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Creativity and digital text

Roberto Simanowski[1]

Introduction and definitions: Digital literature

Any discussion on digital text has to start with a differentiation between 'digital' and 'digitised' text. The most popular misconception is to understand text appearing in digital media as digital text or, to use the concept more important for the discussion at hand, digital literature. This is not very different from saying that a story read on the radio is a radio play. To avoid such misconceptions, it has been asserted that digital literature should be 'born digital'. However, this stricture does not help much if it is understood as a requirement to create the text on or using a computer: typing a novel using a keyboard and reading it on the screen does not turn it into digital literature. The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), founded in 1999 'to foster and promote the reading, writing, teaching, and understanding of literature as it develops and persists in a changing digital environment', tries to be more precise when answering the question of what is electronic literature: 'Electronic literature, or e-lit, refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer' (ELO, 1999). This definition introduces a second problem – without really solving the first – by shifting from '*digital* environment' to '*electronic* literature'. Leaving alone the troubled waters of 'important literary aspects', a poem using the distribution facility of email or weblogs – thus taking advantage of the capabilities of a networked computer – is still a poem.
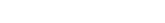
No matter how we eventually define the specific 'literariness' of digital literature, it is evident that it undermines the identity of digital literature as *literature*. In addition to the *sine qua non* of literariness, there is another *sine qua non* regarding the essence of digital literature: that it is more than literature in the traditional sense. By definition, digital literature has to go beyond the employment of letters and it has to make *aesthetic* use of the features of digital media. In digital literature, computation is essential not only to the text as a particular kind of physical artefact, but also to the specifically literary properties of the text. The implication of such a notion is fundamental: if the features of digital technology are essential to the literary properties of the text, they inevitably undermine, more or less, the dominant status of text.

An example and precursor in the history of experimental literature is concrete poetry, in which the linguistic value of the text is accompanied and supplemented by its visual qualities. Thus concrete poetry moves from the paradigm of creating a world in the reader's imagination based on a specific combination of letters towards presenting an event to the viewer

and reader's eye directly. More precisely, the meaning of a concrete poem consists of a combination of the linguistic signification with the way in which this signification (that is, the characters) appears. Thus, in Eugen Gomringer's (1954) concrete poem 'Schweigen', the word *Schweigen* ('silence') is presented in five horizontal and three vertical lines surrounding an empty, silent space in the middle of the third horizontal line (Gomringer, 1969: 27). Understanding the linguistic meaning of the text allows for understanding the meaning of the gap between the fourteen utterances of *Schweigen*. In digital media, concrete poetry becomes kinetic, as in John Cayley's (2004) installation *Overboard*, in which a program of carefully designed algorithms allows characters to disappear or be replaced by other characters, thus undermining the lexical relationship of the word until the original characters are restored. The poem about a man falling overboard during a storm continually drifts in (rising) and out (sinking) of legibility, and thus renders its own message visually.

As this example demonstrates, digital text is digital only if it is, in another sense, not only digital. Undermining the prevalence of text as a linguistic declaration also undermines the digital nature of digital literature: while it enters the realm of the digital on the operational level, digital text or literature must leave it on the semiotic one. The former refers to the computer as a technology based on digitisation; the latter refers to the nature of literature as being grounded on a combinatory system of digital units, such as letters, phonemes, and words. If, by definition, digital literature – digital as an aspect of technology – has to be more than digitised text, then it must also not be limited to the digital nature of text – digital in a semiotic sense.

To put it another way: since language consists of discrete signs, one could say that text is always the result of digital encoding, unlike images or sound, which are based on non-discrete signs. This is the basis for linguists' objections to the prevailing expansion of the term 'language' to non-linguistic signs such as images. They are not based on 'a combinatory system of digital units, as phonemes are', as Roland Barthes (1991 [1964]: 21) holds in his essay 'Rhetoric of the image'. However, in the case of digital text, both concepts of language apply. Since digital literature, by definition, is different from traditional print literature, it also, by definition, has to surpass semiotic digitality. This is achieved by connecting to non-discrete signs such as visual, sonic, and performative elements. The term 'digital literature' therefore points to the *technological* and not the *semiotic* aspect of the medium. The result of this characterisation is a shift from linguistic hermeneutics to a hermeneutics of interactive, intermedial, and performative signs. It is not only the meaning of a word that is at stake, but also the meaning of the performance of this word on the monitor that may be triggered by the reader's action.

Thus digital literature can be defined as literature that is not only presented in and distributed by digital media, but also takes *aesthetic* advantage of their specific characteristics, which can be identified as interactivity, intermediality, and performance (Simanowski, 2002). *Interactivity* aims at motivating the recipient to co-construct the work. This encompasses reacting to:

- characteristics of the work (programmed interactivity: human–software), which includes first of all (but certainly not exclusively, or even primarily) multilinearity in hypertexts requiring readers to make navigational decisions on their own; and
- activities of other recipients (network-bound interactivity: human–human via software), which includes cooperative writing projects asking all readers entering a website to become authors of a given project.

