

1 Introduction

1.1.

Foreword: Not Completely Alone in the Room

Since all presence is presence only at a distance, the tele-presence of the era of the globalization of exchanges could only be established across the widest possible gap. This is a gap which now stretches to the other side of the world, from one edge to the other of present reality.

Paul Virilio, 2005.

This is not a linear thesis. There is no *télos*, in the strict sense of the term, but rather many entry and exit points. In many regards, like its theme, it is a space of theoretical and practical negotiations. Insofar as literary communication can be regarded as a sphere of both reflection and conception of new modes of human self-description, I claim that the phenomenon of *digital literature* is structurally and semantically bound to the medium of its production – i.e., its vehicles of distribution. Because digital literature both inscribes itself in literary tradition and imposes material/medial transformations that redefine what is to be construed as literature, its scholarly analysis calls for significant conceptual revisions and reformulations in literary theory. Necessarily transmodal in the sense that it cuts across modes of cognition, digital literature comprises far more than the typographic sign alone – sound, image and movement being integral constituents of its augmented textuality. My methodology is thus grounded on the hypothesis that by adopting a descriptive tone in the analysis of specific, digitally-born works, original theoretical tendencies will become visible and distinguishable. The idea, rooted in pragmatic and constructivist activities (FINKE, 1989), is to write a scholarly text which stands on

oscillating grounds between empirical analysis and case studies.¹ I am concerned with the two fundamental challenges facing the scholarly assessment of digital aesthetics today: (a) the compilation of a corpus of artworks representative of the multimodality of the field, and (b) borrowing from Anna Münster’s terminology, the “the insolvent place of the body” (MÜNSTER, 2006, p. 3) vis-à-vis processual (code-driven) mediation strategies. I substantiate my hypothesis on the empirical observation that new media objects have been displaying increasing structural ambivalence: the debate on the distributed ontology of “flickering signifiers” (HAYLES, 2006) emerges in the precise cultural moment when aesthetic theory grapples with the “neglected sphere of the body” (GUMBRECHT, 2004). From a systemic-slanted theoretical stance, one must attempt to internally articulate two paradoxical descriptions, namely, the dispersive processual logic of electronic language – the fact that it is a distributed phenomenon of immaterial code-strings (HAYLES, 2005) – with the manifest profusion of sensory-oriented, proprioceptive interfaces, favoring immersion and tactility. My contention is thus that there are theoretical grounds for “reading” these new literary objects in light of non-hermeneutic, presence-driven, aesthetic theories (GUMBRECHT, 2004).

In the preface to their 2007 *The Aesthetics of Net Literature: Writing, Reading and Playing in Programmable Media*, theorists Peter Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer question whether the underlying openness of networked communications can be successfully integrated with the aesthetic demands of literary closure (GENDOLLA & SCHÄFER, 2007). I submit that the “problem of openness” can be solved by adapting the analyses of digital literary objects to recursive parameters – which imply a readjustment in reader-response models (Cf. LUHMANN, 1995; SCHÄFER, 2010; JÄGER, 2010). Today the boundaries comprising the field of digital literature remain largely undefined. Theorizations and prognoses about this discipline consequently travel in predominantly interdisciplinary spaces.

¹ This tentative new approach seems appropriate in light of a widespread concern with the lack of secure theoretical repertoires with which to analyze digital literature. To cite one example, in her doctoral thesis defended in 2000 at Heidelberg University, *Literatur im Internet: Theorie und Praxis einer kooperativen Ästhetik*, Christiane Heibach suggests the “hyperlectic oscillation” between all aspects of the digital medium, attained through an aesthetic of cooperation between theory and praxis (OLINTO, 2002).

