

# A “NOVEL SITE”: CARMEN COVITO, WRITING, LITERATURE AND TECHNOLOGY

Rita Wilson

## Sommario

*L'Internet cambia l'idea del libro e pone allo scrittore nuovi orizzonti di lettori prima impensabili. Carmen Covito è fra i primi scrittori italiani ad avere un proprio sito web. Le sue varie iniziative in internet hanno destato l'attenzione sia di critici culturali e letterari sia del grande pubblico. Tramite l'analisi di alcuni scritti di Covito, si esamina il rapporto tra nuove tecnologie e letteratura, l'influenza del computer sullo stile, le possibili novità narrative di un ipertesto.*

*Io credo che la letteratura italiana debba cambiare, perché non si è accorta che il mondo sta cambiando, le nuove tecnologie stanno trasformando la nostra maniera di percepire la realtà, i ritmi mentali, e la scrittura deve cambiare per questo, dev'essere intonata, deve rispecchiare il mondo circostante (“InterNETvista a Carmen Covito”, Son et Lumiere email, 2000)*

The cultural experiences of globalisation and advanced media communications have focussed interest less on the interaction of texts, and more on a media shaped heterogeneity of literary/cultural practices.

The concept of hypermedia<sup>1</sup> has contributed to reflections on intercultural notions of language and to the shift in hermeneutic interests toward hybrid narrations that do not fit into conventional genre and media categories. As many contemporary cultural critics have pointed out, we employ media as vehicles for defining both present and cultural identity.

As these media become simultaneously technical analogs and social expressions of our identity, we become simultaneously both the subject and object of contemporary media.[...] Whenever our identity is mediated in this way, it is also remediated<sup>2</sup>, because we always understand a particular medium in relation to other past and present media. When we watch the filmed adaptation of a novel we bring to the film a notion of self appropriate to voiced prose. When we participate in virtual reality, our digital point of view is understood as a remediation of the point of view that we have occupied for decades in film and television and for centuries in photographs. and paintings. When we run a multimedia programme on our desktop computer, each windowed space (containing prose, static graphics, audio or video) offers a different mediation of the subject, and our experience is the remediation of these differences. (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 231-232)

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1 Following Bolter and Grusin (1999) the term 'hypermedia' is used here to describe computer applications that present multiple media (text, graphics, animation, video) using a hypertextual organisation, and which use a style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium.

2 "Remdiation. Defined by Paul Levenson as the 'anthropomorphic' process by which new media technologies improve upon or remedy prior technologies. We define the term differently, using it to mean the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms. Along with immediacy and hyperimmediacy, remediation is one of the three traits of our genealogy of new media" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999: 273).

## 1. The Networked Text

The many forms of networked communication available on the Internet induce us to question both the relationship between the traditional order of discourse and “new” forms of electronic discourse, and the identity of the text – literary, visual, or any other. In particular, how does a text change when it becomes not a product of a single culture but something owned by many cultures or, increasingly, dependent upon a single pan-global net of cultural predicates?

The assumptions we make and the instruments we use will shape the information we perceive. In online environments, the information we encounter is fluid and constantly changing. For the postmodernist there is no canon. The truth of a work changes with each reading. [...] People in a highly connected and deeply fragmented world can no longer look to a central canon for direction. Each of us has a piece of the puzzle, but no-one seems to have the whole picture. (Ryder, 1995:7)

Newsgroups, email lists, MUDS<sup>3</sup>, chatrooms connect users in a web of interrelated textual elements. These domains operate under the logic of “hypermediacy” because even if until recently they have not supported multimedia, the textual messages passed between the users form a hypertext. This, in turn, generates an “opening up, a freedom to create and perceive interconnections” (Landow, 1990: 154). The interconnectedness of writing in a postmodern world is suggested

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3 Multiuser dungeon. A programming system which allows people in different physical locations to communicate in the same networked, virtual space. Typically, the MUD is portrayed as a world with rooms or other demarcated physical spaces, and participants become characters in this world and contribute to the creation of a collective narrative.

through the concept of nodes joined by links in an electronic web. The interconnectedness reaches out horizontally to encompass other writings currently available, but may also extend backwards into our past, and even forwards into the future. Thus when a text is presented in cyberspace<sup>4</sup>, it undergoes a transformational process that turns the text into a “present tense palimpsest where what shines through are not past versions but potential, alternate views” (Joyce, 1995).