Intermediality marks the (conceptual-integrative) connection between the traditional media of expression: language, image, and music.

Performance (or processualisation) refers to the programming of an intrinsic performance or of one that is dependent on reception. One could inscribe aspects of the performance into the invisible textual level of the digital work, for example the succession of images, the number of loops, or the background colour in simple gif animation. Another textual level, much more easily accessible, is the HTML source, with its executive commands and the Java-Scripts, which, while not appearing as text on the interface, invisibly continue their activity in the background. The prompt can come either from the program or from the recipient. In the latter case, we are again dealing with the aspect of programmed interactivity mentioned above. In either case, however, the data presented are altered during the process of reception, which requires directing aesthetic attention not only to the predetermined relationships among data, but also at the dynamics of their processualisation.

The given characteristics of digital literature – which, of course, act to various degrees and in a wide variety of combinations – moves the subject at hand from the realm of literature towards the realm of art. The question of when to call a specific aesthetic phenomenon digital *art* rather than digital literature may be accompanied by the question of how much text such a phenomenon must contain in order to still be called *literature*. It has been argued that the difference is based on the materials used: if words outweigh graphic and other elements, then we are dealing with literature (Ziegfeld, 1989). However, the counting of words or characters may not be the most sufficient means to decide this question, since, as this chapter will illustrate, there are many works that provide a lot of words and characters, but nonetheless can be perceived without any reading. Hence a more appropriate question will be how the audience engages with a piece that contains characters without being reduced to pure text. If the piece still requires reading as a central activity, we may call it *digital literature*. If it allows us to play with the letters as mere visual objects, we may consider it *digital art*.

Historical and theoretical perspectives: Competition of words and pictures

In his book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich (2001: 78) claims that:

> The printed word tradition that initially dominated the language of cultural interfaces is becoming less important, while the part played by cinematic elements is becoming progressively stronger. This is consistent with a general trend in modern society toward presenting more and more information in the form of time-based audiovisual moving image sequences, rather than as text.

The notion of the decline of the printed-word tradition is in line with the assumption that electronic media, computers, and the Internet undermine the authority and cultural supremacy of the word. Three significant books demonstrate this view: Neil Postman (1985) claims, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, that the inevitable message of the medium of television is entertainment and distraction; Barry Sanders (1994) holds, in *A Is for Ox: Violence, Electronic Media, and the Silencing of the Written Word*, that literacy is on the decline because of our fascination with electronic media – television, videos, computer games – which fail to provide the narrative power of true literary sources; and Nadin

Mihai (1997) entitles his book *The Civilization of Illiteracy* precisely because it addresses an unfolding civilisation in which the language of the Internet, interactive multimedia, and virtual reality have become the new languages of human interaction.

The advent and success of the Internet has – as soon as digital media also provided images – enhanced the notion of the decreasing authority of the word after the 'pictorial turn' in contemporary culture (Mitchell, 1992). Hyperfiction author and theorist Michael Joyce predicted in 1995 that the 'post-alphabetic image' will soon 'either rob us of the power – or relieve us of the burden – of language' (quoted in Joyce, 2000: 42), and Jay David Bolter, who investigated, in his 1991 book *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*, the new opportunities for the word in digital media, spoke in 1996 of the 'breakout of the visual' in the digital world, observing that, in multimedia, the relationship between word and image is becoming as unstable as in the popular press, in which images do not appear subordinate to the word anymore and 'we are no longer certain that words deserve the cultural authority they have been given' (Bolter, 1996: 258).

The observed subversion of the text's authority can be treated with the concept of remediation, which, a few years later, Bolter and his colleague Richard Grusin developed in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Bolter and Grusin (1999) describe media history as 'the representation of one medium in another', a process in which the formal logic of prior media is refashioned, remediated, in new media. Bolter and Grusin (1999: 45) speak of a 'competition or rivalry between the new media and the old'.

Another concept to understand this rivalry is the cultural perspective on cannibalism developed in Brazil seventy years ago. In his 1928 *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, Oswald de Andrade claimed that the Brazilian must 'devour' – critically assimilate rather than imitate – European codes using irreverence, inversion, joke, parody, sacrilege, and insult as subversive anti-colonialist strategies (Bary, 1991). De Andrade's manifesto appeared in the first edition of the *Revista de Antropofagi* and sparked the very influential anthropophagic movement of the Brazilian avant-garde. An example of the subversive anti-colonialist strategies was to adopt the coloniser's biased view of the colonised as a cannibal and to base the quest for an originally Brazilian identity on the trope of cannibalism (Bary, 1991). In contrast to the nationalist xenophobic movements of the time, the concept of *Antropófago* aimed to produce national identity not through isolation or ignorance of foreign stereotypes and imported culture, but through its intentional ingestion and digestion. Thus *Antropófago* (and its offspring in the 1960s tropicalism) lead to manifold metamorphoses, recognising other cultures, opening the way for non-homogeneous cultural encounters.

