

Giovanna Di Rosario

Electronic Poetry

Understanding Poetry in the Digital Environment

1 Κωτίλας
 3 τῆ τόδ' ἄτριον νέον
 5 πρόφρων δὲ θυμῷ δέξο· δὴ γὰρ ἀγνάς
 7 τὸ μὲν θεῶν ἐριβόας· Ἐρμῆς ἐκείξε κάρυξ
 9 ἄνωγε δ' ἐκ μέτρου μονοβάμονος μέγαν πάροιθ' ἀέξειν
 11 θεῶς δ' ὑπερθεν ἄκυλῆχριον φέρων νεῦμα ποδῶν σποράδων πίφαισκειν
 13 θαῖς ἴσ' αἰόλαις νεβροῖς κῶλ' ἀλλάσσων, ὄρσιπόδων ἐλάφων τέκεσσι·
 15 πᾶσαι κραιπνοῖς ὑπὲρ ἄκρων ἴεμεναι ποσὶ λόφων κατ' ἀρθμίας ἴχνος τιθήνας·
 17 καὶ τις ἀμόθιμος ἀμφίπαλτον αἴψ' αἰδᾶν θῆρ ἐν κόλπῳ δεξάμενος θαλαμῶν μυχοιτάτῳ
 19 κᾶτ' ὦκα βοᾶς ἀκοᾶν μεθέπων ὃ γ' ἄφαρ λάσιον νιφοβόλων ἀν' ὄρεων ἔσσυται ἄγκος·
 20 ταῖς δὴ δαίμων κλυτὸς ἴσα θεοῖσι ποσὶν δονέων ἅμα πολὺπλοκα μεθίει μέτρα μολπᾶς,
 18 ῥίμφα πετρόκοιτον ἐκλιπῶν ὄρουσ' εὐνᾶν ματρός πλαγκτὸν μαιόμενος βαλιᾶς ἐλεῖν τέκος·
 16 βλαχαὶ δ' οἰῶν πολυβότων ἀν' ὄρεων νομὸν ἔβαν ταιυσφύρων τ' ἐς ἀντρα Νυμφᾶν
 14 ταὶ δ' ἀμβρότῳ πόθῳ φίλας ματρός ῥῶοντ' αἴψα μεθ' ἡμερόεντα μαζόν,
 12 ἴχνει θενῶν ταν παναίολον Πιερίδων μονόδουπον αὐδᾶν,
 10 ἀριθμὸν εἰς ἄκραν δεκάδ' ἴχνίων, κόσμον νέμοντα ῥυθμῶν,
 8 φύλ' ἐς βροτῶν ὑπὸ φίλας ἐλῶν πτεροῖσι ματρός,
 6 λιγείᾳ μιν κάμ' ἴφι ματρός ὠδὶς·
 4 Δωρίας ἀηδόνας·
 2 ματέρος



JYVÄSKYLÄ STUDIES IN HUMANITIES 154

Giovanna Di Rosario

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Esitetään Jyväskylän yliopiston humanistisen tiedekunnan suostumuksella
julkisesti tarkastettavaksi yliopiston päärakennuksen salissa C4
kesäkuun 3. päivänä 2011 kello 12.

Academic dissertation to be publicly discussed, by permission of
the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Jyväskylä,
in university Main building, hall C4, on June 3, 2011 at 12 o'clock noon.



UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

JYVÄSKYLÄ 2011

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JYVÄSKYLÄ 2011

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URN:ISBN:978-951-39-4335-6

ISBN 978-951-39-4335-6 (PDF)

ISBN 978-951-39-4324-0 (nid.)

ISSN 1459-4331

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Jyväskylä University Printing House, Jyväskylä 2011

ABSTRACT

Di Rosario, Giovanna

Electronic poetry. Understanding poetry in the digital environment

Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2011, 326 p.

(Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities

ISSN 1459-4331; 154)

ISBN 978-951-39-4324-0 (nid.), 978-951-39-4335-6 (PDF)

Diss.

This study has as its main research object the new forms of poetry based on informatics and it is located in the fields of critical theory, hermeneutics, semiotics of the text and digital culture.

These new forms emerging from the meeting of poetry and informatics are collectively called Digital Poetry. Digital poetry – also referred to as *E-poetry*, short for *electronic poetry* – refers to a wide range of approaches to poetry that all have in common the prominent and crucial use of computers or digital technologies and other devices. Digital poetry does not concern itself with the digitalization of printed works, it relates to *digital* texts. This work studies only electronic poems created to be read on the computer accessible online. It offers the close-readings of 35 e-poems in 5 different languages (English, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish).

How does electronic poetry deal with the possibilities uncovered by the *new* digital medium? A medium that easily allows us to redefine the writing space and the reading time; a medium that allows us to include images and sounds alongside the graphic text, adding also motion and creating new kinds of temporalities; and, finally, that allows the text to be reactive and interactive?

The distinction between digital and printed media hides a complex history. A full comprehension of the movement under consideration, as a concept in literature, requires clarification of the historical development from the “movement analogies” in printed literature (innovations in the literary movements and avant-gardes) to the literary innovations (poetic and artistic) in the Internet era.

The thesis has been organized around three deeply interconnected approaches: historical, descriptive and analytic. The first approach judges the “novelty” of the phenomenon within a historical context. The descriptive work to be done on the corpus is fundamental in order to establish a sort of typology of e-poetry and, consequently, to be able to start the analytic work.

The aim of the study is on the one hand to categorize electronic poems in order to make them more approachable and understandable as objects of study; and on the other it is to provide those who are interested in this new area of study with a sort of critical anthology of electronic poetry.

Keywords: digital poetry, poetic language, aesthetics, ICT, web

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INTRODUCTION

“The association of two, or more, apparently alien elements on a plane alien to both is the most potent ignition of poetry”.
Comte de Lautréamont, *A White Wine for Max Ernst*.

Normally, when speaking about contemporary literature, no one mentions electronic literature. If contemporary art makes one think about multi-media, contemporary literature generally evokes only the recent production of traditional publishers. Poetry is probably even in a more frustrated condition, since it usually tends to remind one of an *old* and *passed* genre.

During the last number of years, however, digital media have sought their way into the research environment of the humanities. Whilst academia – especially in certain countries – still does not seem to be too interested in this area of study, an increasing number of books focusing on digital literature have been published. Some authors have devoted their attention to “new” genres of art and their relationship with the reader/spectator (Landow; Lunenfeld, Hayles). Some other have preferred to discuss the new form of literature (Aarseth, Bolter, Funkhouser, Hayles, Ryan, Saemmer, Simonowski). Generally speaking all those books include discussions concerning terminology, questions of aesthetic, and the relationship between author and reader in electronic literature. Although there are some books specifically devoted to electronic poetry (Glazier, Funkhouser) and collections of essays or chapters of books (Hayles, Simonowski) that provides close-readings of electronic poetry neither of these studies is formally dedicated to a deep and systematic analysis of electronic poems.

This thesis aims at filling this gap. The goal of this thesis is a two-fold goal. On the one hand to categorize electronic poems in order to make them more approachable and understandable as objects of study; and on the other it is to provide those who are interested in this new area of study with a sort of critical anthology of electronic poetry.

We said that the object of this thesis concerns electronic poetry. But what is electronic literature (and thus electronic poetry)? There is no clear definition of what electronic literature is. According to the Electronic Literature

Organization electronic literature includes “works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer”¹. This definition opens up other questions: first of all what does it mean “having important literary aspects”? However, I do not want to answer this question now. To analyze what “literary” aspects electronic poetry has and what new elements it may introduce is one of the tasks undertaken in the elaboration of this thesis so we shall defer giving a definitive answer to this question immediately.

Katherine Hayles says in her 2008 text *Electronic Literature* that: “electronic literature, generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized, is by contrast ‘digital born’, and (usually) meant to be read on a computers”². Raine Koskimaa insists on the “digital born” aspect of these kind of texts, digital literature consists of digital artifacts written *for* the digital medium³. Noah Wardrip-Fruit declares: “literary work that requires the digital computation performed by laptops, desktops, servers, cellphones, game consoles, interactive environment controllers, or any of the other computers that surround us”⁴. Loss Pequeño Glazier – the father of the International Festival devoted to Electronic Poetry – points out three qualities of digital poetics (in his definition he talks of poetics and no longer about literature in general): “[t]exts with certain structural/operative forms not reproducible in paper or in any non-digital medium. These include employing hyperlinks, kinetic elements, multi-layered features, programmable elements and events”⁵.

The aim of this thesis is to study one form of electronic literature: electronic poetry. It is not the object of this thesis to discuss what poetry is. However, let us say that we usually define poetry an artistic experience related to the word both in the oral and written form, whose compositional unit is the *verse line* (see chapter 2). So in general we differentiate poetry from prose⁶, and in particular poetry from fiction. In this thesis we will focus only on electronic poetry forms and not on other experiments of writing with the digital medium such as fictional hypertexts, hyper-novels, mail-novels and so on.

We can adapt the previous definition of electronic literature to electronic poetry and say that it excludes printed works, digitalization of printed work, and includes works with important *poetic* aspects that take advantage of the

¹ ELO – Electronic Literature Organization, web site at: <http://www.eliterature.org/> (accessed, February 1 2006).

² Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Flanner Hall, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 87.

³ Raine Koskimaa, “Approaches to Digital Literature: Temporal Dynamics and Cyborg Authors”, in Roberto Simanowski, Jürgen Schäffer, and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Reading Moving Letters*, Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010, pp. 129-143.

⁴ Noah Wardrip-Fruit, “Learning to Read Digital Literature”, in Roberto Simanowski, Jürgen Schäffer, and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Reading Moving Letters, op. cit.*, pp. 249-259, p. 249.

⁵ Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002, p. 163.

⁶ During the 19th century in France some poets, reacting against the rigid structure imposed to poetry by using the Alexandrine verse, created a new genre: the prose poetry. Particularly famous is Charles Baudelaire’s *Le spleen de Paris*, also known as *Petits poèmes en prose*, 1869.

capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer. However, the term “electronic poetry” encompasses a wide range of practices which are difficult to sum up. In order to do so let us focus on the text and on its relationship with the author and the reader: 1) concerning the text: the different mediums chosen to “write/read” the electronic poem on/from: installations and video-installations, texts created to be read on the desktop or the laptop screen⁷ – or nowadays also on smartphones and tablets – the form factor is largely unimportant to a certain extent so I shall use the generic term *computer*⁸ –, and performances; 2) concerning the text and the author: generative poetry or computer poetry programmed by the author and generated by the machine and electronic poetry which is not generative (which largely appears to constitute the bulk of the works created); 3) concerning the “nature” of the text and its relationship with the reader: animated/kinetic poetry, hypertexts, interactive texts. It is with respect to this third aspect that I constructed my typology.

From now on I will refer to my object of study indifferently as electronic poetry, e-poetry (short for electronic poetry) and digital poetry without making any distinction between the terms “electronic” and “digital”. In this thesis I have decided to study only electronic poems created to be read on the computer accessible online⁹. The aim of this thesis is to produce an empirical study of electronic poetry on the net. There is just one exception which is Eugenio Tisselli’s *Wen*. This piece is a work performed by Tisselli controlled by a smartphone that commands a text generated with software programmed by Tisselli’s himself. The video of the performance is accessible online.

The corpus is composed of 35 electronic poems. The texts are in English (24), in French (4), in Italian (4), in Portuguese (2), and in Spanish (only 1 example)¹⁰. The intention has been to offer a multilingual study of electronic poetry. However, it was particularly hard to find interesting e-poetry in Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. There are several websites in English devoted to the publication of electronic literature and/or electronic art. Also the world of French electronic poetry appears to be quite rich (in keeping with that nation’s experimental poetic tradition, see chapter 1), even though I decided to analyse only four texts as I did for the Italian language. This choice is also due to the fact that a considerable number of the French works have already been analysed (see Bootz, Bouchardon, and Saemmer).

⁷ Those texts can be on floppy disk, CD, DVD or accessible online. The very first e-poems were created on floppy and nowadays they are not easily readable anymore. The problem of how to preserve and archive electronic literature is a serious one. Some projects are on-going to try to archive e-literature even though some texts will be most probably lost forever.

⁸ It is true that by being readable on a smartphone electronic poetry is accessible everywhere at any moment and it can become part of everyday life as happened with video games. But for our purpose this distinction does not seem to be so relevant.

⁹ Schäfer and Gendolla use the word “net literature” but they do not restrict this term to the Internet. Cf. . Jörgen Schäfer and Peter Gendolla, in Simanowski, Jörgen Schäffer, and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Reading Moving Letters*, *op. cit.*, pp. 81- 108.

¹⁰ The different languages correspond to the languages I can read.

As regards the year of publication, it has not been possible to date all of the e-poems. Anyway, generally speaking, the corpus covers around 10 years of experiments: from Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb*, 1997 to Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho*, 2009.

In order to have a broad choice the corpus was selected by using 4 different sources: the ELC1 - *The Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1*¹¹, the Hermeneia website - devoted to Literary Studies and Digital Technologies¹², an online magazine devoted to literature and art - "bornmagazine"¹³, and from the personal websites of the authors¹⁴. When selecting from personal websites, the texts were chosen according to poetic elements such as rhetorical figures, metrical rhythm, aesthetics, new experimentations with different semiotic systems - a system being the still image, video, spoken audio, music, text, and so on. In selecting the corpus I decided not to choose some very important and famous e-poetry such for instance Brian Kim Stefan's, *the dreamlife of letters*¹⁵, because there are already other close-readings available.

The corpus will be analysed in 5 different chapters. Each chapter containing the analysis of several e-poems. The e-poems will be presented in a sort of "crescendo" of textuality. Each chapter will first present texts whose form is easily recognizable to be a poem in a canonical way (because of its structure, its metric, and so on). The later examples, on the contrary, will show more complex constructions where the different semiotic systems comingle and act contemporaneously. Normally these texts provide a more in depth

¹¹ Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, Stephanie Strickland (eds.), *The Electronic Literature Collection*, Vol. 1, October 2006, this first volume is accessible online at: <http://collection.eliterature.org/1/> (accessed, November 21 2007). The second volume has just been published: Laura Borràs, Talan Memmott, Rita Raley, and Brian Kim Stefans (eds.), *The Electronic Literature Collection*, Vol. 2, February 2011, accessible online at : <http://collection.eliterature.org/2/> (accessed, February 9 2011). Two e-poems that I chose for my corpus are now published on the ECL2 - Rui Torres's *Poemas no meio do caminho* and Chico Marinho's *Palavrador*.

¹² Hermeneia has been working on the field since 2001. It hosts on its website around 600 literary digital works and it is recognized by the academic world to be one of the most important sites in the field of Literature and Digital Technologies, accessible online at: www.hermeneia.net (accessed, July 1 2009).

¹³ "Bornmagazine", accessible online at: <http://www.bornmagazine.org/> (accessed, March 23 2004). "Born was founded in 1996 in Seattle as an all-volunteer, free publication where writers and designers could collaborate on creative projects. The magazine launched on the Web in 1997 with a focus on editorial design and traditional editorial topics, including essays, film and music reviews, and topical articles. As Web technology continued to evolve, contributing artists began focusing on the connections between literature and visual arts, and experimented with the dynamic relationship between text, cinema, audio, and interactivity. In response, Born redefined its mission in 1998, focusing on collaboration and media-rich interpretations of poetry, short fiction and creative non-fiction, and eventually arrived at its present incarnation".

¹⁴ All the poems selected from personal web sites are now hosted on Hermeneia website.

¹⁵ Brian Kim Stefan, *the dreamlife of letters* (2000), in *Electronic Literature Collection*, *op. cit.*, accessible online at: http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans_the_dreamlife_of_letters.html (accessed, April 22 2010).

interaction with the reader. By acting on multiple different semiotic systems, moreover, these texts question the boundaries of electronic poetry.

The thesis has been organized around three deeply interconnected approaches: historical, descriptive and analytic. The first approach judges the “novelty” of the phenomenon within a historical context. The descriptive work to be done on the corpus is fundamental in order to establish a sort of typology of e-poetry and, consequently, to be able to start the analytic work.

Chapter 1, thus, offers a historical approach to e-poetry. In this chapter I briefly trace the relationship between writing and images, focusing in particular on last century avant-gardes. From Ancient Greece to avant-gardes movements of the last century Western culture has been interested in the creative tensions that the union of images and writing can generate. The tradition of calligrams is the most well-know way to intertwine writing and images, especially thanks to Apollinaire’s famous *Calligrammes*. This tradition, which started with Simmias of Rhodes (about 325BCE) is nowadays carried forward in electronic poetry (Alex Gopher’s *The child*). But images can also help in the comprehension of the text, as they did in the Middle Age where images and text were interconnected and indispensable to each other.

Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* marked a changing point in poetry. It suggested another “syntax” of the space. His work – after many years of constraints due to the printing press – proposed to use the space of the page in a different way. Other authors rearranged poetry using inventive graphical methods, such as E.E. Cummings who helped to liberate lines and formation of poetry from strict arrangement. Other poets, such as Ezra Pound, were interested in ideograms, thus in how creating figurative writing.

20th century avant-garde movements had been starting more and more to think about the form and the *material* of poetry, considering also the graphic and/or sonorous appearance of words. They introduced many elements and characteristics that exemplify electronic poetry too both as far as the creative practice and as far as the reading practice is concerned. The meaning of the text has started to depend more and more on the reader. Moreover, in many concrete and visual works, the poem will depend on the textual path that the reader will follow or take through the text, since these texts are no longer texts to be simply read but also to be seen like electronic poetry.

How electronic poetry deals with the possibilities uncovered by the new digital medium: a medium that easily allows us to redefine the writing space and the reading time; a medium that allows us to include images and sounds alongside the graphic text, adding also motion and creating new kinds of temporalities; and, finally, that can make the text be reactive and interactive?

Roberto Simanowski wonders “what we need to read, to interpret, when we read digital literature?”¹⁶. In chapter 2 I explain what I will look for in electronic poetry. In this chapter I first briefly review some of the most significant theories concerning electronic writing (such as for instance,

¹⁶ Roberto Simanowski, “Reading Digital Literature”, in Roberto Simanowski, Jürgen Schäffer, and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Reading Moving Letters*, op. cit., 15-28, p. 20.

Aarseth's concept of *cybertextuality* – which, however, does not refer only to electronic texts – Hayles' definition of *technotext*, and Bootz's idea of *transitoire observable* – more related to electronic literature). And I describe the methodology that will be used in the analyses of the e-poems focusing on the limits of the semiotic approach and its challenges. Thus the methodology adopted – besides the historical approach used for the chapter 1 – concerns firstly the semiotic description procedure¹⁷.

The description is a procedure which focuses on the systematic aspects of a phenomenon. According to several semio-linguistic approaches the description allows us to discover the specificity of the general regularity of a genre¹⁸. By using the descriptive approach *systematic* aspects of electronic poetry will be singled out. This approach will allow me to propose a categorization of electronic poetry based on two axes. One axis focuses on the general regularity of the form of expression (Louis Hjelmslev) in which the electronic poems are built. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 correspond to the typology of e-poetry resulting from the first axis. The other axis categorizes the e-poems according to the level of interaction with the reader.

In the last part of this chapter (by which I mean chapter 2) I explain and describe what will be the analytic approach that will characterize all the other chapters of the thesis, what exactly I will look for in analysing the corpus. I am particularly interested in seeing if and how electronic poetry uses/adapts/reinvents rhetorical figures, tropes, and aesthetics – the “canonical” elements that characterize poetry. I am also interested in analysing the “new writing space” that the digital medium offers to its authors. After Mallarmé and during the last century many experiments with the writing space (and typography) have been done. What are the new elements introduced by electronic poetry to these experiments?

Chapter 3, 4, 5, and 6 are devoted to the close-reading of electronic poems. Each chapter will introduce different textualities – categorized according to systematic aspects of the form of expression – in order to provide this study (and the reader) with a wide amount of examples. In these chapter rhetorical figures, new media-figures, emerging aesthetic forms will be singled out and described. Besides being an empirical study to electronic poetry, these chapters should be a useful instrument for a curious reader that wants to approach e-poetry.

In these chapter I will do both a descriptive and a *hermeneutic* work. For Hjelmslev, the description must be scientific thus it is opposed to the hermeneutic description, which wants to understand a single text¹⁹. However, it

¹⁷ Cf. Louis Hjelmslev, *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse*, 1943, En. tr. *Prologomena to a Theory of Language*, “International Journal of American Linguistics”, Memoir 7, Baltimore: Indiana University Press, 1953.

¹⁸ Cf. François Rastier, *Sens et textualité*, coll. *Langue, linguistique, communication*, Paris: Hachette, 1989. Georges Molinié, *Sémiostylistique*, coll. *Formes sémiotiques*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998.

¹⁹ Louis Hjelmslev, *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse*, 1943, En. tr. *Prologomena to a Theory of Language*, “International Journal of American Linguistics”, Memoir 7, Baltimore: Indiana University Press, 1953.

is difficult to see exactly where the border is. The question of “interpretation” opens up interesting and important issues, which is not possible to deal with here and in any case those problems – though essential – are not the main point of this thesis. However, I would like to point out a couple of aspects that I find relevant in the analysis of the corpus.

By using a semiotic approach in the descriptive phase, I have tried to be “scientific”. I have defined the systematic elements of electronic poetry, then I have *interpreted* the texts according to the systematic and recursive elements which have been mapped out. But the so called “*intentio Lectoris*”²⁰ will be an “*intetio Lector*”, mine, and as such it cannot be exhaustive. Moreover, some of these texts, because of their own nature, are impossible to be analysed exhaustively. Some of them can throw up an enormous – if not potentially infinite – amount of possible combinations, thus impossible to analyse (see particularly chapters 5 and 6). Some others have been created to result in different outcomes for each reader (see particularly chapters 5, 6, and 7). Not only are different interpretations possible, but also different texts. Umberto Eco notes that “the infinity, or at least the indefinite abundance of interpretations, are due not to the initiative of the reader, but also to the physical mobility of the text itself”²¹.

In order to analyse these kind of texts (mutable, unstable, with different reading paths) I decided to use many screenshots of the texts. That allowed me to better describe the peculiarities of the text, to point out its mutations, and to highlight its new poetic aspects – such as new media-figures or new forms of aesthetics.

Even though the descriptive and analytic work will also be done in chapter 7, this one does not follow the same criteria in which chapter 3, 4, 5, and 6 were divided. In this chapter I have felt it necessary to discuss the question of authorship and the reader’s role in e-poetry. How does the electronic poetry change the relationships between the author, the reader and the text? In order to do it I decided to focus on two “sub-forms”²² of electronic poetry: generative texts, that is to say those texts programmed by the human and realized by the machine; and collaborative poetry on the net, where many people (without necessarily knowing each other) collaborate together in the construction of the e-poem.

I think that one cannot really discuss electronic poetry without giving special attention to generative poetry as it played a significant part in the birth and evolution of electronic literature (see chapter 1). However, as regards their form of expression those texts are perfectly categorized according the main

²⁰ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Bloomington: The Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 44-63.

²¹ Umberto Eco, “Vegetal and Mineral Memory: the Future of Books”, 2003, accessible online at: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/665/bo3.htm> (accessed, July 2 2006), now available at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20051124224704/http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/665/bo3.htm> (accessed, June 13 2010).

²² The term “form” does not mean “the form of expression” according to which I categorized e-poetry.

typology (see also chapter 6). Similarly the networking, fluid and real-time nature of the electronic environment creates new opportunities for collaborative works. Some of the last century avant-gardes already experimented with collaborative creation, particularly Fluxus and Mail-art (see chapter 1). Can the digital environment improve upon these experiments? In both cases of generative poetry and collaborative poetry on the net the machine appears to have a central role and the author needs to give up/to share her role.

With this thesis, therefore, I aim to provide a broad, multifaceted and empirical approach to electronic poetry. Through the thesis I will establish and define the characteristics and forms assumed by (e)poetry operating under the impact of computers and the Internet. I shall propose a typology of electronic poetry and I will evaluate what is new owing to the advent of e-poetry²³.

²³ An explicative note: all the translations into English of the critical texts quoted in the thesis, if not otherwise specified, are mine. All the translations into English of the electronic poems or parts of them are mine.

CHAPTER 1

THE WRITTEN IMAGE: AN EXCURSUS ON THE CROSS-CONTAMINATION BETWEEN WRITING AND IMAGE

“Literary poetry in a painter is something special, and is neither illustration nor the translation of writing by form.
Paul Gauguin”¹

“Poetry is good for unleashing images”.
Paula Rego²

In this chapter I will illustrate how writing and image mutually contaminate each other – with an eye to the poetic tradition. I will briefly sketch a historical overview pointing out along the way some key works beginning with Ancient Greece. I will show that Western artistic culture used to have a more visual tradition (which is a characteristic more usually attributed to Eastern civilizations) at least up until the slow perfecting of the printing press began to standardise typography and afterwards. From there I will then focus on the 20th century avant-gardes and their typographical, visual and acoustic experiments and, finally, I will connect them to e-poetry.

1. Writing Structure

A writing structure is characterized by using two systems simultaneously: the *linguistic* and the *graphical*, which function heterogeneously of one another. The way in which this linguistic information is encoded is termed a modality; the

¹ Paul Gauguin quoted by Peggy Hadden, *The Quotable Artists*, New York: Allowrth Press, 2002, p. 73.

² Cf. John McEwen, *Paula Rego*, London: Phaidon Press, 2006.

graphical information is conveyed using a medium³. Each type of expression resides in a separate domain, the first one is verbal the second one is visual. If we analyse communication from the viewpoint of inter-subjectivity we see that it is the norm for spoken or gesticulative language that partners have to be co-present, meanwhile for writing, once written, only the *spectator* is needed. There are obvious exceptions with the recorded voice and real-time tutelage, interestingly both forms of mass-communication.

Le geste et la parole by André Leroi-Gourhan highlights the role of the image in the genesis of the written communication. He asserts that the first images drawn by people were inspired by reality even if they might have represented only the appearance of things. According to Anne-Marie Christin “si l’on a pu transposer les langues sur un support visuel-graphique c’est parce que les figures de ce support se trouvaient investies d’abord elles-mêmes d’un pouvoir de sémantisation”⁴.

L’émergence du symbole graphique à la fin du règne des Paléanthropiens suppose l’établissement de rapports nouveaux entre les deux pôles opératoires, rapports exclusivement caractéristiques de l’humanité au sens étroit du terme, c’est-à-dire répondant à une pensée symbolisant dans la mesure où nous en usons nous-mêmes. Dans ces nouveaux rapports la vision tient la place prédominante dans la couple face-lecture et main-graphie. [...] Mythologie et graphisme multidimensionnel sont [...] normalement coïncident dans les sociétés primitives et si j’osais user du strict contenu des mots, je serais tenté d’équilibrer la «mythologie» qui est une construction pluridimensionnelle reposant sur le verbal par une «mythographie» qui en est le strict correspondant manuel.⁵

Anne-Marie Christin states that the “mythography” would have brought dynamism, but it could not have created writing. A paradigm shift hidden from us now by the dark expanses of history was to take place some time later. This shift or displacement would have appeared as a change in the way signs were distributed on their supporting material, a passing from a primitive rather free spatial organization to one of strict linear succession.

Le symbolisme graphique bénéficie, par rapport au langage phonétique, d’une certaine indépendance: son contenu exprime dans les trois dimensions de l’espace ce que le langage phonétique exprime dans l’unique dimension du temps. La conquête

³ Cf. Anne-Marie Christin, *L’image écrite: ou la déraison graphique*, Paris: Flammarion, 2001, p. 11 and p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

“If we can at all transport languages to a visual-graphic support it is because the figures of that support were initially invested with a semantization power”.

⁵ André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole*, tome 1, *Technique et langage*, Paris: Albin-Michel, 1964, p. 262 and p. 272.

Palaeoanthropic age implies the establishment of new relationships between the two operative poles, relationships that are exclusive characteristics of humanity in the narrow sense, that is to say, responding to a symbolicising thought insofar as we ourselves use it. In this new relationship, the viewing has a predominant role in the pair face-reading and hand-writing [...]. Mythology and multi-dimensional graphics [...] normally coincide in primitive societies, and if I dare use the strict meaning of words, I am tempted to balance ‘mythology’ which is a multidimensional construction based on the oral with ‘mythography’ which is strictly its manual correspondent”. The emergence of the graphic symbol at the end of the

de l'écriture a été précisément de faire entrer, par l'usage du dispositif linéaire, l'expression graphique dans la subordination complète à l'expression phonétique.⁶

This viewpoint represents a common amalgam of beliefs among the writing theorists: there wouldn't be writing without the prospective of immediate effectiveness. It is true that the determining step for the creation of writing is the consensual conversion of the ideogram into the phonogram, that is to say the instauration/forging of a functional equivalence between two signs, which are identical as far as the form, but their informational content is different. Anyway there is no archeological evidence to prove the importance of the immediate effectiveness in the construction of Western writing.

1.1 Writing and Drawing

Initially, writing and drawing were analogous actions. These actions sought to record, describe, explain, and arouse. Lines, objects, positional markers, ideograms, pictograms, and phonograms - in a two- or three-dimensional space - were used simultaneously. In their earlier forms, writing and drawing required severe abstraction from the world; the forms demonstrated considerable achievements of visual thinking. Filling an empty surface with signs enabled people to capture reality. Visual language has been shaped by the materials available to a given culture as well as by the communicative task at hand. A wide variety of systems has come into being as visual languages and technologies changed and evolved. The Egyptian hieroglyphics of 5,000 years ago used both abstract and iconic (representational) signs organized into vertical and horizontal groupings of marks. Even spiral compositions, such as the Phaestos disk (a 3,700-year-old Cretan ritual document), have occurred occasionally in the evolution of writing systems.



FIGURE 1: Phaestos disk, side A (Crete Museum-Greece, 3,700BCE ca.)

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-272.

"Graphic symbolism benefits, compared to phonetic language, from a certain independence: its content expresses in the three dimensions of space what phonetic language expresses in the single dimension of time. The conquest of writing has been precisely to bring about, through the use of a linear device, the complete subordination of the graphic expression to the phonetic expression".

After millennia of great diversity in signs and their organization, Greco-Roman forms emerged from Phoenician predecessors and have remained relatively unchanged until the present: 2,000 years of *efficient*, repeatable symbols. This process prompted similar codifications for many non-Western Asiatic languages and Amerindian languages, including languages that already had systems of ideograms. As McLuhan and others have stated, these simple semi-phonetic characters have enabled the development of technology and science as it is understood in the West. On the other hand, it is difficult to deny that certain expressive qualities have been simplified⁷.

1.2 Language and Writing

The alphabetical systems of writing are those where a symbol (letter) represents a sound or a combination of sounds, so they are based on a phonemic segmentation. They are different from logographic writings which are grapheme-oriented and where the grapheme represents a word or a morpheme - the smallest meaningful unit of language. Logograms are normally known also as "ideograms" or "hieroglyphics", but strictly speaking the ideograms represent ideas rather than words or morphemes as the logograms do.

In *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Jack Goody points out that the alphabetic writings tried to organize the writing space according to two dimensions: the abscissa and the ordinate, that is to say the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes of language. This gives us a structural conception of language: changing from the free projection of images in space to the phonologic spectrum of the alphabet. This kind of language imposes another structure on the *representation* of written words, which is symbolic and is not based anymore on the similitude of the images, that is to say, not on an iconic writing. Goody notices that one of the characteristic of the written form is its tendency lay out the terms in lines and columns. The graphic form tends to dispose the words in rows and columns, that is to say linearly and hierarchically in order to assign each element a unique position which defines - unambiguously and continuously - its relationship to other elements. According to Goody the alphabet not only was able to transcribe oral expressivity but also it could be used to control graphical space⁸.

Oral and written expressions have differing social implications. Language is the intimate property of a society. As Wittgenstein says there is no private language, language is all surface, there is nothing beneath it⁹. Though writing is the intimate property of a society we must remember that it exists *in front of the others* (it is shown) and in some way writing is displacement so it is for others or

⁷ Cf. Aaron Marcus, "Diagrammatic Visible Language: An Investigation of Visual Logic", Leonardo, Col. 20, No. 1, 1987, pp. 9-15.

⁸ Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977), Fr. tr. *La raison graphique. La domestication de la pensée sauvage*, Paris: Minuit, 1979, pp. 133-267.

⁹ Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1953), En. tr. by Gertrude Elizabeth Margare Anscombe, *Philosophical Investigations*, Malden: Blackwell, 1953.

for yourself at another time. Certainly writing has been observed to displace oral tradition¹⁰. Writing is a displacement in time and space. According to Jean-François Lyotard writing is just one step. In his opinion it is important to understand how what is read-able is revealed, in order to place it between the *discourse* and the *figure*.

Le lecteur ne voit pas ce qu'il lit, il cherche à entendre le sens de ce qu'à «voulu dire» ce locuteur absent qui est l'auteur de l'écrit. À cet égard l'écriture n'offre pas plus de résistance à l'intelligence du discours que ne peut le faire la parole. La différence entre les deux formes [...] est dans le cadre spatio-temporel : la parole implique la co-présence du locuteur et du récepteur. Supprimez la co-présence du locuteur vous avez l'écriture.¹¹

Also according to Derrida absence is the founder of writing, because writing reveals the extreme degree of this absence and the ultimate truths of the subject, which is not to be the substance of the speech, but the non-substance, the initial otherness. The speaker's absence is the absence of the subject herself making an act of *différence*.

C'est que l'archi-écriture, mouvement de la différence, archi-synthèse irréductible, ouvrant à la fois, dans une seule et même possibilité, la temporalisation, le rapport à l'autre et le langage, ne peut pas, en tant que condition de tout système linguistique lui-même être située comme un objet dans son champ. (Ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'elle ait un lieu *ailleurs*, un autre signe assignable).¹²

For Derrida the writing is a trace, for Lyotard it is an inscription: "écrit, mais surtout écrit comme une inscription, inscrit un texte se prête à la pseudologie puisqu'il appartient par ses lettres à l'objet dans lequel il est tracé"¹³.

The Derridian trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has no place for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace¹⁴.

In *Le degrés zéro de l'écriture*, Barthes commences with a series of definitions meant to show what writing is not, to sup up writing is a value more

¹⁰ Cf. Encyclopaedia Britannic, "Writing", accessible online at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/649670/writing> (accessed, October 14 2010).

¹¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1971, p. 217. "The reader does not see what he reads; he seeks to understand the meaning of what this absent speaker who is the author of that writing 'meant to say'. In this regard the writing does not offer more resistance to the intelligence of the speech than the word can do. The difference between the two forms [...] is in the spatiotemporal setting: speech involves the co-presence of speaker and receiver. Delete the co-presence of the speaker you will obtain the writing".

¹² Jaques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Paris: Minuit, 1967, p. 88. "The arch-writing, movement of différence, irreducible arch-synthesis, opens, at the same time, in a single possibility, the temporality, the relationship with the other and language and cannot be situated - being itself a condition of every linguistic system - as an object in its field. (That does not mean it has a place elsewhere, another sign assignable)".

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure, op. cit.*, p. 370. "Written, but mostly written as an inscription, inscribed a text lends itself to pseudology since it belongs from its letter to the object where it is drawn".

¹⁴ Jaques Derrida, *De la grammatologie, op. cit.*.

than a fact¹⁵. Barthes also states that all the writing does not necessarily imply calligraphy. It is necessary that the gesture is possible there, that is to say the support used to write authorizes it. For Barthes cuneiform¹⁶ writing is unaware of calligraphy by nature, whereas Chinese writing caused it. He sees “la vérité de l’écriture dans la main qui appuie, trace et conduit, c’est-à-dire dans le corps qui bat (qui jouit)”¹⁷.

As I will show in the section 2, Western culture also has a visual tradition based on the aesthetic or beauty of the written text as text (in ancient Greek *kallos* means “beauty” and *graphos* means “writing”), but beyond doubt, the invention of the printing press has strictly regulated writing space and this support structure does not easily facilitate visual experimentation.

2. Western Visual Poetry Tradition

Poetry has been institutionalized as a practice and form since the Renaissance¹⁸. From the end of the 19th century it has undergone a radical renewal. During these periods poetry has been thinking more and more about its form, its imaging, its *material* dimension.

We traditionally call poetry an artistic experience related to the word both in the oral and written form, whose compositional unit is the *verse line* (alexandrine verse, free verse, and so on)¹⁹. The oral medium is normally richer.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Le dégradé zéro de l’écriture*, 1953, Paris: Le Seuil, 1977.

¹⁶ Cuneiform writing is one of the earliest known forms of written expression. Emerged in Sumer around the 30th century BC with predecessors reaching into the late 4th millennium, cuneiform writing began as a system of pictographs. Cf. Encyclopedia Britannica, accessible online at:

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/146558/cuneiform> (accessed, October 20 2010).

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, “Sémiographie d’André Masson”, 1973, *L’obvie et l’obtus*, Paris: Seuil, 1982, pp. 143-144.

He sees “the truth of the writing in the hand that supports, traces and leads, that is to say in the body that fights (that enjoys)”.

¹⁸ Aristotle described three genres of poetry in his *Poetics*: the epic, the comic, and the tragic and developed rules to distinguish the highest-quality poetry in each genre. However, it is during the Renaissance that poetry with its canons was institutionalized. Moving from the Middle Ages European society passed on to the Renaissance that is to say from an oral society (the Middle Ages) to a society that would discover the printing press.

The Renaissance was an age characterized by a commitment to individual and social order. The presence of genre, particularly as a limiting agent in literary culture, was a significant part of this period. The persistence of genre is a logical continuation of the revival of classical thought, and of renewed interest in the classical texts of Greek and Roman authors such as Aristotle. During this period, for instance, the association of the sonnet as a form particularly suitable for amorous verse was concretized. The broader genres of classical thought started to fragment into distinct stylistic identities that held the potential of eventual development into genres and/or subgenres). Cf. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (ed.), *Renaissance Genres. Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation*, USA: The Harvard Press, 1986.

¹⁹ According to the Oxford dictionary a poem is “a piece of writing in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by particular attention to diction (sometimes involving rhyme), rhythm, and imagery.” The Cambridge dictionary defines a poem as “a piece of writing in which the words are arranged in separate

Written poetry, in fact, *translates* onto the page only the segmental part of a text, but it is unable to show with perfect fidelity the extra-segmental part such as the tone or modulation. However, we can say that this discrepancy has been bridged somewhat: for instance concerning emphasis, the oral procedural use of duration or stress has its graphic form highlighted. Written poetry has always searched for visual figures that are comparable to the prosodic variations of oral poetry²⁰.

The Oriental writing system is generally considered to be a *logosyllabary*, a hybrid of a logographic (or ideographic) and syllabic systems. The graphemes of written language do not consistently map onto the individual phonemic units that are heard out loud, as is done to a greater or lesser extent in alphabetic languages. Based on the putting down on the page of ideograms, this kind of poetry focuses on the visual aspect of words.



FIGURE 2: Chinese pictogram for “mountain”



FIGURE 3: Chinese ideogram for “mountain”

An ideogram or ideograph (from Greek *idea* “idea” + *grapho* “to write”) is a graphic symbol that represents an idea or a strictly representational picture of a subject as may be done in illustration or photography: ideograms appeal to nonverbal communication.

Arabic poetry creates abstract figures (such as decorations – figure 4) or figurative objects (i.e. identifiable as world objects: artefacts, fauna, flora – figure 5) by altering and stylizing syllabic graphemes.

Though the rigid imposition of the printed page (and printing mechanisms, and other elements of the printing process) could be viewed as an artistic straitjacket it could also be said that this has spurred a desire to free the written verse line. Many avant-garde movements have experimented with new ways of putting words on the page. Nowadays the computer gives poetry a new expressiveness and materiality of letter use, which has always been palpable in for example Arabic or Oriental poetry and research into typographical/visual matters and their relation to different semiotic systems (words, images, sound) becomes easier. Computers and the internet open up a new space for the creative game of writing: computers highlight the reticular²¹ nature of writing and the web-space multiplies and disperses its dimensions.

lines, often ending in rhyme, and are chosen for their sound and for the images and ideas they suggest”.

²⁰ Cf. Alessandro Zinna (ed.), *Gli oggetti di scrittura 2 CISEL*, Urbino 2004, p. 3.

²¹ With “reticular” I intend “resembling a net in form”, underlining the links between the nature of writing and the nature of the web. Reticular writing consists of

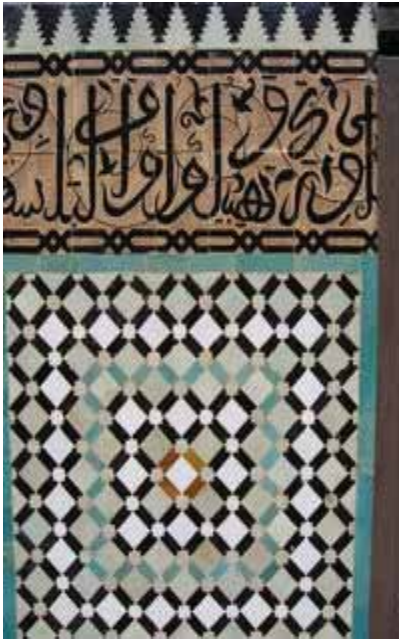


FIGURE 4: Arabic abstract image
(used as architectural ornament.
Mekhnes, Morocco)



FIGURE 5: Arabic figurative image

Normally when talking about *visual* poetry, we immediately think of Apollinaire's calligram and also of the more recent avant-garde movements. Actually, even if the practice of this type of poetry in the Western tradition is not as rich in breadth and depth as, for instance, the Arabic, the Chinese or Japanese cultures, there are very interesting examples of contamination between the written word and image through the centuries.

2.1 From Simmias of Rhodes to the "Late Latins"

We date the first visual poems to around 1700BCE. The first known calligrams are the three, "The hatchet", "The wings" and "The egg"²² examples extant

a continuous dialectic between local and global. The web-space highlights this dialectic between local and global. The web-space (the cyberspace) is a common dynamic, object, constructed, or at least fuelled by all those who use it. Cf. Pierre Lévy, *Qu'est-ce que le virtuel?*, Paris: La Découverte, Paris 1995, p. 120.

²² This piece would appear to have been actually inscribed upon an egg, the lines, are to be read as they are numbered. The lines gradually increase from a trochaic monometer catalectic to a complicated decamter of spondees, anapaests, paeons, and dactyls. Here below the translation.

"Lo here a new weft of a twittering mother, a Dorian nightingale; receive it with a right good will, for pure was the mother whose shrilly throes did labour for it. The loud-voicèd herald of the gods took it up from beneath its dear mother's wings, and cast it among the tribes of men and bade it increase its number onward more and more - that number keeping the while due order of rhythms - from a one-footed measure even unto a full ten measures: and quickly he made fat from above the swiftly-slanting slope of its vagrant feet, striking, as he went on, a motley strain indeed but a right concordant cry of the Pierians, and making exchange of limbs with

created by the Greek poet Simmias of Rhodes at about 325BCE. The word calligraphy comes from the Greek words *kallos*, meaning “beauty”, and *graphos*, meaning “writing” (as explained above), so obviously calligrams concerns a visual art that emphasizes the beauty of written signs-in-themselves.

Another example would be Theocritus of Syracuse – *Pan Flute* (about 300BCE-260BCE) -, then after the alexandrine poets exploited this vein where the art of drawing and the text are not dissociated but where they coincide²³. It is not just a question of illustrating already written poems, or, conversely, an appendix added to drawings: it is the putting together images and writing, or better yet simulating images by writing. The Latin writers cultivated this way of creating, the most famous works are: Laevius’ *Pterigion Phoenicis* (1st century), the famous *Sator Enigma* by an anonymous poet (2nd century), and the 24 *carmina quadrata*²⁴ by Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius (325 ca.), see figure 7²⁵.

1 Κωτίλας
3 τῆ τὸδ' ἄτριον νέον
5 πρόφρων δε θυμῷ δέξο· δὴ γὰρ ἀγνᾶς
7 τὸ μὲν θεῶν ἐριβόας· Ἐριμᾶς ἐκείξε κάρυξ
9 ἀνωγε δ' ἐκ μέτρου μονοβάμονος μέγαν πάροιθ' ἀέξειν
11 θοᾶς δ' ὑπερθεν ὠκυλέχριον φέρων νεῦμα ποδῶν σποράδων πίφανσκεν
13 θοαῖς ἴσ' αἰόλαις νεβροῖς κῶλ' ἀλλάσσων, ὄρσιπόδων ἐλάφων τέκεσσι·
15 πᾶσαι κραιπνοῖς ὑπὲρ ἄκρων ἴεμεναι ποσὶ λόφων κατ' ἀρθμίας ἴχνος τιθήνας·
17 καὶ τις ἄμφοθυμος ἀμφίπαλτον αἴψ' αὐδᾶν θῆρ' ἐν κόλπῳ δεξάμενος θαλαμῶν μυχοιτάτῳ
19 κᾶτ' ὠκα βοᾶς ἀκοᾶν μεθέπων ὃ γ' ἄφαρ λάσσιον νιφοβόλων ἀν' ὄρεων ἔσσυται ἄγκος·
20 ταῖς δὴ δαίμων κλυτὸς ἴσα θοοῖσι ποσὶν δονέων ἄμα πολὺπλοκα μεθιεὶ μέτρα μολπᾶς.
18 ῥίμφα πετρόκοιτον ἐκλιπῶν ὄρουσ' εὐνάν ματρός· πλαγκτὸν μαιόμενος βαλιᾶς ἐλεῖν τέκος·
16 βλαχαὶ δ' οἴων πολυβότων ἀν' ὄρεων νομὸν ἔβαν ταινισφύρων τ' ἐς ἀντρα Νυμφῶν·
14 ταὶ δ' ἀμβρότῳ πόθῳ φίλας ματρός ῥώνοντ' αἴψα μεθ' ἡμερόεντα μαζόν.
12 ἴχνει θενῶν ταν παναίολον Πιερίδων μονόδοπον αὐδάν,
10 ἀριθμὸν εἰς ἄκραν δεκάδ' ἴχνιων, κόσμον νέμοντα ρυθμῶν,
8 φῦλ' ἐς βροτῶν ὑπὸ φίλας ἐλῶν περοῖσι ματρός,
6 λίγειά μιν κάμ' ἴφει ματρός ὠδίς·
4 Δωρίας ἀηδόνος·
2 ματέρος

FIGURE 6: Simmias of Rhodes, *The Egg* (325BCE ca.)

the nimble fawns the swift children of the foot-stirring stag. – Now these fawns through immortal desire of their dear dam do rush apace after the beloved teat, all passing with far-hasting feet over the hilltops in the track of that friendly nurse, and with a bleat they go by the mountain pastures of the thousand feeding sheep and the caves of the slender-ankled Nymphs, till all at once some cruel-hearted beast, receiving their echoing cry in the dense fold of his den, leaps speedily forth of the bed of his rocky lair with intent to catch one of the wandering progeny of that dappled mother, and then swiftly following the sound of their cry straightway darteth through the shaggy dell of the snow-clad hills. – Of feet as swift as their urged that renowned god the labour, as he sped the manifold measures of the song”. (The “Dorian nightingale” is the poet and the “new weft” the poem itself). See *The Greek Bucolic Poets*, English translation Edmonds J. M. Loeb (1912), Classical Library Volume 28, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 496.

²³ Another famous work is the *Jason Altar* by Doxiadis of Crete around 100BCE.

²⁴ *Carmina Quadrata* are poems whose shape is the rectangle.

²⁵ The first line reads: “Vides ut ara stem dicata Pythio”(You see how the ancient altar dedicated to Pythius..). Latin poetry requires neither word spacing nor punctuation. The Latin letter “V” can be rendered as the vowel “u” or the consonant “v”, depending on the context.

