

Literary Criticism and Hypertext or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Paranoia?

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ABSTRACT

In a rare essay, Thomas Pynchon, the famously reclusive author, talks about the 'do-it-yourself hypertextualist', who fits into his discourse on paranoia. This paper will start to explore the questions of paranoia in both literary criticism and hypertext theory. It will focus on the paranoia inherent within one-to-one links from both general, authoritative systems, and the network of personal reader response using examples from literature including Thomas Pynchon and Vladimir Nabokov.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5. [Literature].

General Terms

Human Factor

Keywords

Paranoia, Hypertext, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ted Nelson believes 'hypertext is literature, and nothing but'. [15] This indicates the need for a greater focus in hypertext research on two particular interdisciplinary facets of hypertext that are sometimes overlooked: literary criticism and textual studies. Matthew Kirschenbaum has identified the latter as having richer possibilities in the long run for hypertext theorists than the pursuit of links between hypertext and the 'post-' theories of the Twentieth century[8]. From my own research, three interesting approaches to hypertext and narrative, stemming from textual criticism (aside from narratology), are the complex structures that underlie texts and can be empirically explored for a greater understanding of the text, genetic criticism and an empirical study of intertextuality in all its forms. With a fuller understanding of hypertextuality in print-based media through exploring these and other tropes, one can implement a system that exploits some of the inherent multi-dimensionality of text.

This paper will question if paranoia is an inevitable consequence within the discourse of both literary criticism and hypertext theory, and if it is possible, within the current frameworks of these systems, to allay the cries of paranoia within understanding narrative. In order to do so, I will briefly discuss selected works of Vladimir Nabokov and Thomas Pynchon. This paper will discuss the problems of paranoia that one might face when exploring deeper hypertext structures than the explicit one-to-one linking that is prevalent in current representations of literature online and

in print. Furthermore, I will consider how this affects the representation of print-based literary texts on electronic hypertext systems. There is clearly a paradox here in that reading literature either leads to falling into somebody else's linearity or creating connections that are not there and thus becoming paranoid.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The initial theories of hypertext, whether one believes the heir to be Bush, Nelson, or Engelbart, came out of the golden age of paranoid: the Cold War. This discourse arguably comes from Hofstadter's appraisal of American politics of the time period. David Trotter posits that in this form, 'paranoia ceased to provide a terminology for aspiration, and became instead the focus of a critique of social mimesis'. [25] In his seminal study, Hofstadter posits that the key aspect of paranoia is:

a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. History *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade[6]

This is the familiar 'them' against 'us' that literary paranoia suggests is the central binary of literature. One can even see similar tropes in hypertext theory, whereby it has been so often marginalized by other computer science communities, that it feels that it once more 'them' against 'us'. Michael Wood suggests that 'the great age of American paranoia, the age that began just before the Kennedy/King assassinations, and faded away somewhere in the early Nineties....[instead, now we are in the age of the] post-paranoid'. [26] Trotter repositions the idea of the post-paranoid, by suggesting that paranoia is now 'no longer a strategy for the acquisition of symbolic capital, it has become a form of symbolic capital.' [25] It is my supposition that paranoia, neither a positive or negative trope, can still be fine in both literary criticism and hypertext theory, since both critical industries are products of more paranoid times.

One of the strongest proponents of paranoid fiction is Thomas Pynchon, who preaches his paranoid manifesto most strongly in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, asserting paranoia of 'every degree... from the private to the cosmic'. [21] In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon defines paranoia as 'the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination—not yet blindingly One, but at least connected' [19], and the 'reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible'. [19] Stuart Moulthrop defines hypertext in a similar way when he describes it as

'promiscuous, pervasive, and polymorphously perverse connection' [13]. This fits Pynchon's conception of paranoia [see 13]. He further believes that paranoia provides the reader with 'an essential tool for understanding complex systems' [12]. Pynchon admits as much when he describes the amateur paranoid as a 'do-it-yourself hypertextualist' in terms of paranoia.[11] This is alarming, because the 'do-it-yourself hypertextualist' can also describe the empowered reader who makes his or her own trails through the text, rather than relying on the author's restrictive set of links, simply following interpretative dead-ends. Moulthrop posits 'in Pynchonian paranoia as in hypertext, the perception of structure is never a simple matter. Paranooids produce not just delusions but delusional systems' [12].

