Literatura electrónica: análisis de *Dreamaphage,* una Alegoría Digital/ E-Literature: Analysis of *Dreamaphage,* a Digital Allegory[1]

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Abstract

Walter Benjamin, en *La Obra de arte en la era de su reproducción mecánica,* 1935, reflexiona sobre cómo la información y las tecnologías de la comunicación se relacionan con los cambios económicos, políticos y socioculturales de su época. En este ensayo, Benjamin analiza los cambios en los modos de (re)producción y las condiciones económicas y tecnológicas que conforman la cadena del capital, cuyas interacciones traen consecuencias tanto positivas como negativas. Confrontado con una serie de cambios en el campo de la cultura introducidos por la mecanización, y preocupado por el rol del artista, la experiencia del espectador, y el aura de la obra, Benjamin se declaró partidario de una "politización del arte" que en su opinión debía llevarse a cabo por medio de cuatro estrategias principales: el uso de la alegoría, el uso de la tecnología, la mezcla de alta y baja cultura, y la introducción de elementos marginales o excluidos del campo del arte.

La literatura electrónica y el arte de Internet proponen nuevos acercamientos a las cuestiones discutidas por Walter Benjamin en los anos treinta. Hoy, en la época de la reproducción digital, aquellas cuestiones vuelven a replantearse. Los escritores y artistas que trabajan en Internet son plenamente conscientes de que la red no es sólo una herramienta de trabajo, sino también un lugar de producción, recepción, y distribución. En esta ocasión, analizaremos como Jason Nelson aplica al ciberespacio estas cuatro estrategias propuestas por Benjamin en su obra *Dreamaphage,* http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/nelson__dreamaphage/ v2/opening.html), una pieza de literatura digital escrita y diseñada por su autor en el año 2004. Con la intención de provocar una reflexión sobre la inercia con la que nos adaptamos los progresos tecnológicos, el autor, escritor, artista y programador, se posiciona como un "productor del medio" y presenta su trabajo consciente del espacio social que la red representa.

[1] *Dreamaphage* is a work of digital literature created by Jason Nelson in 2003 and actualized in 2004. Both versions of his work are available on line in the collection of the ELO (Electronic Literature Organization), in http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/nelson__dreamaphage.html This work will be focused mainly on the 2004 version. Also, this and other works by the author can be found in http://www.secrettechnology.com/. Images are reproduced with the author´s consent.

> Every image of the past that is not
> recognized by the present as one of its own
> concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.
>
> W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

Walter Benjamin's ideas from the 1930s about art and the role of the artist were those of a visionary, and are still contested and debated today in a society compulsorily termed «information society». Our times, the age of digital reproduction, revolve again around the status of reproductions and copies, the role of the author, the experience of the reader/viewer, auratic works and authors. Art in the Internet proposes different alternatives to these questions. Today, authors of digital literature write with an acute awareness of the possibilities of the World Wide Web, a prolific resourse they use not just as a tool, but also as a means of production, and as a place for reception and distribution. In this essay, Benjamin's ideas about the role of art and artists are exemplified in a cibertext, W. Jason Nelson's *Dreamaphage*, a contemporary digital allegory. At the same time, it will deal with Nelson's self awareness as a producer, and the particular way he chooses to present his work in a networked, social space through the form of an allegory.

Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* deals with how information and communication technologies are intertwined with broader sociocultural and political economic changes. He applies controversial, Marxist, theoretical insights to changes in the mode of (re)production, analysing techno-economic conditions of production that herald both negative and positive political possibilities. In this work, Benjamin advocates for Breech's drama and the «politicization of art», which can be achieved by several means, namely the use of allegory, the use of technology, the mixture of high and low art, and the inclusion of marginal and excluded elements of artistic work. With his advocating for allegory, Benjamin contradicted the dominant ideas about allegory of the 19th century, which, according to Turner's dictionary of art, disregarded this trope, considering it «intellectualistic and a hindrance to visual communication» (651).

ALLEGORY AND TECHNOLOGY

Benjamin first developed his theory of allegory in his book *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 1928, where he focused on baroque allegories. To Benjamin, the use of allegory «transforms the audience from passive viewers to an active and differentiated group of discussants.» (Caygill 2002: 289) *Dreamaphage* has been termed an allegory, just the same as those used in the past to represent the traditional confrontation between knowledge and ignorance. In this case, it is about a virus provoking repetitive dreams that appear more and more often, even though, ironically, those infected are progressively unable to remember. Their effect is an increasing mental and physical collapse with fatal consequences.

