Escrituras digitales-Autómatas literarios, Laboratorio de publicaciones digitales y sistemas interactivos del Centro Multimedia, Centro Nacional de las Artes, Mexico City, December 4, 2025.

ELECTRONIC POETRY: RESISTING THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM

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BEFORE

In a lecture given at Oxford in 2014, British writer Will Self said that the advent of digital media not only questioned the format of the book but the very mentality associated with the logic of the printing press, what is known as the "Gutenberg mind."

Gutenberg's printing press laid the foundations on which Western culture would be built. This medium, revolutionary in its time, did not merely distribute information but shaped the form of our cognition. By standardizing text, privileging sequential linearity, and converting writing into an object—the book object—the printing press established a mental "operating system" based on logic, individual authorship, and the stability of knowledge. The advent of digital writing tools dismantled the foundations of Gutenbergian heritage. From its possibilities of hypertextuality, open texts, and multimedia texts, new grammars appeared and the very concept of literature changed.

When I began writing on the Internet in the early 1990s, electronic literature presented itself as a marvelous possibility to deterritorialize the printed book, to escape from the pages, to push the experiments of the avant-gardes to unthinkable limits: moving letters, words, venturing into the non-linear, the hypertextual, verbivocovisuality, the practice of collective texts. In addition to being a medium full of possibilities, it also had something of utopia and initiation, since at that time it was like having a secret shared by a few. That cyberspace had a heterotopic quality. It was a "public" space not yet colonized by the "spectacle," to use a term from Guy Debord. In those years, with Web 1.0, there was a DIY way of working. Websites were created, published, and maintained by the writers and artists themselves. Issues of copyright, security, or privacy were not even raised.

Many of the first Internet activists were influenced by the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, people like Stewart Brand, who said—though it seems he didn't say it exactly that way—that "Information Wants To Be Free," or John Perry Barlow, lyricist for Grateful Dead, who wrote the manifesto "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." For these people, technology was liberating and not oppressive. The network was conceived as a space where one could be free in contrast to the real world, where one could not be. Cyberspace was a horizontal place where there were no hierarchical structures and collaboration, sharing, decentralization, and the absence of borders prevailed. There, the always silent voices could find their

audiences and people could connect regardless of the physical distance that separated them. And the most surprising thing was, moreover, that the new technologies were available to the user. Anyone could buy a computer for a fairly low price; anyone could make a website.

In his manifesto, dated February 1996, Barlow warned politicians that "the global social space we are building will be naturally independent of the tyranny you seek to impose on us" and said things like these:

> *"Governments of the Industrial World, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.*
>
> *I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you are seeking to impose on us. Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.*
> *We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere, may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.*
> *In our world, whatever the human mind may create can be reproduced and distributed infinitely at no cost."*

AFTER

It has been 30 years since Barlow wrote his manifesto and since I began writing digital poetry. The utopia of a predominantly progressive network art lasted, at most, until the year 2000. Then the rules of the game changed, and today cyberspace is completely colonized by hegemonic discourses and the infinite reproduction of dominant stereotypes.

In the 1960s and 1970s, in the field of culture, a series of countercultural currents had been registered that, influenced largely by the New Left and anarchism, sought to challenge the status quo and promote social change. In the field of art, groups such as the Situationist International, Fluxus, and many other independent proposals pursued to escape the systems of industry, the market, and institutions. In the early 1990s, the appearance of the Internet and the dissemination of self-managed and horizontal digital networks seemed to have dealt the final blow to cultural capitalism.

But in the late 1990s, as was to be expected, came the counterattack of corporate powers. In 1998 Google launched its famous PageRank, the algorithm created by Larry Page that forever changed the functioning of search engines. The relevance of pages became determined from then on by their greater popularity, determined by likes and link architecture. Google began to profit from the accumulation of search data to transform them into consumption patterns. This was how corporate algorithms ended the horizontality of the network. Moreover, around that time, software companies were already imposing proprietary applications, predesigned patterns, and professional programming tools that ended the self-managed way controlled by the creators themselves that had existed until then.

Today's cyberspace is flooded with the products of neoliberal cultural industries where art and poetry are just another commodity. These are standardized products that normalize the existing order instead of questioning it, that reproduce its ideas and perpetuate them. The same old bourgeois establishment resurges now as a monster empowered by a new technology of which it has taken ownership.

The extreme codification of cultural production today makes it difficult to conceive alternatives to the market-oriented model. Since the 1990s, corporate-driven literature—which remains Gutenbergian despite everything that has been written in these last thirty years about literary theory and new media—is intrinsically linked to performance based on sales algorithms and digital capitalism metrics. Traditional publishing structures have yielded to this logic, proving incapable of addressing themes outside these commercial frameworks. Predictive algorithms and Big Data condition literary production and consumption and determine which manuscripts get published. Corporate publishing houses require their contracted authors to adhere to formulas previously validated by commercial success, discarding aesthetic innovation or forms of social engagement adverse to the system. Furthermore, writers are forced to maintain constant visibility on networks to preserve their commercial relevance. Their online presence does not consist of creating literary work but of self-promotion to sell books. This generates an irreconcilable tension between market demands and the creative capacity or social criticism that literature traditionally claimed for itself.

ZOMBIES

The Haitian figure of the dead controlled by witchcraft as a form of slavery came to infect the Western imagination, giving rise to all kinds of books and films. But moreover, it became a source of multiple metaphors.

