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You are here. Prolegomena for a geolocated literature.

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Abstract

If the advent and the mass spread of smartphones and other mobile devices have already been the subject of several studies, particularly in the fields of cognitive science and sociology, literary analysis in this regard remains somewhat rare, especially in the French-speaking world. However, writers take advantage more and more of the potentialities offered by this kind of support in order to explore new literary possibilities. By analyzing some of these examples, we will ask ourselves how mobile devices are changing our relationship to literature: how are the mobility and portability of these devices, the geolocation and the new interfaces developed for them influencing our reading and writing practices?

Keywords

digital literature, hyperconnection, location, locative media, mobile device, mobile narrative

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Introduction: The mobile device. A new medium for electronic literature?

Even though it is relatively young, barely thirty years old in fact,¹ “electronic literature” has already been split into periods. When academics talk about it, they usually divide it into two major parts: the first period, when the emphasis was on hyperlinks and the resulting interactivity,² and the second, that stands apart from this “hyperlink-centrism” to open up on to what René Audet and Simon Brousseau refer to as “media polyvalence,”³ which means “a broad and diversified use of the technical options provided by the digital medium. This shift results in the multiplication of media, a continual capacity to update and the historical stratification of the discourse.”⁴

From this perspective, the smartphone is the final stage in a long line of reading devices that have radically changed our relationship to reading and writing. Without seeing these changes as clear splits or even revolutions, we will instead retain these stages as heuristic figures that represent epistemological constellations, configurations of meaning, in short, paradigms—an in-depth analysis of the legitimacy of this temporal breakdown and of the formalisation of these stages themselves are not within the remit of this article. The first stage of modernity would then be, if we follow Roger Chartier’s intuition, the transition from the roll to the codex;⁵ consequently, the second, would be considered to be the invention and use of the computer, the “connected screen,” to use the expression coined by Bertrand Gervais,⁶ for literary purposes.

While these two paradigm shifts have already been extensively analysed, literary studies on smart mobile devices⁷ as a medium—from all points of view—remain rare, due to the relatively newness of these devices: the mass use of smart phones started about a decade ago. Consequently, our analysis is obviously not intended to provide definitive answers, but simply to shed light on a few research options and a number of questions relative to practices of reading and writing made possible by mobile devices. To do so, we will use a dual approach: on the one hand, from the range of questions we intend to cover, we will distinguish three types that will help to frame our approach. On the other, as we progress, we will examine issues related to the introduction of mobile devices in literature through real case studies.

Always/everywhere. The potential ubiquity of mobile devices

The first characteristic, perhaps the main one, of this type of device is their mobility and portability. These machines mean that we can write and read at any time and in any place—a particularity that applies also, in theory, to the laptop computer. Nevertheless, it can be highly uncomfortable to use a laptop for writing or reading, especially for reading or writing while walking. As such, we can state that mobile devices are not only “connected screens” but are also,

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1. Even though the first literary experiments on computers date back to the 1950s.
 2. For a better definition and analysis of the typology of electronic literature, see N. Katherine Hayles, “Electronic Literature: What is it?,” *ELO – The Electronic Literature Organization*, 2 January 2007. [Online] <https://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html> [accessed 13 February 2018].
 3. René Audet and Simon Brousseau, “Pour une poétique de la diffraction de l’œuvre littéraire numérique : L’archive, le texte et l’œuvre à l’estompe,” *Protée*, vol. 39, no. 1, Spring 2011. [Online] <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/pr/2011-v39-n1-pr5004899/1006723ar/> [accessed 13 February 2018].
 4. René Audet and Simon Brousseau, “Pour une poétique de la diffraction de l’œuvre littéraire numérique : L’archive, le texte et l’œuvre à l’estompe,” *Protée*, vol. 39, n° 1, Spring 2011. [Online] <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/pr/2011-v39-n1-pr5004899/1006723ar/> [accessed 13 February 2018]. Another point of view on this dual period is that of Marcello Vitali-Rosati in his 2015 article “La littérature numérique existe-t-elle ?,” *Digital Studies/Le Champ numérique*, vol. 0/0, February 2015. [Online] http://www.digitalstudies.org/ojs/index.php/digital_studies/article/view/289 [accessed 11 February 2018].
 5. “The most immediate temptation is to compare the electronic revolution with that of Gutenberg. [...] However, the transformation is not as absolute as they say: a handwritten book [...] and a book after Gutenberg have the same fundamental structures—the codex” (Roger Chartier, *Le Livre en révolutions. Entretiens avec Jean Lebrun*, Paris, Textuel, 1997, p. 7). The idea that the major evolution in Western thought was the shift from roll to codex—and not the invention of printing—is one of the major threads in Roger Chartier’s thinking. For an analysis of the epistemological changes that occurred with the introduction of the codex, his work is enlightening.
 6. Bertrand Gervais, “Naviguer entre le texte et l’écran. Penser la lecture à l’ère de l’hypertextualité,” in Jean-Michel Salaün and Christian Vandendorpe (dir.), *Les Défis de la publication sur le Web. Hyperlectures, cybertextes et méta-éditions*, Villeurbanne, Presses de l’ENSSIB, 2004, p. 51-68.
 7. Here, we are just going to cover mobile devices with internet connections and a geolocation system. Literary experiments with text-messaging which were pioneers in literary use of mobile devices, are not part of our analysis.

