Randomness in Cybertext: A Study on Computer-Generated Poetry from the Perspective of Semiotics

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Abstract : The use of chance procedures and randomizers in poetry-writing can be traced back to surrealist works, which, by appealing to Sigmund Freud's theories, were still logocentrism. In the 1960s, random permutation and combination were extensively used by the Oulipo, John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, which further deconstructed the metaphysical presence of writing. Today, the randomly-generated digital poetry has emerged as a genre of cybertext which should be co-authored by readers. At the same time, the classical theories have now been updated by cybernetics and media theories. N· Katherine Hayles put forward the concept of 'the floating signifiers' by Jacques Lacan to be the 'the flickering signifiers' , arguing that the technology per se has become a part of the textual production. This paper makes a historical review of the computer-generated poetry in the perspective of semiotics, emphasizing that the randomly-generated digital poetry which hands over the dual tasks of both interpretation and writing to the readers demonstrates the intervention of media technology in literature. With the participation of computerized algorithm and programming languages, poems randomly generated by computers have not only blurred the boundary between encoder and decoder, but also raises the issue of human-machine. It is also a significant feature of the cybertext that the productive process of the text is full of randomness.