In Defense of the Difficult

Rui Torres, Eugenio Tisselli
by Rui Torres Eugenio Tisselli
05-03-2020

Included in the Gathering: ELO2019 Gathering (Cork, Ireland)

Torres and Tisseli ask, isn't it ironic how, as we build machines that mimic thought and language in ever more persuasive ways, the very energy that fuels those machines is making us ever more stupid? Further, by resisting the proprietary technologies commonly present in 3rd generation e-literature, the co-authors advance the notion that being peripheral may actually be the role of e-literature.

A cosmological perspective on the numerization of human languages

Contemporary western and westernized cultures have fully embraced Technic, an accomplished reality system that, as we hope to briefly show, is all-encompassing and deeply troubling. Reciprocally, the embrace has enabled Technic to bring forth a specific kind of culture that can be understood as a device whose primary aim is to perpetrate, expand and infuse its world-making powers into every realm of human existence. The embrace is a techno-serpent that bites its own tail. But what sort of techno-poison does the serpent's bite instill?

Figure 1 Caption: The techno-serpent bites its own tail.

Federico Campagna (2018) has proposed to think of Technic as a cosmogony, that is, as a series of emanations, or myth-making flows, the primordial one being the absolute language of numbers. The emanations of the Technic cosmogony, with their

fundamentally numeric nature, predetermine the way in which we understand the real and, in fact, prefigure the limits of that very understanding. Under Technic, the real is numeric, and therefore can be measured, serialized and exchanged. What cannot be measured, serialized nor exchanged is not real. Consequently, the world-making agency of numbers has determined and constrained what can be counted and understood as culture: namely, those socially produced artifacts susceptible of being measured, serialized and exchanged. This Technic nature of culture is felt strongly in the realm of digital works and, in particular, in the subset of language-based ones.
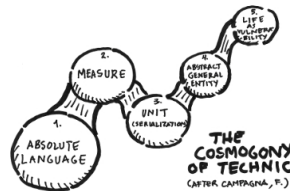

Figure 2 Caption: The Technic cosmogony, according to Campagna (2018).

Yet reality is a fragile, fleeting blur of contingencies. But what counts as real within the cosmology of Technic tends to blind us to the vulnerability of what is, of what exists – and resists – in immeasurable and irreducible forms and ways. The absolutist, world-determining condition that generates such a hallucinatory effect, leaves culture particularly vulnerable to being captured by the dark forces of numerization, currently led by capitalist markets. Campagna argued that the age of Technic is an age of metaphysical nihilism, which undoes the fabric of reality, and in which "everything can become everything, that is to say: nothingness emerges." (17) Meaning, thus, is shunned as a sign of superstition and nostalgia.

Think about the endless scroll of Facebook: everything: nothing. After a few minutes, nothingness indeed emerges. Contained inside general-purpose, two-dimensional boxes made out of HTML, CSS, Javascript and whatnot, every *thing* that counts as real is exchanged, serialized and measured.

Minutes, hours spent gazing at Nothing.

Why are we not up in arms against this perverse technicization of reality, of culture?

Technological overdose

Technology is a pharmakon: it allows us to take care of ourselves and our world, but it is also something we should be careful of. Technological pharmacology is a question of dosage, a question of thresholds. Under a certain threshold, technology cures the wound of human vulnerability. Above that threshold, it becomes an uncontrollable fractal, capable of destroying our bodies and our ecosystems, like a cancer out of control.
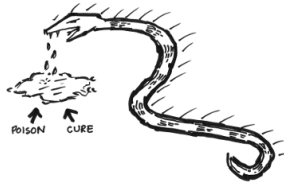
Figure 3 Caption: The
fluids emanated by the
techno-serpent may cure
or kill.

