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A Cognitive-Narrative Reading of Electronic Literature: Self-Blame Emotions in *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012)

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Electronic Literature diminishes the boundaries between different art forms. Multimodal web-fictions, as the second generation of electronic literature, portrays narratives through textual, visual, auditory, and navigational modes. By focusing on Patrick Colm Hogan's cognitive-narrative theories, this paper reveals the relationship between the multimodal narrative of web-fictions and emotion systems. Furthermore, each mode indicates a different emotionally orienting function of narrative. A case study, *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012) by Illya Szilak, is scrutinized in order to depict the working memory processes at play during the activation of specific emotion systems, including self-blame emotions. The present research illustrates that the multimodal narratives of electronic works could be considered as the external manifestations of the cognitive processes, embedded in the working memory, during the actuation of emotion systems. As such, various different modes have essential roles in picturing different types of information, perceptions, memories, and imaginations, which are stored in the working memory and decoding those emotion elicitors, which are perceived, remembered, or imagined. This paper highlights how the behaviors and actions of the main character, Sebastian are directed by self-blame emotions, such as shame and

guilt, which have been engraved in his mind since his childhood, and how they lead him toward self-sacrifice.

Keywords: Cognitive Process; Emotion Systems; Multimodal Web-fictions; Self-blame Emotions; The Working Memory

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Una lectura cognitivo-narrativa de la literatura electrónica: las emociones de autoinculpación en *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012)

La literatura electrónica diluye las fronteras entre las distintas formas de arte. Las ficciones web multimodales, como segunda generación de la literatura electrónica, presentan narrativas a través de modos textuales, visuales, auditivos y de navegación. Centrándose en las teorías narrativas cognitivas de Patrick Colm Hogan, este artículo revela la relación entre la narrativa multimodal de las ficciones web y los sistemas emocionales. Además, cada modo indica una función narrativa distinta de orientación emocional. Se analiza el caso de estudio *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012) de Illya Szilak, con el fin de describir los procesos de la memoria de trabajo implicados en la activación de sistemas emocionales específicos, incluidas las emociones de autoinculpación. La presente investigación demuestra que las narrativas multimodales de las obras electrónicas pueden considerarse manifestaciones externas de los procesos cognitivos, integrados en la memoria de trabajo, durante la activación de los sistemas emocionales. En este sentido, los distintos modos cumplen funciones esenciales para representar distintos tipos de información, percepciones, recuerdos e imaginaciones almacenadas en la memoria de trabajo, y para decodificar aquellos estímulos emocionales que son percibidos, recordados o imaginados. Este artículo pone de relieve cómo las conductas y acciones del personaje principal, Sebastian, están dirigidas por emociones de autoinculpación, como la vergüenza y la culpa, grabadas en su mente desde la infancia, y cómo estas lo conducen al autosacrificio.

Palabras clave: Proceso Cognitivo; Sistemas Emocionales; Ficciones Web Multimodales; Emociones de Autoinculpación; Memoria de Trabajo.

1. Introduction

Multimodal web-fictions, also known as the second generation of electronic literature, utilize several modes, including image, sound/music, video, and text. They are presented as either hyperlinked texts or works with a linear structure. The multimodality of the second generation of electronic literature, which is the result of the emergence of the World Wide Web, diminishes the boundaries between different art forms. Furthermore, multimodality highlights that each mode has "different kinds of semiotic work, each

has its distinct potentials for meaning," in the sense that multimodality could be considered as "the normal state of human communication" (Kress 2010, 2). Alison Gibbons makes the same point in another way. In her book *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* (2012), Gibbons delineates how "multimodality, in its most fundamental sense, is the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context," and that the simple example of multimodality is "an everyday reality" (2012, 8). We experience life in multimodal terms, through sight, sound, movement, olfaction, and perception. According to Gibbons, the rise of digital technologies, such as the Internet, makes the twenty-first century, a "multimodal era" (2012, 8). It could be argued that every experience in this world might be a sample of multimodality, particularly emotional experiences, which could be depicted through the multimodal narrative of electronic literature.

Hogan claims that "feelings may be connected with any aspect of a literary work –most obviously events and characters, but also scenes or language" (2011, 175). Considering various modes as prominent aspects of multimodal web-fictions, it could be argued that each mode has an emotionally orienting function. Written in HTML5 and JavaScript, *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012) by Illya Szilak and Cyril Tsiboulski, is a clear example of multimodal web-fictions. What needs to be emphasized here is the description of multimodal web-fictions. Such fictions contain "complex multimodal ensembles of image, sound, animated movement, and other modes of representation" that collaboratively exist in "the multimodal environment of the screen" (Jewitt 2005, 316). The reader therefore needs to create a narrative through tracking the different modes which present the story. Most of the electronic works which are accessible on Electronic Literature Collections are considered as multimodal web-fictions. They portray the story through textual, visual and auditory means, as well as through and navigational modes.

