

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
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Creative reading and collaborative writing in
digital environments.

Writer Response Theory

PhD Thesis

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Cuprins

Argument. Digitally born creative forms.....	1
Chapter 1:	
Introduction...	7
Approach.....	10
Writer Response Theory.....	13
Literature after print.....	14
Relevance of the study.....	18
Chapter 2	
Creative Reading	
– From Reader Response to Writer Response	19
2.1 Introduction.....	21
2.2 Theoretical assumptions: a return to literary heritage	
Reader oriented theories and their unfulfilled prophecies.....	25
2.2.1 Building subjective readership. Phenomenology.....	28
2.2.2 Reception theory.....	30
2.2.3 Affective stylistics and the new face of Reader Response theory.....	35
2.2.4 What is happening in Anglo-American theory?.....	41
2.3 The return to text – the Digital Age.....	47
2.3.1 The Cathedral model	50
2.3.2 The Bazaar model.....	52
2.3.3 Reading in a Bazaar fashion.....	54
2.3.4 What and how is the digital reader reading? Ergodicity.....	57

2.4 How the Internet taught me to read.....	60
2.4.1 What makes a digital native. The creative reader.....	62
2.4.2 The academic trap.....	66
2.4.3 Excursus – What’s left of the book.....	68
2.5 <i>Meshbooks</i>	80

Chapter 3

Collaboration. General view – symptoms.....	86
3.1 Social theory prerequisites – Stigmergic theory of the creative collective.....	86
3.1.1 Collaboration as participation, contribution and stigmergy.....	90
3.2 Technological prerequisites. Web culture.....	94
3.2.1 Short history of Internet 1.0.....	95
3.2.2 World Wide Web.....	96
3.2.3 The first Internet bubble.....	97
3.2.4 Web 2.0 or what happened after the burst of the dot.com bubble	
Read/write web.....	98
3.3 Web 2.0 impact and the creative society.....	101
3.3.1 Implications of Web 2.0 for Literature.....	102
3.3.2 Low-cost publishing.....	104
3.3.3 Cultural prerequisites.....	105
3.3.4 Digitally born book model.....	108
3.4.1 Literary theory in New Media – hypertext in the collaborative age.....	111
3.4.2 Oral features of collaborative hypertext.....	118

Chapter 4

Collaboration in WRITER RESPONSE Theory.....	121
Introduction.....	122
4.1 Web 2.0 and the participatory deluge culture.....	123
4.1.1 Web 2.0 și participatory practices.....	125
4.1.2 Dystopian features of the participatory deluge or the politics of amateurism.....	129
4.1.3 How to prevent dystopia or the role of the interactive curator in modeling <i>prosumers</i>	132
4.2 2.0 Criticism as alternative and the Percipient figure.....	135
4.3 . An architecture of collaboration between percipients – Writer Response Theory Contribution, Participation, Stigmergy.....	146
4.3.1 Why collaborate? What is collaboration and why do we need it.....	148
4.3.2 Stories of the Bazaar and their architecture.....	153
4.3.3 The ideal architecture for a collaborative Writer Response environment ...	159
4.3.4 The role of narration as process.....	164
4.3.5 Fixing collaboration.....	170
4.3.6 The identity issue.....	171
4.3.7 The role of the percipient.....	175
Conclusions.....	176

Chapter 5

Contributive Writing.....	180
5.1 Features of contributive writing in collaboration.....	181
5.1.1Case study: The Blog book.....	185
5.1.1.1 What is a blog.....	185

5.1.2 Read/Write Web and blogs.....	186
5.1.3 The dynamics of a blog tree-book	188
5.1.4 Blook	192
5.1.5 The workings of a blook platform - YouWriteOn.com.....	193
5.1.6 A blook in progress on YouWriteOn.com.....	196
5.2 Case study: Ketai Bunko - Ketai shosetsu	
Cell phone novels: the portable best-sellers.....	199
5.2.1 Ketai Bunko: mobile fiction.....	200
5.2.2 Instructions of use.....	203
5.2.3 Why Japan?.....	205
5.2.4 Why read and write cell phone novels.....	207
5.2.5 Thumb tribes.....	207
5.2.6 Whimsical literature or grafomania?.....	209
5.3 Conclusions – a constellation of tree-books.....	211

Chapter 6

Participatory Writing	215
6.1 Features of participatory writing in collaboration.....	216
6.1.2 Approach.....	220
6.2 Influences for participatory writing online.....	221
6.3 Radial book dynamics.....	222
6.4 Creative <i>open source</i> and the threat on originality	
All rights reversed: <i>Jenny Everywhere</i>	224
6.5 Radial meshbooks on open platforms.....	229
6.5.1 <i>Flight Paths</i> project	230
6.5.1.1 Dynamics of a complex radial book	232
6.5.2 <i>LA Flood Project</i>	235

