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Growing up Digital: The Emergence of E-Lit Communities in Spain. The Case of Catalonia “And the Rest is Literature”

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Growing up Digital: The Emergence of E-Lit Communities in Spain. The Case of Catalonia “And the Rest is Literature”

By Laura Borràs Castanyer

No. 42 – 20.12.2012

Abstract

Starting with the famous last words of Hamlet “and the rest is silence”, I would like to introduce Catalan e-lit communities and their experience of digital literature. The Hermeneia Research Group has been one of the pioneers in the field in Spain and has been developing many different activities for the last ten years. Lately it has been promoting a public debate in Literary Societies on Digital Literature (Premis Octubre in Valencia (2009), Catalan and Castilian Association of Writers (AELC/ACEC), Spanish Society of Comparative Literature, Alacant (2010) etc.). Certainly, the celebration of the e-poetry festival 2009 in Barcelona was one of the big events that supported this open debate on that matter. In this paper there is a special space for one of these activities, which – for the last five years – we have been trying to encourage: creativity. The establishment of the international Ciutat de Vinaròs awards is one of these activities. These awards accept creations in languages that already have a tradition of electronic or digital literature, such as English, French or Portuguese, but they also serve to stimulate creative works in languages like Spanish, Italian or Catalan. These works are subsequently studied by the Hermeneia research group and at the same time in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, thus promoting an interchange between the areas of creation, teaching, and research.

Catalan Literature, Catalan E-Lit: Being Over Silence

Starting with the famous last words of Hamlet “and the rest is silence” reconverted, I would like to introduce the Catalan e-lit communities and their experience of digital literature since it is a community that has emerged in the last ten years as a consequence of a network of people and interests that could have remained silent. But I guess that to talk about Catalan e-lit communities I should maybe need a sort

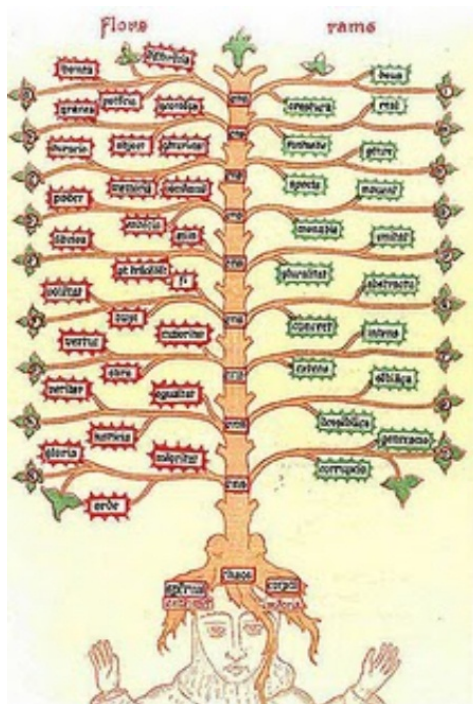
of historical, political and sociological previous approach that, of course, I have no space to provide here. However, it is necessary to know that Catalonia is a nation without a state and so it has been living for the last 300 years under the Spanish domination. This brief historical and political contextualisation is compulsory here in order to understand how difficult it has been to maintain a language – Catalan – deprived of all sort of “national” protection and even having been strongly prohibited since the military defeat of the Catalan people under the Spanish troops in 1714. Since then Catalan language has suffered different aggressions such as banishment with episodes such as the Franquist regime that lasted at least until 1975 (year of Franco’s death). Literary creativity goes hand in hand with its main compositional element, language, so it is easy to realize how difficult it is for a literary system to be “normal” without any sort of normality at a political, economical, cultural, and particularly linguistic level. Instead of talking about e-lit communities in the nation of Spain, we should talk about e-lit communities writing in Spanish. In fact, some of the more interesting and internationally known e-lit pieces in Spanish come from Latin American authors such as Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez, Juan B. Gutiérrez, or Belén Gache. It is also the case that some well-known Spanish authors in the e-lit community live abroad. This is true for María Mencía, a Spanish born net-artist who teaches at Kingston University and has been living in the UK for the last 15 years. I may include Catalonia in this “abroad”, since Isaías Herrero – one of the more relevant and internationally considered author in Spanish e-lit – writes both in Catalan or Spanish, as well as Mexico-born Eugenio Tisselli settled in Barcelona who has been creating in Spanish, Catalan, and also English since the beginning. This is also the case for the Israel-born Orit Kruglanski.