Illya Szilak has established her fame through creating two electronic works, *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* (2008) and *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012), which are respectively accessible on the second and third volumes of Electronic Literature. *Queerskins* consists of five mini-narratives which are presented through photos (from Flickr Creative Commons), videos (from YouTube, the Internet Archive, and Iris Prize nominated filmmaker Jarrah Gurrie), audio monologues (five characters' comments on Sebastian's life and character), and diaristic texts (excerpts from Sebastian's diary, which are presented as hand-written texts on paper and give the impression that Sebastian, himself has written them). Before the novel starts, there is a title page which includes two videos at the top of the screen, four images at the lower part, a piece of music which is attached to one of the images, and the name of the novel which is written in the center of the screen. They provide us with all the modes/media which are used to create *Queerskins*.

This digital novel encompasses eight chapters, "Missouri," "Mother," "Alex," "Carlos," "End," "Bathilde," "Jean-Marie," and "Return." Each chapter consists of

various lexias, which are small chunks of text or images that are presented on the screen. Each lexia contains photos, videos, audio monologues, and diaristic texts. All these modes/media delve into the main character, Sebastian's amorous relationship with his beloveds, Alex and Jean-Marie. Sebastian is a young homosexual physician, from a rural Missouri Catholic family, who is infected with HIV and dies of AIDS at the beginning of the epidemic in USA. Sebastian's love life could be divided into three periods, the time when he lives with his mother in Missouri, the time when he lives with Alex in L.A., and the time when he lives with Jean-Marie in Africa. During these periods, Sebastian experiences self-blame emotions. In the last period, Sebastian's infection with HIV and his own death are represented. In order to investigate the emotionally orienting functions of the use of the different modes/media in *Queerskins*, this article employs Hogan's analysis of emotion systems.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of studies on electronic literature. The following examples shed light upon the extensive research available on electronic works. In *Electronic Literature* (2019), Rettberg provides a thorough introduction to contemporary genres of digital writing. The book is divided into seven chapters which focus on various genres of electronic literature, including combinatory poetics, interactive fictions and gamelike forms, kinetic and interactive poetry, network writing, and divergent streams. In the first chapter, Rettberg describes electronic literature as "new forms and genres of writing that explore the specific capabilities of the computer and network – literature that would not be possible without the contemporary digital context" (2019, 11). He then goes on to examine several works of electronic literature, from the 1950s to the early 2000s as well as contemporary works produced in the last decade.

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature (2018), edited by Tabbi, could be considered as the first authoritative reference handbook to the field of Electronic Literature. It consists of four parts, "Ends, Beginnings," "Poetics, Polemics," "Materialities, Ontologies," and "Economies, Precarities." This book collects various scholars' theories concerning the significant concepts within electronic literature. The essays by Punday and Ciccoricco could be regarded as the examples of investigating narrativity and cognition in electronic literature.

Punday, in "Narrativity," commences by elucidating the evolution of narrativity and how electronic works can create and use narrativity. Moreover, he attempts to "explore the degree to which the traditional features of narrativity apply to electronic literature" through examining "Today I Die" (2009), "a poetic meditation on despair and hope created by Argentinian developer Daniel Benmergui, [which] takes the form of a puzzle game in which the player must manipulate words that make up a sentence" (Punday 2018, 138). He also mentions unique features of electronic literature in terms of narrativity, and some of the ways that electronic literature complicates our understanding of narrativity.

In "Rebooting Cognition in Electronic Literature," Ciccoricco highlights the significance of cognition in electronic literature. He mentions that electronic literature reflects "some of the facets that comprise contemporary research on cognition, which casts it as embodied and emotive, distributed and social, and enacted with and through our media environments" (Ciccoricco 2018, 151). Borrowing form Hogan's theories, Ciccoricco delineates how cognitive-scientific universals are based on prototypes, and states that "cognitive narratology explores the perceptual, cognitive, and narrative universals that shape story worlds across media" (Ciccoricco 2018, 158). He elucidates how the digital literary arts are associated with cognition through examining Fox Harrell's *Mimesis* (2012) and Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro's *Pry* (2014).

In an M.A. thesis from DePaul University, entitled "New Media Objects: The Future of Electronic Literature and Its Influence on Print Stylistics," Brian Tillewein draws an analogy between digital and print texts in order to examine the nature of media shift in literature. He addresses "the influence that new media literature shows over printed works and the manner in which new media continuously remediates the traditional aesthetics of written discourse" (Tillewein 2013, 6) through investigating various electronic works, including *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* (2008) by Illya Szilak. He argues that Szilak employs two forms of remediation, immediacy and hypermediacy. He also makes observations on the roles of author and reader of electronic literature.

In *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, N. K. Hayles identifies electronic literature as "digital born," "a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer" (2008, 3). Then, she examines different genres of electronic literature and asserts that Joyce's *afternoon: a story* (1990) (a hypertext fiction) could be considered one of the first instances of electronic literature. Hayles believes that "in the context of electronic literature, intermediation has two distinct ways in which it might be understood: as a literal description of the dynamics of human-computer interaction or as a metaphor for such interactions" (2008, 51). She portrays the shift from page to screen through scrutinizing Joyce's *afternoon: a story* and *Twelve Blue*. She also explores contexts for electronic literature, the effects of electronic literature, and the future of literature in this book.

