

TECHNICS AND VIOLENCE IN ELECTRONIC LITERATURE

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If, as Jacques Derrida once claimed in a *New York Times* interview, ‘Everything is a text’ (Smith, 1998), then, of course, we are correct to seek methods of textual analysis appropriate for those media we choose to scrutinize, including those texts contained within the entire realm of digital computing. This realm of the text would include the network of machines, the individual machines themselves, the platforms that run on them, the software that runs on the platforms, the plug-ins and applets tucked into the software, the content supported by the software, and the ways that people use, modify, and create this content. To many who read this—electronic literature critics, digital humanists, cultural studies scholars, and others—this broad conception of textuality is nothing new. It fits within a tradition of criticism that is often traced back to the field of semiotics, but could conceivably be traced back to the Hellenic conception of *techne* which is linked to *poiesis*.¹

The digital, however, with its increasing plasticity of interface has intensified popular interest in simulation. The long path from analog mass mediation (beginning with mechanical printing and reproduction, photochemical imaging, audio recording, and data transmission) has led us piecemeal through modernity into the digital age, in which recording, replaying, reshuffling, and recontextualizing information is no longer an aesthetic preference, a hypothetical inevitability, or, even, a description of culture. The digital, in establishing its centrality as the default nexus for communication, has altered the very face of live experience in such a way that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between the realms of *langue* and *parole*, the system of ordained signification versus its everyday usage. Instead, the everyday is everywhere seamlessly and instantaneously integrated into the officially disseminated ur-text of culture, such that even popular, people-powered revolts like those in Tunisia and Egypt are branded as ‘Twitter’ revolutions. The terrain

upon which subjectivity has historically negotiated meaning has supplanted subjectivity itself, as if to say that human culture and aspiration are synonymous with the digital. (Though, admittedly, there is still a gap between the everyday and the ordinary insofar as critics and protesters have been quick to emphasize the overwhelmingly human dimension of the revolution). In this sense, all humanities are now digital humanities by virtue of the ubiquity of the computer.

Additionally, we can take traditional humanities disciplines and enhance or fundamentally alter our range of vision using the computer as a tool. Whether we are talking about research databases and archives that connect scholars to resources or about networking tools which connect researchers to each other, there is a network effect of new media on the humanities. In addition, there are those tools which enable researchers to look at large bodies of information in new ways, creating models and simulations of situations, or crunching ever larger amounts of data in search of patterns and anomalies. And, finally, there are those tools which enable us to look with greater precision at the specific, seeking greater understanding of the humanities through cognitive and evolutionary approaches. Yet all of these approaches strive, basically, for an enhancement of empirical methods that have been in place throughout the twentieth century.

However, this issue of *Culture Machine* asks the provocative question: 'to what extent is it possible to envisage Digital Humanities that go beyond the disciplinary objects, affiliations, assumptions and methodological practices of computing and Computer Science?' And though one might imagine many productive ways to answer this question, I would attempt to answer it by reversing the polarity of the general approaches enumerated above, in order to study the way in which a traditional disciplinary subject of the humanities applies its methods to the digital apparatus. Specifically, I aim to analyze a selection of electronic literary works by Serge Bouchardon as an effort to explore what Roman Jakobson called 'organized violence' against the 'ordinary speech' of the technical milieu (qtd. in Eagleton, 1983: 2).

While some might question a return to Formalist literary criticism, especially as this essay begins with a casual invocation of Derrida, such a return is quite productive if it is made with sensitivity to the insights of late 20th century critical philosophy. Following Terry Eagleton's elegant walk through the history of theory into the

