Ephemeral passages—*La Série des U* and *Passage* by Philippe Bootz: A close reading

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No. 39 – 2009

Abstract

The lability of digital works, mainly due to the changes undergone by programs and operating systems, as well as to the increasing speed of computers, has been taken for granted by a certain number of critics over the last years. The artists, therefore, have four options when dealing with the potential instability of the electronic device which will display their work:

- In keeping with "**the aesthetics of surface**", the artists simply ignore this instability.

- The "**mimetic aesthetics**" takes into account the instability of the electronic device, but it also tries to reduce its impact by providing the work with a stable experimentation frame.

- The most radical approach, the "**aesthetics of the ephemeral**", consists of letting the work slowly decompose, accepting that, through its changing forms and updates, unexpected mutations may even, sooner or later, lead to the obsolescence of the artistic project.

- The fourth approach, called the "aesthetics of re-enchantment", mystifies the relationships between the animated words and images, between the sounds and gestures of manipulation in a digital artwork, in order to advocate an "unrepresentable", something that words can not describe and yet, that one can "feel" by experiencing the work.

The poems *La Série des U* and *Passage* by Philippe Bootz seem to perfectly fit in the aesthetics of the ephemeral: the author was among the first ones to theorize both about the lability of the digital device and the eventual obsolescence of digital creation, and also one of the first ones to experiment them in his poetic projects. Yet, in these digital poems, the mimetic aesthetics, the aesthetics of the ephemeral and of re-enchantment alternately intertwine, merge or mutually exclude one

another, so that their conflicting relationships allow us to raise a certain number of fundamental questions about digital poetics.

The lability of digital works, mainly due to the changes undergone by programs and operating systems, as well as to the increasing speed of computers, has been taken for granted by a certain number of critics over the last years[1]. Indeed, many digital literary works of the 80-90s can no longer be displayed on contemporary computers; others can still be updated, but the works are now endowed with characteristics the artist did not intend to include in the project, and which may compromise its aesthetic result. For example, a quiet stream of words, created five years ago, turns into a gushing torrent when displayed on today's computers. This potential instability of digital poetic works is mainly the result of changes made to programs and operating systems over the years, as well as to the increasing speed of computers.

The artists, therefore, have four options when dealing with the potential instability of the electronic device which will display their work:

The lability of the electronic device: four approaches

1. In keeping with "the aesthetics of surface", the artists simply ignore this instability. They decide to create just for the moment, as if the digital reading framework was immutable—as if the computer constituted an absolute space-time. This is the case for many artists who, for example, create animations on the *Flash* timeline as if they were using video editing software. The notion of "surface" here should not be understood in a pejorative sense: works of high artistic quality, such as *The Dreamlife of Letters* by Brian Kim Stefans [STE], come within the scope of this approach. The artist's project can nevertheless be seriously compromised by the instability of the electronic device, and any hermeneutic approach to his or her work will be obliged to deal with the randomness induced by this instability.

2. In order to circumvent these difficulties, some artists insist on the "right" context for the reception of their work; this approach, called "mimetic aesthetics" [BOO8], certainly takes into account the instability of the electronic device, but it also tries to reduce its impact by providing the work with a stable experimentation frame. According to mimetic aesthetics, everything must be

done to preserve surface events as well as possible. Thus, mimetic aesthetics aims at keeping a work in conditions approaching those experienced by the author during the creative process. The authors who are familiar with this approach know that the notion of an absolute space-time is only a theoretical construction; in practice, a system based on inertia is but approximate. According to mimetic aesthetics, everything must be done to preserve surface events as well as possible. The ideal (and unattainable) result would consist in a reduplication of the poetic experiment. Thus, mimetic aesthetics aims at updating a work in conditions approaching those experienced by the author during the creative process. A significant drawback to this approach, however, is the difficulty, if not impossibility of preserving obsolete software and operating systems.

3. The third approach consists in not only accepting the instability of the framework in which a digital creation will be updated, but in considering the uncontrollable nature of the device as an aesthetic principle fundamental to the work. The most radical approach, which I propose to call (according to Christine Buci-Glucksmann) "aesthetics of the ephemeral", consists of letting the work slowly decompose, accepting that, through its changing forms and updates, unexpected mutations may even, sooner or later, lead to the obsolescence of the artistic project. This constitutes a literally disenchanted vision of the work, and of a world where present time is only an ephemeral transition between the past that is forever lost, and the future that is already slipping away. The "single-reading" poem, experimented by Philippe Bootz (see *Passage*), constitutes one of the possible poetic forms endorsed by the aesthetics of the ephemeral; performances may also partake in this approach. In either of these cases, no absolute chronology subsists. The reader is integrated into the observed system, but the traces he leaves on a poetic work are governed by the same principle of obsolescence as every surface event.

