

CIBERTEXTUALIDADES

Publicação da Universidade Fernando Pessoa



TEMA DE CIBERTEXTUALIDADES 06

INTERACÇÃO DE LINGUAGENS E CONVERGÊNCIA DOS MÉDIA NAS POÉTICAS CONTEMPORÂNEAS

ORGANIZAÇÃO DE **JORGE LUIZ ANTONIO** E **DÉBORA SILVA**



REPRESENTATIONS IN DIGITAL POETRY, BEGINNING IN PORTUGAL¹

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Something I always value in digital poetry and electronic (or multimedia) writing is how its materiality, or even what some might instead call a complex immateriality, is never a fixed or static entity. Rather, it constantly accumulates and forms, emerging with numerous variations and purposes. The ongoing historical achievements in digital poetics, as are those of writers historically, emerge through its aggregation of possibilities for consistent and renewable figural relations between forms and materials. In the five decades since the earliest digital poems were produced, what could be identified as materiality has never reflected the same conditions for very long.

Throughout the historical course of this discipline in Portugal, a wide range of approaches have emerged, up to (and including) those that have been introduced today.

For now, I will return to the beginning. In the late 1960s, the literally animated materiality of language begins in Portugal, with Ernesto de Melo e Castro's *Roda Lume*. In his essay "Videopoetry" Melo e Castro claims this work recognizes and pursues the idea that "the dematerialized virtual image was in itself a

poetic image and therefore the poem could also be dematerialized" (144). Thus, he combines computer-animated letters and shapes propel an abstract narrative. Further, *Roda Lume* involves the organization of a "metonymic" narrative in which substitutes or symbols are used to represent attributes of words instead of definitive language. Melo e Castro suggests that the character of images is more iconic than symbolic, meaning that in video words or concepts are demonstrated rather than directly stated (144). Sophisticated hardware allows the blending of alphabetic figures interlaced with links and moving images, which in some sense could be regarded as a type of activated constructivism as geometric symbols and shaping are so pronounced in the piece. The experience of reading in this kinetic textual environment is complicated and sensual. Of this, Melo e Castro writes, "On the whole, a verbi-voco-sound-visual-color-movement complex and animated image is created calling for a total kinesthetic perception" (143).

Later, in the mid-1980s, Melo e Castro created eighteen videos in a series known as *Signagens*, later published under the title *Infopoesmas: 1985-1989*. These videos feature not only

¹ This essay, adapted from chapters in *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995* (U Alabama P, 2007), was presented as a talk at the PO.EX colloquium "Poesia Experimental: Materialidades e Representações Digitais", held at University Fernando Pessoa in February 2013.

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the movement of text, shape, and color but also theatrical type movements whereby the piece as a whole consists of a series of distinct scenes that employ different graphical treatments. Minimal amounts of text are combined with strategic use of color, pattern, and distortion to illustrate a larger point. For example, "Poética dos meios" (Poetics of Media, 1985) is a five-minute poem containing several different segments. In the narrative Melo e Castro indicates and illustrates some of the new dynamics of text, signified by the kinetic spelling of the phrase "formas voadoras" (flying forms), which is an apt description of Melo e Castro's work, as are other phrases that appear in the video, such as "espaço elástico" (elastic space). In this video lines, dots, and circles appear and interact with each other to make kinetic patterns that revolve into visual chaos. A pulsating synthesizer soundtrack plays throughout the work, a single repeated riff. In addition to establishing a visual continuity for the poem, the wavering shapes in "Poética dos meios" assert the lack of fixity that becomes not only a possibility but a probability of electronically presented poetry. This piece is an exercise that shows the capabilities of the technology and defines the parameters of videopoetry at the time. The poem demonstrates that an artist can manipulate any number of elements: character generators, shapes and symbols, colors, soundtracks, and so on. The poet's charge is to conceive of poetic ideas that the machine can effectively realize. Melo e Castro's work uses minimal verbal information in conjunction with visual patterning that establishes a correspondence between the two elements.

Often, for Melo e Castro and others the concern is not necessarily to retain semantic value but to show how text can be constructed from bits of language, with an emphasis on the understanding of poetic concept through the process of viewing and absorbing active components of text in real time. The hypermediated effects in these works transform shapes into recognizable patterns in a series of shifts that represent new modes of expression.

Melo e Castro, as well as other historical (and contemporary) Portuguese poets, assert visually oriented narratives that display the malleability and flow of contemporary text, illuminating how a combination of letters, symbols, and visual effects can be used to activate language, transmit imaginative ideas, and raise poetic questions. Historically, experimental poets here have practiced similar ideas—that every area of a given electronic "page," or page of a book, has dynamic capabilities. Another powerful example of this type is found in Silvestre Pestana's work of the early 1980s. In *Povo-Ovo* (1981) Pestana created a program that generated a series of abstract images using the words *POVO* and *OVO* in conjunction with negative space. Pestana's work—which has been recreated within the po.ex project, utilizes programming language to produce nonliteral images and recombinations of language and shapes. They appear as distinct but abstract shapes constructed by stacking a combination of *POVO* followed by spaces atop each other. Textual additions and deformations increase the amount of visual information presented. The materials blend into one another

and the shape of the image is altered, thereby presenting a cumulative mutation of symbol and text. Shifting sequences and motion are primary features of the conditions of text. The process of layering words and symbols, on the screen's surface, is automated and crafted via a computer program; the program specifies the placement of text, sequencing two separate documents to appear on top of one another. Multiple processes inform Pestana's digital poem. Creating the code is a process involving writing commands to instruct the computer; the code in turn enacts the structural and presentational processes, which are also multiple but occur in a precisely plotted sequence.