There has, however, been no detailed investigation of *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012) by Illya Szilak, except her own essay, "Towards Minor Literary Forms: Digital Literature and the Art of Failure" (2015). In this essay, she refers to the issues which are examined in *Queerskins: A Novel*, including the exploration of "the politics of gender through a kind of literary drag performance," "playing with binaries, self/other, fiction/nonfiction, male/female, virtuous/perverse," and "how meagerness, smallness, and quotidian, embodied existence can be seen not as 'castrated' forms of a mythic or heroic ideal but as the grounding for 'mutation,' the multiplicity of life whether virtual or embodied" (Szilak, 2015). Indeed, the essay sheds additional light on the contents of the novel.

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

It is worth noting that the overall cohesion of multimodal texts can be achieved through examining the diverse modes and their interactions. Kress makes the same point in another way, all "the modes of music, of color, of moving image, of speech, of soundtrack," and "of writing" "bear meaning, and are part of one message" (Kress 2003, 8). He highlights the equivalent effects of each mode in multimodal texts. What is particularly useful about examining modes and their relations is that it reveals their emotionally orienting functions. Indeed, the methodology employed in this article is to examine the roles of various modes in presenting self-blame emotions of the characters. Moreover, the specific objective of this study is to highlight the relationship between the multimodality of web-fictions and emotion systems. A case study, *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012), is scrutinized in order to portray the working memory processes at play during the activation of specific emotions systems, (including self-blame emotions). To do so, this research follows Hogan's theories regarding emotion systems.

4. Emotions

By drawing on the sources of elicitors of emotions, this article depicts how self-blame emotions are able to permeate all the space of the working memory. However, it is essential to review the structure of the working memory. The working memory consists of various parts, including the central executive, the buffer, the specialized processor, the auditory rehearsal loop, the visuo-spatial sketchpad, and the work space (Hogan 2003, 35-8). The functions of each of these parts could be represented through the multimodality of digital novels. Unlike research that employs reader response theories, including "Hyperfiction as a Medium for Drifting Times: A Close Reading of the German Hyperfiction *Zeit für die Bombe*," by Alexandra Saemmer (2014), which investigated gestural manipulations, the relationship between the text and device, and interaction between the digital work and the reader, the present study underscores the multimodality of web-fictions as a representation of the working memory during the activation of emotions.

Hogan borrows from Keith Oatley and Philip Johnson-Laird, defining emotion as "the product of an agent's evaluations of his/her success or failure in achieving particular goals within what is, in effect, a narrative structure" (Hogan 2003, 76). In order to describe emotions, it is necessary to clarify how emotion systems operate. Investigating the emotion system processes, Hogan states that the components of the lexical entry for a specified emotion comprise the eliciting conditions, the phenomenological tone, and the expressions or action consequences. Hogan presents three sources for the elicitors that activate certain emotions. The first refers to our "innate sensitivities" which include sensitivities "to the emotion expressions of other people. It is well known that we respond to the emotional expressions of others with parallel or complementary emotions, owing at least in part to our mirror neuron systems" which "fire either when one does something oneself or senses someone else doing it" (Hogan 2011, 49). The

emotional response of other people can, then, be stored in one's working memory and it activates the same emotion system as if one experiences it oneself.

Innate emotional sensitivities could shed light on the second source, which relates to "critical period experiences." Hogan argues that "in early childhood, we learn how to feel not only through our own direct experiences (e.g., of pleasure or pain), but crucially by witnessing the emotion expressions of others" (2011, 49). During this critical period, individuals could develop emotions through beholding others' emotional responses. Caregivers or mothers have crucial role in orienting children's emotion systems. This idea is highlighted by many theorists, including Oatley, Keltner, and Jenkins who state that "over time individual infants become more similar to their mothers in terms of their expressions of emotion" and "mothers' reports of their own negative emotions predicted their children's negative emotions" (2007 303-5). Children's mothers or caregivers could be considered as momentous figures whose emotional responses are among the primary data which are kept in children's working memory.

The last source is "emotional memories," which are "implicit memories." For a deeper understanding of 'emotional memories,' Hogan differentiates them from "episodic memories." He states that emotional memories, in and of themselves, do not "bring representational content into working memory" and their activation "leads one to re-experience the emotion. They may be activated without a corresponding representational memory. In that case, we may experience the emotion but not understand why we are experiencing it"; on the other hand, "episodic memories" are "explicit recollections of experiences" and "when activated, they bring those experiences explicitly to mind" (Hogan 2011, 51). Considering the origins of eliciting conditions as the basis of emotional responses, Hogan focuses on the importance of a person's critical period and the emotional memories which are kept in her working memory and triggered by elicitors, which are perceived, remembered, or imagined.

