

# ACADEMIC DIVINATION IS NOT A MYSTICISM: FICTOCRITICISM, PEDAGOGY AND HYPERTEXT

Simon Robb

What hypertext and fictocriticism have in common is this: they decide upon a model of cognition or subjectivity and then use this model as the structure for organising what are variously described as textual fragments, nodes, units or lexia. They share an emphasis on non-linear systems, a re-figuring of the relationship between reader-writer and text, the significance of agency, and of the contingent quality of any reading, writing, and hence text. Hypertext theorists and practitioners (especially the 'boosters') commonly use these terms to describe the structure of electronic writing space: 'navigation'; 'exploration'; 'equality'; 'freedom'; 'collaboration'. Fictocriticism uses the following terms to describe the structure of its space: 'hybridity'; 'negotiation'; 'fragmentation'; 'self-consciousness'; 'bio-graphical'; 'non-hierarchical'. Both, I would suggest, are about simulating the activity of cognition (or subjectivity) by activating these terms in their respective models. Hypertext predominantly is about simulating cognition (or human intelligence) and in many ways this can be attributed to its technological inheritance, which also weds it to the search for models of artificial intelligence. It is also largely driven by American techno-capital and it seems to me that it is modelling a particularly American position of the ideal subject (hence the use of the terms above). As Ulmer puts it, the "'twin peaks" of American ideology—realism and individualism—are built into the computing machine' (1). Fictocriticism is largely drawing upon postmodern models of subjectivity, which maintain that the contemporary subject is a temporal configuration of textual fragments. Hence 'writing' the postmodern text is a form of self composition, and the text (see Barthes) is read as an artefact of subjectivity which reads (and writes) subjectivity.

Hypertext and fictocriticism both legitimate their textual structures by proposing that they offer methods or technologies for simulating an original, be it cognition or subjectivity. In other words, both technologies seem to have as their goal the reproduction and multiplication of simulated self-hood. Indeed they could be described as cloning technologies. And why? Possibly because the self as technological simulation fits well into the market of hyper-real commodity exchange. In other words, both hypertext and fictocriticism offer methods for constructing a saleable commodity: a self that is a 'non-hierarchical' 'hybrid' of 'self-conscious' 'fragments', one that can 'explore' and 'negotiate' 'freely' in the information market. If in the near future pedagogy becomes the management of information then both hypertext and fictocriticism are well placed to produce the managers of the future.

Fictocriticism can be described as the way in which pedagogical methods have put into practice the theories of postmodernism. Fictocriticism is, technically speaking, not only a theory but also a methodology or structure which involves doing the postmodern 'talk' and 'walk'. Embraced by educational institutions as a pedagogical style, it indicates yet another re-

working of the terms 'theory' and 'practice', this time with a view to a negotiated and contingent settlement between rhetorical and subject positions. There are also limits to this writing and they can be found in the logic of the discourse in which one is located. So fictocriticism is also a place of ambiguities in terms of the 'margin' and 'centre', 'subject' and 'object' of discourse. For example, a traditional thesis would locate divination within a larger analysis of cultural self-formation, whereas fictocriticism would read *with* divination, utilising it as a structure to stage an act of criticism. This is one reading of the notion of a 'criticism without an argument'. This also invites the notion that fictocriticism is possibly a kind of contamination or pollution of rational academic writing: 'matter out of place'. Fictocriticism may therefore be an experiment with academic ecology: asking how far writing/reading can go before it begins to contaminate and pollute the discursive regime in which it operates. Fictocriticism is also a method which engages with the distinction between literature and theory; self and Other; text and corporeal body; individual and community; work and play; and last but not least, flesh and electricity. The re-working of these terms in a practical sense within the academy seems to be a historical inevitability. This has important implications for the future of that institution, its workers, and its relation to the broader community.

Central to current theorising of the fictocritical is Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*. The introduction claims that the text is not a metalanguage of love but a performance of a 'primary language' (3). Although he makes this claim, it must be it that the principle of organising the text is a kind of metalanguage, and it is the metalanguage about subjectivity and its relation to language. The particular subject is the lover, about whom Barthes makes a number of general statements in order to construct a model of that general subject, the lover. What is the lover? The lover is an assemblage of fragments of discourse *because* that's the way it is: 'the lover in fact, cannot keep his mind from racing, taking new measures and plotting against himself. His discourse exists only in outbursts of language, which occur at the whim of trivial, of aleatory circumstances' (3). Hence, because the 'original' lover is composed out of momentary outbursts that owe no allegiance to any overall thesis, so too is the text organised along 'arbitrary' and non-linear lines: 'the figures are non-syntagmatic, non-narrative' (7). Again: 'the lover speaks in bundles of sentences but does not integrate these sentences on a higher level, into a work; his is a horizontal discourse: no transcendence, no deliverance, no novel' (7). Hence the fragments or figures 'cannot be *classified*: organised, hierarchized, arranged with a view to an end (a settlement)' (7). So the organising principle could be described as that of imitation, impersonation and simulation.

