

Sarah Thorne
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Paper or Pixel: Revisiting Geoff Ryman's 253

Introduction

It is now 25 years since Geoff Ryman released *253: Or Tube Theatre* (1996), a novel that uses hypertext linking to set the stage for a fictitious story about the crash of a London Underground train. The website that hosted the novel, however, has unfortunately since been lost. According to the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine and corroborated by websites that maintain records of domains and their owners, Ryman's ownership of the website ended in 2018 (whoxy). The domain appears to have been taken over by domain squatters and, at the time of writing, the site now contains articles about Ryman and his work, but its links redirect users to dubious sites. The original novel, however, remains accessible through the Wayback Machine, which last produced a snapshot of the novel on August 5th, 2017.

The challenges of preserving digital literature are well-known (Abba 2012, Dene 2018, Schrimpf 2008); speaking specifically about Ryman's *253* (prior to its disappearance), Tom Abba writes,

Amongst the earliest examples of standalone hypertext writing (as distinct from commercially constructed hypertext packages) Geoff Ryman's *253* (Ryman, 1997) is captured as a crawled archive by Wayback and referenced (but not archived in its own right) within UK Web Archive content, but not curated in any cogent manner. That Ryman's own website remains online is of considerable value to researchers; however, relying on the ongoing largesse of a single author facing annual hosting fees for a work that brings in no revenue in itself is a dangerous policy for the digital writing community to pursue (121-122).

Writing in 2012, Abba is cognizant of the fact that *253* will not remain accessible indefinitely. Though internet archiving sites provide an important repository for works that can no longer be hosted by their authors, there are limitations to these services, and they are also not immune to the very challenges faced by the authors of the works that they archive. These challenges are compounded by the imminent disappearance of crucial software needed to access digital works; such as the discontinued support for Flash Player (Adobe) and 32-bit programs (Apple). There are also legal obstacles, related to intellectual property and copyright, to attempts to preserve digital works, as a recent lawsuit against the Internet Archive reveals. In the lawsuit launched by major book publishers, the Internet Archive was charged with accusations of piracy for its National Emergency Library, a resource intended for those who lost access to public libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dwyer). While such projects may skirt the rules of copyright, without efforts to preserve digital works, many risk disappearing altogether. *253*, notable for its release as both a digital and print novel (copies of which are now also difficult to locate), ought to be preserved to capture a moment in time where thinking about print and digital textuality was developing. In analyzing *253*, this article makes a case for its continued relevance to discussions of interactivity and our enjoyment of texts across different platforms.

It is now a common practice to make a text available in multiple formats — one might even expect to receive a digital edition with the purchase of a print text. Many view the choice of a print or e-book as a preference. One's reasons for choosing a print version might be the tactile experience, its superior viewing in direct sun, or that it is free of the distractions associated with one's digital devices. Conversely, one might instead choose an e-book because of the ability to search the text quickly, look up words, and add detailed notes. Despite such preferences, it is often taken for granted that an ebook and print edition are fundamentally the same text; in the mid-1990s, however, the two versions of 253 were not viewed as such. As I observed while teaching 253 in the last year in an introductory English course, many students were bewildered by the idea of comparing these two seemingly identical texts. Yet, much like 253's reviewers, students were quick to express their dislike of the print version. This anecdote highlights 253's ability to defamiliarize audiences' thinking about media platforms. It compels readers to reexamine their enjoyment of print and digital media. Unpacking the divisive reactions to 253 through Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze provides insight into readers' enjoyment of its voyeuristic narrative. The change in platform, as I argue, not only alters the text's signification (Grossman 1997), but also the voyeuristic fantasy staged by its narrative that promises to permit readers to peer into the lives of the strangers around them.

A Novel for the Internet

Ryman's 253: *or Tube Theatre*, set on a London Underground train, is divided into seven sections, one for each of the train's cars. These sections are further subdivided into single-page passages, one for each of the 252 passengers and the driver. Passages consists of a 253-word description that details each passenger's outward appearance, background information, and what each is doing or thinking in the moments before the crash. These descriptions contain links that allow readers to explore connections between passengers; however, readers are free to use the website's Journey Planner to freely explore the trains cars, including the fate of their passengers, which is detailed in the novel's final seven pages.