4. The fourth approach, called the "aesthetics of re-enchantment", mystifies the relationships between the animated words and images, between the sounds and gestures of manipulation in a digital artwork, in order to advocate an "unrepresentable", something that words can not describe and yet, that one can "feel" by experiencing the work. On the screen surface, the "unrepresentable" can be explored through inter-mediality. As for the relationship between this type of work and the computer, the "unrepresentable" becomes "sensitive" to the possible mutations inherent in the potential instability of the device. Surrounded with mystery, this instability is not only reflected in the aesthetics of re-enchantment, it is literally overexploited, as it is intended to give access to a "technological sublime" [2] in which the machine itself continues the work of innovation.

The poems _La SŽrie des U_ [BOO2] and _Passage_ [BOO3] by Philippe Bootz seem to perfectly fit in the aesthetics of the ephemeral: the author was among the first ones to theorize both about the lability of the digital device and the eventual obsolescence of digital creation, and also one of the first ones to experiment them in his poetic projects. Yet, it seems to me that in these digital poems, the mimetic aesthetics, the aesthetics of the ephemeral and of re-enchantment alternately intertwine, merge or mutually exclude one another, so that their conflicting relationships allow us to raise a certain number of fundamental questions about digital poetics.

La Série des U

In _La Série des U_ by Philippe Bootz, the lability of the electronic device is thematized by textual animations on the screen surface; it is poeticized through the relationship between these animations, the sound and the algorithmic processes taking into account the ephemeral reading context; it is also theorized in an abundant critical framework. According to the author, _La Série des U_ constitutes the "backbone" of the poem _Passage_, which is an "existential" artwork in several respects: primarily because, over the years, it has taken the form of a life's work; secondly, because its subject is time: the time taken by a digital work to pass through the device, but also, metaphorically, the time of a life passing by. Time raises the questions of memory and transformation. In _Passage_, Philippe Bootz tackles these questions through the modelling of human perceptions, and through poetic figurations of human imagination. Eventually, _Passage_ is an existential artwork also because the labile situation of the poem within the device seems to reflect the existence of the poet, torn between the awareness of the obsolescence of human traces and his hope of "shaping" time: "Time can not be written; it is time which describes everything"—"But when it is settled and allows itself to be caressed, we eventually shape it", declaims the poet's voice in a sequence of _Passage_.

Let us observe an update of _La Série des U_. The active window is covered with what seems to be a black and blue roughcast. This background, initially still, is set in motion after a certain lapse of time; the movement is accompanied by a music that seems to be in perfect harmony with the changes occurring in the background. Like _Passage_ and according to the author, _La Série des U_ includes three distinct "layers": the background to which belong the temporal dimension of music and the visual background; the layer of the "visual surface", to which belong the visual aspect of the text and the melodic dimension of music; and finally the "text" layer in its linguistic sense [BOO4]. These three layers are not based on the same processes. They tackle the main themes of _Passage_ in totally different ways.

On the horizontal median line of the window, a little white square gradually appears, that remains slightly shifted to the right. This white square turns into a black one in which the word "le" (definite article, masculine singular) appears. The letters of this word then disappear and reappear separately: at first comes the letter "l", then the letter "e". Thus decomposed, "l" is pronounced "elle" (she) and contains a female element. Gender relations constitute one of the main subjects of the poem: in the following sequence, the word "le" literally generates the letters "l" and "e", which arise from the stable form "le". We read "elle": the letters "l" and "e" cross the screen, following a slight curve and stabilize on its left side. The word "le" on the right side of the screen gives birth to the word "elle" on its left side. Should we interpret this animation as the rise and fall of a masculine fantasy, recalling a poem by Charles Baudelaire addressed to a female passer-by ("à une passante")? Should we read *La Série des U* as a reflection on time and on the complex relationships that time keeps with both the poetic work ("elle") and the device ("il")? Does the poet want to enunciate the impossibility to tell a past or a future transition without resorting to a present animation, which future can only be partially prescribed by the program because of the lability of the device and which present will always be reduced to an ephemeral "passage" between the past and the future? Should we consider that "le" is the poet, and "elle" the poetic work ("une oeuvre poétique" in French) that is being written and that is beginning to live a life of its own in the electronic device? From one sequence to another, these three approaches become interconnected, so that the theme of the gender eroticizes the relationship between the work and the device.

