

IN THE TEXTUAL CAVES OF MAŁGORZATA DAWIDEK-GRYGLICKA

Nonlinearity and Ergodicity in “A Short History of an Accident” and “Definition”

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I. INTRODUCTION

If, as a child you dreamed of entering the book and wandering between its letters, pages and illustrations. If, as an adult you had the possibilities of fulfilling this dream, your efforts could be near some of the works of Małgorzata Dawidek-Gryglicka, as this was also her dream. Two of the works of this young Polish artist, who is also the author of installations and concrete poetry works, deserves a special analysis in the context of ergodic literature. Here, the imaginary act of entering the book is transformed in quite a direct way; the user/observer/reader has to physically walk into the work, wander around its branching paths and stop at its crucial nodes to identify and read them. This truly peripatetic experience also exemplifies an adventure of the ergodic kind.

Not surprisingly, the effects of pursuing the dream of entering the book and being surrounded by text might be nonlinear, ergodic in nature, and worth placing in a cybertext perspective. But quite astonishingly, Małgorzata Dawidek Gryglicka's work during the last 10 years has always been placed in a context different to this, mainly installation art and concrete poetry. This short paper's task is to present the ergodic mechanisms of Dawidek-Gryglicka's works, compare her work to some of their artistic siblings com-

monly known on the grounds of cybertext theory, and last but not least, to show their unique characteristics on the formal, material and operational levels.

The installations in question are *A Short History of an Accident*, first exhibited in 1997, and *Definition* from 2006. Being artworks made for a gallery space, they are at the same time narrative and poetic texts. As objects of verbal communication they do not form one fixed sequence of letters, words or sentences. Instead, they provide several arrangements that differ from one reading to another, which makes them nonlinear (Aarseth 2003, 792). Being works that demand non-trivial, extranoematic effort from the reader, which include the rules of their own use (Aarseth 1997,1), they also fit the definitions of an ergodic work of art. As such, they are worth looking at from the cybertext perspective, in addition to being placed within the historical context of ergodic arts and literature. One should note here that the works in question, though seen from a cybertextual perspective, are not regarded as cybertexts here.

But if we want to categorize them at all, *A Short History of an Accident* and *Definition* as static and not dynamic works can be considered as analogue, three dimensional hypertexts, where links are expressed in a literal, material form and branching narratives are embedded in physical space. Their spatiality relies upon the user's activity, because one has to move in the gallery space from one node to another, taking different paths in order to fully perceive the work.

These texts, perhaps *A Short History of an accident* in particular, not only fill in some gaps in our view of ergodic history. I believe that they can also shed new light on the theoretical models and typologies that one can find in the field of ergodic and electronic literature. At the same time, by blurring differences between the literary and the artistic (literature and visual art), they can also help us in regards to what is needed today: bringing together those two seemingly separate worlds.

One more matter is worth mentioning when analysing the first work. The author, at the time of creating *A Short History*, did not own a computer, had no Internet access, nor did she know anything about hypertext, cybertext, virtual realities or computerized textual caves. The tradition, to which Gryglicka belongs, derived from textual “caves” of concrete poetry, namely the works of the founder of this movement in Poland – Stanisław Dróżdż.

In terms of ergodicity, Gryglicka’s art goes further than this tradition by adding the already three dimensional, peripatetic installations to the elements of controllable choice given to the user, and by introducing links as a means of artistic expression.



Figure 1. *Między* by Stanisław Dróżdż, an artist regarded as one of the precursors of ergodic art in Poland (Pająk 2007), with strong influence on works and critical writings of Małgorzata Dawidek - Gryglicka. The word “między” (Eng. “between”) is spread all over the room and can be read in numerous ways starting at ANY “m” and finishing at ANY “y”.

