

“Allegro for a prepared computer and a dynamized harpsichord”

– Andrzej Falkiewicz’s

Ledwie mrok [Hardly darkness]

as a prototypical proto-hypertext

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Ledwie mrok – a failed novel

First published in 1998, Andrzej Falkiewicz’s *Ledwie mrok* is no doubt an exceptional text by the theatrologist, critic and essayist. This is exceptionality well expressed in Andrzej Skrenda’s claim that “*Ledwie mrok* is best described as a writer’s failure, albeit a very ambitious one, and a work which can be interpreted as Falkiewicz’s *opus magnum*”¹. But how can something be simultaneously an *opus magnum* and a failure? Perhaps *Ledwie mrok* proves that these two categories of critical evaluation are not mutually exclusive, especially if we assume that the failure is intentional and pre-planned. A possible clue can be discovered in the novel’s plot, with its fragmentary structure and ambiguous status of the majority of events. The story is of a debuting actress (?) or athlete (?), who breaks both legs in an accident and after recovery (?) decides to perform (?) her disability, which

¹ Andrzej Skrendo, „Stanisław Brzozowski i Andrzej Falkiewicz — fragmenty o powinowactwie” [Stanisław Brzozowski and Andrzej Falkiewicz – fragments on affinity], in: Stanisław Brzozowski – (ko)repetycje Stanisław Brzozowski – (co)repetitions], ed. by Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, Andrzej Skrendo, Krzysztof Uniłowski (Katowice: FA-art, 2013), 310.

leads to another accident, depriving her of powers in both legs and a hand. This becomes a pretext for a philosophical-artistic description of her experiences of "handicap" in correspondence with an undefined mentor (critic? priest? manager? doctor? novel writer?). There are more question marks than facts in the story. The way in which events are presented in sixty-five numbered fragments increases chaos, instead of imposing order. The protagonists themselves are lost in chronology and even when they try to determine what is factual (e.g. the resume from chapter 23), the experimental nature of the fragments, their internal incoherence and incompatibility with other fragments, which only seemingly pertain to similar issues, only reinforce the recipient's sense of confusion.

The majority of interpretations so far have seen the causes of Falkiewicz's failure in his attempts at creating "a language of the body". Thus, Anna Gębala interprets *Ledwie mrok* as a story of a woman who is "searching for the possibility of expressing the inexpressible"², and "freeing her own speech from the discursive regime [is] one of the most important tasks for writing with one's body"³. Joanna Orska, in turn, points out that "the language of the body, of its warmth, scent and the record in which the body can be heard come together in what is outwardly and whose outwardness remains dubious"⁴. Karol Maliszewski claims that Falkiewicz would like to "demonstrate how language, under the circumstances considered here, becomes helpless and freezes in one's mouth, i.e. in conventions. Its formalized rationality is broken by other means of expression, which improvise around something I dare call «somatic communication»"⁵.

Of course, all these proposals help us notice unobvious relations, entered by the text and the body, especially that the mentor describes the woman's letters as a tumbleweed of "body fragments and plastic, covered in lichen ([sic!] letters)"⁶ or "her own records (of pre-body, post-word...)" (LM 238), frequently pointing to links between *soma* and *sema*. Nonetheless, here I would like to propose a different interpretation of Falkiewicz's failure. After all, *Ledwie mrok* is an epistolary novel – it is a text about communication. However, as pointed out by Krzysztof Uniłowski, "a convention which implies mutual understanding, a deep connection between partners, shared honesty is falling apart in Falkiewicz's work"⁷, which is "so striking that it verges on the ridiculous"⁸. This remark is poignant because the inability to establish any relationship between the correspondents is one of the novel's recurring themes. The mentor complains that the letters he received "can only be called «letters» by virtue of being put in an envelope and put in a mailbox (even though they don't lack a lot to be full-fledged letters... Just a little bit more attention paid to the addressee, like asking him how he spent his summer holidays or if he has a wife and children, how he is feeling today or what he is doing" (LM 237).

² Anna Gębala, „Homo sacer, czyli przeciw homogeniczności. Uwagi o «Ledwie mroku» Andrzeja Falkiewicza” [„Homo sacer, or against homogeneity. Remarks on Andrzej Falkiewicz's *Ledwie mrok*], in: „Nie przeczytane”. Studia o twórczości Andrzeja Falkiewicza” [„Not read”. Studies on the works of Andrzej Falkiewicz], ed. by Jarosław Borowiec, Tomasz Mizerkiewicz (Wrocław: ATUT, 2014), 143.

³ Gębala, 141.

⁴ Joanna Orska, „Ma petite Artaud; gry językowe / gry teatralne”, [Ma petite Artaud; language games/ theatre games] in: Nie przeczytane 89.

⁵ Karol Maliszewski, „O «rozpiętości wyrazowej człowieka» – «Ledwie mrok» Andrzeja Falkiewicza” [„On «people's lexical range» – «Ledwie mrok» by Andrzej Falkiewicz], in: „Nie przeczytane”, 134.

⁶ Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Ledwie mrok* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1998), 505. Henceforth, LM, followed by page number.

⁷ Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Intymność niemożliwa” [„An impossible intimacy”], *Teksty Drugie* 1-2 (2007): 237.

