

Poetics of crisis or crisis of poetics in digital reading/writing?

The case of Spanish digital literature*

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Abstract

This contribution comments on certain works of digital literature in order to demonstrate their use of formal and thematic literary techniques and show that ‘wreaders’ have their own creative pattern. Playing with hyperlinks involves disorganized thinking, associative laxity and conceptual, and linguistic alterations that infringe the linear construction of the literary paradigm. The mechanism that appears during this creative ‘wreading–wandering’ process operates in such a way that time and space converge to produce what we will call ‘digital entropy’, a creative force in which it is nowadays possible to identify cultural keywords. The expansive nature of this ‘entropy’ means that digital work arising from the local becomes universal. A discussion is included on the new ‘complex digital ego’, which operates under multiple cultural and transliterary parameters to denounce the crisis in the analogue aesthetic. Some of the characteristics attributable to digital literature—collective experimentation and the rupture of narrative linearity—are exemplified in literary stories from collective and experimental Hispanic digital literature. We also avail ourselves of some examples of pioneer digital literary works written in Spanish, in which a number of specific qualities can be found in the very virtual nature of the text. This study presents an original approach to these works in relation to three pathways to reading: Hypertextual Reading, Ekphrastic Reading, and Serendipity Reading.

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1 Introduction

Digital networks sometimes generate virtual communities, where the visual and the textual, the oral and the written, the communicative and the cultural converge with the local and the universal, giving the human being a global dimension. Cyberculture is not only a cyberspace in which the genuine is submitted to the power of virtual relativization, where identity is blurred in social consciousness, and the local is globalized. The most radical postures—those

with apocalyptic stances on the one hand, and those of computer fanatics on the other—are gradually softening, and what is left are the reflections of literary and communications theorists, creators, and the general public.

The adaptation of literary texts to new digital technology and the writing of creative texts, especially for onscreen viewing provide an excellent opportunity to reflect on new forms of digital discourse. This has contributed to the nurturing of a ‘new hypertextual paradigm’ for literary studies

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discourse. This has contributed to the nurturing of a 'new hypertextual paradigm' for literary studies through a series of theoretical studies, beginning with those of Moulthrop (1989), Landow (1991, 1992, 2006), Aarseth (1997), Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan (2004), Funkhouser (2007), and Simanowski *et al.* (2010), who either support the transcendental changes in this process or appraise what was initially seen as a revolution in the field of literature. Following in the steps of these theorists, numerous research studies have been published on this topic. Some of these confine themselves to the change from the linear to the virtual (Anis, 1998; Codina, 2000), whereas others are committed to didactics (Botley, 2000; Mena, 2000); other studies are concerned with the structuring and organization of the Internet (Caridad and Moscoso, 1991) and still, others focus on the relationship between hypertext and the humanities or, more specifically, hypermedia and literature (Landow 1991, 1997; Moreno Hernández, 1998).

In Spain, this change has been fuelled by various publications. One of the most prominent pioneers in the field is Jenaro Talens who, with his publication of *El lugar de la teoría de la literatura en la era del lenguaje electrónico* (Talens, 1994), raised numerous questions about the space occupied by literature in this new digital universe. In 1995, Talens published *Escritura contra simulacro. El lugar de la literatura en la era de la electrónica*, in which he claims that since the social entities of today are not the same as those that gave rise to what we now know as literature, the concept should be called into question. This nihilistic view of literary matters in the context of new technologies is also found in his text 'El robot ilustrado y el futuro de las Humanidades' (Talens, 2000). Although Jenaro Talens helps spread the apocalyptic vision of the literary fact presented by Alvin Kernan in *The Death of Literature* (1990) and Michaels and Knapp's statement (1982) on the 'end of theory', he opens up the way to electronic language as a new articulated universe.

The year 2000 saw the publication of *Literatura e Hipermedia. La irrupción de la Literatura interactiva: precedentes y crítica*, in which the author, Nuria Vouillamoz (2000), reflects on models of hypertext

and multimedia, as well as aspects of electronic literature such as dynamism, interactivity, and open authorship. Although María José Vega begins her introduction to *Literatura hipertextual y teoría literaria* (2003) with a certain scepticism towards these new changes, this does not prevent her from giving recent hypertextual literature the attention it deserves. The topics covered in her book range from hypertext, tradition and the canon, hypertextual literature and virtual reality, and hypertextual reading. Antonio Rodríguez de las Heras (2001, 2004) has undertaken a huge research project on new technologies and humanistic knowledge, which was begun at the Carlos III University of Madrid. Following in his footsteps, Domingo Sánchez-Mesa (2004) published *Literatura y cibercultura*, responding to the need to address the challenges to literature presented by the new communicative paradigm, going beyond the use of computing tools (non-web-based) in an empirical phase of philological study. Susana Pajares Tosca (2004) entitled her thesis *Literatura digital. El paradigma hipertextual*. This was the first analysis in the Spanish language of the principal characteristics of the new hypertextual paradigm: multilinearity, multimedia, multiplicity, interaction, dynamism, and connection. In 2005, *Textualidades electrónicas. Nuevos escenarios para la literatura*, edited by Laura Borràs (2005), appeared on the bookshelves, presenting a new purview of the interdisciplinary literary-technological problem: digital literature and the questioning of the post-human subject on the Internet scenario. Anzo Abuín and Teresa Vilariño (2006) published *Teoría del hipertexto. La literatura en la era electrónica* in 2006, with a translation of canonic articles by E. Aarseth, J.D. Bolter, J. Clément, P. Delany, J. Y. Douglas, and M. Joyce. This book outlines the need for 'connected intelligence', which allows us to create connective links through work groups in order to tackle the urgent task of incorporating new digital advances in our literary studies. Two other books, *Literatures in the Digital Age: Theory and Praxis* (Sanz and Romero, 2007) and *Literaturas del Texto al Hipermedia* (Romero and Sanz, 2008) present the results of an international seminar held at the Complutense University of Madrid from 21 to 23 September

2005, organized by the LEETHI Research Group ('Literaturas Españolas y Europeas del Texto al Hipermedia') and the AILC/ICLA Research Committee 'Comparative Literature in the Digital Age'. Both books describe the main research projects, both at national and international level, that were presented at this conference and reflect the organizers' desire for coordination between national and international research groups in order to work from the 'I' to the 'we'.

