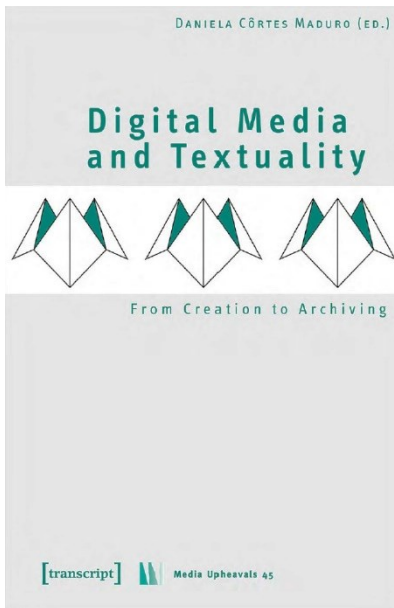


Re-Coding the Text and Other Questions

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Daniela Côrtes Maduro, ed. *Digital Media and Textuality: From Creation to Archiving*. Bielefeld: transcript verlag, 2017. 284 pp. ISBN 978-3-8376-4091-5.

As the title suggests, this is a book about the interconnections between digital media and textuality: from writing to reading, from creation to archiving, digital mediation affects our relationship with language and with all things made of language. For many years, artists and scholars have been exploring the constraints and possibilities of digital mediation. This exploration keeps on going, following the threads of our digital technologies as they seem to open new doors or as they force us to look again at the cultural situation of media and its complex relationships with the literary. This book, edited by Daniela Côrtes Maduro, compiles some of the questions that arise when we consider the impact of digital mediation on literature. The preface sets the tone and starts by presenting the idea that texts are not only independent from media but also from sign regimes: “Even though they are believed to be mostly comprised of words, images and graphic elements are often used as the interweaving thread holding texts together. Digital media seem to (...) demonstrate that texts are not

anchored in verbal language” (9). This is a bold statement. It is true that digital literary works tend to explore graphic and visual elements, as well as sound and movement, but we can argue that what separates digital literature from other forms of digital art is language, understood as a system made of verbal signs: even if these verbal signs are absent, a literary work will always relate to language in some way. This is one of the many hard questions posed on textuality by digital media: how does the creative use of computational processes and devices problematize our notions of literariness? Although the preface points to the blurring of the boundaries of what literature is, the scope of this problem remains open for discussion.

One important question is the ontology of the text itself. The preface clearly points to the duality of the digital sign and to the double nature of all digital readable objects, reminding us of the tension between the surface level of legibility and the structural level of digital inscription and processing. More than animated objects on a screen, digital texts are procedural operations taking place at the level of code: “digital texts do not merely remain at the surface: they exist elsewhere, in our devices, or spread across the web. Locating the text — or bringing it to the surface — has become an intrinsic part of the reading act” (9). Unveiling the layers and coming to understand the mechanisms of digital literary forms is one of the challenges posed to us by digitally mediated textuality. Besides challenging the reader to locate the text, in a movement of discovery of our own status as readers, just like a player or a wanderer in a labyrinth, “digital media have allowed the creation of additional ways to defy the role of the author” (9), mediating and dislocating her voice through text generators or shared and distributed writing strategies, for instance, bringing both the reader and algorithmic agents to the stage of digital writing. These changes in the literary landscape are the focus of the essays collected in this book, which bets on the rise of “unexpected connections between apparently disparate topics” (9). Indeed, this is a book that brings together a series of different perspectives on electronic literature: it isn’t a homogenous book, but one that freely assembles different themes, inviting the reader to find common threads and contrasting critical views.

The book is organized in six parts. Part one, entitled “Nothing Comes of Nothing,” is concerned with the precedents of electronic literature. In the opening essay, Dene Grigar establishes a comparison between the recombinatory structures that characterize the aesthetics of digital texts, and the work of the Greek rhapsodes of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE who “sew new songs together” by stitching pieces of poems into their oral performances. The already canonical *Patchwork Girl* (Shelley Jackson, 1995) is taken as an example of such recombination of multilinear hypertextual structures, which, in this case, are constitutive of the work’s poetics. In the second essay of this section, Jörgen Schäfer brings German Baroque poetry to the discussion, considering anagrams as poetic game-

like machines. Shaffer situates these works as antecedents of the pioneering experiments of the neo-avant-garde. This highlight on German tradition is particularly important in a context where the vast majority of theoretical approaches to digital media and textuality is marked by North-American academic and artistic production, especially hypertext, inviting us not only to learn about important literary traditions such as the ones Shaeffer discusses, but also to establish connections between different European approaches to cybertext. This essay echoes some of the proposals found in *PO.EX. Essays from Portugal* (2014), where authors such as Manuel Portela also underline the visual and game-like nature of Baroque poetry as a root of the procedural nature of today's electronic literature.

The second part, "Introspective Texts," is concerned with the notion of texts as self-reflexive machines and it is comprised of two essays. In the first, Otso Huopaniemi takes the question of translation as a double writing process. What happens when a third language enters the scene and, more specifically, when that third language is a machine language? The author considers the impact and role of machine translation as an experimental tool, claiming that "algorithmic processes can enrich and invigorate self-reflexive writing processes" (48), while also pointing to the fact that "these same processes are made possible by corporate players whose interest in language is capitalistic" (48). In Otso Huopaniemi's view, automatic translators may be understood as "transgressive, adaptive media in the act of writing one's text and reworking one's thoughts anew" (53). The characterization of digital media, digital tools and digital literary forms as transgressive is very present in literary criticism. Transgression is often understood as a form of validation of literary forms that are usually on the margins of literature. But what exactly does that mean? For instance, where is the line that separates the deprogramming associated with estrangement, from the reprogramming associated with the automation of writing, including translation? How does automatic mediation affect our relationship with language, beyond the proverbial deprogramming associated with Dada, Surrealism or the *OuLiPo*?

