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Dialogism, Intermediality and Digital Textuality

0. Abstract

Every time that a new technology which directly concerns the objects and processes of human culture emerges, many different potential ways of thinking seem to compete. The history of technology is neither univocal nor deterministic. Digital technologies seem to offer some solutions to the problems which Modern ways of managing, preserving and transmitting symbols and texts had created, but they do not determine the models by which these solutions will take shape.

In this paper it is assumed that interdiscursivity (pragmasphere) is the place where such models are defined, in a contest in which traditional patterns and new social and cultural instances take part.

So, the shapes and processes of the discourse, as they are shaped in and through new technologies, are very crucial for understanding some of the future characteristics of symbolic exchange and cultural interaction.

Starting from a morphological and functional analysis of some features of digital textuality, I will dwell upon the hypermedia as a new kind of text and discourse. Hypermedia introduce some new chronotopic features into the discourse, which change our perception and construction of cultural reality, and lead us to rethink some literary and semiotic categories, which regard pragmatics but also the ontology of signs. This paper will examine and critically use the Flichy's notion of 'imaginaire', and the Aarseth's theory of 'cybertext'. Bakhtin's notions of *vy-skasivanie* and *otvetstvennost'* underlie this paper as well. A dialogic principle in defining utterances is very useful in understanding hypermedia and helps us to focus on new implications of the concept of 'context'.

Intermediality itself forces us to redefine the notion of context: a pragmatic and connotative context is added to a denotative context. Links are first physical approximations, then conceptual ones. An aesthetic and a historical dimension are restored to a theory of discourse, from which they had been removed by classical information theory and from the signified-centred or the signifier-centred theories of signs and communication.

1. Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his notes on *The Problem of the Text*, states: «A human act is a potential text» [Bakhtin 1986: 107]. This sentence contains three very important elements in the thought of Bakhtin: the act, the text and the idea of potentiality. Although at first sight act and text could be considered to be poles apart, the one an example of openness and the other an example of closed-

ness, one belonging to the sphere of ethics and the other to the sphere of aesthetics, we know that they are both equally subject to the opposing influences of centrifugal forces and centripetal forces [Bakhtin 1981: 271-273]. We know therefore that they are both dynamic elements, which Bakhtin conceives in a dialogic, responsive way. Every act and every text, in their unfinalizability (*nezaveršennost'*) are a meeting point and a point of contrast between different levels of consciousness, between different points of view on the world, between different semantic positions. An act cannot be understood unless it is textualized to a certain degree, and a text cannot be understood except in its active life, in its dialogic context. For Bakhtin, therefore, one must avoid reducing or eliminating both the social interdiscursivity of an act / text and its unrepeatable uniqueness and individuality [Bakhtin 1986: 108].

Far from being in opposition to each other, act and text therefore constitute a continuum which defines and delimits the whole social environment of human culture. It is therefore entirely plausible to turn Bakhtin's statement upside down and say that «a text is an act», or even that a text is a collection of acts. It is this direction that I would like to follow, developing this point. In fact I would like to go even further and maintain that today textuality can be conceived of only in a radically pragmatic way: a text is not really or is not merely a coherent collection of meanings and signifiers, but it is a relatively open collection of processes, acts and reactions to these acts.

I must clarify here that there is a difference between affirming this process aspect of a text in theory, as has been done over the last few decades starting from the theories of reception and intertextuality, and maintaining on the other hand that this process aspect *has become part of the materiality of the text*. This penetration of the act into the concrete make-up of the text is happening silently (Elisabeth Eisenstein would say «inadvertently»), after initial clamour, through digital writing. Perhaps theory paved the way for practical application, thus opening up an entry route for new writing instruments, but we undoubtedly find ourselves up against new, far-reaching phenomena which severely challenge the traditional notion of "text".

I do believe, however, that rather than abandoning the concept of text, it is far more useful to overhaul its very founding rules. In fact I think that in the age of digital and multimodal communication the concept of text is still necessary, and that the minimum conditions of *uniqueness, autonomy, delimitation, permanence, intentionality, coherence* and *cohesion* which define a text remain valid even in the digital world. Basically there are profound reasons, of a perceptive, social, anthropological and cognitive nature which lead us to believe that «without some degree of fixity» [Yates, Sumner 1997], there cannot be any communicative process, nor any social self-recognition of the community, nor any establishment or transmission of memory and knowledge; and this is not all because without texts there cannot be any possibility of social or cultural change. The text is a communicative convention, both practical and theoretical, which fixes the rules for the establishment, preservation and transmission of units of meaning. It is also an experimental space, a cultural and pragmatic space where forms of speech and models for organizing reality are put to the test.