Two years after its release, a print version of the novel was published under the title 253: *The Print Remix* (1998), which maintains the same structure, but uses an index at the back of the book to mimic the hyperlinks used in the original. Although the two texts are otherwise identical, they were not equally reviewed by their readers. Many found that *The Print Remix* fell flat. In "Hypertext: Foe to Print?," Robert Kendall (2000) notes that, "though the book was generally well received, some reviewers complained that it suffered from the loss of its interactive element." Others more harshly criticized the print version as "an example of form obliterating content," while at the same time praising the hypertext version as a "curiously addictive form of storytelling, relying on both the illusion that the reader is shaping the story through choosing which links to follow, and the voyeuristic joy of finding out what people *really* think on the tube" (Mitchell). That these two texts, which share the same restrictions on form, can be viewed so differently provides an unusual opportunity for exploring the effects of transmediation.

In his analysis of film adaptation, George Bluestone (1997) argues that the relationship between novel and film is one that is "overtly compatible, [yet] secretly hostile" (198). Bluestone's assertion is equally applicable to the transmediation of Ryman's text. Although print and digital text appear to be inherently compatible, there is more at stake in this instance of

transmediation than a simple transposition of text. The question of what is altered and what is lost in the process of transmediation is essential to understanding the reactions to 253.

In *My Mother Was a Computer* (2005), Katherine Hayles stresses the need to recognize hypertext and print texts as independent media (38); employing the same reading strategies to each would be comparable to attempting to analyze a film adaptation as though it were a novel. Transmediation, as Hayles argues, is translation, “which is inevitably also an act of interpretation” (89). This understanding of transmediation suggests that a text’s signification is altered in the process. Signification emerges not only from the words on the (web) page, but also from the text’s visual and semiotic features, such as the choice of font, size, and the inclusion of images, audio clips, links, and video. Thus, when such attributes differ between editions, the reader’s experience and interpretation of the text will consequently be altered.

When presented with both versions of 253, there are no doubt differences in appearance; for instance, the very physical form of the print novel is vastly different than a computer screen. In the hypertext version, the reader views the text on a digital display, and navigates its pages using hyperlinks. Pages contain multiple links that may take the reader to the subsequent passenger, a related passenger, footnotes, or even fictional advertisements. Passengers who are employed by the same company, or even those who are fond of felines, are also linked. Though the print novel instead uses an index through which the reader can explore character links, it does not have the same immediacy as its hypertext counterpart: the reader must review the index, as the links are not apparent throughout the narrative. The index lists passengers under categories, such as a company name or “cats.” Jan van Looy (2003) provides an in-depth consideration of its structure and hypertext linking.

Like Hayles, Ryman, too, was very much aware of the effect of transmediation on a reader’s interpretation of a text; as he explains:

“253” with links is about what makes people the same, because you can follow through -- the grandparent theme, the people thinking about Thatcher. It’s about the subliminal ways we’re linked and alike. You just read it passenger by passenger, and it’s about how different we all are. The links change the meaning of the novel. I think I’m going to like the print version more because it emphasizes more just how multi-various the cars are, but the linked version is fun. (qtd. in Grossman)

Yet, a change in navigation does not only alter a text’s signification, it also impacts the reader’s engagement with its fantasy. Contrary to its more conventional understanding, the term fantasy here does not imply a kind of indulgent hallucination, but rather is to be understood in the psychoanalytic sense as it relates to enjoyment and unconscious desire. As Slavoj Žižek explains,

With regard to the basic opposition between reality and imagination, fantasy is not simply on the side of imagination; fantasy is, rather, the little piece of imagination by which we gain access to reality — the frame that guarantees our access to reality, our ‘sense of reality’ (when our fundamental fantasy is shattered, we experience the ‘loss of reality’). (“Possible to Traverse” 122).

Fantasy serves a protective function that prevents one from coming too close to the object of desire and therefore risk losing that desire altogether. Fantasy, as Žižek writes, “is the very screen that separates desire from drive” (*Plague* 32). For readers of 253, the change in platform does not

simply produce a dissatisfaction with one version or the other, but rather it alters the functioning of this protective screen: fantasy becomes distorted through transmediation.