During the second half of the first millennium Venantius Fortunatus' *Carmina cancellata*²⁶ (roughly 530-600) and *De Sancta Cruce* (round about 560) and Rabanus Maurus' *De Laudibus Sanctae Crucis* (815) – whose first book of poems is completely composed of *carmina figurata*²⁷ – were the most well-known visual works.

```

VIDESVTARASTEMDICATAPYTHIO
FABREPOLITAVATISARTEMVSICA
SICPVLOHRASACRISSIMAGENSPhoebodecens
HISAPTATEMPLISQVISLITANTVATVMCHORI
5 TOTCOMPTASERTISETCAMENAEPFLORIBVS
HELICONIISLOCANDALVCISCARMINVM
NONCAVTEVDVRAMEPOLIVITARTIFEX
EXCISANONSVMRVPEMONTISALBIDI
LVNAENITENTENECPARIDEVERTICE
10 NONCAESADVRONECCOACTASPICVLO
ARTAREPRIMOSEMINENTESANGVLOS
ETMOXSECVNDOSPROPACARELATIVS
EOSQVECAVTESINGVLOSSVBDVCERE
GRADVMINVTOPERRECVRVASLINEAS
15 NORMATAVBIQVESICDEINDEREGVLA
VTORAQVADRAESITRIGENTELIMITE
VELINDEADIMVMPVSAVRVSVMLINEA
TENDATVRARTELATIORPERORDINEM
MEMETRAPANGVNTDECAMENARVMMODIS
20 MVTATONVMQVAMNVMERODVMTAXATPEDVM
QVAEDOCTASERVATDVMPRAECEPTISREGVLA
ELEMENTACRESCVNTETDECRESCVNTCARMINVM
HASPHOEBESVPPLEXDANSMETRORVMIMAGINES
TEMPLISCHORISQVELAETVSINTERSITSACRIS
5 10 15 20 25 30 35

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FIGURE 7: Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius, *Carmina quadrata XX* – Poem XXVI (325 ca.)

2.2 Hrabanus Maurus

Circa 845 Hrabanus Maurus created his famous *De adoratione crucis ab opifice / De Laudibus Sanctae Crucis*, where figuratively a monk is praying before a cross, both are traced out by words.

²⁶ *Carmina cancellata*: squares or other geometric figures where words and sentences are inscribed.

²⁷ *Carmen figuratum* is a term used to describe poems in which certain letters or words are contained within patterns or compositions to form independent phrases or verses within regular lines of continuous text.

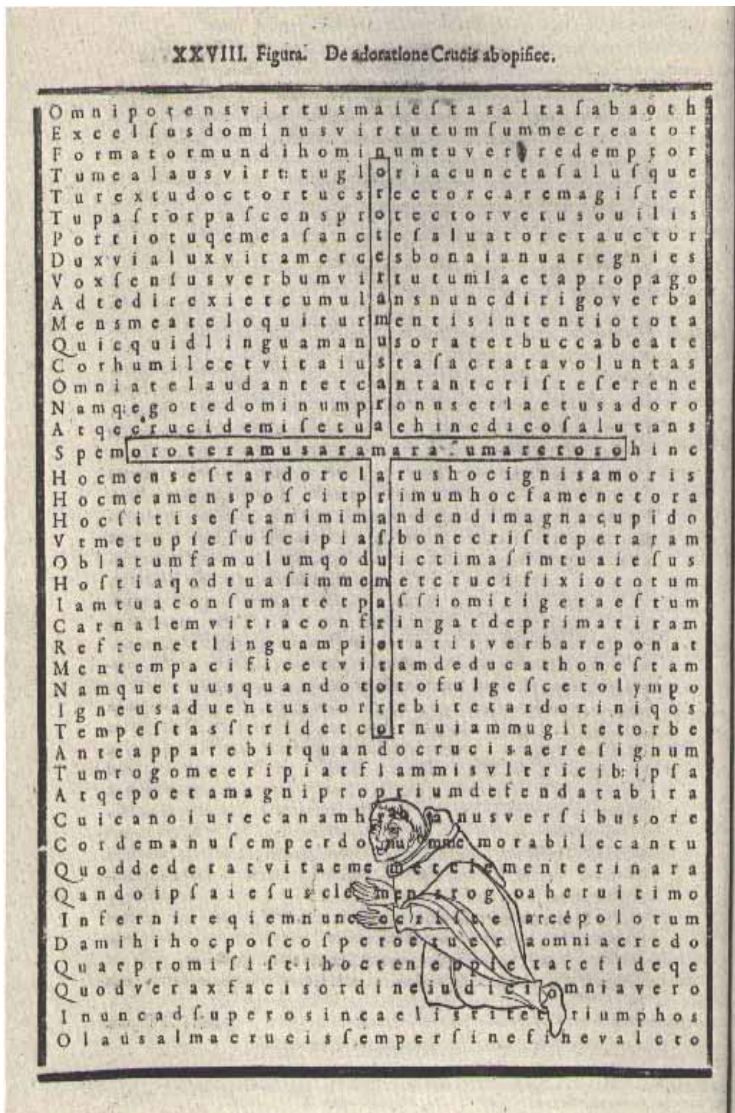


FIGURE 8: Hrabanus Maurus, *De adoratione crucis ab opifice* / *De Laudibus Sanctae Crucis* (845)

This kind of writing is figure-formed writing, the act of reading and the act of looking belong to the same instant. The word is seeking its labyrinthic universe that is reflected in its own image. These texts try to evade the limits that constrain words, unifying two arts and two worlds.

2.3 The Middle Age

Passing from papyrus to codex a new space was made available to the reading practice: the familiar modern page. The *carmina figurata* are a result of this new space. These texts were made to be seen and shown more than to be read. The importance of being readable was not a central matter in the medieval period when literacy rates are not as they are now, even though we must acknowledge the supremacy of the written text. This legibility would become very important during the Renaissance.

Around the 7th century, the practice of *interlace* was invented in Ireland. Interlace is a decorative curvilinear narrow strip where the eye tends to become lost in the intricacies. The letters in this space do not want to be read, they want to be apprehended by the eye via their denotational, not their connotational force. The unthinking transparency of reading is clouded. The absence of clearly delineated letters causes our eyes to stumble. This work makes one think simultaneously of what one is seeing and of what one is reading.



FIGURE 9: The interlace – particular of a Medieval illuminated manuscript

Manuscripts became illuminated as new technologies allowed decoration. We call the small illustrations that are found alongside blocks of text in these manuscripts *miniatures* - derived from the Latin *minium*, red lead, which was used to illustrate the codices. There is a physical nexus that connects writing and decoration²⁸, and there is a relation of sense and significance between them, too²⁹. Thus we have two kinds of illuminated manuscript. In the first case, the contribution of the illustrator is found as a part of the written message, while in the second illustrations accompany the text.

Images and text are interconnected and indispensable to each other. Therefore, images are a hermeneutic support for deciphering the written part of the text³⁰.

²⁸ Cf. Laura Borràs Castanyer, "Digital Literature and Theoretical Approaches", in *Dichtung Digital*, Issue 3/2004.

²⁹ Regarding yet more visual poems three authors need to be mentioned: Pierre Abélard during the 11th century, the Jewish Abraham ben Ezra (12th century), and the cabalist Abraham ben Samuel Ábuláfia during the 13th century.

³⁰ Nicolò de' Rossi, a minor Italian poet, proposed a form of visual sonnet in his "Canzoniere" (1317-1328) - a collection of lyrics: a sonnet in the shape of a star with several circles and 14 centripetal verse lines, and another sonnet in the shape of an episcopal throne, a cathedra.



FIGURE 10: Collage of illuminated Medieval manuscripts

2.4 The Renaissance

In 1422 Cristoforo Buondelmonti discovered on the island of Andros, the *Hieroglyphica of Horapollo*. This text consists of two books, containing a total of 189 explanations of Egyptian hieroglyphs³¹. By the end of the 15th century this famous manuscript had aroused enormous enthusiasm in humanists who perceived that here, at last, was evidence of that primal script which united into one whole the two elements of the symbol, both signifier and signified. This text would have a notable influence on Western culture in the realm of visual thinking³². The major relevance of *Horapollo's* book consisted of inaugurating a new model of symbolic communication. Hieroglyphic representation was understood as an immediate and almost divine form of knowledge, as opposed to the mediated, incomplete and temporal form appropriate to discursive language. These ideas inspired Ficino, Giordano Bruno, Erasmus, and Leibniz. For instance, Marsilio Ficino was impressed with the possibility of such

³¹ In the Renaissance they were generally considered to be authentic Egyptian characters, and although this authenticity was seriously placed in doubt during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern-day Egyptology recognizes that Book I in its entirety and approximately one third of Book II are based on real signs from hieroglyphic writing.

Cf. *Hieroglyphica of Horapollo*, George Boas (ed.), Princeton New Jersey: The Princeton University Press, 1993. The English translation of *Hieroglyphica* (translation by Alexander T. Cory) is accessible online at:

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/egy/hh/index.htm> (accessed, October 20 2010).

³² During the 15th century there were minor authors using visual poems in their compositions such as Iacobus Nicolae in his "Liber de distictione metrorum" and Janus Pannonius in his "Litera Pythagora".

“Platonic language” and Albrecht Dürer illustrated the manuscript translated by his friend Pirkheimer³³.

2.4.1 Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*

During the 15th century there were minor authors using visual poems in their compositions such as Iacobus Nicolae in his “Liber de distictione metrorum” and Janus Pannonius in his “Littera Pythagora”.

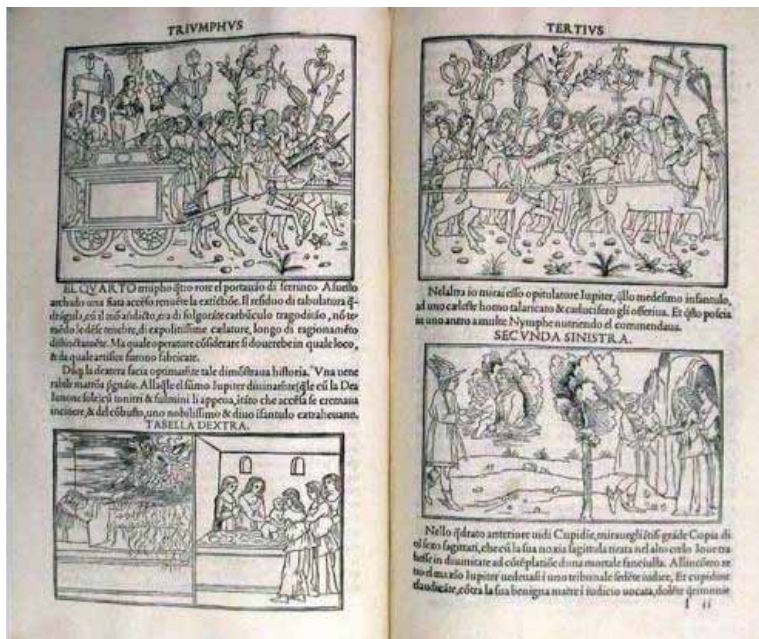


FIGURE 11: Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499)

It is difficult to say if Francesco Colonna was aware of the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollon, which was first published only in 1505, when he composed his *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*³⁴, published in Venice in 1499.

Illustrations were integrated into the main text allowing the reader to slip back and forth from textual description to corresponding visual image. As noticed by Edward Tufte *Hypnerotomachia* integrated the relevant text with the relevant image, a cognitive and an optical integration³⁵. Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia*³⁶ was an extraordinary visual-typographical-textual *assemblage*. Several pages in the book, for instance, make use of the text itself to illustrate the shapes of wine bottles.

³³ The original is lost, but a copy survives containing Dürer’s depictions of the hieroglyphics. Cf. William B. Ashworth, “Natural History and the Emblematic World View”, in David C. Lindberg and Robert S. Westman (eds.), *Reappraisals of the scientific revolution*, Melbourne: The Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 307-308.

³⁴ In English one translation could be *Poliphilo’s Strife of Love in a Dream*, from Greek *hypnos*, “sleep”, *eros*, “love”, and *mache*, “fight”.

³⁵ Edward Tufte, *Beautiful Evidence*, Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2006, p.45.

³⁶ Many of the woodcuts though anonymous, has been attributed by the critics to great artist such as Andrea Mantegna, Gentile Bellini, or the young Raphael.

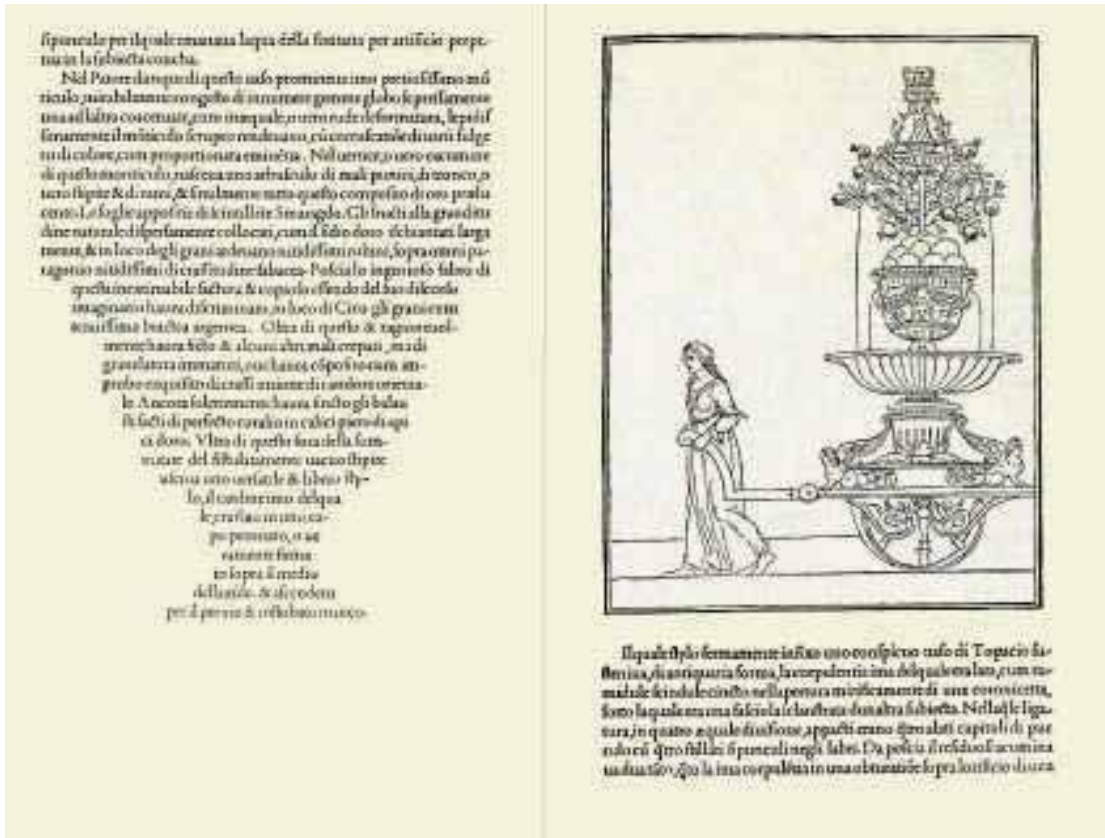


FIGURE 12: Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499)

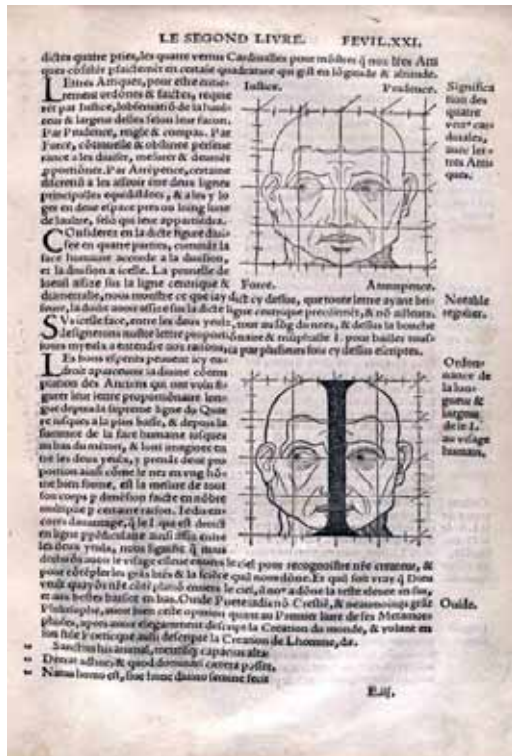
The signs in this book remind us of *logograms*, that is to say of the visual sign without any phonetic mediator.

2.4.2 Geoffrey Tory's *Champfleury*

If Colonna's experiment focuses on the formal aspect of letters (hieroglyphics), mot-figure, Geoffrey Tory with his masterpiece *Champfleury* (1529) focuses on the proportion of letters, linking them to the human being. It is a humanisation of the alphabet. Tory used a theory of the ratios derived from the figure of the human being as the basis of his book's drawings, mapping the human body onto a grid from where he based its capital letters. This was a characteristic idea of the first Renaissance³⁷.

Both Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and Tory's *Champfleury* marked very significant moments during the Renaissance.

³⁷ Joanna Drucker, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History and Imagination*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1999, p. 164.

FIGURE 13: G. Tory, *Champfleury* (1529)FIGURE 14: G. Tory, *Champfleury* (1529)

2.4.3 Connotations of Visual Writing during the Renaissance

Many authors were composing visual poems in the 15th and the 16th centuries in the whole of Europe, for instance the French poets Mellin de Saint Gelay, Jean Antoine Baif, and Jean de Boissière, the Dutch Mathijs de Castelein, the Belgian David Joris de Gand. During the Renaissance, by the way, hieroglyphics and calligrams usually had a negative connotation. Giordano Bruno, analysing the myth of *Phaedra*, defined the hieroglyphics as a degraded version of writing³⁸. But he used images, for instance, when he composed the diagram of the cosmos (figure 16) in *De umbris idearum* (1582) adding horoscope images.

As for calligram, during the Renaissance they were used to create parody as the famous “divine bouteille” (figure 15) by Rabelais³⁹. Also illustrations in general took another connotation. Renaissance decoration and Renaissance books, particularly the frames of the pictures in such books, were often made up of grotesques.

³⁸ Cf. Francis A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London: Penguin Book, 1966.

³⁹ Mireille Huchon showed that “la divine bouteille” was a fitting posthumous work done without the author’s permission. Cf. Mireille Huchon, in Rabelais, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1994, pp. 1599-1607.

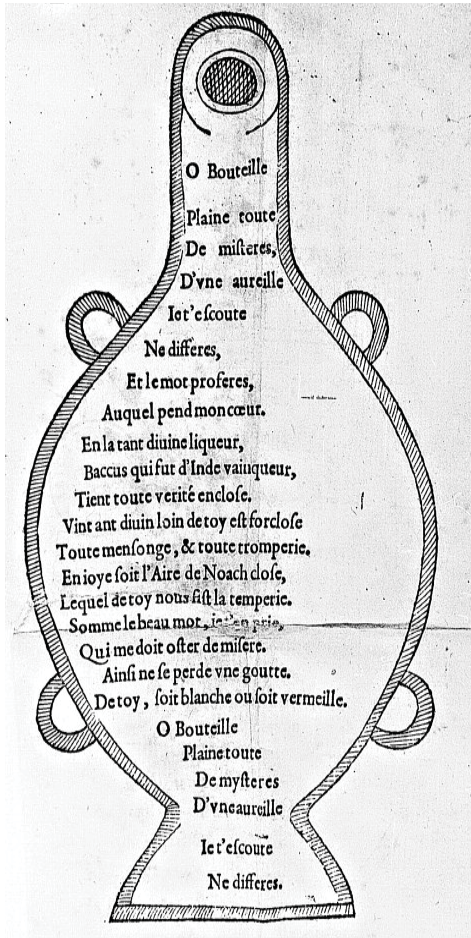
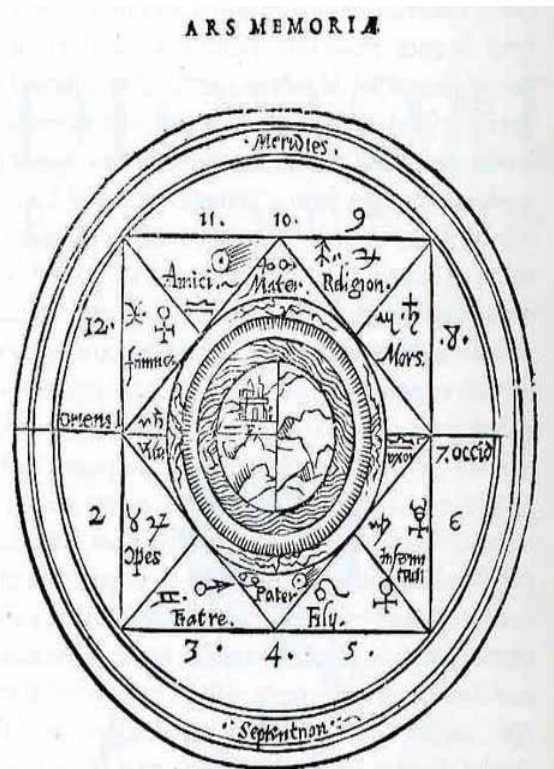


FIGURE 15: François Rabelais, *Le cinquieme et dernier livres des faicts et dictes heroïques du bon Pantagruel* (1565)



Zv Primæ domus imago prima, homo fundamenta iaciens, & alter, virga aliam ouem abigens aliam redu-

FIGURE 16: G. Bruno, *De umbris idearum* (1582)

Montaigne in his *Essais* (1580) criticized severely the form of poetry which used images and figures to gain the reader's sympathy. Interestingly he referred directly to calligram (*Essais* I, 54)⁴⁰:

Il est de ces subtilités frivoles et vaines, par le moyen desquelles les hommes cherchent quelques fois de la recommandation: comme les poètes qui font des ouvrages entiers de vers ... en manière qu'ils viennent à représenter telle ou telle figure.⁴¹

The rediscovery, late in the Renaissance, of Aristotle's *Poetics* reignited the debate about the nature of poetry and gave rise to a proliferation of treatises on the subject.

⁴⁰ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (1580), tome 1 - préface d'André Gide -, Paris: Gallimard, 1962, p. 428.

⁴¹ "It is these frivolous and vain subtleties, through which men sometimes seek the recommendation as poets who make entire works of verse lines... in the way that they come to represent a particular figure".

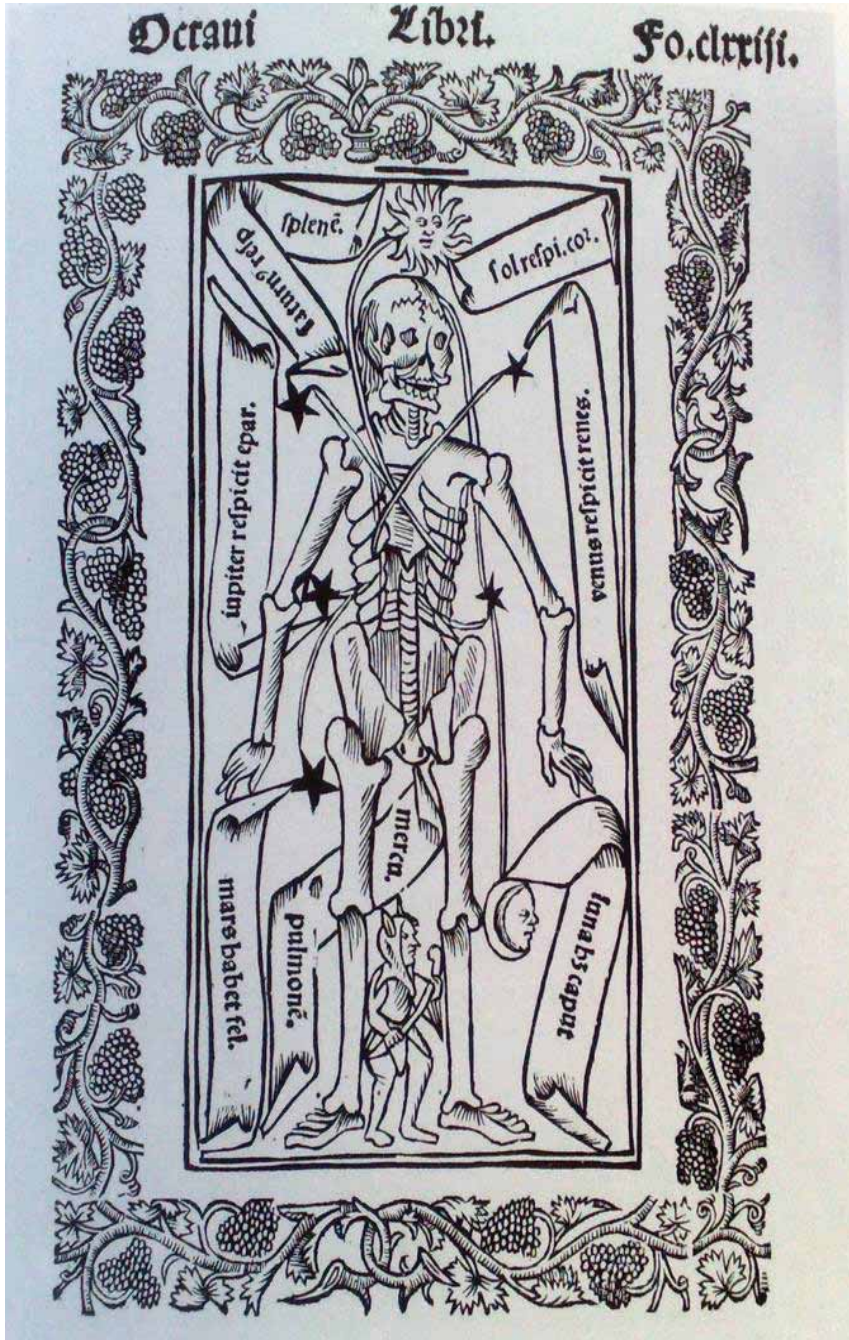


FIGURE 17: Bernardus de Lavinheta, "Homo Zodiacus", *Practica compendiosa artis Raymundi Lulli* (1523)

The Poetics gave scope for a more imaginative view of the poet's task, of seeing mimesis as descriptive of action and of allowing fantasy in addition to allegory, as descriptive of things as they should be rather than just as they were. Art should *transfigure* nature. However, poets still created visual poems. For instance Giovanni Battista Palatino, whose "Sonetto Figurato" (Part I and II) had been composed in Rome in 1566 in a book titled *Compendio del Gran Volume de l'Arte del Ben Scrivere*, which means "Vast compendium on the art of beautiful writing" (see figure 18).



FIGURE 18: Giovanni Battista Palatino, *Sonetto Figurato - Part I* (1566)

2.5 The 17th and the 18th Centuries

Authors expressed the sense of their work in typographical format also during the 17th century. The Slovak Albert Szenczi Molnár, the Germans Johann Hellwig, Georg Philippe Harsdörffer, Johann Klaj and Henryk Firley (1624), the Italian Giovanni Pierio Valeriano da Bolzano and even a woman, the Austrian Catherina Regina von Greiffenberg were still composing focusing on the visual aspect of words. All of these figured poems rely on the synthesis of both media, poetry and picture, which are closely intertwined or combined so that text/script turns into image. George Herbert's *Easter Wings / The Temple* (1633), for instance, reminds of Simmias of Rhodes' "The wings".



FIGURE 19: G. Herbert, *Easter Wings / The Temple* (1633)



FIGURE 20: S. of Rhodes, *The wings* (325 BCE ca.)

René Descartes dreamed about a universal writing - more than a universal language - and he explained his idea in his famous letter addressed to father Mersenne (20 November 1629):

Tout l'utilité donc que je vois qui peut réussir de cette invention, c'est pour l'écriture; à savoir, qu'il fût imprimé un gros dictionnaire en toutes les langues auxquelles il voudrait être entendu, et mît des caractères communs pour chaque mots primitif, qui répondissent au sens, et non pas aux syllabes, comme un même caractère pour *aimer*, *amare* et $\phi\lambda\epsilon\iota\nu$; et ceux qui auraient ce dictionnaire, et sauraient sa grammaire, pourraient en cherchant tous ses caractères l'un après l'autre interpréter en leur langue ce qui serait écrit.⁴²

For Descartes, thus, the idea was to create a universal writing based on *images* of meanings and not on phonemes. Leibniz would base his *Characteristica* - universal and formal language able to express mathematical, scientific, and metaphysical concepts - on Descartes' idea.



FIGURE 21: Johann Praetorius, *Ludicrum chiromanticum* (1661)

⁴² René Descartes, *Ceuvres et Lettres*, Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1953, p. 914. "All of the utility then that I see can be a success for this invention then is for writing. It should be printed a big dictionary in every language it wishes to be understood and common characters should be put for every primitive word, which answer to the meaning not to the syllables, like one same character to love, and amare and $\phi\lambda\epsilon\nu$ and those that have this dictionary, and know its grammar, could seek all the characters one after another and interpret in their language what would be written".

Writers, however, did not simply experiment poetry in the visual form, they also used its literary sense. Juan Caramuel y Lobkowitz's *Metametrical*, (1663) consisted of a voluminous set of rhymes-words. He used volvelles - sort of mobile gears used in the astronomy books. *Matemetrical* thus proposed a device making possible to compose 9.644.117.432.715.608 out of only one page - preceding Quenau's and Oulipo's researchs⁴³.

One of the most relevant figures as far as the visual poetry during the 18th century is Charles François Panard, whose works highlighted a correspondence between form and content, triggered by thematic reference to the chosen visual figure and underlined by an explanation⁴⁴.

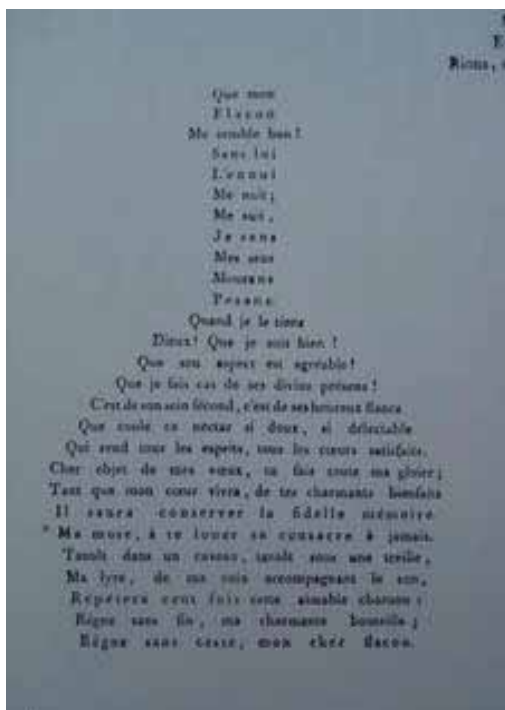


FIGURE 22: Charles François Panard, *Ce que dit la bouteille* (1763)

⁴³ We can say that visual poetry can be divided into two groups of works: static visual poems (written on a rigid support, such as paper) and dynamic visual poems (in this case the movement is part of the work). In the *Vita poetica* (1693) by Lukács Moesch, for instance, poems are composed on geometrical shapes: there are triangles, cubes, trapezoids, circles, and so on. Dynamic visual poetry is more recent as we will see in section 11. Cf. Tobor Papp, "Formes poétiques visuelles & ordinateur", *Revista Texto Digital*, 5 No. 1 2009, accessible online at: <http://www.textodigital.ufsc.br/> (accessed, October 22 2010).

⁴⁴ The poem recites (the capital letter starts a new verse line): "Que mon Flacon Me semble bon! Sans lui L'ennui Me nuit; Me suit, Je sens Mes sens Mourans Pesans. Quand je le tiens Dieux! - Que je suis bien! Que son aspect est agréable! Que je fais cas de ses divins présents! C'est de son sein fécond, c'est de ses heureux flans Que coule ce nectar si doux, si délectable Qui rend tous les esprits, tous les cœurs satisfaits. Cher objet de mes vœux, tu fais toute ma gloire; Tant que mon cœur vivra, de tes charmants bienfaits Il saura conserver la fidèle mémoire. Ma muse à te louer se consacre à jamais. Tantôt dans un caveau, tantôt sous une treille, Ma lyre, de ma voix accompagnant le son, Répètera cent fois cette aimable chanson: Règne sans fin, ma charmante bouteille; Règne sans cesse, mon cher flacon".

3. The 19th Century

During the 19th century, thanks to Victor Hugo and Charles Nodier among others, the text form rediscovered its purpose as a consciously literary activity. In their compositions writing did not strive to be representational as such the art and craft of their writing exploited the medium lending a significant weight to the typography – the use of different types or sizes of glyphs, the text’s position in the page, and so on. In 1829, Hugo published in *Les Orientales* an astonishing text of one hundred twenty rhopalic⁴⁵ verses, entitled “les Djinns”⁴⁶.

Murs, ville
Et port,
Asile
De mort,
Mer grise
Où brise
La brise
Tout dort.

Nodier’s importance as a precursor is evident through his innovations in form and in content. It would be impossible here to discuss even a small fraction of Nodier’s work from these two points of view, let us instead quote his *L'Histoire du Roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* (1830) which represents well his visionary and *revolutionary* writing ideas. According to Christin “habitué à des œuvres plus homogènes, le public devait être assez inévitablement rebuté par l’incohérence narrative, les jeux visuels, le désordre typographique” of this work⁴⁷.

A visible language makes its appearance in this *Histoire*. Nodier introduced into writing a completely new typographic expressivity. The visual representations of the written word – giving the effect of both spectacle and plastic utterance and marking openly the beginning of a quest that electronic poetry – is still uncovering. Moreover, *L'Histoire du Roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* is one of the first examples in the modern era of collaborative work. Nodier collaborated with his illustrator and with the printer. Nowadays

⁴⁵ We call “rhopalic verse” a verse line in which each successive word has more syllables than the one preceding it. Cf. Wiktionary, accessible online at: <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/rhopalic> (accessed, October 22 2010).

⁴⁶ A Djinn is a genie. In Islam, the Djinns were supernatural beings created by Allah. Neither humans nor angels, they form a third class of sentient creatures who inhabit a parallel universe. The Djinns are mentioned frequently in the Koran. There is a Surah entitled Al-Jinn. The Djinns possess free will. Thus, they can be either good or evil. Hugo’s djinns, however, are the incarnation of evil. Among different works, Hugo’s poem inspired a major work for piano and orchestra by Cesar Franck, ‘Les Djinns’ – which is still part of the standard orchestral repertoire, and In 1876, Fauré composes and publishes his work for chorus and piano.

⁴⁷ Anne-Marie Christin, *L’image écrite, op. cit.*, p. 125.

collaboration among poets and artist and/or programmers is very common in electronic poetry⁴⁸.

3.1 Mallarmé and a New “Syntax” of Space

Western poetry after the invention of the printing press has been subject to certain formal rules of page layout. Nodier himself wrote in 1832 that Gutenberg’s invention “a accéléré la civilisation pour la précipiter vers la barbarie, comme l’opium pris a fort dose a accéléré la vie pour la précipiter vers la mort”⁴⁹. Written poetry, however, has always reached for *other/different* prosodic elements in order to reproduce the peculiarity and the characteristics of oral poetry by using for example colours or new compositional forms within the space of the page. After all, the effect that is added by these features of expression (colours, compositional forms and whatnot) is realized by the *graphical* organization of linguistic signs in space and not only by the typography of each sign. Many poets have experimented with the visual potentiality of writing. From Mallarmé’s *Coup des dès*, Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* to the Visual Poetry (20th century), they have been refusing the regularity imposed by typography to take advantage of the run of verse lines, signs, whitespace and, sometimes, also of typographic characters’ *expressivity*.

It was Stephan Mallarmé, with his famous *Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard* published in the international magazine “Cosmopolis” in May 1897, who traced a *différence* in poetic experimentations.

Un coup de dès followed a new “syntax” focusing on the visual dimension of words, using, for instance, capital or tiny letters. Silence was introduced in the reading path by means of the space. The text became immediately an image. For Mallarmé poetry did not represent anything but itself: it is auto-reflexive. Mallarmé looked for “un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue”⁵⁰ and for a new way of expressing it.

⁴⁸ Another important and interesting work of that time was André Gide. *Le Voyage d'Urien* (1893) – the title is a play on words: le Voyage d'Urien, du rien (for nothing). This work was illustrated by the painter Maurice Denis. The book is only 109 pages long including lithographies. These are not mere illustrations however, Denis’ lithographies are part of the creation of the novel. This novel is not a simple illustrated book but as I say a collaborative work between a writer and a painter. *Le Voyage* opens with an illustration instead of a traditional drop capital. Denis defined the ideal illustration as the one “sans exacte correspondance du sujet avec l’écriture”. There is a sort of inherent primal obligation to scan or look over the images before continuing the reading process as reading is a learnt activity whereas simple pattern recognition is not. The lithographies, in this way, are one part of the novel, the text is another one”. Although better known for their works on canvas, artists such as Picasso, Henri Matisse and René Magritte collaborated with poets such as Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Gide and others to pioneer the concept of the artist’s book, in which words and pictures come together in a unique fashion.

⁴⁹ Charles Nodier, “De la perfectibilité de l’homme, et de l’influence de l’imprimerie sur la civilisation”, in *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Renduel, 1932, p. 262.

⁵⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Crise de vers* (extrait), 1897.



FIGURE 23: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897)

The position of the words on the page gives to them a new rhythm in the reading practice. The accentuation of the words does not matter anymore; it is their position that is relevant for the structure and the meaning of the text. How the text is scanned is built out of the space: this is a text to be seen.

Mallarmé's poetry is a like theatre, it is performative. *Un coup des dès* experiments with the potentiality of the written sign: on his page the sign is no longer the pure *phoné's* representation. He proposed a new aesthetic of the page where the writing elements (typographic body) and the page's structure (the space between the syntagms – the white space) reveal new structural meaning. Mallarmé developed a logic of words and of that which is between words and space - a spacing logic. According to Guido Guglielmi with *Un coup de dès* Mallarmé established in 1807 an aesthetic of typography⁵¹.

4. Futurism

XX century avant-gardes wanted to change the idea of Art and the Art itself, and, thus, to reform the reality. Cubism had already started to represent reality as a series of geometrical forms. Symbolism radically rejected prose's style, that is to say the language-communication realism. Rimbaud and Lautremont had looked for a dehumanisation of art. According to Rimbaud: "Je est un autre"⁵².

⁵¹ Guido Guglielmi, "Mallarmé, Marinetti, Apollinaire. Un'estetica tipografica", in Claudio Parmiggiani (ed.), *Alfabeto in Sogno: dal carne figurato alla poesia concreta*, Milano: Edizioni Gabriele Mazzota, 2002, p. 266.

⁵² Letter to Paul Demeny 15 Mai 1871.

Futurism took one step further, connecting the cult of machine – Futurists were fascinated by the rise of industry and the application of new technology – to the art. According to Norbert Lynton, Futurism is in several respects unique among modern art movements⁵³.

It was a 20th century art movement. It was a largely Italian and Russian movement, although it also had adherents in other countries. The Futurist works explores every medium of art, including painting, sculpture, poetry, theatre, music, architecture and even gastronomy⁵⁴. In some ways it is the most radical movement, rejecting all traditions, values and institutions.

The first Futurist exhibition was held in Paris in 1911, but it had originated in Turin in March 1910 by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti who produced the first Futurist manifesto stating what the Futurist artistic philosophy should be: *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909)⁵⁵. At first, his manifesto appeared as a preface to a volume of his poems, published in Milan in January 1909. Anyway, it was its appearance in French on page one of *Le Figaro* on 20 February the same year that gave it the sort of impact.

Futurism got support from the leading avant-garde critic and poet; for instance in September 1913 Apollinaire wrote an essay entitled “The Futurist anti-tradition”, published in the magazine *Lacebra* in Florence. It set out graphically the hates and loves of Futurism and the means whereby the cultural world might be renewed.

Marinetti and Futurism represent a break in art and poetry. Futurists tried to practice a kind of poetics that is utterly a poetics of the present. Its achievements would be “asyntacticism”, the fight against syntax as a constraining force, the typographical revolution, words in freedom, *le tavole parolibere*. They refused the static idea of art – which was still accepted by other avant-gardes, for instance, by Symbolism. Art must be multi-sensorial. Rimbaud has already suggested this idea with *Voyeles* and *Alchimie du verb*.

4.1 The Manifesto of Futurism

We launch from Italy into the world our manifesto of overwhelming and incendiary violence, with which today we found Futurism, because we want to liberate this land from the fetid cancer of professors, archaeologists, guides and antiquaries.⁵⁶

⁵³ Norbert Lynton, “Futurism”, in Nikos Stangos (ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1981, pp. 97-105.

⁵⁴ Futurist were interested in gastronomy, too. They made up the Futurist meals based on the *Manifesto of Futurist Cooking* (1930). There is also a book by Marinetti: *The Futurist Cookbook* (1932).

⁵⁵ Unlike Cubism, which was named by antagonistic critics, Futurists named themselves. Marinetti hesitated between Dynamism, Electricity and Futurism as name for his movement. The alternatives suggest where his interests lay: in technological power. He wants the art to demolish the art and to celebrate the speed and the mechanical energy.

⁵⁶ *Manifesto of Futurism* – English translation accessible online at: <http://proa.org/eng/exhibition-el-universo-futurista-manifiestos.php> (accessed, February 21 2010).

According to Lynton:

Marinetti's vehemence is commensurate with his impatience at Italy's uncompleted national development at the vast burden of grandiose tradition which pressed Italian culture more inhibitingly than in any other country - Italy had contributed next to nothing to the nineteenth-century development.⁵⁷



FIGURE 24: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Irredentismo* (1914)

Marinetti's *Manifesto* - polemic and based on the modern aesthetic principles of a fast, aggressive lifestyle - glorifies danger, war and violence, the love of speed and the wonder of the machine age.

⁵⁷ Norbert Lynton, "Futurism", in Nikos Stangos (ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art, op.cit.*, p. 98.

4.1.1 Destruction of Syntax and Words-in-Freedom

Futurists wanted to destroy the syntax. Building sentence was a waste of time according to them. Punctuation and the right adjectives would mean nothing. They despised subtleties and nuances of language. The poet should be telegraphical:

with the same economical speed that the telegraph imposes [...] (especially in war) [...] Between poet and audience, in fact, the same rapport exists as between two old friends. They can make themselves understood with half a word, a gesture, a glance. So the poet's imagination must weave together distant things with no connecting strings, by means of essential free words. (Marinetti, 1912)

For example they suggested using the infinitive verbs since, according to Marinetti it constituted the very speed of the style and the infinitive in itself denied the existence of the sentence. They also declared the death of free verse; free verse was destined to be replaced by *words-in-freedom*.



FIGURE 25: Francesco Cangiullo, *Poesia pentagrammata* (1923)

They also promoted onomatopoeia and mathematical and musical symbols as a typographical revolution (see figures 24 and 25): “on the same page we will use three or four colours of ink, or even twenty different typefaces if necessary” (Marinetti, 1912). Finally, they made a free use of expressive orthography: the *deformation* of words.

However, Futurism poetry has still a verbal dimension. They did not want to create a new literature but got out from the academic idea of literature. They wanted to create a new language able to pass through art and literature. Futurism movement was an art movement that put idea before style – also in this sense it seems to be related to electronic poetry - thus challenging not only the traditional artistic values but also the aesthetic ambitions of most avant-garde movements.

Futurism influence was of fundamental and long importance. Because Futurism was deeply involved in Cubism, its innovations and activity were strictly connected with Cubism innovations and activity too.

4.2 Cubo-Futurism

Cubo-futurist “Hylaea’s”⁵⁸ members ideated their own idea of poetry and art. The Cubo-Futurism was a synthesis between two major avant-garde movements: the French Cubism and the Italian Futurism combined with Neo-Primitivism. Cubo-Futurism was a reinterpretation of Cubism idea of reality joined to Futurism proposals, in their opinion Cubo-Futurism should be a movement preparing for the future.

The first official manifesto of Cubo-Futurism appeared in 1912 with “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” in which the aesthetic necessary for the Hylaeian primordial future was first prefigured. The manifesto called for new vocabulary, one that did not dispense the “good taste” and “common sense” of the time, but something new, something the Cubo-Futurists called, the “selfsufficient word.”

They believe that in the beginning, language was pure and each word corresponded to its meaning; the letters looked like what they represented and the sounds expressed the natural reaction one would have upon encountering a particular object or emotion. Thus, they suggested finding significance in the forms of letters in the re-arrangement of text on the page, and in the details of typography. In their idea the poet should arrange words in the poems like the sculptor arranges colours and lines on the canvas. Each word has a displaced relationship to what it represents. Although this idea was embedded in the minds of Cubo-Futurists, only two of the movement’s main members sought to actively redefine the language. The members were Velimir Khlebnikov and

⁵⁸ A group of Russian poets and artists who adopted the principles of Marinetti’s *Manifesto*.

Alexei Kruchenykh. They were interested in the linguistic construction of writing and in the deception of visual experience⁵⁹.



FIGURE 26: Velimir Khlebnikov, *Tango with Cows* (1914)

Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh invented *zaum* or *transreason*, which would be used to create a language that would correspond precisely to the objects and emotions it sought to express. Khlebnikov was fascinated by typography, or rather, the failure of typography to link the images of the letters to any real concept. He constructed a system of hieroglyphs for which each letter had a particular meaning.

He was also interested in the relationship between letter and sound. In his essay *A Checklist: The Alphabet of the Mind* (1916), Khlebnikov connected image and meaning to sound. His most famous work *Incantation of Laughter* (1908-9) was composed of just variations of the word “laugh” and nothing else, repeated over and over again. The effect is that the reader notices the word, not its meaning; meaning, sound, and the visual representation of the word have no relationship.

5. Apollinaire and the Calligrams

Calligrams, as we have seen, are a form of poetry well known during different centuries. However, the most famous calligrams that we know are created by G. Apollinaire, who in 1918 called *Calligrammes* a collection of his poems. At the

⁵⁹ Cf. Jennifer Wilson, “Transrational Language: A Revolution in Semiotics Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's Experiments with Cubo-Futurism”, *The Birch Fall* 2005, accessible online at: <http://thebirchonline.org/fall05/semiotics.html> (accessed, July 15 2009).

beginning he thought of calling them “idéogrammes lyriques”. These poems, in fact, allow to free from the constraints of the linear reading thank to the instantaneous perception of the image. According to Jérôme Peignot Apollinaire wanted to “assurer une communication, non plus seulement au niveau du langage mais de l'être entier”⁶⁰.

Apollinaire defined his position within and with respect to Futurism. In it he revealed himself as a poet of order and also as a poet of a(n) [r]evolution. He composed differing calligrams. On the one hand, for instance, we find calligrams such as “Il pleut” (1916), which fits perfectly into the ancient tradition of technopaegnia and of the *carmina figurata* (figure 27).

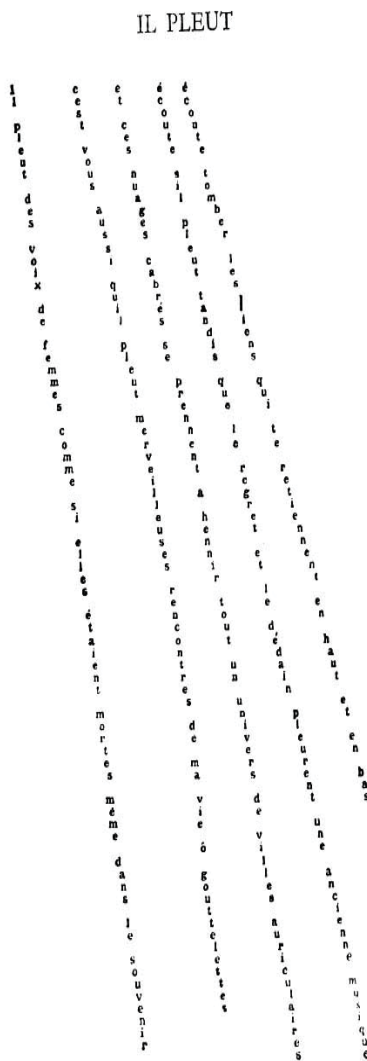


FIGURE 27: G. Apollinaire, *Il pleut*

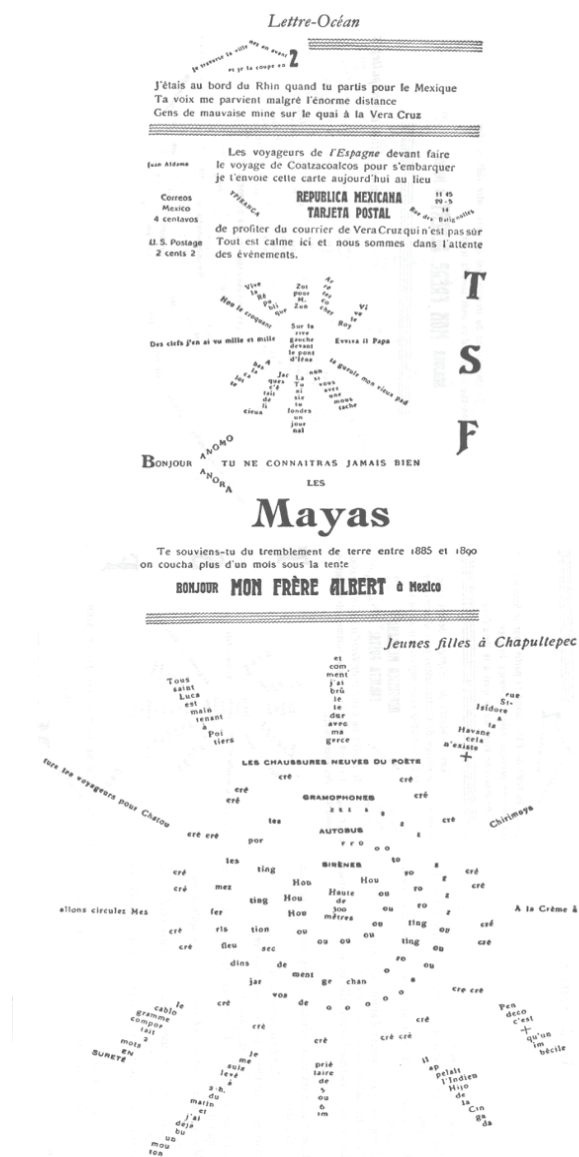


FIGURE 28: G. Apollinaire, *Lettre-Océan*

⁶⁰ Jérôme Peignot, *Du calligramme*, Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1978, p.25.

This poem is composed by linear verses which are arranged from top to bottom on lines that are slightly slanting in order to contribute to the effect of rain. Here the iconism is used to reinforce the sense of the text. Besides this, it functions as an amusement as well. However, the linearity of the reading practice is still evident. On the other hand we find the “Lettre-Océan” (1914), which is a good example of the organization of space on the page (figure 28).

“Il pleut” proposes still a linear direction of writing, but “Lettre-Océan” rearranges words on the page support highlighting some of them, but not giving any indication to catch the reading path. “Lettre-Océan” reminds of *tavoleparole libere* by Marinetti. The technique is a Futurist technique. There is the same phenomenon of spinning the meaning of the text into the space. The linguistic structure is truncated; each line brings a fragmented meaning like the futurist manifesto suggests.

Apollinaire’s calligrams are a bridge from the past to the future: from the carmina figurata to words in freedom and with him the writing has started to become an art of the space.

6. Dada Movement

Dadaism or Dada⁶¹ was a cultural movement, born during the World War I in Switzerland interested in visual art as well as in literature - mainly poetry, theatre and graphic design. Early in February 1916 Hugo Ball⁶² founded in Zurich the “Cabaret Voltaire” in a bar called the “Meierei”. On July 14 the same year at the first public soiree at the cabaret Hugo Ball recited the first manifesto. Two years later in 1918, Tristan Tzara wrote a Dada manifesto, which is considered one of the most important of the Dada writings.

Although it had been a very active movement spreading around the world, Dada had a short life since it declined at the beginning of the 1920's, and ended in 1922, but most of the members moved into Surrealism where they transferred the “shocking and bewildering” aspects of Dadaism.

Dadaist works are characterized by a deliberate irrationality and the rejection of the prevailing standards of art. According to its members Dada was not art; it was anti-art. Dada movement ignored aesthetics principles. Dada did not want to signify anything: if art is to have at least an implicit or latent message, Dada sought to have no meaning—interpretation. Dada’s meaning is dependent entirely on the viewer, for them it was the viewer who made art - “C’est le regardeur qui fait l’oeuvre” (Duchamp). Dada works force the observer to question on the meaning of their works.

Being veterans of World War I, many members were disillusioned by life and by art too. They did not believe in sensibility, they did not want to create a sensitive art. Dada’s art is cynical, ironic and unpredictable. Unpredictability

⁶¹ According to their members, Dada should not be called “Dadaism” movement.

⁶² Hugo Ball was a German poet and philosopher, refugee in Switzerland from the world-war I.

and random are very important aspects of their art. The meaning of Dada's art is apparently non-sense and confusion, distinctive elements of human being. They wanted to shock the audience; they wanted the audience to reconsider defined aesthetic and social value, so they often preferred to use incomprehensible artistic and literary methods. Poems comprised of disorganized words, paintings made of litter, a copy of Mona Lisa adorned with moustache, all belongs to their deliberately degraded, empty and artistically meaningless art. On the other hand they show the ludic aspect of art and poetry (the same ludic aspect appears to be important also in electronic poetry).

Art itself is depended on the society; the artists and the poets are *produced* by the bourgeoisie. Dada revolted against both the bourgeois society and the bourgeois art. Tzara, for instance, wanted to destroy the taste of literature by writing. However, Dadaists wanted to generate art, a new kind of art. In order to do it, they used novel materials and revolutionary techniques to create their art, which the most famous is probably the collage.

6.1 Dada Poetry

Dadaist poetry was deeply anti-intellectual. Their poetry was against a world that, according to them, man's intelligence had failed to control.

Dada poetry was called by Arp "automatic poetry" (Arp, 1938), but more than "automatic" in the meaning of "automatic writing" according to Surrealism, the poetry of Dada was the art of randomness. In this idea of random Dada can be seen as a precursor of a typology of electronic poetry - generative poetry, as we will see in chapter 7.

Writing as life is "absurd", so poetry should produce non-sense. Tzara, for instance, would begin a poem by cutting words out of some "old" poem (by Shakespeare, for example), shaking the words up in a hat, and reading them aloud as he pulling the bits of paper out of the hat and thereby creating a "new" poem⁶³.

Dada poetry sought to reflect a world where, as Tzara stated "words should not be believed" (Tzara, 1959). According to Dadaists "though is produced in the mouth" (1930) thus all meaning are valid. For instance, Tzara's *Twenty-five poems* (1918) uses Africans syllables and words, some of them taken from the journal *Anthropos*. As for the structure of Dada poetry, the syntax is basic, substantive are usually modified by adjectives, and verbs are often verbs of motions.

⁶³ Tristan Tzara's instructions for how to make a Dada poem.
 "Pour faire un poème dadaïste. Prenez un journal. Prenez des ciseaux. Choisissez dans ce journal un article ayant la longueur que vous comptez donner à votre poème. Découpez l'article. Découpez ensuite avec soin chacun des mots qui forment cet article et mettez-les dans un sac. Agitez doucement. Sortez ensuite chaque coupure l'une après l'autre. Copiez consciencieusement dans l'ordre où elles ont quitté le sac. Le poème vous ressemblera". (*Manifeste sur l'amour faible et l'amour amer*, 1920)

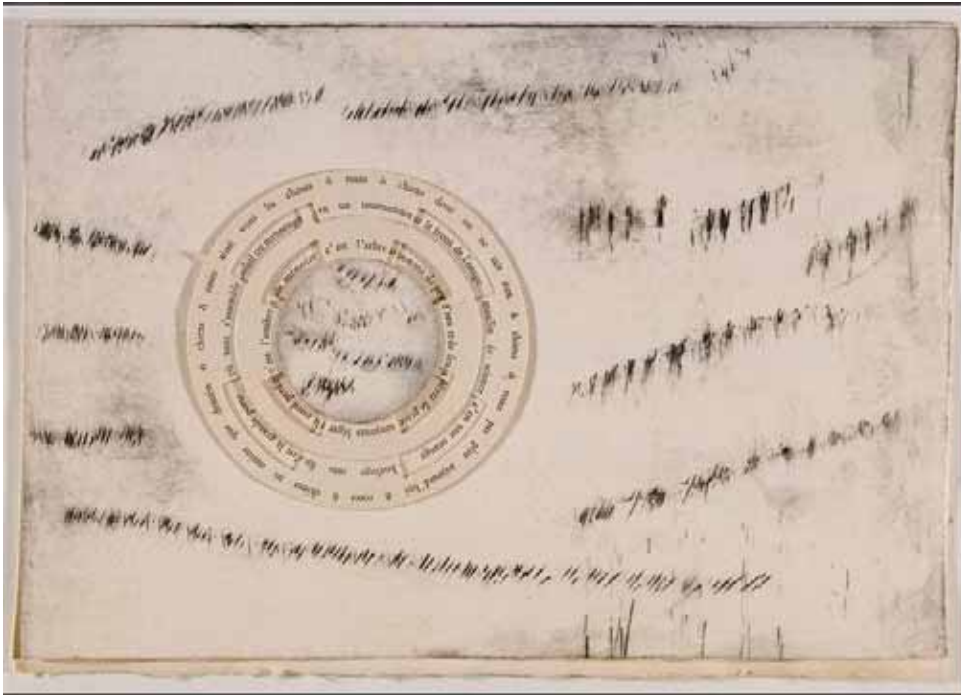


FIGURE 29: Tristan Tzara and Pablo Picasso, *La rose et le chien* (1958)

However, Dada poetry went further. According to John Wall and Dafydd Jones the aspect of Dada poetry can be looked at in terms of “the corporeal dimension of rhythms (as opposed to the purely linguistic understanding of formal rhythms such as meter), the importance of contradiction, paradox, nonsense, delirium, body image and the performativity of body – body as a sign”⁶⁴. Dada poetry, thus, was a whole.

7. Surrealism

Surrealism was developed in the years 1923-24 by a group of writers including Paul Éluard, Luis Aragon and particularly André Breton, who is considered the father of the movement. The Surrealist circle was made up of many of the great artists of the 20th century, such as Marx Ernst, Giorgio De Chirico, Man Ray, Joan Miro, René Magritte, and Salvador Dali.

Surrealism was built on the ruins of Dada⁶⁵. Many of Dada’s members, as said, moved to Surrealism bringing their previous experiences and their idea of art with them. As Dawn Ades notes the relationship between Dada and Surrealism is complicated because in many ways they are so similar⁶⁶. From a political point of view, Surrealism inherited the bourgeoisie as its enemy, and at least in theory it continued the attack on traditional forms of art. According to

⁶⁴ John Wall and Dafydd Jones, “The Body of the Voice: Corporeal Poetics in Dada”, in Dafydd Jones (ed.), *Dada Culture: Critical Texts on the Avant-garde*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006, p. 66.

⁶⁵ It was Breton himself that put an end to Dada by organizing a series of demoralizing events, starting from 1921.

⁶⁶ Dawn Ades, “Dada and Surrealism”, in Nikos Stangos (ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

Roughton “Surrealist works, while not calling directly for revolutionary action, (like Dada did) can be classed as revolutionary in so far as it can break down irrational bourgeois-taught prejudices, thus preparing the mental ground for positive revolutionary thought and action”⁶⁷. The biggest difference between Dada and Surrealism lays in the framework of theory that Surrealism built in place of Dada’s anarchism, otherwise, according to Arp Surrealists “rebellious attitude to ‘art’ and their direct attitude to life is wise like Dada”⁶⁸.

Surrealism was also connected in some elements to the 19th-century mystical Symbolist movement (Symbolism was a movement in which art became infused with an exaggerated sensitivity and a spooky mysticism), but whilst also being deeply influenced by the psychoanalytic work of Freud and Jung.

In 1924 The Bureau of Surrealist Research was established, Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto*⁶⁹ was published and the first issue of the Surrealist review, “La Révolution Surréaliste”, appeared. Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto* was related to poetry and art but also to life in general. To speak of the techniques of Surrealist poetry is necessarily to speak of the theory behind their practice, a theory that is unique in literature because it transcends literature and art altogether and invades the domains of philosophy, politics, and even psychology. In fact, as we will see, Surrealism is essentially a technique and an inquiry utilizing that technique as a key to unlock the limitless within the human mind, affecting an essentially spiritual liberation.

Surrealists viewed tradition as drastically limiting thought and imagination. Moreover logic was perceived as a barrier for the creation act - and thus experience, consciousness, and behavior.

In his *Manifesto*, Breton discussed “the newspaper poem” as a Surrealist activity. However, according to Ades “while Surrealism is to organize these ideas into a set of rules and principles, in Dada they are only part of a great outburst of activity all of which is aimed at provoking the public, destroying traditional notion of good taste, and liberation from the constrictions of reality and materialism”⁷⁰.

7.1 Breton’s Manifesto and Automatic Writing.

Breton’s *Manifesto* was a sort of patchwork of ideas, focusing also on the definition of Surrealism as automatism. A quite long section was devoted to dream, which Freud had revealed to be the direct expression of the unconscious mind, when the conscious mind relaxes its control during sleep. However, it would be a mistake, to think that despite its apparent origins in

⁶⁷ Roger Roughton, *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, Nos 4-5, August-September, 1936, p. 74.

⁶⁸ Hans Arp, letter M. Brzekowski, 1927, in *L’Art contemporain*, no. 3, 1930.

⁶⁹ Breton’s *Second Manifesto* (1929) will push Surrealism further, focusing deeper on policy and linking the movement to the communist ideas.

⁷⁰ Dawn Ades, “Dada and Surrealism”, in Nikos Stangos (ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

psychoanalytical theory a desire of scientific investigation presided over the early years of Surrealism. It was mostly the contrary: the use Surrealists made of techniques of free association and dream were to take advantage of imagination as its primitive state⁷¹.

In his Manifesto Breton suggested the following writing technique:

[a]fter you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that lead to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously [...].Go on as long as you like. Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur. [...] Following a word the origin of which seems suspicious to you, place any letter whatsoever, the letter "l" for example, always the letter "l," and bring the arbitrary back by making this letter the first of the following word.⁷²

According to Breton:

although in the purest version of automatism nothing is 'corrected' or re-written the unexpected material produced by this method can be used as the basis for further composition. What is crucial is the un-premeditated free-association that creates the basic text.⁷³

The flow of ideas and automatic writing are very central in the e-poetry theory and production even though in electronic poetry the machine has a central role (as we will see in chapter 7). The automatic writing technique, according to Breton, intended to express, verbally, in writing, the real process of thoughts. Moreover, Breton defined automatic writing as a "Surrealist game", and also this perception of writing and creation as a game seems to be one of the main thoughts in electronic poetry.

According to Bataille, "automatic writing" removes literature from "the vanity of personal advantage"⁷⁴. However, Bataille criticized Surrealism and especially André Breton, and in fact, in 1929, he published an anti-surrealist review, "Documents", arguing that with Breton Surrealism betrayed the reality "dans son immédiateté pour un surréel rêvé sur la base d'une élévation d'esprit"⁷⁵.

According to Surrealists, Surrealist poetry is exempt from aesthetic judgment. There is the need for another kind of aesthetic for it to be *understood* – which seems to be true also for electronic poetry. Breton stated that

⁷¹ Tristan Tzara thought that Freud's idea to cure men with mental and emotional disorders in order to enable them to take their place in society was a state of bourgeois normality viewpoint.

⁷² André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1924, accessible online at: <http://www.opusfour.com/breton.html#manifesto> (accessed, February 5 2009).

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ Georges Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976, p. 88.

⁷⁵ Vincent Teixeira, *Georges Bataille, La part de l'art (la peinture du non-savoir)*, Paris : L'Hammatant, 1997, p. 108.

“language has been given to man so that he may make surrealist use of it”⁷⁶. Although it is through plastic arts that Surrealism became known to the wider public, Surrealisms main interests were poetry, philosophy and politics. In 1931 Breton, for instance, produced an unusual volume *L'immaculée conception* where he tried to reproduce the actual manifestation of different forms of mental disorders⁷⁷. In *L'immaculée conception* Breton and Éluard experimented with the ways in which language itself can generate poetry. With automatic writing Surrealism purported to explore the mechanism of imagination.

Paul Éluard's *La Capitale de la douleur* is one of the most famous Surrealist pieces and, after the publication, made him the most respected of Surrealist poets.

Turns without reflections to the curves without smiles of shadows with moustaches, registers the murmurs of speed, the miniscule terror, searches under some cold cinders for the smallest birds, those which never close their wings, resist the wind.⁷⁸

According to Katharine Conley “for Breton and Éluard, automatic texts mediate between their conscious selves and their more unconscious being”⁷⁹. Poetic language is capable of generating its own momentum, particularly in the automatic writing process. In 1941 Breton felt the need to explain better the concept of automatic writing:

I maintain that graphic as well as verbal automatism [...] is the only mode of expression which fully satisfies the eye or ear by achieving *rhythmic unity* (just as recognizable in the automatic drawing or text as in the melody of the nest) [...] And I agree that automatism can enter into composition with certain premeditated intentions; but there is a great risk of departing from surrealism if the automatism ceases to flow *underground*. A work cannot be considered surrealist unless the artist strains to reach the total psychological scope of which consciousness is only a small part. Freud has shown that there prevails at this “unfathomable” depth a total absence of contradiction, a new mobility of emotional blocks caused by repressions, timelessness and substitution of psychic reality for external reality [...] Automatism leads straight to this region”.⁸⁰

As noted, the claims that Breton made for automatism were exaggerated here because he was attempting to re-establish it at the expense of “the other route offered to Surrealism, the so-called *trompe l'oeil* fixing of dream images”⁸¹, which according to him had been abused by Dali⁸² and could have discredit

⁷⁶ André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, *op. cit.*.

⁷⁷ Éluard cooperated in 1930 with Breton to write *L'immaculée conception* which are a series of poems in prose.

⁷⁸ Paul Éluard, “Arp”, in *Capital de la douleur*, (1926) translated by Amy Levin, in Amy Levin and Johannes Beilharz (eds.), *A Sampling of French Surrealist Poetry in English Translation*, originally appeared in *Eat it Alive*, University of Colorado at Boulder Creative Writing Program, Volume 3, Issue 5, December 1981, accessible online at: <http://www.jbeilharz.de/surrealism/surrealism.html> (accessed, November 27 2008).

⁷⁹ Katherine Conley, *Automatic woman: the representation of woman in surrealism*, Nebraska University Press, 1996, p. 47.

⁸⁰ André Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*. Paris: Gallimard, 1965, En. tr. *Surrealism and Painting*, London: MacDonald and Company, Ltd., 1972, p. 68.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸² Automatic drawing is very popular among Surrealist painters.

Surrealism. After 43 years, in 1966, Breton marked the end of surrealism as an organized movement⁸³.

8. Lettrism

Lettrism was founded in Paris in mid-40s by Isidore Isou, and at the beginning Isou was the only member of the movement⁸⁴. Isou “discovered” Lettrist poetry by misreading Keyserling⁸⁵. Keyserling had affirmed that the poet dilates terms. In Rumanian “vocale” can be confused with “vowel” thus Isous, mixing up “vocale” with “vowel”, stated that “the poet dilates the *vowels*” (instead of “the poet dilates the vocable”).

Even though Isou tried to establish a French background for his movement, Lettrism derived from Italian Futurism – *tavole parolelibere*, Russian Futurism – *zaum*, exploration of transrational language, and from Dada Poetry – especially with regards to its experiments with optophonetic. Isous’ famous quote “Je préfère mon nouveau dégoût à l'ancien goût dégoûtant” (I'd rather have my new distaste than the old distasteful taste) highlights how this avant-garde focused on making a new way for creating and a new aesthetic sense. But in order to do it they wanted to explore just the potentialities of letters.

Lettrists have been particularly skilled at the production of Manifestos, which were created with the same tone as Dada’s Manifestos. Like Dada, Lettrism was a violently antagonist movement that attempted to redefine the nature and function of the linguistic act.

Lettrism strived to give literature a new concept, consequently the Lettrist poet worked in a variety of forms including sound as well as graphic arts involving letters. Lettrism should have served as the fulcrum point for surpassing the whole Western tradition. According to Lettrists, language should be reduced to its atomic form, that is to say the letter. They focused on the level of the letter in order to create an experiential language that was to be the basis of their new culture.

The visual signs used in Lettrist works, however, are not merely letters in the sense of the elements of the alphabetic system, but also included calligraphed marks, glyphic signs with esoteric meanings, rebus-like poetic compositions using graphic elements; altogether a wide vocabulary of visual signs.

⁸³ Self-labelled surrealist groups continue to exist, however, and they assert that surrealism remains an active movement today. In addition, Surrealism, as a prominent critique of rationalism and capitalism, and a theory of integrated aesthetics and ethics has influence on later movements - Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism as well as in cinema and commercial illustration. - including many aspects of postmodernism.

⁸⁴ Isidore Isou - born Ioan-Isidor Goldstein – was a Romanian refugee recently arrived in Paris when he wrote the first Lettrist Manifesto.

⁸⁵ Hermann Graf Keyserling (1880-1946) philosopher.

Legibility is not a principal feature of Lettrist works. Indeed Lettrist pieces are mostly *illegible*, depending on different strategies of encoding and translation from one set of signs to another. Visual form is the primary mode of poetic production in Lettrist's creation. Some of e-poetries that I will analyse in chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 seem to be created focusing more on the visual form of the text than on the content of it. Lettrism, however, became closed into its visual form unable to move beyond the signs to meanings.

Another characteristic of the Lettrist movement is that they wished to make poetry more popular; in this respect Lettrism was a sort of response to Breton's Surrealism. They built their poetry on new linguistic experiments in order to erase the distinction between literature as an institution and the rest of the society.



FIGURE 30: I. Isou, *The God's Diaries* (1950)

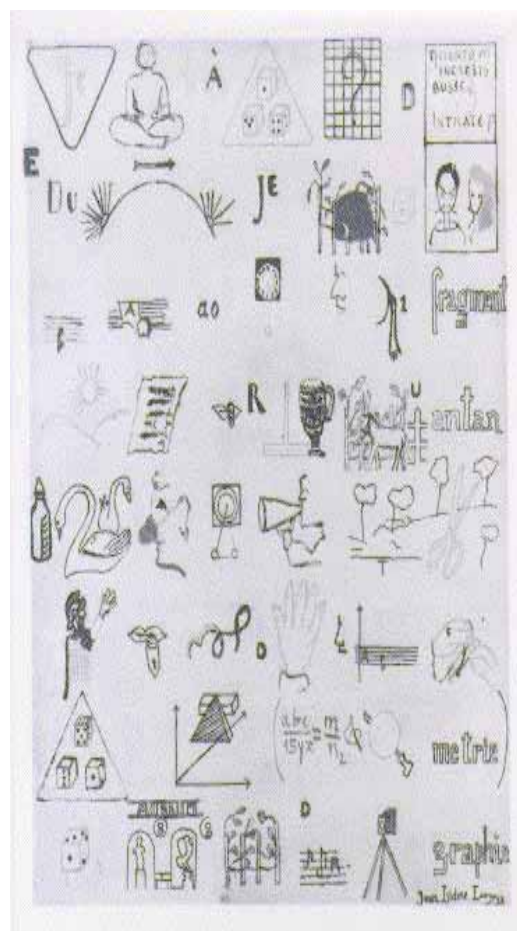


FIGURE 31: I. Isou, *Les Nombres* (1952)

An important element for Lettrist experimentation was the 'sound of language'. Some of the Lettrist poets (as had done some of the Dadaists before them and as would some of the concrete poets) concentrated their work on so-called 'sound poetry' combining letters in various fashions according to their phonetic values. *Lexique Des Lettres Nouvelles* – by I. Isou, Maurice Lemaitre, F. Dufrene, Roland Sabatier, i.a. - for example, is a sonic alphabet of a 130 or so sounds from which a new natural language is to come up and which they should compose with.

Isou along with Maurice Lemaitre, worked out a style that reminds of traditional, common-practice' music, sometimes even with staves, bar lines, and dynamic markings. According to Isou, Lettrism was an introduction “à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique” (*Manifesto of Lettrisme*, 1942). Another peculiarity of Lettrist poetry is that it was also often performed by choral groups.

By the mid-50s various artists involved with Lettrism event on to establish a new movement they called Situationism⁸⁶. However, the Lettrist movement has influenced other movements and continues today, mostly in the form of hypergraphical works and paintings.

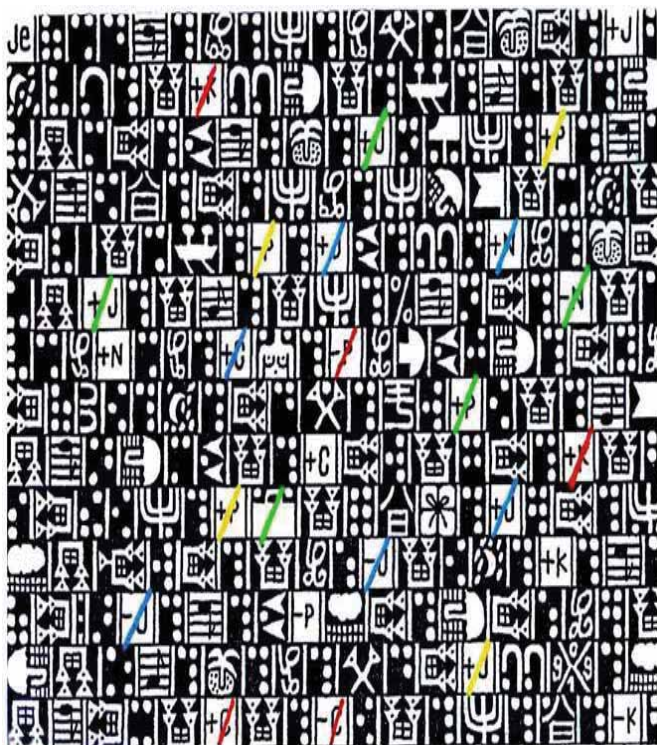


FIGURE 32: Roland Sabatier, *Two Works* (1998)

9. Fluxus

Fluxus movement started in the 1950s as an international community of artists, architects, designers, and composers productive in the visual arts and music as well as literature, urban planning, architecture, and design. In its early days Fluxus artists had been active in Europe (especially in Germany), and Japan as well as in the United States but then the movement became a workshop of ideas and a laboratory for artistic experimentation also in other countries. The word

⁸⁶ Situationism is an international political and artistic movement of the 1950s and 1960s which sought to fuse poetry and music and transform the urban landscape. At first, they were principally concerned with the “suppression of art”, that is to say, they wished like the Dadaists, the Surrealists and the Lettrists before them to overturn the categorization of art and culture as separate activities and to transform the activities into part of everyday life.

fluxus is a term taken from Latin meaning “to flow”. The movement is named and loosely organized by Jurgis Maciunas, a Lithuanian-born American artist.

Fluxus traced its beginnings to John Cage's 1957 to 1959 Experimental Composition classes at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Marcel Duchamp and Allan Kaprow (who is credited as the creator of the first “happenings”) are considered to be influential to Fluxus as well.

Fluxus is often described as an *intermedia*, a word coined by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins in a famous 1966 essay. A chart he made in 1995 diagrams the interactions between various sorts of intermedia (figure 33). According to him, Fluxus artists were to work in the spaces in which different media intersect.

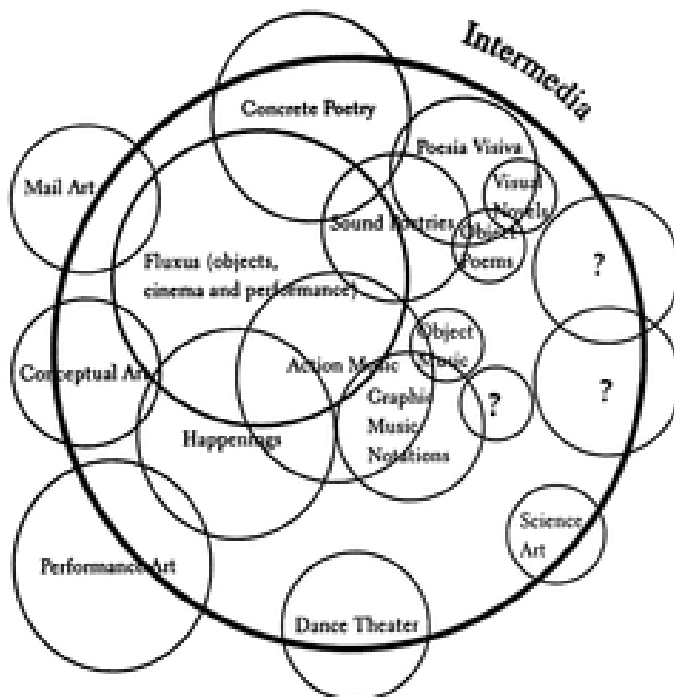


FIGURE 33: Intermedia Chart by Dick Higgins

Fluxus is often considered as the most radical and experimental art movement of the 1960s. It has challenged conventional thinking on art and culture for over four decades, having a central role in the birth of such key contemporary art forms as concept art and installation, performance art, and video art.

Fluxus encouraged doing oneself aesthetic and valued simplicity over complexity. According to Maciunas “[Fluxus is] a way of doing things very informally, a sort of joke group”⁸⁷. Like Dada before it, Fluxus included a strong current of anti-commercialism and an anti-art sensibility, disparaging the conventional market-driven art world in favour of an artist-centred creative practice. Fluxus artists worked with whatever materials were at hand, and they often collaborated in the creation process with their colleagues. Outsourcing a part of the creative process to commercial fabricators was not usually part of Fluxus practice.

⁸⁷ George Maciunas quoted in Owen Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, San Diego: San Diego University Press, 1998, p. 227.

As we have seen in section 2 of this chapter, poetry has historically been associated with the physical sense of hearing. It has been mostly thought of as an auditory art, unlike painting or drawing which have always been thought of as visual arts. Throughout this chapter I have tried to highlight some of the most important pieces of art which interconnect an auditory and graphic art with the painting and drawing practice. We have seen especially how the last century avant-gardes have pushed further the experimentations between poetry and visual art, but Fluxus not only lays on the intersection of media but also does it in a different tempo: *hic et nunc*. In fact, Fluxus poetry was normally created during a performance, an essential difference with, for instance, visual poetry.

According to Fluxus artist Allan Revich Fluxus is:

- An attitude. It is not a movement or a style.
- Intermedia. Fluxus creators like to see what happens when different media intersect.
- Fluxus creators like to mix things up. They use found and everyday objects, sound, images and texts to create new combinations of object, sound, images and texts.
- Fluxus should be simple. The art is small, the texts are short, and the performances are brief.
- Fluxus should be fun. If it isn't fun it isn't Fluxus⁸⁸.

9.1 Fluxus, the Computer and the Internet

While there was not a large Fluxus artist community in any single urban center, the rise of the Internet in the 1990s has enabled a vibrant Fluxus community to thrive online in virtual space. Some of the original artists from the 1960s and 1970s have remained active in online communities such as the Fluxlist, and other artists, writers, musicians, and performers have joined them in cyberspace. Fluxus artists also continue to meet in cities around the world to collaborate and communicate in "real-time" and physical spaces. Litsa Spathi⁸⁹ is one of them; she has developed the concept of Fluxus Poetry where the performance herself creates the result - a Fluxus Poem. Adding the computer as a former medium a new result is generated after each performance.

In Fluxus poetry, everyday actions are framed as minimalistic performances. Fluxus poetry creates a diverse experimental framework, particularly the dissolution of boundaries, such as for instance the distinction between subject and object on which a great part of Western philosophy has been based.

⁸⁸ Allan Revich, *Fluxus Vision*, USA: Lulu.com, 2007, p. 2.

⁸⁹ Litsa Spathi with Ruud Janssen runs the Fluxus Heidelberg Center, which is located in Heidelberg, Germany, web site at: <http://www.fluxusheidelberg.org/index.html> (accessed, March 20 2010).

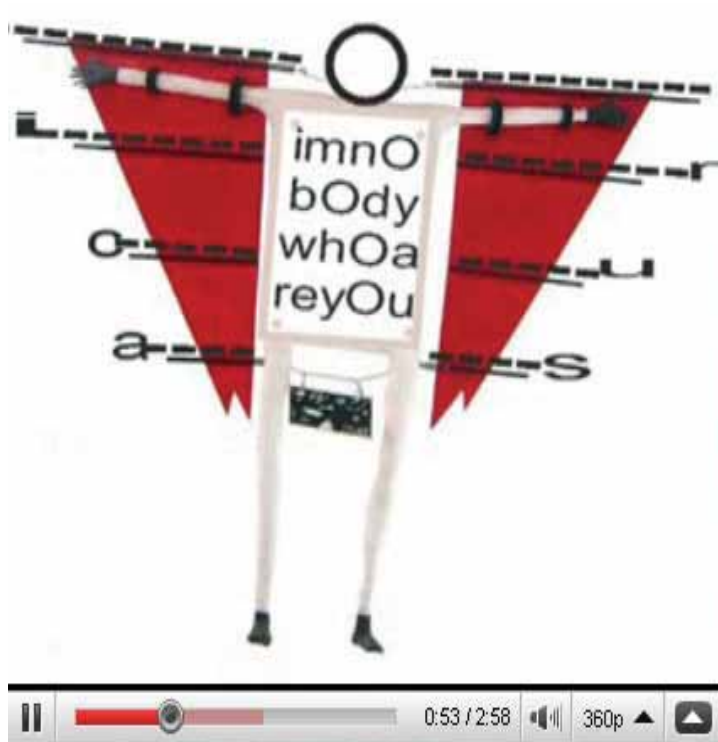


FIGURE 34: Lisa Spathi, *Icarus Poetry* (2008)

Futurists first and then Dadaists already explored the relationship between poetry and sounds, using text to represent sounds by playing with syllabic sensations. John Cage pointed out that music consists of two basic elements: sound waves and human perception of sound waves. Fluxus poets began to experiment with moving texts around on the printed page. They attempted to push against the boundaries where media intersect each other (which is also happening in electronic poetry). With Fluxus works the poem removes itself off from the page and becomes a performance, a process-poem⁹⁰.

9.2 Fluxus and Mail Art

Fluxus is often considered the starting point of Mail-Art. Often Fluxus artists also create Mail-Art. Mail-Art or Postal Art is an international network of artists created in the 60's, which uses the postal system as a medium. Ray Edward Johnson is considered the "Founding Father of Mail-Art"⁹¹.

⁹⁰ *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (co-eds.), New Jersey, Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁹¹ In 1962, Ray Johnson created the *New York Correspondance School*, bringing together artists of varying disciplines and styles, and where Johnson himself organized encounters and performances. A letter became a bearer of messages, an object of inspiration and finally, a collective work of art, a gift that requested the active participation of the recipient. In March '68, artists Robert Filliou and George Brecht emerged from a "sort of workshop" and "international center of permanent creation" in the south of France called *La Cedille qui Sourit* and announced they had developed the concept of the *Fête Permanente* or *Eternal Network*, and they announced their intentions and sent it to their numerous correspondents.

Mail-Art has the aim of creating possibilities for the direct exchange of art, ideas and information between artists in different countries. Mail-Artists' works are exchanged in the form of illustrated letters, decorated or illustrated envelopes, postcards, artistamps and even three dimensional objects. One theme in mail art is that of commerce-free exchange; Mail-Artists want to avoid the art system - as gallery or the idea of exclusivity of art. Anyone who wants to participate in Mail-Arts creation can but the movement is defined as "senders receive", meaning that one must not expect Mail-Art to be sent to oneself unless one is also actively participating in the movement. It is a kind of non-professional art (unlike Fluxus) and in Mail-Art it is common use to accept all works for Mail-Art projects.

In Mail-Art, communication in itself is considered as an art form, maybe even the most important. It generally works this way: a theme is chosen for an exhibition and an invitation is sent out. There are no limitations regarding techniques, materials, or methods- mail-artists have always experimented with different art forms; collages, stamps, post cards, 'objects d'art', audio, video etc. The only criterion to participate is that the work is newly made, is connected with the theme of the exhibition and is mailable.

The arrival of the Internet on the scene has increased accessibility to this trend and brought it an agility previously unimaginable. What was once a limited group of people, who sent each other ideas and small works of art by post, has grown today to the point where thousands of groups are involved in a broad-based and subversive cultural movement. As an open network, mail-art and e-mail-art offer limitless possibilities.

10. The Visual and Concrete Poetry

There are some kinds of poetry which have traversed last century and whose many features are found in electronic poetry. Probably the most manifest linkages between last century avant-gardes experimentations and electronic poetry are evident in concrete and visual poetry, and sound poetry.

Visual and concrete poetry are those which implement visual meaning of varied nature, plastics or iconic. Visual Poetry has a long tradition, as we have seen throughout this chapter. However, in this section "Visual Poetry" is referred to that avant-garde movement which comes from all those literary and artistic experiments performed in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960s, the image appeared in the poem: photographs, advertising image, icon... and brought there the unverifiable character of its polysemia. It was the starting point of a "pop poetic culture" linked to Andy Warhol.

During the first half of the fifties and throughout the following decade, the verbal-visual studies of so-called second avant-gardes were marked by some crucial moments, among them:

- the *rediscovery* of Duchamp by John Cage;
- the ability of the Lettrism to overcome the dada-surrealist positions;

- visual-word experience started within Fluxus with Dick Higgins, Emmett Williams, Daniel Spoerri, Wolf Vostell, George Brecht, and others;
- the advancing in the international artistic world of Concrete and Sound Poetry, represented among others by Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, Eugen Gomringer, Joan Brossa, Adriano Spatola, Mirella Bentivoglio, Elisabetta Gut, Patrizia Vicinelli, Ladislav Novak, Jiri Valoch, Kitasato Katu, Toshihiko, Shimizu;
- the critical and poetic experiments by Emilio Villa⁹².

It is in 1944 that the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer invented, with some friends, the so-called “visual poetry”. The first visual collection of poems was published in 1953 by Gomringer. The title of the collection was *Die Konstellationen* (see figure 35) and Gomringer pointed out that it was the positioning of the word on the page that was of more importance than the meaning of the word itself. In that same year, in Sweden, Oyvind Fahlstrom wrote a Concrete Poetry Manifesto, however he apparently had no knowledge of Gomringer’s work. In the same years, in Brazil the “Noigrandes” published *Poetamenos* experimenting poetry as a visual medium. Finally, in 1956 Pignatari invented the term of *Poesia Concreta*.

It was a time of great co-incidence, but it also showed a global desire to progress beyond traditional linear representation and start manipulating the very substances out of which art is made.

Visual Poetry can be defined as poetry that is meant to be seen. It is poetry in which the visual arrangement of text, images and symbols is important in conveying the intended effect of the work.

Visual poetry is deeply influenced by Fluxus. As said, Fluxus is an intermedia, it makes interacting different media blurring the distinction among them; visual poetry blurs the distinction between art and text putting together two different semiotic spheres.

There are two kinds of visual poetry:

- One, coming from the “tavole parolibere” of the futurist avant-gardes, the typographical character uses of letters (the materiality of the significant) in order to obtain graphical effects.
- The other tradition is legacy to the technique of the collage. In this case, they use photographic images, joined with pieces of writing. This second line of search is usually referred to the citation and the parody.

⁹² He is considered the precursor of *Neoavanguardia* and *Group 63* two of the most important Italian avant-garde movements. He was linked to “Noigandres” - group composed among others from Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, and from Decio Pignatari - from which he learnt concrete poetry yet unknown the Italian circle. Cf. Willard Bohn, *Modern Visual Poetry*, London: Associated University Presses, 2001.

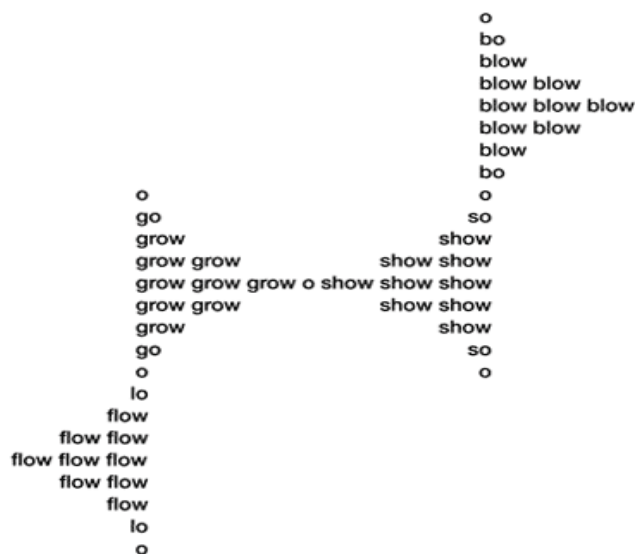


FIGURE 35: Eugen Gomringer, *Die Konstellationen* (1953)

According to Foucault, “[visual poetry] loge les énoncés dans l’espace de la figure et fait dire au texte ce que représente le dessin”⁹³. Whereas concrete poetry is still recognizable as poetry, being composed of purely typographic elements, visual poetry is generally much less text-dependent. Visual poems incorporate text, but the text may have primarily a visual function⁹⁴.

In concrete poetry the typographical arrangement of words is as important in assigning the intended effect as the conventional elements of the poem, such as meaning of words, rhythm, rhyme, and so on. In concrete poetry rather than the visual element being illustrative or incidental, the physicality of language constitutes the structural form. What characterised concrete poetry is the redefinition of the space, the manipulation of typography, and the introduction of design elements borrowed from popular culture. Linearity is rejected a new relation to space is sought: no longer an impermeable yet impotent backdrop against which text must rigidly stand, the new writing breaks out and into the areas all around the text, allowing the reading practice to look for different form patterns and thus to make new, independent inferences. In all these elements concrete poetry is really linked to electronic poetry. Undermining the security

⁹³ Michel Foucault, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, Fontfroide-le-Haut: Fata Morgana, 1973, p. 21.

⁹⁴ There are still some debates regarding the distinction between concrete poetry and visual poetry, in particular there are three dominant views regarding the issues One view is that visual poetry is synonymous with concrete poetry. A second view is that visual poetry is a type (or sub-category) of concrete poetry. And the last view (adopted in this article) is that visual poetry has evolved into a visual form distinct from concrete poetry. This view is supported by work identified as visual poetry in which, typographic elements are secondary to visual elements, or are minimal, or in some cases are absent altogether from the work. Cf. Willard Bohn, *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914-1928*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

between word and page, concrete and electronic poetry dislocate word from meaning and furthermore, destabilise the traditional relationship between the text and the reader.

Concrete poetry uses typography to comment and reflect on the fundamental instability of language in the same way electronic poetry uses the medium to observe and push further the possibilities of language. However, Concrete poetry by necessity involves a reduction of language which does not seem to be always true for electronic poetry.

In 1956 an international exhibition of concrete poetry is shown in São Paulo, inspired by the work of Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Two years later, a Brazilian concrete poetry manifesto appears⁹⁵. The original manifesto says:

concrete poetry begins by assuming a total responsibility before language: accepting the premise of the historical idiom as the indispensable nucleus of communication, it refuses to absorb words as mere indifferent vehicles, without life, without personality without history - taboo-tombs in which convention insists on burying the idea.⁹⁶

According to the English critic Mike Weaver⁹⁷ - who organized in 1964 "The First International Exhibition of Concrete and Kinetic Poetry" in Cambridge - there are three types of concrete poetry:

1. visual (or optic),
2. phonetic (or sound)
3. and kinetic (moving in a visual succession).

He sees individual poems within these three classifications as related to either the constructivist or the expressionist tradition in art⁹⁸. Weaver's definitions and classifications are most clarifying when applied generally; but when we are

⁹⁵ One of the earliest Brazilian pioneers, Augusto de Campos, has assembled a Web site of old and new work, including the manifesto. Its principal tenet is that using words as part of a specifically visual work allows for the words themselves to become part of the poetry, rather than just unseen vehicles for ideas.

The Manifesto of Concrete poetry was first published on *AD architecturae decoração* 20 November/December 1956, São Paulo, Brazil.

⁹⁶ Accessible online both in Portuguese and in English, accessible online at: <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/concretepoet.htm> (accessed, March 24 2010).

⁹⁷ Mike Weaver, "The Lugano Review", I:5/6, 1966. pp.100-125.

⁹⁸ Constructivism is an artistic and architectural movement flourished in Russia starting from 1913 (especially present after the October Revolution), and a term often used in modern art today, which dismissed "pure" art in favour of art used "as an instrument for social purposes", namely, the construction of the socialist system. Expressionism is the tendency of an artist to distort reality for an *emotional* effect. Expressionism is exhibited in many art forms, including painting, literature, film, architecture and film and music. The constructivist poem results from an arrangement of materials according to a scheme or system set up by the poet which must be adhered to on its own terms (permutational poems). In the expressionist poem the poet arranges his material according to an intuitive structure. Cf. Enciclopedia Britannica, "constructivism art", accessible online at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/134466/Constructivism> (accessed, June 23 2009).

confronted with the particular text or poem, it is often found that it is both visual and phonetic, or that it is expressionistic as well as constructivist. It is easier to classify the kinetic poem because it incorporates movement, usually a succession of pages; but it is essentially a visual poem, and its words are made up of sounds.

Often concrete poems can only be classified in terms of their predominating characteristics. It is important to notice that several important concrete poets have also been significant sound poets, among them Henri Chopin, and Bob Cobbing.

With the advent of Personal Computer, holography and video technology during the 1980s, visual and concrete poets have acquired a whole new equipment for expressive devices.



FIGURE 36: Augusto de Campos, *Greve* (1962)

11. Sound Poetry

In this chapter I have talked about the relationship between words and images, by relating both the intersection of words and paintings in order to create a piece of art and the experimentations proposed by using two different semiotic systems – the text and the image. Although poetry is a linguistic construct, the way in which it communicates is influenced by spatial relations as well. However, just because poetry is a linguistic construct the sound, the rhythm, the prosody, and the metric are all relevant elements in the *construction* of the poem. The starting material is the language, according to Paul Zumthor orality

is the working of the voice as it brings language, vocality the whole activities and values which are its own characteristics, apart from the language⁹⁹.

In this section, I will centre my attention on Sound poetry for two main reasons: first of all because it is impossible to trace (even though very rapidly as I have done throughout this chapter) the history of the XX century avant-garde movements without quoting Sound poetry and second because there are some traits that link Sound poetry to e-poetry even if Sound poetry focalizes on the acoustic aspect of words and not on the verbo-visual relations. It stresses the language's phonetic dimension; it appeals to the ear rather than to the eye.

Sound poetry has probably always been with us in one form or another: as oral tradition in preliterate and/or non-western cultures, glossolalia of fanatics and schizophrenics, ecolalia of the baby talk that is lost through the phonetic limits of learned language skills, just to quote a few of the more obvious examples.

In Sound poetry the conventional hierarchy between sound sense and semantic sense is modulated and often reversed. The semantic sense does not necessarily have to be completely neglected but it assumes a more *democratic* role with the addition of any element that can be vocalized. Sten Hanson describes sound poetry as a combination of the exactness of literature and the time manipulation of music.

Sound poetry enjoys a great vitality and an incredible diversity¹⁰⁰. Its history goes up with the beginning of the century; however, it truly starts in the 1950s. The old idea pursued by Lettrist, and earlier by Futurists and Dadaists, which concentrates on the *voice* as the instrument - with all its anatomic aspects - to create is followed by Sounds poets but the novelty consists in not including limits or borders and in the possibilities opened by the new technologies.

The father of Sound poetry is considered to be the German artist and poet Hugo Ball with his piece performed in a reading at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1915. Hugo Ball's final performance marked the beginning of a new experimental form in technique variously known as sound poems, poems without words, or abstract poems. According to Hugo Ball, poet must withdraw into the deepest alchemy of words.

I created a new species of verse, 'verse without words,' or sound poems....I recited the following:

⁹⁹ Paul Zumthor, *La lettre et la voix, de la "littérature" médiévale*, Paris: Seuil, 1987, pp. 20-31.

¹⁰⁰ For instance Mon practices the scission of the phonic a word, which becomes other and then other again, In his research there is a constant transformation from phoneme to phoneme caused by gradual changes of the sonic compounds, a process which is totally inverse to that of Chlebnikov's homophonies. Or one could mention the technological experiments of Henri Chopin who has been proposing his rarefied style, not so far from a phonetic 'rumourism'. Moreover, some Sound poets denies - especially at the beginning - their involvement with iper-tech recording studios. During the 80s' we assist at the so-called 'rumourism' period - the language is exploited vocally, during the 90s, on the contrary, the integrity and integrality of the word is pursued.

gadji beri bimba
glandridi lauli lonni cadori...

Hugo Ball's "Verses without words", is exactly a phonetic assonance. It is based on the equilibrium of vowels, regulated and distributed exclusively in relation to the phonic value of the initial line.

The previous year, in 1914, Futurist poet Marinetti created his "Zang Tumb Tumb". Also Russian Futurists were interested in experimentations of Sound poetry. Particularly Velemir Chlebnikov - one of the movement central figure - considered himself "eternal prisoner of assonance", for whom the alphabet was a "table of sounds".

Sound poetry destroys everyday language. In Sound poetry the object "language" must be investigated in all its smallest and most extensive segments. The word, basic instrument of sonorous experimentation, takes the connotation of multi-word, penetrates all the way in and re-stitches on the outside. The world must be able to free its polyvalent sonorities. In order to construct the poem the language is broken down into its abstract parts (syllables and individual letters) and then reconfigure as meaningless sounds. Sound poetry (also in the feature of simultaneous poems - poems in which multiple languages are read at once rendering each unintelligible) offers a different approach to abstract poetry.

The more astonishing productions in Sound poetry were those which, at the end of the century, exploited the last technologies of sound and communication. It covered the poetic production bringing into playing the voice and resorting to electroacoustic tools (microphones, improvisations around the tape recorder, computer...). It integrated a gestural dimension which sometimes connected it with the "performances" developed in the Sixties. Its new devices: the disc, the magnetic tape, the audio cassette, then the video or the CD-rom.

The development of new technologies marked the progress of poetry, not only of Sound poetry, but also of Visual and Concrete poetry - electronic media (and computers) were, are and will be the true protagonists of this kind of creations. During the 50s, the invention of the recording technique and its immediate commercialization has deeply influenced and accelerated the passage from phonetic poetry to sound poetry, or better said, the change from the typical Lettrist approach to the electromagnetic sound¹⁰¹. However - probably - computer itself has not provoked the foreseen wave of *new shocking* Sound poetry.

¹⁰¹ The arriving of the computer into the artist scene towards the end of the 80s has facilitated the production of the piece of works but the final product, that's the sound poem, has not been deeply changed the contents. Sound poets who have always used the technology for the composition of the poem, still go on exploiting it, and obviously in a more sophisticated way, see Larry Wendt, Charles Amirkhanian, Sten Hanson or the 'rumorism' style of Henri Chopin. There are also poets or searchers who have been able to set up ex novo their own softwares, among them, Tibor Papp, Jacques Donguy, Eduardo Kac, Fabio Doctorovich.

12. (The 21st Century:) Digital Poetry

According to Decio Pignatari (1977), concrete poetry, which communicates its own structure « structure content », announces the arrival of digital poetry. Computer created poetry was born in 1959 at Stuttgart, Federal Republic of Germany, when the German Theo Lutz, under the suggestion of Max Bense¹⁰², succeeded to produce the first electronic free verses, using a machinery that was still called “calculator” and not computer. It is important to highlight that the German scholar, philosopher and poet Max Bense was one of the leading figures of the concrete poets of the *Stuttgarter Gruppe*, and an important international mediator between various different national groups and factions. He was preoccupied with the study of philosophy, mathematics, technology and theory of science as well as with information theory, semiotics and cybernetics.

Lutz was just the first of a group of scholars that view mathematics, science, and creativity as cooperative disciplines. Many other experiments in computer-randomized poetry have been conducted since 1960, primarily in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Thanks to the evolution in technology, in the following years other *electronic* poetry experiments started in Canada and in France where, in 1959, a French engineer, François Le Lionnais, apparently convinced Raymond Queneau to found the “Séminaire de Littérature Expérimentale”, that in 1960 would be changed in the famous Oulipo, “Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle”. In 1960, Brion Gysin’s permutation *I am that I am* programmed by Ian Somerville appeared. As far as the Italian experience is concerned, we shall remember the poem *Tape Mark* by Nanni Balestrini, made in 1961 with an IBM calculating machine. In 1964 *La machine à écrire* by Jean Baudot was published.

In occasion of an international exhibit held in Paris at the Centre Georges Pompidou, in 1985, titled “Les Immatériaux”, the ALAMO¹⁰³ group introduced its first poems “generated” by computer, which sanctioned the birth of a new form of visual poetry “animated” by this new medium. The ALAMO group has carried on the experimentations started by the OuLiPo (see section 13.2). They have wanted to develop tools and computational methods of use to writers. They have focused on the potentiality of writing “assisted” by the machine, by the computer. To this technological revolution we should add another important step which took place in the 1990s, when the CERN’s researchers of Geneva invented the technology that has made the net popular. It was from that date that a proliferation of web-sites of “cyber-poetry” began and, consequently, a new generation of digital authors was born. Since then we have witnessed the

¹⁰² Almost concurrently in the United States, Brion Gysin is able to do the same thing.

¹⁰³ Atelier de Littérature Assistée par la Mathématique et les Ordinateurs (Workshop of Literature Assisted by Mathematics and the Computers). Paul Braffort and Jacques Roubaud, both members of the OULIPO, created in 1981 the ALAMO. In 2008 there were 17 members in the ALAMO group. Cf. Philippe Bootz, *From OULIPO to Transitoire Observable: evolution of the French digital poetry*, accessible online at: http://elmcip.net/sites/default/files/attachments/criticalwriting/bootz_from_ouli_po.pdf (accessed, January 29 2011).

continuous increase of poetic creations published on the web, so that in 1999 the magazine Doc(k)s¹⁰⁴ felt the need to catalogue what had already been produced so far¹⁰⁵.

12.1 Theo Lutz's "Stochastic" Poems