Barthes makes certain claims about the way the original lover's subjectivity is structured, and then imitates this language structure in the structure of the text, hence simulating the subjectivity of the lover. He models a certain subjectivity and then simulates it in a discursive performance.

So the lover is the subject of the text, or the text is the subject/lover. If the text were an analysis of 'the lover', it could not take on those qualities of subjectivity which it desires. Or at least I think that is Barthes' position when he says: 'the description of the lover's discourse has been replaced by its simulation, and to that discourse has been restored its fundamental person, the *I*, in order to stage an utterance, not an analysis' (3). An authentic staging seems to be the goal. Perhaps what we have here is a desire for naturalistic theatre: the most life-like re-creation of 'someone speaking within himself' (3). In its drive towards naturalism it seems to be a strangely pre-modern kind of theatre. Strange because its notion of subjectivity is definitely postmodern.

The structure of the relationship between discursive fragments (non-linear, arbitrary, non-hierarchical) the studied absence (or conditional presence) of a meta-theory, the text as subject ('I'), the centrality of subjective utterance, are all important features of this text, and have been noted by a number of writers as components of the fictocritical, indeed as necessary components of it (see King). I would suggest, however, that these are necessary components when a general (postmodern) theory of subjectivity is extrapolated from the 'real' and used as a model for the textual simulation of subjectivity. If Barthes' text is used as an exemplar for

fictocriticism, such a fictocriticism will be bound to a naturalistic representation of the real or the original, even though this original, and the very legitimacy of the notion of the original, does not supposedly exist. In other words it will be resurrecting the notion of the original in its simulation of postmodern subjectivity.

I want to pose some questions. How would, going on Barthes' model, 'An Academic's Discourse' be structured? Is there a general relationship between the subject and his or her discourse, and if so, can it be modelled? If it can be modelled, it may be possible to simulate the subjectivity of the academic. And here I think I am entering into the area of Artificial Intelligence. But isn't this already the 'reality' of academia? Isn't writing the process of following a model of subjectivity construction, so that the writer is in effect impersonating the original, or in fact actually the illusory presence of the original in the model? Or is it that the pedagogical process is actually a naturalistic theatre, where the nature of the performance is largely determined by the dominant theory of subjectivity? In other words, are we perhaps entering into a period (and the fictocritical is a part of this) where the academic/student is searching for ways to reproduce (simulate) your standard fragmented postmodern self? That is, the urge to write fictocritically within the academy is the urge to simulate the model of postmodern subjectivity, just as Barthes' text is driven by the urge to simulate his model of the lover.

It seems to me that the fictocritical (however described) is a self-conscious collage of genre fragments, which posits subjectivity as being a presence and *process* of its textual landscape. Subjectivity in this sense is constituted in the activity of mapping a relationship between fragments, but likewise, the meaning of the landscape is in some way determined by this subjective agency. In this description there is both a humanist notion of subjectivity and a postmodern one.

What the fictocritical can do is to model the *activity* of aesthetic self formation. It gives examples of 'how to...'. In a sense it simulates this process. On the other hand, the fictocritical is also a representation of the process—an *example* of another's self formation. If the fictocritical is an assemblage, it is a dead assemblage—one that has been completed to be read off. In other words, the final fictocritical artefact *denies* the reader the kind of agency which it valorises. Although the fictocritical invites readers to take a Barthes-like pleasure in the text, it seems that it is really inviting them to witness *someone else's pleasure*. How to deal with this?

One suggestion is to utilise information technology, and specifically Hypertext, where the reader is able to compose a multiplicity of relationships between fragments within the simulated space of the computer. A computer-fictocritical space could be both a method (art) and an artefact of the process of constructing discourse and the process of self-formation. In this sense it functions as a postmodern pedagogy.

Hypertext has been described as a new stage in reading and writing, which incorporates much of print technology and re-configures it: it brings in the scroll, the icon; footnotes and glosses are not 'marginalised' but treated as 'equal players' in the hypertext field. Changes in the relationship between reader and writer are considered to be of utmost significance. The reader of hypertext can compose almost innumerable connections between topical units (fragments, nodes). The reader in this sense writes with the text, they 'perform the text', while the author is the one who supplies the topical units and possible connections (158). In Ulmer's terms the author constructs the paradigm within which the reader constructs a meaning (see below). The text that is read is therefore transitory, provisional, quasi-unique. The reader is therefore also the author. In this sense the conventional difference between reader-author-text begins to blur. It is the product of a combination of reader, text and author. Bolter suggests that the change in these relationships is brought about by the change in technology, but these changes have also been anticipated by authors working on and with print technology (Barthes, Derrida etc.) (164). Bolter acknowledges the power of their predictions yet suggests that electronic writing (EW) moves beyond them. Their experiments with language construction are useful for EW, but are also constrained by the fact that they derive from

critiques of the language of *print technology*. In other words, they cease to be useful as critiques of EW because they have been incorporated as methodologies or techniques in this new medium (166). The same perhaps could be said of fictocriticism.