Contemporaneously, Pedro Barbosa, another major digital writer, took the approach of directly permuting one poem to create an endless series of new poems. Such programming serves to reassemble a given text, or what Barbosa refers to as a "text-matrix." "Cityman Story" (1980), included with Barbosa's *Syntext* program, is an example of this variational style. Described as a "synthesizer of narratives," the program is written to recycle the language of a "text-matrix," which is an unspectacular fourteen-line poem that lists occurrences of a mundane life in confessional form. "Cityman Story" produces a series of texts that portray surrealistic (absurd) and humorous characteristics, in which "there are progressive degrees of freedom" (n.p.). Each version of output is formed with the same phrase ("Here is a . . ."); however, the "voice" of the poem also takes on alternative identities, such as the city or the bus, as seen in these

fragments of generated text excerpted from the beginning of two different activations:

"Here is a bus of 35 index cards
Every morning he takes a man
Gets in the office
classifies two wives
.....
Here is a city of 35 wives
Every morning takes a bus
Says hello to the television
Gets in the background". (March 23, 2005)

The program does not elevate the status of the initial poem but does, in its transformation of the base text, retain a type of narrative while transforming the language into something different, projecting a narrative by something or someone who is seeing the world from an alternative point of view. In another example, the man in the poem is "of 35 beers" (July 12, 2004); a type of drunken rambling ensues—and is projected by the program in general—as if the man is confused and disoriented by this state of being, and life has led to delusion:

"Here is a 35 beer man
Every morning he takes a bus
Gets in the index cards
classifies the years
lunches the office
reclassifies the years
drinks two wives
Gets back home
kisses a steak
says hello to the television
eats the children with his wife in the background

Lays [*sic*] down
 Doesn't fornicate
 Doesn't asleep [*sic*]" (March 23, 2005)

The first two lines in each of the poems begin with the same patterns, but the subsequent verbal structures are not uniform. Completely alternative perspectives and meanings, divergent from the original poem, emerge through the randomness of the subsequent lines' order and shape.

Through all of these historical examples, and throughout the discipline as a whole, we see authors who are not confined to perform in a singular manner; indeed, the many possibilities encourage variety. Language is hardly rejected in these multimedia works and is in some regards worshipped more deeply; words become one of several possible object of reverence. Therefore, it would seem irresponsible not to say a few words about the materiality of the language from another point of view.

The works I have discussed in many ways laid the groundwork for many subsequent animated and generative experiments conducted worldwide. From them, many blossomed. In the opening chapter of *Electronic Literature*, Katharine Hayles asserts that electronic literature is not simply literature digitized, it is "hybrid by nature"; and this is clearly evident when we encounter the blended materiality in other material innovations on the network.

There is one new development in the field that represents a new form of materiality, that I do

not believe has yet to be explored here, and I wanted to take a moment to show you something—partly with the hope that someone in the audience might be inspired to give it a try. Another recent exciting development in digital writing is Augmented Reality, in which interactive computer-generated projections enhance a user's physical environment. Augmented Reality in literary practice merges real and virtual image streams to project poems and tell stories. A copy of Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse's *From Page to Screen* will allow me to provide graphically a hands-on example of how new materiality blends and extends historical materiality, how combinations of old and new technologies activate poetic language at present. <demo book> We see clear connections being made between the tenets of the book, cinema, art and literary history. Expressive devices perpetuate and expand, at times complicating the act of reading, but in the end holding a payoff for those who are open to receiving poetic language delivered through new modalities and devices.

What we see so often in this field today are situations where one text, through programmatic filtering, expands into another. Computers and digital systems and networks have altered the disciplinary sense of what poetry can be, intimating what literary dynamics may contain in the future and how it will be presented to readers. Digital materiality presents both a puzzle and formidable sounding board for poetic ideas and articulations. Within digital poetry and other electronic forms, there are more dimensions to materiality in comparison to con-

ventional writing. Print based works certainly have a specific type of materiality, in which language acts to create a sense of palpability, of reality, perhaps of wonder, and/or otherwise conjures a reader's imagination. Now we are presented with materiality on multiple registers, and mediated materiality often dependent on its content more than its delivery mechanism. Materiality generally refers to the physicality of an object, but so often in this field we have nothing to hold. New senses of materiality involve what we watch, hear, read, and interact with on the screen; evaluating materiality here means considering what can be done with what is available in the current historical moment.

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ISSN 1646-4435



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