If we extend de Andrade's cultural conceptualisation of *Antropófago* to media, we may understand the ongoing shift from the old, elitist medium of text to the new, popular audiovisual media as a kind of *reconquista* of the centre stage of culture. This centre stage had been 'colonised' by the 'Gutenberg Galaxy' (McLuhan, 1962) in the wave of the 'Coming of the book' (Febvre & Martin, 1997) and the so-called *Leserevolution* ('reading revolution'), with its 'structural transformation of the public sphere' (Habermas, 1991) in the eighteenth century.

This 'roll-back' began with the twentieth century and the increasing importance of visual culture in the form of cinema and television, which Guy Debord in 1967 famously identified as *The Society of the Spectacle*, and which Theodor W. Adorno (2005: 54) remarkably called 'language of images' and 'hieroglyphic writing'. The triumph of the image entered a new stage with digital technology at the end of the twentieth century when software such

as Shockwave and Flash facilitated the general 'shift away from prior modes of spectator experience based on symbolic concerns (and "interpretative models") towards recipients who are seeking intensities of direct sensual stimulation' (Darley, 2000: 3). Despite artistic projects to re-establish the authority of text within the aesthetic of the spectacle – such as Michael Snow's text-film *So Is This* (1982), and Barbara Kruger's and Jenny Holzer's text installations – text has increasingly been substituted by the visual and spectacle. The latest example of the anthropophagic process is the fact that the Global Language Monitor (2014) chose an emoji – the icon ♥ for 'love' – as its 'Top Word' of 2014.

This substitution occurs not only as the deletion of text by replacing it with images, but also as devouring the textual by turning text itself into an image – or into a sonic object. There is a trend in interactive installations to incorporate text as an element of the work that is not to be read, but to be looked at or played with. Such desemanticisation evokes a 'cannibalistic' relationship between the semiotic systems of text, on the one hand, and of visual, installation, or performance art, on the other. However, sometimes, these works allow us to regain the linguistic significance of the text in later operations of reading and interpretation. Hence some works may be digital art and digital literature at the same time, or, at least, consecutively – if their audiences and readers are indeed interested enough to engage in an adventure that aims to rescue their literary 'prisoners'. The following sections illustrate this 'cannibalistic' approach to text by means of a close reading of three examples.

Case study 1: Text Rain

In the interactive installation *Text Rain* by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv (1999), viewers stand or move in front of a large monitor, in which they see themselves as black-and-white projections on which letters 'fall' from the top edge. Like rain or snow, the letters appear to land on participants' heads and arms, and respond to their motions, and seem able to be lifted and let fall again. The falling letters land on anything darker than a certain threshold value and 'fall' whenever that obstacle is removed. Participants who have accumulated enough letters can sometimes decipher an entire word or even a phrase. The installation does not completely strip letters of their linguistic value, but allows *reading* the text in addition to *playing* with it, employing passages from the poem 'Talk, You', from Evan Zimroth's 1993 book *Dead, Dinner, or Naked*.

In my own experiences of, and in documentary evidence about, *Text Rain*, however, the lines can hardly be deciphered, even after the viewer has painstakingly collected all of the letters. Generally speaking, viewers do not engage in the reading process, but rather test the interface. The fact that there are words formed by the letters encourages viewers' dialogue with the letters, but it does not allow them to read the entire poem nor does it elicit the intention to do so. The work functions primarily on the physical level: the fascinating elements of the installation are the movements that it creates in front of the monitor as viewers interact with the falling letters. The letters are liberated from their representational function: they have left language behind and turned into visual objects as part of an interactive installation. The viewer (or 'interactor'), on the other side, is liberated from reading the text and looking for meaning: he or she can simply enjoy the moment of playing.

However, in Utterback and Achituv's installation, text does still play a certain role *as* text. On the one hand, it appears as letters that the interactor can collect, unlike in Zachary Booth Simpson's similar installation *Sand* (2000), in which a stream of liquid sand flowing

from above reacts to the interactor's shadow on the screen. On the other hand, if one reads the poem, one realises a deeper relationship between the text and the installation. The poem is about the conversation between bodies. Two of its lines read: 'At your turning, each part/ of my body turns to verb.' This relationship between verb and body, between 'You' and 'I', is mirrored in the installation, in which the movement of the interactor's body creates words. However, the poem ends with the lines 'and yet turn to nothing/*It's just talk*'. This can be understood as a celebration of the aimless conversation, which does not turn into a linguistic message as a practical result. Such aimless talk reflects exactly what the user does in his or her interaction with the letters in the installation, which likewise does not lead to any specific result in terms of a message: it is just play.

