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Series: Nico Nico Douga Texts[1], Nr 11

Reading Nico Nico Douga with Gerard Genette

Inspired by the discussions with Takashiro-san, Hamano-san and Yoshikawa-san, I think it might be just about time to start and come forward with some of my own initial ideas, how an analysis of Nico Nico Douga could be pushed forward. What follows is of course radically preliminary, not only because I still know far too little about Nico Nico Douga, but also because it is only the very beginning of a theoretical analysis.

One way into the analysis could be through the work of the French structuralist and literary theorist Gerard Genette, who wrote in the late 70ties and 80ties extensively about the relations that connect texts to other texts. Genette's term for the multiplicity of the relations between texts is "transtextuality", and you can read more about it in his works "Introduction a l'Architexte" (1979), "Palimpseste. La Litterature au second degree" (1982), and "Seuils" (1987) – the latter two are translated into German, and the last one, as "Paratexts" (1997), also into English. Genette develops in my opinion in these works a precise alternative to the more known ideas of Julia Kristeva on this topic. Attention: He uses his terms slightly different to her.

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[1] In this series of short and preliminary (!!) texts we publish first results of the Metadata Project's ethnographic research on Nico Nico Douga. You can find more on http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/media-research-centre/project2.php and on our research blog: http://d.hatena.ne.jp/metagold/.

Gerard Genette

Genette distinguishes five basic forms of transtextuality: (1.) "Intertextuality" is the presence of one text in another one – a quote would be the most obvious example. (2.) "Paratexts" are all texts that frame the main body of texts, e.g. titles, introductions, cover blurbs or footnotes. (3.) "Metatextuality" is given, when one text talks about another one, such as in reviews or literary analysis. (4.) "Hypertextuality" is based on the transformation of one text into another one – the relationship of James Joyce's Ulysses and Homer's Odyssey is a famous example. Finally, (5.) "Architextuality " is Genette's term for genre – e.g. the fact, that a text is a romantic poem.

Genette's theory is of course much more complex – in fact, this framework is laid out in the first two of the all in all 80 chapters of his book on "Palimpseste". However, I think that even this basic framework can help us to understand one side of Nico Nico Douga better: I can not think of any other larger body of texts and any other interface that ever presented us with such a dense and complex network of transtextuality. Nico Nico Douga is almost pure transtextuality. If you strip it away, there is nearly nothing left.

In a simple form, one can just overlay the five categories of Genette with the different forms of texts on Nico Nico Douga: Intertextuality can be found in the samples in the videos. Paratexts are on Nico Nico Douga all the informations about the videos, from viewing numbers to

the blurb of the "Ps" (= producers in Nico Nico Douga speak). Metatexts are the comments on the video. Hypertextuality can be found in the manifold transformations of one text into another one – every video of Hatsune Miku embodies all other videos of her. Architextuality is, for example, present in the form of tags and categories.

However, in my opinion such a simple approach would fall short of Nico Nico Douga's complexity. The next step is, to apply all 5 forms of transtexuality to all forms of text that you can find on Nico Nico Douga. Even though, for example, a comment is obviously a metatext, a comment can also be a paratext or a hypertext ("hypertext" is used here of course in the terminology of Genette, and not in the one by Berners-Lee). On the other hand, Metatextuality cannot only be found in comments, but also in all other forms of text on Nico Nico Douga.

As this is the blog of the metadata project, I might just as well take metatextuality as an example to demonstrate what I mean. Not only the comments are metatexts. Also music, for example, often provides a form of metatextuality on Nico Nico Douga. Producers and uploaders would sometimes take the footage from a different source, and then comment on it via strange music. At other times, the producer would film him– or herself, and then add ironic sound effects to this (e.g. strange noises, when certain things happen in the video).

Other forms of metatextality can be found in tags. From Hamano-san I have learned that tags, and especially tag-wars, form an additional layer of comment. This layer of tag-comments ads to the comment-comments on top of the video. Some Tag-comments address the video (e.g.: "Gets interesting after 4 minutes and 21 seconds"). Such tag-comments might then be commented on by further tag-comments. Tags are mainly a form of architextuality, but also a form of metatextuality.

This list could go on. For now if might be enough to turn the analysis in the other direction and have a quick look at the comments themselves: Comments, which are the most obvious example of metatextuality, are not only metatext. Some of them are "about" the video, but many other comments seem to more write along the video. An example are the moments, when Nico chuus write in their comments the text of the song that is playing. What is the status of such comments? Other comments deliberately mis-hear the original text: They are examples of Genette's ideas about hypertextuality.

Genette stresses that transtextuality is often implicit. It does not have to be right in your face (but it has to be hinted at by the producer). A prominent example for this is the comment "nice boat" (Non-Nico-Chuus: see the entry "And it started with a party" for an explanation). Every "nice boat"-comment points to the original one, but yet it is also a transformation of it – again, we have an example of hypertextuality. Comments can obviously have many different layers. And of course all examples that i have used here are only scratching the surface: When Nico chuus do "deep Nico talk". they entangle transtextuality on much, much deeper levels.

Well, I stop at this point, but I guess you can see that I could ramble on like this for ages. Such ramblings show in my view the potential, but also the limits of Genette's theory for an analysis of Nico Nico Douga. Genette's theory applies very well, but there is also a danger that I end up with a long list of categorisations, all neat and logical, but in itself nothing more then mere descriptions with theoretical terms. So how do I proceed from here? I guess this is the moment when the ideas of Hamano-san and Yoshikawa-san come in.

For the purposes of an analysis of Nico Nico Douga, transtextuality has to be re-thought under the headlines of "pseudo-synchronicity" and

"evolution". Transtextuality on Nico Nico Douga is not one between canonical texts in literary theory, but between user-generated video content. Whereas the evolution of genres takes centuries, successful tags can form and spread in days, even hours. Transtextuality has taken a computed and partly automated form. Evolution has taken speed and became part of a giant role-playing game. Presence in the form of pseudo-synchronicity is a central outcome of this.

I cannot outline yet how this will work out in detail – inserting the dimension of time into a structuralist theoretical framework can indeed be trick business – , but I guess you get the direction. If ever I arrive at this point, I think there waits another trap. Such a model of Nico Nico Douga might catch its complexity, but it is also in danger of falling into what I might call the "Look how complex this fan culture is, I became a real fan of it"-trap. What papers like this lack is a certain degree of critical distance.

Nico Nico Douga does not provide an easy opportunity for over-simplified critical analysis. Such forms do not apply, because, at least for me, Nico Nico Douga seems to be in fact pretty inclusive, open and democratic, non-hierarchical and egalitarian, surprisingly anti-narcisitic and non-individualistic, relatively un-sexist and un-nationalistic, often subversive in many ways, and in its core still mostly uncommercial and genuinely playful. So how should we add a critical stance? And does it have to be added for its own sake?

I am still undecided, and I can only offer another hunch here: Siegfried Kracauer's work on the "cult of distraction" on the German mass culture in the 1920ties might provide some ideas how to push the analysis deeper into the realm of critical theory. What happens, if the "mass ornament" (Kracauer) becomes a mass-produced ornament – an ornament, which takes the form of user-produced and constantly

evolving transtextuality? Such are the questions that might have to be addressed at the end of this analysis of Nico Nico Douga.