

Ex-foliations

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Terry Harpold

Ex-foliations. Reading Machines and the Upgrade Path

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Ex-foliations is a great book, and of course I don't mean just a great text. As a volume, that most wonderful 'reading machine', to quote N. Katherine Hayles (one of the great models of this book, together with Mathew Kirschenbaum), Terry Harpold's book is in itself a demonstration of one of the messages in this ground-breaking work on the digitization of literature. As he very convincingly argues, it is now time to study the electronic text as a form of visual reading and writing, and in this shift the necessity of folding the e-text back to previous forms of print culture is inescapable. Not because e-literature is more of the same, but because its very novelty can only be understood through a thorough reflection on the many possibilities of print culture and its own writing devices and practices.

In order to do so, Terry Harpold follows three great lines of inquiry.

First, Terry Harpold establishes that the text appearing on screen is not only a text to be read, but also a text to be seen, and even to be looked at. Its visual dimension is not something that has to be 'forgotten' so that the reader can access the information enclosed by the text, but a crucial aspect of its structure and meaning. With the help of Jean Gérard Lapacherie's concept of 'grammatext', Terry Harpold proposes a typology of grammatextual forms –ranging from the almost exclusively visual 'ideogram' to the almost exclusively textual 'alphabet'– which demonstrates immediately to what extent the notion of text exceeds the notion of information. Moreover, Terry Harpold very cleverly takes into account the differences between page and screen. He transfers Lapacherie's typology, which has been elaborated for a better understanding of the visible text in print culture, to the new context of the screen in a very creative and intelligent way. The extreme care for the medium specificity of the object that is studied is an admirable aspect of this book. It also explains many of its new insights and discoveries.

Second, Terry Harpold takes very seriously the fact that most electronic texts –and one is actually invited to understand all electronic texts– are as vulnerable and ephemeral as printed texts. Due to technological evolutions and innovations, most e-texts and digitally recorded and stored documents simply vanish, i.e. they can no longer be read in the material sense of the word. Or they exist in different versions, of which only the most recent one continues to be accessible, and so on. This simple observation, which does not come as a surprise, is however actively repressed by most of our current practices and theories of e-texts. Terry Harpold uncovers and foregrounds this essential characteristic of digital culture

and links it to a more general aspect of reading in every medium, which he calls ‘historiation’: “(...) a reader’s textual memory generates the retrospective defiles of her reading and orients its possible futures. These paths are robustly and inconsistently entangled and hard to imagine, though they may be approximately represented (...). Each moment of the reading encounter is the inconsistent aggregate of other moments, stimulated –consciously and unconsciously– by marks and patterns of marks (...) that evoke others and thus generate meanings that are specific to the encounter. I propose to characterize these operations, which are bound to, and capable of anticipating and generating new responses to, visual-textual traits of the reading surface, by the term historiation.” (p. 56). The careful combination of the history of the text –this might represent the philological side of the book– and the reader’s historiation –and this touches more on hermeneutics and intertext, in short on interpretation– enables the author to offer very interesting ? , for instance of Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon*.

Third, the e-text is also characterized by the mechanism of ‘ex-foliation’, which is next to historiation Terry Harpold’s second major neologism. By this term, the author points to the fact that a screen appears less as a window on the world (this would be the information-centered reading that deletes the text’s very visuality) but a densely layered surface: “I propose the term ex-foliation for 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. Since it must be bound to effects of historiation (...) ex-foliation will be opportunistic, even capricious, in its address of surface-work.” (p. 137). The usefulness of this concept is shown by a superb cross-medial and cross-chronological analysis of a great variety of books and digital works displaying effects of ‘perforation’, either literally or metaphorically.

It would be unfair, however, to reduce Terry Harpold’s study to the mere processing of these three lines of inquiry. *Ex-foliations* is also an intelligent, yet always extremely polite, critique of some clichés that have been hindering digital theory for many years now. Some of them are just misreadings of concepts borrowed from other fields (such as ‘lexia’), others instead reveal a strange neglect of the cultural context of some founding texts and ideas (the book opens for instance with a very interesting recontextualization of Bush’s thinking on the memex, a text we thought we knew by heart). The quality of Terry Harpold’s critical thinking is not only due to the clarity and the coherence of its theoretical framework. One of the great joys of this study is also to open fields of erudition that are rarely used in scholarship in digital culture. The author has a thorough knowledge of print history and its cultural underpinnings as well as a profound awareness of non-Anglo-Saxon scholarship (and I am not referring here to Lacan, but to many other authors of whom Terry Harpold has an in-depth understanding). Thanks to this wealth of new sources, the book is even more refreshing and stimulating, and there are good reasons to believe that *Ex-foliations* will continue to matter even in post-digital times.

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