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Interfacial media figures

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For some time, critics tried to circumscribe the “novelty” of digital literature in rather generalist terms, taking either into account its relation to literary avant-gardes, or focalizing on its technical features; these theoretical approaches were often blind to contents. Now that digital literature seems more and more aesthetically convincing, time has come to define with more precision its stylistic features.

In order to circumscribe the poetics of interaction, critics first tested the validity of the classical figures of style. Jean Clément suggests, for instance, that the “term” metaphor, applied to hypertext, allows to illustrate that a textual fragment can be read in different ways depending on the reader’s browsing¹. Initially, I also assumed that classical figures of speech might meet this taxonomic aim. In using terms like “animated metaphor” or “metalepsis”, I tried in my book *Material text on digital media*² to describe “the phenomena of meaning” in digital literature, when animation enters in significant relationships with the content of a word or a letter³. It is, however, probably dangerous to use classical rhetoric terms intended to characterize *textual* phenomena, whereas the signs of digital text almost constantly refer to different semiotic systems (including the visual one)⁴. We should, for example, wonder if we are right to talk about a “visual metaphor”, or if we designate nonverbal phenomena only *metaphorically* by this term. In the following pages of this paper, I will sometimes continue to borrow from conventional taxonomies to describe the stylistic devices of digital literature; in order to avoid fool-hardy analogies, I will try in other cases to invent a new terminology⁵.

Serge Bouchardon connects hypertext and the art of the ellipse; insisting on the specificity of interactions in electronic texts, hitherto unknown in literature, he prefers in fact the term “figures of handling”, identifying more specifically “figures of displacement”, “substitution” and “transformation”⁶. I think that it is nevertheless not so much the character of an interfacial gesture - touching or clicking, removal or roll-over - that transforms interaction in a “figure”, but the relationship between the gesture, the media content on which this gesture is applied and the media content appearing after the performance of this gesture. When the relation between the content of an interactive media, the handling gesture and the content of the media

¹ Jean Clément: “Du texte à l’hypertexte: vers une épistémologie de la discursivité hypertextuelle”, in: Balpe, Jean-Pierre / Lelu, Alain / Saleh, Imad (eds.): *Hypertextes et hypermédias - Réalisations, Outils, Méthodes*, éd. Jean-, Paris/Londres 1995, <http://hypermedia.univ-paris8.fr/jean/articles/discursivite.htm>

² French titles of books and articles, and quotations from French electronic literature have been translated by the author.

³ Alexandra Saemmer, Alexandra: “Figures de surface média”, in: *Protée, Revue internationale de théories et de pratiques sémiotiques* vol. 36, n° 1, Quebec 2008, p. 79-90.

⁴ See S. Goltzberg, S.: “Note sur la métaphore visuelle”, <http://www.info-metaphore.com/articles/goltzberg-note-sur-la-metaphore-visuelle-goodman-linguistique-semiologie.html>

⁵ Alexandra Saemmer: “Figures de surface média”, *op. cit.*, p. 79-90.

⁶ Serge Bouchardon: “L’écriture interactive: une rhétorique de la manipulation”, in: Saleh, Imad / Ghedira, Khaled / Badreddine, Belhassen / Bouhai, Nasreddine / Rieder, Bernhard (eds.), *H2PTM’07, Collaborer, échanger, inventer: expériences de réseaux*, Paris 2007, p. 155-170.

discovered or processed by the gesture appears incongruous, irrelevant, I would propose to call these phenomena **interfacial media figures**.

Most of the time on digital media, the relationship between the handling gesture and the interacted media content complies with the increasingly stabilized grammatical rules of digital documents. At the beginnings of computer networks, the possibility to handle textual fragments by clicking on them seemed so daunting that any link was considered as a figure. George P. Landow and Jay David Bolter thus considered hypertext as the main device in digital literature. Katherine Hayles is nevertheless right to point out the similarity of classical hyperlinks and footnotes or references in an encyclopaedia⁷. The activation of a keyword hyperlinked to a definition of a term, the entering of numbers giving access to a bank account, the manipulation of a textual or iconographic element enabling to reconstitute a puzzle, do not seem incongruous any more. The interfacial gesture mainly facilitates rapid access to information - gesture and media contents are therefore related according to the reader's expectations previously established by his habits.