2 Which Crisis is Ours?

Today, we are more convinced than ever that literatures of the future will be hypertextual—or they will not be. We are well aware that digital format is not in itself a guarantee of literary or didactic innovation. Indeed, there are too many digital pages that are just that: digitalization of content. This is not enough. Innovation will lie in the conceptual model with which we make our resources and materials work and in the cognitive system we intend to activate. For those of us who are literary scholars, an additional function is imminent: the transfer of our ideas to the reticulated cognitive format of the Internet; if we do not do this, we shall be unable to close the circle and confront the challenges and surprises of this newly created paradigm.

In 2004, Will Corral and Daphne Patai edited a volume entitled *Theory's Empire. Anthology of Dissent*, which had a big impact on the American Academy. If we compare this voluminous anthology with other well-known works, we realize that all of them have been preparing the path that branches off towards *Theory's Empire. An Anthology of Dissent*. Examples of such works are: *Critical Theory since Plato*, edited by Hazard Adams (1971), *The Emperor Redressed; Critiquing Critical Theory*, by Dwight Eddins (1995), *Beyond Poststructuralism: The Speculations of Theory and the Experience of Reading*, by Wendell V. Harris (1996), *What's Happened to the Humanities?* by Kernan (1997), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch (2001), and *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (2001). The anthology highlights

how theory has been criticized over the past 30 years, yet at the same time it overcomes the pessimistic and anti-humanist aspects attributed to literature in the 1990s to invest in a new critical ethic following in the footsteps of pluralism and a return to the reading of literary texts (Michaels and Knapp, 1982).

The thread of the entire book is an appeal for transformation of the concept 'theory', with a small 't', as a system of concepts used in humanities, into Theory with a capital 'T', understood as a higher work with which all knowledge of texts must be inoculated. This Theory with capital 'T' has played a dominant role in the intellectual life of many centres of Humanities, which have thus been imbued with dogmatic, absolutist, and prophetic views. *Theory's Empire* reviews the different schools, from formalism to structuralism, from post-structuralism to cultural studies. Within this new 'Studies' concept, Theory uses identity as a shield to discuss race, class and gender, losing its utopian—and privileged—position to relocate its thinking in the interstices of urgent postcolonial, transnational and intra-marginal negotiations. It is only from this perspective that we understand the irony that emerges from the title, where 'Empire' is parodied with the term 'Dissent'.

In the eighth section of the book, however, entitled 'Still Reading After All These Theories...' (pp. 585–686), the editors select articles defending the future of the Humanities if we go back to Reading literary texts, and defending the role of criticism beyond the constrictive and deforming power of Theory. Critics, scholars, and teachers have a duty to convey the value of literature to future generations, so that it will not be lost but will remain as a cultural identity, not a mimesis of theoretical imperialism.

Nevertheless, another factor that is not considered in this book is that the concept of theory itself has lost strength in favour of the concept of Reading. And this transfer of contents from Theory to Reading has happened at a time when digital space is emerging with great virulence. At this point, I should mention the latest book by George P. Landow (2006): *Hypertext 3.0: New Media and Critical Theory in an Era of Globalization*.¹ In the

title we find two terms that are of great importance for understanding the Crisis of Poetics, namely, hypertext and globalization. In my humble opinion, the two key factors in this crisis of poetic creativity are:

- (1) Literature has ceased to be read exclusively on paper, with all that this implies, and is created and transmitted in digital format; in other words, the channel by which it is transmitted is changing.
- (2) Literature has begun to be a global phenomenon, with all that this involves; in other words, both a global transmitter–creator and a global receiver–reader exist. We are all global readers–writers now... What is exclusively Western or exclusively European is no longer any use to us; we now find ourselves in a global sphere and this is the main factor in the crisis of the poetic or the change in Poetics.

And the cause of this crisis in comparative literature is the digitalization of literary contents and the creation of new literature written exclusively for the Internet. New digital and global textuality has come to stay and, in order to handle it, we must define it to link it to sufficient criteria. In this article, I will focus only on digital literature; meaning literature that cannot be printed, but is created to be read only online.

It seems, then, that we are faced with a paradigm shift. I intentionally avoid the customary references to Thomas Kuhn (1970) and his ‘dominant paradigm’, or to Adam Smith, who defined paradigm as ‘a shared set of assumptions’ to explain the world to us.

In 2005, the 50th anniversary of the creation of the International Comparative Literature Association was held in Venice. In my speech on *El tercer cambio de paradigma para las literaturas* [*The Third Paradigm Shift for Literatures*], I followed the theoretical and methodological contributions of Professors Douwe Fokkema (1982), Pierre Swiggers (1982), and Stuart Moulthrop (1989) in order to situate the new comparative literature paradigm within what was then called digital ‘hypertext’. I went on to comment that the hypertext in question was a natural space for the prefixes ‘trans-’ and ‘inter-’ in which, we

comparatists expressed our need to connect works, languages, and authors, and that this digital space facilitated for us the necessary plurality of reading. In 2006, an international seminar was held in Madrid on *Literaturas del Texto al Hipermedia* to which we invited Laura Borràs precisely to talk to us about her ideas on this paradigm shift. The following is taken from her speech “*Pero ¿hay realmente un cambio de paradigma?*”, later published as a chapter in the book *Literaturas del Texto al Hipermedia* (Romero and Sanz, 2008):

Cada nuevo paradigma, lógica dominante o patrón de pensamiento que se impone lo hace porque es un instrumento eficaz y porque los nuevos paradigmas se instauran tras una revolución científica —una crisis— que de algún modo aporta respuestas a enigmas que no podían resolverse en el paradigma anterior. Consecuentemente creo que podemos estar de acuerdo en afirmar que Internet viene a desestabilizar el sistema de valores y creencias establecido y, por ello, consideramos que se trata de un cambio paradigmático (Borràs 2008, pp. 273–4).

