Appropriationist Practices and Processes of De/Subjectivation: Charly.gr, Matías Buonfrate and C0d3 P03try in the age of algorithmic governance

Fernanda Mugica
Translator: Danny Fitzgerald

Introduction

In the final section of his book *(spam)* (2011), called "Oldie Games", the Argentine writer charly.gr, pseudonym of Carlos Gradín, brings together a miscellany of short texts ranging from a quote by Deleuze to the comments section of a forum devoted to "MIRAMAR EN LOS 90'S", as well as the words for clapping rhymes along the lines of "Patty Cake" or "Miss Suzy": "Miss Suzie had a steamboat. / The steamboat had a bell. / Miss Suzie went to heaven. / The steamboat went to . . ." In the book's "Disclaimer", charly.gr makes clear that "Oldie Games", unlike the rest of the texts, was not generated by Google Search: "no particular phrases were looked up, and the search engine wasn't even used in each case" (2011, p. 73). Still, it remains illustrative of the dynamic running through the book as a whole: a series of fragments – whether quotes or the author's own annotations – are stripped of their original context and set to play off each other.

The fragments in "Oldie Games" recall phrases left hanging for others to finish or writing abandoned mid-sentence, as Hemingway advised, so that tomorrow we'll be moved to take up the pen once more. The fragments speak of the desire for a commanding god who would do our reading for us, the desire for someone else to pick up our words where we left off. Indeed, they present the curious image of Saint Augustin going over his codices and coming to the conclusion that "only when scripture has become indispensable to the final draft of his life story" will the long struggle with his faith have been resolved. Feeling that those passages understand him better than he does himself, Augustin "can no longer evoke even a second of his past without his own words weaving in verses from the Bible, as if they had been written for him to discover, sooner or later" (p. 67).

The fragments in "Oldie games", then, present lines that project their own endings or are taken up by others in an operation that – we think – tells us something about our own times, about our culture of algorithms, something about the waves of language constantly rolling in to finish our sentences for us – with barely a click, and often even without. I'm thinking of everything that speaks for us, in our name, all those suggested phrases that cheerfully save us the trouble of forming our own and substitute instead the algorithm's statistically-informed guess.

Digital Poetry and Algorithmic Control

The forerunner to *(spam)* was charly.gr's "Peronismo (spam)", from 2010, a visual poem that combines music and text. The writer used the freeware *Time-Based Text*, which captures the time taken to write each word and transmits it as additional information, as well as saving and reproducing every input and deletion. The text itself redeploys the results of a Google search of the phrase "El Peronismo es como…" ["Peronism is like…"]. It scrolls past quickly, vertiginously so, as is the wont of readers geared to the frenetic pace of the web, and matches the rhythm of the music. The piece flashes past in six minutes and is programmed to loop back once the cycle is complete. Some of the results Gradín includes give the authors' names, but not all. It's impossible to determine to how much of the poem has been shaped by the search algorithm and how much by the author's own criteria. Data processing and the poet's choices operate simultaneously on voices that are addressable as text in the extremely diverse pages Gradín has accessed automatically.

In "No poseas un miedo" (2020), Matías Buonfrate uses texts by Donna Haraway to generate a visual poem where the words themselves are cut short, to be rounded off by someone or something else ("something that never startswilled / thalwaysnev / wasasllbe starting") New words take shape that shake up the familiar morphology of our language and yet remain perfectly legible. Like Gradín's, this poem captures or simulates writing in real time, letter by letter. Buonfrate's starting point is a Markov chain; he takes texts as a succession of words, a stochastic process of discrete states where the probability of the following state depends exclusively on the one immediately preceding it, rather than the sum of the whole preceding chain. Next, with the transition matrix established, he introduces a "starter seed", a word or a phrase from which the text will grow as a function of the probability of its appearance in the text it draws on. That is to say, the "something else" let in to complete the lines is Haraway's text reduced to raw data and subjected to statistical analysis. The opening line is left hanging, giving rise to chance – but not entirely since it depends on the previous state in "a process without memory, where the past is irrelevant" (Remirez 2013). Then, according to the author, comes "a great deal of manual editing. Back and forth from mouse to program until a distinct tone emerges." As in "Peronismo (spam)", it's hard to determine how much in the elaboration of the poem comes from the author's decisions and how much from the combinations thrown up by the algorithm. In the words of Leonardo Solaas, what we're seeing in these instances is "a kind of creative collaboration between the artist and the automaton."

