

Guest Editor's Introduction

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Experimental Narratives: From the Novel to Digital Storytelling

Introduction

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This special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Critical Studies* gathers a selection of contributions first presented at the international conference *Experimental Narratives: From the Novel to Digital Storytelling*, sponsored by the MHRA and co-organised by Jordana Blejmar, Godela Weiss-Sussex, Sam Merrill and myself. Held on 26 and 27 February 2015 at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London, the conference revolved around the topic of ‘narrative experimentalism’ across languages, including avant-garde and postmodern experiments with the novel form, graphic novels, electronic hypertext fiction, game literature, collaborative narratives, fan fiction and transmedia **storytelling**. By exploring the wide variety of narrative experiments in a comparative perspective across languages, the event aimed to investigate how the concept of ‘narrative experimentalism’ has evolved from printed fiction to digital storytelling in different cultural contexts. In particular, the comparative approach was used to understand how the notions of narrative, textuality, authors’ and readers have metamorphosed in the shift from print to digital; at the same time, it served to examine how contemporary digital writers/artists have dialogued with their national literary traditions and cultural backgrounds. The five articles included in this special issue offer a fresh perspective on various aspects of experimental literature and digital narratives, including Ronald Sukenick and Mark Amerika’s performative theory of writing, the literary heritage of digital works in the Hispanic world, the interplay between experimental writing and popular culture in digital textuality, Twitter fiction, and narratives of self-representation through the users’ selfies.

FROM EXPERIMENTAL LITERATURE TO EXPERIMENTAL NARRATIVES

By emphasizing the interconnection and interchangeability between the modifier *experimental* and the concepts of *avant-garde* and *innovative*, the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012). argues for constructing a ‘tradition of the new’ across XX and XXI century literary experimentation, thus acknowledging the persistence of a particular past in the present. This perspective has proved to be particularly effective to look at the development of experimental literature from the modern-era experimentalism and historical avant-gardes to the impact of the digital age on experimentation across media, including Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, Existentialism and Absurdism, the poetic experimentation of the New York School and the Beats, *nouveau roman*, meta- and sur-fiction, Lettrism, Situationism, Avant-Pop, post-postmodernism, altermodernism, innovation across genres, various poetic forms of experimentation such as concrete and hoax poetry, experimentation with form and design such as graphic novels, multimodal fiction, printed interactive fiction, and, finally, digital fiction, code poetry, new media and computer games. Many features of recent literary experimentalism are indeed prefigured by the historical avant-gardes such as Italian and Russian Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Expressionism, down to Existentialism and Absurdism: ‘for better or worse, the life of the historical avant-gardes seem to have been incorporated into the very DNA of the experimental literature that has come after them’ (p. 5).

Like the *Companion*, this special issue examines the historical development of ‘narrative experimentalism’ in artists and movements that span from postmodernism to the digital age. Unlike the *Companion*, however, we have preferred to use the umbrella term of ‘experimental narratives’ rather than ‘experimental literature’. First, using the concept of

‘experimental literature’ for digital fiction implies in fact a literature-centred critical approach based on traditional printed texts that various critics of digital narratology, including some of the contributors of this issue such as Marie-Laure Ryan, Claire Taylor and Brownen Thomas, have questioned. They seem to generally agree on the fact that the comparison between language-based literary fiction and new forms of storytelling works only to some extent.

. Second, since the publication of the *Companion* in 2012, narrative experimentalism in digital media has extended to forms that barely present any trace of traditional literary formats – think of Twitter fiction, for example.

In the last three-four decades new technologies have in fact radically changed our narrative production and reception, transforming texts into fluid, multimodal, multisensorial and interactive narrative practices. In the early 1990s the advent of the hypertext introduced ‘a new metaphor for the representation of text’, that of ‘a hierarchy or an arborescence of textual nodes linked together’,¹ offering the opportunity to tell stories and compose poetry as ‘layered, linked, unbounded, non-sequential computer assisted ‘documents’ (or electronic networks).² Notable examples of early North American hyperfiction include Michael Joyce’s *afternoon* (1987), Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden* (1991), and Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995). A few years later, thanks to the development of software such as Adobe’s Flash, multimodality became prominent in storytelling, encouraging what Katherine Hayles defined as a second wave of digital fiction.³ Its increasingly central role in storytelling encouraged a new wave of critics to analyse these new textualities and canonize them.⁴ At the same time, the rise of the Internet and the web 2.0 technologies have introduced a third wave of ‘new narratives’ that, using the multiple creative opportunities of social media and social networks, has developed an even higher level of hybridity in storytelling, mingling modes and genres in unprecedented ways.⁵ Texts became even more visual, incorporating not only icons and illustrations, but also animations and graphics. Moreover, in collaborative media⁶

virtually anybody with access to a networked computer can become author of a story, using blogging and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Flickr. In such environments, our understanding of interactivity cannot be limited to the reader-text interaction, but it should take into consideration the more and more influential reader to reader interaction.⁷

From the hypertext to the new genres such as blogging, Twitter fiction, gameplay literature and digital poetry, the notion of 'text' has undergone through multiple metamorphoses that often fall within the unmapped territory between disciplines. What is a 'text' today, after the so-called 'medial turn'? And, is the concept of 'text' still appropriate to define how we weave (from Latin *texere*) our narratives in participatory environments where artistic media converge? These are often 'hybrid narratives' that result from 'a combinatory juxtaposition of genres, media, styles and surfaces'.⁸ Ultimately, going back to our original question of whether experimental language-based literature can still be considered as the term of comparison for these narrative experiments, what emerged in recent critical texts is that it can be more productive to focus on analogy rather than identity between experimental literature and new narrative experiments, as Marie-Laure Ryan and Marina Grishakova suggested.⁹

The study of these hybrid narrative practices goes, in fact, well beyond traditional narratology and it involves the entire culture of the media (literature, paintings, film, music, digital art, photography, installations, comic books, and more), therefore falling within that 'ever-expanding and heterogeneous field of 'intermediality' that 'comprises both the links (and cross-breeds) between various art forms, and the various disciplines with which we talk about these media' (p. 8). While early studies in hypertextuality rather focused on the intersection with print literature, today digital narratology tries to push the discipline beyond its classical boundaries.¹⁰ As Ryan and Grishakova underline, this has not only directed

attention to what has come to be known as ‘new media’, it has also, just as importantly, led to a reassessment of the configuring impact of older media for thought, narrative and the processing of information (a processing which would be called ‘reading’ in an approach that privileges written language).