The Fantasy of the Voyeur

The omniscient perspective of 253 stages the fantasy of the voyeur. As described in its introductory pages:

253 is designed to appeal to the Nosey Parker in all of us. How often have you sat in a restaurant, theatre, or bus and wondered who the people around you are? This novel will give you the illusion that you can know — indeed, that you are Godlike and omniscient. This can be a very pleasurable sensation. But remember that, as soon as you close the book, you are no longer Godlike and omniscient. (*Print Remix* 4)

Ryman's text provides his readers with the illusion that they are not only able to see into each passenger's personal life, but capable of knowing his or her intimate thoughts moments before the train crashes. In this omniscient position, the reader embodies the voyeur. The text allows the reader to peer into the lives of interesting passengers and to shy away from those who are less compelling. The text, however, is also self-reflexive, as diligent readers will come across passengers who are also engaged in the act of watching and, thus, caught up in the voyeuristic fantasy. For example, the description of Mr William Dynham (#32) states that "He enjoys looking at the people" (48), and in the "What is he doing or thinking" section, Mr Dynham is depicted as imagining fictitious lives for various other passengers based on their appearance. Another passenger, Mr Savi Gupta (#56) spends his time on the train "imagining what other passengers would look like if they had been born as the opposite sex" (84). It is this desire to know upon which the fantasy of the novel hinges.

The voyeuristic fantasy of 253 also functions in this very way; that is, the narrative provides the "illusion that you can know" (4), which allows its readers to enjoy in a capacity that had previously been limited. Its formulaic structure provides an almost encyclopedic account of each passenger's intimate thoughts and actions prior to the crash, details that would otherwise elude the experience of any real-life passenger interested in those nearby. Yet, the text also prefaces this demand with the recognition that the power it bestows is an illusion, thereby acknowledging its failure to actually deliver what it promises. In a certain way, however, this failure of the text to "tell all" is essential to the fantasy of the voyeur. As Lacan states, "What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain. There he will fantasize any magic of presence, the most graceful of girls, for example, even if on the other side there is only a hairy athlete" (182). The voyeur's enjoyment depends upon the curtain concealing the object; in other words, the text must fail to provide a truly omniscient subject position in order to preserve the fantasmatic element of desire. The voyeur desires to know all and see all, but does not want to actually fully realize this desire: the aim of desire is not its fulfillment, but rather its own perpetuation, as encountering the object of desire often produces disappointment (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 68) and "eliminates precisely what is appealing about it" (McGowan 79). Ryman's novel, however, sets out to do precisely that: to lift the curtain that obscures those around us. However, the digital and print version do so to different degrees.

253 also addresses the effect that the gaze of the Nosey Parker has on those who are observed. Passengers 27 and 240, for instance, are both aware of the gaze: Mr Stuart Cowe

(#240) realizes that “[t]he woman leaning next to him is leaning over the page. He rears back, snorts, and snaps the book shut” (*Print Remix* 326). Ms Danni Jarret (#27) who is writing a comedy routine and catches the woman next to her reading her work and yells at her: “You keep sticking that in funny places, it’ll get bitten off” (42). What is most important about these specific interactions is that they bring attention to the fact that the gaze is not a one-way process: that is, the other who is being watched, also watches back. This effect is central to Lacan’s theory of the gaze, which is not to be confused with the term often referenced by film theorists such as Laura Mulvey. Lacan’s theory, by contrast, disempowers the gaze, and separates it from the act of looking:

The gaze is therefore, in Lacan’s account, no longer on the side of the subject; it is the gaze of the Other . . . When the subject looks at an object, the object is always already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it. This split between the eye and the gaze is nothing other than the subjective division itself, expressed in the field of vision. (Evans 72)

The voyeur depends on the prohibition and obstruction of his gaze in order to derive enjoyment. As Žižek elaborates, the pervert is not simply one who transgresses boundaries of the Law, but depends upon the Law: “the pervert, this ‘transgressor’ par excellence who purports to violate all the rules of ‘normal’, decent behaviour, effectively longs for the very rule of the Law” (118). The gaze is key to the voyeuristic fantasy of 253, as it illuminates the Other’s role in this fantasy, particularly when the reader is abruptly reminded that he or she is also being observed by others as well. How this fantasy is staged, however, varies in the print and digital versions of 253.

