Beyond the Moral of the Digital Story. Belén Gache's Cyberliterature and the Values of Technological Art

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Abstract – In the face of the theories that dismiss digital arts for being facilitated by the capitalist system, this paper argues that a critical awareness on the dangers of new technologies does not necessarily lead to the condemnation of technological arts. Indeed, the evidence suggests that digital technologies are an excellent medium through which literature can voice a nuanced and critical consideration about the world in which it appears. The analysis focuses on Spanish-Argentinian writer Belén Gache's transmedia project *Kublai Moon* (2013-2019) in order to demonstrate that hypothesis. Firstly, it is shown that the novel reflects on the compatibility between humans and machine, in its content as well as in its forms. Secondly, it is contended that the axiological judgments on literature must be based on updated criteria when it comes to evaluating digital works.

Keywords – Cyberliterature; Digital Arts; Axiological Judgments; Belén Gache; Compatibility.

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1. Evaluating Digital Literature

The recent proliferation of digital art calls for discussions about its value and aesthetic legacy. In this context, the axiological appreciation of digital literature cannot be studied without a clear understanding of the role the Internet plays in the contemporary cultural field. Its conditions of creation, transmission, and reception imply a particular modus operandi in which digital literature must not be understood as a digitalized form of literature (e.g. print or handwritten texts that would have been transferred to digital media), but as "a literature that has been generated inside of/for/from/towards the electronic devices, currently digital, that is, outside of analog media" (Kozak 223).[1] This raises a multitude of questions concerning their aesthetic and moral value; most notably: at what level do the authorities of evaluation and dissemination of the literary work operate? What responses does digital literature give to the critical concerns about its own aesthetic value? And, most importantly, how do these axiological discourses interact with the ethical concerns about technologized human life?

The digitalization of everyday life does not reach any consensus. In his 1998 book, *La Bombe informatique*, the French philosopher Paul Virilio warns his readers against what he calls "the acceleration of reality" (89), induced by digital technologies and by the generalized use of new audiovisual media. Virilio describes the instantaneity of information transmission as a tyranny, and argues that it neglects the reflection period indispensable to the human exercise of reason (143). In other words, the philosopher claims that the speed at which digital technologies work is not compatible with a healthy human lifestyle. An ethical fear underlying this approach is that artificial intelligences may eventually supplant human intelligence. Virilio attempts to describe how the growth of the so-called Cyberworld is about to fatally affect a variety of fields, such as global economy, individual privacy or political systems. The cultural domain is not left out of his consideration: he raises concerns about a "Cyberbomb" that would "seriously jeopardize the reality of contemporary art's values" (143). As can be seen in Paul Virilio's warning, it is a commonly shared idea that new technologies can cause a decrease in art's value. Writing in 1998, the philosopher is concerned that the spread of digital technologies could alter the quality of analog art, without even mentioning the existence of digital-made art. The beginning of the 21st century has seen the rise of the latter, and Virilio's standpoint is still widely shared. Unsurprisingly, it has now evolved into a condemnation of electronic works of art and literature (Grigar 7), supposing that the aesthetic value of art is diminished "simply because it is electronic" (O'Sullivan 13).

Let us examine what Virilio suggests when he asserts that something so widely discussed as the value of contemporary art exists as a single and evident "reality." Does this so-called "reality" hide an "essence" of artistic value that would run the risk of being trampled or

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[1] I translated into English all the quotes originally written in Spanish and French.

forgotten by an extraneous digital medium? Should we not rather accept that if the arts evolve over time, as the philosopher nostalgically notes, it may be interesting to also update its assessment criteria? In 2005, a younger philosopher, Marc Jimenez, answers Virilio's assertions in a paper about "The Aesthetic Challenge of Technological Art," in which he presents a much more nuanced analysis. Jimenez claims that in the face of the increased production of digital art, it is necessary to avoid both the dystopian distrust fueled by nostalgia, and the excessive utopian enthusiasm. If technology indeed transformed the arts and the aesthetic experience, Jimenez finds there the key for a possible redefinition of what could be qualified as artistic (Jimenez 5). Some non-essentialist aesthetical theories reinforce this view. Philosophers such as Gabriel Rockhill and Robert Stecker claim that the arts are fully historical practices that constantly adopt different shapes and cannot be understood independently of their chronological context. As the functions adopted by the arts tend to evolve, the perception of their values should be subsequently updated.