4.1. Self-Blame Emotions

Exploring different emotion systems, as a means for making sense of experience, Hogan claims that "the eliciting conditions for guilt, shame, and regret first involve a past action that is aversive and a spontaneous attribution of causality to oneself. Thus, we may refer to all three as "self-blame emotions" (Hogan 2011, 216). Examining *Macbeth* as a good example of a work which is saturated with emotions of shame and guilt, Hogan introduces five common characteristics of self-blaming emotions. The first is "spiritual alienation and its consequences" which begins with a person suffering from "the regret that goes along with anticipation of punishment," or rather "eternal punishment" (Hogan 2011, 186). In other words, the person apparently turns away from spirituality, particularly God and he/she can no longer pray. As a result of this alienation, he/she suffers from regret, which makes him/her expect a punishment. The second characteristic refers to "a more mundane punishment" which contains "the immediate regret" and "the working memory preoccupation with the aversive act," and

it is related to "the derealization of the present material world" (Hogan 2011, 186-7). This preoccupation gradually intensifies, in the sense that it becomes more real than the physical world. The third one includes the "issues of disgust" and "shame." Indeed, the person is tormented by feelings of disgust and shame. The next characteristic deals with the "spontaneous feeling of responsibility," the result of which is that the aversive action "fills all the space of working memory" (Hogan 2011, 186-7). The last characteristic is "changing the situation by making reparation for it" which can be done in two ways, "reversing the action and compensating for it" or "inflicting punishment," including "the same degree of suffering," which might in some cases be one's own "death" (Hogan 2011, 186-7). In order to examine these features in *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012), the present study classifies these characteristics under two headings: Disgust and Shame and Stages of Punishment.

5. Disgust and Shame

5.1. The Origin of Sebastian's Self-Blaming Emotions

Hogan explains that there are some precursors to shame, including "loss," "failure," "exile," "self-isolation/self-concealment," and "disgust/self-disgust" (2011, 197-9). Before considering these traits in *Queerskins: A Novel* (2012), it is worth focusing on Sebastian's source of shame. The first extract from Sebastian diary contains words which highlight the origin of his self-blame emotions, such as shame and guilt. Depicting his mother as the source of his shame, which pervades the rest of the novel, Sebastian writes: "I don't know if my mother was there, but I turned to her, eternal turning like earth revolving, like time, I turned again and not again" (Szilak 2012, 1). Sebastian's immanent reorientation towards his mother's moral judgment indicates her crucial role in his feelings of shame and guilt throughout his life. His mother's role is enhanced through the sound effect which is interactively embedded in the image of a park with the title of "Summer Evening." Clicking on the play icon, the sound will be played. The combination of the auditory mode with the visual mode is called "interactive variability" by Hazel Smith (2016, p.163-4). At the thirteenth second of the sound effect, a child's/Sebastian's voice calling his mom is heard (Szilak 2012, 1). By utilizing 'interactive variability,' Szilak highlights the underlying functions of the auditory and visual modes. Indeed, the combination of the sound effect/auditory mode, which comprises the sounds of nature and Sebastian's voice, with the image of the park/visual mode, which is a representation of a place where children can play, portrays the fact that Sebastian's feelings towards his mother were activated in his early childhood.

Sebastian's resemblance to his mother is also presented through the other characters' voices to emphasize that Sebastian is akin to his mother in various aspects of his life. For instance, in the second chapter, Alex's voice on the fourth lexia reveals that even Sebastian physically resembles his mother: "I saw his mother once. Recognized her right off. God! She looked just like him. Silver blond [...], beautiful skin" (Szilak

2012, 4). Their similarity is not limited to their physical appearance. Referring to their similar appreciation of art, Sebastian's mother says: "I was taught to appreciate art from an early age. I wanted Sebastian to enjoy it too. When he was old enough, we took him to the museum in Saint Louise. Just like me, he loved those *Water Lilies* by Monet. He was always artistic (Szilak 2012, 5). Both statements, "just like him" and "just like me" are uttered more loudly than the rest of the text, or rather they 'pulsate' in order to depict Sebastian's mother as the source of his emotional responses.

According to Hogan, "one's moral judgment is not fundamental in generating one's emotional response. Rather, that judgment is part of the working memory-based processes that serve to modulate emotion system activations through perception, concrete imagination, and emotional memory. Judgments of an act as moral or immoral have motivational consequences" (Hogan 2011, 176). The source of Sebastian's emotional response is not his own moral judgment, but his mother's moral/religious judgement which is engrained in his working memory and triggered through his emotional memories.

Sebastian calls the activation and re-experiencing of his emotional memories, a dream; "I called it a dream though the images stayed with me for days. Even after the details disappeared, I could still invoke a flutter of feeling like birds' wings beating in my chest. Only now do I understand the gift it is" (Szilak 2012, 1). As mentioned before, during critical period, children can develop emotions through beholding their mothers or caregivers' emotional response, which are then stored in the child's working memory. Highlighting the significance of the critical period, Sebastian states: "I am a child again, no not again, but always. It is like remembering a dream" (Szilak 2012, 1). The act of remembering a dream and being a child again indicate that Sebastian's emotional memories are entwined with his perception.