Here is Ulmer's version of an electronic 'criticism without the argument':

the scholar does not provide a specific line of argument, an enunciation, but constructs the whole paradigm of possibilities, the set of statements, leaving the act of utterance, specific selections and combinations, to the reader/user. Or rather, the scholar's 'argument' exists at the level of the ideology/theory directing the system of the paradigm, determining the boundaries of the inclusion/exclusion. (8)

So perhaps hypertext is an electric fictocriticism which holds out the promise of constant self-composition. Or perhaps electric fictocriticism is a form of Artificial Intelligence? 'For artificial intelligence specialists the mind is nothing other than a self-activating text' (Bolter 184). AI is generally modelled on the structure of cognition, but not, as far as I know, on the structure of human subjectivity. Perhaps it gets down to a difference between imitation and simulation, to a question of *who* activates the text.

The merger of mind and machine, anticipated in science fiction and the Gothic tale, the goal of AI research, is also analogous to the merging of subjectivity with those critical technologies which are deployed to construct it, and the merging of analysis and its Other in the fictocritical. Indeed this merging is also one of horror, the apocalypse and the cyborg. Perhaps the electric fictocritical is a form of abject Artificial Intelligence?

And while discussing electric subjectivity are we referring to a structure of language that is only set in circuits (as the text of computer technology is) or a dynamic structure that is also located inside flesh? The point I want to make is to ask whether artificial intelligence is the same as artificial subjectivity (AS), and what part the body plays in this difference.

Academic writing, when figured as a performance, describes the action of 'building' a character through critical-aesthetic work. This process, according to Foucault, takes place in the presence, or 'virtual presence', of a subject who witnesses, judges, etc. in the manner of the confessional (61). If the hyper-textual or fictocritical field is an accurate simulation, it will need to allow for a relatively uncontrollable and 'arbitrary' judgement to occupy the space of self formation. Of course another side of this coin is sadism and masochism, where, in the competitive market of ideas, attempts are made to kill off and inflict pain on an other written self. These are all rhetorical markers of the discourse in which academic writing operates, and as such, are necessary to any interactivity within a 'user unfriendly' electric fictocriticism. This implies that any performative act will need to negotiate and accommodate the electronic other to its methodology and constructed self. The end result is to open out academic self-formation to 'incommensurate' practices.

I would add that in academic performance, impersonation, imitation, and simulation are all methods of self construction which are employed to measure the self against other written selves. Writing within the academy is in large part an imitation of those styles that have preceded it. If the self can be constructed it can also be deconstructed, dispersed, deferred. The self without boundaries is really the non-self, and it is one that is always haunting academic writing, where error is analogous to death.

So in academic writing there are some 'tendencies' present which I would summarise as being a series of anxieties about death, power, and imitation. These anxieties have been traditionally addressed, or 'solved', by the deployment of originality, sequential logic, an appeal to universality, etc. and more recently by an actual admission or confession of critical anxiety (see King). Both the fictocritical and hypertext are examples of this move towards a structure of anxiety, as opposed to, perhaps, a discourse on anxiety. They are both 'good' postmodern citizens. They both share an 'accommodating' accommodation towards quotation, reconciliation, hybridisation, fragments, borrowed ideas, self-consciousness, ambiguities, performance, provisional form, plurality, productive dialogue. They share a mutual disavowal of authorial authority, accumulative argument, objectivity, universal authority, humanist tradition, linear coherence, repression. So, in sales-speak, fictocriticism and hypertext are an

accommodation and a celebration of a negotiation between genre fragments.

Given what I have said already, I could characterise electric fictocriticism as a technology that, in promising transgression or liberation, soothes academic and market anxieties about death, power and imitation. Put another way, it is a way for academic writing to claim that it is still alive, powerful and original by embracing the signs of its own demise. And that's all right according to Baudrillard who claims that the destiny of theory is to predict its own demise—and that is to become what it is not (98). The destiny of the postmodern pedagogue may likewise be predicted in the technology of artificial subjectivity.

When theory becomes what it is not (and here we return to the lover's subjectivity, to the total simulation of cognition) the theorist also disappears, and this situation can only be averted when the theorist re-configures what it is that theory is not. To 'have a life' a critical practice must also have a death, and this is the line that fictocriticism treads, just as the 'concept of the author is never more alive than when it is pronounced dead' (Burke 7).

Academic divination is not a mysticism, but the mirror of the logic of cause and effect. Figured as a performance practice it partially addresses the existence of non-linear time within the assemblage of the pedagogical 'scene'.

*University of Adelaide*

#### Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill & Wang, 1978.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Trans. Bernard & Caroline Schutze. New York: Semiotext(e), 1988.
- Bolter, Jay David. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991.
- Burke, Sean. *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1992.
- Foucault, Michael. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. 1976. Trans. Robert Harley. London: Penguin, 1990.
- King, Noel. 'My Life Without Steve: Postmodernism, Ficto-Criticism, and the Paraliterary'. *Southern Review* 27.3 (1994): 261-275.
- Ulmer, Gregory L. 'Grammatology and Hypermedia'. *Postmodern Culture* 1.2 (1991).