The style of digital literature however, is partly based on an jeopardization of grammatical rules established by habits, "a gap between sign and meaning" (G rard Genette)⁸. Thus the figures I will try to identify and describe in this article, may be considered as indicative of the "poetic fact" in electronic text. As they diverge from stabilised usage, as they resist to the reader's habits, figures however run the risk of being first perceived as a malfunction, a "bug". If we take into account the instability of the digital interface and its influence on the updating of a poetic work, we can even go further and assume that the critic may sometimes consider as figure a phenomenon actually due to a bug! As I will further demonstrate, only the consistency between a detected incongruity and the context can help us to decide whether we are confronted to a bug, or to a figure intentionally created by the author. Perhaps, we might therefore argue for the existence of two distinct "aesthetics of frustration" (according to the term proposed by Philippe Bootz)⁹: in the first case, the resistance of the work to the reader is consciously pre-programmed by the author; in the second case, resistance would be caused by the running of the computer, by its "intent", by the instability of the digital interface.

While keeping in mind these general considerations, I will now try to identify some interfacial media figures in a panel of works relating to digital literature.

Many internal hyperlinks in the literary blog *tierslivre.net* by Fran ois Bon work in accordance with the established grammatical rules: a keyword, a part of a sentence announces the following parts of the text, representing a textual unity that can be activated by a click. In the text entitled "How the Internet multiplies literature"¹⁰, the typographical highlight of the word "Malbreil" in the fragmented sentence "see Malbreil" invites the reader to manipulate the word; by activating the link, he browses through a collection of texts composed by Xavier Malbreil (just the same way as one might say to the reader: "Take your Saussure"). Such a

⁷ N. Katherine Hayles: *Electronic Literature. New horizons for the Lit rary*, University of Notre Dame Publishings 2008. Hayles: *Electronic Literature*, p. 31.

⁸ G rard Genette: *Figures 1*, Paris 1966, .p. 205-221.

⁹ Philippe Bootz: "The Problematic Of Form Transitoire Observable, A Laboratory For Emergent Programmed Art", <http://www.brown.edu/Research/dichtung-digital/2005/1/Bootz/index.htm>

¹⁰ Fran ois Bon: <http://www.tierslivre.net/spip/spip.php?article676>

link therefore controls relations between strongly stabilized entities; primarily motivated by efficiency in a firmly established communicational context, it tells us nothing new about the organization of the world.

Some authors, however, attribute to the hyperlink a function that is contrary to the established practice; they use hypertext in order to create irrelevance, incongruity in the utterance. Another example quoted (and translated) from the text “How the Internet multiplies literature” by François Bon:

What is fascinating with the Internet is the link that we can create between peers (peer to peer), the idea of reticle starts with a self-investment, which undoubtedly comes already too late. Internet can not function according to the utopias of common houses: also because it is anchored in places devoted to singular creation, whose guiding principle would be rather similar to a constellation; and its literary content, gradually asserting itself, will be done from these singularities, through which in each of them the language goes towards the world.

In French, the word “reticle” has a double meaning, designating at the same time a constellation of the southern hemisphere, and a network of fine lines, dots, cross hairs, or wires in the focal plane of the eyepiece of an optical instrument. Nevertheless, the hyperlink on the word “réticule” does not lead to a definition of the term, but to the blog *LittéRéticulaire* by Patrick Rebollar. The activation of the link on “constellation” allows the reader to discover a page of the website *desordre.net*: In the middle of a starry sky, a button is set, with the legend “randomly Balthazar”. All the small points of light can be triggered, guiding to other sites, giving substance to what has often been called metaphorically the “Internet galaxy” or the “cyberspace”, and making significant and visible what the text affirms. When the interface gesture of the click thus brings forward an element that enters with what is triggered and the activated media in an incongruous, surprising, metaphorical relationship, I propose the term **interfacial retro-projection** in order to characterize it.



However, is the argument of incongruity sufficient to define a figure?