What I mean to do is to unravel a confusion between two postures, which draws a shortcut between two related issues. I believe that the position (a) of reluctance against the propagation of both capitalism and new technologies in all aspects of our daily lives can frequently be linked to another position (b) consisting in axiologically depreciating digital arts. A purportedly logical connection is easily drawn between both: digital technologies are the product of a harmful capitalist system. A well-known ethical flaw of this system is its tendency to hijack any creation originally designed outside of its realm, in order to turn in into a source of economical profit (Piraud). Digital art is thus seen as one of the ways in which capitalism retrieves creativity. Hence, it is considered unethical, and it also appears as an inauthentic version of analog arts. In this perspective, the aesthetical value of digital art is necessarily lesser than the aesthetical value of analog art, if it is not non-existent. It is my contention that position (a) actually represents a far-sighted and necessary standpoint in a world of growing inequalities, and in the context of the social and ecological crisis, among others. However, I do not agree to consider that position (b) is a necessary consequence of position (a). On the contrary, the evidence suggests that digital arts are not necessarily produced in contexts of "creative capitalism" (Piraud) that hijack authentic creativity in order to make it economically productive. On the contrary, digital arts and literatures often try to remain free from those constraints, and that makes them able to avoid both the dystopian and utopian scenarios often brought about by the development of new technologies. The fact that the denunciation of the drifts of capitalism can be expressed thanks to the media produced by that same capitalism is a paradox that must be accepted as such. In the specific case of digital literature, cyberfiction often reflects upon the influence of technologies on the human minds and bodies, and upon acts of communication in the digital era. My endeavor here is to pay attention to what internet-made literary works actually have to tell about their own nature. I will first provide a general panorama of how that question is dealt with in some notable pieces of electronic literature. Through the analysis of Belén Gache's transmedia novel *Kublai Moon*, I will then defend the premise that the digital is a relevant medium through which art can voice a nuanced and critical consideration about the technologized world in which it appears.

2. New Axiological Perspectives for New Technological Narratives

The idea that digital literature can demonstrate a critical reflexion on the technologization of our societies is of course not new. In his book *El susurro de los mercados. Capitalismo financiero y literatura digital* (2022), Germán Ledesma summarizes various theoretical postures that have defended that premise. Scholars like Vilém Flusser, Claudia Kozak and Arlindo Machado consider that digital artists use technologies to disclose the media functioning of the contemporary world. In doing so, they reveal the power games hidden behind such operating modes

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(Ledesma 120-21). Since its earliest manifestations, electronic literature has indeed taken advantage of its media condition to question the role of new technologies in a meta-analytical way. The hypermedia novel *Non* by French novelist Lucie de Boutiny can be cited as an example. Its first episode was published online in 1997, and features a couple who met on a dating site. The whole story presents a satirical description of the character's problematic relationship with screens and the internet. Another early example is William Gillespie and Nick Montfort's *The Ed Report* (2000), a hypertext novel that presents itself as an actual US government report, with the idea to highlight the difficulty of verifying the authenticity of authorship on the internet (Rasmussen). Many more recent examples can also be cited, and poetic works should also be considered. British artists Pip Thornton's *{poem}.py* (2016) is one of them. This digital installation satirically envisions a world in which capitalism would have hijacked every word of the English language, and attributed a market value to all of them. Thornton enters famous poet's text in the program. By means of an adaptation of the Google AdWords Keyword Planner, those poems are then assigned a price in pounds. Alex Saum Pascual's work could also be mentioned. Her *SelfiePoetry. Women&Capitalism* (2016) is a series of bilingual videopoems that explore the often-problematic relationship between the self and the Web. A last but not least interesting case is that of Eugenio Tisselli. This Mexican digital poet and researcher is known for his artistic and theoretical reflections on the impact that digital media have on the ecological crisis. In his bilingual project *El 27/The27*, he also adopts a decolonial perspective on the relationship between English and Spanish, and on how languages are affected by the flows of finance. In a theoretical paper that he published with Rui Torres, Tisselli states that electronic literature should not adopt the modes and norms of mainstream capitalism,

> since the mainstream is, *par excellance,* the medium where the disruptive cosmology of Technic reproduces itself. Mainstream is the school that indoctrinates us, readers, writers and academics, into believing that there are no alternatives to infinite growth and cutthroat competition, even when such principles are hidden behind a mask of openness and inclusion. (Tisselli & Torres)
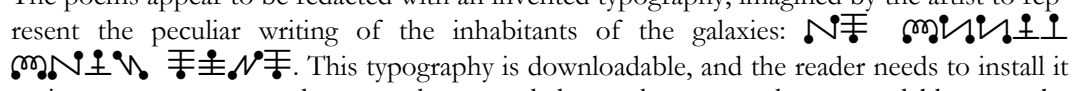
It is clear that digital literature can express a critical reflection on new technologies in multiple ways. I now propose to focus on the specific case of Belén Gache's transmedia novel *Kublai Moon*. That peculiar example should help us understand how an analytical posture can be demonstrated by digital artists in a complex and nuanced way. Born in Buenos Aires in 1960, Belén Gache is a Spanish-Argentinian essayist, digital poet, and novelist. Since the release of her *Libro del fin del mundo* in 2002, she is considered a pioneer of electronic literature in the Spanish-speaking world. Her experimental novel *Kublai Moon* (2013-2019) recounts the adventures of characters Belén Gache (named after the author), commander Aukan and robot AI Halim X9009, that arrive on the territory of the Moon's Emperor Kublai Khan (named after the historical character, and an allusion to Samuel Coleridge's famous poem). As this artistic project has been designed in close relationship with the Internet medium, *Kublai Moon* appears to be a highly interesting case study when it comes to analyzing the ethical and aesthetical value of digital art. As I will demonstrate, Belén Gache's work does not only mobilize technological tools as a mere intermedia experiment, but her artistic production also proposes a critical meta-reflection on its own experimental nature. Analyzing it can be helpful to demonstrate some of the ways in which the reader interacts with digital objects and with fictional characters.