In this section I will relate and describe the very first example of electronic poetry: Lutz's "Stochastic" poems. After Lutz's work, many other authors have experimented the possibilities of computers in creating poetry. In the chapter 7, I will analyse deeply this kind of electronic poetry, which - for its own nature - opens new problematic such as the question of the subject and the author. In the same chapter I will also present and explore some examples of the so called "generative poetry", maintaining a historic approach in order to determine any evolution that is characterising this typology of e-poems.

The pursuit of composing poetry by using computers begins, as we saw, in 1959 when Theo Lutz made "stochastic" (random variation) poems¹⁰⁶. Max Bense suggested Lutz using a random generator to accidentally determine texts. Bense looked for establishing a scientific and objective branch of aesthetics, by means of applying mathematical and information theoretical premises to the study of aesthetic texts. Essentially, his objective was ultimately the production of literature from an emotional basis towards a purely rational one.

Lutz made a database of sixteen subjects and sixteen titles from Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle*. Lutz program randomly generated a sequence of numbers, pulled up each of the subjects/titles, and connected them using logical constants (gender, conjunction, etc.) in order to create syntax. The language of the work contained permutation - the same set of words were used over and over again, each time that the program was running. However it was not the permutation of the whole Kafka's work; it was a fragmented permutation of the words Lutz chose from *The Castle*.

NICHT JEDER BLICK IST NAH. KEIN DORF IST SPAET.
 EIN SCHLOSS IST FREI UND JEDER BAUER IST FERN.
 JEDER FREMDE IST FERN. EIN TAG IST SPAET.
 JEDES HAUS IST DUNKEL. EIN AUGE IST TIEF.
 NICHT JEDES SCHLOSS IST ALT. JEDER TAG IST ALT.

¹⁰⁴ Doc(k)s is a review of contemporary poetry, which explores the audio-visual experiments in poetry that have marked the twentieth century. The review has a web site at: <http://www.sitec.fr/users/akenatondocks/> (accessed, March 31 2009).

¹⁰⁵ It emerged immediately that the new generation of "digital" poets knew the computer culture very well, they came from different fields, visual and /or plastic arts, communication, design, or simply from the web but they did not have any specific aesthetic or literary knowledge.

¹⁰⁶ They are written on a program-controlled Zuse Z22 computer. Examples of this work, which applies logical structure (mathematics and calculation) to process language, are published in a 1959 article "Stochastic Texts" in Bense's journal *Augenblink* n. 4., accessible online at: <http://www.reinhard-doehl.de/poetscorner/lutz1.htm> (accessed, March 31 2010); English version accessible online at: http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/lutz_schule_en.htm (accessed, March 27 2010).

NICHT JEDER GAST IST WUETEND. EINE KIRCHE IST SCHMAL.
KEIN HAUS IST OFFEN UND NICHT JEDE KIRCHE IST STILL.¹⁰⁷

In this piece from Lutz's poem we can see patterns and repetitions of words, along with discursive leaps and unusual semantic connections (i.e. "Keine Dorf ist Spaet." – "No village is late."). The words themselves are not complicated. However, when they are randomly arranged into syntax by computer the operation imposes a non-rational ordering of thoughts. According to Chris Funkhouser "the text is readable but disjunctive"¹⁰⁸. This work is an example of combinatory text, like it will be later Queneau's *Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*.

12.2 OuLiPo

The *Ouloir de Littérature Potentielle* was a group of French writers and mathematicians devoted to the discovery of new literary forms (and the rediscovery of old ones), the conscious use of formal constraints, exploration of the connections between mathematics and literature, and a playful approach to writing¹⁰⁹.

There are two manifestos by François Le Lionnais (*La Lipo*, 1962 and *Le Second Manifeste*, 1973), which explain the Oulipo's idea¹¹⁰. Oulipian-inspired texts - whose principles of reading are always negotiable - marks a change in the reading practice and link these works to the electronic experiments. However, what Oulipo expected of itself and of its experimentations is stated in the editor's note of the 1973, *La littérature potentielle: créations, re-crétions, récrétions*: "1) ce n'est pas un mouvement littéraire; 2) ce n'est pas un séminaire scientifique; 3) ce n'est pas de la littérature aléatoire¹¹¹.

Even though poetry and mathematics often seem to be incompatible areas of study, the philosophy of Oulipo sought to connect them. Oulipo members wanted to explore the possibilities of incorporating mathematical structures in literary works. Lionnais and Quenuau believed in the profound potential of a

¹⁰⁷ Theo Lutz, *Stochastische Texte* (1959), accessible online at: http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/lutz_schule_en.htm (accessed, March 31 2010). "NOT EVERY LOOK IS NEAR. NO VILLAGE IS LATE. /A CASTLE IS FREE AND EVERY FARMER IS FAR./EVERY STRANGER IS FAR. A DAY IS LATE./EVERY HOUSE IS DARK. AN EYE IS DEEP./NOT EVERY/CASTLE IS OLD. EVERY DAY IS OLD./NOT EVERY GUEST IS ANGRY: A CHURCH IS NARROW./NO HOUSE IS OPEN AND NOT EVERY CHURCH IS SILENT".

¹⁰⁸ Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*, Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2007, p. 38.

¹⁰⁹ Some of the most important writers of Oulipo are: Raymond Queneau and his use of mathematics; Italo Calvino on hypertextual prose; Georges Perec and the lipogram - a lipogram (from Greek *lipogrammatos*, "missing letter") is a kind of constrained writing or word game consisting of writing sections or longer works in which a particular letter or group of letters is missing, usually a common vowel,); and Harry Mathews with his "Liminal Poem".

¹¹⁰ François Le Lionnais, *La Lipo (Le Premier Manifeste)*, Paris: Oulipo, 1962, accessible online at: http://www2.ec-lille.fr/~book/oulipo/textes/FLL_mani1.shtml (accessed, September 15 2009).

¹¹¹ "It is nota literary movement; 2) it is not a scientific seminar; 3) it is not a literature of chance.

poem produced within a framework or formula and that, if done in a playful posture, the outcomes could be endless. Mathematics asks literature to reach another level of validity, it furthers literature's evolution¹¹².

12.2.1 Poetic Techniques

Among Oulipo different and original ideas one of the most popular was the formula "N+7" in which the writer took a poem already in existence and substitutes each of the poem's substantive nouns with the noun appearing seven nouns away in the dictionary. The Oulipo idea was to use number to liberate speech and to exploit the power of numbers and patterns in the process of making text.

One of the most Oulipo famous work is Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (*Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* or *One hundred million million poems*), published in 1961. It is a set of ten sonnets printed on card with each line on a separated strip. It consists of 14 groups of 10 lines of poetry each; the groups are ordered and the lines written such that one may select one line from the first group, one line from the second group, and so on until 14 lines are selected. These 14 lines, read in the order of selection, will comprise a sonnet. Any lines from a sonnet can be combined with any from the nine others, so that there are 10^{14} (= 100,000,000,000,000) different sonnets.



FIGURE 37: Raymond Queneau, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961)

The text is practically unreadable in its whole since it would take some 200,000,000 years to read all the possible combinations, even reading twenty-four hours a day. Both the combinatory idea of writing and the endless of the

¹¹² Cf. Peter Consenstein, *Literary memory, consciousness, and the group Oulipo*, Amsterdam, New York: ISO, 2002.

reading practice of the text are elements that characterized many electronic works.

12.3 Computer-based Concrete and Visual Poems

In the late 1960s concrete and visual poets began to focus on using computers to make graphical representations of and with language. When the technology became available, artists started to create digitally static and animated works and manipulate language to increase visual properties. According to Perloff these *digital* poems participated in a larger poetic trend, "the speech-based poetics of mid-century has given way, more and more, to the foregrounding of the materiality of the written sign itself"¹¹³. As Funkhouser showed "[d]igitally produced visual elements first emerged in randomly generated poems, then in two-dimensional static works and other manifestations"¹¹⁴.

As hardware and graphical programs were developed in the 1960s, a few poets started to use digital tools to create visual poems. By the 1980s poets increasingly presented moving language on screen as a result of the development of computers. These experiments prefigure many later works in poetry that proliferated in animated, hypermedia digital formats. Particularly the possibility to animate the language was investigated; in fact animated poems long predated a style of electronic poetic practice that erupted with the advent of the WWW, typified by works such as for instance Brian Kim Stefan's *the dreamlike of letters*¹¹⁵.

The initial works, however, were, like text-generated poems, automatically spawned by viewers confronting a program in an installation setting. With the development of graphics software, successive works embodied visual methods that approximated concrete and visual poems rendered and fixed on the page. In contrast to the production of the earliest visual poets, these works are not interactive. The computer, at the beginning, was a convenient tool to manipulate the appearance and presentations of texts.

By the mid-1980s, moreover, the influence of post-structural critical theories, such as deconstruction, spurred poets to make up new appearances for poetry. Since the earliest analytical texts regarding electronic/digital poetry – concrete poetry has been identified as a significant influence. This perceived influence is given the concretist promotion of the visual presentation of the texts, graphical effects, a new typography, coloration, repetition, all elements

¹¹³ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 137-138.

¹¹⁴ Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹¹⁵ Brian Kim Stefan's *the dreamlike of letters* (2000), in Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Retttemberg and Stephanie Strickland (eds.), *Electronic Literature Collection*, Volume 1, October 2006, accessible online at: http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/flanagan_thehouse.html (accessed, April 22 2010).

that can be easily found in many electronic texts. Computer clearly enables and extends ideas looked for concretist aesthetic.

According to Funkhouser¹¹⁶, the 1979's and the 1980s were a bridge period, where most (but not all) visual poets still produced their work using analog methods, before common graphical software programs were refined and became available via personal computer. Much of the creative output from the 1970s and the 1980s were intended for print rather than for computer presentation, but they show similar characteristics: letters or words using an array of fonts to indicate multiple dimension of text, altered or repeated words on the space of the page, and some pictographic works¹¹⁷.

12.3.1 Marc Adrian's *Computer Texts*

Examples of graphical poems made thanks to the technology of computers began to emerge in the late 1960s. Marc Adrian's *Computer Texts* were featured in the Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition in 1974.

In this work, the computer randomly assembles poems by using a database of eleven hundred alphabetic symbols to place twenty words at time on the screen. Adrian organized the interface using a grid of system. The symbols retrieved from the database (letters or groups of words) appeared in rows and columns on the screen. Adrian in part disguised the grid element by variegating the size of the font and not using every line or block.

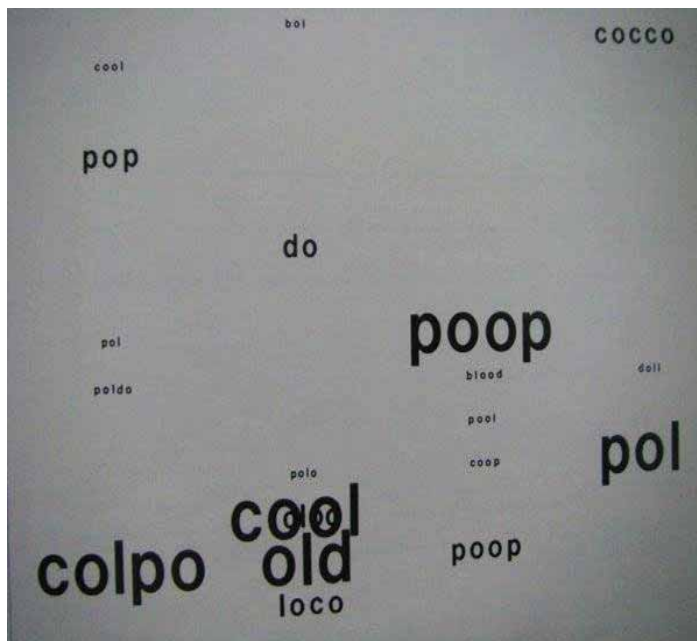


FIGURE 38: Marc Adrian's *Computer Texts* (1974)

¹¹⁶ Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

¹¹⁷ In the period following concretism visual poetry appeared in a number of anthologies, thus not all feature digitized works. Even some of the most notable books made little effort to distinguish digital form from non-digital works.

As for the content only the vowel /o/ is used. This restriction does not block the poem, rather it confers a form that emphasis on both the language's appearance and the sound. Futurists, Constructivists, Dadaists poets – just to quote some of the most important movements of the last century - had already focused on graphical elements of the texts and neologism without using the computer technology. Yet, according to Funkhouser “Adrian’s piece is important for several reasons. The *computer texts* are among the first examples of works presented with unconventional ‘syntax’, permutation and aleatoric reordering of pieces of language by a computer, a technique profoundly exploited by Kenner, Cage, and others, in the later years”¹¹⁸. However, Adrian was just one of several artists that during the 1960s and the 1970s proclaimed the use of computer language and other mechanical fabrications that incorporated arbitrary functions and permutation algorithms to rethink the sequential composition of texts¹¹⁹.

12.3.2 Harry Polkinhorn’s *Bridges of Skin Money*

Harry Polkinhorn’s *Bridges of Skin Money* is considered to be one of the very first computer-based visual poems. Polkinhorn used Macintosh software to make digital collage containing language and graphics. In this piece of work the computer is used as a instrument to create.



FIGURE 39: Harry Polkinhorn’s *Bridges of Skin Money* (1986)

¹¹⁸ Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*, op. cit., p. 95.

¹¹⁹ Carl Fernbach-Frarsheim created an unconventional poetry program called *the Boolean Image/Conceptual Typewriter* that was featured as an interactive installation at the SOFTWARE exhibitions held at the Jewish Museum in New York, in 1971. The output of the program presented alphanumeric information, thought the letters and numbers were arranged as strings of text, instead of being regulated according by rules of grammar and syntax.

The collection *Bridges of Skin Money* was published in 1986 by Xexoxial Endarchy. The texts are composed of hand-drawn lines, coloured geometric shapes, and, sometimes, distorted texts which are impossible to read. Collage and manipulation of language have been used by avant-garde movements starting from Dada, but with the availability of software the facility of incorporating images to the text and manipulating the language has increased.

12.4 Videopoetry

Videopoetry is a particular form of poetry that elaborates texts at various acoustic and visual levels. The Portuguese writer and poet Ernesto Melo e Castro is considered the father of this kind of experimentation in which animation and temporality are brought to poetry. In 1968 he produced his first videopoem *Roda Lume* ("Wheel Light") which was broadcasted in 1969 in Portugal. This piece is a two-minute, forty-three-seconds video that applies video technology to the presentation of poetry. Melo e Castro wished to free the words as he asserted in *Videopoetry* "I did not know [...] where my experiments would take me. A sense of fascination and adventure told me that the letters and the signs standing still on the page could gain actual of their own. The words and the letters could at least be free, creating their own space"¹²⁰.

In the early 1980s, the Italian poet and cineaste Gianni Toti started to mix cinema, poetry text, and electronic images. He decided to call it "poetronica" in order to highlight both components of this new fusion of the arts: the poetic element and the electronic aspect.

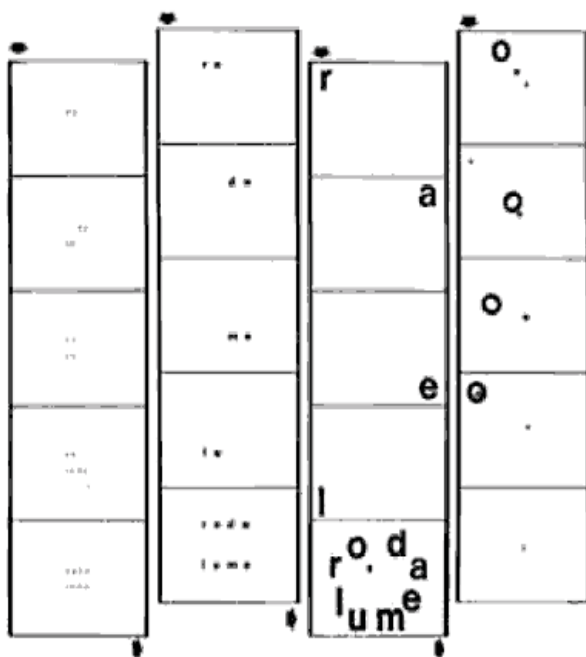


FIGURE 40: Ernesto de Melo e Castro's *Roda Lume* (1968)

¹²⁰ Ernesto de Melo e Castro, *Videopoetry*, Eduardo Kac (ed.), *Media Poetry: an International Anthology*, Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007, p. 176.

According to Melo e Castro videopoetry is “inevitable as a concept”¹²¹ answering the challenge of the new technological means for producing texts and images. He also underlines that reading a videopoem is a complex experience since different temporal modalities of perception will coincide with the moving and changing images and texts. He signals the arriving of a new poetics of reading. He says that: “a concept of ‘visual time’ is thus very important for a grammar of videopoetry as it defines the appropriate time of reading of each poem”¹²².

12.4.1 Calligram in the Computer Era: an Example of Video-calligram

The child is a typical example of an animated calligram¹²³. This poem can be considered as an evolution of the calligram’s tradition. This work well resumes the potentialities of visual poetry in a digital environment. The rough 3D objects use words as their surface textures, these virtual objects take on the shape of the real-world objects they represent through mimesis, a cratylistic graphic.

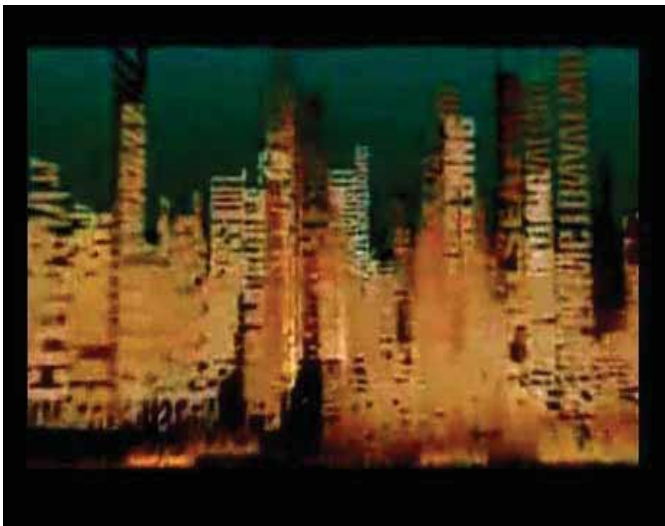


FIGURE 41: Alex Gopher, *The child* (1999)

This animated calligram was created in 1999 by H5, a French graphics and animation studio, as a video clip for the song “The Child” by the French DJ Alex Gopher. In chapter 4 I will analyse of this “video-calligram”, what I would like to underline here is the *evolution* of the relationship between texts, images and sounds. In ancient Greece, poetry was often accompanied by music. Most of the time while a poet was reciting he was accompanied by instruments. The Greeks used the aulos, which is an early version of the recorder, and the lyre, which is an early guitar, when reciting poetry. The two arts (music and poetry)

¹²¹ *Ibidem.*

¹²² *Ibidem.*

¹²³ Alex Gopher, *The child*, 1999, accessible online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgHOGqmRVR8> (accessed, March 20 2002).

were interacting. With electronic poetry the interaction, intermediation (remediation) is possible again. On one side electronic poetry seems to push further poetry's boundaries, on the other, for many aspects, it recalls a very old tradition.

CHAPTER 2

E-POETRY: HOW TO APPROACH IT?

“Most literary theories take their object medium as given, in spite of the blatant historical differences between, for instance, oral and written literature. The written, or rather the printed, text has been the privileged form [...]”. E. Aarseth¹

In this chapter I first summarize the methodology used to study electronic poetry, recounting the most important theories concerning electronic writings, and then I put forward a typology that I use to categorize the corpus that I analyse in the following chapters.

This thesis has been organized around three deeply interconnected approaches: historical, descriptive and analytic. The first approach judges the “novelty” of the phenomenon within a historical context. The descriptive work to be done on the corpus is fundamental in order to establish a sort of typology of e-poetry and, consequently, to be able to start the analytic work.

In the first chapter I traced the historical contaminations between images and words in Western culture, pointing out the evolution of poetry and focusing particularly on the last century avant-garde movements which are strictly connected to e-poetry.

The historical approach allowed me to show that poetry has always been interested in experimenting with new ways of writing. However the (computer and internet) media make the experiments with language itself a basic question. The new textual technology arrived with the invention and development of digital computing in the middle of the 20th century, which brought to literature's doorstep potent media giving it flexibility and more power than any preceding ones. New poetic texts have emerged with digital computing and automation. These texts – due to the peculiarities of their medium – require a different approach and reading practice in order to be *understood*, and they open up interesting questions such as the idea of poetry in the new millennium, the

¹ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 15.

role of the reader – and consequently of the author –, and the relationship between medium and message.

The term “medium” derived from the Latin word “medium” meaning “means/way”. *Britannica’s* dictionary defines the word medium (plural media) as:

1. a channel or system of communication, information, or entertainment – compare *mass medium*;
2. a publication or broadcast that carries advertising;
3. a mode of artistic expression or communication;
4. something (as a magnetic disk) on which information may be stored²

Webster’s dictionary proposes two distinct definitions:

1. Medium as a channel or system of communication, information, or entertainment;
2. Medium as a material or technical means of expression (including artistic expression).

Narration in Various Media defines it partly thus:

The term of medium [...] thus covers a wide range of phenomena such as: (a) TV, radio, and the internet [...] as the media of mass communication; (b) music, painting, film, the theatre and literature as the media of art; [...] (d) writing and orality as the media of language; (e) handwriting, printing, the book, and the computer as the media of writing.

For Walter Ong³ media are “pipelines” for the transfer of a material called information. However, as underlined by Marie-Laure Ryan, if media were simply undifferentiated “pipelines” for transmission of artifacts (a film broadcast on TV) they would not have narratological interest, and in our case poetic interest⁴. According to Ryan, “the shape of the pipe affects the kind of information that can be transmitted, alters the conditions of reception, and often leads to the creation of works tailor-made for the medium”⁵. She continues on by saying that from a narratological point of view channel-type media are only interesting to the extent that they involve “differences that make a narrative difference”.

Marshall McLuhan describes the medium as “extension of man”: “[media are] forms that shape and reshape our perceptions”, and his very famous quote declares that “the medium is the message”⁶.

Film, radio, TV, and internet have developed their own storytelling capabilities, their *poeticity*, their own “language”: thus it will important to

² Encyclopaedia Britannica accessible online at: <http://www.britannica.com/bps/dictionary?query=medium> (accessed, November 28 2010).

³ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*, London: Methuen, 1982.

⁴ Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narration in Various Media”, in Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid and Jörg Schönert (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2009, accessible online at: <http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Contents> (accessed, January 29 2011).

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Cf. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message. An Inventory of Effects*, New York: Random House, 1967.

analyse what kind of “new language” is putting forward by poetry using “new” media such as computer and internet. In e-poetry there are strategic elements – such as infographics, the *poeticity* of the elements, their [il]legibility, the pluri-signification of the relation image-text and the flow of the reading process in the textual rearrangement – which affect the poem’s structure. They create new tropes and figures and, consequently, a new aesthetic sense. All these constitutive elements produce different kinds of creation and reading practices, which, from one side, seem to propose an active and sometimes playful sort of approach to the poetic text and from the other suggest corruption between genres, pushing poetry towards web-art and linking the literary word to Artificial Intelligence (AI).

In e-poetry the roles of both the reader and the author have been at least redefined in relation to “traditional” poetry as far as probably in every kind of e-poem one or more of the following processes occur: a) users have to interact with the poem (in some cases they have to act on the text for the text to appear), b) there are forms of collaborative and/or generative procedures that mutate the poetic result, c) poems can be ephemeral, d) the reading practice can remind the reader of a sort of writing experience (due to certain actions the reader has/needs to perform in order to read the text).

Poetry transforms the medium in the same way that the medium transforms poetry. The historical examples show us that every time that a technological change has occurred, there have been remarkable advances and developments such as with the illuminated manuscripts, as one significant example.

In the rest of this chapter, I will describe the approach adopted to analyze the corpus, discussing the conceptual foundations and implications of this approach, establishing the terminology applied in the analytic chapters and proposing a phenomenology of e-poetry.

1. The Challenge of Semiotics: Semiotics of New Media Literacy

The problem of how to theoretically approach the field of electronic poetry is a difficult one. E-poetry puts forward a new kind of textuality, which implies new reading strategies. Aarseth in his famous book *Cybertext*⁷ states that there is a need of a new definition of textuality in addition to the previous definitions proposed by different disciplines or theories such as philology, logic, semiotics, structuralism and post-structuralism. He adds that none of the previous approaches “have expressed the perspective of the text as a material machine, a device capable of manipulating itself as well as the reader”⁸. He carries on by

⁷ Aarseth refers to the term of *cybertext* as a prospective on textuality. In his book, he analyses also printed texts which, however, present *cybernetic* characteristics. I will refer about Aarseth’s *cybertext* theory in this chapter (see section 3.1.1). In this thesis I talk about the “new” textuality offered by electronic poetry because some of its characteristics cannot be reproduced in printed version.

⁸ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

pointing out that not even semiotics “the most oriented of these epistemes, does not seem to offer any readily useful prospective in this context”⁹. He quotes Per Aage Brandt. Brandt notes that:

neither the interpretative semiotics based on the Peircean tradition (such as Eco), nor the structural semiotics of the Seussurean tradition (Greimas) – thought both necessary – seem sufficient to follow up the substantial change induced by the ongoing implementation of these machines in our ‘life world’, probably for the very simple reason that even these often rather sophisticated semiotics elaborations fail to see what a ‘symbolic machine’ actually is and what it can do.¹⁰

Aarseth suggests that Brandt’s critique

trivializes the reason for recent semiotics theory’s inability to account for cybernetic sign production, since this phenomena could not have been invisible to theoreticians such as E. Eco and A. J Greimas, who surely must have had some contact with the cybernetic ideas and experiments of contemporary individuals and groups such as R. Queneau (1961), Italo Calvino (1993) and Ouvroir de la Littérature Potentielle (OuLiPo 1981). If these phenomena, together with computer machinery and principles in general, were indeed invisible to the semioticians of that time, I suggest that the reason for this blind spot is to be found in the semiological paradigm (which seems inherently unable to accommodate the challenge from cybernetic sign systems) and not in the lack of historical opportunity.¹¹

Both Brandt’s (1993) and Aarseth’s (1997) critique on the limits of semiotics’ approach to text which implies *cybernetic* textuality, demonstrate the importance that semiotics has acquired in studying these kind of texts. But is the semiotic approach able to describe these texts? Does the methodology provided by the sciences of language remain effective when analysing these technological objects?

One could reply that electronic texts are just texts that use another support, but they are still texts even though they put forwards peculiar characteristics, which, however, are not completely new to the language theory, such as multimodality (syncretism) or the multilinearity (coexistence of alternative paths). We will see further along in this chapter how semiotics – in its broad[er/est] meaning – can be useful in the analysis of e-text. About fifteen years have passed since those critiques were made and semiotics itself has changed [to take/and now takes] into account “the challenge from cybernetic sign systems”.

1.1 The Semiotics of New Media Literacy

According to Giovanna Cosenza¹² the semiotics of new media can be considered as a branch of semiotics that aims at investigating the new media as

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ Per Aage Brandt, “Meaning and the Machine: Towards a Semiotics of Interaction”, in Peter B. Andersen, Berit Holmquist, and Jens F. Jensen (eds.), *The Computer as Medium*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 128.

¹¹ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹² Giovanna Cosenza, *Semiotica dei nuovi media*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2004.

texts. Cosenza studies the grammar of the new media, their systems of signs, offering the tools to perform textual analysis.

But what is a text? This is an old and complex question. In a limited space such as this, it is impossible to even briefly trace the arguments of previous discussions of this question. Let us say that the study of the text – as a higher level unit than the study of the sign – began in the second half of 20th century thanks to the structuralism approach. Structuralism shifts the object of its study from the sign to the *code* – therefore the text¹³. Semiotic codes are procedural systems of related conventions for correlating signifier(s) and signified(s) they provide a framework within which signs make sense¹⁴. However, according to most semioticians a text can be defined as ““is an system of signs (in the form of words, images, objects, sounds and/or gestures). It is constructed and interpreted with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication. A text is the product of a process of representation and ‘positions’ both its makers and its readers¹⁵.”

In his influential book, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Umberto Eco (1976) defines semiotics as “the discipline studying everything, which can be used in order to lie”¹⁶. Eco continues, “Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else”¹⁷.

Semiotics investigates the text by using qualitative and descriptive methods, in particular moving from the surface (uniqueness of the text) to depth (abstraction). According to this description the text seems not to be a closed object, but it weaves between various relations both internal (see Greimas’ semiotic square) and external (intertextual relations to the semiosphere - Lotman). According to Spaziante and Dusi¹⁸ this network of connections with what's outside of the text becomes particularly important in contemporary textuality.

The definition of literacy has been changing rapidly. Media Literacy was defined at the Aspen Institute in 1989 as “ability to access, analyse, communicate, and produce media in a variety of forms”. Media literacy is more than asking people to simply decode information that they experience in the media, but they must be able to respond and produce media. Today, gaining Media literacy skills is becoming more important to understand our society.

¹³ According to Structuralism a text is a portion of reality which has a meaning to someone, consisting of defined limits broken down in discrete units/ hierarchical levels of analysis which follow objective criteria.

¹⁴ Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics, Thomas A. Sebeok and Marcel Danesi (eds.) USA: DE GRUYTER, 2009.

¹⁵ Text: most broadly, this term is used to refer to anything which can be “read” for meaning; to some theorists, 'the world' is 'social text'. Although the term appears to privilege written texts (it seems *graphocentric* and *logocentric*).

¹⁶ Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Bompiani, Milano, 1975, En. tr. *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, p.7.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Nicola Dusi and Lucio Spaziante, *Remix-Remake*, Rome: Meltemi, 2006.

Even though digital literacy is a sort of “discipline” for the information sciences, the digital literacy point of view can help to approach the electronic-artistic text.

Gilster defines Digital literacy as:

the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers [...] (Not) only must you acquire the skill of finding things, you must also acquire the ability to use those things in your life. Acquiring digital literacy for Internet use involves mastering a set of core competencies. The most essential of these is the ability to make informed judgments about what you find on-line.¹⁹

The Semiotics of New Media Literacy can help us to approach texts deeply transformed by their medium, texts that can be transformed by them, texts that can be manipulated by the “reader”, texts that can escape –materially – the author’s control. This approach can help us to better describe, analyse, and interpret what Aarseth calls the *textonomy* (the study of the textual media) and the *textology* (the study of the textual meaning)²⁰.

1.2 Semiotics and the *Digital Corpus*

Semioticians (and linguists) normally describe *languages* or *texts*, or *discourses*. For this reason semiotics seems still to be a good approach in order to analyse texts that are not *static* anymore – as normally the *textual corpus* is. Static texts do not change sensibly over time but *dynamic ones* do. Being dynamic is one of the most important characteristics of the *digital/hypertextual corpus* – these texts change and sometimes they can even disappear. What kind of tools do semioticians need to describe texts characterized by *multimodality* and *multilinearity*, by being dynamic and sometimes even ephemeral?

Normally it is thought that semioticians analyse and hermeneutists *interpret*, but the border is very fleeting and its value can sometimes escape us. According to Hjelmslev’s approach the description is the procedure that aims at getting the *systematic* aspects – which are concretely realized in those phenomena that semioticians want to describe – starting from the process. For Hjelmslev the description must be scientific thus it is opposed to the hermeneutic description, which wants to understand a single text²¹.

Umberto Eco²² proposes an interpretative semiotics following on from the main concept of interpretation formulated by Charles S. Peirce. Very briefly these two viewpoints derive from two ways of interpreting the sign. Ferdinand de Saussure and Peirce propose two different conceptions of the sign – or rather the relationship with the signification. This does not mean that the two visions are mutually exclusive and that they cannot be integrated, but generally they

¹⁹ Paul Gilster, *Digital Literacy*, New York: Wiley and Computer Publishing, 1997, p.1.

²⁰ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²¹ Louis Hjelmslev, *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse*, 1943, En. tr. *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, “International Journal of American Linguistics”, Memoir 7, Baltimore: Indiana University Press, 1953.

²² Cf. Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta*, Milano: Bompiani, 1962, and Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula*, Milano: Bompiani, 1979.

gave rise to different approaches to the text. According to de Saussure the sign is the relationship between a *signifier*, understood as the image of a sound which is then physically produced, and a *signified*, the concept of what one wants to refer.

Pierce's definition of semiosis concerns three elements: a *representamen*, the material part of the sign, an *object*, the referent to which the sign refers, and an *interpretant*, which is derived or generated by the sign. The starting point in Pierce's semiosis is in external reality; meanwhile for de Saussure the referent has an "accessory" role in order to define the relationship between signifier and signified.

The meaning of signs or representations is dependent on social, cultural, and historical contexts. We construct meaning based on the physical appearance of the sign, our previous personal and cultural experiences, the time or era we live in, and context or place in which it occurs. There is not one meaning or interpretation of each sign. There are multiple sides and points of view to each sign.

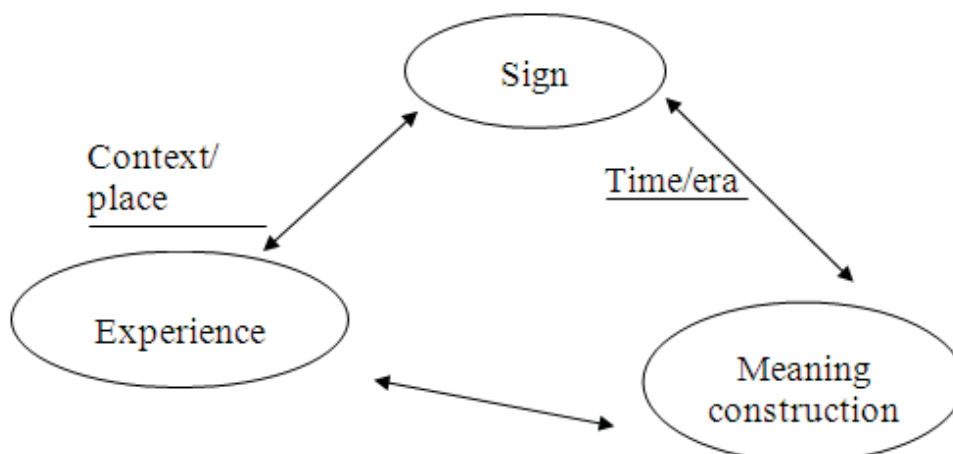


FIGURE 1: Construction of Meaning in Media Literacy – Melda N. Yldiz

The introduction of internet communication into human discourse has influenced semiotic forms throughout world cultures. With the penetration of new media and computer mediated communication systems, human interactions are changing at a rapid pace. Computers and the internet influence the way we communicate and the way we create.

These changes in the creation practice affect the text's form – the text is not static anymore, it can often require the interaction of the reader – making texts resemble objects. Already Marshall McLuhan in 1967 talks about the importance of moving images for the so-called post-modern society:

The aim is to develop awareness about print and the newer technologies of communications so that we can orchestrate them, [...] And get the best out of each in the educational process. Without understanding of media languages and grammars,

we cannot hope to achieve a contemporary awareness of the world in which we live.²³

He goes further and he highlights the importance of understanding media “grammar” and “language”. The media are texts and have their own language and grammar to analyse and understand in order to appreciate the artistic production they are making.

This thesis has the purpose of supplying the reader – who is approaching these e-texts for the first time – with *some* possible interpretations (as I said in the introduction, an exhaustive analysis of electronic texts is impossible). My duty for this thesis is on the one hand to register the regularity of this phenomenon – isolating the constant elements (the form) from the variable elements (the substance), on the other hand to produce a meaning of the substance.

2. The Act of Describing and the Act of Interpreting

In the semiotics ambit each analysis starts by dividing the process. The analysis of the process concerns, according to Hjelmslev’s terms, the research of the homogenous dependencies between the elements they are composed of. Depending on what is the outcome of the description we will have either a general analysis (language’s analysis of the text which presides over the manifestation of the text) or particular analysis (textual analysis, analysis of the realized signification). General and particular analyses point out the two aims of the description: we can ponder the similarity of objects and/or focus on the peculiarity of an individual signification form.

2.1 The Act of Describing

Hjelmslev considers the concept of “description” as an *indefinable* of the theory. In *Prolegomena* he states that this task can be completed only through an informal definition²⁴. According to him, the linguistics’ “making” should be congruent with the empirical principle, which means that the description must be done following three criteria: *coherence*, *exhaustivity*, and *simplicity*. These actions become a succession of ordered operations which compose a procedure.

The description is a procedure which focuses on the systematic aspects of a phenomenon. According to several semio-linguistic approaches the description allows us to discover the specificity of a *semantic use*, the general

²³ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message. An Inventory of Effects*, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

²⁴ Louis Hjelmslev, *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse*, 1943, En. tr. *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, *op. cit.*.

regularity of a genre, of an idiolect, and the stylistic peculiarity of a text²⁵. According to Zinna, semioticians can describe to have results which differ among them. Semioticians can describe in order to find out the *recursivity* of a language, of a narrative structure, of a genre, and of the style of a text²⁶.

2.1.1 The Analysis

According to Hjelmslev, before being described the object is a *subject* not yet analysed. From the procedural point of view, the first step to follow in doing the analysis is dividing the subject into two planes: the planes of expression and the planes of content.

Zinna introduces a distinction between the “level of manifestation” and the “level of immanence” to underline the difference between the descriptive and the analytic approaches. The level of manifestation is the level where the phenomena semioticians describe are placed. The level of immanence is the level where the regularities with which these phenomena become manifested. The description thus is a relation between a manifested phenomenon and a structure of immanence organization which the observed phenomenon is conduct back to²⁷.

The invention of electronic writing introduces manifestations that require new descriptive criteria. Zinna wonders what immanence we should attribute to these manifestations²⁸. According to him any fixed structure we can recover from the semiotics of the text – such as the tongue, the language, the discourse, the narrative structures the genres and the styles – will be pertinent for electronic writing too. These structures, however, could be different from those we find in the texts. Electronic writing is a new phenomenon which calls into question all the levels of immanence known and arranged in order to study texts.

3. The Electronic Text

Zinna argues that any object of writing finds its origin in the contact between a discourse and its material support²⁹. Writing is the contact point between an internal and intense memory of the subject and an objective and collective memory in the external and extense space of materials. He adds that:

²⁵ Cf. François Rastier, *Sens et textualité*, coll. Langue, linguistique, communication, Paris: Hachette, 1989. Georges Molinié, *Sémiostylistique*, coll. Formes sémiotiques, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998.

²⁶ Alessandro Zinna, *Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura*, Roma: Meltemi, 2004, p. 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁹ He is referring to “discourse” in a more ample meaning compared to the meaning that semiotics gives it, that is to say the intention of giving meaning: they can be footmarks, hunting draws, ornamental motives, or evolved writings able to reproduce the different level of phonetic, syllabic and lexical, and/or narrative acts of natural languages, as alphabetic, syllabic, pictogrammatic and ideogrammatic writings do.

in quanto tale, la scrittura esiste solo come *pensiero* della sua trasposizione su un supporto. Questo pensiero implica non soltanto un codice, ma un gesto e una tecnica di iscrizione. [...] Nonostante il problema del supporto si presenti anche nella lingua parlata, l'esistenza di una *materia* del supporto costituisce una proprietà specifica dell'oggetto di scrittura.³⁰

As said in the introduction, I will take into consideration the object in its whole, thus the support as well because the medium has always affected the creative product, but the electronic medium makes the text's dependence on the support deeper and easier. The support has intrinsic physical features such as for instance its resistancy, flexibility, consistency, weight. This physical substance makes writing an object, that is to say an element that has extension in space and duration in time.

One of the current peculiarities of electronic texts is actually their short life. We write to preserve; papyrus, codex, printed books maintain, are maintaining, will maintain our memory. E-texts in general and e-poems in particular do not live too long unless specifically archived. Sometimes the web site closes or the software, the format to read the e-text are changed and suddenly the e-text is "unreadable" – let's just think about all the texts saved in floppy format which are now obsolete³¹.

3.1 The "E-text" Theory

In this section I will summarize just a few of the most significant theories concerning electronic media and electronic writing. I will postpone until chapter 5 a deeper analysis of hypertextuality since even though hypertextual theory is very important it is true that hypertextual writing is just one of the possible electronic writings used by e-poetry – as we will see better as we go through this chapter and particularly in section 5.

The heritage of French Theory in approaching especially hypertextual writing is evident and well known. Some scholars of French Theory in the United-States define the thinkers of "post-modern" literature and philosophy as prophets of the internet era. However, as some other scholars have shown – among them François Cusset³² – the use of various French Theory concepts by assembling a few random quotes as scholars of French Theory in the United-States sometimes have done – decontextualizes the ideas of French Theory.

³⁰ Alessandro Zinna, *Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura*, op. cit., p. 89. "As such, writing exists only as a *thought* of its implementation on a support. This thought implies not only a code, but a gesture and a technique of inscribing. [...] Despite the problem of the support is also present in the spoken language, the existence of a *material* of the support is a specific property of the object of writing". The translation is mine. Italicised in the text".

³¹ This problem is so important that both the American Electronic Europe Organization and European Electronic Europe Organization have projects to archive electronic literary creations.

³² François Cusset, *French Theory. Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze et Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis*, Paris: Éditions de la Découverte, 2003.

Nevertheless it is undeniable that the construction of the internet was realized following the sociocultural environment that took place during the 60s. Some metaphors used in philosophy – like for instance the concept of the rhizome – were/are used also in the technological ambit. In 1969 the Arpanet – the world's first operational packet switching network, and the predecessor of the contemporary global Internet – was created by the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) of the United States Department of Defence (DoD). In 1969 Michel Foucault envisaged in his text *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* the death of the traditional concept of author and he talked about discursive “nappes”, whose the author would just be the initiator³³ (I will examine the authorship in the digital environment in chapter 7).

In the rest of this section I will introduce Aarseth's idea of a *cybertext* compared to Hayles' definition of *technotext*, Bootz's *transitoire observable*, and Wardrip-Fruin's designation of *surface* and of *tale-spin* process. On one hand, all these concepts try to identify and describe the electronic text, approaching this object from a common point of view: the medium, but on the other hand, each of them highlights different elements that seem to be important in the analysis of electronic poetry.

3.1.1 Aarseth's *Cybertext* and Hayles's *Technotext*

Aarseth coined the term ergodic literature to describe a literature where:

nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make a sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages.³⁴

Aarseth's cybertext theory is a prospective on textuality in general – as he himself states – and in fact he also analyses printed texts which, however, present *cybernetic* characteristics. According to him, the concept of cybertext is not limited to the study of electronic textuality, as the definition of ergodic does not refer only to electronic poetry (as I will show in chapter 4). In cybertext theory the text is seen as a machine producing and consuming signs consisting of the medium, the operator and the strings of signs³⁵. The strings of signs are divided into *textons* (strings of signs as they are in the text) and *scriptons* (strings of signs as they appear to the reader). *Textons* reveal *scriptons*. The way in which they do it is called a traversal function which is described as the combination of seven variables:

1. Dynamics: In a static text the scriptons are constant; in a dynamic text the content of the scriptons may change while the number of textons remains

³³ Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969, p. 34.

³⁴ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

- fixed (intratextonic dynamics), or the number (and content) of textons may vary as well. [...]
2. Determinability: This variable concerns the stability of traversal function; a text is determinate if the adjacent scriptons of every scripton are always the same; if not, the text is indeterminate. [...]
 3. Transiency: If the mere passing of the user's time causes scriptons to appear, the text is transient; if not, it is intransient. [...]
 4. Perspective: If the text requires the user to play a strategic role as a character in the world described by the text, then the text's perspective is personal; if not, it is impersonal. [...]
 5. Access: If all scriptons of the text are readily available to the user at all times, then the text is random access (typically the codex); if not, then the access is controlled. [...]
 6. Linking: A text may be organized by explicit links for the user to follow, conditional links that can only be followed if certain conditions are met, or by none of these (no links). [...]
 7. User function: Besides the interpretative function of the user, which is present in all texts, the use of some texts maybe be described in terms of additional functions: the explorative function, in which the user must decide which path to take, and the configurative function, in which scriptons are in part chosen or created by the user. If textons or traversal functions can be (permanently) added to the text, the user function is textonic. If all the decisions a reader makes about a text concern its meaning, then there is one user function, here called interpretation.³⁶

Aarseth's approach described deeply how cybertexts work, but as pointed out by Katherine N Hayles cybertext theories do not take into consideration the specificity of media. It is true that there are forms of cybertexts in different mediums - particularly in printed and digital texts, for instance Italo Calvino's *Il castello dei destini incrociati* is a perfect example of printed hypertext - but it is also true that the digital medium adds possibilities and characteristics that cannot be found in the printed texts According to Hayles, Aarseth's method is objectionable just because "it is blind to content and relatively indifferent to the specificity of media"³⁷. Aarseth's analysis focuses on theory and not on the content, but I do think that the content is necessary to understand the specificity of the medium, and how this specificity influences the content.

Katherine Hayles insists on the necessity of studying the specific materiality of the support or better she suggests the MSA - Media Specific Analysis. Hayles argues that a text's instantiation in a particular medium shapes it in ways that cannot be divorced from the meaning of its "words (and other semiotic components)"³⁸ and calls for the need to develop a theory that takes into consideration the medium as a crucial aspect of the content of a work. According to Hayles:

the physical attributes constituting any artefact are potentially infinite [...]. From this infinite array a technotext will select a few to foreground and work into its thematic concerns. Materiality thus emerges from interactions between physical properties

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-64.

³⁷ Katherine N. Hayles, *Electronic Literature: What Is This?*, South Bend : The University of Notre Dame Press, 2008, accessible online at: <http://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html> (accessed, May 20 2010).

³⁸ Katherine N. Hayles, *Writing Machine*, Cambridge and London: the MIT Press, 2002, p. 25.

and a work's artistic strategies. For this reason, materiality cannot be specified in advance, as if it pre-existed the specificity of the work.³⁹

Hayles defines technotext as "Literary works that strengthen, foreground, and thematize the connections between themselves as material artifacts and the imaginative realm of verbal/semiotic signifiers they instantiate"⁴⁰.

It can be argued that Aarseth's typology of media position offers us a richer map than Hayles's thematic schema of materiality, but for the purpose of this study the specificity of the medium appears to be one of the main points in order to understand how and if poetry is being *modified* by the "new" medium. Moreover, while Aarseth's typology provides also blank gaps that have to be filled in – a potential text that does not exist yet – the typology I will propose in this thesis takes into consideration only the existing different forms of electronic poetry. In order to do that I will consider the specificity of the digital medium and see if and how those characteristics mark the electronic poems.

The empirical study of e-poetry's actual content is fundamental in order to see if and how poetry is transformed by the electronic medium. The risk otherwise is to create an interesting theory that can approach different typologies of texts – like Aarseth's typology does – without completely *understanding* the specificity of the single typology. Taking into consideration the material aspect of the text and offering a descriptive and analytic approach to e-poems, close-readings, and a hermeneutic inquiry will allow scholars to better comprehend the novelty of e-poetry and will help the reader to become familiar with poems deeply different from poems she is used to reading. The empirical approach, thus, will provide results that might be the starting point for a new discussion on the theoretical level and will perhaps make e-poetry less enigmatic for those who are not strictly from the field.

In order to do that I will focus on the materiality of the electronic poem and how this materiality interacts with the reader. These two aspects will be fundamental aspects in creating my typology. Philippe Bootz offers a stricter approach than to electronic poetry. According to him:

the transitoire observable is the multimedia event that happens in the space-sound of the screen at the execution of the program of the piece. It is so named because this event constitutes "the transitory and observable state of the program in the process of being executed". It does not concern a technical state but a communicative and aesthetic state. [...] The transitoire observable changes within time. The same program produces a different transitoire observable when it is executed in a different technical context or on a different machine, and this is true even when it consists of just basic description of what it can be seen on the screen.⁴¹

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴¹ Philippe Bootz, "Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms", in Leonardo Electronic Almanac Vol. 14, No. 5-6, accessible online at: http://www.leoalmanac.org/journal/vol_14/lea_v14_n05-06/pbootz.html (accessed, May 31 2010).

3.1.2 Bootz's *Transitoire Observable*, and Wardrip-Fruin's Designation of *Surface* and of *Tale-Spin* Process

Bootz states that concepts as ergodic literature, cybertext and technotext are useful, but they do not allow to capture the digital poetry in its whole.

Their limitations are contained in their premises; they address literature by locating themselves exclusively from the point of view of the reader, as if he was the focal point of the work. This point of view might seem reasonable, and yet it has been proven that a number of works do not follow this mode, notably those of the French digital poets and, more loosely, most of the work produced by the writers and artists of the international collective *Transitoire observable*. In limiting themselves to this single point of view, the standard theories do not correctly describe the role that the machine plays, nor the exact purpose of reading. These theories consider the computer to be nothing more than an artifact that produces the visible component (that which is observed). For certain theoreticians, the semiotic layers and techniques overlap, as if the reader and the machine could form a new "cyberentity". This isn't correct in the case of digital poetry. The truth is at once more simple and more interesting: the technical artifact establishes a "semiotic gap" between two entities that can both be considered "the" text, but not from the same point of view, in fact not for the same actors. Digital poetry today explores the role of language in signs that use this gap, and which only exist thanks to it. In this case, programming can become a new condition, a new context for poetic creation.⁴²

Due to this "semiotic gap" Bootz divides the "text-auteur" from the "texte-à-voir":

The fact that the program cannot be seen by the reader once it is executed constitutes another important technical fact. What results is that the author of the program has an overarching view of the work whereas the reader can only have a local understanding of it. This difference would not be present in a non-computer programmed work which calls on the reader to execute its instructions. It is thus important to distinguish the "texte-auteur" ("author-text") from the "texte-à-voir". The "texte-auteur" is constituted by what is written by the author, in a format that he can understand and manipulate. It contains, in a programmed work, the program he writes himself in the programming language (and not in the compiled binary file) and the givens that the author adds. The "texte-à-voir" is the part of the *transitoire observable* that the reader considers "the" text. For the same *transitoire observable*, it could differ from one reader to the next by virtue of the archetypes and mental schemes brought into play by the reader.⁴³

As shown by Markku Eskelinen, in cybertextual terms this comes from Aarseth's distinction between textons and scriptons and the reader's lack of complete access to the former. Bootz's procedural model, in this case, matches with Aarseth's typology of textual communication⁴⁴.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Markku Eskelinen, *Travels in Cybertextuality: The Challenge of Ergodic Literature and Ludology to Literary Theory*, PhD dissertation, Faculty of Humanities, University of Jyväskylä, discussed on August 7 2009, p. 35.

In his essay *Understanding Digital Literature*⁴⁵, Wardrip-Fruin puts forward an alternative to Aarseth's "text, medium, and operator" triangle (see figures 2 and 3).

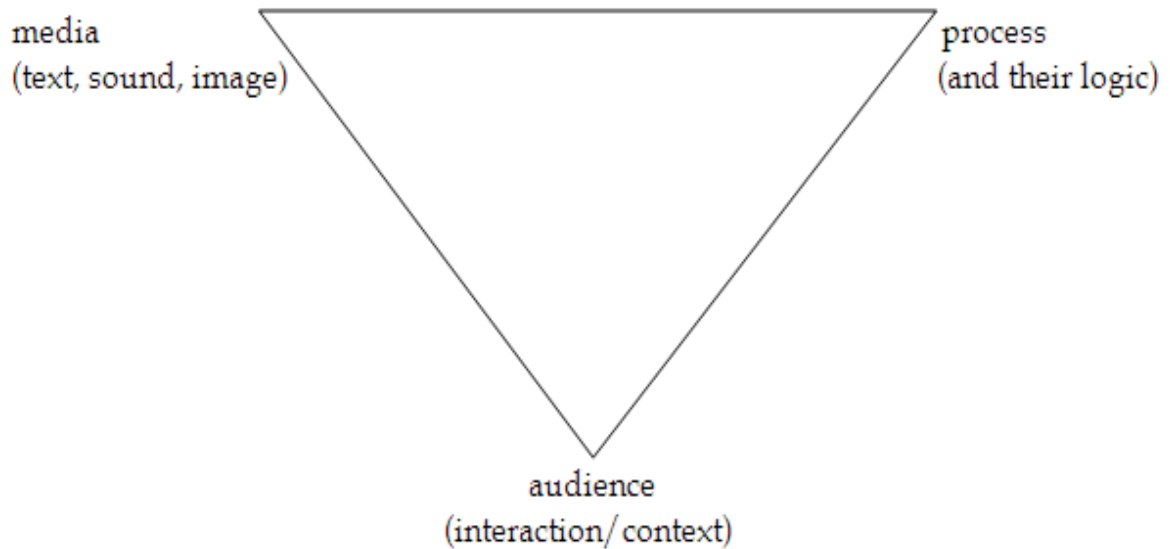


FIGURE 2: Wardrip-Fruin's triangle

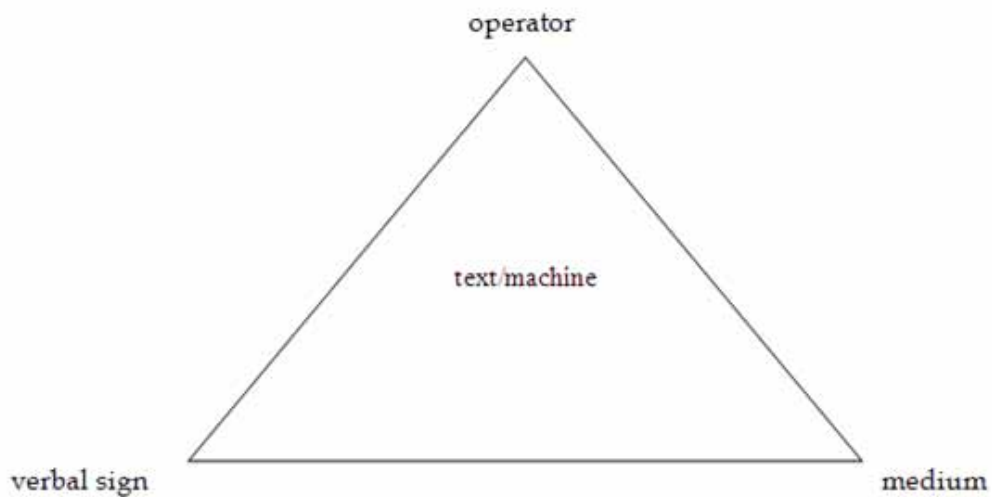


FIGURE 3: Aarseth's triangle - Textual Machine

Wardrip-Fruin explains his model of digital literature starting from his idea of surface (and he visualizes a model of digital literature, see figure 4).

⁴⁵ Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "Understanding Digital Literature", April 2005, accessible online at: www.hyperfiction.org/talks/nwf-diglit-april05.pdf (accessed, May 29 2009).

All the works of digital literature are somehow presented to their audience – whatever on the teletypes, in web browser windows, through immersive installations, or by other means. If the audience is able to interact with the work, the means for this are also part of the work. I will call this site of presentation and possible (interaction) the work’s surface. It may be as simple as a generic personal computer, consist of a large space or dizzying number of devices, or even take unexpected form (e.g, The Impermanence Agent makes all web browsing part of its interaction surface).⁴⁶

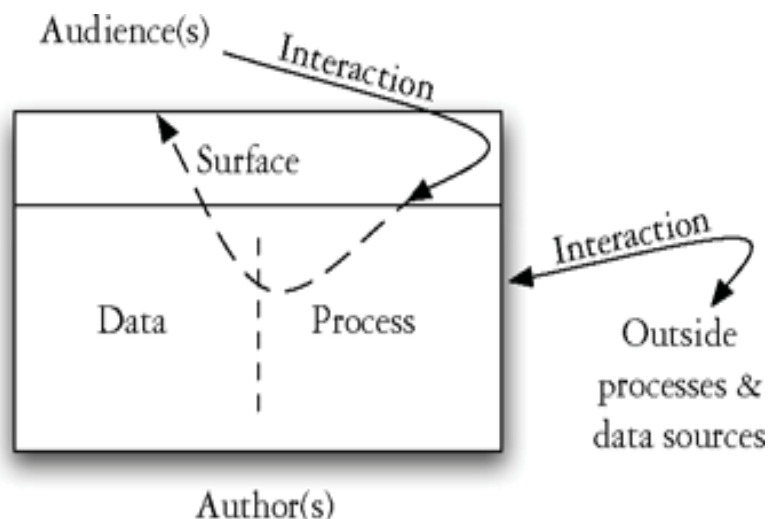


FIGURE 4: Noah Wardrip-Fruin, model of digital literature

He then explains his idea of interaction as “a change to the state of the work, for which the work was designed, that comes from outside the work. Given this the audience is not the only possible source of interaction”.⁴⁷ He finally produces another more complex model of digital literature, where he adds the concept of mumble/tale-spin processes⁴⁸.

Wardrip-Fruin proposes a model for the elements of *Tale-Spin* and *Mumble*.

⁴⁶ Noah Wardrip-Fruin, “The Tale-Spin Effect: Toward an acknowledgement of process in digital literature”, *Media-space Journal* issue 1/2008, accessible online at: <http://media-space.org.au/journal/issues/issue1/wardrip/wardrip.html> (accessed, May 28 2009).

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Tale-Spin* is the first major story generation program and it was made by James Meehan in 1976. It made the leap from assembling stories out of pre-defined bits (like the pages of a Choose Your Own Adventure book) to generating stories via carefully crafted processes that operate at a fine level on story data. In *Tale-Spin*'s case, the processes simulate character reasoning and behaviour, while the data defines a virtual world inhabited by the characters. As a result, while altering one page of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* leaves most of its story material unchanged, altering one behaviour rule or fact about the world can lead to wildly different *Tale-Spin* fictions. *Tale-Spin* can generate fictions with or without audience interaction. When generating with interaction, *Tale-Spin* begins by asking the audience some questions to determine the initial state of the world, especially the characters present in the story. Storytelling begins from these initially-established facts, with the audience consulted as new facts are needed to move the story forward. For example, once the characters are known and the world is established, *Tale-Spin* needs to know the identity of the main character:

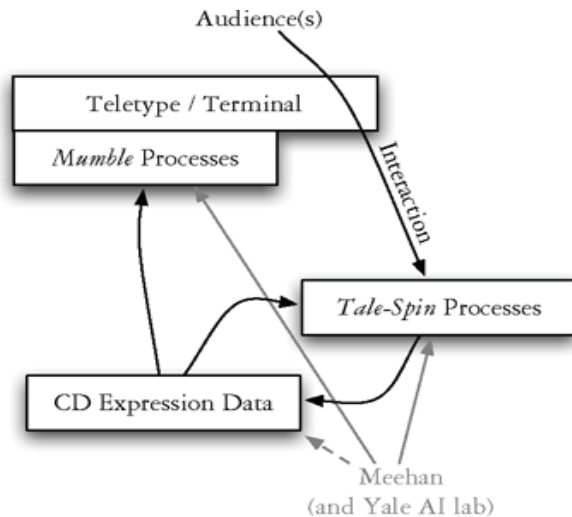


FIGURE 5: Noah Wardrip-Fruin, the elements of *Tale-Spin* and *Mumble*

As demonstrated by Markku Eskelinen Wardrip-Fruin's *Tale-spin* processes correspond to Aarseth's simulation engine in which "the course of action is decided, based on the user's input, the cybertext's idiosyncratic rules, and the current state of the simulated world"⁴⁹. Eskelinen adds that Wardrip-Fruin's "CD Expression DATA corresponds to Aarseth's database, *Mumble* processes correspond to the role of the representation engine"⁵⁰ which according to Aarseth presents "the results of the event to the user by providing a personal prospective on the simulated world"⁵¹. Finally Eskelinen identifies Wardrip-Fruin's Teletype/Terminal as being Aarseth's interface, pointing out that the only thing that Wardrip-Fruin adjoined is the author.

According to Eskelinen this model seems to be more useful for literary analysis and creation than for literary theory, since it focuses on the importance of the underlying processes normally hidden from the audience which makes this model more interesting for our purpose.

Both Bootz and Wardrip-Fruin are particularly interested in the programmed/programmable level of electronic texts. And this can be explained also because of their interest in generative writing. Particularly Bootz has experimented generative poetry, and he has also co-edited since 1988 the review *alire* which is considered as the oldest digital-review in Europe. *Alire* has been particularly devoted to generative poetry. As we will see in section 3.3, Wardrip-Fruin thinks that it is always necessary to study and consider the process (the algorithm) of electronic texts. Even though desirable, however, this aspect does not seem to be so relevant for many forms of e-poetry. The majority of the texts analysed in this thesis require neither a deep understanding of coding nor an analysis of the process in order to be *appreciated*. On the other hand it would be important to also consider the process as part of the text as far as generative poems are concerned. In not considering the machine in the

⁴⁹ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁵⁰ Markku Eskelinen, *Travels in Cybertextuality: The Challenge of Ergodic Literature and Ludology to Literary Theory*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁵¹ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

analysis of generative poetry I am aware that I omit an important aspect, but as already stated, my goal is to make electronic poetry *more readable* for both scholars interested into the subject and curious readers. The main interest and purpose of this study is to focus on the mutation of poetry, on the changes of its form, its structure, its rhetorical figures and tropes, and so on. And in order to do that – even if desirable – the analyses of the process does not appear to be necessary.

3.2 Technologization of the Expression Plan

The phoné is the designated unit of speech and spoken language: words must be articulated into the material of sound waves vocally or instrumentally⁵². Obviously this is not the same when we consider the materials of written language. These materials are the result of a choice, more or less arbitrary, varying according to the knowledge and technical skills of a period or culture, but also depending on the kind of writing that one wants to produce. For this we can say that they are the result of the technologization of the expression plan.

This choice between different materials of expression represents a system of the writing support. Like all elements organized in a system of alternatives, the choice of the support that best suits connotations or genre of the writing object, translates into an extra sense. The value is then chosen according to the repertoire of alternatives that are available at one particular moment in the cultural history. Deciding nowadays to write on a roll of papyrus adds a value of eccentricity that it didn't have to the ancient Egyptians.

The support is chosen according to the kind of discourse that one wants to produce. The material support, the implicit intention to the genre one wants to produce, as well as the gesture and the technique, should be imagined as three constraints that cross each other and determine one another. What one wants to express passes first through a genre of expression: religious, artistic, epistolary, ritual; and through of a type of substance: rocks, clay, textiles, and so on, which are arranged according to the code of the written language: graphic, pictorial, ideographic, syllabic or alphabetic. Since the code regulates the direction of the writing process, there are writings that develop horizontally (from left to right and vice versa) and writings that develop vertically (from the top to the bottom and vice versa)⁵³.

⁵² The technologization of the spoken language is in progress: it is an artificial voice produced by a synthesis of impulses arriving to the vocal cords, to use in cases of the articulatory apparatus' lacerations.

⁵³ It can be observed that there is a relationship between the writing type and the writing direction: the alphabetic writing are oriented on the horizontal axis, from left to right, the syllabic writing on the horizontal direction but they prefer the other way round from right to left, finally ideograms prefer the vertical axis. Cf. Derrick de Kerckhove, *Brainframes, Technology, Mind and Business*, Utrecht: Bosch & Keuning, 1991.

3.3 The Double Act of the Technological Writing

In addition to graphic or pictorial material, writing objects present a substrate that comes from their support and, as such, gives it an enunciative permanence outside the deixis – outside the “here-now” of the production.

There are two theories of utterance: an utterance of the spoken word and an utterance of the written word. The first is based on a combination of “I-here-now” of the illocutory practice, while the second is founded in the assumption of the producing existence. This act is lost in the past.

The writing object requires an utterance of the speech and an utterance of the support: the “I-here-now” of the discourse hardly ever coincides with the “I-here-now” of the support. A double act: the meaning’s articulation starting from the constraints of language, and the support’s articulation, as the material organization of the substrate of writing. The preparation and organization of this support constitute the conception of the writing space. The utterance of the text is taking place in this space.

During history the act of inscribing – that is the origin of writing – has evolved from the slowness of human gesture to the entrusted speed execution of the mechanical gesture. The typographical fonts – a gesture of mechanical writing – have standardized what, at the origin of writing, was the individual act of inscribing. The consequence of this transformation – the machine printing of fonts – was the deletion of subjective traces due to the manual production of the signifier. The individual act is overcome by the font’s standardization and their arrangement on a homogeneous space⁵⁴.

Historically, this automation introduced by printing marked the end of the medieval copyists and lead us to technological reproducibility in large quantities. However, this mechanization of writing did not change the basic condition of the reading act that has been changed by the electronic medium.

After Gutenberg, writing is by definition a series of movable fonts printed on a support which fixes permanently its textual features. Electronic writing allows – for instance – to modify page layout and to have mobile fonts.

According to Zinna, being “movable” is one of the main characteristics of electronic writing. He describes four kinds of mobility:

- a) an internal mobility; due to the composition’s qualities. such as the import or the displacement of some or all its constitutive parts – text blocks, images, graphic elements - ; and b) an external mobility linked to the possibility of sending files away;
- c) a composition’s mobility between documents that belong to different semiotic systems; and d) the possibility of rewriting the supports.⁵⁵

Electronic writing behaves – sometimes – as an interactive object . Some electronic texts are at the same time objects of signification and object of action. This characteristic is also true for some printed texts such as for instance Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* or Saporta’s *Composition No 1* – just to

⁵⁴ Graphology, not surprisingly, studies the manual variation’s ways of the fonts and is based on their distribution’s and concatenation’s mode on the inscribing space.

⁵⁵ Alessandro Zinna, *Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura*, op. cit., p. 180.

identify two of the most famous interactive printed works. However, the kind of interaction allowed by the electronic medium differs from the printed one. In both media – printed and electronic – the action the reader is required to perform brings meaning to the text. But in electronic texts sometimes the reader does not just need to be active – solely to perform some actions on the text – but to be “inventive” and discover what action is necessary to read the text, and finally she can be asked to co-participate to the creative act, as in the collaborative e-poems. The reader’s role must be taken into the consideration in the study of these texts because her function is changing⁵⁶.

Electronic writing also opens up other questions such as the importance of the code in the electronic creations. Where is the border between text and code? Is the technique part of the message in electronic literature? Do we also need to study the code? What we need to read when we read electronic literature? According to Wardrip-Fruin we need to read both data (words, images, and sounds) and process (algorithms and calculations carried out by the electronic work) in order to interpret and understand digital literature⁵⁷. It can be argued that one does not need to know how to use the different painting techniques (watercolour, fresco, oil, and so on) in order to appreciate a painting. Raine Koskimaa points out three main scenarios the reader can be faced with:

1. There are many works for which you do not need programming knowledge at all; all you need to know is the basic usage of the computer (like using a web browser) to be able to read and enjoy the work;
2. There are works that only require installing;
3. There are works that require more profound understanding of the software environment. These include, for example, poems written in such a way that they work as executable code in certain programming language. These work can be categorized as a literary branch of “software art” or “code art.”⁵⁸

Koskimaa’s scenario clearly shows us that the majority of e-poems do not require any particular programming knowledge, which seems to suggest that no advanced computer skills are required to enjoy these texts. Moreover, different programming language can give the same aesthetic and poetic result. However, for researchers and scholars it will be desirable to better understand the code in order to be able to study certain e-texts deeper, but there is the risk that this knowledge can and will create a barrier in the study of electronic literature. As will be mentioned while analysing generative texts a good knowledge of the process would be desirable, but even without it, it appears to be possible to enjoy them (see particularly chapter 7 sections 2.1, 2.2., and 2.3, and chapter 6, sections 6 and 9).

⁵⁶ Cf. also Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, *op. cit.*.

⁵⁷ Noah Wardrip-Fruin, “Learning to Read Digital Literature”, in Roberto Simanowski, Jürgen Schäffer, and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Reading Moving Letters*, Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010, pp. 249-259.

⁵⁸ Raine Koskimaa, “Approaches to Digital Literature: Temporal Dynamics and Cyborg Authors”, in Roberto Simanowski, Jürgen Schäffer, and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Reading Moving Letters*, Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010, pp. 129-143.

Moreover, taking into consideration also the process could distract from the main purpose of this thesis which is to analyse the final product of the text more than the production of it.

4. The Author, the Reader and, the Text

In the Western tradition authors have a duty: authors are responsible for what they say and write, the concept of intellectual property also give rise to issues of copyright and plagiarism. They also have a function. The author function, however, has changed with regard to the history of literary criticism and to the content of the work.

There was a time when a literary work could be read without recourse to some knowledge of who the author was. The history of literary studies since early times is replete with stories, folk tales, and epics that had no authors. Moreover, the kind of author called "the poet" was already for Plato not a trustworthy person. In *Ion* Socrates says that "the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him"⁵⁹. Successively, the work and its author were one thing. In the 20th century, the author is viewed from yet different angles.

During the last century different approaches to the text have been adopted, particularly focusing on the text and on the reader. The first one puts the prime focus on the text which has to be analysed with established criteria, the second one focuses on the importance of the reader and their individual, subjective response to the text.

From the New Critics, that stressed the creative literary qualities of the "primary material", to the Russian formalists (such as Roman Jakobson), to structuralism and post-structuralism, to deconstruction, every critical theory produced its own object of study, focusing on the formal aspects of the text. The modern hermeneutic inquiry was elaborated by Friedrich Schleiermacher⁶⁰. By emphasizing the role of the reader in the production of text's meaning, Schleiermacher prepared the way for later theoreticians of reading, particularly those focusing on the reader-response and reception.

In his seminal essay "Linguistics and Poetics"⁶¹, Jakobson defines the "poetic function" of language as that which promotes "the palpability of signs", which is to say that poetic language calls attention to its own medium. The literary text invites the reader to look at it. To Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault the author is dead. According to them, it is literature that creates the author. Besides, Foucault redefines the author-function as a set of criteria: "a standard level of quality", "a certain field of conceptual or theoretical

⁵⁹ Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics" (1958), in *Style in Language*, Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960, pp. 350-377.

⁶⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) philosopher.

⁶¹ Plato, *Ion*, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, London: Penguin Classic, 2000, 14- 15.

coherence”, “a stylistic uniformity”, and “a definitive historical figure”⁶². The author is no longer a person. Barthes questions the idea that a text can be attributed to any single author. He states, in his famous essay “Death of the Author”⁶³, that “it is language which speaks, not the author”.

What is the role of the author and the reader in an electronic poem? What action does the reader of an electronic text have to do in order to study, interpret, and *understand* it. Umberto Eco suggests that in electronic texts the abundance of interpretations depends both on the initiative of the reader, but also on the physical mobility of the text itself⁶⁴. So the intrinsic nature of the digital text, the technologization of the expression plan, generates different reading paths.

The artistic (and cultural) production of the last century can be read as a weakening of the concept of the artist as the only person responsible of the work’s meaning. Since the 1950s, in fact, we have observed the growth of two great trends that have followed the *upheaval* brought about by those technologies, related to the development of computer science. On the one hand, being interested in a new form of communication that is breaking with the mass-media model, a tendency that seeks to make the spectator take part in the development of the work appeared, by altering both the work’s and author’s function; on the other hand, a tendency insisting more on the *production* than on the *product* and trying to deconstruct the creation’s process in order to make visible the structure, the grammar. The first trend seeks to create new relationships with the audience, the second one focuses on the creative practice.

What does it mean to associate the spectator with the creation? At the beginning, it meant to bring the closer work and spectator. According to Frank Popper in art the essence is no longer the object itself, but the dramatic confrontation between the spectator and the perceptive situation⁶⁵. Finally, can we suppose that the “spectator/reader”, called to participate in the work’s *writing process*, could become herself a program of the work?

Particularly in chapter 7 I will focus on the relationship between the author, the text, and the reader in electronic poetry. For the moment let’s briefly see what action the reader can do to the electronic text.

⁶² Michel Foucault, «Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur ?» (1969), *Dits et Écrits*, Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

⁶³ Roland Barthes, «La mort de l'auteur» (1968), *Le bruissement de la langue*, Paris: Seuil, 1984.

⁶⁴ Umberto Eco, “Vegetal and Mineral Memory: the Future of Books”, 2003, accessible online at: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/665/bo3.htm> (accessed, July 2 2006), now accessible at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20051124224704/http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/665/bo3.htm> (accessed, June 13 2010).

⁶⁵ Frank Popper, «Art action et participation», in *L'artiste et la créativité aujourd'hui*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1980.

5. The Reader's Action

Electronic writing is characterized by being interactive. Actually, not all electronic texts are interactive – as we will see in chapter 4 – but allowing the reader to manipulate the text is one of the main possibilities that the electronic writing offers to its reader. According to different forms of the expression different action are available to the reader. For instance, with hypertext the reader explores the text, she decides her own path through the iconographic and textual material. Like this the reading practice – described by Peter Stockinger as a cognitive activity of textual selection and production of information⁶⁶– does not seem merely to be reduced to a mental process but according to Alexandra Saemmer “elle laisse parfois des traces matérielles”⁶⁷.

5.1 The Digital Reading Practice

The critics in the last decades have underlined the strict collaboration between author and reader and have ended up with talking about “textual co-production”; sometimes in the electronic text this co-production seems to become palpable. According to Saemmer “dans certain nombre d’approches critiques des phénomènes de lecture numérique, les frontières entre *écriture* et *lecture* ne sont donc plus tracées avec exactitude: l’hypertexte serait non pas à lire mais à écrire”⁶⁸.

Before the hypertext became a new structured tool to spread knowledge, poets, writers and philosophers had already thought of texts that could be opened to the reader’s interaction. In *S/Z*, Ronald Barthes defines the reader as a “producteur du texte”⁶⁹. George Landow uses these new definitions of the reading practice as the starting point for his theory on hypertext⁷⁰. Landow and other critics, like for instance J. Bolter, have probably been too enthusiastic and too reductive in knitting together those theoretical thoughts of last century and these technological innovations but the transformation of the reader’s and author’s roles demonstrated by the critical theory and philosophy needs to be taken into consideration when speaking about a new reading practice on a new medium.

According to Umberto Eco – among others – hypertext is not simply a knowledge system but a “meta-knowledge” system, since by chains click on the links the reader constructs her own meaning – path out of all the other

⁶⁶ Peter Stockinger, “Auteur, textualité électronique, et édition multi-support”, symposium intervention *L’auteur face aux logiques de l’édition multi-supports: quelle évolution?*, Université Paris 13, 20 juin 2002.

⁶⁷ Alexandra Saemmer, *Matières textuelles sur support informatique*, Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007, p. 33

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶⁹ Ronald Barthes, *S/Z*, Paris : Seuil, 1970.

⁷⁰ George P. Landow, *Hypertext 2.0, the Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992 and 1997.

meaning-paths built by other authors. Eco points out also that there is a difference between texts that can be produced and modified infinitely and texts already produced that can suggest infinite interpretations but they keep on being physically finite texts⁷¹.

Hypertext author/theorist Michael Joyce identifies two typologies of hypertexts: “exploratory hypertexts” or “constructive hypertexts”. Exploratory hypertexts provide as navigational devices that assist the user in finding and collating information. Joyce describes constructive hypertexts as those that:

require a capability to act: to create, to change, and to recover particular encounters within the developing body of knowledge [...]. These encounters, like those in exploratory hypertexts, are maintained as versions, i.e., trails, paths, webs, notebooks, etc.; but they are versions of what they are becoming, a structure for what does not yet exist.⁷²

The majority of critics, however, agree that hypertext requires a more active reader: “hypertext gives the reader a more active role than is possible with books”⁷³. Suzanne Bertrand-Gastaldy goes further and says that: “le lecteur peut devenir non seulement très actif, mais aussi très créative et à participer à cette ‘porosité’ croissante entre lecteurs et auteurs”⁷⁴. Eventually, Alexandra Saemmer wonders if the activation of hyperlinks is still a reading practice, or if it isn't already part of the writing practice:

Considérant la mobilité de cette frontière sur support numérique, il faut donc se demander si la navigation (l'activation des liens hypertexte) elle-même est encore une activité de lecture, ou si elle relève déjà de l'écriture.⁷⁵

We will see in chapter 5 how some hypertexts like for instance Kendall's *Penetration*⁷⁶ show materially the trace constructed by clicking on the hypertext.

Electronic writing, however, experiments with different kinds of writing, thus the reader in the digital environment does not only “read” hypertext/hypermedia, but also other forms of creation which reveal dynamic elements.

⁷¹ Umberto Eco, “Vegetal and Mineral Memory: the Future of Books”, *op. cit.*.

⁷² Michael Joyce, “Siren shapes: Exploratory and constructive hypertexts”, *Academic Computing* 3(4), pp. 10-42, p.11.

⁷³ George P. Landow, *Hypertext 2.0, the Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁷⁴ Suzanne Bertrand-Gastaldy, “Des lectures sur papier aux lectures numériques: quelles mutations?”, conference paper presented at *Publications et Lectures numériques: problématiques et enjeux*, in the ACFAS' conference *Science et savoir, Pour qui? Pourquoi?*, Université Laval, Québec 13-17 May 2002, p. 10.

⁷⁵ Alexandra Saemmer, *Matières textuelles sur support informatique*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁷⁶ Robert Kendall, *Penetration*, Eastgate System, 2002, accessible online at: <http://www.eastgate.com/Penetration/penetration.htm> (accessed, June 10 2010).

5.2 The User's Position

In his work on cybertextuality, Markku Eskelinen advances a typology focusing on the user's position in relation to the text. The user's position is determined in relation to other users, their physical location, body movements, and the user's point of view with respect to the scripton space:

- a) **Autonomy.** If the user's possibilities to use and realise the text are completely independent of other users (either previous or simultaneous ones or both) his or her position is independent; if not it is dependent. *TinyMud* and *Norisbo* (Strand 1992), included in Aarseth's selection, exemplify the latter position. *Moby Dick* (also in Aarseth's selection) the former.
- b) **Mobility.** Some texts such as *Her Long Black Hair* (Cardiff 2005) and *Astray in Deimos* (Kac 1992) require body movement from the user as a necessary condition for their realisation, while many others do not. Thus there are two basic positions: stationary and non-stationary.
- c) **Point of view.** This variable describes whether the user is able to see the entire presentation area or scripton space at will (omnipresent) or whether he has to change and adjust his prospective in a non-trivial way to do so (vagrant). In David Knoebel's *The Wheels* (1999) the user has to zoom in and out of three-dimensional scripton space he can't see in full (except in the beginning), while the readers of *Moby Dick* will have the page (as a scripton space) in their full view all the time.