[Each new paradigm, dominant logic or pattern of thought that prevails does so because it is an effective instrument and because new paradigms are established after a scientific revolution – a crisis – that somehow provides answers to enigmas that could not be resolved in the previous paradigm. Consequently, I think we can agree in affirming that the Internet ends up destabilizing the established system of values and beliefs; we therefore consider that it involves a paradigmatic shift (Borràs, 2008, pp. 273–4).]

But which is our ‘crisis’ exactly? We are undergoing a financial crisis, an economic crisis, a crisis of values, a political crisis, a national crisis, an international crisis, a global crisis, a crisis in education, in the humanities... I repeat: which crisis is ours, the crisis of Literatures? I would like to define it here with two syntagmas:

- The Crisis in Reading
- The Crisis in Textuality

We are all familiar with the paths our literary ideas have taken throughout history: the Rhetorical, the Poetic, the Stylistic, Structuralisms and Post-structuralisms, reception theory, polysystem theory, Deconstruction, Cultural, and Postcolonial Studies; all these spheres of knowledge have been necessary responses to ideas prevailing at the time with respect to reading and interpreting literary works. So what now? We are facing a crisis in the Theory of Cultural Studies that we can only overcome if we return to Textuality and the Reading of literary works. But this return to text itself, to text that is both creative and creator, to philological text, does not mean reading books on paper; it means ‘another way’ of reading: ‘virtual’ reading, reading with the mentality of today, reading from the inter-relational, reticular, and global perspective. What we need is a Theory of Digital Reading that we must all build together to create networks of global thought. National literatures are no longer national; they are no longer only comparative or only universal (universal is a colonial concept), but global (global is a postcolonial concept). As a result, we find ourselves in a process of invention of new forms, not only of reading, but also of literary creation and reproduction of the literary fact.

It was only to be expected that the discrepancies in the scientific community created by this new commitment to Digital Reading would be enough to bring about a knowledge crisis capable of formulating new socio-cultural changes, new knowledge, and new beliefs, which is what we are already witnessing. We have done this perfectly in that we have speculated with the literary fact in the manner of the best Wall Street stockbrokers. The affirmation is mine, although it could just as easily come from Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont’s book *Intellectual Impostors* (1999). New models of Reading on the Internet will prevail. There is no going back; this is the new paradigm that will impose new values reflecting the new identity. More and more virtual and digital mechanisms are being developed, leaving a considerable number of scholars behind, but at the same time opening doors to others, in a struggle between the apocalyptic and the integrated, an epic struggle that is cyclical, like economic, social, historic, and literary crises. Whether we like it or

not, we are dealing with the ‘text’ (I continue to paraphrase Derrida) that started out being called ‘hypertext’.

The need to read another way already arose in post-modernist theory (Lampropoulos, 2007). We shall now consider some well-known examples: In *Archéologie du savoir* (1969), Michel Foucault states that ‘the book is trapped in a system of references to other books, other texts, other phrases: it is a node within a network...’ (1969, p. 23). Roland Barthes says of the novel in *S/Z*, in which he analyses *Sarrasine* by Honoré de Balzac, that it is ‘a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning, it is reversible, we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one...’ (1974, p. 11). As Theodor H. Nelson puts it in *Literary Machines* (1981): ‘By (electronic) hypertext I mean non-sequential writing – text that branches and allows choice to the reader, best read on an interactive screen...’ (1981, p. 2). George Landow in *Hypertext* (1991) defines hypertext as ‘text composed of blocks of words, linked electronically by multiple paths...’ The expression hypermedia (2006) simply extends the notion of hypertextual text by including images and sound, as well as animation and other forms of information. Such conclusive syntagmas—the ‘node within a network’, the ‘galaxy of signifiers’, the ‘non-sequential text’ that ‘branches’, the text ‘composed of blocks of words and links’ are the pre-history of our way of seeing and thinking of the world, of relating and moving forward, not in a straight line but from different nodules, advancing as a network, thinking together, building global electronic textualities. Nowadays, we prefer to talk of Cybertext and Hypermedia because this hypertextuality has been influenced by the mass media, by images and sound to complement its Reading, bringing it closer to a more and more globalized public.

3 What Is Digital/Electronic Literature?

At present, the hypermedia literary critic has to face two challenges: helping readers locate digital literature, and providing foundations for reading and

interpreting these works. Literature conceived and written on the Internet that develops narrative codes and interdisciplinary structures is now an emerging reality in the Hispanic world. In general, the term digital literature refers to literary genres related to cyberliterature: hypertext, hyperpoetry, hyper-performance, etc. According to the Electronic Literature Organization (<http://www.eliterature.org/about/>), the *sine qua non* feature of digital literature is simply that it should contain ‘important literary aspects’. Its definition of electronic literature is reproduced here:

The term refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer. Within the broad category of electronic literature are several forms and threads of practice, some of which are:

- Hypertext fiction and poetry, on and off the Web
- Kinetic poetry presented in Flash and using other platforms
- Computer art installations which ask viewers to read them, or otherwise have literary aspects
- Conversational characters, also known as chatterbots
- Interactive fiction
- Novels that take the form of e-mails, SMS messages, or blogs
- Poems and stories that are generated by computers, either interactively or based on parameters given at the beginning
- Collaborative writing projects that allow readers to contribute to the text of a work
- Literary performances online that develop new ways of writing

But what exactly are these literary aspects that are so important? Are they copies of the literary principles pertaining to the print tradition, or do they entail a change in the very definition of literature itself? For some readers, digital literature could be a new literary genre; yet for others, it is just a new way of experimenting with literature, or to be more exact, the only way nowadays that literature can experience new forms of creation.

