READING LA PLISSURE DU TEXTE "BACKWARDS"

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In the history of new media art and digital writing, Roy Ascott's *La Plissure du Texte*(1983), has proven a watershed moment. In this paper I will give a historical contextualization of the first work, in order to better understand the challenges of its today's reappropriations.

In the history of new media art and digital writing, Roy Ascott's *La Plissure du Texte*(Electra, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1983), a work using telematics to create in real-time a world-wide, collective narrative (more specifically, a collaborative, multi-player fairy tale), has proven a watershed moment (Plissure, n.d.). Basic concepts and issues of authorship, text, invention, and linearity, among others, have been dramatically redefined as well as implemented in a concrete practice (as much a process in itself as a model for further development) of distributed authorship, text as "work" (instead of "product"), users' participation, and multimedia connectivity, that it is no longer possible to study the art and technology field without taking into account this major achievement.

Putting the stakes of Ascott's involvement with collaborative world-making even higher, the recent up-grade and reconceptualization of this seminal work in the metaverse of Second Life, *LPDT2*, proves that the creative potential of *La Plissure du Text* is still intact, to say the least (LPDT2, 2010). Yet by creating a distance between the "old" and the "new", i.e. by making the (once) "new" now (supposedly) "old", *LPDT2* gives also the opportunity to come back on an aspect that may have been overlooked in the euphoric reception of the truly utopian first version of the work, namely the question of its "reading." So strong has been the emphasis on the shift towards the new paradigm of participation and connectivity, that the very question of the work's reading did no longer seem relevant. Reading instead of "doing", "performing" and "cocreating" *La Plissure du texte* seemed an example of McLuhan's "rear-view mirror" approach of the future: (1967: 74-75). The neglect of reading, however, is not fully motivated here. First because reading is much more than just decoding the words of a text, it has also to do with the various stances and attitudes one takes towards a work (in this sense, reading has to do with global cognitive and cultural issues of "perception"). Second because Ascott's key innovation has not been made from scratch. *La Plissure du texte* is indebted to all kind of textual ancestors (texts, models, au-thors). The revolution it brings about is not a tabula rasa, yet one new (big) leap in the history of art as connectivity, and it is plausible to argue that the relationship with this cultural and literary context –and hence the reading of it– is part of the work itself, so that participation can only be complete if one also takes into account the work's background.

To a certain extent, *LPDT2* functions as a device that reframes *La Plissure du texte* and forces us to un-derstand it in new ways. In that sense, the rethinking of an old work in and through a new one is not

very different from what had been done in the retrospective of Ascott's work (Plymouth Arts Centre, 2009.) In this retrospective, the curators had made some surprising but very clever choices, for instance by blocking any attempt to make their exhibit "interactive". By confronting the reader instead with the intellectual questions that had triggered Ascott's own artistic ideas, they stimulated the visitors to redo the creative thinking that preceded the realization of the works themselves (see Baetens 2009). To a certain extent, *LPDT2* works the same way: it helps us reread *La Plissure du Texte*, disclosing aspects that may have been gone unnoticed, for being totally self-evident, at the time. Among these aspects, that of the very reading of the work is a crucial one, and it is on this reading issue that I will focus my contribution here.

As already argued, the question "How to read (a work such as *La Plissure du Texte*)?" may be for some a false or even deceptive question. Isn't Ascott's work, they suggest, something that must be "performed" (actively, by what he likes to call a "participator") rather than "read" (more passively, by an ordinary "reader")? True, it would be absurd to ignore the priority given to participation, but that does not mean that the project is not accompanied by a whole set of more or less hidden instructions that do influence our interpretation, our approach and finally also our use of the work, since participation is not something that starts from scratch. Even in the case of works allowing and even encouraging very open forms of participation, as in *La Plissure du Texte*, the reader-participator does not experience the work in a "virginal" way, but is channelled through all kind of pragmatic markers that help make sense of what is about to be read. Many elements of this textual and cultural network that program, although never in a deterministic way, her contact with the work, can be found in the work's "others": paratext (the textual and iconic elements that surround the material appearance of a work), metatext (the critical writings and analyses devoted to a work), hypotext (the works that are adapted of transformed in a given work, which becomes then an inferred version or hypertext of the hypotext), intertext (the textual network that sprawls around a text), and architext (the relationships between a text and the discursive genre or genres it activates) (for an overview, see Genette 1992). A theory and practice of global connectivity as illustrated by the work of Roy Ascott, can of course not ignore the weight of such a network, which implies inevitably a certain number of reading instructions. This is all the more the case since electronic literature, is, contrary to print forms of writing strongly characterized by the blurring of boundaries between the text and its others. In the digital sphere, to avoid or to skip the textual "others" is, practically speaking, almost impossible (or at least much more difficult than in the case traditional print culture, which craves for clear-cut distinctions between the text and its others).