The “figures of speech” have often been considered as a difference, “a reasoned change of meaning or language in relation to the ordinary and simple way of speaking”¹¹. Structuralism considers figures first and mainly as devices meant to emphasize the message. They are characteristic of the poetic function of the language: according to Gérard Genette, figures even constitute the way literature distinguishes itself. The semiotic approach has helped to refine the concept of incongruity essential in the definition of a figure.

¹¹ Quintilien: *Institution oratoire*, IX, 1, 11-13.

According to Jean-Marie Klinkenberg¹², the generation of a figure takes place in four inextricably linked steps. The first step consists in locating an isotopy in the utterance. Each element of an utterance is included in a context created by the preceding elements. These elements set forth an expectation, which can be met or disappointed by the following elements. In the case of the example quoted from *tierslivre* by François Bon, the context of the link “reticle” describes how the Internet functions according to the “peer to peer” principle; implementing a link on the word “reticle” seems to meet the reader’s expectation for an illustration of this context. As the link on “Malbreil” had, in perfect accordance with the uses of digital documents, pointed to the website of this author, the inter-actor logically expects a definition of the term “reticule”.

The second step in the forming of a figure is defined as the identification of an allotopy, i.e. irrelevance in the utterance. In classical poetry, this allotopy may be, for example, based on an encyclopaedic incompatibility between the terms of a metaphor. In the context of *tierslivre*, it is the relationship between the content of the activated media (the word “reticule”, defined as an optical device or a constellation), the interfacial gesture questioning this term, and the media content activated by the interfacial gesture (the blog *LitteRéticulaire*), which proves to be allotopic.

After this second step is rebuilt, a third “conceived degree” is intended to safeguard the general principle of cooperation (it is primarily this third step that allows to distinguish interfacial media figures from incongruities produced by the computer’s intentionality). During this process, it is first important to identify the “perceived degree” of the figure - at the previous level, nothing had yet indicated what part of the interactive utterance should exactly be considered as incongruous. It is the general isotopy that enables to decide. François Bon described in his text the way the Internet works according to “peer to peer”-principles. He neither spoke about optical devices, nor about astronomy - the word “reticle” constitutes therefore a first allotopy (reminding a classical metaphor); as the word “reticle”, rather unknown, is used and hyperlinked in the text, the grammatical rules of the digital document would have required the display of a definition; but the hyperlink leading to the blog *LitteRéticulaire* does not throw any direct light on its meaning – it leads neither to a starry sky, nor to an optical tool, thus constituting a second allotopy. At this perceived degree, imposed by the utterance, a content is superimposed which is compatible with the rest of the context. It could be formulated as “the general functioning of the the Internet, and particularly of peer-to-peer principles”. Jean-Marie Klinkenberg calls this level “conceived degree 1”.

In a final step, the perceived degree and the conceived degree 1 are superimposed. For that, the semantic components compatible with the perceived and the conceived degrees must be selected in order to apply them on the conceived degree. The double semantic emanation of the word “reticle”, which at the same time refers to a constellation of stars and to the precise aim you can perform with an optical device, can in fact be explored by the interfacial gesture on the word “reticle”; while illustrating the idea of the Internet as a *constellation* of web sites, it leads the inter-actor not to a page of links, but to a specific site – as if the reader had aimed at the site by clicking. **Interfacial retroprojection** is thus the first example of

¹² Jean-Marie Klinkenberg: *Précis de sémiotique générale*, Bruxelles 1996; Paris, 2000, p. 344-347.

interfacial media figures that I would like to present here, a figure based on mediation between the perceived and the conceived degree.

The activation of the link on “constellation” in François Bon's same text leads the reader to the site *desordre.net* by Philippe De Jonckheere, an author experiencing in a particularly exciting way the poetic potential of interaction. Let us explore for example the fragment “Corridor”¹³. Underneath a series of copperplates that the inter-actor can browse by clicking, he perceives light grey words on a dark grey background - a text describing the furtive encounter of a man and a woman in a corridor:

The woman's body is ample, chubby. The width of her hips and her stomach that bounces imperceptibly above her belt, remind the woman-mother, already maternal, but it is not allowed to swear to it, the women painted by Van Eyck or Rubens were perhaps not all women-mothers. The woman wears a white shirt and a suit on her shoulders. The grey skirt and the walls share the same colour. The woman's stockings and her shoes are so black it becomes impossible to doubt that the grey colour of her suit had been produced otherwise than by mixing, dipping the black stockings in the white shirt.



