

Postmodern theories about readers in electronic environment

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Abstract

Introductory part of the paper discusses theories about readers in the last decades of the 20th century. In particular, two big theoretical schools are discussed: aesthetic reception theory and reader-response-criticism movement. Readers are a subject of very different scientific disciplines: literature theory, sociology, anthropology, book history and library science. The idea that a reader is an essential subject for future life of a literary work is common to all theorists. By constructing the theory about a reader, theorists have thought about the reader who uses the conventions of printed text. The issue whether these concepts correspond to electronic surroundings is discussed. Characteristics of the hypertext are emphasized as a new paradigm, and also the issue whether readers enjoy in hypertextual fiction. In conclusion, paper expands the virtual dimension of Iser's theory about interaction between the text and the reader, and also Fish's concept of "interpretative community" which may be constituted on the Internet as a flexible virtual community.

KEYWORDS: postmodern theories about reader, reception theory, reader-response-criticism, hypertext, electronic text, author, reader.

Introduction

Since the time of Ronald Barthes and his essay "Death of the author", there is an epistemological turn in new western social and humanistic thought which presents an introduction to a new order of discourse. After a hundred years of ruling of the author and the text (literature), a new subject emerges from the postmodern critical thought – the reader. As a result, there are two large schools of theory – at the end of 60s Aesthetic Reception Theory appeared at Konstanz University in Germany and at the beginning of 70s in the USA the reader-response-criticism movement appeared. Within both theories, certain theoretical opinions have been created about the relation to the text and the reader, the process of reading as well as about conceptual definitions of the reader. Reader is not a subject of only one discipline: reader is a subject of literature theory, sociology, anthropology, book history and library science since

the user (considering the need for literature material) is one of the basic terms in literature discourse towards whom basic aims and functions of librarianship are directed (Aparac-Gazivoda 1993, 172-173). In the context of the readers, librarians and libraries have a social role to create their literature environment by getting to know their secret.

During this time basic terms created within these two theories remained unchanged. Apart from the basic theoretical opinions, they also have in common the fact that they have created poetics of reading and reader in relation to a printed text. With the emergence of the electronic text as a new text paradigm and Internet as multimedia, literature theorists were forced to consider the new media as well as printed books, each in its own way shaping new cultural and reading practice. The question is whether media dynamics, electronic texts and multimedia surrounding (that is hypertextual and hypermedial) need the redefinition of already existing theoretical framework.

Next we will describe some of the theoretical frameworks in theoretical discourse about readers and reading, and then check its validity in electronic surrounding. Reading is an intellectual activity; it is a process of discovery, understanding, interpretation and production of the text which is deeply inherent to a person. Critical opinions about readers and reading which we are going to discuss here are from the works of significant theorists: Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Jonathan Culler, Norman Holland in addition to David Bolter and George P. Landow who deals with electronic text.

Aesthetic reception theory

The role of the reader became important for the new direction which emerged in Konstanz. While trying to give a consistent theory on new history of literature (in his essay "Rezeptionsästhetic und Literaturgeschichte"), Hans Rober Jauss gave a new position to readers in relation to a modern piece of literature which readers meet for the first time, as well as in relation to praised and disputed work which comes to them from the past. Within an Aesthetic Reception Theory frame, readers gained one of the basic roles because they become subjects of which the future life of literary work as well as the reception conditions depended. Jauss's theory is a complete literary and historical process which refers to aesthetic reception and historical dimension of literature through the theory of action. Theory of action assumes that the reader meets a number of receptions and recipients throughout history and in this way establishes a contact with the present and the past. In this constellation, history of literature becomes history of reception and the interaction between the two, reception and repeated production, which is the basis of its conception. Action is an element of concretization and creating the tradition. It is conditioned by the text as well as by reception (the readers) in dialogical relationship between the question that is asked by a reader and a response that gives it its life totality (Jauss 1978, 181-182).