- d) **Positioning.** This variable describes whether the user's possibilities to use and access the text require him to be in a specific physical location (localized text) or not (not-localized text). Some texts require the user to be in a specific location (such as a CAVE or Central Park) to access and realise the text while others do not (you can read most books everywhere).⁷⁷

5.2.1 The "User's" Position and Electronic Poetry

1. **Autonomy.** In electronic poetry - as we shall see better in the next few chapters - the user is invariant, the reader often needs to interact with the text, but any one reader is not dependent on any other reader. There are, however, some exceptions: collaborative e-poetry and many installations are examples of this case. *Re-read*⁷⁸ by Simon Biggs is an installation that has its own realisation only thanks to the "reader's" interaction, but many readers can interact simultaneously; in collaborative poetry the reader becomes author altering the text she has just read, thus the text depends on previous readers.

2. **Mobility.** The gesture of the hand touching the text through the mouse is the most common and simplest body movement that e-poetry makes use for the realisation of texts, such as for instance in Daniela Calisi's *Stillicidio* (see chapter 3), but many installations require/allow more complex body

⁷⁷ Markku Eskelinen *Travels in Cybertextuality: The Challenge of Ergodic Literature and Ludology to Literary Theory*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁷⁸ Simon Biggs, *Re-read*, 2009, Installation presented at the 4th International Conference of the ELO (Electronic Literature Organization), *Archive and Innovate*, Brown University, Providence, 3-6 June 2010.

movements as in Biggs' *Re-read* or Camille Utterback's *Text Rain*⁷⁹, which responds to the users' movements.

3. Point of view. Many e-poems do not allow the reader to see the scripton space. Some of them require the reader to zoom or to rotate the text or to navigate through it as in Chico Marinho's *Palavrador* (see chapter 6).

4. Positioning. E-poetry requires a computer (and often internet access) to read it, or CAVE/museum/gallery/and so on if it is an installation. Nowadays however, thanks to notebooks (and Wi-Fi) and now also I-Pad it is possible to access most e-poetry everywhere.

5.3 The Reader and the Levels of Interaction

According to Alessandro Zinna there are eight interaction levels in what he calls electronic documents (electronic texts). He identifies the interaction levels of electronic documents as those that establish the *qualitative* interaction of the document. He distinguishes between the interaction's level and the interaction's extent which refers to the *quantity* of links for each electronic document in its whole⁸⁰.

Zinna describes the different actions the reader can/has to do with the electronic document in order to make it up.

- a) the reader/user can click on the links that are presented in a linear way; in this case she advances in the only possible reading direction;
- b) the reader/user clicks on links that give her alternative paths; in this case her role is a bit different compared with the previous one since she can decide the reading direction according to different alternatives;
- c) she can write some blocks of text in the spaces arranged for that, for instance as commentary; in this case her role is closer to an author's role;
- d) she can erase some parts of the document; also in this case her role is similar to an author's role;
- e) she can create links between two blocks of text; in this case she creates associations between different parts;
- f) she can erase links between two different blocks of text; in this case she denies any possible associations between the parts;
- g) she can create text and links, but not erase them;
- h) she can create and erase both text and links; in this case her role is the same as the author.

As pointed out by Zinna it is only under those extreme forms – which are still very rare – that interactivity makes the reader to be a true co-author of the electronic document⁸¹.

⁷⁹ Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv, *Text Rain*, 1999. A short video of the work is accessible online at: <http://www.camilleutterback.com/> (accessed, October 13 2006).

⁸⁰ Alessandro Zinna, *Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura*, op. cit., p. 225.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

As regards electronic poetry, the two first forms are the more common. The last form is rare but represents a new experiment in the field of electronic poetry (and also literature): collaborative poetry (see chapter 7).

6. Typology of E-poems

In this section I will advance a possible typology of electronic poetry. As shown in the introduction the term electronic poetry shelters different forms of poetry fashioned from our digital support under its umbrella: from hypertextual poetry to installations, from generative poetry to poetry which has images and sound in the text, from animated poetry to video-poetry. Even though sharing the same digital medium, the spectrum of possibilities is vast.

Other typologies already exist. According to Loss Pequeño Glazier hypertext, visual/kinetic poetry and works in programmable media are the “three principal forms of electronic textuality”⁸². This typology is the most common categorization of e-poetry, but it is too general and it does not really take into consideration some innovative aspects of e-poetry. However, many theorists use this typology to describe e-poetry subgenres.

Mary-Laure Ryan in her article “Narrative and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality” compares what we would call electronic literature (e-poetry, hypertext fiction, and so on) to video-games, and she gives a typology for e-poetry (“code poetry, visual poetry, experiments in computerized text generation”):

[i]n digital textuality, the North Pole is represented by hypertext fiction, code poetry, visual poetry, experiments in computerized text generation, browser art, and theoretical fiction, while the Tropics are invaded by the millions of people who spend a large part of their lives playing computer games [...].⁸³

In the above categorizations, nevertheless, phenomenological aspects such as the modes and nature of interaction with the e-text are not a distinctive feature (and besides not only hypertextual text are interactive). The putting together visual and kinetic poetry – as in Glazier’s typology – is a practice derived from avant-garde tradition, kinetic in this typology seems to substitute for in some way concrete poetry – particularly because it was concrete poetry which was the first poetry to put movement in its creations, thus becoming kinetic. However, visual poetry can be also connected to hypertextual/hypermedia construction (see chapter 6), and both visual and kinetic poetry can be either interactive or not. Ultimately programmable media (or generative poetry) involves interesting questions such as the figure of the author (see chapter 7,

⁸² Loss Pequeño Glazier *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2001.

⁸³ Mary-Laure Ryan, “Narrative and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality”, in *Dichtung-digital*, 1/2005, accessible online at: <http://www.brown.edu/Research/dichtung-digital/2005/1/Ryan/> (accessed, May 31 2009).

dedicated to generative and collaborative poetry due to the fact they pose interesting questions in the realm of author-text-reader), but as far as their forms of expression these e-poems reproduce characteristics already present in the other typologies, for instance a generative poem can be kinetic.

I shall consider two aspects of the digital text that seem to me particularly interesting: the question of time and the modes and nature of interaction of the reader. It is true that also the printed word allows the reader to “interact” with the text, but it is also true that the interaction allowed by the digital medium is of a different kind entirely and that it can push forward this kind of experimentation – it can allow the reader to write/erase/rewrite parts of the text, or to become part of the text like for instance in Simon Biggs’ *Re-read*, in which the reader can physically get into the text, and see her image in the work.

The question of time is an innovation that the digital medium introduces to the reading practice and puts electronic literature closer to the movies in this respect. According to Markku Eskelinen:

reading time is not only unverifiable (and conceptually useless) in print fiction, but there are also no effective. [...] As digital text can be programmed to react to the reader way they are being read and to set conditions upon the reader and the reading process, a new dimension of constrained reading and programmed has opened up.⁸⁴

Print literature cannot effectively control reading time whereas electronic literature can be programmed to effectively control reading time (see for instance *La Rossa Parola* in chapter 4).

6.1 E-poems: Segments-based E-poetry, Sequence-based E-poetry, Hypertextual E-poetry, and Hybrid E-poetry

E-poems classified around texts built on the concept of the link we shall call hypertextuality; and around digital poems composed of morphological elements which, we specify to be: a) segments which are morphological elements without an inner clock, such as text blocks, images, and so on, or b) sequences which are characterized, on the contrary, by some inner clock, such as video, animation, game-worlds and so on⁸⁵.

I am using semiotic morphological categories⁸⁶ without ignoring previous possible categories, like kinetic text. Aarseth provides a quite similar distinction: “transient text” (user-controlled times) and “intransient text” (text-controlled time), but I have decided to use semiotics which already offers us a

⁸⁴ Markku Eskelinen *Travels in Cybertextuality: The Challenge of Ergodic Literature and Ludology to Literary Theory*, op. cit., p. 155.

⁸⁵ Alessandro Zinna, *Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura*, op. cit., p. 210.

⁸⁶ For a first possible typology of electronic poetry see also: Giovanna di Rosario, “Hyperpoetry on the net: derive e approcci”, in Alessandro Zinna (ed.), *Gli oggetti di scrittura II*, Urbino: CISL, 2004, (336-337-338/F), pp. 12-21. Matteo Gilebbi, “La testualità differita”, in Alessandro Zinna (ed.), *Gli oggetti di scrittura II*, op.cit., pp.31-40. And Carla Impagliazzo, “La rossa parola”, in Alessandro Zinna (ed.), *Gli oggetti di scrittura II*, op. cit., pp. 22-24.

vast terminology (which perhaps needs to be adapted a bit when applied to electronic texts). Moreover Aarseth's typology – in its whole – produces 576 different combinations, which all differ from each other. It is certainly true that his typology is more accurate and that it takes into consideration all possible nuances that the electronic medium can offer to text; however, as it has been noticed, it can also be problematic since it introduces around 600 different text forms.

In my typology, I have decided, also, to add a sub-type of sequence-based e-poetry, since some e-poems allow the reader to manipulate, after a fashion, the order of the sequence(s) of the e-text: I propose to call this kind of e-writing “random access sequences”, as opposed to the strictly sequential nature of regular elements. I am using computer science's terminology where random means “accessed in any order”, and not in the layman's sense of, say, “chaotically” or “all over the place”. Then, there is one last type of text which I have called hybrid e-poetry because these e-poems exhibit the characteristics of more than one type.

By introducing the notion of ordered time into the text, sequenced-based e-poems are thus also seen to be kinetic. Kinetic poetry is normally the category used to identify poetry which exhibits movement in and of its construction. The word “kinetic” derives from Greek *kinetikos* “moving, putting in motion” - from *kinetos* “moved” verbal adjective of *kinein* “to move”. The word kinetic first referred to art to designate that art which contains moving parts or depends on motion for its effect. Visual and Concrete poetry experiments (see chapter 1) have introduced motion to poetry too.

Heretofore there has been no clear distinction between texts in which the motion is activated by the reader/user and texts in which it is automatic. According to our approach to e-poetry, however, this distinction is important.

The fact that the text can be altered, is one of the characteristics of digital literature in general and digital poetry in particular. In kinetic works poems are transformed under the reader eyes due to movement of and within the text. This motion proposes new meanings to the reader and creates new figures and tropes. Even though not all segments-based e-poetry can be considered kinetic, some of them are built on the idea of movement, for instance Aya, Karpinska's cubes (see chapter 3, the motion is activated and stopped by the reader and controlled by her). The typology thus contains⁸⁷:

- a) Segments-based e poetry: built on morphological elements without an inner clock, they can be either static or dynamic, if dynamic the motion requires the reader's action.
- b) Sequence-based e-poetry: built on morphological elements with an inner clock, they are always kinetic texts. Because of this inner clock they exert a control over the reading-time.
- c) Hypertextual e-poetry: built on links, this kind of e-poetry is derived from the hypertext genre.

⁸⁷ Our phenomenology corresponds to the division of some chapters within the thesis (chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6).

- d) Hybrid e-poetry: this category exhibits the characteristics of more than one type of e-poetry.

6.2 Ergodic Time

According to Markku Eskelinen's preliminary typology of ergodic time there are at least ten categories of cybertextual temporality⁸⁸:

1. Permanence. If the existence of the ergodic work is temporally limited, then it is temporary. Otherwise it is permanent. There's also a third possibility: the ergodic text can be partly temporary and partly permanent.
2. Hybridity. If the ergodic text occupies only one genre position in cybertextual typology it is non-hybrid, otherwise it is hybrid. There are two elementary types of hybrids: successive (consecutive phases of different genre positions) and simultaneous (having at least two genre positions available all the time as in *Hegirascope*). The time is served either concurrently or consecutively.
3. Response time to the whole text. It is either unlimited, limited and more than what is needed, or limited and less than what is needed. The third possibility means that the text can be read or used only partly.
4. Response time to the part(s) of the text (individual screens or nodes). It too can be either unlimited, or limited two ways as described above.
5. The possibilities to revisit the whole. Either none, limited or unlimited. It is all about rereading.
6. The possibilities to revisit the parts. Either none, limited or unlimited like above.
7. The number of time zones in the whole text. Either one zone (homogenous text), several synchronous or co-dependent zones (multiple) or several autonomous zones (heterogeneous).
8. The number of time frames within the visible part (screen or node) of the ergodic text. Like the text above, the screen is either homogenous, multiple or heterogeneous. The difference between frames and zones corresponds roughly to the difference between the surface and the archive or storage of the text. Or to put it differently: the former can be perceived at once.
9. The type of change (if there is any). It can be either cyclic (recurrent) or linear (nonrecurrent).
10. In all previous categories there is an inherent division into given, chosen and caused parameters.

It is important to point out that according to Aarseth's definition of ergodic literature sequence-based e-poetry does not generally require trivial efforts in order to be read, in a way it presents ergodic reading time or reading time that requires a non-trivial effort to navigate within. Sequence-based e-poems are often programmed to react to the way they are being read. According to Eskelinen if we take into consideration the three traditional aspects of time, specific constraints can affect the speed (how fast or slow the text can/has to be read), the duration (how long it is possible to read the text), and the reproducibility of reading (how many times it possible to read the text)⁸⁹. Even though Eskelinen's study concerns narratological time, it is also true that the

⁸⁸ Markku Eskelinen, "Omission impossible: the Ergodics of Time", conference paper presented at *Digital Arts and Culture*, University of Bergen, Norway 26-28 November 1998, accessible online at: <http://lingo.uib.no/dac98/papers/eskelinen.html> (accessed, July 10 2007).

⁸⁹ Markku Eskelinen *Travels in Cybertextuality: The Challenge of Ergodic Literature and Ludology to Literary Theory*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

advent of motion and consequently of temporality in electronic poetry has allowed it to easily tell a story. In particular sequence-based e-poetry and hybrid e-poetry are concerned by the introduction of temporality into poetry.

All of the three traditional categories of time can be altered in e-poetry. The speed of reading, for instance, can be limited: the text or parts of it can move too fast to be read by the reader. As for the duration, the length of the text cannot have any relationship to the time given to the reader to read it. This may lead to (forced) incomplete readings. Finally, the reproducibility of reading: it may not be possible of the text to reread all or some of its parts as they were before, thus the reader reads another text effectively. This manipulation of the time alters the reception of the e-poems and proposes incomplete readings or different readings (due to either different texts caused by a change in the reproducibility or differing reader's skills in reading with respect to a predetermined allotted time). Differentiated or unaccomplished readings are not normally accepted practices for reading "serious" poetry (the same circumstance is valid also for "serious" fictional narrative).

There is also a distinction that concerns the system time and the reading time, since their setting can be different, although reading time depends on system time. If the text's duration is one hour reading time can be either equal to or less than one hour; if the text can be read just twice the reader can choose to read it either once or twice; and if the text will self-destruct after 100 accesses by any reader it would be very hard that one reader could read it 100 times solely.

6.3 The Reading Practice of E-poems

In this section I will introduce a typology of e-poems while focusing on the reading practice. Adding this typology to the previous one, a typology based on two axes can be built up in order to map the world of electronic poems.

All the categories of this typology under our concern – the reading practice – take into consideration the "meaning's construction" in interpreting any kind of text. What I want to focus on is which kind of reader's actions are involved in the reading practice. It is important to clarify now that since I am talking about a reading practice I prefer to call the "reader", "reader" and not to use alternative terms like for instance "user". I prefer employing the term "reader" to "user" – thought sometimes this term will be utilized – because the reading process is still involved in the electronic poetry, even though at a different level and manner perhaps. There are a number of alternatives to both "reader" and the more frequent "user", some theorists have suggested other terms, such as *interactor*, *wreader* and *vuser*. *Interactor* (Douglas1996; Murray 1997) is intuitively meaningful, but it is not always true that the reader interacts with the text. In the early nineties, many argued that the reader of a hypertext became a co-author of the text, and this writer-reader was, for a while, called the *wreader* (Landow 1992; Landow 1997; Rau 2000). The *wreader* in Landow's idea refers to hypertextual writing, but as shown some e-poems are not

hypertextual. So this term should be used when the actions of reading and writing are interacting with each other in order to make the text (which is actually true even in works that are not hypertextual works). *Vuser* is a similar linguistic compound, but more visually grounded, being constructed from the words viewer and user (Seaman 2000), and it is true that images are very important in e-poetry and often even the letters acquire a visual meaning, but generally e-poetry still needs the action of reading, that is to say “to look at carefully so as to understand the meaning of something” which is generally written, but not only that since “to read” means also “to make out the significance of by scrutiny or observation” such as for instance “to read the cloudy sky as the threat of a storm”⁹⁰.

As mentioned in section 4.1, Michael Joyce identifies two typologies of hypertexts: “exploratory hypertexts” and “constructive hypertexts”. These categories can also be adopted to classify e-poems that are not built on links, that are not hypertextual. I propose 4 different categories focusing on the reading practice, starting from a “degree zero” of interaction up till the possibility given to the reader to become herself co-author of the text.

a) Read-only Text . I am adapting Philippe Bootz’s term (see section 3.1.5) and using it in a narrow sense: according to Bootz the “*texte-à-voir*” is the part of the transitoire observable the reader considers “the” text and it is different from the text the author can “see”. I propose to use this term in order to describe those texts that are actually “à voir”, since they neither require nor allow any user’s significant action, besides – sometimes – activating the text, stopping and restarting it. The reader can just “read” these texts. Sometimes she can stop the text and go back, if she misses some parts, or access it “in any order”, which is normal in e-poetry made on video (see for instance chapter 4, Alex Gopher’s *The Child*). Sometimes, however, not even this simple action is allowed, and the text flows without pause. In this case the reader is even less free than with books, since she cannot stop reading the text without restarting it from the very beginning.

b) Exploratory texts. In these texts the reader “explores” the work, choosing among different reading paths – like in hypertexts (and thus making associations among them) – or moving through 3D space following different directions in order to materially explore the text (see – for example – Chico Marinho’s *Palavrador*, chapter 6).

c) Combinatory texts. From Ramon Llull to Juan Caramuel y Lobkowitz’s *Metametrika*, (1663), from Giardano Bruno and Gottfried Leibniz’s *Dissertatio de arte combinatoria* (1666) to the more recent experiments texts by Queneau and Calvino the *ars combinatoria* have always fascinated writers (and indeed not only writers). In e-poetry there are many examples of combinatorial texts, especially if they are also generative text, which means created by the machine. Theo Lutz’s *Stochastic Poems* (1959) and Nanni Balestrini’s *Tape Mark* (1961) are examples of generative and combinatorial e-poetry. Florian Cramer

⁹⁰ Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of English Language, Philip Babcock Gove (ed.), Cologne: Könenman, 1993.

created in 1998 a codework machine that reproduces in digital form many of the famous combinatory systems⁹¹.

Even though it is difficult to distinguish combinatory poetry from other forms of poetry ever since linguistics defined language as a combinatorial system itself – I propose to use combinatory poetry to define those texts that openly expose and address its combinatorics by changing and permuting the text according to fixed textual structures given by the author, that allow/need to be recombined to take on meaning.

d) Constructive texts. According to Michael Joyce these kinds of texts “require a capability to act: to create, to change, and to recover particular encounters within the developing body of knowledge [...]”⁹². This category defines texts that require the reader’s explicit input in order to have a text. The reader can either work on her own text, tracing it (as for instance Maria Mencía’s *Vocaleyes*, chapter 3) or write jointly with other readers (that most probably she does not know at all) in the construction of a collaborative poem (see chapter 7). In this case sometimes the reader is allowed not only to write but also to erase the text, thus her role is the same as the author – she can be defined as a real “wreader”. Already exploratory and combinatory e-poetry are proposing this new figure called “wreader”, a mixture of writer and reader, since the reader not only reads (and interprets the text) but after some fashion she can act on it, developing a subjective – often unique and unrepeatable – reading path, but in constructive e-poetry the reader is taking part of the creative process: she can write, erase and re-write the text.

⁹¹ Cramer’s website <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~cantsin/index.cgi> consists of a number of server-side computer programs written in the Perl programming language, each of them reconstructing – and thereby re-inventing – many combinatory poems written by, among others, Optatianus Porphyrius, Jean Meschinot, Julius Caesar Scaliger, Georg Philipp Harsdörffer, Quirinus Kuhlmann and Tristan Tzara. Unfortunately the website doesn’t run anymore but some of its pages can be accessed through internet archives.

⁹² Michael Joyce, “Siren shapes: Exploratory and constructive hypertexts”, *op. cit.*, p.11.

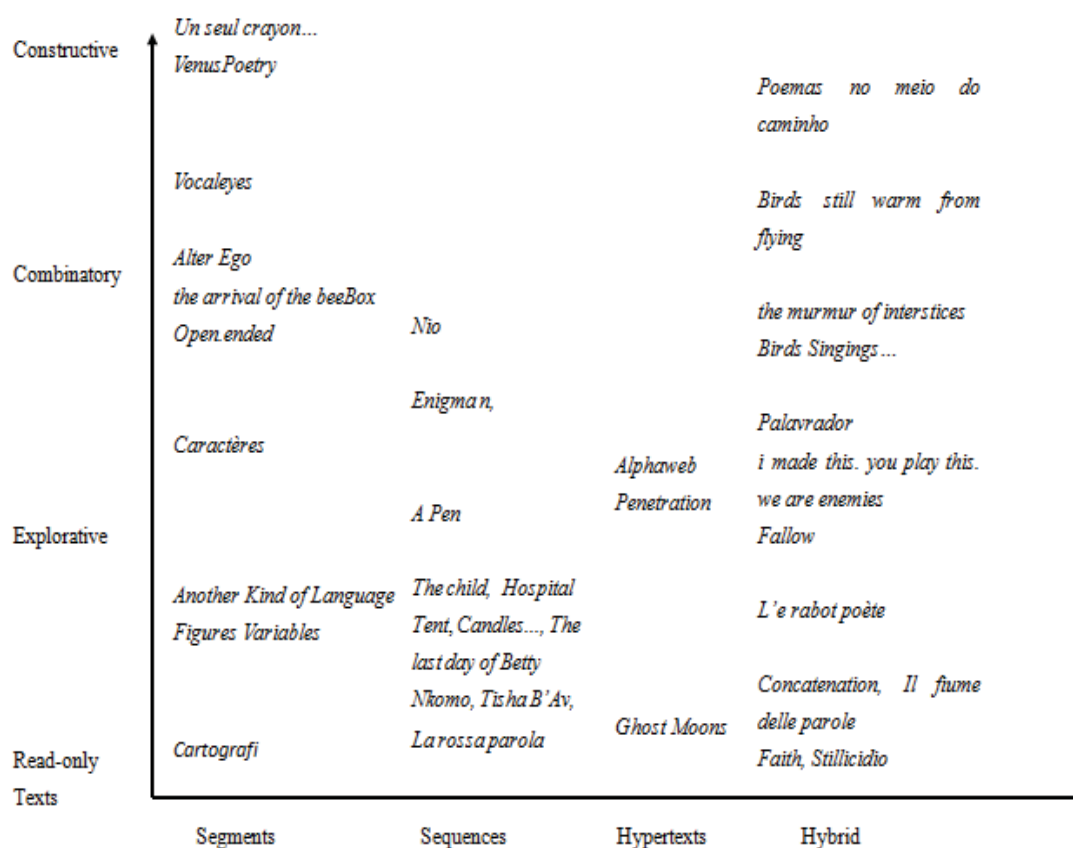


FIGURE 6: Possible typology of electronic poetry

7. Aesthetic of E-poetry: Space, Motion, Rhetorical Figures, Tropes, and Entax

The question of an aesthetic in digital environments has several facets. As Steven Johnson points out we do not engage with the zeros and ones of the digital code, but we relate to the digital support via an interface, which Johnson defines as “a kind of translator, mediating between the two parties, making one sensible to the other”⁹³. Andrew Murphie and John Potts in their book on *Culture and Technology* pose the question of a digital aesthetic in terms of “the transformation of our sense perception by (the ‘hidden’) digital through various interfaces”⁹⁴. They argue that it is not clear what a digital aesthetic is, but “there seem to be lot of it around, and it seems tremendously diverse”⁹⁵. According to them:

[t]he digital aesthetic focus not upon an eternal idea of art or beauty, but upon an endless transformation of our sense perceptions through digital technologies [...] Yet

⁹³ Steven Johnson, *Interface Culture*, New York: Perseus Books Group, 1997, p. 14.

⁹⁴ Andrew Murphie and John Potts, *Culture and Technology*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, p. 84.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

we should begin by saying that there is certainly no definitive approach to the digital aesthetic.⁹⁶

Kant's conceptualization of aesthetics suggests that we should seek in art exactly what is not engrossing, what does not engage us completely as what we already are, but rather what might allow us to find us another way of being human.

According to Sean Cubbit "[t]he aesthetic is [the] pursuit of an ethical mode of being in despite of the conditions in which we find ourselves"⁹⁷. He carries on saying that:

[t]here is some kind of absurdity in looking for ethics in a technical device [...]. The fastest and the widest impact that computers have had is in deepening the class structures of contemporary society on a global scale. We had to confront the demolition, not just of jobs, of communities and of cultures, but of hope itself as a direct or indirect effect of the electronic communications that have enabled the entirely destructive expansion of financial capital. How could we find an artwork as complex, as effective, as engrossing as the worldwide nexus of transnational capital?⁹⁸

Computers and the internet are nowadays our partners in life, we cannot live without them, and if we live without we will be somehow cut off from modern society – already in the '90s Umberto Eco talked about the world divided into two groups of people: people that could/will be able to use computers and the internet and those who could not. We live in an information society⁹⁹, surrounded by communication technologies. What does electronic poetry bring to the society in terms of understanding our post-modern culture? We have seen in Chapter 1 how many 20th century avant-garde's movements subverted the aesthetic sense and tried to make arts and poetry more popular and more related to reality and everyday life. What kind of new aesthetic does e-poetry propose?

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein addresses the question of the limits of language and the more particular question of what there is (or is not as the case may be) beyond language. Wittgenstein asserts that "the world is all that is the case"¹⁰⁰ and when "reality" is laid up alongside "propositions" it is the form of propositions which determines the shape of reality (and not the other way round). Adorno states that "[w]hat is essential about a work of art is not the case". How should we approach electronic poetry, in which codework, generative text, time and motion are pushing the language to its limits,

⁹⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁹⁷ Sean Cubbit, *Digital Aesthetic*, London: Sage Publication, 1998, ix.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, ix-x.

⁹⁹ Cf. Manuel Castells's *Information Age* trilogy: Manuel Castells *The Rise of the Network Society*, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. I*, Cambridge-Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. II*, Cambridge-Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium*, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. III*, Cambridge-Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

¹⁰⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961, p. 5.

sometimes making e-poetry unpredictable and random? In the following chapters we will identify and describe some different aesthetic forms: from the aesthetic of flow proposed by Anaïs Guilet and Bernard Gervais¹⁰¹ (see chapter 3, section 3), to the aesthetics of the sensual by Andrew Darley¹⁰² (see chapter 4, section 7.2), to the aesthetic of “visual noise” and “sonic noise” theorized by Maria Engberg¹⁰³ (see chapter 6 sections 5 and 8), to the aesthetic of frustration defined by Philippe Bootz¹⁰⁴ (see chapter 5, 6, and 7).

7.1 Ergodic Space: Pagination, Motion and Entax

The space offered by our recently fashioned digital support is a new space, a space freed from the constraints imposed by the printed word. Both the author and the reader can manipulate, transform, interact with this space in order to create poetry. This new space allows us to easily connect words and images, to see them in 3D, to have motion and the introduces the notion of time to the text and, finally, the possibility of adding sound: all these elements are easily parts of an electronic poem.

This space is extremely different from the space of the printed page. Even though many poets and writers have exploited the potential of the printed page, reorganizing the elements on it (see chapter 1) it has been common use to organize the page according to predetermined rules. For instance, whitespace between words and between blocks of text creates aesthetic balance and it also make the text readable; furthermore in poetry these spaces have often the metaphorical meaning of silence.

In e-poetry the use of different colours both for the background and for the text is quite normal, what kind of effect does the possibility of easily colouring the writing space cause? For instance colours can identify a command, or they can be a trace of the reading path as in hypertexts where often the clicked on element is differently coloured to begin with and after been clicked it changes its colour to something else again marking that the link as having already been accessed.

¹⁰¹ Anaïs Guilet and Bernard Gervais, *Go with the Flow*, NT2 laboratoire de recherches sur les arts et littératures hypermédiatiques, accessible online at http://nt2.uqam.ca/anais_guilet_bertrand_gervais#note9 (accessed, February 2 2011).

¹⁰² Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture*, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2000.

¹⁰³ Maria Engberg, “Aesthetic of Noise in Digital Literary Arts”, conference paper presented at *Electronic Literature in Europe*, Bergen, Sept. 11-13 2008, accessible on line at : <http://elitineurope.net/node/16> (accessed, September 29 2010).

¹⁰⁴ Philippe Bootz, “Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms”, in *New Media Poetry and Poetics*, Special Issue, Leonardo Electronic Almanac Vol 14, No. 5 – 6, 2006, accessible on line at: http://leoalmanac.org/journal/vol_14/lea_v14_n05-06/pbootz.asp (accessed, September 21 2010).

7.1.1 Typography

Typographic and pagination characteristics largely go unnoticed in linguistics as far as the process of generating meaning is concerned. Linguistics seems simply to deny the importance of graphic elements. Linguistics refuses to acknowledge the typographic field as a semiotic mode. In their view writing is secondary to speech, merely an instrument for encoding spoken language. Consequently, linguists have concentrated on the phoneme-grapheme correlations in different languages and on the nature of various writing systems, but have ignored the individual variability of sign tokens. Saussurean-style linguists have also erroneously focused on the sentence or smaller linear units of language and thus failed to understand the spatial nature of text on the page and its organizing effects¹⁰⁵.

It is only the more recent semiotic trends in text linguistics and stylistics¹⁰⁶ which have recognized the capital function of typography. As it is known the meaning can be constructed with the help of several sign systems. Typography can be seen and studied as a code in its own right. It contributes and influences the textual meaning in various ways.

In electronic poetry both the materiality of the medium and the materiality of the text are crucial aspects to capture the meaning of the story. Consequently, it appears to be important to analyse the typographic aspect of poems. It is immediately evident that kinetic poetry, poetry with motion, for instance, is obsessed with technical mediation. This media-techné is not merely a stylistic form, but it shifts within the function of the poetry itself.

7.1.2 Entax

In Barthes's sense, writing can be called a connotative sign system as it uses content-form combination of a primary system (language) as signifiers in a second sign system (typography)¹⁰⁷. So it is important that readers decode graphic signs in order to make linguistic meaning: graphemes into morphemes into lexemes, etc. By using typography, form can be illustrated or suggested.

The three types of signs, following Peircean semiotics¹⁰⁸, can correspond to three levels of typography: reading is mainly a "symbolic" act (deciphering conventional signs) but it can acquire indexal and iconical qualities. In electronic poetry, often, typefaces point out the nature of the text, carrying emotional weight.

¹⁰⁵ Cf., Rob Waller, "Typography and Discourse", in Rebecca Barr, Michael L. Kamil, Peter B. Mosenthal, P. David Pearson (eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research*, Vol. 2, pp. 341-80. New York: Longman, 1991.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996.

¹⁰⁷ Roland Barthes, *Le Bruissement de la langue*, Paris : Seuil, 1984.

¹⁰⁸ Charles S. Peirce, (1931-58) *Collected Papers*, 8 Voll., Cambridge/Mass: Harvard University Press, tr. it., Torino, Einaudi 1980-1984.

Particularly in electronic poetry, typography seems tied to various linguistic and pragmatic levels of an utterance. It can comment on or reinforce verbal messages in the text. Thanks to the spatial arrangement of lines, text forms blocks on the page and thanks to additional typographic elements, readers access to different meaning levels of the text.

Jim Rosenberg underlines how in electronic literature space is strictly connected to prosody. In linguistics, prosody studies the rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech. Prosody has to do with time more than with space. It is particularly important in poetry but also in prose and it may reflect various features of the speaker or the utterance: the emotional state of the speaker; the form of the utterance (statement, question, or command); the presence of irony or sarcasm; emphasis¹⁰⁹. Rosenberg shows that in electronic literature the possibility of easily editing the space and the words in the space choosing different typographies offers new possibilities to prosody as well. Syllables can be manipulated and like this they can mark, highlight, mimic a pause, and so on¹¹⁰.

I use a semiotic term – entax – to analyse the form, the structure, and the typography of e-poetry, to build a syntax of electronic space. Entax is concerned first of all with typography and pagination, thus it can be useful in the analyses of printed work as well (such as for instance concrete poetry), but the concept and construction of “entax” I would suggest is more related to e-poetry since it takes into consideration motion which is one of the characteristics of electronic texts.

Briefly, in semiotic terms, if syntax covers the assembly operations of both figures and signs along the external space of a sign system, entax indicates the system of the operations that assemble the letters inside the figures. The syntax regulates the grammatical relationships between the linguistic signs; the entax takes into regard the mutual relationship that is created between the characters in an inscribed space. I divide the entax according the typology of syntax:

- Micro-entax (morphology) which refers to fonts, letters and to the configuration of typographic signs in lines and text blocks, it deals with the morpheme – like for instance words' forms, colors changing, and so on.
- Meso-entax (semantic) which relates to the graphic structure of the entire document, it deals with the lexeme – like for instance recreating an image with words as with calligrams, or reproducing a movement with words.
- Macro-entax (pragmatic) which relates to the graphic and visual structure of the whole document, it deals with the sentence in its context – wherein a second meaning is suggested.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Encyclopaedia Britannica accessible on line at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/479409/prosody> (accessed, January 31 2010).

¹¹⁰ Jim Rosenberg, *A Prosody of Space / Non-Linear Time*, in *Post-modern Culture*, Volume 10, Number 3, May 2000, accessible on line at: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/v010/10.3rosenberg.html>, (accessed, February 1 2011).

In all these categories motions can contribute to the effect of sense.

7.2 Rhetoric Media Figures

The possibility of moving about the text in its entirety or parts of it, is one of the fundamental innovations that e-poetry brings to poetry (for videopoetry, see chapter 1, 12.4). E-poetry can set words in motion, words let loose in a physical sense.

The motion of the text and the reversibility of it allow the creation of new poetical figures. Critical analysis highlights the use of particular poetical figures which are typical of electronic poems. Alexandra Saemmer identified some new media figures, applying classic rhetorical figures to aesthetic effects that motion can provoke.

- Interfacial retroprojection. The interactive gesture, the activable media content and the activated media content get into metaphorical relationships.
- Interfacial neantism. The interactive gesture does not provoke any effect on the screenic surface.
- Interfacial incubation. The interactive gesture provokes effects on the screenic surface, which although emerge so late that it is difficult for the reader to establish a relationship between his gesture and the effects.
- Interfacial involution. The interactive gesture invariably displays the same media contents; the inter-actor go round in circles.
- Interfacial sporulation. The interactive gesture, supposed to provoke the emergence of a single pop-up, provokes the emergence of a multitude of windows; the interactor loses his control over the interface.
- Interfacial pleonasm. The interactive gesture does not provoke the emergence of additional information; the message is redundant.
- Interfacial randomization. The interactive gesture provokes the emergence of other media contents according to a random process.
- Interfacial antagonism. The interactive gesture provokes the emergence of media contents contrary to the contents announced by the activable media.¹¹¹

Basing myself on Saemmer's study I will examine tropes and figures which occur in different e-poems and try to determine other more novel aspects.

The technologization of the expression plan has introduced into the electronic text the concept of ergodic time – altering the three traditional aspects of time – and ergodic space – transforming the “writing” space, bringing into the text motion and different semiotic systems, freeing up pagination and often making typography a key element in understanding the meaning of the text. The aim of the following chapters¹¹² is to both categorize electronic poetry and to illustrate its peculiarities.

¹¹¹ Alessandra Saemmer, “Some stylistic devices on media interface”, conference paper presented at *The Network as a Space and Medium for Collaborative Interdisciplinary Art Practice*, 8-10 November 2008 University of Bergen, accessible on line at: <http://elitineurope.net/node/29> (accessed, April 20 2010).

¹¹² Chapter 7 does not follow this criteria: in this chapter the question of the authorship in e-poetry will be analysed focusing on the relation between human author and machine and between author and reader that becomes author.

CHAPTER 3

SEGMENTS-BASED E-POETRY

“Writing a poem is discovering.”¹
Robert Frost

In this chapter I will analyse e-poetry whose *form of expression* is based on the notion of the «segment», that is to say based on morphological elements without an inner clock. I call this typology of texts segments-based e-poetry. Segments are static morphological elements; the motion is initiated by the reader.

All these texts are characterized by movements through which the reader transforms the text. The segment can be a single block of text like Marie Bélisle’s *Caractères*, or many segments can work together as in Daniela Calisi’s *Cartografi* and in Aya Karpinska’s *open-ended*.

The kind of interactions segments-based e-poetry requires (or shall we say allows) differs from poem to poem: we find many examples where the interaction is still very simple – the reader can click through the text as in Marie Bélisle’s *Figures*, she can combine it as in Marie Bélisle’s *Alter Ego* or transform its form and content according to given possibilities, as in Marie Bélisle’s *Caractères* and in Daniela Calisi’s *Cartografi*; she can recombine the poem in three dimensional space as in Aya Karpinska’s *the arrival of the beeBox* and *open-ended* starting from the possibilities laid down by or outlined by the author. Finally, Maria Mencía’s *Vocaleyeyes* demonstrates a more complex level of interaction by allowing the reader to compose her own piece of text which then interacts with the e-poet’s work. Maria Bélisle’s *Alter Ego* and *Caractères*, Daniela Calisi’s *Cartografi*, Aya Karpinska’s *the arrival of the beeBox* and *open-ended* are combinatory texts; Maria Mencía’s *Another Kind of Language* is in-between two typologies, read-only texts and explorative texts. Finally, Maria Mencía’s *Vocaleyeyes* is a constructive text.

¹ Robert Frost quoted in *Elements of Literature*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston: 1997, p. 26.

1. Daniela Calisi and the *Letters-in-Freedom* on the Screen

In this section I will analyse an Italian poem by Daniela Calisi *Cartografi* (in chapter 6 I will analyse another poem by her, *Stillicidio*). The poem is composed of graphic text only and requires reader interaction. Since it is made of multiple segments the interaction allows the reader to access its different parts. Except through the reader's action *Cartografi* is a static text otherwise.

There is no year of publication provided for this text.. On her site “Content(o) design”, introducing her works, she describes her poetry with these words:

Queste poesie indagano il comportamento e il mutamento del testo nel tempo: un linguaggio che non è lineare, ma che esprime una complessità di voci. La capacità del testo di mutare la propria forma: cambiamenti di visibilità, di posizione, di forma, dimensioni e colore. La capacità del testo di mutare il proprio significato: la parola unita alle altre parole da rapporti di trasformazione, mutazione, permutazione, anagramma. La capacità del testo di reagire alle azioni del suo lettore, ma anche, in senso più ampio, i modi in cui il testo configura e consente questo rapporto di azione e reazione; questi sono testi mutanti perché sono capaci di cambiare sotto i tuoi occhi, di reagire ai tuoi movimenti, perché si fanno più complessi o si spiegano man mano che esplori i loro diversi modi di apparire.²

1.1 Daniela Calisi's *Cartografi*

Daniela Calisi, *Cartografi*, at:

<http://www.contentodesign.org/00it/testi/cartografi1.html>

² Daniela Calisi, “Content(o) design”, accessible online at: <http://www.contentodesign.it/> (accessed, February 22 2005).

“These poems probe the text’s behaviour and its change over time: a non -linear language which at the same time expresses a complexity of voices. The ability of text to mutate its form: as far as visibility, position, dimension and colour go. The ability of it to change its meaning: a word united to another word in a bond of transformation, mutation, permutation, anagram. The ability of the text to react to the actions of its reader, in a broader sense, the way in which it configures and allows this relationship of action and reaction; these texts are mutants because they can change themselves under your very eyes, react to your movements, because they get intrinsically more and more complex or explain themselves as you explore their different methods of appearance”.



FIGURE 1: Daniela Calisi, *Cartografi* – opening page

Cartografi (Cartographers) opens up a white pop-up window. The reader perceives the letters settling down on the page as if they were running to take their positions in order to “get ready” for their reader.

Cartografi presents evidence of how the poetic verse and the game of *entax* interplay in the process of building the text. The poem is written in free verse and its particularity resides in the fact that some verse lines, which are found on the background, come to the foreground, thanks to the reader's action, replacing and/or modifying the other textual segments, thus altering the structure and the sense of those verse lines. The reader reads a poem that modifies some of its parts thanks to her interaction.

This interaction, however, is not so evident and personally I needed a while to understand that the reader should touch parts of the screen in order to change the different segments of texts. The interaction recombines the segments of text: by subtracting and/or adding letters and words the text reinforces its message.

The structure of the text reminds one of Futurist *tavole parole libere* (words-in-freedom, see chapter 1), even though in this case a structured poem still exists. The deconstruction of syntax is not perpetuated here, however the syntax is manipulated and the poem is telegraphic as suggested by Futurists. Letters are edited on the screen to suggest other meanings. The micro-entax – which refers to the morpheme (see chapter 2) – alters the meaning of the verse lines, suggesting alternative reading paths (see figure 2).

The first poem is composed of a poem in the central part of the page. Due to its form – free verse lines of different length, each of them starting with a capital letter, all written in the same black font – it is identifiable as the main text even though the reader's attention is caught first by other words because of the “entaxic” construction. On its right, there is another text. Its form is less regular, some letters are bigger than others, some are written in bold, but this text has punctuation – a comma and a full stop – while the previous text does

not have punctuation. Three verse lines are on the left part of the page on the top, on the bottom are other words and single letters detached from the main body of the text. However, describing this text is complicated because this is just one of the different possible constructions. Each time the reader interacts with the text, it changes its general form even though the central text remains composed of 9 verse lines, but the other words around it change size, position and meanings.

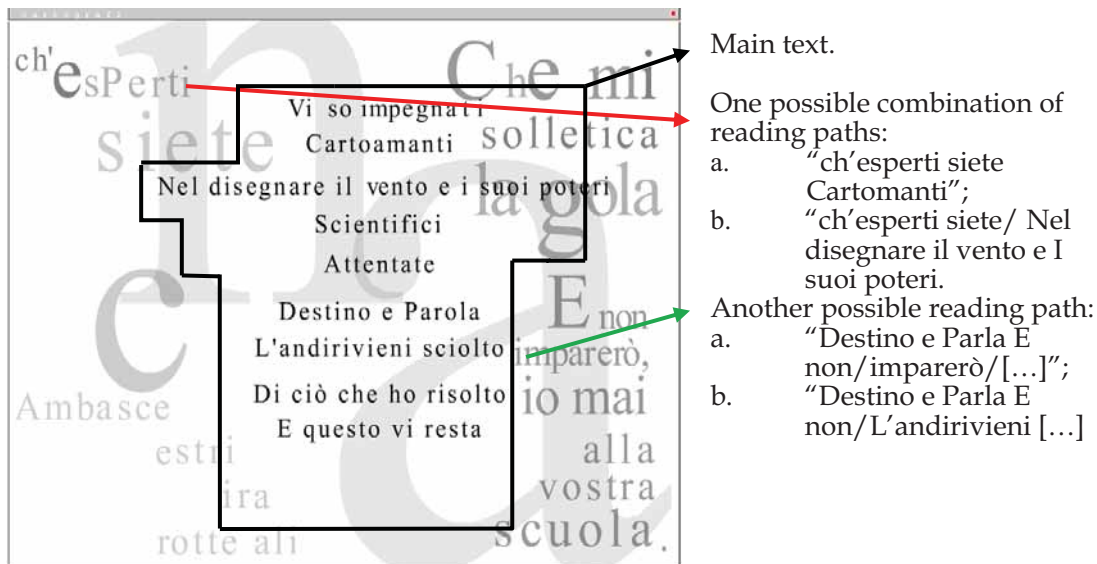


FIGURE 2: Daniela Calisi, *Cartografi* – first combination of verses

The entax takes on different syntactic constructions (figure 2). The main text reads “Vi so impegnati/Cartomanti/Nel disegnare il vento e I suoi poteri/Scientifici/ Attentamente/ Destino e Parola/L'andirivieni sciolto/Di ciò che ho risolto/e questo vi resta”³. The verse lines of this text can be combined with other verse lines or groups of words, altering the text itself. If the reader decides to start reading from the first group of words she finds on the page (from the top-left), she will read – “ch'esperti siete”⁴ - and she will immediately recognize the sarcastic intent of the poem, without yet knowing the poem's theme. The text is a kind of “j'accuse” against the school of immobility and enclosure and of the linear verse line. The “j'accuse” is shown both by the form of the expression – in its form and substance, different segments of text that the reader is invited to discover and different entax – and by the form of the content – both by sarcastic constructions such as “ch'esperti siete” or “E costruite / E distruggete / E vi dannate”⁵“Vi dà fastidio la disarmonia”⁶ and openly: “e indegni / Vi dà fastidio la disarmonia”⁷.The poem is also an anti-science

³ “I know you engrossed / Fortune tellers / In designing the wind and its powers / Scientific(ally) / Attentive / Fate and Word / The comings and goings dissolved / What I have fixed / And this will remain to you”.

⁴ “What experts you are”.

⁵ “And you build / And you destroy / And you wear yourself out”.

⁶ “Disharmony bothers you”.

⁷ “And unworthy disharmony bother you”.

polemic: science is too “rigid”, scientists destroy and rebuild new theories but always with a scientific and inflexible approach.

Cartografi is a dialogue between two different planes of perspective, the poetic text, in and of itself, loses the characteristic as a complete object in order to become an object in movement, which is transformed under the eyes of its readers. The reading possibilities, in this case, are multiple: one can read it in the classical way, or several segments intersect, attracted, for example, by the largeness of the letters. By clicking on some verse lines in the background, the text is transformed, sometimes substituting some verse lines (see figures 1 and 2), sometimes transforming the words of the background with new words inserted in the text – “e indegni” which is firstly positioned on the background is transformed into “nel disegnare” before joining the central text.

The poem shows on the foreground the reflection of the graphic form of words: the difference in form between capital and non-capital letters gives a different impact to the same word. On the contrary, the text in black positioned at the centre of the page, representing the classical text, becomes less attractive for the reader – and sometimes less readable – , likely to be captured by the other possible (subjective) paths.

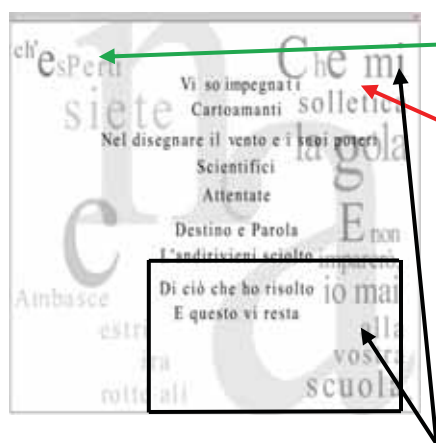


FIGURE 1: D. Calisi, *Cartografi* – 1st combination verses

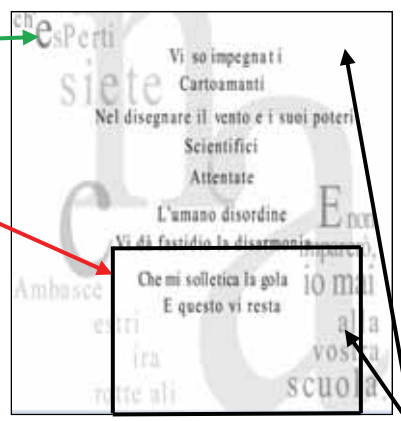


FIGURE 2: D. Calisi, *Cartografi* – 2nd combination of verses

As figures 1 and 2 show, the structure of the poem remains the same, 9 verse lines , even the enjambment in verse line 8th remains in the second text, but the content is different, even if the meaning is similar: “Destino e Parola” becomes “L’umano disordine”⁸, “L’andirivieni sciolto” in “Vi dà fastidio la disarmonia”, “Di ciò che ho risolto” in “Che vi sollecita la gola”⁹. Both segments contain a metaphor and a “j’accuse”. Words are like human destiny, human disorder. Conformists (ironically the fortune-tellers) think they can control fate and their own destiny, they don’t like the free coming and going (“l’andirivieni sciolto”) neither in life nor in poetry. But the poet has resolved it (“di ciò che ho risolto”) and she will never learn at their school (“e non imparerò mai alla vostra scuola”).

⁸ “Human disorder”.

⁹ “That solicits your throat”.

These two texts are still quite similar, but more divergent texts are also possible. The results of the dialogue between the different enunciative plans can be quite different as figures 3, 4, 5, and, 6 show.



FIGURE 3: D. Calisi, *Cartografi* – first text

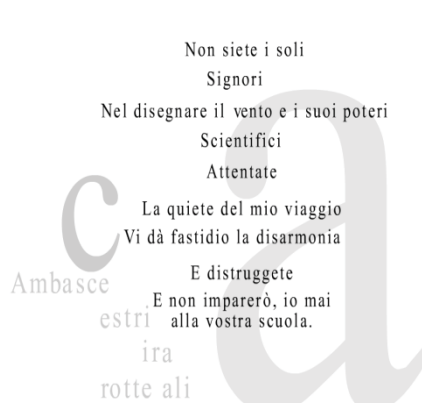


FIGURE 4: D. Calisi, *Cartografi* – different possible text

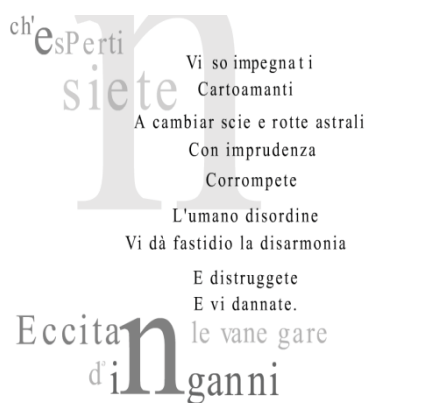


FIGURE 5: D. Calisi, *Cartografi* – different possible text

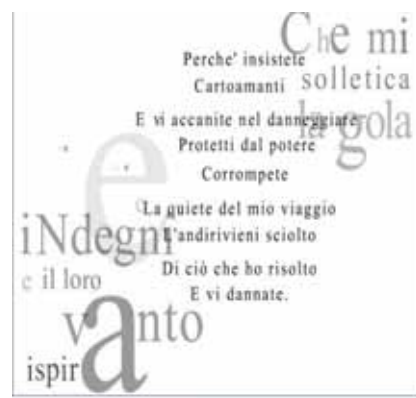


FIGURE 6: D. Calisi, *Cartografi* – different possible text

The poems are composed of 9 verse lines, a different entax characterizes each of them: in the first poem, for instance – the background contains more verse lines or groups of words than the other three. The 3rd third text (see figure 5) can expand its number of verse lines, since the last verse line is written in different colour and fonts “le vane gare”¹⁰ also the verse line which is in the background can be considered as the poem’s last verse line: “d’inganni”, closing the poem with an enjambment, which is not present for instance in the 4th text (see figure 6).

The entax can also link two words by sharing the same letter (see figure 8): the /a/ is the second morpheme for the word “vanto”¹¹ and the last for “ispira”¹². Obviously this possibility offered by the entax does not require a digital environment; yet the digital environment makes easier the changing in the entax itself.

¹⁰ “The vain races”.

¹¹ “Pride”.

¹² “Inspired”.

2. Marie Bélisle and the Alter Ego of Words

In this section I will show three e-poems by Marie Bélisle, a Canadian poetess writing in French. The website has existed since 1999, but it is impossible to date precisely each work.

All the e-poems are segments-based writing and they require the interaction of the reader to be read. They are essentially made of words, but words can become also geometrical figures, as we will see in the last example: *Figures Variables*. By rolling over a word (like in *Alter Ego*), or over a letter (like in *Caractères*), or by clicking on a segment of text (like in *Figures*), words or letters or segments of text appear/disappear, they are replaced with other words, letters and segments of text. Serge Bouchardon, in analyzing Bélisle's *Alter Ego*, talks about a rhetoric of manipulation that can be found also in the other two poems by Bélisle¹³.

According to Bouchardon “[t]he figure of appearance/disappearance (responding to an action by the user) is a key figure of the rhetoric of manipulation”¹⁴. Apparently figures of manipulation appear to offer more control of the text to the reader but, as Bouchardon noted, in some interactive works these figures introduce a loss of grasp: the reader thinks that she is manipulating the text but she can find herself manipulated by the author.

2.1 Marie Bélisle's *Alter Ego*

Marie Bélisle, *Alter Ego*, at: <http://www.scripturae.com/CadresScript.htm>



FIGURE 7: Marie Bélisle, *Alter Ego*

¹³ Serge Bouchardon, *Towards an art of rhetoric in interactive literary works*, accessible online at: <http://www.utc.fr/~bouchard/articles/Bouchardon-ELO-paper.pdf> (accessed, February 2 2011).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

This text interacts both with itself and with the reader even if the interaction with the reader is still a minimal, the reader cannot explore the text, she can just *discover* it. *Alter Ego* is a “reversible text”, composed only of graphical text, with the exception of one iconic image representing the eyes of a face on the first page. The author explains her text:

À la faveur du glissement du curseur sous les mots, l'«autre», à la fois dissemblable et semblable, surgit à l'écran. Ainsi s'instaure, sur un mode analogique, un dialogue entre deux êtres littéraires, les fondant en un seul texte où s'exhibe l'essence même de la figure: le double.

Alter ego est en fait constitué de deux phrases complètes et autonomes superposées l'une à l'autre, chaque mot affiché cachant et révélant tour à tour son «jumeau». Au total, seize mots ou groupes de mots sont soumis au mouvement et produisent dix-sept parcours de lecture différents.¹⁵

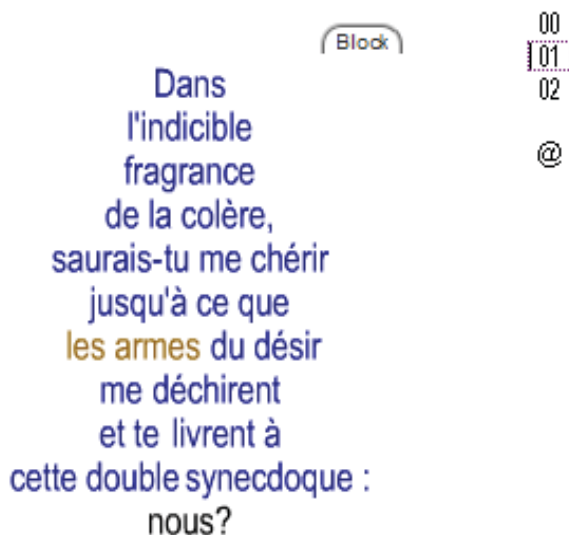


FIGURE 8: Marie Bélisle, *Alter Ego*

Obviously, this formula is not new, it reminds us - even if there are differences - of the structure of Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards des poèmes*¹⁶. *Cent mille milliards des poèmes* is a set of ten sonnets. They are printed on card with each line on a separated strip, like a heads-bodies-and-legs book. All ten sonnets have the same rhyme scheme and any lines from a sonnet can be combined

¹⁵ Marie Bélisle, *Alter Ego*, accessible online at: <http://www.scripturae.com/CadresScript.htm> (accessed, October 22 2006).

“By sliding the cursor over the words, the “other”, at the same time dissimilar and similar, appears on the screen. Thus is established, in an analogical mode, a dialogue between two literary beings, blending them in only one text where the essence of the figure emerges: the double. “Alter ego” is in fact made up of two complete and autonomous sentences superimposed one another, each word hiding and revealing in turn its “twin”. On the whole, sixteen words or group of words are subjected to the movement and produce seventeen different paths of reading”.

¹⁶ Raymond Queneau, *Cent mille milliards des poèmes*, Paris: Éd. Gallimard, 1961.

with any from the nine others, so that there are 10^{14} (= 100,000,000,000,000) different poems.



FIGURE 9: Raymond Queneau, *Cent mille milliards des poèmes*

Bélisle, however, rewrites Queneau's idea, modifying it. *Cent mille milliards des poèmes* is an example of experimental literature, hardly contained in the printed paper and hardly readable even in the digital environment. It gives some kind of vertigo because of the incredible number of poems that the reader can recombine. *Alter Ego*, is easily readable and the reader can experiment with many reading paths, even though there still an interesting amount of possible combinations since a single word can be replaced with another

The text is always composed, because of the form of the expression never changes, of only one interrogative sentence - with the verb/subject inversion, characteristic of a formal register of language. The number of verse lines is always eleven. A possible segmentation of the text it is suggested us by the punctuation:

- a. First part : vv. 1-4 ;
- b. Second part: vv. 5-10:
- c. Third part: v. 11.

The last part, therefore, makes up only one verse line, which is composed of only one syntagm, which never changes and which is written in a different colour, in black. If we address the two principal texts we note the 1st verse line is made from a variant part [X] and an invariant one [— /Y]; on the contrary, the 2nd verse line is made from an invariant [Y] and a variant [X], as you can see in the diagram below:

Dans	X –	Sans
l'indicible	– X	l'inaltérable
fragrance	– X	fragilité
de la colère,	– X –	de la luxure,
saurais-tu me chérir	X – X	pourrais-je te blesser
jusqu'à ce que	X –	alors même que
les larmes du désir	– X	les armes du doute
	x [L]	
me déchirent	XX	te touchent
et te livrent à	X – X	et me délivrent de
cette double synecdoque :	– XX	cette douce métaphore:
nous?	–	nous?

FIGURE 10: Marie Bélisle, *Alter Ego* – the two texts

The 7th verse line introduces a change into the repetition, because it is made from an invariant part, where there is a variant one: *les [l]armes*. The paradox of the repetition - according to Deleuze - it is that we can speak about the repetition only thanks to the difference and to the change which it introduces: “does not the paradox of repetition lie in the fact that one can speak of repetition only by virtue of the change or difference that it introduces into the mind which contemplates it? By virtue of a difference that the mind draws from repetition”¹⁷.

Examining further the form of the expression, we should look at the genre of the verse lines: in the first part (vv. 1-4) of the first poem the end of the verse lines is female (the last syllable is mute), while in the first part of the second poem there is an alternation between the male and the female genre. The same alternation (between masculine and feminine) is found in the second part of the first poem (vv. 5-10), whereas on the contrary, the end of the verse lines of the second poem are always of the female genre. The line which *separates* is verse line 5, where there are (in the two texts) male final syllables. Verse line 8 is the only one which is characterized by a double difference, dues to the opposition *je/tu*, and it is also the only single verse line which is closed by a plural syntagm (with the exception of the last verse line which is, however, a different case). Thus an equivalence emerges on the morphosyntactic level both inside each poem and between them. The 5th verse line is, from the perspective of its form, the opposite of verse line 4, as if, at this point, the text doubles to reflect itself (as the two iconic images of verse line 4, as if, at this point, the text doubles to mirror itself (as do the two iconic images of the opening page); moreover, verse line 5 is the only one which is, in both poems, of the male genre. Finally, verse line 5 is the first to contain a verb, the first four verse lines are composed, indeed, of nouns. The equivalence at morphosyntactic level as well as being internal to each text is found between the texts. The two poems have two different subjects: the first subject is singular (and it is an animated being, respectively *je/tu*), while the second is plural (and it is inanimate *les larmes/les armes*). As for the verbs, there is a perfect equivalence: the first verb is conjugated in the conditional mood (*pourrais/saurais*); the second in the infinite

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition*, Paris: PUF, 1968, p. 25.

tense (*me chérir/te blesser*); the third and the fourth are in the third person of the indicative tense. Once again verse line 7 introduces a difference: indeed, if the subjects of verse line 5 are individual people (*je/tu*), the subjects of verse line 7 are the same genre: female (*larmes/armes*), introducing, this time, a repetition in the difference. These words are very interesting because they are *mots-valise* one is contained by the other: the only morpheme /l/ rewrites the difference and its absence transforms the *larme* (tears) into *armes* (weapons).

<p>Sans l'indicible fragrance de la colère, saurais-tu me chérir jusqu'à ce que les larmes du désir me déchirent et te livrent à cette double synecdoque : nous?</p>	<p>Dans l'indicible fragrance de la colère, saurais-tu me chérir jusqu'à ce que les larmes du doute me déchirent et te livrent à cette double synecdoque : nous?</p>	<p>Dans l'indicible fragrance de la colère, saurais-tu me chérir jusqu'à ce que les larmes du désir me déchirent et te délivrent de cette double synecdoque : nous?</p>
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FIGURE 11: Marie Bélisle, *Alter Ego* – three different combinations of the text

From a semantic point of view this *game* is pushed further at verse line 9 by the verbs *livrent à* et *délivrent de*: this time it is the second syntagm which contains the first, but in this case the difference is larger because the two verbs can be regarded as opposite to each other. The writing creates its *doppelgänger*, but differing. At the semantic level, the twins of several words (those hidden words in the text) tend towards the discrepancy: for example the mirror of the verb *me chérir* is *te blesser*, the word *larmes* has its twin in *armes*, the *désir* finds its other in *doute* (however, in this case there is also a similarity because the doubt and the desire are based on waiting). All that leads us to the biggest of the differences which is heralded by the biggest of the repetitions.

As we have seen, verse line 11 is the only one which is entirely invariant with respect to the plan of the expression and, moreover, it does not even change if one rolls over it using the cursor. However, the final *nous*, the only word which does not have any double (the double would already seem to be present in the pronoun) changes: thus for this word too the double appears: the *synecdoque nous* (including the *douce synecdoque: nous*) becomes a metaphor. The synecdoche is a rhetorical figure of speech which describes a certain type of relationship between objects, the part with the whole, and it makes a part out of *nous* (a couple) relative to the whole, (receives together). This reference of the one to the other can also double: *cette double synecdoque*, the double creates its double. On the contrary, the *nous* can be a *métaphore*, that is a part can substitute for the other because they are linked by a relationship of resemblance: the *nous*

is *transferred* to another, to the absent one. The *nous* of the visible text is formed by the *je + tu*, while the *nous* of the hidden text conceals the *other*. The *transfer* reveals itself at the 7th verse line, a small variance in the repetition traces a difference with the subtraction of the phoneme/morpheme /l/. The genetic link of de[ri]vation which links the two *larmes/armes* terms underlines how fecund the writing of this text is and which finds in the eye of the reader new de[ri]vations of sense. Finally, the verbs “*déchirent/touchent*” (v. 8) reveal the meta-textual logic of this kind of writing, which if one touches it, it tears apart, by reflecting and interacting with the plan of the expression and the plan of the content.

2.2 Marie Bélisle, *Caractères*

Marie Bélisle, *Caractères*, at: <http://www.scripturae.com/CadresScript.htm>

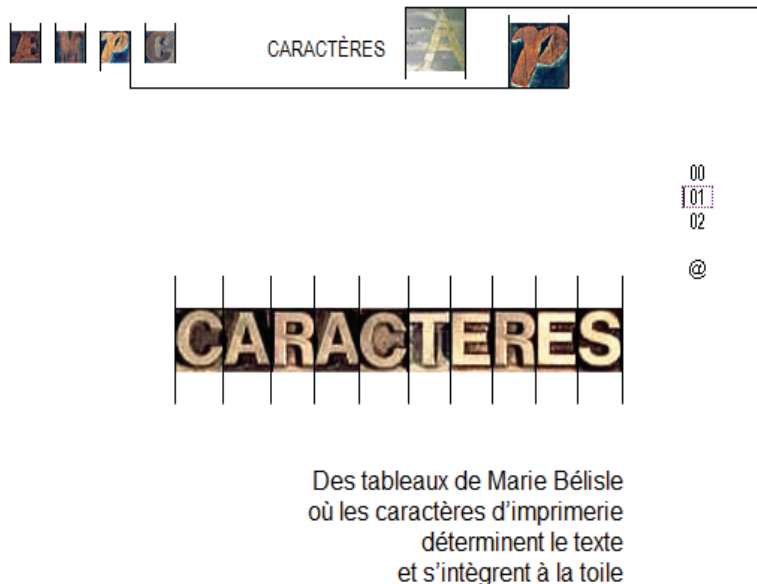


FIGURE 12: Marie Bélisle, *Caractères* – the opening page

There are two texts entitled *Caractères*, whose form of expression is the same, I will analyse the first one. Bélisle explains how the texts work already on the opening page (see figure 11).

Caractères is composed of two texts as suggested by the colours of the letters and the word-buttons on the introductory picture. Bélisle marks this duality using a light blue /A/, and a light brown /I/. By sliding the mouse-pointer over an /A/, an /I/ will appear, creating new forms of words: so from the /A/ of *fraction* we are brought to the /I/ of *friction*. The structure *itself* reminds us of mathematical fractions. The 3rd verse line “*lorsqu’une toile s’offre comme*”, the only one that is not composed of mutable letters divides the text(s) internally. It is a “line” between the other two segments of text.

When the reader opens the page containing *Caractères*, she finds first a picture containing hard-to-read text which is replaced by a more legible graphic of the text, the text then moves downwards providing space for the picture to reappear, what writing there is in the picture is still barely legible but two vowels remain stationary and identifiable throughout the entire sequence: an /A/ and an /I/. These two vowels become the buttons used to read two of several combinations of texts.



FIGURE 13: Marie Bélisle, *Caractères* – a possible combination

The first button allows us to start with a word containing the vowel /A/ that can be transformed into an /I/: *fraction* (fraction) to *friction* (friction) – the other words containing the vowels /A/I/ are: *intérieur* (internal) which becomes *antérieur* (previous), the verb *s'évide* (digs) becomes *s'évade* (escapes), and, finally from an *écriin* (casket) we pass to an *écran* (screen). The nouns *fraction/friction* belong to the same semantic sphere, they are both nouns used in the sciences (mathematics and physics), the adjectives *intérieur/antérieur* reminds the reader of a relationship of contiguity with something (either internal to “something” or a previous “something”); while the verbs *s'évade/s'évider* and the last two changeable nouns *écriin/écran* remind the reader of an opposite metaphorical meaning: from digging to escaping, from soil to sky, from the closed word of an *écriin* to the open world of an *écran*. The single elements can be changed, transforming the text into another and into another... The rhetoric of manipulation mentioned by Serge Bouchardon plays an important role in this text. A letter, written over another one, manipulates the meaning. This changing of letters, highlighted by colours, is a *linguistics commutation*, used to identify the significance of a word and then to further understand its sense. It is through its form, its substance in Hjelmlev terms, that the poetry will enrich its expression.

Finally, this text reminds us also of a mathematical equation: /A/ is to /I/ as /I/ is to /A/, but the final result can be different. The two changeable syntagms can be interchanged without creating an opposition of meaning, but the two last changeable syntagms do modify deeply the meaning of the text if the reader substitutes the letter /A/ with the letter /I/.

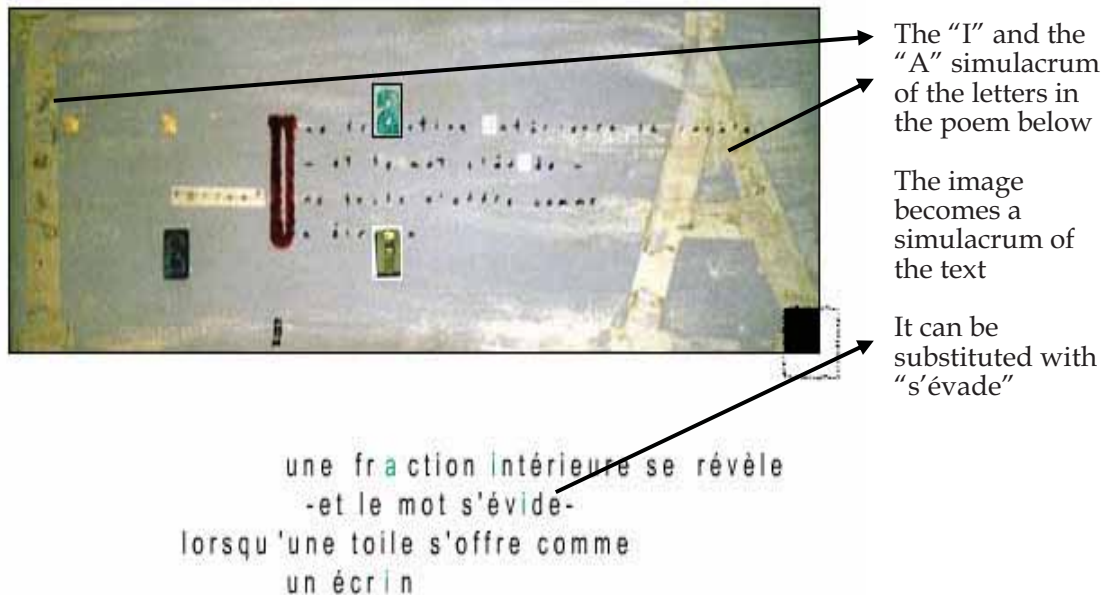
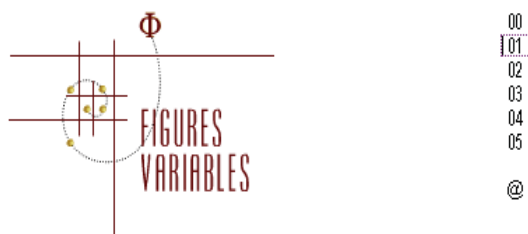


FIGURE 14: Marie Bélisle, *Caractères* – another possible combination

This text is a material work that assembles and forms itself. Its roots are deep, they grow underneath the text, it is the text itself that invites the reader to *évider* (to dig) in order to find a new shape under the given one, in order to find an /A/ instead of an /I/, passing from an *écran* to an *écriin* (screen/casket). Although closed in the casket's screen (*écriin /écran*), the letters rubbing and splitting (*friocionner/fractionner*) to let the word *dis/appear*. However, this impression of depth (*évider*) is merely an illusion since there are just two choices for each letter. Its meaning is virtual, metaphorical, the reader should always look for a second possible meaning combination in any morpheme, syntagm or segment of text.

2.3 Marie Bélisle, *Figures*

Marie Bélisle, *Figures* at: <http://www.scripturae.com/CadresScript.htm>



(Block)

FIGURE 15: Marie Bélisle, *Figures*

Another interesting work by Marie Bélisle is *Figures*. It consists of four figures:

1. «Figures Variables»
2. «Figures Parallèles»
3. «Figures Constantes»
4. «Figures Tangentes»

I will analyse the first *Figures*, *Figures Variables*.

Figures are built as a literary illustration of the Golden Ratio and of Fibonacci's sequence. As an aesthetic and mathematical constant, the Golden Ratio (or Golden Section) constitutes a formal *matrix* which makes it possible to determine the number of words and lines in the texts as well as the way in which they are arranged and connected with one another. Figures are thus Golden Rectangles where the words are used as horizontal measuring unit and the lines as vertical measuring unit.

Leonardo Fibonacci (1175-1240), an Italian mathematician, is recognized as the inventor of a sequence of numbers now bearing his name. In "Fibonacci's Sequence" each number represents the sum of the two numbers that precede it: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144... The more one advances through the series, the more the relationship between two consecutive numbers converge on Phi, (roughly 1,618): $8 \div 5 = 1,6$ $55 \div 34 = 1,617$ $144 \div 89 = 1,6179$. Fibonacci's sequence is connected with the Golden Section through the number Phi.

The Greek letter Phi indicates a mathematical constant called the Golden Section,. Its value is roughly in decimal notation 1,618. It is an algebraic irrational number fully given by the expression $(1+5^{1/2})/2$. Thus, when the relationship between the height and the width of a rectangle corresponds to Phi, one speaks about a Gold Rectangle: it is the case, for example, with a rectangle of 144 mm X 89mm. Largely used in art and in architecture, the Golden Section represents an

ideal of balance and elegance of the proportions. It allows us, by drawing up a constant relationship, to generate forms harmoniously linking one another thanks to their isomorphism.

The Oulipo group and particularly Queneau (see chapter 1) expressed greater interest in mathematical properties and also in Fibonacci's theory. Queneau himself proved several theorems on the behaviour of matrices and identified similarities between them and the Fibonacci series¹⁸. He and the other members of the Oulipo were intrigued by matrix analysis but looked forward to the creation of poems written in columns and rows¹⁹.

Bélisle's *Figures* can be described as "text-spirals". By passing the mouse over the segments the text advances or moves back in a symmetrical way, for example in *Figures Variables* from an opening verse line:

figures
variables

the reader can reach in only three clicks the complete poem, which will form a rectangle.

malgré ce qui survit en nous, voilà presque
advenu l'âge de toujours, éperdu de certitude
comme si nous nous étions égarés dans les
métaphores nous croyons que les figures et mouvements
du langage remplacent les mobiles variables du plaisir

The meaning of the text is already inscribed in the title: *Figures variables*, which are also the first two verse lines: figures that can change. And by clicking on them another rectangle will appear:

figures et mouvements
variables du plaisir

Until now the e-poem is composed only of nominal syntagms, there is no verb. Continuing to click on the text another rectangle will be drawn on the page:

Nous voilà presque
éperdus de certitudes,
égarés dans les
figures et mouvements
variables du plaisir

Figures and movements are metaphor of pleasure in the second segment of the poem, but in the third they acquire a negative connotation, since we (the poet and the reader) are almost lost "presque éperdue" and mislaid "égarés". With another click, the last rectangle will appear:

¹⁸ Raymond Queneau, "L'Analyse matricielle du langage", in Bernard Quemada (ed.), *Etudes de linguistique appliquée*, Paris: Didier, 1964, pp. 37-50.

¹⁹ Andrée Bergens, *Raymond Queneau* (1975), Paris: L'Herne, 1999.

malgré ce qui survit en nous, voilà presque
 advenu l'âge de toujours, éperdu de certitude
 comme si nous nous étions égarés dans les
 métaphores nous croyons que les figures et mouvements
 du langage remplacent les mobiles variables du plaisir

In this fourth segment the poet and the reader are lost in metaphors believing that the language with its movements and figures can replace the pleasure.

The words form and deform the sense of the text by moving in space, multiplying the number of the verse lines and their meanings, creating figures and movements, metaphors, that is to say substituting a part to another, a sense to another one. This mobile language and pleasure is given both by the use of adjectives – “variable; mouvements; mobile” and by the motion of the text that changes meaning under the reader’s click, creating a meta-textual writing.



FIGURE 16: Marie Bélisle, *Figures* – the four texts

The click which allows to de-compose the e-poem, thus, can be defined a metaphoric *click*. The transformation both in the form and in the content carries over the meaning of the text. And it is the reader’s interaction that allows the changing of meaning in the text. It is the reader that with her click that allows physically the language’s figures and motions to replace the mobile variables of pleasure, the pleasure of another reading of another text: “figures et mouvements du langage remplacent les mobiles variable du plaisir”.

Words, meanings, forms; everything changes in Bélisle’s works, highlighting the dual/multi identity of letters: there will be no more one fixed meaning structured by the rigor of the language, but the possibilities opened up by *metaphoric* and embodied writing.

3. Aya Karpinska's Creation of New Space

This part is dedicated to Aya Karpinska and her experiment of using space in the digital environment. According to our typology these texts are recombinatory segments-based e-poems. The e-reader is invited to interact with it, to mix and to discover the various possible reading paths of the e-text, and to change also the viewpoint from where to look at it.

The e-poems, I will analyse, do not have the inner clock, but the reader by manipulating them and by combining differing reading possibilities obliged the texts to move and it takes few second for them to be recomposed on the web page. Anyway, this kind of time depends on the computer the reader is using to *flip* through the e-texts and not on the texts themselves.

3.1 Aya Karpinska's *the arrival of the beeBox*

Aya Karpinska's *the arrival of the beeBox*, 2003, at:
<http://www.technikai.com/box/>

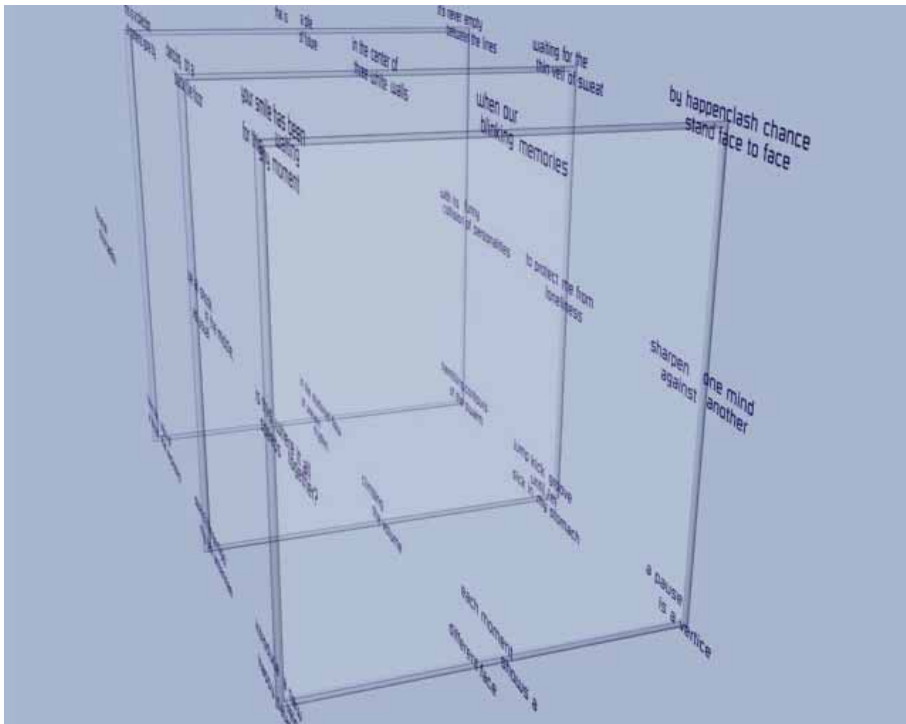


FIGURE 17: Aya Karpinska, *the arrival of the beeBox* – the opening page

If Marie Bélisle deconstructs the words and Maria Mencía, as we will see, deconstructs the phoneme, Aya Karpinska deconstructs the writing space. In *the arrival of the beeBox*, she studies and decomposes the writing space once more. *The arrival of the beeBox* was presented at the E-Poetry 2003 International Digital Poetry Festival, which took place on April 23-26 in Morgantown, West Virginia.

I felt it was necessary to plan the poem in three dimensions. The 3D modelling software I am using, , is somewhat overwhelming to the novice. Microsoft Word just wouldn't cut it, however, I had to write in space. Obsessed with simplicity, and knowing that curved surfaces often take up too many resources in 3D renderings, I settled on a cube as the basic structure of the poem. Besides, the title of the poem is *the arrival of the beeBOX*, not ...*the beeBALL*. After I had a draft I was happy with (yes, I wrote the original verses on regular paper, not in space) I copied the 27 verses onto slips of paper and pinned them to the rickety structure pictured below. I arranged and re-arranged the verses, eventually cutting out the three at the interior for practical reasons - it was just too annoying to stick my fingers among those toothpicks to pin and un-pin the verses in the center. I thought that it would be difficult to select and view those verses in the virtual model as well. As could be expected, working with the physical model affected the semantic and syntactic structure of the poem, it also affected how I imagined an ideal reading of the poem would flow. Basically, I privilege the surface of the box - verses on top are more coherent, verses near the bottom, where it was difficult to reach, are more chaotic and seemingly disconnected from each other.²⁰

The arrival of the beeBox is a three-dimensional work, where the reading practice is at once interactive and immersive. By clicking on unreadable "words", verse lines appear; finally, by using the arrows the reader can move the text, turn it upside down, shift it from left to right. Though, personally, all these movements disturb my reading, giving me a sense of nausea, suggesting to me that more than reading it I should just "play" with it, using the text more as an object to touch than a text to read. More than a sense of frustration, suggested by Philippe Bootz²¹ for some electronic texts (see, for instance, chapter 5 and 7), here the reading practice is disturbed physically. Moreover, it is often difficult to read the different segments of text, since opening one can mean make unreadable another. The position of the cube as well makes affects the readability of different parts of the text to a greater or lesser degree.

Karpinska's poem is a remediation of Sylvia Plath's poem with the same title. As noticed by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, in Plath's poem, the "clean wood box" that the speaker has ordered appears to contain an uncontrollable life-force: the bees, "Minute and shrunk for export,/ black on black, angrily chambering"²², could never be held in check". In Karpinska's spatial poem, the clustered bees have become clustered words and it is the reader/user who is to open the boxes as three-dimensional objects - allowing the words to stretch and flutter out and take their provisional in-line positions²³.

As in the previous Karpinska text, this poem suggests another path in the reading practice which resists the sense of an ending. With *beeBox*, Karpinska allows her reader to play more with and to explore deeper the possibilities

²⁰ Aya Karpinska, *The arrival of the beeBox*, 2003, accessible online at: <http://www.techneka.com/box/history.html> (accessed, June 7 2006).

²¹ Philippe Bootz, "Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms", in *New Media Poetry and Poetics*, Special Issue, Leonardo Electronic Almanac Vol. 14, No. 5 - 6, 2006, accessible online at: http://leomanac.org/journal/vol_14/lea_v14_n05-06/pbootz.asp (accessed, September 21 2010).

²² Sylvia Plath, "The Arrival of the Bee Box" in Geoffrey Moore (ed.), *The Penguin Book of American Verse*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987, pp. 534-535.

²³ Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, *Multimediality, Intermediality, and Medially Complex Digital Poetry*, RiLUnE, n. 5, 2006, pp. 1-18, accessible online at: www.rilune.org/mono5/3_brillenburg.pdf (accessed, June 24 2009).

given by a three-dimensional writing. The reader, in fact, can choose to read the text from the left rightwards, from right leftwards, from the top downwards or the other way round, and so on, deciding not to make readable (and thus not to read) some “verse lines”.

“What is the difference between texts that are near or far? What will it mean when one sentence is behind another? When one sentence is above another?”²⁴ Karpinska focuses, again, on a new syntax of three dimensions: the most privileged issue is the pure spatial relationships between “verse lines”.

The meta-textual function of the text appears reading different “verse lines”: from “it’s never empty between the lines” to “climbing the volume”, from “each moment shows a different face” (which is actually the next-to-last sentence in the text, from the perspective of the standard way of reading) to “This is a collection of moments gone by”.

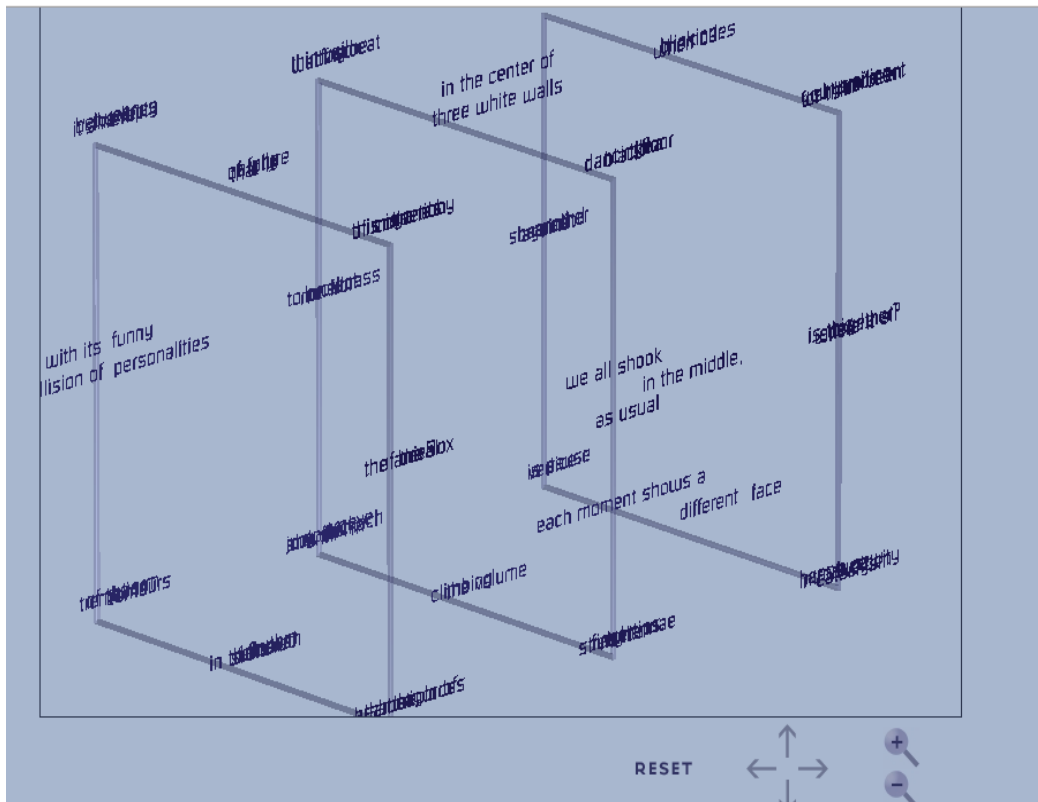


FIGURE 18: Aya Karpinska, *the arrival of the beeBox*

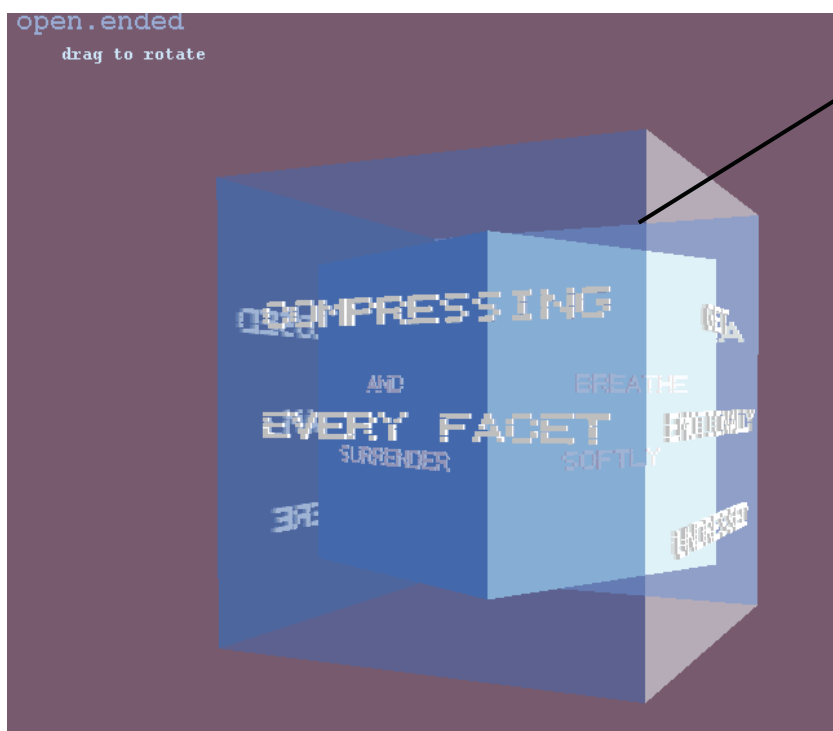
There are many possible links between the different “verse lines”, any association is possible: it is a random creative reading practice, revealing William Burroughs’ cut-up and fold-in method that can be classified under Katherine Hayles’ *modus* of cyborg reading. This reading is no longer related to two-dimensional text, but focuses on “topographic area to explore, with layered strata, hidden openings, crosscutting pathways, links between different world

²⁴ Aya Karpinska, *The arrival of the beeBox*, 2003, accessible online at: <http://www.techneka.com/box/history.html> (accessed, June 20 2006).

levels, and other spatial and temporal unfolding”²⁵. To explore space of this text the reader can literally move into the space of words. She can turn, rotate, zoom in and out. She can immerse herself in *beeBox*, see words from the inside out; she can “erase” words, focus on specific sentences, and link these sentences to others according a personal and private reading experience. Words become “objects” to explore and link in searching of a meaning.

3.2 Aya Karpinska's *Open.ended*

Aya Karpinska, *Open.ended*, 2004, at:
<http://www.technekai.com/open/index.html>
 or in *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 1*, 2006, at:
<http://collection.eliterature.org/1/>



The two cubes one into the other - both movable

FIGURE19: Aya Karpinska, *Open.ended* - the opening page

Marie Bélisle is proposing a new connection with and between words; Aya Karpinska is analyzing innovative possible uses of the writing space. *Open.ended* by Aya Karpinska with the collaboration of Daniel C. Howe is also edited in the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1* where Karpinska describes it as:

²⁵ N. Katherine Hayles, “Print is Flat, Code is Deep. The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis” in *Poetics Today*, 25.1,2004, pp. 67-90, p. 86.

an interactive three-dimensional poem experienced through the interplay of shifting geometric surfaces. Verses appear on the faces of separate translucent cubes nested within one another. The reader manipulates a mouse, joystick, or touch-screen to bring stanzas on different surfaces into view. As cubes, faces, and layers are revealed, dynamically updating lines of text move in and out of focus. The structure of the poem facilitates a multiplicity of readings: from single verses on cube faces, to sequential verses across faces, to juxtapositions of verses across multiple cubes. Meaning is constructed actively through collaboration between reader, author, and mediated work. An audio track of the authors' layered voices extends the experience, enveloping the reader in the atmosphere of the poem, organically complementing the visual and tactile components of the work.²⁶

Karpinska's *Open.ended* is another three-dimensional work made up of two cubes interacting with one another. The poems are not composed of lines and stanzas, rather, the use of stanzas acquire a new dimension by transforming themselves into cubes inside cubes, and stanzas inside stanzas. Verse lines are written with white letters in two light blue cubes,, a sort of Hélène Cixous's "white ink" quote. In "Le rire de la Meduse" she says that she writes "à l'encre blanche" (in white ink)²⁷. Cixous uses the metaphor of "white ink" to relate the writing to the feminine/maternal body (the white breast milk). She describes breast milk as silent, white text, the milk of word²⁸. According to Cixous, the "écriture féminine"²⁹ breaks the linear logic of male discourse and reclaims the feminine that Western tradition has suppressed³⁰.

It has been one of the key aims of feminist literary criticism to define a "female poetic" language. This presupposes that there is a "male poetic" language from which women have to borrow. Sometimes this project has been defined in terms of traditional poetic forms, sometimes in terms of conventions, sometimes in terms of the theory of language formation and acquisition, which are gender-based and which affect female identity and subjectivity, and therefore affect the way that subjectivity is expressed in poetry.

Several feminist critics - Gilbert and Gubar, Margaret Homans³¹ - wondered what happens if the poet is a woman. For the last one hundred and fifty years women writers generally preferred the novel to the poetic genre. Virginia Woolf hypothesised that this was because "the older forms of literature were fixed before women writers could significantly shape their conventions, while the novel alone was young enough to be soft [in the woman writer's]