The installation turns out to be a performance of the poem from which it gains its meaning. The text is devoured and metamorphosed as an object to play with. However, it is important that the 'dismembered' text remains readable (in a book, or on the website for *Text Rain*), since only its perception as intact poem reveals how the installation has digested its meal.

It may not come as a surprise that most visitors experiencing *Text Rain* never look up the provenance of the text, which is not provided at the installation venue. The majority engage with the installation only on the level of a joyful play with falling letters and hence miss the deeper meaning of the installation possible through interpretation of the text. The majority of interactors are not really interested in putting the text together again and, certainly, to assemble the text would require not only collecting some of its letters on one's arm, but also retrieving and reading it in its original form. While the artists may hope that the audience will consult the original text to understand the installation, the audience may opt out of doing so and simply consume the letters as visual, interactive objects.

Case study 2: Listening Post

The installation *Listening Post* (2000–01), by the statistician Mark Hansen and sound designer and multimedia artist Ben Rubin, consists of 231 miniature text display screens organised on aluminium poles on a suspended curved grid of 11 rows and 21 columns, with overall dimensions of 21ft × 14ft × 3ft. Several computers analyse data from thousands of Internet chatrooms, bulletin boards, and other public forums. The culled text fragments are fed to a statistical analysis server, which selects certain phrases to be displayed across the grid of screens and read aloud by computer-generated voices.

The piece is organised into a repeating 17-minute sequence of separate compositions, each consisting of six movements with different data-processing logics and arrangements of visual, aural, and musical elements. While, in the first movement, cycles of text wash in from right to left over the entire grid of 231 screens, rendering text as mere visual, illegible object, in the second movement the text snippets are presented in a readable way, distributed to the 231 screens. The texts are organised by topic clusters, for example phrases starting with 'I am', 'I like', or 'I love'. In the third movement, the text scrolls within each screen at high speed, stopping from time to time, thus allowing the reading of a snippet of the captured conversation. The fourth movement begins with blank displays that eventually fill out completely with texts spoken by a voice synthesiser generating a cacophony of overlapping voice streams. Movement five is visual and silent, presenting sets of four screen names that appear on a single screen, scrolling bottom to top, from the edges to the centre. Movement six presents four-character words scrolling downward and then fading upward.

Rubin explains the intention behind *Listening Post:*

> My starting place was simple curiosity: What do 100,000 people chatting on the Internet sound like? Once Mark and I started listening, at first to statistical representations of web sites, and then to actual language from chat rooms, a kind of music began to emerge. The messages started to form a giant cut-up poem, fragments of discourse juxtaposed to form a strange quilt of communication. It reminds me of the nights I spent as a kid listening to the CB radio, fascinated to hear these anonymous voices crackling up out of the static. Now the static is gone, and the words arrive as voiceless packets of data, and the scale is immense. And so my curiosity gave way to my desire to respond to this condition.
>
> *(Hansen & Rubin, 2001: 1)*

There was a mutual understanding between Rubin and Hansen that their projects should have a strong social component, which is why they used data from online chats rather than from a website. As Rubin says in an interview: 'Internet chat is a strange mirror to look at society. It reflects something about our society but I am not always sure what' (Abumrad, 2002). Steve Johnson, in an interview with *Studio 360*, compares *Listening Post* with Google's zeitgeist portraits, which show the most prevalent search requests over the year, and hence give an idea of user search behaviour and contemporary culture (Abumrad, 2002). Jad Abumrad (2002), in his feature for *Studio 360*, sees *Listening Post* as mirroring 'the mood of the web in that moment'. Sex, the war on terror, the space shuttle: everything that is obsessing people on the Internet at that moment enters the room in a stream of text and sound. However, this installation is more than simply documentation, which already becomes clear from the fact that only some of the six movements allow actual reading of the texts. As Roberta Smith (2003: 1) notes, *Listening Post* 'operates in the gaps between art, entertainment and documentary'. There are specific aesthetic qualities that overwrite this installation's function as mirror to the zeitgeist.

First of all, one may wonder whether the cut-up method, in which the text is assembled, and the collage form, in which it is presented, really provide an accurate reflection of ideas communicated on the Internet. Taking text snippets out of their context resembles rather a distorting mirror. This aspect of the piece is underlined in the third movement, when only a very small part of the scrolling text becomes readable, which actually re-enacts the underlying technique on the screen and underlines – as *pars pro toto* – the decontextualised status of the presented text.