When describing the make-up of Pynchon's fictions, Stark posits that 'Epistemological themes, including searches for information and for patterns that create order, dominate his novels'.[24] I personally believe that all novels work in a similar way; in as far as they are all about the process of understanding and generating knowledge through the microcosm of the novel. The critical difference that Pynchon makes is that it is essential to interpret his texts in a paranoid manner, Hume argues that because of this process, 'to be an orthodox Pynchon critic, I should ritually confess to paranoia and express guilt over it, admit the trespass... and declare that interpretation is not what we must do when we engage this text'[7] In fact, at times it feels as though Pynchon criticism spends more time engaged on discourse about how to interpret Pynchon's novels, rather than discussing them on their own terms. This ironically is entering into the discourse of paranoia, since these critics¹ are creating connections that are not necessarily there on a plane above the actual novel. Part of the reason why this is such a common approach to Pynchon is because his novels are imbued with those feelings of alienation, helplessness and particularly paranoia that an overabundance of information can inspire[17] This has been considered a large problem in early hypertext scholarship, whereby researchers were exploring how to avoid the problem of overwhelming the reader with connections rather than letting them focus on the actual material. Here in Pynchon's novels, he is supplying an excessive amount of referenced material and it is forcing the reader to always be hunting clues to discover the source rather than focusing on working out the already disruptive narrative. Pynchon seems to single out the literary critics as a particular object of satire[18] because their interpretations of any text is a form of paranoia. Umberto Eco is more specific in his attempts to understand the problems with criticism, when he defines 'overinterpretation', another term for paranoid as Pynchon sees it, and suggests 'one can always invent a system that renders otherwise unconnected clues plausible'.[5] McHale further posits that Pynchon sets himself against the Modernist mindset by luring the Modernist into 'interpretative dark alleys'[7]. The characters in Pynchon's novels also travel without purpose down the same dark alleys in an attempt for organic 'connectedness'[23]. In the absence of any definitive organic connectedness, the paranooids, as critics, have to create their own delusional systems in order to satiate their need for order. In a similar fashion hypertext systems can often follow dark alleys that favour connectionism, rather than embracing the other riches within the text. The links overwhelm the content and thus deep reading does not become a plausible activity. Aaron Rosenfeld argues that 'to be paranoid is to be the

last and best reader of the text, the one for whom the text is written'. [2] In the parlance of post-structuralism and hypertext theory, this is the active reader, who engages with the hypertextual structure of the text. Rosenfeld expands on this, by arguing that it is 'the act of reading the world as if it were a book. And moreover, as if it were a bad book: the paranoid, insisting on an excessive correspondence between signs and things, refuses the looser signification of the metaphor for unambiguous certainty'. [2] The extent to which a literary critic or hypertext user wants everything to be connected may affect the degree to which they can be called paranoid.

The paranoid is also pervasive within the discourse of technology. Bersani posits that 'to put this in the contemporary jargon with which *Gravity's Rainbow* is obsessed: paranoia is a necessary product of all information systems', [4] and to further elucidate, 'technology can collect the information to draw connecting lines among the most disparate data, and the very drawing of those lines depends on what might be called a conspiratorial interconnectedness among those interested in data collection'. [4] With the scale of the World Wide Web and similar scale-free networks, we are now seeing patterns emerging that would never have been previously possible, perhaps a useful consequence of this paranoia. A further connection between literature and hypertext systems is the 'encyclopedia [that] has frequently been literature's defense against its exclusion from (or its marginal place in) the information systems, the political, economic, and scientific networks of power; and even the symbolic orders by which a society defines itself'. [4] The World Wide Web has a similar encyclopedic autonomy, whereby it positions itself as the absolute place for knowledge. Perhaps this is a response to its marginalization by mainstream media for so many years until it gained critical mass with the emergence of higher bandwidth and social media technocracies. Sanders argues that 'Pynchon reifies technology... [because he] has elevated technology into a metaphysical principle standing outside human control'.[21] Technology in Pynchon's fiction is another 'them' for 'us' to fight, although Pynchon did admit that he would support the personal computer and the Internet if it was used for human progress. [20] Most interestingly, Ted Nelson, in a self-reflexive article on initially conceptualizing open hypertext, posits that there might have been a paranoid aspect to his early work:

Indeed, I didn't realize during those early years that people may have thought I was clinically insane. And, if paranoia is to believe what others do not believe, then clearly I was paranoid... Or, on the other hand, by the paranoid's effort and persistence he can persuade others to adopt the same view, thus freeing himself of the malady. This was my therapy of choice[16]

Thus, the tropes of paranoia run deep into the history of both hypertext scholarship and literary criticism, it remains that these issues need to be addressed.

