

A narrative approach to ambient literature: embodied spoken monologue and enhanced interactional metalepsis¹

I. Ambient literature that needs to lend its readers bodies to tell stories

Ambient literature concept was developed in a research project led in years 2016-2019 at the Digital Culture Research Centre at the University of the West England in collaboration with Bath Spa and Birmingham Universities. The term was proposed to describe “situated writing practices in which text is able to respond to the site of reading” (Dovey, Abba, Pullinger 2020: 5) and the aim of this practice-based research project was to look for new forms of literature that spring from combining place-based, situated writing and new (also location-based) technologies; the project was conducted in “active dialog” with publishing industry (10). Ambient literature concept was proposed as an umbrella term to talk about what is possible in literary field production and the project aim was to gather “perspectives and findings for wider use and future development” (10). Emma Whittaker compellingly sums up the broad spectrum of ambient literature field, arguing that: “ambient literature can be considered a frame denoting narrative practices in which the structure and story consent is intentionally integrated within the reader’s physical surroundings”. As a consequence not only the reader becomes part of the story, but also “their environment is turned into the setting for the story events” (Whittaker 2020: 233).

In this paper, in order to characterize ambient literature works and the experience of reading them, I will look at them through the lenses of three well-known concepts: *palimpsest*, *metalepsis* and *syllipsis*. Then I will ask about the poetics of such works, about the narrative form that can be useful to create such literary experiences. I will focus mostly on one of the possibilities: enhanced form of what had been characterized as a *spoken monologue*. I will illustrate my argument with some terse examples (deeper analysis, due to the imposed paper length, definitely goes beyond its scope).

Ambient literature proposes the new concept of author-reader contract. Such literary experiences are fully “embodied readings” (Abba, Spencer 2020), not only “cybersomatic e-lit works” that rather use readers’ bodies as a kind of reading tools (those are also told to work on metaleptic level (Ensslin et al. 2020)). Ambient literature works need their readers’ bodies (understood as a part of the ambient) to tell the story. So the author-reader contract takes the form of declaration: “Dear Reader, lend me your body, and then I will show you my story”². And let me remind here that the aim for ambient literature project researchers was “to think about work that makes the phenomena of the embodied and material reader a key determinant of the text, not a problem to be elided” (Dovey, Abba, Pullinger 2020: 19-20).

Some of proposed concepts can be as well used to describe literary locative narratives, what was in scope of my research during last years (Przybyszewska 2020). The complicated

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² This declaration can function not only in e-lit, but also in many other fields of art (Górska-Olesińska, Przybyszewska 2020).

relation between the field of ambient literature and literary locative narratives (see Dovey, Abba, Pullinger 2020: 14-17) unfortunately goes beyond the scope of this paper.

II. Palimpsestous, metaleptic experiences for sylleptic protagonists

I. Palimpsestuous structure of palimpsestuous experience

At the very beginning of Carlos Fuentes' *Aura*, there is a moment when Felipe Montero, the main protagonist whose name and personality is uncannily imposed on the reader, wanders, looking for the Donceles 815 street. Various time layers, past and present, overlap in the oniric, empty city and Felipe (thus, also the reader, textual "You") sees simultaneously old and new door plates with building numbers or street names from the past mixed with the present ones as if the past shown through the presence. Fuentes' vision vividly illustrates the figure of palimpsest, which is a perfect metaphor of ambient literature works as well as of the character of such works reading.

When the reader's ambient becomes part of the story, the storyworld overlaps the actual one (and the other way round). As a consequence, there are various "layers" of reality that the reader is immersed in; and they are blended, like in Fuentes' story. The ambient literature reader has to sum up information from all the layers, including his actual surroundings, to get the whole picture. As underlined by Matt Hayler, ambient literature not only is palimpsestuous itself, but it also "asks to be read palimpsestuously" (Hayler 2020: 91).

Interviews with readers (which were an important part of the ambient literature research project) show another similarity with Felipe Montero's experience. They document testimonies of being lost between the realities, of not knowing to which reality (actual or literary, fictional one) particular sounds, actions or facts belong. They depict constant crossing of ontological borders. "[I]t's really funny, but I thought I was listening to the city, and I suddenly became aware that I was listening to it on my headphones. It blended so naturally" - explained one of the interviewed readers, while another claimed: "I actually thought that it was happening for real in the street... I could hear barking... I really jumped and looked around" (Hayler 2020: 99). These readers were like Felipe Montero, who was lost in time and - in a little metaphorical way - between the stories and worlds.

