**Title: The authoring tool in digital literature as a vector of the global imaginary**

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## Introduction

Technology, with its constant and unceasing development, must be “intuitive” and easy to use, without the requirement of a manual or “how-to book”. The authoring tool is thus supposed to meet all our needs and to be understood “naturally” by everybody. This intuitive use of the tool as a kind of universal language can be seen as part of a globalization process of information. While the authoring tool does allow some fair competition, it also involves the use of standardization.

The tools used by many authors in the field of digital writing had their beginnings as commercial tools,often created for application areas other than digital literature. An undeniable relationship is created between the author and his/her tool, sometimes without the author being aware of the influence exercised on him/her by the software tool through the proposals it makes and the practices it anticipates.

## 1. Understanding globalization

We will discuss some of the defining aspects of globalization and then examine the role of the authoring tool within globalization.

*Globalization* is a term that is identified with a contemporary phenomenon. If we think only in economic terms, globalization is not just a linking of national economies but also the creation of a space – an autonomous market that inherently reduces national markets to a form of regulation for the benefit of the marketplace as a whole.

The idea of globalization reflects a certain world view. The first thing to point out is that the phenomenon of globalization is not new: we need only look at the world view of the state given by Jules Verne in 1873 in *Around the World in Eighty Days*. However, globalization has come fully into its own with the development of new information and communications technology. *Globalization* is, among other things,a term used to express the changes associated with the global dissemination of information through the Internet.

One of the characteristics of the modern global world system is the ascent and decline of a state that achieves greater economic power than any other, and which then assumes a leadership role. In the seventeenth century, the Netherlands had this status; in the nineteenth century, it was Great Britain; then it was the turn of the United States in the twentieth century. In his book *Contre la pensée unique* (Against Single Thought), published in 2012, Claude Hagège, a linguist and professor at the Collège de France, compares globalization to the term *colonization*, pointing out that colonialization also strives for a type of standardization based on a certain inequality among trading industries. Such an invasion of the world usually takes place through language (generally, the English language), and its underlying mental representations. This author makes a plea against standardization which, once ensconced in our tastes,our ideas, and in our very conception of existence, gives a prominent place to a single mode of thought.

PowerPoint is a software application that uses conventions entailing a seemingly high risk of standardization. Combining text and image, this proprietary Microsoft software captures the user’s attention through the use of preformatted slides that are very restrictive in nature. Valérie Beaudoin studied PowerPoint in an article in which she cites a review by Tufte[[1]](#footnote-1), a specialist in information design and visualization. According to Tufte,PowerPoint structures reflect the thinking of Microsoft business models; a central place is given to hierarchical organization and there is excessive use of slogan-like thinking. In 2001, Claude Hagège mentioned a headline in the *New Yorker*: “How software enacts our thoughts” (Hagège, 2011, 73). The framework of the software – what Yves Jeanneret and Emmanuel Souchier call the “architext” (1999) –directs and formats the output, and bears the mark of the organization that sells it.

## 2. Understanding globalization and imaginaries

### The imaginary of the “déjà vu”; the imaginary of erasure

Over the past twenty years, the increasing level of global trading has been redefining balances which, in some cases, took centuries to establish. Globalization has encouraged the emergence of wealth and knowledge, two elements that have always accompanied corporate progress. If exchanges are balanced, globalization – depending on whether one is an economist or a politician – can be a real asset to the development of societies. Rachid Amirou quotes Fernand Braudel, a French historian, stating that allglobalization has at least four aspects – economic, social, cultural, political – that form a system, and that the economic aspect cannot be isolated from the other aspects. In our view, globalization is far from being solely a matter of finance and commerce. It also engages the dimension of the imaginary and representations.

Globalization is, above all, an idea, a representation of a situation that affects political, economic, social and philosophical debates. Globalization remains a globalized space that structures thoughts and discourses, and we must say that globalization is primarily how we imagine the world – a world with neither geographical nor human borders, fed by the imaginary of erasure (Laidi, 2005).

In his article “Globalization is also an imaginary”, Zaki Laidi begins his thoughts with the following observation: “Globalization exists only by the representations it identifies”. He then defines several components of globalization. First, there is a “consumer-oriented international style”, the “déjà vu” imaginary conveyed by groups of individuals who travel and translate this idea of world standardization. The danger lies in the removal of the borders that have built our lives thus far,and the leveling of our own identities. By erasing the borders, we share our cultures. Do we become the same as a result? Does the mixing of our cultures mean that they become a single culture?

The media convey communication among cultures and thus are part of this globalization. In the end, society and the “marketplace” (underpinned by neoliberal doctrine) merge and bear the imaginary of erasure, which manifests itself first and foremostthrough the disappearance of nation-states.