Before explaining how this collaboration between humans and technologies presents itself, it is necessary to give a brief summary of the novel *Kublai Moon* and to describe the side projects that give this set of artworks its transmedia identity. This science-fiction story presents a universe in which human and non-human beings reside on many planets and satellites, in different galaxies. The narrative itself takes place on the Moon. The satellite is suffering the totalitarian regime of dictator Kublai Khan, a poetry lover that kidnaps hundreds of human poets on the Earth and keeps them sequestered in barracks. After having extracted their hearts, that serve

to supply machines that process their blood into ink, he forces the poets to write poetry without respite. Poet Belén Gache is one of those who manage to escape from the Moon to reach the Ratonas Galaxies, governed by president Julio Sánchez. Supposedly preoccupied by her testimony, Sánchez sends an undercover mission to the Moon, in order to examine the seriousness of the situation. This is how Belén Gache, commander Aukan and robot AI Halim arrive on the satellite as spies, but are immediately captured by the Khan's soldiers. Soon convinced of the goodwill of the trio, Kublai Khan appoints Belén Gache assessor of his library. She asks him to free the imprisoned poets, which he does immediately. The trio discovers that Julio Sánchez is a hidden poetry hater who wants to erase all of the Moon's poetry and that a Silence Bomb was actually hidden inside of AI Halim's mechanism. Without their knowledge, the real purpose of their mission was to make it explode, which fortunately does not happen. When the freed poets, who got their hearts back, finally return to the earth, the robot AI Halim decides to accompany them. While being assessor of the Khan's library, Gache discovers that the imperial city is a place full of corruption, violence, and betrayals between those who want to create and preserve poetry and those who secretly want to destroy or modify it. Gache finally becomes another victim of those conspiracies, and is removed from her prestigious position. She goes into exile and rejoins Aukan, who is leading the Galactic Poetic Resistance, until she is able to win back the Khan's trust. When she learns that AI Halim is victim of planned obsolescence, she decides to go back to Earth. Once she is back on her native planet, Gache finds the remains of the dead robot and picks up its hard-drive. It soon becomes a highly coveted object, as it contains precious information about the history of poetry and literary theory, as well as a poem generator created by the robot. Anti-poetry movements want to eliminate it, while pro-poetry movements try to restore it and upload it to the Internet. The latter emerge victorious, and *Retroexistential sabotage* becomes freely accessible on the Internet, for the diegetic characters as well as for us, non-fictional readers (Gache *Project*).

Kublai Moon was originally intended to be a science-fiction narrative built gradually through daily posts on a fiction blog. The author then progressively completed her project with new artistic elements. AI Halim writing poetry is not just a diegetic fantasy. With the help of a programmer, (the real) Belén Gache created an online poem generator that any curious reader can freely access to generate and read texts supposedly composed by the robot. Similarly, the poetry from the Ratona Galaxies repeatedly mentioned in the novel acquires an actual existence in the collection *Poesía de las Galaxias Ratonas,* published by Belén Gache on her website. The poems appear to be redacted with an invented typography, imagined by the artist to represent the peculiar writing of the inhabitants of the galaxies: �ⱳ. This typography is downloadable, and the reader needs to install it on its computer, copy and paste each text, and change the typography to a readable one to be able to consult those poems, that have strong revolutionary messages. In a series of Second Life performances, Belén Gache also gave live interpretations of some passages of *Kublai Moon* by reading the poems mentioned in the fiction. Once the project reached its end, she finally published a print version of the story.

Gache takes advantage of many technological devices to create her art, and *Kublai Moon* addresses formally and thematically the topic of the Internet's and the machines' influence on human lives. However, as Claire Taylor remarked, this does not mean that

> Gache advocates digital technologies as the teleological end point of literary experimentation; rather, […] her poetic play engages in a questioning of the very same technologies she employs, and her [works] demonstrate how many of the much-vaunted features of digital technologies not only have their roots in a much longer pre-digital tradition, but also, more importantly, have their own limitations. (Taylor 153)

The artist's position is thus openly nuanced, and I want to adopt that same caution in my analysis.

That being said, let us now return to the main research question. Which aspects of this work should we consider when evaluating it? It is by no means my purpose here to actually rate Belén Gache's *Kublai Moon*. Rather, I want to demonstrate that this novel, as a digital, transmedia and experimental story, voluntarily does not match the horizon of expectation associated with traditional print narratives. It is therefore necessary to gain an informed understanding of this artistic project before assessing it, and to formulate adapted criteria. In order to do so, I will address the question of the relation between humans and technologies. This topic has been widely analyzed by Argentinian anthropologist Paula Sibilia: in different publications, she explains how digital media actually have a huge impact on their users' lives, up to the point that human bodies become compatible with those technologies. Her theories offer guidelines that can be used to read *Kublai Moon* and the issues concerning technology, embodiment, and artistic value raised within the novel itself. This will lead me to determine what aesthetical and ethical standards are at stake. In a second phase, I will reflect on how the first conclusion should or should not affect an axiological perception of Gache's artwork. At this point, I will add Robert Stecker's philosophical works about the value of the arts to the theoretical framework. This will outline some key points to take into account when addressing the issue of rating. Finally, I want to study how the question of value is raised at a diegetic level in *Kublai Moon*, and how its parodic style prefigures a strong meta-reflection on the nature of digital literature.

