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THINKING ELECTRONIC LITERATURE IN A DIGITAL CULTURE

PENSER LA LITTÉRATURE ÉLECTRONIQUE EN CULTURE NUMÉRIOUE

> sous la direction de / edited by BERTRAND GERVAIS & SOPHIE MARCOTTE

LES PRESSES DE L'ÉCUREUIL



LIRE ET ÉCRIRE EN CULTURE NUMÉRIQUE

READING AND WRITING IN A DIGITAL CULTURE

ROLANDO RODRÍGUEZ • JESSICA RODRÍGUEZ

A Visual/Motor Activity Signifiant In Textual Reality

ABSTRACT

This paper is born by the interest in theorizing artistic and educational practices and experiences through the collaborative platform andamio.in. Within this, we have worked with sound, visuals and text as three layers that can be expanded within themselves and through other practices and fields producing performances, installations and fixed-media pieces. We have also developed and implemented educational activities with children, always from the perspective of the informal school: workshops. We try to collide sound, images, and text using both memory and reality, taking into account theoreticians, such as Hans Belting, Marshall McLuhan, Didi Huberman, and writers such as Marcel Proust, Jaime Sabines, Gabriel García Márquez, among others.

Résumé

Cet article est né d'un intérêt pour la théorisation des pratiques et des expériences artistiques et éducatives à travers la plateforme collaborative andamio.in. Dans ce cadre, nous avons travaillé avec le son, le visuel et le texte comme trois strates qui peuvent être déployées en elles-mêmes, comme elles peuvent l'être par d'autres pratiques et domaines, produisant des performances, des installations et des pièces à supports fixes. Nous avons également développé et mis en place des activités éducatives avec des enfants dans la perspective de l'école informelle, fondée sur des ateliers. Nous avons entrepris de réunir le son, les images et le texte en utilisant à la fois la mémoire et la réalité et en tenant compte des travaux de théoriciens comme Hans Belting, Marshall McLuhan, Didi-Huberman, et des écrivains tels que Marcel Proust, Jaime Sabines et Gabriel García Márquez, entre autres

INTRODUCTION

What is reading? As a transitive verb and strict action, it is to convey the view by the signs that we recognize from our mother tongue, written in a text to understand them and turn them into sounds. The act of reading goes beyond the interpretation of an inherited code. Reading is a cognitive, visual/motor activity that is meaningful to reality. Whatever reality might be.

When we read a text, our thought manages a set of received information that is gradually organized according to its maturity, experience, cognitive processes, intuition, and conceptualization. The order in which it happens does not matter. What is important is the fact that when it is read, the construction and appropriation of both historical and a-historical concepts occur.

Technology, following the proposal of Marshall McLuhan (1988), is an extension of our own body. For that matter, clothing is an extension of our skin. Shoes are an extension of our feet, and written language is an extension of our identity.

One could think of the transitive verb of reading as a natural activity in the human being. Simone de Beauvoir affirms in her novel *Una Muerte muy Dulce* (*Une mort très douce*) that "there is no natural death; nothing that happens to man is natural, since his mere presence calls the world into question" (Beauvoir 2003, 72). The act of reading implies the development of a technology of reading. It is an artificial action.

You cannot think of reading as a natural act. The expansion of reading happens at the moment in which a common code is constructed that is accepted by a specific society as an element of meaning of identity. Thus, the idea of understanding ourselves as undifferentiated beings of nature is displaced. Code technology makes man more cultured. It subjects him to the understanding of reality. Reading will no longer be the understanding of sound, the use of taste as appropriation and cognition, touch as the experience of unity.

The artificiality that Simone de Beauvoir affirms and the extension proposed by Marshall McLuhan coincide in the code of the written language subject to the truth, to the construction of concepts.

The act of reading is now understood, not as conveying the view on a text that contains an artificial and arbitrary code, but as an act of culturalization and appropriation of an identity discourse. Sound and vision, substantial elements of the primitive, are reduced to the subjection of the text that is read and that is true in itself.

EXPANDED READINGS

Expanded Reading is one of the emerging artistic practices that have the characteristic of using technology to build meaningful experiences, not only from text but also from sound and the visual.

An Expanded Reading can be generated from sound, the visual, or the textual. We will call each layer an element because each one is juxtaposed against the other in the sense that the narrative is respected. There is no interest in involving one layer into another. The idea is thinking of each one arbitrarily. So, at some point within the production, there is the possibility that they collide. What happens in these untimely moments—in space/time—the experience of a phrase, a visual, a sound that connects with the spectator recovering his memory and his social collective memories.

As an emerging practice, it is detached from thinking about the text; which means that the written code is just another layer. It moves towards a narrative construction without a plot, deactivates linearity, and does not operate within the discourse. It is thought from the relation between the triad that, insistently, we try to separate sound, visuals, and text.