It is commonplace to describe any form of digital writing as unstable and non-material. In reality digital writing, of whatever kind, is developing ways of re-establishing stability and delimiting context and text, which deserve to be studied in depth, and without which not only the multimodal potentialities, but also simple text-based computer-mediated communication would be totally chaotic and dispersive as some people claim that they actually are. These stabilizing elements are material devices and functions that allow us to establish processes and to connect text to processes, i.e. to make the reader and the text compete with each, and at the same time to construct a framework of coherence that coordinates the existing processes.

The argument concerning stabilizing elements, or rather centripetal forces, is in reality more complex, because digital writing, both in its internal stratification and hierarchies and in the discrepancies in its usage, the so-called digital divide, evokes a society that is equally stratified and hierarchical, and would appear to suggest forms of social fixity through rigid divisions of labour: a picture that is very different from the utopian ideas of access or from the fears of excess that accompany technological development [Flichy 1995; Lovink 2003]. But this aspect goes beyond the limits of this paper. Here I will limit myself to posing a textual model that takes into account the internal devices, following, albeit from afar, the theories of Propp on narrative functions. We will then have a look at interdiscursivity and socio-technical interaction, by reflecting on the different kinds of discourse [Bakhtin 1986] and on the transformations of the nature of writing and of signs. Another clear limit of this work is that I will take as my starting point for the construction of an intermedia textual model the zero degree of digital writing, that is hypertext. My reason for this is that I am convinced that the most elementary form of digital writing, as it has become established in the average form of the web, already contains the basic features of digital textuality. Furthermore I am not convinced of what some semiologists somewhat provocatively maintain [Fabbri 1998], that is that different systems of signs are substantially equivalent (so that a picture can explain a poem, a ballet can comment a work of sculpture, and so on). The verbal system undoubtedly has a different role, a much broader one. This is not a question of hierarchy or of value, but one of function: the verbal system has a greater metalinguistic potential than any other form of language, and this is particularly well confirmed (we only need to think of mark-up languages) in the digital world.

Through the digital mode the role of linguistic-verbal mediation increases at the same rate as bodily and kinetic participation, while the purely visual element is if anything less predominant [Pellizzi 2004a, 2004b], because it is re-textualized and mediated by other language forms. And the verbal element which emerges is not attributable solely to any presumed dominance of a neo-oral civilization, because it is more to do with the permanence of writing [Bara 2003]: a permanence that is currently in many cases more searched for than found; but this seems to be the direction.

The purpose of this work is to present a textual model that accounts for the processing nature of the new intermedia forms of writing and reading while not neglecting either the potential preservation of contractual aspects of the matter. To this end I believe that we must first of all remain focused on the objects involved and on how they work, which means observing the technologies that do

actually exist. The model is in fact based on certain assumptions resulting from the observation of digital artefacts. If we consider text as a network of possible actions we must then find out what these actions actually are. I think that they are not an unlimited number, but they can be reduced to a limited number of functions, which I have called pragmemes [Pellizzi 1999; 2005]. Moreover we should not overlook that fact that there are two new determining elements in the model: the machine and the reader. Digital textuality begins when the reader comes on the scene. This is valid for any type of text (Bakhtin said that an isolated text does not exist), but in this case the reader must enter the text materially as an internal “actant”¹ [Greimas 1973]: his or her choices are essential for the setting up of the text, his or her participation is represented even by the discreet yet essential presence of two small textual avatars, with different functions: the *mouse-pointer* and the *cursor* (insertion point). The machine should not be excluded from the model but its importance should not be overestimated either. It cannot be considered as a large “textual machine» [Aarseth 1997] because in this way one loses the corporality, historicity, uniqueness, plurality of textual events. The web does not produce “signs”, but “texts”, and thus we come back to an authentically Bakhtinian perspective.

2. Digital textuality

Anyway, digital textuality possesses characters part of which come from the history of pre-printing-press writing, part draw on printed materials, and part have been created for the first time. But it is substantially a radically new phenomenon, a leap forward in the history of writing. Digital text is layered yet deep, framed and frame-providing, part of a process and a process itself, inclusive, hetero-referential, simulating, multimodal and interactive. All of these concepts belong in some way to literary tradition and critical theory, but digital text in a sense gives its own concrete interpretation of them, creating a particular objectual meaning. The concepts are no longer valid as simple metaphors, but take shape in the form of devices and practical usages, and thus they lose their metaphorical background and form part of new metaphorical networks.