poststructuralist moment, I share the view that literature is not an 'objective, descriptive category' nor a 'whimsical' designation of preference, but rather that the literary designation is a historically variable value-judgment which is closely related to social ideologies (1983: 16). Yet I would also add, following Eagleton, that these socially-linked value judgments are formed in relation to the zeitgeist, at various points confirming and/or resisting the prevailing ethos. While the literary, thankfully, bears little resemblance to the crude polarizations of American electoral politics, it remains political in that the literary is a place where desire is expressed to others, articulated amongst others, and ultimately negotiated with others. And, perhaps, it is all the more political to the degree with which it differs from raw propaganda. Insofar as literature creates authentic opportunities for the arrangement of unlikely continuities and unforeseen ruptures, it mobilizes subjects against prescribed formations and initiates true change. Such revolutionary politics offers neither the validation of pre-existing beliefs nor the tired application of understood labels; instead, this is politics in a pure form—realized as it is in the ability to form ideas, to change thought, to re-imagine social existence. To be sure, such politics is contrary to the imposed revolutions that we think of when we use the word in its ordinary, quotidian sense. This subtle and indeterminate mode is all the more necessary for its marginal status, precisely because it yields no predictable or reliable results. In an age of strategic planning, futures markets, and algorithmic consumer profiling, change itself is something that is increasingly managed and industrialized.² What could be more political than that which calls us to step out of this managed process to revolutionize our own thinking through dialogue with others?

Rather than make general claims about the organized violence essential to literature, I will make specific claims regarding a bounded definition of *a* literature by a specific author in relation to the broader cultural milieu in which this work is situated. I begin, then, with the modestly polemical definition of 'electronic literature' offered on the Electronic Literature Organization's website, which begins as follows: "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."³ While this definition does not move us beyond a pragmatically tautological definition of literature, it does indicate, quite clearly, what is meant by the term 'electronic.' Rather than being purely descriptive, suggesting that electronic literature is literature via an electronic medium, this definition specifies that the 'literary aspects' themselves 'take

advantage' of the computer. In other words, it implies that the question of electronic literature spins upon the very ways in which the digital medium itself can be put to 'literary' use.

Though I am involved in the Electronic Literature Organization and have a measure of responsibility for the ELO's *Electronic Literature Directory*, I have no intention of limiting this definition as it is used by the broader community. To insist that my critical theoretical priorities are essential to this definition would be to overstep my bounds and draw lines that are not necessarily shared by the broader community of e-lit readers, critics and artists. Rather, my own preoccupation with neoliberalism and technological culture, one which is informed by research and writing which began with my study of smart houses, leads me to ask specifically where the point of contact exists between the literary and the electronic. The general spirit of digital culture, by which the culturally rich and infinitely variable surface of communication is underwritten by codes, protocols, and norms that are rationally ordered to function on rational machines, points to one area in which Jakobson's 'ordinary speech' is realized. While the realm of the program, platform, and machine might not necessarily leap to our minds when we think of speech communities (perhaps they are too static for our poststructuralist imaginations), they do, in effect, speak to each other in a language that many are reluctant to call language precisely due to their rational character. Yet, if we think of 'ordinary' language in this way, we remember that the 'ordinary' is not only 'commonplace,' but that it is also 'ordering' and 'ordered.'

On an abstract level, however, we can see this same logic at play in the culturally acquired taste for modular units of expression and experience that can be plugged into templates of communicative response (often called 'postmodernism'); we can see it in the rise of instrumental language and technical jargon, and in the preference for technical metaphors for human cognition (often called 'posthumanism'). But, perhaps, most powerfully, this logic is represented in the prospect of technics as an engine of culture as discussed in the work of Bernard Stiegler. Stiegler writes,

[The] independence of mnemotechics from the technical system of production no longer exists today: in becoming planetary, the technical system is now also, and even foremost, a global mnemotechnical system. In a sense, a fusion between the technical system, the mnemotechnical system and globalisation

has occurred. This transformation first started taking place during the nineteenth century (which nevertheless still constitutes a transitional period), with the appearance of the first communication, information and signal-processing technologies. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, communication and information industries have become the centre of the technical system responsible for the production of material goods. What I previously described as 'convergence' between computer, audio-visual and tele-technologies also seems to refer to a convergence between the technical system of material transformation and the technologies of memorisation. (2003)

