, new details are discovered about the origin, critical interpretations, the enormous success of the poem and the details of the author's life and death. As these issues are interlinked, there are links that direct from one question to the next, so that the reading process can occur in a linear fashion, according to the points that most attract the reader's attention.

According to the FAQ, "*Hypertext*" was created by Alan Richardson, a former investment banker, who, after the collapse of the shares of the "dot-com" companies, decided to compose a poem-anagram and send it to some friends. Upon becoming viral on the internet, "*Hypertext*" suffered numerous fraudulent versions and several people were indicated as responsible for its creation, until it was impossible to arrive at the name of the real author and establish the original version of the work.

The huge success of "*Hypertext*" motivated the appearance of several fanfics, that is, a type of production, very common in the virtual environment, which is characterized by being a fiction created by a reader from another one of which he is a fan (MIRANDA , 2009). The author of the Frequently Asked Questions is responsible for one of these fanfics, entitled *Another day at the office*. In this recreation, the character Dick A. Hellton is the writer responsible for both the

FAQ document and the poem. The latter was inspired by the transformations experienced by Eric(a) Taylor, a transsexual office colleague who was in the midst of the processes of sex change and who triggered Dick's memories of a youth adventure with a transvestite.

Richard Alan Holeton is also responsible for a fandom, that is, a virtual community aimed at critical debate and fanfiction disclosures by fans of a work (MIRANDA, 2009). The fandom, called HerHim.org (Hierarchical Electronic Recombinating “Hypertext” Interactive Matrix®), would enable the research, production and publication of “*Hypertext*” fanfics, through automatic generators, as occurs in generative literature.

The poem-anagram also aroused the interest of the academy and motivated a series of works by specialized critics. The first of these, called the Texas school or Bush school, is attributed to the critic of the University of Texas, Hilton Allrich, whose reading finds in the poem references to the fragmented rhetoric and scandals of the life of former President George W. Bush.

The critics and poets of Language and Post-Language pointed out that the silly syntax, a-linearity, and ambiguities, among other elements of “*Hypertext*”, give the reader autonomy in the search for textual coherence and contribute to socialist revolution worldwide.

However, the most widely accepted criticism, known as the popular interpretation, was carried out by MFA (Master in Fine Arts) student Ellen Richards, with help from internet critics and their knowledge of media culture. Richards proposed that “*Hypertext*” embraces elements of popular culture and subverts hierarchies, since its excerpts refer, concomitantly, to well-known mass culture productions, such as films, television series and game shows, and to famous works of the literary canon which, in turn, dialogue with historical facts and criticize hegemonic power relations, including sexual ones.

After having an affair with the critic Ellen Richards and discovering that she was the new sexual identity of the poet Alan Richardson, the critic Richard Allman, from Stanford University, proposed another interpretation of “*Hypertext*”, which became known as the technosexual reading. Relating the content of the work to the author's biography, Allman's reading emphasizes that the poem makes reference to transvestite initiation rituals and cosmetic surgeries and treatments used by transsexuals in the process of sex change, which would give rise to a hybrid of woman-machine or a seductive technosexual cyborg.

As a retaliation, Ellen Richards accused Allman of projecting her own transvestite fantasies onto the characters in the poem-anagram and stated that her ex-boyfriend's reading was a heterosexist response to a failed love affair with a transsexual woman. In addition, the critic-poet presented a new work, known as the post-transsexual or post-transvestite reinterpretation, which understands “*Hypertext*” as a poem that breaks with the dominant discourse on sexuality, overcoming the opposition between male and female.

Therefore, the FAQ presents several analyses about a poem whose original version and authorship are doubtful. Following, throughout the text, are interpretations in the wake of formalism, new criticism, cultural studies, biographical and psychoanalytic readings, post-humanism and queer theory. The more details that are added around the author's work and biographies and those of the commentators, the more it is perceived how doubtful the information provided may be and how imbued with subjectivity the literary criticism may be.

In this sense, *Frequently asked questions about “Hypertext”* is similar to Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, a narrative from the 60s that presents a long poem, attributed to the poet John Shade, accompanied by a preface that refutes criticisms regarding the reliability of the work, explanatory notes on the verses, and an index of the main characters involved in the poetic

text. Critical comments, all written by scholar Charles Kinbote, blend information about the biographies of the poet and the critic and blur the edges between reality and fiction, imploding the reliability of the stories surrounding the poem.