⁸ Uniłowski, „Intymność niemożliwa”, 237.

Perhaps then *Ledwie mrok* ought to be read as evidence of the failure of communication between the mentor and the disabled woman? Indeed, their miscommunication is not only a result of their inability to engage in a closer relationship, but it also stems from technical issues. The first occurrence of the word “letter” can be found in the sentence “You probably confused the letters” (LM 56), which suggests that the correspondence is initiated by mistake and maintained by means of attached messages: on cassettes, video and floppy discs. One might assume that that intense exchange of multimedia attachments was planned by Falkiewicz quite early on in his work on the text⁹ but that is not the only reason for its importance. The fact that all attachments which reach the recipient are garbled seems poignant for analysing this communicative failure. The cassette’s spools are “simply empty, colourless” or “unfortunately [...] broken. I was so emphatic about not sending the letters by post. I asked that you give the letters to an intermediary, someone who is, as far as possible, reliable” (LM 198). In the audio recording “the added buzz of the electric fan made it impossible [...] to replay her words!” (LM 238). Even though all these examples of technical difficulties call for an independent analysis, here I will only focus on one of them – the one related to the working of the computer.

In his *Ta chwila* [*That moment*] Falkiewicz refers to *Ledwie mrok* as “an allegro for a prepared computer and a dynamized harpsichord”¹⁰, resorting to a doubly impossible formula. Even though the paradoxical nature of the second part appears to be obvious (it is a characteristic feature of harpsichord that it cannot differentiate dynamically), the first paradox is more cryptic. It seems to me that the prepared computer turns *Ledwie mrok* simultaneously into the writer’s failure and his *opus magnum*. Since Falkiewicz’s novel ends on a bugged floppy disk, which dismantles the entire text, let us begin the analysis of the operation of a prepared computer from a story of a certain CD-ROM.

Ledwie mrok - the novel as an anachronistic remediation

In the repositories of the Silesian Library there is a CD-ROM, whose existence, to the best of my knowledge, remains unknown to the scholars of Falkiewicz¹¹. Inserted in an optical drive, it reveals a “parcel-website”. In the left corner of the screen one finds a selection of tabs (*Nota bio- i bibliograficzna* [*A bio- and bibliographical note*], *Takim ścięciem* [*Using that stitch*], *Coś z mądrości lenistwa i snu prawie* [*Something almost from the wisdom of laziness and dream*], *Ledwie mrok*, *Świetliste* [*Luminous*], *Być może* [*Perhaps*], *Wobec nowożytnego rozumu* [*In reference to the modern mind*], *Ontologia istnień* [*Ontology of beings*]), above those - the signature *Andrzej Falkiewicz*, on the main page – the explanation “why I’m doing this”:

⁹ This is evidenced by fragments of journal entries from *Takim ścięciem* [*Using that stitch*]. See: Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Takim ścięciem. Zapisy z lat 1974–1976, przepisane w 1986, przeczytane w 2008 roku* [*Using that stitch. Records from 1974–1976, copied in 1986, read in 2008*] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2009), 177.

¹⁰ Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Ta chwila* (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2013), 89.

¹¹ The parcel-website [electronic document] can be found in the repository of the Silesian Library, sg. no. II 1093417 (see Andrzej Falkiewicz, „Przesyłka-witryna” [B.m.: 2004]), as well as University libraries of Gdańsk, Cracow, Toruń and Wrocław, as well as in the National Library. One may thus assume that the author or somebody from his close circle sent it to those institutions. To the best of my knowledge the „parcel-website” has not been described in any existing study on Falkiewicz.

This parcel is meant for those who would like to become interested in each and every One of us – this is where the notes included here lead (critical works, confession-novels, philosophical essays...) From the nature of my enterprise it follows that these notes do not always fit cultural norms and – by extension – in the readers' impression they often transgress "what is decent". Instead of the gutter of eloquence, passages of cultural references – the ease (shamelessness) of privacy. But they do contain a consistent, carefully articulated philosophical proposition.

I am taking advantage of this medium's low storage cost and free dissemination of texts¹².

The page is not dated, but the properties window informs us that the file was last modified in 2004. We can therefore assume that it was then that Falkiewicz decided to disseminate virtually his most recent texts (i.e., those created from the beginning of the 1990s). Individual tabs contain a few sentences of commentary to a given text and a download link. Falkiewicz thus uploads his books online, ensuring access to them via a network of hyperlinks, which means that the "parcel-website" meets the most basic criteria for a hypertext¹³, which is "a collection of data combined into a system by means of hyperlinks"¹⁴. What is the meaning of this gesture?

In one sense, publishing one's works online could be interpreted as a fulfillment of the neo-avant-garde-messianic promise of creating a communicative community, which frees society from the destructive structures of institutions – a calling to life of a non-hierarchical space of a free exchange of thoughts. For Uniłowski this idea is realized in the way in which information society is organised:

Falkiewicz saw the importance of interactivity and "the principle of mutual contact", that is, equity and mutual substitutability of the sender and recipient roles, which prevent this community from becoming total in character [...] Of course, this is a highly utopian vision, but one cannot fail to notice that subsequent decades saw the emergence of technical possibilities which made that vision partly come true. From the modern perspective Falkiewicz's idea of a communicative community is somewhat reminiscent of a highly idealized image of information society...¹⁵

Is it possible that positioning Falkiewicz's works in a new communicative context, one which requires active involvement from the reader, allows for establishing a new relationship with these texts? Could the properties of that new medium turn the writer's failure into his *opus magnum*? Regardless of whether we believe in the "saving power" of the Internet, the "parcel-website" provides us with new information about *Ledwie mrok* by revealing its previously unknown version. There are two editions of the novel – the first one was published by Wydawnic-

¹²Falkiewicz, „Przesyłka-witryna” [„Parcel-website”].