Just to give an example, the depth of a text is not a metaphor of its infinite polysemy and interpretability any more, but a third and concrete dimension that the text itself acquires. Before the advent of digital technology every written text, whether figurative or verbal, had only two dimensions: the material objectual dimension and the semantic and representative dimension. The latter was all represented on the visible surface. The depth was in the social context or in the consciousness of the interpreter, or, as Umberto Eco would say, in the encyclopaedia of the reader. Now a text does not give its all to the surface. In spite of the post-modernist theories of interfaces [Turkle 1996], the Graphical User Interface is a complex structure of layered writings, often multi-authored, which are not immediately visible. This is not surfaces slipping away but an architecture of points of view, a coordinated construct of subtexts that are both cognitively and functionally important. In order to access these layers, when one can, one needs to take action, digging into the subtext, which is where the additional

¹ I use the term of Greimas «actant», because «actor» would be too easily personified.

semantic content is found. This is why I say that the purely visual element has become less important and the linguistic verbal element has gained importance, because the great modern metaphor which linked *sense* to *visibility* has been vacillating or has at least become more complicated. A database cannot be seen. The visual becomes an insufficient hermeneutical category. The «era of the image of the world» as Heidegger saw it with the modern convergence of science and technology around a notion of truth as the «certainty of representation», is perhaps ending definitively [Heidegger 1950]. The digital is the other side, and in a certain sense the possible antidote, of the entertainment culture, in spite of what Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard think.

“Seeing” in the digital world is always accompanied by “doing”. In a Bakhtinian perspective, it is the *process of seeing* that becomes important, as Makhlin underlined. Not only can every document be manipulated and edited, but involving oneself in digital textuality can also mean, as everyone knows, not just reading and writing but also consulting, searching, downloading, surfing, launching applications, and performing many other operations. The important thing is that all these processes are intimately linked to portions of text, they are part of the text and constitute it. The distinction made by Genette between text and paratext [Genette 1982, 1987] becomes problematic in the digital world: in digital textuality paratext, i.e. all the ancillary elements that accompany a text, from the title to the notes, from the numbers of the pages to the epigraphs, is enhanced by devices which connect portions of text to possible actions. They are, therefore, elements that do not merely have the function of presenting the text, as Genette’s paratext does, they also serve to make it work. This is a characteristic that only digital textuality really possesses: even in this aspect each connection is not purely metaphorical, but is operational. Digital text is materially linked to the frames that surround it, and the frames are themselves interconnected, and each part is linked to the available functions.

It should be pointed out that generally the concept of link is used in a fairly narrow way, meaning the link between one «node and another node» in a hypertext. I however suggest a broader definition: a link is every connection between the text and a possible process. I believe that the link between a portion of text and another, or between two documents, is only *one kind* of link. There are other kinds, equally important if not more important. I believe however that the number of possible textual actions that can be taken is limited. It seems to me that the possible actions can all be reduced to seven main functions, which I will call *pragmemes*, and that these are common to all interfaces and all digital environments. A *pragmeme* is therefore a function linking to a possible action (from drag and drop to data entry), which has its point of activation in the text. As is known, a point of activation can take the form of any graphic element (icons, buttons, activatable strings, images, etc.), which represent, describe and at the same time render one or more *pragmemes* operational.

This group of functions forms a paratextual network which adheres to the text and guarantees its mobility, and if we look more closely also its governability. If the pursuit of knowledge and discursive strategy of the typographically printed model seemed to be the *distinction* between disciplines, branches of knowledge, arts, meaning regimes and sensorial spheres, the strategy of the digital model seems to be the *connection*, not only between disciplines, branches of

knowledge, arts, meaning regimes and sensorial spheres but also between different symbolic practices, between institutions and between people. Even reading and writing are more closely related without however being confused. They are both strengthened, and communicating, yet independent. The establishment of a material dimension linking all these worlds, however, creates a huge potential, which would be inaccessible without new instruments for managing units of meaning. The various kinds of link, in the broader meaning that I am putting forward here, and their related pragememes, are just these instruments. Basically we are talking about neotextual devices that allow us to use processes on a temporal and spatial plane in a unified manner - processes which would otherwise destroy perception. They allow us to textualize processes and to make texts act. They are in a certain sense the sheepdogs of digital textuality.

3. Theory of pragememes and the textual model

One of the advantages of a theory of pragememes is being able to observe in a unified way digital textuality in its process aspect, grouping together phenomena which are normally considered separately and in a fragmentary way, such as the surroundings of interface, intermodality, interactiveness, usability, etc. A pragememic approach also allows us however to connect the *morphology* of the digital text to its *metaphorical aspect*; i.e. it allows us to study the forms and the functioning of digital textuality while not losing sight of the role that digital technology plays in the collective imagination [Latour 1987; Flichy 2001; Pellizzi 2005]. This kind of approach thus allows us to wonder about the cultural weight of the digital and about its lapses into metaphor. The pragememes, i.e. the elementary actions that can be carried out on the web, also link concrete operations to metaphors, and in a basic sense can be thought of only in terms of metaphor. And these metaphors are not merely examples of catachresis, meaning old concepts used to name new phenomena, but they are also cultural filters and, more especially, transitional concepts: they are, we can say, semantic ferries which at the moment in which they describe the new with old imagery, illuminate the old with new practices. To express this in technical terms, an effective, happy metaphor (long-lasting and extensive in meaning) enriches both the «metaphorical receiving field» and the «metaphorical issuing field» [Weinrich 1976; Pellizzi 2005]. To give an example: if we continue to use an archetypal and complex metaphor such as that of the library to describe the internet, it is more likely that real libraries will start to become like virtual libraries, rather than the contrary. I am not saying that metaphors *cause* this transformation, but they help it along and influence it.