II. A SHORT HISTORY OF AN ACCIDENT

Spatial Story of Choice

A Short History of an Accident is a narrative with three intersecting storylines contained on 40 loose pages, which are connected to each other by approximately 70 hempen strings. The pages are mounted on the walls of the room, on the floor and the ceiling. The strings running from one surface to another form quite a dense network, but they still enable the viewer to follow the connections between pages by walking along the cords. The installation was displayed in one of the rooms of The Conceptual Drawing Studio in Poznan Academy of Art in 1997.



Figure 2. The space of *A Short History of an Accident*.

The branching narrative of *A Short History of an Accident* starts at a point that is shared by all three alternative plotlines. The main character – a man in his early forties travels on a bus. When the vehicle approaches the next stop, the man sees another bus going the opposite direction, and a woman who is just about to get off. She reminds him of a girl who he was in love with some 15 years before, and he realizes that she actually looks just like her. The starting node ends. From now on the plot branches into three different strands, which describe the consequences of three different decisions taken by the main character. In one of the versions, the man gets off at the next bus stop and comes back to the place where he saw the woman for the last time. He wanders around trying to find her, encounters places that bring back old memories and eventually he returns home, to have a sleepless, long night. In the second strand, the man stays on the bus, arrives home, decides to visit a hotel in which they once met, and calls for a cab (the taxi motive is an important one here). Finally, in the third chain of events the main character returns to his house, and during the night a neighbor pays him an unexpected visit, confessing the story of an accident.

The possible combinations of nodes that spring from the starting point are both the continuation and the reminiscences of the events from the period of time 15 years back. All three story-lines, dotted with narrative flashbacks, once again meet at a single end: a scene where the main character wakes up from a dream.

The Structure of Links

Both the structure of this work and the reader's activity are described by the author as a "movement onwards and aside". In other words, the main action always goes forward. The flashbacks mark a step-aside and transport the reader back into one of the three main story-lines, but always a step or more ahead in time, and never to the events that already happened.

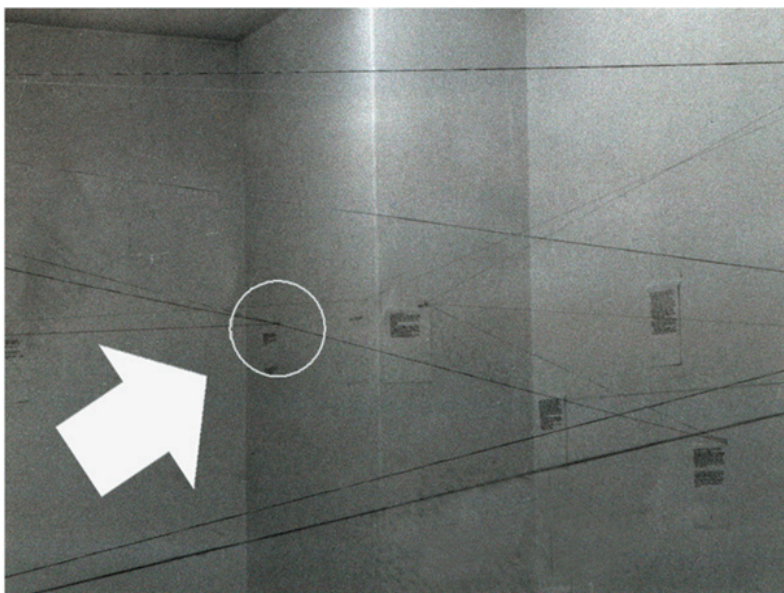


Figure 3. The on-the-go branching of links in *A Short History of an Accident*.

There is not a simple tree of a branching narrative that underlies this work, nor is there a tangled web of random movements and dead ends (Bernstein 1998). If anything, it is a unidirectional variant of a maze, a structure typical of an adventure game (Ryan 2001, 246–254), with a single (successful) ending. As for the density of the network, it is spread unevenly. There are pages with one link coming in and one going out, in addition to pages with three links in and one out. Quite interestingly, the links themselves can branch out. Thus, after having made a choice on the page from which we come, it is necessary to make another choice before even arriving at the destination (Figure 3).