"Le" is a definite article that cannot exist independently of the noun it defines and yet, it stays alone on the right side of the active window. The theme "masculine / feminine" is enriched by the theme of the "passage": the word "pas" (step) appears beside the word "le". A few steps further, the "passage" nevertheless belongs to the past ("le passé" in French); "le pas" turns into "le passe", a neologism that evokes both "la passe" (the prostitute's trick) and the ephemeral aspect of a "past" transition. Via another appearance and disappearance "effect" (3) of letters, "le" undergoes another transformation; on the left side of the window, "elle passe" ("she passes") stabilizes. At this moment the passage seems to be that of a woman, but the constant mutation of words and letters, based on the figures of transposition and sporulation on the screen surface, constitute another allegory of the complex *passage* of a poetic work to the electronic device.

A new "le" already appears on the right side of the active window. At first, the words "elle passe le" ("she passes the") are displayed, then "elle passe le fil" ("she passes the thread"). Should we interpret this image as hinting at Ariadne's thread—a mythical symbol of female intelligence—that helped Theseus come out of the Labyrinth? Or should we consider it as hinting at the poetic work, which guiding principle ("fil rouge" in French, literally "red thread") tries to pass through the electronic device? The following part of the utterance slowly appears, "le fil de l'eau"

(an expression meaning "to go with the flow"). These textual animations can not really be considered as unexpected or incongruous. We are here confronted with a borderline case of the "figure of animation"[4], which I already proposed to call "movie-gram" [SAE] in a recent article: the textual movement enounces the present time of this transition (this "passage" in French) according to the meaning of the text itself. On a linguistic level, the metaphor "elle passe le fil de l'eau" constitutes a paradoxical image, reflecting the complex relationship between a woman who passes by and perhaps saves a man from drowning by giving him a spool of thread; since the *Stances à Hélène* [BO05], water has often been associated with the theme of suicide in Philippe Bootz's poems; the thread of the text, which passes through the animated blue background, can be considered as an echo of this theme; according to the author, "le fil de l'eau" also raises the question of womanly inheritance; last but not least, this poetic image also reflects the complex situation of the poetic work in the electronic device, between the "fil rouge" of the timeline in the absolute space-time of the program, and the unpredictable temporal interfering of the work with the device.

On the screen surface, "le fil de l'eau" comes closer and closer to the words "elle passe"; for a short while, all these words are superimposed, forming an indecipherable magma – a figure of animation based on "telescoping". This temporary illegibility challenges the reader's expectations: until then, all the letters and words of this poem were perfectly legible. The "general principle of cooperation" [KLI, 344-347], characteristic of media figures, is nevertheless maintained as we put this animation in relation with the implied media contents: as she passes by, the man observes her and gets confused; the text passes through the screen, the reader tries to decipher it and is surprised by the illegible components; the work passes by, the animation takes place but its readability is constantly threatened by the lability of the device. After the words have telescoped, "elle" (she) disappears. Only the word "passe" remains on the screen, already belonging to the past—a memory that is fading away.

Screenshot *La Serie des U*

La Série des U is based on a double generator: the first one is combinatorial and composes a musical sequence according to specific principles; the second one is adaptive and constructs the visual aspect of the poem. Philippe Bootz affirms in his comments on the poem [BOO6], that a synchronization of the visual aid with the sound is impossible from a strictly logical point of view. Because of the lability of the device, the visual aid is always displayed in the same way on a given machine, contrary to the sound which constantly varies. However, the laws of sound variation are identical from one machine to another, whereas the temporality of visual behaviours adapts to the machine. In keeping with the fundamental principles of the aesthetics of the ephemeral, the poet should accept this transformation of the work as an event confirming his disenchanted vision of literature and of the world. However, like any media work, *La Série des U* must be questioned as regards the timing of the different musical and visual frameworks. In order to control the interferences between the absolute space-time of the program and the relative space-time of the device, an adaptive generator modifies "the settings of each and every elementary process constituting the on-screen multimedia product, according to real-time measures taken by the machine as the work is displayed" [BOO6,72]. Thus, the temporal coherence between the animated text and the sound is attained. In this respect, the author of digital poetry "manages breakups", he creates with "the certainty of failure", affirms Philippe Bootz [BOO6,72]; at the same time, the author tries to do everything he can to postpone this failure.