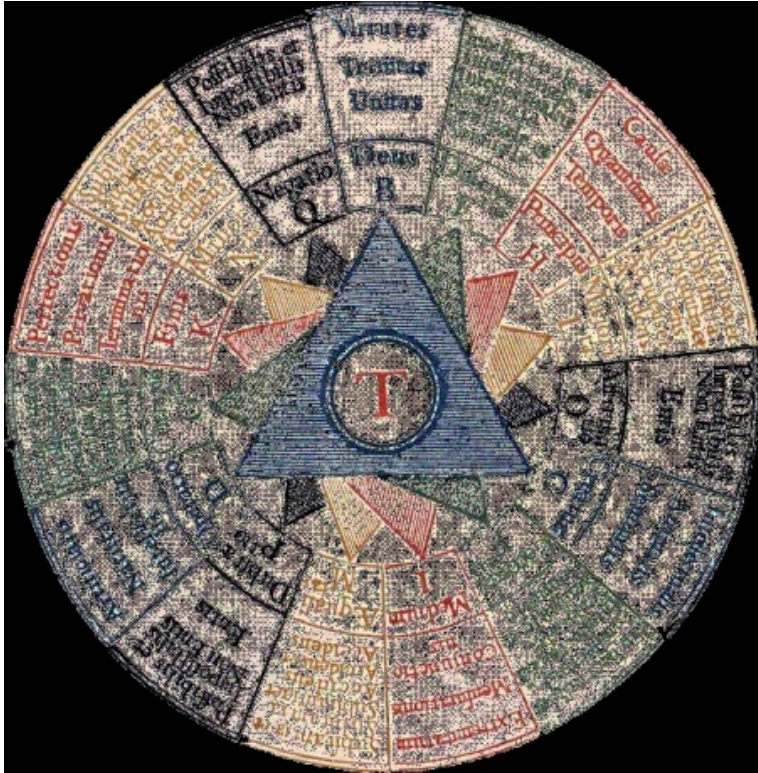
But besides this contextual introduction, there’s another circumstance I would like to introduce before we go any further. I am referring to the “place” of e-lit in Spain and in Spanish universities, including Catalonia, since it was probably there where the first university course on “electronic literature” was taught as an official subject during the 2002 academic year at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Open University of Catalonia, UOC).

Literary studies is the discipline where digital literature has received the most attention in Spain. Due to this I will establish here an approach based on three main branches of literary studies: the historic point of view (history of literature), the poetic or the intrinsic literary point of view (literary theory) and the receptive point of view (literary criticism) to discuss this process of growing up digital for e-literature in Catalonia.

History: Tracing the Digital

We cannot trace here the genealogy of the digital in Catalan literature. But since its origins, there has been a huge will for the experimentation in poetry, with the word (materiality, sound, and meaning) and with space and time. We have inherited a whole corpus to be read under this perspective: cycles of innovation and evolution, sometimes leading to a total revolution. In 2006 I guest-edited the study “A Brief History of Ergodism in Catalan Literature” where different members of the Hermeneia Research Group presented different authors. The articles were published in a *Cybertext Yearbook* volume on *Ergodic Histories* edited by Raine Koskimaa and Markku Eskelinen. Starting with Ramon Llull – who used literatures as a medium and through whose work we could find a great variety of knowledge of disciplines such as philosophy geometry, theology, logic, law, astronomy, medicine, rhetoric, science, etc. – we studied the genealogy of Ergodism in Catalan literary history. Despite the fact that Ramon Llull rejected literature as a concept, he wrote many literary works, or, rather, he opted for a “new literature”, as he called it, an art of “combination”, where trees, wheels, etc. helped him to define his purpose (cf. fig. 1 and fig. 2.)





Illustrations from Ramon Llull "arbres de coneixement" (fig. 1) and "rodes combinatòries" (fig. 2).

Other periods of history such as the baroque presented us with a sort of constrained literature created according to some specific rules such as the sonnet "Laberinto" in form of a labyrinth by Manuel de Vega (1701) dedicated to the death of King Charles II (fig. 3). The layout is forced to give the image of the X-shaped cross and highlight the name of "Don Carlos Segon", from top to bottom. The speaking epitaph addresses Catalonia "which cries reclined on the sepulchre of its beloved king".

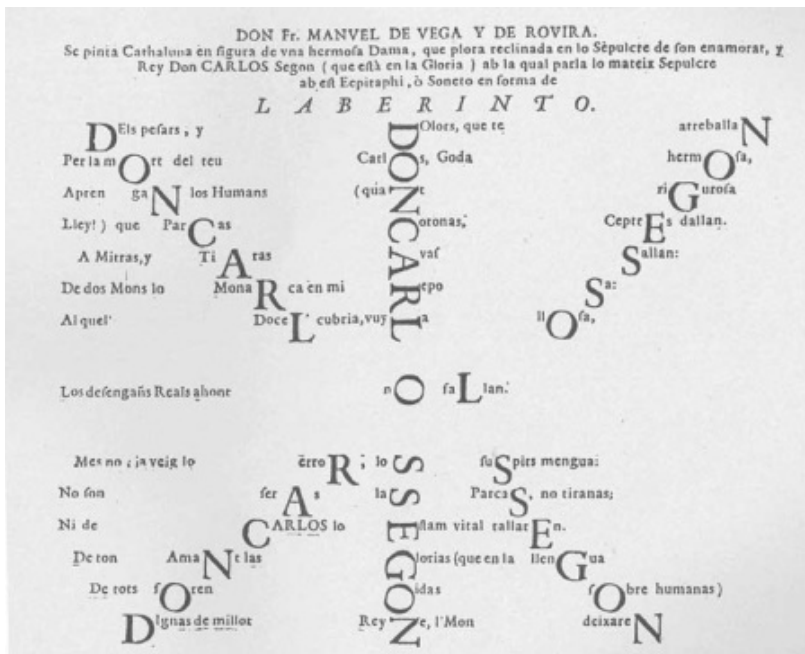


Fig. 3. "Laberinto" by Manuel de Vega (1701).