II. Enhanced interactional metalepsis

Thus, because of their palimpsestuous character, ambient literature works propose to readers the metaleptic experiences: they blend two different worlds, two ontological dimensions. Metalepsis, defined in the 1980s. by Gérard Genette, is a term used to characterize different types of violations of ontological boundaries; it serves to describe the movement between narrative levels or separate worlds (e.g. between the fictional and the actual ones). Having in mind various typologies of metalepsis, I will focus on the *ontological metalepsis* (Fludernik 2003) and, above all, on what Bell and Ensslin in their last publication have called *convergent interactional metalepsis* (Bell, Ensslin 2021: 112-113), staying focused, like these researchers, on crossing boundaries between the actual world and the storyworld. In fact, presented analysis of metaleptic character of ambient literature can be seen as supplement to the analysis of interactional metalepsis subtypes IV and V presented by Bell and Ensslin. Additional question is if the ambient literature isn't using as ultimate interactional metalepsis as VR (Bell, Ensslin 2021: 104-115).

Metalepsis has been deeply characterized in literary theory discourse, and its initially underresearched area(s) - the metalepsis in digital storytelling - has been also examined (e.g. Kukkonen 2011, Bell 2016). However, these analyses, based eg. in Ryan thesis that cursor can be a virtual representation of the reader in the storyworld (Ryan 2006: 122) were mostly focused on the fact that the technology of interaction “causes a trace of the reader [avatar, cursor, visual imprint of haptic interaction - AP] to appear onscreen and thus an imprint of them in a separate ontological domain” (Bell, Ensslin 2021: 77). In comparison with what happens while reading the ambient literature (or, more generally, works that use convergent interactional metalepsis, with strong emphasis on VR experiences), this seems only symbolic, metaphorical breaching of boundaries between the reader’s world and the storyworld.

In the introduction to the chapter focused on interactional metalepsis, Bell and Ensslin also quoted the user³ experience description (Bell, Ensslin 2021: 73). However, comparing this testimony (and its analysis) with the ones that were references for ambient literature project researchers, one can clearly see a slight, but very important difference. Crossing the ontological border is in this case still a symbolic act (“I [...] situated myself as that first person view” interpreted by Bell and Ensslin as “deciding to become the avatar” (73)). That is because the (let’s call it “early”) theory of interactional metalepsis, reasonably proposed as necessary extension of this theoretical approach in context of digital art, is still focused on metaphorical presence in the story-world which is definitely not connected with the real one. In other words, as Bell and Ensslin stated, the user (reader) need to declare his will to cross the border and the way they interact (“via hardware” (73)), although sometimes makes them believe that they are in the story world (player “exploring the house” seen as “being inside the storyworld” (73)), is still what in cognitive theory is called *enacting*; it is still based in the act of imagination (that would be my interpretation of the phrase “I sort of situated myself as that first person view” (73)). Entering into the storyworld needs to be linked to the act of “stepping into someone’s shoes”, adopting his/her perspective and point of view. Of course, in the experience quoted by Bell and Ensslin that is also a consequence of using first person narrative, because there is no space for the user (reader) themselves in the storyworld. To enter into it, the reader needs to become someone else (and this one is seen as an “automatic extension” of experiencing “I”), but there is no “real” connection between the reader body and the storyworld. The use of second person narrative doesn’t change a lot (Bell, Ensslin 2021). Readers’ gestures and actions only permit a still symbolic presence of the reader in the storyworld, confirmed by perceived traces of these actions on the screen.

