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Editorial

Philippe Bootz

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Editorial of Regards Croisés

Phillippe Bootz, Université Paris 8, laboratoire Paragraphe

One can generally claim that digital literature(s) has an international dimension. But does this mean that digital literature(s) would escape the cultural readings resulting from regional traditions? Or that the creative practices at work would not bring out any cultural identity? The short but already consistent history of this literature(s) demonstrates to us that they do. It is not a product of chance to claim that hypertext fiction was mainly developed in the United States, or that text generation was mainly developed in France, or that Brazilian digital poetry is concerned particularly with intersemiotic relationships between media. These differences exist because digital literature is rooted in literary problems impelled by developments specific to each culture. Of course, for a long time, the development of communication has allowed ideas, concepts, and proposals to cross through and to influence productions in a global way. But these concepts and ideas were always adapted, reinvented, and/or reinterpreted by the creators according to their culturally distinctive features. Even a movement born of international meetings, like Concretism, presents cultural variance in its origins: the concrete poetry by Eugen Gomringer or Franz Mon is not that of Augusto de Campos. These are the fundamental cultural variants that make the literature rich and keep it safe from the harm of “*pensée unique*” [intellectual orthodoxy] in France.

The first guiding line of this collection is to offer crossed perspectives, either because the authors or researchers speak about works deriving from their culture, or because they deal with works deriving from other cultures in the light of their own culture. There was no question of imposing a set of themes—not even an explicit orientation of the contributions according to this line. Leaving the contributors a total freedom of subject matter makes it possible to treat the topical questions—those questions which lead to debates, and which naturally cause reflection—and brings out coherence from the topical triad of programming/body/informational noise. The contributors were perhaps influenced by the title of this volume, which they knew before proposing a contribution, but more so I think, because the field of research in digital literature(s) necessarily works to constitute a pluricultural and multidisciplinary crossed approach to the diversity of literary digital creation, an approach that is paralleled by this collection.

The term *digital literature(s)* is seldom defined and too seldom discussed, as if a “natural” definition exists that would be essential and would exempt us from questioning ourselves about it. Not by a long shot! Just as the term *cybertext* is perfectly defined by Espen Aarseth but remains fuzzy—which enables him to include in the same discussion productions that are examples of what I call digital literature(s), along with others which concern videogames—so too does the concept of digital literature remain fuzzy. It is enough to note the diversity and the plurality of the works shown at the various festivals or conferences that claim to deal with digital literature to be somewhat convinced of the fuzziness. The editorial choices that consisted of gathering these contributions here are thus not neutral. They rest on a conception of digital literature(s) that should be made explicit. The various movements or “-isms” of the twentieth century made the conception of literature evolve, breaking the textual medium, and mixing it with a multitude of media and in increasingly complex devices, reinventing an oral character as much as a practice of public presence and display. Digital

literary explorations fall within the scope of this historical context. It could just as well have been called “digitalism” to mark its membership in the great influential sphere of the “-ism” and schisms on all sides. History spared us this hideous word which would undoubtedly have made things more clear: digital literature, or rather digital literatures, constitute a set of literary proposals which are neither more nor less fundamental than these other proposals. In spite of the opposite assertions of the majority of their authors, digital literature(s) will undoubtedly damage the literature of the book no more than their famous predecessors did. It is a euphemism to claim that digital literature uses a numerical device for its creation and its reading, without this claim being clarified and used to make actual distinctions. On the other hand, the term *literature* itself must be clarified. In the logic of the context of “-ism,” I would define poetry as the “commando of the language” because poetry is the way by which the human language can enter every domain of human activity: we know poetry in action, technopoetries, biopoetry, and so on. Any production centred on problems related to language is poetic, regardless of whether the production was intended for non-poetic ends, as in the support of a narrative or ludic framework. In other words, is poetry defined as any approach that asks questions of the text, that asks the place of natural language in the constellation of semiotic systems? But is poetry also, in a less traditional way, any approach that asks the question of the manipulation of language by writing or reading? Is poetry any approach that questions the place of the language in a globalized world? Is poetry any approach that questions the place of the language in a technical world? Such definitions do not require the explicit presence of the word or even of the letter in a poetic work. Language can even be questioned on an *illegible* level; i.e. indications of it can appear in legible material without its explicit presence. It can be present on the level of the metadata, as in Gerard Dalmon’s work “My Google Body,” where language does not appear on the screen.

Accordingly, the digital literature of fictional narrative is a particular case of digital poetry. A digital fiction is a digital poem, which, moreover, uses language as a narrative vector. One can come close to defining a digital work of fiction by focusing on its narrative dimension or its poetic dimension. One could undoubtedly define several types of digital literatures according to the custom of using non-poetic language.

I did not want to impose such definitions to the contributors of this volume, nor, moreover, to its readers. It is only one proposal; it requests, on the contrary, to be freely discussed. But it played a part in the choice of proposals and explains both the diversity and the coherence of the contributions.

Eugenio Tisselli opens this volume with an analysis of his own works, based on the metaphor of “narrative motors,” in which the program plays the role of the engine and information the role of the fuel—in degenerative works, the logic of the program, or only its execution, burns this fuel until it becomes noise, indicating the destructive power of the look or view.

This slow destruction echoes the analysis of the digital literary work I do in my essay according to the categories of the distant and the near. Reading is seen as a perceptive failure, the program creating a work that is distant but which is seen as so close.

Camille Paloque-Berges’s analysis of the practice of codework is also about noise. The focus

in this case is creative textual noise in the informational system. The focus always remains noise, however organized. Shuen-shing Lee, by examining the forms of satire and simulation in the hypertextual fiction *Reagan Library* by Stuart Moulthrop, shows how the principle of “noise filtering” increases textual coherence. Janez Strehovec shows us the digital poem as a hybrid of “words-pictures-bodies-motions,” that programs give life to on screen. Such objects are intended for a new public and are open to a new form of distribution.

Alckmar Luiz Dos Santos points out to us that this conception of the bodily relationship between words and pictures is related to the practice of Concretism and more still to the process-poem. These fundamentally Brazilian twentieth-century poetic movements asked the question of the function of the device in poetic works. The essay’s reading takes this cultural background into consideration and leads the author to demonstrate an epigrammatic dimension in digital poetry. Finally, Alexandra Saemmer also analyzes poems as “words-pictures-bodies-motions” to discover some rhetorical figures that these objects bring to the more general corpus of literary works.

These explorations remind us that digital works of this sort, in all the diversity of their forms and objectives, remain, above all, Literature. This collection expresses different conceptions of digital literature and, notably, conceptions that are sometimes unusual for American readers. If some of them deal with “classical” aspects of digital literature such as “codework” (Camille Paloque-Berges) and “hypertext” (Shuen-shing Lee), the others break with these conceptions and remind us that the “very nature” of digital literature depends on cultural background (look especially at the essay by Alckmar Luiz dos Santos). Clearly, the “classical” aspects of digital literature are different from one country to another. This is why I prefer to use the term digital literature(s). This collection is not focused on an analysis of the diversity of the field but is instead an academic manifestation of this diversity, one that usefully reminds us that theories, as great and popular as they can be, are always relative to an implicit cultural point of view.