From the Baroque to Twitter: Tracing the Literary Heritage of Digital Genres

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This article explores contemporary digital literary genres and the complex negotiations they undertake with earlier literary experimentation. Viewing digital literature as works on a continuum, the article addresses in particular the ways in which authors of digital works in the Hispanic world speak back to rich tradition of literary experimentation which goes well beyond the Anglophone. The article takes as examples the hypermedia *novela negra* of Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez, the blog aphorisms of Eduardo Navas, and the electronic poetry of Belén Gache, and traces their response to prior literary experimentation, and to contemporary digital technologies. In their different ways, these three authors make sustained intertextual references to prior generations of literary experimentation at the same time as making frequent metatextual references to the process of their works’ own (digital) creation. In so doing, their overt references to digital technologies themselves often play with, and yet question or thwart, key notions of interactive literature.

As such, our understanding of their works must be informed not only by their use of digital technologies and platforms, but also in terms of how these digital literary forms speak to a (pre-digital) literary heritage and how they dialogue with their predecessors and contemporaries. Crucial to this, I argue, is that this dialogue is critical and often self-aware, as their digital literary works often critique the digital tools and platforms that they make use of. Indeed, as this article will explore, the authors often make implicit or explicit reference to some of the key debates in electronic literature, from some of the earlier, utopian pronouncements by scholars such as Bolter[[1]](#endnote-1) or Landow about hypertextual writing as offering radical re-thinkings of the conventional form of the text, the author, and writing systems, through to some of the latest concerns about electronic surveillance and social media.[[2]](#endnote-2) In their references, however, these authors do not uncritically celebrate digital technologies as offering radically new tools for literary experimentation. Rather, they often warn us against falling into the trap of technological determinism and of seeing digital technology as of necessity emancipatory or experimental. In other words, it is not that these authors posit digital technologies as the culmination of literary experimentation, and as the answers to the limitations of the printed page; instead, they simultaneously use *and critique* the potentials of these technologies.

This complex negotiation between literary experimental heritage and digital technologies can be seen in the digital literary projects of Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez, one of the pioneers of electronic literature in Colombia. A leading theorist in hypertext fiction,[[3]](#endnote-3) Rodríguez is author of one of the first hypertext novels in Latin America, *Gabriella infinita*, which first started out as a print text (1995), and was subsequently adapted by Rodríguez into a hypertext novel (1998), and finally a hypermedia narrative in 2005. Following on from this, Rodríguez’s hypermedia narrative *Golpe de gracia* (2006),[[4]](#endnote-4) on which this article focuses, makes use of multiple media formats in the narration of a whodunit, with the central character, Amaury Gutíerrez, lying dying in a hospital bed. Our role as readers is to navigate the various components of the narrative – including sound files, still images, video files, text and video games – and piece together these fragments and clues in order to work out who has attempted to kill him.

As a whodunit, Rodríguez’s most obvious literary precedent within this work is the *novela negra*, but he also, significantly, dialogues with a surrealist tradition of literary experimentation that comes to revitalise and re-work the whodunit. This surrealist heritage is immediately made clear through the first of the three sections of this work which, bearing the title ‘Cadáver exquisito’, alludes to both the long tradition of experimental, ludic practice that informs this work in terms of its structure and procedure, and the whodunit genre in which this work sits in terms of its plot. As regards the former, Rodríguez’s choice of title is an obvious reference to the famous Surrealist game, *Le cadavre exquis*, first developed by Marcel Duhamel, Jacques Prevert and Yves Tanguy in 1925. The game involves experimenting with word combinations to spontaneously form sentences, and its title is purportedly derived from the first sentence to be created through this technique: ‘le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau’.[[5]](#endnote-5) Growing out of the their interest in parlour games and children’s games, as well as their engagement with Dadaist wordplay, this creation of sentences by means of the conjunction of apparently disparate phrases was viewed by the Surrealists as one of the preferred techniques in going beyond the constraints of the rational mind, and of creating ludic, collectively-generated sentences.

Rodríguez updates this Surrealist game for the twenty-first century, where these notions of chance operations and of multiple sources contributing to the sentence – for which read the overall narrative in Rodríguez – can be seen to function in Rodríguez’s collage effect novel, where multiple images, sound files, videos and games make up the narrative are evidently an updated version of the Surrealist game. Moreover, as will be analysed below, the corporeal disturbances affected by the visual version of the *cadavre exquis* – whereby figures are drawn collectively, in sections, resulting in a disjointed, distorted body – is transmuted into the fluctuating body of the corpse in *Golpe de gracia*.

The second way in which Rodríguez updates the *cadavre exquis* for the twenty-first century is to draw out the whodunit implications. Given that title of the original surrealist game made reference to a corpse, it is significant that Rodríguez now makes the corpse – or rather, a near-dead body, agonising in hospital – the central feature of his narrative. This near-dead body dominates the visuals in both the opening to this work and in the *Cadáver exquisito* section. Here, we see the body lain on the hospital bed with, across the bottom of the panel, four icons, each of which depict a head-and-shoulders image of a male, named respectively ‘jefe’, ‘sacerdote’, ‘maestro’, ‘padre’. [FIG 1] Each of the four figures is distinct: the first dark-skinned and well-built, the second bald with a moustache, the third thin, with receding hair and glasses, and the fourth young, with a full head of fair hair. Crucially, Rodríguez’s mingling of the *novela negra* and the *cadavre exquis* come together here: clicking on each image merges the identity of this figure with the figure in the bed, as the facial features of the victim morph into those of the figure we have selected. In other words, this interactive feature allows us to alter the victim, swapping one image for another. Once we do so, the content that is loaded in the narrative changes, with each of the four victims having three different visitors to the hospital bed. These un-named visitors are represented in silhouette form with an accompanying sound file which is activated when we click on each of the silhouettes, in which the voice of each character tells us of grudges that they hold towards the figure in the bed. In each of these cases, we overhear but a small snapshot of the words of each visitor, such that our access to the information is partial; for instance, if we select ‘Visitante 3’ we hear a confident male voice who threatens the figure in the bed, stating ‘¡Te lo advertí!’ (‘I warned you!’), but we do not know what this warning refers to. In each case, our access to the information is partial.