Apart from the questionable documentary value of the text assemblage, the way in which the text appears distracts from its reading. The text is 'flying by like blood racing through a vessel, accompanied by the chittering sound of a rainstorm', report Pop Fizz and Melanie McFarland (2002). Peter Eleey (2003) speaks of the 'particularly striking moments the text washes rapidly across the screens in patterns akin to the topologies created by the movement of wind across a wheat field':

> At one point, what begins with one phrase builds into a cacophonic deluge of communication, suggesting a kind of *horror vacui* in the human psyche. During another act the text bursts across the screens like a flock of birds alighting, crawling in a Holzerian manner, like stock quotes.

In addition, the sonic and visual arrangement of the text contributes to the aesthetic thrill: the darkened gallery space features text pulses of soft blue light, and accompanying waves

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of synthetic voices and sonorous Glass-esque musical chords. There are eight computer voices emanating from different speakers around the room, separately or in unison, in call-and-response or round robin patterns. The sonification of the text is in line with the general aesthetics of the piece – namely, its theatrical effect – which is reinforced by the location of benches in front of the 'text curtain'. The theatricalisation makes the text part of a larger event – that is, dissolves it into the experience of the sonic and visual environment. This experience has been compared with 'watching graffiti out of a window of a moving car' (Abumrad, 2002), or looking at a modern painting, the canvas of which consists of a curtain of computer screens (Gibson, 2003). Rubin himself compares the 'giant cut-up poem' *Listening Post* with 'a kind of music' (Hansen & Rubin, 2001: 1).

This appearance and arrangement of text lets visitors experience the installation as 'beguiling, sublime' (Schmader, 2002), as 'almost irresistible, like magic' (Smith, 2003), as 'meditative, sublime and elevating . . . hypnotic and captivating', making it easy 'to be lulled into a trance-like state, forgetting the passage of time and the surroundings' (Huhtamo, 2004: 3). One may conclude that, in the end, the set-up of the installation over-shadows the text that it presents and actually (mis)uses words as ornament. This 'misuse' is the very artistic merit of Rubin's and Hansen's work.

At the end of her review, Roberta Smith (2003: 1) wonders whether *Listening Post* 'is simply the latest twist in the familiar modernist tradition of making art from chance arrangements of everyday materials, and is more a result of technological progress than genuinely new thought'. Smith's concern is a valid one, because there are many examples of applied technology that have been labelled art, although they are missing a genuine idea or artistic statement beyond their actual application. As other critiques note, Rubin and Hansen 'do what composers have done for centuries: transform ordinary, overlooked means of expression into art' (DeLaurenti, 2002). Rubin describes his position as an artist with respect to *Listening Post* as follows:

> As an artist right now with the whole prospect of war it's a very difficult thing to know how to conceive of a response. And this piece has no political message per se but it is listening. It is at least an open space.

> *(Abumrad, 2002)*

Rubin's words explain and justify the withdrawal of the artist and the abdication of a personal message symptomatic of naturalistic examples of mapping art, which mirror everyday data found online without adding a specific artistic statement (Simanowski, 2011: 158–86). However, *Listening Post* not only listens – or transmits the data collected – but also speaks to its audience, providing a specific message through the way in which the data are presented. One aspect of its specific manner of presentation is the trance-like experience, which overwhelms the overt message of the data presented. There are more metaphors to be taken into account.

Debra Singer, curator at the Whitney Museum, points out that participating in a chatroom is, while ostensibly social, actually solitary and isolating – 'just the lone person, you in front of your keyboard' – and holds that *Listening Post* gives 'a sense of that collective global buzz. It sort of makes visceral the diversity and the scale of Internet conversations and exchanges' (quoted in Balkin, 2003). Singer is absolutely right in that *Listening Post* indicates the magnitude of virtual communication. As Rita Raley (2009: 31, emphasis original) notes, ' "Listening Post" *is* the crowd, or least a representation of the crowd.' However, it is an artificial crowd created by Hansen and Rubin, because *Listening Post* makes data public

that are 'private to a particular community', as Raley (2009: 27) also notes, referring to the element of surveillance in this piece. The texts are taken from communities resembling salons rather than crowds on the street. The crowd presented in *Listening Post* is the result of the collage that Hansen and Rubin generate. The crowd represents individual groups, rather than a crowd unified by the same opinion and intention. Only the combination of all of the more or less private communicative communities creates the sense of a crowd. The scale of Internet conversations, the sense of the 'collective global buzz' that *Listening Post* provides, according to Singer, is the result of a collage of different communications making obvious their diversity rather than their unity.