Interactivity & Interpassivity

The reader’s enjoyment of Ryman’s novel, according to its reviews, relies on the interactivity afforded by its hyperlinks. The reader’s engagement with the work forms a kind of interpassive relationship with the text. The term interpassivity, coined by Robert Pfaller, describes moments in which one enjoys in the place of the subject: “Rather than letting others *work* for them, they let them *enjoy* for them. In other words, they delegate *passivity* to others rather than *activity*” (2). Pfaller includes Lacan’s analysis of the Chorus’ emotional reaction to events in Greek tragedies, and Žižek’s discussion of canned laughter in television sitcoms as examples (26). Adopting Pfaller’s term, Žižek theorizes two forms of interpassivity: one passive and the other active. In its passive form, the subject enjoys vicariously through the Other, as in the previous examples:

I accede to the Other the passive aspect (of enjoying), while I can remain actively engaged—that is, I can work longer hours with less need for “nonproductive” activity, such as leisure or mourning. I can continue to work in the evening, while the VCR passively enjoys for me; I can make financial arrangements for the deceased’s fortune while the weepers mourn in my place. (“Will You Laugh”)

The subject can, therefore, feel as though they have fulfilled their duty to enjoy without actually viewing what the VCR has recorded, producing an illusory sense of enjoyment. Consequently, Žižek argues, “[i]n contrast to the notion that new media turn us into passive consumers who just stare numbly at the screen, the real threat of new media is that they deprive us of our passivity, of our authentic passive experience, and thus prepare us for mindless frenetic activity—for endless work.”

In its active form, however, interpassivity operates such that the subject is incessantly active in an effort to render the Other passive. This particular form of interpassivity is associated with obsessional neurosis. As Žižek writes, “[t]he link with obsessional neurosis is crucial for the notion of interpassivity, since the key problem of the obsessional neurotic is how to postpone the encounter with jouissance (and thus maintain the belief in its possibility).” (“Possible to Traverse” 108). The purpose of postponing enjoyment is to prevent one from having to accept that attaining jouissance is not possible; as discussed earlier, encountering the object of desire produces disappointment. By avoiding this acknowledgement, the obsessional neurotic can indulge in the fantasmatic illusion that jouissance is merely deferred. As Ian Parker argues, the obsessional neurotic would thus be attracted to science fiction fantasies, for “[i]n science fiction we project fantasies into the future and are then caught in those fantasies both because they seem to confirm what has always been deeply true and hidden about human nature and destiny and because, we believe, we will eventually meet up with the fantasies when we arrive in the future” (203). Like the future, jouissance always remains at an elusive distance from the present.

In order to preserve the fantasy, the obsessional neurotic engages in fervent activity. As an example, Žižek notes the analysand who speaks endlessly at his analyst. By overly fulfilling the analyst’s demand for him to speak, the obsessional neurotic attempts to delay his progress in therapy to avoid the realization that fulfilling desire is unattainable:

I am active precisely in order to keep the other (analyst) silent — that is, so that nothing will happen, so that he will not proclaim the word (or accomplish some other gesture) which will disclose the nullity of my incessant babble. This example shows very clearly how the key feature of interpassivity is that it designates not a situation in which the other replaces me, does something for me, but the opposite situation in which I am incessantly active, and sustain my activity by the other’s passivity. (“Possible to Traverse” 110)

Though it may seem unusual that one who willingly submits to therapy would sabotage one’s own progress, the reality, as Bruce Fink explains, is that “the patient does not really want to change . . . The patient has a great deal invested in keeping things the way they are, for he or she obtains what Freud referred to as a ‘substitute satisfaction’ from symptoms, and cannot be easily induced to give it up” (3).