But by looking at digital textuality in a unified manner, at the same time morphological-functional and cultural also has other advantages. The digital is an invitation to a convergence of disciplines and branches of knowledge, more than a mechanical convergence of the media, as some people maintained during the Nineties.² The digital is re-textualizing human culture, introducing for the first

² I am referring to the theory of digital convergence, which also had television as its economic-productive and consumer model [Cfr. Negroponte 1995; Gilster 1997]. Apart from the pervasiveness and widespread distribution of the digital, which affects all sectors of public and private life, proof of its inter-disciplinary nature is provided both by the number of disciplines that have made it the object of

time a linking instrument connecting three different functions: a representative function, a descriptive function and an operational function. Each digital text is in reality a meta-text, that is a text which represents, describes and makes other texts work. This triple function is already evident on the purely IT plane, since every digital datum tends to have three elements, comprising data, metadata and instructions. This enhances the form of textuality, which derives two features that traditional text did not possess, except in a very broad sense: an *architectonic structure* and a *temporal organization*. These are two extremely innovative aspects.

The first aspect, the architectonic one, concerns both the relationship between the parts, the objects and the language forms which make up a digital text and the communicative context of the digital textuality as a whole. From the first viewpoint the architectonic character regards *how* it is connected and *what* is connected, and therefore involves the establishment not only of a *textual* model, but also of a *discursive* model, i.e. a specific “type of discourse”: that is it determines a type of utterance, which configures a particular relationship between utterances and also a particular relationship between the utterer, the referents and the person to whom the utterance is made. I will come back to this point later. From the second viewpoint the architectonic character of digital textuality involves a reorganization of the traditional pattern of communication, as we shall see shortly.

The second aspect, the temporal aspect, is equally revolutionary, not only because it allows the inclusion (the textualization) of «media flows» and of the execution of texts (from drama to music, from conversation to the audio-visual, even passing, why not, through television), but also because it configures textuality *internally* as an event, as duration.

Digital text, on the temporal plane, can be considered as a concatenation of successive processes (and hence also as a succession of pragmemes) [fig. 4]. Or even better, as a succession of steady states and processes. What distinguishes textual processes from automatic processes is the determining intervention of the reader: a textual event is produced when the reader enters the scene with his reversible choices. His or her concrete presence inaugurates a textual session. But putting this textual session into a broader context (or an architectonic one as we said above), we can observe that this interweaving of processes is the result of more complex negotiating, in which four «actants» take part, i.e. four forces that determine the direction the action takes. Two actants are deep ones, the medium (the material network) and the text deposited (generative text, GT); while two actants are superficial, the operator (the writer-reader) and the visible text (emergent text, ET) [fig. 2].

Here we find therefore that the old scheme of textual communication, author-text-reader, is cancelled. The present model is a field of forces, in which we can identify two poles. On the one hand we have the elements reducible to the unified aspect, we could say the “projectual” aspect of the text. We can recognize the boundaries first of all on the technical, physical and morphological plane and then on the ideological plane or on the semantic, contextual plane, to use