The activation of the hyperlinks on “Van Eyck” and “Rubens”, quite conventionally, reveal portraits painted of the two artists. A click on the hyperlinked names of colours opens pop-up windows. Their background is uniformly filled by the designated colour. The title of the window displays colour codes used for the construction of web sites in html language: for example #ffffff, #000000. Unlike the links activated on the painters' names, these links do not illustrate; they do not provide additional details on the woman's white shirt, on her black stockings; the relationship between the activable word, the interfacial gesture and the activated media can therefore be considered as allotopic. More precisely, it is the link between the performative gesture and the display of redundant information that, in this example, constitutes the perceived degree. The conceived degree 1 corresponds to a detailed description of the woman in the corridor. But the superposition of the conceived degree 1 and the perceived degree disturbs our confidence in the power of illustration. The activated colours are so elementary, so unsubtle that they rather remind us Gustave Flaubert's reluctance towards illustration: a described woman makes us dream about thousands of women, whereas illustration slows down our imagination in presenting only one possible portrait. Inspired by the name of a classical figure characterizing such phenomena of redundancy in linguistic contexts, I would thus propose the term **interfacial pleonasm**. In “Corridor”, interfacial pleonasms retrospectively weaken the value of the information provided by the links on

¹³ Philippe De Jonckheere: <http://www.desordre.net/plan.htm>

VanEyck and Rubens. In fact, any description of the woman is immediately turned into doubt: in spite of her “maternal” hips and stomach, the narrator is not sure this adjective really characterizes women painted by Van Eyck or Rubens; nevertheless, he shows us some explicit illustrations. Basically, all these accumulated and hyperlinked words say nothing about this man and this woman who, in fact, did *not* meet in the corridor of hypertextual writing.

A closer look at the function of hyperlinks in this passage reveals another, even more disconcerting incongruity: the term “white shirt” is used twice; the word “white” can be activated twice by a hyperlink; but when the inter-actor tries to compare the background colour of the two pop-up windows, he not only notes that it is technically impossible to juxtapose them; in addition, the first hyperlink on “white” opens from time to time a window uniformly filled with black! When the click reveals the opposite of the announced content, I call this figure an **interfacial antagonism**. When the relationship between the content of the activable and the activated media is based, as in our example, on random processes, I propose the term **interfacial randomization**.

Nevertheless, we have to specify that a single activation of the links on “white” would not enable to make a decision on the exact nature of this interfacial media figure. If the inter-actor discovers twice the white window linked to the word “white”, he probably would not click again on the same word. If, however, he discovers immediately the black window, he may doubt and retrace his steps... even if a second activation of the same hyperlink probably displays a white window. Anyway, such a reading experience is rather unsettling. In fact, the inter-actor discovers, by experimenting the incongruous relationship between the interfacial gesture and the activated media, how this man and this woman, firstly “beings of ink and paper”, become digital reflections generated by the substance of the corridor where they meet.

Another example of an interfacial randomization can be explored in the “page of links” on *desordre.net*. Each activation alters the configuration of a starry sky leading to different websites. Whereas the grammar of digital documents promotes stability of hyperlinked configurations on a page, the instable layout of *desordre.net* prompts the inter-actor to randomized wanderings.

One of the most conventional relationships between a hyperlinked word, an interfacial gesture and an activated content, consists in providing an explanation of the word. Already by its title, the poem *Explanation text (Explication de texte)* by Boris de Boullay seems to allude to this pragmatic use of hyperlinks. At the centre of a black surface appears, in green, a poem sprinkled with 27 hyperlinks¹⁴:

Having clean hands for cross a bridge in the summer.

Crossing the bridge of Arcole with hands as big as pockets, with frogs in the belly, arms in the air to restore balance.

Balance is to risk the water of the Seine, green, thick, unreal, prohibited, abandonment, to make frogs find the green water.

Being a bag of water, floating, swollen with water.