3. Human-Machine Compatibility in and Around the *Kublai Moon* Project

As explained above, the idea that digital technologies are radically modifying human lifestyles and relationships does not seem incredible. Paula Sibilia has addressed that question in her books *El hombre postorgánico. Cuerpo, subjetividad y tecnologías digitales* (2005), *La intimidad como espectáculo* (2008) and *Redes o paredes. La escuela en tiempos de dispersión* (2012), as well as in many papers. In her first publication, Sibilia's standpoint on the expansion of technologies is not optimistic: she highlights the potential risks of this evolution, such as the generalization of control mechanisms. She also describes the current use made of technologies as a "faustic" movement: the popular German character Faust serves her as a metaphor for describing how technoscience follows "an insatiable and 'infinitist' impetus" that blindly tries to reach "the domination and the total appropriation of nature, both exterior and interior to the human body" (*El hombre postorgánico* 52). However, as an anthropologist, Sibilia remains in a balanced and far-sighted posture about the implications of these developments and dedicates most parts of her books to a descriptive and analytical approach to the phenomenon. She evidences how, in the course of the last four centuries, human lives and societies, as well as nature in general, have been deeply affected by technoscience, to such an extent that human bodies can appear to be obsolete… and upgradable. In this respect, the key notion that should be retained from her theory is that of compatibility.

Sibilia explores the parallelism frequently drawn between the body/spirit couple and the hardware/software couple, and explains how both couples can be crafted by technoscience in order to become metaphorically "compatible" (Sibilia, *El hombre postorgánico* 111). For example, she examines the case of bionic protheses that connect electronic circuits with muscles and tendons, enabling people who have lost part of their bodily functions to artificially recover them (Sibilia, *El hombre postorgánico* 170-71). If those creations are originally meant to be used in a medical context, it cannot be excluded that they may someday serve to 'upgrade' any

human body. Over the course of the last century, such changes have already been huge. However, more evolutions could yet occur, and the arts are one of the spaces in which they can be prefigured. As Sibilia puts it, "the science-fiction movies […] recreate those dreams of compatibility between computing devices and mental circuits, both sharing the same digital logic of software and hardware" (Sibilia, *La intimidad como espectáculo* 150-51). Indeed, the limitless imagination enhanced by science-fiction enables infinite experimentations regarding the interactions of humans with machines, and Belén Gache's *Kublai Moon* has to be viewed in this context. I now propose to examine how the novel addresses that topic as a central theme, but also how it mobilizes it in its digital construction, in order to show how the project's form interacts with its content.

One of the fields that is most clearly impacted by the imaginary technologies of the *Kublai Moon*'s universe is communication. Interpersonal relations appear to be meaningfully upgraded by digital inventions. The CCE ("centralized communication equipment") is a good example. This device is described as a microchip that both character Belén Gache and commander Aukan have implanted in their wrists, and that they can activate in order to communicate with one another via long-distance calls. The CCE can appear as a futuristic idea, but not as a totally unrealistic one since similar devices exist in our contemporary world. A significantly more whimsical invention is the interplanetary cardiotelepathic calls by which AI Halim is able to contact Belén Gache. AI Halim is presented as a highly intelligent robot:

> AI Halim is a last generation machine. It has been conceived with complex programs of social learning, and it is programmed with algorithms inspired by the adaptation mechanisms of living beings. It is part of a series of semiautomatic robots that are able to realize activities […]. [T]he last generation sensors, developed by teams of neurophenomenologists and neuroscientists on the Ratona Galaxies, enable him to detect human emotions and facial expressions, and even to emulate them thanks to its incorporated prothesis of socio-emotional intelligence. (7-12)

The description of AI Halim seems to be an extrapolation of Paula Sibilia's account of the post-organic body, generated by biotechnologies. In a faustic movement, machines tend to surpass the human condition, to the point that artificial intelligences humanize themselves (Sibilia, *El hombre postorgánico* 43). AI Halim is one of the imaginary results of those experimentations, which try to "not only extend or enlarge the capacities of the human body. It goes much further: it demonstrates an ontological vocation, a transcendental aspiration that unveils in the technoscientific instruments the possibility to *create life*, . . . subverting the old priority of the organic over the technological" (Sibilia, *El hombre postorgánico* 53).

That logic goes even further in *Kublai Moon*. When AI Halim decides to leave the Moon to accompany the human poets to Earth, Belén Gache accepts to give him her own heart, as he expressed the desire to feel like a human and to understand poetry. Indeed, in *Kublai Moon* the human heart is returned to its metaphorical identity of emotions generator, and it is then presented as nothing more than an accessory object. As it travels with Gache's heart inside its robotic body, AI Halim shares with her an organic relationship that funnily enables them to communicate from the Earth to the Moon, and vice-versa. Obviously, (the real) Belén Gache does not consider that the criteria of biological foundations and of rational uses of technologies must be satisfied in the writing of a fiction. They do not limit her whatsoever in the creation of new fanciful compatibilities between humans and machines. The cardiotelepathic calls clearly exceed the boundaries of scientific realism without any justification being provided, but they still reflect the faustic fantasy of a "possible needlessness of any organic or material support to go across times and spaces without restriction" (Sibilia, *El hombre postorgánico* 103).