The work also incorporates a certain type of generation, albeit not random but well planned. This *Machine à vers* "Quartilla" written by Marià Lloses (1784) works by reading the double entry table and solves the relative intrigue of knowing how the little, insignificant poem will end.

"Gràcias a Déu,
 que ha donat a la Espània successió;
 gràcias al rei savi i bo,
 1, 9; 5, 9; 5, 6; 5, 6; 3, 9; 4, 9; 1, 6; 2, 9; 5, 6; 3, 8; 5, 8;
 1, 6; 5, 9; 3, 7; 1, 6; 1, 8; 4, 8; 2, 7; 2, 9; 1, 6; 4, 9.
 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 0
 a, b, c, d, e, 6
 f, g, h, i, k, 7
 l, m, n, o, p, 8
 q, r, s, t, u, 9
 Cada lletra, en àngul recte,
 dos números fa parlar;
 combina'ls ab los de dalt,
 que ells te formaran lo vers."
 ("Quartilla", Marià Lloses (1784))

Should we follow the instructions properly, we'd end up composing the missing fourth line.

If we move forward to the moment of maximum innovation we will reach the avant-garde movement. Catalan culture – with nuances, inevitable contextualisation and, especially, taking into account its idiosyncrasy in relation to the language – took part in the artistic and aesthetic convulsion that emerged between the two world wars in the twentieth century. Catalan writers thought they couldn't play with and destroy a language they were trying to rebuild. Catalan had been prohibited and had survived almost only in orality because it was forbidden to use it in normal public context, and it was not taught at schools. There were generations that were excluded from their own language and culture because they didn't know how to write it. That is why writers were so prudent in their experimentation, because to be able to make literature in their own language was something precious that had been impossible to do for such a long time. There was a movement that split contemporary literature into two large antagonist blocs: those who understood it as "a cultural experience", and more specifically as an autonomous linguistic construct, and those who saw it as an "irrational experience", an adventure, and therefore an act of breaking and subversion but also one of not simply intellectual but also artistic research. Catalan *avantgardism* was basically an individual adventure of a small group of creators (Salvat-Papasseit, Folguera, J.V. Foix, Junoy, initially, and subsequently Foix, Trabal, Sindreu, Dalí, Montanyà, and Gasch) who did not form homogeneous groups or create a shared state of opinion.

To conclude this short historical background and come to the present, we can say that when the digital meets real innovation the (r)evolution arises. New media poetry and other new forms of literature appear when the authors' aspirations cannot be achieved in print.

Theory. A Poetics of the Digital: From Re-Mediation to Motion, E-Motion, Commotion

We are living in moving times. Different kinds of moving: disciplinary, technological, and conceptual... The story of digital literature in Catalonia is, in fact, a story of movements. It has started as a story of inter-mediations and re-mediations from different media. We will be able to see the continuation of the avant-garde as an evolution of the medium with the example of Joan Brossa (1919-1998); he has been considered one of the more representative avant-garde poets in Catalonia. In 2002, a CD titled "Els entra-i-surts de Brossa" was produced at the UOC using a "canonical" author (Brossa) to experiment with the possibilities of the digital as a medium to

study literature. In this project, Brossa was remediated from paper into the digital. The result can be found [online](#):



Fig. 4. Screenshot from "Els entra-i-surts de Brossa."

The work of the important futurist and avant-garde author Joan Salvat-Papasseit was also remediated by Cori Pedrola in this beautiful exercise of visual hermeneutics:

In this video we can reproduce the writing process of the physical poem but at the same time we can see how is metaphorically produced. The literal and the metaphoric come to a visual narrative, a sort of reconstruction.

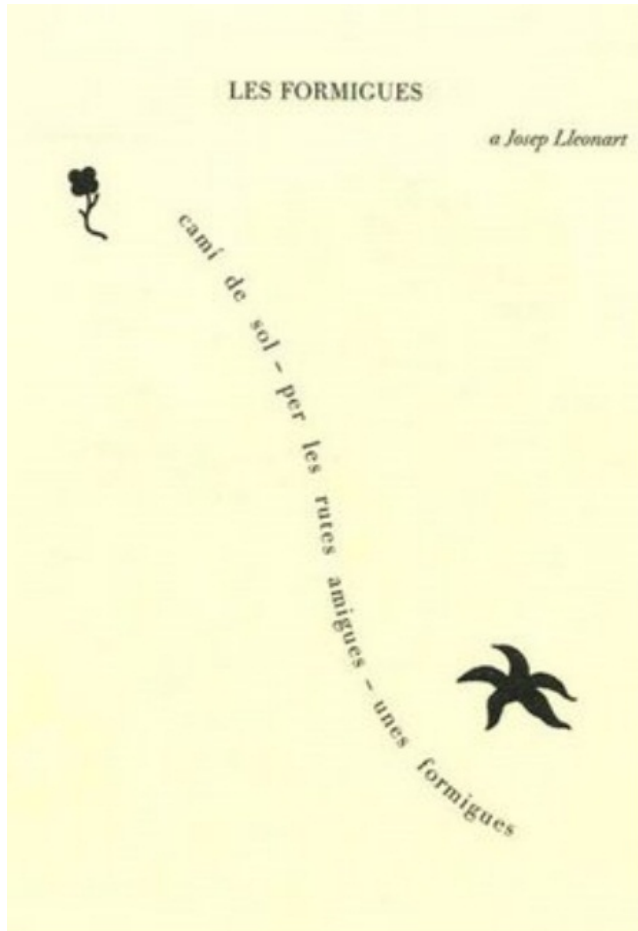


Fig. 5. Screenshots from Cori Pedrola's work "Les formigues."

