



Digital Resistance: Electronic Literature as Counter-Market Practice

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Abstract

This study investigates the emergence of electronic literature as a counter-market practice within contemporary digital culture, examining how digital literary works establish resistant practices while operating within neoliberal market structures. The research demonstrates how digital literary innovation establishes new value paradigms that challenge market-driven literary production through critically analyzing electronic literary works. This research advances scholarly understanding of cultural production under digital capitalism by demonstrating how electronic literature establishes creative practices that maintain critical independence while acknowledging their embeddedness within broader economic structures. The paper presents new theoretical possibilities for conceptualizing literary value and political engagement within an increasingly platform-mediated cultural landscape.

Keywords:

electronic literature, digital capitalism, neoliberalism, literary production, digital humanities

Résumé

Cette étude se penche sur l'émergence de la littérature électronique en tant que pratique de contre-marché au sein de la culture numérique contemporaine, en examinant comment les œuvres littéraires numériques établissent des pratiques résistantes tout en opérant au sein des structures de marché néolibérales. La recherche démontre comment l'innovation littéraire numérique établit de nouveaux paradigmes de valeur qui remettent en question la production littéraire axée sur le marché par le biais d'une analyse critique des œuvres littéraires électroniques. Cette recherche fait progresser la compréhension de la production culturelle dans le cadre du capitalisme numérique en démontrant comment la littérature électronique établit des pratiques créatives qui conservent une indépendance critique tout en reconnaissant leur intégration dans des structures économiques plus larges. L'article présente de nouvelles possibilités théoriques pour conceptualiser la valeur littéraire et l'engagement politique dans un paysage culturel de plus en plus médiatisé.

Mots-clés :

Littérature électronique, capitalisme numérique, néolibéralisme, production littéraire, sciences humaines numériques

1.0. INTRODUCTION

1.1. *The Crisis of Literary Politics*

The contemporary literary landscape is at a critical juncture where traditional literary production and dissemination modes have become deeply entrenched in neoliberal market logic (Nilges 360). The commodification of cultural production has reached such totality that it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine alternatives to market-driven creative expression (Fisher 23). This commodification manifests particularly strongly in the publishing industry, where the evaluation of literary merit has become inextricably linked to market performance metrics, sales algorithms, and platform capitalism's demand for quantifiable success (Spencer 429-30).

The advent of digital technologies, rather than immediately liberating literary production from these constraints, has initially intensified the grip of market forces through "platform capitalism," where digital intermediaries further consolidate control over cultural production and distribution (Srnicek 48). Amazon's dominant position in the book market, for instance, exemplifies how digital platforms can intensify rather than ameliorate the commodification of literature, with its recommendation algorithms and marketing metrics reshaping how literature is consumed and produced. This algorithmic governance of literary value creates new forms of entrenching market logic in creative expression.

The digital realm presents unprecedented opportunities for resistance and reconceptualization of literary production. Electronic literature, operating at the intersection of computational processes and creative expression, emerges as a potential site of resistance to market-driven literary production. Electronic literary works are "creative artworks that interrogate the histories, contexts, and productions of literature, including as well the verbal art of literature proper," while creating new possibilities for expression that exceed traditional market constraints (Hayles 4). The crisis of literary politics manifests as a tension between intensified commodification and potential liberation. Although there has been a boom in publication houses and

presses in recent years (Benharrouse 13), this potential for disruption has become particularly significant as traditional publishing structures increasingly fail to address urgent contemporary issues, from climate crisis to social justice, within their market-driven frameworks.

The emergence of politically engaged electronic literature (Bruno Ministo's *Progress in Work*, Vivian Abenshushan's *Permanente obra Negra*, Amira Hanafi's *A Dictionary of Revolution*, etc.) represents a new genre and a fundamental rethinking of literary production's social function. "An aesthetic of difficulty would undermine the very spreadability and commercialization paradigms that help 3rd generation works thrive" (Flores 21). This transformation suggests possibilities for "convergence culture," where participatory digital practices might enable new forms of collective political expression through literary means (Jenkins 2-3). This crisis moment in literary politics thus demands careful examination of how electronic literature might move beyond traditional publishing constraints and late capitalism's new forms of control.