4 New Characteristics of Digital Literature

Specialist critics have created an accumulation of clichés that have repeatedly been used in the analysis of digital literary texts. Thus, with the definition of hypertext as their referent (Landow, 1992, 2009), and based on the analysis of a small number of experimental works—for example, *Afternoon, a Story* by Michael Joyce and *Victory Garden* by Stuart Moulthrop—the theorists focus their reflections on five issues: the collective (Moulthrop and Kaplan, 1991; Casacuberta, 2003), the death of the author (Toschi, 1996), the rupture of linearity (Bernstein, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1994; Aarseth 1993, 1997), the demythification of the canon, and the democratization of art (Gómez Trueba, 2005). Digital literary text must be multilinear, multimedia, multiple in content and form, interactive, and dynamic (Pajares, 2004). These adjectives sum up different post-modern theoretical contributions based on Julia Kristeva’s intertextuality, Roland Barthes’ *lexias*, Mikhail Bakhtin’s textual polyphony, Michael Foucault’s networks of power, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s rhizomes, the Derridian expansive text and Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish’s evolution of communication systems. This convergence theory has been violently criticized by other theorists like Ensslin (2007) whose monograph focuses on a new form of computer-based literature, a digital, interactive, communicative form of new writing.

So far, I have reviewed some of the theoretical background of new digital literature. But, I do not think it fair to impose such theories on these new Readings. I prefer to understand how we can improve the concept of Reading to understand digital literature as a global and hypermedial thread.

Those who are not digital natives realize that we have acquired several vices as a result of the way we read books. We manage quite well to read text, look separately at images or even listen to music while we do something else. But when we go on the Internet, we need to read, listen, and look at the same time, and that reminded me of ekphrasis. What about old ‘ekphrastic’ Reading through which the reader-viewer tried to understand texts and images at the

same time? Would it be possible to rethink ekphrasis as a new genre for digital literature? Ekphrasis is not based on mimesis but on inter-textual synaesthesia. In view of the many questions raised, I have decided to read the digital text in an attempt to propose different entryways to digital literature Reading.

5 Some Notes on Hispanic Digital Literature

Two challenges currently face the scholar of hypermedia literature: helping readers to locate digital literature, and offering them samples of reading and interpretation of the texts in question. Literature designed and written online, involving codes and interdisciplinary narrative structures, is today an emergent reality in the Hispanic world. We will briefly analyse some of its main aspects here:

Some basic Internet portals and directories are now available for digital literature in Spanish:

- (1) Directorio de Hiperficción en Español [Spanish Hyperfiction Directory], created by Luis Orihuela at the University of Pamplona.
- (2) *Espéculo* [*Speculum*], a digital magazine founded by Joaquín Aguirre Romero (Complutense University).
- (3) *Antología de Literatura Digital* [*Anthology of Digital Literature*], published on the portal of the Hermeneia Research Group (University of Barcelona).
- (4) *Literatura: Hipertexto* [*Literature: Hypertext*] which is part of the Open Directory Project.
- (5) *Hiperficciones online* [*Online Hyperfiction*] directed by Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez from the Javeriana University of Colombia
- (6) *Literatura Electrónica Hispánica* [Hispanic Electronic Literature] directed by Juan José Díez and located in the Biblioteca Virtual Cervantes (Cervantes Virtual Library).

A lot remains to be done to develop these portals and adapt them to the possibilities offered by today's technology. New projects are already under way to complement work currently in progress. These will not only cover collections of works from Hispanic literatures, but also literatures in

other languages. We shall have to wait to see results that will surprise us all.

Most of the authors are unknown to the general reading public, although they always leave some interesting trails in their work published online. Authorship is usually shared: the inventor of the story collaborates with the technicians who adapt it into hypermedia format. A good number of hypertextual and hypermedia digital writing projects are devised by students of journalism under the guidance of their teachers at university. This may be the reason why such texts are created in a style that is in line with the taste of young people today. 'Collages' are made from chats and e-mails, images are mixed with music and words, and the influence of the comic is felt very strongly. The favourite topics of these young creators are adventures and diaries. The characters are mostly young people with young people's problems, such as identity, falling in and out of love, and social conflicts.

If we trawl the directories mentioned in a search for hyperliterature, we find we already have quite a respectable repertoire. Despite the fact that in electronic virtuality the borders between different literary genres are very blurred, critics continue to look for similarities between these texts and the three great classical genres: poetry, prose, and theatre. A characteristic of all these texts is that the creator hands over to the reader the power to steer the text towards wherever he or she wants, although when it comes to marking the route, it is always the creator who holds all the cards. This semi-organization relates to the realization of a long-standing dream: that of getting the reader to take part in the production of the work. Reading is understood as a pathway; each reader moves forward in the text by opening the way between fragmented units.

