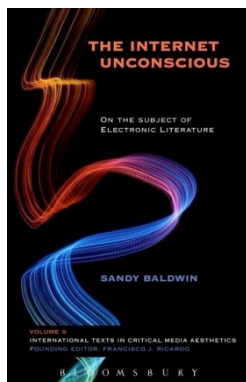# There Is No Electronic Literature
(But It Is Everywhere)

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Sandy Baldwin*, The Internet Unconscious:*
On the Subject of Electronic Literature.
London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, 287 pp.
ISBN 978-1-62892-338-4

This is and this is not a book on electronic literature. Its objects aren't texts or genealogies, but the search for the place and mode of the literary on the network ("the problem of writing the net as the problem of literature" [23]). Baldwin reflects on how digital inscription is mediated through the protocological specificities of the Internet, situating the writer on the network and the network in the wider neo-liberal context, and highlights the technical, political and imaginary determinations of digital mediation: "[T]he triumph of informatics. Literature as literally 'what is written' is an exemplary case of such writing within the apparatus. (...) Electronic literature is a dutiful part of the bureaucracy, and all existing discussions of electronic literature imply some version of this managerial logic" (1). Addressing an abstract *you*, Baldwin explores what he calls the 'preversity' of digital writing, to refer the imagination of an *other* in the network–which is the reader but also the algorithmic otherness that shapes the Internet, and argues that this imagination determines both the writer and the phenomenology of the network itself: "I imagine you. We might call this net affect, but 'affect' (...) does not capture the intersubjective drama. (...) Perhaps it is better to call this the imaginary net"(53).

Starting from the idea that everything on the Internet is code and inscription, Baldwin seeks a poetics of digital writing showing how concepts

like *file* and *protocol* are not only technical but institutional mediations. *IP*, *TCP*, *traceroute*, file packages in transit: through the *ping* command which, like a sonar, confirms the existence of the other on the other side, Baldwin imagines the cartography of the network, with its territories and borders open or closed to our writing. If *ping* and *traceroute* tell the stories of their paths, are they texts? Although the notion of text implies an inter-subjective field, Baldwin argues that "even if there is no sign of response, this lack is the signifier of the Other's response" (40). There is always an *I* and an *other* saturating the communication systems, and the text is the trace of any human activity on the network: "The discovery that the text is the product of continual logging and processing in my computer means I read towards an anonymous other, a structural other that I posit or project across the space of the net" (45). However, this imaginary over-investment which reads any inscription as text does not invent the literary by itself, but it participates in what constitutes electronic literature, since the encounter between the literary and the digital "leads to the double play of literalization and imaginary overinvestment" (3).

Far from being the democratic rhizome promoted by the rhetoric of Silicon Valley in the 1990s, the Internet is described by Baldwin as an infrastructure that reflects and intensifies the neo-liberal macro-structures. Interweaving the history of the network with the analysis of gestures such as sending an email, accessing a website or signing in, Baldwin demonstrates how "we constantly enter into consensual relations with the opacity of a technical infrastructure" (58). Through the CAPTCHA form (Completely Automated Public Turing Test To Tell Computers and Humans Appart), for instance, in which the user's interpretation is explored to review and authenticate texts reproduced by optical recognition systems in the context of book scanning, Baldwin demonstrates how human writing is converted into value accumulated by companies like Google or Amazon. Considering that each online gesture is an enunciation which the writer doesn't entirely control; that this information is produced in a dimension that overlaps work with leisure, and that it is converted into value and power, we conclude that the surplus extracted from our writing on the network raises important economic, political and cultural issues. In this regard see, for example, Matteo Pasquinelli on cognitive capitalism and the production of the commons (2009; 2010), Tiziana Terranova on free work and the network centric production of value (2000), or Alexander Galloway and the notion of protocological control (2004). In a literary context, John Cayley reflected on these issues in works such as *How It Is in Common Tongues* (2012) or "Pentameters Toward the Dissolution of Certain Vectoralist Relations" (2013).

The algorithms that give form to the Internet interact invisibly with our writing, learning to use language, mapping territories and structuring profiles. Its administrative logic, established in protocological permissions, entangles the subject and thus acts as a precondition of electronic literature. But if we

write under permission, are we still writers? If we write where allowed, with tools which we do not control, if we accept unilateral terms, we may actually be writers *of*, more than *on* the net, and we are also written *by* it. But Baldwin still holds on to the subversive power of the literary gesture as resistance to the *apparatus*: "But what if permission were a struggle? (...) To invent permission, what if this were the condition of digital poetics?" (63).

Like Kittler, Baldwin considers that, in the digital context, "the inscriptive act is the end of humanity and the beginning of something other" (5). We talk about digital writing because digital sub-structures are, like writing, discrete and differential, but the execution of the code is so fast and made of differences so microscopic that it becomes unreadable to the human scale. The digital writer has no empirical knowledge of his trace, and his writing, once recoded in mathematical signs and electricity, already belongs to the post-human sphere. "Do not talk to me about haptic or VR or what have you, all of which only reinforce the gap. (...) They are on the other side of the screen in the great beyond" (8). In this "great beyond", the body has no place and neither does disorder, and it is to that extent that digital writing must obey the bureaucracy in order to exist.