¹³Given the large number of theories and ideas concerning the category of hypertext, I would like to emphasise that I am referring to Ted Nelson's technical concept of an IT construct, rather than to Gerard G enette's theory.

¹⁴Joanna Fruzyńska, *Mapy, encyklopedie, fraktalne. Hipertekstowe opowieści w prozie XX wieku* [Maps, encyclopedias, fractals. Hypertextual narratives about 20th c. prose]. (Warszawa: Wydział Polonistyki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012), 11.

¹⁵Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Andrzej Falkiewicz i neoawangarda” [Andrzej Falkiewicz and neo-avant-garde], in: „Nie przeczytane”, 193.

two Dolnośląskie in 1998, whereas the second one - by Warstwy in 2015.¹⁶ There are several minor differences between these two editions. Neither of the two, however, is equivalent to the “parcel-website” version. Nor has the existence of the latter ever been acknowledged in any commentary on Falkiewicz’s works.

How, then, do the two editions differ from each other? The principal difference are editorial corrections. Both in the computer version of the “parcel-website” as well as in the 1998 print edition sentences are slightly longer (ca. 14,2 words per sentence) than in the book published by Warstwy (13,7)¹⁷. We can also discern subtle visual discrepancies. Chapter 8 of the first edition contains a different third sketch (“a special egogram”) than the ones that can be found in the other two. In the online edition in fragment 15 Queen Elizabeth is replaced by the Austrian Archduchess Stéphanie Clotilde Coburg wearing a nurse’s outfit. But there are also a few other minor changes, which seem to be meaningful from the perspective of a computer-based interpretation.

At the end of the 1998 edition there is a note concerning the use of Microsoft Word 6.0 typographic symbols (LM 521). In the online edition this software is replaced by Windows 98¹⁸, and in the 2015 reprint, in turn, by Mac OS X¹⁹. Similar changes occur in the first sentence of chapter 27. In the first edition we read: “I don’t have Windows 95 on my computer (LM 521)”, in two subsequent ones: “I don’t have Apple... something”. Thus, Falkiewicz updates his operating system between each edition. There are also changes in the operation of the virus sent on the floppy disk. The first version contains the message: „Disc error!, Serious disc error!!!, Del Esc Esc”; in the online version we read „*Brain error! Serious brain error!!! Del Esc Esc*”, and in the second edition this command disappears altogether. Falkiewicz did not introduce many changes between subsequent editions of the book, which is why his work on fragments related to technology seems to be the most significant. Let us therefore take a closer look at it.

The third part of the book comprises almost exclusively the female protagonist’s letters to blondeM, the only exception being chapter 42. After twenty months from the previous contact the mentor sends another message to the woman. It is in that message that he informs her why they cannot meet; he also writes that he managed to finish the book. This letter is sent on a bugged floppy disc. The message contains a postscript, written by the addressee rather than the sender.

Postscript. Mine; after a careful perusal of the letter. Its silent calling is disability, but its true passion is MUTILATION. No, not the brutal one, by means of a knife or a cutting blade. It works IN THE HEAD, which is already mutilated, it washes the brain. Without needing to dry-clean it first! IT IS MY SECOND GREATEST ENEMY! (I am the greatest one). For years it has been fool-

¹⁶Of course, the second edition was published posthumously. However, one of the notes in *Ta chwila* indicates that Falkiewicz had been working on reissuing the book and planned on finishing it in 2009. „PLANS FOR 2009: 1. Finishing – somehow – somehow because somehow – that moment. 2. Publishing *Ledwie mrok* 3. Preparing *Świetliste [Luminous]* for publication (deadline: January 2010!)”. Falkiewicz, *Ta chwila*, 285.

¹⁷The ratio of words per sentence was calculated using Voyant Tools.

¹⁸Falkiewicz, „przesyłka-witryna” 521.

¹⁹Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Ledwie mrok* (Wrocław: Warstwy, 2015), 540.

ing me and driving me crazy. Every time I got better, it made me stupid again with its "advice". I've kept its "concerned" longwinded guidelines as evidence. It won't let the healthy one die! Even Don Quixote was dying in full mental health! His niece had washed his brain before, his housekeeper tapped lightly on his forehead and the priest sprinkled some holy water on him. One can read all about it in Cervantes. But not when that black priest is around! „Dellusio et allusio”. „Jin i jang”. “To live one's own life”. “To give birth to a world capable of existence”. “Not excluding galaxies and cosmic “bubbles”... - Tender motherly scabbing on the wounds! An after-work oozing with pain in the garden! There was never a greater joy for him than a word I had mutilated, an error, tired with my handicap. Silly me, I toiled and toiled for his enjoyment.... I managed to get used to his nonsense, too. But today he has outdone himself. As if all that was not enough, he has sent me a letter on a bugged floppy disc. He infected my computer with the viruses of his gossip (LM 485).