The key question, therefore, is how to avoid this in both literary criticism and hypertext theory. This is a question that cannot be answered in the scope of this paper, but one that needs to be raised nonetheless, and as such, I will simply identify some of the current problems in this discourse. Take for example the *cul-de-sacs* of both hyperlinks on the World Wide Web or the idea of the single correct interpretation of a text that everyone has to follow. These are restrictive systems that favour 'them' over 'us'. Pynchon frames this paranoid system as the pillar of western civilization [22], demonstrating how engrained it is in our society,

¹ I must also acknowledge the paranoia of this current paper too.

and thus how difficult it may be to reverse the trend. This suspicion could be confirmed by the etymology of paranoia as ‘beyond the mind’ [1] and intelligence as ‘joining together’. [9] Hypertext is the natural extension of this definition of intelligence. Intelligence has reached its pinnacle with the representation of these connections, but how does one escape the feeling of paranoia? Ted Nelson argues that hypertext is not just simply linking through association, but a lot deeper, and this malaise is a deeper symptom of more than just hypertext with this definition of paranoia:

Anything is associative! Text is associative! Lists, databases, spreadsheets, objects are associative! (To say nothing of neural nets!) To call hypertext “associative” says nothing whatsoever.[15]

It is the deeper structures that instead compelled Nelson to carry out his visionary research, while the resulting focus on links had led to this shift towards the paranoid. One way of eschewing this enforced structure was explored in the mid-Twentieth century by the print-based hypertexts, which eschewed the bounded limits of the novel, such as Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1*, which has been criticized by critics otherwise enthused by hypertext, such as John Stark, who believes ‘recent novelists have of course often abandoned this effort in favor of randomness, which reached its ultimate stage with the cutout novel that a reader can assemble in any order’. [24 see also 4] The cure to paranoia is definitely not ‘randomness’, or what in Pynchonian discourse has been called ‘anti-paranoia’. One has to find the balance between the two polarities whereby order emerges from chaos.

3. DISCUSSION

Paranoia is an activity that consumes the characters of Pynchon’s fiction through trying to figure the larger pattern within their lives. This is reflected by the reader, who sees the character’s lives as a microcosm of the reality they inhabit and makes grander connections than most of the characters in these fictions can. Even in systems that are not explicitly paranoid, such as the world of Nabokov’s novels, there remain paranoid tropes. Bader, an early critic of Nabokov argued that in *Pale Fire*, ‘Shade … muses in his poem about the pleasures of perceiving in his life certain events which appear to be ‘coincidences’, but which on another level are games played by ‘them’[3]. This is the familiar ‘them’ from Pynchon’s definition of paranoia. These coincidences are a perennial feature of Nabokov’s texts and often his ‘greatest’ artists are those who recognize the complex tapestry of events, which are affecting their trajectory. This is reminiscent of the discourse on paranoia. The problem is the extent to which these characters engage with their paranoia and render otherwise unconnected clues plausible[5]. Take for example, the on-going, bizarre debate on the ‘true’ authorship of ‘Pale Fire’ the poem and its surrounding commentary. Critics have explored the connections in the book, then added their own far beyond the reach of the novel in order to form theories that defy belief. They stretch the parameters of the text so fully that it would be a lot simpler to believe in the far more sensible and understandable explanation that both Kinbote and John Shade exist, and their roles are as stated. It is this rereading into connections that are not there disrupts an already disruptive text. It is perhaps a natural consequence of a text that invites rereading and connection making that it invites the most paranoid readings. In a real example of this that is more unbelievable is Ronald McHugh’s *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*, a gloss to a text which can only

be reread and never read in a linear manner, riffs on Kinbote’s suggestion at the end of his foreword to have two copies and create a new book whereby poem and commentary occupy the same space, when McHugh suggests:

For extensive long-term use he or she may wish to dismantle the two books and fit alternating pages into a folder, or else possibly have a bookbinder make up a combined volume. [10]

This appears to be an essential activity in order to use McHugh’s text comprehensively, since there is a distinct lack of markers otherwise on the page other than a few line numbers. The spatial representation of the text is very confusing and does not even work for some editions of the text. Thus, one has to often force the connections to work and become paranoid to fully utilize the text.

