

Hyperfiction- Openness and Interpretation

1. What is openness in a work of art, in a text?

In his 1962 work “Opera aperta”¹, Eco tries to define the different possibilities for an art work to be “open”. There is a difference between closed works like literature books and open ones like music works whose various parts can be brought into every interpreter’s own order. But still the so called closed works are quite open as it is impossible to understand the work completely in the creator’s sense – in a kind of congenious act (Eco, p.31). So every interpretation “opens” the work more, widens its interpretation.

Nevertheless this closed work is *done* and *complete*: its openness means that the structure allows a lot of interpretations and needs only some participation by the recipient’s mind.

The open work on the other hand needs the active collaboration of the recipient. He is part of the creation of the work (Eco, p.41). Eco talks about Scambi’s compositions in which the composer allows or even challenges the interpreter to change the different parts of the piece, some combinations of which are restricted, but the possible variations are quite a few. This kind of open work he calls “work of movement” because it has the ability to take varied, unexpected structures made by the performer (Eco, p.42).

The open work can now be defined with the principle of complementation: every performance/reception explains and carries it out, but none of them is complete, all are complementary and cannot show the whole of the work at once. This incomplete knowledge of a system is maybe its integral part, it is intended by its creator (Eco, p.49).

Still the recipient's interventions are limited: he is supposed to adapt into the work up to a certain degree, adapt into the artist's created world. It's a work to be completed by the recipient, yet it is always recognized as this special artist's piece (Eco, p.55). So we can see that "open" works are – if they are "works of movement" – characterized by being created by both the artist and the recipient (Eco, p.57). In 1967 there has been no idea of an upcoming hypertext literature yet, but I think this definition works quite well for this kind of literature. It is supposed to be the real open work.

2. Claims of hypertext authors

In 1996 the hypertext author Michael Joyce said in an interview, that he

“wanted, quite simply, to write a novel that would change in successive readings, and to make those changing versions according to their connections which I had for some time naturally discovered in the process of writing, and which I wanted my readers to share”, and “Storyspace enabled me to write a hyperfiction, *afternoon, a story*, which changes every time you read it and which in some sense defined the beginning of a new literature.” (Norton, p.577)²

This very enthusiastic opinion has, however, some traps: of course the story changes each time you read it, but a lot of the paragraphs passed would perhaps be the same; how often does one want to read half of the story over and over again, to get finally some lexias not passed before, in a story which has no real start and no real ending. The false start as a trick of the genre (Hapold in Norton, p. 637) doesn't make it easier to get into. And hyperfiction – making the active reader its target – depends on this reader, though the structure of the text remains impenetrable to him. He has a choice of which reading-path he wants to follow but still he is forced to comprehend the author's associations – otherwise he could have the problem to go astray somewhere in the universe of the hypertext (like in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* the finite cosmos of the text creates at the same time an unlimited one (Eco, p.39)).

¹ Eco, Umberto: Das offene Kunstwerk. Frankfurt am Main 1996. I use the German translation because the English one was not available.

Jane Douglas says in an interview in the same year as Joyce:

“I see hypertext as something that returns us to the notions of intension and narrative more strongly even than print does. My problem with the aesthetics of print is that it has all the restrictions real life has: all these intricate scenarios and variables converge and you only get to discover a single outcome.”(Norton, p.573)

But the closed work with its “single outcome” also has a lot of interpretations, whereas the open hyperfiction work – having lots of “outcomes” – has no real possible interpretation because there are hundreds of possible narrations in it. If you want to interpret it you would either have to pick out one linear path with a “single outcome” or you would have to consider all possible paths at once.

3. The reader’s guidance

“*Afternoon* makes heavy use of storyspace’s “guard” function, which places hidden restrictions on the reader’s movements, making it impossible to visit some lexias until a specific sequence of other lexias has been followed. Jane Yellowlees Douglas has calculated that *afternoon*’s use of guards makes it unlikely that most readers will, in only one or two readings, visit more than 10% of the lexias in the text.” (Hapold in Norton, p. 639)

First we can see that there *are* restrictions guiding the reader. He will probably feel free in his decisions but he is not. In spite of these restrictions it is still possible to read *afternoon* differently almost every time you open the document. But: “each reading can’t be unique – the 539 lexias and 950-odd links define a finite domain.” (Norton, p.640).

Also there is no chance of avoiding a decision: “Yes” and “No” lead you on to new ways.

And although it is possible to get to a conclusion without using all lexias and links (Norton, p. 642) you can miss some important lexias for your own satisfying conclusion.

And as said before the finite domain of the hypertext is in itself infinite and unlimited – a never beginning and never ending circle, so “any ending will be marked by the punctuality of interruption” (Norton, p. 641).

² Postmodern American Fiction. A Norton Anthology. Ed. by Geyh, Paula; Leebron, Frad G.; Levy, Andrew. New York/London 1998.

So on the one hand the reader's guidance may help him get through this "universe of the text", on the other hand these restrictions disable him from having a true freedom of decision.

4. The subjective intertext

The hyperlinks enable the reader to switch from one lexia or level to the other, they are set by the author or editor; their combination is thereby subjectively.

Wirth³ talks of the centrifugal effect of the links, the idea of the intertext seems to be carried out. In the printed press intertext is virtual in the recipient's mind, in the virtuality of the internet it becomes apparently reality. But while the setting of the links is predetermined this intertextuality is close to becoming a farce. All texts which are not linked seem to be excluded; the virtual intertext is an exclusive one.

There is some hyperfiction where the readers are also asked to participate in the project in writing, sending pictures, setting new links (e.g. Spielzeugland⁴) but also there the editor takes the chance and shortens texts or changes them to fit in, so the openness is only apparent, just as Eco said (see Ch. 1.): the collaboration of the recipient ends at the point where it doesn't fit in to the creator's world anymore. And – as Wirth says as well – if a text renounces of an intern coherence, just to open itself to the readers completely, there will be no limits anymore – between interpretation and usage, the original work may dissappear more and more. And a completely opened text would be not interpretable.

4. What is now open, what is closed? A Conclusion

So far we can summarize:

1. The open work is a space created by an author/artist.
2. The recipient is supposed to collaborate.

³ <http://www.rz.uni-frankfurt.de/~wirth/texte/litim.htm>

3. The collaboration is restricted by rules given by the author/artist.
4. Complete openness would destroy the intended work.

But couldn't it be that a "closed" work is much more open than the supposed "open" one?

The *closed* work, a printed novel maybe, challenges the reader's mind – intertextually as well as interpretatively, while the *open* work of hyperfiction perhaps only creates a playing reader, who is – to be sure – supposed to make decisions all the time but the intertext is limited by the author and no real interpretation is possible. While Wirth says that only in a completely open work an interpretation would be impossible I would also like to include the whole real hyperfiction into that, because interpretation is always a recipient's conclusion, and it is hard to get to a conclusion while one is still thinking to have missed an important clue, to have been misdirected in some way. The closed work presents one linear text and lots of interpretations – the open work lots of texts and maybe no interpretation. And still the activity of reading remains linear and no-one can follow all paths at once. The labyrinth of hyperfiction is a quest, challenging the reader to combine his own novel out of lexias. Considering that the recipient is also a participant - an important distinction, because as a participant he is also a creator, an artist, a composer. And as the composer almost never interprets his works himself a third institution is needed, interpreting each path made by each reader – but as no such institution exists, that is why there can be no more interpretation - maybe.

⁴ <http://www-public.rz.uni-duesseldorf.de/~karlowsk/>