An example of this is the sentence from the novel by Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien Años de Soledad* (García-Marquez 2007). "Things have a life of their own—the gypsy preaches with a harsh accent—it's all a matter of awakening the soul." The affirmation is forceful in the harsh cry of the gypsy who waves it to the wind to spread it between the ears he seeks to penetrate. The enunciation exists in the expansive solitude of the text. It is known. It is all a matter of opening the book and wishing to declaim the first line of the second paragraph of the Colombian writer's novel.

But opening raises its genesis from the sound of enunciation. Thus, affirmation does not exist if there is no one to whom it is useful and useless to say it or unuseful to listen to it. And when you say it and listen to it, both the reader and the listener build the image. On one hand, a life that is, and cannot deny. It exists in the reality of the senses. On the second hand, we have the lightness of the text rhythm. While rough things seem heavy; life itself proclaims awakening, accent, and soul to light actions and nouns, which seem to travel from space/time in any street. We are not talking about the book, nor even Macondo. A street that might be Vancouver, Reading, Berlin, Buenos, Aires, or Uruapan.

The text is nothing without the enunciation and the construction of the image. Because the human being is an image. But this is not reduced to the primacy of the vision. It is a personal process that is unleashed by activating the text based on sound as the principle of enunciation and the opening of memory files as the memory to build the image.

The reading expands, then. The first line of the second paragraph of García Márquez's novel is no longer a frigid phrase, trapped in the loneliness of its one hundred years. It is pure life that flows. It is useless to recover the sound of rennet, liver, or heart. That admits the construction of an image through a cognitive and historical process where the line of the knowable and the sensitive disappears.

Thus, things such as clepsydra or scaffolding, cornice or hibiscus, caravan or herd, lamppost or gutter, lion or dolphin, score or Turkish bath cohabit in the metropolis of sound, which is the throat from which a scarecrow emerges as a silencer of the torturing sound of an insect which turns off the reverse image that projects a parallelogram. This makes appear, in the middle of the bonfire, the sound which arbitrarily has been acquired by experience, common sense and intuition. The declaration of things, the discovery of the multiple meanings of each sound contained in the images that one learns to exchange with oneself: ("a flaming ribbon," "a dry land," "a happy life," "seed of poppy," "stowage full of avocados," "river that sings," "dog scabies," "bazaar lovers," "the ingenuity of a masterful wind," "the mikrokosmika reality of an empire," "a pirate of courtyard inside," "a train on lines," "drops against loneliness"). Each story of flaming ribbons, dry land, happy lives, poppy seeds, pallets full of avocado, rivers that sing, dog scabs, city lovers, naiveties, maestral winds, mikrokosmika realities of empires, of pirates in the backyard that were part of

the pile of enunciations and declarations that were becoming more and more distant senses of the truth of sound and image, and that, at the same time, brought us closer to a truth of the text and the lie of the image and sound. It appears in the reading, the primacy of the written word as exercise of the truth and the primacy of the eye that builds the truth.

But we do not know about the long journey that happened to unravel this truth-if it is true. When the balance within the ear, which is sound, gentle waters that become turbulent, kinesthetic movement that is now a tremor that moves the uncertain floor that sustains us, is agitated, one begins to activate memory, to evoke memories. By then, the flaming ribbons will have already become a newcomer; the dry land in a jackal howl; the happy lives in the abundance of hunting; the poppy seeds in existential poison; the pallets full of avocado in forced labor; the rivers that sing in monuments to modernity; the scabies of the dog in silent hands that tend to close and to be fixed; the city lovers in permanent, silent and immobile conversations; the ingenuities of maestral winds in barely a whisper of understanding; the mikrokosmika realities of empires in workshop rings that manufactured clepsydras; the backyard pirates in adventurers that do not go beyond an owl's cry; the things that have a life of their own in playful dragons from a pirate vase made in china: that roughness is nothing more than a wood sandpaper that softens surfaces; those things are everything and they are nothing; what to preach is a discourse carved in the sand; that awakening causes the disease of uncertainty; that the souls no longer live in purgatory but that they go through the streets digging in garbage containers; and that the accent is just a whisper that does not travel beyond the distance that is allowed.

The reading of the first line of the second paragraph of the novel by García Márquez, *Cien Años de Soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude)*, has been expanded. It has been activated from the moment it is decided to read it with the silent voice of the sound that belongs to us, and an image has been constructed that provokes the echo of its history, of our history.

THE BODY MOVING TOWARDS EXPANDED READINGS

Hans Belting (2007) states that the body is the place of images. This is where the images are produced/consumed. Memory is the archive of images, and memory is the production of images of the body itself.

Much has been said about the problem of the loss of the body and its importance in the production with the use of current technologies. The truth is that our forms have changed: the way we communicate, produce and consume what surrounds us. We have another relationship with objects, and consequently with images.