In *La Série des U*, the fact that the lability of the device may possibly endanger the poetic work is thus thematized by a certain number of screen surface media figures, such as telescoping (when the text becomes illegible). An adaptive programming imposes a certain number of limits to that risk. That an author hopes his work will survive in such a complex environment, while looking for a substitute for the unbearable loss of the present time, constitutes a paradox that permeates many sequences of *Passage*, of which *La Série des U* is the "backbone". I will now explore the development and deepening of certain themes in three excerpts from *Passage*— in the present, future and past times.

Passage : **Present/future**

Many animated sequences of *Passage* are based on the blue background already used in *La Série des U*. This background is occasionally animated in order to produce 3-D effects and it sometimes enters specific relationships with the music that is based on "temporal semiotic units" (TSUs). The TSUs can be defined as minimal meaningful entities: psychological tests have proved that every listener associates their movement with the same meanings. The results of these

psychological tests have been introduced in *Passage*: the author and the composer of the music played in *Passage*, Marcel Frémiot, have developed models providing algorithmic descriptions of the TSUs, which are transposable both into the sound and the image of the work [BOO4].

Bernard Stiegler points out in *La Technique et le temps 3* that a movie, like a melody, essentially forms a stream: "its unity constitutes a flow" [STI, 33]. This flow coincides with the spectator's stream of consciousness. Yet, certain sequences of *Passage* go beyond this usual level of cooperation—according to the author, "synonyms" are formed between the visual animation and the sound movement: the music seems to rise from the picture, and vice versa. Their effect on the reader of *Passage* is all the more striking than these synonyms are not only based on the author's or the composer's intuitions, but on general principles of human perception. Of course, *Passage* is not a movie: Philippe Bootz has always considered the lability of the digital device as one of the main characteristics of electronic poetry. Nevertheless, adaptive programming ensures the cohesion between the sound and visual behaviours in order to preserve, for example, the aforementioned occurrences of synonymy.

When the correspondences between the sound and visual events, based on psychological observations, coordinate so inevitably with the spectator's consciousness; when the reader's perception thus proves to be modelled and anticipated in the poetic work, there is but little place for imagination. These parts of *Passage* thus constitute an extreme case of mimetic aesthetics. They can also be considered as a borderline case of digital poetry: the artwork turns into a scientific experiment, which conditions are ensured by adaptive programming. Let us not forget that Philippe Bootz is both a poet *and* a scientist. These existential themes of the writer's life get a response in *Passage*. In connection with the musical movement, a thicker magma of visual matter appears in the blue background of the active window, from which the white square, which was already used in *La Série des U*, seems to arise. The motions of the background are based on TSUs and are produced by a modelling of human *perception* included in the program of the work; the visual components of these animations are built up from an iconographic material that appeals to *imagination*.

According to Philippe Bootz, the photograph of an ammonite has been used in certain backgrounds of *Passage*, but the ammonite is never visible as such [BOO4]. The fossil, a kind of "plaster cast" of past times, is more than a graphic material. Several texts mention the possibility of "ploughing a furrow" over time; a very specific manner to introduce interaction in this poem, which also thematizes the consequences of traces and memory left in poetic works.

The only stable furrow ploughed by the author would then be the program of the poetic work, in which a certain number of paths taken by the reader's perception

have been modelled. The scientific experiment requires a stable framework, which depends on mimetic aesthetics. But the author of *Passage* is also a poet. Many layers of *Passage* are thus based on "figures of animation" and "figures of manipulation"; they contain images and a melody appealing to imagination. This moving path is represented by the work that is updated in the device, which lability is metaphorized by the figures. An analogy between the characteristics of the digital work and a certain model of human imagination gradually arises in the reader's mind. This analogy, which is as appealing as problematic, comes within the scope of the aesthetics of re-enchantment. In order to make this possible, the reader has to remain in a sort "semiotic vagueness". It is important to hide what is going on between the work and the electronic device from him.