What needs to be emphasized here is the outcome of moral judgment as elucidated by Hogan:

> One of the most socially consequential modulatory functions of moral judgment is to inhibit spontaneous empathy. A particularly important form of such empathy inhibition involves in-group/out-group divisions. Insofar as someone characterizes another person as part of an out-group, he or she will feel less empathic identification with that other person. This is in some degree the result of a broad emotional tendency relating to parallel versus complementary emotions. Part of what it means to characterize someone as an in- or out-group member is that one sets a default value for one's emotional response to that person's emotion expressions–parallel for an in-group member, complementary for an out-group member. (2011, 177)

This group division, which could be considered a disgust trigger, sheds light on the idea that everyone around Sebastian at some point views him as an out-group member. From the beginning of the novel, Szilak, by depicting Sebastian's relationships with his parents and lovers (Alex and Jean-Marie), indicates the impacts that their emotional responses have in enhancing Sebastian's feelings of shame, which lead to his self-isolation.

5.2. Sebastian's Self-Exile

From her religious point of view, Sebastian's mother classifies him as an out-group member through considering his love affair with a man as a sin: "I told him in no uncertain terms that it was a sin. That is what church says, that is what the Bible says (Szilak 2012, 3). Instead of empathy, she manifests disgust as a complementary emotion (at Sebastian's love affair). When Sebastian confesses to his mother about his first lover, James, she ignores it. He tries again three years later, but this time, they fight. After he moves to L.A., his mother sends him a package of his personal belongings. Since then, they have not spoken with each other (Szilak 2012, 12). Sebastian's father, Ed, demonstrates the same emotional response through a masculine view. His fathers' disgust is revealed via his mother's comments: "It must be hard to be a man and have a son like [Sebastian]" and "He was always harder on Sebastian than I was" (Szilak 2012, 5). Just as "disgust felt by other people is certainly relevant to one's experience of shame" because "it fosters or intensifies self-disgust" (Hogan 2011, 179), so Sebastian's parents' disgust makes him feel self-disgust, and then shame, which is the basis of his self-concealment/self-isolation and self-exile. Since the source of disapproval or disgust is his own parents, Sebastian feels more profound shame. One of the "actional outcomes that allow any possible reduction in shame" is "removal of oneself from others, thus removal from their expectations and their disgust" (Hogan 2011, 179). Consequently, Sebastian goes to L.A in order to free himself from his parents' disgust and expectations, and to reduce the amount of shame that he feels.

Betrayal by one's beloved is considered as a kind of failure; likewise, sexual jealousy is related to shame. In other words, "jealousy is [...] bound up with a sense of disgust. Insofar as that disgust can come to affect one's understanding of oneself as well as the beloved, jealousy can always verge on, or even overlap with, shame" (Hogan 2011, 203). Seeing Alex's infidelity as a breach of reciprocity, Sebastian feels disgust and self-disgust. (During their relationship in L.A., Alex betrays Sebastian, and this leads to their separation.) In order to clarify this shifting between disgust with someone else and self-disgust, it is essential to elucidate Hogan's theories:

> It is a matter of just who is salient at any given moment. As long as the other person is salient, then the disgust will be connected with him or her. But as soon as the jealous person becomes salient for himself or herself, then the activation of the disgust system can easily be reoriented toward the self. Indeed, such changes in salience are likely, as are cycles of jealousy shifting into shame shifting back into jealousy. One obvious cause of a shift toward salience of oneself, thus toward shame, involves other people's attitudes. (Hogan 2011, 203)

Accordingly, Alex's engagement in sexual activity with another person could be considered as the starting point for Sebastian's feeling of disgust, in this period of his life. Although Alex thinks that his infidelity is of no great importance: "I don't know why he got upset. It was nothing," Sebastian claims that "it separated every man"

and he blames Alex: "You had no right" (Szilak 2012, 24). Sebastian's feeling this sort of disgust quickly changes to self-disgust when Alex expresses his feelings toward Sebastian: "[I]t's my house. And you can get out. I'm sick of it. Every time I'm with you, I feel like I'm going straight to hell. Get a psychiatrist and get over it. Or just be miserable. I don't care anymore" (Szilak 2012, 24). At this moment, Alex is no longer salient and the disgust is not connected to him. Indeed, Alex's attitudes alter the object of salience. It makes Sebastian salient for himself, and the activation of his disgust system reorients towards his own self, which results in feelings of self-disgust and shame. Sebastian's (emotional) abandonment by Alex could be seen as the inauguration of a sequence of emotional responses.

Illuminating the underlying relation between emotional responses and mood state, Hogan claims that "depending on the nature of a background mood state, we may have an inclination toward 'mood repair' or 'mood congruent' processing" (2011, 52). When we divert our attention from emotion-provoking objects and turn to opposite emotions, we unconsciously limit our experience of that emotion and engage in mood repair. On the other hand, when we pay particular attention to those emotion-provoking objects, we engage in mood congruent processing. This is what Sebastian performs in response to Alex's infidelity. Sebastian's emotional response contains both mood congruent processing and mood repair. Sebastian's first action divulges that he seeks mood congruent processing in order to reduce his sense of failure, disgust, and shame. He goes to a club which is exclusively for homosexuals, the Watering Hole, to fulfil his desire for a sexual relationship. In another respect, he is in search of the same love affair: "[M]aybe I was looking for love of a sort. I'd like to think that was true" (Szilak 2012, 36). Looking around the club, Sebastian finds a man whose body is covered with scars. Initially, this attracts Sebastian: "I had a thought that I ought to kiss every wound on that broken body," but shortly after that, Sebastian becomes frantic and moves from looking to having sex with the man: "I felt my climax slipping away. Furious, I closed my hands around his neck and squeezed. At first, he seemed aroused by the violence, […]. When I did not release him, though, he began to trash." (Szilak 2012, 36). Undergoing a clash between desire and disgust, Sebastian squeezes the man's neck which taps into Sebastian's feeling of self-hatred. At this point, Szilak presents us with an account of Sebastian's feeling of shame: "Immediately, I felt guilty. I was back in childhood doing the things I knew were wrong. Shame speed into my mind like floodwaters into a basement. I knew if I did not act quickly, I'd drown. I got up, wrapped the towel around my waist and escaped into the corridor" (Szilak 2012, 36). Sebastian's escape from the club foreshadows his self-exile to Africa.

