

Close Reading of Stephanie Strickland, Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo and Paul Ryan's *slippingglimpse*

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1. Close Reading of Electronic Poems Applying Hermeneutics, Semiotics and Affect Theory

In a close reading we have to discover how a literary text works; it consists of a reading process followed by a literary analysis. The ways that I find more appropriate to analyze electronic literary works are using hermeneutics to interpret the text and semiotics, in order to examine the use of signs. Furthermore, as poetry is inseparable from emotion the close reading of the electronic poem *slippingglimpse* is also going to be analyzed applying affect theory.

Reflecting on how signs are used and how emotions are transmitted in poetry, we realize about the complexity of electronic poetry in which the stimuli come from various media and the possible imaginary perceptions of the *wreaders* – a term coined by George Landow to specify the interaction of readers who become writers in electronic literature—are combined with the already given images or videos of the e-poem. Reading is a whole body activity, the body receives information that can be deciphered by the brain, and at the same time the reader can get goose bumps and shivering and even feel the heart beating calmer or faster than usual. Reading poetry means decoding words and finding possible meanings and interpretations. Electronic poetry demands the *wreaders* cooperation by interacting in the reading process. According to Katherine Hayles the reading experiences become more complex due to its multimodal nature:

In digital media, reading partakes irreducibly of synaesthesia, as sound, vision, haptic responses, kinaesthesia and proprioception work together to create complex sensory/cognitive experiences. Moreover, these experiences occur through the mediation of intelligent machines, resulting in the further in-mixing of human and non-human cognitions. (Hayles 16)

Not only the reading becomes more difficult in electronic literature than in printed due to nonlinearity, interactivity and the fact that the text sometimes disappears before the reader has had enough time to read it – as it happens in *Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales* (2006) by Edward Falco, in Rui Torres' *Poemas no meio do caminho* (2009) and, as we are going to study in Stephanie Strickland's *slippingglimpse*- but also hermeneutics becomes more difficult because the theories and publications on how to analyse electronic literature are not as numerous as in printed literature and the researcher has few references to support the interpretative results and create new interpretations, which is more challenging than working in more traditional research areas, but it is more innovative and creative at the same time. As Katherine Hayles (2008) states, the multimodality of digital art works challenges writers, users, and critics to bring together diverse expertise and interpretive traditions to understand fully the aesthetic strategies and possibilities of electronic literature.

Hermeneutics is present in the study of digital literature because computation uses signs “which are both human-readable and machine-executable” (Alberto Romele, Marta Severo and Paolo Furia 4). Humans tend to be textualized, to interpret and “in the field of digital hermeneutics, traced and datafied” (12). In a hermeneutic approach to the digital, the researcher works on the philosophical part of electronic literature. Alberto Romele introduced the concept of *emagination*, arguing that human schematizations are externalized into technologies, and that human imagination has its analog in the digital dynamics of articulation between databases and algorithms.

Semiotics is a quite accurate method to analyse electronic literary texts as some researchers have proved (“Comparative Literature in the Digital Age: Semiotic and Cultural Implications”, López-Varela 2014, “Antiabecedarian Desires: Odd Narratology and Digital Textuality”, López-Varela 2014), (“Electronic Poetry: How to Approach It?” Di Rosario 2012), “Requiem for a Reader? A Semiotic Approach to Reader and Text in Electronic Literature”, Post 2003). Interactive texts are not static and the characteristic of being dynamic, appear and disappear urges the necessity of describing them in semiotic terms by Ferdinand de Saussure, the sign will be the relationship between a signifier, understood as the image of a sound which is then physically produced, and a signified, the concept of what one wants to refer. In e-poetry the image will be the signifier and the concept, the signified.

Affect theory is also important to take into account the sensitivity in poetry. Nico Frijda and Klaus Scherer explain that, in affective science, the term “affect” “is often used in a general sense to refer to a class or category of mental states that include emotions, moods, attitudes, interpersonal stances, and affect dispositions” (Frijda and Scherer 10). In poetry emotions and states are expressed using symbolic language and electronic poetry illustrates those emotions blending words with images.