What Stiegler describes here, beyond the advance of technology, the advance of media industries, and the increase of global trade, is a system in which the broad field of human culture is being transformed and instrumentalized in such a way that the material practices of consumption and production are integrated with memory, desire, and consciousness itself. This radical reorganization of being, of human being, is what I aim to read electronic literature against. If the literary has Jakobson's violence within its folds, then *electronic* literature might direct this violence towards to the very material within which it is organized. If literature carries within it revolutionary potential, then a work's merit might be measured by the strength of the order it opposes and the wit with which such an opposition is mounted. This is not to say that the *only* good literature is that which struggles against the mnemotechnical system. Rather, it is to say that a new species of literature has emerged in the face of new challenges, that the old formal assumptions about what constitutes the literary do not necessarily measure up to these challenges, and that a new mode of criticism must address the new work and the new milieu. I aim to illustrate how such a criticism might proceed through a close reading of Serge Bouchardon's work.

While it is easy to grasp the basic idea that code can function as an example of 'ordinary language,' the larger question is whether or not this language has anything in common with ideological framework of the technical system. And though I do not mean to suggest that computer programmers themselves are somehow ideological activists for a monolithic world system, I would argue that networks,

machines, software, and a general spirit of the instant, modular, and proprietary have emerged as a dominant (but not entirely unchallenged) player for global governance. It might not be ideological in the popular sense, but it is a manifestation of a form of capitalism, it has a social imaginary, and it does have a language.

Thus, I find it appropriate to ask the question: could Electronic Literature be a form of organized violence against this ordinary language? While I can immediately point to a number of possible poets who could easily be read against this question (Alan Sondheim, Mez, Jason Nelson, Talan Memmott, John Cayley, Judd Morrissey, and Stephanie Strickland are only a few of these), I will pursue the question through close readings of Bouchardon's *The 12 Labors of the Internet User* (2008), *To Touch* (2009), and *Loss of Grasp* (2010) because Bouchardon's works, while eschewing any sort of overt political content, manage to work through formal process that open up the digital to active reflection. Furthermore, Bouchardon's theoretical wrings indicate an active struggle with the interface, thus pointing to the potential that I describe above. However, I feel that this subversive kernel could be identified in the works of many writers active in the field. As I've noted, my argument here aims not for the 'essence' of electronic literature, but for a specific claim about a particular poetics in a particular time.

In *The 12 Labors of the Internet User*, Serge Bouchardon *et al.* (<http://www.the12labors.com>) craft an elaborate series of entertaining, satirical games which liken real-life frustrations to the mythical labors of Hercules. Against this epic backdrop, users must complete technical feats such as eliminating spam ('Augean Stables'), blocking pop-ups ('Lernaean Hydra'), and wiping out cookies ('Horses of Diomedes'). The satirical flavor of the piece is enhanced by a driving electronic soundtrack and *Matrix*-style loading screens, suggesting that we, the internet users, are action heroes as we engage in witty simulations of everyday life in the digital age.

The piece is technically noteworthy for the level of development devoted to what is really a simple idea. Rather than simply making the comparison of epic struggle to our daily frustrations with technology, which is funny in itself, Bouchardon *et al.* (2008) go to great lengths to create distinctive levels of play, each of which is sufficiently novel to merit continued play (and to use the piece's log in feature, so that readers can save their progress as they play). Each labor comes to the reader via an 'email message' with instructions as

well as a brief text and classical image of the Herculean feat from which it draws its inspiration. For instance, the 'Erymanthean Boar' requires users to move through a maze of words, each of which links to a relevant site (and many of which will be of interest to readers). In this labor, the reader struggles, like Hercules, against fatigue, though the contemporary analogue is that of boredom rather than the exhaustion brought on by physical pursuit of a mythical beast. The result is a well-developed piece which reaches beyond the initial novelty factor.