Even though Hansen and Rubin (2001) consider the 'creation of a kind of community from the informal gathering of thousands of visitors to a given Web site' to be a by-product of their Internet traffic sonification, the correlation between the crowd and the individual, the social and solitary, is perceived as the underlying subject of *Listening Post.* Although the piece funnels communication from thousands of chatrooms into the installation space, one wonders whether this space is another room: thousands *plus one*. How does the exhibition space connect to the online world? How does *Listening Post* talk about its own audience? There is anecdotal evidence for the relationship between both spaces: 'Hansen recalls one showing that amused a silent audience when the installation's strange song began with a short solo that loudly asked, "Are there any bisexuals in the room?"' (Fizz & McFarland, 2002). At least after bringing to mind the given exhibition situation, the audience knows that it is not the addressee for this question. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of its situation of communication points to the difference between both spaces. The audience of *Listening Post* is listening (it is assumed silently) to the presented collection of text snippets, while people out there are sending messages. The latter sit separately behind keyboards connecting to other people via the Internet; the former come together in a room, most likely not connecting to one another in person. *Listening Post* addresses two completely different situations of crowd or groups. The text from the Internet – and not only the quoted particular question – asks people in the gallery who they are and how they connect to each other. The answer may be that they too connect via chatrooms to other people, which would only affirm the advantages of the virtual room over the real.

But there is more: the meaning of *Listening Post* also lies in the texts' dissolve into sound or background music. The decontextualisation that *Listening Post* is undertaking – Rubin calls the piece 'a big de-contextualization machine' (quoted in Coukell, 2004) – makes it hardly reliable as documentary. This very fact, however, underscores its potential as an interactive story. Rubin explains that, when everything is pulled out of its original context, he tends to project around the fragments that he hears, to imagine the conversation from which the fragment came (quoted in Coukell, 2004). When people listen to messages such as 'I am fifteen', 'I am alive', 'I am lonely and sad too', 'I am cooking now for my son', 'I am sexy but not mature', 'I am getting tired of Muslims', 'I am back', to quote only from the 'I am' proclamations, they wonder what these messages mean, what their context may be, and to whom they are addressed, as well as what they are responding to and how they may have been answered. Thus *Listening Post* actually has its audience doing more than listening; it also prompts them to fill in the gaps. The listeners are provoked to use their imagination; they become co-authors in a kind of delayed collaboration with the unknown authors from the Internet.

This is true at least as long as the text is presented in a readable way, and as long as the audience stays with the text and moves through it as reader. The moment at which the listeners – or visitors – step away from the text is the point at which the linguistic

phenomenon eventually leaves the centre of attention, giving space to the experience of sonic and visual effects no longer based on deciphering the text. And that brings us back to our initial question: is *Listening Post* linguistic or visual art?

Eric Gibson, in his 2003 review in the *Wall Street Journal,* compares the experience of *Listening Post* with the experience of a painting:

> The viewer relates to *Listening Post* much as he does [to] a traditional painting, that is, by alternating between the part and the whole. One may back up to take everything in, then move in to scrutinize a detail – in this case a message on the screen.

Gibson's comparison of the installation to the traditional medium of painting may intend to furnish the former with the dignity of the latter, but it is nonetheless misleading. Although Gibson sees a quantitative change between only the part and the whole, there is also a qualitative change between two completely different modes of perception. The alteration between the part and the whole is an alteration between reading and watching. The audience redirects its attention from the text conveyed to the installation conveying it. The installation takes on its own life, which is more than the sum of its parts.

What would be the meaning of the transformation from reading to watching – or 'taking everything in', as Gibson phrases it – in the case of *Listening Post*? Pop Fizz and Melanie McFarland (2002) describe this change of experience as follows: 'Close to the screens, voices and content color the experience more than if you take it as a whole from farther away, a perspective that makes it look like a raging river.' What has been text, with its particular linguistic meaning, becomes the image of a raging river when one steps away. This change from reading the single text to taking it (in) as a whole is not only a change between two modes of perception regarding the language of signification, but also a change in the perceived mood. Reading the single text stimulates us to imagine its context. In this situation, the reader deciphers the text and connects with it, like a detective or archaeologist. The reader feels himself or herself to be the agent of this undertaking. Stepping away from the texts, the letters become a 'raging river', to which the visitor feels subjected and inclined to surrender. The sensation of having control gives way to the overwhelming, 'hypnotic and captivating', 'trance-like', 'sublime' experience reported earlier.