Sebastian's next action, going to Africa, sheds light on him seeking mood repair as an emotional response to his shame and guilt. After spending the night at the club, Sebastian is haunted by a flood of thoughts regarding his self-isolation or self-exile: "All the desire, hatred, self-loathing, and shame of the night before had settled into

a muddy brown soup while I slept. It seemed to me that I was made of shit inside and out. My past was shit and my future was shit. I could see my life stretching out day by day, all the minuscule happenings" (Szilak 2012, 37). Feeling self-disgust, Sebastian tries to find a way to diminish his shame: "Frantically, I searched my brain for some thread of hope. Perhaps, I thought, if I could just make my appetites smaller [...] and my circles of intimates even smaller, my life could be calm and lucid again. I imagined myself living alone, helping patients, cooking for myself, and communicating with nature" (Szilak 2012, 37). His fascination with the idea of living alone, or rather in self-isolation continues until he decides to leave L.A. because he discovers he cannot lead a life of seclusion there: "How had I imagined even for a minute, that I could live a monkish life, in a place like L.A. (Szilak 2012, 37). The reader's understanding of his desire to leave L.A. is enriched through being able to observe L.A. at night. His viewpoint is revealed by means of the four videos on the thirty-eighth lexia. The first video, which is titled as "L.A. night walk small," portrays a long shot of L.A. and the sound of the hustle and bustle of life there. The integration of auditory and visual modes represents Sebastian's relationship with the place where he lives, as he states: "I realized that there was nothing to keep me in L.A. The whole edifice of my life had collapsed. I could rebuild anywhere" (Szilak 2012, 38). This is how he comes to select self-isolation and self-exile in response to his self-blaming emotions.

His desire to isolate and hide from others take Sebastian to Africa, where he experiences another sort of failure. Visiting patients and helping them, Sebastian meets Jean-Marie, who is a medical student at the University of Bamako. Their meeting provokes Sebastian's sexual desire which leads him to seek the love of Jean-Marie. Another friend, Bathilde, says that "they were with each other always. They were in love" (Szilak 2012, 43). In spite of their love, however, Jean-Marie asks Sebastian to leave when he finds out that Sebastian has AIDS. Then, Jean-Marie avoids Sebastian as Bathilde explains: "Jean-Marie did not sit with us at meals anymore. Even when his test came back negative" (Szilak 2012, 47). Jean-Marie's attitudes provoke Sebastian to feel again a kind of failure, which triggers his self-blaming emotions. Sebastian considers himself guilty: "[I]f Jean-Marie's test comes back positive, I will never forgive myself" and wonders: "[W]hat if this required some sacrifice" (Szilak 2012, 47). This view presents us with a series of thoughts which indicate Sebastian's contemplation of his own self-sacrifice. It commences with his appealing to God to spare Jean-Marie's life: "I told the God of my childhood that if he let Jean-Marie's test [be] negative, I would do whatever he asked. It was a pandering bargain, the kind that a kid makes. I've operated under the same childish logic my whole life" (Szilak 2012, 46). In response to his self-blaming emotions, Sebastian chooses not only self-isolation and self-exile, but also self-sacrifice. Sebastian recognizes that his urge to sacrifice himself has its roots in his childhood. In this sense, it is crucial to uncover the implication of his emotional memories with regard to punishment.

6. Stages of Punishment

6.1. Sebastian's Working Memory Preoccupation with the Aversive Act

As mentioned before, various stages of punishment are among the traits of self-blame emotions. Responding to his shame and guilt, Sebastian experiences diverse kinds of punishment throughout his life. His experience of punishment begins in the early stages of his life. Imagining punishment for himself from early childhood, Sebastian foreshadows his ultimate punishment. He elucidates: "[A]s a child, I devised punishments for myself for moral lapses, real or imagined. I'd deprive myself of a favorite food, or water, or force myself to stand on one leg for an hour (Szilak 2012, 3). He sees himself as guilty and imagines punishments for himself. Afterward, Sebastian turns to the more mundane punishments that he anticipates: "I've lost all my desire for sex, for food, for sleep. These are associated now with a primitive bodily need – no more vital than an itch. The acts are pleasurable, but in the same way that scratching is. They have lost the nimbus of love, flavor, or relief" (Szilak 2012, 57). These lines, which refer to the working memory preoccupation with the aversive act, denote his incapability to feel at peace. The preoccupation also leads to his derealization of the present material world:

> As with any illusion surrendered, I feel a distant regret. You see, I have begun to understand that what we call consciousness is the stuff of dreams. Like a cloud, it appears to exist only at a distance. Examined close up, it is nothing much at all – a reflection seen through the mirrors of my eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin. These reflections are only what they are, and not at all what they seem […]. Today, it occurred to me, the observer, who is also in this world, exist this way. I suddenly feel the weight of me leaving, feel myself dissolving, expanding into space like light. I do not desire annihilation. But, given the chance, I'd pay for this love with all that I am. (Szilak 2012, 57)

Sebastian turns away from the present material world and considers it an 'illusion' or 'reflection' since his working memory is filled and controlled by the aversive act. He denies the reality of the world and of himself.

Portraying the usurpation of Sebastian's working memory, the novel recurrently refers to Sebastian's shame. Miscellaneous moments of Sebastian's shame represent the impacts of the aversive act on his life. Writing about his feelings during his sexual affair with James, Sebastian confirms that he felt ashamed because he enjoys the act of sex: "You liked that, didn't you? [James] murmured. I was ashamed because I did" (Szilak 2012, 10). His feelings of shame are extended throughout his life. Sebastian's working memory is obsessed with the idea that his (homosexual) love is "unholy" and "a sin." The obsession is depicted through a conversation with Alex: "[Sebastian] told me once that he couldn't believe that love could be a sin. He said that if you wanna give your body for pleasure to another. How could that be unholy. A sin, I said. A sin? I couldn't believe that he could seriously use that word (Szilak 2012, 4). Although Sebastian initially expresses

that he could not believe the unholiness of love, his constant feelings of shame and guilt during his relationships prove that he does in fact consider homosexual sex to be a sin all through his life. It is clear that Sebastian's attitudes towards his (homosexual) love has been affected by his mother's judgment. As mentioned before, she regards his love affair as a sin. The intensity of Sebastian's sense of guilt and shame makes Alex aware of Sebastian's feelings during their relationship: "[H]e told me to fuck him. 'Fuck me.' Just like that. 'Ok.' I told. [...] but that wasn't needed at all. He was just pretending. He was like if he said it loud enough and played enough he didn't feel bloody guilty" (Szilak 2012, 20). On the same lexia, there is an image of a theater, which mirrors idea that Sebastian is performing an act. There is no end to Sebastian's feelings of shame and guilt, in the sense that he becomes homophobic. Even Alex claims that homophobia controls Sebastian's mind: "This homophobic shit is beating his brains in (Szilak 2012, 30). Controlling his working memory, homophobia induces Sebastian to deem himself causally responsible for suffering of Hesus, the man who attacked him. Hesus was accused of trying to kill Sebastian, but Sebastian refuses to testify in order to save Hesus' life, even for some months. (Sebastian belives that Hesus is the guy whom Sebastian saw in the E.R.) Examining Hesus a few months ago in the E.R, Sebastian knows that Hesus suffers from AIDS. Sebastian thinks that "Hesus is gonna die anyway. So why should he make him suffer more?" (Szilak 2012, 35) by testifying against him. This very act signifies that Sebastian's feelings of shame and guilt are so intensified that makes him unable to think. In other respect, Sebastian's empathy with Hesus, as an in-group member, foreshadows Sebastian's own infection with AIDS and his death.

Moreover, Sebastian writes about his working memory obsession with self-blame emotions through using color terms; "green for fear, and red for pain, and orange for anger, and brown for disappointment, and what color is shame (Szilak 2012, 35). Afterwards, he attributes shame to red. Sebastian's feelings of shame are explicitly manifested in one of his extracts. He describes shame as a red dress:

> Shame is a red dress.
> When I was little, my mother said
> Shame on you, and
> It's a crying shame.
> And shame about that
> She didn't say
> Shame is a red dress
> That you will wear
> Shame is a tight red dress
> . . . .
> I found the dress in the morning
> Lying on the floor
> I picked it up.

On the front was a stain,
A dark island of semen in a sea of red.
. . . .
So here I sit, with the dress in my hands.
It is nothing, a cloth,
A synthetic blush
You wanted to shame me,
You said I wasn't much of a man,
Then why dress me in red
The opposite of surrender?
You should have dressed me in white
And made me your bride. (Szilak 2012, 28)

The above passage is combined with an image of a red dress, "Red dress," and an image of Jesus Christ, who wears red clothes, with the title of "Jesus chained," which is accompanied by Alex's voice referring to Hesus's death, "Hesus did die, chained to his bed, just like Sebastian said he would (Szilak 2012, 51). On this lexia, the visual modes and the textual mode are connected in terms of "rhyme," which refers to the common qualities that are employed in separated modes (Van Leeuwen 2005, 13). Indeed, Sebastian's account of shame as a red dress, the image of the red dress, and Christ's red clothes are linked through the color red. Moreover, the description of Hesus' death and the image of Jesus Christ foreshadow Sebastian's sacrificial status.