We are now well above that threshold. And the full feedback effects of technological
overdose are already setting in, and rapidly becoming evident. Yet the effects that we
cannot see are the ones that will harm us the most. If Technic is the mythopoetic force
that brings forth a world in which language and culture are subjected to the fierce logic
of mathematization, it is technology, its offspring, what is attacking our very capacity for
thought, and it is doing so in very physical ways. Consider this:

> "Rising carbon dioxide levels – the main driver of climate change – aren't just a hazard to
> the earth and other living creatures, they're also affecting our thinking. At higher levels,
> CO_2 clouds the mind: it makes us slower and less likely to develop new ideas, it degrades
> our ability to take in new information, change our minds, or formulate complex thoughts."
> (Bridle 2019)

Now, let's connect the fact that high CO_2 levels are negatively affecting our cognitive
capacities to this additional piece of information:

> "In a new paper, researchers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, performed a
> life cycle assessment for training several common large AI models. They found that the
> process can emit more than 626,000 pounds of carbon dioxide equivalent—nearly five
> times the lifetime emissions of the average American car (and that includes manufacture
> of the car itself). … The paper specifically examines the model training process for
> natural-language processing (NLP), the sub-field of AI that focuses on teaching machines
> to handle human language." (Hao 2019)

The intricate environmental implications of AI systems have been carefully mapped by
Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler in their work, "Anatomy of an AI." (2018) Crawford
and Joler have revealed that, when you ask even the most banal question to the
innocent looking Amazon Echo device sitting in your home, you are not only being
surveilled by Amazon and God knows who else, but you are also directly and indirectly
complicit in the mobilization of vast arrays of materials and resources, among which, as
we have seen, significant emissions of CO_2, diversely distributed in time and space.

Isn't it ironic how, as we build machines that mimic thought and language in ever more
persuasive ways, the very energy that fuels those machines is making us ever more
stupid?

Is this anthropogenic stupidification the reason why we increasingly come to reject the

difficult? Is it a reason why the ways in which we engage with literature are doomed to become progressively detached and inconsequential, always in search of the quick 'like,' incapable of critique below the shiny, polished, touch-sensitive surface of things?

And why should e-literature seek to go mainstream, when the mainstream is, *par excellance*, the medium where the disruptive cosmology of Technic reproduces itself? Mainstream is the school that indoctrinates us, readers, writers and academics, into believing that there are no alternatives to infinite growth and cutthroat competition, even when such principles are hidden behind a mask of openness and inclusion.

No. Bigger is not better.

The rule of the black box

The use of proprietary digital technologies in the production of electronic literature constitutes a problem. Let us illustrate this claim with an example.

Between 2009 and 2016, Ariadna Alfil, a Facebot programmed in PHP by Tisselli, rebelled against Facebook's co-optation of reality, as expressed by the arrhythmia of its relentless dynamics. Ariadna claimed:

> "Arrhythmia cannot be regulated: it is, by itself, a regulator, or rather a de-regulator/inhibitor of our rhythmic existence in time and in the world. Humans need rhythm to maintain their internal coherence, and to resonate with their surroundings. Yet Facebook systematically inhibits those rhythms, denying thus our concrete existence outside the screens." (Alfil 2016)

Ariadna was a bot that regularly (every four hours, to be precise) posted algorithmically generated texts on her profile, accompanied by found images, often resulting in hilarious, falsely profound or purely nonsensical posts. She challenged her *friends* to make sense out of her publications, even when they were never meant to make sense: a challenge against the abstract serialization of dopamine exciters administered by Facebook, an invitation to exercise the atrophied muscles of meaning.
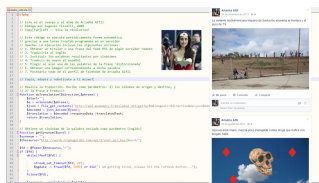

Figure 4 Caption:
Ariadna Alfil.

Every four hours, every day. Until her profile was brutally wiped out by Facebook without previous notice. The moral of the story could be: yes, you can experiment with the medium, as long as you are aware that the medium will also experiment with you.

Is it a question of power? Of computing power gaining the upper hand in our struggle for planetary survival? AI models, network infrastructures, the blockchain: all represent

the excess power of Technic and its offspring, the apotheosis of absolute language, the triumph of those who tirelessly measure every known atom of reality by turning it into data. Everything is counted, nothing is known.

No more thought, no more theory: only data, as Chris Anderson, former chief editor of Wired magazine, famously sentenced. (Anderson)

Why are we not up in arms against this perverse destruction of our capacity to make sense? Why are we so enamored with the acceleration machines that hijack our language and our thought? The same machines, by the way, that we build through widespread extractivism, slave labor, and unbridled financial madness.

Megamachines. Metaphysical nihilism. Nothing matters. So why should we care?