Contrary to what happens in *La Série des U*, the reader may interact with some sequences of *Passage*. As the definite article (masculine singular) "le" appears in the white square, the reader is given the opportunity to click on it. If he does, a cloud of black pixels indicates that the interaction has been taken into account. The article "le" escapes from his square prison cell and stabilizes on the left side of the active window. The sound stops and the "le" moves around again, slightly multiplied—as if it was echoing in the work and laying out a path. This figure of animation, called "sporulation" [SAE], can be considered as an allusion to the functioning of an emblematic figure of manipulation in *Passage*, called "incubation".
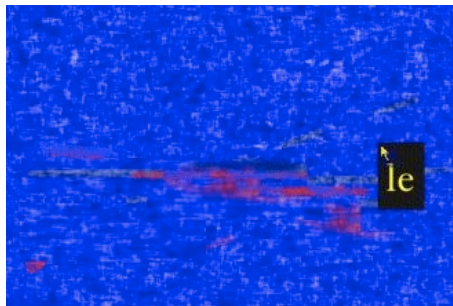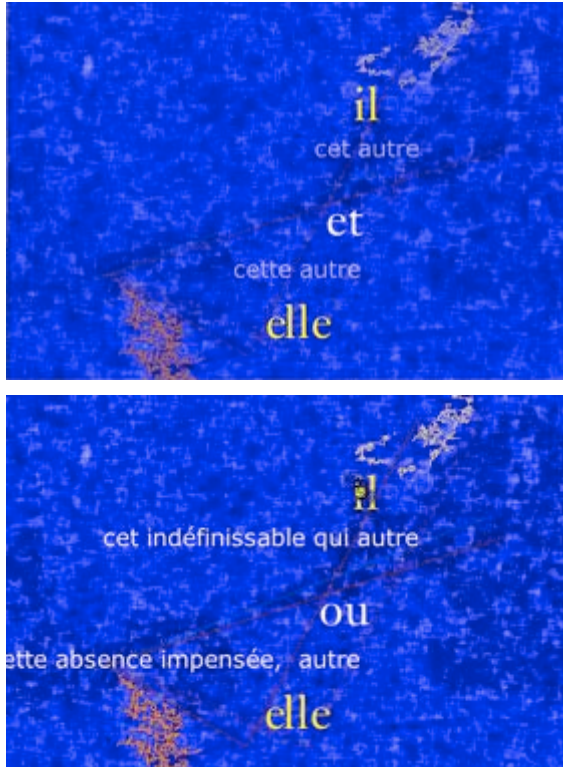

Screenshot *Passage*

Usually, a "manipulation gesture" in a digital environment causes immediate reactions on the screen surface. In *Passage*, certain interactions are memorized in the work but their consequences are not immediately visible. Even if these consequences become obvious later on, i.e. in the last sequence of *Passage* which is the result of all the reader's previous gestures, no indications help him understand, as he explores *Passage*, the governing principles of this functioning. The explanations provided by the author do not really shed light on this semiotic vagueness.

« Qui saura jamais le champ laissé par notre sillon » ("Who will ever know the field left by our furrow?") asks the poet. The ancient gives birth to the new, forming a loop that does not partake in a reduplication process, but in *différance*, i.e. repetition in a Derridean sense [DER]. In the last sequence of *Passage*, "elle passerait" ("she would pass by") is displayed on the screen: the reader may reset the active window that displays these conditional sentences as many times as he pleases, he will never be given strictly identical results. These latter are not "a copy of the reader's willingness, but the author's reply to the reader's choices" [BOO7]. Even if the author perfectly knows the principles that rule this sentence, they remain elusive to the reader. The re-enchantment caused by the hope of a mobile and progressive survival of memory, which is translated in *Passage* by the unpredictable consequences of the many paths left by the reader's "passage", is nevertheless overwhelmed again by the aesthetics of the ephemeral: *Passage* is a "single reading" poem—"Its functioning relies on irreversibility" [BOO7].

"Stability is only a transitional moment, an illusion; the future of a form is not predictable [BOO4]", affirms Philippe Bootz—although the layers of the work based on TSUs definitely need this stability and although adaptive programming tries to make this stability as steady as possible. Once again, the aesthetics of the ephemeral and mimetic approaches intermingle. In *Passage*, this paradox is reflected in the linguistic layer and the visual dimensions of the textual motions: "elle passe" ("she passes by") crosses the screen in this transitional time called the present; the only stable manifestation of this present time being the program, which is out of time and space. As soon as the work is updated on a computer, it is inevitably seized by the past. Thus, the manifestations of the work are changed and the events that occur within that work are projected towards an unpredictable future.