Although Karl Marx, for whom the concept was still alien, used the metaphor of the vampire to describe capital as "dead labor that sucks the blood of living labor," it is easy to imagine that had he lived in the twentieth century he would have employed the image of the zombie. This today embodies slavery under capitalism, but no longer as the alienated and exploited proletarian horde of Marxism but as the horde of hypnotized consumers, controlled not by a voodoo sorcerer but by their own consumption habits, unable to distinguish their real identity from the digital one.

From another context, in 1969 Marshall McLuhan also spoke of zombies. He referred to the "zombie attitude of the technological idiot." This technological idiot zombie was, according to him, a person in a passive state who did not perceive that the impact of a technology on their consciousness was more significant still than its content.

In yet another context, during the Occupy Wall Street movement, activists dressed as zombies to protest corporate voracity. They used this figure to expose the soullessness in the pursuit of money, representing a body governed not by the urge to eat brains —the only thing zombies care about is eating brains—but by an insatiable capitalist greed.

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han points out how, under digital capitalism, we are no longer exploited by an external entity but exploit ourselves. We are consumerist zombies addicted to a relentless routine of self-promotion —"I instagram therefore I am"— where identities are converted into products for public consumption. This

addiction to the smartphone and compulsive profile updating is a new metaphor for the living dead.

In the context of this cultural apocalypse, cyberspace is flooded with zombie art and poetry: domesticated, conformist, bourgeois, amateur, trivialized, prioritized for consumption. It is here that electronic literature presents itself as an act of aesthetic and political resistance, as a way to keep the soul alive in a zombie cyberspace.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE

Electronic poetry resists the logic of corporate literature through the creation of new forms of expression that exceed the constraints of the market and market-oriented literature. It employs strategies that simultaneously depend on and subvert the logic of the platforms it uses. Although embedded within their structures, it escapes the forms of capitalist control by evading commercial codification, offering alternative modes of production, distribution, and consumption, and making traditional notions of copyright meaningless given that its distribution is open. Its relationship with the reader is not based on sales but on the search for a shared and interactive experience.

Electronic poetry operates simultaneously within and against capitalist platforms, establishing spaces of resistance where new literary forms and new political forms of expression develop. In this sense, they are framed within a tradition of artistic practices that, throughout the twentieth century, sought to "hack" hegemonic media to divert their logics of power. The Italian Futurists, with their radio dramas and their manifesto *La Radia*, conceived radio not as a mere broadcasting device but as an instrument to create a new art. In the late 1950s, pointing out the way mass media converted life into a series of consumable images through their hypnotic effects, Situationism applied strategies such as *détournement*, appropriating their messages to give them a new critical meaning and expose their ideology. Around the same time, mail art began to use the postal service—a global and bureaucratic network—to weave a decentralized network of creative, collaborative, and anti-institutional exchange, demonstrating that corporate-state infrastructure could be subverted to build artistic community. In 1970, William Burroughs proposed using his cut-up technique—in texts, audio, and visuals—to intervene in mass media messages and cut the control lines of their discourses. Also in those years, video art emerged conceived as a kind of guerrilla television opposed to corporate television. In the 1990s, different proposals of cultural jamming sought to create "semantic shocks" to criticize commercial culture. These "cultural interferences" encompassed all "those radical, nonviolent, group or individual efforts that sought to derail cultural patterns perceived as negative, manipulative, harmful, and violating the interests attributed to a society." (1)

Similarly, in the twenty-first century, electronic literature intervenes in corporate platforms to create collaborative works; to build spaces of freedom, criticism, and non-alienated creation on "enemy territory."

Of course, poetry and art that are not market-driven will be displaced, along with all non-normative messages, to the extremes of the Gaussian bell curve of corporate algorithms, substantially diminishing their visibility. What remains then is to resist from the extremes, emphasize our unquantifiable singularity, and above all, not

forget that we are operating on hostile terrain designed and engineered for the reproduction of capital.

We must become aware that we are involved in a cultural war. We must write our own algorithms, challenge the rhetoric of the hegemonic, resist the capital model. Perhaps it would be convenient to recall here the three principles of the hacker ethic according to Pekka Himanen: "Activity should be motivated by the desire to create something valuable and not by money," "we should cultivate an open model in which one gives their creation so others can use it," "we should adhere to a network ethic based on freedom of expression." (2)

We could also remember that the work of hackers is not oppositional in the traditional sense of the term. As McKenzie Wark said: "Within protocological networks, political acts generally do not occur by displacing power from one place to another, but by exploiting the power differences already existing in the system." It is not about confronting the state of things with the intention of "overthrowing" them but of impregnating them with new forms of existence, "sowing the seeds of an alternative practice of everyday life." (3) The work of the writer in networks is then to change the logic of the corporate algorithm for the logic of the work.

But for that, we must first begin by confronting the zombies we carry within ourselves and recognizing the ways in which we are complicit in our own zombification. We must reject the cult of personality and self-selling strategies by dedicating that energy to producing different messages.

Immersed in this zombie mass of hegemonic discourses where triviality, repetition, stereotypes, and simplification prevail, how do we become minoritarian, singular, deterritorialized, clandestine? As we poets have always done: seeking new lines of flight, new spaces of resistance online, offline, or wherever.

(1) The Centre for Culture-Jamming Studies was an online initiative active in the 1990s. http://www.culturejamming.homestead.com

(2) Pekka Himanen (2001), *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the New Economy*, New York, Random House

(3) McKenzie Wark (2004), *A Hacker Manifesto*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press