Regarding Digital Literature as a Discourse out of Nucleus
Laura Sánchez Gómez, Complutense University of Madrid

Bouchardon, Serge. (2014). *La valeur heuristique de la littérature numérique*. (340 p.). Paris: Hermann. ISBN: 978-2-7056-8802-8

Portela, Manuel. (2013). *Scripting Reading Motions: The Codex and the Computer as Self-Reflexive Machines*. (491 p.). Massachusetts: MIT Press. ISBN: 978-0262019460

Keywords: comparative media studies, digital literature, global culture

This review analyses two of the most important contributions in the present context of digital theory from a comparative approach. These works formulate two alternative approaches to digital literature in which differences emerge. They stem from different traditions, perspectives and literary careers. Manuel Portela comes from Portugal and Serge Bouchardon is French. Both are teachers and researchers as well as authors of electronic literature. Nevertheless, they both know how to read and assimilate their own heritage (Bouchardon comes from the French school, whose main representative is Jean-Pierre Balpe, and Portela from the Portuguese school, whose main representative is Pedro Barbosa) and, subsequently, place their analyses besides those coming from "anglo" traditions. Therefore, they maintain their differential viewpoints and place them in a

global context. This essay will compare the structures and resources of these approaches in order to build a discourse out of nucleus, which helps to nourish and complete dissimilar perspectives. The two volumes are already mature investigations that materialise the last years of works and readings. The digital knowledge of both authors has integrated theory and practice to perfection. Furthermore, that influence is an essential point that affects their perspective, so much so, that Bouchardon defends the digital creative research as the one in which authors create experiences and not just serve themselves from observation: "From my part, the creative research solution's lies in the creation of experiences" (33, my translation). Thus, this way he takes advantage of other theoretical initiatives that combines theory and practice in the European electronic literature field, with examples such as Philippe Bootz, Rui Torres and Alexandra Saemmer.

According to Portela, traditions like concrete and visual poetry, or Oulipian approaches to language and form, have contributed to anticipate the kind of concerns that will be central in digital literature studies. Portela's tradition includes Brazilian and Portuguese visual and concrete poetry authors, such as Augusto de Campos, E. M de Melo e Castro, Pedro Barbosa, Eduardo Kac, and Rui Torres among others. In this sense, Portela's review of digital theory and practice is more open and fluid than Bouchardon's, connecting authors and essays all over the globe to argue and support his theoretical ideas. In contrast, Bouchardon builds an organised assessment of the French school of thought by dedicating a chapter to analyse the filiations and history of digital literature in France. He begins in Letrism (Isidore Isou), concrete and visual poetry (Mallarmé, Apollinaire) and then goes to the text generation (Jean Pierre Balpe), animated poetry (Philippe Bootz) and hypertext theory (Jean Clément). The two authors are able to maintain a global vision but defending and placing their thesis as local results. This is possible due to the focus, which is not in the origins but in the commonalities, which arise from being part of a global digital culture. This change highlights

the sense of a digital critical community instead of national literary discourses based on geographical determinisms. As Bouchardon asks himself, we wonder whether digital literature corresponds to an international field having its own coherency, or whether it corresponds to an aggregation of cultural specificities. The new possibilities given by the Internet come to substitute cartographical nation concepts for data stream spaces of exchange, modifying rituals of readings, formulas of production, narratives and poetics forms.

Therefore, what the two books have in common is not just the "object" of study but also the way of looking to digital literature as a complex process. What Portela does in *Scripting Reading Motions: The Codex and the Computer as Self-Reflexive Machines*, is to read both, the codex and the digital object, through the code, establishing reading and vision concepts as the main topics throughout all the discourse. He develops a "Comparative Media Studies" as a theoretical point of view alongside Reading Studies, Digital Literary Studies, Software studies, Digital Humanities, Electronic Editing and Book Studies (74). From this perspective, he first analyses the semiotic operations at work when the text becomes an object or when it approaches this state. Secondly he analyses the digital textuality as reflexive operations revealing its executable and readable forms that depend on the code and the interface of manipulation. Lastly, he analyses the dialogue between codex and electronic forms through remediation and intermediation. For this purpose, the author provides the theoretical roots for the study of self-referential enactments of reading in the first chapter of his book. This chapter is followed by six more chapters that penetrate in the analysis of the dynamics of reading and writing as self-reflexive processes, combining codex (Johana Druker's prints artist books, e.g., *From A to Z* 1977, in ch. 2; or Mark Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* 2006, in ch. 5) with electronic works founded in motion, generation, or media translations (from authors like Philippe Bootz, Serge Bouchardon, Jason Nelson, and Rui Torres, among others).