We can surmise that the protagonist added this fragment to the text file she received from the critic. This possibility of never-ending add-ons is characteristic for working with a computer. In his book *Track Changes. A Literary History of Word Processing* Matthew Kirschenbaum points out that, unlike a typewriter, where “composition and editing remained two separate activities”²⁰, a word processor allows for a seamless transition from one model of textual interaction to the other. The recipient becomes a co-creator of communication – while reading, they always (over)write.²¹

The fantasy about remodelling the relationship between the sender and the recipient of a message is, however, disturbed by a concerning fact. We are never really alone when working on a computer. All our actions are accompanied by the hum of programs running in the background. Just as some of the bacteria are necessary for the functioning of the human body, similarly, some processes must operate on the hard drive. Yet, from time to time both spaces are visited by harmful agents, which want to use the networks of productive connections for their own purposes. Perhaps this is where the odd structure of the protagonist's words stems from. The worst part is not so much the fact that the mentor caused her disease, sabotaging her recovery, as his bugging her computer. He introduced undesirable actors to the system. Those, in turn, introduce destruction on the metalevel. First, they infect sources of knowledge: “Viruses! Viruses in Encyclopaedia Britannica, in the Educational programme” (LM 490). Then they remove agency from the program's user, disabling the input device: “Chaotic kilobytes, a mad mouse” (LM 490). A few pages later they similarly affect the output device²², displaying the following image on the computer screen:

²⁰Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes. A Literary History of Word Processing* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

²¹It is worth pointing out the meaningful vocabulary. On reading a text file, computer changes its properties and a slight movement of the cursor by the program user automatically assigns the user the role of a document's author. The technology which mediates communication also remediates the concept of reading and inscribing messages from the traditional media and blurs the boundary between the acts of receiving and sending. A similar problem in the context of translating the thinking about record from literature onto video is discussed by Siegfried Zielinski. See: Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisions. Cinema and television as entr'actes in history* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 240.

²²Viruses influence the performance of input peripherals (the mouse) and output peripherals (the monitor), which means that they prevent both entering and reading computer data.

cej. I zawsze pachną kwiaty. Teraz też. Może śnić? Może. Kobiety podobno śnią więcej i lepiej od mężczyzn. Posłuchaj, dziecko. Chciałabym żebyś dokładnie zrozumiała to o śnieniu i nie bala się. Pośnimy. Pośnimy razem. W lustrze. Po drugiej stronie.

BYŚ FADNIEJ WIDYWAŁA MINE. Dłac error! Delete Del Esc
 ŚWIATA? LEPIEJ BYM CZYTAŁA MELODIE RZECZY A TY
 KWIATU NAGA — BARDZIEJ OTWARTE NA CIEBIE I
 BYŚ WOLAŁA ŚEBYM CHODZIŁA PO NASZYM MIEŚC-
 CZY MOŻE TUŻ PRZY SZAFIE SŁUCHAŁA...? A MOŻE
 BLIŻEJ KUCHNI CZY BLIŻEJ OGRODU, KOŁO DRZWI
 SZAMI WIEDZIEĆ W KTÓRYM MIEŚCIE POKOJU JESTEŚ,
 TAKI SAM METALOWY PAPIER, A NIE POTRAFIĘ CZY-
 DOTYKIEN OD KOSTKI MARGARYNY ZAWINIĘTEJ W
 ZNALEŚĆ W LODÓWCE KOSTKĘ MASŁA I ODRÓŻNIAM
 SZADZIWIĄCIE NIEKIEDY NIEPORADNOŚCI UMIEB

Brain error! Serious brain error!!! Del Esc Esc

MAŚLANKI W USTACH I TĄ HERBATA ZAWSZE DOBRZE
 ŚWIERKAMI I JODYNĄ. AŻ SŁOWU: OWSIANE PŁATKI,
 SKÓRA DO... DO CZYSTA WYMYTYA KTÓRA PACHNIE
 ALE NIE WIEM CZYJA. CIEPŁA. CHOCIAŻ Z GŁADKĄ
 PO TWARZY ZAWODZI RĘKA. KTO? WIEM ŻE RĘKA
 CZASU DO CZASU ZESUWANIE Z ŁYŻKI I CZUJE TAK MI
 USTA I DO PRZEMYWANIA, OWSIANE PŁATKI OD
 NIE I PIESCZONE RAZEM. KWASNE MASŁANKI W
 (TAKI SŁODKAWY KLEISTY PŁYN) POTEM OBYWAWY-
 POWIEKAMI ŚWIEŁA. CE. G. MAM POCIESZANIE WARGI
 ŁA NIE WYCZUWAM SKÓRA SKRONI, NIE WYKRYJE
 ZWARŁE CORAZ CIEMNIEJ I WRZESZCIE NAWET ŚWIEP-
 WANE OCZY ALE TAK JAKBY ŚMAROWALI ŚMOKA.
 GŁUSZEJ. ZWILŻANE MAM CZĘSTO CZOŁO, PRZEMY-
 ŁAM ŻE MOŻE BYĆ SZCZELNIEJ: JESZCZE ŚPIEPIE,
 SZUMIAŁAM I SZUMIAŁO W GŁOWIE — AŻ ZROZUMIA-
 SIĘ ŻE NIE MOŻNA BYĆ ŚLEPA BARDZIEJ. LEŻAŁAM
 PRZESZ PIERWSZE DWA TYGODNIE WIDYWAŁO MI