Then, a new musical sequence begins staccato. A form appears on the screen, made up of two triangles linked by one of their tops. One of the triangles remains partially open, recalling the visualization of the relative space-time described by the physicist Hermann Minkowski, who denies the existence of an extended present[5]. The two letters of the definite article "le" split; each of them gives rise to a new semantic content: "l" engenders "il" ("he"), "e" generates "elle" ("she"). The word "et" ("and") appears in between. "Il" stabilizes in the open triangle, which we may consider as symbolizing the future. "Elle" is associated with the "closed" triangle, which would therefore represent the past. The intersection of the past and the future seems extremely thin. Nevertheless, this intersection, as thin as it may be, constitutes the only link between "il" and "elle", represented by the word "et". "Il" is specified by "cet autre" ("this other one"), "elle" by "cette autre". The coordinating conjunction "et" turns into the disjunctive conjunction "ou" ("or"). Eventually, this latter conjunction seems more appropriate and more realistic than "et" in this case. It is either male or female, past or future.

Screenshots *Passage*

If we consider that "il" does not only represent the masculine gender but also the electronic device and that "elle" symbolizes the work, the textual and graphic configurations in this sequence reveal the fragility of the link between these two systems in a striking way: "elle"—the work—is localized in a "closed" past, which may also be interpreted as the past time of the creative act; "il"—the device—could be associated with an unpredictable future; the extremely thin, almost inconsistent transition between past and future symbolizes the present time of the poetic work in the device. The hesitation between "et" and "ou", coordination and disjunction, tackles some fundamental questions about digital poetry in a figurative way: how are we to deal with the poet's original intent, how are we to deal with the *essence* of the artistic work, as soon as it is faced with the lability of the device? The two "others", "il" and "elle", engender two lines that cross the screen. We can either read one line and neglect the other, or jump from one another while losing the thread of what is written. Once more, this media figure constitutes a poetic translation of the crucial choice between past and future, male and female, work and device. Prevented from reading the entire text, the reader feels frustrated, a feeling all the

stronger than *Passage* is a single-reading poem. Thus, the textual material of these two sentences accounts for the loss of the poetic essence amid the lack of differentiation and the eventual obsolescence.

Philippe Bootz explains that the semantics of the animated texts "resists" the "a-media" functioning in *Passage* [BOO4]. Contrary to the models of perception, which are a-media (independent from media contents) and therefore are likely to be re-introduced into the work, the figures of animation are based on the differential between the reader's expectations and the realized events, according to the author. These expectations, which are shaped by the past of the work, but also by the reader's habits, are deeply anchored in media contents. Contrary to the object-image of the ammonite that is hidden in the program and contrary to human perceptions that scientists can try to schematize[6], a mental image inevitably changes, endorses unpredictable shapes, to finally disappear. Thanks to its animated images and linguistic contents, in harmony with the music, *Passage* is definitely a poem: it gives birth to mental images that are neither formalized, nor remodelled, but "metaphorized" in the poetic work.

In our sequence of *Passage*, « Elle passe … le fil » ("She passes the thread") remains static for a while, on a darker and darker (almost black) background—as if water had turned into earth. Finally, this static image turns into a very fast animation, from which synonyms for both the visual background and the background music seem to spring up. The large and semi-transparent letters of the word "passe" are displayed in this animated background. In keeping with the rhythm of the music, a certain number of short utterances appear and disappear on the background: « instant obscurci » ("obscured instant"), « prend et projette » ("take and project"), « le fuit » ("the escapes"), « passe et demeure » ("passes and remains"), « demain d'hier » ("yesterday's tomorrow"), « insaisissable » ("elusive")... This rapid succession of fragments of sentences makes an exhaustive reading difficult, or even impossible. However, the animation makes sense in relation to the media content: the utterances themselves hint at the fugacity of the present moment. The music accompanying the movement of the movie-grams only strengthens this impression. As soon as a poetic work is updated in the device, the animation is projected into the future, producing an elusive past in the reader's mind.

This meditation on the impossible extension of the present in an updated digital work, constitutes the transition towards a reflection on the future. At first, the letters of the word "passera" ("will pass") pile up—as if the present state, however indecipherable, contained the promise of a future form. Some granules multiply on the screen in a explosive motion. Like larvae turning into butterflies, the many occurrences of the word "passera" spread their wings. They flee the explosion and then sink back into the background magma. The relationship between media contents and animation thus constitutes a kinetic allegory of the future. Emphasis is made on the paradoxical relationship between the hypothesis of a future