Listening Post lives a double life as a 'document' of online communication – or rather a 'giant cut-up-poem' (Hansen & Rubin, 2001) – and as a sculpture or installation with its own aesthetic value. As a document or poem, the piece presents text in a readable way. As a sculpture – a gigantic curtain of screens with ever-changing compositions of dissociated messages – it uses text as visual and sonic icon to convey the magnitude and immediacy of virtual communication. Close to the screen, *Listening Post* therefore may be considered an example of experimental literature. Farther away, when letters turn illegible, it becomes visual and sonic art; it exists outside the linguistic paradigm and has to be read like a sign in visual art or an action in a performance. This transmedial transition is the effect of walking. Perceiving *Listening Post* either way lies in the hands (or rather the feet) of the audience.

One may go one step further in understanding the symbolic power of *Listening Post*. Although it is debatable to what extent the work mirrors 'the mood of the web in that moment' (Abumrad, 2002), it can be argued that the work tells the story of its history: walking away from the curtain is walking in time. At its beginning, the Internet consisted only of words appearing as green letters on a black screen – pretty much the way in which text is presented in *Listening Post*. What hyperfiction writer Michel Joyce (1995: 47) said about the hypertext as an essential feature of the computer – 'the word's revenge on TV' – was equally

true for the Internet. However, with the arrival of the World Wide Web, people observed the 'breakout of the visual' (Bolter, 1996: 258).

This development is re-enacted in *Listening Post* by walking away from the curtain. The walk communicates the history of the Internet in two ways. First is that the scale of communication changes: stepping back widens and deepens the perspective; the single-text screen comes into sight as part of a grid of 231 screens, demonstrating the organic growth of the Internet. Second is that the way of communication changes: stepping back shifts the attention from the text as linguistic sign to the audiovisual environment demonstrating the development of the Internet from textual towards multimedial signs. In this perspective, *Listening Post* is not only about the content transmitted on the Internet, but also about the way in which content is transmitted online. It is a linguistic artwork that turns into a sculpture and allows the audience, in this transmedial transition, to experience time by experiencing space. Walking backwards from the screen is going forwards in the history of the Internet.

Case study 3: The Complete Works of William Shakespeare

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare by Caleb Larsen (2008), a former student at the Rhode Island School of Design, represents letters with random visual signs. Larsen employs a copy of the complete works of William Shakespeare from Project Gutenberg, which provides a corpus of literary texts online. He has parsed the entire work of Shakespeare, replacing each letter with a small coloured square: Each alphabetic character, plus space and apostrophe (twenty-eight characters in total), is assigned a colour, the name of which starts with that letter (for example B = blue, G = green, C = cyan, A = azure, etc.), with white (blank) being a space and black being an apostrophe. The result is a huge image in a 'pointillistic' style, with the difference that it is much less figurative and at the same time far more 'representative' than an image by Georges-Pierre Seurat or Paul Signac, for example. What looks like a decorative painting seems to hold a tremendous depth, because it represents the texts of Shakespeare line by line, play after play: the entire work in *one* view. Although the text itself has no appearance at all, it is present in its disguised form.

This presence is the *sine qua non* of Larsen's piece. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* would not be interesting if William Shakespeare were an unknown pointillist painter. One would perceive (and dismiss) Larsen's work as a mere decorative painting with little visual allure. Would it be interesting if William Shakespeare were an unknown writer? Yes, because the relation between the coloured points and the text would still be intriguing. However, one certainly cares more about such transmedial manipulation if one cares about the writer whose text is behind the canvas. The 'eaten' text nurtures the work. Larsen is well aware of this and allows the piece to pay tribute to the text (or rather: to text) in the semiotic conceit of assigning to each letter a colour, the name (that is, textual existence) of which starts with that letter. Although *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* annihilates the text in an even more radical way than *Listening Post* or *Text Rain*, with the right technology for recoding the pixel as letters, one could still gain access to a meaningful text.

Conclusion

Depriving text of its linguistic value and turning information into an ornament can, as noted in this chapter, be situated within the aesthetics of the spectacle that is part of the contemporary 'society of the spectacle' (Debord, 1967). With a perspective more centred in media studies, the transformation of text from a linguistic artefact to an audiovisual object can also

be discussed by means of the concept of the visual as pornographic, as developed in Frederic Jameson's (1992) *Signatures of the Visible*. According to Jameson (1992: 1), 'the visual is essentially pornographic' because 'it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination'; pornographic films are therefore 'only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body'. As in McLuhan's (1964) dictum that 'the medium is the message' and Neil Postman's (1985) use of this dictum with respect to television as inevitable medium of amusement, Jameson ascribes a certain quality to the medium of film and questions its critical-utopian potential. For him, film is part of mainstream culture to the extent that it presents a phenomenon as interesting, attractive, and seductive as a naked body at which the spectator is staring with astonishment and affection.

