MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Changing Maps: Cyberspace, Global Culture and the Interconnected Wor(l)ds of Geoff Ryman's *253*

Lucia Esposito

(Università degli Studi Roma Tre, IT)

Abstract

The article focuses on the increasingly large and interconnected expanse of cyberspace, which is denoted by such a plurality of sites of cultural exchange and sharing between individuals and communities that it eludes mapping. Electronic literature, and in particular hypertext, with its malleability, interactivity, connectedness, indeterminacy, erosion of boundaries between nations, human and machine, public and private, seems best suited to making sense of our technologically textured and globalised reality. In this light, Geoff Ryman's *253* is analysed as an experimental example of hypertextual and global narration; a locus where the evolving relationships between information technologies and social spaces, places and practices are staged and tested.

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1. Introduction

In an extreme view, the world can be seen as only connections, nothing else.
Tim Berners Lee, *Weaving the web*, 2000

During the memorable Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics directed by Danny Boyle, a performance called "Frankie and June say… thanks Tim" featured the presence of Tim Berners-Lee, the computer scientist who is credited with the invention of the World Wide Web at the end of the Eighties. In the right centre of the Olympic stadium, the scene staged a family two-storey house, on whose walls, transformed for the occasion into giant screens, shards of high and low, local and global, musical, televisual and cinematic culture were projected. The scene ended with the house taking flight and revealing in its depths Berners-Lee seated at his computer and live-tweeting a message that reminded us that he donated his work to the world. In fact, in addition to appearing on Twitter, the message *This is for everyone* flashed around the stadium, with the letters made up of pixel paddles held by thousands of spectators crowding the stadium bleachers.

In the special features of the Ceremonies' DVD, in the section dedicated to the filmic design of the scene, Boyle praised the interconnectedness and inclusiveness of the web as a formidable means of (trans)cultural transmission and integration. He did not actually say whether he had meant to portray the house as a tangible icon of the web, with its portals and *home*pages, yet the whole performance seemed to suggest it. The house was represented as more accessible and porous than a private, enclosed place: its screen-walls were definitely more fluid and shifting than bricks and mortar, its structure and perimeter less stable and confining. A number of people that moved in and around the house, frantically accessing and exiting its spaces, seemed to bodily replicate the virtual, real-time interactions in which they were involved in using their smartphones to consume, share and comment on the

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cultural data being broadcast on its walls. However, not only did the scene seemingly evoke the internet-based communication flows and the "actor-networks" formed by the blending of human and technical performances (cfr. Graham 1998, 177-180), it also represented the World Wide Web in the act of sharing culture globally, as the *This is for everyone* twit reminded us.

Unsurprisingly, among the many wonders projected on its walls, the house did not display anything literary, or written *tout court*. Today's media ecology is increasingly dominated by performance media; it is an environment in which literature must fight to preserve its relevance in the overall system of communication and expression; that is so say, not to succumb to the challenges of other languages that co-exist, and seek to prevail, in the digital environment[1]. However, even if one of the main instances of e-lit, the literary hypertext, has not received the attention it expected[2], electronic artworks have long since left their place at the "margin" of literature (Aarseth 1997, 18), making it rather anachronistic to limit the field of the literary to the medium of the printed page. Therefore, Boyle's choice to exclude even the more performative electronic writing from the screen-walls of the web-house may appear unjustified. The following pages aim to show the reasons why, conversely, electronic creations, and hypertext in particular, should nevertheless have been given a place in a performance dedicated to the globalizing practices of cyberculture. The work on which the following discussion will be focused, Geoff Ryman's *253, or Tube Theatre: A Novel for the Internet about London Underground in Seven Cars and a Crash* (1996), will indeed

[1] On this topic, with a particular emphasis on media ecology, see L. Esposito, "La letteratura si salverà dall'estinzione? Sulla sopravvivenza dei libri e delle storie in una prospettiva ecodistopica" (2022).
[2] In the 1990s, in the wake of seminal studies by Jay D. Bolter (1990) and George P. Landow (1992), people began to believe that hypertext would be the (only) future of literature because, with its multiplicity, mutability and fundamental openness, it seemed to fully reflect postmodern thought and sense of identity. Actually, since the 2000s, enthusiasm on the part of both authors and readers has waned significantly. This, of course, has not prevented e-lit from continuing in the most varied forms, from more traditional types of writing – e.g. in blog format – to multimodal texts – such as vlogs and hypermedia – or hybrids based on the languages of Web 2.0 and social networks, such as spoetry, twitter-literature, instanovels, e-mail novels, mobinovels, augmented novels, ARGs, etc.