6.2. Sebastian's Ultimate Punishment

Sebastian goes even further and foresees his ultimate punishment, or death, as a reparation for changing the situation, in which he suffers from self-blame emotions. He knows he would pay for his love with all that he is. When Sebastian realizes that he can do nothing in response to his self-blame emotions, he prefers to sacrifice himself and inflict death upon himself: "[W]hen Bathilde presents me with the miracle drug, I do not question whether I deserve it. I do not for a moment consider giving it away. When I finally do, to the wife of Tuareg herdsman, it is out of fear, not yet love" (Szilak 2012, 49). Ultimately, then, he decides to put an end to his sufferings of self-blame emotions and gives his drug to another person due to the fear-inducing aversive act. Then, he goes into the desert and waits for his death. On the fifty-third lexia, there are four images of the desert. The one which is titled "Flag of red" depicts Sebastian's self-exile. Locating a tent and a backpack, which are bordered by stones, in the center of the image foregrounds them against the background of the desert. The separation of (Sebastian's) tent from the rest of the desert indicates Sebastian's self-isolation.

The image of the desert is accompanied by Jean-Marie's voice. Jean-Marie metaphorically refers to Sebastian's tent as a "flag of red," "I […] searched the horizon with the binoculars […] and suddenly a flag of red against the white" (Szilak 2012,

53). Then, Jean-Marie says: "There he was. Sitting outside [...]. [Sebastian:] How did you know where I was? [Jean-Marie:] Your tent was like a flag [...]. [Sebastian:] It should be white then. [Jean-Marie:] But then, I would not have found you" (Szilak 2012, 53). Considering Sebastian's tent as a flag of red, Jean-Marie sheds light on Sebastian's description of shame as a red dress. In other words, the auditory mode enriches the textual description of shame on the fifty-first lexia which contains the following spoken lines:

> So here I sit, with the dress in my hands.
> It is nothing, a cloth,
> A synthetic blush
> You wanted to shame me,
> You said I wasn't much of a man,
> Then why dress me in red
> The opposite of surrender?
> You should have dressed me in white
> And made me your bride. (Szilak 2012, 51)

In the textual mode, Sebastian elucidates that he is dressed in red, which is the opposite of surrender, though he should have been dressed in white. Correspondingly, in the auditory mode, Jean-Marie states that (he could find Sebastian because) Sebastian's tent is like a flag of red against the whiteness of the desert and Sebastian comments that his tent should be white. Regarding red as a color of shame, both modes indicate that the source of Sebastian's actional outcome (self-sacrifice) is his feeling of shame.

Finally, Sebastian's ultimate punishment/death is depicted on the fifty-fifth lexia, where Bathilde and Jean-Marie describe Sebastian's death. Their voices are accompanied by images of the desert. On the same lexia, there is a video/short movie of panoramic views of the desert and it refers to what is narrated in auditory mode. After Sebastian's death, Alex ludicrously declares that "Jean-Marie said, [Sebastian] was hallucinating, angels! Can you believe it. Angels!" (Szilak 2012, 58). Since Sebastian's working memory is controlled by his mother's moral judgement, over time he becomes more and more like her in terms of his expressions of emotion; on the other hand, his mother's voice reveals that she has already predicted Sebastian's actional outcome, "[T]he black doctor told me that Sebastian saw angels the day he died. I wasn't surprised really. It was like I already knew it. I knew he had come back to God" (Szilak 2012, 60). This speech hints at her acknowledgement of her role as the underlying origin of Sebastian's emotional responses and actional outcomes.

7. Conclusion

Queerskins: A Novel (2012) reflects the usurpation of Sebastian's working memory by self-blaming emotions, including shame and guilt, through a multimodal narrative. Various modes and media portray how Sebastian's emotional memories are triggered and how they

form his emotional responses. Sebastian experiences shame and guilt throughout his life, which can be divided into three periods, the time when he lives with his mother in Missouri, the time when he lives with Alex in L.A., and the time when he lives with Jean-Marie in Africa. In these stages of Sebastian's life, his emotional responses and actional outcomes highlight his mother's role in the formation of his emotions during his critical childhood period. Szilak depicts Sebastian's mother as the source of his self-blaming emotions, which lead to Sebastian's self-exile, and then self-sacrifice. It is worth mentioning that the eliciting conditions for guilt and shame involve the aversive act, Sebastian's critical period, and the activation of his emotional memories which trigger his emotion systems. Moreover, it is crucial to underscore here that the activation of Sebastian's emotion systems and the obsession of his working memory is represented through the combination of diverse textual, visual, and auditory modes, and their composition on each lexia of the novel.

This article has demonstrated that electronic literature portrays emotion systems and the activation of particular emotions. Furthermore, the multimodal narrative of electronic projects provides us with the external manifestations of the cognitive processes, embedded in the working memory, during the actuation of specific emotion systems. In this sense, multimodal narrative has a pivotal role in portraying various sorts of information that including perceptions, memories, and imaginations, which are stored in the working memory and decoding those emotion elicitors, which are perceived, remembered, or imagined. It could be argued that multimodal narrative is fundamental in understanding emotion systems. Similarly, particular emotions are vital in deciphering the multimodality of web-fictions.

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