Having clean hands and slender, stretched, long fingers, to imagine grasping the guardrail, to see, despite the tremendous breadth of the pavement.

¹⁴ Boris De Boullay: <http://www.lesfilmsminute.com/explication/>

Progression or stagnation - in most interactive environments, something goes on when the reader activates hyperlinks. In *Underground* by Gregory Chatonsky¹⁵, a click on a photo showing a subway corridor gives, quite conventionally, access to the work. A face appears, marked by wrinkles. The text emerging and disappearing, “When I took the subway, as a child, I was doing little shows to make passengers laugh”, bathes the reader in a narrative universe. The reader expects to discover the content of these shows, the reactions of the other passengers. Activating certain points in the network and abandoning others paths, pointing and clicking, the inter-actor quickly creates a relationship between the metro branching, the neural network and the Internet: the branching of subway or bus maps has often inspired e-poets. Whereas in traditional hypermedia, navigation among fragments can be re-experienced and easily modelled by graphs and diagrams, the reader of *Underground* realizes that some changes occur in the interface regardless of whether he interacts or not; that some manipulations seem to have an impact on the interface without being instantly discernible.

A click on the words “first memory” in the sequence “map” for example, does not seem to produce visible effects at first on the interface. Yet, the inter-actor feels that multiple clickings on the link provoke reactions, the sequence of sounds gradually getting out of control. Processes apparently take place beneath the smooth surface of videos and animated graphics. Do they also influence the *visual* re-composition of the narrative fragments? In the sequence “reflects of the travellers”, a click on the emerging words does not immediately alter the display of the background videos. If nothing happens immediately after a click, the reader will maybe forget his past interactions. In *Underground* however, images and words seem changed when the reader returns to the same place, after a few other explorations. According to the author, Gregory Chatonsky, it is the program that links the fragments of *Underground* according to prescribed parameters and variables. These variables rely on a statistical device, based on navigation paths that former visitors had explored before. Interaction has thus consequences on the work’s device. But these consequences are not always connected to the immediate, well-known interfacial reactions¹⁶. The relationship between the interfacial gesture, the activable and the activated media content proves to be strongly disturbed.