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be analysed as an apt illustration of the incisive transformations and reconfigurations of spaces, relations and communities taking place both on the world map and in the digital environment. Thanks to its interactive links, the text is much more dynamic and kaleidoscopic than a traditional book; readers are called upon to navigate their way through a space that might be seen to epitomize the "multiplicity of worlds" (Nancy 2000, 185) in which we daily move and come into contact with others, both physically and virtually.

2. Ever-shifting configurations: cyberspace and global culture

As is well known, Berners-Lee's fortunate intuition gave birth to a distributed hypertext system motivated by the need to provide co-workers at CERN with a space for transmitting and sharing information on the computer network. After a short time, thanks to rapid technological development, that limited working environment would turn into the cybernetic space we know today: a boundless but interconnected universe of communication and cultural interaction, ideally depicted as a constellation by Barret Lyon in his 2003 *Opte Project* (Museum of Modern Art, New York), with its millions of IP addresses and connection nodes. According to one of the most enthusiastic, if not entirely utopian, supporters of the web, the French philosopher Pierre Lévy, a new form and distribution of knowledge has been allowed by the emergence of cyberculture, considered as a set of techniques, habits, ways of thinking and values that develop in connection with the growth of cyberspace. As Lévy wrote at the beginning of the millennium, "cyberspace (also referred to as the "network") is the new communication environment that is emerging from the global interconnection of computers. The term refers not only to the physical infrastructure of digital communication, but also to the oceanic universe of information it contains and to the human beings who navigate and feed it" (Lévy 1997, 17; my translation).

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The emphasis on the interconnectedness of cyberspace extends as much to the flows and waves of networked information as to the users who surf them from all over the world[3]. However, from this conception emerges a new form of universality, different from the one inaugurated by the system of writing. Print culture, as Lévy reminds us, is based on the separation of receivers and senders and, thus, on the effort to compose messages capable of circulating everywhere independently of their conditions of production; it responds to the desire to embrace a totality through the issuance of globally comprehensible and translatable meanings, containing in themselves, as far as possible, their "reason" or "key to interpretation" (Lévy 1996, 6). Cyberspace, on the contrary, insofar as "the interconnection and real-time dynamism of online memories" make users "share the same context again", recovers the conditions of oral cultures – "albeit on a different level and orbit" – allowing "universality without totality" (6):

> Through computers and networks, the most diverse people can get in touch, hold hands all around the world. Rather than being built on the identity of meaning, the new universal is experienced through immersion. We are all in the same bath, in the same flood of communication. There is therefore no longer a question of semantic closure or totalisation. […] We can now state [cyberspace's] central paradox: the more universal (extended, interconnected, interactive), the less totalisable. Each additional connection adds more heterogeneity, new sources of information, new lines of flight, so that the overall meaning is less and less legible, more and more difficult to circumscribe, to close, to master. This universal gives access to an enjoyment of the global […]. It makes us participate more intensely in living humanity, but without this being contradictory, on the contrary, with the multiplication of singularities and the rise of disorder. (7)

Cyberspace appears from this perspective as a new territory that eludes the orderly work of the map; one whose internal and external boundaries, centre and margins, are constantly being redefined and renegotiated by contacts and interactions that re-configure

[3] It should be noted, in order to highlight the shared use of aquatic metaphors by most Internet scholars, that the word "cybernetics", originally used in the 1940s to identify Wiener's studies on the recognition of a similar functioning – via feedback – of communication and control in living beings and machines, takes up the Greek κυβερνητική (τέχνη), (kybernetes), whose former meaning was "helmsman, pilot of a ship".