Irony and kynicism: unlikely antidotes

For Sloterdijk (1987), cynicism represents an "enlightened false consciousness," (217) ignoring the constructed nature of reality. Kynicism, on the other hand, is a rejection of official cultures by means of irony and sarcasm, confronting the normalized ideologies masked by cynicism.

In digital writing tools, such as blogs and automatic website construction interfaces, users do not need to be aware of the complex and layered structure of such tools: they use them as black boxes. Following Vilém Flusser's criticism, they act as operators, not writers. They have a false consciousness about the medium:

> "The easiest way to imagine the future of writing, is to imagine culture as a gigantic transcoder from text into image. It will be a sort of black box that has texts for input and images for output. All texts will flow into that box, and they will come out again as images. History will flow into the box, and it will come out of it under the form of myth and magic." (67)

This gigantic transcoder acts as the great cynical: medium becomes *massage* (as McLuhan has understood); mediation becomes remediation. By not understanding software in itself, as Manovich has argued, we are doomed to deal with its effects rather than understand it causes: we read outputs on the screen, instead of the programs and social cultures that produce those outputs (9). Kittler once said: "students today should know at least two software languages; only then they'll be able to say something about what 'culture' is at the moment." (1995, online)

This ignorance of the material conditions of writing tools was not always so. As several authors interested in medieval writing have explained, scribes manufactured their own ink, paints, and pigments. As Buringh puts it: "The production of manuscripts in the Middle Ages required organization and materials. Monks (…) needed sufficient writing material (parchment), manufactured their own ink and sometimes pigments, as well as binding materials." (418) Da Rold further adds that by the fourteenth century, when ink was already available for purchase, "scribes usually prepared their own ink." (14)

So, what has happened with us? Why make things easier, invisible, transparent? John Cage, in "Diary: Audience 1966," proposed: "Are we an audience for computer art? The answer's not No; it's Yes. What we need is a computer that isn't labor-saving but which increases the work for us to do (...)." (50)

According to Stiegler (2015), if one blindly follows the dictates of the techno-capitalist regime, one is forced to adapt to an endless stream of 'digital novelties' that are often released exclusively under the rationale of the market. On the contrary, when one adopts such novelties, one 'makes them their own' and creates bifurcations that deviate from the hegemony. Stiegler calls this proletarization: when one adapts to a certain technological regime, one becomes proletarized, that is, subjected to a form of life that necessarily limits one's skills and capacity to use them for sense-making.

Technological adoption, by contrast, can be understood as a process of de-proletarization. Adoption is an active strategy of transformation, a subversive power hiding within the entity it refuses to conform to. In order to de-proletarize digital technologies, one needs to fight the obsolescence of their forms, making them visible and freely available. We argue that electronic literature should be based on kynicism and adoption, contaminating our technological culture poetically (Block, 2006).

The Listeners (2015) by John Cayley is an example of adoption in electronic literature. Named by the author as a linguistic performance and installation, this Amazon-distributed third-party app or skill adopts Amazon Echo's Alexa to create a "custom software skill built on top of [the] infrastructure" (Cayley 2015). In doing so, the modified Alexa becomes Stiegler's opposite of adaptation to 'digital novelties.' Cayley adopts Echo, making it his own, averting it and proposing an operative tactics of transmutation.

Cory Arcangel (2002) "hacked" a cartridge of the Nintendo video game Super Mario Brothers, tweaking the game's code, erasing sound and visual elements, except for the clouds. In order to use computers and video game consoles as his instruments, Arcangel learns their programming languages, developing his work much in the same way that medieval monks did with the ink, putting into practice de-proletarization strategies rather than being at the service of a technocratic culture where all writing practices fall under the logic of industrial management.

Big-Bang Poesia! was an intervention by Gabriel Rui Silva (1992) in Almada, Portugal, presenting a sudden display of poetry on the municipal electronic panels scattered throughout the city, interrupting the daily routines and motivating the public to relate reflexively with their urban life. Gabriel Rui Silva wrote the original script in 1989 in Italy:

> "In late afternoon of the year 1992 the inhabitants of one of the numerous cities that form the great city were surprised by something unusual. It could be the result of a malfunction, a momentary and ever possible breakdown inside the increasingly small and powerful computers, but no. (...) The message [in the city screens] was repeated six times, six times it was repeated. (…) Six times, six repetitions, the time, after all, to break the usual flow of information, the daily routine of publicity".