Aesthetic reception theory has two main factors: on one hand there is the literary work; on the other hand the reader. That is not a relation between literary works – passive recipient, but this dialogue is activated in the readers, within their aesthetic expectations and their life frame. Communication between the work and the readers is established through the term of *horizon of expectations*. For Jauss horizon of expectations and historical construct, that is the system of norms that define historical generation, are a collection of conventions which, at some point, form the readers' complete competence. Aesthetic reception and relation towards the work are realized through a continuous process of founding and changing the horizon of expectations, centre of which are the readers' literary and life experiences. The horizon of expectations means the readiness of the reading public to accept a certain work on the basis of their previous reading experience which includes genre and literary normative, that is poetical experiences and life expectations. New work evokes already familiar horizon of expectations as well as familiar and acquired aesthetic expectations in readers. Interlude of concretization appears in the merge of familiar and expected. Jauss affirms the term *aesthetic distance* which appears when there is a difference between the readers' previous aesthetic experience and the work: when this distance is small work is closer to "culinary" that is entertaining art (Jauss 1986, 257). Certain theorists emphasized that the horizon of expectations is not just a simple term.¹

For Wolfgang Iser reading is also a creative act. Iser went further in expanding the reception theory. A text is an intentional and schematized creation. Structure of the text are its *schematized aspects* (term that was taken from Roman Ingarden) and they enable a literary text to be received in an aesthetic way. The reality of the literary text is never based on copying the reality, as reality is a part of it. Ambiguity that needs to be based in the process of reading appears in this discrepancy point between a literary text and the reality. This way the term *ambiguity*, emptiness becomes one of the basic Iser's terms, basic condition of text activity and its reception. By reading the text, the reader continuously fills the gaps establishing at the same time the relation between individual aspects of the text which are not formulated in the text (Iser 1978, 101-102). Therefore, a literary text is not an object in itself but it is an effect of a reader's process, passing through schemes set in the text and filling the gaps.

Appellative structure of the text is included in the function of these empty places. Ambiguity is the basis of literary communication and communication is not a finished form but the result of interaction between implicit and explicit. Iser, in the same piece, questions what leads us to let ourselves to the adventures of the

1 For example K. R. Mandelkow questions the possibilities of determining one horizon of expectations and assumes there are more of those: he defines them as the expectations of a period, expectations of the work and expectations of the author. According to this, Jauss created an abstract construct which simplified a complex process of reception (Mandelkov 1986, 120).

text. Iser thinks it is obvious that we as readers have a tendency to participate in fictional risks of the text.

By expanding an authentic reading act which is created among schematized aspects of the text in the process of reading, Iser thinks that the emptiness, "unfulfilled place" which enables a number of different communications presents the fundamental asymmetry between the text and the reader. Unfulfilled places have several functions; they enable the development of an aesthetic subject in a way that they condition a reader's view to both new and previous topics (Iser 1989, 53-57). Emptiness is a paradigmatic structure; it initiates structural operations with the reader whose performance transfers to consciousness a number of textual interactions (Iser 1989, 60). Reader as a reflex to author's attitude towards the reader is incorporated in every literary work – for Iser that is an "implicit reader" who becomes an element of the structure of the work and instructions for reading.

Reader-response-criticism

Early Stanley Fish affective stylistics tries to explain the reading process by answering the question: What does a sentence do to a reader? Text has no meaning and reading is an event, something that happens to a reader, and that event is the meaning of the sentence. Therefore, a literary work is a sequence of events that happen in a reader's conscience. Reader is "an informed reader" literary and language competent, able to understand.²

The theory he develops in his second phase can be named Social Reading Theory. In the book "Interpreting the Variorum" Stanley puts the term of "interpretation" in the centre. He strongly contradicts the statement that there is a sense established and coded in the text. Reader's activities do not lead toward the revelation of meaning; rather they have the meaning. While the reader is reading a whole play of changes happens: assumptions and their revisions, creation of judgements and then the regret, abandonment of conclusions, progress and withdrawal. These are interpretative activities that determine and modify the question of value – that is the interpretation of the experience of fact. In the process of reading, readers are always trying to understand the author's intention. To describe readers' experience, means to describe their efforts to understand. To describe the efforts to understand means to describe their detection of the author's intention. In this sense, Fish talks about the "intended" readers, readers who are competent due to their education and occupation to experience what

2 That is someone who is a competent connoisseur of the language the text is written in; completely owns the semantic meaning ... which a mature listener brings into his task of understanding, that is knowledge of lexical sequences, classification of probability, idioms, professional and other dialects etc., has a literal competence (Fish 1989, 46).

the author wanted to offer. Readers are those who produce the meaning and in this sense there are conceptual relations between the reader and the producer as Michel de Certeau (2002, 66-80; 238-251) and S. Fish see it. By reading a certain work, readers develop their own interpretative strategies, create formal units, make decisions and produce intentions. The readers' experiences and the structure of speaker intentions are the basis of the reading and understanding process – interpretation.