On the contrary, in ambient literature there is a real space in the storyworld left for the reader. He/she doesn't have to enact someone in the storyworld nor to “decide to become” someone else. The reader is still himself/herself, with his/her own body, in his/her own ambient (which, both, become part of the story). And because of that, people who experienced ambient literature works were more focused on the palimpsestic structure of the word, on the fact that they could not distinguish the actual (real) world and the storyworld. They didn’t need to think about “situating themselves” in someone's role; they played themselves. How different from the testimonial quoted by Bell and Ensslin is the one cited by Dovey and Hayler: “The thing that, maybe, makes it ambient storytelling is that it utilised your universe, what’s surrounding you, differently than stories that absolutely ignore who you are and where you’re going...it didn’t impose an identity on you which sometimes happens in games [...] It didn’t tell you who you are. I think that it was immersive, but it’s strange to be immersive but also be in the place where you are” (Dovey, Hayler 2020: 149)

³ Andy Cambell’s and Judi Alston’s *Wallpaper*.

The principal aspect of ambient literature works that enhances the metaleptic character of experience of reading them is the fact that they ask readers to interact in/with their actual world. When the storyworld is a kind of palimpsestuous overlay for the reader's reality, the reader doesn't need to transport him in his imagination into the storyworld to interact, he doesn't see his/her symbolic extensions on the screen. In Pullinger's *Breathe*, when the reader moves his screen to unveil the text hidden by ghost, he sees as it is being revealed. His mobile phone being hunted by the ghost is part of the story, but the results of this (as well as readers reaction to that and the phone itself) are rather part of actuality. In the same work the traces of reader's previous locations (thus real movements in actual world) or images from the actual reader location are used in ghosts' monologues to create the thrilling impression that they really know everything about the reader, that they really "see/saw" him, as declared; Similarly, in Semyon Polyakovsky's *Maginary*, when the reader walks in the actual world, the protagonists are tracking (counting) his steps and commenting that it is the reader who needs to walk (and it is true that the action, as ironically and repeatedly emphasized by protagonists, won't go ahead till the reader has stepped his 1000 steps)⁴.

III. Sylleptic protagonist

Characterised permission for being yourself in the story lead to the very specific construction of textual "You", which I will call the *sylleptic "You"*, *sylleptic protagonist*, applying the Ryszard Nycz's term *sylleptic "I"* in a new context. In ancient rhetoric *syllepsis* was characterised as a figure of speech which permits to break with syntactic rules in order to highlight ambiguity of the word and its ability of entering at the same time in two different, contradictory relations. Then it got its modern, a little metaphorical, reinterpretations. For Derrida *syllepsis*, when used in a text structure, "cancels the choice between two contradictory options" (Winięcka 2004: 139) and makes both of them, paradoxically, possible. Also in Michael Riffaterre's interpretation *syllepsis* permits "parallel actualization of both alternatives" (139). Ryszard Nycz used this concept to build a typology of modern subjectivity, in which one of its types he called *sylleptic "I"*. As Nycz explains: "The sylleptic *I*, to put it most simply, is the *I* which has to be understood simultaneously in two ways: namely as true and as fictional, as empirical and as textual, as authentic and as fictional-novelistic" (Nycz 1995: 386-367). Thus, this kind of "I" is somehow fragmented, dispersed between two realities, but not self-contradictory, and that is because of the fact that the relation between the real "I" and the literary "I" is interactive and interferential, they "mutually affect and exchange properties" (Nycz 1995: 367).

While Nycz used the trope of syllepsis to describe textual "I" (and also to particular strategy of writing (Winięcka 2006: 7)), I will apply this category to the textual "You", which is so pivotal for ambient literature. By *sylleptic "You" (addressee)*, or more generally *sylleptic protagonist*, I mean "You" that belongs to two (entangled) realities, the actual and fictional one, and which is not self-contradictory because of that.

While Nycz's *sylleptic "I"* is "being written" (Nycz 1995: 387), sylleptic "You" is being spoken to. As a "sylleptic" entity this "You" can belong at the same time to diverse ontological worlds and parallelly be (and act) in them. This textual "You" is at the same time the reader of flesh and blood, the addressee of the narrative and (more or less) active protagonist in the

⁴ Because we rather can observe here traces of the actual world in the storyworld, one could call it *descending* metalepsis. However, it is not the difference between *ascending* and *descending* metalepsis what really defines the ambient literature.

storyworld, because - according to the ambient literature concept - the reader and his ambient (in various modes) become part of the storyworld. The proposed concept would be similar to what Bell and Ensslin called *metaleptic you* (Bell, Ensslin 2021: 222) and could be also seen in context of Hanebeck's category of *second-person metalepsis* (Hanebeck 2017) (although such comparison goes beyond the scope of this paper).