It should be made clear that users/readers/viewers of Małgorzata Dawidek-Gryglicka's installation art are not left on their own, but



Figure 4. A user in action with links and pages of *Short History of an Accident*. Poznań 1997.

are carefully guided from one point to another, and that all possible routes are taken into consideration.

Modularity and Coherence

Even though the choices in *A Short History* belong to the reader, the outcomes are not random, rather they are consciously planned by the author. The same applies to the shaping of nodes. Within the three story-lines there are pages that do not depict any action at all; their function instead is to harmonize events that happen in different locations (taxi, bus, home, hospital) and relate to different causal chains. This modularization, the effect when each piece of the narrative belongs to the right place even in different combina-

tions, Gryglicka achieves by introducing nodes containing radio announcements or ones with short scenes when a character reaches out for a cigarette. A radio can be heard in all three narrative paths which makes encountering a piece with a radio announcement an ideal opportunity to jump from one path to another without making the transition an abrupt one. The same happens with the cigarette scene. Reaching out for it, lightening up and inhaling a smoke can indeed fit into any narrative, when a male character is the smoker.

I am focusing on this aspect of *A Short History* for one reason. All the soothing effects, the need for modularity as seen by Lev Manovich (Manovich 2000, 51) with redistribution of a new media object and its ability to fit into constantly changing contexts, gives this installation much more coherence than a dense and tangled hypertext with lots of dead ends, abrupt jumps and structural “noise”. By trying to shape the content of each page in such a manner that it can possibly fit into any of the emerging contexts, Gryglicka identifies the cybertextual range of expressions with a variety of coherent stories. This artistic formula is closer to the interactive drama Facade than to the hypertext fiction *Afternoon, a story*.

Immersive Techniques And Spatial Play

The immersive experience can be regarded as one of the goals of *A Short History of an Accident*. Gryglicka does not end with mounting the scattered pages onto all possible surfaces which makes the user feel surrounded by the story from all sides. There is more than that. The events of the story which happen during the day are contained on pages situated closer to the atelier’s window. When a scene depicts the main character approaching a window in the fictional world, the page with this passage hangs as close to the real life window as possible. A page with a scene where the main character drops something on the floor lies exactly there. Accordingly, scenes

from the nighttime were pushed towards the door of the exhibition room, that is, to the darkest area of the space.

Another set of semantic implications was carried on by yet another spatial arrangement. The first and the last page of this nonlinear short story were placed just before and behind the door, accordingly, marking them as the entrance and the exit of the text.

III. DEFINITION

A Short History of an Accident is one of just few of Małgorzata Dawidek-Gryglicka's artworks with a strong narrative element. Most of her other installations and graphics employ literariness in a much more conceptual manner, with the source material of the artist's explorations being not a story, but single sentences, words and letters. The construction of meaning takes place mainly in the



Figure 5. *Definition* (2006), view from the entrance.

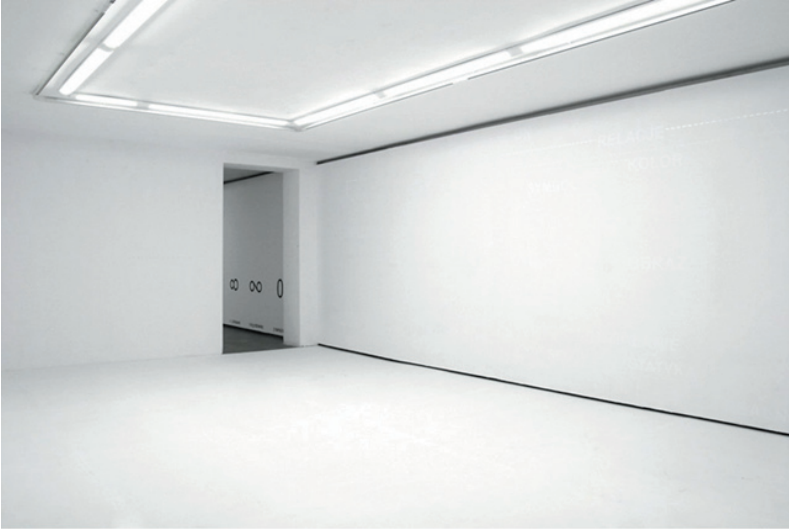


Figure 6. *Definition* (2006) An all encompassing whiteness makes words and connections between them almost invisible. Note the fluorescent dotted line of a link at the top of the wall from the right. Further in the background, in the other room another of Gryglicka's installations.