In the second essay of the second part, Sandy Baldwin and Gabriel Tremblay-Gaudette establish a connection between poetry and video games, the third point of this connection being the concept of performance. The authors depart from a work called *Poems You Should Know* to reflect on some of the relations between writing, reading and playing as performative interventions that intermingle, complicating and questioning our theoretical frameworks with regard to disciplines, genres or modes of creation. *Poems You Should Know*, is "a transwriting performance with famous literary texts in an online multiplayer video game (Counter-Strike: Global Offensive). This performance pwns the game as a critical, artistic intervention" (57). As the authors explain, to "pwn," in gamer culture, means to own or to conquer. What is at stake here is thus the ability for poetry to conquer the game, or, as the title of the essay suggests, the ability for "Pwning Gamers, One Text at a Time." Textual performance becomes a tool for reframing

“codes and actions,” reconfiguring our perception of what a game and a text might be in a digital context.

“Where is Narrative?”, the third part of the book, is comprised of three essays and it opens with a reflection by Carlos Reis on the concept of “character,” contrasting its construction in print and in electronic literature, as a “dynamic entity” (75) who “does not stand still” (75). Carlos Reis establishes an association between the transposition of digital technical features into literary forms and the mutability of characters in fiction. The essay draws on realist 19th century novelists such as Eça de Queirós to establish a continuum articulating the dynamism of characters throughout literary tradition, from romanticism to hypertextual canons of the 20th century. From the mutability of characters to the fragmentation of the subject, María Goicoechea De Jorge revisits Shelley Jackson’s *my body — a Wunderkammer* and explores the mind-body problem through the lens of the grotesque, understood as a deconstruction of form, suited to embody alterity and change: “The mind-body relation does not emerge from an ontological integrity, but in the immanent and recursive parceling, fragmentation, and reconstruction of the whole” (87). The representation of the body and the self is mirrored in hypertext as a textual structure that, through reconfiguration, enables a meta-reflection on the tensions between fragment and whole, and between process and form. In “Choice and Disbelief: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity,” Daniela Côrtes Maduro explores the role of imagination in the reading strategies enabled by digital fiction. Drawing on Paul Zumthor, imagination is understood as a means to apprehend and at the same time reconfigure perceived elements on a text. For Daniela Maduro, this apprehension and reconfiguration enable the reader to participate in the construction of the text: “The inclusion of an imaginative effort enables us to overcome the paradox ‘writing a story while reading it’ and (...) to back claims such as ‘the text is generated by the reader’” (122).

“Teaching the Digital,” the fourth part of the book, is dedicated to digital literacy and to pedagogical approaches to electronic literature. María Mencía offers her views on her teaching experience with a module dedicated to digital environments, which become media for analysis and discussion but also for experimental practice in the context of the classroom, enabling students to “learn by doing and enquiring through practice-based research” (133). In the same spirit, Mia Zamora presents her pedagogical experiments with “Networked Narratives,” described as “an innovative pedagogical experiment in teaching digital literacies, digital writing, and electronic narrative” (152).

The role of the medium in the writing and reading of literary texts is explored in the fifth part of this book, entitled “Trans-Multi-Inter-Meta (The Medium).” Once again, Shelley Jackson’s work is taken as a case study, now with her piece *Snow* (2014-), which is read through the lens of intermediality. This essay, by Anna Nacher, explores the relationships between inscription and ephemerality, and the ways in which “evaporating substance, photographic documentation and networked media play out in an aesthetic sense” (170), and it establishes

connections between Land Art and the network aesthetics that characterizes digital media works, while drawing on notions of distributed agency. In the same part, Maria Teresa Vilariño Picos explores the relationships between digital networks, connectivity and isolation, in a critical stance towards cultural models informed by entertainment media, which adopt intermediality, transmediality and interactivity in ways that “derive from the commercialization and banalization of culture” (188).

The sixth and final part of this book is concerned with the archive and curatorial practices. Devon Schiller presents us his research on how vocabulary may be used as a tool for describing facial expressions. Reflecting on indexing and archiving as interfaces with epistemological power, one of the questions that arise is how taxonomies may influence our perception of a given work. In “Curating ‘Shapeshifting Texts,’” and departing from the recognition that digitally mediated literary texts are process driven objects, Daniela Côrtes Maduro presents a summary of her project “Shapeshifting Texts,” which included the organization of a conference and an exhibit dedicated to electronic literature. The book closes with an afterword on algorithmic art, by the mathematician and computer artist Frieder Nake, which underlines the common threads connecting different approaches (verbal, visual, etc.) to digitally mediated artistic forms.

The essays collected in this book point to the continued relevance of canonized artists and scholars such as Shelley Jackson and Katherine Hayles, and of certain key concepts such as fragmentation and multilinearity, as well as validating theoretical strategies such as interactivity and disruption. This is also a book written by and for a community that reclaims its space in contemporary literary studies, in a space that is as fragmented and dynamic as its field of study, where a plurality of voices with different theoretical approaches has been establishing a rich dialogue for almost thirty years, testing the frontiers of the literary through an engagement with digital technologies. The plurality of critical and aesthetical approaches to computer-mediated literary creation shows us that this is a complex and rich field. Through a variety of themes and perspectives, this book addresses crucial dimensions of electronic literature and shows us how electronic literature can be illuminating about the nature of digital textuality.