As readers we can only look at the destruction created by the viruses in the novel. First of all, there is not too much to read here, because their actions render the text illegible; secondly, there is nothing we can do about it. Instead of the actual *Delete* or *Escape* keys we only have their novelistic props, which can imitate the form but cannot perform the function. *Ledwie mrok* will always remain bugged; after all, it is impossible to update a sheet of paper and return to the fabric settings from before error 490. Here Falkiewicz challenges Jochen Hörisch, who in his introduction to *Eine Geschichte der Medien* discusses self-referentially the limitations of the book format:

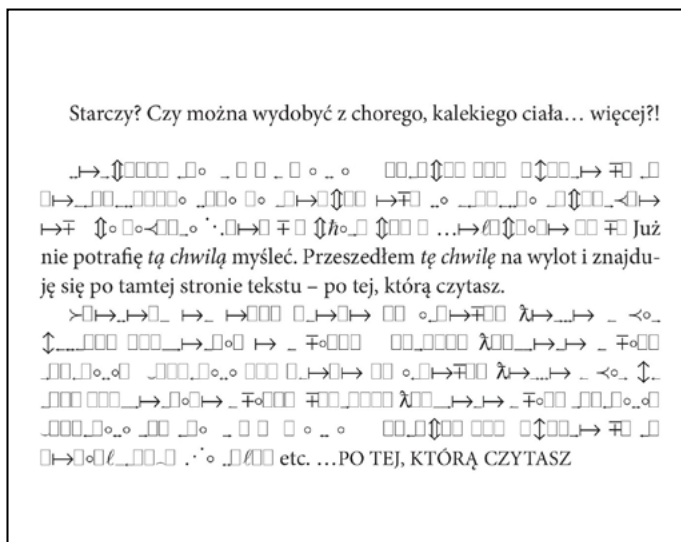
Living sounds, motion pictures and electronically generated letters are the subject matter of this book, but they cannot be included in it, regardless of the author's will, because the classical format of the book forbids it. There is no loudspeaker, monitor or Internet connection. There is no CD-ROM, floppy disc or a cassette attachment. No update can eliminate printing errors. Yet, it requires no batteries, and no power cut can threaten it; no virus can destroy the sequence of letters.²³

If one were to juxtapose these words of the German historian of media with *Ledwie mrok* it would turn out that Hörisch is wrong, or at least partly so. Falkiewicz's writing shows that it is possible to bug a book and update harmful programs in between subsequent editions. In that

²³Jochen Hörisch, *Eine Geschichte der Medien. Von der Oblate zum Internet* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 10–11 (the author's own translation).

sense the work of the author of *Takim ścięciem* is a text featuring an anachronistic reversal. Traditional codex format remedies digitality in its most autonomous stage – that of an error. *Ledwie mrok* would then illustrate the state of a computer understood – to quote from Justyna Janik’s game-theoretical proposal – a resistant object: “in this context the glitch seems to be emphasizing the autonomous nature of the digital game, pointing to its resistance. Thanks to this resistance, the game not only frees itself from the power of the player, but it can also work against them and the designers’ plans. It begins to project its own senses”²⁴.

The freeing of typographic signs from the power of the user is a recurrent topic in Falkiewicz’s works. Of course, this can partly result from his poor digital competence, as proven by his remarks in more private notes – the reissuing of his essay *Nie-przeczytane* [*Un-read*]²⁵ and *Ta chwila* [*That moment*]²⁶. It does not change the fact that some of the errors related to the appearance of the text are purposefully designed by the author for artistic purposes²⁷. He does that, for example in *Ta chwila*, when he mentions *Ledwie mrok*:



Ledwie mrok is an “allegro for a prepared computer”, that machine being as impossible (yet potentially interesting) as the second part of that expression, i.e. “a dynamised harpsichord”. Falkiewicz’s intuitions seem to be confirmed in the work *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* by Jussi Parikka. The media theorist, describing the workings of the

²⁴Justyna Janik, *Gra jako obiekt oporny* [Game as a resistant object] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2022), 120. The following analogy seems to apply here: just like the protagonist’s body acquires a kind of autonomy only after her accident because it is no longer objectified, likewise a computer program is revealed through its non-responsiveness.

²⁵Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Znalezione. Szkice do książki* [Found. Sketches for the book] (Wrocław: ATUT, 2009), 138. I am referring to a reissuing because characteristically for Falkiewicz, remarks on technical difficulties only appear in the second edition. A similar pattern can be noticed in the case of typographic experiments with *Takim ścięciem*. A detailed analysis of this regularity is beyond the limited scope of this essay.

²⁶Falkiewicz, *Ta chwila*, 141.