The improbable digital creations described in the novel can serve the protagonist's purposes, such as the ECC or the cardiotelepathy do. However, many other examples show that *Kublai Moon* primarily tells the story of the main characters trying to resist the adversity of

violent, totalitarian powers that are fitted with the latest technologies. These are mightier and much more efficient than their own equipment. So is the Silence Bomb that AI Halim unknowingly carries to the Moon. Silence Bombs are described as fearsome weapons used by poetry haters to wipe out all the poetry existing in an area. The effects of its explosion would be to mute the citizens living in the surroundings and to delete any written text in the vicinity, erasing all the book pages of the Khan's library. The sudden erasure of linguistic knowledge, whether written, oral or mental, is the threat against which the protagonists are constantly struggling. This can be seen as another representation of digital technologies' faustic scope: originally designed to help humans in their daily tasks, the machines' artificial intelligence can serve malicious intents, or abruptly show themselves capable of backfiring.

Thus, *Kublai Moon* does not blindly depict a utopian world positively upgraded by digital technologies. Although the science-fiction genre offers a huge playground for the imagination, the novel also tackles the limits of IT development. There is nothing really surprising in the fact that a fiction represents these kinds of conflicts. What is more interesting, however, is that along with these thematic reflections, the novel simultaneously includes a formal experimentation also based on digital technologies. As explained above, Belén Gache conceived *Kublai Moon* as a transmedia project, meaning that the story expands itself in a variety of digital media and artistic genres. That is how the artist delivered a series of three poetic performances on the virtual reality platform Second Life. In each of them, Gache's avatar recites one of the poems that are evoked in the novel. One of the performances takes place in a virtual landscape evocative of the Moon, and the performed poem is the "Poets' liberation speech", composed by commander Aukan, the leader of the Poetic Galactic Resistance.

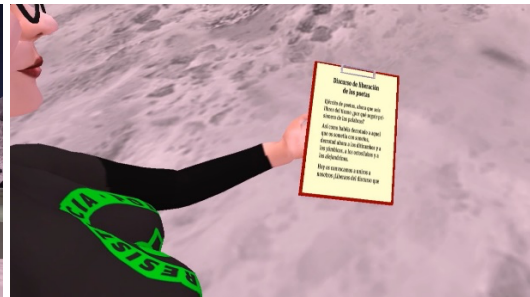Fig. 1 – "Discurso de Liberación de los Poetas" [20 sec.]

Fig. 2 – "Discurso de Liberación de los Poetas" [54 sec.]

As shown in figure 1, the performing avatar tends to assume the real-life appearance of the artist. This slightly reinforces the autofictional dimension of *Kublai Moon*, in which the only clear link between the author and the character seems to be their common name. Most importantly, this shows that Belén Gache uses Second Life as a digital extension of her 'first' life and that her avatar becomes a sort of post-organic extension of her own body. By expanding her novel in different platforms, she gets the opportunity to become compatible with the technological scope of her novel and to read the poem in a scenery that complies with the description given in the written novel. The satellite and desertic landscapes [figures 3 and 4] chosen for the other two performances, in which Gache reads anonym poems from the Ratona Galaxies, also enable such a visual immersion.

Fig. 3 – "Los pájaros del espacio exterior" [19 sec.]

Fig. 4 – "Mundos en colisión" [1 min. 11 sec.]

In the three readings, however, the performing avatar remains entirely on its own, as no public can be seen in the video. This particular situation puts to the test a traditional definition of the poetic performance. According to recognized performance specialist Erika Fischer-Lichte, "a performance is inseparable from the bodily co-presence of various groups of people who come together as actors and spectators: this is linked to the medial conditions of performance, or its mediality" (18). If we were to follow that restricted classification, Gache's Second Life readings could not be qualified as performances, for at least two reasons. Firstly, there is no bodily implication of the performer, as she only appears in the form of a digital avatar. Secondly, there is no co-presence, not even a digitally mediated one. One could imagine that some Second Life users may come to attend the show via their avatars, as this can happen in other performances on that platform. However, Belén Gache choses to perform in an empty space, meaning that the only spectators are the internauts who open Vimeo to watch the video recording in a delayed mode. It is not my purpose here to discuss whether these readings should or should not be called "performances" What I want to highlight is the autotelic dimension that is necessarily implied by such experimentations. A feeling of absurdity emerges from the scenes, as the avatar remains talking to herself, and the artist does not try to allocate it a more sensitive signification through recontextualization or through justifications. The strangeness of the situation is fully assumed, and indirectly gives a humoristic scope to the artwork. The fact that Belén Gache gives performances on Second Life has to be seen as a game, and it does not mean that she considers them to be the culmination of contemporary literature. The absence of any public attending the show voluntarily questions the compatibility between artists and technologies, and evidences the limitations and unique opportunities of live digital art. A non-literal reading is thus required to understand Belén Gache's creations and it is also necessary if we want to acknowledge the artistic meta-reflection that is at stake. Obviously, *Kublai Moon* does not formulate any explicit moral judgment about whether digital literature is "good" or "bad" in itself. However, it shows that digital art is capable of engaging in a critical reflection on the social impact of technological media, even when these are the condition for its own existence.