The images have also changed. Their traditional sense has ceased to exist by changing the relationship between the body and the image. The body continues to exist from the moment when it produces from its memory, generates images, and expands through them. The images then become living organisms that are constantly changing until the moment that another body receives/consumes them.

The body functions as a generator of individual and collective images. Although in the physical body they die with it and have a defined space / time, the collective memory has its own mechanism. It is handled in spaces / times as those organisms that are transformed with them. Marcel Proust understood the mutable value of memory in his book In Search of Lost Time. In Volume One, *Du côté de chez Swann (Swann's Way)* (1913), he describes how a second before awakening those memories of past rooms were called from the memory archive. All spaces / times exist in the same moment, to return to the body at the moment of awakening, a second later.

LOS DÍAS TERRESTRES, AN EXPANDED READING PERFORMANCE

Los días terrestres is a piece produced by ANDAMIO. The main idea was to read three female poets. The first presentation was in Uruapan, in May 2014. Wislawa Szymborska, Herta Müller and Gabriela Mistral were read. Along with the readings, a second sound layer was added in real-time. A visual layer produced by a light table and pre-recorded/edited videos were mixed in

real-time projected onto a wall. The three layers ran out of phase with each other. There were visual silences and pauses in the reading when passing from one text to the next, from poetess to poetess.



Figure 1. Los Días terrestres, performed in Uruapan, Mexico in May 2014

The expanded reading *Los días terrestres* recovered three elements with which it had been working: sound, visual and textual production. From this perspective, the being of the art piece is not static but changes according to the specific space/time in which it is produced. For example, it has been presented a total of four times, and in all of them it has changed; not only in the elements that were used on stage but also in their duration–20 or 45 minutes–in the sound/visual materials, in the way of using the chosen texts.

In the first two presentations—in the cities of Uruapan and Zamora, Mexico—a total of 30 poems were read from the three poets. One was differentiated from the other by a change in the visual material or by changing the projection place. The light table was positioned as an important element from the first stage of the project because it provided the physical objects: keys, buttons, threads, paper and old photographs manipulated in real-time, where the images generated were translated and mixed through the Resolume video software.

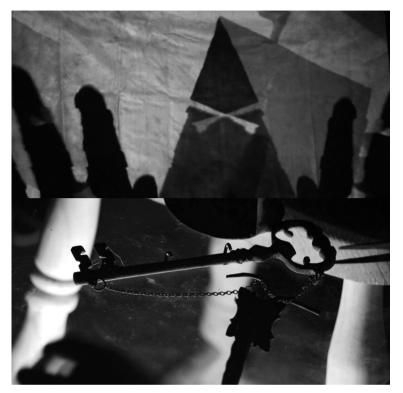


Figure 2. Los Días terrestres, performed in Uruapan, Mexico in May 2014

As far as sound is concerned, the texts read are rarely modified and are competing with the second sound layer, made in real-time through Max/MSP. At some moments the meaning of the texts is lost to the point where, for the spectator, the sound and the reading become noise. The sound/visual/textual layers become possibilities that co-exist in space/time, generating the experience of emerging narratives without plot, non-linear, without apparent discourse.

The second stage of the piece—Los días terrestres 2.0—we worked on the basis of pre-production where we established a score based on time. What do we mean to it? The experience we got from the first stage, the piece demanded segregation in time. It would have an impact on the presentation. We weren't looking to write a script, the idea was to try to make each layer narrative have their own chaotic and congruent moments. So, the spectator would have the possibility of connecting with the text read in last times: at the beginning and at the end of the piece. And the same with the other layers.





Figure 3. Los Días Terrestres, performed in Manizales, Colombia at the International Image Festival 2015

Beyond the unexpected events that take place between complex and simple moments, the expanded reading is no longer divided by the three writers. The relationship between images is sharpened when they are interrupted, modified and confronted in the specific space/time of the producer-spectator.

Appropriating the concept of audiovision proposed by Michel Chion (1993), it is understood that visual/sound/textual images do not submit to each other. None of the three layers is the main one, but they coexist to build an experience.

The reading producer was able to choose which texts to read and their order.

The sound producer makes a counterpoint starting from the same recording in real-time of the text read, generating the possibility of recovering the individual/collective memory within the space/time of the performance.

The visual producer plays with the stage space/time, which is one more element to make the sound/textual layers breathe.

CHILDREN LIVE IN IMAGES

When we assert that children live in images, it is because they do not differentiate between reality and fiction. The stage proposed by Piaget (1991) regarding the activity of children to animate, makes everything possible in it. For example, the idea that a thunderous sound can be a witch, an image of a pencil is subject to the flight of an airplane, the words of a text can be light and soft as feathers or severe and solid as a rock.