This regulation is incompatible with the literary: "The possibility to write anything at all is a fundamental condition of literature. (...) In this sense, all that passes under the name 'electronic literature' is really typing practice for the militarized weapon-subjects" (13). If literature is "the possibility of uncontrolled enunciation" (6), how can we produce the literary within the regulated space of the network? How to recover the human, or how to turn writing into a work of the hand? Perhaps reclaiming intentionality?

The aesthetics of error (or glitch) is as an ironic example of Baldwin's argument, since even an intentional error has to conform to systemic permissions in order to be interpreted: "The notion of glitch and glitch art is nothing more than a way of talking about the intention allowed me by the great beyond" (11). But Baldwin goes further: in the absolute gap where digital writing is inscribed, the writing body is also re-coded—"The web zombifies my body and in doing so keeps itself alive" (15). Hence, "when literary critics describe 'embodiment' in relation to digital writing, they reinforce this zombie shell as our occupation" (10-11). And with synthesis and irony, Baldwin concludes: "The genre may be generously expanded to include left-handed people or those with low-vision (...) this only means that zombie status is available to all" (15).

Baldwin's thesis that literature doesn't fit into the electronic echoes in his criticism of the definition of electronic literature proposed by the ELO: "The Electronic Literature's Organization definition of electronic literature as 'works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the possibilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer' is a way of saying that such works are obliged and in debt" (81). Debt to software, to hardware and to communication networks. The presentism and technicism

implicit in the term 'electronic', as well as the literalization of the technical device, were already criticized for instance in the introduction to *PO.EX: Essays from Portugal* (Torres and Baldwin, 2014) or in the recent words of Espen Aarseth at the ELO 2015 conference.[1]

In addition, Baldwin considers that there isn't a community of digital writers but a heterogeneous and temporary crowd, defined by the technical medium and, therefore, situated in a logic external to literature, the neoliberal sphere of cybernetics, which constitutes precisely the predetermination that the literary act seeks to overcome. While Baldwin seems to lament the lack of a community of digital writers, we think of how the crowd, being relatively unpredictable, may more easily resist the regulation of the Internet's protocols. In "L'hypothèse cybernétique" (2001), the collective Tiqqun precisely proposes unpredictability, dispersion and fog as strategies of resistance to the military, political and economic dimensions of the Internet as a global system of communication and control[2]: "Attacking the cybernetic hypothesis (...) means experimenting alongside it, actuating other protocols" (Tiqqun, 2001: 35).

Baldwin sees the digital as a "series of empty places, a syntax for combination, indifferent and blank" (70), a field of repetition which, in addition to technical over-determination, gives the same set of features to all works of electronic literature: "infinitesimal variation on computation, animation, linking (...) I tell you, there are no works, only a continuum" (70). Or "electronic literature artists make work indistinguishable from Google Apps" (72). In order to speak of electronic literature, we need a philosophy of digital writing but, "rather than a theory of electronic literature there is a fast-forward collapse, auto-destruction, and a resulting delirium of work, criticism, and writing" (70). Like Paul Virilio, Baldwin sees in electronic literature a poetics of disaster.

What would then be a philosophy of digital writing? Baldwin gives us some clues:

> Listen close: electronic literature is not an arms race of ever cooler and more refined technique—this is literature as a tool of rhetoric—nor is it pure invention from the symbolic scansion of empty spaces—this is literature as philosophy of the performative—but it is a literature as *elsewhere*. (...) You might reply, look Sandy, you're talking about the net itself as proto-inscription, and in such inscription there's no reflection, no

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[1] https://mediasite.uib.no/Mediasite/Play/f31b084a522148d6afc69ead64bd0b941d?catalog=32d41cb3-5cd7-489f-bd55-f8f2b08528f9 (from minute 00:25:15 to minute 00:56:00)

[2] Communication and control in and of systems, precisely as in Norbert Weiner's proposal of cybernetics (*Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1948).

intersubjectivity, there's nothing to be read (...) you're just intensifying, lightning up our desiring production in and of the net (74-75).

Finding the literary in the network is indeed a matter of perspective: for cybernetics, whose mantra is efficiency, there are no aesthetic functions but disciplinary ones, and literature belongs to the dimension of noise. In this context, what could the writer's task be, other than the production of disorder? "Poetics means thresholds and boundaries. (...) Think of Jean-Paul Sartre's description of 'the poetic world' as 'love of the impossible'. Think of the catastrophe theory, a la Rene Thom: the point is changes of state, intensifications of distended surface" (71). We may see in this perspective the same romantic pursuit of limits and their transcendence that fed modernism, but that seems to be precisely Baldwin's bet regarding the digital: testing the system's limits, infecting it with the noise of literature, opposing the possible with the "elsewhere".

With a poetic and oralizing expressiveness, and as synthetic as digressive, *The Internet Unconscious* is a humanist reflection on a post-human subject: digital inscription as a post-writing, and its retro-action on the human. If the composite of algorithmic agencies that shapes the Internet and digital media conflicts with the authorial voice, preventing the literary; if the digital is a condition of contemporary culture, and if, as Godard said, culture is the rule and art the exception[3], then literature remains insofar as the writer claims the un-encodable excess on this side of the interface. Against the digital, literature exists in the ratio of the human, like an insistence, impossible to contain. "Literature discovers organs sprouting from the medium like flowers" (87).

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[3] "Il y a la culture qui est de la règle. Il y a l'exception qui est de l'art.", JLG, *Je vous salue Sarajevo*, 1993.

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