²⁶ Daniel C. Howe and Aya Karpinska, *Open.ended*, in Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, Stephanie Strickland (eds.), *The Electronic Literature Collection*, Vol. 1, October 2006, accessible online at: http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/howe_kaprinaska_open_ended.html (accessed, November 22 2006).

²⁷ Helene Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse", Paris: L'Arc 61, 1975, pp. 39-54, p. 44.

²⁸ Cf. Pamela Marie Hoffer, *Reflets Réciproques*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006.

²⁹ Helene Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse", *op. cit.*

³⁰ According to Cixous l'écriture féminine is milk, it is something with rhythm and pulse, but no words, something connected with bodies and with bodies' beats and movements, but not with representational language.

³¹ Cf. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1979. Margarey Homans, *Woman Writers and Poetic Identity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

hands"³². Can e-poetry break these forms and traditions and offer women writers new ways of relating to language and poetry? Karpinska's works experiments with the flow-logic of electronic writing that can break the "male linear logic". According to Gregory Chatonsky the flow should be used as a medium that is to say as a language, not as an ideal communication support, a language that needs to be coded, decoded and coded again without fixing the reading practice in advance³³. Anaïs Guilet and Bernard Gervais propose an aesthetic of flow: the flow is not anymore a philosophic concept to think time and society but an aesthetic value characteristic of the hypermedia ³⁴.

Back to the e-poem, the number of verse lines in the external cube is always three and the verse lines in the internal cube are always two. Thus, when the "cube-stanza" is created by the intersection of the two cubes, the verse lines are five in total for every cube facet. This organisation of lines provides the text with a fixed structure and also opens up many different and unpredictable meanings, depending on the interaction of the cubes. *Open.ended* suggests some of the possibilities of multimedia poetry operating in three dimensions. The reading practice is no longer linear: the reader carries on reading from left to right, but in a third dimension. The three-dimensional experience affects the writer, too. She, at the moment of writing, feels herself "being immersed in multiplicities" quoting Deleuze and Guattari, (1980/1987) and she can hardly control where the reader's path can go.



FIGURE 20: Aya Karpinska, *open.ended*

³² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), London: Penguin, 1984, p.80.

³³ Grégory Chatonsky, "Esthétique du flux", *Rue Descartes*, no 55, P.U.F., 2007, accessible online at: http://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID_ARTICLE=RDES_055_0086 (accessed, February 2 2011).

³⁴ Anaïs Guilet and Bernard Gervais, *Go with the Flow*, NT2 laboratoire de recherches sur les arts et littératures hypermédiatiques, accessible online at http://nt2.uqam.ca/anais_guilet_bertrand_gervais#note9 (accessed, February 2 2011).

In *open.ended* Aya Karpinska explores the syntax of the three-dimensional space. She does so by experimenting with the dynamic relationships between space and meaning, and with the “effect of spatial arrangement on the meaning and experience of text” (Karpinska, 2003). She thinks that the extension of poetry into the third dimension will lead to “novel ways of representing relationships between words, as well as the evolution of new patterns of reading and rhythm”. “We suddenly have access to the backs of words – let’s make use of it”, she states, offering an experience of reader participation in which the reader can manipulate two cubes and the words written on them in a three dimensional environment, allowing other words (and thus other meanings) to emerge.

Finally, the verse line “an insatiable need to repeat” suggests the meta-textual value of Karpinska’s work. As with Bélisle’s *Alter Ego*, the repetition hides a difference. If the reader doesn’t manipulate them, the cubes will carry on in their fluctuant movements, repeating the same combination of words. Nevertheless, by playing with and manipulating the cube faces, the *difference* appears. The three-dimensional space brings new meaning to the verse line: “an insatiable need to repeat” can become “insatiable breath that softly repeat” and/or “press every face softly” and/or “eyes breath so softly here”, passing from a *perlocutive act* to a *metaphoric writing*. The reiteration of some syntagms, as “softly, breath, repeat” and the reiteration of morphemes like /s/ and /r/ reproduce the idea of the movement of the cubes (the liquid consonant /r/ recalls a series of Indo-European words linked to the idea of “flowing”, as the Greek verb: $\rho\epsilon\omega$). Finally, the title itself suggests how to use and read this text: a text with no end or better yet an opened end work composed of two texts that cross one another, offering new meanings using the reiteration of morphemes and syntagms. The disturbances around the traditional *intentionalities* of writing, the multiplicity of signifiers, the articulation and the metamorphosing of the reading experience thus reconfigure the writing and the reading practice.

4. Maria Mencía and New Possible Languages

In this section I will introduce Mencía’s experiments with language. According to our typology her e-poems are segments-based texts. The reader explores the possibilities offered by Mencía’s works in which are assembled together differing semiotic systems - texts, images and sounds. Finally, she is invited to re-compose the e-text that without her interaction would remain a potential text.

4.1 Maria Mencía's *Vocaley*s

Maria Mencía, *Vocaley*s, 2000, at: <http://www.m.mencia.freeuk.com/>

Maria Mencía

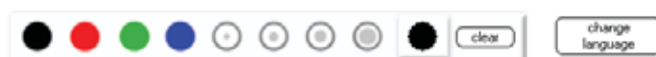


FIGURE 21: Maria Mencía, *Vocaley*s – the opening page

In *Vocaley*s Mencía has created an interactive piece that enables the user to create drawings and sounds compositions. The title *Vocaley*s is a pun on the word 'vocalize' through the union of two words: vocal and eyes. The audio background is created by the phonetic sounds of various languages, for example English, Mandarin and, in the form of musical notes. Mencía explains her text:

It is a piece that was produced with the idea of linking it to the Eyemouse produced by John Tchalenko, Research Fellow at Camberwell College of Arts. In his research he is looking at cognitive ways for learning to draw, while I am interested in communicative processes using text-sound and image. For this piece and taking into consideration his idea of learning to draw with your eyes, I used 'meaningless' phonetic sounds as the basic elements used in speech to learn to speak, conceiving in this way both parts of the brain: the linguistic and the visual.³⁵

Mencía focuses on the phonetic aspect of language, on the minimum sign-unit of potential meaning. She is suggesting a new language that has to be discovered and learnt: to learn how to draw (would be an instrument) to learn how to speak. The sounds reproduced, in fact, remind us of the sounds of a baby who is learning how to speak, how to vocalize.

³⁵ Maria Mencía, *Vocaley*s, 2000, accessible online at: <http://www.m.mencia.freeuk.com/> (accessed, July 10 2008).

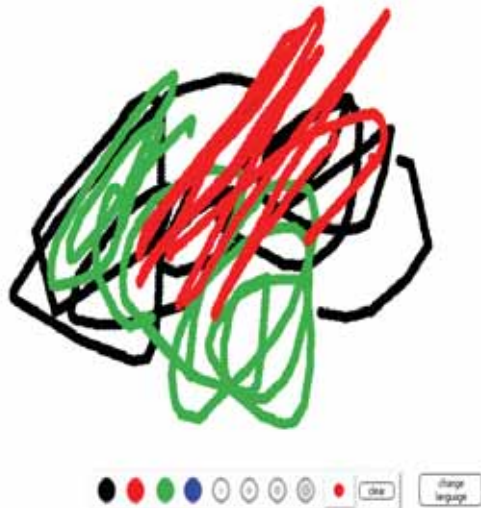


FIGURE 22: Maria Mencía, *Vocaleyas* – a possible text

The drawing system is rudimentary, it is easier just to scribble (as kids do). In this case there is no text to re-construct, but there is a text to construct, no images to retrace on the screen but images to draw on the white web page. The reader and the author share the text, co-participate in composing it. The user is materially composing the piece; she will end up with her own personal trace. There is no constructed poem to tell, nor painted drawing to show, but a proposal of co-composition of meaning offered to the users.

4.2 Maria Mencía's *Another Kind of Language*

Maria Mencía, *Another Kind of Language*, 2002, at:
<http://www.m.mencia.freeuk.com/>

Another Kind of Language

Interactive Work in Flash

a e c

FIGURE 23: Maria Mencía, *Another Kind of Language* – the opening page

In *Another Kind of Language*, as the title suggests, Mencía experiments with the possibilities of a new language form. In this case, too, she keeps on analysing communicative systems produced in the area of *in-between* “Semantic Text, Image Text and Phonetic Text” using digital technology.

This piece works as a web piece or as an interactive installation: three computers projecting the images on to the same screen in order to get a multi-layered image at the same time as a multi-layered soundscape of phonetic compositions. By rolling the mouse around, the textual surface appears and disappears, revealing the text-image and sound. The user can go from any of the pieces to the others and interact with other users. Each one of the pieces is formed by the *meaningless* phonetic sounds of three different languages: English, Mandarin and Arabic.

In the web version, which is the one I will analyse, three letters permit us to accede to different text: Arabic, English, and Chinese. By moving the mouse around the screen white surface images appear for a few moments and sounds are produced.



FIGURE 24: Maria Mencía, *Another Kind of Language*

The reader is watching and listening to fragments of text, fragments of language, and fragments of images. The act of touching makes the signs and the sounds of these texts palpable. It is the reader who re-creates the pieces, through her action. Mencía is breaking (her) language down to the essential. Images and sounds take the form of little fragments on the web page, a very fast movement of the mouse creates bizarre sketching and produces a sort of strange melody (for the sounds are created by singing and pronouncing the combination of sounds used in these linguistic systems). The directionality of Western reading is from left to right, but because here we don't have a

traditional reading space you can read from right to left, from inside out, from top to bottom and so on. The reader is charged with reconstructing the meaning of the piece and with re-tracing the reading path. With *Another Kind of Language* Mencía is proposing an open language, a language which is not controlled, a language without gender, a neutral language that has the ability to suggest free meanings and free associations between words, sounds and imagines. Starting from the blank page, it is the reader who has the power of composing and recomposing. Mencía structures the piece but allows it to be freed from her control she cannot preview how the reader will “read” it, in which sequences, and so on. The reader can play with the piece, experimenting with actions, using her imagination and knowledge to give sense to the piece.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I presented some examples of segments-based e-poetry in different languages: Italian, French and English. These texts experiment with some of the possibilities that the digital environment offers to the practice of creation, particularly they offer the reader the possibility of interacting with the text, of transforming and/or recombining it, even in a three dimensional space.

Calisi *Cartografi*, Bélisle’s *Figures*, and Aya Karpinska’s *the arrival of the beeBox* and *open-ended* – although in different ways – experiments the possibilities of the digital space. *Cartografi* focuses on different enunciative plans talking together and on the entax as basic elements to construct a new syntax. *Figures*, experiments with the changing of the form – thus the content – of the poetic text. To do that she links the poetic work to an aesthetic and mathematical constant, the Golden Ratio openly unifies literature and science. Both e-poems – *the arrival of the beeBox* and *open-ended* – show the text as a three dimensional object that can be combined, formed and deformed by the reader.

Marie Bélisle’s works *Caractères* and *Alter Ego* investigate the text’s deepness in the digital support. *Caractères* is also a visual poem coming out from a painting. *Caractères* studies the depth of the text from a morphological point of view – a letter, “un caractère”, hides another one, *Alter Ego* from a syntactic point of view – a word of groups of words hide other words or group of words. In both cases there is a dialogue between two different enunciative plans. *Alter Ego* is a reversible text which, however, allows combinatory writing, being composed of two complete and autonomous sentences superimposed one another. In total, sixteen words or groups of words are subjected to combination. Maria Mencía’s *Another Kind of Language* and *Vocaleyeyes* are e-poems where differing semiotic systems – texts, images and sounds – work together. These texts without the reader’s action would remain just potential texts. Particularly *Vocaleyeyes* is an interactive piece that enables the user to create drawings and sounds compositions, thus Mencía is sharing – in some way – with her reader her authorship.

All these texts have just one declared author. In electronic poetry it is quite usual to have works made by the collaboration between two or even more authors (see chapters 4 and 7). Sometimes, however, even if the skill is collaborative, only the one who got the idea of the text – or wrote it – is named as the author of the piece. However I will move towards the question of the author in electronic poetry in chapter 7.

But are those texts still readable, and is the reader still interested in reading them? It seems to me that some of them, those who offer an easier approach to the reading practice, like Calisi's *Cartografi* and Bélisle's works, seduce the reader with their text alone, so the reader desires to interact with the text that she is also reading. Some others, such as Aya Karpinska's cubes are more texts/objects with which the reader interacts, tools that offer the reader the ability to manipulate the text, to rotate it or to recombine its diverse segments, but those kind of texts do not expect a *delved into* reading practice. According to Umberto Eco the motion of electronic texts imposes a superficial reading practice, more consultative than reflexive³⁶. Thierry Baccino suggests that more than just reading the user of electronic text applies strategies of inspections: she searches³⁷. Karpinska's works put forward a "diagonal reading practice"³⁸ (see also chapters 5 and 6) and what Alexandra Saemmer calls the frenetic click³⁹. The reader clicks, rotates, zooms in and out, she treats the texts as an object, as a tool, more than a text in a canonical way.

Finally, Maria Mencía's works offer even less "text" (in the canonical sense): in *Another Kind of Language* the reader rolls over the screen and the text appears (both in its visual and sound form) but just for a few second, not giving her the time to *reflect* on what she is seeing and listening to. In *Vocaley* the reader appears to be seduced by the device and by the possibilities the device offers her to create, modify, and re-create her own text: by co-sharing the role with the author there is no *real* text to reflect on in order to interpret it.

³⁶ Umberto Eco, "Vegetal and Mineral memory. The future of the Book", Al-Ahram 20-26 November 2003, accessible online at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/665/bo3.htm> (accessed, February 3 2011).

³⁷ Thierry Baccino and Teresa Colombi, "L'analyse des mouvements des yeux sur le Web", *Interaction Homme-systèmes: perspectives et recherches psychoergonomiques*, Paris/Londres: Lavoisier/Hermès Sciences Publishing, 2001.

³⁸ Cf. Alexandra Saemmer, *Matières textuelles sur support informatique*, Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007, p. 46.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

CHAPTER 4

SEQUENCE-BASED E-POETRY

“The cryptic eye is an approach to infopoetry./ Infopoetry is made with the use of the computer thus adding the virtual reality of the poetic images to the virtual, dematerialized of the synthetic imagery and writing produced by the computer./ Infopoetry is metavirtual, bringing with it the difficult reading of the non obvious’.
E. M. de Melo e Castro¹

In this chapter I will analyse e-poetry whose *form of expression* is based on the notion of the «sequence», that is to say which has an inner temporality, an inner clock. I would propose the definition “sequence-based poetry” for this kind of e-writing, and not use the terminology already employed to classify this category of texts, normally described as kinetic works (or visual and kinetic works)², but instead I refer to semiotics terminology³. It is true that sequence-based e-poems are kinetic: sequences are kinetic, however, also segments-based e-poetry can be kinetic in some ways as we saw in chapter 3. The reader can give movement to a text with her interaction (see for instance Aya Karpinska’s cubes: they move but it is the reader that controls the motions, thus the time). What I would like to differentiate in this typology is the nature of time.

“Kinetic” means characterized by movement. Motion is one of the characteristics of this category of texts. In kinetic works the optical mutation of text, words, and letters is the operative principle. Poems move and change before the viewer’s eyes. The motion suggests new meanings to the reader and introduces new figures and tropes, as we will see further along in this chapter. And, finally, the motion here imposes a reading-time on the text, which marks the difference with segments-based e-poetry.

¹ Ernesto Manuel de Melo e Castro, *Finitos mais infinitos*, Lisboa: Hugin Editores, 1996.

² Cf., for instance, Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*, Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2007

³ Cf. Alessandro Zinna, *Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura*, Roma: Meltemi, 2004.

I have also put forward the proposition (see chapter 2) that we specify this kind of e-writing with an inner o'clock «random access sequences», as opposed to the strictly sequential nature of regular elements. I am using computer science's terminology where random means "accessed in any order", and not the layman's sense of, say, "chaotically" or "all over the place".

Many of the texts I will analyse in this chapter still present a prosaic – by implication sequential – reading practice. *The last day of Betty Nkomo* by Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge, *Tisha B'Av* by David Harris Ebenbach and Jonathan Gould, and *Hospital Tent* by Tony Barnstone, Jonathan Minori and Fabrizio Aiello are clearly linear e-poems. *La Rossa Parola* by Elisa Carlotti and *Candles for a Street Corner* by Robert Kendall and Michele D'Auria – even if in different ways – are multi-linear texts. Alex Gopher's *The child* is again a linear text, it tells a story in a linear way, but because it is a video, the reader can somehow interact with the time. She can stop the video, go back or jump forward once it is loaded. Jim Andrews' poems do not actually present a reading structure. Based on concrete poetry, these works are made either of single words or of single letters. However, the motion suggests the multi-linearity of letters and/or words on the screen – they can appear from right to left or from left to right, from the bottom to the top and vice versa, they can appear backwards starting from the last letter of the word, and so on.

We have spoken about the relationship between the text and the reader, before analysing these e-poems I would like to focus also on the question of authorship. Due to the nature of electronic poetry and particularly due to the characteristics of this category of texts – polysemic texts – collaboration between authors seems to be necessary for the creative practice.

Many of the poems analysed in this chapter are collaborative texts – *Tisha B'Av* by David Harris Ebenbach and Jonathan Gould, *Hospital Tent* by Tony Barnstone, Jonathan Minori and Fabrizio Aiello, *Candles for a Street Corner* by Robert Kendall and Michele D'Auria, and *The last day of Betty Nkomo* by Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge. The first three texts state who is the author of the poem, and who is the author of the visual part – the images and sounds. In the *The last day of Betty Nkomo* the reader is uninformed of the details of how the collaboration between Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge worked. Other poems seem to have just one author – witness Elisa Carlotti's *La Rossa Parola* but in these cases it could be the case that there is another "author" of the technical parts whose name does not appear in the work. Finally, Alex Gopher's *The child* seems to have just one author but actually this example demonstrates quite well the complexity of the question of authorship in electronic texts. Gopher's *The child* is a three minutes video-clip. The DJ and musician Alex Gopher creates a song using Billie Holiday's voice, remixing Billie Holiday's song "God Bless the Child", but the graphic designers H5 executed the video-clip. H5 is a French graphics and animation studio started in 1996 by Ludovic Houplain and Antoine Bardou-Jacquet. H5 works mostly in the fields of music video and luxury advertising (such as Dior Cartier, Hugo Boss, Hermès, Lancôme). Other graphic artists work for the studio – so who is the author of this e-poem?

Moreover, they are not properly poets, they are graphic artists, but *The child*⁴ represents the last step in the evolution of the calligram as shown in chapter 1. Even if this piece was not made with the expressed purpose of being an electronic poem it is an interesting example of (animated) calligram.

1. Appearance and Disappearance of Words on the Screen: *LA ROSSA PAROLA* by Elisa Carlotti

The poem *LA ROSSA PAROLA* (“The red word”) by Elisa Carlotti – published without any editorial filter on her own web site under the section “Poesie Visive” (Visual Poetry) – it is an example of sequence-based_electronic writing. The level of complexity is low since this poem consists of just one page of graphic-text, and it does not require any actions by the reader – the text moves automatically once accessed and it is impossible to halt it.

1.1 Elisa Carlotti’s *LA ROSSA PAROLA*

Elisa Carlotti, *LA ROSSA PAROLA*⁵, at:
http://utenti.multimania.it/elisa_carlotti/rossaparola.html

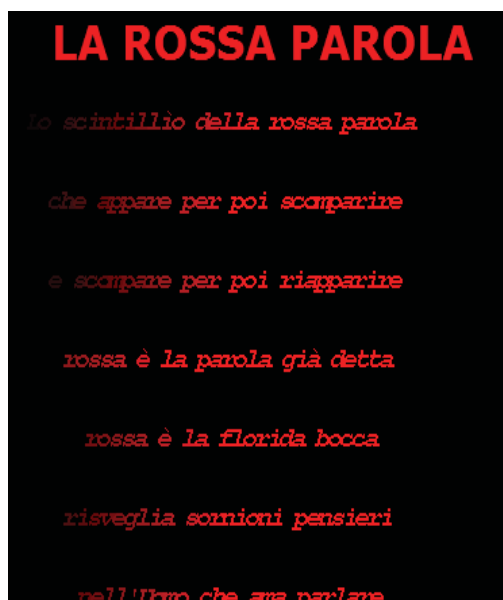


FIGURE 1: Elisa Calotti, *LA ROSSA PAROLA* – the opening page

⁴ H5’s works, however, have been presented in numerous exhibitions and festivals, such as in Paris (National Center of Art and Culture Georges-Pompidou), London (Institute of Contemporary Arts), Tokyo (Sendai Mediatheque), Rotterdam (NAI), and New York (MoMA).

⁵ There is no year of publication for this poem but it should have been made between 1997 and 1998 because in the web side the author suggests to use Internet Explorer 4 in order to read the poem, and Internet Explorer 4 was realised in September 1997. Already in 1999 Internet Explorer 5 would appear.

The poem is written in red letters on a black background which provides a certain aesthetic effect to the work and makes it more readable (depending on your point of view). *LA ROSSA PAROLA* consists of just one page comprising the title and 7 verse lines. The page can be divided into two parts: the title and the poem itself. The title is written in capital letters in order to mark a distinction with the text of the poem – written in lowercase letters, with the exception of one U in the word Uomo (man). The title is the only static part of the piece. The fact that the title is in the same page with the e-poem – which is quite unusual for electronic poetry – allows the author to highlight the contrast between the static (“old” printed) poetry and the potentialities of electronic poetry.

The text is composed in free verse lines whose length differ. The motion of each verse line also varies depending on each inner clock. They appear on the screen from the left side of the page, which is also the first part of the text to disappear – thus the poem becomes readable still in a linear way. If the presence of the static title confers to the kinetic poem the idea of a whole text, the different motions suggest to the reader the potential multi-linearity of the work. In fact, even though the structure of the poem reminds one of a printed poem – 7 verse lines one after another, in a linear way, following the typographic rules imposed by the Western printing press – the different time in which the verse lines appear on the screen forces the reader not to follow the standard prosaic reading practice but to access the text in any order. Particularly verse lines 3 and 4 emphasize the potentialities of the reading practice in this kind of sequence-based e-poetry since these two verse lines show clearly a different frequency in appearing on (and disappearing from) the screen – verse line 3 is the first one and verse line 4 is the last one to appear and disappear conferring a key meaning construct to the central part of the poem.

The text reads:

Lo scintillio della rossa parola
 che appare per poi scomparire
 e scompare per poi riapparire
 rossa è la parola già detta
 rossa è la florida bocca
 risveglia sornioni pensieri
 nell'Uomo che ama parlare⁶

The meta-textual function of the poem is immediately clear – red words appear, disappear and reappear on the screen.

⁶ “The glitter of the red word / that appears to then disappear/ and disappears to then reappear / red is the word already said / red is the florid mouth / it reawakens sneaky thoughts / in the Man who loves talking”.

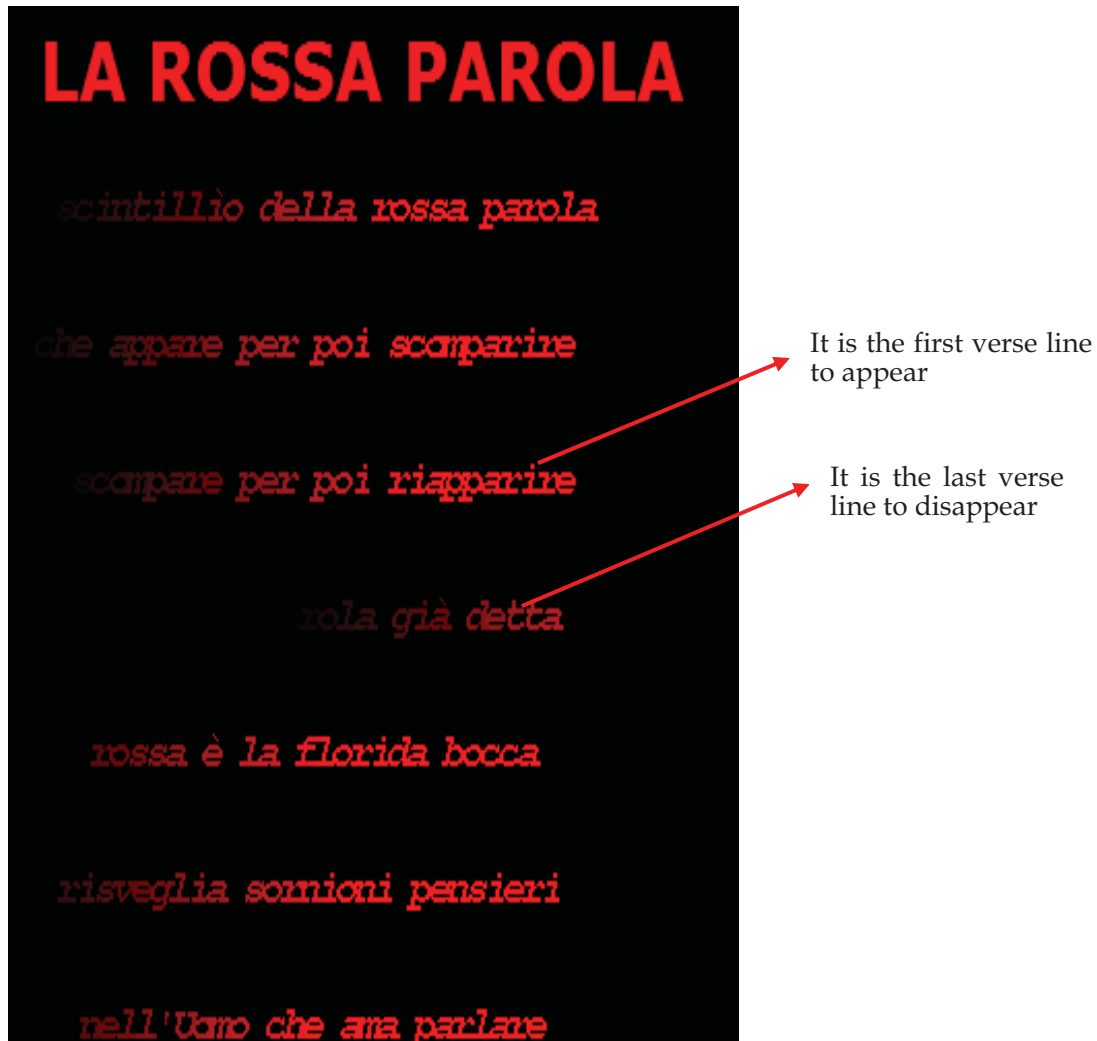


FIGURE 2: Elisa Carlotti, *LA ROSSA PAROLA*

The rhythmic dimension of the poem is determined both by the position of rhythmic accents and the sequence in which the verse lines appear and disappear⁷. At the beginning the rhythm is slow and then it becomes faster and driving. The position of the rhythmic accents and the change in the frequency of the verse lines alters the tempo of the poem. For instance, in the first verse line the rhythmic accents are positioned on the 4th, 7th, and 10th syllables, in the second and third verse line on the 3^d, 6th, and 9th syllables until we reach the fifth verse line (which is the shorter) where the rhythmic accents are placed on the 2nd and 7th syllables changing the general rhythm of the poem (see the scheme below).

⁷ For the analysis of the prosody in this poem see also Carla Impagliazzo, "La rossa parola", in Alessandro Zinna (ed.), *Gli oggetti di scrittura II*, Urbino: CISL, 2004 (336-337-338/F), pp. 22-26.

<u>VERSE LINE</u>	NUMBER OF SYLLABLES	RHYTHMIC ACCENTED SYLLABLES	<u>EFFECT</u>
Lo - <u>scin-ti-l-lio</u> - del-la - <u>ros-sa</u> - pa- <u>ro-la</u>	11	4°, 7°, 10°	<u>Synaesthesia</u> - <u>Metaphor</u>
che - ap- <u>pa-re</u> - per - <u>poi</u> - scom- <u>pa-ri-re</u>	10	3°, 6°, 9°	<u>Chiasmus</u> , <u>alliteration</u> sound /r/
e - scom- <u>pa-re</u> - per - <u>poi</u> - riap- <u>pa-ri-re</u>	10	3°, 6°, 9°	
ros-sa <u>è</u> - la - pa- <u>ro-la</u> - già - <u>det-ta</u>	9	2°, 5°, 8°	It is the last verse line to disappear
ros-sa <u>è</u> - la - flo-ri-da - <u>boc-ca</u>	8	2°, 7°	Anaphora: repetition Adjective "red" at the beginning of the verse line
ri- <u>sve-glia</u> - sor- <u>nio-ni</u> - pen- <u>sie-ri</u>	9	2°, 5°, 8°	enjambment alliteration of nasal sounds
nel- <u>l'Uo-mo</u> - che - <u>a-ma</u> - par- <u>la-re</u>	9	2°, 5°, 8°	

FIGURE 3: scheme of Elisa Carlotti's *La rossa parola*

The overall effect is remarkable. The motion shows clearly that the seven verse lines are seven distinct sequences: in fact, while initially appearing at the same time, their manifestation and disappearance is modified by a different frequency with which the cycle repeats. The motion breaks the text and confers it multi-linearity. If at the very beginning, the text appears following a prosaic way of reading – from the first verse line to the last one – after a few minutes the sequence in which the verse lines become visible on the screen is altered.

The third and fourth verse lines, as we saw, appear with different frequency than any of the others. Verse line 3 “scompare per poi riapparire” (“[it] disappears to then reappear”) is the first one that appears on the page meanwhile verse line 4 “rossa è la parola già detta” (“red is the word already said”) is the last one to vanish from the screen. The 4th verse line plays, therefore, an important position in how we interpret the text. The entire meaning of the whole poem becomes meta-textual and can be summarized with the words of Roland Barthes: “l'écrivain ne peut qu'imiter un geste toujours antérieur, jamais originel; son seul pouvoir est de mêler les écritures”⁸.

⁸ Roland Barthes, “La mort de l'auteur”, in *Le bruissement de la langue*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984, p. 69 first public in English *The Death of the Author*, Aspen Magazine, no. 5/6, 1967.

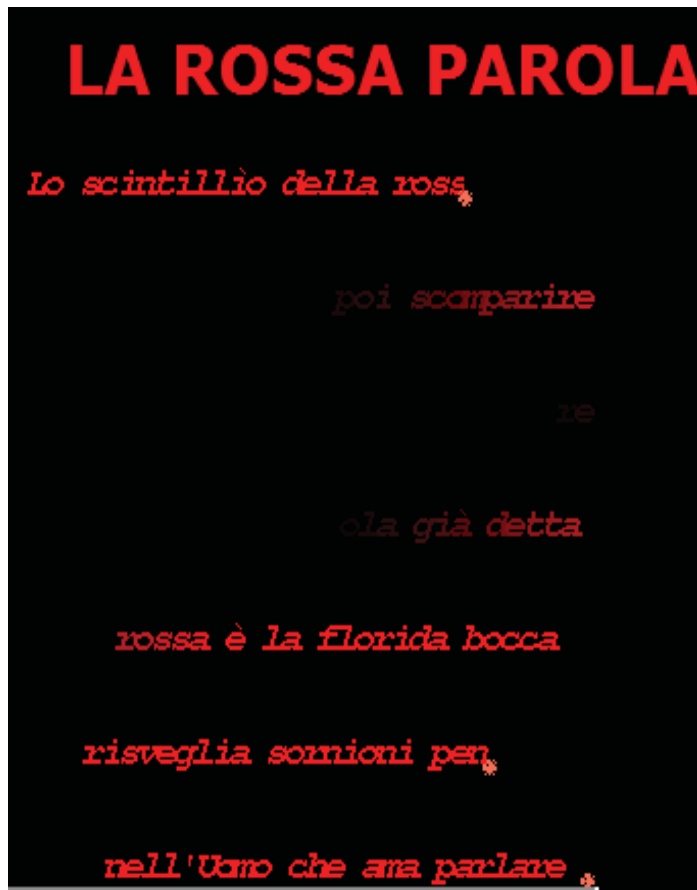


FIGURE 4: Elisa Carlotti, *LA ROSSA PAROLA*

If the reader lets the text run for several minutes, this order will change again and again. In fact after several repetitions of appearance and disappearance of the verse lines, the discrepancy in tempo between them will become even more evident.

What characterizes this text thus is the motion. The idea of movement is also underlined by the alliteration of the phoneme /r/. It appears eighteen times in the text, but is more concentrated in the first three verse lines, producing an effect of sound that emphasizes the sense of flow. The liquid consonant /r/ recalls a series of Indo-European words linked to the idea of “flowing”, as in the Greek verb: *ρῆω* which means to flow⁹.

The red characters and the red adjective to the word “parola” (word) and its vehicle “florida bocca” (florid mouth) express and dramatize everything that substantiates the human existence. The word is central in man’s experience: the final enjambment (in lines six and seven) reveals that the real protagonist is the “Man who loves to talk” (“l’Uomo che ama parlare”) – also the use of the capital letter confers on the word Man the role of the subject in the text. By rewriting Descartes’ statement the poem proposes a new axiom: “I speak, therefore I am”.

“The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others”.

⁹ Other poems have used the reiteration of the phoneme /r/ to underline the idea of motion, see chapters 3 and 6.

2. Syncretic Poem: *Tisha B'Av*

*Tisha B'Av*¹⁰ is another sequence-based e-poem – around 4 minutes long – which does not require reader interaction – actually it is impossible for the reader to manipulate the text or the time of the text, she cannot for instance pause the text or reproduce just some parts of it. It is a collaborative work by David Harris Ebenbach and Jonathan Gould. Actually Ebenbach's poem was first published in 2005, in a printed poetic review without the collaboration of Gould (and without digital effects)¹¹. The digital version was published in “bornmagazine” in 2006.

2.1 David Harris Ebenbach, *Tisha B'Av*

David Harris Ebenbach *Tisha B'Av*, 2006, at:

<http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/tishabav/>

Tisha B'Av

They've torn the skin off my street. Underneath are the long striations of muscle tissue, but petrified; it seems possible that the city underneath us is essentially dead, that the sewage in its veins moves only for show. It might also be possible, in a long-suffering universe that reaches so casually from here to there, that the city underneath is just an old body moving on geologic time, and that I am impatient, that I am a single-celled frenetic beating against the windows of life. Meanwhile this afternoon's rain fills the striations and pours up dirty against the curb, where things are easier; meanwhile on either side of the street scaffolding rises up against the sides of these buildings bone by bone and hangs on, and then at some point each structure comes down, all the ligamenture for just an hour in shining piles along the sidewalks. The advantage then is the sky; maybe I am walking with a book once the rain has stopped and then I realize I am blinded by the pages, and I look up through what I remember to be planks, and there it is – the fringes of the universe, soaked in some kind of blue.

FIGURE 5: David Harris Ebenbach, *Tisha B'Av* (still at 00:00)

Tisha B'Av can be considered a prose poem due to its structure. As such, it is a poem written as prose, in other words it is a hybrid form combining poetry and prose. The poem has all of the essential elements of traditional poetry written in verse – it has rhythm, rhyme, repetition and assonance. *Tisha B'Av* is also a

¹⁰ David Harris Ebenbach and Jonathan Gould, *Tisha B'Av*, 2006, accessible online at: <http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/tishabav/>, (accessed, November 3 2006).

¹¹ The first version is accessible online at http://www.zeek.net/poetry_0508.shtml (accessed, November 3 2006).

poem that reminds the reader of the oral poetry tradition. The poem, in fact, is recited but there is also the support of the written text¹².

Tisha B'Av is – mainly – composed of a graphic piece of poetry whose verse lines disappear synchronously as the reciting voice is whispering them. The text is divided into three sequences – none of them needs to be user-activated (the poem starts automatically, to play it again the reader needs to click on the button “repeat”). The first sequence – which is the longest (a bit less than 2 minutes) – is composed of graphic text and audio-images, the second – the shorter (around 1 second) – of one iconic text representing a man, and the third – again longer – of iconic texts representing the cycle of birth: from the “singled-celled” (as written in the poetry) to a small foetus and audio-images, formed of babies gurgles and of an repetitive waxing and waning tonal background that eventually fades to silence. This work is thus polysemic.

In the first part, this poem offers an example of “syncretic assembling”. According to Zinna¹³ syncretic assembling happens when signs belonging to different semiotic systems compose a new unity. On one side there is a segment of text but on the other there are sequences of words. The graphic syntagmatic part and the audio-images make the reader cope with different signification systems.

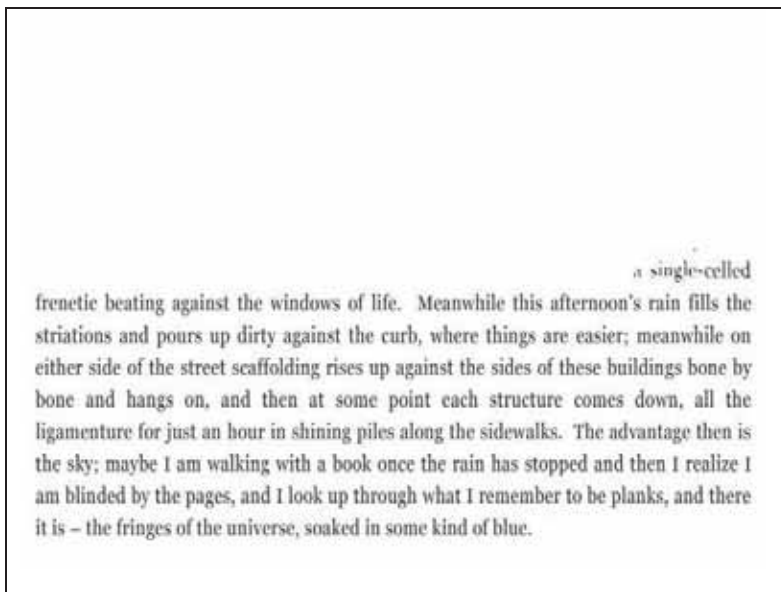


FIGURE 6: David Harris Ebenbach, *Tisha B'Av* (still at: 00.38)

The way of reading this poetry is still linear, prosaic: also the words after being pronounced disappear in a linear way – morpheme after morpheme – representing visually the words vanishing in the air after being said. The voice whispers, murmurs the words instead of declaiming them in a loud voice. The

¹² A strict definition would include only poetry that is composed and transmitted without any aid of writing, however, considering the complex relationships between written and spoken literature, some societies extend this definition and oral poetry is sometimes considered to include any poetry which is performed live.

¹³ Cf. Alessandro Zinna, *Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura*, Bologna: Meltemi, 2004, pp. 212-219.

background audio – which accompanies the whispered poem – is composed of sounds of cars and a bus and – probably – of the narrator’s steps. These sounds are in opposition: on the one hand the whispered private speech of the voice, on the other the public everyday life of the street. The sound of the steps becomes clearer towards the end of the poetry, especially during the last two verse lines: while the sound of the bus disappears, it accompanies the fading of the voice.

Regarding the title *Tisha B'Av*, the Fast of the Ninth of Av, is a day of mourning to commemorate the many tragedies that have befallen upon the Jewish people, many of which coincidentally have occurred on the ninth of Av. Tisha B'Av means “the ninth (day) of Av.” It usually occurs during August. Tisha B'Av primarily commemorates the destruction of the first and second Temples, both of which were destroyed on the ninth of Av (the first by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E.; the second by the Romans in 70 C.E.).

The text describes the slow decline of the city where presumably the narrator is walking. As the voice runs through the text, the sounds of the city are becoming stronger and stronger, until disappearing – allowing the reader to listen just to the narrator voice during the last two verse lines.

They've torn the skin off my street. Underneath are the long striations of muscle tissue, but petrified; it seems possible that the city underneath us is essentially dead, that the sewage in its veins moves only for show. It might also be possible, in a long-suffering universe that reaches so casually from here to there, that the city underneath is just an old body moving on geologic time, and that I am impatient, that I am a single-celled frenetic beating against the windows of life. Meanwhile this afternoon's rain fills the striations and pours up dirty against the curb, where things are easier; meanwhile on either side of the street scaffolding rises up against the sides of these buildings bone by bone and hangs on, and then at some point each structure comes down, all the ligamenture for just an hour in shining piles along the sidewalks. The advantage then is the sky; maybe I am walking with a book once the rain has stopped and then I realize I am blinded by the pages, and I look up through what I remember to be planks, and there it is – the fringes of the universe, soaked in some kind of blue.

The poem can be divided into 5 parts according to the punctuations. The first part is very short and poetic: “They've torn the skin off my street”. The trope of personification/anthropomorphism introduces the subject of the poem: the decadence of the city as “just an old body”. This anthropomorphism trope recurs, appearing in the second part: “city... dead”, in the third “long-suffering universe” and in the forth “scaffolding rises up... bone by bone”. The motion of the words vanishing after been said reproduces what Alexandra Saemmer calls *ciné-gramme*¹⁴. Saemmer defines this term just in relation to animations remembering the calligram of the paper medium. I propose to extend this meaning to all those animations that make the motion represent what the text says and make the text say what the motion represents. The *ciné-gramme* is often redundant insofar as meaning is concerned like in this case. The effect is

¹⁴ Alexandra Saemmer, “Some stylistic devices on media interface”, conference paper presented at *The Network as a Space and Medium for Collaborative Interdisciplinary Art Practice* (Bergen Nov. 8-10th, 2009), accessible online at: <http://elitineurope.net/node/29> (accessed, April 20 2010).

to achieve a poetic emphasis through echoing across media and mirrors other linguistic devices used for emphasis.

As previously mentioned the text sounds like a whisper: the internal rhymes, the alliterations, and particularly the reiteration of the phonemes – tongue patents – /s/, /f/ and /th/ reproduce the whisper sound. The rhythm of the voice imposes the tempo in which the words vanish, as said with synchronism. We should also remember that in synagogue, the book of Lamentations is read and mourning prayers are recited. At the end of the text, the noise of the opening doors of the bus and some words declaimed by the voice: “[...] these buildings bone by bone and hangs on [...]” break the poetical rhythm of the whole text, introducing acoustically what is visible – the end of the poem.

In the second sequence a fuzzy picture of a young man appears. It stays on the screen for just one second and then vanishes, and no sound accompanies the picture. The picture might represent the poet/narrator himself, being an extension of the subject “I” that appears 7 times in the poem, but 5 times just in the last part: “[...] I am walking with a book once the rain has stopped and then I realize I am blinded by the pages, and I look up through what I remember to be planks, [...]”.



FIGURE 7: David Harris Ebenbach, *Tisha B'Av* (still at: 01.40)

The third and last sequence represents the cycle of life: eight small circles appear in temporal order simulating the evolution of the ovule. A metallic and annoying sound marks the evolution of the ovule. Then – after the signature of the two authors Ebenbach and Gould appearing – the word “repeat” is positioned just in the middle of the nine circles. By clicking of it the eight small cellules rewind as in a type, replaying the text, simulating the cyclical meaning of life. Moreover, even if the nine small images set down on the page in less than one minute, the audio-images – babies gurgles and an annoying metallic music – keep on playing for almost 2 minutes, particularly the annoying

metallic music stays longer, almost forces the reader either to launch the text again or to close the page.

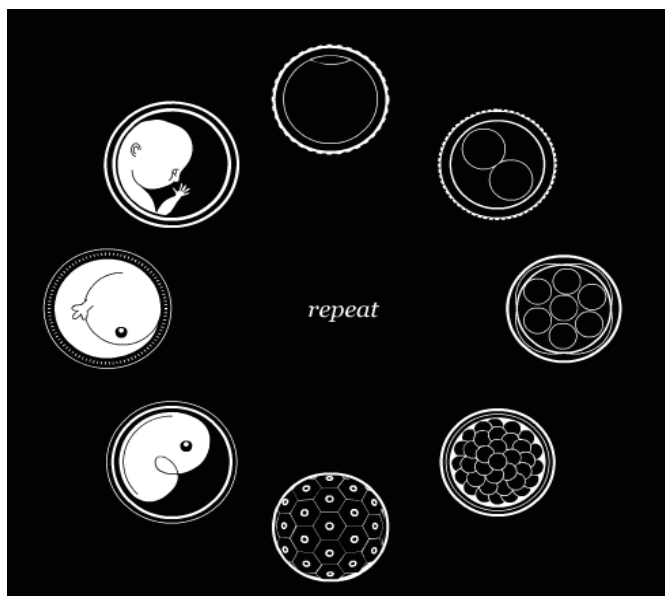


FIGURE 8: David Harris Ebenbach, *Tisha B'Av* (still at: 02.10)

The multi-layering of this text (the level of the type-letters on the page, the level of voice sound-waves, the film strip of letters and the images on the screen) confers it a multi-nature. "I realized I'm blinded by the page" recites the text, giving the reader the lecture-key – the whole text is just a metaphor. The electronic medium materializes the decadence of the city by making the words vanish on the web space.

3. Cinematographic Poetry: YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES' *The last day of Betty Nkomo*

The YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES is a group based in Asia, in Seoul, South Korea to be precise consisting of Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge. They arrange graphical texts with music (normally jazz, but not always) and their website contains works in 14 languages, among them some oriental languages too. Their works are a rare case of e-poetry in Asia. *The last day of Betty Nkomo* is published on the author's web site – thus it is self-published without any editorial process or procedure, but it is also presented in other websites specifically devoted to e-poetry¹⁵. This e-poem lasts approximately 2 minutes and it is a video which does not allow the reader to interact with the text. The reader cannot stop it and watch again some of its parts: the only action she can do is to go back on the page. Her control of the text is nil.

¹⁵ It is published also in *poems that GO* website at <http://www.poemsthatgo.com/> (accessed, November 3 2006) which is a web site dedicated only to e-poetry made in flash.

3.1 YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES' *The last day of Betty Nkomo*

YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, *The last day of Betty Nkomo*¹⁶, at:
http://www.yhchang.com/BETTY_NKOMO.html



FIGURE 9: YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES', *The last day of Betty Nkomo* (still at 00:00)

This sequence-based e-poem exhibits different semiotic systems – the graphical text and the audio-images – interacting together. The video-poem starts with a countdown where numbers are written alternately in ciphers and letters. Then, like in a movie, the name of the artistic duo that presents the work (see figure 9) appears followed by the title. Both the name of the artistic duo and the title are blinking on the screen.

YOUNG-HAE CHANG
 HEAVY
 INDUSTRIES
 PRESENTS

FIGURE 10: YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES', *The last day of Betty Nkomo* (still at 00:04)

¹⁶ There is no year of publication for this poem.

This motion separates these two first sequences from the text itself. The flashing marks a division into the video-poem, it introduces the poem. An oriental music starts to play as soon as the countdown begins. With a perfect synchronism the poem begins when a woman's voice starts to sing. But the song stops after repeating three "AH!" - which is highlighted by them blinking - meanwhile the words are still sliding on the screen.

The text is simple. The lines move forward in a prosaic progression, they are simple statements:

TODAY / IT'S COOL / IN / THE / SHADE. / MY / CHEEK / IS COOL / AGAINST / THE DIRT. / YES / IT'S! / I / WILL / LIFT / MY / HEAD / UP / TODAY, / THEN / I WILL / SEE / IF / I / CAN / SIT / UP / I / WILL / LIFT / MY HEAD / TODAY. / I / WILL / STRETCH / MY / FROM / THE / SHADE / AND / SET / A HAND / IN / THE / SUN! / I / WILL / LOOK / UP / AND / OUT / THE / DOORWAY / NOW / AT / SOMEONE / PASSING. WILL / HE / COME? / AND / IF / THAT / SOMEONE / IS / MY SON, / I / WILL / SMILE / I / WILL / LIFT / MY CHEEK / FROM / THE DIRT / AND / SET / MY HAND / IN / THE SUN / I / WILL / LIFT / MY HEAD / TODAY / OR / MAYBE / TOMORROW / DON'T / BELIEVE / IT! / AH! / HA! / HA! / THE RATS / GO / IN / THE / PATS / GO / OUT / THE / SUN / GOES / UP / THE / SUN / GOES / DOWN / THE / WORLD / GOES / 'ROUND / THE /

All the text is written in capital letters. Normally each line is composed of just one syntagm with a few exceptions such as "it's cool" or "the dirt", fragmenting the reading practice. White letters flash on a black background for the majority of the video, but there are also 4 parts of the text where black letters flash on a white background. The colour change highlights certain sequences of words. Normally the sequences with black background are shorter except for the last one, which actually finishes up the text. The text has also a sound background: an oriental song, which might be the oriental version of the text that appears on the screen, but it could also be a different text and not just the translation of the song.

The text itself is quite simple. It evokes a story pointing out the desires of "I". The use of the first pronoun "I" repeated 9 times in 19 words also contributes to interrupt the flow of the reading practice. The repetition of some words, such as "sun" and "lift" (4 times), or the use of the future construction with the verb "will" (9 times) and the use of the determinative article "the" (13 times) give to the text a circular effect. This recurring effect created in the syntactic level is also present in the semantic level: in fact some actions will be repeated during the text, for instance "I / WILL / LIFT / MY / HEAD / (UP/...)", "I / WILL / LIFT / MY HEAD / (TODAY/...)", "I / WILL / LIFT / MY CHEEK /". This repetition is highlighted by the text itself both in the meaning "THE RATS / GO / IN / THE / RATS / GO / OUT / THE / SUN / GOES / UP / THE / SUN / GOES / DOWN / THE / WORLD / GOES / 'ROUND / THE /" and in the syntactic construction - the text ends up with the determinative article "the" as it should be followed by a noun, to repeat the story over and over again. This recurring construction is highlighted by the animation of the text too, by the montage of some sequences according with the song's rhythm. The first change in the rhythm - imposed by the chorus - corresponds to a change in the rhythm of words' animation "AND / SET / A HAND / IN / THE / SUN! /". This variation in the rhythmical sound and

movement is repeated few sequences later just before the end of the video-poem “DON’T / BELIEVE / IT! / AH! / HA! / HA! /”.

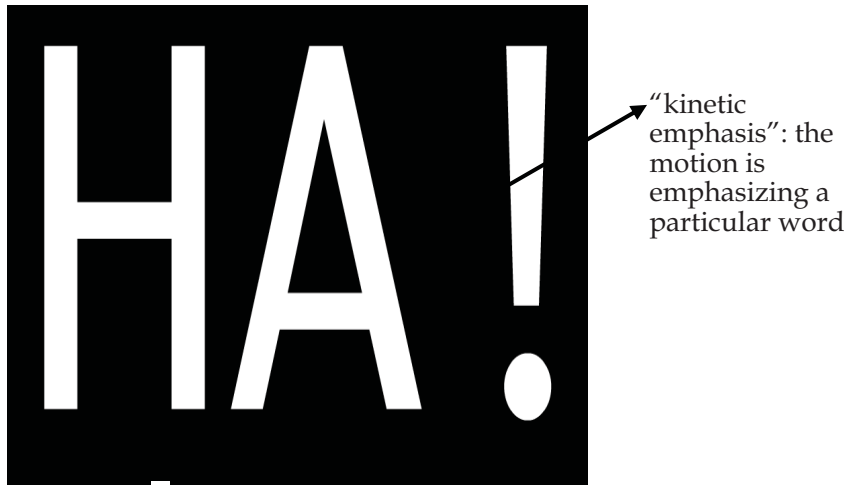


FIGURE 11: YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, *The last day of Betty Nkomo* (still at: 00:59)

What is relevant in this text is the perfect synchronism between the words and the rhythm of the song. Even if the text has its own punctuation it is the sound of the song, which determines the reading mode/rhythm. The relationship between music, motions and colours is reciprocal. Colours interact with musical passages, the music gives rhythm to the text, and the motion emphasises some words, for example, “HA”, repeated three times that blinks according to the musical rhythm. I propose to call this motion “kinetic emphasis”, since the motion is emphasizing a particular word. This motion of words, even if less clear because there is not a correspondence from the written words and the words of the song, has already appeared twice in the video-poem according to the changing in the song’s rhythm as we have seen.

The letters look as if they are dancing on the screen. Words become “images of sounds” that narrate the last day of a mother waiting for her son. The motion of the words and the changing in their size impose a visual rhythm to the text and the letters seem to be used as musical notes. What is attractive in this work is not the meaning of the text itself, which we have seen is quite easy; what is poetic here is the choreographic and rhythmic sense shown by the words moving on the screen. The eye of the reader is challenged to abandon her reading rhythm and to follow the text own rhythm.

4. Robert Kendall’s *Candles for a Street Corner* between Syntax and Entax

Bob Kendall’s *Candles for a Street Corner* is the result of a collaboration between Bob Kendall and Michele D’Auria. In *Candles* graphical text (in motion as well as static) is joined to both iconic and audio images. The poem is recited by Kendall himself. It is sequence-based but does not require any decision making

on the reader's part. It is impossible to pause the text or to repeat a part of it. The reader must wait until it finishes and then it automatically restarts.

4.1 Robert Kendall's *Candles for a Street Corner*

Robert Kendall, *Candles for a Street Corner*, 2004, at: <http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/candles/>

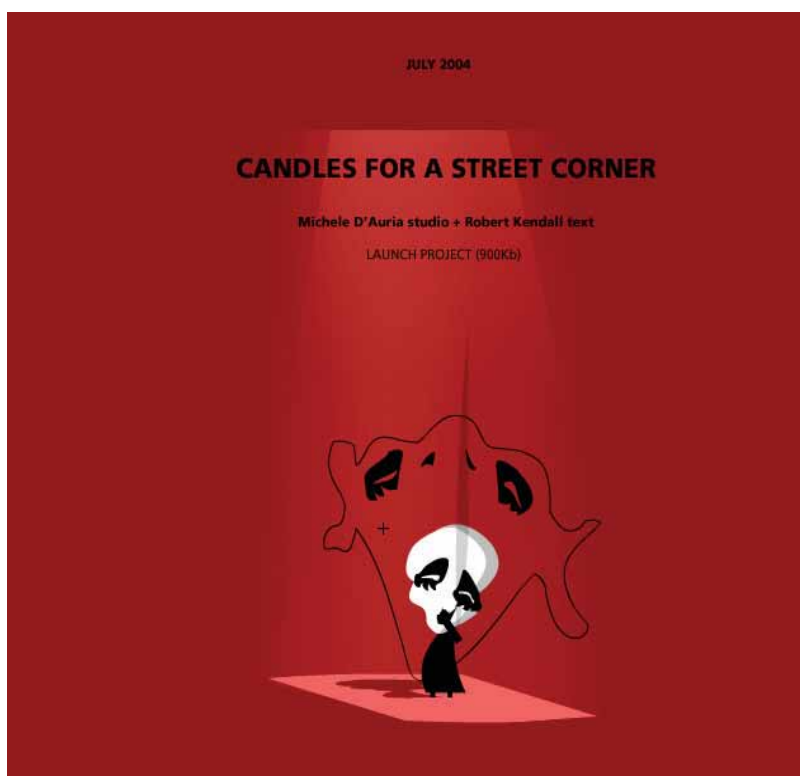


FIGURE 12: Robert Kendall, *Candles for a Street Corner* (still at 00:00)

The e-poem is recited which helps the “readers”, especially if they are not native English speakers, to trace the word-order, to reconstruct the text, to catch the sense. For instance, one sequence is almost incomprehensible in its entirety because it is practically unreadable (due to a black colour sequence).

The text opens with the title uttered by Kendall's voice. Then a small sad ghost rotating by itself appears on a grey screen. No words are displayed in the first sequence, just the number “32” going in a circle, the only associated element between what the “reader” is listening to and what she is seeing.

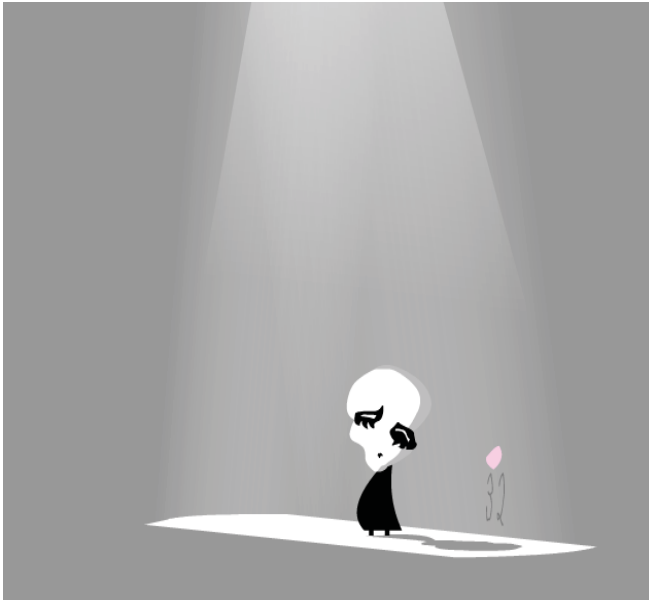


FIGURE 13: Robert Kendall, *Candles for a street corner* – 1st sequence (still at 00:02)

To the contrary, the second sequence is full of words, many of them unreadable.

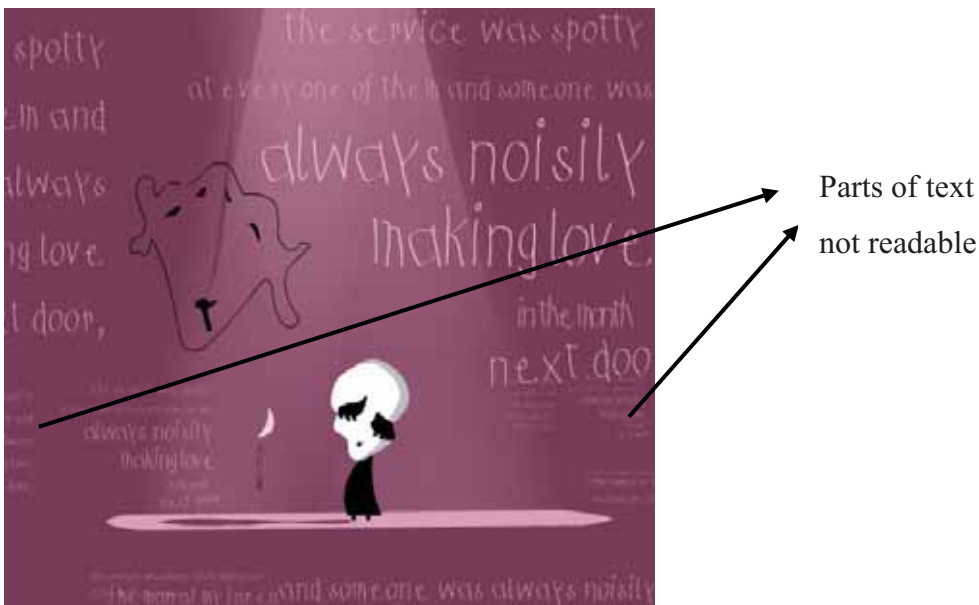


FIGURE 14: Robert Kendall, *Candles for a street corner* – 2nd sequence (still at 00:11)

In the entire e-poem, some pieces of the text are just a simulacrum of the poem: blocks of the text represent a poem structurally with its verse lines and blank spaces, but are completely illegible.

Normally, closely spaced lines are harder to read and when the text is too uniform, our eyes classify it as a single block of grey, and thus ignore it or reject it as text. On the page, we appreciate above all the contrasts between empty and filled spaces. Consequently, if iconic images are stylized, the graphic parts complicate the reading process, due to the movement in some of its parts (even if the inner clock of this particular text allows for an easy reading) and some segments are written in letters too small to be read. This text block represents

the *mise en abyme* of the morphology of this text: it shows how to construct it. The micro-entax allows the reader to find a path to follow.

There is not a perfect correspondence between what is uttered by the voice and what the reader is invited to read from a careful use of micro-entax, that is to say which deals with morpheme. The sixth sequence is an indicative example of how we normally read: our eyes look for the uttered word on the top left side, while actually the uttered verse is on the right side: we look for “when she reclines” (the position is deceiving) and we read “I feel”.

Many syntagms in the sequences are repeated, even if with some little changes, modifying the text and so rewriting it. Some verse lines are not uttered in the sequence they are written in; in fact they are anticipations of the following sequence or references to the previous one. For example, the verse line “what a view” anticipates the following sequence: it appears in the second one and it goes to the third always rotating on itself. In “she can't see/but I can see” (4th sequence), “I can see” is performed by the voice as the first verse line of the successive sequence, (5th sequence). Finally both verse lines “she can't see/but they can see” remain in the 6th sequence too, although they are not uttered by the voice, then they disappear.

Robert Kendall presents his poem, an “animated poetry video confronts the fear of growing older but not necessarily wiser”. Many uttered words are related to the fear of getting old and also to life, such as “nostalgically”, “loneliness” (which appears many times written in the 7th sequence), “my life hurts”. Finally, the word “chance” remains rotating during the whole 3d sequence, underlying what the voice is also uttering like “take a chance in life”.

The chromatic aspect changes in every sequence to emphasize the passage from one sequence to another while, on the contrary, the narrating voice does not mark so clearly each time. There is little synchronicity, even in the divisions of the text: the “time mark” given by the voice is not the same “time mark” that the reader would perceive from the text.

The two texts, the oral text and the text performing on the screen, are integrated with each other; they are both a hermeneutic support to understanding the e-poetry. This text experiments with micro-entax with temporality. It experiments with time and space. The same words are repeated in different sequences, giving an idea of recursive time, moreover many words move in a circle. Finally the image of the ghost spinning in the last sequence (throughout the entire sequence it is his shadow we see spinning), where there is no graphic text with the exception of the word “trust”, kept in hand by the ghost and redoubled, in a continuous repetition which is a metatextual function of the text since the text can carry on performing forever once it is started: “so we can get through another day”.

5. Tony Barnstone's *Hospital Tent*: a Dialogue between Graphic Text, Image, and Sound.

Hospital Tent is a collaborative work written by Tony Barnstone, with animation and images by the artists Jonathan Minori and Fabrizio Aiello. According to our typology, this text is a classic example of sequence-based electronic writing, which means that it has its own internal clock, but unlike our previous example the reader cannot interact in a sophisticated way - let us say - with the poetry. It is impossible to pause the motion of the text and/or to reread a part already read. The reader has to wait for the entire text to be completed before she can restart the text.

5.1 Tony Barnstone's *Hospital Tent*

Tony Barnstone, *Hospital Tent*, 2006, at:
http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/hospital_tent

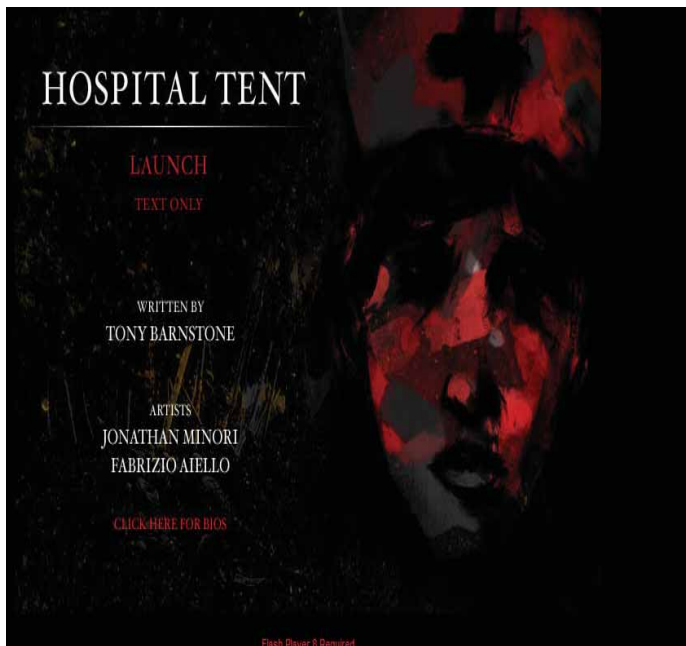


FIGURE 15: Tony Barnstone, *Hospital Tent* (still at 00:00)

This e-poem combines audio, graphics and text. The text scrolls from the bottom of the page in a window boxed by a frame much smaller than the entire text. Really, the reader can see about two to three lines at most as the text scrolls by. The reader's attention is snared first of all by a number of background images, which take up almost all of the entire web page. The melange of graphics and text begins when the title appears, superimposed on the background. A nurse's face then appears to the sound of troubled breathing. The iconic text is progressively drawn and with a final sharp inhalation all of the iconic text and the graphic text are revealed. The graphic text: *Hospital Tent*,

is the title of the piece as we would traditionally conceive it, but here we are viewing all of this animated sequence as the piece's title. The sound and the images come up first, then the title, but the media combine to suggest to the reader the probable content of the text.



FIGURE 16: Tony Barnstone, *Hospital Tent* (still at 00:07)

We propose to call this figure “animated hypotyposis”¹⁷ according to the terminology that Alexandra Saemmer gives to texts where thank to the hypotyposis the meaning of linguistic sign is highlighted by other associative and imitative stratagems¹⁸, even if in this case the linguistic sign will appear just at the end of the sequence.

The sequence opens with a cough, and two images: an arm (probably amputated) drawn in white and a thin young face in red. Red and white are the main colours of the pictures, which contrast with a black background. These colours are related to hospitals and nurses and with blood and war. Red is the colour of blood, which the third sequence articulates clearly and white is the colour of death: “white like death”¹⁹, and in an Asiatic context the white colour symbolizes death (and white is the colour of funerals and unhappiness). The image sequence we see tells a story: a man, presumably a soldier who has suffered an injury in a foreign country during a war, is in a hospital tent seriously hurt - a nurse takes care of him, but he will die.

Regarding the poetic text in the traditional sense, as text-in-itself, it is the story as seen through the nurse's eyes, and retold by the nurse:

¹⁷ The original term is “hypotypose animée”.

¹⁸ Alexandra Saemmer, *Matières textuelles sur support informatique*, Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007, p. 92.

¹⁹ Interestingly, this expression also exists in French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese alike

I looked around the scene, and saw the men,
 some dead, some twisting on the tables, smell
 of antiseptic, smell of blood, and then
 I looked outside where more waited. I tell
 you I knew nothing of the Philippines,
 of mangoes, houses on stilts, nipa huts,
 the smell of copra in the air, gangrene
 and amputations, lice, the surgeon's cuts.
 I had to sew back up, of carabao,
 the glisten of the small steel instruments
 catching the glint of lantern light, red pile
 of gauze. But still I never cried
 until this day, when (I did not see how)
 my hand was grabbed as I passed by, intent,
 by a young man, who gave me a half smile
 and held on as if for his life. Then died
 (U.S. Navy Nurse, the Philippines, 1942)

The graphic text occupies a very small part of the screen: three verse lines, written in a small font, it scrolls past at the bottom of the page.

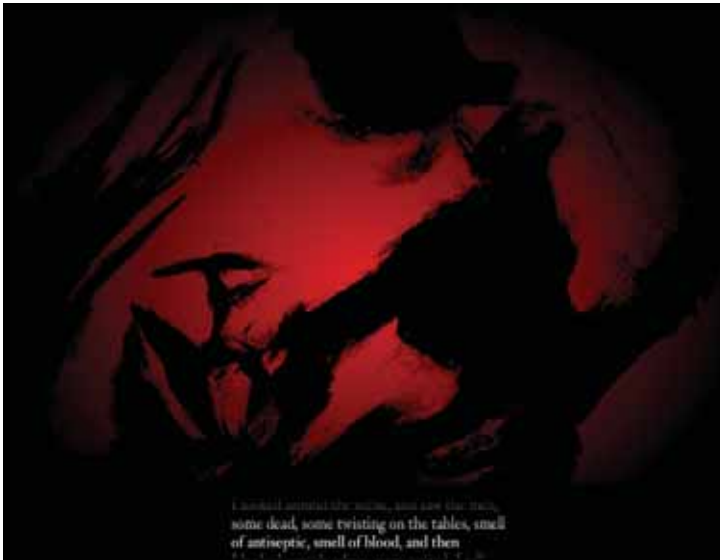


FIGURE 17: Tony Barnstone, *Hospital Tent* (still at 00:11)

Two-thirds of the text is written with an incisive and fast style, the last part is sweeter and calmer. This rhythm coincides with the rhythm in which the images are shown and with a different sound. From verse line 1 to verse line 12 there are 6 verbs declined (in the first person) all in the past tense except for one line, "I tell you". A list of objects, where even men could be considered to be objects is iterated, "[...] the men, some dead, some twisting on the tables, smell of antiseptic, smell of blood, [...]" marks the rhythm of the text in its first part. The repetition of "smell of antiseptic, smell of blood" and four verse lines later "the smell of copra" reinforces the rhythm of the text. The assonance of some words ("catching the glint of lantern light"; "mangoes, houses") and the repetition of some phonemes like /s/ "the scene, and saw/the men, some"; "small steel instruments" unifies the structural sound of the graphic text.

This "fast" rhythm is also given by the contrast of the verse lines. The first

detached and crude verse lines, “I looked around the scene, and saw the men, some dead, some twisting on the tables, smell of antiseptic, smell of blood, and then [...]”, are followed by the exotic description of the Philippines with “mangoes, houses on stilts, nipa huts, the smell of copra”, and then, in the same verse line, again the brutal reality: “gangrene and amputations, lice, the surgeon’s cuts”. This passage from the war to the exotic landscape and back again to the war is also shown by the image, by introducing – very quickly, just for an instant – into the images of the landscape the image of a dead soldier (see figure 18). The arrival of the image with the dead soldier is also highlighted by the soundtrack: the images of the landscape have as a background birds singing, the image of the dead soldier is introduced by a sort of thunder or shot that interrupts brutally the harmony of the text.

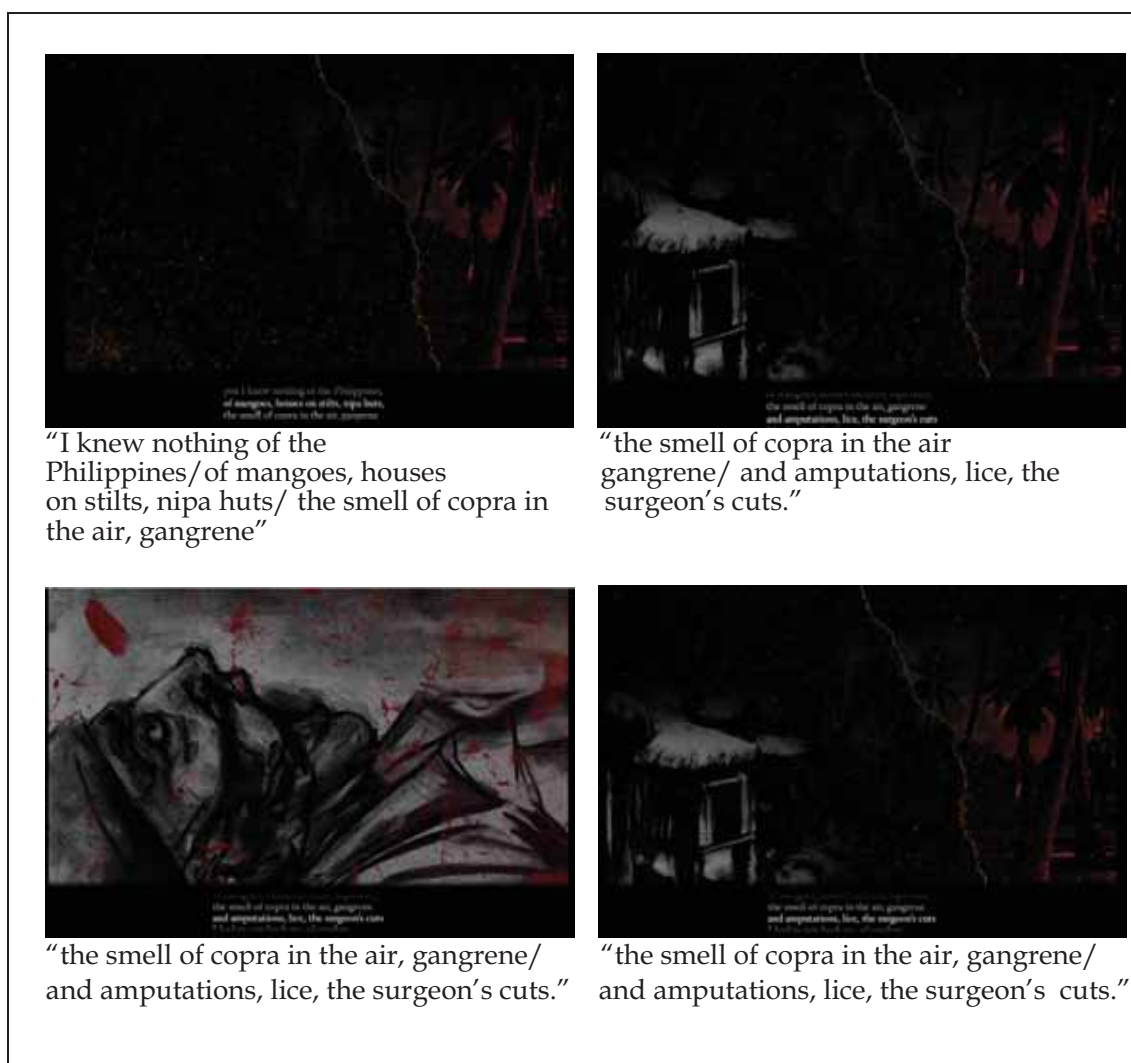


FIGURE 18: Tony Barnstone, *Hospital Tent* (still at 00:20; 00,26; 00,27; 00,27)

In the second part (the last five verse lines) the phoneme / ah/ is predominant: “smile”, “life”, “died” and there is also an alliteration “as if for his life”, which makes this second part more harmonic. The whole poem is an *apostrophe* to an

imaginary reader “I tell you I knew nothing[...]”. The iconic text narrates the story in an “objective” way, while the graphic text tells the story from the nurse’s point of view: the iconic one is a third person narration while the graphic one is a first person narration. But also the audio narrates a story: in this case it is the story of the injured soldier.

The audio background is composed of the sound of coughing, some kind of loud report, the chirping of birds, of silence, and of a whispered word. The silence actually is very important because it punctuates the events. The first piece of audio is of a person coughing, the second is probably a shot, then silence and then the chirping of birds, and then a shot again, then silence, followed by the word “mercy”, then silence again: the soldier is dead.

The audio is not simply unstructured background noise, the story is narrated from three points of view, and this is one viewpoint. The deep level of narrativity of this text is evident if we analyse the three stories in a comparative fashion. The coughing coincides with the first four images - an amputated arm and a thin face, another face drawn once more in red which gets turned into a drop of blood which drips down - representing the first part of the text, that is to say what both the poet and the narrator of the sound text are seeing. The drops of blood are still present when the graphic text recites, “of antiseptic, smell of blood, and then”. Then, there is the chirping of birds along with the images of some place, with houses and palms: the Philippines as underlined by the text “I knew nothing of the Philippines, of mangoes, houses on stilts[...]”. Finally the key part of the text, where the poet and the soldier talk to each other: while the last 5 verse lines of the graphical text are being displayed:

But still I never cried until this day, when (I did not see how)
my hand was grabbed as I passed by, intent,
by a young man, who gave me a half smile
and held on as if for his life. Then died.

a word is whispered: “mercy”: it is the soldier. In this way the graphical poem with its poet (“I never cried...”) speaks with the sound poem, the voice of the “young man, who gave [...] a half smile” whispers “mercy” before dying. There is a dialogue, a *real* dialogue between the graphical text and the audio-image one.

The pictures and the silence announce and close this crucial moment of the text. Before the word “mercy” is whispered, the sound text does not emit any noise, and the iconic text shows just a black screen. The following sequence shows a drawing of a hand grabbing another one. This image is the only one that is repeated²⁰: before and after the whispered word. Repeating the images highlights what is happening between the sound and the graphic text: the dialogue between the nurse and the injured soldier. The text here reveals its meaning and also shows the possibilities allowed by the digital medium.

²⁰ With the exception of the black screen, in fact, the images do not repeat themselves, they are linked by resemblance, especially the suffering faces, as the assonance we saw in the poem. The black screens bookend the scene where the soldier is having surgery.

As we saw, stylistically the text in this second part is more harmonic, as for the audio-image text there is a prevalence of silence and a *whispered* word. Finally, the iconic text shows the only picture of a face (see figure 19) which is neither scarred nor suffering, actually this one is almost smiling (he is the soldier dying in peace).



FIGURE 19: Tony Barnstone, *Hospital Tent* (still at 01:00)

Between the images there is continuity but also a contrast: some of them are red, others white. But this image contrasts with another one where from the left side a screaming face appears, reminding us of “The Scream” by Edvard Munch (see picture below).



FIGURE 20: Tony Barnstone, *Hospital Tent* (still at 00:30)

The interaction between the three texts and the temporality given to them by the digital medium allows this e-poetry to reach a deep level from the viewpoint of narrative. As we have seen, this e-poetry is not only a poem, a visual and sound poem, but it also tells us a story.

6. The Animated Calligram: Alex Gopher's *The child*

Again, according to our typology, this text is an example of sequence-based electronic writing, with its own inner clock. It does not require any decision making on the reader's part since this text is a three minutes video-clip whose development was carried out by the graphic designers H5 for the DJ and musician Alex Gopher. But since (in the example provided) the text is a video-clip hosted on Youtube the reader can pause the text and jump to different parts in a non-sequential manner.

The child reminds the reader of another animated calligram work: Jeffrey Shaw's *Legible City*. However, *Legible City* is an interactive art installation, which, moreover, requires the active and physical participation of its "readers". The reader needs to sit on a stationary bicycle and to pedal, like this she will go thorough simulated city streets and architectural structures made of letters, words, and sentences that are projected on a large screen.

6.1 Alex Gopher's *The child*

Alex Gopher, *The child*, 1999, at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgHOGqmRVR8>

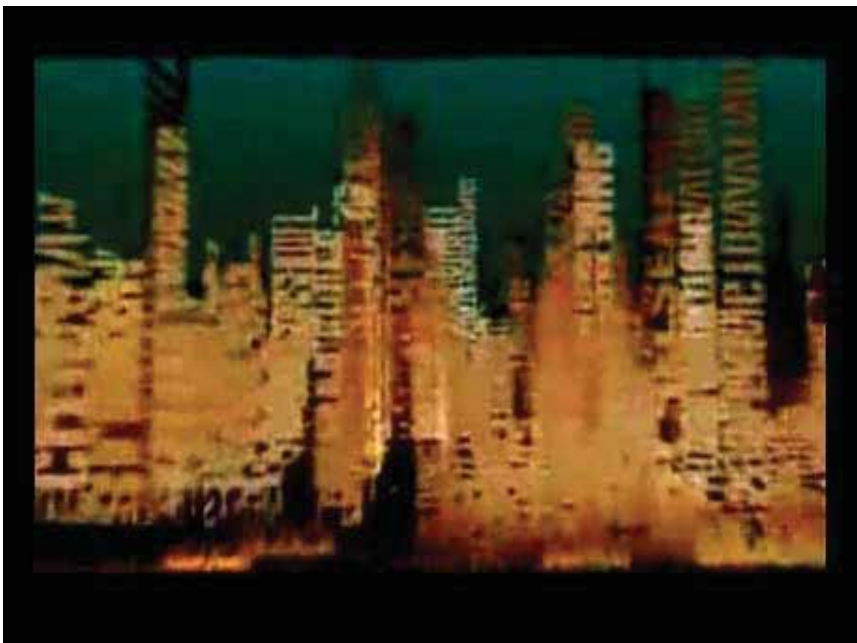


FIGURE 21: Alex Gopher, *The child* (still at 00:15)

In Plato's *Cratylus*, Cratylus and Hermogenes asked Socrates to tell them whether names are "conventional" or "natural", that is, whether language is a system of arbitrary signs or whether words have an intrinsic relation to the things they signify.

Cratylus compares the original creation of a word to the work of an artist. An artist uses color to express the essence of his subject in a painting. In the same way, the creator of words uses letters containing certain sounds to express the essence of a word's subject. He states, "this would be the most perfect state of language"²¹.

In *The child*, the language, is conceived as an imitation of the objects that it indicates.

The child follows the calligram tradition begun by Simmias of Rhodes at about 325BCE (see chapter 1, sections 2 and 2.1) and made famous thanks to Guillaume Apollinaire (see chapter 1, section 5). *The child* is an evolution of the calligram, it is an animated calligram. Thanks to the electronic medium, it realizes the potentialities of visual poetry in the digital environment.

In *The child* the language materializes in the writing. The words paint the landscape of Manhattan thus: the skyscrapers, the cars, the taxis, "a very very long cadillac" are composed of dense word skins. According to Michel Foucault the calligram makes the text say what the painting represents²².

This calligram focus on words: words become things. As so the "syntactic" space is regulated according to the meso-entax, focusing on the lexeme. The meso-entax concerns the semantics of the visual poem and it relates to the graphic structure of the whole document. Semantics, of course, in linguistics deals with the lexeme. Because the writing is meta-textual, where there is an isomorphism between the form of the expression and the form of the content, the text is shown while showing us what is happening.

In this universe of thing-names, two silhouettes advance: a pregnant woman, and her husband. Their aspects are described once again by the words "black hair/big glasses/anxious face/husband" (see figure 21) for the man and "brown hair/pretty face/woman/pregnant/red dress/sneakers", for the woman. All the words describing the man are blue, and as for the woman, they stereotypically pink. The "poetical" construction suggests anxiety also: no verbs, no articles, and no conjunctions - only nouns and adjectives, one after the other, recreating a sort of racing heart: "black hair/big glasses/anxious face/husband". Because of the use of different shapes and sizes of words two syntagms stand out more than the others: "anxious face", and "husband". The letters of "anxious face" appear in a special font, recalling with humor the typography used in the posters of horror films (see figure 22). Moreover these two words are pulsing as would a thumping heart which is anxious. Finally, "pregnant" swells and contracts, reproducing in a metaphoric way the imminence of childbirth.

When they leave the apartment to go to the hospital, the verse lines move like a person walking. A "lift", totally made up of capital letters descends to the ground floor, and even if it is only a small object on the left side of the screen it

²¹ Plato, *Cratylus*, David Sedley (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 6.

²² Michel Foucault, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, Fontfroide-le-Haut: Fata Morgana, 1973, p. 22.

attracts more of the reader's attention than the bigger block of letters forming a skyscraper on the right - there is a story to follow.



FIGURE 22: Alex Gopher, *The child* (still at 00.28)

The streets are filled by nouns which indicate objects: “taxi, very very long Cadillac, car,...”. “Very, very long Cadillac”, for example is written in huge white letters: which plays on the entax, the text is a visual pun which gives us the image of a long, long white, elegant Cadillac. The word “Brooklyn” forms the mythical bridge of Brooklyn. The two "O"s of “Brooklyn” become bigger and transform themselves into two short tunnels where the words/cars go. The scene remains in motion, the *reader* follows the text by collecting moving words. Words/cars crash into each other, simulating an accident; letters become objects: a “H” becomes hospital.

The writing is thus reborn as image. The use of words is not the only method to convey the meaning and they fill the space according to the temporality. Indeed, the electronic nature of this poetic experiment makes it possible to go beyond the usual static structure of drawing, makes it possible to connect the words to actions, to build a narrative time in the static world of the poem.

The animated calligram acquires a very strong narrative aspect: the animation shows us the chaotic way from the apartment of the couple to the hospital where the young woman will give birth to a boy. *The child* borrows from the art of calligrams but it is also influenced by cinema. The trip by car, with all the visual and sounds effects, imitates the car chases in American movies or TV series. On the Brooklyn Bridge the taxi even overtakes Starsky and Hutch’s mythical red and white Ford gran-Torino, before being escorted by two police motorbikes (see figure 22).

The music of Billie Holiday accompanies the journey. Bits of dialogues reach us: “The baby! It’s coming! - Ok, Ok! Let’ s go” [...] “Oh my god!”.

The words which compose the landscape are fragmentary words, they are

words that have just *left* the dictionary and that still have to find their position and role in the (communicative) space. There are no articles in front of the words, to identify them. These words are not yet language, but thank to the animation and to a creation of temporality they can narrate a story.



FIGURE 23: Alex Gopher, *The child* (still at 01:29)

The title, *The child*, appears significantly only at the end of the clip; the childbirth is punctuated by a sentence of congratulation: “Congratulations Mr. Gopher, it's a boy”. The sentence is clichéd, but it is also the longest coherent arrangement of words in the whole animation. The sentence replaces the music and the sound effects and the onomatopoeias, the words alone or simply juxtaposed between them, and the repeated words of the song of Billie Holiday. Finally, the sentence appears on the screen under the titles. It is written in white capital letters highlighting in this way the difference from the other parts of the text, marking the end of the story.



FIGURE 24: Alex Gopher, *The child* (still at 3.12)

As suggested by the title, the e-poem sets the scene of a birth. Calligrams are

meta-literary, this one all the more so since it concerns its creator in a story that we discover to be autobiographic: “congratulations Mr. Gopher”. The video-clip tells the story of a birth but also shows the creation of a poetic form.

7. Jim Andrews and the Letter as Image

In the following section I will show three works by Jim Andrews, these are: *Enigma n* (1998), *Nio* (2001) and *A Pen* (2007).

As I said, the form of expression of all these texts is based on the notion of «sequences», that is to say they all have an inner clock, in *Enigma n* the reader can actually stop the motion of the text so she can take part, in a small way, with the text in a temporal manner as well. We propose to call this sub-typology of texts where it is possible to manipulate in somehow the time «segment of sequence». The reader can interact with all these texts using a toolbar to do so, modifying the flow of the text in a parametric manner.

7.1 Jim Andrews' *Enigma n*

Jim Andrews, *Enigma n* (1998) at:
<http://vispo.com/animisms/enigman/index.htm>



FIGURE 25: Jim Andrews, *Enigma n* – the opening page

Jim Andrews introduces his text.

Stylistically, the piece is similar to the pop-up poems (though not in behavior) in that the text talks about itself. I like this approach because it focuses attention on the questions and also allows me to develop character. The character is the text itself, and the character commenting on its own nature and behavior, though embodying that

nature and behavior also, beyond it but within it, like the rest of us.²³

The text begins with a quote by Phyllis Webb: “The world is round. It moves in circles”. After the quote a black web page appears containing one word: “meaning”, fixed in the middle of the page and written in small green letters. The interface is minimal: at the top, on the left side of the page, there are other four words: the title of the text “Enigma n” (which is also a link to get information concerning the poem), and three other words which allow the reader to interact with the text: “Prod”, “Stir” and “Tame”. These three words are commands for the text, but also reading keys. By clicking them, the text starts to move, it reacts to the *prod* of the reader, moving in circles: “Prod meaning/Stir meaning/Tame meaning”. The letters seem dancing on the screen, they seem to be free to move around suggesting to the reader various meanings.

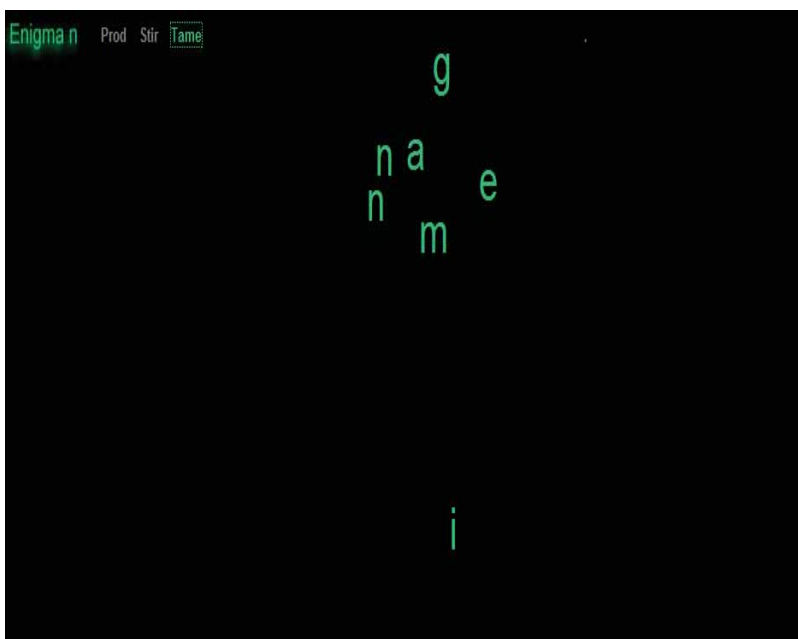


FIGURE 26: Jim Andrews, *Enigma n*

The more the reader clicks on the commands, the more other commands appear on the screen. The total number of the word-commands is 8, each of which allow the reader to modify the shape, colour, speed of the text, to pause the text and to reactivate it. So the reader is invited to play with the word “meaning”, changing its form, looking for a meaning which seems to escape.

The single letters will take on a form and sense, following different entax, which offers the reader altered “meanings”: *image*, *game*, or *man/men* as the picture below shows.

²³ Jim Andrews quoted by Roberto Simanowski. Roberto Simanowski, “Fighting/Dancing Words Jim Andrews' Kinetic, Concrete Audiovisual Poetry”, in *Dichtung-digital*, 2001, accessible online at: www.dichtung-digital.com/2001/12/10 (accessed, September 30 2009).



FIGURE 27: Jim Andrews, *Enigma n*

The motion of the text transforms the meaning of it. The movement of the letters, the colours, and the entax shift the content of the words and build the text in a synesthetic and metaphoric game. The reader can read the word *men* in two directions, either reading in a linear way from left to right or from up to down, in this second case she gets two possible meanings: *men* but also *man*. But other meanings are suggested by the letters: for instance *game*, *gem*, *name* and obviously the word “meaning”, even if the reader in this case needs to add the letter /i/ because its colour makes it unreadable. Moreover, “meaning” is a quite obviously an anagram of “enigma n”.

Enigma n is strictly related to visual and concrete poetry not only because of its form but also because of its content. Anagrammatical games, in fact, belong to the tradition of experimental and concrete poetry. The possibilities allowed by the digital medium, concerning temporality and movement through space, push further the experimentations proposed by concrete poetry. In this instance, thanks to the perpetual movement given to the text, and thanks to the possibility of changing colours, highlighting some letters and thus some meanings, the relations between the letters are constantly changing. This work is multi-faceted. At times the meaning is lost to the reader through textual deformation, at other times there is an injection of meaning, a surplus of significance - an allusion to this process is by the /n/: “enigma n”. The “n” is shorthand for the unknown, we have in our hands an enigma hinting at the unknown - a riddle that draws us inwards. As shown by R. Simanowski (2001), (let us add more meaning to this riddle about meaning) there is a linguistic twist that links this poem to the transition from Saussure to Derrida. For de Saussure the meaning in language is first and foremost a matter of difference. In other words, meaning is always the result of a division or articulation of signs. Derrida concurs with de Saussure that the existence of the sign is dependent upon the difference between signifiers, but questions the Saussurean view of

the sign as a neat symmetrical unity between one signifier and one signified. Instead Derrida proposes a “grammatological” model in which a signified is seen as the product of a complex interaction of signifiers and meaning, the spin-off of a potentially endless play of signifiers, rather than a concept securely anchored to any one particular signifier. In other words, meaning is never immediately or fully present in any one given sign, just like this poetry suggests. Because the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is not, its meaning is always in some way absent from it. Thus meaning can be defined as never being identical with itself. It is the result of a process of division or articulation, of signs being themselves only because of the fact that they are not some other sign.

We tend to think that what we call the meaning of a word depends on the fact that it has been used by speakers on various occasions with the intention of communicating or expressing this meaning, and we thus might want to argue that what can in general be called the structure of a language – the general system of its rules and regularities – is derived from and determined by events: by acts of communication. But if we took this argument seriously and begin to look at the events which are said to determine structure(s), we would find that every event is itself already determined and made possible by prior structures. The possibility of meaning something by an utterance is already inscribed in the structure of the language. The structures, of course, are themselves always products, but however far back we try to push, even when we think of the birth of language itself and try to describe an originating event that might have produced the first structure, we discover that we must assume prior organization, prior differentiation.²⁴

For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer.²⁵

Giving a meaning to something is an infinite process since every signified ends up being the signifier of another signified. The transcendental signifier, which Saussure still allows, only materializes when the semantic play has been stopped. The self-description of the poem defines *Enigma n* as “a philosophical poetry toy for poets and philosophers from the age of 4 up” which is playful but provocative.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974, p.161.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, U.K.: Blackwell 1953, PI #43.

7.2 Jim Andrews' *Nio*

Jim Andrews *Nio*, 2001, in *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume I*, at: http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/andrews_nio/Nio5.htm

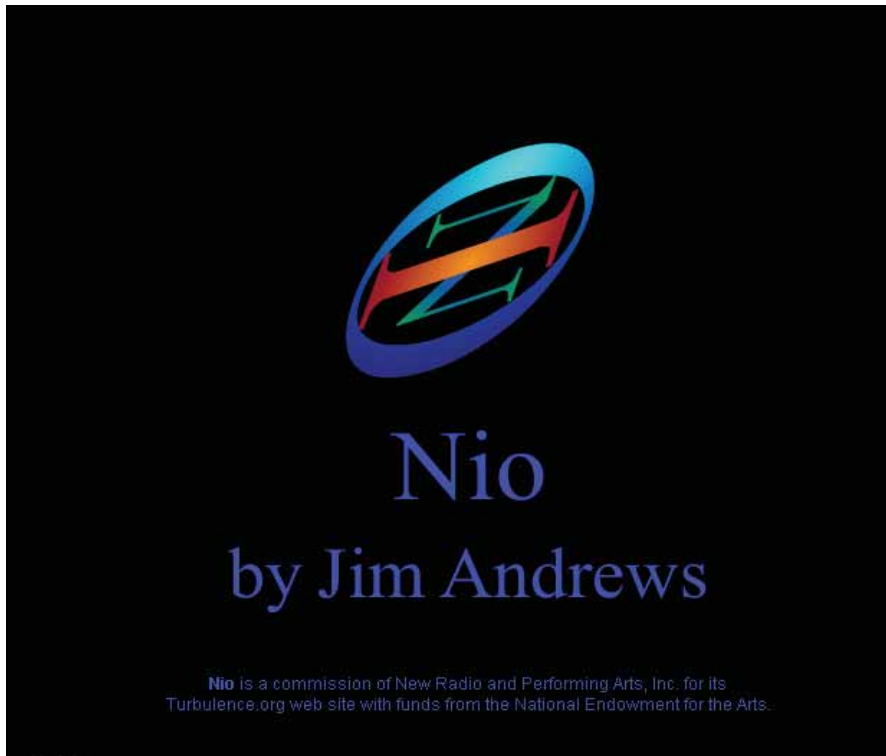


FIGURE 28: Jim Andrews, *Nio* – the opening page

Nio is an interactive audio work. As Andrews defines it, it is a mix of music, sound poetry, and visual poetry that invites the player to create a little composition from the sixteen audio recordings in it. There are two “verses” of *Nio*. In verse one you play with layers of audio and visuals. In verse two, you play with synchronized layers and sequences of audio and visuals. Andrews focuses again on interaction, highlighting the possibilities of the digital medium in the integration of the acoustic into the poetry. “I’m trying to synthesize and transform image, sound, and text, not simply juxtapose them”, says Andrews on his website, “my work is all about synthesis of arts and media”. Andrews adds that *Nio* is “a kind of lettristic dance” an “alternative music video” and underlines a characteristic of this text:

Most programming languages are set up so that the visual dominates and controls the audio. In *Nio*, when a new sound begins playing, it causes the animations to change, which is a case of the audio controlling the visual.

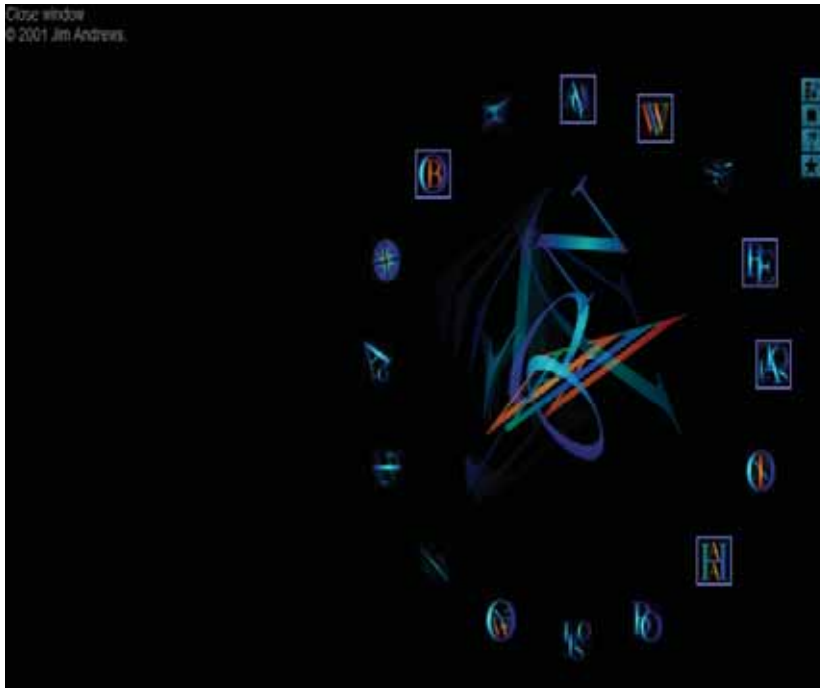


FIGURE 29: Jim Andrews, *Nio* – verse one

By clicking in the icons, which are positioned in a circle, letters will appear in the center of the circle (figure 28). The letters will keep moving according to the music to disappear in a sort of vortex to reappear again. The reader can activate up to 6 icons, imposing different rhythms on the letters.

The second verse is more interactive. The reader is invited to place the icons in a grid containing sixteen spaces, one for each icon. The reader can modulate the rhythm, the order of the icons, and so on.

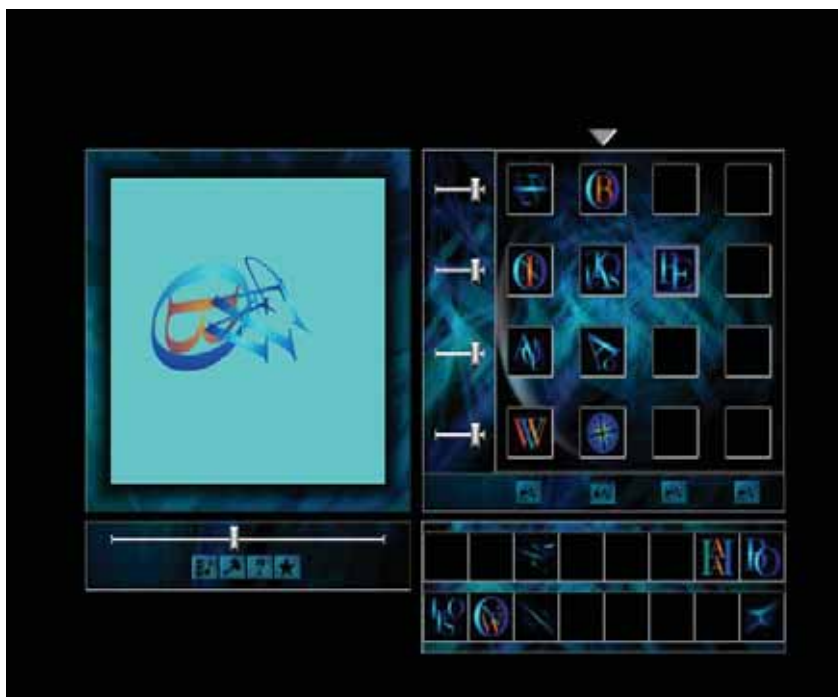


FIGURE 30: Jim Andrews, *Nio* – verse two

This work stresses interaction - the text is no longer completely made by the author for it requires the reader's interaction - you arrange the text yourself according to options provided by the author. Thus each single performance of the text will theoretically be unique.

Nio doesn't provide the reader with narrative logic as we normally consider it. *Nio* does not concern language; it is not like *Enigma n*, where the language game is immediately visible. *Nio* speaks to another sense: the geometrical shapes imposed by the icons (which, by the way, are made of letters beside each icon), their colours and their movements are visually pleasing. "The lettristic dance" is not related to the meaning, it is an example of the "aesthetics of the sensual" according to Andrew Darley²⁶ which is a tendency for the semantic and visual arts.

Nio is a pure experimentation, emphasizing interaction and focusing on visual and sound possibilities, the semantic interpretation is useless. The activity of the reader is not reading anymore, but playing, experimenting the text. She is not a reader, she is a player. The involvement of the player is what Andrews aims at:

One of the things about *Nio* is that it can deal with layers of rhythmic music. So you can take songs and chop them up into loops (even better if you have different recordings of the vocals, drums, etc) and then allow people to rearrange the music arbitrarily or with constraints. And you can associate one or more animations (which themselves may be interactive) with each of the pieces of the song, so that you end up with a very different sort of music video for the Web than we have seen so far and perhaps a different song than you started out with. Very interactive and engagingly compositional both sonically and visually, hopefully.²⁷

With *Nio* Andrews realizes what Giselle Beiguelman calls "dynamic fusion"²⁸ that points to new literacies. "Those process operate by a process of expanded lettering, prepared for the reading of simultaneously languages - cinematographically, videographically, textually, and sonorously"²⁹.

²⁶ Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture*, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2000.

²⁷ Jim Andrews interview quoted in Roberto Simanowski *Fighting/Dancing Words Jim Andrews' Kinetic, Concrete Audiovisual Poetry*, *op. cit.*.

²⁸ Giselle Beiguelman, "The reader, the Player, and the Executable Poetics", in Jörgen Schäffer and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Beyond the Screen: Transformations of Literary Structures, Interfaces and Genre*, Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010, pp.403-426, p. 403.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

7.3 Jim Andrews' *A Pen*

Jim Andrews, *A Pen*, 2007, at: <http://vispo.com/nio/pens/springs7.htm>

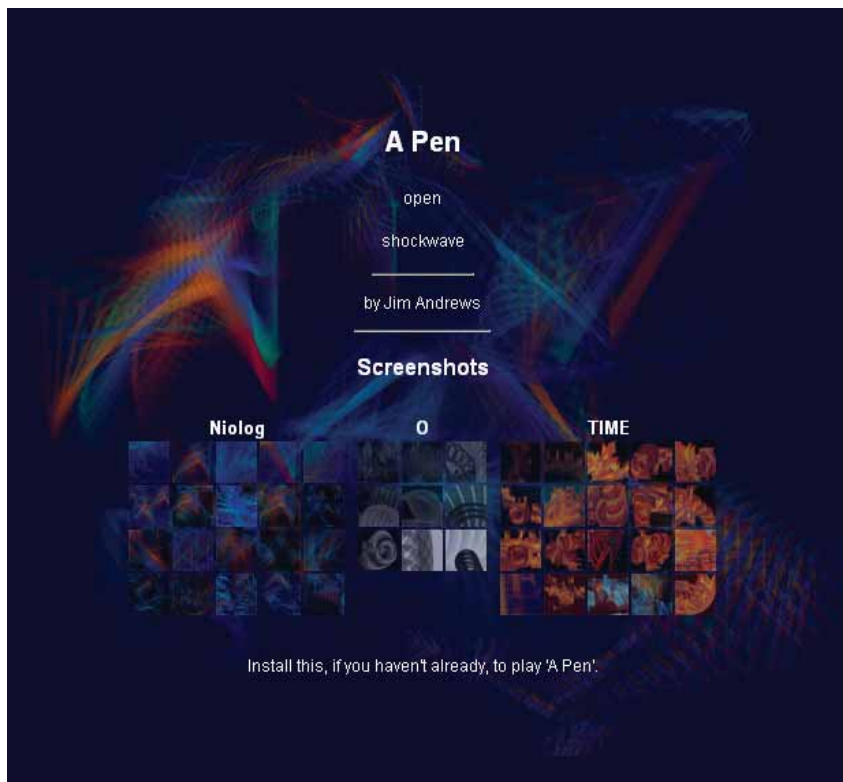


FIGURE 31: Jim Andrews, *A Pen* – the opening page

A Pen is composed of three visual poems: “Niolog”, “O” and “Time”. The project consists of an interactive software pen that uses ‘nibs’ whose ‘inks’ are letristic animations of letters. “Niolog”, “O” and “Time” show letters by leaving a contrail of motion, a trace of their movement in space. The letters appear from the back of a fully black screen and materialize themselves on the web page but carrying on moving. Many parameters can be modified on the toolbar: you can manipulate the speed of the pen, making the letter go very fast or slow them down until they seem to *hiccup* on the screen. You can change the size of the letters, the colour of the screen turning it from black to white; finally, you select which poem is displaying. All these actions require some experiments and the reader does not immediately realize (especially if she is not an expert) what she is doing.

All the poems work with the same logic: they trace their materiality on the screen, to create new images in a spiral of sense that the same reader has to decode.

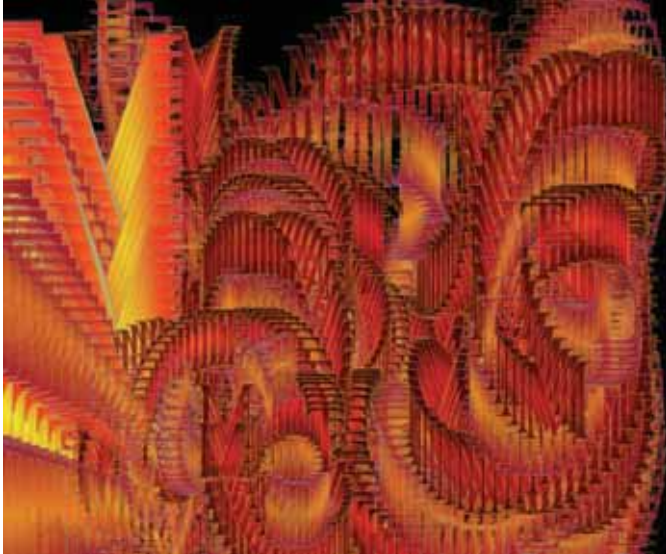


FIGURE 32: Jim Andrews, *A Pen*

The importance of the materiality of the letters does not concern only the images appearing on the screen, it concerns also the *meaning* of the word. For instance “TIME” and “NIOLOG” link respectively to a typographic character, perhaps the most famous and used: TIME, and to NIO, that is to say New I/O program. The New I/O, usually called NIO, is a collection of Java programming language APIs that offer features for intensive I/O operations³⁰. *Niolog*, moreover, is an intertextual poem since it quotes another Andrews’s e-poetry, *Nio*. This intertextual view of literature, as shown by Roland Barthes, supports the concept that the meaning of an artistic work does not reside in that work, but in the viewers. Intertextuality is a mode of production across texts according to recent post-structuralist thought³¹. So *A Pen* is a text in production in itself (it is producing itself under the reader’s eyes) and within other texts.

Andrews’ works attempt to explore how the poetic meaning can be conveyed in ways other than the usual bunch of words strung together on paper. Andrews focuses on the relationship among letters, images, movement, and also sound. He creates room for different types of contemplation to emerge, and he invites his reader to bring her own creativity to his works. These texts require another kind of meditation: the “reading” practice involves different elements: graphic text, image, sound and interactivity.