Jameson's concept of the visual has been applied to the role that text plays in electronic media. Thus Janez Strehovec (2010: 221) – who picks up Manovich's notion about the cinematic character of the language of new media quoted earlier in this chapter – holds that an important part of the textual production in contemporary culture is based on words in motion and that a great amount of it is 'presented as naked bodies'. As a case in point, Strehovec refers to Brian Kim Stefans' (2000) *The Dreamlife of Letters*, a flash animation of moving letters that ends, quite adequately, with the sentence: 'Thanks for watching.' Like many other examples of kinetic text in digital media, *The Dreamlife of Letters*, with its syntax of surprise and shortcuts, owes much to the aesthetic of cinema and music video. Hence Strehovec (2010) notes that text, formerly representing the rather elite medium of literature, is refashioned and appropriated as something adequate to the contemporary movie industry and club culture.

A similar observation can also be made concerning *Text Rain* and *Listening Post*. Text appears as a captivating event and physical body to be stared at, rather than as a linguistic object to be read and understood. Jameson (1992: 2), describing the visual and musical as the physical and not essentially linguistic elements of text, notes:

> The more advanced and rationalized activity [that is, the engagement with text as a linguistic object] can also have its dream of the other, and regress to a longing for the more immediately sensory, wishing it could pass altogether over to the visual, or be sublimated into the spiritual body of pure sound.

Text Rain and *Listening Post*, as well as *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, surely carry out such sublimation into the sensory. The text, in its physicality, is stared at in 'rapt, mindless fascination', to use Jameson's (1992: 1) words.

To be precise, what is stared at is the hidden, unexposed, embedded text: the programming code. The code makes the text – the words falling down in *Text Rain* and pulled from websites in *Listening Post* – appear in a particular, fascinating way, and so, during this process, the code is in fact exhibited itself. However, we do not stare at the code as an alphanumerical equation, but rather as a materialisation on the screen or on the scene: the falling, flying text. Staring at the code processing the text is inter-reliant with stripping this text of its linguistic value. Blending de Andrade, McLuhan, and Jameson, we can describe the concept in the following way: the pornographic message of digital media is code devouring text. This can be linked to N. Katherine Hayles' (2006: 182) notion about the 'eventilidation' of the text in digital media, whereby each letter is the result of the computer's processing. While the audience may not be aware of this 'eventilisation' when reading (seemingly) static text on the screen, the 'cannibalisation' or 'pornographisation' of text draws their attention to it. In this perspective, the pornographic turns into elucidation: making the text illegible makes the code visible.

Such a conclusion can be arrived at with respect to the three works discussed here and many other installations employing text as audiovisual objects, as well as with respect to other genres of digital art, such as kinetic concrete poetry, computer-generated text, and mapping art (Simanowski, 2011). In fact, the focus on code may, with the application of the title of another seminal text by Jameson (1991), even be considered the inherent 'cultural logic' of digital technology. Even though processing in digital media is primarily invisibly embedded behind the interface, we may say that it is this technology's natural (narcissistic) intention to centre stage its own basic material: code work. The shift from the linguistic to the physicality of text, from the expression of ideas to the thrill of technical effects, demonstrates the desire for publicity and recognition. This desire, however, builds completely on discipline (that is, the skill of virtuoso programming), for it is the faultless code that generates the 'perfect body' (or 'visual') at which we cannot help staring.

The discipline of coding has its counterpart in perception. As the close readings of *Text Rain* and especially *Listening Post* have shown, the thrill of the technical can, beyond sensual stimulation, also be approached within a hermeneutic model. Although text deprived of its linguistic value no longer utters a specific message, the way in which such text is presented is surely meaningful. In the end, the pornographic of the medium lies in the eyes of the beholder: staring at the materialisation of code can always (and finally should) turn into looking through it down to its deeper meaning.

Related topics

computational approaches to language and creativity; creativity and technology; literature and multimodality; silence and creativity

Note

1 The paper combines passages from earlier discussions of the subjects presented in Simanowski (2010, 2011, 2012).

Further reading

Bolter, J. D. (1996) 'Ekphrasis, virtual reality, and the future of writing', in G. Nunberg (ed.) *The Future of the Book*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 253–72.

This essay compares the 'breakout of the visual' in the digital world to the relationship between word and image in the popular press, holding that the word is losing its traditional cultural authority against the image.

Darley, A. (2000) *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*, London/ New York: Routledge.

This book explores the prevalence of technique over content and meaning in contemporary culture with respect to contemporary movies, music videos, and computer games.

Debord, G. (2006 [1967]) *The Society of the Spectacle*, Oakland, CA: AK Press.

In this essay from 1967, Debord develops his thesis about the increasing commodification of modern society and the function of the spectacle as a relationship between people mediated by images.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (1992) 'The pictorial turn', *Artforum*, 30(7): 89–94.

In this essay, Mitchell discusses the relationship between text and image, and portrays a movement of various disciplines in the humanities towards the picture as research subject.

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