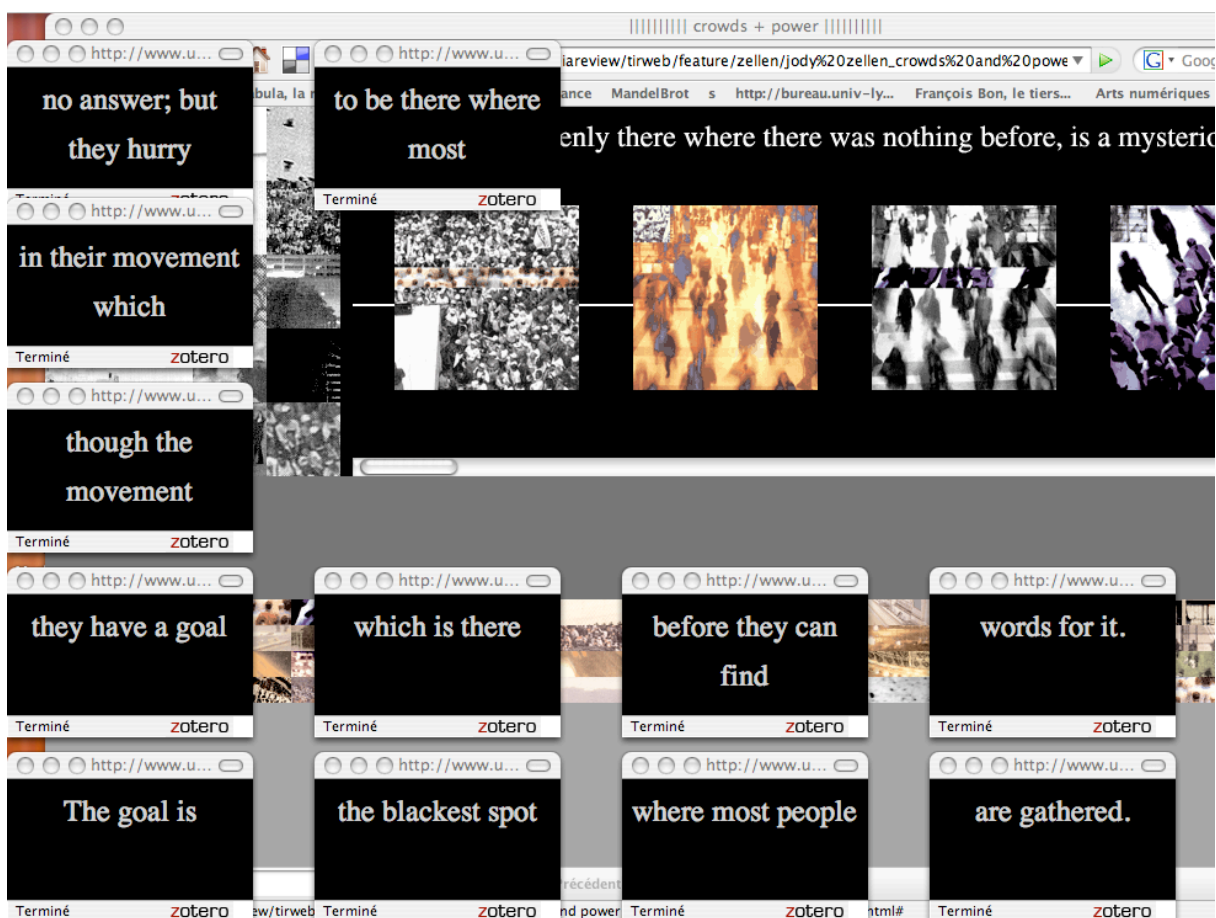
When the inter-actor clicks on the words “first memory” without creating any apparent interfacial reaction, this incongruous relationship between the gesture and its effect therefore constitutes the perceived degree of the figure. The projection of the conceived degree 1, built around the utterance “interactive exploration of the metro network and the author’s memory”, on the perceived degree (the impossible activation of the link on “first memory”) makes us understand that some specific areas of *Underground* will forever resist to manipulation. I propose to call this figure an **interfacial neantism**. When an interfacial gesture produces changes on the digital interface of a digital creation, but that these changes occur so late for the interactor to easily create a meaningful relationship between his gesture and the provoked changing, I would speak about an **interfacial incubation**. In *Underground*, interfacial

¹⁵ Gregory Chatonsky: <http://www.incident.net/works/sous-terre/>

¹⁶ Alain Balseiro and Marida di Crosta show that the reader of *Underground* therefore is immersed in a state of “semiotic fuzziness”: he can no longer “conceptualize laws of contingency, namely the law that relies interaction to its effects” (Alain Alain / Marida di Crosta: “Narration hypermédia et cognition”, in: Saleh, Imad / Ghedira, Khaled / Badreddine, Belhassen / Bouhai, Nasreddine / Rieder, Bernhard (eds.), *H2PTM’07, Collaborer, échanger, inventer: expériences de réseaux*, Paris 2007, p. 91-106, p. 92.

neantisms and incubations contribute to building a complex metaphor, suggesting similarities between memory and digital network.

When the interactor clicks on a hyperlink, his gesture usually provokes either a page break, or the display of a new window that overlaps the initial one. This pop-up-technique has proved to be particularly effective in the context of information searching. Whereas a page break may disturb the reader, the pop-up technique allows him to keep a look at the original context. But the pop-up-technique is much less reassuring if, instead of a single window, multiplicities of windows invade the screen. Online advertising overuses this technique that often irritates the reader. In *crowds + power* by Jody Zellen¹⁷, the multiplication of pop-up windows becomes an interfacial media figure I would like to call **interfacial sporulation**. The activable images in *crowds + power* do not only show crowd movements invading public places, department stores, airports and railway stations; the activation of the hyperlinks also



provokes a pop-up invasion; the reader has to fight the invaders by clicking over and over again. The “normal” functioning of digital documents, where a click provokes the display of a *single* pop-up window, constitutes the isotopy of this utterance; the multiplication of pop-up windows on the screenic surface can be considered as allotopic. More specifically, it is the incongruous relationship between the interfacial gesture and the uncontrollable pop-up invasion that constitutes the perceived degree of this figure. The contents of the pop-up