Raymond Queneau was also translated and remediated by some post-avant-garde poets such as Esther Xargay and Carles Hac-Mor and programmed by Eugenio Tisselli. One webpage that represents this evolution is *epímore*, a website created by Lluís Calvo and Pedro Valdeolmillos, where examples that show gradual approaches to the literary experimentation with the word into the digital space can be found.

After this first stage we can find a deeper exploration of what the digital is and what it really means in terms of the logic of writing and reading and, specially, founding interest on the interface and on the medium in itself. This would be the case of Màrius Serra – a print writer who experiments with puns and other games with the

language – and his particular experiment with a Bluetooth narrative: a mobile novel that he developed for a big Shopping Center in Barcelona, L'Illa Diagonal, entitled: *The true story about Harold Bluetooth*.

From now on we will start speaking of the digital. And the pioneer was Ramon Dachs¹. His work is an example of ergodicity in contemporary Catalan literature. In his work we can observe an evolution that goes from hypertextuality, the influences of the oriental writing, mainly the haikú, the attraction of an endless textual river and the temptation of silence ("Intermínims"), towards the space of the word or the word in the space ("Geometric and Fractal Writing"), and the randomized combination of words ("Tarot de Marsella").

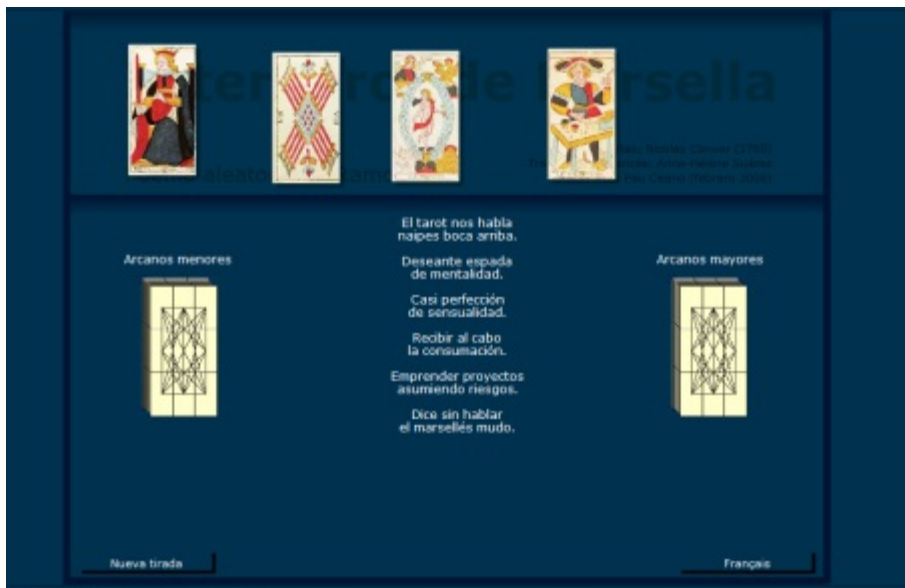


Fig. 6. Screenshot from "Tarot de Marsella" (Dachs).

In 2002 and in the context of a course on digital literature, I decided to write the *Diari d'una absència* (The Diary of an Absence). *The Diary of an Absence* aims to be an example of intimate personal writing through something which has been put into words but which perhaps should have remained unsaid. Arranged in the form of a diary, this narrative follows the paths of absence by delving into the pain that is caused by desire, a desire that is reflected in this particular box of raptures in the face of a separation from the loved one. To the idea of introspection arising from the exercise of spiritual reflection and the flood of torn feelings that this brings, there appears the idea of the house as a cloister, which is the scenario in which the tale

in our hypertext exercise has been set. A closed space, with rooms to walk through, just as we travel different routes when we go deeper into the intimate truth of the suffering narrator. The apparently illogical ups and downs of the narrator's thoughts are metaphorically translated into the maze where the reader gets lost, this reader who has come in search of words that will lead towards the interior that tells a story of love, of the loss of love, of passion and of impossibility. The Diary is an eminently textual product, situated in a determinate visual and musical dimension, which offers the reader a pilgrimage, a journey to be undertaken. It is an example of immersion into narrative in Catalan language and despite the fact that the students were not familiarized with digital literature yet, they found in this piece a perfect way to get into studying digital literature. It was conceived as a pedagogical effort in order to offer our students a digital work of literature in Catalan. It has been used since then as a case of study to teach digital literature at the UOC.