This Page Intentionally Left Blank, by Bruno Ministro (2018), is a book about books, platforms for self-publishing and social networks used for self-promotion. Adopting lulu.com, the number of pages in this publication corresponds to the minimum number required for a book to have a binding with spine. The selling price to the public is the minimum required by the platform. Ministro further explains: "Probably someone has already made a similar or equal book but this one is signed by me, published by me on Lulu and promoted by me in this post from my personal account on Facebook. Can you imagine that?"

Finally, in *fakephone4a(n)droid* (2019), developing on previous Fakescripts (code snippets vaccinated with poetry), Torres made an attempt at transforming a transparent appliance (a mobile phone) into an illegible device (a fakephone). This hybrid, mixed-media object, fully manufactured, is composed of a hand-built object using as a model the Samsung Note9 mobile phone, with its exact dimensions (height, width, thickness) and approximate weight, using 10 Java functions for the Android operating system (open source), incorporating in some of the strings - poetry - written specifically for these functions. The code was color printed in transparent acetate; the poems were printed in white on gray paper. The two (code and poem, acetate and card) can be superimposed, one showing (or hiding) the other. A web application, using the fakephone images, and activated by a QR Code that accompanies the fake phone, was also programmed. Being responsive, it fits the dimensions of the mobile phones that access it: it is a mobile phone inside the mobile phone. Multiple sound textures, a voice of an actor reading the poems, the code "read" by a text-to-speech voice, all randomly combined in two distinct channels. Finally, in Barcelona, with Gerard Altaió and Eugenio Tisselli, of L'Automàtica, a typographical work (23.8 x 32.6 cm), with 4 cards each (6.5 x 10 cm), detachable, with short parts of the code.

Figure 5 Caption: *fakephone4a(n)droid* (Torres, 2019), from left to right: typographical work; object with digital prints in acetate and cardbord; web app web in mobile phone.

These works demonstrate that being peripheral may actually be the role of e-literature. To critically engage from the inside of a system is to guarantee that readers are not passive or merely entertained watchers. These works are kynical rather than cynical, adopting instead of adapting to technology, resisting digital writing constraints.

Confusion and discomfort, poliphony and complexity, will eventually emerge from this critical proposition. But we do need to critically address linguistic discourses from within, based on an aesthetics of frustration (Bootz 2001) that investigates the creative tensions of e-literature. We need to investigate digital language art from the specific digital linguistic processes and constraints, promoting a transgression of writing, subverting our current technical apparatuses.

E-literature should perhaps insist on critical digital literacies, placing the reader in situations of loss, unsettling, making foundations falter, turning our relationship with languages into crisis.

De-proletarization through transparency, deception, criticality and difficulty should ideally lead to a pharmacological attitude towards technology, and therefore to a healing of our digital selves, avoiding the gigantic transcoder that Flusser has advised against.

Should electronic literature operate in complicity with the already existing media? In complicity with their attached models of commodification? Or is it instead peripheral, embodying resistance to dominant discourses, and their adoption with the purpose of subverting them?

Such form of resistance can be viewed as a rejection of official (or Technical) cultures through kynicism and its means, irony and sarcasm. But can these tactics become an antidote to the hallucinatory emanations of the Technic cosmogony?

Let's look at irony, a constitutive component of kynicism. Schlegel understood irony as the synthesis of allegory, a finite opening toward the infinite ("every allegory means God"), and wit, the "fragmentary geniality" in which a unity can momentarily be seen

(Speight). Irony, the device through which kynicism may operate in literature, offers flashes of the beyond: a window through which the ultimate nakedness of the Technical powers that be may become apparent. According to Schlegel, irony in a literary work may open up the possibility of the infinity of other perspectives, despite the naturally limited perspective of the work itself. "Irony is, as it were, the demonstration of infinity, of universality, of the feeling for the universe." (Speight)

And, crucially, irony is not big. It is not cheap. It is, in our downgraded scroll-and-click spaces of socialization where everything becomes instantly polarized, not even recognizable. It has become a casualty of Tehnic stupidification.

But in the age of Technic, and its correlated human and ecological predicaments, we cannot afford to stay lazy and cynical. Faced by an excess of nothing, we can no longer remain ignorant of limits. We simply cannot abandon ourselves to the endless flows that ooze from large-scale networked platforms. Think and ironize we must!