In "Poner cuerpo en palabras", the duo cod3 P03try also work with the words of others – this time by the Argentine poet Francisco López Merino – and make use of

Markov chains to form new versions. They then run these versions through Hydra, which manipulates the words' visual texture, before generating sound samples using TidalCycles, in both cases through live coding, a type of programming that combines the use of algorithms with improvisation in real time. The writing process is made visible by projecting the code on the screen. The Merino piece was performed on March 9, 2019 as part of the exhibition "Brotes II", which took place at the Pasaje Lopez Merino, in the city of La Plata, and brought together more than seventy artists. With computers sitting on stacks of old books - surrounded by books -, the artists played back robot-voiced samples of the new phrases generated by the Markov algorithm. At the same time, the texts became visual material: as well as the code, fragments of the poems appeared on screen bending and twisting eccentrically, as if in 3-D, given that the artists were really – and in real time – playing with the plasticity of words.

While the technical aspect of these works is certainly arresting, it could be argued that this focus on the materiality of sound and graphics is also common in contemporary experimental analogue poetry. Yet these works are grounded in a materiality specific to the digital sphere; it's not just that they work with other people texts but that they do so by means of probabilistic algorithms. While these may be more apparent in the works of Buonfrate and c0d3 P03try, they are no less remarkable in "Peronism (spam)" given that among the multiple readings the poem allows is how Google manoeuvres and manages the vast archive of texts available on the web.

The works under discussion here suggest a different approach to these algorithms and make clear that the answer we are looking for is not always a function of a word's statistical prevalence; that there is a place for the multiple – as in Gradín's poem – as well as for the ambivalent and the ambiguous – as in Buonfrate's – ; that some forgotten poems, like those of López Merino, can return to say other things and in other voices. And they do so by using those same algorithms, thus affirming that playing otherwise is possible after all, that we can *jugar en contra* (Kozak 2011) or counter the whole apparatus bent on autocompleting our thoughts or presenting itself as the only possible answer to our searches. By making algorithms visible, by showing that they are in fact working – even when their precise workings elude us –, these works question some of the naturalized behaviours and hegemonic meanings of digital culture. In Kozak's words, making this kind of materiality visible – as ways of *being with* materiality – invites us to question what it means to think of the digital sphere as a culture of "users" (2019a, p. 74). How these pieces work with the algorithm's modes of being and doing is what interests me here, and it is what has led me to pose the question regarding subjective processes in the age of algorithmic governance.

My hypothesis is that the productions that make up this corpus facilitate possible displacements or lines of flight with respect to standardized modes of de/subjectivation. In the general process of virtualization of subjects and their signifying practices (Da Porta, Tabachnik 2019), I contend that these appropriationist digital productions give rise to mediated subjectivities, halfway between the human and the machine, mediums spectralized by their diversified commerce with technology. In the double movement of these practices, which give voice to others and, at the same time, waive their own power of expression, we can read - in addition to questioning notions of ownership and authorship - a deviation with respect to digital culture's hegemonic meanings. That is, an operation of withdrawal with respect to the binary logics of techno-linguistic standardization and the segmentation of profiles, which tend to reduce subjectivity to that which can be "recorded as data" (Kozak 2019b, p. 12) and, so, can be quantified by the probabilistic algorithms that constantly finish our sentences for us and foreclose our searches. In the poetic works considered here, this subtraction instead opens a space for that which has yet to be determined.

Given the eccentric conception of the literary in these works, with literature placed outside itself, what can be said of the place of the subjective? Before hazarding any possible answers, we must look at some of the characteristics of the hegemonic modes of de/subjectivation that have become naturalized.

Algorithmic Governance and Processes of De/Subjectivation

In their article "Gouvernementalité algorithmique et perspectives d'émancipation…" (2013), Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns analyze the ways in which data collection and processing, and its subsequent use in predicting individual behavior, hinder and block any process of subjectivation. According to the authors, this data functions as digital "footprints" that we leave, often involuntarily, since all our movements are being recorded - data stripped of all context and meaning, which we don't give too much thought to sharing since it's perfectly nondescript and, after all, remains anonymous. Yet from the automated processing of this data, subtle correlations and statistical knowledge emerge – free from prior hypotheses, human intervention or any "subjectivity" whatsoever. Now what "does not fit the average" is no longer excluded, as was the case with heyday of statistics; rather, the aim is "to avoid the unpredictable" and ensure that all data, no matter how insignificant, has a basis in fact.

