ALEATORIC AS ENLIGHTENMENT
Simon Biggs' Deconstruction
of a Kafka Text

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Aleatoric and Literature

Simon Biggs' project "The Great Wall of China" (2000) uses the English translation of Kafka's unfinished story "Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer" as a database to create a new text. The text is generated on mouseover contact, either on the four verses beneath the image, on the ten Chinese signs in the middle of the screen, or on the text block on the right-hand side. The block is divided into ten sections; the letters in the contacted section appear in a larger font and continue to generate text relentlessly until the contact is broken. There we can read sentences like: "These communes hopelessly scrutinize these gradually pure realities or must rapidly quote any mightily taken couch." The sentence has been formed "on the fly," as Biggs writes in the Introduction: "through object-oriented and behavioral programming techniques, based on pattern recognition, redundancy algorithms and Chomskian Formal Grammars." In this way correct syntactical formation is ensured: article, subject, adverb, verb – everything shows up in the right form and order, and the four verses always generate an a-b-a-b rhyme. What we don't know, however, is what the sentence is trying to say.

We have entered the realm of nonsense poetry which takes chance as one of its main principals. However chance is used – throwing the dice, taking drugs, or cutting words out of a news paper – it is an aesthetic means of going beyond traditional, familiar and predictable ways of seeing

and describing things. It sets out to overcome the old, shallow tracks of creativity. The usual second step, however, is to work with the result, to polish the sentences, to make sure they do contain some sort of meaning. Without this ex post facto treatment, without this correction of chance, one would be stuck with a kind of *semantic horror vacui*, as Holger Schulze puts it in his extensive and stimulating study "Das Aleatorische Spiel" (2000).

The relation between literature and chance began long before the computer. Schulze recalls the combinatorial poetry of the baroque, the experiments in the automatic writing of Gertrude Stein at the end of the nineteenth century, Raymond Queneau's "Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes" from 1961, and William Burroughs cut-up poetics. The computer opened new possibilities for combinatorial writing, which have been used by the Stuttgarter Gruppe around Max Bense since the end of the fifties, to name only one example[1]. The computer allows authors to produce text in various random ways, but it can also generate the desire to fool the reader by simulating a real author. One famous example is the Turing test[2], which has a person communicating with two sources she cannot see, one of which is a real person while, unbeknownst to her, the other is a computer. A well known example of this in the realm of literature is William Chamberlain's book *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed*, published by Mindscape in 1984, written by Racter, the computer program. Other instances of computer generated, random literature are the eighty poems of "Die Reisen. In achtzig flachen Hunden in die ganze tiefe Grube" by the Austrians Franz Joseph Czernin and Ferdinand Schmatz, or more accurately, by their computer program, as they revealed after *The Resident* had been published and the critics had praised their book.

Simon Biggs does not aim at such deception. Nor does he intend to produce meaningful sentences, equipped to fool their readers. He wants to speak, instead, about producing meaning by consequently refusing such meaning. To quote Christiane Heibach: "Biggs uncouples the reader's search for meaning from the script and shifts it to the process of transformation; the reader finally contemplates her own act of perception" (Heibach 2000). However, there is more to say about Biggs' transformation of text since there is more to the interplay between Kafka, software, and the user. Let us first have a closer look at Kafka.

Kafka

Kafka's text from 1917 was found unfinished in his estate but provided – thanks to its extraordinary quality – the title of a posthumous anthology of Kafka's stories. That the story was important to Kafka as well is proven by the fact that he extracted the enclosed legend of the imperial messenger for his story "Ein Landarzt." In it, a messenger sets out to convey the dying emperor's last words, addressed to every single person in his realm. Since the way is long and full of obstacles, the messenger is on the road for ages. Indeed, his undertaking is hopeless, for nobody ever has and no one will travel from the empire's center to its farthest frontiers in order to transmit the message. But you, the narrator adds, are sitting at your window looking forward to the arrival of the message this evening. This is typical of Kafka: while the messenger is still on his way, a message about him has already arrived. It is certain that there is a text, but it is not yet certain what it is. Can one ever hope to know it? The messenger – who is called Hermes in Greek mythology, much closer to Kafka and his readers than Chinese mythology – has the key we are waiting for.

Kafka's story reads like a parable of the reading process as such: the text is already there, but without hermeneutic efforts it will not tell us very much. Without hermeneutic interpretation, it is as if the text is still on its way, as if the messenger hasn't yet knocked on our door. This holds true especially for Kafka's own texts, which are linguistically so simple that they have become a staple of foreign language instruction in German, yet they remain ultimately inscrutable. This text by Kafka, for instance, refuses to reveal what the emperor has said. However, since Hermes, the messenger in Kafka's story, never appears, the message will never arrive no matter how long the potential recipient waits for it at the open window at night. Only the lack of message, the message about the messenger, is known. Kafka does not provide an explanation for how this can be in a pre-telegraphic age where there is no faster medium of transmission than a messenger. Could there have been a second, much faster messenger? This explanation is unlikely for the emperor is the emperor and will have the very best messenger at hand. Moreover, a second messenger would

reduce the story to a banal race narrative – something we, as scholars of literature, know that Kafka would never have written.