### The imaginary of modernity

Our societies seem then to focus on two apparently contradictory concepts, namely, creativity and standardization; these concepts are part of a globalized imaginary that can be called the “imaginary of modernity”.

The growing interconnectedness of communications technology accelerates the inevitable globalization that permeates our imaginary; this is an imaginary based on beliefs, economic and socio-cultural structures that defy national boundaries, and in which all tensions are combined into a single “universe”, a single “world” defined and accessible in a single connection (Nancy, 2002).

Globalization and technology are closely linked. Globalization that compresses space and time is widely seen as progress – progress that is a process rather than a state – and which requires our adaptation to it. This concept also entails a final stage of “perfection” that implies a state of static balance; however, such balance seems to be in contradiction with “what scholars have described as the very essence of the universe, that is, movement and constant change” (Giedion, 1948; 1980, 585).

But the multiplication of international trade could paradoxically transform the world we inhabit into an enclosed, completed and finished place. This is why Paul Virilio says that globalization is nothing other than “the closing of the possible field of the earth's horizon” (Virilio, 2008, 145).

Paul Valéry had indeed already declared that “The time of the finite world is beginning” (Valéry, 1931, 11). Virilio, while equally fascinated by this acceleration of time,also warns against the damaging effects of such speed, which, when associated with fear,can lead to totalitarian excesses in which standardized and synchronized emotions might reveala two-faced globalization, with one face for those who adapt and another for those who do not.

While globalization has potential economic benefits – a proposition that is increasingly being called into question today – itinvolves above all a flow that should not be halted. The planet could turn into a vast global marketplace.

*Global Village* is a term coined by Marshall McLuhan (1962; 1967) to describe the effects of globalization. It indicates that there is now only one culture, and that the world is a space in which we all live under the same rules. Technologies, including digital technology, have promoted this feeling of being in one unified space-time.

Philosopher François Jullien wrote in his article *“L’écart et l’entre, comment penser l’altérité (2012)” (xxxx* How to think otherness): “Should we not be worried [...] about the erasing of so many cultural resources under the great steamroller of globalization and its market? When a stack of Harry Potter books shapes the same imaginary in young people all over the world...”. And he argues: “The common and the similar are not the same”.

### The imaginary of proximity vs. the imaginary of differentiation

With reference to our shrinking world, Martin Heidegger questions the notions of proximity and lack of distance, looking nostalgically at a world that is close to nature, and questioning artists and their role in the creation of forms in a new globalized world – one in which “all distances decrease in time and space. [...] But this haste to remove all distance does not result in proximity because proximity is not the reduction of distance” (Heidegger 1958, 194-200). The imaginary of proximity is thus offset by an imaginary of differentiation, in which every culture that feels threatened tries to preserve its identity. Consequently, globalization points to the diversity of cultures.

Cultural industries are dominated by economic logic; they exercise power and produce “cultural goods” that spread forms of propaganda. Culture becomes a mark of allegiance to the power that marginalizes those who refuse its logic. Individuals become imbued, in their languages, gestures and emotions, with the power of the culture industry; this industry then transforms the individual consumer into what it views as a product. As such, consumers lose their power of critical thinking.

While the intention of the cultural industry is a positive one, i.e., to resolve conflicts, the consequences described by Theodor W. Adorno are dramatic. Marcuse explains them in these terms:

If workers and their bosses watch the same TV program; if secretaries dress as well as the daughter of their employer; if black people own a Cadillac; if everyone reads the same newspaper, such assimilation does not indicate the disappearance of the classes. On the contrary, it indicates how the dominated classes participate in the needs and satisfactions that guarantee the maintenance of the ruling classes (Marcuse 1968, 33).

Adorno endows the media with a powerful ideological effect. This hypothesis of “powerful effects”, on which the School of Frankfurt bases its theory of influence, shows that the individual is atomized in a mass society. McLuhan also attributed to the media a significant capacity to influence, and today the media are literally supported by digital software tools. The digital versions of newspapers are mostly formatted by a content management system, or CMS.

## 3. The software tool as a globalized cultural vector

### The production of globalized objects

While the industry transforms the individual consumer into a product, globalization produces globalized objects and commercial software tools that are part of these objects. From software to television, globalization can be seen through meaningful objects that convey meaning and common identities imposed by the cultural industries. Andrea Semprini, a sociologist and semiotician, explains that “the objects share operating rules, logic, a homogeneous public and a common lifestyle” (2001).