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meaning in ever-changing ways. Bringing to the fore the extensive use of spatial and territorial metaphors in the field – e.g. information superhighway, virtual communities, electronic neighbourhood, electronic frontiers, web surfers and travellers – Stephen Graham underlines the need to "help make tangible the enormously complex and arcane" technological systems and socio-cultural flows of cyberspace (Graham 1998, 166). Indeed, even though the web is only a part of the contemporary cultural landscape recently described by Jay D. Bolter as a "digital plenitude", "in which there are many focal points but no single center" (Bolter 2019, 2), it is responsible for setting the conditions for the complexity and non-circumscribability of the overall system, which is a-hierarchical, disseminated, and constantly reshaped by the multicursal connections and exchanges between producers, consumers and texts that take place within it. Unlike the world of writing and printing, in which the book was itself the best evidence that our intellectual heritage could be understood as a comprehensible whole, the digital plenitude is far from showing itself as a coherent, ordered and organic whole or, as Lévy puts it, as a 'totalising universe'. It is reasonable, therefore, that, beyond the field of possibilities that such an understanding of culture seems to open up, this lack of landmarks can also be perceived as disorienting. Bolter brings up the example of the giant Google, which "built its business on our need to trace threads of order through the plenitude" and has hitherto kept the design of its access page simple and functional in order to give us "the impression that we can gain control over the universe of digital information" (9). Yet, as Bolter firmly asserts, this is an illusion: "The more an individual can master these organizing tools, the larger her sphere of control, but she cannot hope to manage more than a tiny fraction of the ever-expanding web" (9).

Cyberspace, with its countless sites and gaps, unfolds to our perception as a labyrinthine network to be navigated and deciphered; a space where, as prefigured by Michel Foucault as early as 1967, all information is fragmented, distributed, dislocated,

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assembled spatially and relationally[4]. The World Wide Web, which is constantly subjected, in Berthold Schoene's words, to "disruption, dispersal, and ceaseless reconfiguration" (Schoene 2013, 10), appears indeed, just like the world itself in Jean-Luc Nancy's view, as something irreducibly plural: "[t]he unity of a world is not one; it is made of a diversity and even disparity and opposition. […] [T]he world is a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the mutual sharing and exposition to all its worlds – within this world. The sharing of the world is the law of the world" (Nancy 2000, 185). Accordingly, as Graham points out, there is not one single, unified cyberspace; rather, there are multiple, heterogeneous networks", or "an enormously varied 'skein of networks' […] straddling, linking and weaving through different spaces" (Graham 1998, 178).

Nevertheless, as Steve Mizrach suggests, "[t]here can be (and perhaps must be) a geography of cyberspace"; one which is based not on geometry but on relations and human experience:

> It may not be meaningful to 'map' virtual worlds in terms of Cartesian coordinates or latitude and longitude. Still, virtual worlds can contain a multitude of places, each of which are perceived and experienced differently, and thus there must be ways in which we can 'map' cyberspace, however arbitrarily. To do the cultural geography of cyberspace, we must accept the fact that it is not a space that can be measured by simple linear units. Movement from place to place in cyberspace can only be described in terms of *difference of experience*. (Mizrach 1997)

Paradoxically, while cyberspace is basically quantitative, made of numbers (binary bits and digits), people experience it qualitatively, even immersively, just like reality; they have

[4] Foucault's interest in spatial relations, in the 'continuity' or 'contiguity' between places, was a long way ahead of topological discourses that would fit perfectly the cyberworld. As he wrote in his essay on heterotopias (1984 [1967]), the modern epoch was the epoch of simultaneity, of juxtaposition, of the near and the far, of the side by side, and of the dispersed. Whereas the space that had preceded the early-scientific age had been that of 'localisation', governed by strict relations of hierarchy or opposition between places, the one that had followed the discovery of the infinite universe of Bruno and Galileo had become that of 'extension'. In the twentieth century 'dislocation' had broken in, defined by the relations of proximity between points, and by questions of storage, circulation and classification of information and human elements.