Here, Rodríguez’s hypermedia novel plays with one of the central tenets of detective fiction, since a key point in conventional detective fiction is the stability of the victim. In Todorov’s classic typology of detective fiction, the whodunit genre is seen as one in which ‘starting from a certain effect (a corpse and certain clues) we must find its cause (the culprit and his motive)’.[[6]](#endnote-6) In the classic conceptualization of the modern whodunit, then, the victim *must* remain stable, for it is precisely the victim, and the crime of which s/he is the victim, that lies at the heart of the detective’s quest, and that lies at the heart of the narrative structure leading us from effect to cause. By contrast, Rodríguez’s victim in *Golpe de gracia* is unstable, and can be swapped at will by the reader-user of this novel. By combining the structural features of the *cadavre exquis* with the plot of the whodunit, Rodríguez has taken the traditional missing pieces of the whodunit one step further: we no longer have a stable set of coordinates, with some elements missing that we must fill in. Rather, the coordinates *themselves* are unstable: the identity of the victim mutates; the names of the suspects are not given, nor their faces shown; and the context for what the suspects are talking about is unclear.

This revitalisation of the whodunit format through its intermingling with the surrealist *cadavre exquis* then permeates the entirety of this multimedia narrative, with the other two sections of the narrative – entitled ‘Línea mortal’ and ‘Muerte digital’, respectively – providing a ludic take on the whodunit, with significant reworkings of this format. ‘Línea mortal’ consists of a computer game which we must play in order to piece together clues as to the victim’s past life and dreams. An introductory animation to this section starts with the figure in the hospital bed which we zoom intovia an extreme close-up through the figure’s eye, and the lines of the iris turn into rings of wood within the trunk of a tree. This, in turn, them morphs into a sea-scape, with the rings turning into the spirals of the waves, and then moves swiftly, vertiginously, along to rest on a cliff along the sea front. We then enter a game world in this section which is an oneiric, fantasy landscape inhabited by mythical creatures and monsters and is, we assume, the inner world of Amaury, as he lies in the hospital bed in a coma. This animation also turns out to be, as we realise as we play through this section, a visual metaphor – a spiralling inwards, from the outer story of Amaury and his attempted murder, to the inner story comprised of mythical elements - for the mise-en-abîme that this section represents, and the blurring of narrative levels that this section undertakes.

Upon loading the game, written instructions on the screen – a common feature of the computer game format – address us initially in the second person and inform us that our mission is to ‘ayudarle a recoger los pasos a Amaury’ (‘help re-trace Amaury’s steps), but then an important slippage takes place as regards the grammatical person of the verb. By the time we get to the second screen of instructions, we are still addressed in the second person, but we have *become* Amaury, since we are commanded, ‘recorre tus pasos, Amaury’ (‘retrace your steps, Amaury’). Our identity as reader-player has now merged with one of the characters of the narrative, as we are interpellated into the game by this second person singular form of address; significantly, we have swapped roles within the narrative as we are no longer a detectiv(esque) figure attempting to solve the mystery of the attempted murder, but the victim himself. Again, Rodríguez’s mobilization of the notions underpinning the *cadavre exquis* leads to this destabilization of the norms of the whodunit genre, where the stability of the victim/detective is under question, and reader alignment is shifted.

The format of this section is also markedly different from the first section, both narratologically and procedurally. Narratalogically, our role within the narrative has shifted, since we have moved from the first section which positions us in the role of a static (external) bystander who overhears conversations taking place within the narrative world, but cannot affect their outcome. Now, in this section, we are firmly embedded within this narrative world and become a character within it. Procedurally, there is also a significant change since, if in the first section our interaction involved clicking on buttons which launched sound and image files, we did not, for all that, have an avatar, and our interaction with the keyboard did not move *us* around in the screen. In this second section, we are represented by an avatar in the gameworld and we must use the keyboard to move around this gameworld; indeed, our dexterity, and the swiftness with which we are able to take on board the instructions, determines the outcome.

In this section, we are charged with finding clues as we move around the game, the majority of which are hidden in buildings that we encounter on our way. Each time we successfully do this, the game awards us one piece in a jigsaw that we must fit together to find out whodunit. Yet each jigsaw piece relates not to the gameworld narrative we are in now – the inner dreamworld of Amaury – but to the external layer of the narrative, since it shows Amaury and the other characters of his real-life world. In this section then, as we play we encounter a complex interplay between the narrative levels making up this interactive narrative. We are playing in a mythical, inner mindscape, representing Amaury’s dreams as he lies in a coma, and yet are given clues relating to the outer world. *Línea mortal* thus functions as a nested story, since it is the-story-within-the-story of Amaury, but it then turns out to contaminate the outer story, as the boundaries between the outer story and the inner story become blurred.

