Chapter 4
Mashup as Paratextual Practice: Beyond Digital Objects (in the Age of Networked Media)

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this chapter is to contribute to a more dynamic understanding of the notion of paratext (Genette, 1997a). The author argues that in order to fully grasp the discourse of contemporary media objects, one has to focus on the networked, hyperconnective and fluid nature of today’s media environments (Jenkins, 2008; Varnelis, 2008), where content itself often seems secondary to the modes of its circulation. In this regard, the concept of paratext still provides a valuable framework of analysis, especially when related to the widespread programming and coding procedures of contemporary Web services. In order to enable such a dynamic understanding of the notion in the contemporary digital media environment, Genette’s proposition should be read not only (or primarily) as relating to the set of subtexts, “parasitic” texts, annotations and markers accompanying the “main” text, but first and foremost as a semiotic-technological apparatus enabling the circulation of digital content across different media platforms. Such a re-reading also calls for an updated understanding of digital media, with more prominence given to the relational characteristics of the objects, as well as to the fluidity and dynamics of the processes of circulation, rather than to digital “objects” as such.

INTRODUCTION

My chapter is aimed at a more dynamic understanding of the notion of paratext developed by Gérard Genette (1997a), which I argue is necessary to fully grasp the discourse of contemporary media objects. It seems that what distinguishes them from older types of media is not only their digital nature, but first and foremost their networked, hyperconnective and fluid nature (Jenkins, 2008; Varnelis, 2008). By “hyperconnectivity” I mean the intensified communication exchanges which define today’s society; it is, however, important to notice that such a communication frenzy is a matter of concern not only in regard to us, people (Ranadivé, 2013). The fact is, it incorporates different kinds of machinic entities (including artificial intelligence) on a much wider scale than
ever before, which inspires attempts at developing a kind of thinking that would face this new situation in a more relevant way (Gunkel, 2012). The growing role of machine-to-machine (M2M) communication contributed to a nascent phase of what came to be called the Internet-of-things (IoT) (van Kranenburg, 2008), strongly relying upon RFID technology (a wireless technology allowing for direct communication between machines). Another important factor determining the formation of a hyperconnective world is the increasing automatization of communication environments. Who and what communicates with whom and under which conditions depends today, to a growing extent, on the algorithms, automated responses and standards of interoperability (the idea of interoperability enables the use of different software environments, a combination of applications, their mutual information exchange and the sharing of content across platforms). It is not a coincidence that Google’s exact algorithm is one of the company’s most treasured secrets and that Facebook’s EdgeRank is actually responsible for what kind of content we can see on our profile walls.

In such a media environment, content itself often becomes secondary to its circulation modes. This is why the reconfiguration of the paratextual theory seems so tempting. I argue that it is worthwhile to reconsider its tenets to the effect that the full potential of Genette’s proposition in tackling the challenges of analysis of cultural texts in networked media can be sparingly used. Therefore, I propose a shift in focus, from the analysis of the textual (digital) objects themselves, which treats them as a set of discrete entities, to thinking about them in terms of the possibilities they offer for the circulation of the content. In a world of print media—for which and within which paratextual theory was devised—such circulation is enabled by inviting the reader to perform particular practices of movement: searching for references, browsing through text, connecting the various fragments of reading experience (in Barthesian terms, incorporating the fragmented and dispersed phenomena which also include corporeal activity while reading a book) (Barthes, 1970). I am going to demonstrate the possibilities and advantages of such a theoretical shift with reference to the strategies of mashup, which I understand primarily as programming and coding practices enabling an automated recombination of digital content across Internet platforms, and which, to some extent, is different from the well-known and broadly theorized concept of remix (Sonvilla-Weiss, 2010). The very basic definition offered by Wikipedia clarifies that a mashup is “a web page or web application that uses and combines data, presentation or functionality from two or more sources to create new services” (“Mashup (web application hybrid),” 2013). (However, I would argue that Wikipedia’s definition of mashup in music is just an example of a remixing procedure.) We might not really know, nor even notice, that the practices of mashup constitute the everyday of our Web presence—every time we directly share a video clip from YouTube on our Facebook wall or embed Web content on our Wordpress blog. Such environments will serve as a point of reference in my theoretical endeavor. In particular, I have chosen the digital mapping environment Google Maps. It is the most “mashable” online service available, which means it is the one that most often gets recombined and appropriated by users across vast spaces of the Internet. But first, I will extensively outline some theoretical possibilities for reframing the theory of paratext as a more dynamic account which would be more inclusive of processual and experiential aspects of content circulation in a networked digital media environment. In this regard, the concept of paratext still provides a valuable framework of analysis, especially when related to the widespread programming and coding procedures of contemporary Web services. In order to do this, I propose that Genette’s concept be read as a whole semiotic-technological apparatus enabling the circulation of content or inspiring readers/users to perform
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