Form the beginning of the story, Nelson introduces two typically Freudian elements: his method of dreams interpretation and the presence of the unheimlich or the sinister in the ordinary: something happens while we sleep. Soon, these two elements are clearly related to technology. In the introduction, we find dense pixel fields, yuxtaposing with a slow movement, so blurred that they just hardly allow for interpretation. The general tone of the story is introduced in these images, a story about our fear to confront something unknown and out of control.

Allegory, according to Benjamin, highlights the importance of an active experience by the audience because it confronts the audience with an idea of the unavoidable gap between words and images inscribed in the work. Nelson seems to be alluding to this gap already in the first lines of his narrative, when Dr. Felt tells us that he is simply unable to solve this medical case. He confesses: HOW LONG BEFORE I BECOME ANOTHER LOST? He has been studying some samples of his rare virus in infected people, trying to find a cure by reading what they remember about their dreams in a delirious race against time before they are completely unable to describe them. But Dr. Felt´s efforts were in vain, and worse, he is also infected. He firmly believes that the cure for this virus is hiding in his notes, which contain descriptions of the patients´ reports of their dreams. So he urges us to read and see if we can find the cause and cure of this misterious illness. In *«The words of these books, their dreams, contain the cure»* the reader is given a clue about reading and understanding as the only «cure» for this epidemic virus, even though no cure has yet been found for it, neither are its infection vehicles known. Our expectations are already flawed from the very beggining. This sense of incompatibility floods the reader trying to get where Dr. Felt failed. The «cure by reading,» as opposed the «cure by talking» in classic psychoanalysis, and the impulse to experiment its effects in oneself is reinforced with the signature of the Doctor in charge of the files, a surname which meaning implies a witness, but also a «failed» one. So reading turns to be an ambiguous act, as it contains the cure but also the possibility of contagion: the whole story tells about the unreadability of signs: our battle for meaning and our consequent failure. In this point we can see the change that art has undertaken from Modernism: the work does not talk about its own autonomy or its self-sufficiency, but rather it talks about its own insufficiency to explain itself. The next paragraphs will explain how the user in *Dreamaphage* will notice this through the immersion in Nelson's work.

According to Craig Owens in his article *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,* included in *Art after Modernism* by Brian Wallis, allegory has been considered

an «aesthetic aberration, the antithesis of art,» (Wallis 1984: 203) for the past two centuries now. Although the romantic lack of interest in it was inherited by Modernism, which considered it opposed to its main motto: «Il faut être de son temps,» Owens claims that this just happens in theory, but not in practice (e.g. Duchamp's *Large Glass*). He cites Borges calling it «an aesthetic error,» meaning an old fashioned figure of speech valid just as a source of historical but not of critical perspectives. Even though, Borges is frequently considered an allegorical writer. Owens explains the origins of this figure of speech in commentary and exegesis or text explanation, saying that it

> first emerged in response to a ... sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical rein-terpretation, might have remained foreclosed. A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it from the present -these are its two most fundamental impulses. (Wallis 1984: 203)

This way, Owens attaches the figure of allegory to an attempt to bridge the gap between tradition and the present day, a task that has much to do with the implementation of internet in society, and that is represented in Nelson's portraying his digital book as resembling a printed one.

Owens claims for a recovery of this trope in the twentieth century, only for its importance in psychoanalysis and visual arts, and also thanks to Benjamin, who was almost the only twentieth century critic to have considered this subject «without prejudices, philosophically.» (204) Owens finds a link between allegory and contemporary art in its usual appropriation and hybridization of images. Like appropriation, allegory does not bring back an original meaning in an image, it rather replaces one meaning for another. Its materials are always reproductions, like photographs, film, drawings. These are the kind of materials found in *Dreamaphage*, a work in which the visual and the verbal is blurred: words are not enough to explain dreams, so they are helped by images, images that are all reproductions.