embodied in the program (the granules), its update in the device (the explosive movement and the spreading of the wings), and its eventual obsolescence. Even if the hypothesis of a future transition is stated by the program of the work, which is out of time and space, stating a future in the "active" present of a textual animation happens to be impossible. As soon as it is displayed on the screen, "passera" is already here and will inevitably pass by.
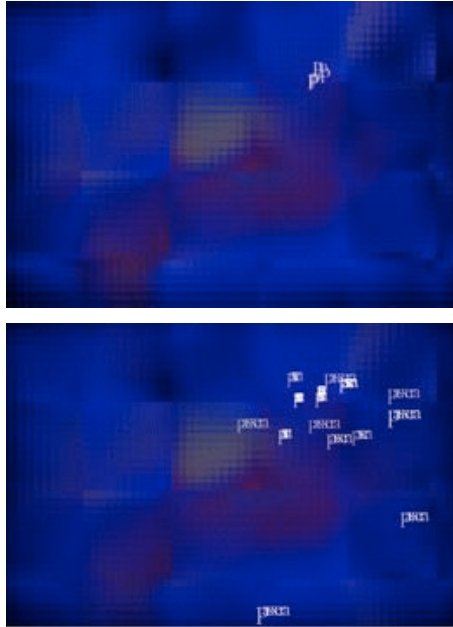
Screenshots *Passage*

The blue background freezes for a moment and then is set in motion again. Once more, the reader is confronted with a paradoxical animation of the word "passera". Curving across the screen, every letter leaves ephemeral marks, like echoes or furrows. In addition, they draw traces and loops as they multiply, so that we get the impression that each letter gives birth to another one. This "sporulation" constitutes a paradoxical figuration of the work's future that is updated in the device. Even if the author tries to plan the future awareness of certain transitions through scientific modelling; even if he tries to lay down the updating of certain "granules" of the program by resorting to adaptive programming, he is perfectly aware that the future of a digital work can not be predicted. Philippe Bootz explains that we cannot display the future; we can only show the events that lead to the future [BOO4]. The aesthetics of the ephemeral gets the most of the aesthetics of re-enchantment.

The word "passera" recomposes on-screen. The music ends with a sustained note. An "i" and a "t" appear; the passage is now in the conditional and announces the final sequence of *Passage*. This final sequence has been prepared by the reader's manipulation gestures throughout his reading. The future turns into the conditional in order to create *a* past; but as this past is partly the reader's production, it will have consequences on the future of the work (as implied by the statement « Sous le fil de l'eau », meaning "going with the flow") without the reader noticing it immediately. Unlike *La Série des U*, *Passage* seems to have a past, a memory. The aesthetics of re-enchantment gets the most of the aesthetics of the ephemeral.

Passage : **Past**

Stating the past in the actual present of a textual animation happens to be as paradoxical as stating the future. The background (the original "magma" that is typical of many sequences in *Passage*) is set into motion again, as if a force behind the screen was distorting its surface; a fast music accompanies this process, with marked rhythmic changes. The word « passa » ("has passed by") appears. In French, the "simple past" is used in order to signify a single event, which has a dynamic character: it introduces a process and induces an expectance. After this short sequence, the word « passait », which is in the imperfect tense in French (then, the progressive preterite "was passing by" would be the most faithful translation) is displayed. This paradoxical passage, written in the actual present of the animation while stating a past event, is qualified by: « d'un pas lourd » ("with a heavy tread"). The background that has grown hollow forms a mobile point and seems to lean on this sentence in an imaginary three-dimensional space. From this illusory point, « d'un pas lourd » is split in two, as if the words in the foreground had been gathered in the background.

Screenshots *Passage*

The letters are then caught in a stream of blue substance, which increasingly dissociates and leads them away from the foreground, in which the animated background and the utterance had met. The collision between the words collected by the flow and the words later displayed in the present of the animation via the deformation of the background substance, may again be characterized by the term "telescoping". This media figure literally points out the paradox between the present of the animation and a past tense narration. The past and the present collide: inside the animated text, the movement collides with the contents of the word and the TSU (a-media) layers collide with the media layers of *Passage*. The « passage » is constantly enriched by new, highly metaphorical expressions: « d'un pas hardi » ("at a quick pace"), « d'un pas métronome démesuré » ("at a disproportionate regular pace"), etc. The confrontational dialogue between the present tense of the animation and the past tense of the narration is accompanied by a dialogue between a flute and a piano.