Interest in written digital literature in Spanish has led to growing support for these particular repertoires in the form of prizes and institutional events. In 2007, a LEETHI Prize for digital literature was awarded, funded by the Complutense University and Microsoft Ibérica S.A. The prize had three categories: (1) electronic edition of literary works written in Spanish, (2) online didactics in Spanish literature, and (3) digital literature created in the Spanish language. In this last section—the

one we are concerned with here—the winner was Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez Ruiz (Colombia) for his work entitled *Golpe de gracia* [*Coup de Grace*]. The work embodies numerous prophesies respecting digital narrative and their convergence with computer games. It entangles the reader in a skein of intrigue and mystery, in which the story of the death of Father Amaury is mixed with reflections on cyberculture and new narrative genres about death and old age, authoritarianism, the confrontation between the world of young people and that of their elders, between virtue and moral corruption. The work consists of three levels or worlds: *Cadáver exquisito*, *Línea mortal* and *Muerte digital* [*Exquisite Corpse*, *Mortal Line and Digital Death*], and four rooms (playroom, reading room, study, and construction room). Each of these worlds offers us a different way of Reading: a quasi theatrical performance, a game of skill, and a game of deduction. The reader becomes an explorer in a fictional universe populated by characters, who gradually become familiar, themes that provoke reflection, and levels that become interwoven. Through its different rooms, *Golpe de gracia* offers us the strange experience of reading different texts making up the original story. The reader is also invited to take part in the creation of an atmosphere of critical reflection on cyberculture and its products, which include various blogs on *Golpe de gracia*.

Other Spanish cultural institutions² are also becoming aware of the literary possibilities of the Internet. Other events are more open to the general public. One such event, *Yuxtaposiciones'08. Microfestival de poesía y polipoesía* [*Juxtapositions '08. Microfestival of poetry and polypoetry*], was organized by the Autonomous Community of Madrid and held at La Casa Encendida in 2008. It included recitals of *Poetry Slam*, a new form of communication based on controversial texts and rapid-fire rhythms, which inspire young people to create ways of expressing their points of view, their criticisms, and their problems. Although this offers them a new way of 'shouting', in the literal sense of the word, they are also required to share and listen to each other. Taking part in these recitals were D' de Kabal, Julio Jara, and the Pimpipoets. Other poets present were Ricardo Domeneck

(Brazil), Eugenio Tisselli (Mexico), Nora Gomringer (Switzerland), Mark Sutherland (Canada), and Albert Pla and Josep Pedrals (Catalonia). The aim of this very international event was to renew literary expression through digital media. In May 2009, a particularly outstanding event was held in Barcelona. This was *E-Poetry*, organized by Laura Borràs with ELO support, at which most of the work presented was by creators from the English-speaking world.

6 The Reading Process of Digital Literature

In order to reach an understanding of online reading, it helps to use a form of metaphoric thought. The ergosphere is the area located outside a rotating black hole, a region in which the field of gravity drags space-time along with it. Just like in the ergosphere, on-screen reading offers no rest; the text seems to be in perpetual motion. Digital space itself revolves around this single phenomenon: movement; digital text moves in accordance with the speed or tempo of its readers. Readers of a digital literary text are also aware that their Reading must be done in rotation around the space the work occupies. What makes a digital text literary is the range of reading possibilities it offers: the text does not become a work with its own cultural identity until it has been read through to the end. Creative reading is a mechanism in which there is a convergence of a unique space/time perception that also shows the key cultural elements of a period. Hypertext and hypermedia entropy arise within this digital ergosphere, that is, the creative energy of identifying values. The expansive character of this entropy³ gravitates around the ability to make a global view of the world evolve and transform itself. When the entire mechanism that rotates around digital entropy is fully developed, its specificity gives us a digital work. In this sense, entropy is what also makes a digital work literature. How is it recognized? We are only just starting out on the path towards theorization of the reading of online literary works, a path that is sure to be long, with numerous obstacles on the way. At the present time,

it seems more appropriate simply to consider possible entryways to the digital works themselves and the reflections of their authors.

6.1 (1) Hypertextual Reading

The first entryway to digital literary text reading is linear: the reader is led by the ‘link’ and reads the pages that make up the text one by one. This is the case of the work by Isabel Ara and Iñaki Lorenzo *Nada tiene sentido* [*Nothing Makes Sense*]⁴ (Fig. 1). This work consists of a digital diary in which a narrator describes his desperation at being unable to leave his own room; all he can do is write on his computer about how he feels. It reads:⁵

The composition of this work resorts to new digital discursive genres: e-mail and chats (López Alonso and Seré, 2003), in which the narrator copies and pastes text into his virtual diary. The plot is simple, well presented and formally distributed: the narrator wants to communicate with others in order to be saved from his loneliness, but does not manage to do so. His girlfriend is away and other (anonymous) internauts do not believe him. He tries to communicate with the police and the emergency services but they pay no attention; everyone seems to take him for a madman. Suddenly, one anonymous internaut contacts a psychiatrist, who turns out to be the same psychiatrist who is already treating the narrator. The psychiatrist warns the internaut that the person he is communicating with by e-mail is a schizophrenic suffering from symptoms such as hallucinations, delirium, disorganized thinking, and strange behaviour. In the end, the whole situation is resolved: the narrator is a certain Pedro Martínez San Miguel, who is confined to a psychiatric ward run by a well-known psychiatrist at the San Cristóbal Clinic. The readers’ suspicions are confirmed—the text gradually loses coherence and cohesion, that is, a logical word order. The background and foreground converge into schizophrenia, into the madness of the digital narrator.

This text can be classified within the autobiographical subgenre (Durán López, 2005), but there are some features that belong specifically to the solipsistic digital identity: the self is now not only the centre of the beliefs of modern autobiography but

rather there is a disintegration of identity that is typical of post-modernism. Indeed, this text shows the annihilation of human identity, exiled by the machine. Isolation produces schizophrenia, a division of identity, a fragmentation of the self enclosed inside a room and simultaneously inside a machine. But what is most disturbing is the recognition of the fact that beyond digital entropy, nobody pays any attention to the narrator, nobody understands him, nobody takes him seriously.