If there is no second messenger, the message about the messenger must already have been known. He does not arrive from the future but from the past, as an anthropomorphic figure. Longing for the message is the ever-present longing for meaning, for the holy word, be it that of God, the emperor, Marx or anyone, who promises to make sense of our lives. For this we wait looking at the open window in those moments when we have time to ask questions of Why? and To What End?

The question about sense is already discussed in the story's first part, which focuses upon the construction of the wall itself. The wall, one is told, provides the foundation for the new Tower of Babel. Once the former has been finished, the latter will be built. The symbolic significance of this biblical tower is well known. God caused it to collapse because it was presumptuous of men to try to come so close to God. Their punishment was the diversity of languages, which caused misunderstandings and was intended to prevent a second attempt. And indeed: ever since, people have been talking and trying to come to agreement. But because the language is the house of everybody's being, people fail to settle their differences – even individuals within one nation are hardly more successful. Unity can only be achieved, if everybody lives in the same house, and this requires a wall.

Another much more recent, much shorter, much more effective and controversial wall clarifies what walls are supposed to do. The wall in Berlin was a similar attempt at sealing people off in order to erect a Tower of Babel, which in this secularized version aimed to provide access to the Truth rather than to God. Truth is accessed by excluding difference and deviant meanings, by the suppression of polyvocality. This method is as well known in the West, although it has never been applied with great success[3]. The aim is to fill people up with certainties and provide them with a particular point of view.

This process of assigning meaning by specific regulation has been questioned in detail in the last century. Sometimes the approach of critical theory was not itself reflected upon critically, which led ultimately to the substitution of traditional walls and towers with other walls and towers. The linguistic turn, however, addressed the tower as such by describing how the process of assigning meaning is related to its varying circumstances. The critique of representation has shifted its focus from space to time. Derrida's keyword *différance* refers to the double sense of the Latin

"differre" which means postponing as well as differentiating. Putting things off makes them different: signification is an ongoing process. According to Derrida, because signification never ends, one can never reach the truth. The imperial messenger will never arrive, unless, of course, one turns to the first person who pretends to be this messenger. Herein lies the difference between Derrida and Saussure. The latter still believed in the arrival of a transcendental signifier. Kafka's story and Biggs' language machine subscribe to Derrida's view rather than to Saussure's.

Software

There are two important aspects of Biggs' "The Great Wall of China": the text is incomprehensible, and it changes upon mouseover contact. The incomprehensibility of the text, which uses the linguistic material from Kafka's story, mimics the nonappearance of Hermes in the story. However, this incomprehensibility is not static. The user's turn to the text – which normally signifies the hermeneutic effort and is marked here by each new mouseover contact, – always changes it. Each new "reading" generates a new text and a new textual meaning from the same underlying text. With Biggs' text generator the change happens literally in the material letters of the signifier itself.

In contrast to normal readings and processes of signification, it is not statement or meaning that is important here. Statement A doesn't change into statement B. Rather the statement as such changes but remains incomprehensible for the reader in either case. This incomprehensibility is not only due to the fact that providing sense is much more difficult for the language machine than providing correct syntactical formation. The fact that there is no process of meaningful signification in the first place draws our attention even more to this very aspect of signification. We understand the act of change without having to understand its starting point or result.

This is the moment that literature turns into conceptual art. By drawing our attention to the act of signification from the outset "The Great Wall of China" tells us about storytelling without telling a new story. Its aesthetic paradigm is the allegory, which comes straight to the point and has no narrative body beyond this point, in contrast to the symbol, which is the aesthetic paradigm for Kafka's story.[4] Thus, in the phenomenology of digital aesthetics, Biggs provides a good example of how, working in a digital

setting with literature can generate not literature but art.[5] However, it is not enough for the text to be incomprehensible or to turn incessantly into another text. We should not forget that the user herself is the one who triggers this process.

User

The user isn't only unable to read; she is fooled again and again by her hope of finally becoming a reader. Biggs included all 4335 words of Kafka's story and has constructed his program to generate an infinite number of sentences from it. The text actually never ends, although the reading could be stopped after the first sentence of nonsense. But can one really stop? Or is the situation the same as in Kafka's story: people waiting for the messenger, although he has been expected for ages, but without knowing whether today might not be the day of his arrival? How does one know that Biggs' text won't ultimately provide readable sentences?

However, this is not the chief point of interest arising from the fact that the user causes a never-ending production of text. The actual question is: who is the author? Kafka? Biggs and his language machine? Or the user? Of course, it is the user, but only after Kafka and Biggs. Here we have to return to a point already discussed above. The new focus is language as *individual* house of being.

The user's participation in the production of text brings her role as author into the discussion of her act of perception. This participation does not intend or amount to the "co-authorship" of reader-determined text combination, which in the early hypertext debate was overrated as the "embodiment" and "vindication of postmodern literary theory."[6] Here the reader's role as author is understood in terms of reading as autobiographical act. This thesis is the constructionist follow-up to Iser's reader-focussed theory of perception. Bernd Scheffer states in his prolegomena to a constructionist theory of literature: "Readers, even professional readers (critics and scholars of literature) act as "autobiographers": What we perceive, what we recognize, experience, and know, is the result of a continuous not written and sometimes even not linguistic 'self description'" (1992, 182).

