

Abducting the Interactive
Literary Work as a Communicational Artifact
A two-panel program by the Society for Critical Exchange

Abducting the Interactive SESSION A

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The “Anxiety of Inactivity,” or the Notion of Interactivity in a Broader Literary Context

Is literature “interactive”? Can the reader participate in what she reads? In this paper I will ponder whether these are the right questions to ask. As Heidegger would point out, the question already can pre-determine the answer. In confronting this problem, my talk falls into two parts. First, the notion of the “activity” or “passivity” of a reader is involved in a constellation of issues, and I will sketch out some of them (including the recent theories of Marie-Laure Ryan and Janet Murray). For instance: What do “activity” and “passivity” mean in relation to “literature”? At what point in (literary) history does it become possible to formulate this type of question, and why? Does the idea of readerly “interactivity” derive its spirit too much from a fear of the culture of consumerism? Who is reading, and how do we define the reader? The second part of the presentation will use a blend of Nietzsche, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom to critique the very idea of a “passive reading” of literature, against which “interactivity” is defined. To “read literature,” as we typically mean the idea in a deep, professional sense, is never passive to begin with. In line with this thinking I will propose the concept of the “anxiety of inactivity,” which I distill from some exemplary texts by Kafka and Bloom: ironically enough, we can wonder if we perceive in literary texts themselves an *anxiety that literature itself might be passive*.

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Entering the Interactive Text: Postmodern Wizardry and the Gothic Tradition in Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*

House of Leaves, a hybrid project of defiant literary wizardry, replete with parallel stories, graphics, poems, and footnoted scholarly texts, seems to offer a postmodern textual complication that defies the typical modernist gothic novel. Yet, what the reader discovers is that despite the appearance of multiple postmodern literary techniques, the *House of Leaves* can be read as a modernist gothic story, a fiction where the desire for a return to the modernist desire for the real can be satisfied through a grounded and traditional metanarrative.

This presentation argues that *House of Leaves* is an allegory of one man's psychoanalytic reintegration dominated by the gothic haunted house, and because the reader can reconstruct a referent for meaning, grounded in a traditional epistemological world despite the complications of multiple intertexts, the reader must determine which of two narratives to privilege: *The Navidson Record*, a story about a film created by Will Navidson, Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer, straightforward and convincing in tone, or Johnny Truant's, the story of an uneducated orphan whose narrative relates unspeakable abuses in his life, particularly concerning his mother, and who claims to have found *The Navidson Record* in the dark, bleak apartment of a dead man. Between the two, Johnny is our privileged narrator, and the defiant gothic mystery he unravels through the deviant postmodern facade is his own past, a convoluted psychoanalytic doubling slowly revealed through his metanarrative. *The Navidson Record* is his mind employing prosopopoeia to survive the discovery of his truth: *The haunted house as vagina*.

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Nathan Zuckerman and Narrative Interactivity

Interactivity plays an integral role in the work of Philip Roth. He interacts with his narrators and his narrators not only interact with other characters, but with the larger movements and politics of the society at large as well. His fiction, therefore, interacts in an intricate way with the real world in which it is produced, creating a complicated mixture of truth and fiction. This combination is evident in the fictions created out of real life by Nathan Zuckerman, a fiction himself, created by Roth. Particularly, three recent Zuckerman/Roth penned books, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*, exemplify this complicated relationship between fiction and reality. This paper proposes to examine how Roth, using a fictional surrogate, makes observations about the actual world by creating fictional scenarios based on real life events and trends, and having his surrogate narrator create a further fictionalized account of these already fictional scenarios. Sounds complicated? It is, but by examining these thorny relationships, we gain a glimpse into how literature can, and does, interact with the world in which it is created.

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Abducting the Interactive SESSION B

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Navigating the Gap: the Audience's Role in Interactive Digital Narratives

In the metaphoric "architectural" space of interactive digital narratives, audiences create meaning where they encounter gaps. This paper proposes to explore how the idea of the gap informs our understanding of how narrative works in such digital texts, through analyzing the digital space within which readers interact and create meaning.

This gap or space empty of meaning is a metaphor for understanding the nature of interactivity in interactive digital narratives. As Bolter states, metaphorically, hypertext and other interactive narratives invoke a sense of space. As a metaphor, Bolter's idea of a writing space doesn't go far enough in explaining the nature of how interactivity informs narrative.

Perhaps the best discussion of interactivity, Mark Stephen Meadows' *Pause and Effect*, uses the metaphor of architectural space to describe how audience members interact with hypertextual/interactive narratives (and to a lesser extent writing in general). Just as in any architectural space, what the architect has created needn't be used in the manner imagined. An author can create a labyrinth or maze, but cannot control how they will be used. The same is true with interactive works. The greater the interactivity built into the work, the more space the work provides its audience to explore outside of the work's narrative arc. This paper will explore how interactivity and visual, mimetic content require that the audience create meaning- or mediate- the narrative themselves.

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Between the Aleph and the Mandala: Touring Buenos Aires with María Negroni

Argentine poet María Negroni collaborated on a fabulous crossing of conceptual art and poetry, the CD-Rom and boxed set *Buenos Aires Tour* (2004), in which collaborator Jorge Macchi created a fictional subway line superimposed on a map of Buenos Aires and invented some fifty "stations" where he took photos, collected found objects, and recorded sounds, including the political protests of recent street demonstrations, and variously hyperlinked them.

Negroni's forty-seven prose-poems and mini-essays are also linked to various street corners of the city, few of them well known. Herself an international expatriate based in New York City, Negroni's points of departure are cosmopolitan, and yet her debts in this project are avowedly to Borges, clandestinely to that early advocate of the interactive text Julio Cortázar. Borges declared that the universe is a circle whose center is anywhere, whose circumference is nowhere: this posits a faith that anywhere in a city can be

interesting. More craftily, Cortázar wrote a novel that mapped revelation onto a hopscotch mandala and claimed that it could be read, interactively, in more than one way, but everybody ends up reading the novel his way; likewise, while adhering to the ludic game of *Buenos Aires Tour*, Negroni's poetry also offers a singular narrative into revelation and transcendence, as ironic and fitful as Cortázar's was, or as the detritus and shopping lists are that her collaborator has amassed for their joint project.

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From Hyperlink to Hyperchain Gang: Interactivity as a Surrogate for Collaboration

New technologies create an illusion of improving our knowledge of archaic technologies. The advent of digital print and hypertext has provided us with a delusively clear idea of *analog* book production. Text processors and printers, Internet and web-design software have disambiguated the material process of literary production by creating new, digital knowledge, but also new, digital ignorance.

In our paper we start from a simple premise that the purpose of literature is communication. To fully communicate is to ensure collaboration between mutually equal participants. Yet, because they are creating new ignorance, all that digital technologies have to offer in place of collaboration is its surrogate – interactivity. Unlike the universal code of human language, the plurality of mutually incompatible codes (computer languages, brand-name programs, online forums etc.) promotes the authorship of the machine, and the fallacy of hypertext, the fallacy of interactivity, in trying to guess, to preempt the reaction, the very existence of the reader or, more precisely, the user. By that, the new technologies for mediating literature are sanitizing the production, as well as the consumption of literature, ridding it of any but the most superficial social interaction. At the same time, by relying on *paraliterary* devices, instead of expanding the primary code of literature (language), technologies such as hypertext, expand the secondary code, the code of the machine, which in the case of traditional print is made invisible, by virtue of digital media rendering the codex book (at least nominally) obsolete.

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