In the third and final section, ‘Muerte digital’ (‘Digital death’), the reader-user is explicitly figured as investigating the death of Amaury, and has the task of discovering information, finding suspects, and interviewing them. Again, on-screen instructions position us within this section, and we now switch roles once more, telling us that ‘Ahora eres un periodista que investiga el crimen del sacerdote Amaury Gutiérrez. […] el modus operandi que has decidido desarrollar es clásico: delatar a los posibles sospechosos, identificar al culpable, y develar el plan criminal’ (‘Now you are a journalist who is investigating the crime of priest Amaury Gutiérrez […]. The modus operandi that you’ve decided to develop is the classic one: denounce the possible suspects, identify the guilty person, and reveal the criminal plan’). These instructions guide us in our entrance to this section of the narrative, but are also, tellingly, self-reflexive. The fact that ‘el modus operandi que has decidido desarrollar es clásico’ (‘the modus operandi that you’ve decided to develop is the classic one’) makes a self-reflexive commentary on the whodunit, and Rodríguez here makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to the rules of the classic whodunit that his hypermedia narrative is deliberately trying to bend.

This information and the suspects are accessed through a variety of screens representing different locations, starting off with the journalist’s office, where we discover information hidden within the décor of the office. Here, some of the objects are interactive, these being the computer, the filing cabinet, the telephone, and the diary, and we have to select files within these sources to inform our search. This self-referential touch, with the files of the narrative referencing the files that make up this interactive work, is one further instance of Rodríguez’s metatextual commentary. Subsequently, we move to venues in which the suspects are located, and here Rodríguez makes nods to the notion of the ‘modos operando clásico’, with buttons that bear the official terms common to police dramas, such as ‘psicología’ (‘psychology’) and ‘identificación’ (‘identification’) allowing our progress through the whodunit.

Moreover, intertextual references are also clear in the composition of the scenes representing these venues, with Rodríguez deliberately aping immediately recognisable images. *Casa cura* (*Priest’s house*), for example, opens with a scene depicting a table around which various figures are seated, with the priest its head and at its vanishing, point whilst around him sit the other characters, who are all outlines. The composition of the scene is deliberately set up to mimic the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, with the priest as the central figure, at the focal point of the image, and the plates in front of each of the other characters. The figures to the left and right of priest are all the suspects, and our role is to identify the culprit – the Judas figure – who killed him.

In summary, in Rodríguez’s work it is the potentials of digital technologies, and the point of intersection of the *novela negra* and the *cadavre exquis*, where Rodríguez engages in his most innovative experimentations. Rodríguez makes use of the potentialities that digital formats allow him in order to revisit and revitalise prior literary paradigms, and engages in a self-conscious commentary on the whodunit format that he mobilizes. Particularly notable in Rodríguez’s work is how digital technologies enable him to blur boundaries between narrative levels, and question some of the standard features (stability of character, cause-effect relationship) that are so central to the genre he mobilizes.

If Rodríguez’s work provides an example of how two literary precedents inform a contemporary digital literary work, and are brought together into a productive clash, other works use digital technologies to remix prior literary genres in order to critique these digital technologies themselves. Such is the case of the works of Eduardo Navas, US-Salvadoran media artist, critic, theorist and curator whose *Minima Moralia Redux[[7]](#endnote-7)* (2011 to date) is a blog-based work that combines an engagement with a literary predecessor with a self-conscious commentary on digital technologies. In this work, Navas re-mixes and visualizes excerpts from the English translation of Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (*Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*).[[8]](#endnote-8) Punning on the title of Aristotle’s treatise on ethics, *Magna Moralia[[9]](#endnote-9)*, Adorno’s book was intended to elaborate a new form of philosophical thinking, and focused on social practices and institutions, political and economic structures, the bourgeois era and the fate of the individual; it is, in the words of Andreas Bernard, ‘Adorno’s attempt to spell out the alienation of the individual into its minutest ramifications in everyday life’.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Adorno’s original text thus attempted to speak out against alienation and awaken the reader to his/her situation as caught within the political and economic structures constructed by the state in alliance with capital, yet Adorno knowingly chose to do so through a genre which itself was implicated in these structures. Crucially, as Norberg argues, the very genre itself – a collection of aphorisms – is undermined by the content since ‘Adorno packs a social-theoretical diagnosis into a generic form that is undermined by this very diagnosis’.[[11]](#endnote-11) In other words, the very genre itself of the book of aphorisms is a bourgeois genre: it forms part of the broader genre of conduct literature that, from its initial boom in the Renaissance, continued into the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth, schooling its readers on how to behave in accordance with societal norms.[[12]](#endnote-12) Adorno’s text, therefore, in its attempt not to oblige the reader to comply with societal norms but, rather, to unmask the structures underlying them, undermines the genre within which it sits, as it ‘robs the reader of the belief inherent to the mode of address of the advice book’.[[13]](#endnote-13)

There are, hence, two important features to draw out from Adorno’s original with regard to Navas’s purposes in *Minima Moralia Redux*: firstly, the sustained critique of industrial society and the dominant form of capitalism under which Adorno lived, namely statist capitalism; and secondly, the reworking of existing literary forms, both Aristotle’s *Magna Moralia* specifically, and the genre of conduct literature more broadly. These two features come to the fore in Navas’s work, in its recycling of previous textual formats and in its updating of Adorno for the neoliberal, corporatist era. Where the critique undertaken by Adorno in *Minima Moralia* was of the liberal, statist model of capitalism, now it is the neoliberal, corporatist model of capitalism that comes under scrutiny in Navas; and where the book of aphorisms was the literary format underpinning state capitalism for Adorno, now for Navas it is social media advocating our compliance with late capitalism.