E-poetry signs –sound and image- make it close to art, web space increases the visual contents of poetry, however, the visual content of poetry has always been there, in Giovanna di Rosario words: “Poetry and art in general have always been synonymous with subjectivity, with creativity” (Di Rosario “Gender as Patters: Unfixed Forms in Electronic Poetry” 267). E-poetry comes from the avant-garde movement tradition, its originality and novelty has even been put into question by some critics because they believe that e-poems are only reproducing 50s avant-garde experiments: “some critics suggest that many e-poems are simply a reproduction of what avant-gardes, like visual poetry or especially concrete poetry focusing on the materiality of the language” (Di Rosario “Digital Poetry: a Naissance of a New Genre?” 184). However, media provides new elements and e-poems are original for their themes, visualizations and new ways to be manipulated by the reader. Also, “The digital poet is faced with the task of reinventing an innovative way the poem is, or could be, and thus an innovative possible language” (Di Rosario “Gender as Patters: Unfixed Forms in Electronic Poetry” 280). The language required in electronic poetry has to be poetical though coded at the same time. Multimedia poets use new languages in poetry: programming language, code, visual language, gaming language, etc. E-poetry can have an industrial appearance for readers and certain lack of intimacy in the reading process compared to printed poetry. The way we associate new technologies with the industrial revolution and robotics probably comes for the original use of military and commercial use of the Internet, however, e-poetry remains a space for feelings and sensations: “Technologies that were originally envisaged for military or commercial use have been quickly subsumed into a new art world of digital artistic practice and poetic expression” (Naji 127).

In digital poetry, poets, having learnt from avant-garde concrete and visual poetry, reproduce the pleasure of poetical creation, travelling in a universe of sensations, words and images that fly and a text that is algorithmically generated. In a society of speed connection and in a place like the internet, where the changing information is so fast, some digital poems propose a different relationship with time linked to the reading practice. E-poetry readers are invited to play with the text and let themselves be surprised and stimulated by images and sounds, “as the children who play with the language before learning how to speak, e-poetry plays with its form to create its content. Through digital poetry one starts again to have a visual, material and ludic relationship with the language” (Di Rosario 203).

Christopher Funkhouser explained that “Poetry is poetry, and computer poetry –though related to poetry –is computer poetry” (*Prehistoric Digital Poetry* 80), therefore, if an e-poem cannot only be analysed like a printed one, using hermeneutics, semiotics and affect theory would not be enough in the close reading of *slippingglimpse*, the technological elements have to be also known, described and interpreted as part of the work aesthetics and

meaning. For that reason, the close reading is going to pay attention to the common features of poetry such as poetical language, structure, form and rhythm, as well as the signs used, the affects and the computer elements it integrates.

2. *Slippingglimpse* Making Process: Stephanie Strickland and Cyntia Lawson Jaramillo's Explanations

Slippingglimpse is a digital kinetic verbal-visual collaboration between prize-winning poet Stephanie Strickland, programmer Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo, and videographer Paul Ryan. It was published in the Electronic Literature Collection 2, in 2011, edited by Laura Borràs, Talan Memmott, Rita Raley, and Brian Kim Stefans. This Flash poem is also included in *Women Authors and Cyberfeminism Collection*, curated by Maya Zalbidea Paniagua in the Elmcip Knowledge Base. It is an electronic poem made of multimedia elements: video, moving letters and text. It is also an interactive generative Flash poem which combines text with ocean patterns along the Atlantic coast. The authors of this work call these patterns *chreods*. A chreod is a portmanteau term coined by 20th century biologist Conrad Hal Waddington that comes from the Greek word for "determined" or "necessary" and the word for "pathway." Lisa Swanstrom in her article about *slippingglimpse* explains what chreods are:

Coming from the Greek words for necessity (chreos) and road (hodos), a chreod signifies an exigent pathway, a necessary route, which natural phenomena take. Given this definition, chreods already speak to agency, again, not to a directly intentional form of agency, but to a pattern that repeats so often it seems to be willful. Chreods can be found in weather systems, wind patterns, river flows, and ocean currents. (Swanstrom "Nature's Agents: Chreods, Code, Plato, and Plants")

In the introduction of *slippingglimpse* the authors explain that making this work made them newly aware of commonalities in code, in poetry, and in chreods. Stephanie Strickland and Cyntia Lawson Jaramillo explained the reading of lines, loops and chreods in *slippingglimpse* in their essay "Dovetailing Details Fly Apart— All Over, Again, In Code, In Poetry, In Chreods". For them, in reading lines the reader will find visuals on the page, they affirm: "Code and poetry, both, are read in end-stopped lines as short as one word" (Strickland and Lawson "Dovetailing Details Fly Apart"). For them, code and poetry are similar because their lines are short but they always have a meaning. "The meaning that emerges from silently read lines of poems draws from three realms which are always operating on each other" (Strickland and Lawson "Dovetailing Details Fly Apart"). And they continue explaining that the first of these realms are graphemes, the written part that always has a separation. For instance, in a poem the line can be "an ever-fixed mark / a never-fixed mark" depending on the poet's choice of which graphemes use and how to separate them. The second realm is the words not taken unconsciously. And the third realm is