Fish introduces the terms of *interpretative strategy* and *interpretative community* as creations by which he wishes to stabilize the variety of interpretations and meanings produced by reading in order to stop the relativity of the personal interpretation to destroy the work. Interpretative strategies are the way of reading; they produce the text, give them shape and are not created at the end of a reading act but are developed during this process. To be a part of an interpretative community means to share the same interpretative strategies. Readers employ interpretative strategies which make one out of everyone, that is create the same text all over again. The term of interpretative community is a flexible one. Interpretative communities are not more stable than the texts; they increase and decrease because interpretative strategies are learnt. Ability to interpret is inherent to a human being; strategy is gained and changed not for reading but for writing the texts – for the construction of their meaning (Fish 1986, 288-294).

Jonathan Culler introduces the term of *literal competence* in his theoretical settings. Literal competence is a number of responses that direct the reader to understand the sense of the work and that explicitly manifest itself in literature criticism, magazines and literature education. Reader who has adopted institutionalized conventions better understands a certain work (Culler 1989, 78-79). His reader is non-historical *ideal reader* who is able to use agreed sign systems.

Norman Holland has subjective and psychological approach to the reading problem: literary consumer builds the reaction by implementing it through the identity, fantasy, free association and the text changes its meaning. He reveals the correlation of their subjective association and their personalities (Holland 1989, 32). David Bleich denies that the text can exist independently of the reader with reference to Thomas Khun who claims that there are no objective facts.

Theories about a reader in electronic environment

Theories that have been interpreted above are known in Croatia, mostly from the translations of the works by H. R. Jauss, W. Iser and S. Fish as well as from some studies and critics. However, validity of these terms in electronic surrounding is a little less dealt with. Discussion about this, as many authors emphasize, is not possible without knowing the concepts of hypertext. Ted Nelson was the

first to define the hypertext³: “By ‘hypertext’ I mean nonsequential writing – text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at interactive screen. As a popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways” (Landow 1992, 4). George Landow thinks that the parallels between the hypertext and critical theory have many points of interest and one of the most important ones lies in the fact that critical theory establishes and tests theoretical aspects, especially those directed to textuality, narration and function of both the reader and the author. Apart from the mentioned, the experience of reading the hypertext greatly explains many significant ideas of critical theory (Landow 1992, 3). For David Bolter hypertext is a part of the “collective cultural knowledge” (Bolter 2006, 13). Reading a hypertext as an interactive system became a global paradigm as well as a new cultural practice and literature is, as defined by Nelson, “a continuous system of mutually interlinked texts, literary and scientific and technical” (Bolter 2006, 16).

In general, there is congruence between basic critical and receptional theoretical settings about the reader and reading. Everything happens in the mind of a reader. Hypertext is natural to the mind Ted Nelson claimed. It is natural and true shape of our literacy tradition (Bolter 2006, 20). Manuel Castells also claims that the reader/person is the one who gives sense by saying that “we have a hypertext: hypertext is within us. It can be found in our ability to combine inside our minds and to give sense to all the components of the hypertext arranged in many different worlds of the cultural expression” (Castells 2003, 224). On the other hand, the fact that we live in a “culture of real virtuality”, that we primarily process the creation of sense through virtuality expands the possibility for interpretation of some terms in receptional and critical theory even more: text is created virtually (Iser 1989) and the meaning is a part of reading (Fish 1986). *Interpretative community* also may be constituted on the Internet as a flexible virtual community.

Castells questions: if we all have a personalized hypertext what is a common sense. The most obvious process is through the common experience (Castells 2003, 225), by which he refers to the terms of an interpretative community and readers’ experience.