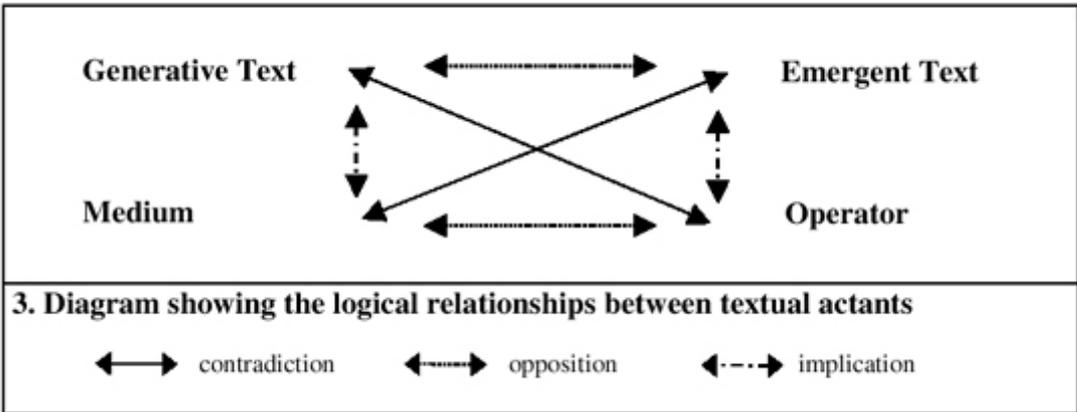
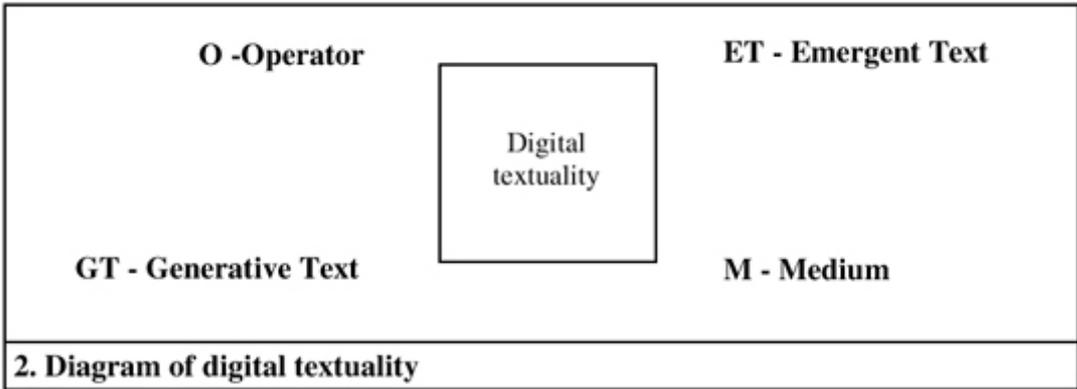
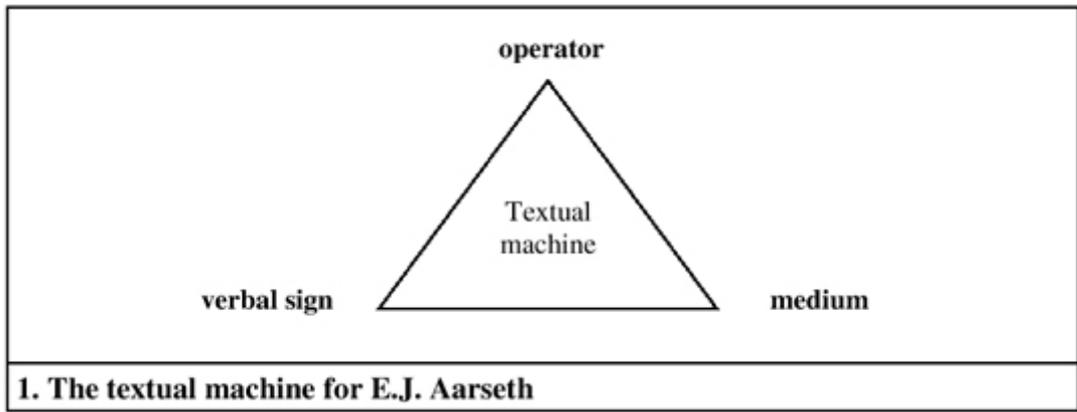
their studies and by the number of disciplines which have been profoundly influenced by its theories and methodologies.

Bakhtinian terms. This is the part of digital textuality that can be traced to the criteria of *uniqueness, autonomy, delimitation, permanence, intentionality, cohesion* and *coherence* which I spoke about at the beginning. I have called this pole *generative text* in order to show that it has in any case a generative, illocutive role in giving rise to the textual event. On the other hand we have the textual elements that are created or activated in the reading process, which are not likely to share the criteria of the generative text, but which follow other criteria, such as that of *acceptability* [Beaugrande, Dressler 1981], *succession, rhythm, assembly, editing, montage*. Where these criteria are present we do have however the emergence of a form of textuality, albeit more ephemeral and bland. The result is a *textual happening* which can be followed and is memorable, up to a point (and is also therefore re-textualizable), although consumption and *loss* are more frequent once the textual session is over. I have called this other pole *emergent text* to highlight its fluid, occasional character.

It is evident that these two poles can also be viewed as two fairly traditional points of view: the first from the author's side, the second from the reader's side. I think however that it is more useful to shift the emphasis through which text has been thought of for some centuries. As I was saying, agreeing on this point with Espen Aarseth [Aarseth 1997], I believe that one must abandon the three-way division author-text-reader (or sender-message-addressee), which seems to be inadequate now. Nevertheless I feel that the alternative model that Aarseth puts forward is also inadequate and illusory [fig. 1]: he imagines various participants (operators) around a text viewed as a «textual machine» that is continually being processed. In reality Aarseth puts forward a Peircian triangle operator-medium-sign, which also recalls Max Bense's *Aesthetics*, in order to highlight the performative function of text, which becomes a machine for the production and consumption of signs. I believe however that the error lies in making the participants plural while maintaining the text as singular. The idea of the web as a huge textual machine, as dynamic macrotext thus surfaces again. In reality operators bring textuality, and texts are in the plural. One cannot get away from this pluralistic idea of texts, which participate in the process like independent, responsive utterances. In any case one cannot place texts and machine in one single block (the medium): we are clearly talking about different levels in terms of quality, even though the boundary between the levels is variable and relative (for example for a programmer a script in Pearl or in Java will be an emergent text at the moment when it is compiled, it will tend to leave the «textual zone», towards the machine side, for a passive user). The form will then be that illustrated in figures 2 and 3.