interpretative domain. One of the most notable exceptions is *Definition* from 2006, another three dimensional “cave” of words, links and branching paths.

In order to see *Definition* one has to adjust one's eyesight to a prevailing monochromatism with the dominant whiteness on walls, floor and ceiling. Attached to all surfaces, scattered words made up of matte white strips surround the viewer. The space between them is filled with dotted, fluorescent lines that connect one word to another, in an apparently non-random manner, while also making each word a matte white node in a fluorescent white network. The user is guided from one word to another, or when encountering a node that leads to more than one direction, the user has to make the

choice of where to follow next. In space, getting from one word to the next, it might take as little as a few inches, or a traversal of one or more walls.

As the title may suggest, the starting point of a user's/visitor's journey is "definition", and what follows is every single word from the dictionary's explanation of what "definition" stands for. In this case, the definition of "definition" is taken from a Polish Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases. Its English equivalent would sound like this:

a: statement expressing the essential nature of something b: a statement of the meaning of a word or word group or a sign or symbol <dictionary definitions> c: a product of defining 3: the action or process of defining 4 a: the action or the power of describing, explaining, or making definite and clear <the definition of a telescope> <her comic genius is beyond definition> b (1): clarity of visual presentation : distinctness (distinction) of outline or detail <improve the definition of an image>

[definition, <http://www.webster.com>]

The elaboration similar to the above was broken into single words, which later were connected in order to form unexpected sequences bringing new meanings. The user is guided by the links to rediscover these new chains of associations. Some of the new word sequences could even evoke the exact opposite sense of a "definition", giving it a more destructive than constructive character, suggesting that instead of explaining the process of defining, one can actually obscure the very object that is being defined. A similar technique of breaking a given source and connecting it to a different, yet not random component is applied to some single words from the official dictionary's explanation. Most noteworthy is the word "definition" itself.

The constructive role of user choices, the importance of links branching the semantic value of node sequences, and the relationships between each other were already recognized by some Polish critics:



Figure 7. Links and barely visible words of *Definition*

The efforts of drawing any lines that would help the viewer in getting out of this maze always mean the necessity of omitting some fragments of the explication [the text of definition]. So following the glossy stretches of links, and starting from the nouns “statement”, “meaning”, “something”, “word” and the preposition “by means” one comes to “destruction” and “deconstruction” and also to “de” – a common part for both. From the word “time” appearing already in the explanation of the “definition”, and linked with “silence”, “voice” and “history”, the dotted line leads our eyes towards the morpheme “fi”, followed by a node “fi, a number” (Dzioba 2007).

The decisions that users have to make do not result in the same dramatic tension as in *A Short History of an Accident*. There is no narrative current that would unfold the events throughout the visited nodes, to encourage the reader to proceed further in order to discover the ending of the story. In other words – there is no suspense in the usual meaning of the word, and one cannot see a play of aporia and epiphany which happens quite often when a rhizomatic,

nonlinear structure is accompanied by an embedded narrative or a quest structure (Aarseth 2004, 369). This is even in its slightest, most scattered form, as in Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*, a story or in computer games like Doom or Quake. *Definition* is a poetic work of art projected onto the space of a room. It is also designed as a work of art ready for viewing. Its viewer may consider the mere action of entering the installation room to be already satisfactory, examining the perfectly clean white walls, and looking at the words and the fluorescent dotted lines as they change colors from various angles.