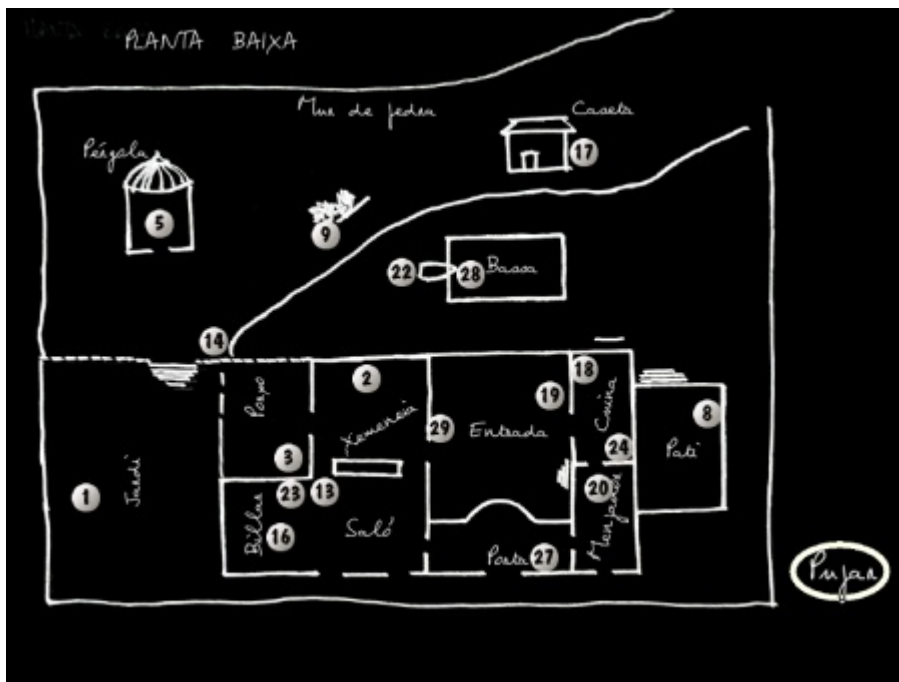


Fig. 7. Screenshot of the different navigation modes that are offered in The Diary of an Absence.

Other authors who were tempted by the call of the digital include Ton Ferret, whose style is characterized by the use of humor and the experimentation with the different media that coexist inside the net of nets that is the Internet. *Retorn a la Comallega* or *The Fugue Book* are two representative examples of this fresh way to delve into the field (cf. Borràs "From Words, Words, Words").

Isaías Herrero's work is exclusively born-digital. His pieces offer a new grammar and he himself creates the software that the pieces need to be read. *21 días* (2006), *Universo Molécula* (2007), *La casa sota el temps* (2007), *Eidola Kosmos* (2008) *Jardins de plàstic I* (2008) *Kairos* (2009) *Deus Ex Machina* (2009), and his last piece, *La incubadora* (2010), a collective cannibalistic project developed for the Master Programme in Digital Literature at the University of Barcelona.



Fig. 8. *Jardins de plàstic*, Isaías Herrero, 2008.

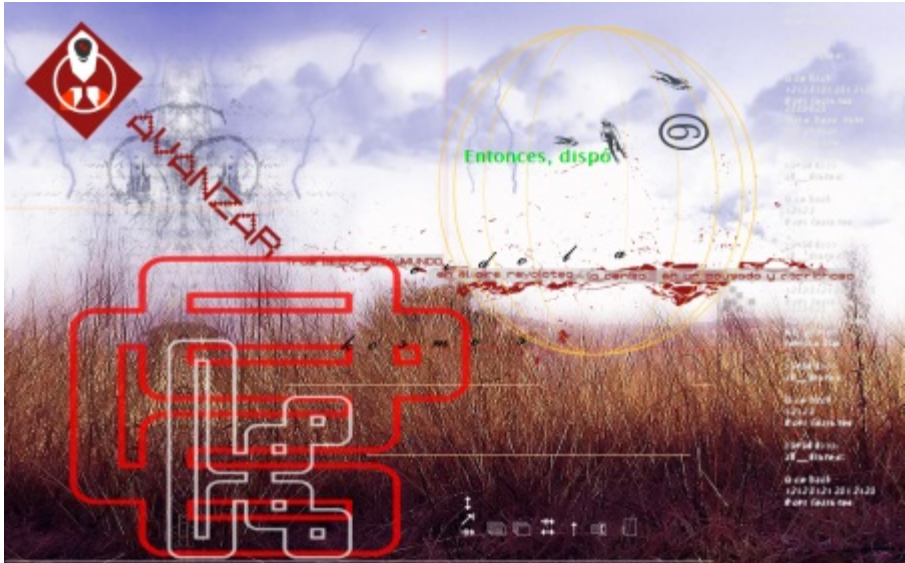


Fig. 9. *Eidola Kosmos*, Isaías Herrero, 2008.



Fig. 10. *Kairos*, Isaías Herrero, 2009.