1.2. *Electronic Literature as Counter-Market Practice*

Electronic literature emerges as a critical force of resistance against neoliberal market structures, offering not merely alternative distribution models but fundamental challenges to how literary value, authorship, and reader engagement are conceived in digital environments. This analysis examines how digital literary works create creative practices that challenge market logic through their formal properties, technical implementation, and modes of distribution. Through close examination of works employing programmatic generation, deliberate degradation, linguistic hybridization, and digital-born modalities, this study demonstrates how electronic literature establishes new paradigms of literary value that actively resist commercial commodification while creating spaces for discursive and critical digital poetics.

The works analyzed here represent more than individual artistic achievements; they collectively

establish electronic literature's counter-market potential, challenging neoliberal assumptions about literary value through their very form and operation. By examining works that employ strategies ranging from algorithmic mutation and programmed decay to linguistic experimentation and resource-intensive processing, this analysis reveals how electronic literature creates new forms of literary engagement that resist traditional market mechanisms while establishing alternative creative production and distribution models.

2.0. NEOLIBERAL CONSTRAINTS IN TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING

2.1. Marketization of Literary Value

The transformation of literary value under neoliberalism marks a fundamental shift in cultural production's evaluation and dissemination. Historically positioned as a cultural institution balancing artistic merit with commercial viability, traditional publishing has increasingly surrendered to pure market logic (Hviid et al. 355-6). This shift reflects the "economic world reversed," where market success becomes the primary arbiter of literary merit (Bourdieu 83). The contemporary publishing landscape demonstrates how this market rationality has evolved beyond Bourdieu's initial analysis, creating new algorithmic governance forms that reshape literary production and consumption.

The implementation of sophisticated marketing analytics has fundamentally altered publishing decision-making processes. Major publishing houses now employ predictive algorithms and market data to select manuscripts and actively shape literary works (Murray 971). This algorithmic governance represents a significant departure from traditional editorial judgment, creating a structure where market metrics increasingly determine creative decisions. This market-driven approach has profound implications for literary form and content. Publishers increasingly demand authors conform to market-tested formulas, leading to books designed for maximum market penetration (Striphas 56-7). This standardization extends beyond genre conventions to influence narrative structure, character development, and even language

complexity, creating a form of literary production that prioritizes predictable market performance over artistic innovation or social engagement.

The consolidation of publishing houses under media conglomerates has intensified these market pressures. Corporate ownership has transformed publishing's traditional understanding as a cultural enterprise with modest profit expectations (Schiffrin 104-5). Contemporary publishing conglomerates typically demand profit margins that would have been unthinkable in previous decades, fundamentally altering the industry's relationship to cultural production (Rosen 422). This shift has particularly affected midlist authors and experimental works. Amazon's emergence as a dominant force in book distribution represents perhaps the most significant transformation in contemporary publishing (Rub 370). The company's algorithm-driven recommendation systems and pricing strategies have fundamentally altered both purchasing patterns and publishing decisions. This algorithmic curation creates a discourse where visibility and success increasingly depend on conformity to digital platform metrics rather than traditional literary merit.

The implications for politically engaged literature are particularly significant. Works addressing complex social and political issues often struggle to find support within publishing structures focused on guaranteed market returns. This creates a market-driven political silencing of crucial contemporary issues that receive inadequate literary attention due to their perceived commercial risks. Climate crisis, systemic inequality, and technological critique often find themselves marginalized in favor of more marketable content.

2.2. Authorship under Market Pressures

The reconfiguration of authorship under neoliberal market pressures represents a fundamental shift in creative practice and professional identity. Contemporary authors face an entrepreneurial imperative, where creative production becomes inseparable from self-marketing and brand management (Braun 458-9). This transformation

extends beyond traditional publishing responsibilities to encompass a multifaceted professional identity that demands simultaneous mastery of creative, marketing, and platform-management skills. The emergence of the author-as-brand has fundamentally altered the creative process itself. Authors are increasingly compelled to develop and maintain consistent personal brands across multiple platforms.