Reading and writing in light of Barthes and the Surrealists

The reader of *La Plissure du texte* has to pass through two major locks (next of course to the dominating discourse on participation, which can be read as the official and authorized user's manual of the work). The first lock is named Roland Barthes, the second one is the *cadavre exquis* technique of French Surrealism.

Barthes's thinking on writing and textual practices is conveyed through a double filter. On the one hand, there is the very title of the work, which is a variation on his famous book *Le Plaisir du texte* (1972). On the other hand, and perhaps more surprisingly, the "meaning" of this book is processed via well-chosen quotations, such as the one that opens today *LPDT2*: "The brio of the text (without which, after all, there is no text), is its will to bliss, just where it exceeds demand, transcends prattle, and whereby it attempts to overflow, to break through...." This quotation, which opens the door to *La Plissure du texte* for the contemporary reader eager to know more about the work, involves a strong interpretation or reinterpretation of Barthes' thinking, for instance by putting between brackets the distinction between *pleasure* (of the "readable" text and *jouissance* (of the "scriptible" text) while bringing to the fore the semantic fields of "joy" and "innovation". Of course there is absolutely nothing wrong with such an interpretation, for after all this is the way we interact with texts and to refuse interpretation would only signify a lack of connectivity, but the use of Barthes as a self-chosen gateway to the discovery of the work is also open to interpretation and debate, certainly in the case of a temporally evolving readership (hence my emphasis on the Barthes quotation that opens the new version of Ascott's work, *LPDT2*).

But there is also a second cultural reference, that of the Surrealist "exquisite corpse" a method by which a collection of words or images is collectively assembled. Each collaborator adds to a composition in sequence, either by following a rule or by being allowed to see the end of what the previous person contributed. This technique, variously mentioned by Roy Ascott himself, describes quite faithfully the making of *La Plissure du texte*, produced collectively by participants in 8 different locations all over the world. The participants, who had been assigned the role of traditional fairy tale character: princess, witch, fairy godmother, prince etc.., did not have to follow a given script or storyline and could therefore only expand on what had been written previously by the other participants. Here as well, the reference to Surrealism, with its numerous attempts to exceed traditional visions of authorship, text, and art, does not come as a surprise. But once again, the (contemporary) reader does not have to take this reference at face value, he or she can on the contrary, question the value of this position which puts a strong claim on what the text actually means (and asking questions on meaning means... starting to read).

In my brief presentation of the role and weight of Roland Barthes as well as of the "exquisite corpse", it has already become clear that issues of chronology and temporality are absolutely crucial. Since we are discussing here the question of rear-view mirror ways of reading and perhaps more specifically the question to what extent *La Plissure du texte* escapes such ways of reading–, the temporal distance between the readers that we are (and we are all today's readers, whatever our tastes or habits may be) and the reading instructions as given by the double mention of Barthes and Surrealism, is all but a detail. As a matter of fact, that distance is a key element in our contemporary reading of both Barthes and Surrealism, since we do no longer read them today as they might have been read in the cultural environment that made the emergence of *La Plissure du texte* possible.

To make a long story short, what has changed is the fact that, for contemporary readers, neither Barthes nor Surrealism (at least not the Surrealism as epitomized in the exquisite corpse and automatic writing in general), are considered good examples of the type of participation and connectivity that Ascott and his friends were looking for. In today's reading of Barthes, who used to define his position as that of the

rearguard of the avant-garde, the feature that is being underlined is the author's *antimodernism*(Compagnon 2005), the melancholic inability to let go certain aspects of the past while embracing more or less enthusiastically the challenges of the future. If we think of Barthes today, we think of Proust, of Stendhal, and above all of Chateaubriand, much more than of the revolutionary visions of textual practice that he has been defending as well. Or to put things even more sharply: if we want to "save" the revolutionary aspects of Ascott's "plissure", we would prefer today a mention of Deleuze's "pli" (fold) rather than one of Barthes's "plaisir". Too strong an emphasis on "pleasure" might jeopardize the understanding of Ascott's major breakthrough.

The case of Surrealism is even clearer (or worse, if one prefers). Since quite some time (and the work by authors such as Maurice Blanchot and Roger Caillois has played an important role in this reinterpretation), automatic writing, of which the exquisite corpse remains a good example, has been accused of doing the contrary of what it claimed to do, namely helping the author to get rid of old-fashioned ideas of literature and authorship, on the one hand, and to discover absolutely new forms of (collaborative) text production, on the other hand. What is being stressed today, is more the counterproductive aspect of these automatisms, which do not foster imagination or invention but which on the contrary condemn the author to mechanically repeat what he or she already knows. And it cannot be denied that most specimens of automatic writing are highly formulaic and weakened by semantic stereotypes and syntactic poverty.