The way in which this transformation and critique is achieved is through remix as an active, creative strategy, whereby Adorno’s aphorisms are remixed, added to and updated in order to comment on the era of corporatist technocapitalism. In its use in Navas’s work, then, Adorno’s text is not only simply quoted, but remixed, reworked, and re-semanticized through a variety of means, as will be analyzed below. Navas defines the type of remix in which he engages as ‘selective remix’, a particular form of remix that can be understood through Navas’s own theoretical publications on remix theory.[[14]](#endnote-14) ‘Selective remix’ is the second of the subtypes of remix identified by Navas, and defined as involving ‘adding or subtracting material from the original composition’; whilst this type of remix contains new sections of material, the ‘essence’ or ‘spectacular aura’ of the original composition is maintained.[[15]](#endnote-15)

It is this particular type of remix, then, that Navas is aiming to create in *Minima Moralia Redux*, and, indeed, in his brief gloss of the work, Navas explains in more detail the significance of selective remix in this context:

The selective remix consists of adding to or subtracting material from a pre-existing source. [...] The selective remix may not only extend the pre-existing material, [...] but can also contain new sections, while others are subtracted, always keeping the source recognizable. In this fashion, Adorno’s aphorisms are rewritten to make evident how his voice is still worth revisiting.[[16]](#endnote-16) (Navas 2011-)

What is striking here, therefore is that the selective remix, all the while subtracting from the original and adding additional material to it, still maintains the relevance of the original. This maintenance of the ‘aura’ of the original text in this particular case is, as Navas argues, intended to demonstrate that Adorno’s thinking still remains relevant. It is this attempt to update Adorno for the twenty-first century – or, to borrow Navas’s term, to *remix* Adorno for the twenty-first century – that we see coming to the fore in *Minima Moralia Redux*

The most immediately obvious of these remixes, and the most straightforward, is the visualization of Adorno’s text in the form of word clouds. The word cloud format allows for the visualization of text whereby word frequency in a particular text is represented by the difference in font size, and allows the most prominent terms of a given text to be grasped at a glance. This technique can be employed to visualize any text, but is of course in contemporary usage is most commonly associated with a particular type – the tag clouds of social media platforms, particularly popular on blogs. Navas’s use here of text clouds clearly alludes to this popular blog device, yet he does this to critique the very technologies themselves, as will be seen below.

In addition to the creation of word clouds based on the original Adorno text, Navas produces for each lexia not only a word cloud based on the original aphorism, but a second, different word cloud based on an adapted, remixed version of Adorno’s text. An example of this dynamic can be seen in aphorism 14 which remixes Adorno’s original aphorism, entitled ‘Le bourgeois revenant’. In Adorno’s original, a strident critique of the bourgeois order was voiced, in which, for Adorno, ‘whatever was once good and decent in bourgeois values, independence, perseverance, forethought, circumspection, has been corrupted utterly’, and the ‘bourgeois live on like spectres threatening doom’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Accordingly, the word cloud representing the original text gives prominence to terms such as ‘bourgeois’, ‘bourgeoisie’ and ‘economic’, amongst others [FIG 2]. The largest of these terms is ‘bourgeois’, and is located at the top right of the screen; calling our attention to this as the structurally most important key word, the word cloud visualizes for us how the bourgeois order is the primary structuring order to which all the other words on the screen, below it and smaller font – ‘property’, ‘administration’, ‘functionaries’, and so forth – are subordinate.

In the lexia that lies beneath it, and in thumbnail image towards the bottom of the page, however, Navas’s remixed version tells a similar, although subtly different story. Regarding firstly the paragraph of text, although starting off with Adorno’s familiar opening lines of the aphorism, the third sentence in Navas’s version has had a small but significant addition. The original text by Adorno reads: ‘Private life however is also marked by this’. However, Navas’s remixed version reads: ‘Private life is certainly marked by this, quite inevitably, given that the concept of “private” was originally conceived by the very system that now data-mines it in the name of the emerging social media market’. Navas’s version now updates Adorno’s aphorism for the era of informational capitalism and web 2.0. Whereas Adorno’s concern was how the private realm reflected the dominant social order – where purportedly ‘private’ institutions such as the family upheld and reproduced bourgeois statist capitalism – for Navas, the term ‘private’ is now interpreted in terms of data privacy, and his critique is directed at the fact that data mining lies in the hands of, and is used to serve the interests of, corporate giants. Navas’s new version of Adorno’s original sentence here thus turns into a critique of what has variously been termed ‘wikisurveillance’[[18]](#endnote-18), ‘dataveillance’[[19]](#endnote-19) or the ‘electronic eye’ – the corporate takeover of the internet.

Similarly, a few lines below, Adorno’s original sentence reading ‘For while bourgeois forms of existence are doggedly preserved, their economic prerequisites have fallen away’[[20]](#endnote-20), is transformed by Navas into an adapted, expanded version. Navas’s sentence now reads: ‘Bourgeois forms of existence are comfortably preserved even though their prerequisites have moved into an ephemeral decentralized system, which keeps them relevant through endless recombination.’ Again, Navas’s version updates the referent of Adorno’s original since now the system is no longer statist, but is ephemeral and decentralized; it is the system of late neoliberal capital, where power lies no longer in individual states but increasingly in the hands of global big business whose networks of power extend across the nation-state boundaries. In this scenario, the ‘endless recombination’ refers not only to the functionings of the classical liberal market where the constant promotion of new commodities ensures the survival of capitalism, but also hints at the workings of social media, whereby endless recombinations – or remixings, we might say – form the backbone of user’s interaction on social media, with images and data constantly shared by users across a range of social media platforms.

Further down the paragraph still, we see another addition that has not only extended Adorno’s original sentence but created new sentences entirely. In the original aphorism, the sentence reads: ‘that which is private has gone over completely into that privation, which it secretly always was, and the stubborn grip on one’s own interest is intermingled with the rage that one is no longer capable of perceiving that things could be different and better’. In Navas’s version, however, we now read:

The private is now completely immersed in privation, which from the very beginning was its secret leniency. By doing this, paradoxically, it is now in the open, and used as a tool of advertising. There is more revenue in tracking the flow of privation throughout the network. The stubborn grip on particular interests is intermingled with rage, and one is no longer able to perceive that things could be different and better.