This phenomenon manifests in creative decisions prioritizing brand consistency and market viability over artistic experimentation or political engagement. Social media platforms have intensified these pressures; Writers must maintain constant visibility and engagement across multiple platforms, creating a paradigm where the promises of visibility become the means of precarity (Duffy et al. 2). This digital presence requirement generates significant uncompensated labor as authors produce content across platforms to maintain visibility and market relevance.

The economic precarity inherent in contemporary authorship has profound implications for literary production. Authors increasingly modify their work to maintain market viability before external pressures are applied (Larson 4-5). This self-censorship extends beyond content to influence genre selection, stylistic choices, and political perspectives, creating a form of market-driven creative constraint that operates at the level of conception rather than execution. These constraints mainly affect authors addressing political or controversial subjects. The market's preference for "safe" content creates a clear preference for romance (Radway 35), where challenging perspectives face marginalization through market mechanisms rather than explicit suppression.

The cumulative effect of these pressures has generated a neoliberal author paradox, where increased opportunities for publication and audience engagement coexist with diminished creative and political autonomy. Authors are caught between the imperative to maintain market viability and the desire to produce meaningful, challenging work. This tension often results in an attempt to

balance artistic integrity with commercial demands through various formal and thematic strategies. These constraints have created a crisis in contemporary literary production, where the very mechanisms designed to distribute literature increasingly limit its expressive and political possibilities (Clair 179-80). Traditional publishing's transformation under neoliberal imperatives has generated what appears to be an irreconcilable tension between market demands and literature's capacity for social critique and artistic innovation.

This crisis also led to new forms of literary production and distribution. The rise of print-on-demand and self-publishing services further exemplifies the intensification of platform capitalism's grip on literary production (Blummer 48). While these services appear to democratize publishing by eliminating traditional gatekeepers, they actually reinforce neoliberal market pressures through algorithmic governance and platform dependency (Petre et al., 4-5). Authors utilizing services like Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing, IngramSpark, or Lulu find themselves increasingly entangled in platform-specific algorithms and metrics determining visibility and success (Wang and Miller 14). While reducing initial production costs, the print-on-demand model creates new forms of precarity and market pressure. Authors must master writing and marketing and become versed in platform-specific optimization strategies, metadata management, and algorithmic visibility techniques.

The author's transformation into a platform entrepreneur is particularly evident in how self-published authors must navigate multiple service providers' technical requirements, pricing structures, distribution networks, and invisibility (Myers West 4374). Platform capitalism's influence extends beyond mere distribution mechanisms. Self-publishing platforms' algorithmic recommendation systems and visibility metrics actively shape creative decisions. The promise of democratized publishing through these platforms masks a deeper entrenchment in market logic, where success depends on literary merit and mastering platform-specific mechanisms of

visibility and engagement. This creates a new form of digital precarity where authors must constantly adapt to changing platform requirements while competing in an increasingly saturated market. The result is a paradoxical form of creative constraint where increased access to publishing tools coexists with intensified market pressure and platform dependency.

2.3. Comparing Traditional and Digital Publishing Models

The commodification of literature manifests distinctly in traditional publishing and electronic literature despite operating within capitalist frameworks. Traditional publishing employs what Thompson terms the "value chain" model, where literary works gain market value through controlled production stages, artificial scarcity, and standardized distribution (Thompson 15). This system relies on unit sales, established marketing metrics, and conventional copyright protection to maintain economic viability. The limitations of traditional publishing are even more pronounced when considering that an author may have limited control over the entire publishing process, from editing to promotion, resulting in diminished creative autonomy and a smaller share of generated revenue. Hence, an author with no previously published works is more prone to be published than a published author with "average" numbers further to protect the possibility of a higher generated revenue.