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customised ways of reading cyberspace or navigating its landscapes, "but not in such a solipsistic way as to avoid having contact and interaction with other people" (Mizrach 1997). Indeed, in Mizrach's opinion, cyberspace can even provide a testing ground for rethinking old assumptions about how social-cultural relations emerge in space and place[5]. To analyse and explain "the new kinds of identities and interactions that emerge in such a new, unforeseen place" may prove even more crucial than "deciding how to do the cartography of a place that is nowhere and everywhere at the same time" (Mizrach 1997).

3. Connecting words and places on the (Tube) map of *253*

Digital literature can itself be understood, in its various forms, as a practiced and shifting space that, using Michel de Certeau's words (1984, 117), possesses "none of the univocity or the stability" of a circumscribed location. Just like the environment in which it flourishes, it is characterised by multiplicity, movement, openness, interaction, continuous reference to external dimensions and transformation. With hyperfiction, in particular, the literary text ceases to be an object and becomes an activity carried out in a fluid "performance space" (Moulthorp 1995), which, thanks to hyperlinks, is traversable by the reader/performer – with "nontrivial effort" (Aarseth 1997, 1) – along multiple paths and directions. As an a-sequential trajectory, the text can easily be imagined as a moving labyrinth or rhizome, in which each point is connected to other points, other pages, other images. However, within such spaces, just as in those of the web, one can also easily lose orientation, control, the thread of the story. This explains why, besides innately offering an experience which is,

[5] In "The End of Geography or the Explosion of Place? Conceptualizing Space, Place and Information Technology" (1998), Graham explores the main theoretical perspectives on the relations between IT technologies, cyberspace and the concepts of space and place. He advocates for a more fully relational view of the links between technology, time, space and sociality, that is, between the electronic space and the human territorial life. He also quotes Doreen Massey's suggestion to define places as "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings" rather than as "areas with boundaries around" (Massey in Graham 1998, 181).

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borrowing Foucault's words, "less that of a great path developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (46; my translation), most hypertexts are specifically focused on issues of location and direction and not infrequently provide geographical indications and classical or digital maps to contain potential anxiety[6].

Ryman's *253 or Tube Theatre: A Novel for the Internet about London Underground in Seven Cars and a Crash* falls into this category. Created as a website in 1996, then published as a printed book under the title *253: The Print Remix* in 1998[7], it tells of 253 people travelling on the London Underground between Embankment station and Elephant & Castle on January 11, 1995. Its visual and structural layout overlaps with the Way Finder that Henry Beck invented in 1933 to simplify overly detailed representations of the Tube journey through the city by omitting almost everything but the names of the stations. Ryman performs a similar operation by creating a neat and ordered space, which tries to contain the chaos and bewilderment that we usually associate to hypertexts (and hyperspace): the 'real' space of the Tube map – which, like London itself, is not a homogeneous entity but a cluster of separate spaces demarcated by coloured lines – is articulated with the 'virtual' map of the website; in the same way, the 'real' movement of passengers is articulated with the 'virtual' movement of web travellers. The homepage of the text is expressly meant to reassure us: "You are here! Trust me in this and we may proceed. […] Simply click on the option of your

[6] According to many scholars, not least under the influence of digital communication, a range of cultural domains, including the scientific, the sociological or the economic ones, use cartographic metaphors to respond to "that variegated need for orientation that seems to characterise contemporary society", always in search of "systems of [...] decoding the complexity of the world" (Papotti 2012, 77-78; my translation). Marina Guglielmi and Giulio Iacoli (2012: 14-16) point to the frequency with which it is now possible to find literary texts that either include "explicit maps" or otherwise emphatically display a distinct topographical quality by presenting themselves as spaces to be traversed and explored, just like hypertexts or networked novels. Among the latter, *The 21 Steps* by Charles Cummings is worth mentioning here. In it, the navigation skills of web explorers were enhanced with the latest geo-referenced navigation technologies (GPS), which made use of satellites and other digital localisation means to allow users not to get lost in the narrative. (Unfortunately, the text is no longer available on the Penguin Books website).

[7] It was possibly the first-ever Web-site-to-book deal.