The experience of expanded readings in children leads us to declare that the differentiation that adults make between the sound/visual/textual triad expressed in it depends on their own academic history that demands coherence, systematization, and a fragmentation of the images that, from experience, they know to be lying.



Figure 4. Workshop in collaboration with Vivelab Bogotá and the University of Bogotá, Colombia 2016

Images, on the other hand, generate a movement towards the playful/cognitive in children. The images are pedagogical in the historical sense, and at the same time playful in the a-historical sense of the immediacy of the game where everything possible fits into the animation.

A second project, from ANDAMIO, is the work done with children through the piece *Me encanta Dios*, a poem by the Chiapan poet Jaime Sabines. Although the piece takes the title of the poem, it consists of reading a series of writers of short stories and poems for children.

The piece leads us to think of Expanded Reading as an exercise of imagination generated through the text, and the animation built from the sound and the visuals.

The Expanded Reading aims to begin with a dynamic presentation where children recognize each other, generating empathy among them. Then, some exploration dynamics are used with the voice generating different sounds: loud, soft, continuous, or impulsive screams. The body is set in motion and space is explored.

Thanks to a video system reactive to the sound programmed in Resolume, the children use the sounds, the fruit of their own exploration, to apply different processes to a video in real-time, guided by the person who manages the software.

We continue with a brief activity of reading to bring them closer to the texts, dividing the group into teams, and we work with poetry read simultaneously in different ways for each one: slow, fast, singing, from back to front. Thus, a plot of sound/visual images is generated with the texts with which the children usually feel familiar by connecting their memories and individual and collective memory with the reading. This allows the activity to take on a playful character, turning words into bodies with weight, volume, tone, measure, meaning.



Figure 5. Workshop in collaboration with Vivelab Manizales and Banco de la República in Manizales, Colombia 2016

This Expanded Reading experience with children is technically comparable to the production process described above for the piece *Los días terrestres*. Only it adapted the horizon of possibilities that is wider in children. Poems such as *La Luna* and *Me Encanta Dios* by Jaime Sabines, *Las Palabras* by Pablo Neruda and Otoño by Rolando Rodríguez have been used so far, as well as short stories: *Un azul para Marte* by José Saramago, *La luz es como el agua* by Gabriel García Márquez, and *Pirata de patio Adentro* by Rolando Rodríguez.

CONCLUSIONS

Expanded Reading, as an emerging artistic practice, faces the problem of defining its limits and the content of its forms. The idea of characterizing it, instead of defining it, allows us to recognize the horizon of possibilities it has. But it will be the specific characteristics that correspond to the category that will allow, at the moment of producing it and consuming it as an image, to signify it as such, giving it that sense.

The experience of producing Expanded Reading allows us to recover meanings that are minimally used. The fact that the sound is the principle that generates the idea whereby the text expands towards the visual/textual is a process of exploration that returns us to the primitive, to the playful as an experience of cognitive/significant learning.

Where it goes, and what the current state of such artistic practice is, is uncertain. The technological changes are so immediate that only speculation remains as to whether or not Expanded Reading will be consolidated as part of the art system. And such speculation is contradictory, liquid and gaseous.

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ANDAMIO is a collaborative platform where producers with different training meet, generating projects at a distance. Andamio works within three lines: production, research and education. All are related not only to the union and breakdown of sound in other disciplines but also in the use of different technologies to produce experiences. To see more information about this project: http://andamio.in/.

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ttention à la marche!, issu du congrès de l'Electronic Literature Organization tenu à Montréal en 2018, entend questionner de façon explicite la place de la littérature électronique dans la culture numérique. Quelle est la nature de la relation entre les deux? Comment une forme déjà vieille de cinquante ans parvientelle à rester pertinente dans un environnement culturel fortement marqué par le numérique? Comment une pratique d'avant-garde développée en culture du livre réussit-elle à s'adapter aux principes d'une culture de l'écran? Comment prendre en compte les technologies mobiles, de plus en plus présentes au quotidien, dans leur impact sur les habitudes d'écriture et de lecture, et investiguer la dimension politique du numérique, dans ses liens à l'art, à la littérature et à la culture?

ind the Gap!, the proceedings of the Electronic Literature Organization's conference held in Montreal in 2018, intends to explicitly question the place of electronic literature in a digital culture. What is the nature of the relationship between the two? How does a form that is already fifty years old manage to remain relevant in a cultural environment strongly marked by digital technology? How does an avant-garde practice developed in the context of book culture succeed in adjusting to the principles of a culture heavily engaged in screens, networks and mobile devices? How can we take into account mobile technologies which are increasingly present in everyday life, understand their impact on writing and reading habits, and investigate the political dimension of digital technology, in its links to art, literature and culture?

BERTRAND GERVAIS SOPHIE MARCOTTE

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