In contrast, electronic literature establishes value not derived from controlled access to content but from the work's processual and experiential qualities (Hayles 103). This fundamental shift in value creation manifests through several distinct characteristics. Electronic literary works often embrace infinite reproducibility, challenging traditional scarcity-based models while establishing value through engagement and interaction rather than ownership. Third-generation electronic literature (Flores 1-4) mainly resists traditional commodification by emphasizing process over product. This resistance operates even as works depend on digital platforms and infrastructure maintained by corporate entities.

The process of signification in itself is resisting commodification since signifiers and signified are continuously being defined. For instance, Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* "insists on the co-originary status of subjectivity and electronic technologies. Instead of technologies being created by humans, this work imagines digital technology present from the beginning, with subjects and technologies producing each other through recursive loops" (Hayles 49). Hence, the reader, author, text, and medium are entangled in the process of signification and continuously being reshaped rather than fixed within a commodified product waiting to be bought. However, both systems ultimately operate within platform capitalism, where digital infrastructure mediates cultural production (Srnicek 48). Thus, the dialectic between traditional publishing and electronic literature reflects a broader tension inherent in capitalist cultural production.

2.4. Resistance Within Platform Capitalism

Electronic literature's relationship with platform capitalism represents a unique form of immanent critique, where resistance emerges from within the systems it challenges. Platform capitalism operates through digital infrastructures that extract value from user interactions and content creation, fundamentally reshaping cultural production through algorithmic governance and data commodification (Srnicek 48). Rather than attempting to escape these structures entirely, electronic literature employs approaches that simultaneously depend on and subvert platform logic.

This paradoxical position manifests most clearly in how electronic literary works utilize platform infrastructure while deliberately disrupting its value-extraction mechanisms. Platforms typically operate through commodification processes that transform user engagement into quantifiable metrics. Electronic literature responds by creating works that generate meaning through processes that resist easy quantification or commodification while operating within platform environments. For

instance, most electronic literature deliberately destabilizes user interaction metrics, creating experiences that platform analytics cannot effectively capture or monetize, where the digital medium's unstable and emergent nature resists platform capitalism's reductive logic.

Electronic literature's deployment of tactical media represents a sophisticated form of protocological resistance that works within and against platform capitalism's infrastructures. "Tactical media as those phenomena that are able to exploit flaws in protocological and proprietary command and control, not to destroy technology, but to sculpt protocol and make it better suited to people's real desires" (Galloway 176). This manifests in electronic literary works deliberately manipulating platform protocols to create instances where creative practice reveals and repurposes technological control mechanisms. For example, Tisselli's "Degenerative" deliberately corrupts its code through user interaction, exploiting platform protocols while revealing their inherent instabilities. Electronic literature establishes technological constraints into creative opportunities by operating within platform protocols while deliberately exploiting their limitations.

This internal resistance mainly manifests in electronic literature's data generation and collection approach. While platform capitalism operates through the extraction and commodification of user data, electronic literary works often generate meaningful experiences while actively resisting data commodification. This creates resistance that operates not through rejection but through utilizing platform capabilities while revealing and challenging their underlying economic mechanisms.

3.0. TOWARDS COUNTER-MARKET LITERATURE

Electronic literature emerges as a critical site of resistance against market-driven literary production, offering both formal innovations and alternative distribution models that challenge the neoliberal commodification of creative work. Loss Pequeño Glazier's *White-Faced Bromeliads on 20*

Hectares (1999) represents a fundamental challenge to literary commodification through its programmatic generation of perpetually mutating poetry. The work's JavaScript algorithm creates unique textual combinations with each viewing, effectively rendering the concept of a "definitive version" impossible. Consider this passage from the work:

in the morning, early, through the coffee fields
the bromeliads float white-faced in the morning air

These lines, when processed through Glazier's algorithm, might transform into:

through the morning fields, early, coffee white-faced in the bromeliads float morning air

This perpetual recombination does more than simply generate variations; it actively resists what we might term "textual fixity" - the cornerstone of traditional publishing's ability to commodify literature. The work's resistance to stabilization creates a perpetual literary becoming, where the text exists as a process rather than a product. This fundamentally challenges the market's need for stable, reproducible commodities. Glazier's work operates on multiple levels of resistance. First, its technical implementation makes traditional copyright protection practically meaningless. Second, its distribution through open web platforms bypasses conventional publishing gatekeepers. Finally, its aesthetic experience requires active engagement with its generative nature, forcing readers to confront the constructed nature of literary stability.