Furthermore, in ambient literature, thanks to its palimpsestic and metaleptic character, there is a specific place created (or left) in the story for this *syllleptic* "You", for the reader. The latter is "physically present within the work" (which responds to it "accordingly") because "such embodied literary experiences bring their reader into contact with a physical location as part of a narrative" (Abba, Spencer 2020: 284), what can be seen as similar to breaking the fourth wall in theatre or movie. But, as the Pullinger's *Breathe* case shows, it needn't always mean that the reader is in the concrete place during the act of reading (this story "uses" for example location API data to make the ghost dialogue more appalling: the ghost knows where the reader had been earlier). In the subsequent part of this paper I will focus on narrative structure that has such a "gap" for the real reader (the reader of flesh and blood), for the *syllleptic* "You".

IV. Embodied spoken monologue

Narrative structure can help in creating enhanced metaleptic character of the story and make it easier to the reader to unnoticeably and fluently cross the ontological borders and to be in two words at the same time. Dovey, Abba and Pullinger have emphasised the role of narrative techniques for immersion in ambient literature (Dovey, Abba, Pullinger 2020: 1), underlying the usefulness of second person narrative in this context (14). Also Bell and Ensslin appreciate second person narrative as a textual metaleptic device (Bell, Ensslin 2021: 212-246) and even see textual "you" as "one of, if not the most powerful, linguistic-rhetorical device for digital fiction writers and developers" (Bell, Ensslin 2021: 245). One of the narration structures that makes textual "You" an important element of the story is a *spoken monologue* deeply characterized by Michał Głowiński (Głowiński 1963).

Spoken monologue was developed in the 1950s in Europe (the model for this narrative construction was *The Fall* by Albert Camus (1956)) and it became popular in 50s and 60s in some countries (e.g. France and Poland), especially for literature of intellectual reckoning, influenced by existentialism and philosophy of the absurd⁵. In modern times, along with the growing popularity of interactive storytelling and second person narration, it is again in play. I will use this concept to characterize one of the ambient literature frequently used narrative structures.

Spoken monologue is "paradoxically dialogical" (Głowiński called it also "one-sided dialog" (Głowiński 1963: 236, 237)). It means that, even the addressee (textual "you") cannot answer, the speaking "I" constantly behaves as if he/she were there, including reacting to the "given" responses (they are known, because the speaking "I" repeats them while commenting)⁶. The speaking "I" not only addresses its monologue to this textual "You", but there are also traces of this "you" in the text; this "you" has its own role to play. The specific construction of *spoken monologue* that provokes, invites the reader to substitute textual "You"

⁵ Wolf Schmid calls similar but lacking the ideological themes and the intellectual argumentation structure a *dialogic narrative monologue* (Schmidt 2010: 87).

⁶ What Głowiński had called the "mute partner of the conversation" Richardson later described as a *figure of interlocutor* (Richardson 2006).

with themselves, to become him/her is called by Głowiński the “method of invocation” (Głowiński 1963: 238).

In “embodied reading” of ambient literature this “substitution” loses its metaphorical, symbolic character. *Spoken monologue* takes the form of *embodied spoken monologue* in which the “you” is substituted by the real reader of flesh and blood. The ambient literature work seen from that perspective becomes a literary work in form of the “score” (Bogalecki 2020) in which there is a special role for the reader; it seems a kind of performance (Abba, Spencer 2020: 290).

Vivid example of that can be Janet Cardiff’s *Her Long Black Hair*, a locative audio walk with pictures. The speaking “I” in this case not only creates an imaginary relation with “you”, but also places the “gap” for the reader in the actual reality, mushing up two ontological levels. It is hard to maintain that the meeting of speaking “I” and listening-to “you” is only fictional and imaginary, because if it hadn’t happened, how would the reader have had the real material picture in his hand? Because in *Her Long Black Hair* the “gap” for the reader is (re)located into the actual world, because it is moved from the text to the reality (what is the nub of embodiment of *spoken monologue* structure), the reader can act as a *syllaptic* you. In the structure of story and narrative the “you” is the one who really acts in the actual world, who holds the pictures and looks at them, guided by the speaking “I”.