6.2 (2) Ekphrastic Reading

In the second entryway to digital entropy, the reader can simultaneously browse through different links. In addition, in this type of reading gravitation, hypertext becomes hypermedia, that is, it loses textual linearity so as to rotate around figures and even the spoken language. This occurs, for instance, with Belén Gache’s text *El idioma de los pájaros* [*The Language of Birds*]⁶ (Fig. 2), in which birds sing/recite in unison poems by well-known poets, whose protagonists are themselves birds. Thus, we hear *Volverán las oscuras golondrinas* [*The Dark Swallows will Return*] by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, *Leda* by Rubén Darío, *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Le paon* [*The Peacock*] by Guillaume Apollinaire and *Le cygne* [*The Swan*] by Charles Baudelaire. The author tells us her aim in creating these poems:

Los pájaros han sido tradicionalmente símbolo de sentimientos o propiedades humanas. Muchas historias nos cuentan, incluso, acerca de la facultad de palabra que poseen ciertas aves. Esta facultad es, sin embargo, ocultada a los hombres. Algunos pocos han podido, no obstante, compartir el secreto. Entre ellos, Anaximandro, Apolonio de Tiana (curiosamente, los dos eran magos) y el mismo Esopo.[...]

Los pájaros de “El idioma de los pájaros” son máquinas-poetas. En este sentido, comparten con el ruiseñor mecánico, en primer lugar, la paradoja de combinar una fragilidad extrema con una armadura rígida y monstruosa. También comparten el hecho de estar programados para re-citar palabras. ¿Acaso las palabras no son siempre ajenas? [...]

He decidido seguir con estas páginas web y utilizarlas como diario. De pequeño tenía uno de papel, pero me cansaba tener que utilizar la pluma para contar mi vida. La mayoría de los días mi vida era tan gris que no merecía el esfuerzo de escribirla.

Fig. 1 *Nada tiene sentido* [Nothing Makes Sense] by Isabel Ara and Iñaki Lorenzo.

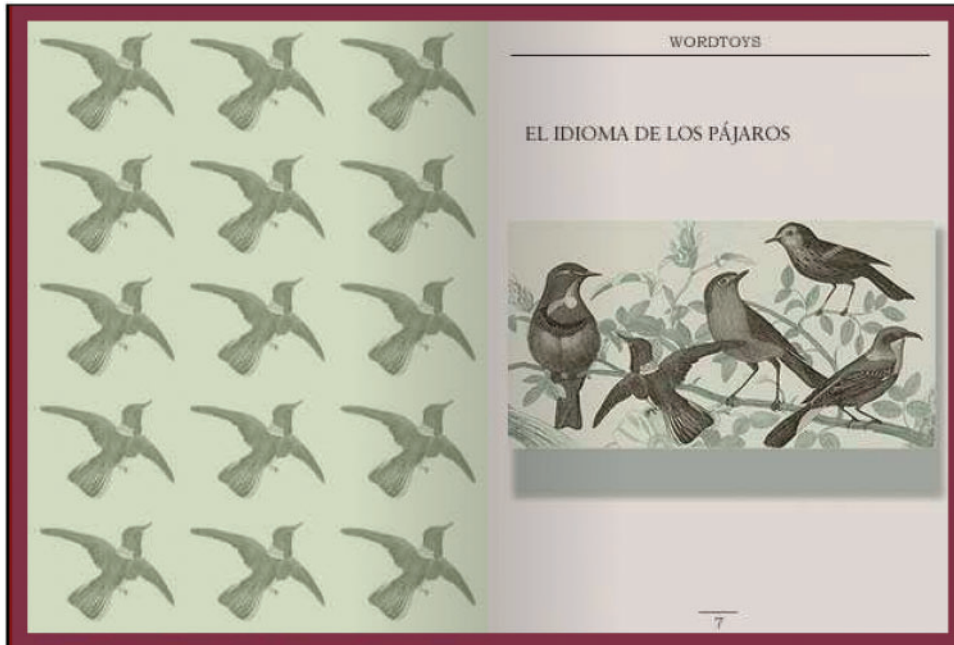


Fig. 2 *El idioma de los pájaros* [The Language of Birds] by Belén Gache.

Además de las aves autómatas, en “El idioma de los pájaros” hay otro tipo de aves, incluso más aberrantes todavía: las que están hechas únicamente de palabras. Cisnes, golondrinas, cuervos y ruiseñores se nos presentan como pájaros lingüísticos, capturados por las máquinas-poetas dentro de una inviolable armadura significativa.

Esta es la trágica canción de los pájaros de “El idioma de los pájaros”: cuanto más cantan, más irremediadamente prisioneros quedarán de la jaula del lenguaje.

[Birds have traditionally symbolized feelings and human qualities. There are many stories

about the talking ability of certain birds. However, this ability is hidden from men. Only a few have been able to share the secret, among them Anaximander, Apollonius of Tyana (funnily enough, both were magicians) and Aesop himself. [...]

The birds in *The Language of Birds* are poet-machines. In this respect, they share with the mechanical nightingale the paradox of the combination of extreme fragility with the rigid armour of the cage. They also share the fact that they are programmed to re-recite words. Could it be that the words are not always someone else’s? [...]

Apart from automated birds, there is another type of bird in *The Language of Birds* which is even more of an aberration: birds that are made exclusively of words. Swans, swallows, crows and nightingales are presented as linguistic birds, captured by the poet-machines in the inviolable armour of the signifier.

This is the tragic song of the birds in *The Language of Birds*: the more they sing, the more inevitable it becomes that they remain prisoners in the cage of language.]

The sparrow, swan, rook, turkey, and stork sing their own songs and are shown in an animated figure. The singing of the five birds, the text and the sound, all form an ensemble, bringing together audio and visual elements, just as experimental poetry had tried hard to do, but here the additional feature of movement is included. This poem unites, on the one hand, the Hispanic and European tradition of letterism and, on the other, avant-garde linguistic internationalism (Cózar, 1991). What does this type of digital literature contribute to what is already known as analogue visual or experimental literature? Again, as in the previous example, the schizophrenic—the lyrical self (the bird)—is imprisoned in a cage (digital entropy), now transformed into a poet-machine. The creator self is presented enclosed inside a machine, as if it were a simulacrum from the film *The Matrix*.