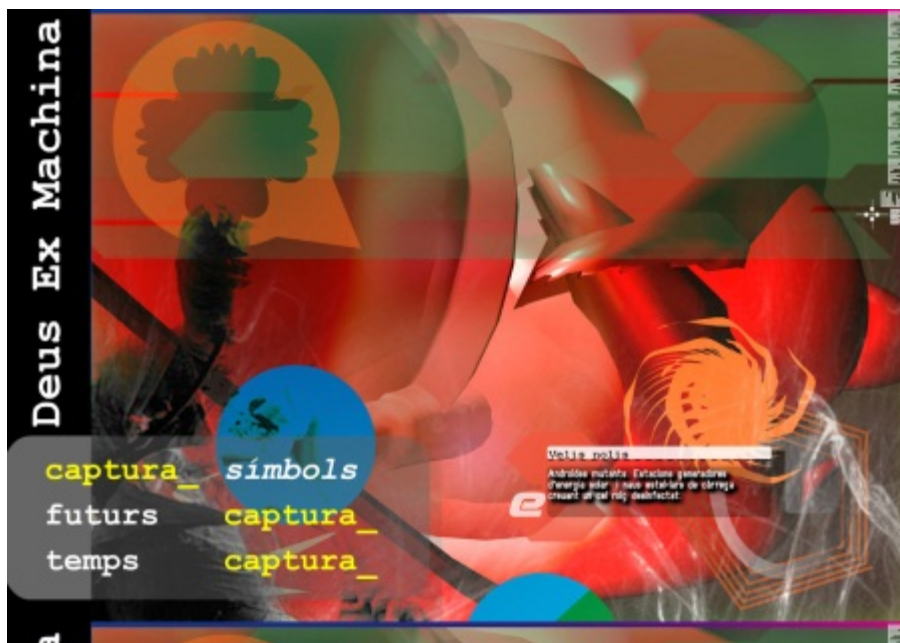


Fig. 11. *Deus ex machina*, Isaías Herrero, 2009.

Criticism

The Hermeneia Research Group has been the first research group in Spain devoted to the study of digital literature. When founded by the author in 1999 there wasn't any other. It has been necessary to present this new form of literature by always comparing it with the printed one, to study it, to explain it, to find new grammars, new reading logics to be transferred, to archive the literary productions of the digital and to stimulate the creation of new pieces from new authors. If we try to systemize some of the milestones of Hermeneia's journey we'll have to first identify the list of possible "partners" for such a journey. What was really important was to establish the network of complicity, interests and elective affinities. Being practically alone as my colleague Joan Elies Adell and myself were at that time (this loneliness affected the academic literary studies context in Spain), we looked abroad to find scholarly colleagues: Tiziana Terranova (London), Patrizia Calefato (Bari), Alain Vuillemin (Artois/Paris), Enric Bou (USA), George Landow (USA), Susana Pajares Tosca (one of the first Spanish scholars that with J.Aguirre and the "Especulo" group at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid had been

interested in hypertext but that lived and worked in Denmark at that time and has been doing so until now), Raine Koskimaa (Finland), Rui Torres (Portugal), Roberto Simanowski (Germany/USA, now Switzerland), Takis Kayalis and Anastasia Natsina (Greece) and also created a net¹ of relationships in Spain with Domingo Sánchez Mesa (Granada/Madrid), Teresa Vilariño y Anxo Abuín (Santiago de Compostela), Virgilio Tortosa (Alicante) and Antonio Rodríguez de las Heras, Amelia Sanz, Dolores Romero, Asun López-Varela, María Goicoechea and Pilar García Carcedo (Madrid), etc. And we have never stopped to expand the community since then. So in the last years writers or scholars such as Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez (Colombia), Juan B. Gutiérrez (EE.UU), Eugenio Tisselli (Mexico), Markku Eskelinen (Finland) or the last member that has joined Hermeneia, Perla Sasson-Henry (Argentina/EE.UU) have augmented the group (the ongoing list of members can be consulted [online](#)). Throughout the time, we have organized more than fifteen seminars and international conferences such as e-poetry 2009 with invited speakers; have created undergraduate courses on digital literature using the hypertextual possibilities of the medium first in order to finally be able to create courses on the matter, digital literature at a postgraduate level, in a master program. But of course it is important to stimulate and promote the study and research of e-lit to a new generation of e-lit scholars and critics at the doctoral level, just to name a few: Giovanna di Rosario, Eduardo Ledesma, Angela Celis, Eugenio Tisselli, Anna Tort, Sandra Hurtado, and Oreto Doménech.

We have also been encouraging new authors to create digital literature. In this sense, the Vinaròs Prize has played an essential role stimulating simultaneously the creation, the research, and the teaching of digital literature. Since 2007 we have been trying to encourage creativity by establishing the international "Ciutat de Vinaròs" awards. These awards accept creations in languages that already have a tradition in digital literature, such as English, French, or Portuguese, but they also serve to stimulate creative work in languages like Spanish, Italian, or Catalan. These works are subsequently studied by the research group and at the same time in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, thus promoting an interchange between the areas of creation, teaching and research. It has to be noted that all of the winners (except from Marc Lloan, a student that presented a PowerPoint narrative in the first edition of the Prize) of the Vinaròs Award have been selected for the *Electronic Literature Collection* vol. II published by the Electronic Literature Organization: Susanne Berkenheger, Chico Marinho, Jason Nelson, Stuart Moulthrop, Isaías Herrero, Ton Ferret, Rui Torres, and Caitlin Fischer.

