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Repositorium für die Medienwissenschaft

DFG Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

French e-poetry: A short/long story

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No. 23 – 25.05.2002

Abstract

If I believe professor Alain Vuillemin I was twelve years old when France began to pay attention to computer based poetry. In 1959, in France, Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais created the "Séminaire de Littérature Expérimental " (Experimental Seminar of Literature), which became shortly after his creation in 1960, the well known "OULIPO". Oulipo was interested in the secret possibilities of these "new machines for information treatment". (In between, Theo Lutz had in Stuttgart produced the very first electronic poetry, "stochastichte text" in *Augenblick*). But nothing concrete rolled out the huge machine.

We must wait until1964 to see the first electronic poems written in French in Montreal by the French Canadian engineer Jean Baudot "La machine à écrire mise en marche et programmée par Jean A. Baudot". More than ten years later, the first exhibition of automatic produced poems took place in 1975 during the "Europalia " event in Brussels. In July 1981 the professors Paul Braffort and Jacques Roubaud created the literary group ALAMO: "Atelier de Littérature assistée par la Mathématique et les Ordinateurs" (Literature Workshop aided by Mathematics and Computers). The definition contained in the name says enough about the artistic ambitions. The use of electronics cannot reach further than helping to find unknown and unthinkable combinations of words. According to Philippe Bootz (e-mail 28 02 02), the first automatic generator of poetry was "Poèmes d'Amour" by Jean-Pierre Balpe, in 1980 and Bootz' first programmed combinatory poems, on mini-computer (not micro), are from 1979 (Bootz dixit). In 1985, during the exhibition "Immatériaux" in the Georges Pompidou's Centre, the audience was invited to create and print computer generated poems. The funny is that the numerous printed productions have been archived, but not the generators themselves. All those poetical experimentations are in a way not yet fully electronic. Written text on paper remains the most important aspect of creation. The input is computerized, but not the output.

The ALAMO group went on by creating text generating programs for DOS, such as the language APL that made possible to easily manipulate text objects as vectors or fonts. We met some members of the ALAMO group during the first Conference for e-literatures in Paris in 1994. I have been surprised by their agressivity against the emerging computer based poetry. For them, nothing new could be done out of the paper publication. There was obviously a break between the authors who saw

the computer as a tool and the ones who are considering the machine as an autonomous medium.

In 1985 during the festival "Polynix 5" at the Pompidou Centre the French Hungarian poet Tibor Papp presented the first french animated programmed poem, created on Atari: "Les très riches heures de l'ordinateur". In my opinion, fully computer based poetry in French was born. It became obvious in 1989 with the first world wide electronic review ALIRE (a Spanish scientist, Orlando Carreno, established in 1990 that Alire was indeed the very first electronic review). ALIRE number one clearly announced a new kind of literature. There is no paper item: all works have been programmed for a computer screen reading. The publishers of this historical number were fully aware of the break caused in the literary tradition. This historical movement was the fact of five authors: Claude Maillard, Tibor Papp, Frédéric de Velay, Jean-Marie Dutey and Philippe Bootz gathered in the association L.A.I.R.E. (which means "Lecture-Art-Innovation-Recherche-Ecriture" - "Reading-Art-Innovation-Research-Writing"): Another review is KAOS (two numbers) from 1990 to 1994 directed by Jean-Pierre Balpe. KAOS formed the necessary link between the literature based on the text generators and the emerging media.

For me, another fundamental date is in 1989 the poem "Voies de faits", by Jean-Marie Dutey, November, in ALIRE 2. At the time, the use of Personal Computers begun to get common. Computers had a screen where colours were displayed. They could show texts and pictures as well. Objects on screen could move and sound begun (quite seldom I agree) to be added to the show. Computers begun to be multimedia. Conceptions as "computer aided literature", and even the automatically generated texts were in a way outdated before all possibilities had been explored.

The L.A.I.R.E authors made textes-à-voir " (texts-to-see), "textes-à-lire " (texts-to-read), " textes-lieux " (texts-places) which are getting very much further than the pure linguistic approaches of Oulipo and ALAMO. As the members of LAIRE underline it, a poem becomes a multimedia work of art, without clear differences with the other visual arts. In a way it corresponds with the old desire of total art described already by Guillaume Apollinaire.