Does this mean that *Definition* is less ergodic than *A Short History of an Accident*? In light of cybertext typology it is not. Both works share the same set of variables. Subsequently, this is what makes it even more interesting.

IV. CYBERTEXT TYPOLOGY

In the table of cybertext variables as presented by Espen Aarseth (1997, 68-69), installations of the Polish artist would present themselves as follows:

texts	dynamics	determinability	transiency	perspective	access	linking	users/functions
SHA	static	Determinable	transient	impersonal	random	explicit	Interpretative explorative
D	static	Determinable	transient	impersonal	random	explicit	Interpretative explorative

Figure 7. *SHA – A Short History of an Accident, D - Definition.*

From a reductionist perspective of cybertext typology, both of Grylicka's works appear the same. They are static, determinable, intransient, explorable, and they can be randomly accessed. The latter

variable – accessibility – can be questioned in the case of *A Short History of an Accident*. As I have shown before, access to its parts is carefully controlled, and following the links is never random. But, because of the possibility that some visitors will break the rules for using the work and just wander around the room picking up random pages and following links from any point, we should consider it as having random accessibility (just as in, for example, Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch*). This assumption can be, once again, put into question when we consider *I-Ching* and controlled status of its accessibility in Aarseth's typology. If *I-Ching* is controlled and *Hopscotch* is random, where should we then situate *A Short History*? The strict rules of access to possible scripton sequences in *I-Ching* and its conditional linking make it different from both *Hopscotch* and *Short History*. If we try to access *I-Ching* at random, the outcome would not make much sense in terms of its integrity, unlike in the two other examples.

Thanks to the explicit linking and the fact that both *A Short History* and *Definition* are explorable, and that the user must make a decision as to which path to choose, they share exactly the same position on the cybertextual typology as the already mentioned *Hopscotch*, also in addition to Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* or Milorad Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel*. They are all static, determinable, transient, explorable and can be accessed randomly. The main difference between these books and Gryglicka's installations is the additional spatial dimension of the latter, not visible in the cybertext typology.

There are two more intriguing examples already discussed in cybertext theory, that despite having some apparent similarities with Gryglicka's installations, do not share the same position in the typology. The first of them are the paintings of the ancient Egyptian temples, mentioned by Aarseth in *Nonlinearity and Literary Theory*, which are considered to be an example of three dimensional, nonlinear, ergodic work (2003, 764). *A Short History of an Accident*

resembles them in many ways. The only noticeable difference is the lack of links in the former. Are these paintings seen as a model of an ergodic artwork, closer to *A Short History* than *Hopscotch* or *I-Ching*, even if they do not share the same cybertext variables? If so, for what reason? To answer this question further development of differentiations between ergodic works may be helpful. The same can be said in the case of yet another comparison. *Definition* can be viewed as being quite similar to Guillaume Appolinaire's *Calligrammes*: in both works the text forks on its writing space (pages, walls), both are static, determinable, explorative, and once again the only difference lies in links, which are not present in *Calligrammes*. Are the links of no importance or is their presence not as essential in an ergodic work as one would think? Or maybe one should form an internal hierarchy within the ergodic, where variables are given values according to their importance. Perhaps we can just say that the importance of the variables varies from text to text and user to user.

Same Machines, Different Texts?

As textual machines both of Gryglicka's works belong to the same category. Although they should be considered as works of art to be experienced, the differences seem remarkable. The first difference concerns the links, which in *Definition* are less symbolic, as well as more material and operational than in *A Short History*. The other is narrativity; whereas *A Short History of an Accident* tries to emulate nonlinearity in a temporal dimension as a branching story or as a syntagmatic chain, *Definition* explores and emulates the paradigmatic connections of language in its etymology and its social and grammatical conventions. These differences actually mark a division between prose and poetry, construction and (de/re)construction as a mode of artistic expression. However as already mentioned,

when viewing these works as machines from a cybertext perspective, the differences between the two dissolve. Herein rests the beauty, simplicity and provocative core of cybertext methodology.

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