²⁷These are only a few examples, but sufficient to state that in Falkiewicz’s later works the non-cooperativeness of programs was a meaningful inspiration for artistic activity. I do not claim, of course, that the author possessed any specialist knowledge of errors or viruses (although it is worth mentioning here that his son, Wojciech, had been interested in IT since the 1990s, as evidenced in his letters to Karpowicz); what we can notice in his text is rather a particular way of imagining the way in which a computer works.

Cascade virus (which caused letters to drop off screens), defines an end of a certain era of thinking about script:

In a sense Cascade demonstrated a new digital ontology of the script: farewell, discreet, readable Galaxy of Guttenberg's letters; welcome script executed as code on screens [...] The visible layer of the user's graphic interfaces breaks apart, demonstrating that language is not just about meanings and nature but it becomes more and more a binary machine code²⁸.

It is not possible to read *Ledwie mrok* as a successful analog novel. But the role of remediation is important from the interpretative point of view, as are the differences between editions or the fact of distributing the text on a CD-ROM, as they encourage one to place it in the space "between a sheet of paper and a screen"²⁹. That is why a different reading of the novel will be possible if it is recognized as a representative of the "late epoch of print"³⁰. Let us then try to analyse the structure of the work, relying on the concept of hypertext.

Ledwie mrok as a proto-hypertextual non-novel

The seemingly unbreakable bond between hypertext and a digital carrier was not an issue for researchers looking for the precursors of the format amongst texts written on paper. Grzegorz Jankowicz remarks, somewhat jokingly, that "one of the favourite pastimes of theoreticians of e-fiction is a search for proto-hypertextual works in the immense repositories of traditional literature"³¹. Depending on how that concept was defined, predecessors of hyperfiction were found both amongst post-War experiments (Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, Pavič's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, Saporta's *Composition no 1*, Calvino's *Invisible cities* or Nabokov's *Pale fire*³²), as well as in earlier artistic projects (Sterne's *The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, gentleman*, Potocki's *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie* [*The Saragossa manuscript*], Irzykowski's *Pałuba* [*The Hag*]³³). The key criterion of "a certain type of nonlinear organization", which might assume "strong and weak forms", is quite enigmatic. Even though hypertext concerns the possibility of manipulating freely the component parts of the work, the same label is sometimes assigned to works whose plot includes a series of transitions and connections, which do not influence their format or offer any reflection on materiality. This abridged and necessarily incomplete list of concepts highlights the fact that attempts at defining the history and theory

²⁸Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 34.

²⁹I am referring here to the title of Piotr Marecki's book because I believe that *Ledwie mrok*, albeit less hybrid than the texts analysed by Marecki, could benefit from being interpreted as an intermedial object. See: Piotr Marecki, *Między kartką a ekranem* [Between a sheet of paper and a screen] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2018).

³⁰Jay David Bolter, *Przestrzeń pisma* [The space of script], transl. by Aleksandra Małecka, Michał Tabaczyński (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2014), 39.

³¹Grzegorz Jankowicz, „Granice hipertekstu” [“The limits of hypertext”], in: *Linternet. Literatura i internet* [Linternet, Literature and the Internet], ed. by Piotr Marecki (Kraków: Rabid, 2002), 151.

³²These texts are listed under the entry „Proto-hypertext” on the Techsty webpage, see: „Proto-hypertext”, Techsty 13.07.2022, <https://techsty.art> Mariusz.pl/hipertekst/protohiperteksty.htm.

³³Links between these nonlinear texts and the hypertext are discussed in detail by Mariusz Pisarski. See Mariusz Pisarski, *Xanadu. Hipertekstowe przemiany prozy* [Xanadu. Hypertextual metamorphoses of prose] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2013), 111–126.

of hypertext are characterized by, to quote Lev Manovich, information surplus. Therefore, instead of risking confusion in the multiplicity of links, let us opt for but one concept: Espen Aarseth's textual machine³⁴:

As the cyber prefix indicates, the text is seen as a machine--not metaphorically but as a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal signs. Just as a film is useless without a projector and a screen, so a text must consist of a material medium as well as a collection of words. The machine, of course, is not complete without a third party, the (human) operator, and it is within this triad that the text takes place³⁵.

Tools proposed by Aarseth are arguably relevant for *Ledwie mrok* because they bring into focus a similar manner of conceptualizing the interactions of a novel and a program. Moreover, they allow a broader perspective on the effects of the text. Hitherto mediation between two elements has been regarded as the key concept in the reading of *Ledwie mrok*. These mediations included communication between the woman and the mentor, relation between manners of expression and styles of broadcasting or connections between body and language. However, maybe it is necessary to incorporate another crucial element of textual interpretation - that of a human operator, without whose energy (as emphasized by Hörisch in a different context) the book does not work properly. The operator's task is then not only to acknowledge the protagonists' mutual manipulations but also to manipulate independently elements of the novel's structure.

The operator's activity helps us notice the wrong order of the novel's chapters: the earlier ones make references to later ones (2 to 10), others, even though they are obvious responses to a letter (e.g. 0), make no reference to anything at all. The first few letters (starting from no. 1) were supposedly sent by mistake. Most of them contain attachments, sometimes acknowledged in the correspondence, but the readers usually cannot access those. Thanks to the mentor's extensive quotations from the letters, whose philosophical-artistic value he evaluates, it is possible to establish that most of the quoted sentences do not appear in the novel at all.