So operators, generative texts (even these are really layered, having a deep structure and a superficial structure), the medium (the machines) and the emergent texts (which can correspond in some way to Aarseth's «verbal signs») all take part in the process. In this way the plurality and independence of the utterance events are preserved. The boundaries between the four elements are somewhat fuzzy; each is interdependent and definable only as a function of the other three. But I think I have shown how a model of digital textuality, which takes into account its material layers and the dynamic polarity between generative text and emergent text, can find not only criteria which safeguard the his-

torical value of the texts, but also the distinction on the theoretical plane between reading (ET) and writing (GT).



On the other hand I call the other pragmemes characterizing and interactive, because their presence, frequency and position determines the type of digital textuality (the hypertextual type or genre) and establishes different degrees of responsiveness. These are actions that in fact involve a dialogue (between operator and machine, between operator and operator, between operator and text and even perhaps between machine and machine) the result of which is not written in the text but depends on the interaction.

To give some examples, if I decide on a particular position of windows (*c*: spatial decision), independently of the role that I take in that part of the textual event, or if I choose the logical operators with which to search a database (*d*: choice of options), or if I carry out a search through a search engine (*e*: interrogation), or copy some passages in my notes (*f*: bricolage), I am exploiting the potential that a given textual environment offers me, on the basis of its “kind”, but I carry out operations that are not given, which allow me through constructing, searching, sharing and creating to produce portions of emergent text.

Pragmemes *c*, *d*, *e*, *f* thus configure the hypertext as a dialogical spatial-temporal entity. From the beginning of a textual session (pragmeme *a*), the textual event is configured as a spatial-temporal path, almost like a narrative event in which the pragmemes operate like diegetic functions, turning points in the textual happening [fig. 4].

If the structural pragmemes *a*, *b*, and *g* do not basically attack the classical three-way model of communication as sender-message-addressee in any decisive way, the interactive pragmemes demolish it once and for all. When interactive pragmemes appear on the interfaces it is as if a four-way communication process is opened up: texts become (at least) two, and the operators become (at least) two [fig. 3].

5 Discourse and tertiary genres

The textual model being presented here is an open model, which allows us not only to understand some of the rules for the production of text, but also to understand some of the ways of producing these same rules. And this depends on the meta-textual and meta-discursive nature – I will explain further on what I mean – that the model and certain pragmemes in particular possess. There is nothing for example to prevent us from creating new pragmemes, because digital textuality has an inclusive and modular nature, and can adapt itself to new operational needs. It is not a deterministic model but, as we have said, a battle field, where different *forms*, *functions* and *ideologies* compete.

I believe that even in this age of automation textuality – even though a changing model of textuality – remains the preferred semiotic space in which cultures can recognize themselves, in which they modify and experiment with their own intellectual parameters and in which their institutions are reflected. There are however two adjacent areas, strictly connected with the creation of text, which it is useful to talk about briefly: the area regarding “discourse genres”, and that regarding socio-technical interaction. Text actually exists in this humus, on the two faces of language and objects, of discursive practices and social and technical practices.

These are two areas where we find the same battle being waged between signs and semiotic models that we find in the construction of a textual model.

Here I will try to make some short inferences and conjectures about questions relating to the textual model that has been put forward and with the analysis of the elementary units of action that distinguish it.

Regarding the sphere of discourse, I would like to recall the reflections of Bakhtin on discourse genres, trying to complete them in relation to the problems which concern us here. In the sphere of discourse too both centrifugal and centripetal forces are at play at the same time. Some elementary forms (which Bakhtin calls primary genres) constitute a system of pre-established discourse genres which can then be reclassified into more complex genres. But in actual fact a continuous exchange is taking place, not only between simple and complex genres, but between textual forms and forms of discourse (and also socio-technical practices).

In his essay written in '52-53, Bakhtin links up to the linguistic reflections of the "Bakhtin Circle" at the end of the Twenties, and therefore it is important for him to «shed light on the nature of the utterance» [Bakhtin 1986: 62]; but at the same time he believes that showing the historical and social function of language, which is inherent in concrete utterances and in discourse genres, can help to get a better understanding of styles, complex texts and literary works in their historical and individual aspects. To this end Bakhtin invites us to keep «primary (simple) and secondary (complex) speech genres» always correlated [Bakhtin 1986: 61], meaning discourse genres in the specific sense and also literary genres in a broader sense, because this relationship can help us to understand something «on the complex problem of the interrelations among language, ideology, and word view» [Bakhtin 1986: 62]. As far as focusing on the nature of the utterance is concerned, Bakhtin anticipated in part, back in 1929, certain Anglo-Saxon views on the philosophy of language,⁴ but referring to a much vaster anthropological framework. As far as complex genres are concerned, perhaps, what is left of the Bakhtian project does not fill all the gaps. It is as if the connecting link were missing between the primary and the secondary genres. The mention of «thematic and compositive units» is not sufficient.