While the writing itself is fairly utilitarian (rather than poetic), *12 Labors* is literary at a conceptual level. At once, it relies upon familiarity with classical literature (myth and allegory) and the conventions of contemporary narrative (cinematic and ludic) to provide critical and humorous insights into the tedious realities of daily life in the 21st century. Of the three pieces, this earliest work addresses the question of basic living with the machine at the level of content, at once mythologizing the mythical sphere of technologically enhanced living in the 21st century while satirizing the many inconveniences that emerge, even as it aims to ameliorate others. Though it tends to work most clearly as a critique through its content, a game that seeks to simulate frustration with technology and cast human-machine interaction in mythical terms works through a couple of fascinating ironies. In inscribing human inadequacy into a mythos which positions the machine as the scene of heroic challenge, the authors elevate the digital to Olympian levels. It is a subtle point, and one which takes time to sink in after the novelty of play has worn off, but this piece highlights a relationship that has some basis in a deep existential reality. While digital technology is typically presented to us as a tool, its failures are frequently attributed to human error, the human condition. Overcoming these errors is cast, in the piece, as heroic and virtuous. On the other hand, the myths themselves from which this work draws its inspiration are noteworthy for the capricious and arbitrary nature of the gods they represent. While contemporary readers will certainly grasp the epic frustrations of human inadequacy in our dealings with machines, we are also aware that the machines themselves place seemingly thoughtless and arbitrary demands upon users. In the end, *12 Labors* resides in a zone of negotiated meaning—players live with machines, understand their value, see through the overblown nature of technoutopian hype, yet struggle to make do with the daily setbacks and strides accomplished through a tool which has become indispensable.

Bouchardon, Kevin Carpentier, and Stéphanie Spenlé's *To Touch* (<http://www.to-touch.com/>) is a flash-based work which, as its title suggests, emphasizes physical interaction with the work as an opportunity to experience a literary text. The work opens with the image of a hand, which users can touch with their mouse pointer to open up the various subsections of the text, one for each finger (plus a 'bonus' section hidden within the page). Readers are invited to 'caress,' 'blow,' 'move,' 'hit,' 'spread,' and 'brush' the work, making use of the reader's microphone, camera, speakers, and mouse to explore the various subsections, each of which could be considered as a standalone piece. While the work contains elements which are recognizable as literary in the conventional sense—after playing with each section, a brief, but reflective passage is revealed—the emphasis is placed on interacting with the text through touch as a means of encountering the literary qualities of the work. The piece is notable for the ways in which it signifies the reader's touch, and thus poses a fascinating question for critics of electronic literature: when a physical act such as 'touching' is transformed into representation via an interface, in what ways might this parallel the representational conjuring that we associate with literary works? Bouchardon, Carpentier, and Spenlé's work seems to suggest that, although we cannot physically 'touch' the hand on the screen, we can explore many dimensions of this experience through a broad range of embodied metaphors.

To Touch goes beyond *12 Labors* insofar as it is more squarely engaged with the question of embodiment, vis-à-vis the interface. Though, like the earlier work, it strives for a comprehensive use of the computer interface, it differs in its tone. The satiric mythology and playfulness of *12 Labors* is replaced by intimacy and reflection, though, through its light language and ironic interface, it manages to maintain some of the spirit of the earlier work. Where it addresses the central question of this essay most squarely is in its appropriate use of the interface itself. Bouchardon *et al.* make expansive use of the available hardware to simulate that which the computer ultimately cannot provide—a human touch. Blowing, caressing, hitting, the piece invites an extended use of the interface that, in the context of the piece's content, seeks to situate the work within a human scale. Though one can find popular culture examples of such innovative uses of the interface, these uses tend to occur in the realm of electronic gaming and interactive pornography, and are thus hardly instrumental in the conventional sense, and certainly would fall into the ludic, the illicit, and the extraordinary.

The strongest and most recent example of such an intervention is Serge Bouchardon & Vincent Volckaert's *Loss of Grasp* (<http://lossofgrasp.com/>). *Loss of Grasp* explores the terrain of certitude as a tension between the 'grasp' and its 'loss.' As the title suggests, the piece opens up the space of the grasp after its hold on things has slipped away, focusing the reader's attention on the anxious desire experienced in loss (as opposed to the more optimistic grasp of the one who aspires towards something). The piece, created in Flash, is divided into six distinct segments, held together by a common protagonist and unified by the recurrence of slippery texts that reconfigure themselves when 'touched' by the reader's mouse strokes.