In fragment 23 the mentor collects all information concerning the dates and tries to establish some kind of chronology. He tries to match a year with a letter in one of two ways (the dates he proposes are separated by as many as three years) and declares that the woman is lying: first, to hide her stay in a psychiatric ward, then, to spite him. None of his calculations, however, stands scrutiny. Finally, the entirety of part three is supposed to take place after breaking off contact with the mentor. But the numbering system is the one adopted in the mentor's archive, which means that the critic must at least be receiving copies of the protagonists' intimate correspondence. There are probably more inconsistencies in the novel. I think, however, that the problems listed above show that for *Ledwie mrok* to become a story, the reader needs to undertake exploratory actions.

³⁴Aarseth's concept is, of course, much broader than theoretical ideas listed above (it incorporates a variety of texts, from I Ching to chatbots, adventure games and prose generators from the turn of the 1980s).

³⁵Espen Aarseth, *Cybertekst. Spojrzenie na literaturę ergodyczną* [Cybertext. Perspectives on ergodic literature], transl. by Mariusz Pisarski (Kraków: Ha!art, 2014), 30.

I am not trying to claim here that *Ledwie mrok* is, indeed, a hypertext, but only to indicate that methods developed while reading it as if it were a hypertext could aid with its interpretation, because this manner of reading assumes that the recipient does not simply interpret the text³⁶. This novel then lies on the boundary between a linear and an ergodic text³⁷. Even if the reading of *Ledwie mrok* in juxtaposition to projects whose intermedial nature is more obvious seems to be unjustified, it is worth noticing that the chronology of events in the novel requires “a not insignificant effort from at least one person or mechanism”³⁸. The question remains, who would make that effort? Perhaps the answer can be found in *Być może* [*Perhaps*].

Now the computer in the material tissue of its hardware, prepared for binary operations, contains precisely what is our logic. The system, i.e. that which makes the computer useful, must be external to it, it must originate from outside its logical system, brought to life by the programmer who follows their own logic or illogicality while designing the program. Even in the case of the so-called neurocomputer, imitating the human brain, capable of correcting or self-creating its programs, these programs are outsourced from beyond the system, it is just that now the designing programmer is below the level of the logical system, characteristic of a given computer³⁹.

What level then is the reader on? One answer is offered by the previously quoted glitched fragment of *Ta chwila*, which pertains to *Ledwie mrok*. The paragraph is almost entirely illegible, the only decipherable fragment is “I am on the other side of the text – the one you are reading now”⁴⁰, then the part after the dash is repeated and written in small caps. Perhaps it is not the task of the reader to manipulate individual structural elements of the novel in order to create its plot. It is the mentor who performs the role of the text-external operator. He is the one who organises the letters he received, thus manipulating not only the fragments of the novel but also the sender of these letters and the reader, the latter of whom is a witness to this process. *Ledwie mrok* thus announces certain barriers to hypertext as a literary form. Metaphorically speaking, as pointed out by Andrzej Kudra, the terror (authoritativeness) of the hyperlink, paradoxically, limits interactivity. Excess of hyperlinks may cause information

³⁶Aarseth distinguishes four functions performed by the reader: interpretive, explorative, configurative and textonic. The first one appears in interactions with every text, including the second one into the process of “reading” suggests that we are dealing with an ergodic text, and the latter two – with its dynamic variant (Aarseth, 73–75).

³⁷In this aspect *Ledwie mrok* is similar to Jerzy Andrzejewski’s *Miazga* [Pulp]. Andrzej Pająk emphasises that the author of *Bramy raju* [The gates of paradise] was able to assume that the recipient would move from the journal to the index of people, but this manner of reading was not suggested by the author. Similarly in *Ledwie mrok*, jumping between “lists” of characters, amongst which the woman’s writings typically have the status of an artistic text and the mentor’s – that of a commentary, would enable us to uncover narrative inconsistencies, i.e. the mechanism governing the text. However, Falkiewicz does not implement any form of reference which would make this operation easier. For both novels it would seem that “The explorative function of the user is present, but not directly”. See: Andrzej Pająk, „Na tropie dziwnych książek. Polska droga do e-literatury (od baroku do XXI wieku)” [On the trail of strange books. Polish path to e-literature (from the Baroque to the 21st c.)], in: *Od literatury do e-literatury* [From literature to e-literature], ed. by Eugeniusz Wilk, Monika Górka-Olesińska (Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2011), 281.

³⁸Aarseth, 103.

³⁹Andrzej Falkiewicz, *Być może* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2002), 101.

⁴⁰This phrase recurs in Falkiewicz’s works, e.g. in *Polski kosmos* [Polish cosmos]. It is worth pointing out that the recurrence to particular motifs and rewriting are characteristic for Falkiewicz’s artistic project and they require a separate consideration, especially in light of the artist’s quasi-journalistic practices.

noise and the reader's fatigue; this might also be the consequence of 'over-information'⁴¹. Just as the letter-inspired form deprives the protagonist of her voice⁴², a hypertext-like structure limits rather than expands the reader's freedom. Preparation, i.e. a compositional technique recalled in the titular quotation, is related to a composer's interference with the instrument's structure, and structural procedures considered here allow for such interpretation of a prepared computer. Yet, it is hard to get rid of less substantive associations with preparation understood as manipulation, misleading the recipient.