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choice. Relax! It's so easy travelling with *253*"[8]. Moreover, the layout has an evident mathematical and symmetrical structure: just like in the title, the story is about 253 people, "so that the illusion of an orderly universe can be maintained" (Ryman 1998, 2)[9], and is composed of 7 macro-sections, each dedicated to one of the 7 carriages composing the train; each section has its own map, that shows where the 36 people travelling on the carriage are sitting, and gives in 3 different subsections – 'Outward appearances', 'Inside information' and 'What he/she is doing or thinking' – which portray each character in exactly 253 words. However, especially through the juxtaposition of the author's outward descriptions of passengers and the more unmediated presentation of what is going through their minds, Ryman dissipates the idea of a single observer/author and point of view, building in fact a fragmented structure based on the stitching together of multiple perspectives and pieces of stories[10]. Transversal micro-dramas involving more than one passenger – such as the quadrilateral formed by four women in four different carriages who are lusting after the same *Big Issue* seller, the American Sam Cruza, who is also present on the train – are also enabled by the links, which break "the illusion of an orderly universe" by giving the story a jigsaw puzzle-like shape.

So strongly focused on space, to the point of stating "in cyberspace, people become places" already on the first page, the work does not follow a chronological order except in the final section, where we are offered the alienating experience of the final crash. As Ryman said in an interview, "[u]sually the primary metaphor for fiction is temporal, the flow of time, although there is a spatial element. Here you're exploring the simultaneity of

[8] The website http://www.ryman-novel.com/ still exists, but, unfortunately, the original contents are no longer there.
[9] Since, as the author himself stated, the adaptation for the book fairly closely follows the contents of the hypertext, this quotation and some other following refer to the pages of the novel published in 1998.
[10] As Michael O'Brien says, "[t]he effect of this structure is through the omniscient narrator's negation, enabling the reader to enter the chronotope of the text, allowing them to move around the train, transferring their reading of the text from character to character, continually shifting their perspective on this particular train journey" (2010, 160).

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something, mainly spatial" (Ryman in Grossman 1997). Therefore, the work does not construct an actual temporal plot, rather it deconstructs it, freeing the narrative from the linear and sequential constraints of before-after and cause-effect, thus emphasising the different organisation of the story afforded by the hypertextual *mise-en-texte* (cfr. Debeaux 2017). As the introductory notes reveal, "[n]othing happens in this novel" (Ryman 1998, 4); and also "the universe is not held together by cause and effect alone, but by mysterious patterns", so that all the people involved in the story were included because they "reached and important *point in their lives*" (3; my emphasis). Indeed, as the author highlights, thanks to its spatializing dynamics, the novel "replaces curiosity about time with curiosity about space […]. The question is not: what happens next? but *where* will we go next?" (Ryman in Grossman 1997; my emphasis).

4. A network of communal and global practices

The way turning points and destinations are discussed in this Internet novel strongly reminds how, in Chapter IX of his well-known work on *The Practices of Everyday Life* (1984, 115-130), Michel de Certeau described those 'spatial stories' that rely more on the 'tour' than on the 'map'. If, according to the French scholar, the stories that follow the map model ignore the element of practice produced by movement and displacement, and thus build a rational and ordered space, the stories modelled on the tour have to do with motion: they tell both the story of someone experiencing a place and the way in which that place is perceived through the movement within it. In fact, all the passenger sections in *253* are purposely designed "to appeal to the Nosey Parker in all of us" (Ryman 1998, 4); to give us the illusion that we can get to know and share the travel experiences and thoughts of all the people on the train (in fact, to "share their London Transport Experience", 3). Michael O'Brien (2010) focuses on the physical act of commuting depicted in the story and on the imaginative work triggered by both the spatial-temporal void represented by the