the sounded part created by the silent reading body. The same sounds can have different meaning due to the chosen letters, like in “mind’s ear / mind sear / mind seer” or “I scream” and “ice cream.” In the section about reading loops they expose that the machine reads code line by line, the reader can read line by line or has to jump to move into another direction. “Although the machine reads line by line, all of its reading happens within loops” (Strickland and Lawson “Dovetailing Details Fly Apart”). It is important to emphasize that they explain how parallel actions can be reflected in the machine. In *slippingglimpse* when we scroll the text we find two columns of text that appear at the same time and the reader has to read one column and then regenerate the text again to read the other. Another reading possibility would be to read part of a sentence from the text on the left followed by part of a sentence of the text on the right and even if the sentences do not make any sense we should pay attention to them anyway because maybe the authors have chosen this format to produce alternative meanings. The text actions are parallel, reader’s interaction consists of choosing the speed of the text appearance, he/she can stop the motion to read it at his/her own pace. The reader of *slippingglimpse* can control the poem when clicking on “scroll text”, stop it, regenerate it or going back home to read other poems or sections. However, the moving images of the videos with flying or swimming words cannot be controlled by the reader, the machine can only control them. From my perspective, the name of the work refers to the fast glimpse of the reader which tries to catch words and images as they are slipping. Strickland and Lawson describe the making process of an electronic text as an experience in which the writer takes part of the technology, even if code is not creating, there are actions taking place:

In making a piece of software, one is part of a system. The system functions and—regardless of content—signifies, through the actual processes of coding. Even if code does ‘nothing’, there is still a lot happening—writing, reading, compiling, executing—that expends machine time and energy. (Strickland and Lawson “Dovetailing Details Fly Apart”)

In the third part about reading chreods, Strickland and Lawson make reference to C. H. Waddington, who—as it is explained above—coined the term homeorhesis to describe the developmental systems, whose “necessary path” (chreod) seems to be done to return, and therefore, making loops. Chreod, as defined by Waddington, was borrowed from the mathematician René Thom in his book, *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis*. “For Thom, all creation or destruction of forms can be described by the capture of one set of attractors by another. The set of chreods and the multidimensional syntax controlling their positions constitute his semantic model” (Strickland and Lawson “Dovetailing Details Fly Apart”). In *slippingglimpse* the chreods have been recorded by the videographer and ecological activist Paul Ryan: “In *slippingglimpse*, the water reads the poem text, the poem text reads image/capture technologies, and

Ryan's image capture technology reads the water" (Strickland and Lawson "Dovetailing Details Fly Apart"). Strickland explained in an email exchange that the water reading idea came from her early experience on boats with her father:

He would read the color of the water as relating to the depth as we moved over reefs and shoals, and of course he would read/interpret many aspects of the wind and water as any sailor will. It seemed clear to me that the water was also reading/interpreting the depth using color to signal, as the wind interprets/reads/signals temperature. In other words, I never restricted reading to a symbol system. Reading was a way to wade and proceed in an environment, whether of literary symbols, mathematical symbols, or physical signs (Strickland quoted in Swanstrom, "Nature's Agents: Chreods, Code, Plato, and Plants")

The authors compare reading chreods to silent reading of poetry, experiences are transmitted without being said. They believe in a future in which readers can get used to lines of poetry, loops of code, and chreodic patterns in order to read their generating futures, find and choose a life-sustaining necessary path.

3. Close Reading of Stephanie Strickland, Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo and Paul Ryan's *slippingglimpse*

Slippingglimpse's cover presents the ten images which correspond to the ten segments of the e-poem. The photographs of the oceans are in different natural colors being blue, green, yellow and white the predominant ones. Obeying semiotic rules it could be considered that these signifiers use only one of the five sensory channels: sight. Their signifiers seem to be simple, although the signifieds –what the readers associate the colors with– can be more complex. The signifieds could be: blue for calm, green for peace, yellow for heat and white for emptiness. By clicking on any image the user finds a video with floating verses of the e-poem which do not follow any semantic order. Some verses can be read, others cannot be read because a verse overlaps the other or it is covered by the colors of the image, finally, when they stop, they can be read but as the verses do not fit into any logical meaning, the poem cannot be fully understood, the words are watched, more than read. However, even if the content is not clear, through images, we can experience feelings and energies. The videographer Paul Ryan pointed out: "I would avoid the term visual to describe video. You can see a bottle of perfume, but sight is not the sense it really affects... Video is about perceiving events with the nervous system, not visualizing in a pictorial way" (Ryan "Interview" quoted in *Animal Vegetable Digital. Experiments in New Media Aesthetics and Environmental Poetics*, Swanstrom 106). Authors have intentionally created an electronic poem that exploits its aesthetical value. The meaning does not need to be understood. When analyzing electronic poetry, Giovanna Di Rosario, quoting Hélène Cisoux, explained this intentional ambiguity of

meaning: "Paraphrasing Cixous, the digital writing frees the language from the primacy of meaning, opening it up to the unintentional not intentional rhythmic movement. The intelligibility of meaning, that wants to understand and master what is being said, is subverted" (Di Rosario, "Gender as Patters: Unfixed Forms in Electronic Poetry", Di Rosario 279).