The theory of transformative technology (Michael Heim’s term) suggests that modernism arose with a print culture that could freeze knowledge in apparently stable archival forms separated from the flux of human existence. Postmodernism arose with the onset of an electronic culture which gives the audience (according to McLuhan) a much more personal, intense, involving relationship with media that can no longer be kept at a safe distance, or, to put it slightly differently: “The facticity of print tends to transform writer into ‘author’, whereas the interactivity and malleability of electronic text tends to empower the reader” (Ong 1988:132). For readers, hypertext literature has two fundamental properties that make it unique. First, it lets readers interact with the text. Second, it lets them perceive the text as a nonlinear or multilinear structure. But what are the implications of hypertext technology as a medium for the creative writer looking to move beyond traditional notions of linearity and univocity?

## 2. An Italian Case Study

If we accept that all “writing”, all “texts”, are penetrated by and composed of traces of previous “texts”, then it follows that the word

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4 The term was first coined by William Gibson in his science fiction classic, *Neuromancer*: “Cyberspace: a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light arranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data” (1995: 67).

(or the text) is denied transcendental, representative status: “Instead of representing some exact thing, idea, presence, the word (text) is the conditional moment, which indicates all the words (texts) that have gone into making it understandable, approachable, meaningful” (Marshall, 1992: 42). Marshall’s description of the “archaeology” of a text has a curious resonance with the transformations undergone by Carmen Covito’s texts. One of the ‘new’ Italian authors of the 1990s, Covito is a professional writer and translator, has been a theatre and literary critic, has written comic screenplays and has worked as a free-lance journalist and editor. She is the author of prizewinning novels: *La bruttina stagionata* (1992), *Del perché i porcospini attraversano la strada* (1995) and *Benvenuti in questo ambiente* (1997).

Noting that our postmodern era is particularly concerned with multiplicity, with equalised and decentralised authority, as reflected in the structure of the World Wide Web, Covito asserts that contemporary (electronic) writing can help to shape new ways of reading (especially fiction): it can help do away with retrograde insistence on author-provided continuity of narrative, and give more significance to reader-provided coherence. Covito is fascinated by the new technology and the Internet:

Mi attraggono le sue implicazioni sociologiche, psicologiche ma soprattutto filosofiche (l’azzeramento delle distanze e dei confini geografici attraverso la simultaneità della comunicazione, la frantumazione e la moltiplicazione dell’io, e così via). (Interview with Capozzi, 1999: 268).

Her interest in transformations and the possibilities of “contamination” between genres, modes of writing, multimodal productions of literary works, reflects the ideology of her “generation” of writers. Her third novel, *Benvenuti in questo ambiente*, is an experiment

nato da un interesse per il gergo, per il gergo telematico in particolare. Già nei romanzi precedenti ho sempre cercato di inserire gerghi contemporanei. In questo caso trattandosi di personaggi che hanno a che fare con l'elettronica mi incuriosiva molto lo strano gergo che in questo mondo si usa, che è un misto di italiano e di inglese, di parole che a volte non sono neanche tradotte ma sono direttamente mediate dall'italiano oppure che hanno delle traduzioni piuttosto curiose: esempio classico è scannare, scannerizzare, scandire, su cui nessuno si è ancora messo d'accordo. (<http://www.dols.net/interviste>)

The style used in e-mails is particularly interesting for contemporary Italian writers, because it is a style that reflects both the current, spoken language and the classic epistolary style. There is both immediacy and syntax; there is a tendency to use a colloquial register (the informal *tu*, short phrases, lack of traditional civilities) but the gap between the formulation of an idea and the time taken to type it out on the keyboard ensures that the repetition typical of spoken language is avoided and helps to structure the discourse. In *Benvenuti in questo ambiente*, the Computer Lady (an on-line help programme “sperimentalmente dotato di una complessa e articolata personalità artificiale al fine di interfacciarsi con l'utenza nella maniera più naturale”, 1997:10) writes in a style that mimics the style of email (including iconic faces or ‘emoticons’). But Covito found this type of intervention at the level of the phrase, i.e., at a microstructural level, insufficient:

Ho cercato di fare entrare la logica del computer anche nella macrostruttura del romanzo, ed ecco che sono venute fuori le ‘finestre’, e dall'esistenza delle finestre si è affacciata tutta la varietà possibile di giochi intertestuali ed extratestuali (finestre ‘a cascata’ per

raccontare episodi che avvengono simultaneamente, finestre che non si chiudono o si chiudono male, finestre pubblicitarie, la finestra che contiene un *Easter egg*). (Interview with Capozzi, 1999: 269)