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underground tunnels and the physical confinement of the commuters in the carriages. During the journey, what Henry Lefebvre (1984) calls "mental space" overlaps with "social space": it is awoken and becomes apparent to the subjects involved as they feel compelled to escape into the novel they are carrying, to indulge into musings, or to eavesdrop, peep or imagine what the other people sitting next to or opposite them are doing or thinking. In some cases they also end up talking with or touching each other, for example when Ms Danni Jarret (passenger 27) notices that the woman sitting next to her, Miss Flora McCardie (passenger 28), is reading over her shoulder. Danni turns to look at her and, on impulse, pushes her nose like a button. When they both get off, Flora stops the girl and asks her why she did it, then "they begin to speak" (Ryman 1998, 43). People effectively enter into a form of topological relationship – of proximity or distance, openness or closure – with others and with the space they occupy and traverse[11]. Taking up Lefebvre's words, O'Brien writes that the Underground "is indeed the locus of an unlimited multiplicity [and] unaccountable set of social spaces" that "interpenetrate" or "superimpose one another" (O'Brien 2010, 159); it is located at the intersection of the 'mysterious patterns' that constitute the wide array of the collective thoughts and social types that are put on display in *253*'s carriages. Thus, what the Tube ostensibly does to Londoners is to make them more aware of one another: "the act of commuting becomes ritualized around memories and impulses connecting individuals to a society which lives its life through the Tube" (164).

If the Tube can be seen as an allegory of cyberspace, the fractured and interconnected micro-dramas of the passengers in it could also be seen as "a metaphor for the ways in which we function in our various communities" (Bolter 2001, 10). Since hyperlinks can be seen as "meeting places" or "crossing points" (Audet-Saint Gelais 2003, 74) capable of disjointing

[11] In his article on 'electronic literature as world literature', Joseph Tabby observes how in digital fiction a topological approach – centred not on Euclidean geometry but on relations such as opening/closing, direction/orientation, distance/vicinity, or on gaps, immersion, dimension, etc. – gives way to a more flexible space of creation, in tune with the very dynamics of the network (2010, 42, 47).

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and uniting at the same time, and of opening perspectives by referencing subsequent information (Debeaux 2017, 4), electronic literature, as Jay D. Bolter postulated in his seminal work on *Writing Space* (1991), might be seen as more adept than the conventional novel at seizing who we are, or aspire to be, as communities in the digital era. Bolter has even identified the new global culture with a vast hypertext. The other way round, as Schoene points out, Ryman's hypertext can be seen as an example of contemporary global narration: "weaving us into one at the same time as setting us free, disclosing both our predilection for affiliation and our capacity to propagate endless dispersion. […] [T]he new global narration sees the world open up in communal, yet never homogeneous, synchronicity" (Schoene 2013, 8). In fact, "the novel imagines not just the daily circulation of *Massenmenschen* that is contemporary London, but moreover the mass commotion that animates and agitates the world as a whole" (11). London itself represents the vast immensity of the world, and the Underground, which makes this immensity more navigable, transforms its space, in Tobias Döring's words, in "a network of relations without a centre, without clear limits as well as a vast arena for unforeseen, momentary and often singular encounters" (Döring in Schoene, 11).

Indeed, in Ryman's world, people of the most diverse ethnicities, nationalities, religions and social classes – black and white, Christian and Muslim, straight and gay, workers and professors, etc. – meet and interact with each other, mirroring global community and culture. Epitomising this blending, the first character that opens the novel is the driver Tahsin Celikbilekli, a Turkish political scientist with a British wife who teaches at SOAS (London's 'School of Oriental and African Studies') and is also writing a book. Unfortunately, by falling asleep, he will also be responsible for the train crash. Canadian writer Geoff Ryman himself is also included among the cosmopolitan passengers on the train. He is passenger number 96 in carriage number 3, and on the carriage's map his name is ironically accompanied by the words "maps and mistakes" (Ryman 1998, 107). In fact, he

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is described as standing to peer at the Tube map opposite his seat before accidentally sitting, without looking backwards, on top of a passenger, and thus triggering hilarity among those present. In reality, he is part of a company of 'amateur' actors performing the slapstick comedy *Mind the Gap* on the trains. As Ryman writes, "[p]aying customers follow the comedians from station to station as they perform", but this is the first time that "he has taken the lead idiot role" (137). To the metaphor of the web as a cosmopolitan stage is thus added the widely accepted idea of hypertext – with whose 'maps' and 'gaps' the author is 'awkwardly' dealing for the first time – as a collaborative performance. The customers/readers follow the paths from one station to another (from one link to another) traced by the author, but precisely as in a theatrical performance (as suggested by Brenda Laurel in her work on *Computer as Theatre*, 1991), they also provide the work, through their interactive involvement, with the affective dimension that Ryman also pursues through his constant appeals to the reader throughout the text (even asking them to fill in the "customer feedback at the end of the novel" – Ryman 1998, 5). Indeed, the web-travellers are asked to co-produce meanings in an environment in which, despite the abstractness and virtuality of the context, the communal aspect of human communication is not neglected; the human intervention is "connected, sensuous and personal" (Graham 1998, 172); bits meet bodies in a network of emotional attachments.

