

Grammalepsy: The Art of Language as Culture Goes Digital

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Throughout history, our understanding of literature has continuously evolved, with different forms of literary expression emerging. While novels are unquestionably referred to as literary works, many experts argue about whether language art that is performed, read aloud or presented through different types of media are literature.

Recently, technology has created new possibilities for language-based art. Technology not only enables the dissemination of artistic texts using digital media; but algorithms and programs can be employed to actually create language-based art.

John Cayley, Professor of Literary Arts at Brown University, was a pioneer of language-based digital art. Since the beginning of personal computing, he has been experimenting with the use of computer programs and algorithms to create poetry.

In 2018, he published a book called *Grammalepsy: Essays on Digital Language Art*, which brings together writing on work that he produced over the past decades, along with his theoretical understanding of language-based digital art.

Coined by Cayley, the term 'grammalepsy' refers to the processes through which humans create, understand, and appreciate language. In his book, he highlights the tendency of literary critics to underestimate linguistic works created using digital technology.

He suggests that digitally-based or computer-generated literature is a powerful means of expression for those drawn to audio-visual art. Digital technology allows writers to convey their ideas by appealing to many senses simultaneously. This work should not be dismissed or pigeon-holed as 'electronic', but should instead be approached with the same appreciation as other literary works.

Rather than focusing on the specific media used to create language-based art, Cayley believes that literary critics should focus on the true medium underlying these works, which is language.

According to Cayley, if they can be read by humans, then strings of letters and punctuation that are generated by code are traces of language, irrespective of the fact that they are encoded inside a machine. Instead of distinguishing

between conventional literature and 'digital' language art, he prefers to focus on the effects of digitalisation on literature.

As technology continues to transform our society, we will encounter an increasing number of linguistic artworks expressed through digital media, particularly in the realm of aurality and in the form of smart speakers, speech recognition and speech synthesis. Cayley's recent book could prove invaluable for understanding these works: as co-evolved language artworks that are aligned with the current times.

Ultimately, Cayley hopes that his theory and artistic efforts will encourage other writers to help reconfigure the conception of literature that has been in place for centuries, using modern technology and computation to convey language art in new, immersive, and engaging ways.

Summary of the chapter '**At the End of Literature**', from the book **Grammalepsy: Essays on Digital Language Art**.

<https://doi.org/10.7273/hk5k-7350>