In Navas’s new version, the private, as noted above, has now been re-semanticized to refer to data privacy issues on the internet, and his reference here to ‘the network’ invokes both the internet as structure and wider issues of network capitalism. Moreover, Navas explicitly links this notion of internet privacy that he established earlier in the remixed aphorism with advertising and corporate interests, a feature that has come under scrutiny by scholars in recent years. Christian Fuchs, in his in-depth analysis of the political economy of privacy in Facebook, notes that:

New media corporations do not (or hardly) pay users for the production of content. A widely-used accumulation strategy is to give the users free access to services and platforms, let them produce content, and to accumulate a mass of prosumers that are sold as a commodity to third-party advertisers. No product is sold to the users; the users are sold as a commodity to advertisers.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Fuchs’s argument within this article – namely, that ‘capital accumulation on Facebook is based on the commodification of users and their data’[[22]](#endnote-22) – proves a useful way of approaching Navas’s enterprise in this aphorism and indeed throughout *Minima Moralia Redux* as a whole. Just as Fuchs brings to bear some of the tools of classical Marxist inquiry on twenty-first century informational capitalism, illustrating how privacy and surveillance on Facebook are connected to surplus value, exploitation and class, so Navas reworks Adorno’s comments on commodity capitalism for the corporate capitalism of the twenty-first century.

The effect on the reader, as we browse through the various lexia, is disconcerting, as it is at times hard to spot which sentences or phrases of Adorno’s have been doctored, and we need to be familiar with Adorno’s original aphorisms to immediately pick up on what has been inserted. Some of the subtler insertions may initially escape our notice as we read through the paragraph, and, only as we start to pick up on the jarring of certain terms – the fact that the term ‘data mining’ is anachronistic in the context of the 1940s and 1950s when Adorno’s book was written, for instance – do we spot the intrusion of the additional content. Indeed, part of this strategy is precisely to encourage the reader to check back against the original, and Navas has enabled this for us, with a hyperlink to the original aphorism of Adorno’s in each blog entry, below the remixed text. Here, thus, in our reading, we are encouraged to look beyond the text we have in front of us and to go back to Adorno.

If such is the effect on the reader as we peruse the new, remixed aphorism, similarly, in the new word cloud we encounter towards the bottom of the page, Adorno’s emphasis has been altered to present a visualization of the structures of network capitalism. In this new word cloud, the terms ‘bourgeois’ and ‘bourgeoisie’ still maintain some prominence, but are rendered in medium-sized font towards the centre of the screen. Instead, the most visually arresting term is now ‘private’, rendered in large font to the right of the screen [FIG 3]. Dominating the screen, this term now takes precedence and a small ring of satellite terms around it, in medium-sized font – ‘now’, ‘system’, ‘social’, ‘elite’, and ‘caring’ – radiate out from it. It is now these terms, and the other smaller ones within the word cloud, that are subordinate to the term ‘private’ as the structuring node of the system. Navas’s remixed word cloud has thus mapped out for us the transition from a form of capitalism based on bourgeois statism in Adorno’s time, to a form of capitalism based on private finance and corporatism; in other words, from liberal, statist capitalism to neoliberal, global capitalism. Indeed, the addition of the new terms inserted by Navas within this constellation, such as ‘media’, ‘network’, ‘decentralized’, and so forth, indicate how the visualization we are now viewing represents an updated, informational capitalism.

In this case, and in many other examples in this work, the insertion of additional material into Adorno’s original sentences via Navas’s remix has produced a new, updated aphorism for the twenty-first century. Still containing much of the original content of Adorno’s statements, and bearing traces of its original aura – that is, the Marxist-influenced scrutiny of the minutiae of everyday life – Navas’s version brings into focus the minutiae of everyday life under informational capitalism. Navas makes use of a variety of new media formats and tools – the blog as platform; word clouds as visualization tool – for literary purposes, and in order to engage in an overtly political project. Significantly, this political critique is undertaken by Navas via an interrogation of textual formats themselves – whether digital or pre-digital. Just as Adorno was critiquing the very format of the conduct book through his challenging, critical aphorisms, so Navas is now critiquing the format of the blog and the wider phenomenon of social media within which it sits. If Adorno critiqued the book of aphorisms as a genre which attempted to ensure our compliance with the bourgeois norms of state capitalism, now, for Navas, it is social media and the blog format which runs the danger of encouraging our compliance with late informational capitalism. If, as Navas has argued in his theoretical works, ‘remix culture is experiencing a moment in which greater freedom of expression is mashed up against increasingly efficient forms of analysis and control’[[23]](#endnote-23), then the tools of web 2.0 must be interrogated for their downside as much as for their creative potential. Greater freedom of personal expression afforded by the internet and web 2.0 technologies is, Navas warns, accompanied by greater opportunities for the analysis and control of the data we produce; if this data is no longer predominantly manipulated by the state as per Adorno’s earlier vision of capitalist control, then now it is the power and influence of global corporations of which we must be on our guard.

In Navas’s work, then, remix as a resistant practise is used to rework an earlier text (which itself reworked earlier texts). Navas’s literary play here speaks back to and admits its debt to existing genres, whilst at the same time negotiating the possibilities offered by new media formats. Crucially, in his critical, resistant reworking both of existing literary genres and of web 2.0 technologies, Navas makes political comments on corporate (informational) capitalism, encouraging the viewer/user to look beneath the commonplace uses of the blog format, and to acknowledge the political economies that underpin them.