But the other main activity I would like to highlight in this article is the Master en Literatura en l'era Digital (Master Programme on Digital Literature) that the Hermeneia Group has developed since 2007. This Master Programme has also been a structural success since it has allowed to create a community of young researchers that are developing the field by translating works of e-lit, having a strong

presence in conferences where digital literature appears as the main subject: E-Poetry 2009 in Barcelona, the special and monographic edition of the *Premis Octubre* in its XL edition (Valencia 2009) that I was invited to organize and that I devoted to digital literature, the introduction of e-lit – under the name of “ciberliterature” – as one of the topics for the Comparative Literature Association in Spain (SELGYC) in Alacant (September 2010), the XXth edition of the Hispanic Literature Conference in Málaga, organized by Salvador Vergara (November 2010) (which was devoted to e-lit as well). All these events show that we are spreading digital literature and promoting new studies. Some of them are produced by the same students of this Master programme (ex. Jaume Marfany, Rocío Ávila and the experience of reading and criticizing the *Diary of an absence*:

Translation has been one of the issues that the e-lit community is facing in the last years. It has to be mentioned that the *bleuOrange, Revue de littérature hipermédiathique* (based at Université du Québec à Montréal) in the three numbers that have appeared has started adapting some works into French such as Jason Nelson’s *Game, game, game and again game*, Nick Montfort’s *Rame*, Alan Bigelow’s *When I was a president* or Aya Karpinska, and Daniel C. Howe’s *fin.ouverte* among others. Hermeneia has made Catalan translations of Rui Torres’ *Amor de Clarice* and Deena Larsen’s *I’m simply saying* with some of the students of the Masters programme of the University of Barcelona.

As I have previously mentioned, the Hermeneia Research Group has been one of the pioneers in the field in Spain and has been developing many different activities for the last ten years. Lately it has been promoting a public debate in literary societies on digital literature such as at the “Premis Octubre” in Valencia (2009), at the Catalan and Castillian Association of Writers, (AELC/ACEC) in Barcelona (2010). Of course the celebration in 2009 of the E-Poetry festival in Barcelona was one of the big events and supported this open debate. Despite of these activities, it has to be said that the dialogue with the academic community has not been possible in a ‘normal’ way for the last decade: At the beginning digital literature was considered as a novelty or fad and it had to be “considered” by the more innovative researchers. Once a simple gaze was given to it, the voyage of the literature into the digital was largely considered a dead end. Since there used to be (things have changed a bit during the last ten years) an ideological opposition to the new medium, people could hardly be interested in how the digital transforms texts. Only at the end of 2008, in part due to the Bologna process, there has been an emergence of interest because the humanities have been a focus of the transformation process that the Spanish universities have suffered in the last years. There has been an interesting inversion: we have moved from arguing about the legitimacy of this new field of study that was considered suspect by the humanities, toward a humanities that have to be more digital in order to themselves be legitimated right now.

More generally, a real interest has emerged as the expectations generated by digital technologies such as e-books, e-readers, tablets, iPods, iPads, etc. arose. In this sense, if the invention of the print served to gradually reduce the mistakes of the written copies and doing so to fix the texts, digital technology can be used even better to accomplish this task. We find some examples in the critical digital editions that Hermeneia has promoted using digital technologies to produce digital critical editions that have been used as teaching materials in e-learning platforms: Dante's *Vita nuova*, the manuscript of the Oath of Strasbourg, Guilhem de Peitieu's compositions in the material that Victoria Cirlot and I wrote in 2003 on *European Romance Literature*, the scholarly production on classical criticism done taking advantage of the possibilities of the medium, and so making digital criticism (editions of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Voltaire's *Candide* or the Spanish Medieval *Poema de Mio Cid* by the University of Texas)

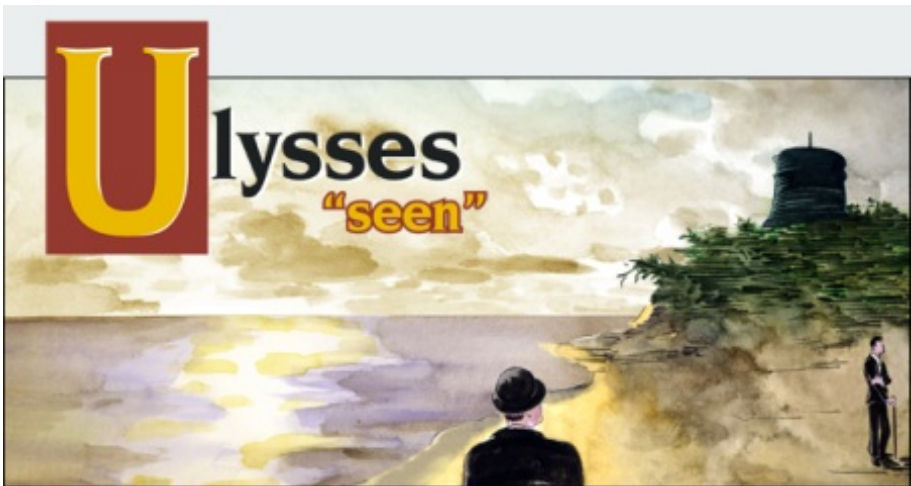


Fig. 12. Screenshot from *Ulysses* adaptation into a comic by Robert Berry.