As underlined by Leonardo Flores, *A Pen*:

is an exploration of text as a tool for writing, rather than as the result of writing. It is about the interpenetration of code and language in programmable media to imbue letters and words with behaviours and allowing the poem to emerge from their play³²

³⁰ In computing, input/output, or I/O, refers to the communication between an information processing system (such as a computer), and the outside world – possibly a human, or another information processing system.

³¹ Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism*, Manchester: PUM, 2005.

³² Leonardo Flores, *Typing the Dancing Signifier: Jim Andrews' (Vis)Poetics*, PhD dissertation, Faculty of Humanities, University of Maryland, discussed in 2010,

Andrew studies and experiments the material possibilities of letters. In his opinion, letters are more fun to work with; the form of letters is more interesting than the form of words. Letters have more individual character than words, visually³³. As Glazier notices, materiality is important because writing is not an event isolated from its medium but is, to varying degrees, an engagement with its medium³⁴. With these poems we are in the speed and visual paradigm in which the letters conquer their materiality (and their meaning) to leave it again to reach another materiality, then another meaning. The letters overlap one other in order to settle themselves differently in the screen. Andrews follows the Lettrist's tradition (see chapter 1). According to the Lettrists language should be reduced to its atomic form, that is to say the letter. Legibility is not a principal feature of either the Lettrist or Andrews' work. In this new paradigm, the reader is not a reader anymore and she is not a receiver either. Actually the receiver becomes a perceptor, her relationship with the text is no more conditioned by the linear model of writing, it is her eyes that orients in the decoding adventure. As for the poet, we can say that Andrew does not write anymore, but he draws his texts, he *traces* his texts, he is experimenting.

Finally, this kind of e-poetry makes it easier to discover the poetic virtues of word materiality, thank to the medium at hand. The poetics of material, wherein words are inscribed, is a way to show the human imagination, in constant search for other meanings, as all these texts suggest.

8. Conclusion

All these texts introduce both temporality and motion to poetry, transforming the idea of poetry itself, however the way they are offered to the reader differs from text to text. Some of them, like *La Rossa Parola* by Elisa Carlotti and *Candles for a Street Corner* by Robert Kendall and Michele D'Auria, are created responding to some of the characteristics of what Western culture has considered poetry since the Renaissance (see chapter 2). They are composed in verse lines, free verse lines though, but the form of the text immediately reminds the reader of a poem. *Candles for a Street Corner*, particularly, emphasizes this idea of the poem's structure, reproducing many times pieces of poems, which are actually unreadable because of the small size of the fonts, but instantly recognizable as poems just because of their shape. *La Rossa Parola* is still completely made of words, still crated considering the rhetorical figures and the metrical rhythm. *Candles for a Street Corner* adds images and sound – Kendall himself recites the poem – to the graphical text. *The last day of Betty*

accessible online at: <http://hdl.handle.net/1903/10799> (accessed, December 19 2010).

³³ Jim Andrews interviewed by Regina Cécilia Pinto, "Artonline", 30 August 2002, accessible online at: <http://www.artonline.arq.br/museu/interviews/jimandrews.htm> (accessed, September 30 2009).

³⁴ Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002.

Nkomo by Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge is also made of words and sound, but the poem is not recited like *Candles for a Street Corner* or *Tisha B'Av*; the sound here imposes the reading-time and the text's motion highlights it. For instance, "HA" repeated for three times is emphasised by the motion of the text, by blinking according to the musical rhythm. I proposed to call this motion as kinetic emphasis.

The text's motions offers new rhetorical figures also in other texts like *La Rossa Parola* and *Tisha B'Av*. Both in *La Rossa Parola* and *Tisha B'Av* there are animations that make the motion represent what the text says and make the text say what the motion represents. I proposed to call this figure ciné-gramme extending Saemmer's idea of ciné-gramme, particularly referred to calligrams. The ciné-gramme figure predominates obviously in *The child*, which is an animated calligram telling a story of a birth. Finally, the motion in *Hospital Tent* by Tony Barnstone, Jonathan Minori and Fabrizio Aiello creates animated hypothesis.

Hospital Tent - even though presents rhetorical figures - differs from the other texts. *Hospital Tent* uses the text, the images, and the sounds to tell a story and to give three different viewpoints to the reader. It is a poem but it is also a visual narrative text. Three different semiotic systems interact perfectly showing the potentialities of electronic poetry in making converging diverse creative practices. *Tisha B'Av* by David Harris Ebenbach and Jonathan Gould also uses different semiotic systems - a poem, whose structure reminds of a prose poem, images and sounds; but in this case the text and the images are showed in a sequential way, they do not share the same space at the same time. Even though all these texts are sequence-based, thus with an inner o'clock which the reader cannot manipulate (with the exception of Alex Gopher's *The child*), the variety of these e-poems is palpable.

Normally sequence-based e-poems do not require the interaction of the reader. Many of them are not even "exploratory" e-poems, since the text appears in front of its reader, and there are no actions that she can do, the reader has no power over the text. Due to their form of expression, they also propose a prosaic - linear - reading practice. In *Nio* (verse two) Jim Andrews allows the reader to rewrite the text even if the pieces of text she can assemble are still chosen by the author - we proposed to call this kind of e-texts combinatory e-poems, since the reader recomposes/recombines pieces of text that the author has prepared for her. In *Enigma n* and *A Pen*, Andrews suggests another way to influence the text. The reader interacts with the text using a tool - which is part of the text - that enables to modify some characteristics of the poem, as for instance the shape of the text. In *A Pen* the reader explores the possible forms the text can take, in *Enigma n* the possible meanings (and mentally she can re-combine others). These are alterable works because it is the visual aspect of the text that the reader can alter, according to predetermined possibilities, and not the content of the text. If *La rossa parola* still offers a canonical form of poem, whose first aim is yet to be read, Andrews's work treat the letters as a tool for writing, letters do not need to be read but *manipulated*.

CHAPTER 5

HYPERTEXT POETRY

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive at where we started
And know the place for the first time”
T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

“... un numero finito di elementi le cui
combinazioni si moltiplicano a miliardo di
miliardi”. Italo Calvino, *Il Castello dei
destini incrociati*¹

In this chapter I will trace the development of hypertext from the time when the word was coined to the present day touching on some theories that it involves. A few hypertext poems will be presented and analysed since the vast majority of hypertext poetry makes use of some other media along with the text. This textual condition is known as hypermedia where pictures, animations, video and audio elements become part of the hyperlinked poem. However, according to our typology videos and animations – which put forward another kind of temporality – connected to other forms of text generate hybrid poetry which does not essentially involve hypertextual construction, and which I will talk about on chapter 6.

The hypertexts studied here will be: Eduardo Kac’s *Storm*, which is one of the first hypertext poems, Robert Kendall’s *Penetration*, made with “Storyspace” (see section 1.2), Diana Reed Slattery’s *Alphaweb*, an example of hypertext poetry which also contains images; and Deena Larsen’s micro-hypertext *Ghost Moons*.

In the beginning of his very influential book *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, the hypertext theorist, George P. Landow describes one of the sources of inspiration that prompted him to make the connection from poststructuralism to hypertext. When designers of

¹ “[A] finite number of elements whose combinations multiply a billion billion”.

computer software examine the pages of *Glas* or *De la Grammatologie*², they encounter a digitalised, hypertextual Derrida.

George Landow, Jay David Bolter and others see the poststructuralist theories about a new outlook on (semiotic) discourse as calling for a new medium that can embody it better than print does. None of the poststructuralist theorists, however, directly requested a new medium for practising 'writerly' (Barthes) writing. They philosophised about the ideal kind of text that would undermine the particular bourgeois ideological power as they see it that has become an inherent part of the print medium.

We must abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of centre, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks. Almost all parties to this paradigm shift, which marks a revolution in human thought, see electronic writing as a direct response to the strengths and weaknesses of the printed book.³

As we saw in chapter 2 Landow – together with other critics – has probably been too reductive to combine poststructuralist theories and technological innovations; nevertheless it is true that the "new" approach to the author, the text and the reader introduced by the French Theory has to be considered when analysing electronic literature.

1. Hypertextual Writing

According to Jean Clément a hypertextual work is "un ensemble constitué de documents non hiérarchisés reliés entre eux par des liens que le lecteur peut activer et qui permettent un accès rapide à chacun des éléments constitutifs de l'ensemble"⁴.

Even though it is interactive, it does not imply an act of writing on behalf of the reader. The reader, of course, has larger freedom of reading than in traditional fiction, as she can choose the link on which she clicks, and takes part, in this sense, in the development of the text. However, if she has a role of explorer, mostly it is still in a "hyperspace" already written. If data processing made it possible to push hypertextual logic up to its point of result, we should state that it had been germinated in the "traditional" literature, where certain authors like Laurence Sterne, Raymond Russell, Jorge Louis Borges, Marc Saporta, Italo Calvino, Raymond Queneau, George Perec, Jacques Roubaud and other Oulipiens were interested in multilinear and multimodal writing.

² Jaques Derrida, *Glas*, Paris: Galilée, 1974. Jaques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, Paris: Minuit, 1967.

³ George P. Landow, *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1997, p. 2.

⁴ Jean Clément, "L'Hypertexte de fiction: naissance d'un nouveau genre?", symposium intervention ALLC, Sorbonne, 22 April 1994, accessible online at: <http://hypermedia.univ-paris8.fr/jean/articles/allc.htm> (accessed, July 10 2008). "An assembly of non-hierarchical documents connected by links that the reader can activate and which allow quick access to each component of the unity".

1.1 The Hypertext

Theodor Nelson explains in the essay “Opening Hypertext: A Memoir” that in the 1960s hypertext was put forward as a practical proposition: by using computer storage, writers could create multiple “branchings” and alternative structures in their work and allow the reader to navigate through them. He put forward the notion of hypertext⁵ as non-linear text “by hypertext I mean non-sequential writing”⁶. Nelson defined the form of hypertext in his book *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*, where he documented his Project Xanadu started in the 1960s with the goal of creating a computer network with a simple user interface⁷.

Though Nelson⁸ never directly addressed poetry, he named his project on hypertext vision *Xanadu* referring to Coleridge’s famous poem “Kubla Khan” (1797)⁹. This thematic connection is a sort of admission that the dynamics of poetry are active and fundamental in the “new literature” imagined by Nelson in his opening hypertext.

At the same time that Nelson was working on Project Xanadu, authors such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes laid the base of deconstruction and poststructuralism. Barthes coined the term of *lexias* to refer to “blocks of signification” and “units of reading”¹⁰ as they exist in hypertext

Burnett extends the meaning of hypertext by looking to the root word for “text” which derives from the Latin *texere*. This origin refers not to the written word but to “weaving”:

I like the sense that this lends to the meaning of “hypertext” as an art “beyond weaving,” allowing for infinite variation in colour, pattern, material and structure. It is unfortunate that this is not the way the term is commonly understood, because it gets to the heart of what it signifies.¹¹

Deleuze and Guattari offer the idea of the rhizome as a model for this framework¹². A rhizome is a large root-like structure which is often subterranean and horizontal. There is no hierarchical pattern, but nodes and links sprout here and there in an unpredictable nonlinear arrangement. A

⁵ And hypermedia consisting of alphabetic, visual, and audio components and performed in dimensions that printed formats do not allow.

⁶ Theodor H. Nelson, *Computer Lib/Dream Machines: New Freedoms through Computer Screens – a Minority Report*, Chicago: Hugo’s Book Service, 1974, p 44.

⁷ The project is still ongoing.

⁸ In *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* Nelson celebrates the work of his predecessors, such as Vannevar Bush father of the Memex – MEMory EXtender – machine and author of the essay “As We May Think”, and Douglas Englebart inventor of the mouse and early hypertext prototypes.

⁹ “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan” – first verse line of Coleridge’s poem.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Paris: Seuil, 1979, p. 13.

¹¹ Kathleen Burnett, *Towards a Theory of Hypertextual Design. Postmodern Culture*, 3(2), 1-12, p. 2.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press Ltd, 1988.

hierarchical structure or pattern may be part of a rhizome but the overall structure is not a hierarchy¹³.

According to Michael Joyce “hypertext is, before anything else, a visual form”¹⁴. Hypertext “embodies information and communication, artistic and affective constructs, and conceptual abstractions alike into symbolic structures made visible on a computer-controlled display”¹⁵.

1.2 Technological Conditions

Nelson’s idea of hypertext appeared before hypertexts were mechanically possible. The first “hypertext system” – “Augment” – was developed by Doug Englebart in 1968. Nelson attempted to realize his vision mechanically through the development of Xanadu complex system, which came up in the 1980s, and according to Nelson’s *Literary Machines*¹⁶ was acquired by the software company Autodesk in 1988.

By the mid-1980s other hypertext programs were developed. The advent of personal computers equipped with software able to interconnect different bodies of data – particularly Apple’s introduction of HyperCard in 1987, was a significant advancement. Many of the initial hypertextual poems were made up using the software program HyperCard which was shipped as a standard piece of software with all Macintosh computers between 1987 and 2004. HyperCard was a very versatile program and hypertext developed much further – first offline then on the Internet – as more people became familiar with it.

Eastgate System based in Massachusetts has been a pioneering publishing company for hypertexts. Since the early 1990s Eastgate has published and thereby preserved many titles of hypertext literature. Eastgate published hypertext poetry when very few other publishers wanted or were able to edit this kind of literature. The best known hypertext program associated with Eastgate is Storyspace. Storyspace was written and developed by David Bolter, Michael Joyce, John Smith and Mark Bernstein and produced by Eastgate in the beginning of the 1990s. Storyspace offers a variety of methods to write, read and explore the digital texts. When the program is fully up and running the reader can choose three ways to read the text: tree map, chart view, or Storyspace map. This last one is an important invention, which allows the reader to have a visual overview of the text she is reading

As Chris Funkhouser reports

[o]n the Internet hypertext was first seen in Gopher systems, which were used for information retrieval, but it soon become the lingua franca of the WWW, which

¹³ A hierarchical structure with one parent node is a Tree in mathematics / computer science, otherwise it is called a Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG for short).

¹⁴ Michael Joyce, *Of Two Minds*, The University of Michigan Press, 2002, p.19.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*

¹⁶ Theodor H. Nelson (1981), *Literary Machines*, Paperback, 1992. In 1992 Autodesk retired from the project and returned the brand to Nelson.

operates using a language called HTML (HyperText Markup Language), enabling programmers to interlink pages and incorporate all type of media files.¹⁷

Hypertextual writing has been experimenting for quite a long time in electronic poetry creations, however, nowadays the pure form of hypertextual writing is rare, authors prefer to put together this writing form with other constructions as we will see in chapter 6.

1.3 An Example of Hypertext Poetry Created with HyperCard: Eduardo Kac's *Storm*

In the early 1990 Eduardo Kac made a hypertext poem using the HyperCard program. His hypertext entitled *Storm* first appeared in *Alire* 8 in 1994. *Storm* is a quite interesting explorative hypertext even though simpler when compared with Kac's works on holography. In *Storm* if the reader does not do anything much at all – such as clicking on the link of the hypertext or moving around – nothing new happens on the screen.

Eighteen words (sometimes preceded by an article) – written in italics on a black background – are contained on nineteen individual stacks. Stacks are connected to each other through each letter that appears on the screen. The result is a minimalist poem (see figure 1). The feeling that everything is synthesized is somehow contradicted by the possibility of creating another association of words (see figure 1). The poem is “melted” and recombined by the reader. Its structure remains basic, simulating the syntax of the language, that is to say how we formulate and recombine words in order to construct a phrase. It is still a synthetic poem but the meaning is modified.

Kac writes in the README file that the linking structure originates in vocalic and consonantal bifurcation, which presumably involves finding a way to arrange or map words in series so that they complement rather than disrupt each other. The application of bifurcation is a very interesting – and mysterious – context Kac made up for the work. Kac stated that his poem has no end and that the reader is “now presented not with one narrowed-down selection of words in strings or in graphic layouts, but with an electronic field that is a complex network with no final form”¹⁸. He has selected and arranged the language so that the reader will never be faced with awkward juxtapositions. However, since there are less than two dozen stacks of mixed up words pretty soon they begin to repeat, although normally in different patterns.

¹⁷ Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*, Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2007, p. 154.

¹⁸ Eduardo Kac, *Storm*, in *Alire* 8, 1994.

ALL ENDS MAIN STORIES RESURFACE LIKE A FACE A SCENT ALL BLENDS.	ALL MELTS SOMESTRIES RESURFACE LIKE A FACE LIKE A TRACE OR ELSE ENDS MAIN MEMORIES REMAIN LIKE
--	--

FIGURE 1: Eduardo Kac, *Storm* - two combinations of text

2. The Hypertextual Trace: Robert Kendall's *Penetration*

One of the most well-known examples of hypertextual poetry is *Penetration* by Robert Kendall. *Penetration* was published by Eastgate in 2000, but it is available online. Internet Explorer should be used to access the text since other browsers are hampered from correctly displaying the first page, the technology alters somehow the text.

Penetration is the second of two poems from a collection entitled "The Seasons". The first one *Dispossession* was published in 1999. On the page there are two other empty spaces which presumably should have finally hosted two other poems to complete "The Seasons".



FIGURE 2: Robert Kendall, *The Seasons*

2.1 Robert Kendall's *Penetration*

Robert Kendall, *Penetration*, 2000, at:

<http://www.eastgate.com/Penetration/Welcome.html>

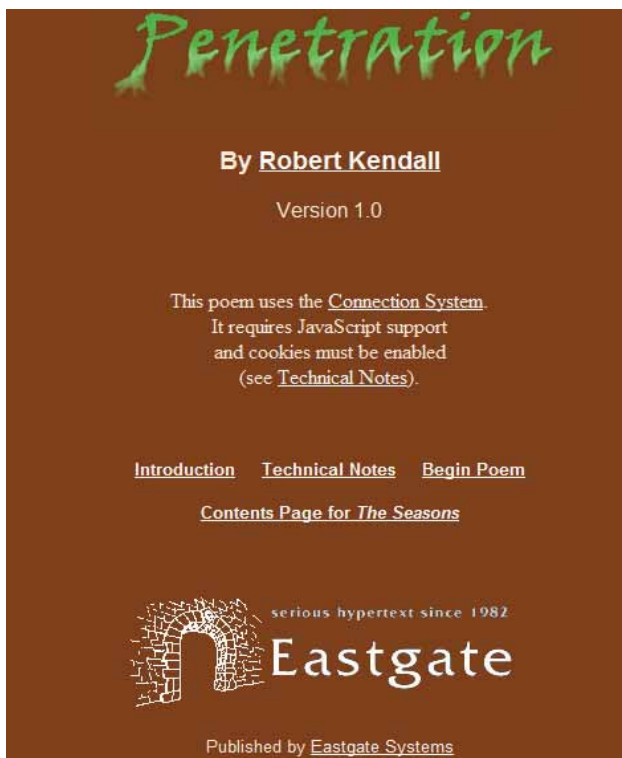


FIGURE 3: Robert Kendall, *Penetration* – the opening page

In the opening page there are several pieces of information regarding the publication, including technical notes and even an introduction to the poem. In this last section Robert Kendall explains his text

Penetration focuses on two individuals, a father and daughter. The natural world around them takes on the role of a third character called the Mothering Earth. Whenever you move the mouse pointer over a link, the status bar at the bottom of the window indicates which character the link leads to. Links leading to unvisited nodes (that is, sections of text not yet read) are white, while dark green links indicate nodes that you have already visited. A shade of light green (lying between the other two link colors) signifies that you have visited the node but it has not been fully revealed to you. If you click on a light green link to return to one of these partially revealed nodes, you will find the node's contents altered to reflect the new context in which you are reading it. This is accomplished by means of variable text elements created with the Connection System.¹⁹

By clicking on “Begin the poem” a pop up “preface” page appears, inviting the reader to “come in”, and these are – besides the title – the only words contained on the page. It is a physical invitation to the reader to join the text. By doing its

¹⁹ Robert Kendall, *Penetration*, Eastgate System, 2002, accessible online at: <http://www.eastgate.com/Penetration/Welcome.html> (accessed, July 20 2009).

bidding another page comes into sight, with the images of two people and 9 words, which correspond to different start-points of the text (see figure 4). One of the characteristics of hypertext is, after all, the possibility to have many beginnings and not a clear and unique end.

In his web site "Wordcircuits" Kendall better introduces his work:

Penetration explores change. The immigrant's experience of changing homelands, the seasonal changes within those lands themselves, and evolving states of mind are counterpointed against one another and against the shifting hypertextual structure of the poetry. The poem focuses on two immigrants from Eastern Europe, a father and daughter, who are seeing each other again for the first time in many years. The natural world around them becomes a third character, the Mothering Earth. The hypertext unfolds organically from the reader's choices, with each different reading emphasizing different aspects of the relationship. Many pages in the work contain variable text, which changes whenever the reader rereads that page. The changeability of the text reflects the constant flux of the relationships explored in the poem.²⁰

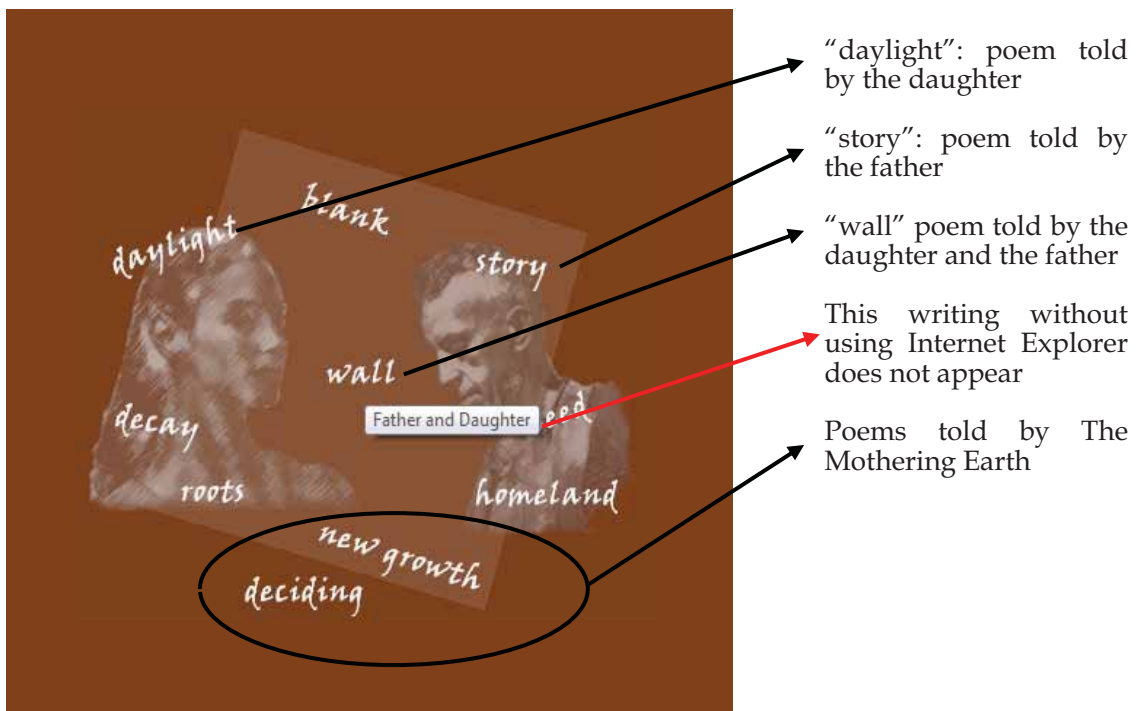


FIGURE 4: Robert Kendall, *Penetration* – the beginning of the poem

The poem focuses on immigration and on a relationship between a father and his daughter. These themes are interesting since many e-poems have as the subject of their work: memory, decay, language itself and its potentialities.

Once started the reader can re-enter the text at any time without losing her reading path unless she deliberately wants to. In fact each time the reader reopens the hypertext, a page appears reminding her that she has a reading in process and asks if she wants either to resume the reading where she left off or start over and delete the current history. This page, moreover, shows the reader

²⁰ Robert Kendall, "Wordcircuits", accessible online at: <http://www.wordcircuits.com/kendall/poetry/index.html> (accessed, July 20 2009).

what current history is, clarifying which pieces of the text – previously read – belong to the father and which ones to the daughter.

Since the hypertext has many entrances the reader comes across different texts: from a very simple text with just one link, to more a complex text with up to 5 links (see figure 4).



FIGURE 5: R. Kendall, *Penetration* – by clicking on either “decay” or “seed”



FIGURE 6: R. Kendall, *Penetration* – by clicking on “wall”

The links are not part of the text – as they normally are in hypertexts – but they are positioned either at the bottom or at the top of the page where first there was the title. In fact once started the hypertext the title disappears – the reader has already penetrated the text – only a white line remains on the page to remind the reader that over that line there was the title – but that is the case only if the reader is not using Internet Explorer, otherwise there is no white line cutting the page: again the technology can modify the text²¹. This line appears to suggest a difference between the links on the screen: those which are situated after the texts seem to have a clearer contiguity with respect to the links that are separated from the text by a line, as if they belong to another part of the text.

Each time the reader clicks on the text an audible “click” is made up, highlighting the step forward taken by the reader. The different lexias can be composed of several lines or of just one verse line as in “he marveled at”.

The links are contained in green brackets. This green is also the colour in which the title is written and the colour the links take after been touched. In green there are written some words that appear in the text – just a single green word for each part of the text. These words are the link the reader has just clicked to access that section of the hypertext. And finally green is the colour also of the small bush that is growing at the left-hand side of the page each time that the reader accesses an unknown reading path.

²¹ Cf. Philippe Bootz, “The Problematic of Form Transitoire Observable: A Laboratory For Emergent Programmed Art”, in *Dichtung-digital*, 2005, accessible online at www.dichtung-digital.com/2005/1/Bootz (accessed, February 10 2010).

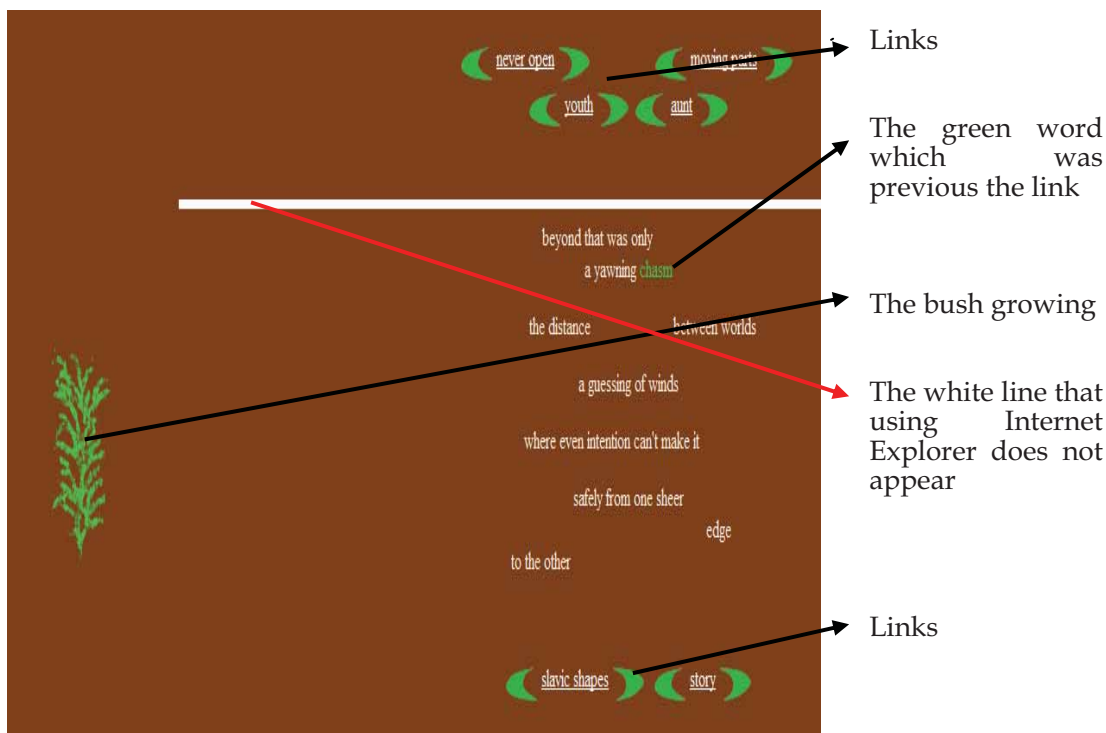


FIGURE 7: Robert Kendall, *Penetration*

This small bush that grows as the reader is learning more about the text makes the traces of the reading practice materially visible. Not only the links change colours once accessed – light green, if the reader needs to pass thorough that link another time to completely read it and in this case the bush does not grow, and dark green – but also a bush that simulates the reading path and makes visible the reader’s touch. This is a peculiarity of this hypertext. Normally hypertexts show the reading practice only by changing the link colours. Here, once the bush is fully drawn the reader knows the hypertext is finished and no other paths need to be discovered.

The risk in this genre of text is that the reader will start to click constantly without reading or reading just the very first verse lines. We saw in chapter 3 that electronic writing stimulates a diagonal reading practice, quoting Alexandra Saemmer this writing risks “la frénésie du clique”²² (see also chapter 6). But by doing it the reader will lose the poetic constructions the text puts forward such as assonances, alliterations, internal rhymes, synaesthesia, changes in the rhythm of the poem, repetition, and so on, as the texts below shown.

²² Alexandra Saemmer, *Matières textuelles sur support informatique*, Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007, p .60.

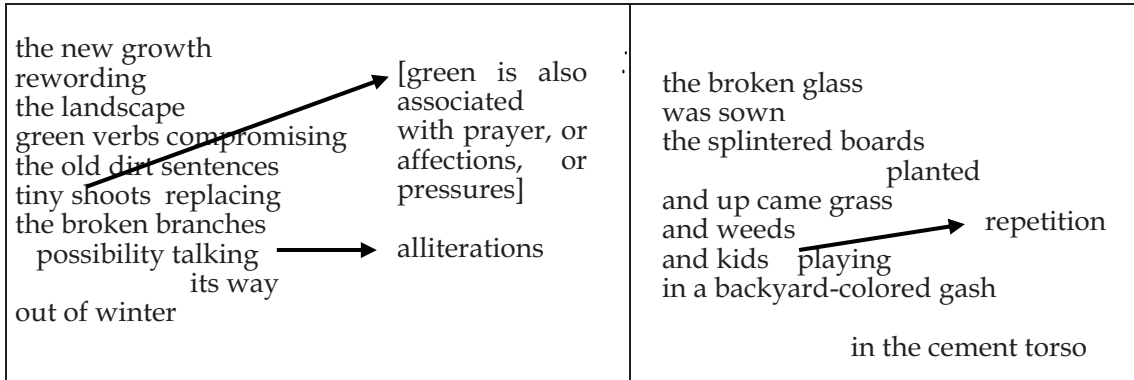


FIGURE 8: scheme of Robert Kendall's *Penetration*

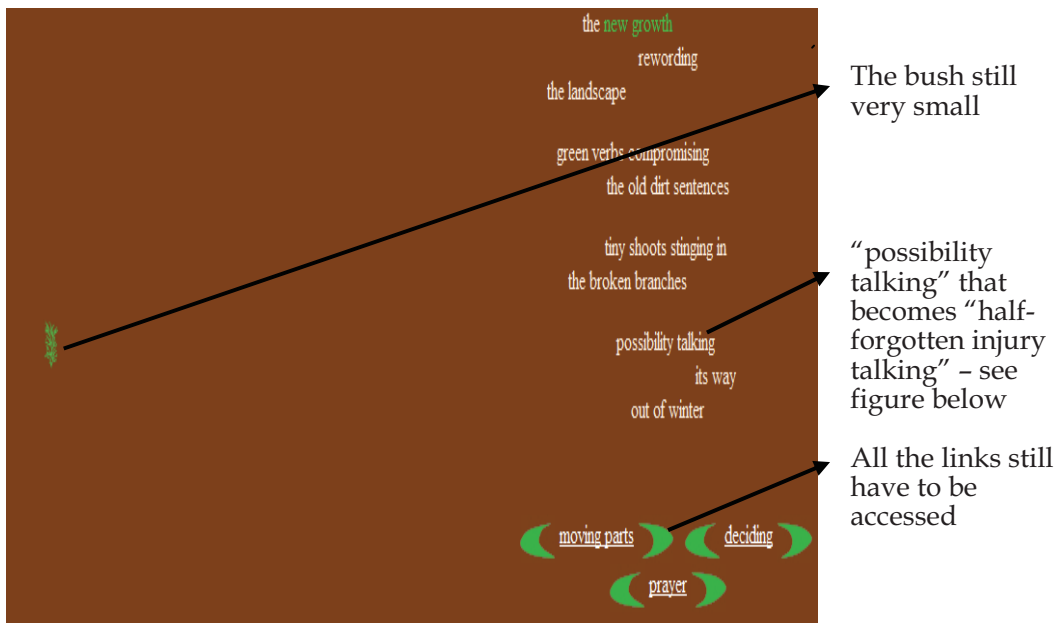


FIGURE 9: Robert Kendall, *Penetration* – first time accessing the link “growth”

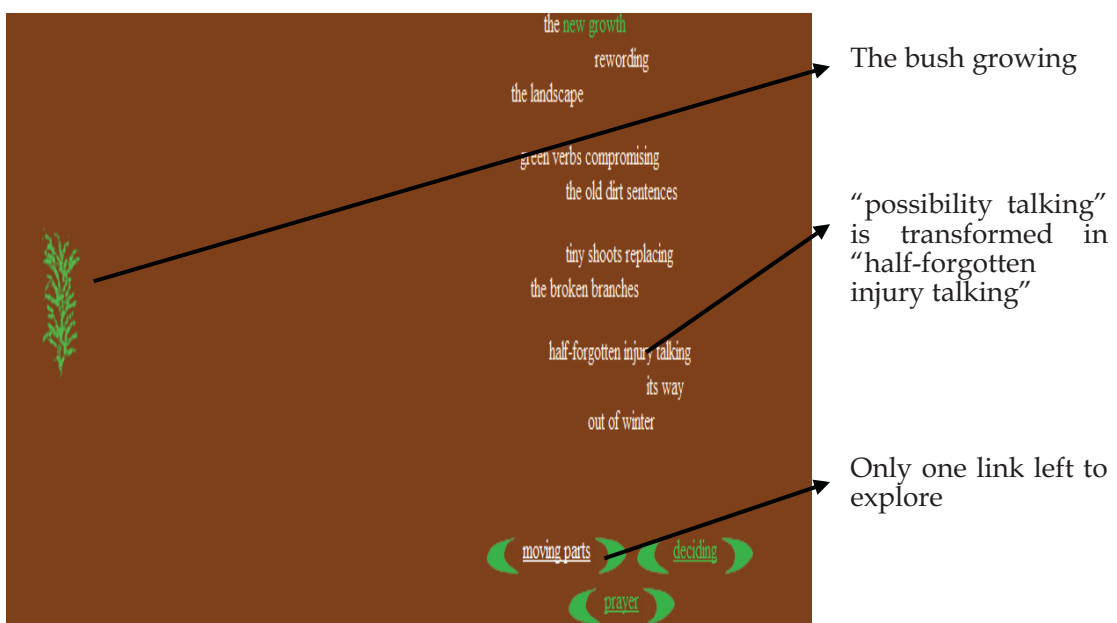


FIGURE 10 : Robert Kendall, *Penetration* – second time accessing the link “growth”

The different reading paths offer by the hypertextual writing allow the reader to personalize and to make unique her reading experience, to realize her own dialogue among the father, the daughter, and the mothering earth, that shows its presence with colours (the green and the brown of the background) and with words, from some links “seed”, “water”, “soil”, to some adjectives that reiterate particularly the adjective “green” associated with “prayer, affections, verbs, pressures”, to the content “n his village long ago / the artillery's seed / slipped / into the earth / that was now / half a world away”, “poppy narcissus plum blossom / smeared on / the moving parts /of memory”.

In all the texts there is no punctuation, no capital letters to stop this flow of memory. The (hyper)text simulates a stream of consciousness where only a green word reminds the reader of the past (link).

3. Hypertext Alphabet: *Alphaweb*

Alphaweb is a hypertext poem that links all the letters of the western alphabet: each poem starts with a different letter creating a web of poems. Even though older than Kendall's *Penetration*, this hypertext poem lies at the intersection of different semiotic systems combining, as it does, graphics and images.

3.1 Diana Reed Slattery's *Alphaweb*

Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb*, 1997, at:
<http://iat.ubalt.edu/guests/alphaweb/>



FIGURE 11: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – first section of the opening page

To go inside the text the reader has a large variety of choices. She can click on any single underlined word that the author gives her by way of explanation, she can click on images or she “can enter here or with your choice of lists and navigation tools below or with the letter A. You can optimize your viewing / meet the interactress or use an eject button NOW to get as far away as possible”²³.

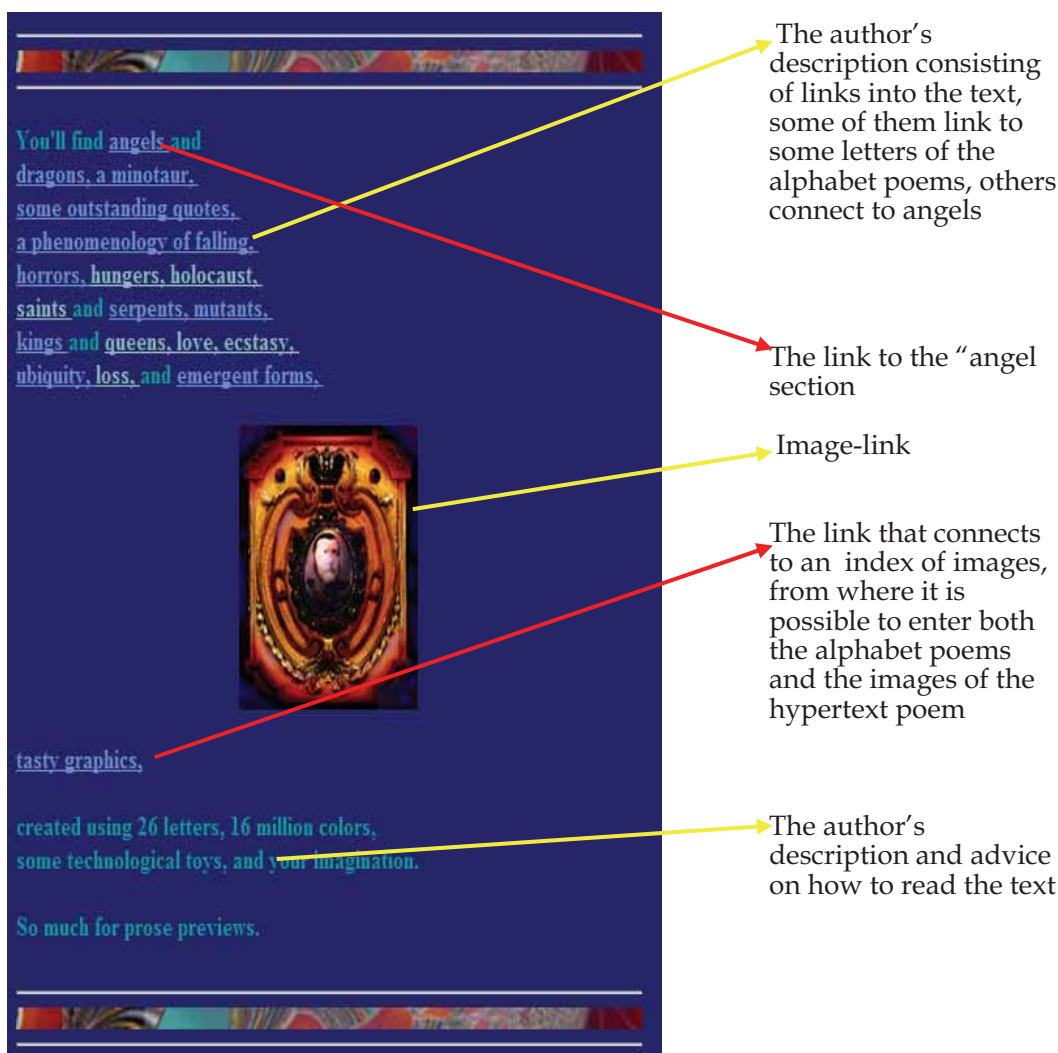


FIGURE 12: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – central section of the opening page

The opening page is quite long, the reader needs to scroll it in order to see it completely. From any section of the opening page the reader can access the hypertext poem, as the figures 11, 12 and 13 show. However, in the lower part of the page there are more links to enter the text. The first part is descriptive and creates a reading pact between the author and the reader “We meet in the house of words. Whoever you are, you are my honoured guest; that's why this door is open. Diana Reed Slattery. slattd@rpi.edu”²⁴. The author not only signs

²³ Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb*, 1997, accessible online at: <http://iat.ubalt.edu/guests/alphaweb/> (accessed, July 21 2010).

²⁴ Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb*, 1997, *op. cit.*.

the message for her reader but she puts also her mail, if her reader wants to write her. This section of the text shows a phatic function of language²⁵: it checks if the channel works, if the medium works “(are you the ideal reader I’ve been waiting for)”, the one able to read this “new” form of text using this new channel.

The second and the third sections are both descriptive and they provide many links into the text, both in the form of words and images (see figure 12 and 13).

The work has at least three interpenetrating structures, approximately 250 areas and three times that many doors and passageways. The structure that is always present, and so can be used for orientation, is the alphabetical structure; both the poems and the angels (mentioned in the annotation for figure 12) can progress in a linear way; but this apparent stability of the structure can be seriously compromised by grid-layout of the alphabetical links since there is the visual suggestion that the reader can follow the link to any letter from any area.

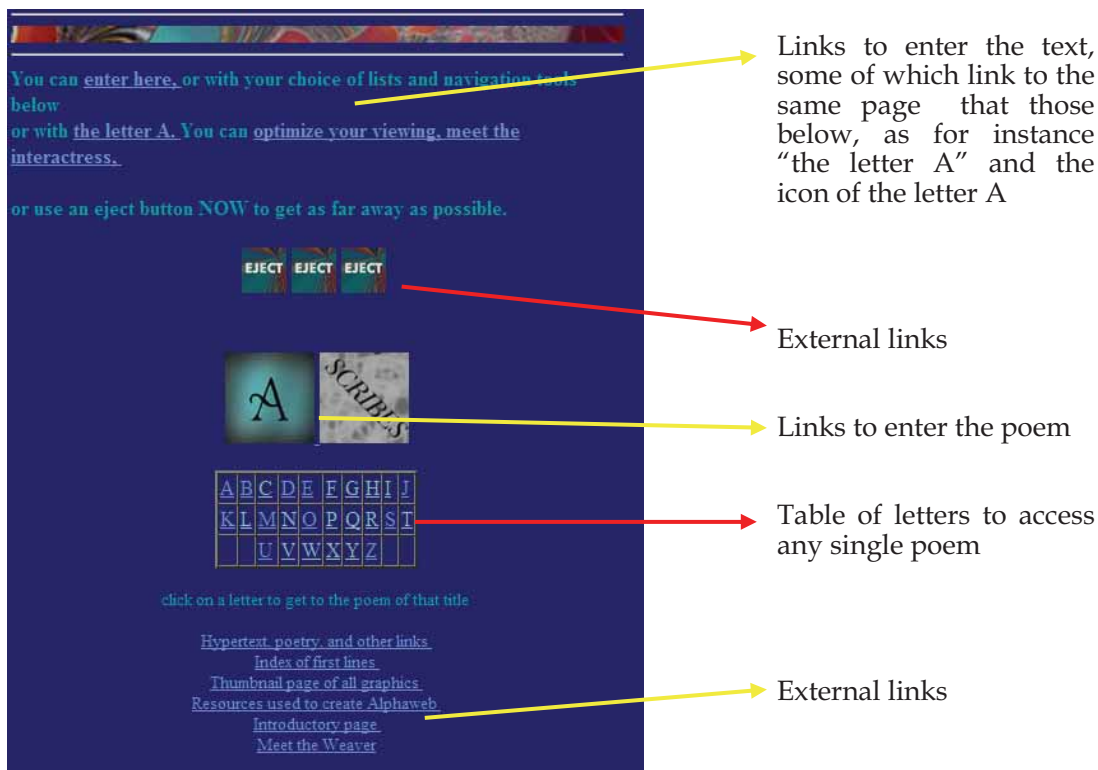


FIGURE 13: Diana Reed Slattery, *AlphaWeb* – the last section of the opening page

Since there are more than 50 links to access the poem itself I will analyse just a few of them following my personal and subjective taste and curiosity, given that according to Italo Calvino “la lettura è un atto individuale molto più dello scrivere”²⁶.

²⁵ Roman Jakobson, “Linguistique et poétique”, in *Essais de linguistique générale*, Paris: Minuit, 1963.

²⁶ Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, Milano: Mondadori, 1979. “Reading is an individual act much more than writing”.

Let us start linearly and later on we will explore the hypertextual nature of the poem, let's start by clicking on the letter "A".

The page opens with the icon of the letter and below it in brackets there is the number of the sections into which the poem is divided

The link to move into the other sections of the poem – the reading practice follows a linear way, always present in the poems if there is more than one section

Table of letters to access any single poem – always present in the poems

Advice on where to click in order to read the text and a suggestion on how to read it – “try spelling your name”

External links. They are in each pages also in the opening page

FIGURE 14: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem of the letter

The page opens with the icon of the letter and below it in brackets there is the number of the sections into which the poem is divided. In this case there are 5 sections, but the number of sections differs from poem to poem – from just 1 section as, for instance, in the poems “B” and “D” to 6 sections. As well the colours of both the text and the background are different in each poem.

The poem starts with a formula which is repeated in many other letter-poems: “A is for...”.

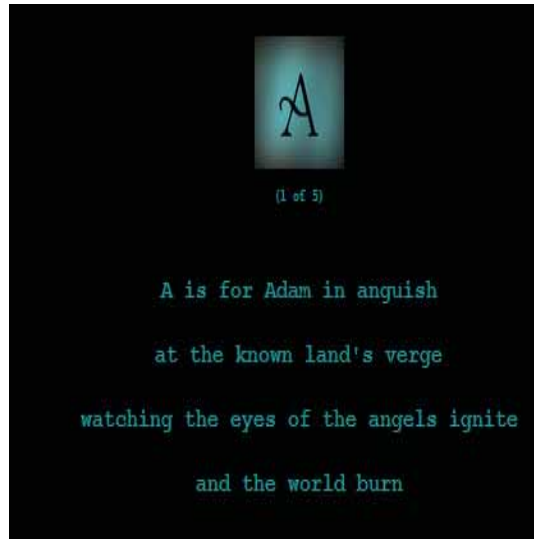


FIGURE 15 : Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem of the letter “A” , the first section

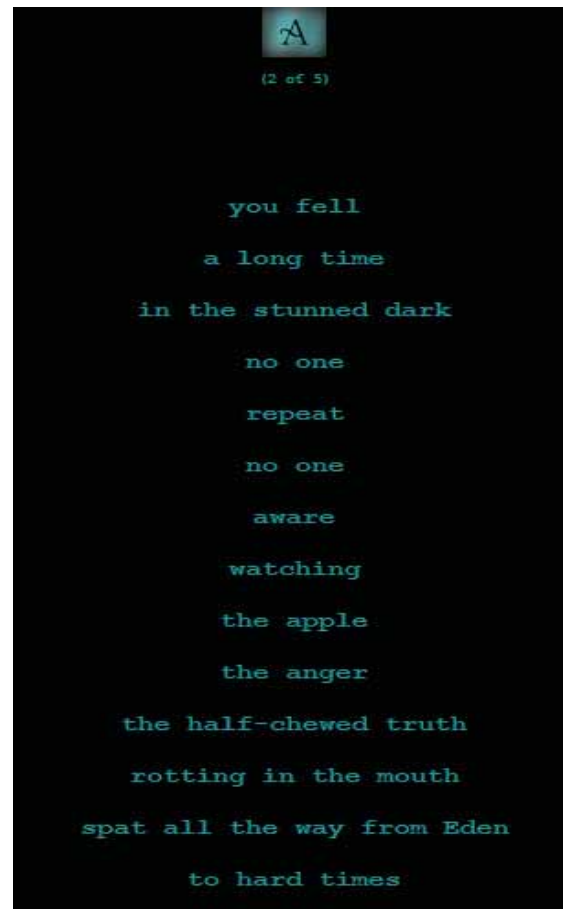


FIGURE 16: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem of the letter “A”, the second section

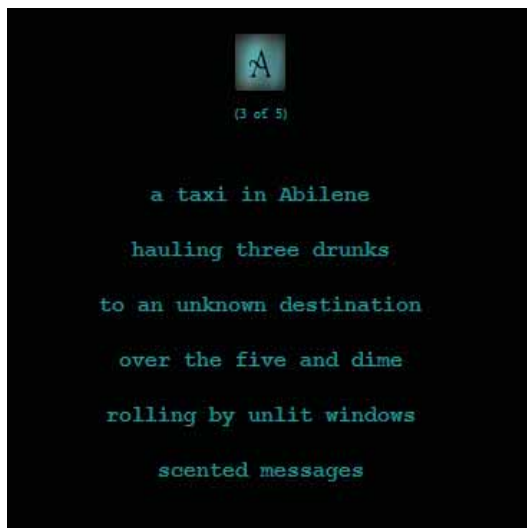


FIGURE 17: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem of the letter “A”, the third part

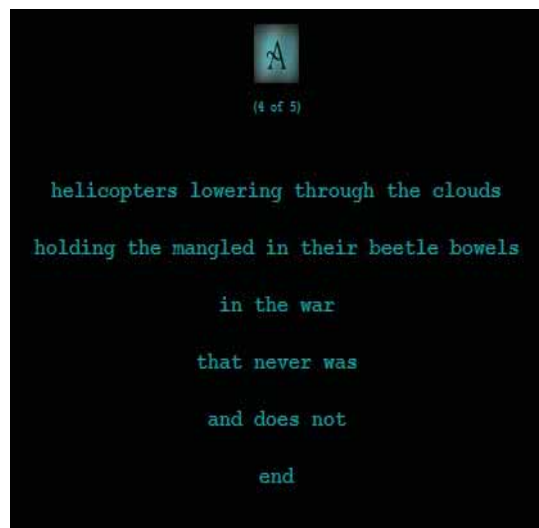


FIGURE 18: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem of the letter “A”, the fourth section

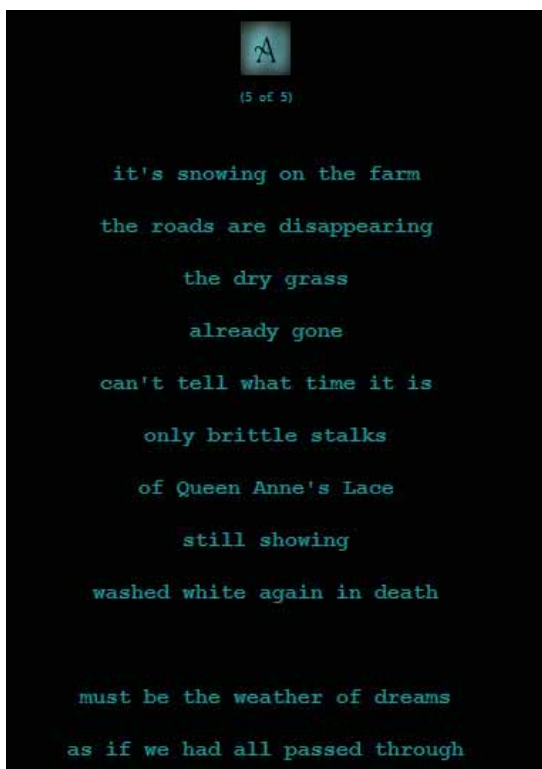


FIGURE 19: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem of the letter “A”, the fifth section, first part that appears on the screen

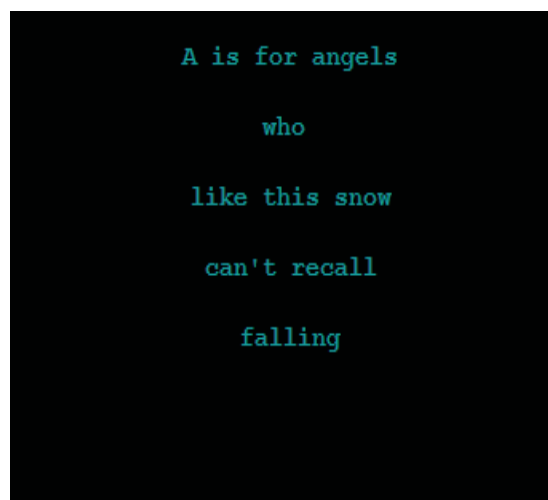


FIGURE 20: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem of the letter “A”, the fifth section, second part of the poem

The structure of the sections differs, the second and the last one are longer than the others, but the second is more telegraphic composed of just one word per line for many lines. No punctuations segment what is just a long sentence (the long story of the human beings). The poem is dedicated to Adam and to the fall of human beings. “A” the first letter of the alphabet and Adam the first man, the one that caused our pains our “anguish”. From the loss of Eden of the first section to Abilene of the third section. Abilene is known just for its paradox²⁷, here in the poem three drunk people reveal the suffering condition of human beings. Life then is a “war / that [...] does not end” and the snow is a metaphor for the fall. And the poem ends with the same structure it started with “A is for angels / who / like this snow / can't recall / falling” highlighting the cyclical nature of life where “the half-chewed truth / rotting in the mouth / spat all the way from Eden / to hard times”.

²⁷ The Abilene paradox is a paradox in which a group of people collectively decide on a course of action that is counter to the preferences of any of the individuals in the group.



FIGURE 21: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem letter “E”, the second section

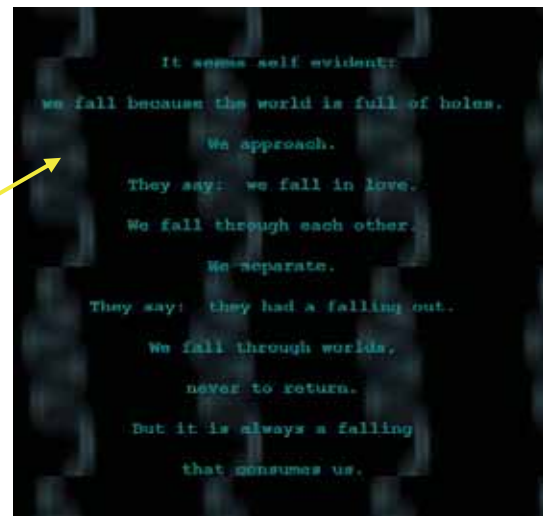


FIGURE 22: Diana Reed Slattery *Alphaweb* – “Falling”
The link to access this text
Contiguity of background, and contiguity (black colour) with the background of the “A” poem
Author’s suggestion

At the end of the poem the reader can decide whether to move onto poem “B” in a linear way, to jump to any other letter, or following the author’s suggestion to click on “a letter to get to the poem of that title try spelling your name”, underlining the subjective potentiality of this text.

However, the thematic concerning the human beings is also the topic of other poems. In poem “L”, for instance, “[t]he numb place fascinates, / waiting for pain to invade, tears, anything, / like staring into an empty mirror, / waiting for my image to reappear”. The poem “E” put forwards the theme of evil “E is for evil”.

The structure of this poem differs a bit: the poem does not start with “E is for...” but with “the right hand sliding sideways / while the eyes look left” as if it was the continuation of another text, especially because there is no capital letter in the beginning of the poem. The second section focuses again on the Fall and at the end of the text next to the normal link to carry on the poem in a linear way (“moving on”) there is a link called “falling”. It is a break into the reading practice, a sort of brackets put into the hypertext. “those [...] who fall because the world is full of holes” says the “E” poem and the “falling” lexia repeat the same “we fall because the world is full of holes.” The “who” becomes “we” both we all human beings, but also “we” the reader and the poet.

This lexia explains the different meaning of “falling”: “we fall in love. / We fall through each other / [...] They say: they had a falling out / [...] But it is always a falling / that consumes us”. At the end of this text the reader can choose if she wants to go back to the third section of the “E” poem, or to read other poems.

Another way to enter the hyper-poem is by clicking on the image²⁸. The reader gets into a text with the image she has just clicked on and two lines "I want them. They are mine". To move on she is forced to click on "moving on" or on any letter of the table of letter. By clicking on "moving on" she ends up at the fourth and last lexia of the "J" poem. Again the topic of falling appears "we have fallen", linked to the thematic of desire which "turns to degradation". If the reader wants to access the "J" poem she has to click on the table of letters, there are no other direct links to the poem. At the end of the page three links connect to the "K" poem, to "dragon" and to "angel". Both texts - "dragon" and "angel" - have a direct link to the "K" poem.

The "dragon"-lexia is a quote from children's books by Roger Lancelyn Green: *The Wonderful Stranger*:

They would be strange creatures, these dragons. Over all the world 'tis the same with them: they gloat over treasure, and value it above all things else. In caves or burial mounds they gather great hoards: and should even the smallest of its jewels be stolen, a dragon would pursue the thief in deadly hate even to the world's end. Yea, and a man might give it an hundred gold rings in exchange, but still it would know if its own ring was not among them.....

The "angel" part tells about the angel named Jaluha. The "J" is also the last letter-poem the reader passed through. Jaluha is a Gnostic angel who hands the cup of oblivion to the souls of sinners. After drinking from it, the humans forget the sinful deeds they performed while they were alive. And maybe the humans need to forget: life is too painful

The author read Hersey's Hiroshima at the age of ten. The relation of / eyes melting, running down faces, is one of the unforgivable images. / Is purgation forgetting or remembering? / Should we drink? / Do we have a choice?

The reader can also access the "angel" section from the opening page, by clicking on "angel" (see figure 12). But in this case she enters another lexia of the "angel" text. The form of the text reminds the reader of the prose structure, no verse lines, no space between the lines, no words positioned freely on the space. The hypertext here opens to a parallel story:

In the 17th century, a Jesuit, Athanasius Kircher, made several unauthorized visits to the planets. His guide was the angel Cosmiel. It wasn't the full vision, always unspeakable, that got him into trouble, so much as the glimpse described, the

²⁸ Almost all the images that are contained in the hypertext are made for this hypertext, except, for instance, two images of "Czar" one of which is one of the links on the opening page. There is a section called "Thumbnail page of all graphics" where a catalog of the images is given to the reader who can decide whether or not to use them as links to trace her poem. The images were created by combining "a wide variety of graphic techniques. Some begin with a scanned photograph or drawing which is then manipulated electronically in Photoshop, CorelDraw, or PhotoPaint. Some begin with a fractal calculated with Fractint 19. There are two 18th century medical engravings, and two manipulated scans of Faberge frames holding pictures of the final Czar and his son. The rest are original. You are welcome to download these images for personal use. Many look good printed as clear transparencies (as for overheads) and stuck on a window. I use an Epson Stylus Color printer at 720 dpi".

flashpoint in the minefield of metaphor, what you thought you saw when the lightning slashed. Ecstasy has always inspired the enmity of groundlings. Left behind, they shake their fists at the disappearing balloon, dodging ballast bags of discarded reason dumped on them thoughtlessly from above the clouds.

This voyage in the universe reminds the reader of Dante's voyage, but in *Itinerarium exstaticum* (1656), Athanasius Kircher describes his understanding of the universe, it is not an allegory. Kircher, obviously, was careful in what he asserted. *Itinerarium exstaticum* tells about a dream in which the good Jesuit Athanasius Kircher – here called Theodidactus – is guided through the solar system by his guardian angel Cosmiel²⁹. Kircher used illustrations to say things he could not tell. The frontispiece to *Itinerarium exstaticum* shows Cosmiel leading Kircher to a universe that is clearly not that of the tradition.



FIGURE 23: Athanasius Kircher, *Itinerarium exstaticum* (1656) – the frontispiece

Opening this link means to enter in a completely different narrative process that even perhaps leads the reader out of the hypertext, in order to know more about Athanasius Kircher and his works, and thanks to the support this action is very easy.

²⁹ The dream is a real description of the universe one step away from a Copernican world. This one step away was not far enough, and censors were quick to react. But a student of Kircher's, Gaspar Schott, published a new edition that with a few changes met the critics' demands.

At the end of the lexia there are two main links: one that connects to the letter "D" and another link: "moving around" – plus the table of the letters as usual. By clicking on "moving around" another quote this time from David Porush's *Hacking the Brainstem* appears "What is the expense of this victory of abstraction?". Here again, the reader can decide to discover more about this text and his author. The complete title of Porush's work is actually *Hacking the Brainstem: Postmodern Metaphysics and Stephenson's 'Snow Crash'*.

In this article published in 1994 Porush discusses how cyberspace is often presented in literature as furnishing the possibility for transcendence of the physical body. Users traverse and operate in this new cyberspatial environment through a "'meta' body in the brain"³⁰. Porush states that postmodern cyberpunk novels deal with meta-physics and meta-physical modes of existence. He argues that postmodern fiction's "critique of rationalism, and of the scientific/technological project of our culture in particular"³¹ put forward an embracement of irrationality that is part of metaphysical thought and even more importantly, the experience of cyberspace itself. Porush underlines that users have to delude themselves into believing that they can temporarily dissociate from their material bodies and exist in a meta-physical form of disembodied consciousness in order to fully inhabit cyberspace.

The last part of the article Porush analyses Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. He discusses how the *Snow Crash* virus destabilizes the distinction between the real world and virtual reality by affecting both digitized avatars and the material human brain, suggesting a transcendence of space and human-machine dichotomies. Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* is a very famous cyberpunk novel published in 1992. The title refers to a term for a particular software failure mode on the early Apple Macintosh computer. By quoting Porush, the hypertext creates another hypertext that the reader can decide to follow leaving the *Alphaweb* hypertext poem she was reading.

Alphaweb is not only a mixture of poem and prose, of images and quotes from other texts, but also it shows the potentiality of the hypertextual writing in digital environment. It is a metatextual hypertext in its form and in its content. The intertextuality it offers can materially be rebuilt, passing from the *Alphaweb* to other texts or fragment of text the *Alphaweb* refers to. *Alphaweb* suggests constantly a new beginning, a new story, poem, quote to read. It suggests a new begging at any time but it does not seem to have an end – there is no omega. By clicking on letter "Z" in fact the text does not suggest an end

[i]f suddenly found / in the company of angels, / can we dwell intact? / After so long / falling / such deprivation / after the apathy, the degradation / that which has been grabbed from our hands and hidden / that which has been removed from us utterly / turns and returns to us / robed in flames.

It puts forward again the idea of falling – the word "falling" occupies the whole verse line, and the idea of eternal return "/ that which has been grabbed from

³⁰ David Porush, "Hacking the Brainstem: Postmodern Metaphysics and Stephenson's *Snow Crash*." *Configurations* 2.3, 1994, pp: 537-71, p. 538.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 539.

our hands and hidden / that which has been removed from us utterly / turns and returns to us /”.

The “Z” poem in the regular structure that the text has chosen many times, appear only on the second section of the poem, but this time there is no number indicating which section of the poem the reader is reading.

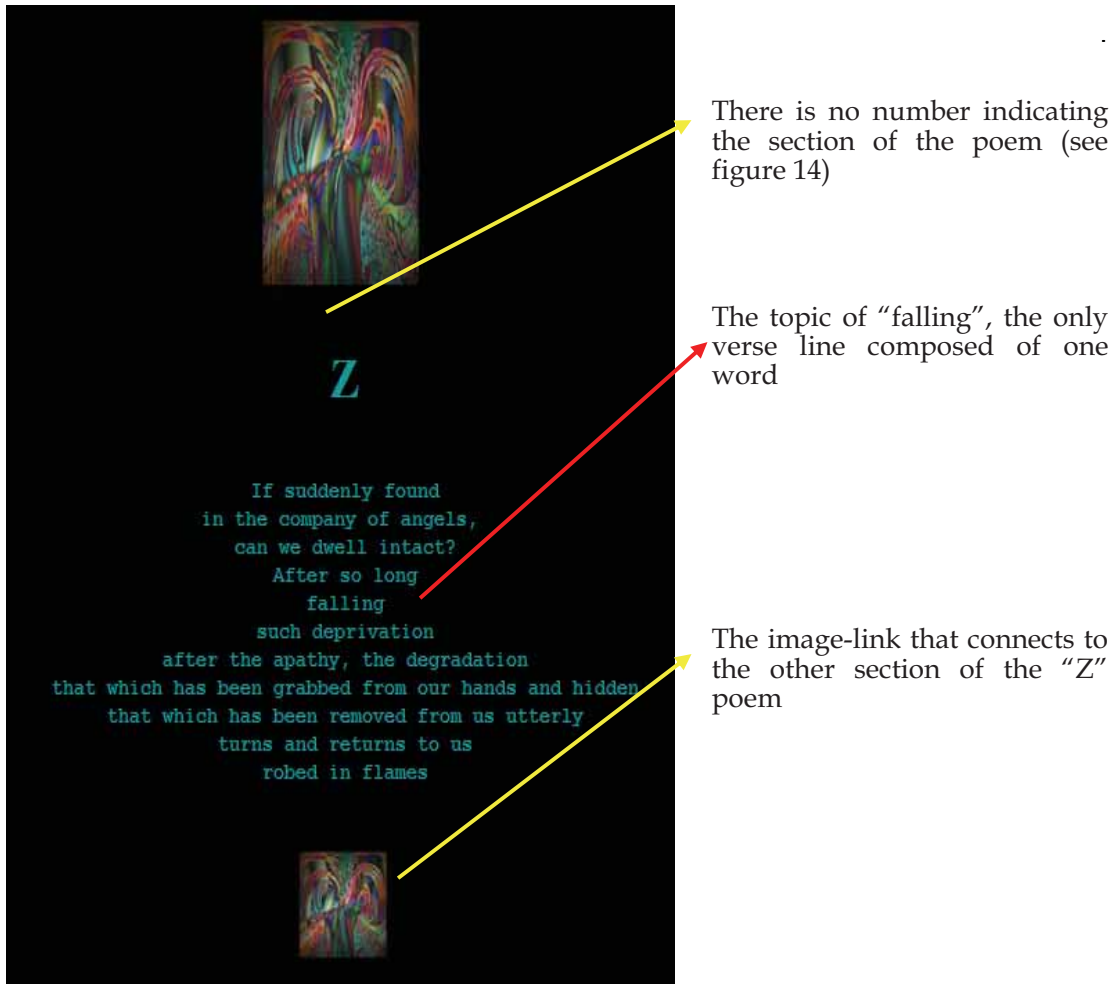


FIGURE 24: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem of the letter “Z”, the opening page

The “Z” poem does not end, it links to other sections of the same poem and then to the “angel” section and to other text like “escape velocity”.

Particularly the last text of the “Z” poem reminds the reader of a verse line of the second one: “you can't die yet” (second lexia) becomes “you don't die at all” in a poem that as the human condition “falling endlessly up”. The reader is in a “limbo” as written in the “Z” poem, or in a “house of words”. One verse line of the “escape” link says “I am a house of words”, and keeping on clicking the reader will reach a page which repeats that verse line three times and that links back to the letter “A” or to the box of the alphabet (see figure 27). The text is a “house of words” and of new stories that the reader can discover and reconstruct following her interest and, eventually, she can write on it, on this text she has just read, transforming the reading practice into a writing experience.

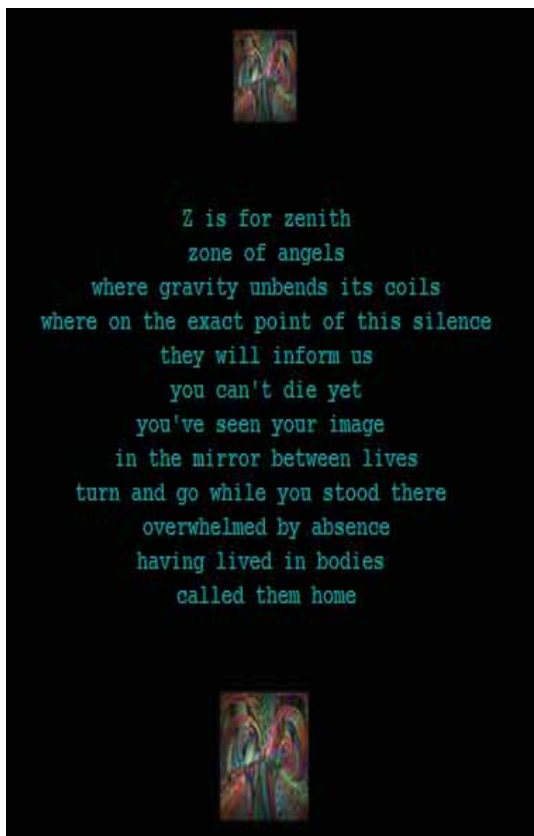
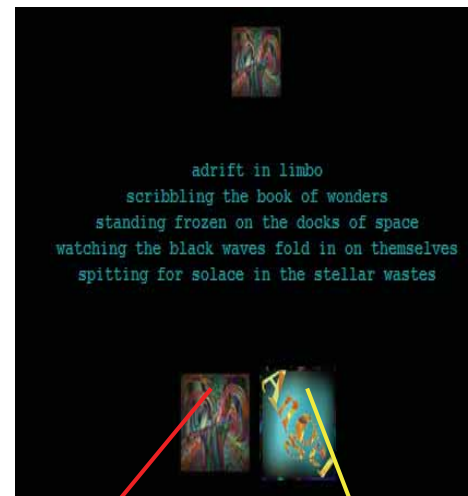


FIGURE 25: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* – poem of the letter “Z”, the 2nd section

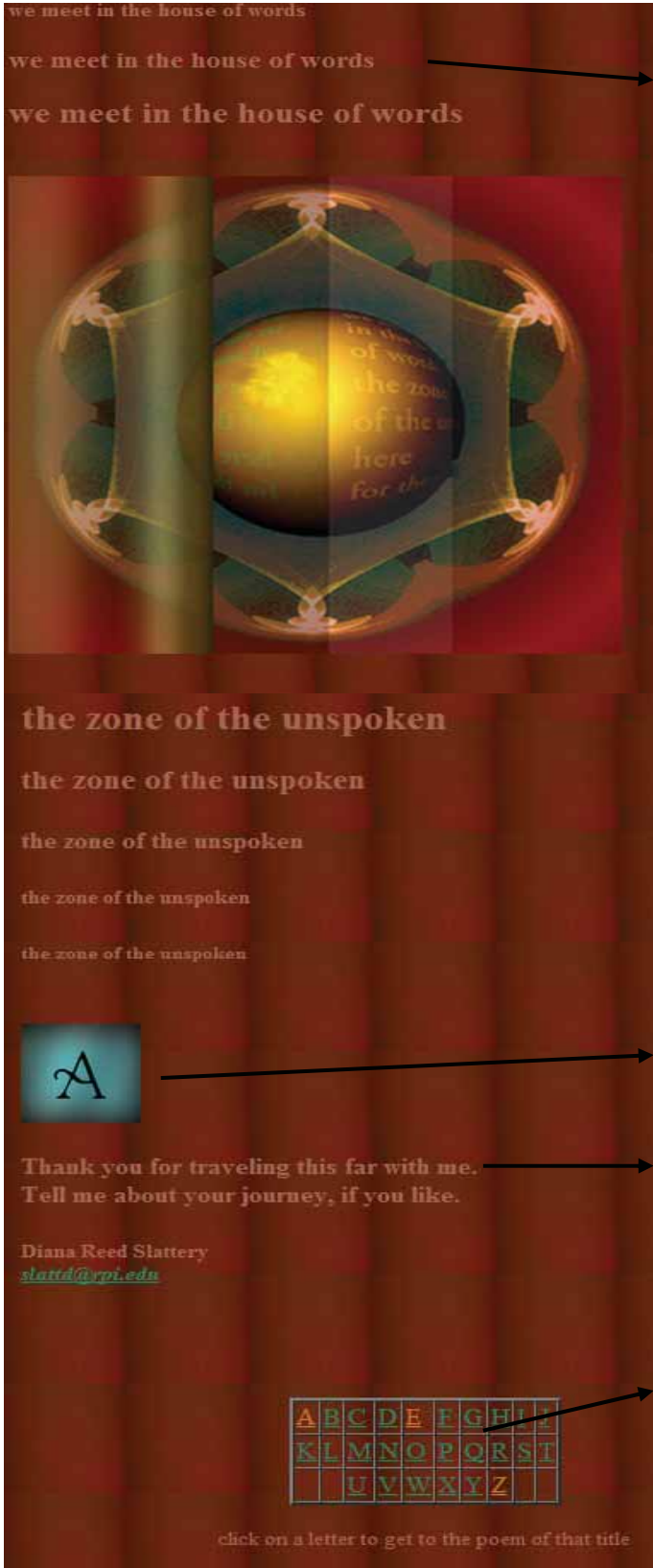


The image-link to access to the next section of the “Z” poem

The link to the angel section

FIGURE 26: Diana Reed Slattery, *Alphaweb* poem of the letter “Z”, the 3d section

Even though the author thanks her reader for travelling with her the text first invite its reader to keep on reading in a travel that does not seem to have an end by clicking on the “A” letter, prospecting her a new beginning.



The verse line repeated for three times

The link to go back to the "A" letter and restart the poem

The author is addressing her reader thanking her and inviting her to write about her reading experience

The table of the alphabet with all the other links for the letter-poems

FIGURE 27: Diana Reed Slattery *AlphaWeb* – poem of "Escape"

4. Micro-hypertext: Deena Larsen's *Ghost Moons*

This hypertext is a micro-hypertext as underlined by Deena Larsen herself in the description of the work: “a micro-hypertext with seven nodes. It uses a skating rink structure, where you simply “skate” your mouse on the image, and watch the words change and coalesce. You can also click on any underlined word to begin”³².

4.1 Deena Larsen's *Ghost Moons*

Deena Larsen, *Ghost Moons*, 2001, at:
<http://www.deenalarsen.net/kanjis/tsuki/index.html>



FIGURE 28: Deena Larsen, *Ghost Moons* – the opening page

The peculiarity of this micro-hypertext is that even though its hypertextual structure is clear it is also possible to move along the reading paths by passing the mouse over the stylised Japanese kanji which translates into English as *moon*. By performing the action the text will change automatically.

The hypertext web page is blue simulating the night, on the left the Japanese kanji is the only unchangeable part of the text together with the title “*Ghost Moons*”. The kanji represents the moon graphically and iconically in the

³² Deena Larsen, “About *Ghost Moons*”, 2001, accessible online at: <http://www.deenalarsen.net/kanjis/tsuki/index.html> (accessed, August 23 2010). The text is written and designed by Deena Larsen, the java code is programmed by Miko Matsumura.

usual manner, and it also stands for a poem itself. In the lines of the large Kanji character words are in fact written (see figure 29). “Ghost Moons/flit across/everything/wondering where you’ve been”. I will return to this poem later. What I would like to underline here is the presence of the “static”³³ poem close to the emergent hypertext fragments: these hypertext fragments occupy just a small part of the web page, while the “kanji poem”³⁴ captures the reader attention first since it occupies half of the written page. The dimension of each hypertext fragment is small, especially when compared to the kanji. The fragment resides there on a small, though central, embossed part of the web page. It is not a *shouted* poem, it does not need the whole page; it seems more to simulate a whisper, a murmur of words.

The micro-hypertext is short, thus it is easily entirely readable, the reader does not feel she is missing some parts of it. Each lexia is quite short, from two lines up to seven lines. The hypertextual fragment’s structure is always the same: a title and then the text. The title is made from the word hovered over (skated in Deena's parlance) in the “kanji poem”: for instance if you hover over the words “you've been” which are the last syntagms of the “kanji poem” then the title and the first words of the first lexia in the hypertext fragment are “you’ve been”.

Because of its length and because of the numbers of its nodes, the hypertext is really simple to read. Also with this example of hypertext the reading practice is traced: the word-links, once read, change their colour. The words used as links can be single syntagms: verbs, such as “follow”, nouns such as “memories”, “centuries”, or “light”, adverbs such as “nothing” or “everything”; dual syntagms: adjectives plus nouns like “musk flesh” or verb and pronoun like “invites you”; and triple syntagms subject and verb like “you’ve been” or verbs and nouns “stands of light”. The links then are not always single words.

One of the protagonists of the poem is the moon – the moon which is always there in the text and on the screen with its kanji. A moon which is personified, which stands for the lunar deity Σεληνη. Selene was in love with a mortal she saw in a cave while sleeping, Endymion. One of the different versions of the Greek myth says that he was so handsome that Selene asked Zeus to grant him eternal sleep so that he would stay forever young and thus would never leave her.

The first lexia can refer to this lover “You’ve been the moon’s lover for centuries”. But it can also generally address the reader. As in the Greek myth time is eternal for the moon “as if time were nothing”, she (the moon) “comes again” to probably meet the reader.

³³ I am using the word *static* here not as the opposite of *dynamic*. The micro-hypertext fragment that is the other poem in the web-page is not dynamic, but the reader needs to go through its nodes and links in order to read it, while the “kanji poem” is like a digitalized one-page printed poem.

³⁴ On her home page Deena calls them kanji-kus – a contraction of kanji-haiku though to be pedantic haiku is its own plural so kanji-ku would be more correct.



FIGURE 29: Deena Larsen, Ghost Moons – first lexia

The *call* for the reader is repeated in another lexia – entitled “across” – “she invites you”. This lexia is the first one to appear if the reader decides to naturally pass the cursor over the kanji, from the centre of the screen to the left, instead of activating the hypertextual reading by clicking on the underlined words in the presented text. In both lexias the pronoun “you” is part of the link. Not only has the text invited the reader to follow it metaphorically but also physically by clicking on “you”. This connection to the reader appears also in the lexia entitled “wondering where”. Here the text says: “[a]nywhere you go/ the moon will follow”. The moon will give the reader everything “Like a coy suitor, the moon/ shyly offers you everything”. The reader is the protagonist of the text with the moon. In the lexia entitled “everything” the reader is invited “to smell the thick/musk flesh of its flowers”. Each lexia addresses openly a “you”; two lexias repeat twice the pronoun “you”. In the lexias entitled “flit” and “everything” – which are the longest lexias with 7 lines each – the pronoun “you” appears twice in each lexia: in “flit”, “you think” and “you look for” and in “everything” “offers you” and “inviting you”. The reader passes from being the subject to be the object of the text.

Some links are deictic like the links “invites you” and “you’ve been”. This hypertext is built around the *conative* function of language, according to the theory by Roman Jakobson³⁵. The *conative* function is allocated to the addressee/receiver. It is at work when something that is willed, wished, exhorted, or desired is addressed by the speaker to the receiver. The conative function prompts the receiver and encourages participation. The conative function plays a dominant role in this hypertext: for its structure the hypertext

³⁵ Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics” (1958), in *Style in Language*, Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960, pp. 350-377.

asks for participation. In this case – even though the hypertext is short – the conative function makes the text redundant: not only is participation asked for from the form of the text but also from its content.

The moon is there *physically* looking for “her” reader: “her hands search for you”. The rhetoric figure of personification not only attributes personality to an impersonal thing, but *materially* transforms the thing in a woman. The binomial moon-woman is quite common in poetry, but here the text uses the personification of the moon in a game of mirrors: the moon searches (and follows) the reader, while the reader is materially (by clicking) searching for the moon’s poem.

This meta-textual function is also expressed by the “other” text. As previously said there are two ways to read the “Ghost Moons”: either by activating the links, clicking on the underlined words, or by passing the cursor over the kanji. By doing it the reader watches a text that seems to “flit across”, where the lexias appear and disappear rapidly and lightly.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter I briefly summarized the hypertext theory from the *grand* idea of Theodor Nelson – who coined the word – to the recent theory of hypertextuality formulated particularly by Landow and Bolter, who link their theory to the so-called French Theory. The critics say (and I agree) that it has probably been too reductive to combine poststructuralist theories and technological innovations (see also chapter 2), however, it is true that the “new” approach to the author, the text and the reader introduced by the French Theory needs to be taken into consideration when analysing electronic literature, especially when analysing some “genres” of e-literature such as for instance hypertext poetry. The number of the texts I analysed in this chapter are less in number than those in other chapters. This is first of all because the hypertext form is the “famous” form in electronic writing, so I decided not to examine many texts, but rather I elected to show some different examples out of what is on offer. Secondly, hypertext writing is a form very common in electronic writing, but as for poetry it is normally used along with other forms of expression as we will see in chapter 6.

The hypertexts I have selected show different kinds of hypertexts. Besides Kac’s *Storm*, one of the first hypertext poetries, the other three put forward different possibilities of hypertext: from the micro-hypertext of Deena Larsen’s *Ghost Moons*, whose structure (short lines composed of few words) “clearly” reminds the reader of a poem structure; to a very long hypertext poem, where different genres, quotations from other books, images, and so on work jointly to create a complex hypertext, creating an “aesthetic of frustration” where the reader can sometimes get lost.

According to Philippe Bootz the aesthetic of frustration is a new kind of aesthetic typical of digital poetry:

The aesthetic of frustration considers that the activity of reading is one of the components of the work. The actions and reactions of the reader are thus used by it as iconic signs of other processes that are carried out in life; they constitute the aesthetic representation of these processes in the work itself. The reader carries, sometimes unknown to him, an essential part of the follow-through of the work in the role of involuntary actor and not as the author. In this aesthetic the work is not conceived of in order to please the reader, nor in order to be read in the same way as a book or a video. It is not as much a robot as a place for the confrontation of the intentionality of the reader and that of the author.³⁶

Bootz refers particularly to animated and generative poetry, but this form of aesthetic is also present in a text that the reader cannot be completely sure to have totally read.

Robert Kendall's *Penetration* is probably, the most classical example of a "traditional" hypertext poem: there are very few images and only then these are at the beginning as links into the different texts, multiple-links to activate. However, while reading, the reader involuntarily draws an image on the screen: this image is the redundant trace of her reading practice.

Particularly Kendall's *Penetration* and Larsen's *Ghost Moons*, as seen, play on the meta-textual function of the language: *Penetration* openly announces it already in its title – the reader has to penetrate the text in order to read it; *Ghost Moons* bases it in a reciprocal research of the reader and the hypertext.

As said, the hypertext form of poetry is used more often alongside other forms of writing, however, it seems to be true what Nelson predicted, that is to say that the introduction of hypertext would give birth to numerous new kinds of writing:

[...] this simple facility – the jump-link capability – leads immediately to all sorts of new text forms: for scholarship, for teaching, for fiction, for *hyper-poetry*.³⁷

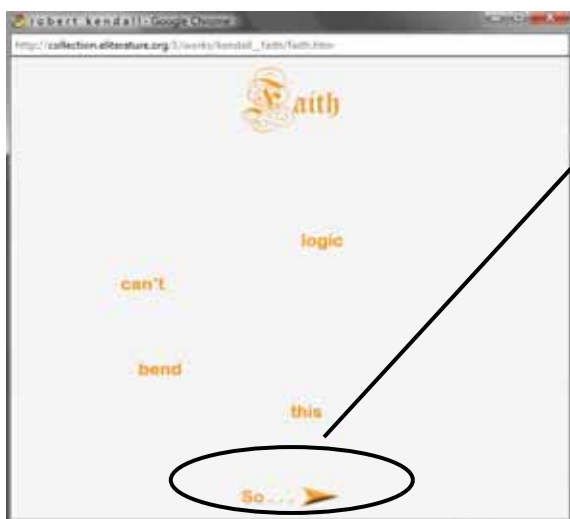
³⁶ Philippe Bootz, "Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms", in *New Media Poetry and Poetics*, Special Issue, Leonardo Electronic Almanac Vol. 14, No. 5 – 6, 2006, accessible online at: http://leoalmanac.org/journal/vol_14/lea_v14_n05-06/pbootz.asp (accessed, September 21 2010).

³⁷ Theodor H. Nelson (1981), *Literary Machines*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

CHAPTER 6 HYBRID E-POETRY

“We were clever enough to turn a laundry list into poetry”.
Umberto Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum*

In this chapter I will analyse e-poetry whose *form of expression* is based on the notion of «segment», and «sequence», and on (hyper)links. I am calling this category of texts hybrid e-poetry since these texts are composed using a combination of the forms of expression I have already analysed in chapters 3, 4 and 5. The first two texts we turn to are two works written in Italian: Elisa Carlotti’s *Il fiume delle parole* and Daniela Calisi’s *Stillicidio*. Both these texts are “read-only texts” and they are “segment/sequence” based: in *La rossa parola* the segment construction is prominent, in *Stillicidio* it is the sequence form of the expression that predominates. Also Robert Kendall’s *Faith*, is a “read-only text”, even though it is link-based which normally would suggest an explorative reading practice. The reader is presented with a link to click on at the end of every sequence, but these links do not cumulatively build a hypertextual environment, they simply make the reading process advance in a linear way.



The link that allows a linear and sequential reading practice

FIGURE 1: Robert Kendall, *Faith* – end of the first subsequence

Rebecca Givens' and Monica Ong's *Fallow* is in between a "read-only text" and an "explorative text", it also invites the reader to materially explore it a bit, by unfolding it so to speak. This text is made up of segments, sequences and links, however, the links are not – as they normally are – words but images.

Zahra Safavian's *the murmur of interstices* is an example of combinatory text since the reader is invited to combine images and pieces of a poem, to look for different meanings by combining different parts of a unique poem. As I explained in Chapter 2 I define "combinatory e-poems" those texts that openly expose and address its combinatorics by changing and permuting the text according to fixed text's structures given by the author, that allow/need to be recombined to have a meaning. In order to build *murmur*, the reader needs to interact with it by clicking on it, but the clicks do not realize any hypertextual reading practice, the clicks allow the reader to assemble fragments of texts. Jason Nelson's *Birds still warm from flying* and Rui Torres' *Poemas no meio do caminho* are other examples of combinatory reading practice. The former is built from a cube, in chapter 3 two examples of e-poetry built from cube-figures were analyzed but Nelson's cube adds to the segment of writing also images and sound and suggests that we think of the writing practice as a game. The latter is actually a collaborative and generative text, which opens important questions concerning the authorship and the "subjectivity" of the machine. In the next chapter other examples of generative texts will be analyzed and the problematic nature of this kind of text will be studied in depth. However generative texts, as far as their form of expression is concerned, do not fall outside of the bounds of the typology proposed.

Maria Mencia's *Birds Singing Other Birds Songs* allows the reader to access the text in any order, by activating 13 different options, to stop it whenever she wants and to activate another sequence: thus this text is in between the combinatory and the read-only text.

The reading practice is explorative in Chico Marinho's *Palavrador* and in Jason Nelson's *i made this. you play this. we are enemies*. In both e-poems the reader explores the text, however, the way we explore them differs. In Chico Marinho's *Palavrador*, the reader explores the space, she moves in a 3D space, she looks around in order to find and read pieces of text, and to listen some pieces of audio. In Nelson's *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* the reader uses the keyboard as a type of game-controller to move into the text and to play with it, in order to see how the text reacts to what she thinks are her choices.

1. Metric, Rhetorical Figures and the Digital Environment: *Il fiume delle parole* by Elisa Carlotti

*Il fiume delle parole*¹ by Elisa Carlotti is a very simple example of digital composition since it is made only of graphic parts. The poem is published without any editorial filter on Elisa Carlotti's website under the section "Poesie

¹ "The river of words".

Visive” (Visual Poetry). There is no year of publication for this work². It is important to notice that this poem works only on Microsoft's Internet Explorer otherwise either the page automatically closes or the text does not move.

In order to be able to read the text the reader needs to interact with it, but the sort of the interaction is very simple, the reader (as you will see) needs to “scroll” the text though I suppose some basic ability in controlling the mouse is required. There is no need – nor possibility – to explore the text, to recombine it, or to reconstruct it.

1.1 Elisa Carlotti's *Il fiume delle parole*

Elisa Carlotti, *Il fiume delle parole*, at: http://utenti.lycos.it/elisa_carlotti/

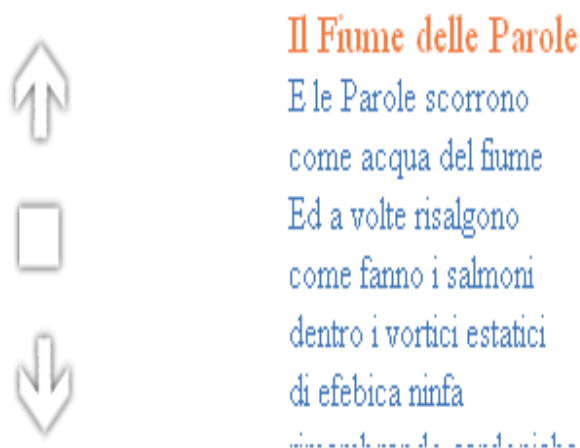


FIGURE 2: Elisa Carlotti, *Il fiume delle parole*

Il fiume delle parole is one page poem, which is not shown in its entirety at first sight – only the title and the first 6 verse lines appear on the screen. Two big arrows with a square between them (like the controls of a video player) placed to the left suggest to the reader that she can activate some function in order to read the whole poem. By hovering the cursor over one of the two arrows the text scrolls forward or backward very quickly, to the point of not having the time to read it. Actually, once the cursor is positioned on the arrow, the text begins to scroll very quickly, becoming illegible, thus the reading-time depends on the readers' ability to control the mouse. The text, apart from this, doesn't interact at any other level with the reader.

² The web site probably came into being towards the end of 1997 or in 1998 sometime because on the website the author suggests the use of Internet Explorer 4 in order to read another poem (which is analysed on Chapter 4), and Internet Explorer 4 was released in September 1997. Already by 1999 Internet Explorer 5 had appeared.

The title is written in light red letters in order to mark a distinction with the text which is written in light blue letters, simulating the color of the sky reflected in water (the river); the background is white – simulacrum of the printed page. At the end of the poem, on the right, there is a “word-button” – “ritorna” – which allows the reader to get the text back again. Together with the arrows and the small square in between them and “ritorna” – all three elements are interfaces that allow access to the poem – are a part of the text itself.

The poem is composed of 29 verse lines. It opens with a metaphor: the words flow as water in the river. The flow of words is again a metaphor – words represent life. The syntagm “Parole” (words) is always written in capital letter, which according to Italian rules is a reverential capital letter, meaning that it is used with syntagms that have a “sacred” value. Words, water, and life flow, pass either quickly or slowly, it depends on the capacity to control them – to control the text – but an unpredictable event – like a small unwanted movement with the cursor – can change the flow of life.

E le Parole scorrono
 come acqua del fiume.
 E a volte risalgono
 come fanno i salmoni
 dentro vortici estatici
 di efebica ninfa
 rimembrando sardoniche
 risatine distratte.
 E le Parole scorrono
 e il fiume è in tormenta
 ribadisce costante
 il dominio del ventre
 che natura ci pose
 dentro fervidi limiti
 e carpendo le vite
 che si accingono all'onta
 di violare indefesse
 quell'acqua invitante
 ma terribile ed infida.
 E le Parole scorrono
 e di Parole io vivo
 e ricordo le sere
 sotto il sole di maggio
 a cantare nel brivido
 di un pensiero non ruvido
 canti poco intonati
 canti che scaldan la vita.
 E le Parole scorrono
 e io scorro con loro.³

³ “And the words flow/as water in the river./And sometimes they return/like salmon/into ecstatic vortexes/of ephobic nymph/ remembering sardonic/ distracted giggles./And the words flow/and the river is in turmoil/it constantly stresses/the belly's domain/that nature poses us/within fervent limits/and catches the lives/that are about the shame/of tireless violation/that tempting water/but terrible and treacherous./And the words flow/and I live of Words/and I remember the evenings/under the May sun/singing in the shiver/of an smooth thought/songs a bit out of tune/songs that warm life up./And the words flow/ and I am flowing with them.”

The reiteration of both the nominal syntagm “parole” 5 times and of the verbal one “scorrere” (to flow⁴ – it too also appears 5 times: 4 declined in third person plural present indicative – “scorrono” they flow – one at the first singular person of the present indicative – “io scorro” I flow/I scroll) aims to stress on the poetry’s theme. Both the use of the conjunction “e” (and) at the beginning of the poem – thus to start the poem - and its repetition – 10 times – highlights the idea of flow. The initial “e” emphasizes the continuum of the poem, the poem seems to start somewhere else, in the white space that is also a part of the text. In fact by passing the slider on the arrows – in both directions – the reader can make the text disappear, but she cannot make it reappear unless she reloads the text by clicking on the small square in between the 2 arrows.

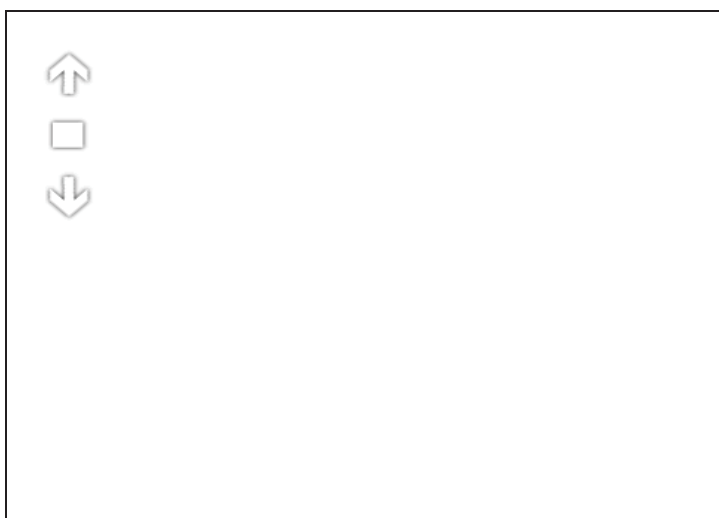


FIGURE 3: Elisa Carlotti, *Il fiume delle parole* (the border of the text is mine, on the web page there are just the two arrows and then the white space).

This feeling of flowing is also underlined by the 4 times repetition of the same syntactic construction “E le Parole scorrono” (and words flow). Furthermore, the internal rhymes and the assonances, (for instance, verse line 4 “vortici estatici”), the alliterations (for instance, verse lines 24 and 25 “brivido di un pensiero non ruvido” or verse line 29 “scorro con loro”), the reiteration of the morpheme /s/ (21 occurrences) and of the morpheme /r/ (39 occurrences) reproduces the sound of water rushing or flowing, sometimes whirling the deeper noise of a whirl. The liquid consonant /r/ recalls a series of Indo-European words linked to the idea of “flowing”, as in the Greek verb: $\rho\epsilon\omega$. The liquid consonants reflect liquidity. In linguistics they are considered to be flexible, to *flow*.

The verbs “scorrere” and “risalire” – the arrows allow the reader to direct the reading in two directions: from the top downwards and the bottom upwards – show the metatextual function, which is the poem's base. I propose to call this figure, ciné-gramme using Alexandra Saemmer’s definition of the ciné-gramme. According to Saemmer ciné-grammes are “animations

⁴ It is important to note that the Italian verb “scorrere” means also “to scroll” in English giving a metatextual value to the poem.

remembering the calligram on paper medium"⁵. A ciné-gramme is an animation that makes the motion represent what the text says and makes the text say what the motion represents. I propose to differentiate the automatic ciné-gramme from the interactive ciné-gramme. The effect is the same, but in the second case without the interaction of the reader the effect will not exist. The ciné-gramme is often redundant like in this case.

The flowing and going-up of words *physically* calls both the poet and the reader to share the same space at the same time: the reader needs to interact with the text, she physically has to touch the arrows and cause the text to flow; and the poet declares "e io scorro con loro" (I flow with them). The poet and the reader thus share the same space, in a time that does not stop – the reader can cause it to "flow" forever if she wants – both forced in *whirlpools* (of sense) in which words (and the world) can materially become illegible (incomprehensible).

The metric in this poem is particularly important. The construction of the sense – the flow – is also made by the construction of the metric of the verse lines. The rhythmic accent is mostly placed on the 6th syllable. In Italian metric, this composition is called "verso settenario", or Italian alexandrine verse consisting of 2 hemistichs (two half verse lines), each accented on the sixth syllable. To this structure, however, there are some exceptions: verse lines 4 and 5 have their rhythmic accent on the 7th syllable – "ottonario" very common in the Italian metrics. Verse line 10 has also another rhythm: it is a "novenario" the rhythmic accent is on the 8th syllable, as shown in the figure below.

N.	VERSE LINES	N. OF SYLLABLES	KIND OF VERSE	NOTE
1	E le Pa-ro-le scor-ro -no	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Alliteration sound /r/
2	Co-me ac-qua del fiu-me .	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Synæresis
3	E a vol-te ri- sal-go -no	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	
4	Co-me fan-no i sal- mo -ni	8	Otonario rhythmic accents on the 3d and 7th syllables	"Verso piano"
5	Den-tro vor-ti-ci e- sta-ti -ci	9		Synaesthesia "verso sdrucchiolo" Internal rhyme
6	di e-fe-bi-ca ninfa	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	
7	Ri-mem-bran-do sar- do -ni-che	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Alliteration sound /r/
8	Ri-sa-ti-ne dis- trat-te .	7	Settenario-iambic	Internal rhyme

⁵ Alessandra Saemmer, "Some stylistic devices on media interface", conference paper presented at *The Network as a Space and Medium for Collaborative Interdisciplinary Art Practice*, Bergen Nov. 8-10th, 2009, accessible online at: <http://elitineurope.net/node/29> (accessed, April 20 2010).

			meter/alexandrine	
9	E le Pa-ro-le scor-ro-no	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Repetition
10	e il fiu-me è in tor-men-ta	9	Novenario rhythmic accent on the 3d, 5th and 7th syllables	Synæresis
11	Ri-ba-di-sce cos-tan-te	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Enjambment
12	il do-mi-nio del vent-re	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Enjambment
13	che na-tu-ra ci po-se	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Enjambment
14	Den-tro fer-vi-di li-mi-ti	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Synaesthesia
15	e car-pen-do le vi-te	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	
16	che si ac-cin-go-no all'-on-ta	9	Novenario rhythmic accent on the 3d, 5th and 7th syllables	Syncope Enjambment
17	di vio-la-re in-de-fes-se	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Enjambment
18	quell'-ac-qua in-vi-tan-te	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Metaphor
19	ma ter-ri-bi-le ed in-fi-da.	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Systole
20	E le Pa-ro-le scor-ro-no	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Repetition Alliteration sound /r/
21	e di Pa-ro-le io vi-vo	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Anaphora
22	e ri-cor-do le se-re	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Alliteration sound /r/
23	Sot-to il so-le di mag-gi-o	9	Ottonario rhythmic accents on the 3d and 7th syllables	Alliteration sound /s/
24	a can-ta-re nel bri-vi-do	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Rhyme (brivido- ruvido)
25	Di un pen-sie-ro non ru-vi-do	9	Ottonario rhythmic accents on the 3d and 7th syllables	Assonance Alliteration sound /r/ Synaesthesia
26	Can-ti po-co in-to-na-ti	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Assonance
27	Can-ti che scal-dan la vi-ta.	8	Ottonario rhythmic accents on the 3d and 7th syllables	Apocope Anaphora Metaphor
28	E le Pa-ro-le scor-ro-no	8	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Repetition Alliteration sound /r/
29	e io scor-ro con lo-ro	7	Settenario-iambic meter/alexandrine	Deixis

FIGURE 4: Review schema of Elisa Carlotti's *Il fiume delle parole*

This text is particularly rich in rhetorical figures. For instance in verse lines 11, 12, 13, 16, and 17 we have enjambment; internal rhymes, and alliteration in 1, 5, 7, 8, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26 and 28; there is an anaphora in verse lines 21 and 26, and synaesthesia in verse lines 5, 14, 18, 25, and 27. But also rhythmic figures

characterize this poem: apocope in verse line 27; systole in verse line 19; syncope verse in line 16; synæresis in verse lines 2 and 10.

Owing to its metric, this poem calls to be recited out loud and not to be read silently while scrolling the words on the web page, when controlling the text is the most important action the reader needs to do. Like this, the reader cannot enjoy the musicality, the rhythm of the text. The poem seems to suggest that with the electronic medium the pleasure of reading is somehow lost. The reader is too concentrate in interacting with the text (the two huge arrows can be read as a parody of this control) that she lost the real “contact” with the poetic text – based on metric, rhythm, rhetorical figures, and so on. *Il fiume delle parole* realizes what Philippe Bootz calls the aesthetic of frustration⁶ (see also chapters 5 and 7). In chapter 5 we saw how this aesthetic of frustration is concerned with the text regarding its content, here this aesthetic play is more concerned with the text’s form: because of the concentration on the function of the text the reader can at times be unable to appreciate the text as far as its style and content are concerned.

2. Daniela Calisi and the “Text’s Behaviour over Time”

Stillicidio is composed of graphic text only and it requires reader interaction. No year of publication is provided for this work. On her site “Content(o) design” the author describes her poetry as works that investigate the “text’s behaviour and its change over time”⁷ (see chapter 3).

2.1 Daniela Calisi’s *Stillicidio*

Daniela Calisi, *Stillicidio*, at:
<http://www.contentodesign.org/00it/testi/tempo1.swf>

⁶ Philippe Bootz, “Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms”, in *New Media Poetry and Poetics*, Special Issue, Leonardo Electronic Almanac Vol 14, No. 5 – 6, 2006, accessible online at: http://leoalmanac.org/journal/vol_14/lea_v14_n05-06/pbootz.asp (accessed, September 21 2010).

⁷ Daniela Calisi, “Content(o) design”, accessible online at: <http://www.contentodesign.it/> (accessed, February 22 2005).

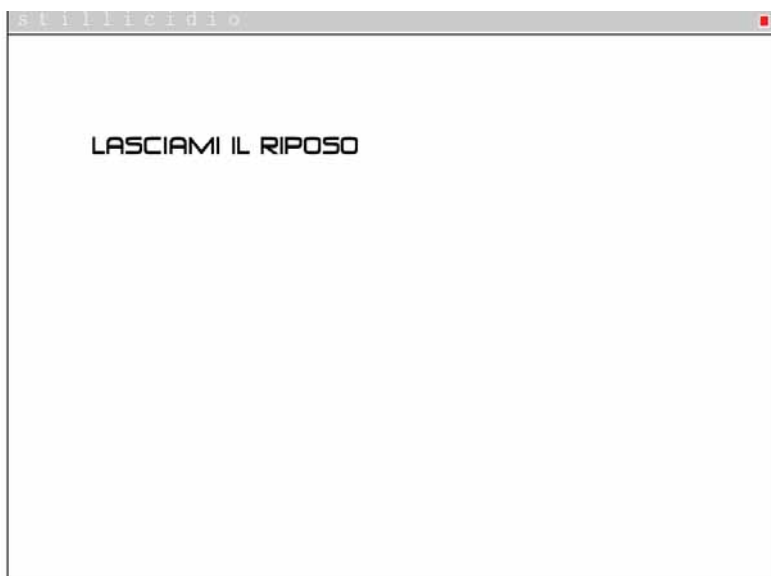


FIGURE 5: Daniela Calisis, *Stillicidio* – opening page

*Stillicidio*⁸ opens in a pop-up window by clicking on a link labelled “Stillicidio” on the main web page. In the beginning the pop-up window contains the title (which is static) on the top left of the page (see figure 5) and an animated verse line – the verse line oscillates on the white web page. By passing the cursor over the verse line the other verse lines will appear. These will appear simultaneously if the reader moves the mouse very fast over the other verse lines that, meanwhile, are appearing on the screen, or they will appear one by one if the reader passes the pointer slowly over the words. This second scenario is more simple to be activated⁹. Each verse line has its own time in which it is shown. Particularly the 2nd verse line is the only one that appears in two pieces: first two syntagms and then the other two. Verse line 4 can start to appear before verse line 3 has finished to be settled down on the page, giving a double direction path to the reading-practice.

⁸ Even though there is no year of publication for this text, this is a second version of it, in fact the previous one – which has existed until around 2008 – worked slightly differently (see note five).

⁹ In a previous version of the poem, the text appeared all together and depending on the velocity in passing the slider on the words the text would appear slower or faster.

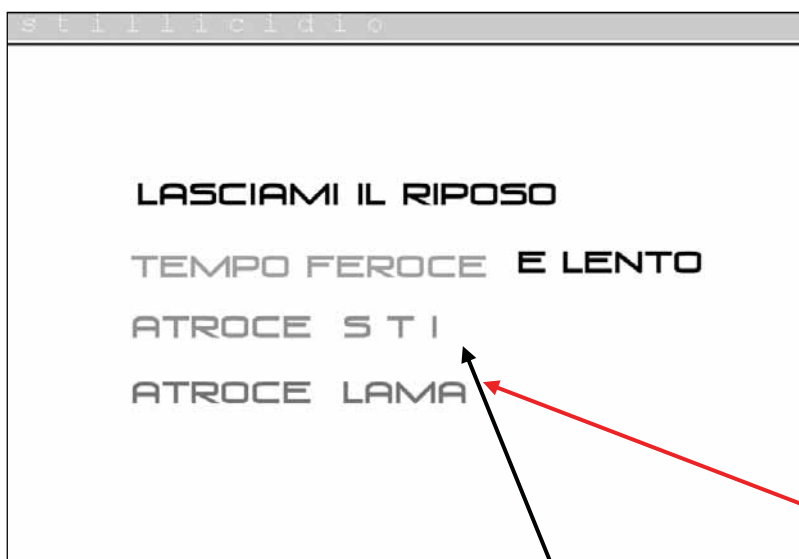
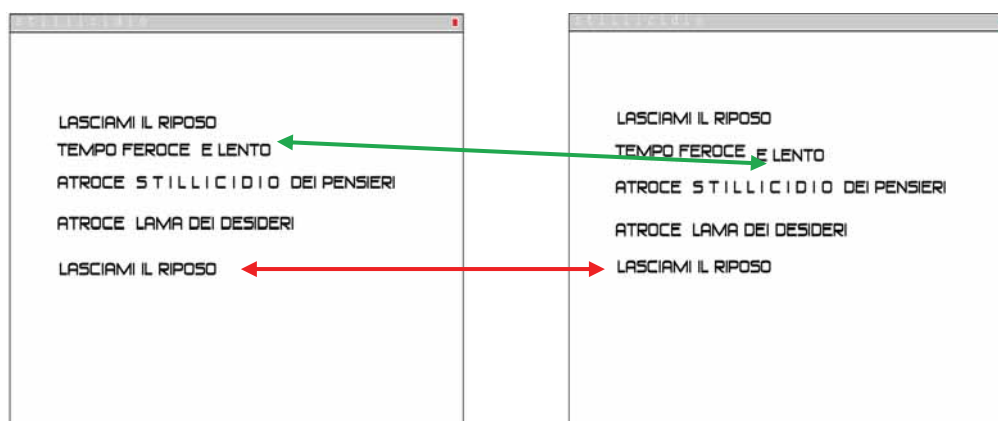


FIGURE 6: Daniela Calisi, *Stillicidio* – verse line 3 still has to appear completely while verse line 4 has already started to appear

The reading practice, however, is still prosaic, since the words are coming on the page in a linear way. The potential of the idea of a multilinear reading in the digital environment is just suggested by verse line 4. How the last verse line is more complicated, the reader needs to pass the pointer over the words in order to make it appear.

The poem is made of 5 verse lines, none of which are ever static. The lines keep on moving even when the poem is (re)composed on the web page: they move up and down on the page but with different motions and rhythms. They have an inner time for their animations, but this inner time does not affect the reading practice, since the motion of the text is very slow and the poem is already composited on the page. It was up to the reader – more or less consciously – to choose the time in which the poem showed up on the page.



FIGURES 7 and 8: Daniela Calisi, *Stillicidio* – words' positions: "e lento" and "lasciami il riposo"

Once on the page, the reader can still interact with the text. By passing the cursor over any verse line she makes them fade out and in again, it depends on the velocity she moves the cursor – they disappear for few instants.

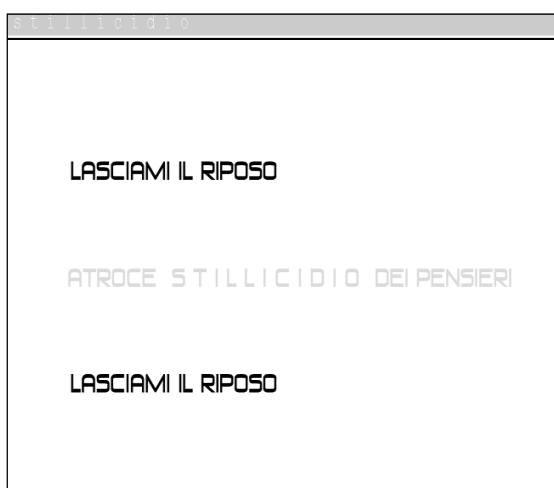


FIGURE 9: Danilea Calisi, *Stillicidio* – verse lines 2 and 4 missing

The poem – written in black capital letters – is in free verses and it goes thus:

Lasciami il riposo
 Tempo feroce e lento
 Atroce stillicidio dei pensieri
 Atroce lama dei desideri
 Lasciami il riposo¹⁰

The slow time given to the text reflects the “tempo lento” (slow time) described in the text. This metatextual function however is the opposite to the synaesthesia that first defines the tempo: “tempo feroce” (fierce time). As said the 2nd verse line is the only one that appears in two parts: first two syntagms and then the other two, thus first “tempo feroce” and then “e lento” (see figures 10 and 11).

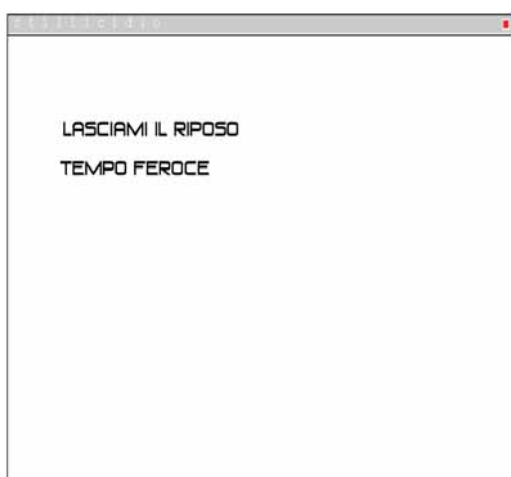


FIGURE 10: Daniela Calisi, *Stillicidio*

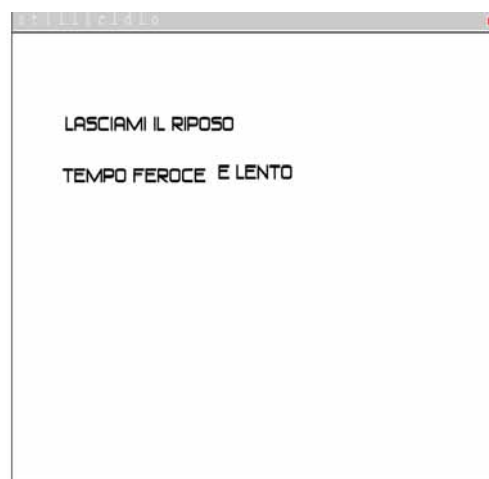


FIGURE 11: Daniela Calisi, *Stillicidio*

¹⁰ “Let me rest my bones/ fierce and slow time/ atrocious *stillicide* of thoughts/atrocious blade of desire/ let me rest my bones”.

The composition opens and closes with the same verse line: “lasciami il riposo” (let me rest my bones) a kind of plea more than an order even if the verb is in the imperative mood that the poet addresses to the “tempo”. The anaphora in the 4th verse line marks the repetitive construction of the poem, which is also emphasized by the constant and repetitive movement of the words. It as if the reader is cradled and hypnotized by the words’ motions. The rhyme in verse lines 3 and 4 links these two verse lines, already connected by the anaphora. Verse line two is separated from the rest of the poem since it is the only one that does not contain any repletion and it is the only one that appear in two different moments – the reader needs to keep on moving the slider to make the words appear. The time is fierce and slow, but it is also the *stillicide* of thoughts. *Stillicide* has two meanings in the Italian language (as in English): the first meaning is “a continual falling or succession of drops” – *stillicide* derives from Latin *stillicidium* composed by *stilla* meaning “a drop” and *cadere* meaning “to fall”. The figurative meaning is “disturbing and unnerving persistence”. The word “*stillicidio*” is a break in the continuum of the text, the different way in which the syllables are place at a distance from one another puts forward what Jim Rosemberg calls the prosody of the *space*¹¹ (see chapter 2). The electronic author can easily manipulate the digital space and rearrange lexias, syntagms and morphemes in it. By playing on the spacing of the letters, the text emphasises this syntagm which already occupies the central place of the composition and which is also the poem’s title.

3. Robert Kendall’s *Faith*: Construction of a Meaning, Deconstruction of Words

Faith by Robert Kendall was first published in the fourth volume of the electronic review “Cauldron & Net” in 2002 and then republished in *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume I* in 2006.

According to our typology, this is a hybrid e-poem because it is composed of sequences with an inner clock and also of links. Even though it needs the interaction of a reader it can be considered as a read-only texts” since the reader interaction is limited to a simple click in the block of text predetermined for it.

¹¹ Jim Rosenberg, *A Prosody of Space / Non-Linear Time*, in *Post-modern Culture*, Volume 10, Number 3, May 2000, accessible online at: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/v010/10.3rosenberg.html>, (accessed, February 1 2011).

3.1 Robert Kendall's *Faith*

Robert Kendall, *Faith* 2002,
http://www.studiocleo.com/cauldron/volume4/confluence/kendall/title_page.htm
 at: or at:
http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/kendall_faith.html



FIGURE 12: Robert Kendall, *Faith* – the cover of the e-poem

Kendall describes his text as:

a kinetic poem that reveals itself in five successive states. Each new state is overlaid onto the previous one, incorporating the old text into the new. Each new state absorbs the previous one while at the same time engaging in an argument with it. The gradual textual unfolding is choreographed to music.¹²

This e-poem is a perfect example of how words in electronic writing can easily assume a visual value; moreover, in this text, we can find all three levels of entax:

- Micro-entax (morphology), which deals with the morpheme;
- Meso-entax (semantic) which deals with the lexeme;
- Macro-entax (pragmatic) which deals with the sentence in its context.

There are two versions of *Faith*: one with music, the other one without music; I have chosen to analyse the one with music. Except for the music, however, the two poems are exactly the same.

The text is a sequence into which some pauses have been introduced. The

¹² Robert Kendall, *Faith*, 2002 in Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, Stephanie Strickland (eds.), *The Electronic Literature Collection*, Vol. 1, October 2006, accessible online at: http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/kendall_faith.html (accessed, November 21 2007).

sequence, we find, is divided into five other subsequences; inside these subsequences the reading process advances automatically. Between one subsequence and the next there is a link which allows the reader to continue reading. Each link is annotated with a connected syntagm. The subsequences, moreover, are made of blocks of text that appear and disappear at different times and with differing movements, all accompanied by colours and onomatopoeic sounds that refer to the movements. This dynamism helps generate associations between words that would ordinarily be more loosely connected.