The basis of traditional literary creations have been shaken. Reading a poem now could become a unique action, unpredictable and impossible to reproduce. Philippe Bootz speaks about poèmes à lecture unique ("only one time readable poems") disappearing when they have been read and impossible to repeat again, even after the computer has been shut down. Secondly, the reader, the "writingreader" becomes a fundamental element of the text to be read. The authors are clearly dealing with new reader behaviour. The work is never the same twice, as in a printed

text. First the poem is computer dependent. That means that the machine adds its own parameters : colours, speed and sizes can change. Then the reader has a big influence. The author can (or may not) imply an active reader by letting him use the mouse or keys. But the reader cannot see everything at once and cannot understand before happening what changed and why. He has of course his own freedom in interpreting the 'happening' but for instance cannot jump first to the end for a better understanding. He must follow the sketch. The poem has to be re-read.

Work read on screen asked for a new approach to the concept of text and communication. A poem created to be read in a book is terribly boring on a computer screen. The status of the word and even of the letter has changed. If I may speak of my own experience, I was making before this time visual poems, looking for a matrix of language independent poetry, experimenting with letters, shapes, colours, compositions. When I saw some screensavers on an Apple MacIntosh, I immediately understood that the moving coloured shapes on screen could be words too. In November 1994 ALIRE number 8 (eight numbers have been published within five years!) published my first animated poem: Les Vagues de la Mer (The Waves of the Sea), a strong visual work, realized in collaboration with Jean-Marie Dutey. This same issue contains another aspect of computer literature already experienced in the USA but not in France at the time. *Fragments d'une histoire* (Fragments of a Story/History)a "hypertextual fiction" from Jean-Marie Lafaille is one of the first hypertexts in French. This work had been first given away for free on disquette before it was published in the review.

Now the machine is multimedia, computer poetry cannot be any longer a mix of text on the one hand and computer programs on the other. Other experimental art branches are joining it: visual and concrete poetry discover a fascination for the computer, certainly as a tool for creating and transforming data, but also as an autonomous medium. The computerizing of sound tracks and new user friendly software make it easier to introduce sound manipulations into the computer poetry. The french sound poetry is internationally famous (think about Bernard Heidsieck, François Dufresne, Henri Chopin) and using sound in our poems for us was just the continutation of a well known practice.

The visual or performance poetry is principally organized around the review ~~Doc(k)~~, first directed by the visual poet Julien Blaine, then by Philippe Castellin. In 1997, a CD-Rom, called ~~Doc(k)~~-s-Alire, was produced by ~~Doc(k)~~ in collaboration with ALIRE. It is to me a curious meeting. The review is a traditional paper edition including a CD-Rom. The CD-Rom, again, exists of two parts one called CD Gallery, and the second part Authors. The Gallery part reveals the break between analogical poetry and the electronic one. A lot of visual poems have been scanned or created with the help of visual software such as Photoshop. All of them are stills and I find no notable difference between a still on a screen and a picture in a book. The author part is only composed of computer animations, those which can never be 'read' on any other

medium. The animations focus on the run up, on moving life, and either on typical screen design: colours, shapes, and transparencies. Here we find again the distinction between the computer as a tool or as a medium. A computer can be use to read words on it, but on a screen, words are seen as pictures before their meanings have been decoded. In 1997 however, interactivity in the sense of the clicking mouse or keys is not yet the main concern. My CD-Rom "Poèmes et Quelques Lettres" is exclusively made of animated poems. Jean-Marie Dutey, for me the first one who implies radical interactivity in a poem structure unfortunately does not write computer based poems anymore. But young poets such as Eric Serandour who never dealt with other kinds of poetry are coming up.

We must wait till 1998 to see the first websites devoted to french e-poetry. One of the main reasons is that the Internetwas introduced in France quite late, because Francealready had a kind of telephone net called Minitel. Philippe Castellin puts ~~Doc(k)~~ online and in 1999 he publishes an issue with a part on paper and another on a CD-Rom, a thick book called "un notre web". I looked up some URL before I begun to write this paragraph. A lot of URLs are shut down, and sites of the most participants to "un notre web" are only portfolio, artists' documentation and not works of art. Actually, one of the most interesting people in it is Annie Abrahams, a Dutch artist living and working in France with a true art project: "Being Human".