Benjamin conceded that linguistic and visual instances belong at the same time to different but intersecting spheres, as in graphic design, writing or allegory. He recognizes a gap between the symbolic and the imaginary, which he exemplifies in the image of a ruin, the epitome of allegory. The image of a ruined landscape conveys in Benjamin the impossibility to say through words all this image implies. The decay of mind and body is one of the main themes of Nelson's present work. And Benjamin gives us a glimpse of Nelson's most repeated images, those of heads and head scannings:

> Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuc-cessful, is expressed in a face — or rather in a death's head. And although such thing lacks all «symbolic» freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity — nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise to not only the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing... (Wallis 1984:167)

Owens finds a second link between allegory and contemporary art, and it is that of site-specificity, which has as one of its most outstanding characteristics, that of the ephemeral. Owens calls it «the memento mori» (207) of the twentieth century. *Dreamaphage* is a digital work that makes the most of its site, taking advantage of the capacities of spreading and remediation of the Internet; that is, it depends on film, drawing, photography and sound, which are not only explaining the text, but adding additional levels of significance, and which could hardly be portrayed altogether in a printed book. The author's main concern is our incapability to analyze and to remember, our ephemeral condition and our incapability to fully understand a hyper-computerized world.

MIXTURE OF HIGH AND LOW CULTURE. INTRODUCTION OF MARGINAL ELEMENTS

The mixture of high and low culture, examined in his essay *One Way Street*, 1928, occurs through an «extension of the allegory out of the realm of art and into the contemporary metropolis.» (289) In the same way, Nelson expands his allegory to the real world (by giving us the chance to download the virus to our computer) and also to the realms of science and technology through the piling of several medical files presented in the form of an archive. Caygill explains that Benjamin «anticipates the three-dimensional text, based on the card index» (289), a form he used in his Arcade Project, foreseeing a qualitative transformation of communications into a purely visual language that abolishes the word which he called the «picture writing». (289)

By «picture writing» he meant the increasing capacity of graphic design to transmit information due to technical advances in typography, which allowed eccentric modifications in their pictoriality by adding diagrams that required a new form of reading. In Nelson´s story, characters are suffering extrange symptoms: the more their dreams are repeated, the less they remember. So they find that words are not enough to define their dreams, and they need the help of images, reproduced in a wide variety of audiovisual material.

The patient´s files conveying the infection process present a cartography of virus which is essentially pseudo-scientific. The author introduces tragicomic elements scarcely found in high culture: until recently, the motive of the virus used to belong to minor genres like science-fiction or cyberpunk. Nevertheless, the viral aesthetics has turned to be a canonical genre in digital contexts, referring to the effects and practice of living online. So, Nelson extends his allegory through the city by expanding his technological virus through the net.

Each of the viruses is unknown and fantasized, and is calculated to raise an emotional response, in a reverse of the XIVth and XVth century allegories, which included more serious vicissitudes of life and the triumph of death. This is, for instance, the case of the *Ars Moriendi Treatise*, an anonymous work from the XVth century. Jason Nelson seems to have taken his subject matter of folly and death from the secular allegories in the late Middle Ages, which also related these themes to that of love, slightly treated here (there is some talk about love and ropes connecting cattle in Texas in the Angrybovinedisease file). Folly was then considered as culpable of ignorance, and salvation could only occur by reason and love of God. Here, we face folly as a surrealist access to the unconscious, explained in the text with the (im)possibility of salvation due to the unknown sources of contagion. It was the Italian Renaissance which introduced a broader application of allegory to philosophical systems and social phenomena, where Christian sources of knowledge are considered as valid as non-Christian sources. A virus, of course, is an ironic, irrational, mundane source of knowledge.

When acceding to each virus, the user enters a simulacrum of a traditional book, including the cover, index, and numbered pages that allow a slight interaction. The user is able to flip pages using the mouse. Everything in the disign of the story, form and content, helps the reader to get the sensation of being experiencing the virus´ effects, both mentally and physically. The author places the same amount of energy in achieving this sensation of inmersion as in telling a good story.

CONCLUSION

The allegory in Nelson's *Dreamaphage,* about the impossibility to know how the process of infection by technology, is highlighted by the whole ambience offered by this artwork, in which one might or might not get infected while reading. This is a pivotal point in this story, a success obtained by the handling of the overall ambience and the experience of a fragmented reading. The user is able to experiment the feeling, where Nelson has put much more emphasis than in the explanation of the virus itself. This is how this story immerses in the relations between technology, code, art, truth and contagion, with society.

We could conclude that the work itself plays the role of the psychoanalyst, just posing questions.

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