In French, the imperfect tense is mainly used to describe background events, or to express a repetition in the past. However, this past tense is always relative: the temporal reference it indicates is determined by its relation with another moment in the past. The imperfect is therefore subject to a strong constraint: the need to recover a past moment that is supposed to serve as an "anchor" [SAU]. This recovery seems to be represented in *Passage* by the mobile point in the background material. Yet, a past that has just taken place and is now reduced to oblivion collides with an utterance in the imperfect tense obeying the rules of the present animation. That collision constitutes a representation of their cross-contamination: the present constantly feeds the past; the past affects the present; the imperfect requires a temporal anchor: the current process is selected as a temporal landmark; this landmark is literally pointed out in the animation.

Once again, the poem tells in a metaphorical way the "passage" of the work in the device. If the work was concerned only with the aesthetics of the ephemeral, it would not need an anchor point in the past to perform this passage. But *Passage* also partakes in a mimetic aesthetics: adaptive programming coordinates the relationship between the visual motions and the music. Adaptive programming needs temporal landmarks, which are recovered in the characteristics of the device. The violently confrontational relationship between the mimetic aesthetics and the aesthetics of the ephemeral thus becomes particularly perceptible in this sequence of *Passage*, through "telescoping": if he wants to control the obsolescence of a digital work, the poet is forced to distort the space-time framework. Total disruption awaits such a moment of tension.

After a while, the violent movements calm down; the word « passait » is the only one that remains on the screen. Suddenly, the reader is invited to interact with the work again, on which he is supposed to leave a trace. A new sequence goes back to the main themes of *La Série des U*. « le » first appears, then « le pas ». The utterance is

now in the conditional. We are entering the last sequence of *Passage*, which is generated by the traces left by the reader's previous manipulation gestures.

To sum up: the author left a path as he wrote the program of *Passage*; the path that is to be taken by the reader's perception has been modelled in the program. The scientific experiment of modelling requires a stable framework, which is provided by adaptive programming: the future thus seems to be predictable. These parts of *Passage* come within the scope of the mimetic aesthetics. However, other layers of *Passage* contain media figures of animation and manipulation, some images and a melody appealing to one's imagination; most of these figures do not account for the existence of a modelling or a regulation of both the future and the past, but for the fundamental lability of the device, the obsolescence of the poetic work, and the fact that it is impossible to "write time". The work is updated in the current present of the animation. This present is ruled by the unpredictable characteristics of the electronic device. That is why stating the past and the future in an animated poem remains illusory. As *Passage* is a single-reading poem, the aesthetics of the ephemeral seems to be predominant. Despite the author's statements that seem to confirm this predominance, the confrontational relationship of the final obsolescence of electronic poetry with the poet's desire to shape time remains visible at every moment. The work's struggle for existence in the device thus reflects an existential paradox: the poet seems permanently torn between the desire to model, regulate, shape the passage of time, and the awareness that this « fil de l'eau » (literally "thread of water") will become obsolete, sooner or later. Adaptive programming, which governs many sequences of *Passage* and which is metaphorized in the sequence dedicated to the imperfect tense, at the same time constitutes a violent act against the transitory space-time of the device and the only way for the work to survive. The incubation figure, which hides the exact consequences of his interactions from the reader while making him understand that they leave marks on the work, shifts this hope for a survival of memory into the unstable device, a hope that finally partakes in the aesthetics of re-enchantment.

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Notes

1. This lability has been theorized about by a certain number of writers and poets of the French poetic association LAIRE (Philippe Bootz, Jean-Marie Dutey, Claude Maillard, Tibor Papp) through the 90's.

2. The term first appeared in certain analyses of the history of technology: in certain contexts, technical progress has replaced religious eschatology and has become a source of myth and transcendence. The "technical sublime" also plays an important role in science fiction literature and cinema (in the film *Ghost in the Shell* for example, a bodiless consciousness resists political domination by surviving on the Internet), and in posthumanist philosophy (for example *How We Became Posthuman* by N. Katherine Hayles); according to all these approaches, technology is supposed to open the door to a new existence transcending the present time normality.

3. "Media effect": an animation makes sense in accordance with the reader's expectations (examples: flashing, scrolling of the word "sale" in web advertising).

4. "Media figure": based on the differential between the reader's expectations and the realized events. In a recent book-chapter, I proposed to define a certain number of "figures of animation" and "figures of manipulation", also called manipulation figures [SAE].

5. See [COL].

6. I do not want to comment here on the possibility of such schematizations. Let me just quote Bernard Stiegler, for whom the distinction between primary and secondary retention, perception and imagination, is an illusion; in reality, perception always stays in a "transducing" relationship with imagination.