Every subsequence differs from the others by the way in which the text in the window appears (and within each subsequence, some textual segments differ from others by the various types of movement that they perform). The first subsequence, for instance, contains the word “Faith”, which is also the title of the e-poem, it is written in orange gothic-like type.

Then the word “logic” begins to fall from above and it hits and bounces off of “Faith”, after which “logic” dissolves, this is all accompanied by thin metallic chimes which increase in tone with the number of times that the word falls. Concerning proportion and scale, “logic” is smaller than “Faith”, but both “Faith” and “logic” do not change in size or dimension during the entire sequence. On the contrary, the others words “can't”, “bend”, “this”, appear with greater size and, while rotating, they shrink progressively until they are positioned at the right spot on the page. The first sub-poem is thus composed: “Faith. Logic can't bend this. I know...”.



FIGURE 13: Robert Kendall, *Faith* – first sub-sequence

This change of the size of the words can be seen as a poetic figure, as a “contraction”, since this modification underlines that “Faith” and “logic” are the key-words of the sequence, and, probably, of the text.

During the second subsequence new words appear and join the previous ones, modifying and developing the meaning of the text. In this subsequence the words slide horizontally until they stop at the required point in the window, their dimensions remain always the same and the sounds that

accompany their appearance become more harmonious and amplified. Every subsequence is characterized by a particular sound (xylophone, perhaps, in the first subsequence, a harp in the second one).

Kendall creates a text which is based on three simultaneous processes: combining and disposing letters/words on the space, adding new letters to create new words and new meanings. This addition/subtraction of letters makes new relations between words, giving the text other meanings. We have two typologies of poetic figures related to the construction of the meaning and to the de/construction of the words. Some words can be added to a phrase like “the mind press” and “around the” which modify “can’t bend this” (1st subsequence) into “can’t the mind press around the bend” (2nd subsequence), transforming a verb into a noun. But also single letter can emerge and “I edge” (2nd subsequence) becomes “I hedge” (3rd subsequence). This poetic figure can be called an “emergence/eclipse” figure since it changes the meaning of the word. This emergence/eclipse is concerned with the micro-entax because it deals with the morpheme.



“Edge” is transformed in “hedge” in the third sub-sequence. It is an example of micro-entax

The syntagm “bend” was a verb in the first subsequence and here is a nominal syntagm. It is an example of meso-entax

FIGURE 14: Robert Kendall, *Faith* – second sub-sequence



“Emergence/eclipse” figure: the meaning of the word is changed

FIGURE 15: Robert Kendall, *Faith* – third sub-sequence

Carrying on with the second subsequence, the harp sounds become more pleasant, but the sequence is left with an unfinished feeling that is also suggested by the graphic text:

Faith. The edge logic out. Can't then mind press on around the bend to consummate this vision of the deep 'or'? Maybe. But...

Also the colours differ between one subsequence and another, so that the blocks of text that appear in each subsequence are distinguished from those of the previous subsequences and the successive ones.

As far as the colours in the first subsequence all the words are orange, in the second all red, a complementary colour of orange. The colours of the words in the following subsequences are brown and black. Each time the colours are more and more intense, and owing to the colour-gradient they communicate, at the same time, continuity and emotive growth until we arrive at black, the last one on the colour scale.

During the development of every subsequence, associations between the segments, movements and sounds are forged – for example, in the third subsequence, the syntagms “red”, “winking” and “neon” flash in the upper part of the window just like neon-lights. The visual part, therefore, underlines the metaphor of the text (red, winking, neon), emphasizing it, maybe to indicate the logical inability to achieve understanding of all phenomena. In the fourth subsequence we have another example: the words “off the rocker (yippee!)” after having appeared in a horizontal position slips, simulating a fall. Once again, therefore, the literal meaning of words is represented graphically and is emphasized by the musical foundation (moreover “off the rocker (yippee!)” reminds one of the slang expression “off one's rocker”). The text does what it is telling. According to Alexandra Saemmer this redundant figure can be called “ciné-gramme” (“kine-scope”). So we can say that until now certain movements made by the words exemplify visually the linguistic meaning thanks to the *kinescopic* meso-entax.

All the verbs that indicate movement, after having appeared, are duplicated into two identical segments, then they take on a less defined colour, but one is raised and it slides away horizontally, while the other remains like a pale simulacrum in the same position.

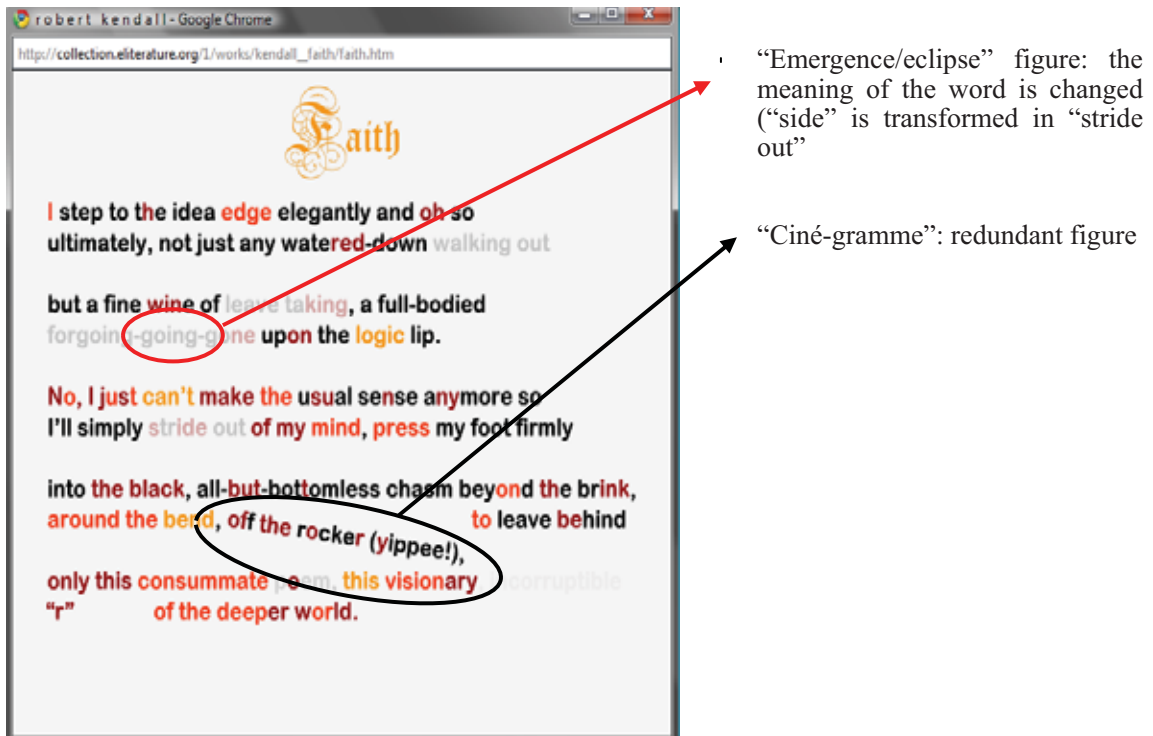


FIGURE 16: Robert Kendall, *Faith* – fourth subsequent

Finally, from the left lower corner appears a syntagm “Leap” (in black), which, as has happened to all the verbs that indicate movement, is duplicated. One of the identical segments occupies the whole page. It is a visual invitation to the reader to “leap now”. The motion of the word gives it a second meaning: the literary meaning: “to leap” and the *temporal* meaning – *hic et nunc* – which suggests to the reader “to leap now”. This double meaning is a kinetic allegory which refers to the macro-entax as we will see soon.

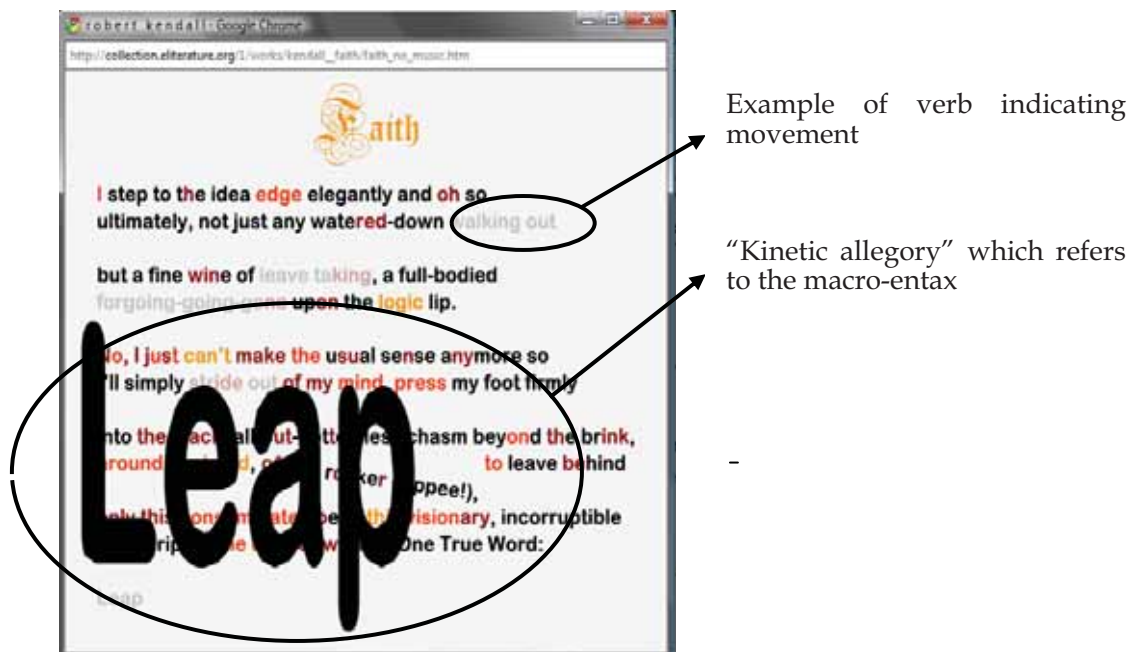


FIGURE 17: Robert Kendall, *Faith* – the end of the fourth subsequent

In the last subsequence the reader can finally understand the substantial ambiguity of the poetry: the graphical animation means exactly the contrary of what the text asserts. The text says: “just to sum up: Faith”, while the graphical animation suggests another meaning: i.e. that everything ends, and faith, too.

Regarding entax we saw that all three levels of entax are used. Concerning micro-entax, this text plays with morphemes by assembling new words. With meso-entax it focuses on lexemes: “logic” being smaller than “Faith”. Finally, with macro-entax it plays with the double meaning of words, so for example the verb “leap” recreates the idea of the movement, just like the other verbs of movement, but, moreover it suggests to the reader that it is necessary “to jump now” to advance in her reading since it becomes bigger until it occupies the whole page.



FIGURE 18: Robert Kendall's *Faith* – the end of the poem

This poetry creates a new entax that breaks the regular grouping of textual segments, thus altering the order of the verse lines on the page, transforming the regularity of the characters, and so offering a pragmatic sense to the letter.

4. Images as Links: *Fallow* by Rebecca Givens and Monica Ong

Fallow is a collaboration between poet Rebecca Givens and new-media artist Monica Ong. Published in *Born Magazine* in 2007, this project reinterprets a quite common form of electronic poetry integrating text with images and sound, even though in this case the pictures are original photography, found objects and vintage images.

This e-poem is a hybrid-based e-text since it is built from sequence-based expression forms, connected to one another by links, with a part built from

segments. In this text, however, links are not made of words, as they usually are in hypertexts, but of images.

As for the reading experience, *Fallow* demands of the reader that she interacts with it, otherwise it will just remain “virtual”, and to show a bit of curiosity, to leaf through it. It presents some of the characteristics of the explorative experience of the reading practice, but it is still mostly a “read-only text”.

4.1 Rebecca Givens’ and Monica Ong’s *Fallow*

Rebecca Givens and Monica Ong, *Fallow*, 2007, at:

<http://www.bornmagazine.org/projects/fallow/>

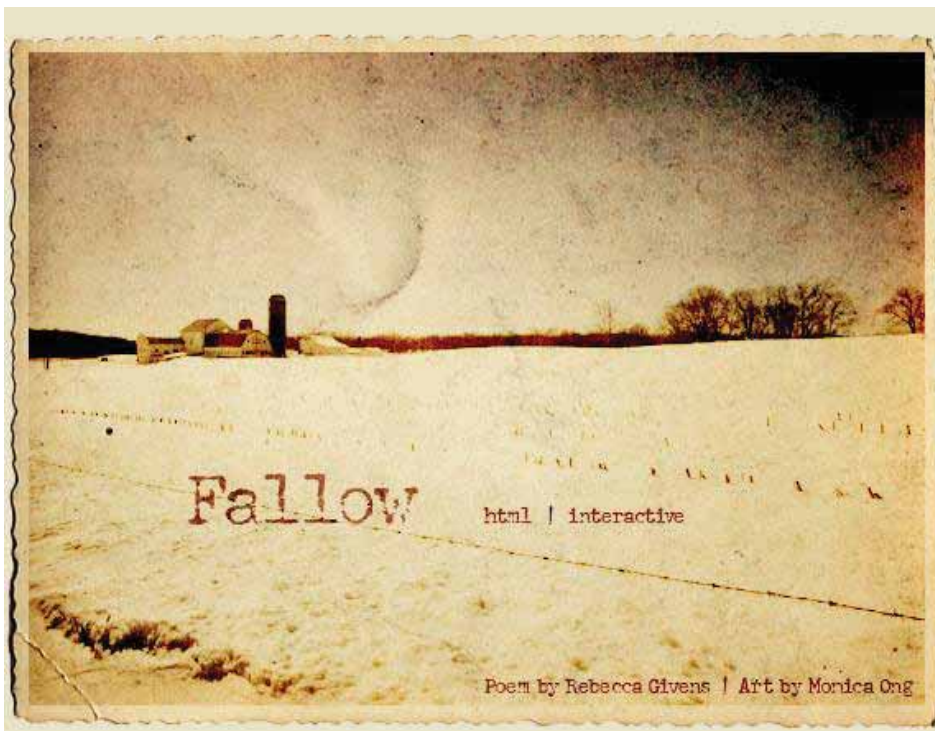


FIGURE 19: Rebecca Givens and Monica Ong, *Fallow* – the cover

The poem is composed of 5 stanzas, each of them made of 4 verse lines. Actually, in the interactive version (we are referring here to the text only version, which is accessible as well) the division of the text is a bit more complicated, anyway I will refer to this division while analysing the e-poem.

and this is your allotment of freedom
 sitting on the porch in the sun
 black fog this morning and everywhere
 a knife of gold

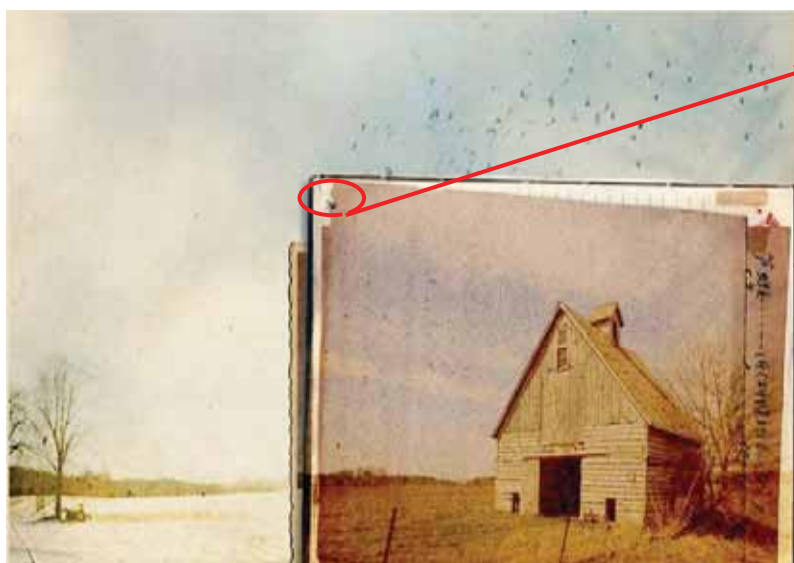
poor farm is the curse of a farmer
 dead logs filled to the brim

a tough revolt and everyone
filed along

in the sunlight it was another day
everyone said stop writing to him
the cost is too much and the clear eye
sees it tomorrow
go suffer the cattle of few wings
it was a fine prince caught up with them
if a prince really he could have
found them

not been crushed with the ceremonies
a rose two roses and the real kid
bleats out a name running
from the pen

The poem starts with a conjunction “and”. There are neither capital letters nor punctuation. It seems as a fragment of some other texts, a story which has already started and which will not finish in the space of this text. The text opens with an image, which contains within it another image and the first verse line to the left: “and this is your allotment of freedom” after some seconds, another verse line appears: “sitting on the porch in the sun”. Both verse lines disappear after a few seconds, only a picture of a hayloft remains on the screen. It is contained within another picture of an arid countryside and hides another image, probably a photograph, of which only the borders are visible to the reader. As soon as the first verse line appears the sounds of birds twittering, a dog barking, and another dog barking back in the distance start. On the one hand these sounds contrast with the absolute silence that surrounds the countryside, which suggests feelings of loneliness and solitude and on the other they contribute together with the images to create the idea of an isolated countryside in the reader’s mind. The sounds – constantly the same – will be repeated throughout the whole text.



The small birds: the
image-link (the whole
image acts as a link)

FIGURE 20: Rebecca Givens and Monica Ong, *Fallow* – first part

Meanwhile the sequence is still running on, the text invites the reader to interact with it: from a corner of the second image a small black bird appears; it moves, it is it only *thing* to move: a clear invitation to the reader to try clicking on it (see figure 20). As soon as the small bird appears in fact the picture becomes draggable. The reader can either wait for the verse lines to disappear on the left side of the screen and then touch the picture, or immediately touch the picture and drag it around. The next sequence is the same in both cases, but if the reader drags the picture she will see it vanishing under her touch. This image is a sequence – with an inner clock – that works also as a link, bringing the reader to the next step of the text.

At this point the verse lines are still appearing before the reader in a linear and sequential way, but by touching the picture straight away the reader alters the order of the verse lines, for instance dragging out the image she can read “and this is your allotment of freedom/ a knife of gold”. The aesthetic result is a shorter and wilder text, the poetic atmosphere created by “sitting on the porch in the sun” like this is lost.

After clicking on or dragging the image, the birds multiply and they fill it, simultaneously another verse line appears: “black fog this morning and everywhere”. This is a “sporulation” figure according to Saemmer¹³, since this “figure” anticipates and concludes the meaning of the verse line.

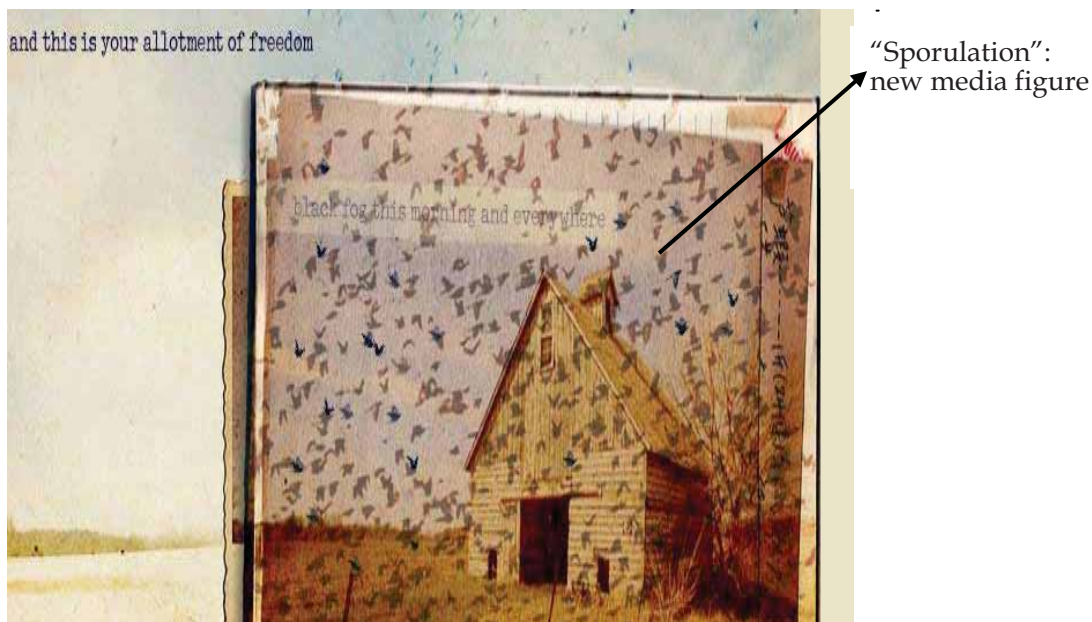


FIGURE 21: Rebecca Givens and Monica Ong, *Fallow*

When the “sporulation” ends, and the image vanishes a small shining sun appears. The sun suggests that the second part is over; in fact the sun is a link. The small sun is just on the border of the *content/contained* image. This link is a *mise en abyme* of the narration process, it is a meta-link, as the text and the images themselves suggest to us. The verse line is as follows: “knife off gold has”, and now the sun looks like a small blade which seems to slice the screen

¹³ Alexandra Saemmer, “Some stylistic devices on media interface *op. cit.*..

in the direction of the reader. It is a performative link – links are performative according to Adrian Miles¹⁴ – but it is also a new-media figure, an “interfacial retroprojection”¹⁵ since the interactive gesture, the activatable media content and the activated media content get into metaphorical relationships. The sun is a sort of command to the reader; it invites the reader to go through the text, to go into it physically.

The second part of the text is self-directing. If in the first part – which is divided into two sub-parts – the reading time can be altered by the reader (who is able to activate the second sub-part before the first one is completely ended), the second part is a pure sequence with an inner clock and with no possibilities of interaction.

The sequence starts with an image rising up, it is an envelope, the main image containing other images – the reader can hypothesize that the last image she saw and the one she is seeing now are pictures contained within the envelope. Over on the left a verse line anticipates the desolation of the images, “poor farm is the curse of a farmer”, and then two pictures become visible. The first one shows tree trunks piled up probably for the winter, and the verse line says “dead logs filled to the brim”; the second picture highlights the desolation and the loneliness of the place: the picture shows two men on their knees working an arid and infertile field. The images reinforce the meaning of the verse lines. Then, once again, a link, this time in the form of a red flower, shows up. It is the contact point between the text and its reader. This link has a metaphorical value. It is the only vivid colour on the screen, the only sign of life in a burnt place, the only hope for the future, the only way to keep on telling a story, since it is the only interactive point on the screen.

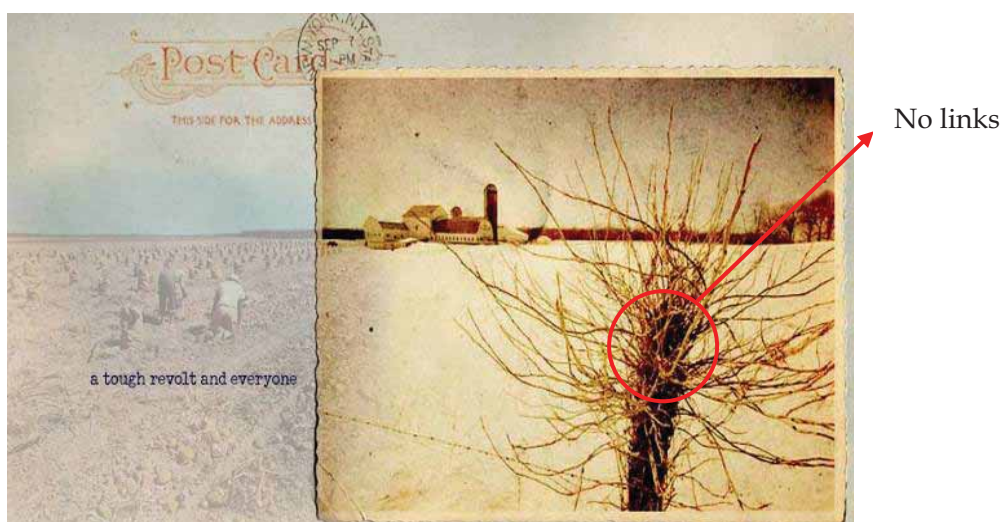


FIGURE 22: Rebecca Givens and Monica Ong, *Fallow* – an image shown during this sequence

¹⁴ Adrian Miles, “A Web is not a Page”, 2001, accessible online at: <http://cs.art.rmit.edu/hyperweb> (accessed, October 23 2007).

¹⁵ Alexandra Saemmer, “Some stylistic devices on media interface”, *op. cit.*



FIGURE 23: Rebecca Givens and Monica Ong, *Fallow* - the end of the second part

The following part requires the interaction of the reader. This part of the text is built from segments, in fact (for the very first time) the reading time is decided by the reader herself that (again for the first time) is allowed to re-read the different verse lines and to see the images again. Three segments of texts are displayed one after the other one, when the reader touches the three different images. In this case there is no correspondence between the verse line of the poem and the e-poem, the last two verse lines appear together: “in the sunlight it was/another day/everyone said stop writing to him/the cost is too much and the clear eye/sees it tomorrow”.

The reader can read this part of the text as many times as she wants in a cyclical and repetitive way. This repetition constructs a new-media figure that Saemmer defines as “interfacial involution” since the interactive gesture invariably displays the same media contents. The reader goes round in circles unless she decides to click on the small piece of paper on the right bottom of the page. Actually, she has to touch the images at least three times in order to make the link appear – but she has to be careful because if she moves the mouse too quickly she will not be able to make the link come out. The reader is participating in a cyclical reading practice just when the text says: “everyone said stop writing to him”. The creative process seems to be in opposition with the text. This could be defined as an extension of Saemmer’s “interfacial antagonism”. The interactive gesture provokes the emergence of a type of content that is contrary to the content brought about by the activatable media.

This part of the text is also interesting because other fragments of writing join the main poem. These fragments of text are handwritten, making the content of the text and of the envelope more personal. They do not belong to Given’s poem, but they are parts of the e-poem, and even though they are difficult to read they suggest to the reader other possible stories. The envelope – containing all these elements, all these pieces of stories – is a symbolic interface between the author(s) and the stories which are being told and also between the

author and the reader who is in primis the imaginary addressee of the envelope.

Also in this part of the text, images are contained within other images, but here the text is more complex. It is composed of different substrates: the images, the verse lines of the poem, the handwritten words, and even of stamps and mildew, in a space that is not at all empty, as it has sometimes been the case in the previous parts. Narratologically this is the "Spannung", this is the moment of highest tension, after that the story starts its epilogue.



FIGURE 24: Rebecca Givens and Monica Ong , *Fallow* – third and last image of the third part of the poem

Now there is no more links blinking at the reader, but scraps of paper emerging from a corner of the art-piece, like ancient memories. In one of the possible combinations a small postcard, contained within the large image, hides another postcard. However, to activate the link the main image (as shown below) is needed. By rolling over the image over the corner, a picture of a young man emerges and the last sequence of text starts.

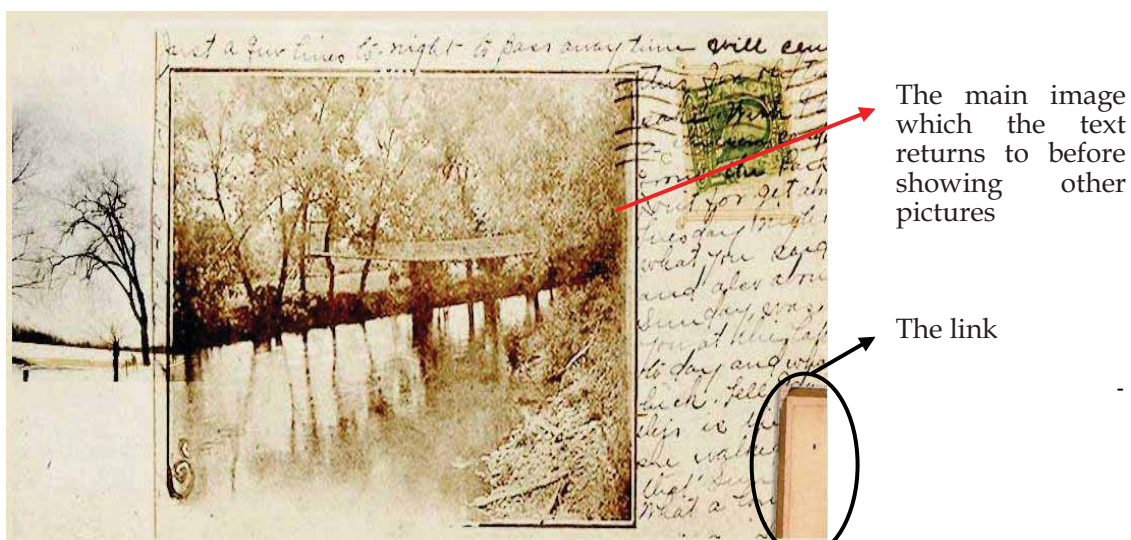


FIGURE 25: Rebecca Givens and Monica Ong , *Fallow* – third part of the text

Even in the other parts of the text the reader has found this stratification, but here the stratification is more evident: the main image now contains a picture of a young man (dressed according to early 20th century style) and over to the right there are other two images where only the margins are visible.

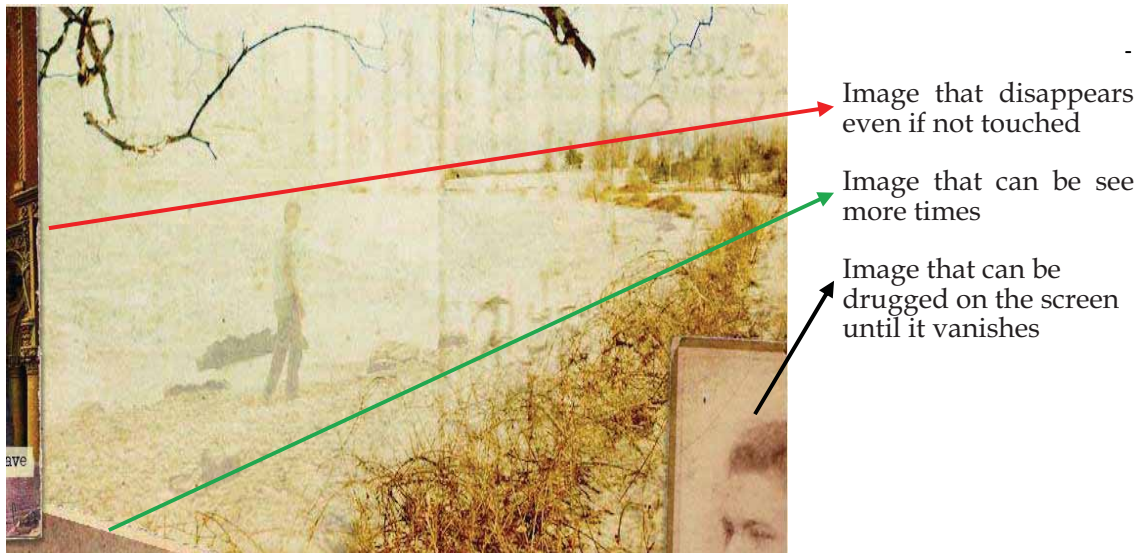


FIGURE 26: Rebecca Given and Monica Ong, *Fallow* - the fourth part

The image on the left represents people (probably celebrating something) who are also dressed according to the style of the beginning of the last century and it contains a verse line “if a prince really he could have found them”. The pronoun “them” appears also on the other picture, and the reader at one point reads “if a prince really he could have found them them”. The second “them” is redundant and underlines again the loneliness that images and sounds have narrated during the whole text. By dragging the picture of the young man on the right to the centre of the page, he appears to be looking at the image of a young modern man who seems to be walking (see figure 27), but that looks behind like perceiving the presence of the other man – maybe looking for his past. By moving the picture the reader can recreate other possible stories.

The picture at the bottom here is the final link, by touching it the text will end. This image is recursive, a very similar image has already appeared before, and it will appear in the main image for a few seconds: it is the image of an isolated factory. On this picture the last verse lines “not been crushed with the ceremonies/a rose/two roses/ and the real kid/bleats out a name running/from the pen” appear in sequential order. The e-poem ends with a postcard picture of a young man alone in a more than likely “deserted” seaside.



FIGURE 27: Rebecca Given and Monica Ong, *Fallow* – the fourth part

The poetic narration is delegated more to the images than to the words, which actually have a telegraphic style (and which remind one of telegraphic writing since sometimes they appear as dashes made by a telegraph). The narration continues thanks to the links that are made from images. The images produce figures that normally are created by language, we have talked about “sporulation” for instance. Even though the pictures of the a boy first and a young man later seem to suggest a linear evolution of time, the repetition of the same images or of very similar landscapes give the poem a cyclical sense, as if the story is repeated over and over again, and in fact once ended the e-poem can be launched again and again, to infinity.

5. The Interstices of the Writing Space: Zahra Safavian’s *the murmur of interstices*

Zahra Safavian’s *the murmur of interstices*¹⁶ is (following our typology) a hybrid electronic poetry example; it combines segments of texts, sequences, and requires some actions from the reader: the reader recombines the text by reading it.

¹⁶ Zahra Safavian, *Murmur of Interstice*, 2000, accessible online at: <http://iat.ubalt.edu/guests/murmur/> (accessed, December 7 2006).

5.1 Zahra Safavian's *the murmur of interstices*

Zahra Safavian, *the murmur of interstices*: 2000, at:
<http://www.poemsthatgo.com/gallery/fall2000/murmur/index.html>



FIGURE 28: Zahra Safavian, *the murmur of interstices* – title sequence

Upon going to the e-poem's location the poem starts automatically. It starts in sequential animation mode, what we are calling sequence-based. The reader reads the text, “the murmur of interstices”, and then it vanishes. After this a subtitle (about which more later) and the reader realises that she is going to approach an old Persian poem – a very classic of Arab literature. Finally, three rows and three columns of images, nine in total, are displayed on the page, but the alluded to poem is not shown. In order to discover how the e-text works the reader needs a dollop of curiosity. Sometimes e-poems have a link to their instructions – how to read the text, how to interact with it – but *murmur* forces the reader to be curious, to be *attentive* to the mechanics of the text.

The e-poem is composed of text, images, and sound which change of their own accord and thanks to the reader's manipulation of the text. Nine *modules* (separated from one another) are before us. A music in the background hypnotizes the reader with its repetitive rhythm and gives her another small suggestion about the content of the poem.

Each of the nine modules is made up of a visible iconic sequence and segment of text (syntagm), and a hidden iconic sequence and syntagm: by clicking on the module the other combination of image and word will appear. Finally, every module is also contains sound which, however, needs to be activated by combining two modules as we will see later. By itself each module fluctuates between certain image sequences and written text. On clicking each module, different sequences and syntagm appears.



FIGURE 29: Zahra Safavian, *the murmur of interstices* – combination given

The lexia are linked to each other by some sort of metaphoric, metonymic, contiguity/opposition meaning. For instance, the hidden part of the first module “winter”, which is “shadow”, suggests a metaphoric relation between the two syntagms and between the syntagms and the images: the winter is the darkest season, the one with less light, and the images are made of dark colours. The image that contains the syntagm “winter” reproduces a forest that a ray of light tries to penetrate and water where the ray reflects off a stone in the water; the image containing “shadow” represents, clearly, the shadow of two hands and the shadow of a hill reflected most probably on a lake. Contiguity and opposition link the first module “winter” with the fourth module “storm” (the one is just below the “winter”): so we can have ‘winter and storm’ or ‘winter versus summer’; or ‘shadow and storm’, or ‘shadow and summer’. Other modules can be related by the idea of “liquid”. The sixth module “blood” hides the syntagms “honey” and the ninth module (which is just below the sixth) is composed by “lake” and “milk”. Again four combinations are possible: ‘blood and lake’, ‘blood and milk’, ‘honey and lake’, and ‘honey and milk’, passing from a chilling association of ideas ‘blood and lake’ (a lake of blood) to a sweet representation of breakfast and family ‘honey and milk’. The page, therefore, is never static but it is transformed constantly under the eyes of the reader: thanks to her interaction with the text but also automatically.

Between the nine modules, twelve spaces exist, apparently empty, the so-called interstices, in which there are twelve points of interaction. Upon acting

on the interstices there appears, at the bottom of the page, some text which is a product of the several possible combinations.



FIGURE 30: Zahra Safavian, *the murmur of interstices* – other possible combination

As for the textual pieces displayed at the bottom of the page of *murmur*, this is extracted from the poem *The Turn: Dance in Your Blood* by the Persian mystic Jalaluddin Rumi (XIII sec.) – as it is stated in the subtitle.

Here, on the web page, Rumi's poem is recomposed according to the point of interaction chosen by the reader. In fact, every single module is a carrier also of a segment of *Turn's* text, or better yet, of two segments of the poem, because as it has been said every module is composed of two iconic sequences and of two different segments. For example, if one clicks the interstice between the modules "winter" and "dream" a text composed of four line verses appears, that says:

Some nights stay up till down
as the moon sometimes does for the sun

A secret turning in us
makes the universe turn.

If instead one chooses, as interaction point, the interstice between "winter" and "dream" she will notice that a part of the text, the first two verse lines, remains the same, but the last two verse lines change, transforming the poetry from:

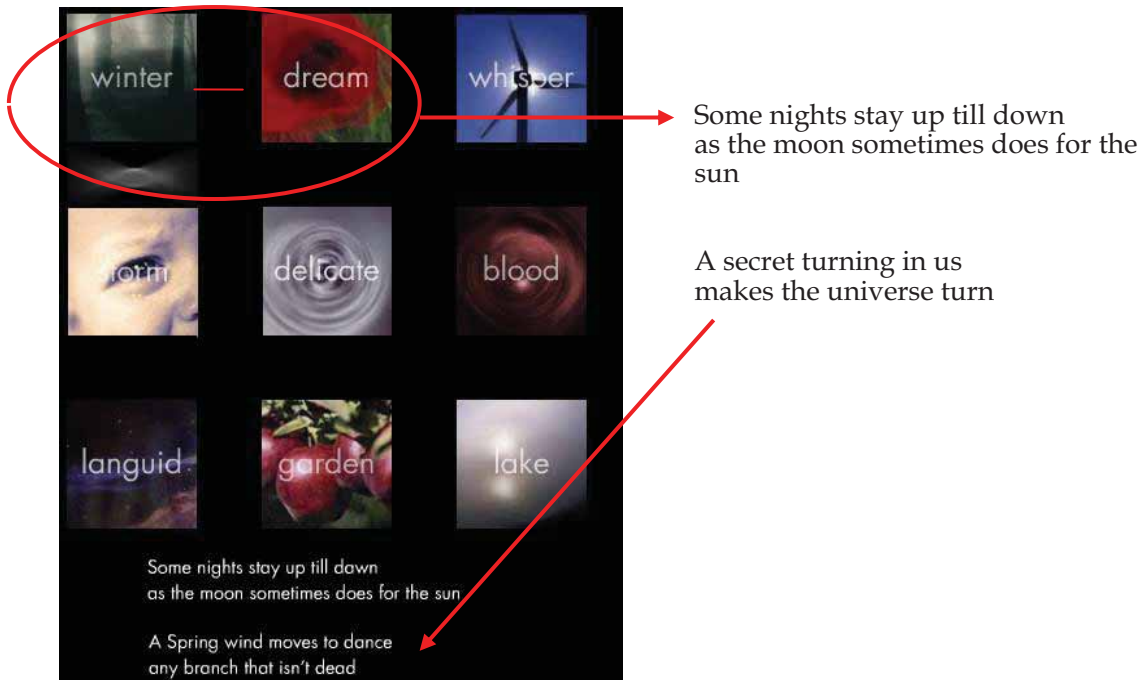


FIGURE 31: Z. Safavi, *the murmur*

to:

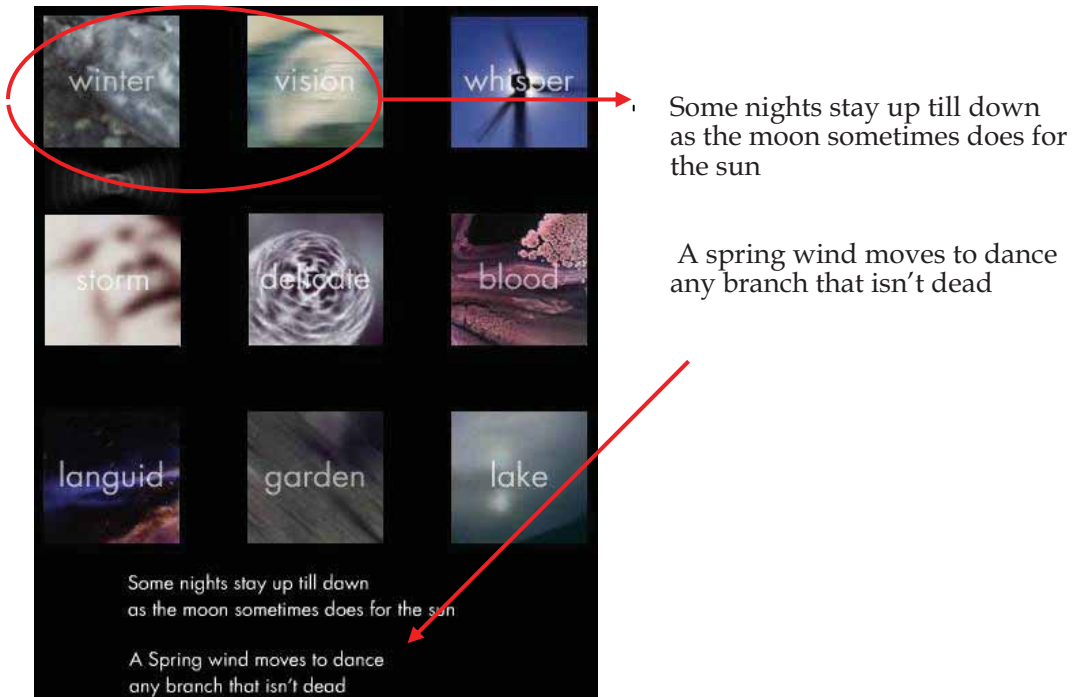


FIGURE 32: Z. Safavian, *the murmur*

Also with the combination between “winter” and “summer” (the reverse side of “storm as it were”) the first two verse lines remain the same but the final part changes – crossing the visible module with the hidden one:

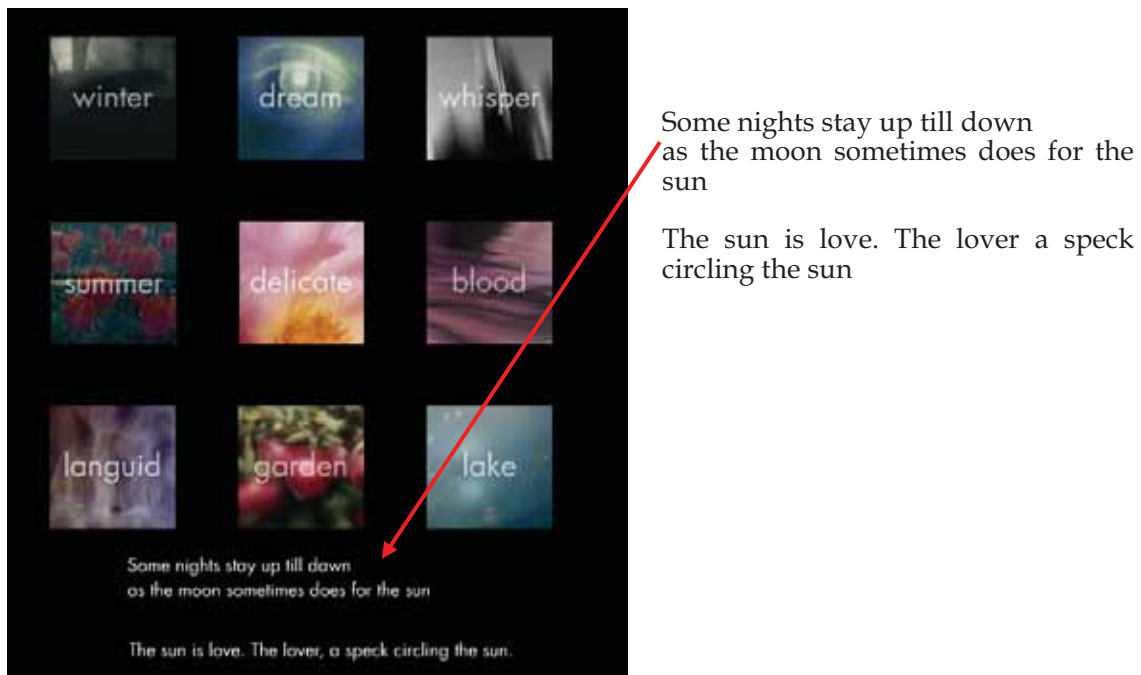


FIGURE 33: Zahra Safavian, *the murmur of the interstices*

The sound changes, too, according to the interstice that the reader decides to click on: the combination “winter-dream” makes a sound which reminds us of the sound of wind and the chirping of a night-bird; the combination “winter-storm” reminds us of the sound of wind and a noise like thunder. The first part of the sound remains the same, the second changes, as with the text.

The poetic text, therefore, is made and unmade according to the whims of the reader, who can choose to follow various paths of reading:

1. linear: from the right to the left, and from the top, from the first “line”, i.e. from the first three modules, to the bottom, maintaining or modifying the modules;
2. reverse: beginning from the end;
3. “zigzag”: in order to see which text is born through this game;

This text shows the set of possibilities given by the electronic texts to the reading practice.

Each single module is, as it has been said, a carrier of a visual sequence, a segment of text (a syntagm) and an audio-image, which are modified by the reader’s click. *murmur*, therefore, is a sort of combinatory text varying constantly; finding a singular, complete, non-modifiable sense is impossible: *Murmur* speaks to the reader from silence, from the apparently empty space of its interstices generating one’s own poetry; making, unmaking, remaking one’s own sense, getting lost in the labyrinth generated by writing, images and sounds, which, by their constant movement (and also thanks to the oriental music – simple and repetitive), try to hypnotize the reader. The readers will no longer uncover a particular sense, indeed she will abandon her senses because, as it is suggested by the text:

No more satisfying work
than work with no purpose¹⁷

and

no better love
than love with no objects¹⁸

No more a unified sense, no more a single and unique text, but a plurality of senses, paths, objects, sounds and names: “I have no name/for what circles so perfectly”¹⁹. This e-poem shows one of the characteristic of electronic poetry. Electronic poetry requires a close-reading to be understood, but it could be never exhaustive. The reading practice is unstable because the text is unstable, it changes, it is transformed, different explorations and combinations are possible. Every reader will peel back another layer of sense, a personal meaning which will enrich only her, differentiating every reader from the others: “you have said what you are/I am what I am”²⁰.

6. Generative Poem: Rui Torres’ *Poemas no meio do caminho*

Poemas no meio do caminho is a collaborative²¹ and generative work. In 2008 it won – ex aequo with Caitlin Fisher’s *Andromeda* – the 4th edition of the International Prize in Digital Literature: Ciutat de Vinaròs. It is a combinatory text, it continues the tradition started by Lutz’s *Stochastic Poems* (1959) and Balestrini’s *Tape Mark* (1961) and which was carried forward in Portugal particularly by Pedro Barbosa.

Poemas no meio do caminho is a quote of Dante’s *Inferno*:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita²².

but it can also be read as a metaphor “*poemas no meio do caminho da leitura*” (“poems midway upon the journey of reading”).

There are two versions of the text – two ways of reading it: horizontally and vertically. Both versions allow the reader to save her own textual production, and then to send that production to a weblog. Both versions are composed of eight texts. All eight parts of the vertical version will be analysed

¹⁷ The first two verse lines from the combination of “garden” and “lake”.

¹⁸ The first two verse lines from the combination of “bitter” and “lake”.

¹⁹ The last two verse lines from the combination of “garden” and “lake”.

²⁰ The last two verse lines from the combination of “bitter” and “milk”.

²¹ Nuno F. Ferreira (programmer), Luís Aly (audio), Nuno M. Cardoso (voice), Luís Carlos Petry (images in the horizontal version).

²² “MIDWAY upon the journey of our life/I found myself within a forest dark,/For the pathway straight ahead had been lost”.

below (section 6.1); in section 6.2 the first text will be re-analysed in its horizontal version²³.

6.1 Rui Torres' *Poemas no meio do caminho* – vertical version

Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho*, 2009, at: http://www.telepoesis.net/caminho/caminho_index.html

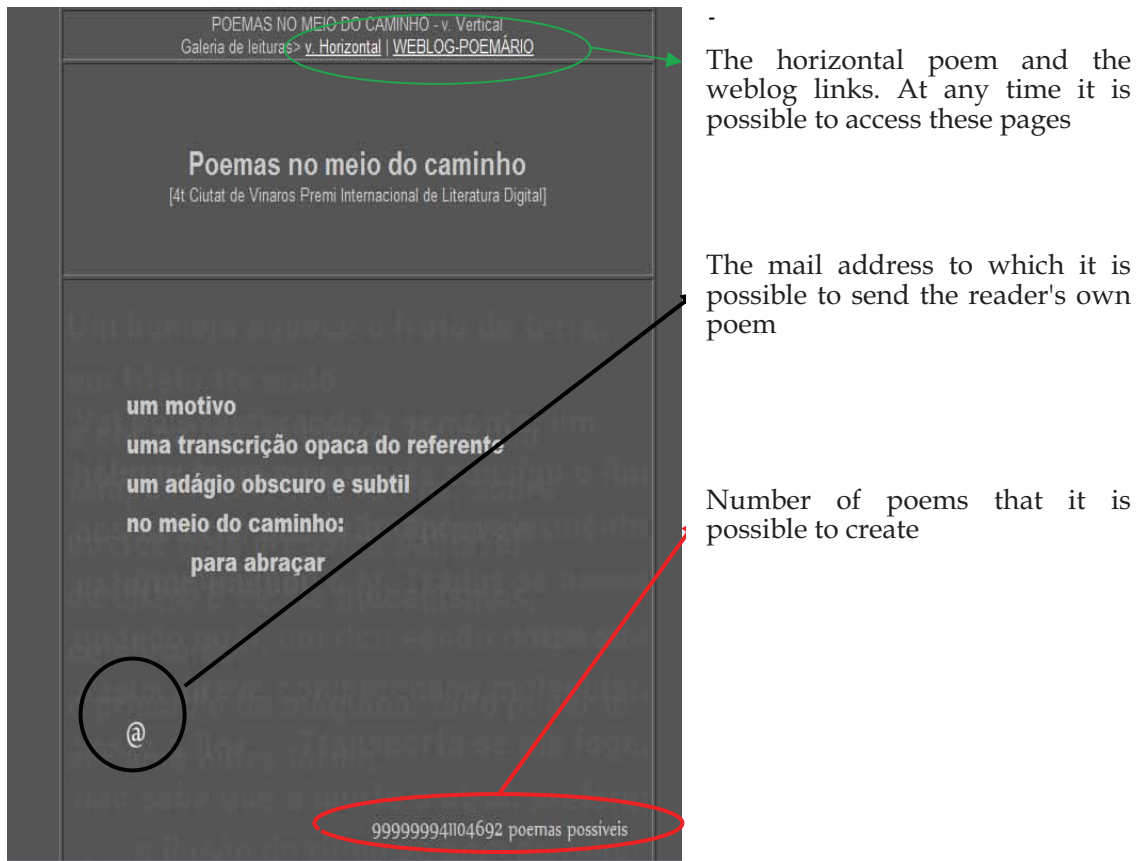
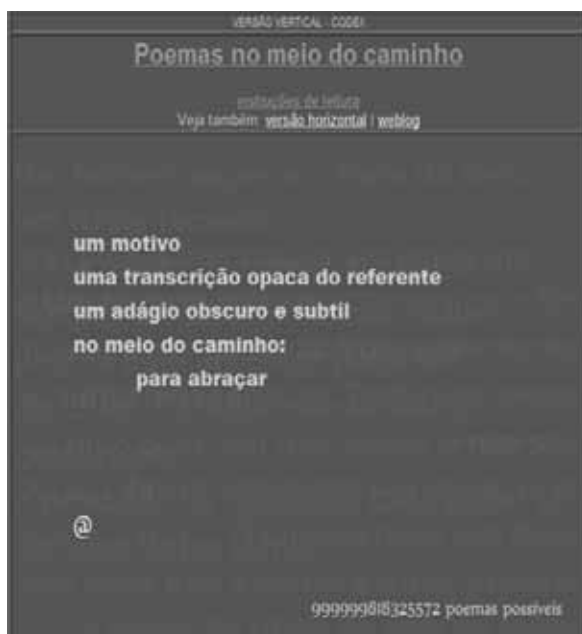


FIGURE 34: Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho* – the beginning of the opening page

In the vertical version eight texts appear on the page separately and a voice recites a ninth. The poems are written in free verses and they are composed of differing number of verse lines (from 5 to 7 lines each). In the background some words are readable. The words belong to the text which is in the foreground. At the end of all the poems, a number indicates the possible texts that can be generated²⁴.

²³ The vertical version is according to our typology a segment-based e-poem, but since it is possible at any time to switch to the horizontal version, I decided to categorize it as an hybrid poem that presents a part of its form as segment-based.

²⁴ "A reason/a transcript of the opaque referent/an obscure and subtle adage/ midway upon the journey:/to hold".



um motivo
 uma transcrição opaca do
 referente
 um adágio obscuro e subtil
 no meio do caminho:
 para abraçar

FIGURE 35: R. Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho* – first text

The syntactic structure of all the text can partially be modified by the reader. In the first text the substantives (6 in total: 5 of male gender, “motive, adágio, referente, meio, caminho”; 1 of female gender “transcrição”), the adjectives (3 in total: 2 of male gender, “obscuro, subtil”; 1 of female gender, “opaca”) and the verb (1 only: “abraçar”) can be altered by passing the cursor over each word; the invariable parts are the indefinite articles (the masculine article “um” – twice repeated – the female article “uma”), the conjunction “e” and the prepositions “do” and “para”. The first text the reader is presented with, the one the computer has selected for her, is a metaphoric text: “uma transcrição opaca do referente” let the reader imagine other possible reading paths that she can “abraçar” (“hold”).

The reader can reconfigure the text along the paradigmatic axis of language: so the reader selects and the text morphs/recombines. However, there are some “obligatory” options: the substantives in the first three verse lines can be modified according to a vast number of choices, but the two last substantives have but a few choices: “meio” gives rise to “lado” (“side”), “principio” (“beginning”), “fim” (“end”). By selecting the alternatives on the paradigmatic axis, the syntagms are related one to another.

“Caminho” gives four choices, and once selected “caminho” no longer appears as an available word. The alternatives are “percurso” (“path”), “texto” (“text”), “parágrafo” (“paragraph”), “programa” (“program”). Again the alternatives are in some way related to each other: for instance, “percurso” can be linked to “texto” metaphorically, and also “paragraph” thanks to the mechanism of synecdoche. The verb “abraçar” hides 12 alternatives. The most interesting combination, thus, is revealed by the three first substantives. It is there that the reader can construct her text, and then she can improve it. However, due to the “rigid” alternatives given by the last substantive the main theme of the poem will always be the same: the text itself.

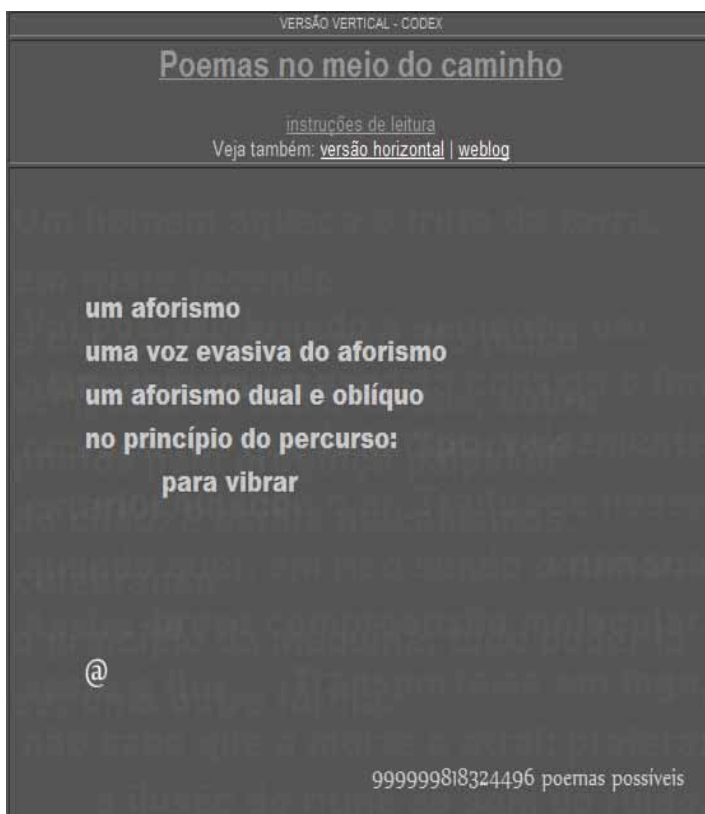


FIGURE 36: Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho* – one possible combination of the first text

Also the second text like all the others starts with no capital letter, as if it was a continuation of a single poem. The form of the expression works in the same way, it is the content which is different. However, this second text allows more combinations since 13 syntagms can be recombined. The first combination of the second poem has a person as the subject of the text²⁵, “homem” (man) but it can be substituted by “poeta” (poet), but also substituted by an object such as “verso” (verse line) and “texto” (text) and “poema” (poem). The syntagm “homem” will not appear again, so the initial text is impossible to recreate. The verb “aquece” (warms up) can be modified with 27 other verbs and “fruto” (fruit) hides 57 other syntagms, which sometimes can be synonymous to each other – for instance “rumor” and “ruído” (noise) – but normally they have different meaning: “refúgio” (refuge), “teorema” (theorem), “êxtase” (ecstasy), “pasma” (wonder), and so on. Already by the first line it is possible to say that the form is the same of the first text, but that the result will be different. In the first text a “common” meaning between all the possible combinations can be retraced, but this second text shows the impossibility of exhaustive analyses that is exhibited by several e-poems.

²⁵ “A man warms the fruit of the earth/ saddening the pale colour of noise/shattering mechanisms celebrating the beginning of the machine”.

verb in the seventh poem “começa” (it begins), otherwise all the other syntagms – nouns and verbs – are combinable.

The author cannot foresee which kind of poem the reader will decide to create. The possibilities offered to her are numerous enough to be unpredictable. Moreover she can decide at any second to modify her text, she needs just a roll over to create a different poem. The possible combinations are offered by the machine, so the author has no control over these exact e-poems which are created by the reader and the machine. The author creates the space of poetic possibilities. These poems live for a while, after a click they disappear and a new text takes form. A weblog, however, can save the creations, since it is possible to send a mail from the same page where the poem is made up to a weblog which will archive the text. *Poemas no meio do caminho* suggests an ephemeral poetic construction that appears and vanishes in a click.

6.2 Rui Torres' *Poemas no meio do caminho* – horizontal version

Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho*, 2009 at:

<http://telepoesis.net/caminho/caminho1.html>



FIGURE 39: Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho* – the very beginning of the text

The horizontal version is composed again of the same 8 poems, but presented and linked in a different way. Here the reader is in a 3D space and she can move around by running the cursor over the text. Four different video-sequences contain two poems each. There are 8 poems in the vertical version and there are 8 poems in the horizontal version too. The 1st text “um

motivo,/uma transcrição opaca do referente [...]” is followed by the 5th “e quebram-se os ovos”, the 2nd by the 6th, and so on.

The poems are not clearly structured in verse lines, but different lines move prosaically – from left to right – on the screen. The reader can alter the motion of the text, she can decide to make it move from right to left, or explore it from the top to the bottom, and so on, but she cannot manipulate the linearity in which the text appears on the screen. The reader accesses the next poem by clicking on what reminds me of holes (containing videos) that are to be found in the text.



The video-hole which allows the reader to access the other text

FIGURE 40: Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho* – first sequence, horizontal version

The entax suggests that the main text is the one written in bigger fonts, as this is the text the reader can change and combine; all the other lines are some possible combinations of that text, and they cannot be altered.



um motivo
uma transcrição opaca
do referente
um adágio obscuro e
subtil
no meio do caminho:
para abraçar

Another possible
combination

FIGURE 41: Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho* – first sequence, horizontal version

Syntactically the horizontal poems are like the vertical poems – the reader recombines the text according to the paradigmatic axis of language: the reader selects, the text morphs, but because of the background the result is more spectacular. The background is broken into four parts, differing in colour but not structure, nor in the content.

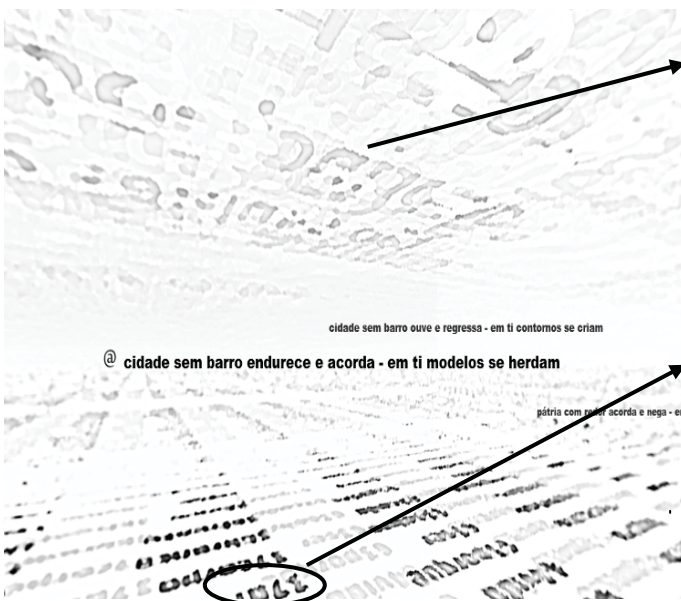


The poetic text and the background seem to create a unique poem which is difficult to read and to interact with because of the colours chosen

The interactive text

The poems generated by the machine which in this particular sequence are almost unreadable

FIGURE 42: Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho* – second sequence, horizontal version



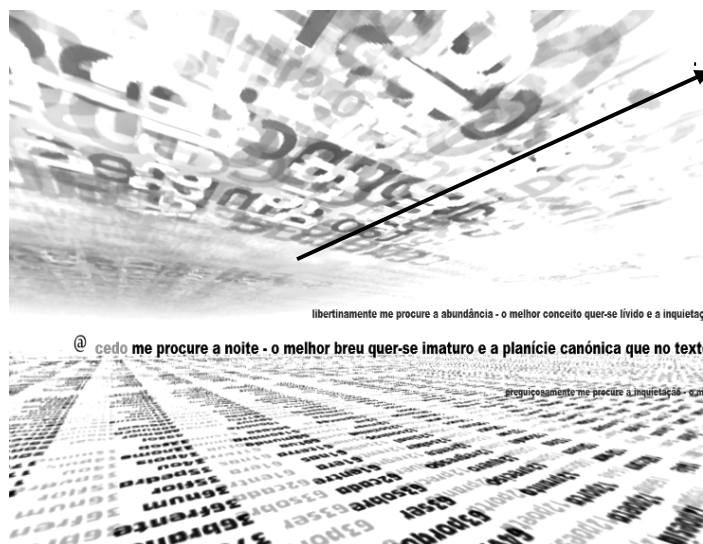
The background reminds one of photographic negatives, and it is not very readable. On the contrary the generative texts are very readable (even though it does not look so in this figure)

“37 ar”. The ordering of the words is done numerically

FIGURE 43: Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho* – third sequence, horizontal version

They are concrete poems, where letters and numbers have a visual meaning. They create other texts where language is reduced (the reduction of language is a characteristic of concrete poetry see chapter two): the words written on the background are the same words used to combine the e-poems. Each word also

has a number which most probably indicates the number of occurrences of that word in the generated poem: for instance “37 ar” (air), “37 corpo” (body) “75 silêncio” (silence), “84 vento” (wind), and so on.



Contiguity between sequence 3 and 4 also because of the gradation of colours

FIGURE 44: Rui Torres, *Poemas no meio do caminho* – fourth sequence, horizontal version

The words are positioned after the numbering. Each row of words has its duplicate written in lighter text. These concrete poems show the inner structure of these generative poems. On the one side we have texts composed of only one word and one number, and on the other side generative texts the main texts of which are composed of almost infinite combinations of words.

Poemas no meio do caminho are poems melded into poems, with other poems that are constantly being created under the reader’s eye and with the possibility that the reader can – at any moment – create her own poems.

Both versions of *Poemas* realize what Alexandra Saemmer calls “aesthetic of the ephemeral”²⁸. According to Alexandra Saemmer the aesthetics of the ephemeral consists in letting the work slowly decompose. But these poems are not decomposing slowly, so I propose to enlarge Saemmer’s concept. What is fascinating in *Poemas* is how fast the poems can be composed and decomposed, how fast they appear and disappear forever, how fast (thus easy?) it is to *generate* a poem. But the creation of poetry is something that has always worried poets. Baudelaire, for instance, was always afraid of the “white page”, in the *Fleurs du mal*, he often describes this fear, for instance in “L’ennemie” the poet is scared by the time passing and by the inability of creating. On the one hand these poems destroy the sacredness of the poetic language; on the other they realize the *poiësis*²⁹. *Poemas* foreground the dual meaning of the art of practice and the practice of art.

²⁸ Alexandra Saemmer, “Aesthetics of surface, ephemeral, re-enchantment and mimetic approaches in digital literature”, *Neohelicon* 2009, accessible online at <http://www.springerlink.com/content/02152335157238u8/fulltext.pdf> (accessed, January 13 2010).

²⁹ *Poiësis* (our modern “poetry”) derives from the ancient Greek verb *ποιέω*, which means “to make”.

7. E-poetry as Games: Jason Nelson's *Birds still warm from flying* and *i made this. you play this. we are enemies*

Birds still warm from flying and *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* by Jason Nelson are both e-poems created open-endedly following the game logic. Some works of digital literature are contaminating literature with games and they put literature "au risque du jeu"³⁰. Jason Nelson wants to create a new "genre" that plays with an idea beyond games and literature. They are interactive texts: *Birds still warm from flying* is a combinatory text and *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* is an explorative e-poem. Both texts invite the reader to "fight" in order to obtain their text. The former reminds one of a Rubik's cube³¹, the latter is a "video-game-poem".

7.1 Jason Nelson's *Birds still warm from flying*

Jason Nelson, *Birds still warm from flying*, at:
<http://www.secrettechnology.com/ausco/poecubic2.html>

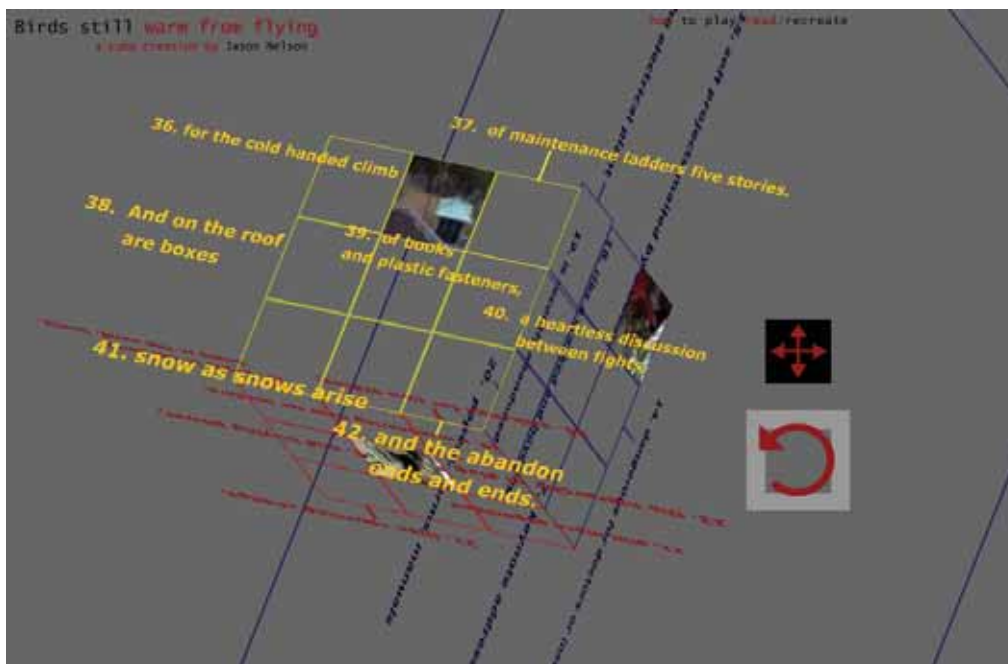


FIGURE 45: Jason Nelson, *Birds still warm from flying* – the opening page

³⁰ Cf. Alexandra Saemmer and Monique Maza, *E-Formes. Écritures visuelles sur supports numériques*, Saint-Etienne: Université de St. Etienne Press, Janvier 2011

³¹ The Rubik's Cube is a 3-D mechanical puzzle invented in 1974 by Hungarian sculptor and professor of architecture Ernő Rubik. Originally called the "Magic Cube", the puzzle was licensed by Rubik to be sold by Ideal Toys in 1980 and won the German Game of the Year special award for Best Puzzle that year. As of January 2009, 350 million cubes have sold worldwide making it the world's top-selling puzzle game. It is widely considered to be the world's best-selling toy. (Cf. "Wikipedia" accessible online at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubik's_Cube).

Birds still warm from flying is “an interactive/re-creatable poetry cube” that the reader can fill with small moving images and turn through three-dimensions, reading its lateral lists. It was presented in 2009 during the International Festival and Symposium E-poetry 2009 (Barcelona 24th -27th of May). *Birds still warm from flying* is a new, perhaps more complex version of what Chris Funkhouser, among others, calls the “poetry cube”³². The cube form is not a new shape for creating poetry neither for Jason Nelson³³ nor for other digital poets as Aya Karpinska (see chapter three), but this cube introduces some new interesting characteristics in building poetry in 3D. According to our typology this e-poem is a hybrid form of expression since it is built from both segment and sequence, and since it is also composed of seven small videos. As for the reading practice, the reader manipulates the 3D poem, into which text and some video and sound clips are embedded, selectively choosing (registering) what is to be read.

Instructions on how to read the poem are provided on the web page, in a link called significantly “how to play/read/recreate”. One command allows the reader to read the poem in 3D, another to rotate it; in order to interact with the cube the reader has to touch each row and column of the cube, they are both movable. Everything is contained within the same page: title, authorship, instructions, commands, and the text. Elements normally considered belonging to the paratext – like for instance commands – are here parts of the text since without them the text will be incomplete in practice.

The reader is invited to manipulate the space and the text, to play with the cube, in the same way as once, most probably, she used to play with a Rubik’s cube – that Nelson’s cube simulates very well – and that represents one of the most famous and common games of the 80’s. The text is openly a game.

Each facet has a different colour and also the words are coloured according to the side of the cube they initially belong to. Each facet contains a different number of texts and images. Except for white and red, the former substituted in Nelson’s cube by black and the latter repeated twice, all the other colours are the same colours of Rubik’s cube. Besides words and phrases (and numbers which indicate the numbers of the piece of text – 42 in total), the text is also made of sounds and images. The music is repetitive and reminds one somehow of the music in video games, the rhythm is constant and quite fast. However, it is impossible to keep the music set loud, it could be too disturbing. The images are videos of places (countryside, cities, and so on), they break the monotony of the language showing one of the possibilities given by e-poetry: adding other semiotic systems to the writing.

³² Chris Funkhouser, “Encapsulating E-Poetry 2009 Some views on contemporary digital poetry”, in *Dichtung-digital* 2009, available online at: <http://www.brown.edu/Research/dichtung-digital/2009/Funkhouser/index.htm> (accessed, January 12 2010).

³³ See Jason Nelson, *Series Eleven or Five*, accessible online at: http://www.secrettechnology.com/poem_cube/poem_cube.html (accessed, January 12 2010).

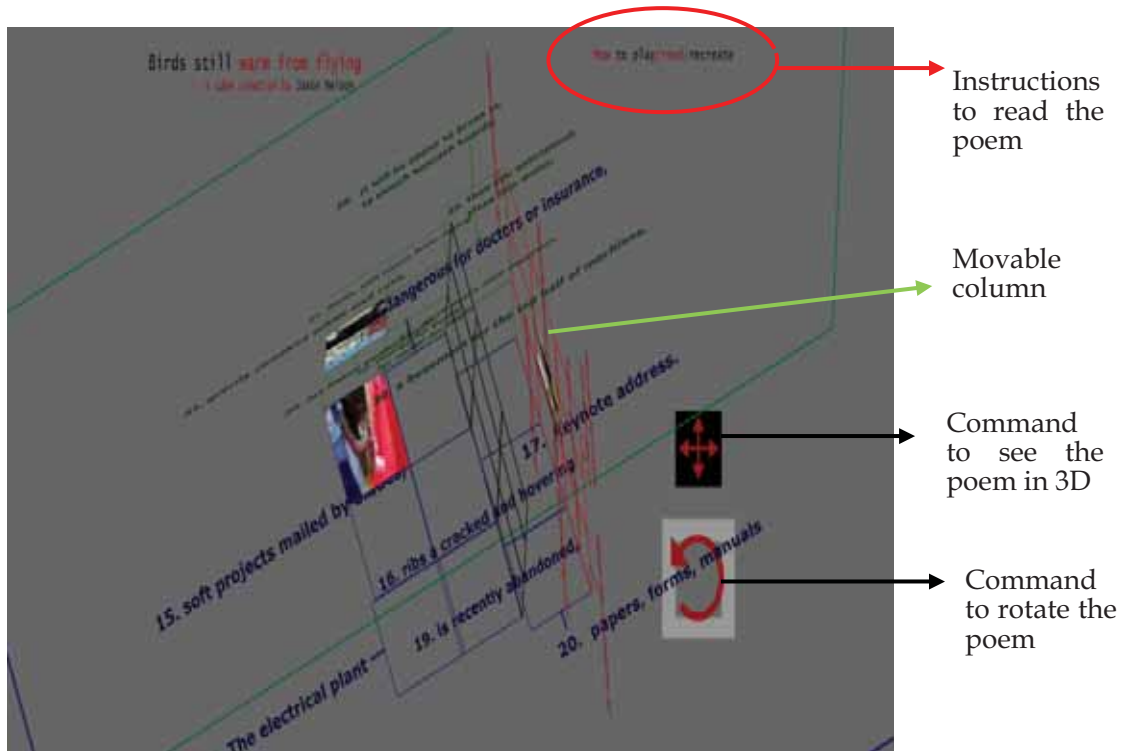


FIGURE 46: Jason Nelson, *Birds still warm from flying*

The text opens with the last facet of the cube, according to the numbering at least. One of the first parts of text the reader reads is the end "and the abandon ends, ends". It seems to be an invitation to the reader to interact with the text and to make up her own cube poetry, since she is already at the end of the story. By moving the rows and the columns other texts can be magicked into existence. This is an example of the combinatory reading practice since the reader recomposes her text according to given possibilities. E-poetry with a cube-based spatial perspective appears to focus on this combinatory reading practice (see chapter 3). As I said in chapter 2 I propose to use combinatory poetry to define those texts that openly expose and address its combinatorics by changing and permuting the text according to fixed textual structures given by the author, that allow/need the text to be recombined to take on meaning. Jason Nelson's combinatory text, however, is peculiar since composing a text in a facet means also having five texts made up on the other facets, by rotating the cube the reader accesses these other texts. The cube poetry escapes from both its author – who built the first combination but who cannot control all the other eventual texts – and its reader – who can decide to rewrite one "facet" but who cannot know what this combination creates on the other facets.

It can happen in rotating the rows and the columns that fragments of text come to overlap one another or that some images cover some words making it impossible to read the text, as that part of the text is unreadable/incomprehensible information overload. It can also happen that words belonging to different segments of text end up creating a new sentence because of the superimposition of different sentences. Also this combining is arbitrary.

Nelson offers in this text what Maria Engberg calls an “aesthetic of visual noise”³⁴ (see figure 47). Engberg explains that “visual noise is generated by a tactilely responsive surface in combination with visual excess which requires an embodied engagement from the reader/user in order for a reading to take place”.³⁵ Nelson realizes with this work also what Engberg suggests that we call “the aesthetic of sonic noise”³⁶, since as said, the background music cannot be set loud because it will be too disturbing.

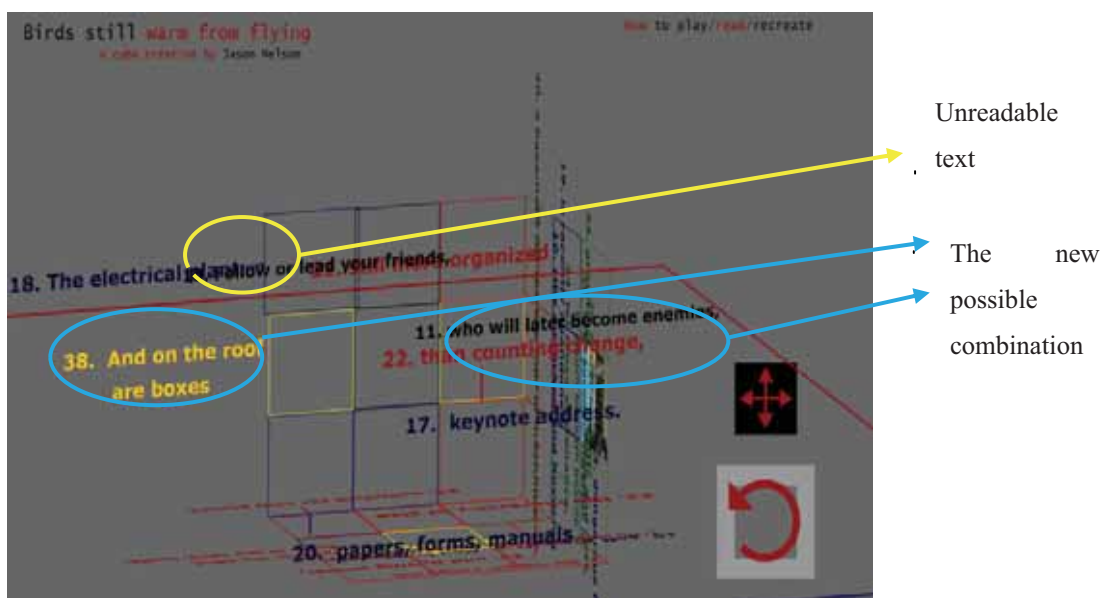


FIGURE 47: Jason Nelson, *Birds still warm from flying*

Nelson’s cube differs from the Rubik's Cube: here it is impossible to win. On one hand Nelson realizes a parody of Rubik's Cube, and on the other he shows the playfulness of language and text. The author gives the reader fragments of texts, fragments of textual information that need to be recomposed. The writing is metaphorically “a meandering river for borders”, readers “birds still warm from flying” and “the suggestion this is a search”. A search for freedom of words and creation practice.

The process to obtain the text, the possibility that electronic writing can give to the creative and reading practice are more important than the final product. The text is no longer a “standardized” text, possible of more interpretations but still just one text, but a multitude of potential texts. Mirroring our information society, Jason Nelson provides the reader with lots of information that the reader can recompose freely. *Birds still warm from flying* is a collage, a poem that can be cut up and rebuilt, taken into pieces and reassembled over and over again, potentially infinitely. It is a cut-up technique – already experimented by Tzara and Surrealist (see chapter 1), an aleatory

³⁴ Maria Engberg, “Aesthetic of Noise in Digital Literary Arts”, conference paper presented at *Electronic Literature in Europe*, Bergen, Sept. 11-13 2008, accessible online at: <http://elitineurope.net/node/16> (accessed, September 29 2010).

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

literary technique that cuts up and rearranges the text in order to create a new text. In allowing this it is a metaphor of the human language which also can be cut up and rearranged without practical limits.

7.2 Jason Nelson's *i made this. you play this. we are enemies*

Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies*, at:

<http://www.secrettechnology.com/madethis/enemy6.html>



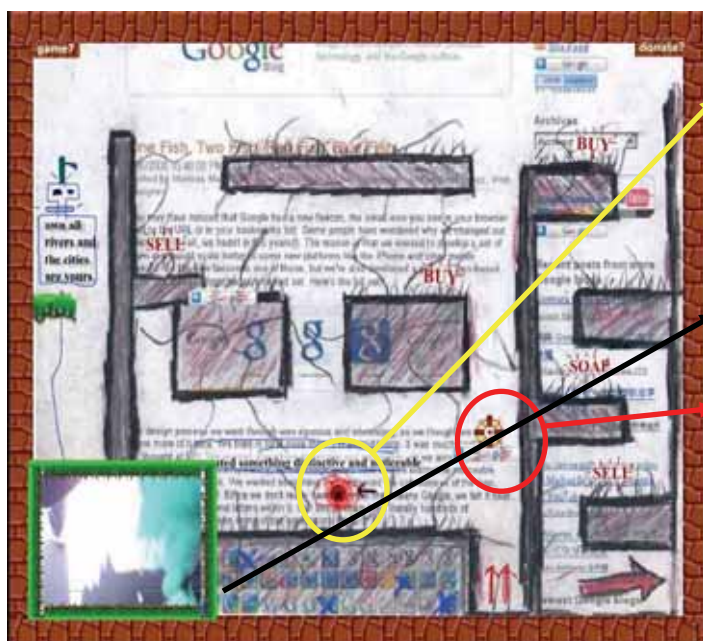
FIGURE 48: Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* – the opening page

[I] *made this. you play this. we are enemies* is an e-poem constructed as if it were a video-game. The reader is the author's declared enemy. The reading pact between them is subverted: they do not collaborate, they fight. The reader has to pass through 10 levels in order to finish the text. The subtitle, however, re-establishes the reading pact: the author addresses his reader inviting her to "play, play, play, and play again". The reiteration of the syntagm "play" seems to be both a promise and a hope that the reader will enjoy this new experience. The background of many of the levels reminds the reader of Tom Phillips' *A Humument* (first edition 1970)³⁷. Each level background design has a childish quality: Disney characters (see figure 53), flowers with faces (see figure 52), stylized drawings, and so on. But as we will see soon, Nelson uses those images as a parody: there are images of Disney characters like Dalmatians that have angry eyes, or Peter Pan can kill the reader.

The opening page contains, along with the title and instructions, hints about how to read it. Nelson in fact provides his reader with the list of the

³⁷ *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* was revised on 1980, 1987, 1997, and 2005.

websites from which his e-poem is constructed. Each level of the poem is designed from pieces of famous websites: from Google and Yahoo (the two most popular web search engines at the time of creation) to Mininova (one of the largest BitTorrent index sites³⁸) from Disney to MetaFilter (a very famous community weblog whose purpose is to share links and discuss content that users have discovered on the web). The other websites are: Fark, an important community website that allows members to comment on a daily batch of news articles and other items from various websites; Huffington Post, a “progressive” American news website focusing on politics, media, business, entertainment, living, style, the green movement, world news, and comedy; RIAA, the website of the Recording Industry Association of America which is the organisation that infamously sues illegal music file-sharers and downloaders on behalf of (mainly) the “Big Four” record labels and distributors [EMI, Sony, Universal, Warner] in the name of copyright infringement and intellectual property ; Something Awful, a comedy website housing a variety of content, including blog and forum, digitally edited pictures, and humorous media reviews; Boing Boing is a geek and tech culture publishing entity that of late has become a group blog; and Joystiq, a successful video gaming blog. [I] *made this. you play this. we are enemies* is built from pieces of these other texts which it takes words and images from, it rewrites the other texts, also adding pictures and videos and sound. *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* is another example of cut-up technique but in this case it is still the author that cuts up and reassembles.



The teleportation link which the reader has to jump into in order to reach the other section of the page and be able to pass the level

Video that the reader can launch

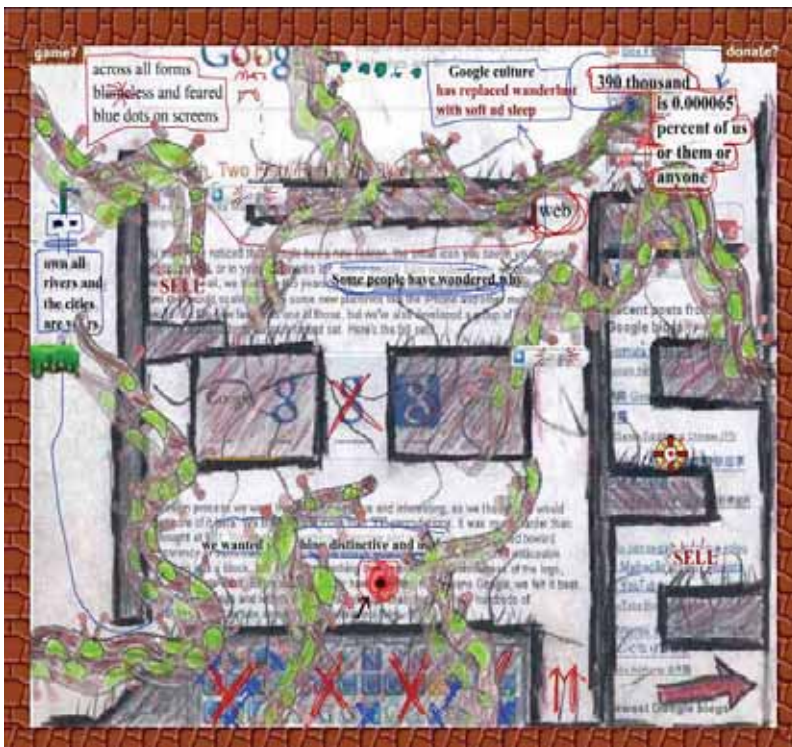
The small wheel the reader runs

FIGURE 49: Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* – the first level

³⁸ According to Wikipedia Mininova was one of the largest BitTorrent index sites. The word ‘mininova’ ranked 9 on Google’s list of most queried terms in 2006. On May 28, 2008, Mininova indicated that there have been over 5 billion downloads and a lawsuit. It does not, however, host its own tracker. In November 2009, the site operators deleted all torrents that enabled users to download copyright-protected material, i.e. the vast majority of the torrents. Cf. *Wekepida* accessible online at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mininova> (accessed, March 11 2010).

The “game” is a parody of side-on single screen non-scrolling platform games such as Donkey Kong. The first level is very easy. The reader's on-screen character is a misshapen wheel, which can jump and move left and right. Fragments of text can suddenly appear when strange objects are collected. The wheel has to navigate paths, discover the properties of odd symbols, use teleportation devices, jump on moving platforms and finally go through a hole in the wall in order to pass on to the level. The text thus adheres to the simple language of the platform video-game.

The reading time is partially chosen by the reader, partially by the text, because she can decide to stop a while to read – without the risk of being killed as it can happen in other levels –, but some fragments of text appear according to an inner clock, in this case the duration is imposed by the text.

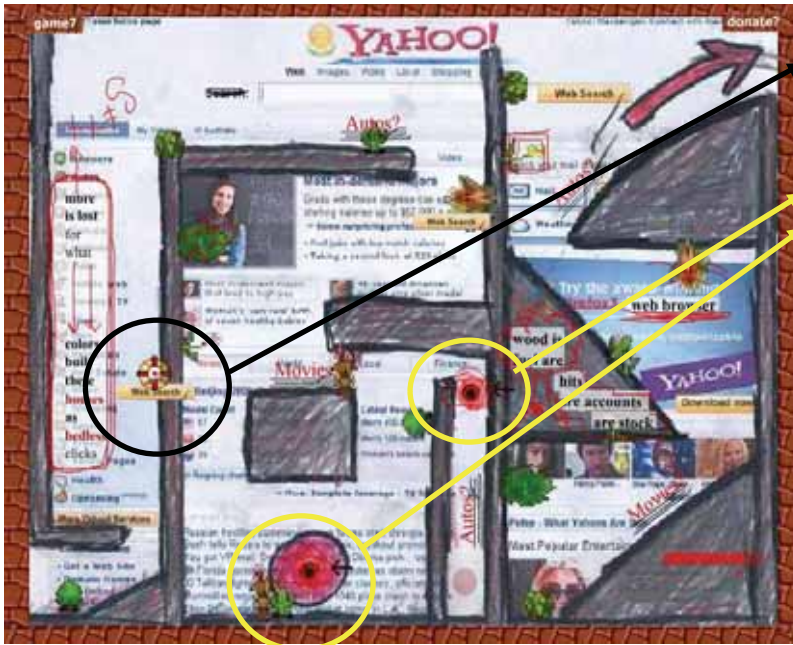


Texts and images suddenly appeared

The text is being transformed under the reader's eyes

FIGURE 50: Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* – the first level

While the reader is passing through the text in order to complete the level, the text changes: scraps of text can appear and then disappear, or they can appear and stay fixed on the page and the text in the background can partially be transformed (see 51 and 52).



The elevator-platform on which is written "web-search"

The two teleportation links that allow the reader to pass to the next section of the page

FIGURE 51: Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* – the second level

The second level reminds us in structure and in function of the first level, and to die in the first two levels is impossible. Even though the reader can have the feeling of not being able to finish the level. If she is not very fast in reaching the end of the text a huge image appears quickly expanding until it covers the all page, making the reader all but unable to see where she is (see figure below). "Grow! Damn you! Grow!" in capital letters also appears on the screen in part superimposed over the image.



The way to go out

The wheel still "alive"

FIGURE 52: Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* – the second level

The words on the screen simulate a screamed order (signified by the use of capital letters) from the author to the text: the text should go faster, catch the reader and kill her. But it is a “false” message since the reader can accomplish the level even if the wheel is caught by the image which does not allow her to see where she is directing the wheel. It is interesting to notice how in this case (as in the previous text), Nelson subverts video game rules. *I made this. you play this. we are enemies* is a parody of video games.

In the following levels more huge images cover the screen making impossible for the reader to read parts of the text and to see exactly where the wheel is going. In level 4, for instance, images of Dalmatians and red words cover the whole screen, announced by a phrase “here comes the death by Dalmatians” written again in capital letters which immediately catches the reader’s attention. Another piece of advice is given to the reader “pause to reconsider the joy and the pain of playing this game”. However, if the reader solves the level very quickly, she will not see the Dalmatians fill the page. So depending on the speed she reads and passes through the text, the text will appear different. The Dalmatians, however, do not kill the reader but some other Disney characters like Peter Pan will.

In this level two teleportation links transport the small wheel to the next level, repeating the same structure of the two first levels which differs from the third one where there are no teleportation links.

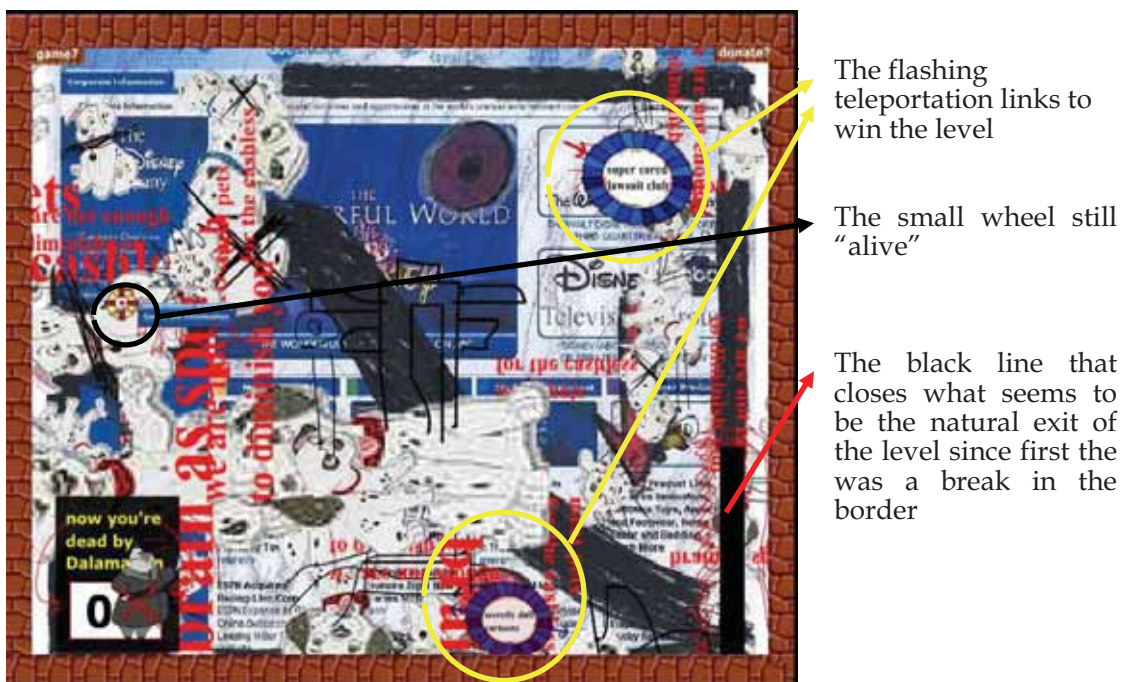


FIGURE 53: Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* – the fifth level

Each level of the text indicates to the reader which path to follow in order to reach the next level: arrows, blinking scribbling, and so on, point out the right way. Nevertheless, the reader can try to explore the text, she can even go back if she wants, but the path to finish the text is obligatory: there is just one solution. In level four, for example, the reader can try to reach the end of the path quickly

since there is a break in the border (see figure 53), but even if she is fast she cannot pass the level throughout that space. The only way to complete it, it is to use the two winging holes highlighted also by small red arrows.

Level five is the last one of the first part, after solving it there is a break with an intermission video where the author appears. The author's signature is not only in the beginning but also in the middle and at the end of the text, where another short video on him can be launched.

The more the reader advances, the more the texts become unreadable. Too many words and images make it illegible. As in the previous text Nelson puts forward what Engberg calls "the aesthetic of visual noise"³⁹. The sixth level reproduces the images of the previous levels meanwhile the reader is trying to jump the last few stairs that separates her from the end of the level. This text that suddenly appears in front of her is the same text she has already seen and passed. The text is repeated in form and content. *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* replicates our information society: the text contains loads of word, images, that change and then are repeated, it is impossible to follow and read even a small part of the text considering also that the reader has to control the small wheel. The reader questions, which parts of the text are more interesting? Which ones should I read?, this seems to correspond to our everyday life: what information is important, which news should we read and be kept in our knowledge? This game-poetry simulates our society. We live in a world where accessing information, resources and communication seems to be very easy, while evaluating, judging, and *understanding* them and their cultural, social, and economic implication appears to be difficult.

Level 8 seems to be safe for the reader, it is impossible to die even though each time she tries to reach the hole-link to jump to the next section of the page, a white image seems to follow the wheel in order to erase it. Once the wheel reaches the end of the page, the page will be filled in with words and sentences.

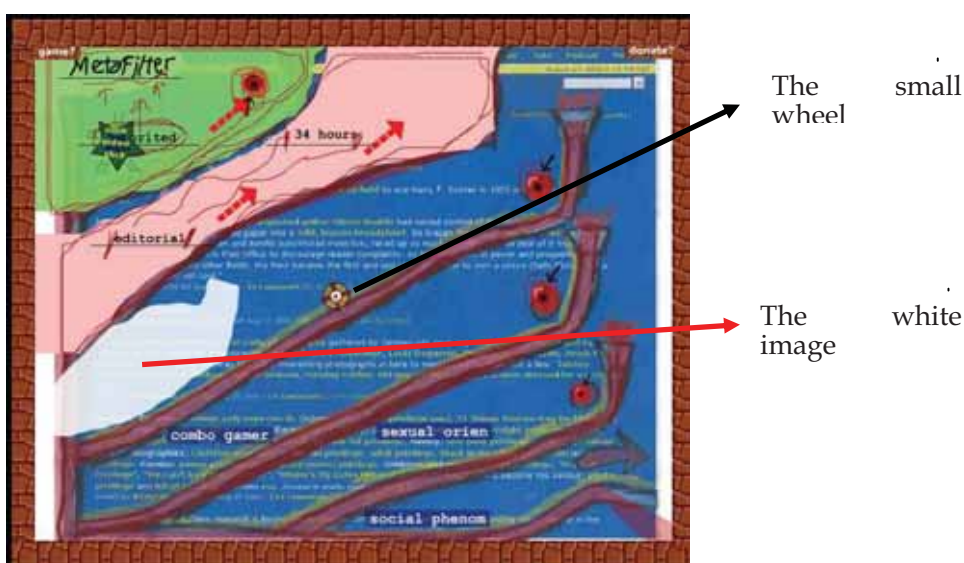


FIGURE 54: Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* – the eighth level

³⁹ Maria Engberg, "Aesthetic of Noise in Digital Literary Arts", *op. cit.*.

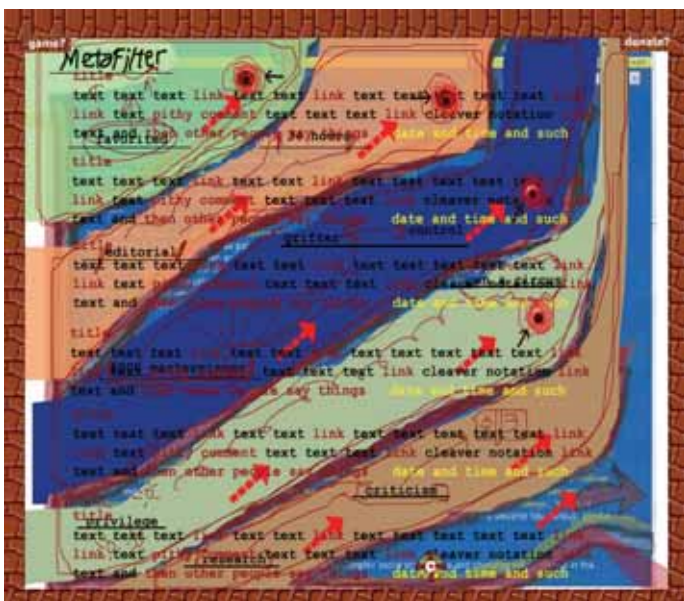


FIGURE 55: Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* – the eighth level completed

The reader does not read all the information unfolding on the page. She has to complete the level and go further, she is close to finishing the game. Nelson's game-poetry simulates the reading practice in the internet era. The reader reads in diagonal "un lecture en diagonale, basée sur un parcours rapide de l'information, une pratique 'frénétique' et une activité oculaire saccadée. Considérée comme superficielle cette lecture [...] semble contraire à des pratiques d'apprentissage et de mémorisation classiques"⁴⁰ (see also chapters 3 and 5). She zips along the surface of the text, she does not go deep. The apparently nonsensical construction of the text implies this kind of "web" reading practice.

Two years ago a published study of online research habits, conducted by scholars from University College London, showed that we are probably changing our way of reading (and thinking) because of Internet. In the study it is stated that:

it is clear that users are not reading online in the traditional sense; indeed there are signs that new forms of "reading" are emerging as users "power browse" horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins. It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense.⁴¹

By making the text unreadable Nelson appears to realize the reading practice of the web environment.

⁴⁰ Alexandra Saemmer, *Matières textuelles sur support informatique*, Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007, p. 46.

⁴¹ "A Cyber briefing Paper", University College of London, January 2008 UCL, accessible online at: <http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf> (accessed, June 22 2010).



FIGURE 56: Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* – the end of the game

The end of the text is a metaphor of the addiction that video-games (and partially internet) can cause to their users. Once completed the last level, the reader is not free. She can still watch three videos and, in any cases, the small wheel is stuck in a part of the page. “A place named the end by you for now” written according to a particular entax, highlights that the end of the game is temporary, soon she will probably play again.

This work subverts the “game rules” but also with its “playfulness” it clearly subverts the “elitist” conceptions of art. Particularly last century avant-garde movements – and mainly Dada, and like many Dada’s works this text is a collage – already having dismissed any (bourgeois) notion of art. [*I*]made this. you play this. we are enemies invites us to rethink of and to resist the “world rules”. However, the risk in this genre of texts (for instance, see also Aya Karpinska’ works, Chapter 3, section 3) is that the reader is more interested in the process (in the tool) – in understanding how it works – than in the product (in the text) and in what is written.

8. Maria Mencía’s *Birds Singing Other Birds Songs* and the Limits of Literature in New Media

Maria Mencía's *Birds Singing Other Birds Songs* is an example of the animated calligram, where the letters draw the figure under the reader’s eyes. The text is composed of 13 «sequences» that can be activated one at a time, all together, or according to the combination the reader prefers. At any time the reader can stops one sequence and click another one to manipulate in some way its temporality.

8.1 Maria Mencía's *Birds Singing Other Birds Songs*

Maria Mencía, *Birds Singing Other Birds Songs*, 2001⁴², at: http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/mencia_birds_singing_other_birds_songs.html



FIGURE 57: Maria Mencía, *Birds Singing Other Birds Songs* - start

The web page opens with a blue sky with some clouds which are moving. On the bottom there are three lines of: numbers, which indicate the sequence, and activating and deactivating links. These links allow the reader to interact with the text choosing which text/s the “reader” wants to approach.

This text invites readers to reconsider what they consider the limits of literature. In *Birds Singing Other Birds Songs* the linguistic and the visual intertwine to explore the area in-between the visual, the aural and the textual. The “reader” or better yet the spectator can interact with the text in a traditionally_unconventional manner. It is still a passive interaction, the “reader” cannot arbitrarily rewrite the text, but she can explore it by proposing many different reading paths, which are potentially unique for every reader.

Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs is also edited in *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1*, where Mencía herself presents her text:

This work originated when I was invited to exhibit at the Medway Galleries. The most interesting features of the gallery were its high ceiling and three large windows, which I was inspired to use in the work. I wanted to explore kinetic typography, the animation of images and sound. I came across a transcription of birds' songs in the book *The Thinking Ear*. Suddenly, I was drawn to this transcription because of the

⁴² *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs* was first exhibited at the Medway Gallery (Kent) in 2001.

similarities with the phonemes I was using in my other works. The repetitive aspect of letters and what looked like syllables reminded me of sound poems. So, I decided to ask some singers to sing their own interpretation of the transcriptions of the songs, in order to play with the interpretative process of these translations. Having been translated first from birds' song into linguistic interpretations, now the birdsongs would be re-interpreted by the human voice. The sounds that emerged from this study were later attached to the animated birds in the shape of calligrams. The outlines and letters of the text birds corresponded to the transcribed sound made by each bird, so making the birds sing their own visual-textual compositions. Nevertheless, the sound does not correspond to the real bird. The visual character of the typographical character was another important characteristic in the making of each individual bird, which leads to the matter of the materiality, virtuality, and movement of the letter. This work has shown an incredible versatility in reshaping itself into different forms of media and possibilities of presentation and thus of exploration.⁴³

Based on the tradition of concrete poetry and calligrams (see chapter 1), this work focuses on the materiality of a *primordial* language. The words are decomposed to become phonemes, the smallest phonetic unit in language that is capable of conveying a distinction in meaning, or to represent typographically just sounds. For instance, in the 13th sequence a white bird contains pumping letters that can form a verb *see*. The words don't have a clear meaning, the reader must seek it. Words construct forms: the calligram of a bird; but also they deconstruct them as in the 4th sequence.



FIGURE 58: Maria Mencía, *Birds singing Other Birds' Songs* – sequence 4th

The conceptual basis for the work is an exploration of the translation process from birds' sounds into language and back to birds' songs via the human voice

⁴³ Maria Mencía, *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs*, 2001, in Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, Stephanie Strickland (eds.), *The Electronic Literature Collection*, Vol. 1, October 2006, accessible online at: http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/mencia_birds_singing_other_birds_songs.html (accessed, November 22 2006).

with the knowledge of language. These birds are animated 'text birds' singing the sound of their own text while flying. The letters, which create the birds' physical outlines, correspond to the transcribed sound made by each of the birds. The sound is produced by the human voice slightly manipulated in the computer. Nevertheless, the sound does not correspond to the visual representation of the word bird, as the birds appear on screen in a random manner. If the "reader" activates all the 13 sequences into which the work is divided, she will listen to a flock of singing birds and watch a sequence where letters form, transform, deform themselves.

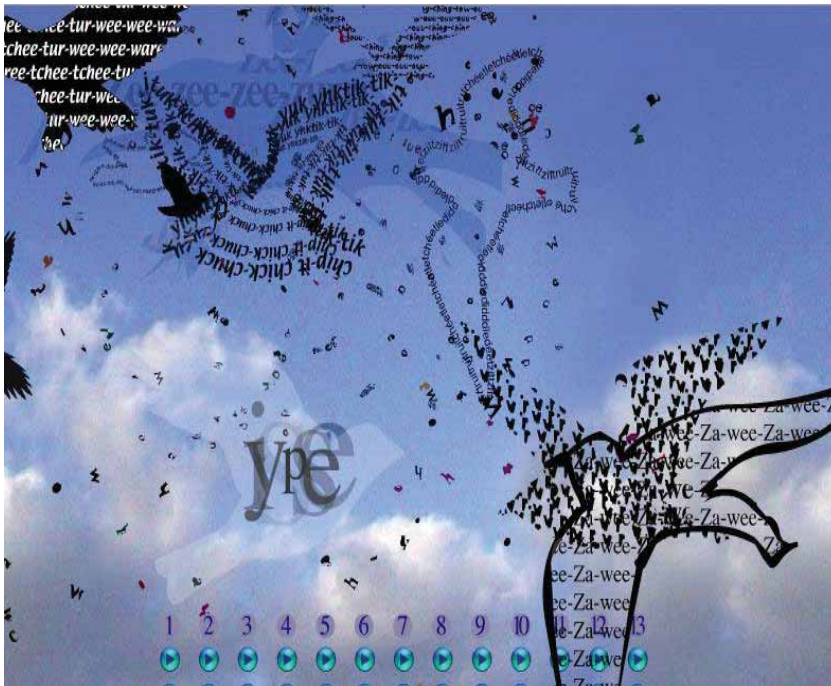


FIGURE 59: Maria Mencía, *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs* – all the 13 sequences activated

Through her play with letters, sounds and forms Mencía proposes a way to watch and to seemingly touch sound. At the same time, she suggests that the language used in the poem still has to find its form and its identity.

The repetitive and redundant images, motions, and sounds create also in *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs* both “the aesthetic of visual noise” and “the aesthetic of sonic noise”⁴⁴ that we already analysed in Nelson’s works (see section 7).

Walter Benjamin's essay, “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” focuses on the new functions of modern post-aesthetic art which leaves behind its traditional functions in ritual and aesthetic enjoyment by highlighting its new function in politics and in popular, visual and tactile culture. His claim is that the work of art becomes “a creation with entirely new functions”⁴⁵. Mencía and many other e-poets - such as Andrews, Bélisle and

⁴⁴ Maria Engberg, “Aesthetic of Noise in Digital Literary Arts”, *op. cit.*.

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” (1935), London: Penguin, 1986, 34.

Karpinska (see chapters 3 and 4) demand of their readers a new reader's function, they want their readers as *performers* of their text: they want them to (re)mix, cut, sample, filter, mash-up and recombine their texts.

9. *Palavrador*: an Artistic Research Project

Palavrador is a collaborative interactive computer artwork conceived and produced in 2006, during the 38th Winter Festival sponsored by UFMG (Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil) Over the course of 15 days, "the group Palavrador"⁴⁶, made up of artists and professors from Brazilian Universities and abroad, used a trans-disciplinary methodology in order to create a generative piece of art that is also able to interact with its reader. *Palavrador* is a poetic cyber 3D-world. It uses computational procedures that apply artificial life behavioural algorithms consisting of autonomous agents and computer graphics techniques to create poetic virtual robots and expressions. It won Prize in Digital Literature: "Ciutat de Vinaròs" (Catalonia, Spain). There is also a sort of "physical book" of *Palavrador* which interacts with a poetic 3D-world.

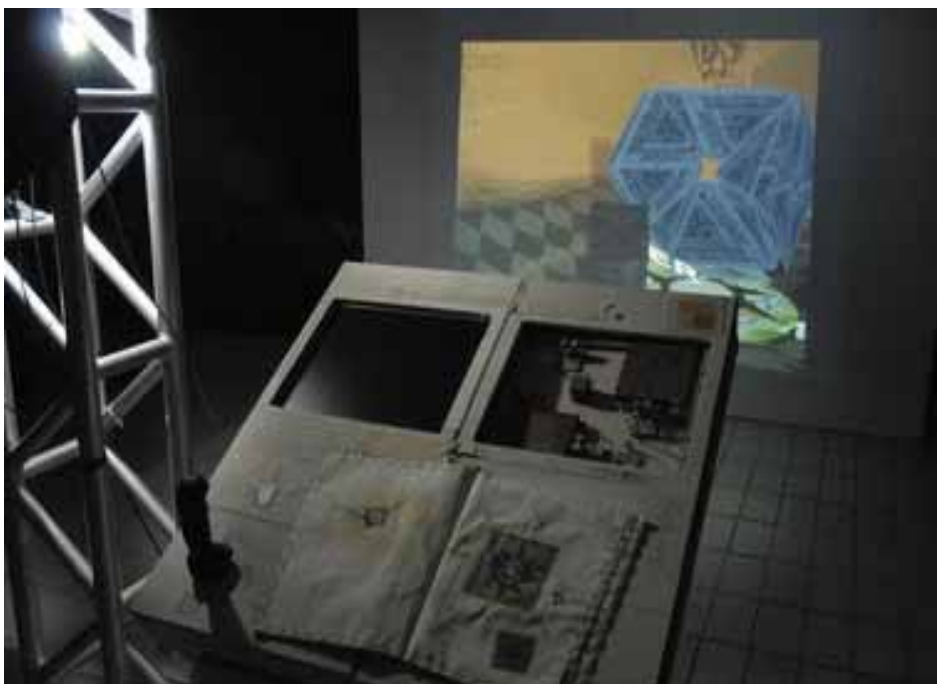


FIGURE 60: Chico Marinho, *Palavrador* – the book version as installation

⁴⁶ The project director is Chico Marinho. The other members of the group are: Alckmar Luiz dos Santos, Álvaro Andrade Garcia, Carla Coscarelli, Carlos Augusto Pinheiro de Sousa, Cristiano Bickel, Daniel Poeira, Delaine Cafeiro, Fernando Aguiar, Gustavo Moraes, Heitor Capuzzo, Jalver Bethônico, Leonardo Souza, Lucas Junqueira, Lúcia Pimentel, Márcio Flávio Dutra Moraes, Marcelo Kraiser, Rafael Rodrigues Cacique, Tania Fraga, Vibeke Sorensen, Walisson Costa.

9.1 Chico Marinho's *Palavrador*

Chico Marinho, *Palavrador*, 2006, at:

<http://www.ciclope.art.br/pt/downloads/palavrador.php>

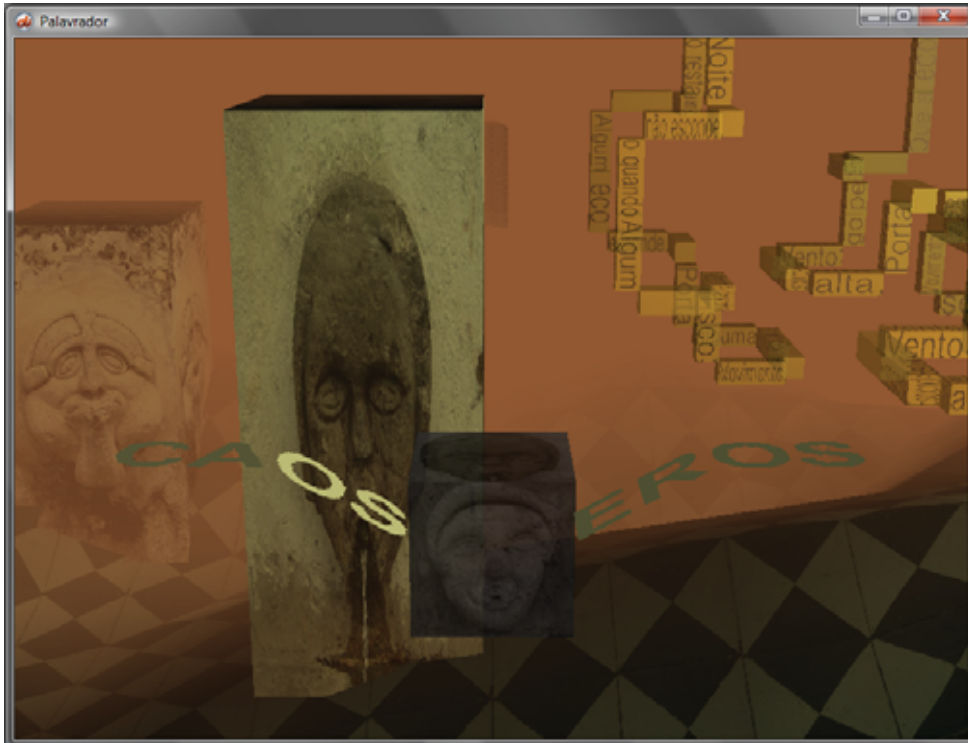
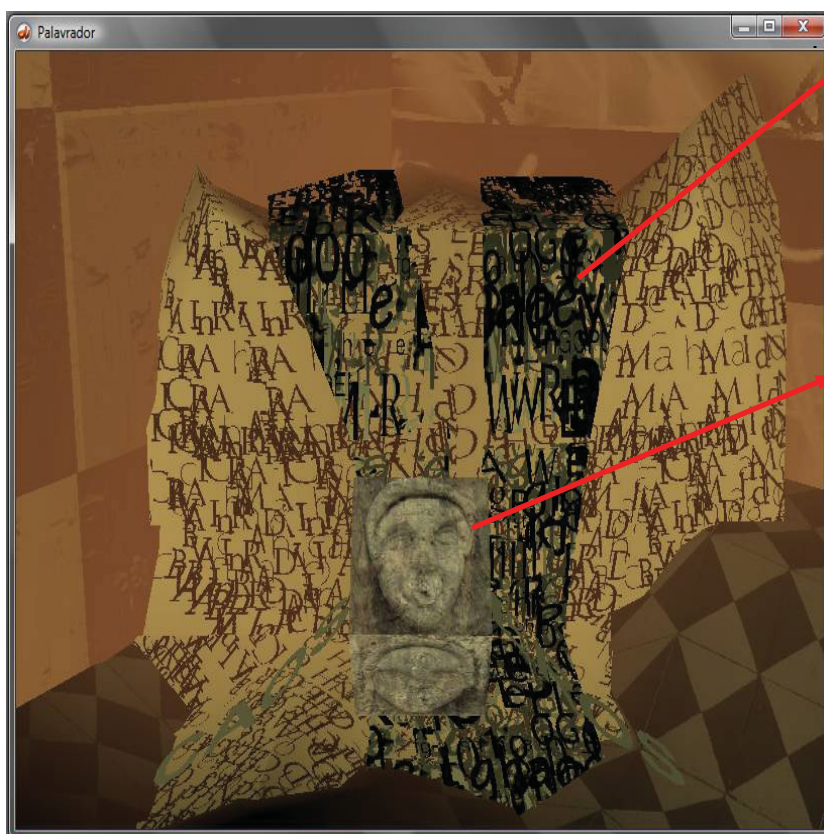


FIGURE 61: Chico Marinho, *Palavrador* - the opening sequence completely loaded

Palavrador sets out an explorative reading practice. The reader explores a 3D space, she can change the camera position, she can decide to fly around using a cube or to slide along the ground with a smaller cube-flower that has a tail made of words. The keyboard is her “joystick” to navigate into the text. By pressing the “h” the instructions on how to move around the 3D poem appear – however in order to discover these instructions the reader needs to be curious. The letters “w-a-d-s” let the reader move into the text as if it was a video-game.

Palavrador is made up of images, texts, videos, and sound. Entering into *Palavrador* – which in Portuguese sounds also like the union of the syntagms “word” and “pain” – “palavra dor” – but it means “verbiage”, is metaphorically going into a primordial world of words. The cube the reader can use to fly around in the 3D space has two words as wings “Caos” and “Eros” both words written in capital letters to emphasize their importance. Chaos was the first of the Protogenoi (primordial gods) to emerge at the creation of the universe, quickly followed by other gods between them Eros. Even though it is not the original meaning, our culture defines Chaos as the chaotic mix of elements that existed in the primeval universe. On one side, Chaos – division and confusion – on the other Eros – union and love.



The calligrams of a waterfall - the black letters are falling down simulating a real waterfall

The cube with the two wings made up of the word Caos on the left and Eros on the right

FIGURE 62: Chico Marinho, *Palavrador* - viewpoint given by flying around

In the 3D space the reader finds a primordial state of the words represented by a waterfall and a whirlwind of letters. Both the waterfall and the whirlwind of letter are calligrams and kinetic concrete poems, it depends on the reader's position on the screen. When she is distant the poems are ciné-gramme" ("kinescope", section 3, and chapters 3 and 4), the more she approaches the more her point of view changes and the poem becomes a kinetic concrete poem. They experiment the use of letters before they become words. The huge V designed by the waterfall can be the first letter of the word "vórtice"⁴⁷, and another V is designed by the whirlwind. When the reader is close to the waterfall the sound of water falling superimposes on the word recited.

⁴⁷ In Portuguese the word "vórtice" is used to both elements water and air.

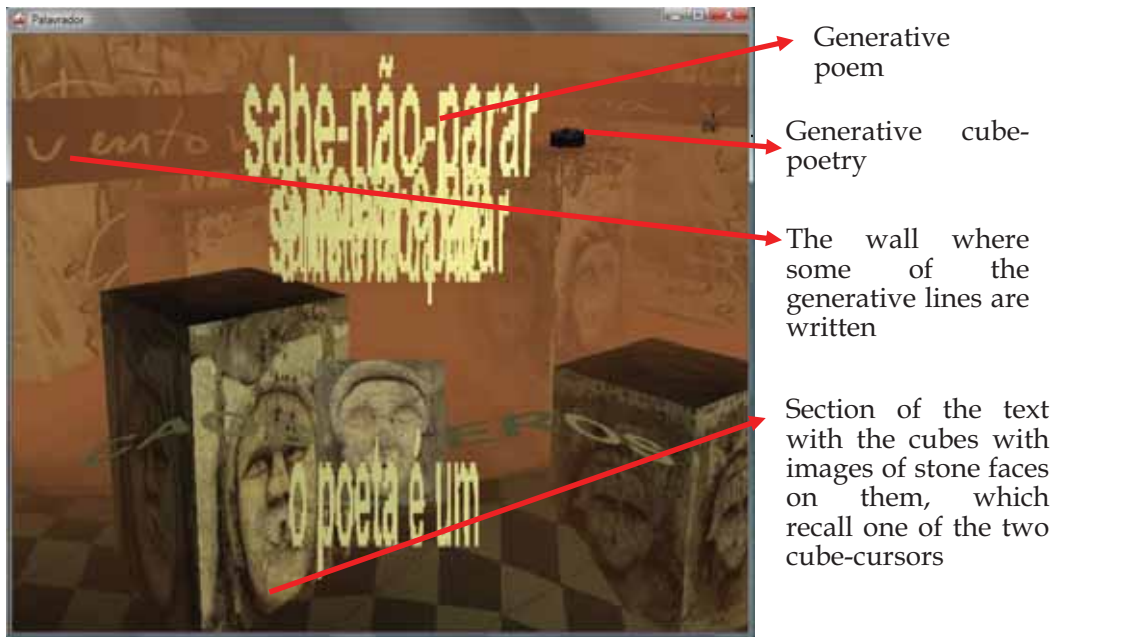


FIGURE 63: Chico Marinho, *Palavrador* – viewpoint given by flying around

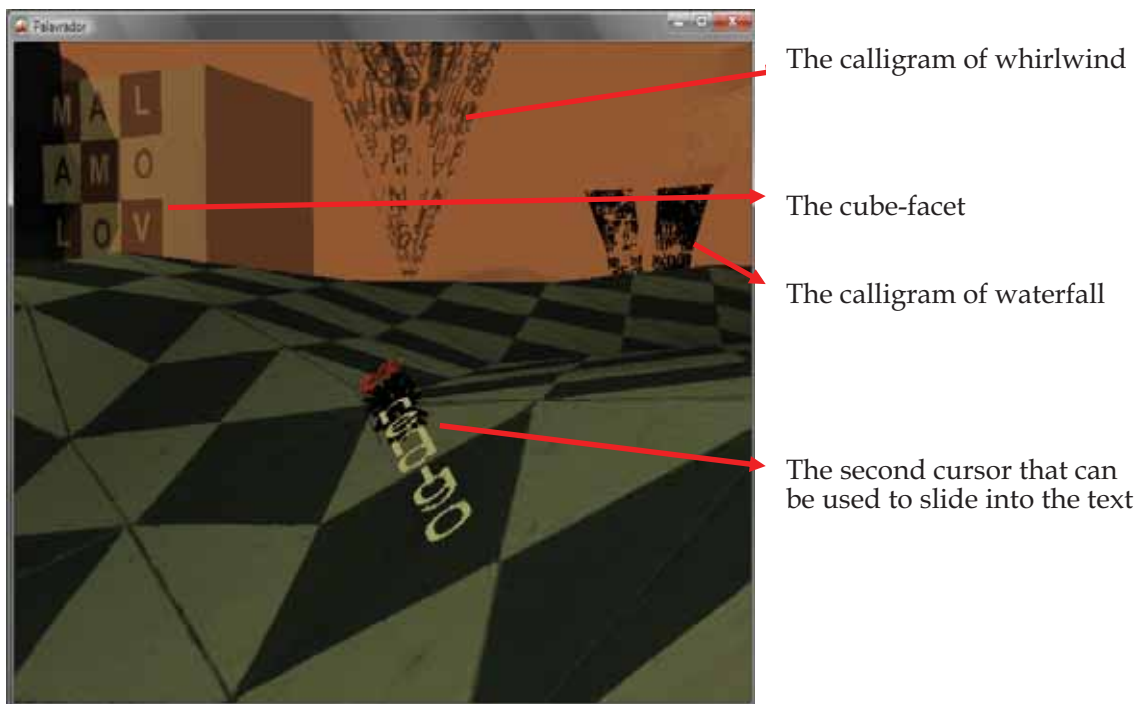


FIGURE 64: Chico Marinho, *Palavrador* – viewpoint given by sliding around

Meanwhile the reader explores the text, poems are generated by both cursors, but the reader herself can also generate poems by cling on the letter “x”. However, if she presses it too many times, the poem will be unreadable because too many lines will be created⁴⁸. Random cube poems can also be generated, they move around containing just one readable word – “poesia”.

⁴⁸ Moreover depending on which part of the text the cursor is the poem are made up in different colours either white or black and if the lines are written in black it is impossible to read.

Meditative sounds come up if passing through a section where there are many cubes with images of stone faces on them. There is also a video that shows images of words in different historical periods. Some speeches of Presidents and Dictators – for instance Bush father and Bush junior and Mussolini – are in the video’s background. The images shown and the speeches demonstrate that history is cyclical and repetitive. The same events repeat over and over again. The video is also a parody of the war since warriors and tanks made of pieces of papers interrupt the war images.

By going around into the 3D work, the reader finds also words contained in some closed structured, such as two huge rotating loudspeakers, letters held in a hand, letters written in a wall. When the reader reaches the loudspeakers a poem starts to be recited, it begins with “a palavra passa”⁴⁹ and keeps on defining the word “palavra”. Moving around the loudspeakers another poem can be launched. This poem follows a rigid rhythmical and rhyme structure, meanwhile the previous one is in free verse lines. The two poems can superimpose one another, but they still remain comprehensible. A cube-facet contains few letters forming the words “amo” (I love), “mal” (evil, ill, wrong⁵⁰) and love. Another image shows a bit more complex word structure – compared to the cube one – where verbs and nouns are repeated. It is a way to illustrate how language works: each word begins with the letter “s” and then is morphed with other morphemes producing different syntagms: “seu” (your) “sou” (I am) “ser” (to be) “sem” (without)⁵¹.

The text is showing the genesis of the language’s construction which needs organised structures. The reader passes from the freedom of letters in the waterfall – a sound link is activated by passing close to the waterfall and one word is somehow spelled and repeated “palavra” (word) – to the words in the loudspeakers producing two oral poems. From the words written for instance in a cube-facet or in a small wall where the same words are repeated over and over again to the words contained in the labyrinth – sophisticated and complex writing process that many famous authors have used in their novels. The walls that surround the text also show this evolution of the language: on one wall there are graffiti and letters that seem to be written by kids, on the other wall there are images and nice letters and the last two walls contain some verse lines.

49 “The word changes”.

50 “Mal” has various meaning in English.

51 “Ser” and “sem” can have other meanings as well.

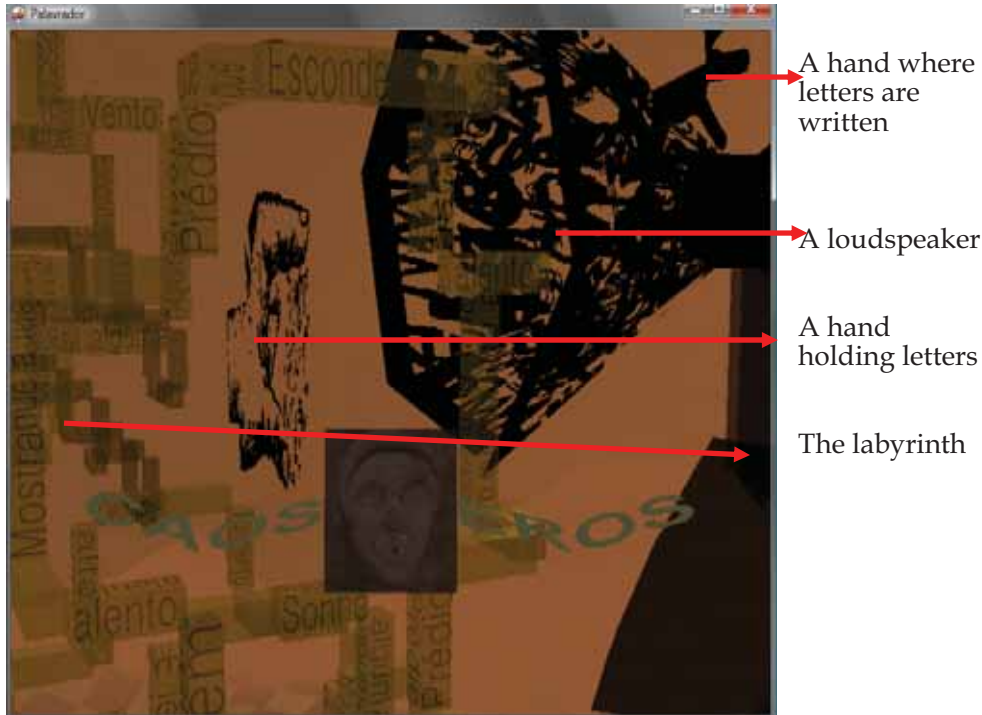


FIGURE 65: Chico Marinho, *Palavrador*

The text simulates the birth of the language and its evolution: from the chaos of the whirlwind, where letters are rotating in a vortex of nonsense, to the labyrinth structure where the words are changing under the reader's eyes, modifying the meaning of the writing, showing the possibilities offered by the electronic writing. This "birth" is also simulated by the generative poems created by the two cursors in this "murmúrios de poemas"⁵². Poems that are not meant to be read, but just to be created. "L'art pour l'art" or the creation for the creation sake.

10. Conclusion

As far as their form of expression is concerned these texts are hybrid: some of them are built from links and sequences Robert Kendall's *Faith* is an example of this, others from segments and sequences like Zahra Safavian's *the murmur of interstices*, others from segments, sequences and links as Given's and Ong's, *Fallow* shows. These texts exhibit different manners of reading practice. In the hybrid form of e-poetry there are "read-only texts", explorative and combinatory texts, but in all cases the reader must somehow interact with the poem.

In Elisa Carlotti's *Il fiume delle parole* the level of interaction required is basic: the reader needs just to scroll the text. At any rate her possibility of reading the text depends on her ability to control the mouse. This text assaults the reader with rhetorical figures and its metrical construction. In order to

⁵² "Murmurs of poems".

appreciate it – its musicality – it should be read aloud, but the digital environment does not seem to be suitable for this type of reading. On one hand *Il fiume delle parole* chooses the digital support as its base – metatextualising its form and content – on the other it proposes – exaggeratingly – rhetorical figures and a metrical rhythm that the 20th century avant-gardes demanded to overcome. *Il fiume delle parole* is a rare example of rhythmic construction in electronic poetry.

A prosody of space⁵³ is offered by Daniela Calisi's *Stillicidio*, while Kendall's *Faith* and Ong's and Given's *Fallow* introduce new media-figures. In *Faith* figures such as "contraction" (the change of the size of the words), "emergence/eclipse" (figure that changes the meaning of the word), and "cinégramme" ("kine-scope" - redundant figure: the text does what it is telling) have been pointed out. Other figures appear also in *Fallow*, like for instance the "sporulation". This "figure" anticipates and concludes the meaning of the verse line. The possibilities given to the reader by the electronic writing create other media-figures such as the "interfacial involution" – the reader's interactive gesture displays the same media contents – and "interfacial antagonism" – interactive gesture provokes the emergence of a type of content that is contrary to the content brought about by the activatable media. Finally Kendall's *Faith* put forward the importance of typography in e-poetry. By focusing on the three levels of entax I singled out, a syntax of the visual aspect of signs can be suggested.

The practice of poetry as game or video-game is explored by works like Jason Nelson's *Birds still warm from flying* and *i made this. you play this. we are enemies* and Chico Marinho with *Palavrador*. *Palavrador* is a particularly interesting work since it was first created for the web and then transformed into an interactive installation simulating a book. The presence of various semiotic systems – the use of images, videos, and sounds – is very common in this typology of text. The possibility of using different forms of expression facilitates the presence of various new-media figures in the same e-poem and produce new aesthetic effects. Maria Mencía's *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs* and Jason Nelson's works, for instance, realizes both the "aesthetic of visual noise" and "the aesthetic of sonic noise"⁵⁴.

The reading practice is still mostly linear, or somehow presume a linearity behind the text as in Rui Torres' *Poemas no meio do caminho*, which however puts forward two ways of reading horizontally and vertically.

In this chapter I also introduced a couple of generative texts, Rui Torres' *Poemas no meio do caminho* and Chico Marinho, *Palavrador*. Which besides being collaborative texts – requiring different skills – are also generative poems, opening up questions concerning subjectivity and authorship as we will see in the next chapter.

⁵³ Jim Rosenberg, *A Prosody of Space / Non-Linear Time*, op.cit..

⁵⁴ Maria Engberg, "Aesthetic of Noise in Digital Literary Arts", op. cit..

CHAPTER 7

ON GENERATIVE E-POETRY AND COLLABORATIVE E-POETRY

“Computers can't create anything. For creation requires, minimally, *originating* something. But computers originate nothing; they merely do that which we order them, via programs, to do”.
Lady Lovelace

The task of this thesis is to set out the discerning reader an “instruction manual” for electronic poems. While going about this task it has also seemed necessary to me to talk specifically about the additional facets of generative and collaborative poetry in order to provide her with a wider view of what electronic poetry is. One cannot really discuss electronic poetry without giving special attention to generative poetry as it played a significant part in the birth and evolution of electronic literature. Similarly the fluid and real-time nature of the electronic environment creates new opportunities for collaborative works. In both cases control is ceded by the author over the resultant content. I will also investigate how the role of the author, the text and the reader change (if they do) in these kinds of e-poems where the machine has a fundamental role: in the first case the machine *generates* the poem, in the second it enables or facilitates the collaboration amongst people that, oftentimes, do not know each other. In both types of text the author seems to give up/to share her role with the reader (and/or with the machine).

The avant-gardes (not just the ones associated with the business of poetry), constantly tried to create their works in new ways and with new supports. “Experimental” literature has been using informatics and computers for its production since the arrival of the new information technologies. As seen in Chapter 1 (sections 11; 13; 13.1; 13.2) the very first examples of electronic poetry were actually generative poems. The first piece of electronic poetry is considered to be Theo Lutz’s *Stochastic Poems* (1959). Then Brion Gysin’s permutation poem *I am that I am*¹ (1960) Balestrini’s *Tape Mark* (1961), Jean

¹ The poem was programmed by Ian Somerville.

Baudot's *La machine à écrire* (1964) and other authors have kept on experimenting with this form of creation that *embraces* the machine².

By the term collaborative poetry I am specifying a new form of poetry (based on the wiki model but not exclusively) that involves different people who do not necessarily know each other. We have seen in the previous chapters some "collaborative" poems, poems created by more than one author. However, that kind of collaboration, it is a "closed collaboration": a certain amount of people (normally two or three) with certain skills (a poet, a programmer, an artist...) agree to collaborate on the same project. "Collaborative poetry" is different: people do not necessarily agree to collaborate on a project, at least not always in advance, they may simply find a webpage where a collaborative poem is instantiated and then decide to collaborate, to leave a mark on that website, with no need to register themselves at the website, to join a group, and perhaps they will contribute with just one text or even with just one letter. This genus of collaboration is an "open collaboration".

Experiments into the nature of collaborative creation have existed before the advent of the internet and personal computers, avant-garde movements such as Fluxus and mail-art already experimented with collaborative writing (see chapter 1), but the electronic environment appears to offer new possibilities to this creation practice. Derrick de Kerckhove defines "collettivale" (something that is collective, but also that makes something be a collective) as those practices that are collaborative, participative and dynamic³.