Conclusion: Pixel or Paper

The incessant activity involved in the postponement of jouissance is essential to understanding the reader’s interaction with the digital version of 253. While on the one hand Ryman’s text positions its readers as the perverse voyeur, on the other, it has the reader engaged in the incessant activity of clicking the links that comprise the narrative of the text. Precisely because 253 encourages a non-linear reading, if one so chose, one could endlessly follow the various pathways that connect the characters without ever being certain that they had read the text in its entirety. However, in so doing, the reader defers its conclusion; the reader is not necessarily seeking its end, but is caught up in its seemingly endless web, or rather the enjoyment of one’s symptom. As Žižek writes,

the hypertext rhizome does not privilege any order of reading or interpretation . . . we, the interactors, just have to accept that we are lost in the inconsistent complexity of

multiple referrals and connections. . . The paradox is that this ultimate helpless confusion, this lack of final orientation, far from causing an unbearable anxiety, is oddly reassuring: the very lack of the final point of closure serves as a kind of denial which protects us from confronting the trauma of our finitude, of the fact that there our story has to end at some point — there is no ultimate irreversible point, since, in this multiple universe, there are always other paths to explore, alternate realities into which one can take refuge when one seems to reach a deadlock. (“Cyberspace Real” 6)

Although 253 makes the details of the inevitable crash available immediately, readers do not have to accept these events as they are presented. The reader’s incessant clicking of links can be conceptualized as an attempt to postpone this inescapable tragedy; another page may only be just a click away that will alter the events. While this view appears to contradict J. Y. Douglas’ claim that “[p]art of the pleasure in reading is tied up with an ending . . . it all ends, satisfying some longing or curiosity within us and freeing us to pursue other things” (89). However, the obsessional neurotic’s desire is dependent on the existence of an ending; their activity serves to both preserve the fantasy that there is more to learn about the train’s passengers and to defer the ending to avoid disappointment.

In *The Print Remix*, however, fantasy cannot be sustained through incessant activity — the protective screen is removed. Although readers of *The Print Remix* are certainly free to flip randomly throughout the novel, the effect is not equal to the experience of navigating the links of the hypertext version. The loss of hyperlinking does not simply make this version less enjoyable to readers, but removes the security that the obsessional neurotic experiences in their incessant activity. The print version cannot support the illusion that the links are endlessly intertwined, as the entirety of the text is in plain view; the reader can know all there is to know. Like the disruption of the voyeur’s desire to see all, readers’ dissatisfaction with the print version of 253 becomes all the more clear: with the whole text in view, there is no surplus that escapes one’s grasp.

The context in which these navigational differences play out (e.g., whether the novel is read in public or in private) is also significant to understanding the staging of the novel’s fantasy. In public, the reader would be subject to the gaze of others. Key to the Lacanian gaze is that it emerges in instances in which one is struck by a sudden awareness of the Other staring back, much like passengers 27 and 240, which serve to destabilize the voyeur’s fantasy and force the reader to acknowledge that those around might be engaged in a similar activity.

While readers of the digital version would likely also experience a similar reaction while reading the novel on public transit, this version also adds an additional dimension from which one recognizes the gaze of the Other, as its presence on a digital device calls attention to the fact that we are constantly being surveilled by our devices — a reality that has only grown to be more true over the past two decades. As Laura Colombino writes, although 253 is optimistic about the future of the web, it “reflects how, in the mid-1990s new economy and Internet euphoria, the web ‘was emblematic of both control and freedom, the apotheosis of the surveillance society and the dream of anarchistic autonomy’” (625).

Describing his novel, Ryman states that the digital version is about how we are all the same, while the print version stresses our differences. Yet, there is much more at play. Studying 253 in a contemporary context provides a fruitful site for rethinking the experience of print and

digital writing. Its ability to defamiliarize an experience that is often taken for granted provokes a critical discussion — one that is especially important in the context of a global pandemic that has made access to libraries difficult at times and has introduced us all to online learning. As a result, many students now exclusively read required texts on digital platforms. This activity should be defamiliarized and made strange once again so we can examine its effects. 253 highlights the secretly hostile relationship between transmediated works, and reveals the need to revisit the effects of transmediation more broadly.

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