There is a tendency for hypertext systems often to be constructed around one-to-one explicit links denoted by some marker. This is often counter to many of the other one-to-one links that exist within a text that resound of both a general and personal level. Perhaps this is the caveat that enables hypertextualists to escape being labeled as paranoid, but it remains true that the predominant discourse in the hypertext community is linking and this may be paranoid. In literature, there are multiple types of one-to-one resonances in the text, most of which are not explicitly marked. These are divided, although the distinction is often blurred, between general links that exist in every system, and the reader’s personal response to the text, which is perhaps the most important part of champion for hypertext theorists. An example of this reader response is that in rereading Pynchon, ‘as familiarity increases, the text starts to establish links in each reader’s mind to the broader literary tradition’.[7] There is not necessarily a standard level of understanding and connectionism within the text that all readers plateau at. Perhaps the majority of these connections are personal. Within the discourse of intertextuality, what is purposefully appropriated, and what is coincidence is often a very grey area. The reader has to become paranoid in order to understand the text. Nabokov encourages a similar approach when he argues ‘curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader’ [14]. If the idea of the rereader is the reader who makes connections that are not obviously there (this excludes references from being an aid to the rereader, since any reader can use them quite happily), then perhaps Nabokov’s conception of the good reader in the paranoid reader, either following the systems that he created, or creating their own new paranoid systems. Both the author and the reader in the following forms create these connections:

- References (the form most commonly appropriated by hypertext systems as it can be explicitly demonstrated). This is the only form of linking that can only be from an authorial perspective and thus, it is the paranoia of one person bestowed on another.
- Allusions (that is the implicit indication that there is a connection being made, but not one that is necessarily tangible for those that do not get it – this kind of connection is difficult to mimic on a hypertextual platform currently without turning it into an explicit link). With allusions, the reader’s response is often a slightly stronger factor. The author could have innocently used a certain phrase, or it might have been

- intentional, but there is certainly a lot more seeing patterns emerge in this practice.
- Plagiarism (an important trope on the World Wide Web and in literary theory after the introduction of intertextuality, and the fact that plagiarism is practically unavoidable). This is the type of one-to-one connection that is perhaps least discussed in academic discourse. Again, this is a highly subjective matter usually as people can often simultaneously come up with the same idea at the same time. Nonetheless, this is an important part of connectionism, and one that could potentially be explored more.
- All three different types of one-to-one links have tropes of paranoia in them. Mainly due to the tension between the general system that overwhelms the reader, or, on the other hand, if empowering the reader to make their own connections is going to make them connect where there is not necessarily any connection, something which can become a serious problem when one moves into the plagiarism type of connections. The balance of paranoia shifts from the paranoia of a greater being's authority with the explicit link, and then when one explores plagiarism, often the paranoia is entirely the reader's, whereby the imagine plagiarism where it is simple coincidences.
- ## 4. CONCLUSION
- This brief and surface discussion of paranoia within literary interpretation and hypertext systems highlights some of the problems the continuing amalgamation of print-based literature and hypertext systems will face as it gains critical mass. Particularly as systems are developed that allow the reader to create their own trails through the text rather than simply rely on the authority of the link creator. Furthermore, I have identified a basic classification of degrees of paranoia within literary interpretation, which systematic paranoia, whereby one is simply dictated at by a higher being at one end with the explicit link, and at the other end the linking of plagiarism, which has the biggest risk of being personal paranoia, whereby one could easily accuse a writer of stealing a phrase somebody else. Thus, it may be difficult to find a balance between the two types of paranoia, but both literary criticism and hypertext theory is working towards that goal, and hopefully they will achieve that goal in tandem.
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