The first segment is initiated when the reader is instructed to press the hash key on the keyboard. From here, text appears on screen telling the protagonist's story from the first person perspective: 'My entire life, I believed I had infinite prospects before me.' After touching the text with the cursor, it scrambles briefly, and is followed by the next line: "'The whole universe belongs to me", I thought.' The narrator continues, describing his perception of control, always in past tense. As this first section, or stanza, proceeds, color and sound are added and the protagonist shifts into present tense, 'How can I have grasp on what happens to me?/ Everything escapes me./ Slips through my fingers.' This passage establishes the general mood of the piece: the perception of control unsettled by the experience of doubt. The unsettling is mirrored in the instability of the on-screen text itself.

The second segment begins with a meeting that the narrator characterizes as deceptive. Against the sonic backdrop of restaurant, the reader is presented with a series of statements and questions, small talk, that slips into distorted, absurd, homonymous phrases. For instance, when readers move their mouse over the question, 'Have you lived around here for a long time?' a voice recites the question as the text is replaced by the absurd: 'Have you used the wrong ear for a long time?'. The effect is to suggest a difficulty with language, a nervousness, as the speaker attempts to make conversation with a beautiful woman. As an image of the woman emerges, pieced together by the narrator's many questions, readers discover that the woman in question is, in fact, the narrator's wife. Eventually, the text reveals, 'Without my being aware of it, this stranger became my wife.' Here, the sense of unsettled memory and unreliable perception work through the central concept of the piece.

The third segment begins twenty years after the initial meeting, with the narrator reading an ambiguous note from his wife. A scrolling effect of the text allows readers to see the note as either a 'love poem or break up note,' depending on the order in which one reads the lines of the text. The fourth segment, following the narrator's troubled grasp of language, presents an essay from his own son, who reveals, 'I don't have a hero,' the text of which can be broken up and reassembled into phrases that express a desire for autonomy and, even, outright resentment. The fifth segment presents readers with their own distorted image, warped by the movements of the mouse, and punctuated by frenetic music and the narrator's own profession of outrage. The sixth segment begins with the declaration that it is 'Time to take control again,' and concludes with a provocative and amusing interactive component. The progression through these segments parallels the narrator's progressively loosening grip on the certainties he had taken for granted. Functionally, the interface itself plays games with the user by erasing certainty and interrupting conventional usability. The irony, of course, is that this engineered 'user-unfriendliness' is the technical means through which the narrative aspects of the piece are signified. It works because it doesn't.

Loss of Grasp is consistent with the other works by Bouchardon in that it explores the relationship between the human and the computer by way of interface, making broad use of mouse, keyboard, screen, speakers, and camera. On its most basic level, it is a piece about control and its loss that resonates with the common experience of media users in times of transition. Technology always proceeds by the extension of grasp and the promise of control. At the pedestrian level, the new device is sold by virtue of potential to extend agency, thus the piece functions, at the level of content, to challenge that basic idea. Grasp is lost, not enhanced, across the narrative arc of the piece. This loss is punctuated by the final segment, with its malfunctioning interface, itself a representation of a fully-functioning code.

Bouchardon & Volckaert mesh this practical question of grasp with a narrative that resonates with the broader human experience, by providing a story about a man who struggles to maintain control of his words, his relationships, and even his identity. But, perhaps most significantly, attentive readers will note that the piece is also about the question of control that exists between artists and their audiences. The net effect is to engage with our anxieties about loss of control across the physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and

cultural realms, and to put new media into a perspective that bridges these realms of experience, offering an interaction that is characterized by its complexity, indeterminacy, and elusive agency.