The importance of visualization makes these kinetic poems closer to an artistic work than to poetry itself. The advantages of visualization can be many: human brain remembers more easily images than sentences and therefore, the poem's images can remain in memory for a longer time. From the artistic view, these video poems can be projected in art exhibitions and even if the spectators do not understand the language of the work they can appreciate the beauty dance of the letters and natural landscapes. At this stage, we may ask ourselves the following question: Is it really necessary or important to understand the verbal media or the images can speak by themselves? Maybe understanding the images is enough to receive the message. William J. Thomas Mitchell, theorist of visuality stated in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, that, although the visual and verbal media are different "at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions" (161), in terms of "expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listener, there is no essential difference between texts and images" (quoted in López-Varela, Asunción 160). Following this theory, images and texts have the same poetical value.

There are two ways of enjoying *slippingglimpse* reading experience: one is watching the videos and floating verses and the other is clicking on "scroll text" and reading the segments of the poems text while watching the video at the background. "*Slippingglimpse's* software tracks the motion of the water movement that occurs within each of the videos, and then uses this motion to animate phrases and lines from the poems so that they move in correspondence with the chreodic patterns" (Swanstrom, "Nature's Agents: Chreods, Code, Plato, and Plants"). Meaning can be found in each word in a segment of a poem, words can be connected to other sentences like in "passion of the flax" (*slippingglimpse*) but many lines are disconnected to each other like at the beginning of the first poem that starts by "through a development of consciousness I detached myself from spontaneous expression" (*slippingglimpse*) which seems to be a sentence that has been taken from a part of a poem and it is not the beginning because of lack of the capital letter at the beginning of the sentence. This lack of order and coherence can produce excitement and interest, which are positive affects, surprise or startle, which are neutral, and negative affects: anguish or anger due to lack of comprehension.

All segments of the e-poem contain a video with floating sentences which imitate handwriting, "somewhere between cursive and calligraphy" (Swanstrom, "Nature's Agents: Chreods, Code, Plato, and Plants"). Probably the desired effect is to reproduce a natural landscape and the organic writing of the poet using her own hands. This effect of making the text organic comes

from the influence of concrete poets as Lisa Swanstrom confirmed in her description of *slippingglimpse*: "What this accomplishes, on a purely visual level, is to make language look organic, to make these pieces of verse, in the tradition of the concrete poets and the image poets, crawl out of the sequential nature of written language in order to try on a different form" (Swanstrom, "Nature's Agents: Chreods, Code, Plato, and Plants"). I interpret the fact that the text can be read but the handwritten text in nature cannot as the idea that we can control reading a text, but we cannot control nature. Natural elements come and go, there is a continuous movement, "everything flows", like in Heraclitus "panta rhei".

The authors explain in the introduction of the work, the poem is made by visual artists sampling and recombining words. The first segment of the e-poem, whose background image seems like stone in a mountain, is difficult to understand due to the ellipsis between verses and how the ideas are not logically connected. Like in all the other segments of the e-poem there are two columns and the reader can read the right or the left column while the text descends. Lines structure appears cut and the graphemes do not follow the grammatical or orthographical rules but have been typed to create effects. For instance, the segment of the poem on the left side starts by:

my mother killed by lightning
[
in] a high risk environment of
air
(*slippingglimpse*, 2007)

Like in a Vicente Huidobro's creationist poem, images and metaphors are juxtaposed combining words irrationally. Words are separated in spaces that cause intrigue and distance from some mental images to others. In the above extract the digital poet plays with the graphemes and sounds "lightning" and "in", which in the silent reading the words separation and use of brackets is graphical but in the loud reading there is a needed pause in reading between "lightning" and "in". The first sentences are very difficult to be objects of a hermeneutical interpretation, literally the mother could have been killed by a lightning. But probably, this is a metaphor and the mother was killed metaphorically by the impression of an electrical discharge that could have emerged from the poet's art as the speaker explains that she has been carving to create the form:

each stone I carve...[I] convolve
with mathematical ideas...the form
that no one has ever felt
(*slippingglimpse*, 2007)

My personal interpretation is that the poet is explaining writing digital poetry process as carving in a stone where nobody has done it before. In a similar way Giovanna Di Rosario compared the craft of the avant-garde poet with the work of a sculptor: "The poet should arrange words in the poems like the sculptor

arranges colors and lines on the canvas" (Di Rosario 188). From a semiotic perspective it could be said that carving can be seen, read and experienced by the clicking process. The affects that the speaker can raise in the reader can be startle at the beginning when he/she does not understand how the e-poem can be read, and interest, once the text has been processed.