and most importantly “freed screens.” The mobility they provide is incomparable with that of a computer, and electronic devices can compete with the portability of a notebook as a format for writing and poetry⁸ and, in terms of reading, with the accessibility of a book one always has to hand.⁹

Since mobile devices became products of mass consumption, and in particular smartphones, we can attest to a considerable upsurge in forms of electronic writing that are specifically characterised by the technical constraints this new writing medium imposes. They are conditioned, not only by the ergonomics of the platforms in question—Twitter being the perfect example—, but above all by what these devices allow—it is uncomfortable to write very long texts on a tactile screen—, the “digitally mobile” writer tends to poetically reflect his or her environment in haiku form, in aphorisms. Examples that spring to mind are the *Matin* series by Sébastien Rongier¹⁰ Arnaud Maïsetti’s¹¹ and Pierre Ménard’s photos,¹² and even, in the case of the *Arbres* series by Gilles Bonnet, where one simple word is used.¹³

The electronic writer, in pulling away from the computer, indulges in a contemporary form of wandering or *flânerie*: so, we are treated to images and notes taken in the field, literally while passing by, giving an account of a passing impression of a place, a chance meeting or the descriptions of a town’s inhabitants. Not only do these notes and pictures appear on the platforms, websites and blogs, the typical options for electronic literature, but they also give rise to specific literary forms. Among these forms, we feel a few examples should be mentioned for future research. The *Disparition*¹⁴ series by Sébastien Rongier, where a photograph of a park bench with clothing, a bag and a box are spread out, becomes a writing constraint for guest writers, leading them to reflect on the poetic, interlocking process of mobility: by inserting a description of the context in the literary fragment that starts the series off—“I took this picture in early January 2014. I was passing by this little park and I saw this deserted bench. I kept walking but then turned back, waited a moment, then took the photo”¹⁵—, Rongier turns the circumstances around the taking of the photo into a stand-alone piece of literary material, removed from the actual content of the photo. In the same way, the fictional “multiplatform” character General Instin¹⁶ questions the poetics of mobility from the reader’s side: *SP 38*¹⁷ “Instin’s international poster campaign” as well as the so-called “unofficial”¹⁸ version, gathers testimonials about the General’s appearances in