4. Cyberliterature's Value

It is now clear that digital literature should not automatically be assumed to blindly praise new technologies. However, the question of its assessment still remains. "In what senses is electronic literature in dynamic interplay with computational media, and what are the effects of these interactions?" asks electronic literature specialist Katherine Hayles. "Addressing [this question] requires a theoretical framework responsive both to the print tradition from which electronic literature necessarily draws *and the medial specificity of networked and programmable machines*. Computation is not peripherical or incidental to electronic literature but central to its

performance, play, and interpretation" (Hayles 43-44, emphasis added). If Hayles is right and the interpretation of cyberliterature requires a reading grid specific to its medial identity, I want to add that the axiological judgments that deal with it also ask for adapted criteria. However, determining the evaluation standards of digital literature by revising the evaluation standards of analog literature is not a simple task. Indeed, the latter is far from responding to clear and commonly agreed principles. Print literature has been the object of numerous changes and experimentations throughout its history. The forms in which it has appeared are extremely varied, and the different shapes adopted by digital literary works are more or less likely to have analog equivalents. Therefore, the brief analysis that I shall propose here does by no means pretend to be exhaustive nor systematic. It does not aim to identify artistic values that are only specific to digital literature, and neither is it meant to propose a good or bad rating of Belén Gache's *Kublai Moon*. Rather, it analyzes it as an example, and argues that some of the traditional criteria intended to assess the value of literary works can difficultly be applied to it in a pertinent way. In order to do so, it mobilizes Robert Stecker's aesthetical theory of artistic and literary values, since his book *Artworks. Definition, Meaning, Values* presents a complete discussion and a useful synthesis of various works that have dealt with that topic. After Sibilia's anthropological approach, adopting a philosophical perspective will help us understand to what extent the individual reader's response is influenced by the technological dimension of digital fiction, and how that can affect his/her appreciation of it.

Stecker states that "the chief, though not the only, value of artworks lies in functions they fulfill. An artistic function is valuable if its fulfillment implies the capacity of a work to bestow benefits on an audience" (256). According to his theory, a literary work can thus have different kinds of value: among others, aesthetical ones, historical ones, and most importantly, functional ones.[2] If Robert Stecker is right, there is no reason to believe that digital literature is axiologically inferior to analog literature because of its format. Each one of the above-mentioned values may find an expression through digital literature. However, their traditional definition may require an adaptation, as we shall see below. According to Stecker's theory, literary value is to be found in its various functions, namely, generating aesthetical pleasure, promoting interpretation, exercising the reader's cognitive imagination or training his understanding of the possible forms an emotion can take (270-304). Let us focus on that last category as it provides interesting results when applied to Gache's work. Stecker thinks that literature gains in value if emotions are expressed by an adequate articulation of their intentional ingredients (297). To put it more simply, the emotion-centered value of literature arises from a meaningful description of the causes and effects of the speaker's emotion. Those can therefore be experienced by the reader, who acquires a greater empathetic flexibility (301).

It is not difficult to imagine how these affirmations can concern a great amount of literary works. What is interesting here is that it remains difficult to apply to *Kublai Moon*. The transmedia novel can be described as dispassionately eventful, as it recounts series of factual adventures with very little comments on them. Few value judgments on the characters' actions are suggested to the reader, and even if their emotional states are sometimes mentioned, no processes of introspection are consistently developed. The relatively neutral style of the story, that in some chapters evokes the zero-degree writing, could possibly be explained by the fact that the first half of the book is written in the third person by an extradiegetic narrator, as can be seen in this example:

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[2] The values of Stecker's first category reside mainly in the formal, material experience of artworks. The second category focuses on the way in which an artwork is (or is not) representative of a given style in a given area and at given time of history. The last category includes the aesthetical enjoyment of the pleasure taken in reading, the cognitive value of presenting conceptions to the imagination, the emotion-centered value of creating an affective flexibility in the reader, and the interpretation-centered value of envisaging a creative and personal understanding of the text.

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> Behind them, two Mongol soldiers are threatening them with their pointed swords. The poetess
> and the robot have been discovered. […] The poetess does not remember ever having been in
> this sector of the Moon. She hardly remembers that, when the shuttle that was carrying her and
> the poet prisoners landed, it was completely dark, and that they had had to walk many kilometers,
> with their feet tied with silver chains, crossing a desert covered with meteorites and silence. The
> soldiers inform Belén Gache and AI Halim that they are being led to Kublai Khan, the emperor
> of the Moon. Once through the fields, the group enters a large building: the ink factory. (23-24)

Although the internal focalization clearly focuses on the main character's mind, the poetess' sentimental state is not evoked. The extradiegetic posture can however not be seen as the reason of this emotional disinvestment. Indeed, that situation remains the same in the second half of the book, which is presented as Belén Gache's personal journal. Here again, the telling of the events is most of the time deprived of the judgmental and emotional reactions that could be awaited from a first-person narration:

> As soon as I turn around, two Dragovites grab me by the arms and haul me violently towards
> one of the corners of the marketplace. There, I am questioned by another austere Dragovite,
> wearing a bathrobe and a tagelmust wrapped around his head. Where did I get that coin from
> the constellation of the Serpent? Only then can I see the verses of Rubén Darío crossed out on
> the tarps covering some of the merchants' carriages: "The singer goes on foot through the mead-
> ows, among the crops and cattle". (110)

This extract shows how the turning points of the novel do not result in explicit emotional reactions of the main character, even when she is the victim of extreme or shocking events. Rather, her response usually consists in analytically commenting on the situation, or in quickly changing the topics. Coming back to Stecker's theory, it can be said that Gache presents the intentional ingredients of her characters' emotions, but that the emotions in themselves never really get to be expressed. This absence of fictional introspection creates a rupture in the horizon of expectations of the reader, and therefore complicates the acquisition of an affective flexibility. To put it more simply, *Kublai Moon* does not depict characters with whom the reader can easily identify. Therefore, the transmedia novel cannot be valued for a commonly appreciated effect of fiction, namely, the exercise of empathy. I nonetheless believe that it would not be a far-sighted position to consider that the novel has little aesthetic value because of this particularity.

My argument thereon continues along the path chosen in the previous section: I believe that the structural peculiarities of the novel are there to formally reflect what appears in its content. As told before, the novel recounts how Belén Gache gives her heart to robot AI Halim, so that it may be able to acquire human feelings. By doing that, the poetess apparently loses part of her own emotional capacities, as it is suggested in the paradoxical affirmation that "she has discovered that she is happier without her heart" (Gache 40). Her lack of sentimental introspection can easily be understood as a ludic experimentation that seeks to describe, in an irrational and humorous way, the consequences of that compatibility between humans and machines. The irony of that stylistic investigation is also exemplified by the functioning of the poem generator that (the real) Belén Gache conceived. It is freely accessible on the Internet and it is described as the program developed by AI Halim in order to write its robotic, but human-like poetry. The poems generated by this program always have a similar structure of seven verses. The artist chose to maintain a fixed form in order to determine the rhymes and rhythms:
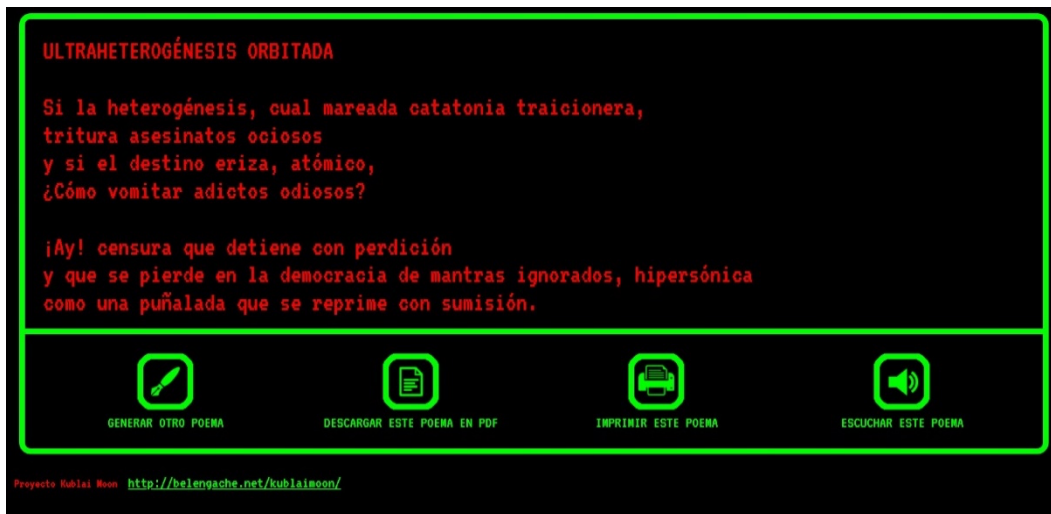
Fig. 5 – "Ultraheterogénesis orbitata."
Screenshot of a poem automatically generated on Gache's website.

This automatically generated poem can be translated as follows:

Orbited Ultraheterogenesis

If the heterogenesis, as a sick traitor catatonia,
Pounds idle assassins,
And if the fate gives chills, atomic,
How can one vomit addicted haters?

Ah! Censorship that imprisons with perdition
And that loses itself in the democracy of ignored mantras, hypersonic
As a stab that represses itself in subjugation.

As can be seen in this example, the database of words that Gache established to create the texts mostly consists of terms that have political, religious and technological connotations. The result is that the generated poems usually have a paradoxical and overtly ideological dimension. As they are randomly generated, their meaning almost always seems absurd. What can also be noticed is that the program has been coded in order to add a lot of prefixes to the words, increasing the exaggerated tone of these revolutionary poems. All this contributes to the unsettling and somewhat comical scope of the *Kublai Moon* project. In a certain sense, the emotion-centered value of the novel is superseded by its ironical and humoristic value.