Classical poetics and rhetoric can perhaps come to our aid. Between primary genres (such as questions, prayers, injunctions, orders, exclamations, promises) and secondary genres (such as «the novel as a whole»), we can postulate a more general class, which we will therefore call a tertiary genre, which defines the *mode* of the utterance. This is a class belonging to the higher order, yet it is at the same time on an intermediate plane between primary and secondary genres, because it is located between the oral and the written, between the situation and the text, between the day-to-day and the aesthetic. Limiting ourselves to the indications that we can glean from poetics (and leaving aside the better known and more analytical classifications of rhetoric), we can state that the two classical models, in the manner of Plato and Aristotle, of tertiary genres are the dramatic and the narrative type. Aristotle in his *Poetics* talks in reality about literary genres (secondary), but identifies a more general and formal prin-

⁴ I am obviously thinking of Austin and the "second" Wittgenstein, but also of Bakhtin's brother Nikolaj.

ciple as one of the criteria for classifying them: the *manner* of imitating [1447 a, 15]. Aristotle alludes to the mode of making an utterance. He says substantially that the «manner» of imitating is established in the relationship between the person making the utterance (utterer), the referent and the action [1448 a, 20]. A mediated, reflective mode, in which the utterer has recourse to «different personalities» and re-evokes the action, is the narrative mode; an immediate, enveloping mode, in which the actors act out the action directly and simulate being what they are talking about, is the dramatic or theatrical mode [1448 a, 23]. All this too has a lot to do with digital textuality, which is able to draw on both of these forms of discourse.

But now it is useful to observe that on the basis of this definition it is possible to identify other tertiary genres that have become established throughout history, some of which are more orthodox, like the lyrical type; others are less orthodox, like the “encyclopaedic type”. That the latter can be considered (even) as a discourse genre may seem arguable, but it is not in any case particularly strange, because it is a way of presenting discourse that implies not only a particular *dispositio*, but also a specific relationship between the act of making the utterance, the objects represented and the act of reception: i.e. it implies a particular way of *reading*. I am referring of course to a post-illuminist encyclopaedism, which is both discrete and non-hierarchical rather than to a mediaeval encyclopaedism, which is agglomerative and hierarchical. The encyclopaedic genre, which also influences many literary genres, is one of the most widespread type of utterance today. It consists of presenting discourse in independent units, ordered according to an exogenous criterion (such as, for example, alphabetical order, but there can be many other criteria). This tertiary genre has a lot to do with the «Database Logic» that Lev Manovich has spoken about [Manovich 2001]. This was just a further example of interaction between models of discourse and textual models: but this is not the point.

This class of tertiary genre can be assimilated in some way to the «modes» of Northrop Frye, to the «types» of Tzvetan Todorov, to some of the textual types of textual linguistics and to certain types of rhetoric. But what counts here is that the development of the textual model that has been described goes hand in hand, in my view, with the development of a new tertiary genre of discourse that I will call “architectonic”.

I do therefore believe that digital textuality can be likened to a new kind of utterance, that joins other very ancient ones, such as narrative and drama. A type of utterance, or rather a tertiary discourse genre, which nonetheless presents (as indeed do all the types that have preceded it) a feature that renders it unique. I define it as architectonic on account of just this peculiarity, which gives it a framing position compared to other pre-existing modes of discourse. This is what I mean by «meta-discursive». Architectonic discourse is able to include, coordinate, and make other types and modes of discourse express themselves in their distance and otherness, arranging them in the chronotopic context of a new operational textuality. It is in this sense that the intermediality of the digital should first of all be interpreted.

Aarseth has said that «cybertext is a *perspective* on all form of textuality» [Aarseth 1997], but I believe that we can also say that cybertext (or hypertext, or

hypermedia, or digital text, for me any difference at this level is purely captious) is a viewpoint for other forms of discourse.

An essential component of digital textuality is the meta-discursive aspect: being discourse that deals with other discourses. It is immediately obvious, however, that this “dealing with” should not be interpreted in the abstract sense of meta-linguistics, but rather in the literal, concrete sense, meaning *having to do with* other kinds of discourse, which it has in some sense the duty to manage dialogically.

6. The Pragmasphere

I will only make brief reference to the problem of socio-technical interaction. The advent of the digital has undoubtedly changed the framework within which relationships between people, ideas and things, between culture, technology and social practices take place. Technology is no longer an *instrument*, but the very *environment* in which all cultural, social and vital interaction takes place. It is our world and we must acknowledge this fact. It is no longer possible to use concepts such as “nature” and “culture”. We live in a hybrid world to which the digital has made an essential contribution, creating the possibility of penetrating, weaving together in a totally new way heterogeneous elements such as matter and information, objects and writing, social networks and practices.