In a different way, Bouchardon reviews in his book *La valeur heuris-tique de la littérature numérique*, the theoretical approaches up until to-day, trying to define the object of digital literature and to reconsider some important aspects of it, such as the textuality, the materiality, or the preservation problem (obsolescence). Bouchardon provides the theo-retical approaches with a criticism of the "théorie de la convergence" by arguing that this theory's abstract focus prevents a close analysis of works (17). He proposes a theoretical tetrahedron through which to articulate technical, semiotic, social and aesthetic approaches, which serve as a starting point for his study. Bouchardon considers digital literature as a frontier object, between digital and digitalised artifact, literature and art, dispositive and surface, and international and national as mentioned ear-lier. These frontiers or frictions are viewed as laboratories of investigation instead of chaotic situations, putting particular emphasis on the practical character of electronic literature. With this in mind, he defends the heu-ristic value of digital literature as a field of experimentation placing spe-cial attention in digital literature as a didactic tool. According to that, he presents his project PRECIP, which focuses on teaching digital literature and conceiving it as a learning object. Bouchardon defends digital litera-ture as a "*révélateur*" of digital writing (255), enabling a technological sensitisation, an informational culture sensitisation and a semiotic, aes-thetic and social sensitisation.

In different ways, because Portela's focus is on reading processes and Bouchardon's on practical experimentation, we could say that both of them have a similar close attention to concepts as performativity in elec-tronic literature, materiality and multimediality, which have been widely discussed in the digital critical community. Therefore, they defend elec-tronic literature as a process and not as a result. In line with Katherine Hayles, they consider digital literature a process rather than an object and they refer to the time of performance rather than the time of production. For this reason Bouchardon talks about textuality but not about text and Portela talks about the performativity dimension of reading code. Both

works tackles the electronic literature from an obligatory material nature, leaving behind perspectives like the ones from Landow or Bolter which considered electronic literature immaterial. Their contributions about materiality discussions are also explicit. Bouchardon talks about a conception of materiality derived from manipulation to the extent that not just the support, but also the content, is calculable. That means a double materiality nature or a double manipulation highlights the processes that occur between the author and the machine, and the processes that occur between the reader/user and the machine. To Portela, materiality is inherent to code, precisely because code becomes the source for this material operation, either in books or in electronic devices. Concerning the concept of electronic literature as a multimediality form, they have similar perspectives, considering digital medium as an integrative device. Bouchardon talks about the intersemiotization process as the one in which the different media that coexist create new signs and significances through their own relationship. Portela adds, about Jim Andrews's works, that "new conditions for the reintegration of optical, acoustic, and written data [...] originates hybrids forms in which it is possible to recognize the simultaneous presence of cinematic techniques and literary techniques" (302).

In summary, Portela is focused on textuality and the reading processes beyond the mere contrast between print space and pixel space, establishing the complexities of reading across media. Bouchardon's aim is scholarly and professional attention to the code as a didactic tool that liberates the practical value of experience. He places digital literature between communication, epistemological and pedagogical issues, and he considers it as a particularly fruitful object because it connects the scientific and the critical questions. Both Bouchardon and Portela search the semiotic and interpretative actions through which readers produce meaning or sense when interacting with codes.

These works focus on the basis of an analysis of production cases and literary reading in paper or electronic support. They serve well as useful

contemporary studies that provides answers on what is currently happening in the experimental creative field as much to the traditional as to the digital literary work. Moreover, they provide responses to the academic world of teaching and research. The overall impression is that movements between paper and screen are resources used to test our understanding of the reflexive functionalities of code that illuminates performative acts of reading. Also, paper-to-screen or screen-to-paper movements, as the ones described by Portela (translations between medias) or the ones referred by Bouchardon (movements from paper to screen looking to conquer the didactic place traditionally occupied by paper) serve to understand cultural and academic paradigms.

Laura Sánchez Gómez is a PhD candidate in Literary Studies at Complutense University of Madrid. She is member of LEETHI (European and Spanish Literatures from Texts to Hypermedia), an interdisciplinary Research Group located in UCM. Her research interest concerns mainly the relation between digital literature and digital arts.
Contact: laurasanchezgomez@ucm.es