5. Conclusion

Qu'est-ce que l'universel ?
C'est la présence (virtuelle) à soi-même de l'humanité.
Pierre Lévy, *Essai sur la cyberculture*, 1996

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Considering that Ryman wrote *253* when electronic literature had just come onto the scene, the text can be considered as an early attempt to fathom how computer technologies and cyberspace relate to the real world, but more importantly how the simultaneity, juxtaposition and topological relations of the web can help to better understand the way people connect to the environment and to each other. A statement included in the printed version of the novel supports this view. In the book's "useful links appendix" aimed at bringing readers "all the ease and convenience of the original interactive novel" (Ryman 1998, 353), Ryman emphasises how "linking people because they were gay, black or Asian seemed pointless", so much so that he preferred to group them under semantic labels – such as Beatles, Canada, Cats, Football, Painting, Arts, SOAS, Margaret Thatcher, Weightlifting, etc. – that answered more fundamental questions such as "What do the characters have in common? Do they interact personally?, Do they share a common employer or locale?, Do they share other interesting or novel characteristics?" (353).

Being an exploratory survey of the constraints and affordances of digital environments and narrations, *253* does indeed seem to convey the idea that "cyberspace is not a particular technical telecommunication infrastructure but a certain way of using existing infrastructures", and that "by means of any physical links, it aims at a particular kind of relationship between people" (Lévy 1997, 145; my translation). However, with its simultaneously fragmented and interconnected layout, in which the spaces of the London Underground and those of the web overlap, the text is also an ideal place for reflection on the changing configurations of local and online communities, as well as on the supposed capacity of Internet spaces to both mirror and embody the new "contact zones" where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt 1991, 33). Indeed, as an instance of contemporary global narrative, *253* also probes the new forms of cosmopolitanism and communal living favoured by the web. Given the constant articulation of local and global allowed by the bi-focal structure of the text, Ryman seems to antedate Kwame Anthony

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Appiah's view of the modern cosmopolitan citizenship as a connection to both the particular place we live in and the global tribe that we have become. In Appiah's words (2006, 11), what Ryman's narrative eventually demonstrates is that "the worldwide web of information […] means not only that we can affect lives everywhere, but that we can learn about life anywhere too", not least in the (hyper)space of the Tube.

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI
Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Bio-bibliographical note

Lucia Esposito is Associate Professor in English Literature at 'Roma Tre' University, Italy. Her main interests include: the relationship between Shakespeare's late plays and figurative arts; literary forms and cultural identity through the lens of performance studies (Sukenick, Malkani,Kureishi, and other authors); the various interconnections between literature and the media, with a focus on radio (*Scene sonore. I radiodrammi di Samuel Beckett*, 2005; and some other articles and essays on Stoppard and Carter's radioplays), on cinema and musical biopics (Lennon), on the utopian/dystopian genre in TV series (*Black Mirror*); and on the issues of creativity and literariness in the digital culture (Amerika, Danielewski, Fforde, Coupland, Hall, among others). She has co-edited a volume on *Metropoli e nuovi consumi culturali* (2009), an issue of *RAEI* on "Identity, Culture, and Performance Studies" (2013), an issue of *Between* on "Technology, Imagination, Narrative Forms" (2014), and the volume Downton Abbey. *Il fascino sfacciato dell'aristocrazia* (2021). Her last monograph is *Oltre la mappa. Lo spazio delle storie nell'immaginario moderno: Shakespeare, Beckett, Danielewski* (2021).

E-mail address: lucia.esposito@uniroma3.it

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