The digital creates radically intermedial media, or rather media which are hybrid by constitution, allowing material and cognitive interaction between heterogeneous actors. The model of digital textuality that I have presented is an example.

This intertwining of *tekhnē* and *epistēmē* creates great cognitive uneasiness, if it is viewed through the gnoseological filters of traditional human sciences. We need new instruments and I am convinced that Bakhtin made a considerable contribution both with his many specific ideas and more especially in his way of thinking.

It is no longer possible to consider human culture outside this interweave, and we need to hone a new way of studying it as a whole and in its specific aspects, in its intrinsic links with technology and social interaction. I call this world of cultural and socio-technical interaction the “pragmasphere”, to highlight once again its pragmatic and process aspect. This is where our notions of sign, writing, text and discourse are being transformed. The sign is losing its purely representative nature: it no longer tends to “stand for”, but to lead materially towards that which it represents and indicates.

In this context concepts such as that of the «logosphere» [Bakhtin 1986: 134] or the «semiosphere» [Lotman 1984], are no longer appropriate because it is just not possible to avoid material, body and practices from being jointly pervasive. The pragmasphere is what keeps relations between codes, objects, uses, ideas and people fluid. It is a concept maybe closer to Vernadskij's notion of «noosphere» [Vernadskij 1967], which indicated the joint pervasiveness of “mind” and biological life. However I would like to highlight the distance between the concept of pragmasphere and other current theories.

There are undoubtedly many elements in common with the Actor-Network Theory of Bruno Latour and others [Latour 2005], but the objective is obviously dif-

ferent. In my approach the construction of models of texts and discourses is of primary importance (rather than the social element itself), and the digital plays an essential role in this.

The distance between the concept of pragmasphere and the notion of «collective intelligence» of Pierre Lévy [Lévy 1996], consists precisely of the significance that the material element has in the make-up of this sphere, which is partially autonomous. On the other hand the concept is also different from the «Connective Intelligence» of de Kerckhove [de Kerckhove 1998], because it does not stress the cognitive and psychological aspect, neither does it postulate a superior form of human perceptive consciousness determined by a material connectivism.⁵ Autonomy means precisely that within such interaction, in which culture (understood as the Lamarkian heritage of forms, conceptions, habits and memories) has a predominant role, the materialized (textualized) and negotiable rules of a new readability for the world are in the process of being established.

7. Conclusions

The pragmasphere and hypermedia are therefore a world of text and discourse, more than of data, information and signs. They are places of social bargaining and semiotic experimentation in which, thanks to the factors that have been examined, a configuration that respects otherness (even in terms of the preservation of the historical dimension) is possible – although it is neither easy nor obvious. The meta-discursive character of the digital enables us to construct a model of interaction that facilitates both the construction of texts and rendering them fluid. It is a model that forces many of our categories, starting from the notions of writing and text, and broadens our idea of context: not only because of the power of multimedia simulation, which extends the boundaries of the potential to represent (we need only think of Bakhtin's important concepts of tone, intonation and voice which have become central for contemporary linguistics too thanks to the digital); but also because of the self-declaratory nature of the digital world: for instance the rule that prescribes declaring the coding criteria of a digital document. This is a rule that allows the use of codes and at the same time gives them a framework and a history. This is an extraordinary innovation not so much for communication, where originating in that sector it is more banal, but for memory. A memory established in such a way has a predisposition for framing, for a dialogical configuration of contexts. Framing is both an aesthetic attitude and a critical operation, which brings distance, reflection and dynamic memory into communication.

The paradox is that this framing of context, which can also be viewed as the open textualization of portions of interdiscursivity, is possible thanks to another powerful instrument of the digital world: simulation. And simulation is the most radical means of de-contextualization that has ever been invented. However Goethe had already pointed out in the preparatory documents of his *Journey to Italy*, observing the exceptional ancient exhibits of the Maffei Collection, which

⁵ In general one can say that Lévy has a substantially “deductive” (and idealistic) approach, stressing the imaginary and collective and then proceeding to the person. De Kerckhove has an “inductive” approach and follows the opposite path: stressing the connection system and the psychological perceptive aspect of the individual in order to reach a cognitive system..

had been torn away from their original sites, that de-contextualization is one of the most efficient methods of studying and understanding otherness [Goethe 1998]. In that case however the de-contextualization came about through the physical removal of the findings, which were then ordered following the typographical model of the page (they were in fact “set in pages” on the walls of the museum); whereas in the case of digital simulation there is no physical removal, and the model is that of architectonic discursiveness. It is by no means certain that all this is any less painless.

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