By using 'windows' instead of traditional chapters, she produces an irreverent effect, while drawing attention both to the impact of the computer on writing and narrative strategies:

ho cercato di fare entrare nella struttura del romanzo quella che è la struttura di un programma a finestre, proprio perché io credo che la narrativa tradizionale non debba più accontentarsi delle strutture letterarie classiche, ma debba comunque cercare di fare entrare nei suoi canoni, chiamiamoli così, quelle che sono le modificazioni della sensibilità contemporanea, e quindi anche le modificazioni della nostra percezione. E la nostra percezione oggi è molto influenzata dai mass-media e tra questi mass-media prima ovviamente in ordine cronologico la televisione e adesso il computer, che ormai è un vero mass-media. (<http://www.dols.net/interviste>)

Covito is effectively creating a hypertextual environment by weaving a writing space that is more personal than the standard sheet of paper. At the same time, she draws the reader into the virtual reality of the Computer Lady's domain: the 'window' becomes a "liminal zone where new meanings and values are negotiated for old structures" (Dickinson, 1996:82). In the same way, the setting of the novel, North-East Italy, represents a "territorial history", a "political and temporal complement of the cognitive map" (Dickinson, 1996:82):

Nel nostro Nord-Est c'è un tessuto industriale fitto di piccole aziende tecnologicamente molto avanzate

(credo che buona parte delle ditte italiane che fabbricano *software*, o anche *hardware*, siano concentrate in quella zona) e tuttavia vi permangono caratteri di vecchia società contadina, con fenomeni anche di arretratezza culturale vistosa: alcuni dei personaggi del mio romanzo non sono, dal punto di vista culturale, all'altezza dei propri consumi (Interview with Capozzi, 1999: 269-270).

Covito's 'vernacular landscape' provides a dramatic account of the contradictions inherent in the development of information technology and telecommunications in an old peasant society.

Her web site (<http://www.carmencovito.com>), which she entitles "Un sito romanzesco", is both an introduction to and the natural extension of her third novel. In this novel the protagonist designs and sets up a personal web page, and Covito declares that having written this fictional event, she (the author) felt like imitating her fictional character, and constructing her own web site: "si potrebbe dire quindi che è un romanzo 'autobiografico al contrario', dove invece di avere un personaggio che mima l'autore abbiamo un autore che mima il personaggio" (quoted in Capozzi, 1999: 268). By presenting a version of the contemporary mediated self that corresponds to the logic of hypermediacy, Covito constructs (new) textual identities in a networked environment:

desideravo rompere il muro che è sempre esistito tra cultura letteraria e tecnologica e che secondo me non ha senso. Infine ho voluto creare un mio sito per utilizzare l'interattività, aprendo una porta di comunicazione col lettore.

(<http://www.dols.net/interviste>)

Covito's "remediation" of the printed novel, is exemplified by a link on her home page to *Sei personaggi in cerca di siti*. Each character, in

turn, provides links to websites that “best suit their character and their role in the novel”. The Pirandellian reference further serves to remind us that, for a novelist, adapting to interactivity is a little like venturing into theatre work, which also requires entrusting part of the creative process to others – in this case, actors and a director. Having already worked in theatre, Covito is less anxious about relinquishing control to the “reader” of her hypertext novel, than she is about ensuring that the dialogues remain the privileged places in narrative which reflect the rich layering of contemporary language, including the jargon of different professions or generations, linguistic status symbols, tics and psychological and socio-cultural slips of the tongue.

Covito has very specific ideas about what writing style should be used for electronic writing:

Per definire [la] capacità di dissimulare tutto il lavoro che giace sotto l'apparente naturalezza di una danza leggiadra o di una scrittura brillante, [Castiglione] aveva inventato un bel neologismo: ‘sprezzatura’. E a me sembra che il Web sia il mezzo ideale per farci capire quanto sia necessario e utile applicare alle nostre fatiche un bel tocco di sprezzatura. Pagine apparentemente spensierate ma ricche di significati potrebbero proporsi, poi, per contagio, come un felice esempio per tutta la scrittura letteraria, che in Italia è spesso ancora molto ‘pesante’ a causa di un equivoco di fondo: si pensa che ‘pesante’ equivalga a ‘denso’ e ‘interessante’, mentre spesso equivale solo a ‘prezioso’ e ‘noioso’. (Interview with Luisa Carrada, 1999)

She has recently put these ideas into practice by publishing, *Racconti dal Web*, advertised as “Primo E-book d’autrice in Italia”.

Per i testi ho scelto di usare un tono ‘leggero’, semi-ironico, che d’altra parte corrisponde alla tonalità della mia scrittura letteraria. [...] Le [...] pagine dovevano essere impaginate piacevolmente (con immagini non arbitrarie, non puramente decorative e soprattutto non ‘pesanti’) e dovevano risultare di agevole lettura sullo schermo. (Interview with Carrada, 1999)

Tackling this new breed of writing is now little more difficult or risky than trying one’s hand at any other unfamiliar genre – and it should be regarded as a new genre, not a potential replacement for traditional forms of literature. Like any distinctive medium, it requires first-time practitioners to rethink some elements of their craft to use it effectively. It can also demand some artistic readjustment as the hypertext author learns to relinquish to the reader some control over the final form of the work. This doesn’t mean giving up responsibility for the structure of the writing or somehow losing authorial claim to it. If anything, the structural responsibility increases, for the work must maintain coherence in the many possible permutations it can undergo.