Through a more explicit political critique of digital capitalism through its systematic manipulation of user interaction, Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert's *Loss of Grasp* (2010) presents a new dimension for counter-market practices. The work begins with apparent user control over the narrative but progressively deteriorates into experiences of

manipulation and powerlessness. Consider this pivotal moment:

[User attempts to type a love letter]

System: "I love the way you smile."

[User's text transforms into]

System: "I can't stand your face anymore"

This forced transformation of user input creates an algorithmic betrayal, revealing how digital systems can override user intention. Bouchardon's work thus functions as a metacritique of digital capitalism's promise of user empowerment, exposing the gap between promised and actual user agency in digital systems. The work's formal structure mirrors its thematic concerns. As user control diminishes, the interface becomes increasingly unstable, text becomes harder to read, and interactions produce unexpected results. This technical implementation creates an experiential critique where the user's frustration with the interface becomes inseparable from the work's political message about technological control.

Moving from manipulation towards Mez Breeze's *cross.ova.ing* [4rm.blog.2.log] (2006), we are met with a profound intervention in digital literary practice through its innovative "mezangelle" language system. Consider this representative passage:

[blog_append][4rm.past.2.present][
n.sert][s][tray.texting][in2 dis_course

This hybrid construction simultaneously operates as poetry, programming code, and linguistic experimentation, creating what we might term "resistant textuality." The work's deliberate violation of natural language conventions and programming syntax creates texts that resist computational processing and commercial platforming. This resistance operates at multiple levels: syntactical, semantic, and systemic.

The significance of Breeze's linguistic innovation extends beyond mere formal experimentation. Mezangelle establishes textual environments outside traditional publishing economies and digital

content systems by creating text that confounds human and machine reading protocols. Language itself becomes subject to market optimization through search engine algorithms and content management systems.

Beyond textual environments, J.R. Carpenter's *The Gathering Cloud* (2016) advances electronic literature's critical potential through its sophisticated engagement with digital infrastructure's material consequences. The work deliberately employs resource-intensive processes to make visible digital culture's typically hidden environmental costs. Consider how the work generates increasingly complex visual elements that burden network resources:

Each refresh draws more data
Through submarine cables
Across server farms
Converting electricity into heat
Heat into bills
Bills into environmental debt

Carpenter's work transforms technical burdens into aesthetic and political critique. Creating intentionally inefficient code forces readers to confront their complicity in digital infrastructure's environmental impact. The work's resource consumption becomes inseparable from its meaning.

The manipulation of time, an impossibility in print, is evident in Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' *Dakota* (2002). It presents perhaps the most radical challenge to commercial digital platforms through its deliberate embrace of technological obsolescence and aggressive temporal aesthetics. The work's high-speed text presentation cannot possibly absorb all content in real-time:

BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO
BECAUSE I'M WAITING
BECAUSE I'M WAITING
BECAUSE I'M WAITING

This temporal manipulation serves multiple critical functions. First, it actively resists the "user-

friendly" interfaces that characterize commercial digital platforms. Second, its use of obsolete technology (Flash) represents a deliberate rejection of platform capitalism's demand for constant technological upgrading.