In his review of *Ledwie mrok* Krzysztof Uniłowski writes:

I refer to Falkiewicz's book as a novel, but this word – I admit – is inadequate. I used the term 'novel' because I would like this work to be that. Meanwhile, *Ledwie mrok* is a fictionalized essay. It is possible that this is what the book was supposed to be, but if that is the case, it is even a greater shame⁴³.

What if that book was never meant to be a novel? If *Ledwie mrok* is a prepared text, comprising mixed utterances, and only pretending to be a novel? Perhaps it would be worthwhile risking a claim that *Ledwie mrok* was supposed to be a database which, as Manovich says, "in the era of computers [...] becomes an independent cultural form"⁴⁴. Uniłowski notes that "language does not have the ability to [...] want to long for something or to love" but "allows one [...] to find out"⁴⁵. That would mean that the text becomes part of a phenomenon characteristic for the era of information, in which description and the narrative swap places. *Ledwie mrok* can be then read as a non-linear way of organizing knowledge⁴⁶, akin to an encyclopedia (let us recall that it was encyclopedia that appeared on the bugged floppy disc) or the Internet. Instead of a novel we thus get a structured collection of data, divided into sixty-five fragments. *Ledwie mrok* can be both a writer's failure and his *opus magnum*. In print format it would try to recreate the manner of organizing the message, which is characteristic for the new media; to separate noise from information. On one hand, this is a very ambitious task, and Falkiewicz's work becomes a text connecting enthusiasm for encyclopedic properties of the computer with critical thought about the materiality of the medium⁴⁷, characteristic of non-linear experimental works from mid-20th c. On the other hand, it is an impossible task – there is no structural difference between information and noise.

⁴¹Andrzej Kudra, „Hiperjęzyk hipertekstu a chiralność” [„Hyperlanguage of the hypertext vs. chirality], *Media, Kultura, Społeczeństwo* 1 [Media, Culture, Society 1] (2006): 121.

⁴²Marta Koronkiewicz, „Uniemożliwić średniość. Strategie pisarskie w «Takim ściegiem»” [“To prevent mediocrity. Writing strategies in «Takim ściegiem»”], in: „Nie przeczytane”, 116.

⁴³Krzysztof Uniłowski, „Modernizm poczty” [„The modernism of the post-office”], *FA-art* 1 (1999): 36.

⁴⁴Lev Manovich, *Język nowych mediów* [The language of the new media] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2006), 104.

⁴⁵Uniłowski, „Modernizm poczty”.

⁴⁶On that note, it is worth quoting Frużyńska's remarks that “nonlinear organization of the text (e.g. a dictionary) is quite frequent in the humanities, although it is restricted to a scholarly utterance and as such, it is juxtaposed with linear fiction, by directly questioning its cognitive importance” (Frużyńska, 63).

⁴⁷This highly interesting contradiction, related to the incorporation of experiments like Hopscotch or Composition no 1 in the history of hypertexts, is also acknowledged by Frużyńska: “the non-linear novel is a product of a protest against the conventions of script and print, whereas the hypertextual novel is usually an act of affirmation of its electronic medium” (Frużyńska, 31).

The analysis of Falkiewicz's work proposed here suggests a particular manner of thinking about proto-hypertexts in literature. Instead of focusing on features like openness and interactivity, perhaps one should put greater emphasis on encyclopedias or databases as cultural formats. After all, in Ted Nelson's definition, hypertext is just a manner of organizing information. Instead of remaining under constant influence of metanarratives concerning the recipient as a co-creator of the open work, perhaps it is worth thinking about processes of construction, which make the text a closed entity. Perhaps one should try to create between a sheet of paper and a screen some new story about the neo-avant-garde, especially about its technological model, highlighted by Stefan Morawski?⁴⁸ Perhaps the printed, codex version of *Ledwie mrok*, which replays on the prepared computer tensions between possibilities and limitations of the new media, could be a prototypical proto-hypertext in this story. This, of course is a song of the future, to recall a musical metaphor, one which exceeds the possibilities of this short essay, inspired by Falkiewicz, one which only runs over a few problems in the allegro tempo.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

⁴⁸Stefan Morawski, *Na zakręcie: od sztuki do po-sztuki* [At the crossroads: from art to post-art.] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985), 264.

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KEYWORDS

Andrzej Falkiewicz

NEO-AVANT-GARDE

ABSTRACT:

This publication provides a reinterpretation of Andrzej Falkiewicz's *Ledwie mrok*. This essay-novel is believed to have been an attempt at inventing a new idiom for expressing the experience of corporeality. Following from the reading of the metacommentary describing the author's creative process a claim is made here that for Falkiewicz the role of the new media, computers in particular, was important. His project of "parcel-website", which relies on online publication of earlier texts supports this hypothesis. The interpretative framework adopted here affords a different perspective on *Ledwie mrok* as a text about relations between a sheet of paper and a computer screen. These relations are here problematized by means of the concept of the proto-hypertext, introduced in the final parts of the article.

proto-hypertext

L e d w i e m r o k

experiment

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