One might object that the (partially) inadequate relationship between the reading that*La Plissure du texte* is expecting (namely a "participation" that goes beyond traditional frontiers between reading and writing, author and reader, etc.) and the concrete reading instructions that surround the work (but which program its reading in very constrained ways), is a false problem, since its relies upon an anachronistic approach of these models and metaphors. It is not fair, one would say then, to question the importance given to Barthes "pleasure" and to Surrealist games, given the fact that in the early 80s these two models functioned in a completely different way (at that time, both textual pleasure and exquisite corpses were convenient, useful, appropriate models and metaphors). Yet for two reasons, this objection does not hold. First of all, the reading of a Roy Ascott work must take into consideration the fact that things change over time, and that it would be absurd to stick to readings of the past which achieve a kind of supratemporal status. Such a stance is simply contradictory with everything Ascott is thinking and what his work stands for. Second, and even more importantly, Roy Ascott as well as Roy Ascott scholars are highly aware of the ambivalent status of the metaphorical tools one uses while elaborating new forms of thinking. On the one hand, it is impossible to do without, for these metaphors are not merely "ornamental" of human thought, instead they make human thought and innovation possible. On the other hand, each metaphor or model has also its limitations, and one has always to remain suspect of them and take care of not taking them too literally. In that sense, our current reflections on the double model of textual pleasure and automatic writing is very similar to Edward A. Shanken's meticulous rereading of the twofold model of the *noosphere* (the model of expanded consciousness, borrowed from Teilhard de Chardin) and the *global brain* (Peter Russel's elaboration of that same idea). These models have been key to Ascott's own thinking on interactivity and connectivity, yet as Shanken rightly argues, it is important to maintain a critical distance towards these (necessary) speculations (Shanken 2003: 4-5).

Looking for new reading models is therefore necessary, but should not be seen as an aim in itself. Therefore, it is important to know which kind of features one wants to highlight. In the case of *La Plissure du texte*, it might be interesting to further reflect on two basic characteristics of contemporary writing that have undoubtedly been enhanced and accelerated by Roy Ascott's work: spatialization and digitization. The modern literary text is a spatialized text, not in the sense that its material presentation accentuates visual parameters (typography, lay-out, illustrations, etc.), but in the sense that its very writing and reading are producing new experiences of space. One may think here of Stéphane Mallarmé's groundbreaking poem *Un coup de dés* ("A Throw of the Dice", 1897), whose visual pattern, which it is not possible to start analyzing here (Cohn 1949), offers an experience of a process in which nothing is taking place, except place itself. Spatialization, which in the case of Mallarmé has also to do with the abolition of old forms of authorship and the introduction of chance operations, is more and more linked today with computerization. Literature is becoming more and more digital born (Hayles 2008), yet many consequences of the shift from page to screen have still to be discovered.

It seems plausible, however, that works such as *La Plissure du texte* (and even more LPDT2) should be paramount in our reflection on all these aspects, provided we can use or elaborate new tools that help makes sense of their novelty. An interesting candidate in this regard may be Anne-Marie Christin's notion of "screen-thinking", as defended in numerous publications on the history of writing as a profoundly visual system, and whose usefulness for spatialized and computerized writing is very promising.

Christin's notion of screen is much broader than the technical sense of computer screen. It involves both a material and a cognitive aspect. Materially speaking, it implies that the meaning of a text is not (only) determined by the meaning of its linearly and hierarchically organized units, but (also) by the metonymic relationships that are being established within a certain frame or screen. Cognitively speaking, it implies that the production of meaning has not only to do with the recognition of already meaningful units but also with the contemplative and meditative creation of new meanings within the energized field of the screen. And just as in the case of Mallarmé, this new vision of the text involves also a new vision of authorship and text. It is the viewer who makes the text, and this text is an open network of relationships within a given frame.

Christin's screen-thinking is obviously compatible with Ascot's work. First, it strongly emphasizes the link between art and technology. The screen is indeed a device, not one that is mechanically imposed, but one that is creatively activated according to permanently shifting contexts. Second, screen-thinking appears also as a form of participation, for interpretation is much more than the identification of already given elements. Third, the agents involved in this whole process are clearly supra-individual. Even in the case of a solitary meditation of the textual object or the writing process, there is a strong awareness of the mutual implication of subject and object: I am shaped by what is being shaped by me, in an eternal movement of mutual enrichment and questioning. For all these reasons, and given the highly productive and stimulating character of Christin's work in the field of literary and visual scholarship, it may be highly

relevant to try to implement screen-thinking in our reading of *La Plissure du texte*. Of course, screen-thinking may prove in the (near?) future as problematic as the reliance upon Barthesian pleasure and Surrealist automatic writing, but in the meantime it can only enrich the already existing network around Ascott's work, which it helps connect with the key issues of LPT2: textual mobility, distributed authorship, emergent semiosis, multiple identity, and participatory poesis.

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