Since virtuality is the reality we live in, electronic environment facilitates the meeting of a modern reader and the work in diachronic and synchronic level. Modern and older works which readers have the opportunity to find online are also a part of the expectations of a modern reader. Thanks to commercials, web pages of publishers and libraries, author’s blogs and social networks the modern readers have the opportunity to familiarize themselves better with modern literary production. An older work online becomes an event in a horizon

3 Hypertext, a term coined by Theodor H. Nelson in the 1960s refers also to a form of electronic text, a radically new information technology, and a mode of publication (Landow 1992: 4).

of expectations which is connected to the literary experience of a modern and recent readers, critics or authors.⁴ Since according to Jauss aesthetic experience is limited by the horizon of expectations regarding everyday reality as well as by the reader's life experience (Jauss 1978, 194), the internet influences the change of the reader's reception, above all by its processes of globalization and by its change of relation towards aesthetic, ethical, cultural, political and other values. Hard aesthetic experience of the internet as a new media enters the horizon of the expectations of reader's life practice and changes the reception.

Regarding the texts on the internet some authors question whether readers used to conventions of the printed text can enjoy reading the hypertextual fiction and the way the interface influences the reader through its structure? Reading online refers to a problem of readers' competences for movement through non-linear text. Regarding readers' expectations in relation to hyper textual fiction James Pope emphasizes that the hyper textual fiction is not a book nor a webpage nor a play. Therefore, readers regardless of the background and preferences will probably not be satisfied. According to his studies, interface is a centre element of success or failure of the interactive story because a good design can direct the reader, it can offer him a logical structure and enable him pleasure of reading a book (Pope 2006).

Bolter thinks there is no universal meaning of the text separated from the meaning: author creates a set of potential texts among which a reader has a choice of freedom. Therefore, a role of a reader of electronic fiction lies half way between the traditional role of the author and reader of printed media (Constantinescu 2009, 97). Electronic text also questions the idea of the authorship: reader is asked to get involved into the creation of the work. This demands new theoretical concepts of the author as a producer of thought and author. The virtual dimension of Iser's theory of space in which the work is created, directly rests on hypertext.

According to Constantinescu, in electronic environment all text can be viewed as functioning in a similar way to a play or a musical score: "Reader performs the text, for himself or another reader, who may then choose to perform the first reader's text for others, like in a chain. In this way electronic writing defines a new level of creativity "(Constantinescu 2009: 97).

Conclusion

Regardless of the uncertainty that has been imposed by the experience of the new media, theoretical settings of the reception and reader-response-criticism found its confirmation in the internet as a metaphor of a new media. Reading through the internet is characterized by interactivness, freedom of choice and responsibility for the choice which certainly demands the research and

4 See discussion in Tkalec (2010).

theoretical explanations that can even include the study of the psychology of readers, especially of the generations that grew up reading and learning interactively on the internet. If we accept Bolter's view of the hypertext as a remediation of the printed forms (Bolter 2006, 29), than it is necessary to refer to the old experiences while interpreting behaviour of the readers and the process of reading. Personalized hypertext opens a space of freedom to readers, but is there any common sense of our existence. This is what Manuel Castells (2003, 226-227) refers to when he takes the internet as a metaphor, as a general hypertext and hypermedia and as the most important of all protocols in the sense of communication in the culture of real virtuality.

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Sažetak

Postmoderne teorije o čitateljima u elektroničkom okruženju

U uvodnom dijelu rada raspravlja se o teorijama čitatelja u posljednjim desetljećima 20. stoljeća, a posebice o dva teoretska pristupa: estetičkoj teoriji recepcije i responsivnom čitatelju. Čitatelji su tema različitih znanstvenih disciplina, poput teorije književnosti, sociologije, antropologije, povijesti knjige i knjižničarstva. Ideja da je čitatelj temeljni subjekt budućeg života literarnog djela zajednička je svim teoretičarima. Teorije o čitatelju podrazumijevaju čitatelja koji koristi konvencije pisanog teksta, te se u radu raspravlja jesu li takvi koncepti primjenjivi i u elektroničkom okruženju. Karakteristike hiperteksta naglašene su kao nova paradigma, a postavljeno je i pitanje uživaju li čitatelji u hipertekstualnoj fikciji. U zaključku rad razmatra Iserovu teoriju o interakciji teksta i čitatelja u virtualnoj dimenziji te razmatra kako se Fisherov koncept "interpretativne zajednice" može uspostaviti na internetu u vidu fleksibilne virtualne zajednice.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: postmoderne teorije o čitatelju, teorija recepcije, responsivni čitatelj, hipertekst, elektronički tekst, autor, čitatelj.