In general, web poetry present in "un notre web" can be characterized as not specifically made for the web, but this situation is general, web art, or net art, remains an exception. However, a new generation of poets is coming up since 1999. Xavier Malbreil, a novel writer, and Gerard Dalmon a gallery owner, opened a web site "e-critures," with real web works on it. A collaborative poetic novel: "Le Livre des Morts" is created together by Xavier Malbreil and Gerard Dalmon. Another collective work is "WC fields". All the members of the discussion list e-critures may add their own works to the virtual "fraffiti wall", without any kind of censure. I initiated a collective work ironically called "Fenêtres" (windows) from Stepane Mallarmé's poem. Julien d'Abrigeon, coming from sound poetry, manages a site "TAPIN", devoted to all new poetic experimentations. Mots-Voir, which represents the organization LAIRE, now practically running under Philippe Bootz alone, is also online with: motsvoir.org.

In April 2000 in Buffalo (NY) the International e-poetry Conference took place. Together with Philippe Bootz, I presented new works, in which the reader's behaviours were central. According to Charles Bernstein, Director of the Department of English at the State University of New York the presented works and the direction we sketched during our lectures were even "new and revolutionary as in their time the first surrealistic poems". Charles Bernstein was maybe a little too enthusiastic by comparing our modernity with the beginning of the XXth century, but I must say that French e-poetry is progressing quickly in the study of the computer as a medium in poetical innovations. Poetical patterns and concepts discovered over the

past fewyears have been impractical before, and even unthinkable. We are not dealing anymore with poetry on or with a computer but with computer poetry. It is completely different.

The very quick technological changes during the last decades have for a large part caused positive and negative results in the evolution of experimental poetry. The positive ones are that the multimedia made the total? poetry easy to imagine and to create. Verbal and non-verbal communication, words and icons, sound, colours, shapes, moving pictures, all of them can be meaningful and functional. The poem doesn't only exist of words written in a certain way. Besides, interactivity gets an evident meaning. It is much more than a jingle or some superficial entertainment. It belongs to the deep layers of a narrative structure. One of the negative consequences is the fact that technology evolves perhaps too fast. We get no time for studying poetical patterns (think for example of the text generators). Computers are bigger, faster, more powerful and what five years ago looked like an unreachable frontier is completely dated by now.

But the social and cultural conditions of a valuable recognition are not yet present. If e-poetry is not anymore the strange hobby of a few marginals, its position is still far from being recognized. Not a single main French publisher runs a multimedia collection, there is no structure able to archive and announce the works and the poets, it is very difficult to convince art directors and gallery owners to exhibit the new movements. Very often they don't even realize that we cannot show anything without computers. I think we have now to struggle for the full recognition of electronic poetry as an independent art. A new generation of poets will rise up, never involved in any other poetical expression. In France, we are not that far yet.

Links

Alain VUILLEMIN Littérature et informatique:de la Poésie électronique aux romans interactifs
http://www.sitec.fr/users/akenatondocks/DOCKS-datas_f/forums_f/theory_f/VILLEMIN_f/vuillemin.html

Jean Clément Littérature et génération de textes: http://www.labart.univ-paris8.fr/ciren/conferences

La littérature générée par ordinateur / Textes réunis par Alain VUILLEMIN et Michel LENOBLE Artois Presses Université, 1995: http://www.univ-artois.fr/arras/cer-tel/publi.html

e-critures : http://www.e-critures.org/ecritures.html

Annie Abrahams: http://www.multimania.com/abrahams/beinghuman/infol.htm and

http://www.fraclr.org/users/abrahams/perl/jesuisunoeuvredart.pl

E-poetry Center : http://epc.buffalo.edu

Alire: http://www.motsvoir.org (27, allée des coquelicots, F-59650 Villeneuve d'Ascq, FRANCE)

Eric Serandout: http://www.serandour.com

Patrick-Henri Burgaud: http://www.burgaud.demon.nl

~~Doc(k)~~: http://www.sitec.fr/users/akenatondocks

Julien d'Abrigeon Tapin: http://www.multimania.com/tapin

Gerard Dalmon: http://www.neojego.com

Xavier Leton: http://www.confetti.org/ecriordi/bonjour/index.htm

Xavier Malbeil: http://www.0m1.com