Another category of Stecker's theory that is worth applying to the novel is the one that highlights the cognitive value of literature. The philosopher argues that "literature's cognitive function resides in the intellectual benefits […] of presenting vivid and detailed conceptions to the imagination" (292). A novel is valuable if it is "rich and plausible" (286), meaning that it must appropriately present the information that shape the narrative. This information consists in "detailed conceptions" regarding "ethical issues […], conceptions concerning self-knowledge and our knowledge of others, the emotions, the springs of action, the nature of perception, of personal identity, of free will or determinism, of society, of time – to mention just a few additional common themes" (285). Hence the importance of plausibility: if the fiction describes a relatable situation thanks to those "detailed conceptions", the reader becomes able of evaluating the possible futures that will result of the choices that the characters have to make, and therefore train his or her skills of "investigation into their truth" (285). Here

again, that pedagogical dimension of literature is not easily found in *Kublai Moon*, since very little information is given on most of the elements cited by Stecker. The reader cannot rely on a detailed description of the spring of actions, the emotions, the nature of perception of the self-identity, in order to cognitively evaluate the consequences of the actions. The absence of these speculative features results in a fastmoving narrative style, and leads to a very steady pace in the novel. That can be seen in the following extract, which takes place at the beginning of the novel, when character Belén Gache arrives on the Moon and is captured by the Khan's soldier. She is led to meet her enemy, the Khan, whose council charge the poetess with sedition:

> – Excellency, I must remind you that the punishment for initiating a rebellion and escaping from the writing barracks is to be sentenced to a one-year term of penal servitude in the archives…– says one of the assessors . . . .
> – Declaration of rebellion, flight from the writing barracks, instruction in an extraterrestrial spaceship, and conspiracy. If we sum up all of these crimes, Belén Gache will be condemned to life imprisonment in the archives . . . – recommends another assessor of the emperor.
> – On the contrary, claims Kublai Khan, stopping abruptly his assessor with a gesture. I do not only absolve you, Belén Gache, but from now on, I also appoint you to be my Poetic Assessor– continues the Khan.
> A whispering of surprise and hidden disapproval circulates in the room. (31)

That short example can give an idea of how plot twists constantly happen in the novel, without clear justifications always being provided. Hence, the novel ends up being extremely dense. In a similar way, it is interesting to note that the main character Belén Gache frequently guesses the intention of her enemies before she finds any evidence of it, as can be seen in a last example: "Thinking that no one observes him, he leaves a note in one of the dustbins. Would Brush Strokes be a hidden agent of the semiocapitalism? Did he just lay a track so that a follower of the metacode can determine the group's coordinates?" (147). This last observation is highly representative of the fact that little space is left for the reader's interpretation of the situation. One could expect that a science-fiction and adventure novel such as *Kublai Moon* may generate suspense. However, the story breaks again that horizon of expectations, as the constant sharing of the main character's intuitions undermines the principles of suspense itself.

Our understanding of those particularities in the rhythm of the novel can be improved if we look back to the original conception of the project as a work-in-progress. The author made daily posts on her blog, and the resulting text has never been subsequently modified. The process can nevertheless not be seen as a mere upgrading of serialized novels, such as those that used to appear in the 19th and 20th century newspapers. Once again, Belén Gache's approach to digital writing must be seen as a ludic experimentation that tries to connect the format of the novel with the content of its storyline. As I have shown in the previous section, a great part of the novel's plot is based on the interactions of humans with robots or machines, to a point where humans are 'machinized' and machines are 'humanized'. I therefore propose to see *Kublai Moon*'s narrative style as a metaphorical replica of the human-machine communication, or even as a parodical imitation of their *mis*communication. Computers' language follows the 'cold' logic of a codified syntax, and no communication is possible outside of the rule under which it has been designed. Cognitive extrapolation or introspection are not part of that language, and the novel somehow uses that machine-like communication style to tell the characters' adventures. In that respect, this is the metaliterary value of the novel that should be appreciated, more than the cognitive one.

As a whole, it seems that, exactly like the emotion-centered value of *Kublai Moon* cannot be understood in a traditional way, the cognitive value of the story cannot be appreciated following the criteria that are usually applied to analog books. As a conclusion, I reiterate that the

assessment needs to be done at another lever, and following new paradigms. I believe that the call for new principles and for new standards that emerges from digital literature is one of the aspects that makes its interest. Although it is not yet an artistic form that has effectively been canonized by the social instances of legitimation, the institutional recognition of digital literature may be part of the future. As Stecker puts it, "It is said that artworks derive part of their value from influencing other works, being a precursor, originator, or culmination of a style, by being, in short, historically linked in numerous ways to earlier and later works" (263). In the specific case of artistic creations made with new media, it is not an exaggeration to say that one of their main value is the breaking of the norms. Moreover, Belén Gache's *Kublai Moon*, as well as her other literary works, propose an alternative discourse on technological media, using those same media. Although the novel's story supposedly lies in the future, it gives a thoughtful, satiric insight into how the digital currently influences social communication. It ironizes about essentialist, instrumentalist, and mainly empty uses of language. This is how character Belén Gache paradoxically claims, at the end of the novel, that "as long as there will be in the universe beings that pretend to be the owners of language, and continue to confuse words and things, there will be no hope. […] [O]nly poetry will liberate us from the illusions of the language, only poetry will set us free!" (129).

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