6.3 (3) Serendipity Reading

As for the third entryway into digital entropy, this is one in which the reader is carried away by the gravitation of a two- or three-dimensional virtual world. Although it is not a very widespread genre, because of the creative difficulty entailed, there are several works that exemplify it. It is found in two poems by the Argentinian Santiago Ortiz. The first one, entitled *Bacterias*, created in 2004, portrays interlinked words and phrases in movement. When one clicks on one of the lexeme-nodes, it reproduces as if it were bacteria. The supposed lexical bacteria have differently coloured centres, depending on the type of food they eat and the width of their centre determines their energy. Relationships between the different terms seem to have been taken from chaos or deconstruction theory.

The second text, created by Santiago Ortiz in Medialab, Madrid in 2004, entitled *Diorama*⁷ (Fig. 3), is a relational network of concepts, texts, figures, interactive applications, links, and references, all within navigable web-space. The contents are a compilation of information, as well as a reflection on language and codes. Three uses of code are identified, each operating in very different, yet related, fields: a life-generating code [genetic code], a narration-generating code [languages] and a representation and system model generating code [computer code]. The interweaving of relationships is more important than the compilation of information. *Diorama* is the result of work that began with the exhibition *El inventor de historias* [*The Stories Inventor*] (Medialab Madrid, Centro Cultural Conde Duque, Madrid, April–May 2004). The walls of the exhibition hall were covered with texts and figures that were all interrelated, and also included installations and digital applications (a photograph of the montage can be seen on the exhibition website). One can explore the network of texts, figures, and applications by travelling around the contents by way of the relationships. Thus, each trajectory is a specific journey, a narrative through knowledge. Although each node (content area) is represented in three-dimensional space and surrounded by its related nodes, the network-space includes multiple dimensions associated with the network topology.

Before entering these works, the reader receives information on the functioning of the text, based on fractal geometry, which lies at a midpoint between mathematics, art, and the conception of philosophical reflections. If we classify them as experimental works, it is because of the playfulness we perceive from the concepts, which are linked to one another without much discursive logic, but which lead the reader to wonder about a possible personal reflection. The works are organized in non-linear geometry in an immaterial, three-dimensional space, in which the reader or spectator observes the poem as it transforms itself and takes on new meanings. The reader does not jump from one page to another by way of links, which seem to be more related to play or instinct; in this reading, both the poet's choice of words and the relationship between these words

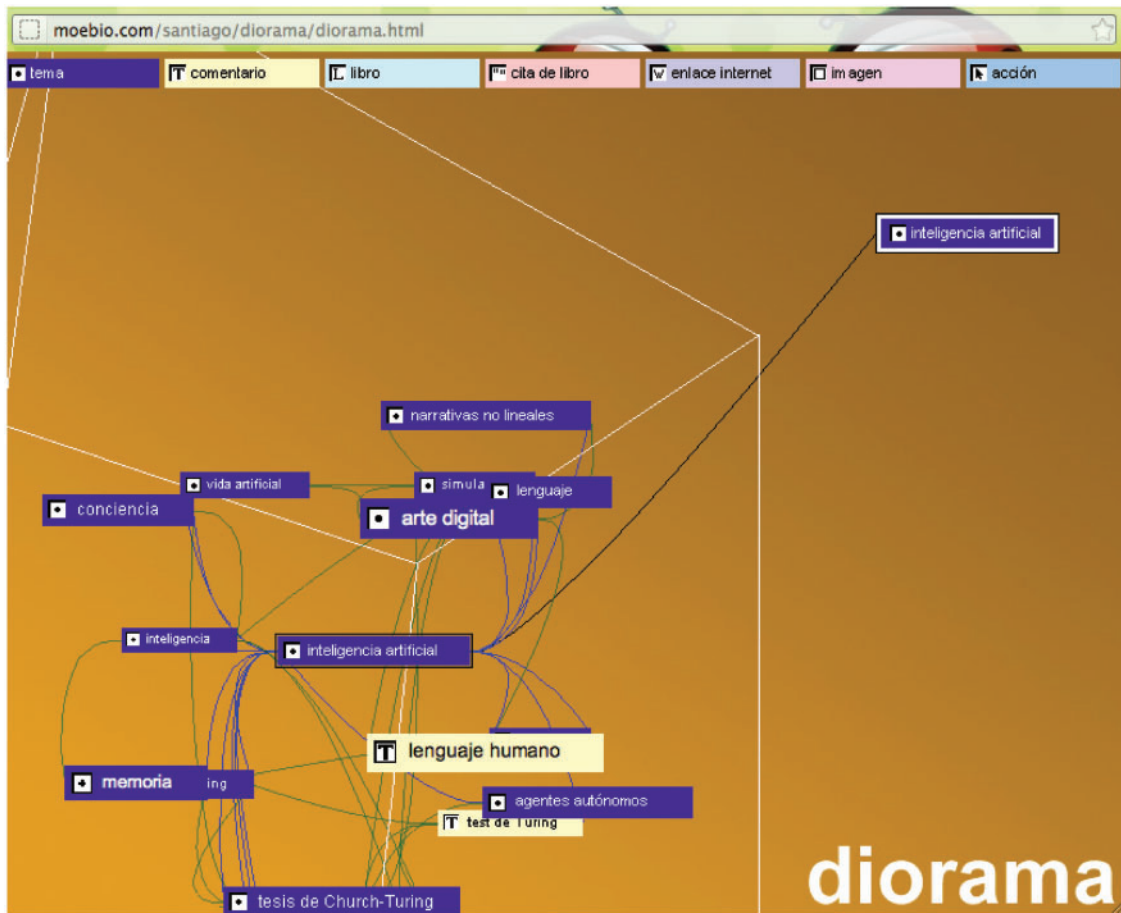


Fig. 3 *Diorama* by Santiago Ortiz.