### **3. Instead of a Conclusion**

Hypertext theorists point out that when we follow the linear flow of words down the page, there is often not just a single route. Look at all those unmarked intersections in the form of ambiguities, allusions, and levels of symbolism. They lead in many different interpretive directions at once. If, as Umberto Eco puts it, the poetic effect is the capacity that a text displays for continuing to generate different readings, without ever being completely consumed (1994:59-64), shouldn’t we welcome anything that can deepen its textual multiplicity, such as, say, hypertext?

Hypertext doesn't demand that the multifarious structural possibilities inherent in a narrative be pared away to accommodate the sheath of linearity. The narrative's multiplicities can stand unashamed as the structural framework itself. Interrelationships among the narrative's parts become actual links rather than implied connections. The painted-on *trompe l'oeil* doors (or windows) become real, letting the reader open them to explore alternative juxtapositions and interweavings. While all sorts of subtle multiplicity, multivalence, and synchronism lend themselves well to embodiment in hypertext, the best links are realisations of connections that already exist in the text – like Covito's 'character' pages which could be viewed as a new aesthetic space in which narrative is de-centred. Covito's writing space is now boundless. The links from her home page can lead to other documents by other authors who in turn can direct the reader into boundless other spaces. Once a text reaches outside itself in this manner, the author has not only lost control of the reader's path through that particular text, but the size and shape of the text itself. Ted Nelson's "docuverse" is born.

What can hypertext offer literature in general in terms of creative writing? Kendall suggests that poets and fiction writers can use digital technology to extend the boundaries of traditional writing:

The new electronic literature breaks the bonds of linearity and stasis imposed by paper. In digital form, a story can draw readers into its world by giving them a role in shaping it, letting them choose which narrative thread to follow, which new situation or character to explore. Within a 'page' of poetry on screen, words or lines can change continually as the reader watches, making the text resonate with shifting shades of meaning. Written work can be 'improvised', altering its own content every time it's read. With its power to mix text, graphics, sound and video, the PC can

extend the ancient interdisciplinary traditions of writing. (1995: 1)

A view shared by Covito, who describes her own experience in this regard as follows:

Una pagina web è una creatura intimamente multimediale, anche quando non vengano applicati suoni o musiche o filmati ... mi sembra ovvio che pensare una pagina web o un intero sito vuol dire ‘immaginare’ nel senso pieno del termine, cioè pensare **da subito** per immagini e non soltanto per parole. [...] Ho individuato quelle che secondo me erano le caratteristiche del mezzo (utilità sommata a un certo spirito ludico, ipertestualità nel senso di collegamenti a siti esterni, almeno qualche elemento di interattività) e mi sono inventata delle mie soluzioni. (Interview with Carrada, 1999)

The question raised by Covito’s decision to ‘write for the web’ is: to what extent is the change that a text undergoes when it is presented in cyberspace comparable to earlier ‘translations’ or adaptations? I would argue that the difference lies not so much between Internet presentations of texts and those that came earlier *per se*, but in a key dimension of the kind of translation from one medium to another that we are witnessing. Espen Aarseth’s research at the University of Bergen (<http://www.hf.uib.no/cybertext>) has broadened the discussion of theory into discussion of texts that he terms “ergodic”, in which, in “the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence” to generate a text by moving sequentially through a series of hyperlinks. In so doing, the reader controls the access process to a degree, and in a manner, quite different from those involved when reading text in print. However, most theorists still look, at least in part, towards the generation of a text through this experience. Yet isn’t the

really new element of cybertext, and the one that has most influence to bear on globalisation, not the text that is eventually generated through the new semiotic sequence, but the process itself? In other words, it is not so much that a new text is generated at the end, but the process itself becomes a text of a new shared, consensual identity:

una volta esistevano le cosiddette Società letterarie, con gli scrittori che nei caffè si incontravano fra loro o incontravano i lettori. Si dice che questo oggi non esista più, che ognuno è isolato, ecc. Il comunicare in Internet può allora essere un rinascere della comunità, non dico di scrittori, ma comunque di persone che si interessano ai libri. (“Navigando tra Internet e Letteratura con Carmen Covito”, <http://www.alice.it>, 30 January 1998)

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(University of the Witwatersrand)