In the second segment of the e-poem, the video displays sea waves and words which seem to be flying over the waves. The text is prosaic and semiotically the groups of signs succeed each other in time, making the interpretation easier than in the previous segment. The speaker is a visual artist who describes the creative experience process:

Day after day
 A different image appears
 seeing is forgetting the name
 of what you see
 (*slippingglimpse*, 2007)

The speaker mentions Bense and Barbaud as the responsible ones for making her change her mind. Max Bense was a German philosopher known for his work in logic, aesthetics, and semiotics. In 1964, Bense and Dohl wrote the manifesto for the literary component of the Stuttgart group. Entitled "Zur Lage", meaning "Toward an experimental condition or state of affairs", the essay articulates the following elements of concrete poetry in terms that emphasize typography and process such as serial and permutational realizations, metrical and acoustic poetry as well as cybernetic and material poetry. Pierre Barbaud was the inventor of algorithmic music. The speaker mentions both probably because they have influenced the visual artist—and maybe Stephanie Strickland herself—to understand how poetry can be transmitted using algorithms, permutations, typography and cybernetics.

In the third segment green water is accompanied by green letters. The speaker describes that her experience of learning computed information was similar to learn music. There is a simile with "treading a wave" and "photography". The speaker shows how with computer poetry the poem makes itself. The fourth poem is about the format and the influence of the computers in this e-poem: "a scanner starts at the beginning [...] this is just what the QuickTime VR movies do" (*slippingglimpse* 2007). Shooting seems to be dangerous like in the previous segment with the metaphor of the mother who was killed by the lightning, here there are two signifiers for shooting people: in a film or killing them. In the 5th video golden leaves float on crystal clear water. The speaker feels strange in the Academia because they are turning out people who can get jobs in the animation industry. Underwater, there is a slipping glimpse. The 6th video seems to be turning mud and the speaker confesses that Quick Time Virtual Reality seems like reality to her. As Jean Baudrillard explained hyper-reality looks more real than reality itself. The 7th video displays a black hole or hurricane and the speaker transmits the idea that she uses programs to explain logic. In the 8th video there are waves, collapsing with each other in the vast ocean, the

sky is grey and waves are black. The affect transmitted is fear or anguish to anticipate the tragic content of the poem. The poem is about a story in Ancient Greece. There is a goddess who offers birds "the death" to break a spell older than bread. There is a feast with a masquerade where dogs are killed. Barley of Babylonia is not divinized "nor sacred green ear of Eleusis" (*slippingglimpse* 2007), which means that the annual rites in Eleusis are not sacred. A child was born at the House of Bread Beth-Lehem (an allusion to Jesus Christ) and there is a final simile in the verses: "seven virgins disciples whose flesh shines during torture as white as the shining silvery" (*slippingglimpse* 2007). In the 9th video blue water moves fast like in a river, a cloth moves over water. It is a narrative poem like the previous one, here the story is about a hunter whose "graces pass a woman weeding flax" (*slippingglimpse* 2007). After a description in which vegetables and clothes are being personified, the speaker uses the first person to declare that he or she has not tortured the plants, but another one shovelled them into the oven. The 10th video is a jumping green wave. The last poem is completely chaotic like the image of waves breaking in the rocks. The words and sentences seem to be random. My interpretation is that the visual artist finally explains the reader to be careful to avoid spoiling the piece of photographic art.

Slippingglimpse is one of the most famous works of electronic poetry due to its quality and originality as far as experimentation is concerned as well as the video photography and the uniqueness in the form of the segments of the poem. In the research field of electronic literature there are few publications of close readings, it would be positive to encourage junior as well as senior researchers to lose fear of the new technologies and avant garde electronic literature because supporting our contemporary writers and artists will be useful as a contribution for the future academics in order to better understand the literary production of our times –not only at the commercial level as it happens with printed literature, best sellers or Nobel prize winners-but also to support the production, distribution and study of alternative ways of producing literature. Electronic poetics should mature as the tools for making it evolve, and our future analyses and interpretations must also increase in quantity and quality.

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