Nesta situação, onde se mesclam convicções epistemológicas e projetos políticos, o acento de sinal positivo é atribuído, de modo geral, a modelos que enfatizam domínios inclusivos, esferas *intermezzo*, espaços *in-between*, que privilegiam heterarquias e heterodoxias, mas que atendem, igualmente, às necessidades de construir campos conceituais de altíssima complexidade e mobilidade, capazes de tornar visíveis os modos de experiência vivencial nas sociedades contemporâneas a partir de seus próprios modelos de representação. (OLINTO, 2009, p. 10)

The coupling of literary theory and epistemology of complexity is not unprecedented in literary studies. In order to establish productive reciprocity, literary and new media theories have been displaying promising paths in the analyses of new hybrid, computer-based, literary communication models. My belief is that through descriptive readings of particular works (a variation on close readings), it will be possible – or more plausible – to develop a conceptual and theoretical repertoire with which to approach digital literature. Methodologically, the thesis *Digital Literature: Theoretical and Aesthetic Reflections* tackles the aesthetic and theoretical challenges wrought by computer-based communications through a heuristic approach to digital literary objects. Highly context-dependent and profoundly informed by cultural and historic specificities of the self-described “information age,” the examples to follow are intended to present scholars with a variegated conceptual repertoire. The five chapters include a selection from the scholarly literature extant in the burgeoning field of digital aesthetics as well as possible interchanges with “print” literary theory.

To agree with Niklas Luhmann by displacing his argument, I posit that society’s “loss of faith in the correctness of its self-description” (LUHMANN, 1998, p. 1) does present us with an advantage: adequacy is no longer an issue and paradoxical conditions can be coextensive within contexts which privilege difference rather than consensus. This is why I cannot completely agree theorist Roberto Simanowski – whose work informs many of my pages – that we should regard a return to hermeneutics as a dismissal of presence theories as per Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s theorizations (GUMBRECHT, 1988, 1997, 2004). On the one hand, literature does presuppose recursive semantic operations – not the search for stable, fixed, definitive and “correct” meanings, but the acknowledgement that processes of

signification are inherent to human cognitive faculties. On the other hand, there is a case to be made for the re-inscription of the material body in the artistic midst.

Structure:

Chapter Two both adopts and problematizes Roberto Simanowski's method of close readings in digital literature (SIMANOWSKI, 2007; LOOY & BATENS, 2002). Contesting fundamental intricacies of early terminological debates – Simanowski's claim that *digital literature* is informed by its dependence on the technological medium (the “genuineness of the medium”) (SIMANOWSKI, 2007) –, the discussion recovers key provisional tropes of digital literature, such as interactivity, intermediality and performance (SIMANOWSKI, 1999; 2007). The chapter also sheds initial light on the ontological difficulties embedded in Katherine Hayles' notion of the “flickering signifier” (HAYLES, 2006). The principal examples found therein are the “ambient time-based” poetic language painting, *Overboard* (2004), by John Cayley and Gilles Perring and Alex Gopher's *The Child* (1999), a fringe experiment consisting of a video clip that makes aesthetic use of animated text and sound synchronicity.

Chapter Three pinpoints the evolutionary steps leading to the transition from orality to literacy. Regarding the development of alphabetic writing (ONG, 1982; MCLUHAN, 2008) as a progression of various processes of technological remediation (BOLTER, 1991) – i.e., writing as *téchne* –, I am able to draw parallels between early technological transitions (i.e., codex to the printed book) and the advent of computer-based communications. Additionally, the chapter addresses two key concepts in new media theoretical discourse, namely, hypertext (NELSON, 2003) and ergodic literature/cybertext (AARSETH, 1997). The latter is expanded into a conceptual dialogue with Markku Eskelinen's ludological approach to Genettean narratology (ESKELINEN, 2007; GENETTE, 1972) and Umberto Eco's model of the open work (ECO, 1989). Literary hypertext works, such as *Afternoon: A Story* (1995) by Michael Joyce and *The Impermanence Agent* (2003) by Noah Wardrip-Fruin are analyzed within these frameworks. Noticeably, Chapter Three ends with a

detailed description of Gumbrecht's theories of presence (GUMBRECHT, 1988, 2004) to be revisited within the contexts of mixed media immersion (**Chapter Five**) and embodiment (**Chapter Six**).