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8. For an examination of the role of the notebook in writing, especially for the writer-flâneur, see Bertrand Gervais, “De lignes en lignes. Poétique de l’écrivain-flâneur,” *Captures 2*, n° 2, 2017. [Online] <http://revuecaptures.org/article-dune-publication/de-lignes-en-lignes-po%C3%A9tique-de-l%E2%80%99%C3%A9crivain-fl%C3%A2neur> [accessed 11 February 2018]. Dominique Pety also took an interest in the figure of the writer-flâneur and his use of digital devices in an article in 2017, “Le flâneur, le collectionneur, le blogueur et l’art de la trouvaille.” [Online] <http://komodo21.fr/flaneur-collectionneur-blogueur-lart-de-trouvaille/> [accessed 30 April 2018], in Gilles Bonnet (dir.), “Web Satori,” *Komodo 21*, dossier spécial, vol. 7, 2017. [Online] <http://komodo21.fr/category/web-satori/> [accessed 24 September 2017].
 9. The use of the aesthetics and functionalities of analog media by contemporary digital platforms and media was examined by Servanne Monjour who gives it the term “retromediation.” Cf. Servanne Monjour, *Mythologies post-photographiques. Les inventions littéraires de la photographie numérique*, Montréal, Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2018.
 10. A series by Rongier on Facebook. “Sébastien Rongier,” Facebook. [Online] <https://www.facebook.com/rongier.sebastien> [accessed 7 March 2018].
 11. In particular, the “La ville écrite” section of his website *Carnets*. Arnaud Maïsetti, “La ville écrite,” *Carnets*. [Online] <http://www.arnaudmaïsetti.net/spip/spip.php?rubrique60> [accessed 7 March 2018].
 12. Even though Pierre Ménard’s multiform literary production and “multiplatform” are housed on the website *Liminaire* ([Online] <https://www.liminaire.fr/> [accessed 7 March 2018]), his flânerie and “poetics of mobility” truly come to life on Twitter and Facebook. Cf. “Pierre Ménard (@liminaire),” 2008, Twitter. [Online] <https://twitter.com/liminaire> [accessed 1 March 2018] and Pierre Ménard, “Pierre Ménard,” Facebook. [Online] <https://www.facebook.com/liminaire/> [accessed 1 March 2018].
 13. With each new photo posted on Facebook, almost daily, Gilles Bonnet changes the title of the photo by replacing a few letters of the word “arbre” with the number of the photo. Cf. “Gilles Bonnet,” Facebook. [Online] <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100011326977234> [accessed 7 March 2018].
 14. Sébastien Rongier, “Disparition,” 2014, *remue.net*. [Online] <http://remue.net/spip.php?rubrique723> [accessed 7 March 2018].
 15. Sébastien Rongier. “Disparition,” 2014, *remue.net*. [Online] <http://remue.net/spip.php?rubrique723> [accessed 7 March 2018].
 16. The literary avatar Général Instin is on Twitter, Facebook and on *remue.net*. See also Sébastien Rongier, “Le Général Instin, les vies multiples du littéraire,” *Fabula*, “Colloques,” 2017. [Online] <https://www.fabula.org:443/colloques/document4184.php> [accessed 29 March 2018].
 17. Général Instin, “SP 38. Campagne mondiale d’affichage instin,” Facebook. [Online] <http://www.sp38.com/modules.php?op=modload&name=galerie&file=index&req=voirparcat&cat=113> [accessed 7 March 2018] and Général Instin, “campagne officielle SP 38, suite,” Facebook. [Online] https://www.facebook.com/generalinstin/media_set?set=a.145641852137308.20796.100000744810185&type=3 [accessed 7 March 2018].
 18. Général Instin, “campagne instin non officielle,” Facebook. [Online] https://www.facebook.com/generalinstin/media_set?set=a.10031900002927.431.100000744810185&type=1&l=6a1512b4c0 [accessed 7 March 2018].

the four corners of the Earth. These traces are collected with mobile devices and contribute considerably to the development of the character's collective identity, questioning the role of the author today.

Finally, the mobility of these devices leads to the production of literary works that are specifically written with this characteristic in mind. *Lignes de désir* by Pierre Ménard is a prime example: the project is based on an online app using location technology to construct a narrative that is tailor-made for the user's movements. The author himself says that *Les Lignes de désir* "tells the story of a photographer who criss-crosses Paris from one end of town to the other, looking for the woman he loves who has disappeared, in places they used to go to together." The intermedia set-up of the project means users can listen to the story as they walk around the space in which the narrative takes place (the streets and riverside walks of the Ile Saint-Louis in Paris), developing, according to the route they choose and their movements (walking pace, direction, length of ground covered), a way of writing the text while walking.¹⁹ In this project, portability and mobility, in as much as they are the actual conditions that make it possible—as the basis for both the reading and the writing of the piece, in short, the underlying poetics—, prove to be separate literary materials themselves.

Reception/transmission. Geolocation, the Internet and hyper connection

The second notable characteristic of these devices is their high-speed internet connections—which makes them fluid hubs inside a global network of communication as they act as entry and exit points of all sorts of information in real time.²⁰ If the computer is a "connected screen," the smartphone is always connected, in space and time, it is *hyper-connected*. And yet again, the Internet, while it is crucial, is not the only means to make this *hyper connection* possible:²¹ integrated geolocation technology also contributes to the way our position in the world is being defined, by redefining our relationship to space²²—not only because the massive availability of location apps means it is rare to get lost in a city these days, but also because our spatial position has become a piece of data that can be shared, conversationally²³ and semiotically—a poetic signifier and material in and of itself, just as much as language.