6.6 Living to post your life	
– radial participatory writing – Alternate Reality Games.....	238
6.6.1 The audience is dead. Long live the audience – Influences on transmedia storytelling.....	240
6.6.2 Ceci n’est pas un TV-show. <i>The Truth about Marika</i>	245
6.6.3 <i>Conspiracy for Good</i>	247
6.6.4 The limits of fiction.....	250
6.6.5 The world-construct.....	251
6.7 Conclusions.....	256

Chapter 7

Stigmergic Writing	260
7.1 Features of stigmergic writing.....	261
7.2 Case study - <i>A Million Penguins</i> of Penguin Books Publishing House.....	265
7.2.1 What is a wiki book.....	270
7.2.2 Percipients in a cloud-book.....	274
7.2.3 The pattern of narration in a cloud-book.....	279
7.2.4 The chronotopic carnival.....	282
7.2.5 The percipient as a character in the novel.....	287
7.2.6 Collaboration within a cloud-book.....	291
7.3 Creative reading in a cloud-book.....	293
7.3.1 Surfing a cloud-book.....	298
7.4 Conclusions.....	302

Chapter 8

Conclusions

New forms of writing and Web 2.0.....	306
Bibliography/Webography.....	317
Annex	333

Creative Reading and Collaborative Writing in Digital Environments.

Writer Response Theory

Keywords: mass collaboration, Writer Response Theory, percipient, meshbook, tree-book, radial-book, cloud-book, literary social platforms, contributive writing, participatory writing, stigmergic writing, collaborative writing, online fiction, social reading.

PhD Thesis Summary

This thesis entitled *Creative Reading and Collaborative Writing in Digital Environments. Writer Response Theory* is placed at a cultural crossroads between literary theory, net.art, collaborative practices, history of art, epistemology and digital culture.

The present study reflects on a theoretical meshwork for specific collaborative environments and it focuses on creative textual mass collaboration in online environments. The analysis will try to render an architecture and a best collaborative practice which describes the emerging mechanisms that lead to the spread of mass collaboration online within Web 2.0 framework and the Read/Write Web. The thesis

incorporates a definition for the discourse of collaboration and its semantic and distributive features. It also contributes to an already known initiative to create a General Theory of Collaboration from a philological perspective.

This theory constitutes an instrument for interpretation. There are a number of works (in Europe and around the world) which were not a part of this research due to its claim of not wanting to exhaust the whole research area, but simply to present an alternate instrument for interpreting these collaboration phenomena.

The present thesis addresses only collaborative authorship. It examines the process of writing determined by mass collaboration i.e. more than 50 people.

Collaboration is generally defined by this study as *the act of working together in order to produce or to create something* and it is further applied in detail to all forms of creating and producing content inside a literary social platform. Acknowledging the authorial process within these platformworks is rarely easy and so the forms of collaboration for the duration of the writing period are often very difficult to identify and index.

Literary platform-works or *meshworks*, as I name them, imply a type of mass collaboration where communities of textual entities associate in order to produce text. Writer Response Theory does not refer to known or acknowledged authors. It conveys a voice to the masses of amateur or aspiring writers that choose to make use of their talent within the network. That is why the theory I propose in this study originates from Reader Response and social reading as practices

that offered the reader a chance to collaborate and to produce text, learning as he goes to be active in a social platform, to follow the netiquette and to guard the inherent rules for textual coherence.

In addition, the study proposes an original instrumental theory I call *Writer Response Theory* that deals with co-authored storytelling. This storytelling technique must be acknowledged and examined as a process and more than just the product it renders in a post-theoretical and epistemological discourse. With its performance features, online mass collaboration raises specific issues that clearly surpass the old poststructuralist methods and instruments by implying ways of community building and platforms and encouraging overlaid text production and simultaneous storytelling.

In creating this theory I realized that the term for *platform* will limit the multidisciplinary approach with its technological provenance. The core concept of this theory proposed by the present study is the authorship of the *meshbook*. The platforms resulted from networked writing, which I call *meshbooks*, (due to their reference to pages bound together) are open, with an automorphic structure and interchangeable parts which any reader can edit. These *meshbooks* are social experiments by default. They are processed by way of mass collaboration and hyperlinking.

The *meshbook* (with its subcategories – *tree-book*, *radial-book* and *cloud-book*) is used to render and to describe the process of creating, sharing and reception of these works as product and process.

In order to illustrate a *meshbook* and to mark its limits from a printed book I employed two concepts originally coined by Eric S.

Raymond in his open source manifest *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, concepts defining two types of software building that I apply to literature. The *Cathedral book* follows closely the traditional concepts of literary theory. The *Bazaar book* on the other hand, proposes a self-conscious display medium replacing the human component with what I call further a *percipient*.

Following the *Cathedral model* for books I chose to analyze a number of works in which the display medium of the printed book itself becomes problematized and employed as raw material for sculptural works.