Let’s take another example, the roll-over, to illustrate this idea that the expectations of digital text readers are structured by “rules”. Many readers probably expect that the roll-over on a word or image changes the cursor shape and provides a link option. When text changes color or becomes underlined as the cursor passes over it, the reader certainly understands, in a generally shared way, what to do. Similarly, it seems generally accepted that a mouse-click triggers an action. Some kind of standardization thus seems to have occurred in recent years, when certain interactions with the “model-forms” on the screen tend to be understood in a similar and universal manner. All across the computerized planet, the fact of placing the cursor over a hyperlink and seeing it change color is probably now considered an expected and understandable event that indicates the presence of a link. Authors know how to respond to these habits, and use links in this standardized manner. The software tools are now adapted to provide this standardization using automatically underlined links (as in the Dreamweaver software application, for example).

### The illusion of universality: transparency and metaphor

The cultural industries, linking globalization to various myths embedded in the software tools, also maintain the illusion of universality,notably, for example, through the pictograms found in graphic user interfaces, or GUIs. The rhetoric of the software tool as a discursive strategy of persuasion and domination reflects and therefore contributes a great deal to this globalization trend. This is what Ivan Illich suggests when he writes:

As long as people assume that the automobile is beneficial to them, they can take advantage of the car, they will not reproach Ford for building cars. As long as people share the illusion that travel speeds can be increased for everyone, the company will continue to criticize its own political system instead of imagining a different transportation system (Illich 1973, 51).

Illich proposes an alternative based on a critique of the destructive aspect of the tool that increases “uniformity, dependence, exploitation and powerlessness”. In his view, the solution does not lie “in a mode of appropriation of the tool, but in the discovery of the nature of certain tools, namely, that nobody will ever be able to possess them” (Illich 1973, 51).

The software tools are seeking to become more “transparent”, and this desire for transparency has prompted the proliferation of metaphors (a breeding-ground for expression) as an experience of reality. The desire of the designer is to ensure that the user of a software tool understands and accepts the predispositions that are more or less visible to him/her. To achieve these goals, the designer must seek the most readily understandable representations so that the user can establish a relationship between the physical world of everyday objects and the interface.

However,metaphor often deceives us, since it defines a reality and “moves” us to adapt to a situation. Some dreams of universality run the risk of cultivating the idea that there could be a universal “language” understood by all, without any learning and manifested through the expression of commands, especially software graphics. In this sense, “graphic figures” seek to be as unambiguous and as “intuitive” as possible, thereby maintaining this “dream” of universality which, combined with globalization, leads, however, to standardization.

What we have called in our research the “rhetoric for creative authoring” offers a new methodology based, on the one hand, on the analysis of statements and “model-forms” by which software tools anticipate the practices of users, and, on the other, on an empirical study of the practices used by authors of digital literature.

Some uses of the tool then become a standard practice for millions of users. In our research, we studied three representative tools and software applications used in digital literature. One of these tools was Flash, which provides “model-forms” of design that strongly suggest the field of cinematography. The appropriation of these cultural codes means that they are no longer seen as a free choice,but as “defaults” (Manovich 2010b, 187). We can assume that common practices from the movies, such as film editing, are increasingly anticipated by software tools available on the computer, making it a “dominant cultural interface” (Manovich 2010b, 188). The linking of time and space,operating in this software between a stage and the timeline, for example, is part of an aesthetic strategy and has become one of the “fundamental organizational principles of the software” (Manovich 2010b, 189).

The user is also facing standardized context menus and the “toolbox” within the same product range (for example: File> New in Microsoft, Adobe, etc., or the magnifying icon that tells users that they can zoom in by clicking on it).

### The cultural software-tool

Because of technological change, software has taken a prominent place in the global economy. That is why it seems important to authors of digital literature to measure the implications of the software tool.

For Manovich, the software tool is one of the “fuels” of our consumer society, which also reflects the globalization process. Many activities now seem to owe their existence to the software tool and should be considered through this prism. However, an amazing paradox emerges within this context: although the software tool is ubiquitous, it actually receives very little attention.

Manovich speaks about “cultural software”, in the sense that it is directly used by millions of individuals worldwide. “Software is the invisible glue that ties it all together” (Manovich 2010b, 4).

Search engines, recommendation systems, mapping applications, blog tools, auction tools, instant messaging clients, and, of course, platforms which allow others to write new software – Facebook, Windows, Unix, Android – are in the center of the global economy, culture, social life, and, increasingly, politics. And this “cultural software” – cultural in a sense that it is directly used by hundreds of millions of people and that it carries “atoms” of culture (media and information, as well as human interactions around these media and information) – is only the visible part of a much larger software universe (Manovich, 2010b, 3).