Where Navas employed the blog format to engage with prior literary works and yet critique the implicit power structures underlying that same format, Argentine writer Belén Gache has used a variety of platforms to engage in literary play in order to question some of the much-vaunted new potentialities offered by the digital for literary purposes. One such case in point is her collection *Góngora Wordtoys* (2011) which not only makes intertextual reference to Góngora’s *Soledades*, but also makes metatextual reference to the process of digital literary creation itself. In this collection, Gache allies digital technologies with Baroque literary experimentation, yet at the same time questions the potentiality of these digital technologies.

The first of the poems in this collection, entitled ‘Dedicatoria espiral’ ‘Spiral dedication’, displays the text of Góngora’s dedication of the *Soledades* in a caligramme-esque fashion. Preceded by a short prologue in which Gache sets out the Baroque’s favouring of the ‘estética multiforme y plural’ (‘plural and multiform aesthetic’), ‘las formas abiertas’ (‘open-ended forms’) and ‘la elipsis y la espiral’ (‘the ellipsis and the spiral’)[[24]](#endnote-24), the interactive poem itself consists of the words of the dedication set in a spiral which, as we move the cursor over the image, begin to spin at a dizzying rate. Several of the words in the outer edges of the spiral cannot be seen in their entirety and move in and out of view, meaning that our access to the text is always only partial. The vertiginous spinning of the text disrupts our conventional reading patterns, whilst the order of the original lines is hard to decipher.

In this ludic interactive poem, Gache makes explicit how the spiral stands as an image of literary experimentation, for the non-linear, for the multiple, and for open-endedness. In so doing, she alludes to the characteristics that many theorists have identified in digital technologies and in electronic literature.[[25]](#endnote-25) The spiral, in its refusal to abide by the norms of linear textual presentation is thus representative of Góngora’s stylistic excess and it is also, just as importantly, representative of the open-endedness and of the experimental forms that are made (more) possible by digital technologies (but for which Góngora and others had laid the foundations).

All these techniques combined make the experience highly challenging for the reader: here, Gache is attempting to re-create for us the vertiginous sensation that the seventeenth-century reader must have had when faced with Góngora’s poetry. Language and its presentation is not how we expect it to be, as the conventional linear reading of the text is disrupted, and words become slippery, constantly moving off the page and refusing to be fixed. Góngora’s stylistic excess, his complex metaphors, his overturning of the norms of syntax, his use of catachresis and his neologisms are thus, in Gache’s version, conveyed by a parallel experimentation with the physical presentation of the words across the screen.

Yet if this interactive poem presented us with a ludic but ultimately positive image of the alignment of digital technologies with neo-Baroque literary experimentation, other poems within this collection deliberately call into question the usefulness of the digital technologies on which they are based. Such is the case of the poem ‘En breve espacio mucha primavera’ (‘In a short space much spring’) which takes its title from line 339 of the *Soledad segunda,*[[26]](#endnote-26) in order to explore notions of literary allusiveness, the function of the signifier, and the potentials (and limitations of) digital technologies. This interactive poem consists of a series of pop-up windows, starting off with one bearing the word ‘sol’ (‘sun’), which itself then loads several pop-up windows displaying short phrases or words; clicking on one of these takes us to a further set of windows containing another phrase in which one word is hotlinked, and so forth.

Gache’s interactive poem thus leads us along an intertextual labyrinth, as we click on link after link, only to be constantly pointed towards a further signifier. In this way, the reader-user builds up a poem from individual lexia, generating the pathways from one lexia to the next through the links that are activated. Gache’s deliberate foregrounding of the hyperlink as poetic device here engages with one of the most frequently discussed features of electronic literature: the potentials for hyperlinking to offer not a linear, explanatory text, but instead to work via juxtaposition, concatenation and assemblage.[[27]](#endnote-27) In so doing, Gache draws parallel between Góngora’s techniques and the potentials of contemporary digital technologies. In Gache’s poetic practice, hotlinking is reworked as a (neo-) Baroque technique; constantly pointing us towards another signifier, the hotlink provides us with a twenty-first century version of the intricate, intertextual and self-referential nature of the Baroque.

Moreover, that the frame of the computer screen is foregrounded in this work indicates the metatextual and intertextual play that Gache is engaging in. [FIG 4] The conceit of the frame-within-a frame mirrors the Gongoran technique of the metaphor-within-the-metaphor, of the continually allusive textual play, of, in the words of Collins, the ‘elaborate grafting of several systems of connections onto one another and the mixing of their constituent parts in a hybrid metasystem of meaning’ that characterises the poetic style of Góngora.[[28]](#endnote-28) The notion, therefore, of Góngora’s poetry as allusive, as setting up metaphors that refer to other metaphors, and of drawing the reader into a rich web of intertextual allusions is represented here by Gache’s mise-en-abime of multiple frames and windows.

Another important element in Gache’s remixing of Góngora is that fact that the phrases that she has created in this interactive poem are in themselves mashups. For instance, the lexia ‘de muchos pocos de marfil dueño’ (‘master of many few ivory’) appearing in this poem does not exist in the *Soledades*, but is in fact derived from the lines ‘de muchos pocos numeroso dueño’ (‘master of many small realms’) (Góngora II, 316) from the *Soledad segunda* and from two references to ‘marfil’ (‘ivory’) in the *Soledad primera* (‘que, en las lucientes de marfil clavijas’ (‘that, in the gleaming keys of ivory’) (Góngora 1, 346), and ‘o de terso marfil sus miembros bellos’ (‘or of smooth ivory their beautiful limbs’) (Góngora 1, 489). Similarly, the lexia to which it links – ‘pues no de Leda enamorado’ (‘so not in love with Leda’) – again does not appear as such in the *Soledades*, but is partially derived from the line: ‘“Rayos, les dice, ya que no de Leda”’ (“Rays”, he says to them, “as not from Leda” (Góngora 1, 62-64). Gache has thus created new lines of poetry, derived from an intertextual play with Góngora’s original, suggesting new meanings in the reworkings and clashings caused by bringing together distinct phrases of the original. Her practice here thus engages with what scholars such as Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss has argued with regard to “mashup cultures”, namely that the mashup is not just a technological feature, but is also a ‘metaphor for parallel and co-existing ways of thinking and acting rather than exclusionary, causal and reductionist principles’.[[29]](#endnote-29) The facilitation of new ways of reading and thinking that proves central to mashups is illustrated in Gache’s poem here, and allied with previous, Baroque ways of forcing new readings and thinkings in Góngora’s time.