¹⁷ Jody Zellen:
http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/tirweb/feature/zellen/jody%20zellen_crowds%20and%20power/crowdsandpower_web_site/index.html

windows, thematizing the sensations of a person literally overwhelmed by multiplicity, however allow to superimpose the perceived degree and the content compatible with the rest of the context. The identification and the application of semantic components compatible with the unpleasant invasion of the screen by crowds of pop-up windows, the interfacial gesture consisting in provoking *and* pushing back the invasion, and the content of the activated images showing crowds moving, permits us to describe the functioning of this interfacial media figure.

The interfacial gestures involved in media figures are not only limited to the click. In *Bitter sun (Soleil amer)* by Bruno Scoccimarro¹⁸, for example, a roll-over on the black background displays textual and iconographic fragments, making us dream about a meaningful entirety. However, each little fragment disappears as quickly as it springs up. Instead of reading, instead of recomposing an image, the inter-actor can only enjoy his gesture. Like *Bitter sun*, interactive puzzles on the web relay on the principle of fragmentation. By selecting, drawing and pushing fragments to the right place, the inter-actor reconstructs the original image. Each interfacial gesture is performed according to the activable and the activated media contents. In *Bitter sun*, the effects of interactor's handlings always remind him of his own gesture; therefore, the relationship between the reader's gesture and the media contents proves to be inherently incongruous. In classic puzzles, this relationship is based on the principle of a possible recomposition. *Bitter sun* leaves the inter-actor dissatisfied, reminding him that the power of digital gestures is often solitary, compulsive rather than performative, frequently opening a rather partial field of view. The classic puzzle makes him hope that a careful recomposition of the fragments might be rewarded by a beautiful overview. The challenge of the puzzle is entirety. A prolonged exploration of *Bitter sun* proves either to be motivated by the "dizzying" pleasure to observe the emergence and disappearance of light spots on the interface, or by the desire to recompose ephemeral entireties separated from media contents, or to play the interface like an instrument.

When the visitor takes pleasure in exploring the interface for itself, when the interface becomes the real object of semiosis, and when the interfaced content only proves to be an artefact for technical functioning, Philippe Bootz calls this figure an "**interfacial inversion**"¹⁹. Another convincing example of this figure can be observed in >>*Oh*<< by Jennifer Hill-Kaucher, Dan Waber and Reiner Strasser²⁰. But in these contexts, the contents of activable and activated media do not play any role in the construction of meaning; we thus leave the field of "media" figures – moving to an experimental, still largely unexplored field.

¹⁸ Bruno Scoccimarro: <http://www.mandelbrot.fr/SoleilAmer.html>

¹⁹ Philippe Bootz: "Eléments d'analyse de l'interface sémiotique des sites Web", in: Saleh, Imad / Ghedira, Khaled / Badreddine, Belhassen / Bouhai, Nasreddine / Rieder, Bernhard (eds.), *H2PTM'07, Collaborer, échanger, inventer: expériences de réseaux*, Paris 2007, p. p. 119.

²⁰ Reiner Strasser, Jennifer Hill-Kaucher, Dan Waber: <http://nonfinito.de/oh/>

Some interfacial media figures

Interfacial retroprojection	The interactive gesture, the activable media content and the activated media content get into metaphorical relationships.
Interfacial neantism	The interactive gesture does not provoke any effect on the screenic surface.
Interfacial incubation	The interactive gesture provokes effects on the screenic surface, which although emerge so late that it is difficult for the reader to establish a relationship between his gesture and the effects.
Interfacial involution	The interactive gesture invariably displays the same media contents; the inter-actor go round in circles.
Interfacial sporulation	The interactive gesture, supposed to provoke the emergence of a single pop-up, provokes the emergence of a multitude of windows; the interactor loses his control over the interface.
Interfacial pleonasm	The interactive gesture does not provoke the emergence of additional information; the message is redundant.
Interfacial randomization	The interactive gesture provokes the emergence of other media contents according to a random process.
Interfacial antagonism	The interactive gesture provokes the emergence of media contents contrary to the contents announced by the activable media.