For example, in the *Arbres* series by Gilles Bonnet, only a few of the photographs indicate where they were taken, through the Facebook location function. What is the function of geolocation in this case? Can we say that geolocation has a function similar to the one Barthes gave photography,²⁴ meaning that location marking testifies to the fact that something *happened*? To take the photography analogy even further, in this series, does geolocation have an indexing function that anchors the photograph in real life? And if so, what about the others?

Bonnet's use of geolocation is just one way among many others. Echoing the words of the artist Karlis Kalnins—to whom we owe the expression *locative media*, and for whom "location describes a situation, not a place"—the Montreal collective *Dérives*²⁵ questions the techno-centred construction of the idea of geolocation, based notably on GPS technology.

19. Pierre Ménard, *Les Lignes de désir*, 2015-2016. [Online] <http://leslignesdedesir.net> [accessed 12 March 2018].

20. For an in-depth examination of the changes the Internet has wrought on human perception of time and space, see, cf. Boris Beaudé, *Changer l'espace, changer la société*, Limoges, FYP, 2012.

21. Louise Merzeau, using and developing the terminology adopted by Régis Debray's mediology, proposed that the digital era be referred to as a hypersphere, as it is characterised by the sharing of information by hypertext. For Merzeau the paradigm change came from the existence of a connected network that enabled the exchange of hyperlinks, but we feel that it is the possibility to access the network at all times and anywhere that brings us into the hypersphere. Cf. Louise Merzeau, "De la vidéosphère à l'hypersphère. Une nouvelle feuille de route," *Médium*, n° 13, 2017. [Online] <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00491049/document> [accessed 13 February 2018].

22. On this subject, see the seminal study by Nicolas Nova, *Les Médias géolocalisés. Comprendre les nouveaux espaces numériques*, Limoges, FYP, 2009.

23. When I say "conversational" the meaning is the same as André Gunthert with regard to digital images. Cf. André Gunthert, *L'Image partagée. La photographie numérique*, Paris, Textuel, 2015.

24. Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Notes sur la photographie*, Paris, Gallimard/Seuil, 1980.

25. The *Dérives* collective saw the light of day first on the personal website of Victoria Welby, a writer from Montreal. It then transferred to the website www.derives.xyz, that also closed down in 2017. It is currently ongoing, using Twitter and Instagram, on the participants' personal accounts. The last update, and a detailed description of the project, dated March 3, 2016 can be consulted on Victoria Welby's site which is archived on Archive.org: [Online] <https://web.archive.org/web/20160311134549/http://victoriawelby.ca/derives/fiche> [accessed 8 March 2018].

Taking literature to Twitter, and, to a lesser extent, Instagram, using the *hashtag* #*dérive* and a hashtag that indicates the name of a piece of Montreal’s urban landscape—streets, alleyways, neighbourhoods, parks, etc.—, the collective shows us the possibility of rethinking the idea of geolocation from a literary point of view: the located-being somewhere in space, is not only defined through technology, but also—and perhaps most of all—through the discursive construction of the idea of place.²⁶

Another possibility for diverting away from the technical aspect of geolocation is that established by Cécile Portier. Her writing workshop *Traque traces*,²⁷ asked high school students to write two series of numbers, with no explanations:²⁸ they came up with the GPS coordinates of a given place. While the point where latitude meets longitude is just that, a point in space, a simple place is given a body and depth when inserted into a narrative network, that go beyond mere occupation of a space: in fitting poetically into the construction of a literary story, the place gains a real identity thanks to the narrativization of its *location*.

Walking/reading/writing. Interface and literary gestures

The final category of questions calls for an analysis of the material nature of this type of device. The material nature of the traditional paper book has been the subject of much study, in particular with the new epistemology brought by the codex, and the advent of the computer. The introduction the tactile screens should also be covered in light of the new relationship between user—be it writer or reader—and the device itself. Taking Chartier’s reflection a little further, when he says that “with the computer, the mediation of the keyboard [...] sets up a rift between the writer and the text,” it seems legitimate to ask what the consequences are of a form of reading and writing that requires one to touch the body of the text on a screen? What new interfaces and gestures will mobile, geolocated devices lead to?²⁹