The epistemological basis of this thesis lies in the assumption of cognitive self reference of living systems, that is, in the assumption that percep-

tion is bound to concepts possessed by the perceiver (reader) who assimilates and accommodates received information according to these concepts. For radical constructionism, during the process of reading signification absolutely depends on individual concepts of perception and understanding. Thus radical constructionism declares the author's death and the text's powerlessness over and against the reader. Such a radical statement cannot be justified, as "The Great Wall of China" precisely conveys: the individuality of the act of signification has its limits in that it functions only under certain conditions. The reader can't do everything with the text. What are these conditions? Who is responsible for them?

The absolute denial of sense in Biggs' text provokes the question: what conditions must be provided before the self-referential cognitive system can make meaningful use of received information? The answer is that conditions must be provided on whose ground the self-referential cognitive system established itself. The correct syntactical formation of sentences is one important aspect, but it is not enough. The sentences have to evoke meanings that are familiar.

Thus, the external world comes back into the internal, society back into the text. The cognitive system doesn't arise out of nothing; first it has to be constructed. This process takes place within the social systems of which one is a part, and it is influenced by the discourses in which one participates. In these settings, concepts are made, which later govern our ways of perceiving and understanding. The autobiographical act is under social control, and the place of signification actually lies outside the individual subject. By randomly generating sentences, which correspond syntactically but not semantically with our concepts, Biggs' piece makes us aware once again of the supra individual, the binding and shared conditions on the basis of which our individual acts of signification take place. We can operate successfully only within the frames other people have set up for us.

Intermedial Interaction

After this reflection we can only agree with Christiane Heibach, who considers "The Great Wall of China" a work about the de-semanticization of writing, which draws attention to one's own act of perception (Heibach 2000). However, as we have seen, the work does not only deny meaning. It also provides a key to understanding this denial, albeit only insofar as

readers perceive *all* parts of the work, including the text used as database to create de-semanticized text. This paratext already addresses the question of meaning and signification and helps us understand the overall project.[7]

"The Great Wall of China" is the transformation of Kafka's story into digital rhetoric. It embodies the non-appearance of Kafka's messenger as a textual performance of nonsense. While normally hermeneutic efforts start with the first contact with the text, in Biggs' piece these steps are separated again and therefore brought to our attention. On this basis each aspect of reading and understanding can be discussed: the ongoing process of signification, the reader's role within this process, and the impact of context on the reader's concepts. While Kafka's story about the construction of the Chinese Wall is about the importance of the wall within the hermeneutic process, Biggs' piece permanently pulls down the wall.

Biggs' project operates above (or beneath) rather than between the lines. It turns the hidden message in Kafka's story into a *visible performance* on the surface of the screen. "The Great Wall of China" is the appropriation of literature for a project of conceptual art. Although the piece already refers to literature in its title, it denies access to this literature. At the same time it presupposes the reading of this literature because only after reading can a user understand and appreciate the digital setting and the conceptual idea behind it. Biggs' "The Great Wall of China" is intermedial in two ways: 1. It appropriates literature for a digital interactive project – i.e. intermediality as content transposition between media, for instance, from literature to painting or film. 2. It brings together two types of perception: reading (the Kafka text) and seeing (the performance of this text on the screen) – i.e. the concept of intermediality, as applicable to concrete poetry.

This double intermediality prevents Biggs' piece from becoming an event of interactive nonsense production. The danger of such status always exists in digital media, whose message is speed, dynamism, and click activity. However, as my reading of "The Great Wall of China" has shown, whoever perceives this piece only at the level of interaction with the language machine on the screen misses the deeper interaction with the text *before* the machine. If one does not read Kafka's story, one cannot appreciate its digital adaptation.

NOTES

1. See interview with the member of the Stuttgarter Gruppe Reinhard Döhl in *dichtung-digital* 4/2001. Available: http://www.dichtung-digital.com/2001/07/4–Auer-Doehl

2. See http://cogsci.ucsd.edu/~asaygin/tt/ttest.html

3. On information policy in the USA see Noam Chomsky – http://www.zmag.org/chomsky or *FAIR* the magazine of the Media Watch Group – (available: http://www.fair.org).

4. See Georg Wilhelm Hegel: *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, Part 2, Chapter 3, B 2.

5. For a discussion of the difference between digital literature and digital art see Simanowski (2000).

6. See Landow (1997, 65) and Bolter (1992, 24). For a discussion see: Simanowski (2001).

7. Using Gérard Genette's terminology (1997), one could define Kafka's story as the "hypotext," which is taken up by Biggs' project as a "hypertext." Such an approach, of course, is rarely helpful since Genette understands hypertext in terms of transformation instead of combination – non-sequential writing – as Nelson coined the term originally in 1965.