

**TERRY HARPOLD (2009) *EX-FOLIATIONS:  
READING MACHINES AND THE UPGRADE PATH.*  
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*Ex-foliations* is an exploratory book. It aims to draw a map of the early years of the 'upgrade path', the path of textuality in new media. Harpold takes a much needed polemical stance in saying that scholars must be wary of dominant narratives on this path, with their promises of ever-improving experiences and their quite obvious commercial drives. Narratives of this kind are sustained by a teleological ideology, for which an improvement in technical resources means *per se* a 'better' experience of the consumption of media texts. At the same time such narratives usually avoid addressing the nature of that experience itself and the subtle play of memory, codes and technology in which 'texts' actually *come to exist*. We can't affirm that new technologies automatically mean a new reading practice if we don't even know what reading *is*, and, especially, how technologies can orientate it.

Harpold's effort has a historical character. His starting premise is that early forms of electronic textuality, such as the classic texts, Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girls*, and their forebears, Vannevar Bush's Memex and Ted Nelson's Xanadu, have been misunderstood. The scholarly community needs to go back and study them again, according to Harpold, and to try and disentangle the fixed ideas and prejudices concerning them. In doing so we must consider the very nature of the *reading machines*, i.e. the technologies or concrete devices on which reading happens. 'Reading' is always reading on *something*; it is an engagement with a physical object – and also, as in the case of electronic literature, with software. Software, in turn, has its own proper textual characteristics and is made by many layers of different codes (Hayles, 2005).

In Harpold's view we can't understand the process of reading without studying the material base on which the text is read. While many theorists of writing today address the 'materiality' of technological supports (for example, Hayles 2002), Harpold argues that it is the experience of reading that we must try to understand first of all. The principal object of his interest is the very 'surface' of the reading machine – that is, the specific part of the technology with which the reader is engaged.

Gaining a better understanding of reading in new media is made difficult by the rapid obsolescence of formats and platforms. The progressive narrative of the 'upgrade path' makes the transformation of technologies extremely fast. Scholars interested in historical approaches can find it difficult to even gain access to older material. Analysing an old floppy disk version of Joyce's *Afternoon* requires access to a floppy disk reader, which is not so common anymore, and also to the software which will be able to emulate one that originally enabled the reading of *Afternoon*. Every button, every icon and every operation offered by the software is important for the understanding of the text.

*Afternoon*, to which Harpold dedicates a whole chapter serves, as is often the case in analyses of new media textuality, as an emblematic example. Navigating the text on a Macintosh, as Harpold points out, has always been a different experience from navigating it while using Windows. The Mac OS Reader opens the nodes of the text in a sequential fashion, closing the past window while opening the next. On the other hand, with the Windows Reader it is possible to leave all the past nodes opened, organizing them in a way that is simply not possible with the pages of a book. The result is that with the Windows Reader the space of the screen becomes conceptually different from the traditional space of the page, and the reader can actually see, in front of him or her, every single step s/he has taken in what Umberto Eco terms the 'narrative wood'. With the Macintosh OS Reader, in turn, every past node is gone – after a while the reader gets lost in the text and cannot trace back his or her steps. These differences are subtle but substantial: two different OS organize two different reading experiences and actually generate two different texts, or two different *Afternoons*. All of this gets lost if we study the electronic work without paying attention to the software and the physical device – in a word, the *machine* – which we are using to read it.

*Ex-Foliations* is organized around a couple of conceptual tools. The first one is *historiation*, which Harpold defines as ‘a form of recollection activated by visible traits of the reading surface’ and ‘an aspect of the reader’s engagements with the reading surface’ (8). Drawing on Lacan, Harpold explains that reading happens at the crossroads between activated signifiers and memory – between, in other words, a text and its implicit history, or the archive that already exists in the mind of the reader and that insists in the text itself, thus orientating the reading act. This concept of *historiation*, Harpold notes, is different from that of ‘interactivity’, because it does not define a supposed free agency of the reader, but highlights how much the reader is subjected by memory and text.

The other face of *historiation* is the practice that gives the name to the book, i.e. *ex-foliation*. It is ‘a loosely grouped set of procedures for provisionally separating the layers of the text’s surfaces without resolving them into distinct strata or hierarchies, with the aim of understanding their expressive concurrencies’ (137). *Ex-foliation* does not aim at the discovery of a single truth ‘hidden’ under all those layers – as Harpold states, ‘it does not discover the basis of *historiation*’. It is not a rigorous methodological operation and it postulates that signifiers and signified are different, disjointed entities. More than a structuralist exercise in interpretation, it is reminiscent of Derrida’s ‘free play’.

There are two main reasons why I consider *Ex-foliations* a really important book. First, there is a real need for the reconsideration of the history of electronic textuality. Almost every textbook on new media mentions the Memex, but it is difficult to find a description and an analysis of the device itself as accurate as the one provided by Harpold. Second, his questioning of the rhetoric of the upgrade path allows him to ask questions about the concrete interplay of the reader and machines that are essential for the debate on textuality in new media.

Where the book seems to fall short is, strangely enough, exactly in the problematization of one of its core concepts. It is not entirely clear (or, at least, I couldn’t understand it) whether *ex-foliation* is just another name for Derrida’s ‘free play’ and, if it is so, why we need to add yet another word to the already overcrowded scholarly lexicon. Harpold recognizes that this notion shares some ground with ‘critical activities of textual decomposition and recomposition’ (137), especially those of Barthes. But he does not address at any length Derrida’s work. Still, the idea of a reader (and/or scholar)

that plays with the text without any methodological preoccupations, and with no hope or desire for referring to an ultimate 'truth', is exactly what 'free play' is about. This is certainly a lack that haunts the book, especially considering all the focus on the relations between Derrida's thought and hypertext that have – for better or for worse - characterized a good deal of scholarship on electronic literature. Harpold rightly questions some of these discourses, but his own position, and the value of its neologism, could have been strengthened via a more detailed confrontation with Derrida himself. Even with this caveat, Harpold's book provides a useful and interesting argument which can aid us greatly in developing a better understanding of textuality in the new media ecology.

### **References**

Hayles, N. K. (2002) *Writing Machines*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Hayles, N. K. (2005) *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.