Similarly, in *Dzieje jednego pocisku* by Marta Dziedziela and Szymon Szul⁷, the reader-listener’s phone on which he/she listens, reads and watches the story is the element that links two ontological dimensions. It is a permanent point of reference for both, the textual “I” (or “I-s”, because there is more than one speaking “I” in this story) and the textual “You”. The speaking “I” comments on how old (from his future perspective) this phone is and asks to “acknowledge location” with it. From the beginning of the story it is clear that the mobile phone will be an instrument of communication between the reader-listener and the protagonist(s); this “pact” is an important element of the story (as the reader has their mission to realise). Thus, for the reader-listener his mobile phone is the “metaleptic machine” (Ryan 2007) that converges two worlds, similarly as were the photos in case of Cardiff’s work⁸.

So, to sum it up, in ambient literature there is no avatar offered to become him/her. Instead, the stories lent the reader’s body and thanks to that offer this paradoxical (syllaptic) experience of being *here* and *there* at the same time (Hayler 2020: 93), experience in which - palimpsestuously - different ontological layers are entangled. As the real body, the reader of flesh and blood to whom the textual “I” speaks, is *conditio sine qua non* for this, I propose to call this narrative structure *embodied spoken monologue*.

V. Conclusions: the reader of flesh and blood enclosed in the story

Described narrative address is frequently used in ambient writing. But it is not the only one option, even if it is the most natural, intuitive and simple one. The palimpsestic structure of the world, metaleptic overlapping of real and story worlds, and syllaptic structure of reader-protagonist can fruitfully nourish another kind(s) of narrative structure(s). Semyon Polyakovsky’s *Maginary* is a perfect example here. This catchy story (which, similarly to Pullinger’s *Breathe*, is linked to the particular one space and location: the one its reader inhabits) is written in third person narrative (and because of that it would be hard to analyse

⁷ See: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/elo2020/asynchronous/panels/1/>

⁸ Bell and Ensslin talk here about “acting as a conduit rather than as an ontological barrier” (Bell, Ensslin 2021: 107).

this work with categories like *second person metalepsis* or *metaleptic you*). However, one of its protagonists is the *syллеptic* one.

Maginary conjures up one of canonical metaleptic literary texts, “The Continuity of Parks” by Julio Cortázar. It’s reader, exactly as the reader in Cortázar’s short-story, is reading about a reader that is reading what he/she is reading. There is of course one (slight but important and meaningful) difference - no one is sitting on the green armchair and no one is holding a paper book in his hands. This time, the reader discovers that in the story he/she is reading on his/her screen, there is a protagonist who is reading the same screen. And this protagonist is the one that has the name of the proper reader, the one he/she had used to sign the e-book, just before (not so metaphorical) entering into the storyworld. Polyakovskiy proposes a very intriguing narrative structure in which we are reading about us like about the Other, in the third person narrative. And at the same time we can observe how our real actions have an impact on the story world (as in the example of steps mentioned previously) and we are a *syллеptic protagonist* of the story, even though we are not its addressee.

In ambient literature mobile phones (and sometimes material books) become what Marie-Laurie Ryan called “metaleptic machines” (Ryan 2006). While fifteen years ago she was sure that the actual world “remains protected from metaleptic phenomena” (209), the deeply embodied reading proposed in ambient literature shows that the overlapping and amalgamation of actual and virtual world in a literary experience is possible. In 2006 Ryan was dreaming about possible “metaleptic” future of VR experiences and actual literary production (including VR literature) has shown that the whole reader body, as well as the reader, can become part of the story and not only be used as a reading machine, a tool, kind of virtual extension that enables the reader non-trivial effort needed in ergodic reading practices.

In narrative of palimpsestic and metaleptic works of ambient literature, which I called *embodied spoken monologue*, there is a special “gap” left for the reader; for the reader of flesh and blood (not the virtual one), who becomes the *syллеptic* protagonist of the story. Because “ambient literature seeks to make work that responds to the presence of a reader”(Abba, Spencer 2020: 278), the readers' bodies are in this case a kind of “play button” for the whole experience. So, as was stated, ambient stories propose the new pact with the reader; they declare: “Dear Reader, lend me your body, and then I will show you my story”. And because bodies are different, ambient literature works “by their nature, offer unique experiences to each reader” (Marcinkowski 2020: 199).

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