must be taken into account. The artist strives for a total art form in which different signifying codes are conflated. The reader finds these works rather strange, and in addition, is forced to participate more actively in them, but at the same time the events that occur seem to happen by chance in a happy or beneficial way. This is what could be called Serendipity Reading. What exactly is being attempted here? It could be said that the goal is relativism and the loss of the hegemony and rationality of written language. The perspective of critical judgment and the development of what is cognitive (the communication of sensations, emotions, and concepts) allude to a changing existence; just like in reality, time and space change according to the

contingency of each reader, bringing about timelessness and utopia. Rhythm is based on the sensation of textual instability, which becomes emotional, since what the holographic artist actually attempts to do is demonstrate the theory of the impossibility of closed structures.

Another possible point of view with respect to these works is the generic one, influenced by the inertia of assuming the Aristotelian tradition, although in my opinion it is necessary to overcome this and move on in order to update the way we narrate our lives. The fact is, we have more and more examples of where to look for narrativity based mainly on intrigue, mystery, and detective narrative: I shall mention just a few of the works

already studied by Amelia Sanz and Silviano Carrasco in their text *Telling Detective Stories in the Digital Age* (in press). A well-known example that has been widely studied is *Condiciones Extremas* [*Extreme Conditions*] by the Colombian Juan B. Gutiérrez. This is based on a web of intrigue, persecution, quests, kidnappings, and enigmas, against a backdrop pulsating with ambition, the desire for power and social control, racism and fear, and is undoubtedly a critical reflection on the extremes reached by the pollution of our planet. The web of intrigue is developed further in his latest work, *The First Flight of the Wright Brothers*, (despite its title, in Spanish only). Another hypernovel is the one by the Sevillian, Edith Checa, *Como el cielo los ojos* [*Like the Sky, the Eyes*], based on intertextual links and relations. As soon as we click to access the novel, we see a series of rows of squares, with an eye in each square. On the vertical axis are three names, and on the horizontal axis are the numbers from one to thirteen. Three characters, three time periods, but only one novel triggered by a single event: 'Isabel is dead...'. The last example I want to refer to here is *Tierra de Extracción* [*Land of Extraction*]

by Doménico Chiappe and Andreas Meier (Fig. 4), which has appeared in different versions since its authors began the project in 1996. It is a multimedia novel in which music, image, and six narrative plots are combined to tell the story of a man who leaves a woman and runs off to join the revolution.

The first examples of poetry that emerged, which at the time drew my attention (Romero, 2008), could again be considered as the work of students of the media. However, these have now been superseded. Recent research by Ana Cuquerella (DEA-UCM-2010) under the title '*E-tertulias, e-vanguardias, e-juglaría: la poesía que se aloja en las bitácoras españolas*' [*E-discussion groups, e-avant-gardians, e-minstrelsy: The Poetry Residing in Spanish Blogs*] reveals different examples of poetry in motion (typopoems, anipoems), animated poetry, hypertextual poetry, photopoetry, video-poems, holopoems, and poetry automatically generated by computer. Here, I would like to mention the Madrilenian multimedia writer and musician, Óscar Martín Centeno, founder of the group *Artístico Octodigital* and winner of numerous poetry prizes. His poem *Somos* (*We are*) is an example of a digital



Fig. 4 *Tierra de Extracción* [*Land of Extraction*] by Doménico Chiappe and Andreas Meier.

work that uses music, images, and words to try and reflect the identity of a 'self' beset by the anxieties that affect modern man: panic, tranquillizers, anti-depressants, the Friday night drink, the news on the radio, the power station... The force of the word, which is both epic and social, is accompanied, minstrel-style, by his own musical composition.

7 Conclusion

The Internet nowadays is our digital 'Speculum'. Decartes would say 'I am what I am and what the Internet says about me'. The Internet is a global space that allows for the local, and this is the way digital literature should be compared: from global to local and vice-versa. There could be remarks on how these literatures can and will connect if global is not only supposed to mean globally available, but further research is needed on this topic. In this study, we have tried to adopt an original approach to literary digital works, presenting them in relation to three pathways of reading: Hypertextual Reading, Ekphrastic Reading, and Serendipity Reading. Thus, from forms of literary experimentation based on the collective and the desire to break linearity, we have reached schizophrenia, solipsism, and chaos as expressions of a creator-self who manifests digital entropy in this way.

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- 2 For example, *The Conference on Comparative Literature in the Digital Era* (University of Alicante, October 2005), the *International Seminar on Literatures: from Text to Hypertext* (UCM-AILC, September 2006), *First Conference on Digital Literature* (September 2007), *Contemporary Spanish Literature. Literature and the Internet. New Texts. New Readers.* (University of Malaga, November 2010).
 - 3 Entropy is a thermodynamic quantity representing the unavailability of a system's thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work, often interpreted as the degree of disorder or randomness in the system.
 - 4 See: http://www.unav.es/digilab/proyectos/enl/2002/nada_tiene_sentido/
 - 5 Translation: I have decided to carry on with these web pages and use them as a diary. As a child, I had a paper one, but I got tired of having to use a pen to tell about my life. Most of the time, my life was so dull that it did not deserve the effort of writing about it.
 - 6 See: <http://www.findelmundo.com.ar/wordtoys/data/pajaros/intro.htm>
 - 7 The diorama is a model representing a scene with three dimensional figures, either in miniature or as a large-scale museum exhibit.

Notes

- 1 Other authors I consider fundamental for understanding this transfer are Espen Aarseth with his work