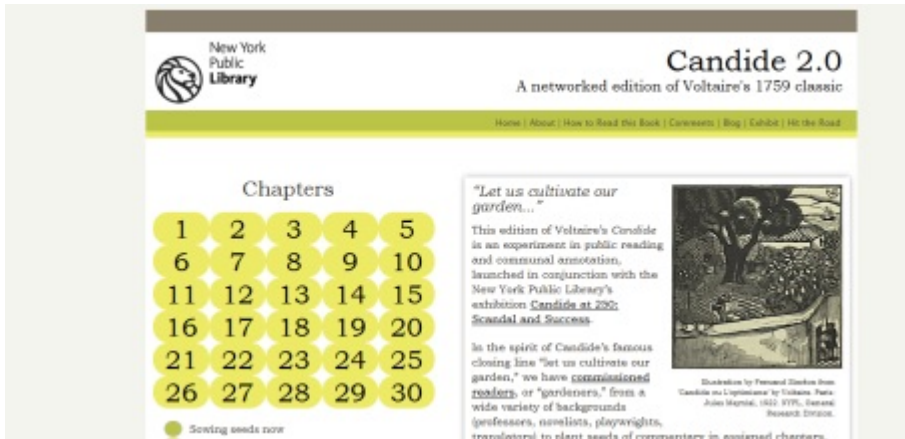


Fig. 13. Screenshot from the Candide 2.0 promoted by the public library of New York, produced in collaboration with Produced in cooperation with the Voltaire Foundation and the University of Oxford.

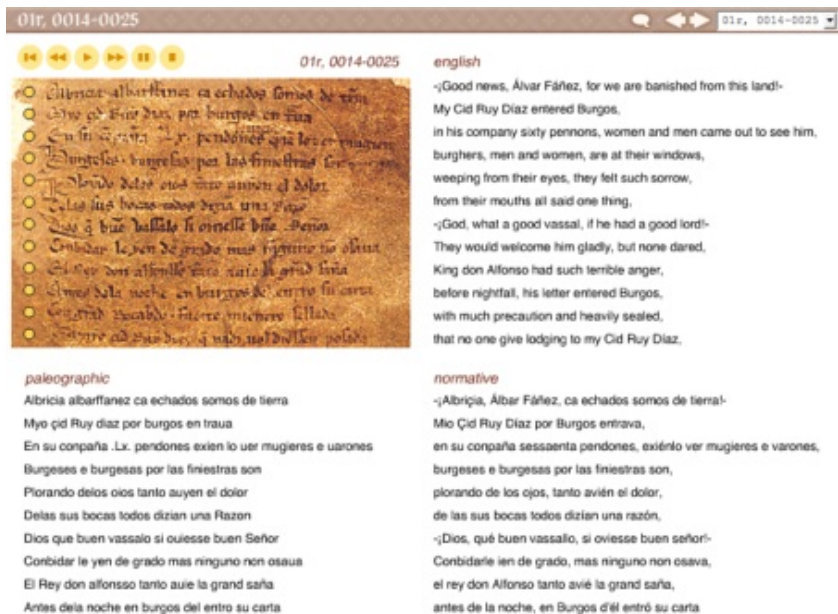


Fig. 15 Screenshot from the Digital Edition of *Poema de Mio Cid*, created by The University of Texas at Austin.

Conclusion. Of Ruins and Restart: The Paradigms of Modernity

Once upon a text there was a story (on digital literature in Catalonia) that has yet to be written, with this article we laid the first brick. The metamorphosis of the text when it is moved into a screen is creating and might yet create new ways of enjoying from the word: be it written, dancing, exploding or raining. Of ruins and restart: these may be the paradigms of modernity, Iraci Simões da Rocha, a Brazilian Professor of Comparative Literature, said when Cultural Studies appeared:

Os Estudos Culturais surgem como consequência de rupturas, operando um deslocamento da posição da literatura em favor de **outras produções culturais** “não-literárias” que passam a ser lidas como textos, enquanto o “texto literário” passa a ser lido também como produto cultural que dialoga com tantos discursos”.

Cultural Studies arise as a consequence of ruptures, operating a displacement of literature in favor of other cultural “non literary” productions that began to be read as texts, whereas the “literary text” starts to be read as well as a cultural product that dialogues with so many other discourses.

In this sense I would also like to mention the project “Interzones”, an Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorate on Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature where e-literature is also represented as a field of study. This European elite Program selects ten students every year that are generously funded to produce their PhD studying in at least four different universities to be chosen from the consortium of fifteen and the specialized research groups involved.

Digital literature has provoked a dislocation of (printed) literature for other cultural productions, sometimes literary, sometimes not, but – and this is to me the most important thing – that can be read as texts in the same way that the literary text can be read as a cultural product that is in permanent dialogue with other discourses and disciplines. This, in my opinion, is good news. The technological advances that are used to expand the territory of literary writing in the digital age are disconcerting and are attacked because they are marked by the stigma of being opposed to “Literature”. They materialize onscreen the mischief of imagination and continue on a long road of textual research. But there’s a warning: as in car-mirrors: “Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear”. We’re talking about screens and reflections. After all, the screen is a mirror, indeed... and as Verlaine said: *...et tout le reste est littérature.*

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Notes

1. In the Complutense University in Madrid there is a group that, raising from the philology faculty, knew of our existence and came to visit HERMENEIA in order to create research and teaching relations. Despite they don't come from the Literary Theory Departments, that is where the digital literature is being studied in Spain, after the conference that they held in Madrid in september 2006 *From text to hipermedia*, we dcided to create a formal net of research that at that time (2006) was refused by the Spanish Ministry.