Moreover, a further notable feature of Gache’s poetic practice lies in the fact that the links between the lexia themselves do not follow a logical pattern. That the ‘marfil’ (‘ivory’), underlined in this lexia, links to ‘pues no de Leda enamorado’ (‘so not in love with Leda’) illustrates that Gache’s hotlinking is not intended to be understood as a straightforward explanatory mechanism. The linked terms do not have any obvious semantic or grammatical similarity (‘marfil’ (‘ivory’) is not a synonym for ‘enamorado’ (‘in love’), nor are they the same part of speech). Neither are the lexia linked through their location within the poem - ‘marfil’ and ‘enamorado’ never appear together in the same line of the *Soledades.* There is, in other words, no immediately obvious connection between the first lexia and the one to which it then leads us. Gache’s technique here, in which she forces us to attempt to establish our own connections as we trace a path across these deliberately disparate lexia, serves to imitate one of Góngora’s favoured literary techniques, that of catachresis. Catachresis, the figure of speech in which the terms of comparison are implausible, is here enacted for us via these hotlinks, which draw us from one term to another. Here, the reader is forced to create a connection, as s/he traverses these links in which each lexicon links to a term that is apparently not connected. As with the ‘Dedicatoria espiral’ poem, ‘En breve espacio mucha primavera’ enacts for the twenty-first century reader-user the complexities of Góngora’s poetry via the use of digital technologies.

Yet, significantly, Gache’s poem does not here present digital technologies as the teleological end-point of Góngora’s earlier literary endeavour, for she deliberately sets limitations to this hypertextual linkage, and frustrates the reader’s desire for agency. For any *wreaderly* agency promised by this poem is deliberately illusory since, although the reader-user can create meaning from disparate lexia, there is a limited number of hotlinks available from each individual lexia. Gache sets up an interactive poem based on the hotlink with its potential for multiple branchings and non-linear readings, only to then deliberately set limitations on these potentials, and to reduce the potential for agency by the reader. The promise that hypertext offers for an ‘infinitely recenterable system whose provisional point of focus depends on the reader, who becomes a truly active reader’ as mentioned by Landow above[[30]](#endnote-30) is at once brought tantalisingly into view by Gache, and yet thwarted. Gache’s knowing and tongue-in-cheek use of the hyperlink in this poem brings to the fore the potentials and yet the limitations of the medium.

In summary, Gache’s interactive poems engage in a playful and yet creative poetic practice. The Gongoran techniques that she identifies and overtly admires find their parallels in contemporary literary-digital experimentation, yet she does not advocate digital technologies as the teleological end point of literary experimentation. Rather, Gache’s poetic play engages in a questioning of the very same technologies she employs, and her poems demonstrate how many of the much-vaunted features of digital technologies – such as hyperlinking, visualisations and mash-ups – not only have their roots in a much longer pre-digital tradition, but also, more importantly, have their own limitations.

The three authors discussed in this article each engage with digital technologies for literary purposes, and each trace their own negotiations with pre-digital literary genres, but with different approaches. For Rodríguez, digital technologies are seen as allowing ways of putting different literary genres into play with each other and enabling a creative intermingling which revitalises these genres. For Navas, digital technologies are mobilized to re-work a prior literary text, but in order to critique the very digital platform itself. For Gache, digital technologies are allied with prior era of literary experimentation, but then to highlight the limitations of these technologies.

As this article has attempted to demonstrate, when exploring digital literary works, it is important to recognise a rich, non-Anglophone tradition of literary experimentation that informs contemporary digital practice. As many scholars have already argued, it is not the case that digital technology is always the radically new and in fact, digital literary practice draws on existing (pre-digital) experimentations.[[31]](#endnote-31) The works of the authors discussed in this article explore the new possibilities enabled by digital technologies all the while maintaining close dialogues with prior literary discourses, genres and traditions. They combine meta-textual commentary on digital technologies with intertextual references to pre-digital authors, texts and genres. In their different ways, for each author it is less a case of applauding digital technologies as offering new, anti-linear, revolutionary reading patterns *per se,* than of examining critically these potentials – and their limitations.

1. Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and The History of Writing* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992),. Landow’s early pronouncement that ‘hypertext […] provides an infinitely recenterable system whose provisional point of focus depends on the reader, who becomes a truly active reader’ (Landow, p.36) is one such instance of how hypertext was argued to entail significant reconceptualisations of the role of the reader. This was accompanied, for Landow, with the revisions of our conventional understandings of textuality, such that ‘hypertextual materials, which by definition are open-ended, expandable and incomplete, call such notions [completion and the finished product] into question’. Landow’s pronouncements on the new configurations of readership and new understandings of the text have of course since been nuanced by Landow himself, and, indeed, studies following his early work have challenged some of the ideas that he puts forth. Aarseth, for instance, all the while acknowledging the potentials that technological advances have, warns against technological determinism, critiquing the ‘rhetoric of novelty, differentiation or freedom’ which claims that ‘digital technology enables readers to become authors’ (Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.14. Murray’s research into immersive digital environments has demonstrated that although a substantial re-thinking of narrative is needed when approaching these works, the increased interactivity that they offer is not in itself a measure of agency Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1997), p.128. Hayles has cautioned against the fallacy of associating ‘the hyperlink with the empowerment of the reader/user’ since the ‘reader/user can only follow the links that have been scripted’ Katherine N. Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p.31. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Rodríguez’s various theoretical works, including *Trece motivos para hablar de cibercultura* (Bogota: Universidad Javeriana, 2004), *Tecnocultura y comunicación* (Bogota: Universidad Javeriana, 2005), *El relato digital: hacia un nuevo arte narrativo* (Bogota: Libros de Arena, 2006), and *Narratopedia: reflexiones sobre narrativa digital, creación colectiva y cibercultura* (Bogota: Universidad Javeriana, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez, *Golpe de gracia* (2006). http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/rodriguez\_golpe\_de\_gracia/ . Accessed 13 June 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For more on the *corps exquis*, see Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren ‘Towards a Communal Body of Art: The Exquisite Corpse and Augusto Boal’s Theatre’,  *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 7:1 (2002), 217-226 (p. 217). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell, 1997), p. 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Eduardo Navas, *Minima Moralia Redux* (2011-), <http://minimamoraliaredux.blogspot.co.uk/>. Accessed 8 November 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Theodor, 1973); first published 1951. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Although for ease of reference I have here given the author of the *Magna Moralia* to be Aristotle, the authorship of the text remains disputed, and most scholars nowadays concur in classifying this text as likely to have been written by a pupil of Aristotle rather than Aristotle himself (for an overview of the debates on the authorship of this text see John M. Cooper, ‘The Magna Moralia and Aristotle’s Moral Philosophy’, *The American Journal of Philology*, 94:4 (1973), 327-349. Yet, as Cooper argues, since it ‘seems to report in someone else’s hand lectures of Aristotle’s on ethics’, it therefore represents ‘the earliest version of Aristotle’s moral theory’ and so can be understood as reflecting his views, if not actually written by him (John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), p.xiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Bernard, cited in Rahel Jaeggi, ‘“No Individual Can Resist”: *Minima Moralia* as Critique of Forms of Life’, *Constellations*, 12:1 (2005), 65-82 (p. 65) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jakob Norberg ‘Adorno’s Advice: *Minima Moralia* and the Critique of Liberalism’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 126:2 (2011), 398-411 (p. 401). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In Renaissance times, the broad genre of conduct literature was mostly directed to the nobility and focussed on courtly behaviour and courtesy, but saw transformations through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the rise of monied interests and changing social norms. This period saw a rise in manuals addressed to the lower classes, and evidenced the ‘bourgeois preoccupation with efficiency’ (Jaques Carré, *The Crisis of Courtesy: Studies in the Conduct-Book in Britain, 1600-1900* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p.6). Indeed, as Donawerth argues, drawing on Armstrong, the conduct book in this period ‘helped establish the middle class as a group with shared interests’ (Jane Donawerth, ‘Nineteenth-Century United States Conduct Book by Women’, *Rhetoric Review*, 21:1 (2001), 5-21, (p.5). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Norberg, ‘Adorno’s Advice’, p.405. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In a variety of articles, posts to his theory website (<http://remixtheory.net/>), and his recently published monograph, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (New York: Springer, 2012), Navas has developed the notion of remix as an aesthetic practice in art, music and new media. Tracing its roots in early forms of mechanical reproduction in the nineteenth century, Navas subsequently draws on techniques of music sampling in the 1960 and 1970s to develop his theory of remix. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Eduardo Navas ,‘Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Culture’ in *Mashup Cultures*, edited by Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss (New York: Springer, 2010), pp. 157-177(p.157). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Eduardo Navas, *Minima Moralia Redux* (2011-), <http://minimamoraliaredux.blogspot.co.uk/>. Accessed 8 November 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Theodor Adorno, 2005. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, translated by. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Mike Arntfield, ‘Wikisurveillance: A Genealogy of Cooperative Watching in the West’, *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society*, 28:1 (2008), 37-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Roger A. Clarke, ‘Information Technology and Dataveillance, *Communications of the ACM*, 31: 5 (1988), 498–512. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. This appears on p.34 of the Verso edition of Adorno’s *Mimina Moralia*, but is slightly adapted in Navas’s version. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Christian Fuchs. ‘The Political Economy of Privacy on Facebook’, *Television and New Media*, 13: 2 (2012), 139-159 (p.144). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Fuchs. ‘The Political Economy of Privacy on Facebook’ p.139. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Eduardo Navas ,‘Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Culture’, (p.174). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Belén Gache, *Góngora Wordtoys* (2011), <http://belengache.net/gongorawordtoys/gongorawordtoys.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See Landow, *Hypertext*, Bolter, *Writing Space* and Hayles *Electronic Literature*, mentioned above. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Luis de Góngora, *Soledades*, edited by John Beverley (Madrid: Cátedra, 1980), 337-339. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See Hayles, *Electronic Literature* pp. 6-7 and Landow *Hypertext*, p. 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Marsha Suzan Collins, *The Soledades, Góngora’s Masque of the Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p.135. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss, “Introduction: Mashups, Remix Practices and the Recombination of Existing Digital Content,” in *Mashup Cultures*, edited by StefanSonvilla-Weiss,(Vienna: Springer, 2010), pp. 8–23 (p.8). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) (p.36). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See, for instance, Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetics* (Tuscaloosa : University of Alabama Press, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)