Through actual decay that directly opposes the linearity and demand for maintenance in print literature, Eugenio Tisselli's *degenerative* (2005) presents a radical challenge to digital and platform capitalism's logic of perpetual upgrade and improvement through its implementation of programmed textual decay. The work begins with a coherent text that deteriorates with each viewing as characters are systematically replaced with American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) symbols and coding elements. Consider this transformation sequence:

Initial text:

"The morning light filters through the window"

After multiple readings:

"Th3 m0rn!ng l!ght f!lt#rs thugh th& w!ndw"

Eventually degrading to:

"T#3 m%rn!ng l!g#t f!l|#rs t#r*gh t#& w!nd&w"

This systematic deterioration creates a negative accumulation, where increased engagement with the work leads to its gradual destruction. The significance of this approach extends beyond mere formal experimentation. Tisselli challenges fundamental assumptions about digital textuality and value creation by creating text that actively resists preservation and reproduction. If value is accumulated in print through the linearity and progress of the story through pages, *degenerative* becomes an immanent critique and a counter-market practice. The work's degradation process operates as both technical implementation and theoretical critique. Each reading triggers an algorithmic process that randomly selects characters for replacement. This process reverses the traditional relationship between use and value - instead of becoming more valuable through circulation (as in traditional publishing), the work deliberately diminishes itself through reader engagement.

These works represent the counter-market potentiality of electronic literature and resist commodification not just thematically but through their very form and distribution. Their significance extends beyond individual artistic achievement to suggest alternative models for literary production in a digital age. These works create value through their uniqueness and resistance to replication, shifting away from the traditional publishing model that relies on scarcity. They effectively circumvent conventional market dynamics by being primarily available online and often at no cost, opening the door to innovative forms of literary engagement that prioritize accessibility and inclusivity. This transformation invites a diverse array of voices and perspectives that were previously marginalized or overlooked in more traditional formats. These works challenge conventional notions of authorial control by introducing models of creative production that embrace indeterminacy and collaborative meaning-making, allowing readers to participate in the creation of meaning rather than simply consuming content. These works cultivate a participatory critique by necessitating active participation in their generative or interactive elements, where reading transcends mere enjoyment and becomes deeply intertwined with political awareness. This engagement encourages readers to reflect critically on social, economic, and political issues, thereby reshaping their understanding of literature as an economic product within platform capitalism and market dynamics. Yet, electronic literature is a dynamic, participatory practice that has the potential to resist these market forces and inspire social change and a more informed and engaged community. In essence, these transformative texts redefine the relationship between authors, readers, platforms, and the literary landscape itself.

4.0. CONCLUSION

This investigation into electronic literature's relationship with neoliberal market structures reveals a complex dialectic between digital resistance and market incorporation. The paper demonstrates how electronic literature simultaneously operates within and against

platform capitalism's infrastructure, establishing digital spaces that enable new literary and political expression forms. This study has revealed how electronic literature's formal innovations serve as aesthetic achievements and political interventions by carefully examining works employing programmatic generation, deliberate degradation, and temporal manipulation. Investigating neoliberal constraints in traditional publishing has exposed increasingly restrictive market mechanisms that fundamentally reshape creative expression and political engagement. These constraints manifest as external pressures and internalized imperatives that transform authorship itself, converting writers into entrepreneurial subjects required to navigate an increasingly algorithmic marketplace. This transformation presents particular challenges for works that attempt to address contemporary political crises or experiment with literary form outside market-tested parameters.

Electronic literature emerges as a critical site of resistance to these market pressures, though this resistance remains necessarily partial and contested. The works analyzed demonstrate sophisticated strategies for challenging market logic, from Glazier's perpetually mutating poetry that resists textual fixity to Tisselli's degenerative texts that subvert digital capitalism's logic of accumulation. However, this resistant potential must be understood within its material and economic constraints. The increasing consolidation of digital infrastructure, the sophistication of surveillance capitalism's tracking mechanisms, and the persistent precarity of cultural workers all present significant challenges to electronic literature's critical project. These constraints suggest that while electronic literature cannot entirely escape market forces, it can create significant spaces for resistance and experimentation within platform capitalism's architecture.

The implications of this study extend beyond electronic literature to broader questions about cultural production under digital and platform capitalism. This analysis suggests new possibilities for understanding the relationship between artistic autonomy and economic constraints in digital

environments by examining how creative works can establish resistant practices while operating within market structures. These insights become particularly relevant as traditional cultural institutions increasingly migrate to digital platforms, raising crucial questions about the future of creative expression in an algorithmically mediated culture.

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