According to Rouvroy & Berns, the apparent individualization of statistics, which is really nothing more than a segmentation of profiles based on market segmentations,

leads to a progressive disappearance of the instances of subjectivation. Whatever capacity individuals may have for understanding, will or expression, these qualities no longer play into how they are apprehended by power – only their profiles. Algorithmic governance does not produce subjectivation; it is indifferent to any human reflexivity since it takes in infra-individual data in order to shape supra-individual models of behavior, or profiles, without ever appealing to a subject, without ever requiring we account for ourselves or what we might become. The moment of reflexivity, critique and recalcitrance necessary for the formation of subjectification seems to become ever more taxing or is just postponed (174). In other words, rather than respecting individual desires, this type of governance appears to be based on the automatic detection of certain propensities in order to trigger actions as reflex responses to stimuli. This automatic detection aims at producing a kind of short-circuit in individual reflexivity that impedes the formulation of singular desires. Rouvroy & Berns refer to actions that occur without prior formulation of a desire, thus making algorithmic governance "the culmination of a dispersal of the spatial, temporal and linguistic conditions of subjectification and individuation, based on the objective, operational regulation of possible behaviours from the outset" (176). All based on "raw data", meaningless in itself, but which, when approached statistically, seeks to accelerate flows and avoid any possible deviation – or subjective reflexive pause – between stimuli and reflex responses (177).

These ideas regarding the obturation of subjective processes echo with works that engage probability algorithms on their own terms, that expose their workings or use them as tools, skewing them for alternate ends. I am thinking of the Markov chains generated in the works of Buonfrate and c0d3 P03try, with their stochastic processes where the appearance of a word or a morpheme depends only on the previous state, or on the Google search algorithm that is the protagonist in Gradín's poem. I'm thinking of the sentences cut short in "Oldie games", waiting for someone or something to round them off, of all the automatic detections and reflex responses that come together in these works. I'm also thinking of the fact that here we have a series of digital experiments that, far from the romantic notion of creative genius, do not express any subjectivity, do not reflect experience, and in no way arise as the manifestation of any authorial interiority. On the contrary, the writer cedes control to a process that is, in part, alien to her will, embracing chance, based on the set of rules by which the poem unfolds (Solaas: 2018).

What can we say about the processes of subjectivation in these works? Is it a question of subjectivities that refuse to make everything about themselves "available" and instead incorporate the voices of others? In this vein, Cristina Rivera Garza's idea of "disappropriation" might be useful since she proposes that, in addition to appropriating

other people's words, these practices imply dispossessing oneself of any control over one's own. One might wonder, then, if the artists that make up our corpus really dissociate themselves from their words and even their name, or if what is produced merely reassigns the figure of the "creative genius" from the writer to the programmer (Goldsmith 2011). Faced with subjective hyperproduction, faced with the ways digital processing operates - metabolizing, according to Sibilia, vital forces "with an unprecedented voracity, relentlessly thrusting new subjectivities on the market" (2005, p. 28) -, do these voices simply decide to withdraw? Is that all? While there may be some truth to this at the level of the authorial gesture, what is interesting about these practices is how they assume that the work of algorithmic governance is not interested in either the subject or individuals.

While I'm aware that neither appropriationism nor works based on systems of rules are novelties in the history of art and literature, I believe that the specificity of the digital medium confers new meanings. These are productions that cut and mix, that combine and recombine material reality, in the context of the current configuration of language in semio-capitalism, that is, in a context that translates everything into "recombinant information" (Berardi 2018). Questioning subjectivity in this framework implies asking oneself, along with Rivera Garza, if this incapacity to produce other than on the basis of what already exists cannot also be read as the incapacity to think of oneself except as the emphatically other. When we say "half-way" subjectivities, then, we are referring not only to the dialogue acted out between human and machine, but also to the incompleteness inherent to lines left hanging so as to leave room for the words of others, so as to let themselves be rounded off by the algorithm's autocomplete. In this sense, I wonder if it is possible to think in terms of "mixed" subjectivities, as well as spectral ones, where discrete fragments of the voices of others take the place of one's own, calling it into question. Although works like these have been seen as symptoms of the artists' inability to grab hold of and give voice to the world around them, I am more concerned with their productive nature, insofar as they rework the materials they come across and proliferate disparate couplings and correlations

In her analysis of 1990s Argentine poetry, Tamara Kamenszain speaks of a self that seems "about to shed its role as the custodian of experience" and that "lets others share in its *acontecer,* or ongoing" (1). She sees certain poems as clips or as windows, where the self is punctuated by the comings-and-goings of shadowy "others". Kamenszain reads the mark of a disappearance, the self in the form of "what is no longer there", because there is no longer a lyrical self to shape an intimist poetical image on the page. What particular forms of that absence, of what's no longer there, can be read in the digital poetry we've been discussing? Any hypothetical self might well be punctuated by

these others, but it, too, would be worked over by an algorithm, by the possibility of certain combinations of words occurring, or not, according to statistical norms.