One meaningful example of the new possibilities provided by these interfaces and literary gestures is the one we already mentioned, *Lignes de désir* by Pierre Ménard. According to the author, this mobile app uses a base of “365 texts specifically written for a non-linear reading that allows the process to be arbitrary.”³⁰ Even though Pierre Ménard is indeed the author of all of the texts—of the story—, it is the user who strings them together, each time producing a different story, determined by the route and pace of the individual walking around the Ile Saint-Louis. This is the same process Kristin Veel described when talking about the archetypal figure of the *flâneur* in the labyrinth-city and, by extension, the ergodic reader: “*the reader has to perform the process of the implied author, not that of the author.*”³¹ The poetics of the “abandonment” of the authorial function in favour of the reader forms the basis of *Lignes de désir* also: as Pierre Ménard himself tells us, underlining the way the book and the city are so closely intertwined “a book becomes another book each time we read it. A city is the same kind of invention, a trip through time, each journey changes it. Walking in the streets, as if through the pages of a book, keeping a trace, with, over time, the surprise of seeing a path developing that did not exist when we were travelling.”³² Pierre Ménard’s project sees the

26. See Daniel Chartier on this subject, “Introduction. Penser le lieu comme discours,” in Daniel Chartier, Marie Parent and Stéphanie Vallières (dir.), *L’Idée du lieu*, Montréal, UQAM/Figura, le Centre de recherche sur le texte et l’imaginaire, vol. 34, 2013, p. 15-25.

27. The writer-in-residence programme at the Lycée Henri Wallon in Aubervilliers gave rise to a work based on the deviation and appropriation of the data we produce every time we go online. The <http://petiteracine.net/traquettraces/> is now off-line, but most of Portier’s work can be seen on Archive.org. Cécile Portier, *Traque traces, une fiction*, 2011. [Online] <https://web.archive.org/web/20160314105711/http://petiteracine.net/traquettraces/> [accessed 8 March 2018].

28. The Résidence assignée section details the process of identity construction of places that appear in Traque Traces. Cécile Portier, “Résidence assignée,” *Traque traces, une fiction*, 2011. [Online] <https://web.archive.org/web/20160314101707/http://petiteracine.net/traquettraces/assignation-a-residence> [accessed 8 March 2018].

29. On the idea of interface in the digital age, see Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, Cambridge/Malden, Polity Press, 2012. For a philosophical take on the notion of gestures in the digital environment, see Peppe Cavallari, “Les gestes dans l’environnement numérique : la ponctuation des affects,” *Revue française des sciences de l’information et de la communication*, no. 11, 2017. [Online] <http://rfsic.revues.org/2882> [accessed 23 September 2017].

30. Pierre Ménard, “Présentation,” *Les Lignes de désir*, 2015-2016. [Online] <https://lignesdesir.wordpress.com/presentation/> [accessed 9 March 2018].

31. Kristin Veel, “The Irreducibility of Space: Labyrinths, Cities, Cyberspace,” *Diacritics*, vol. 33, no. 3/4, Autumn-Winter, “New Coordinates: Spatial Mappings, National Trajectories,” 2003, p. 168.

32. Pierre Ménard, *Les Lignes de désir*, 2015-2016. [Online] <http://leslignesdesdesir.net> [accessed 12 March 2018].

entire body becoming a literary interface, thanks to which the user generates his or her own reading and writing path:³³ the way the texts from the database arrange themselves according to the walking, stopping, slowing down and wanderings of the user make them as much about writing as reading.

Conclusion

Mobility, portability, geolocation, interface and gestures are but elements through which we can shed light on the changes that have occurred since the advent of mobile devices, when they are used as literary media in writing and reading practices. Other perspectives are also needed for a better overall understanding of the issue: narratology, semiotics, analysis of the structure, form and literary motifs can answer questions that involves digital literature and paper literature alike, and that have little to do with the purely technological side of this type of literature.

Nevertheless, what we have tried to do in this article, by suggesting the research options mentioned above, is to outline the specific characteristics of this type of medium, that make mobile devices stand out specifically from other contemporary literary media, be they digital or not. Each category of issues leads to other transversal questions, both intra-literary and extra-literary: geolocation, for example, leads to new poetic material as much as it does to new platforms for literary production that exploit the technology for writing and reading. A complete study of this new form of literature requires a multidisciplinary approach, that can analyse these new practices on a number of levels.

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33. The user does have access to readings of the texts, but the author uses the term “reading” so we will do the same.

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