Getting back to the structure of this chapter, I will first analyse some generative texts: geniwate's *Concatenation*, Philippe Bootz's *L'é robot poète* and Eugenio Tisselli's *Wen* then I will present two examples of collaborative e-poetry – one in French, the other in English – characterised by different forms of collaboration.

1. Generative Texts: Introduction and Examples

Research demonstrates that language bears an essential pragmatic function, in other words based on concrete references. Moreover and beyond the different techniques (rhyming, free verse...), different forms (haiku, proverbs, short stories...) and generative processes (algorithmic syntaxed, phrase matrixed...) the different informatic experiments have been all based on the same principle: that literary writing consists essentially of combined ordering. If what Hartman

² For an accurate history of generative poetry see Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*, Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 2007, pp. 31-84.

³ Derrick de Kerckhove quoted by Jean-Pierre Balpe in "Internet ridefinisce l'estetica della letteratura", Biblioteca Digitale Mediamente, accessibile online at: <http://www.mediamente.rai.it/biblioteca/prov/010611balpe.asp> (accessed, March 18 2006).

says is true: “a poem is nothing but a selection and arrangement of words from the dictionary”⁴ then writing seems like a potentially mechanizable process.

Computer poems can be constructed by designing a framework where only certain components are randomly filled by grammatically appropriate words. According to Chris Funkhouser “[a]ssembling texts using different varieties of a slotted framework was pervasive in the prehistoric era of digital poetry”⁵.

Nowadays it is very easy to find websites containing text generators. One of the most experimented forms of generative poetry is the haiku. Most probably this is due to the formulaic limitations of haiku: the form’s unit of line, usually three and the metrical patterning, five syllables in the first line, seven in the second and five again in the third line. Charles Hartman in *Virtual Muse* explained the popularity of haiku generator by connecting haiku generators to the motivations of imagist poetry. He wrote that “[...] both poets and programmers have realized, for different reasons, the reader’s mind works most actively on sparse materials”⁶. As highlighted by Chris Funkhouser “[haiku’s] brevity made the unwieldy task of programming unique poems more manageable”⁷.

The example I show below is a very basic Italian text generator⁸. In a manner of speaking, one could say that it is naïve.

Vuoto assoluto, nulla santo Segni di luce Del soffio della tua anima ⁹

FIGURE 1: Italian Text Generator of haiku

The poem is a Haiku of 11-5-11 syllables, the poetic text is very short, thus easily manageable and controllable. The obscure associations between words are rendered more logical just by the structure of the poetry. It is the structure of this poem that gives it poeticity more so than the meaning of the words, even though the union of words such as “*segni di luce*” (signs of light. light signs) and “*soffio della tua anima*” (the breath of your soul) reveal a poetic value.

By clicking the button “*generare nuova poesia*” (generate new poetry) the reader can cause new poems to appear in rapid succession in the space of a few seconds. There is no interaction between the “author” and the reader besides the gesture of the reader, her click that makes the poem, existing potentially, appear on the screen.

⁴ Charles O. Hartman, *Virtual Muse: Experiments in Computer Poetry*. Hanover: The University Press of New England, 1996, p.66.

⁵ Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁶ Charles O. Hartman, *Virtual Muse: Experiments in Computer Poetry*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁷ Chris Funkhouser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁸ “Generatore Poesie: Web pages trent”, accessible online at: <http://www.3nt.it/poesie.php> (accessed, November 7 2008).

⁹ “Absolute empty space, nothing holy /Signs of light/Of the breath of your soul...”.

Malda's "Rob's amazing poem generator"¹⁰ is another interesting text generator with a more complex structure. It uses the text contained in whichever web site in order to generate an accidental poetic text: all that is needed is to feed it an internet address. As the program is structured on English grammar, the best poetries are obtained by choosing English web sites. The result is a kind of word-collage. Even if more complex as far as its program is concerned, this second generator also risks being more interesting for the "making" than for what is "made", for the program than for the product. However, in this case the reader with her choice – she decides what web site she would like to use – makes the generative poem quite personal: many readers will probably suggest many different websites over time, then the *text generated* will be *unique*. In this type of text generator the WWW plays a dual function: it serves as a medium to connect the different texts but it also co-participates in the creation of the e-poem and it serves.

With these examples the internet, instead of being only a publishing medium, is also a "productive medium". Quoting Looy and Baetens (2003): "[...] the primary focus is not to produce literary, but rather to test the [...] capabilities of computer programs". The second generator, however, by transforming intentional associations into non-intentional ones, is also related to the idea of "spontaneous emergence", permitted/caused by *medium* of the internet.

"C'est le regardeur qui fait l'œuvre" said Duchamp, in this case it is the reader's chosen path that materially co-produces one of the potential texts.

2. Generative Texts: Analyses

In this section I will introduce and analyse some generative poems. As stated in Chapter 2 (sections 3.1 and 3.3) in analysing generative poetry I will not consider the process. Even if the process is an important aspect of these kind of texts I am just more interested in the final product, in the aesthetic it creates, rather than in the production of it.

Wardrip-Fruin says that in order to understand electronic literature one needs to read both data (words, images, and sounds) and process (algorithms and calculations carried out by the electronic work)¹¹. Different media imply different results – so the peculiarity of the medium has always to be taken into consideration – it is also true that one does not need to know how to use the different painting techniques (watercolour, fresco, oil, and so on) in order to appreciate a painting. In not considering the process in the analysis of generative poetry I am aware that I omit an important aspect, but as already stated, my goal it is to consider the aesthetic and poetic language of e-poetry. The texts I propose to

¹⁰ Rob Malda, "Rob's amazing poem generator", accessible online at: <http://cmdrtaco.net/poemgen.cgi> (accessed, November 7 2008).

¹¹ Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "Learning to Read Digital Literature", in Roberto Simanowski, Jörgen Schäffer, and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Reading Moving Letters*, Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010, pp. 249-259.

analyse have been created in different languages, English, French, and Spanish to show how this kind of writing is played with in different cultures¹². As far as the typology of each text is concerned, I will follow my typology and describe each poem according to its form of expression.

2.1 Geniwate's *Concatenation*

Geniwate, *Concatenation*, at:

http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/geniwate_generative_poetry.html

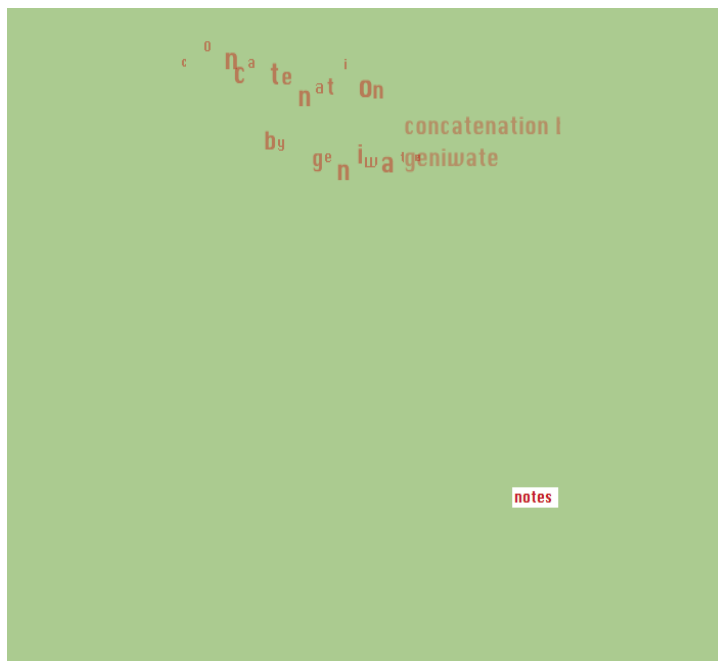


FIGURE 2: geniwate's *Concatenation* – the opening page

Concatenation written by geniwate was published in 2006 in the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1*¹³. According to our typology *Concatenation* is a hybrid e-poem built out of segments – morphological elements without inner clock – and sequences – with inner clock.

The opening page shows a green background where – at the top – letters are unstable, they are pulsating on the screen as though they were alive and

¹² In chapter 6 I analysed “Poemas no meio do caminho” by Rui Torres a generative poem in Portuguese.

¹³ Geniwate, *Concatenation*, in Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, Stephanie Strickland (eds.), *The Electronic Literature Collection*, Vol. 1, October 2006, accessible online at: http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/geniwate_generative_poetry.html (accessed, November 18 2009). *Concatenation* is the first of three e-poems entitled *Generative Poetry*. *Generative Poetry* has been previously published by *Machine Poetics*, accessible online at: <http://machinepoetics.com>, as well as at geniwate's site, accessible online at: <http://www.idaspoetics.com.au> (accessed, November 18 2009).

they were pushing, fighting to move freely. This spasmodic flash of the title suggests that letters and words have transitory yet resounding nature.

At the left a small syntagm “notes” is the link to access to some information concerning the text: the title, the author of the text, a short explanation of it “[the poem] explores a nexus between language and violence”¹⁴, and some references to other authors and to experimental writing. The para-text, again, is in the text and the very first lines of “notes” concern the explanation of the poem, showing that some authors need to suggest the way to read their works.

Even though the poem is interactive (the reader needs to click on the screen in order to make the next verse lines appear) *Concatenation* is predominantly a read-only text. However, it has a quite unique particularity. The reader can erase the text. The cursor in fact can be used for generating the next segment of text but also to cancel it, or part of it (see figures 3, 4, and 5). After the new text has appeared on the screen, the cursor turns into a small white square that looks like an eraser (from a typical bitmap graphics program) and is no longer the traditional cursor. By moving it over the webpage first the background – thus the scattered letters – and then the verse line will be erased. Both letters and verse line stay on the background as a very pale simulacrum of the text once it has been completely disappeared. The text will not change if the reader does not click the page, she can decide to erase the whole text before moving further or she can just partially cancel it.

This is a rare and interesting characteristic of this text. The reader cannot co-write the text, or even re-combine or explore it, but she can subvert the text by erasing it. Then she can transform a read-only text into a text-invisible, thus unreadable.

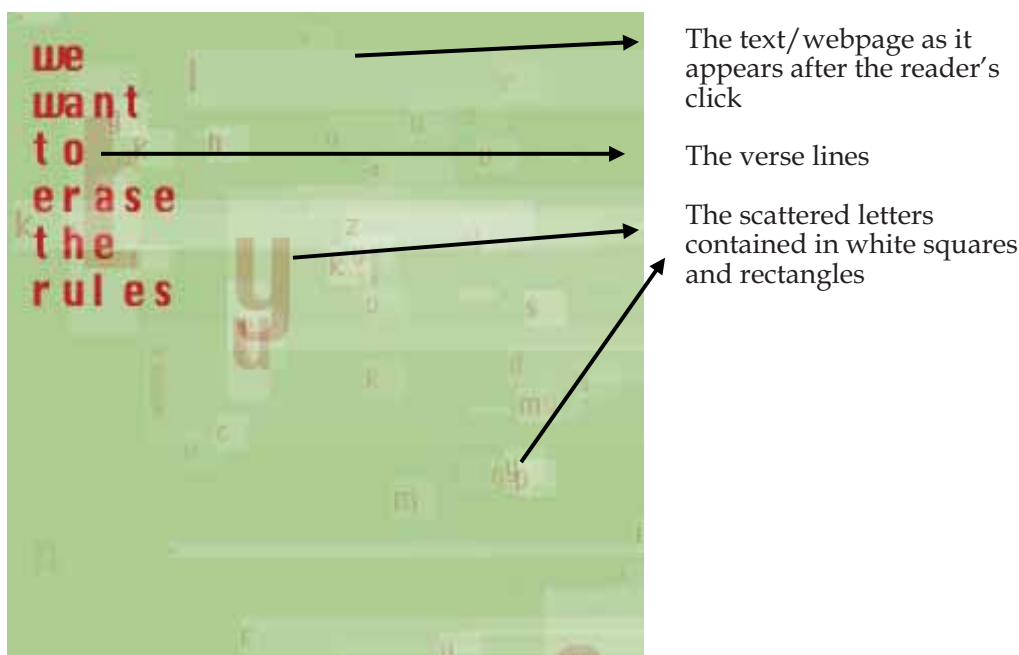


FIGURE 3: geniwate's *Concatenation*

¹⁴ Geniwate, *Notes on Concatenation*, in *The Electronic Literature Collection*, op. cit..

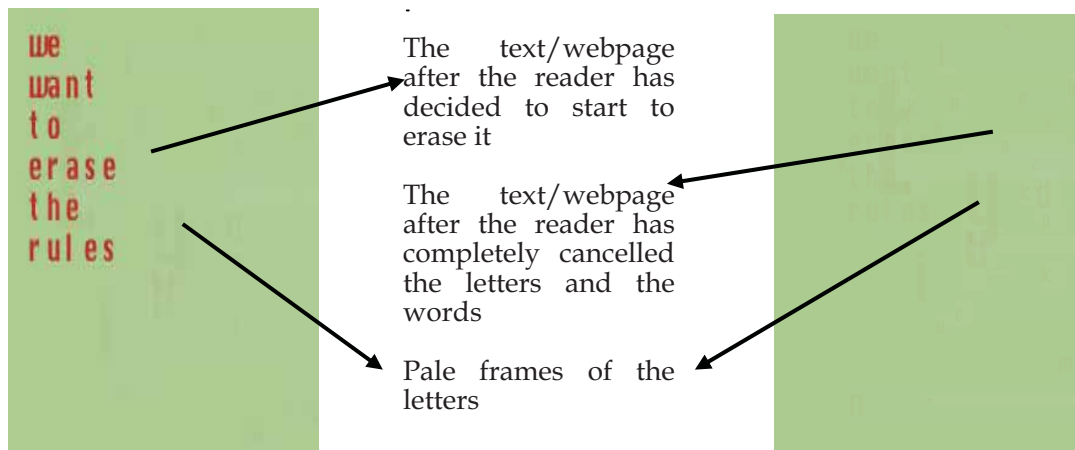


FIGURE 4: geniwate's *Concatenation*

FIGURE 5: geniwate's

The easy erasure indicates that words are easily manipulated, that language can be easily manipulated. Significantly the e-poem has no fixed beginning nor end. Each time that the reader enters the text it can start differently. Leaving the window open for too long without interacting with the text – for instance by opening a new browser tab or moving into a different program – causes *Concatenation* to eventually revert to its title page. The text resists having an end. There is no end for language, and one of the verse lines says “round and round we go”.

To pass from one segment to another the movement of the text itself seems to simulate the selection of the correct morpheme. The text visually reproduces the act of selection that characterizes one of the two axes of language. This simulation is visually interpreted by quickly rotating the letters on the screen. Also, the white squares and rectangles that contain the words are rotating along with the letters. When the correct morphemes are found the words are recomposed in the white rectangles and squares. These squares and rectangles seem on one side to highlight the letter and on the other to hold in boxes where one (in this case the machine) can choose/select the correct morpheme needed in order to create the word. By doing this the poem simulates language: the poem selects and morphs/recombines in a *concatenation* of letters, words and meanings. The reader, furthermore, often reads or mentally forms disjointed words in scattered letters that lay on the screen after the poem has been formed: “concatenation” and “torture” appear regularly. The word torture underlines that “nexus between language and violence”, the author in the “notes” talks about. “Words are bombs”, “I want to erase you” or recombined “we want to erase the rules”, “I want to break the rules but”.

Concatenation manifests an ostensibly endless combination of letters and words, of morphemes and syntagms, combining and recombining them over and over again: “I am constructing connections” or “I am constructing misconceptions” or “we are deconstructing misconceptions” which echoes “I am deconstructing connections”. The poem repeats words, it shuffles and reshuffles their order, recombining letters and words it introduces a difference

in the repetition, quoting Deleuze: “does not the paradox of repetition lie in the fact that one can speak of repetition only by virtue of the change or difference that it introduces into the mind which contemplates it? By virtue of a difference that the mind draws from repetition”¹⁵.

Concatenation is a metatextual poem. It shows what it says: “even my elegy disintegrates”, “graffiti off the walls ricochets” “semtex for syntax we trace”. This poem collapses, explodes, and disintegrates words through rearrangement and disassembly. Morphemes are recombined into new syntagms, and new syntagms are recombined into new sentences. By decentralizing the meaning of words, paradoxically, *Concatenation* shows the power of words and language.

War themes and explosion motifs resound through the text. “[M]y thoughts explode” is one text fragment that often appears when reading the poem. The word “explode” is deconstructed into single letters and rearranged in a circle around “my thoughts”, emulating a bomb. All the letters scattered everywhere reminds one of *shrapnel* after an explosion.

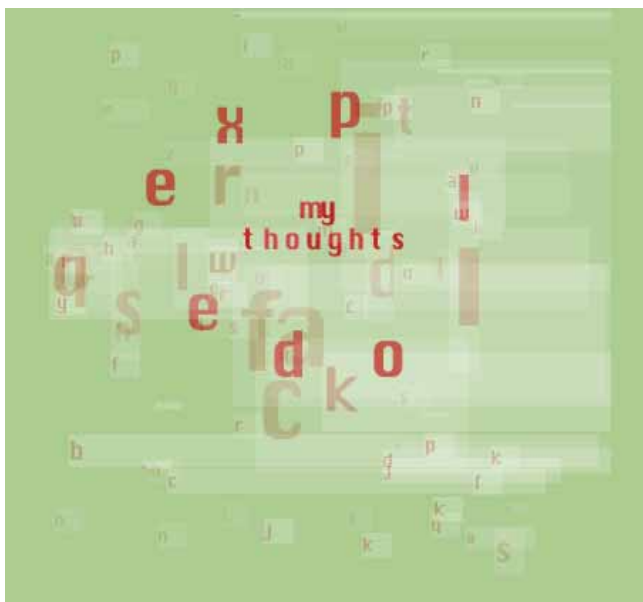


FIGURE 6: geniwate’s *Concatenation*

The entax, or better yet the micro-entax, is particularly significant in this poem. The letters, the words are not positioned at the same places on the screen: sometimes the verse lines appear at the top of the screen sometimes in the central part and so on. They can be recomposed anywhere. They break institutional literary order. But the entax can also be used to highlight the meaning of the poem, as we have just seen with “my thoughts explode” (figure 6) it can be used as a *mise en abyme*.

Even the apparent cohesive colour scheme of the text is not so cohesive as it seems to be and it can be broken. In fact it is disrupted by coloured horizontal silhouettes of “saints” that slide along the screen from left to right when the text

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition*, Paris: PUF, 1968, p. 25.

“help us patron saint of concatenation” appears¹⁶. Both the silhouettes and the words appear in different colours in different moments, particularly “concatenation” can appear in orange, purple, light blue and so on. After this novel text appears, some of the scattered letters will appear in light blue, orange, ..., according to the colour that the word “concatenation” was written in, leaving the trace of this concatenation on the other texts. Showing that the language is a concatenation of used morphemes.

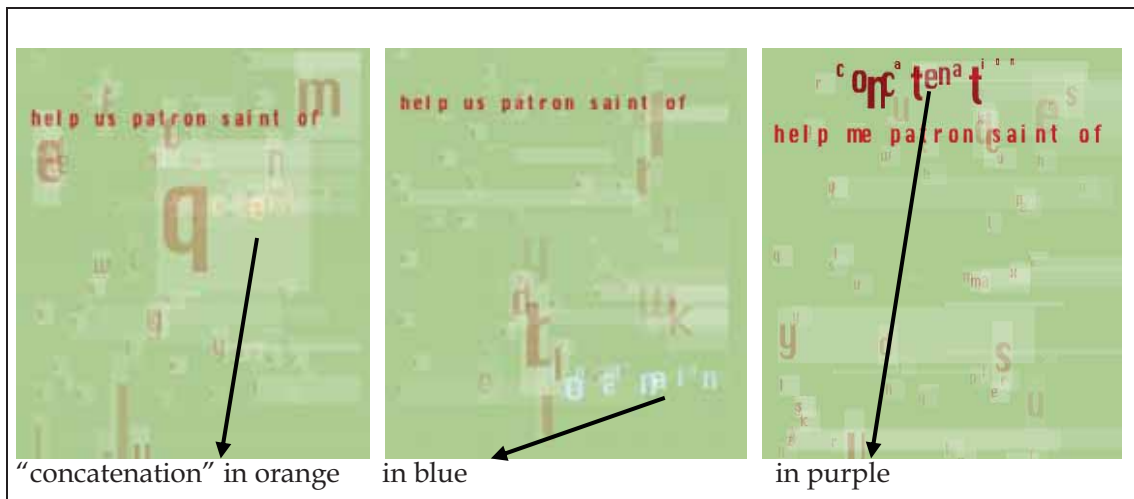


FIGURE 7: geniwate's *Concatenation* – text: “help [us/me] patron saint of concatenation”

This poem explores how violence can deconstruct language and affect new sources of meaning. Here language degenerates, “soldiers teach the grammar of war”; one text asks “how do you say torture” with the letters of torture scrambled, the entax is suggesting textually and visually that the trauma of torture resists coherent definition. *Concatenation* puts forwards an aesthetics of disruption and decay as well as an aesthetic of frustration¹⁷ since the e-poem never ends as new concatenations of letters, words, verse lines and meaning are always possible.

¹⁶ The text can rewrite itself and says “help me patron saint of concatenation”.

¹⁷ Philippe Bootz, “Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms”, in *New Media Poetry and Poetics*, Special Issue, Leonardo Electronic Almanac Vol. 14, No. 5 – 6, 2006, accessible online at: http://leoalmanac.org/journal/vol_14/lea_v14_n05-06/pbootz.asp (accessed, September 21 2010). For a better description of the “aesthetic of frustration” see Chapter 5.

2.2 Philippe Bootz's *L'e robot poète* in "Petits poèmes à lecture inconfortable"

Philippe Bootz, "Petits poèmes à lecture inconfortable", *L'e robot poète*, 2005, at:
http://www.epoetry2007.net/artists/oeuvres/bootz/bootz_index.htm¹⁸



FIGURE 8: Philippe Bootz, *L'e robot poète* – the opening page

Bootz's "Petits poèmes à lecture inconfortable" is a collection of three generative texts that needs the reader interaction in order to be read. I choose to analyse the first one *L'e robot poète*. According to our typology it is a hybrid e-poem based on sequences linked by segments. Even though the reader *must* act on the text, Bootz's work is still a read-only text since the reader cannot manipulate, explore, (re)assemble it, her action is limited to simply reading it. However, as opposed to almost all other poems analysed in this thesis *L'e robot poète* requires physical effort on the part of the reader (see also *Il fiume delle parole* by Elisa Carlotti, chapter 6). Some of the e-poems shown along the way in the previous chapters demanded a curious and sometimes an "inventive" reader. This e-poem works on two planes: a cognitive plane and a physical plane. In order to access the text the reader needs to constantly move her mouse, in way that the cursors keeps on moving over the text, otherwise an opacity is formed making the text invisible. There are different levels of involvement in the reading practice. The way how to read the text is declared on the second screen, where the author explains (ironically) his text.

This physical effort on the one hand captures the reader but on the other distracts her from the reading. The text materializes that aesthetic of frustration

¹⁸ The work was presented during the 4th edition of the International Festival E-poetry, in Paris in 2007 (May 20th-23^d)

that, even though in different ways, many e-poems *offer* to their reader¹⁹ (see chapters 6). Here the reader needs persistently to *touch* the text, otherwise this one first stops working, showing just some flashes of what potentially the reader is missing, and then, after a few seconds, it goes back to the opening page. The text calls for its reader, the flashes are an invitation to the reader for interacting with the text: the text shows for a few instants what there is behind or beyond that sequence. The animation then, it is not just a way of showing the text, but it becomes a conative function: the text calls to the reader to keep on being present. Before going back to the opening page, the text dissolves itself, showing that it cannot exist without the reader. It reproduces the last sequence where the textual content is transformed into numerous detextualised pixels that then vanish, a snow-crash that highlights the “crash” of the text.

In this e-poem the letters, move, fall, push other letters, change their position on the screen. The text is meta-textual “tu écarter ces eaux et la sève de toute fleuve d’atteindre l’essence”²⁰ says one sequence where by moving the cursor over the screen the words – appearing – remove the previous image (see figures 10 and 11).

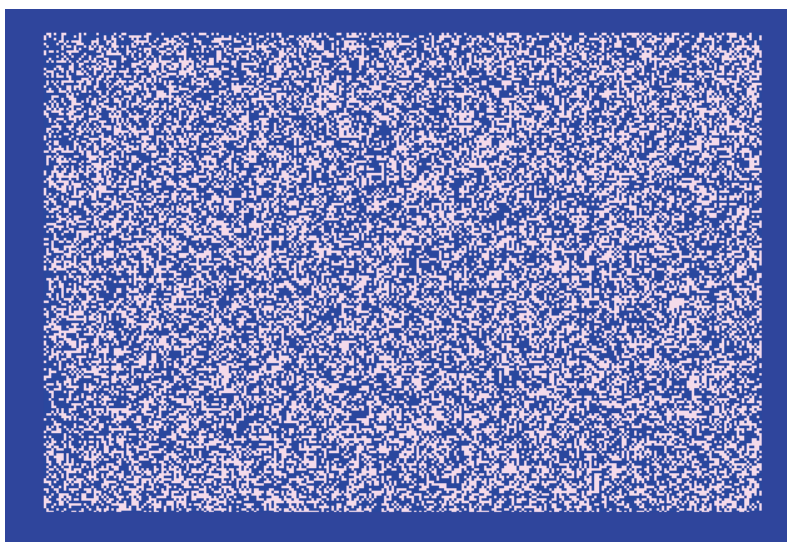


FIGURE 9: Philippe Bootz, *L’e robot poète* – the last sequence

The letters of “arbre” (tree) become leaves that are falling “d’une feuille à l’autre”²¹, but in French the word “feuille” has a double meaning: it means “leaf” (then the leaves from the tree “arbre”) but also it means “sheet”, and the reader by persistently moving the mouse over the screen it is like if she was frenetically turning the pages of a book.

By imposing a specific reading practice that involves the reader’s body – not just the simple gesture of the click, but the effort of moving (quite fast!) the mouse for a number of minutes – a new kind of textuality is produced. The

¹⁹ See note 15.

²⁰ “You remove these waters and the sap of every river to reach the essence”.

²¹ “From a leaf to another”, or “From a sheet to another”.

reader's movements at the same time are distracting her from reading and are allowing her to read.

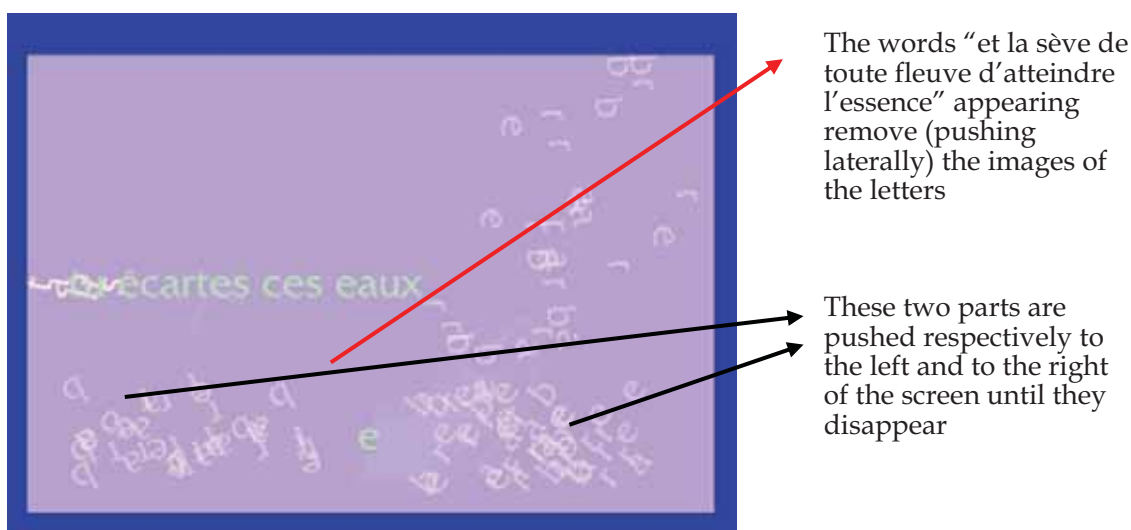


FIGURE 10: Philippe Bootz, *L'é rabet poète*



FIGURE 11: Philippe Bootz, *L'é rabet poète*

Like geniwate's *Concatenation*, Bootz's work – as I have shown – will go back to the opening page if the reader does not interact with it. But here the reason is different: geniwate's work has no end – it generates new texts over and over, *Concatenation* lives a perpetual beginning. Bootz's *L'é rabet poète* needs a reader to exist, if it is not touched it is just a "potential" text and it exists only potentially.

Finally the movements the reader has to perform in order to read the text are the same movements one needs to use the "rabet" (the plane used in woodwork). The computer then, according to this poem, is not a medium but a tool to access the text. And the reader is not just a reader but a "program" of the text: she is forced to read the text exactly how the author conceived it: not only did Bootz program the text, but also he programmed the reading practice.

2.3 Eugenio Tisselli's "MIDIpoet" and *Wen*

"MidiPoet" is first a piece of software and second a project conceived and developed by the digital artist Eugenio Tisselli. The software is for free and can be downloaded at Tisselli's webpage²². It is Windows compatible only, so in order to access the texts which MIDIpoet generates one needs to use a specific computer. MIDIpoet has a very simple interface and is designed to actualize words, rescuing the transience and performance from poetry and adding the visual quality of signs to the setting. It consists of two programs: "Composer" and "Performer", which can be used to compose and perform, respectively, manipulated pieces of text and/or images. These pieces may or may not respond to external impulses, such as MIDI messages or the computer keyboard, and generate visual manifestations involving the manipulation of the different text attributes (content, letter type, position, size, etc.), the image (content, position, etc.) and other visual elements and effects.

The text I will analyse here is Eugenio Tiselli's performance made with the MIDIpoet which is entitled *Wen*. As said in the introduction I have decided not to analyse digital poem of the form of either installation or performance because installations normally require reader interaction and to analyse just a short video - of both installation and performance - as such does not allow a very deep analysis of the text. This thesis has been thought of as a critical tool for those who are interested in electronic poetry, and thus the visibility/legibility of the digital text is very important.

However, I feel that both Tiselli's performance and generative poem are a very interesting form of new textuality enabled by the digital possibilities. Tisselli's work shows another example of generative text: the previous two e-poems require - even though in a different way - the reader's interaction. Their natural support is the computer and they suggest a private reading practice. Tisselli's *Wen* needs an audience that, however, does not interact with the text. It is Tisselli himself that does it.

Last but not least Tisselli's *Wen* is one of the *few* examples of digital poetry in the Spanish language and one of the ends of this thesis is to deal with e-poetry in different languages.

²² Eugenio Tisselli's software MIDIpoet was conceived in 1999 and it can be downloaded at <http://www.motorhueso.net/midipoet/>.

2.3.1 Eugenio Tisselli's *Wen*

Eugenio Tisselli, *Wen*, 2009, at: <http://vimeo.com/8278370>²³

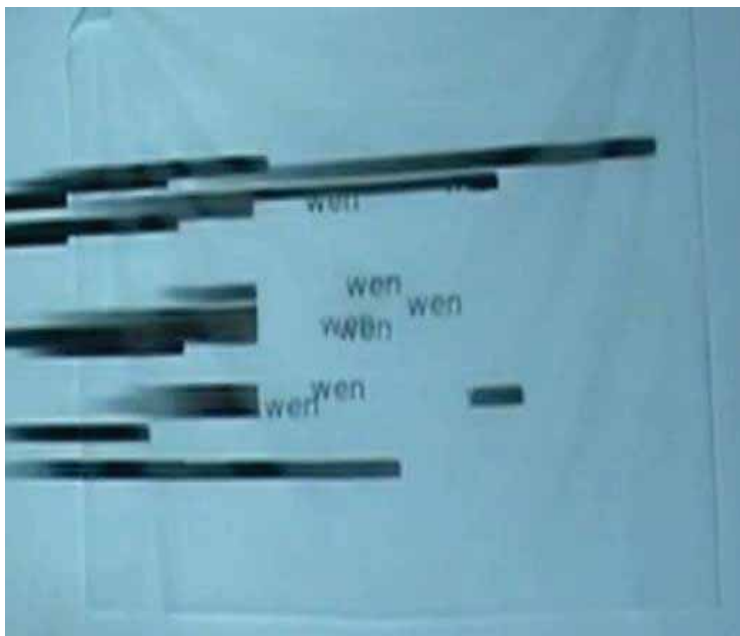


FIGURE 12: Eugenio Tisselli, *Wen* (still at 00:19)

According to our typology this work is built out of segments and sequences but mostly out of sequences, and even though the text in itself is interactive, for the reader (in this case the audience) it is a read-only text since the only “user” that can interact with the text is the author himself, and the interaction is part of the program: it has already been decided when the interaction is needed and what it should produce²⁴.

The text opens with the word “wen” repeated a number of times sliding across the screen horizontally. After a few seconds the same words are flowing down from the top of the screen followed by a kind of smear of their wake as if the words were melting²⁵. Then some of the words “wen” are transformed into “new”, making also readable “new wen”. “Wen” is a Chinese proper noun meaning “elegant, gentle, refined”, but most probably its most important meaning is “literature”. So just after a few seconds of execution, the text is suggesting that *it* is a “new literature”. Lines are blending and streaking across the screen in patterns, and suddenly the words: “no texto sólo textura”²⁶ appear. Texto (text) derives from Latin *textus* that originally derived from

²³ The work the video is taken from was performed at the Galería MX Espai in Barcelona, in December 2009. Tisselli made a very similar performance with the texts in English during the 5th edition of the International Festival of E-poetry held in Barcelona in 2009 (May 24th-27th).

²⁴ In the explorative poems, if not that short, it is difficult to preview all the possible paths to map out the text, This also true for the combinatory texts.

²⁵ The same effect is also being done horizontally.

²⁶ “no text, only texture”.

“textura” (texture). Playing with the word the text regains its meaning. Moreover, one sequence seems to weave the screen (see figure 13). After these words other syntagms appear. Like this alliteration is created: “el agua se aguanta”; “el muro murmura”; “el viento vientre”²⁷, greater than the meaning is the poetic value that the words are feeling their way towards. The words are re-written and transformed into other words. Then another sentence comes up on the screen:

silencio ya
el ruido
ocurre
adentro²⁸

After a few second a white square – simulating a white page – is filled with words that are so numerous that they are unreadable. Tisselli’s work realizes what “aesthetic of visual noise”²⁹. Engberg explains that “visual noise is generated by a tactilely responsive surface in combination with visual excess which requires an embodied engagement from the reader/user in order for a reading to take place”³⁰ (see chapter 6, sections 5). It is interesting to notice that there is no sound accompanying the text and the performance. The previous sentence announces “el ruido” makes by words on the screen.

Suddenly the Chinese ideogram “wen” appears³¹. The appearance of the “literature” marks a breaking point. Until now Tiselli has controlled his performance using just the keyboard of his computer, but now he walks to the screen with a mobile phone which is the new controller to interact with the text. The mobile is an “object-writing” according to Zinna³², one uses it to write.

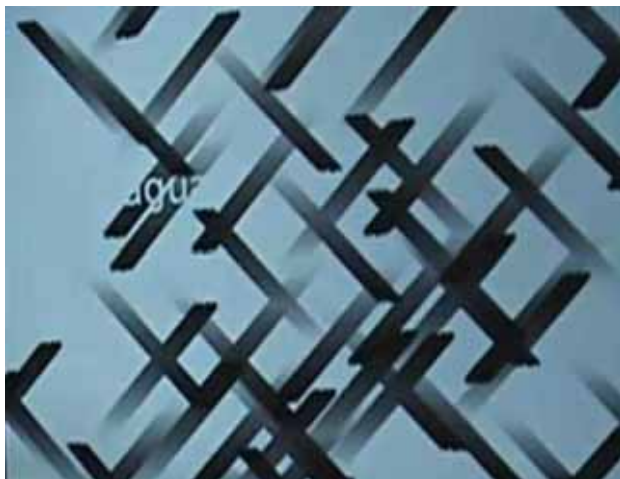


FIGURE 13: Eugenio Tisselli, *Wen* (still at 07:47)

²⁷ “Water holds”; “the wall whispers”; “wind stomach”.

²⁸ “Silence now/noise happens inside”

²⁹ Maria Engberg, “Aesthetic of Noise in Digital Literary Arts”, conference paper presented at *Electronic Literature in Europe*, Bergen, Sept. 11-13 2008, accessible online at: <http://elitineurope.net/node/16> (accessed, September 29 2010).

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Tisselli has also drawn the Chinese ideogram.

³² Alessandro Zinna, *Le interfacce degli oggetti di scrittura*, Roma: Meltemi, 2004, p. 120.

Tisselli is now typing some words and they come up on the screen letter by letter. While typing, some syntagms spin quickly at the bottom of the screen, replacing one another as in a slot machine, looking for the right (combination) of words in order to finish the sentence Tisselli is typing: “el lenguaje ha dejado ser”³³. The ideogram of “wen” appears again and then from the bottom of the white screen a barcode begins to move up.

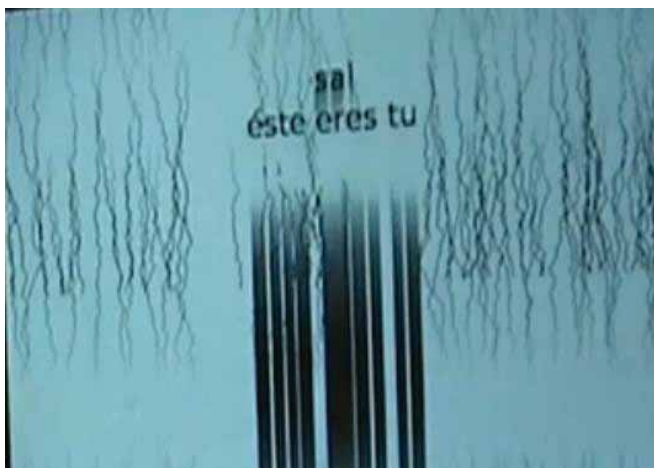


FIGURE 14: Eugenio Tisselli, *Wen* (still at 06:38)

From the barcode words are generated, such as “sé la sal de ti mismo”³⁴ that rewrite themselves a few times: one possible combination is “sal/ éste eres tu”³⁵, that is to say “you are the barcode”, immediately followed by another sentence “éste no eres tu”³⁶. Not only do the words change their combination on the sentence, but also they change their nature: “la sal” noun feminine is transformed into an imperative verb “sal”. Passing from a noun to an imperative the “sal” creates a new media figure the “cine-gramme”³⁷ (or “kinescope”, see also chapters 4 and 6) since the text is now doing what it is saying: it is going up.

Then words keep on occasionally appearing in a screen that is a “texture of lines”, reminds one visually of the previous words “no texto sólo textura”. At this point the words fixed on the screen horizontally and vertically start to move under Tiselli’s command. With his hand Tisselli *makes* the words slide from left to right, stop, go back and down. He controls, commands the text, its words. He transforms the words into black ink, which pours. He touches the screen and he *generates* a group of words, he duplicates, triplicates those words, and he ends the performance and the text composing what seems to be a concrete poem, placing himself into the poem touching the screen and making

³³ “Language has stopped to be”.

³⁴ “I know the worth of yourself”. In Spanish expression *es la sal de la vida*, means it's one of the things that makes life worth living.

³⁵ “Go up/ this is you”

³⁶ “This is not you”

³⁷ Alessandra Saemmer, “Some stylistic devices on media interface”, conference paper presented at *The Network as a Space and Medium for Collaborative Interdisciplinary Art Practice*, 8-10 November 2008 University of Bergen, accessible online at: <http://elitineurope.net/node/29> (accessed, April 20 2010).

the ideogram for literature” appear. The author himself is a part of the “new literature”.

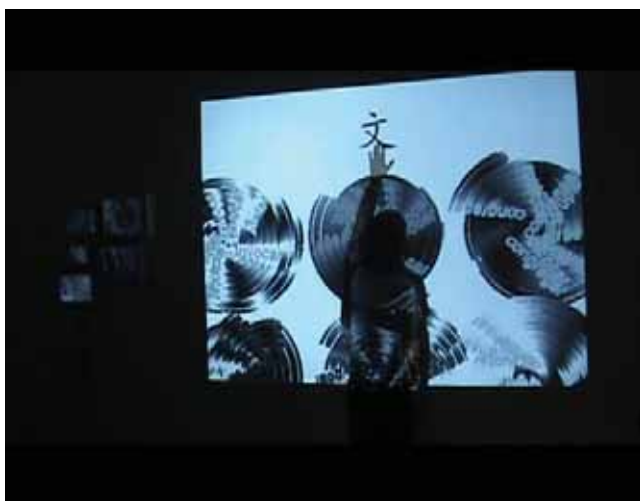


FIGURE 15: Eugenio Tisselli, *Wen* (still at 12:21)

Thanks to “MIDIpoet” Tisselli can fluidly control the performance of the text in real-time. Tisselli selects the text, disassembles it, destroys it and gives re-birth to it. Words are rewritten, meanings are changed and transformed literally and visually. As Tisselli states MIDIpoet is an environment for letting him become a “Text Jockey”.

I invented MIDIpoet because I wanted to become a Text Jockey. Back in 1999, software for playing with texts and images in real time using MIDI messages was either expensive or very difficult to use and, in some cases, both things at once. Facing this scenario, I knew I had to develop my own tools. MIDIpoet is an environment for the composition and performance of pieces in which texts and images can be controlled, altered and remixed in real time, using a computer keyboard or any MIDI device (musical instruments, sensors, etc).³⁸

MIDIpoet is not only software but, as we will see better later, since it reconfigures the relationship between author and reader introducing the machine-software we can define it as a meta-author.

3. Collaborative E-poetry

As I explained in the beginning of this chapter what I mean by collaborative poetry is that kind of poetry made by people that do not necessarily know each other and that are not necessarily belong to a group or a collaborative writing project. Even though in art but also in literature collaboration have always existed, the form of collaboration that the internet is allowing seems to be quite different from before. The kind of collaboration I am referring to is an “open” collaboration: anyone can join the project. Even though each project exhibits

³⁸ Eugenio Tisselli, “MIDIpoet” and “MediTrash”, 3 September 2010, accessible online at: <http://romaeuropafakefactory.blogspot.com/2010/09/eugenio-tisselli-midipoet-and-media.html> (accessed, September 22 2010).

different characteristics and different ways of participating in the collaborative project, the collaboration is always open.

Generally speaking there are three main kinds of collaboration: a) hidden collaboration (one or more persons participating in the creative process who are not openly mentioned); b) declared collaboration (as seen in the previous chapters some e-poems are created by more than one author each with different skill sets) and c) open collaboration. We can consider the first two forms of collaboration as “closed collaboration” (most probably some of the poems in the previous chapters were created thanks to a hidden collaboration as well). The “closed collaboration” (both the hidden and declared type) normally concerns skills; open collaboration involves other factors as we will see soon.

The two examples I analyse have similar characteristics but present also some peculiarities regarding the construction of the collaborative poems. In the first example, *VenusPoetry*³⁹, there is a collaborative writing process that focuses on the construction of many texts, we could say a collection of poems: the reader/author can write a single text, many texts, and change one or more texts. Texts can also be sabotaged by the reader/author. The second example, *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains*⁴⁰, concentrates on the construction of the poetic text letter by letter. I chose these two examples because, generally, collaborative writing projects have quite a short life span, while these two projects have been in existence for a few years by this stage. *VenusPoetry* is a project that I have been following for the last 2 years and *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains* started in 2004 and now there is a second version of the project.

3.1 *VenusPoetry*

VenusPoetry Project, *VenusPoetry*, at: <http://www.venuspoetry.com/>

³⁹ VenusPoetry Project, *VenusPoetry*, accessible online at: <http://www.venuspoetry.com/> (accessed, November 30 2008).

⁴⁰ “One pencil for all hands”. Jérôme Monceaux, *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains*, 2004, accessible online at: <http://voote.phpnet.org/mambo/index/> (accessed, November 4 2008).



FIGURE 16: VenusPoetry Project, *VenusPoetry* – the opening page

The webpage opens on an image of Botticelli's "Venus". As written on the website the project was created by a decorative painter and a web designer/developer whose idea was to mix two different artistic systems: poetry and painting. "Botticelli's painting" contains 388 pages of poetry. The "pages" are links on the painting. The links connect to different webpages. The structure of the text simulates the printed poem, with numbered "pages/links". Knowing that there are 388 pages the reader feels that she controls the text, she knows when it ends; however, the links on the painting are placed randomly and to proceed linearly through the text from page 1 to page 388 is impossible. Once the reader clicks one of the pages/links she will see a couple of lines on a page that has (not) been started or a poem that someone else (or many other people) already have written. She can decide then to start a new poem, to modify a poem that exists, or to re-edit an old poem that someone else changed. "Feel free to start a new page or edit someone else's work if you have something to contribute, but please do it thoughtfully"⁴¹ suggests the website.

The reader accesses the first page by clicking the very first touchable part of the painting on the bottom right of the screen – and not at the top, as maybe it should be according to our Western way of reading. At the top-left of the painting is the link to the last page, page 388. So even though a linear reading practice is suggested then this is impossible, and the reader upon clicking on the screen accesses the pages in a random order.

⁴¹ VenusPoetry Project, *VenusPoetry*, on "about", *op. cit.*.

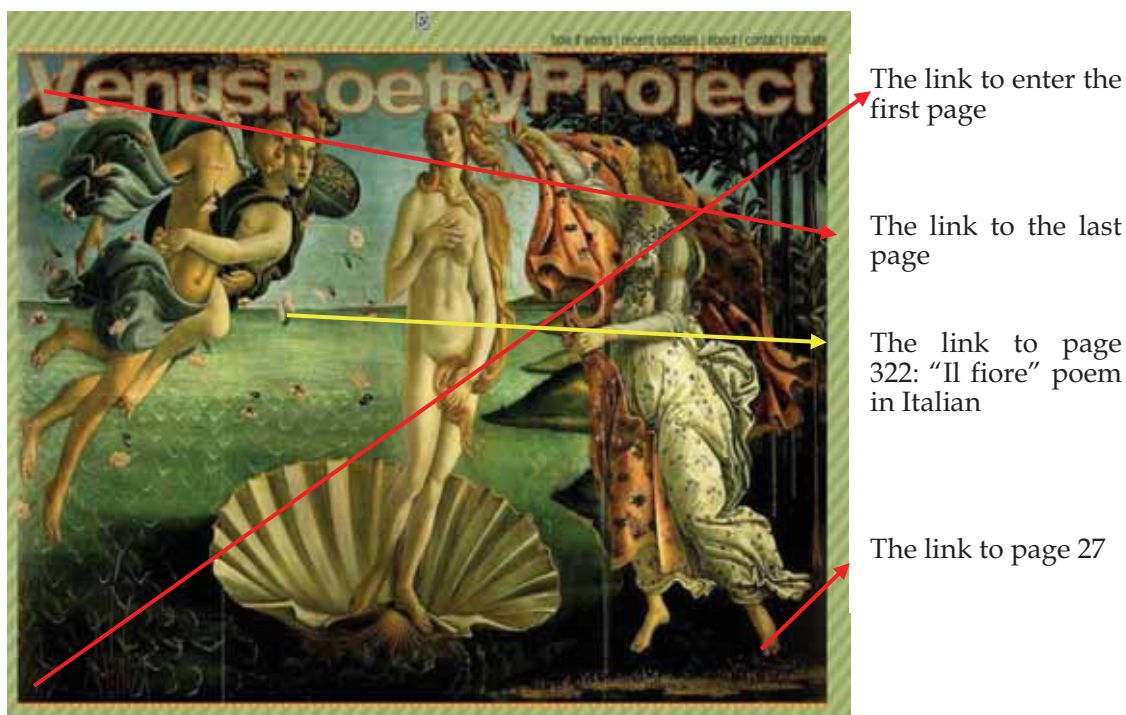


FIGURE 17: VenusPoetry Project, *VenusPoetry* – the opening page

Page 1 is not really a poem but more a thought about poetry and the project itself: “Poetry can be a very personal reflection of one's feelings. Would people want to share in such a public way? Maybe since it is anonymous.” The first page explains this work: the collaboration is anonymous so there is no need to be enrolled in the project, obtaining a username and a password. The reader stumbles upon this website and suddenly she can decide to be a writer, a “poet”, instead of being *only* one of the readers of the text.

Many pages/links are still empty, but some others have been modified and re-edited several times. It seems then that the “users” of this website prefer to re-write previous texts rather than create new ones. Page 362 shows 7 different poems (each of which is possible to re-publish – see figure 18) but the new poems contain just the title “What was lost”. The person who decided to erase the last poem and just to leave the title obviously was playing with the possibilities offered by this website in the sense that it allows everyone to play the role of the author by erasing parts of individual texts or removing whole texts, while the old texts live on in the bottom right part of the screen as a trace of what the text was and has become thanks to the collaboration of different anonymous authors⁴².

⁴² I noticed visible mark-up and codification errors in some texts. Neither the conceiver of the project nor the other readers seem to be interested in correcting those mistakes, which would be normal in printing editions where they would be considered printed errors.



FIGURE 18: VenusPoetry Project, *VenusPoetry* – page 362

Some texts are quite long, other are composed of just one verse line (or solely the title as we have just seen). Some poems are related to the painting, for instance poem 361 talks about “Beauty”, others are more a sort of a joke, as for instance poem 98:

because you are somewhere
 because you are standing
 because you ask why
 Someone help me understand
 Why I am still standing here.

The possibility of modifying the text so easily sometimes can really sabotage the text. For example the text entitled “Beauty” – that presents a poetic structure – was modified by someone and now ends with “hi mom, look im a poet”.

Blinding asphalt on ribbon roads through hills
 built like firm breasts. Hand clutched on the shift stick
 knuckles white tight and smooth. Your rough voice fills
 the arched car cave, splintering the air. Thick
 with all we made last night, all we found there
 in dark so deep it's liquid. You are caught
 in my slick throat, scratchy, sinewy, bare
 and I throw back my head, laughing gun shots
 fired in the wake of whatever it was

we had. These words spell history in black
 and white though I don't see all life that way.
 I don't see you that way. My language lacks
 the strength to show you who I am. So I'll
 keep driving and keep quiet for awhile.
 hi mom, look im a poet

The project is run in English but there is a poem in Italian: page 322, that can be found by clicking on a flower in the painting; the poem is entitled “Il fiore” (the flower). Nobody has re-edited this text – there is just one version – which shows that most probably the project is used by English native speakers.

The project is still developing; many poems have yet to be created in order for all the pages/links to have been filled. However, *VenusPoetry* is a collaborative project that has been ongoing for a few years, keeping alive the interest of the readers/authors. Being an open project where it is possible to re-edit each text in theory it will never end unless the readers/authors stop having interest in it. In this case it is more the reader that preserves the existence of the text/project.

3.2 *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains*

Jérôme Monceaux, *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains*, 2004, at:
<http://voote.phpnet.org/mambo/index/>



FIGURE 19: Jérôme Monceaux, *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains* – the opening page of the website

Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains is a project that contains three different sub-projects, as it were, in two languages: French and English. The French version,

however, has always been more used and active, and is richer in information compared to the English one. There are three collaborative sub-projects: a “manifesto”, a story and a poem. I will analyse just the collaborative e-poetry but the other texts work in accordance to the same rules.

Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains is original not only because the readers collaborate in the poetic production, but also because they collaborate in a “democratic” way. This experience got under way in 2004 and continues to this day, even though is not as active as it used to be⁴³. The aim, as mentioned, is to create a collective poetic text. However, unlike the majority of collaborative texts, this project requires a letter-by-letter, atom-by-atom composition.

The reader/writer has access to a circular virtual keyboard, containing a range of the symbols of a normal keyboard. She votes by clicking the “keys” on this keyboard. Some of these keys have other functions, i.e. they allow erasing the last letter, the last word, or the last sentence.

The reader's choice takes place in two steps: the first vote is “blind”, while the second allows the reader to take into consideration the results of the first round by showing a count of the letters or symbols that have been clicked (see figures 20 and 21). The first vote is unalterable, while the second can be modified: in this way the “personal instinct” may join the “collective instinct”. The first keyboard does not allow each reader to see the other readers’ votes. In the second round the scores of the votes are displayed but to keep some randomness a first blind vote has been maintained. The new keyboard for the first vote reinforces this “blind” vote by having a question mark on it.

The first character to obtain 12 votes is registered. I would like to quote one of pieces of “advice”, given by the text, which seems particularly significant:

Ayez en tête, le sens du texte déjà rédigé, le mot que vous aimeriez écrire et la phrase que vous pensez voir sortir. Débridez votre imagination, libérez vos rêves pour profiter pleinement de votre implication dans les votes et dans l'inspiration du texte.⁴⁴

In order to allow interactivity, once a syntagmatic unit is complete, it is necessary to intervene to make the text advance. This progression determines a change of image, of sound, etc... The interactive text introduces the pragmatic narrativity of the receiver which is realized through her participation with the development, building or creation of the hypertextual process, like a series of actions enforced by their reading practice.

With collaborative poetry we have not only the “classical” problems of the interpretation and the author-function, but also what we may call the

⁴³ Users keep on registering to the website even though it is not strictly required to be registered in order to produce the text. I checked the registration list for the last time on the 4th of November 2010.

⁴⁴ Jérôme Monceaux, *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains*, 2004, *op. cit.*.

“Keep in mind the meaning of the text already written, the word you would like to write and the sentence you would like to make appear. Unleash your imagination, free your dreams in order to completely enjoy your involvement in voting and in being inspired by the text”.

unpredictability of the work; every text, every creative practice will realize a single moment of the work. Particularly in this last example the involvement of the reader is increased to the point that her reading practice has to be converted into written practice so that the text perpetuates itself.

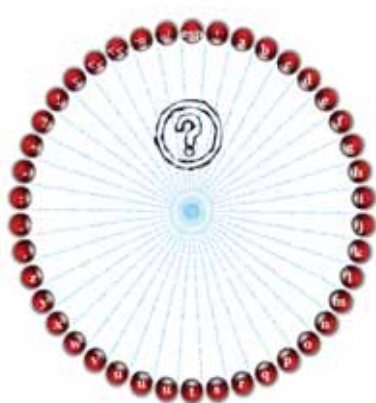


FIGURE 21: J. Monceaux, *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains* - the first keyboard, blind vote



FIGURE 20: J. Monceaux, *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains* - the second keyboard showing the other readers' choices

As far as numerical collaboration is concerned, it does not mean that a whole work is built by each collaborator, nor to participate in a work in movement, but it deals with an "involved" subject that creates the work, that create the movements of the work, the traces of the work, to re-write it so that it may keep on existing⁴⁵.

4. Conclusion

In these collaborative texts the "reader" can decide to participate in the building of poetry, so she can choose to co-participate in the dialogue which begins with an author, but which is only partially checked by the author. In this kind of text the "reader" is invited to take part in the process of text creation: the reader in the role of co-author and poetry as an open structure.

According to Carlo Infante⁴⁶, collaborative writing on the net exercises a new sensitivity: that is to say to pass from the expressive dimension to an associated search. And this is the important element: in electronic writings

⁴⁵ Cf. Giovanna di Rosario, "For an Aesthetic of Digital Poetry", in Ana Pano (ed.) *Littératures numériques en Europe: état de l'art*, RiLune numéro monographique 5 - July 2006, pp.1-13, accessible online at: <http://www.rilune.org/mono5/articlesnumerique.htm> (accessed, July 22 2009).

⁴⁶ Michela Aveta, Simona De Pascalis, and Francesca Sanzo, "Intervista a Carlo Infante", in *Bollettino 900, Electronic Newsletter of '900 Italian Literature* (2002-2003), at: <http://www3.unibo.it/boll900/numeri/2002-i/W-bol/Infante/Infante.html> (accessed, November 7 2006).

(segmental, sequential, hypertextual, hypermedial and/or generative), we always remain within domain of the expression, while with collaborative writing there is evidently an advancement, in that we are faced with the new social paradigm of the act of communication: to be author is no longer the most important thing; on the contrary, as Carlo Infante points out the writing is no longer developed vertically but horizontally⁴⁷.

The collaborative work is not a finished product but a subjugated virtual reality because of the modifications of other authors/readers. We can actually define them as real *wreaders*. *Wreader* is a mixture of writer and reader, since she writes after a fashion her own text as she acts on it, as she develops the reading path in one way or another⁴⁸. With collaborative texts the *wreader* becomes the conjunction of two practices: the reading and the writing ones. The author of a collaborative work is actually a project-creator; she proposes a project which precisely proceeds thanks to the "rewriting" of other *wreaders*. Thus the work is really open, but it is a transitory work. Indeed re-creative art, it is an art of reality, of a reality in metamorphosis. An art combined at the present: *hic nunc*.

As for text generators, also, the concept of author changes: the author is not an author anymore but a potential text author. It seems to materialize that kind of "positive dehumanization of the language" sought by Balpe⁴⁹, in which the text/writing is the element that has priority. This mechanical creation would seem to "de-value" the person and at the same time "re-valorise" writing. As one easily understands as far as some generative, collaborative and interactive works are concerned, if the reader does not memorize her own choices through the text, that text will just fade without hope of it re-emerging. However, this fact seems unimportant as far as the reader's subjectivity is concerned, because in this way the subject/reader co-traces her own text (making it unique). Giselle Beiguelman introduces the concept of "meta-author"⁵⁰ and Raine Koskimaa talks about a "cyborg author"⁵¹. A "cyborg author deals with the complex of combination of human and machine jointly producing texts with literary qualities.[...] the networked computer cannot be seen only as a tool for writing, but rather as a partner in creative process". Both Beiguelman and Koskimaa enlarge the problematic to the technologized world, I would rather prefer to focus only on digital texts. However, according to Koskimaa the cyborg author is a significant phenomenon at least for two reasons: first the

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ George Landow, *Hypertext 2.0, The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

⁴⁹ Jean-Pierre Balpe, "Pour une littérature informatique: un manifeste..." , in Alain Vuillemin and Michel Lenoble (eds.), *Littérature et informatique. La littérature générée par ordinateur*, Arras: Artois Presses Université 1995, accessible online at: http://www.univ-reunion.fr/t99_miroirs/multi_ct/littinfo/1_balpe.htm (accessed, November 29 2008).

⁵⁰ Cf. Giselle Beiguelman, "The reader, the Player, and the Executable Poetics", in Jürgen Schäffer and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Beyond the Screen: Transformations of Literary Structures, Interfaces and Genre*, Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010, pp.403-426.

⁵¹ Raine Koskimaa, "Approaches to Digital Literature: Temporal Dynamics and Cyborg Authors", in Roberto Simanowski, Jürgen Schäffer, and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Reading Moving Letters*, Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010, pp. 129-143.

cyborg author gives new possibilities for new types of expression and literary communication. Second, the computer programs support the human author in reflecting language from a new prospective and in analysing the new digital environment.

Aarseth proposes a typology of authors in the “machine-human continuum”. Aarseth’s typology refers to the whole creation that involves a machine and not specifically about the role of the machine in co-creating e-poetry, when the machine substitutes the human author in the creating process. He says:

Given a machine for producing text, there can be three position: 1) preprocessing, in which the machine is programmed, configured, and loaded by human; 2) co-processing, in which the machine and the human produce text in tandem; 3) postprocessing, in which the human selects some of the machine’s effusions and excludes others.⁵²

In his book *La technologie dans l’art*⁵³ Couchot wonders who or what is the prevailing subject in texts that have the machine as a co-author or meta-author⁵⁴ - the impersonal subject *On* (one) or the personal *Je* (I). What is the role of the author (and furthermore the reader) in a mechanized work? As defended by some critics the author should not and should never be allowed to express herself - expose her feelings or show her own ego - but in compensation will she be allowed to symbolize in an impersonal fashion and method the human potential? With the emergence of AI it seems in a yet indefinite way that *On* may reach certain processes unique to thought.

In addition to the existence of an *ON* subject, in some generative texts, as in geniwate’s *Concatenation* (but also in Rob Malda’s “Rob’s amazing poem generator” there is a re-emerging subject *JE*. It seems that these texts propose Derrida’s text model: no longer homogeneous and mastered by the author who has written (programmed) it, but on the contrary a model structured in plural and different ways, thought more like a woven fabric of traces and setbacks which really makes of them an eventful manifestation (I would add subjective manifestation), a point of perpetual transformation in an original written movement. In short with mechanical enunciation one achieves both subtraction and restitution of bio-mechanical subjectivity.

The mechanical flux (the cybertext), which I am arguing here permits a loss of power in respect to personal subjectivity, in fact, seems to re-allow the subject *JE* to re-appropriate *her* role, *her* own possibilities.

De toutes les hybridations vers lesquelles le numérique incline, c’est l’hybridation du sujet et de la machine, à travers les interfaces, qui est la plus violente et la plus décisive. Violente parce qu’elle projet le sujet - aussi bien l’auteur de l’œuvre que le spectateur [...] -, dans une situation nouvelle où il est mis instamment en demeure

⁵² Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 135.

⁵³ Edmond Couchot, *La technologie dans l’art*, Nîmes: Éd. Chambon, 1998.

⁵⁴ Giovanna di Rosario, “Macchine Letterarie: da Gulliver a Brutus”, in Alessandro Zinna (ed.), *Semiotica delle macchine*, Urbino: CISL, Working Papers, (347-348-349/C), 2005, p. 37-49.

de se redéfinir; décisive, parce que l'émergence de ce que l'on pourra appeler un art de l'hybridation dépend d'elle.⁵⁵

Style is what distinguishes and what collectively unifies, the notion of style – with this double meaning – unification and differentiation – seems to find a renewed meaning and function in the works analysed in this chapter, which are capable of creating a variable (a difference) in the absolute (in repetition).

However, the risk in certain cases (besides the obvious banal machine-written texts, the inconsistencies of the text, the insufficient poetic style...) is the insistence on stressing the plane of expression instead of stressing the plane of content, that they do not have anything of interest or value to say one hesitates to point out, they do not have a subject *JE*, but an *ON* subject which talks about *itself* and finds us in front of texts like a programme instead of a production result.

It seems to me that these kinds of texts give literature a ludic face: the reader plays the role of the author, the author experiments with programming or she shares her function. Through these texts it is possible to test a less “serious” relationship with literature. Obviously collaborative writing opens a problematic concerning authorship, but on the other hand this kind of writing allows a real horizontal link between author and reader. Even though computers and the internet offer a non-hierarchical creative practice examples of collaborative writing sites are not so numerous. It suggests that reader still needs author: writing poetry or fiction is a demanding purpose that could be amazing and fascinating but it is also difficult and ambitious.

In the collaborative texts, therefore, an object is built through a dialogue which begins with an author, but she only checks it partially. The reader as well has not control of the text and even if she is a *wreaders* allowed to write and sometime to erase texts is not simple subject of the collaborative texts, but she should be considered as a “program” of the collaborative work. In fact if the *wreaders* stop working on the text, the text will simply die.

⁵⁵ Edmond Couchot, *La technologie dans l'art*, *op. cit.*, p. 93 . “Among all hybridizations the digital tends to, is the hybridization between the subject and the machine, through the interfaces, which is the most violent and most decisive. Violent because it projects the subject – both the author of the work and the viewer [...] – within a new situation where she is demanded to redefine herself, decisive, because the emergence of what we can call an art of hybridization depends on it.”

CONCLUSION

“No puede haber sociedad sin poesía”
Octavio Paz¹

Electronic poetry encompasses works very different from one another. Talking about electronic poetry as just one creative form seems to be inaccurate. On the other hand the interest one can have in electronic poetry seems to reside exactly in the diversity which electronic poetry can offer to its reader. Throughout this thesis I have tried to show the diverse textualities put forward by electronic poetry on the net. The variety is remarkable, and I feel that it is this variety that makes e-poetry attractive from a poetic point of view. This variety shows the potentiality of (electronic) writing in general and of the (electronic) poetry in particular.

My study is an empirical approach to e-poetry. In choosing my corpus I selected only poems that were created to be readable online (with the exception of Eugenio Tisselli's *Wen*, see chapter 7). It is my intention that this thesis should be a useful tool (a sort of critical anthology) that allows the reader to approach this new form of poetry emerging with the advent of these new technologies. In this thesis I described and provided a close-reading of 35 texts. In selecting my corpus I chose from many different languages: English, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish – trying to give the reader a broad panorama.

In studying these texts I used three interconnected approaches: historical, descriptive and analytic. According to Slavoj Žižek those who propose new terms “[...] in order to grasp what is going on today [...] miss the contours of what is New. The only way to grasp the true novelty of the New is to analyze the world through the lenses of what was “eternal” in the Old”². That is the reason why I felt it necessary to devote the first chapter to the relationship between images and writing and also to deal with the last century avant-garde movements, to map out the “new contours” offered by electronic poetry following, these experimental creative practices that have always existed in

¹ Octavio Paz, “Los signos en rotación” (1967) in *El arco y la lira. El poema. La revelación poética. Poesía e historia* (1956), México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1967, p. 284. “There can be no society without poetry”.

² Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, London and New York: Verso, 2009, p. 6.

poetry. Mallarmé's 19th century *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* is the clearest example of an inflection point in poetry. It suggests another "syntax" of the space. His work would influence poetry for the next couple of centuries. But literature in general and poetry in particular before the Gutenberg era used textual space differently. And if on the one hand electronic poetry reminds us of oral poetry, on the other hand there are important similarities in the contamination of images and words between e-poetry and pre-printed texts. The last century avant-gardes with their *desacralization* of poetry opened up vistas of new experimentation, that find in the electronic poetry their natural continuum either in the way that the "digital" is conceived as a medium or that it is seen as a tool with which to create – as for instance *L'e rabot poète* by Philippe Bootz. This text forces the reader to use it like a tool, like a plane ("rabot"): without the planar movement, without reproducing that movement with the mouse, the text is not readable (see chapter 7).

Again because of this need of looking for the "new contours" put forward by e-poetry I felt necessary to devote the second chapter to summing up some of the most important approaches to digital texts and to going over the methodologies used, without proposing any revolutionary terms nor approaches. I simply adapted the existing theories to the emerging poetic form, also evaluating whether the new challenge that these theories – first semiotics – have to face would give results in the analysis of e-poetry.

My goal was to make the study of electronic poetry more systematic in order to approach it, to describe it, to analyze it and then to appreciate it more easily. The categorization I suggested concerns only the different expression forms which already exist. I categorize the e-poems according to two axes (see figure 1). One axis focuses on the form of the expression (Hjelmslev): segments (texts without inner temporality), sequences (with inner temporality), hypertexts (texts based on the link construction), and hybrid poetry (when two or more of the previous types are used to create the text). And the other axis takes into consideration the possibilities that the e-poem offers to the reader: "read-only texts" (the reader does not need to interact with the text and if she interacts with it this interaction is minimal and can be compared to the turning of the page in printed literature); "explorative texts" (the reader explores the texts either in its possible construction – such as in some hyper-poems – or she explores the space of texts – that can also be in 3D); "combinatory texts" (the reader recombines given options: either these options are controlled by the author, or they are not), "constructive texts" (the reader becomes the author of parts of the text).

My intention was to approach e-poetry in a broad way in order to be able to categorize the new aspects e-poetry appears to introduce in poetry. Many different questions have been taken into consideration: the relation between aesthetics and rhetorical figures and e-poetry; the new time and space offered by the digital environment; the relationship between author-text-reader; and the relationship between the author and the machine; the borders of e-poetry as a "genre" of poetry and its playfulness.

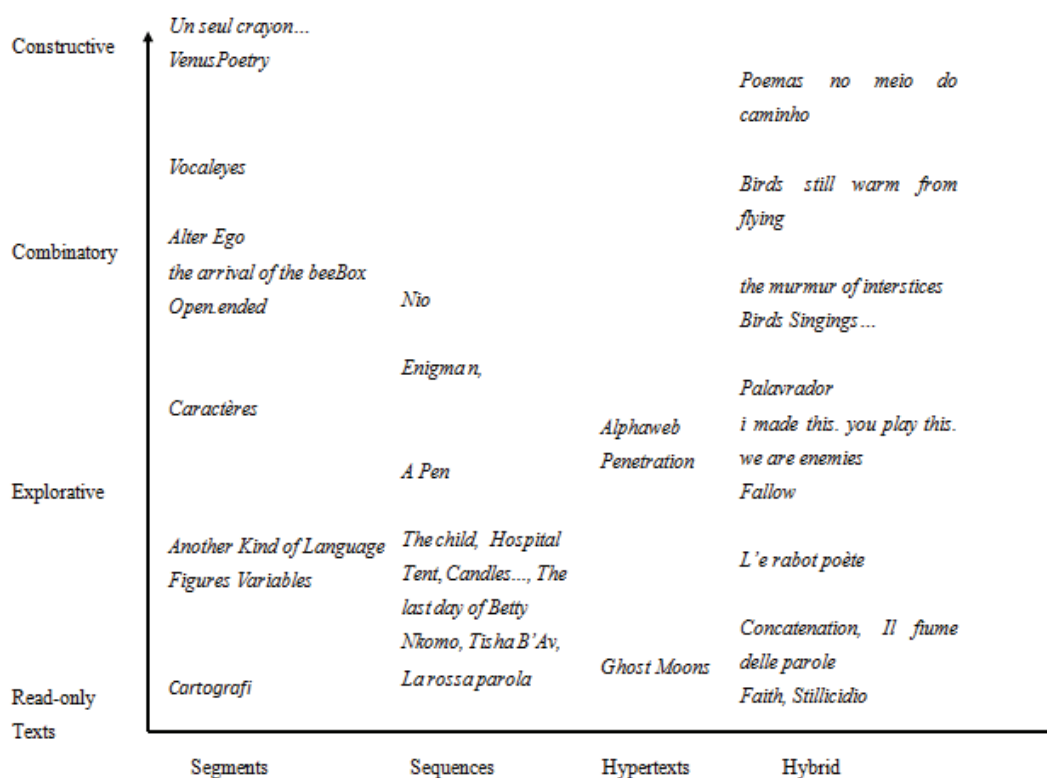


FIGURE 1: Electronic poetry's typology

The different semiotic systems adopted and assembled to create the e-poems offer a great variety of creation. There are texts that are mostly graphic texts, whose structure clearly reminds the reader of poetry (in the classical meaning of the word), such as Marie Bélisle's *Alter Ego* (see chapter 3) and Elisa Carlotti's *La rossa parola* (see chapter 4). Bélisle and Carlotti experiment with the possibilities of the electronic writing putting forward a very classical and recognizable form of poetry. Bélisle creates poems that change in meaning and sometimes in length like *Figures* (see chapter 3); Carlotti produces poems that have a rigid metric composition. This can be explained because those texts were published in around 1999-2000 (there is no year of publications for Bélisle's and Carlotti's works, but somehow we can reconstruct the period from their website). They can be considered as the first experimentations in e-poetry accessible online. But it is also true that other authors prefer to focus on the graphic text only, such as Daniela Calisi, and her works are datable to around 2004-2007.

However, electronic poetry seems to be more than just graphic text. The majority of e-poems unifies images and words, following the tradition of visual and concrete poetry like Jim Andrews' works (see chapter 4) which propose – quoting Giselle Beiguelman a “dynamic fusion” of different elements, or Given's and Ong's *Fallow* (see chapter 6), where vintage images are used to illustrate a poem that talks about memory and oblivion. According to

Beiguelman “[i]n this liquid reading context the difference between text, [and] image [...] becomes relative”³, and for many e-poems this is absolutely true.

Then there are poems that add images and sound to the graphic text. Following the tradition of videopoetry – started by Ernesto de Melo e Castro and Gianni Toti (see chapter 1) – the e-poem can be a video clip like Alex Gopher’s *The Child*, or a video where the letters move and *dance* in time with the music as in *The last day of Betty Nkomo* by Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge. Alex Gopher’s *The Child* is also an evolution of the calligram; it is an animated-calligram – following in this instance the tradition started with Simmias of Rhodes in about 325BCE – here the notion of text and image become interchangeable, one and the same thing. Both these texts put forward new media-figures: the former of which Alexandra Saemmer calls “ciné-gramme”⁴, the latter of which I have labelled “kinetic emphasis” (see chapter 4). The three semiotic systems, the graphic text, the images and the sound can create a dialogue between them giving a meaning to the poem that it could not have if it was printed like for instance *Hospital Tent* by Tony Barnstone, Jonathan Minori and Fabrizio Aiello. Not only can the image help in the comprehension of the text (as they did in the Middle Ages) but also images and text are interconnected and indispensable to each other. Moreover, here a dialogue between the three different semiotic systems is built (see chapter 4)⁵. E-poetry can also follow the tradition of oral poetry and be recited like in the case of *Candles for a Street Corner* by Robert Kendall and Michele D’Auria or *Tisha B’Av* by David Harris Ebenbach and Jonathan Gould. However, whilst in *Tisha B’Av* there is a perfect synchronicity between the words recited and the words disappearing from the screen (simulating visually the words recited), in *Candles* it can happen that the reader is listening to one verse and reading another (see chapter 4).

Some e-poems experiment with new temporality like Carlotti’s *La rossa parola*, where the time passing alters the reading order of the verse lines (see chapter 4). Carlotti’s poem like other texts analyzed has an inner temporality which imposes the upon the reader the reading time showing that it is not universally true that electronic writing is always interactive *as such*, allowing her the possibility of choosing how to read the text.

Others e-poems focus on space, testing the alternatives offered by the digital environment. Besides using space differently by putting forward a different entax (see chapter 2), some texts are made in a simulated three-

³ Giselle Beiguelman, “The reader, the Player, and the Executable Poetics”, in Jürgen Schäffer and Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Beyond the Screen: Transformations of Literary Structures, Interfaces and Genre*, Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010, pp. 403-426, p. 410.

⁴ Alexandra Saemmer, “Some stylistic devices on media interface”, conference paper presented in *The Network as a Space and Medium for Collaborative Interdisciplinary Art Practice*, Bergen November 8-10 2009, accessible online at: <http://elitineurope.net/node/29> (accessed, April 20 2010). All the new media-figures presented in this chapter refer to Saemmer’s categorization if not otherwise specified.

⁵ There is a printed version of the poem that only in a second moment was transformed into a electronic poem.

dimensional space. The cube is a quite common form about which to construct e-poetry (see chapters 3 and 6). The “cube-poem” is normally related to a combinatory text: either combining two facets of two different cubes as in Daniel C. Howe’s and Aya Karpinska’s *open.ended* or combining the different rows in the same cube as in Jason Nelson’s *Birds still warm from flying* that simulates a Rubik’s cube. This combinatory practice is realized also in other texts, such as for instance Rui Torres’s *Poemas no meio do caminho*. This generative e-poem places on show the combinatory practice of language. and puts forward two axes of reading – horizontal and vertical.

Particularly Jason Nelson is interested in combining the playfulness of literature with the narratological aspects of games. He suggests the idea of e-poetry as a (video)game also with another work *i made this you play this we are enemies* (see chapter 6). Both texts – *Birds still warm from flying* and *i made this you play this we are enemies* – experiments with the limits of literature and suggest a parody of games.

As underlined by Alexandra Saemmer and Monique Maza in their book *E-forme. Écriture visuelle sur support numérique*⁶, electronic writing and thus electronic poetry can give literature a ludic face. I think that even if in different ways, e-poetry proposes “primitive” literary experiments. In the “primitive” adjective one should not seek any negative connotations, but simply “which refers to a previous/earlier time”, as the children who play with the language before learning how to speak, e-poetry plays with its form to experiment it and to create its content. Through digital poetry one again starts to possess a visual, material and ludic relationship with the language. The reader *touches* the language. “L’image «interactive» est une image qui convie le regard à des actions de proximité, à des gestes, à des contacts d’ordre tactile”⁷.

Chico Marinho’s *Palavrador* exhibits this ludic aspect as well. In this text the reader is invited to move around, up and down, to explore the three-dimensional space of the text. However, some of these texts appear to be more objects than texts. Are those texts still readable, and is the reader still interested in reading them? Some of them put forward what Saemmer calls “la frénésie du clique”⁸ (see chapter 3, 5 and 6). Electronic writing can stimulate a diagonal reading practice. The reader clicks, rotates, zooms in and out, treating the texts as an object, as a tool, more than a text in a canonical way. Two years ago a published study of online research habits, conducted by scholars from University College London showed that our way of reading is probably changing because of the internet (see chapter 6). In this research it is said that

⁶ Alexandra Saemmer and Monique Maza (eds.), *E-formes. Écriture visuelle sur support numérique*, Saint-Étienne: Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2008.

⁷ Monique Maza, “E-formes – remises en chantier”, in Alexandra Saemmer and Monique Maza (eds.), *E-formes. Écriture visuelle sur support numérique*, *op. cit.*, p. 203. “The ‘interactive’ image is an image that invites the eye to do actions in proximity, to do gestures and tactile contacts”.

⁸ Alexandra Saemmer, *Matières textuelles sur support informatique*, Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007, p. 60.

“[i]t almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense”.⁹

However, electronic poetry can also be a way of reproducing classical poetry in digital form. A digital poem that reproduces an old poem is, for instance, Zahra Safavian’s *the murmur of interstices*. The poet here uses a poem by the Persian poet Gialal al-Din Rumi to re-create her work, adding images and sounds, re-writing it, by using the possibilities afforded by the digital support such as having dynamic images and hypnotic sound.

The option of putting words into motion, letters also, has made possible the emergence of new media-figures. In Kendall’s *Faith*, for example, we find figures such as: “contraction” (the change of the size of the words), “emergence/eclipse” (a figure that changes the meaning of the word), and “ciné-gramme” (“kine-scope” – a redundant figure – the text does what it is telling). The ciné-gramme figure seems to be predominant since it appears in other works, for example in Alex Gopher’s *The Child*. Other media-figures appear also in Given’s and Ong’s *Fallow*, like for instance that of “sporulation”. This figure anticipates and concludes the meaning of the verse line. The possibilities given to the reader by electronic writing create other media-figures such as the “interfacial involution” – the reader’s interactive gesture displays the same media contents – and “interfacial antagonism” – the interactive gesture provokes the emergence of a type of content that is contrary to the content brought about by the activatable media (see chapter 6). In *Hospital Tent* by Tony Barnstone, Jonathan Minori and Fabrizio Aiello (see chapter 4) we find the “animated hypotyposis” – thanks to this hypotyposis the meaning of the linguistic sign is highlighted by other associative and imitative stratagems.

Some texts also explore the possibilities that typography has in the digital environment. I used the semiotic term entax to analyse the form, the structure, and the typography of e-poetry, to build a syntax of electronic space (see chapters 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7) and I categorize 3 levels of entax:

- Micro-entax (morphology), which deals with the morpheme – for instance, words being assembled in Kendall’s *Faith*;
- Meso-entax (semantic) which deals with the lexeme – for instance, “verylonglongCadillac” in Gopher’s *The child* ;
- Macro-entax (pragmatic) which deals with the sentence in its context – for instance the word “leap” in Kendall’s *Faith*.

Throughout the thesis different aesthetic forms have been pointed out, such as the aesthetic of flow proposed by Anaïs Guilet and Bernard Gervais¹⁰ (see chapter 3, section 3), the aesthetics of the sensual by Andrew Darley¹¹ (see

⁹ “A Cyber briefing Paper”, University College of London, January 2008 UCL, accessible online at: <http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf> (accessed, June 22 2010).

¹⁰ Anaïs Guilet and Bernard Gervais, *Go with the Flow*, NT2 laboratoire de recherches sur les arts et littératures hypermédiatiques, accessible online at http://nt2.uqam.ca/anaïs_guilet_bertrand_gervais#note9 (accessed, February 2 2011).

¹¹ Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture*, USA: Taylor & Francis, 2000.

chapter 4, section 7.2), the aesthetic of “visual noise” and “sonic noise” theorized by Maria Engberg¹² (see chapter 6 sections 5 and 8), and the aesthetic of frustration defined by Philippe Bootz¹³ (see chapter 5, 6, and 7).

Some texts included in the main corpus are indeed problematic as far as their “genre” is concerned: are they electronic poetry or digital art? Maria Mencia’s works, for example, rub up against the limits defining the boundaries in electronic writing. Her works involve language, either in the form of calligrams or as a trace of sound or text. Her poems focus on the minimum unit of meaning, sometimes adding inhuman sounds (there are for example birds’ tweets) to the text. However, according to Katherine Hayles the demarcation between digital literature and digital arts is “often more a matter of the critical traditions from which the works are discussed than anything intrinsic to the works themselves”¹⁴

Some other texts introduce the problematic nature of human-machine interaction, the so-called generative texts (see chapter 7). They open up questions concerning the role of the author and the role of the machine and the subjectivity involved in these kinds of text. Particularly the concept of author changes: the author is not an author proper anymore but an author of potential texts.

Let us conclude with *interaction*: which along with or maybe more so than (according to some critics) temporality is what we are tempted to say is novel about electronic writing. The reader’s interaction, as I have already said, provides one of the two axes that I have used to create a typology of e-poetry (see figure 1).

The majority of the texts analysed (21 of the total) are (or present more characteristics of) “read-only texts”. The “explorative texts” allow the reader to choose her reading path, to explore the text according to her curiosity. These kinds of text can however stimulate the reader just to click the text, treating it like a new object, an object the reader wants to understand how to use as a device – rather than read it in a “reflexive”¹⁵ way to understand its meaning. The “combinatory” texts are in between these two typologies: “explorative” and “constructive”. These texts allow the reader to re-combine her own reading path, according to determinate options. The text can offer a few choices of possible combinations – like, for instance, Bélisle’s *Caractères* – in this case the author still knows all the possible combinations that the reader can recreate.

¹² Maria Engberg, “Aesthetic of Noise in Digital Literary Arts”, conference paper presented at *Electronic Literature in Europe*, Bergen, Sept. 11-13 2008, accessible online at : <http://elitineurope.net/node/16> (accessed, September 29 2010).

¹³ Philippe Bootz, “Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms”, in *New Media Poetry and Poetics*, Special Issue, Leonardo Electronic Almanac Vol. 14, No. 5 – 6, 2006, at: http://leoalmanac.org/journal/vol_14/lea_v14_n05-06/pbootz.asp (accessed, September 21 2010).

¹⁴ Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ According to Umberto Eco the motion of electronic texts imposes a superficial reading practice, more consultative than reflexive (see chapter 3). Umberto Eco, “Vegetal and Mineral memory. The future of the Book”, *Al-Ahram* 20-26 November 2003, accessible online at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/665/bo3.htm> (accessed, February 3 2011).

The author still has control of the final product. Other texts, however, can offer a great amount of options to combine – such as Nelson’s *Birds still warm from flying* or Rui Torres’s *Poemas no meio do caminho*. In the first text the reader recombines the text in a cube-facet. Composing a text in a facet means also having five texts made up on the other facets, by rotating the cube the reader accesses these other texts. Nelson’s text escapes from both its author – who built the first combination but who cannot control all the other eventual texts – and, partially, its reader – who can decide to rewrite one “facet” but who cannot know what this combination creates on the other facets. In *Poemas* in the vertical version the reader can read at the end of each poem how many combinations are possible (for instance 999999945902130, but this number can change). She combines her text and then she can send it to an e-mail address, in this way “her” creation will not disappear. These kinds of combinatory texts elude the author’s control, and they suggest an “aesthetic of the ephemeral”¹⁶. According to Alexandra Saemmer the aesthetics of the ephemeral consists in letting the work slowly decompose. However, those works are not decomposing slowly, on the contrary what is fascinating – especially in *Poemas* – is how fast the poems can be composed and decomposed.

The “constructive” texts are those texts that allow the reader to interchange her role with the author. However, these kinds of texts are not so numerous and they open up questions from a poetic and aesthetic point of view. They appear to be more interesting for the process they realize than the product realized (see particularly chapter 7).

It appears that we are still far away from an e-text where the role of the author and the reader are easily exchangeable. In the majority of the texts analysed here the author is still the master of her text. This new figure the *wreader* or the “lect-acteur”¹⁷ is not so common indeed. George Landow himself in a lecture given at the university of Jyväskylä distinguished the figure of the reader in the fictional/creative environment (as literature is) and the reader in the pedagogical/learning environment¹⁸.

The possibilities of manipulating a text are not so frequent, and sometimes it is only fictitious. It is true that it may be interesting to see in some e-poems what the interaction produces – for instance it is possible that interaction realizes new media-figures like in Given’s and Ong’s *Fallow* (chapter 6); but in other texts the interaction does not add anything to the poetic value of the e-poem like in Kendall’s *Faith*.

¹⁶ Alexandra Saemmer, “Aesthetics of surface, ephemeral, re-enchantment and mimetic approaches in digital literature”, *Neohelicon* 2009, accessible online at <http://www.springerlink.com/content/02152335157238u8/fulltext.pdf> (accessed, January 13 2010).

¹⁷ Jean-Louis Weissberg, *Présence à distance, déplacement virtuel et réseaux numériques: pourquoi nous ne croyons plus à la télévision*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999.

¹⁸ George P. Landow, “Scholarly Publishing of Hypertext, the Case of Victorian Web”, conference paper presented at ELMCIP, 28-29 March 2011 University of Jyväskylä. Cf. also George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization (Parallax: Re-visions of Culture and Society)*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Jean-Pierre Balpe declares that “nous sommes loin d’un internet scriptable”¹⁹, far from the utopia of the internet as a place of communication without hierarchies and boundaries, far from a cyberspace thought of as an electronic “res cogitans”. Not only is the author still the master of the text, but also many texts have the author’s instruction on how to *read* the text. This instruction the author provides to her reader generally concerns the method of *reading* the text in the sense of how to enter it, how to move into it, and so on; however, sometimes, the author provides a (short) explanation of the meaning of the text itself. It seems that sometimes the electronic author thinks that her ideal reader is illiterate as far as the expression form of the text as for the content form of it are concerned. One imagines that this need to help the inexpert reader could have been justifiable a few years ago when the technology had not yet become part of our daily lives, nowadays it seems a bit anachronistic, and this need to help seems to suggest the degree of control that the author wants to have over her text.

However, according to Alexandra Saemmer we should wonder if should we really seek the salvation of the digital creation in the exchange of roles between author and reader? The recent success of blogs can not be considered as an affirmative response, because the writing and reading practices are clearly separated”²⁰.

Perhaps it is somewhere else where we should look for the novel as a poetic value of electronic poetry. According to Jean Clément the use of the function of randomness is one of most relevant characteristic of electronic literature²¹. Jean-Pierre Balpe insists on the generative texts “l’algorithme du texte EST la littérature”²².

I think that one of the most interesting characteristics of e-poetry is based on the possibilities that the digital medium provides for the manipulation the language. It is in the creation of new media-figures, in the use of space and in new aesthetic forms that electronic poetry is introducing novelty to poetry. It is in this direction that electronic poetry is building its own poetic language but maybe neither critic nor poet yet does not have an awareness of it. The content of the e-poems shows it quite well: the majority of the poems by focusing on the place of the word in the digital environment end up creating meta-textual poems, or meta-poems. However, some others have started to experiment with where the word can also tell something else, a story, feelings, memories, (see for instance *Hospital Tent, Fallow, Stillicidio*). Interestingly enough in the corpus

¹⁹ Jean-Pierre Balpe, “Règles, contraintes, programmes”, in Serge Bouchardon, Eduardo Kac et Jean-Pierre Balpe (eds.), *La littérature numérique et cætera*, Formules 10, Paris: Noësis, 2006, p. 61. “We are far from a scriptable Internet”.

²⁰ “Fallait-il réellement chercher le salut de la création numérique dans un échange des rôles entre auteur et lecteur? La récente réussite des blogs ne peut pas être considérer comme une réponse affirmative, car les lieux d’écriture et de lecture y sont clairement séparés”. Alexandra Saemmer, *Matières textuelles sur support informatique*, op. cit., p. 143.

²¹ Jean Clément, “La littérature numérique: une littérature aléatoire?”, conference paper presented at *E-poetry 2009*, Barcelona 24-27 May 2009, p. 1.

²² Jean-Pierre Balpe, “Règles, contraintes, programmes”, in *La littérature numérique et cætera*, op. cit., p. 62. “The algorithm of the text IS the literature”.

there is no “love poem”. For instance during the Renaissance the association of the sonnet as a form particularly suitable for amorous verse was concretized (see chapter 1). E-poetry appears to be still more concentrated on how to say something rather than on what to say.

However, I think that Katherine Hayles is right when she declares that it is too early to judge electronic literature. In the dispute between printed literature and electronic literature she states that

[i]t is obviously inappropriate to compare a literary medium that has been in existence for fifteen years with print forms that have developed over half a millennium. A fairer comparison would be print literature produced between 1550-1565, when the conventions of print literature were still in their nascent stages, with the electronic literature produced between 1985-2000. I believe that anyone familiar with both canons would be forced to agree it is by no means obvious that the print canon demonstrates conclusively the superiority of print as a medium for literary creation and expression. Given five hundred years in which to develop—if we can possibly stretch our imaginations this far—electronic literature may indeed prove itself the equal or superior to print.²³

Our society is changing fast because of the possibilities afforded by these “new technologies” and poetry is searching for new ways to communicate, to seduce, as from the Latin “seducere” to lead apart/astray, its *new* reader, a reader that daily deals with the digital if she is not born digital, because paraphrasing Octavio Paz there can be no (digital) society without (digital) poetry.

²³ Katherine Hayles Translating Media: “Why We Should Rethink Textuality”, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16.2, 2003, pp. 263-290, p. 272.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Giovanna Di Rosario: Elektroninen runous. Miten runous ymmärretään digitaalisessa ympäristössä?

Tutkimuksessa luodaan elektronisten runojen luokittelutapa, joka helpottaa niiden tarkastelua ja ymmärtämistä. Luokittelun pohjaksi tekijä esittää 'kriittisen antologian', kolmenkymmenenviiden elektronisen runon yksityiskohtaisen kriittisen luennan. Analysoiduissa runoissa on edustettuna viisi eri kieltä (englanti, espanja, italia, portugali, ranska). Tutkimus yhdistää historiallistavaa, kuvailevaa sekä analyyttistä lähestymistapaa. Työssä keskitytään erityisesti liikkeen (animation) ja muokkauksen (manipulation) eleiden semioottiseen ja retoriseen tarkasteluun. Niitä tarkastellaan myös suhteessa perinteisen retoriikan kielikuviin.

Tutkimuksessa lähdetään liikkeelle visuaalisen runouden perinteestä antiikin kuvarunoista modernismiin (futurismi, dada, surrealismi) ja postmodernismiin (fluxus, konkreettinen runous) ja esitetään kuinka elektroninen runous liittyy monin tavoin tähän perinteeseen. Luvussa 2 esitellään elektronisen kirjallisuuden teorioita, mm. Espen Aarsethin kybertekstin teoriaa ja N. Katherine Haylesin teknotekstuaalisuutta. Luvussa myös esitellään semiotiikan keskeistä käsitteistöä ja pohditaan sen suhdetta digitaalisen median teksteihin. Luvussa 2 esitellään myös elektronisen runouden typologia, jonka elementteinä ovat 1) segmentteihin perustuva runot, 2) sekvensseihin perustuvat runot, 3) hypertekstuaaliset runot sekä 4) hybridirunot. Teoriaosassa määritellään myös työn kannalta keskeinen 'ergodisen tilan' käsite (sisältää sekä teoksen oman dynamiikan että käyttäjän vuorovaikutteisen toiminnan)

Luvut 3-6 esittelevät runojen kriittiset luennat edellä mainitun jaottelun mukaisesti. Luvussa 7 tuodaan mukaan myös generatiivisen runouden ja kollaboratiivisen runouden muodot. Työn päätännössä esitellään analyysien keskeiset tulokset ja mm. jaotellaan elektroniset runot sen mukaan, millä entaktisella (ergodisen tilan vastine syntaktiselle) tasolla ne ensisijaisesti toimivat (mikro-entaksin, meso-entaksin tai makro-entaksin taso). Suurimmassa osassa käsitellyjä teoksia lähtökohtana on sanojen ja merkkien paikka visuaalisessa tilassa, mutta pääsääntöisesti ne kehittyvät metatekstuaaliseen suuntaan.

Analysoidut runot noudattavat myös erilaisia estetiikkoja, joista vahvimmin esiin nousevat liikkeen/virtauksen (flow) estetiikka, sensuaalinen estetiikka, hälyn estetiikka sekä turhautumisen estetiikka.

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