In the poems analyzed by Kamenszain, perceiving an absence remains a possibility; in the poems that make up our corpus, however, that space appears to be sealed. Where the lyrical self would be, all we find is automated predictions of virtuality, laying bare floating signs of linguistic abstraction, not rooted in any subject or subjective experience. Statistical manipulation heads off any moment of reflexion, prompting reflex responses, calcified in artificial memory, with a rhythm similar – and yet so different - to the one that leads us to fill in what's missing when we listen, for example, to the rhyming songs of our childhood, like those recovered by Gradín in "Oldie games".

A Few Questions and Partial Conclusions

In times of algorithmic governance, is there a place for emancipated forms of individuation? Having posed this question, Rouvroy & Berns answer with another: what happens when we are linked only to ourselves, when relationality is "no longer 'physically inhabited' by otherness"? Under algorithmic governance, every subject is - they affirm - in itself a multitude, but it is multiple without alterity, fragmented into a number of profiles related to its propensities, desires, opportunities and risks. The works in our corpus insist on highlighting the power that a probabilistic algorithm can extract from something as miniscule as a search result or a phrase that autocompletes itself and, so, exert on the kind of relationship we have with the world. A type of relationship that, in the words of Rouvroy & Berns, is not conducive to transindividual individuation processes – those that amount to "neither I nor we, but designate the processes of co-individualization of the 'I' and 'we' producing social reality, that is, associated environments in which meanings form", in Simondon's terms. On the contrary, they foreclose the possibilities of such transindividual individuations, folding the individuation processes back onto the subjective monad (185).

The works in our corpus render probability algorithms visible; highlighting their materiality, they work with them from the inside. But, in addition, they put the focus on language itself, coming at the written word from unexpected, marginal and eccentric angles. In Buonfrate, for example, verbs conjugate in several tenses at once or apply to more than one subject, depending on one's reading, leading us to stop and go back over the words, to engage in a multiple reading as opposed to a sequential one - something a machine would be hard-pressed to do. From the subversive use of Markov chains fed with Haraway's texts comes a poem that seems written to pre-empt machine reading; depending on the scansion, two tenses, or two subjects, are affirmed simultaneously,

states before which the binary logic of the machine would have to choose, and lead to an error pinging up on screen. In this algorithmically-generated poem, Buonfrate seems to argue that the possible is not always contained in the actual, that there are becomings-with that give rise to other worlds.

c0d3 p03try also redeploy phrases eccentrically, in this case the poetry of Francisco López Merino, leading us to look at them afresh. Between Hydra's distorted visuals and TidalCycles' dissonant, robotic samples, López Merino's verses speak anew and lead us to pause on the various modes of being words take on in the digital medium. Remnants of words and proper names and, at the same time, ways of insisting on those same words and names. Remnants, also, as words of the "unruly dead" Rivera Garza refers to, which, nevertheless, come to life in live coding, in being there, in the presence of bodies, in the putting into evidence of a doing-through-code that implies a real and shared time.

Using Google searches, Gradín does summon that otherness, that disparity that, according to Rouvroy & Berns, algorithmic governance seeks to avoid. "Peronism (spam)" is a text that gives rise to excess, to the multiplicity of voices that a word can draw in, making clear that there is no one way for the sentence to end, that there is room for the other, for heterogeneity. In this sense, it disrupts standardized meanings and frees itself from techno-linguistic automatism by engaging with it.

Ultimately, these productions make a point of leaving a sentence hanging in order to go back over the word itself instead of the reflex response of instantaneous autocomplete, which folds back on itself. They do so by maintaining that "remnant of incompleteness" that, as Kozak asserts, becomes problematic in a programmed world. In this way, they withdraw – at least for an instant and from places literature rarely ventures – from the naturalized modes of machinic slavery (Guattari 1980) in order to affirm that there is room for manoeuvre after all, that, even in this environment, spaces remain for becomings-with through the poetic voice. Thus, they find disruptive ways of being with machines, and question automation: they produce difference as opposed to the blocking mechanism that, through probabilistic algorithms, generates everything that finishes our sentences for us - for if all our sentences are set to autocomplete, the desire to give voice may not stir again tomorrow.