In Bouchardon's paper, 'The Heuristic Value of Electronic Literature' (2010a), the poet discusses the potential of electronic literature as an opportunity to gain new insights into established approaches. Originally presented at the 5th Annual Digital Assembly Conference at the University of Florida, 'Futures of Digital Studies 2010,' Bouchardon's essay explores the limits and assumptions of several methodologies by simply applying them to electronic literature: narratology by way of Michael Joyce's *Afternoon: A Story* (1987), semiotics through Gerald Dalmon's *My Google Body* (2004) and Jean-Pierre Balpe's *Trajectoires* (2001), aesthetics via Sophia Calle's *Vingt ans après* (2001), rhetoric by means of Lucie de Boutiny's *NON-Roman* (1997-2000) and the anonymously authored *Anonymes.net* (2001), anthropology through Alex Mayhew's *Ceremony of innocence* (1997), and archiving via Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* (2001) and Alexandra Saemmer's *Tramway* (2003-09). The result of Bouchardon's exploration is an open-ended discussion, a heuristic, which points to many intellectually intriguing potential uses for electronic literature. More importantly, Bouchardon returns from the various disciplinary interrogations to the question of the 'literary' itself, pointing out that electronic literature 'questions printed literature by unveiling issues hardly discussed by literary studies, among which [are] the materiality of the text and the weight of the technical device in every literary production and reception.' As Bouchardon notes, it is the 'unveiling effect' of intermedial and interdisciplinary approaches that opens new opportunities for literary criticism vis-à-vis electronic literature.

In a second paper, 'Digital Literature and the Three Levels of the Digital' (2010b), presented at the 2010 ELO Conference at Brown University, Bouchardon elaborates on this concept of 'unveiling.' He explains, 'Digital literature can *reveal* the tensions between the different levels of the Digital.' In Bouchardon's terms, these are: 1) 'the technical possibilities of the Digital,' 2) 'the potential of the applications,' and 3) 'the expressive potential of contents.' Each level has its own 'logic of development and constraints': 1) 'the purely formal construction of computing as a combinatorial space,' 2) 'the applicative construction regarding the tasks targeted,' and 3) 'the interpretative construction which depends on the content's own coherence and on its context.' Bouchardon continues, 'These logics

are desynchronized and incompatible *a priori*.' The key, he explains, is the tension that is produced when each of these levels interact. And though Bouchardon is describing how classroom teachers can use electronic literature to reveal the tensions between the three levels of the digital, the case is made that electronic literature explores these tensions as the mode of its work. In other words, Bouchardon's claims exist in strong parallel to my highly qualified claim that Electronic Literature commits organized violence against ordinary language. And thus, it is not a remarkable surprise to find that Bouchardon's own work would seem committed to this poetic project, however subtle and elegant his creative works might be.

The ultimate irony of this argument, perhaps, is the question of what organized violence looks like. Though in the field of Electronic Literature it is entirely reasonable to encounter works that appear disruptive, cacophonous, and chaotic at the level of content and that are jarring at an overt level, the three works here are not likely to be interpreted as violent in any conventional sense.⁴ One would expect, rather, that 'unity' or 'coherence' would be considered their overt qualities. The tensions in the piece are precisely at those points where the friction between levels opens up thinking about the technical imaginary, human/computer interaction, and, ultimately, the ideology of control, subjecting the mnemotechnical regime to violence, resisting its order, by framing it within the scale of human agency and contemplation. That such violence appears so humane begs the question: What, then, is the true face of the emergent order to which it is opposed?

Endnotes

¹ For a more detailed discussion of *techne*, *poiesis*, and the digital arts, please see Davin Heckman, 'Inside Out of the Box: Default Settings and Electronic Poetics'.

² For more on managed change, see Davin Heckman, 'Utopian Accidents: An Introduction to Retro-Futures'.

³ The definition continues, listing *some* examples to for illustrative purposes:

* 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 emails, SMS messages, or blogs.

This list, and the related definitions, are distilled from N. Katherine Hayles' 'Electronic Literature: What is it?' (2007).

⁴ One might ponder here Rita Raley's discussion of *Black Shoals* in *Tactical Media* (2009).

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