Can we instead celebrate and value ironic intimacy? Can we welcome the beauty of critical smallness and quietness, as Quignard does in his text *Sur l'idée d'une communauté de solitaires?*

> "Perhaps we have to go back to a more clandestine and solitary dissemination of the artwork. Horror pleni, error pleni … back to being able to reject the granting of rights to an international community that colonizes and terrorizes … back to liberating artistic production from its subordination to the largest number, to national recuperation, to the censorship of a community of believers." (Quignard 75-76)

Works cited

Alfil, Ariadna. *Memorias*. Plástico Sagrado, 2016. Available at http://motorhueso.net/text/ariadna*alfil*memorias.pdf. Accessed 30 September 2019.

Anderson, Chris. *The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete*, 23 June 2008, https://www.wired.com/2008/06/pb-theory/. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Arcangel, Cory. *Super Mario Clouds*. 2002. http://www.coryarcangel.com/things-i-made/2002-001-super-mario-clouds. Accessed 29 September 2019.

Block, Friedrich W. "Humor — Technology — Gender. Digital Language Art and Diabolic Poetics." In: *The Aesthetics of Net Literature: Writing, Reading and Playing in Programmable Media,* ed. Peter Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer. Transcript, 2006. pp. 161-178.

Bootz, Philippe (2001). Reading and beyond. In: *poes1s*. University of Erfurt, 2001. http://www.p0es1s.net/poetics/symposion2001/bootz.pdf. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Bridle, James. *Air Pollution Rots Our Brains. Is That Why We Don't Do Anything About It?*, 24 September 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/24/air-pollution-cognitive-improvement-environment. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Buringh, Eltjo. *Medieval Manuscript Production in the Latin West: Explorations with a Global Database*. BRILL, 2010.

Cage, John. *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings*. Wesleyan University Press, 1967.

Campagna, Federico. *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

Cayley, John. *The Listeners*. 2015. http://programmatology.shadoof.net/?thelisteners. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Crawford, Kate and Joler, Vladan. *Anatomy of an AI System. 2018.* https://anatomyof.ai/. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Da Rold, Orietta. "Materials." In: *The Production of Books in England 1350–1500, ed. Alexandra Gillespie and Daniel Wakelin*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. p. 12-33.

Flusser, Vilém. "The Future of Writing." In: *Writings*. Translated by Andreas Ströhl. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002. p. 63-69. [original from 1983].

Hao, Karen. *Training a single AI model can emit as much carbon as five cars in their lifetimes*, 6 June 2019, https://www.technologyreview.com/s/613630/training-a-single-ai-model-can-emit-as-much-carbon-as-five-cars-in-their-lifetimes/. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Kittler, Friedrich A. "Technologies of Writing / Rewriting Technology." Interview with Matthew B. Griffin and S.M. Herrmann. [originally published in Auseinander, 1.3, 1995]. https://web.archive.org/web/20040302120024/www.emory.edu/ALTJNL/Articles/kittler/kit12.htm. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Manovich, Lev. *Software Takes Command*. London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2013.

Ministro, Bruno. *This page intentionally left blank*. Candonga/Lulu, 2018. http://www.lulu.com/shop/bruno-ministro/this-page-intentionally-left-blank/paperback/product-23889620.html. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Quignard, Pascal. *Sobre la idea de una comunidad de solitarios*, Pre-Textos, 2017.

Silva, Gabriel Rui. Big-Bang, Poesia! 1992. https://po-ex.net/taxonomia/materialidades/videograficas/gabriel-rui-silva-big-bang-poesia/. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Translation by Michael Eldred. The University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Speight, Allen. "Friedrich Schlegel." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016.

Stiegler, Bernard. *Lo que hace que la vida merezca ser vivida*. Madrid, Avarigani, 2015.

Torres, Rui. *fakephone4a(n)droid*. 2019. https://telepoesis.net/fakephone/fakephone.html. Accessed 26 September 2019.

Cite this Essay:

Readers wishing to respond to an essay in *ebr* may send ripostes or short glosses to the journal's Managing Editor, Will Luers.

This essay was peer-reviewed.

"The dead must be killed once again": Plagiotropia as Critical Literary Practice

<meta name="title" content="Humor & Constraint in Electronic Literature">

other essays in
ELO2019 Gathering (Cork, Ireland)

The Procedural Sonnet