How can we find spaces of subjectivation, other ways of being with machines, programs and algorithms? The experiments of Gradín, Buonfrate and c0d3 P03try offer a glimpse, perhaps, of a way out, or at least nod towards the pressing need to find one. Their technopoetic/technopolitical practices problematize the specificity of the subject by highlighting how we're rewritten by the words of others, while the wealth of

experimentation insists that other modes of appropriation are possible, that not everything can be reduced to a statistical estimate, that poetry and art remain – even today - spaces of subjectivation not anchored exclusively in the human; that algorithmic literature, too, can bring forth world; that there are different ways of saying, of reading, of listening, and of abiding in the middle of a sentence.

Sources

Buonfrate, M. (2020). "No poseas un miedo". Disponible en: https://www.instagram.com/tv/CD9dRlCgBx9/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

C0d3 P03try (2019). "Poner el cuerpo en palabras". Disponible en: https://rapo.bandcamp.com/album/c0d3-p03try-palacio-l-pez-merino (no hay registro de las visuales)

Gradín, C. "Peronismo (spam)" (2010). Disponible en: http://peronismo.atspace.cc/

References

Berardi, F. (2018). *Fenomenología del fin. Sensibilidad y mutación conectiva*, traducción de Alejandra López Gabrielidis. Buenos Aires, Caja Negra.

Da Porta, E. & Tabachnik, S. (2019). "Escrituras virtuales y subjetivación. Los nuevos escribientes de la red" en *Heterotopías* Vol II, N° 3, pp. 1-10.

Garramuño, F. (2015). *Mundos en común: ensayos sobre la inespecificidad del arte.* Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Goldsmith, K. (2011). *Escritura no-creativa. Gestionando el lenguaje en la era digital*, traducido por Alan Page. Buenos Aires, Caja Negra.

Gradín, C. (2011). *(spam).* Buenos Aires, Ediciones Stanton.

Guattari, F. (1980). "Présentation du seminaire". Disponible en: https://web.archive.org/web/20081116053749/https://www.revue-chimeres.fr/drupal_chimeres/files/801209.pdf

Kamenszain, T. (2007). *La boca del testimonio. Lo que dice la poesía.* Buenos Aires, Norma.

Kaufman, A. (2007). "Imaginarios, lecturas, prácticas". *La biblioteca*, núm. 6, pp. 76-83.

Kozak, C. (2011). "Tecno-poesía experimental y políticas del acontecimiento". *Actas del Seminario Internacional Ludión/Paragraphe,* pp. 53-63.

---. (2019a). "Poéticas/Políticas de la materialidad en la poesía digital latinoamericana". *Perífrasis. Revista de Literatura, Teoría y Crítica*, 20, pp. 71-93. Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia.

---. (2019b). "Derivas literarias digitales: (des) encuentros entre experimentalismo y flujos culturales masivos". *Heterotopías, Revista del Área de Estudios Críticos del Discurso*, pp. 1-24. Escuela de Letras, Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba.

---. (2019). *Seguir con el problema. Generar parentesco en el Chthuluceno,* traducción de Helen Torres. Bilbao, Editorial Consonni.

Perloff, M. (2010). *Unoriginal genius.* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

Remírez, F. (2013). "Generación de textos por cadenas de Markov" en *Biblumliteraria*. http://biblumliteraria.blogspot.com/2013/05/generacion-de-textos-por-cadenas-de.html

Rivera Garza, C. (2013) *Los muertos indóciles. Necroescrituras y desapropiación.* México: Tusquets.

Rouvroy, A. & Bernss, T. (2013). "Algorithmic governmentality and prospects of emancipation: Disparateness as a precondition for individuation through relationships?". *Réseaux,* 1(1), 163-196. https://doi.org/10.3917/res.177.0163

Sibilia, P. (2005). *El hombre postorgánico. Cuerpo, subjetividad y tecnologías digitales.* Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Simondon, G. (2009). *La individuación: a la luz de las nociones de forma y de información,* traducción de Pablo Ires. Buenos Aires, La cebra/Cactus.

Solaas, L. (2018). "Autómatas creadores: los sistemas generativos en el cruce del arte y la tecnología". *Medium*. Disponible en: https://medium.com/@solaas/aut%C3%B3matas-creadores-los-sistemas-generativos-en-el-cruce-del-arte-y-la-tecnolog%C3%ADa-f6d36dc1edd5.

Striphas, T. (2015). "Algorithmic culture". *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* Vol. 18(4-5), pp. 395-412.