Such attention and reassessment can also be defined, as digital scholar Katherine Hayles did as a ‘media-specific analysis’ of texts (p. 28); in other words, an analysis that takes into account the ‘materiality of the medium’ and how this has an impact on the way we produce and perceive stories. At the same time, it is interesting to see how ‘media effects’ – i.e. our culture’s technological unconscious – are ‘narrativized or how they can be seen to condition conscious awareness as a ‘reading effect’.¹¹ Whether future critics are expected to acknowledge, as Joseph Tabbi suggests, ‘the implications of a self-conscious, networked aesthetic for the practice of critical writing’ (p. 317) is also something that needs further exploration.

By focusing on a variety of narrative experiments, the articles of this issue aim to reassess the literary-critical categories of ‘fiction’ (including performances and new digital genres), ‘interactivity’ (including, not only as reader-text interaction, but also reader-reader interaction), and ‘narratology’ (including new disciplinary approaches such as the study of narratives situated in social contexts), by showing, at the same time, interconnections with pre-digital narrative experiments. The first article, Lucia Esposito’s ‘The Experiment of Experience: Ronald Sukenick and Mark Amerika’s Performative Theory of Writing’, discusses the notion and practice of performative self-reflexivity or self-reflexive performativity in two writers who have placed the meta- and criti-fictional approach at the centre of their creative activities. As Esposito convincingly demonstrates, both Sukenick and Amerika, on a line of continuity, seem to conceive the continuous *de-* and *re-*structuring process of writing as a survival strategy; a process that, we could say more confidently today,

bears many similarities with a certain idea associated with the utopia of hypertextuality. The interconnections between digital fiction and pre-digital narrative experiments, especially in relation to the national literary heritage, are explored in Claire Taylor's 'From the Baroque to Twitter: Tracing the Literary Heritage of Digital Genres'. Viewing digital literature as works on a continuum, the article addresses in particular the ways in which authors of digital works in the Hispanic world speak back to rich tradition of literary experimentation which goes well beyond the Anglophone. The article takes as examples the hypermedia *novela negra* of Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez, the blog aphorisms of Eduardo Navas, and the electronic poetry of Belén Gache, and traces their response to prior literary experimentation, and to contemporary digital technologies. How digital narrative is coming to terms with its 'split condition', namely the fact it has predominantly addressed either a highly specialized readership or popular culture, is the topic of the third article by Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Digital Narrative: Negotiating a Path Between Experimental Writing and Popular Culture'. By analysing different genres that fall into either one category or the other, Ryan argues for the need, in digital narrative, to negotiate a path between the two types of audiences/readership/users. In the fourth article of the issue, 'Tales from the Timeline: Experiments with Narrative on Twitter', Bronwen Thomas discusses the relatively new genre of Twitter fiction and how this creates new challenges and opportunities for storytellers. Whether this narrative form can be considered truly 'revolutionary' and experimental is the leading question of this article. By taking a bottom-up approach to the analysis of Twitterfiction, Thomas outlines some of the key affordances of Twitter, examines the state of the art, and discusses the varieties and genres of Twitterfiction that have emerged to date. Finally, in the last article, 'Reading the Self in Selfies', Hannah Westley takes into consideration the development of narratives of the self from textual forms of representation (blogs or websites) towards the purely visual languages of Instagram, Flickr, Tumblr, Snapchat and Pinterest. Westley explores what this

means in terms of identity formation, whether it is indicative of a return to a specular coherent sense of the self, or rather to a splintered and dispersed sense of self. Ultimately, as this final article demonstrates, the guiding principle of ‘experimentalism’ proves to be just a pretext to trace a history of narrative forms that have questioned the nature of the verbal art itself, giving priority to the performative, transformative and mobile aspects of storytelling, rather than the canonical.

¹ Christian Vandendorpe, ‘Reading on Screen: The New Media Sphere’, in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, edited by Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 209.

² Kersti Krug and Patricia Piller, ‘Sex, Lies and Hypertext – Two Feminists’s Review of Landow’s Hyper/Text/Theory’ in *Organization*, 2: 3-4 (August 1995), 576-586.

³ Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002). Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the essay.

⁴ See, for example, Astrid Ensslin, *Canonising Hypertext: Explorations and Constructions* (London: Continuum, 2007) and *Analysing Digital Fiction*, edited by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Rustad (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁵ Bronwen Thomas and Ruth Page, *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New

⁷ *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*, edited by Ruth Page (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁸ *Travels in Intermediality. Reblurring the Boundaries*, edited by Bernd Herzogenrath, (Dartmouth College Press, 2012), p. 8.

⁹ Marie-Laure Ryan and Marina Grishakova, *Intermediality and Storytelling* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

¹⁰ Bronwen Thomas, *Narrative: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 351.

¹¹ Joseph Tabbi, ‘The medial turn’, *Pynchon Notes*, 42-43 (Spring Fall 1998), 317-327.