Following Genette's postulates on transtextual relations, it is possible to say that, just as Joyce transports Homer's *Odyssey* action to 20th century Dublin, Richard Hopleton transposes *Pale Fire* into the context of digital technology. For this reason, in addition to being an electronic hypertextual fiction, *Frequently asked questions about "Hypertext"* is also a hypertext in the Genetian sense, as it is a text that originates from the transformation of another.

Both the configuration of electronic hypertext and the peculiarity of being a fiction that descends from another are duly reflected in *Frequently asked questions about "Hypertext"* through *mises en abyme* spread throughout the narrative.

The title of the work, at first, seems to appear as an illusory sign, since the term "*Hypertext*" does not refer to either electronic hypertext or Genettian, but to the poem-anagram, around which the narrative revolves. In this sense, the work attributed to Alan Richardson, far from being a mirror capable of reflecting the narrative that encloses it, seems to work like any object that, blocking the incidence of light under the reflecting surface, would prevent the phenomenon of reflection.

Yet the anagrammatic construction of "*Hypertext*" mirrors an important detail in Richard Hopleton's fiction. Just as the poem is composed of words derived from Hypertext, the characters' names from *Frequently asked questions about "Hypertext"* (Alan Richardson, (author of the poem), Ellen Richards (critic and poet), Dick A. Hopleton, Eric and Erica Taylor (fanfic characters), Richard Allman and Hilton Allrich (critics)) are all anagrams of the character who created the FAQ, Richard Alan Hopleton, who, in turn, is the namesake of the author of the

narrative.

Nevertheless, some critical comments on the poem “*Hypertext*” reflect the characteristics of electronic hypertextual fiction in general, especially from *Frequently asked questions about “Hypertext”*, such as “anti-linearity”, “disjunctive narrative collage”, “unstable point of view”, “kaleidoscope of topics and images”, “autonomy given to the reader in establishing the coherence of the text”, etc.

The fact is that *Frequently asked questions about “Hypertext”* is a hypertextual fiction in the Genettian sense, too, and has as its internal mirrors the transvestite characters (present in the fanfic *Another day at the office* and in “Technosexual Reading”), which refer to travesty, a hypertextual practice that, according to Genette (2010), operates by the satirical transformation of the text.

The Genettian hypertext is also reflected by the mentions of the genre fanfic, which is a practice of hypertextuality (in the sense attributed by Genette) very common in the virtual world, since the texts that fall into this category are produced from the imitation and transformation of others' texts. An example of this, in the fiction of Richard Holeton, is the fanfic *Another day at the office*, a creation inspired by “*Hypertext*” that was later plagiarized in the so-called “technosexual reading”, by critic Richard Allman.

Furthermore, although the HerHim fandom site does not effectively function (perhaps because, as explained in the narrative, fan communities have become the target of hackers), it alludes to the *ad infinitum* character of the artistic re-creation practices of one text from another. In a way, it is possible to say that fandoms and fanfics point to the possibility of repeatedly reduplicating the same work.

In addition to the mirrors that reflect electronic and Genettian hypertextuality, the central

theme of *Frequently asked questions about "Hypertext"*, that is, the interferences of critical analyzes on works of art, is also duly mirrored. As mentioned, Holeyton's text is composed of summaries of critical texts that interpret "*Hypertext*" in very different ways. The readings seem to function as deforming mirrors, which enlarge, reduce, invert and distort the meanings of the poem. The narrative therefore becomes a kind of house of mirrors, framing the same text from different angles. These changes are reflected by the scathing and crude description of the transformation of the male body into a female in processes of sex change, carried out during the explanation of the so-called technosexual reading of the poem-anagram. The very changes involving the character Alan / Ellen Richardson, from banker to poet and man to woman, mirror the inversions that literary criticism imposes not only on the works, but also on the authors' personality.

In view of the above, it is notable that the possibilities of electronic hypertext for creating internal mirrors are only partially explored in *Frequently asked questions about "Hypertext"*. Multimodality was limited to the presence of some images, which are merely illustrative and cannot be characterized as *mises en abyme*. On the other hand, the fandom resource HerHim.org demonstrates that reduplication to infinity can become viable from the fanfic genre, especially if public participation is allowed, as occurs in communities of virtual fans and in interactive works made available on the Web. In this sense, further research is needed to define the peculiarities of specular reporting in electronic literature.

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