Chapter Four explores the work of artist Eduardo Kac as a theoretical point of departure for further investigation of Hayles' oft-quoted posthuman view (HAYLES, 1999). Descriptions of the *Genesis* installation and Kac's *Holopoetry* (1980s) are found therein. Moreover, through the critical examination of Peter Gendolla and Jürgen Schäfer's theories of media upheavals (*Medienumbrüche*) (GENDOLLA & SCHÄFER; 2007, 2010), I sketch an argument around new tendencies in theorizations of digital *literariness* as recovered from formalist debates (SIMANOWSKI, 2010; STREHOVEC, 2010; GENDOLLA & SCHÄFER, 2010). As a theoretical provocation, I revise Stanley Fish's concept of interpretative communities (FISH, 1980) in light of Katherine Hayles' definition of digital literature (HAYLES, 2008). The chapter ends with an epistemological contemplation, revisiting notions of postmodernism (HUTCHEON, 1988; HUYSSSEN, 1986), avant-garde (BÜRGER, 1984; GREENBERG, 1939) and software avant-garde (SIMANOWSKI, 2011; MANOVICH, 2001; STRINGER, 2001; KOSKIMAA, 2010). For illustration purposes, I scour concrete examples of generative text (the "textual instruments," *Regime Change* (2003) and *News Reader* (2004) by Noah Wardrip-Fruin), net.art (*Web Stalker* (1997) by I/O/D and radical experiments such as Caleb Larsen's *A Tool to Deceive and Slaughter* (2009) and Zachary Booth Simpson's *Mondrian* (2004).

Chapter Five opens with a discussion on the close theoretical relationship between concrete and digital/kinetic poetry (HAYLES, 2006; SCHAFFNER, 2010; BEIGUELMAN, 2010). It also introduces a detailed close reading of the immersive interactive installation *Text Rain* (1999) by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv. Scripting a dialogue with theorist by Francisco J. Ricardo (RICARDO, 2009), my reading of *Text Rain* both comments and expands on issues of digital ontology and altered receptive scenarios, including a brief foray into Niklas Luhmann's systemic approach to theories of interpenetration and communication – which assume premises

derived from Heinz von Foerster's second-order cybernetics as well as Humberto Maturana's autopoietic cognitive biology (LUHMANN, 1988, 1995, 1998).

Chapter Six is the conclusion. It recovers Gumbrecht's reading of Martin Heidegger's concept of Being as it relates to Gumbrecht's concept of production of presence (GUMBRECHT, 2004) and Martin Seel's aesthetic of appearing (*Erscheinen*) (SEEL, 2005). The debates on the granularity of aesthetic experience are readdressed – Gumbrecht's priority of “lived experience” (“*ästhetisches Erleben*”) over “aesthetic experience” (“*ästhetische Erfahrung*”). The chapter also recuperates Hayles' discussion of “flickering signifiers” and disembodied informational patterns as a way to incite debate on Gumbrecht's ontological – i.e., substantialist – claims. The examples discussed are two virtual reality (VR) pieces designed for Brown University's Cave, a room-sized virtual reality display – respectively, Noah Wardrip-Fruin's *Screen* (2002) and Claire Kwong's *Aphasia* (2010). The chapter ends with an extended reading of Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen's *Listening Post* (2003), an immersive installation which utilizes natural-language processing algorithms and a commercial text-to-speech (TTS) engine to parse and synthesize snippets of online conversations culled in real-time from unrestricted chat rooms, bulletin boards and online forums. The data stream collected (text) is simultaneously relayed in varying visual patterns across a suspended array of vacuum fluorescent chain-circuit displays (HANSEN & RUBIN, 2002).

Swallowing the words of this world: timely disclaimers

I structured the discourse of my extended “close readings” after Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's “descriptive surface perceptions,” deployed in his *In 1926: Living on the Edge of Time* (GUMBRECHT, 1997). The idea in these theoretical exercises is to (as much as possible) “get my hands dirty,” to once again quote Gumbrecht. Then again, given the nature of this assignment, a doctoral thesis, I could not refrain from contextual analyses and theoretical problematizations. I leave the reader with the following consideration extracted from Eva Knodt's outstanding foreword to Niklas Luhmann's English edition of *Social Systems* (1995): “the message announcing the

end of books is [recursively] contained within the covers of – a book” (KNODT in LUHMANN, 1995, p. x). Here, too, presence will be bound to abide by the constitutive tyranny of scholarly writing.