The next logical step in creating this theory was to replace the terms *reader* and *author* (found to be insufficient in digital environments) with the notion of *percipient*. In short, a *percipient* plays several roles; she is a reader, a writer, a re-reader, a curator of content, a *platformer* (a digitally educated and transliterate user of social networks), a *connoisseur* of digital devices (tablets, cell phones, computers) and a *lifecaster* (an agent of self-fictionalization). The *percipient* sees the creative drafts and metatexts as part of the process of writing a *meshbook*.

While a lot of the little literature we have in digital humanities about this topic pays more attention to text, the innovative part of this study is its focus on the active agency, the person that writes behind a screen display, the *percipient* managing her own writing and reading *parcour* through *contribution*, *participation* and *stigmergy*. This is one of the reasons I started building this theory on social reading and not text production.

I must add that every reader in these *meshbooks* had a chance to become a writer. Many did and became *percipients*. These *percipients* are the object of study for this thesis as they chose to contribute to the final product through discourse, manifesting their presence through actual text, and not just by visitor counter occurrences.

The necessary process of creating a theory by which I will explain the prerequisites engaged in the mechanism of readership will be diachronically exposed. *Writer Response* theory identifies the emerging stages of the reader discourse.

On the other hand, I will try to establish the origins of the digital reader as she appears in all her networked glory in the times of the oral culture, a time when the creator was mistaken as the *performer* (orator, rhetoric persona, etc.) and reading was more than sequentially following rows of signs across the paper, completing this task unilaterally.

The demonstration this study renders is based on three types of writing - grounded in discursive collaboration – as an inception knock for platform *meshbooks*, multifaceted, perpetually changing works in Anglo-American tradition. These three types of writing are *contributive writing*, *participatory writing* and *stigmergic writing*. The case studies were organized in such a manner as to indicate an ascending degree of autonomy and control over the story as yielded to the percipient, transforming her into a text, story and world building entity.

In addition, I coded a soft that renders a graphic visualization of the main story lines of different *meshbooks* presented in case studies.

Visualizations concern also inactive narratives, story nodes, slow nodes, metatexts and ongoing narratives. This software traced the dynamics of these *meshbooks* until the completion of this thesis.

Contributive writing is the object on a finite work that generates *tree-books* as databases of possible narrative endings and narrative overlays of which only some will enter the final story – resembling fan fiction narratives and multiverses. *Ketai Bunko* – the cell phone novels, bifurcated books on the literary platform *YouWriteOn.com* and literary blogs will serve as case studies for this chapter. This type of writing is highly sensitive to its audience.

Participatory writing deals with writing assisted by external or internal platforms and operates through the concept of *radial-books*. Within these *radial books* we can observe certain situations in which *lexia*, the narrative nucleus, generates multiple autonomous narratives which vary in a certain degree in regard to the initial narrative. This type of narrative will be exemplified by archived *meshbooks* like *Jenny Everywhere*, complex *meshbooks* like *Flight Paths* and *LA Flood Project* and by *transmedia* experiments like *The Truth about Marika* and *Conspiracy for Good*. A comparison between the three types of collaborative writing analyzed by this thesis will show that *participatory writing* assumes the most creative networked forms regarding its layout and platform building.

The third type, *stigmergic writing* – borrowing the stigmergy theory of Pierre Paul Grasse who formerly studied the behavior of insects in a hive – is the cornerstone of what we usually call *wiki*

literature and it involves potentially infinite works that generate *cloud-books*.

Stigmergy is an alternate approach to the study of termites. This approach views any actions of agents (termites, in this case) are determined by the environment in which they activate rather than by a genetically passed on collective intelligence.

These works are based on the process of writing (not the product) as pieces of a performance in which the product is continually shifting and the changes made by participants are often dispersed and simultaneous. This type of writing does not involve a universe or a predefined narrative nucleus; the only limitations and rules are technical (inspired by the platform) and collaboration is *ad hoc*. This chapter analyzes in detail the case of *A Million Penguins*, the experiment lead by Penguin Books, the prestigious British publishing house.

The present thesis chooses to develop a theory that deals only with fiction works in order to reveal the process of creative collaborative authorship, and not with non-fiction platforms such as Wikipedia for instance. This way we can witness creative multiauthoring in action, as well as the way readers react when they turn into writers.

Given the fact that the Internet is a relatively new environment, with volatile canons, I refer to these *meshbooks* not as literature *per se*, but as *literary practices* that may one day lead with to valuable and acknowledged literature.

I use the literary theory perspective up to a point in order to establish connections with an oral and written culture that allowing a deepening of my understanding of this role switch between reader and writer and the overall process of collaboration. The cultural and technological perspectives allowed me to penetrate the depth of context regarding every case study and to reveal the cultural significance or *percipients* and the position of the text in this constellation.

In the last chapter of my thesis I suggested a number of micro business models for editorial practices from which both percipients and the publishing industry can benefit.

The *Writer Response Theory* rendered by this study is looking to serve as an alternative and transdisciplinary approach to networked creativity from a philological point of view as a theory about networks generated by the network.