Taking the example of After-Effects, an Adobe video-creation software application, Manovich shows that the tools have a significant impact on contemporary aesthetics. As with Flash, similar “visual strategies” appear in all types of projects designed with these software tools, often without this being consciously planned by the authors.

Marc Andreessen, co-founder of Netscape (one of the first Web browsers) wrote an article in August 2011 for the *Wall Street Journal*[[2]](#footnote-2) with the provocative title “Why Software is Eating the World”, in which he agrees with Manovich’s thesis.

While Andreessen does not go so far as to evoke a technological determinism, he does see the software tool potentially becoming a globalized cultural vehicle thanks to the Web and the effects of globalization.

What is the relationship between the software tool as a virtual object and globalized culture? What relationship does the software tool have with globalized culture? Software tools, and therefore the creations made with them, convey, in fact, not only the personal views of the author, but also the image of a company (e.g., Adobe) and the idea of “how to produce” (e.g., Photoshop, Word ...). Business strategies aimed at trying to “break into” an area where competition is important enable organizations to federate a maximum of individuals who have been “won over” by a tool.

Andréa Semprini specifies that the globalized object “lives in a local space without really integrating into it”. The tool negotiates a kind of “entente cordiale”. By insinuating itself into how we do things, it becomes an actor that has an impact on our view of the world, providing global consistency in a finite world. It becomes what Levi-Strauss called a”kind of socio-cultural and semiotic do-it-yourself tool”. The software tool therefore survives in particular in groups of users who come from different locations but are linked by practices centering around the tool.

By positioning itself in the globalized lifestyle of the Internet, the software tool apparently becomes an “autonomous semiotic system”, drawing its autonomy from globalization.

Let’s look at the example of CMS. Here the standardization of pages generated by software tools (which now seems to be inevitable these days) provides a structural framework for culture and its forms of expression. If we take the example of the personal options available in WordPress, we see that the language chosen for the presentation of the interface or the language proposed by default for navigation is usually American English. This presupposition already represents what François Bernard and his globalization study/research group called “degree zero of [...] cultural diversity”. If we simply consider the available content of content management systems, we also see cultural trademarks that would lead us to prefer one CMS (supported by a community) over another. Belonging to one particular CMS becomes an identity marker.

Communities appear that redefine borders – borders that go beyond physical boundaries. Belonging to one community versus another would be an additional marker of identity. These concentrated levels of online users and signs apparently create what sociologist Stuart Hall calls a “cultural supermarket” effect, a space for modeling differences. The tool provides representations on diversity, identities and cultures, and becomes a strategic place for global thinking.

We see that globalization contributes to the dissemination of ideas, concepts, innovations and symbols. As openness becomes international, bringing associated benefits with it, some people fear an “American hegemony”. Does globalization basically come down to imports from the U.S.? Could it move soon to another power, such as China or Brazil, or to other countries already engaged in international competition? Perhaps we have not yet reached that point. Thanks to such industries as the cinema, a powerful cultural vector for globalization (as we also mentioned vis-à-vis Flash), the U.S. might well have acquired a high degree of cultural importance in the imaginations of “globalized” peoples, giving it an equaled power of seduction. It seems obvious to point out that the computer was first designed and thought out in American English.

## 4. Free software – an antidote to globalization?

Although the world of finance has used new technologies to structure trade for its own benefit, the question arises as to whether we should leave behind a distribution model and structured networks, and create instead open-source communities to reflect a collective intelligence that goes beyond conventional physical boundaries. While Florian Dauphin believes that “beyond their technical and pragmatic aspects, these [free] software applications greatly exceed the limits of technical reason and seem to be imbued with a humanist imaginary”(2008),Edgar Morin recognizes the existence of a global civilization derived from Western civilization that includes standard shared values.

The world is equipped with computer sites and interconnected by cables and satellites; this fact makes us think that our companies are user-friendly and promote immediate global communication in which the new technologies and tools offer freedom of exchange.

In other words, the Internet with its global network – and its lack of borders – suggests that collective intelligence produces a “butterfly effect” under which an event happening in one part of the world has an effect in another part of the world. It is our hope, of course, that this effect will be positive. As we have already said, globalization is associated with the imaginary of modernity.

The issue of “free software” emerges in this context and is a question that is often based on an economic strategy to position the creation tool at the heart of a visible and active economic market. “What are we to think of free software in the context of a generalized liberalism?”, asks Chatonsky (2011).

The French translation of open-source is “logiciel libre”, or “free software”, meaning freedom of access to the code – and sometimes free of charge, as well.

The concept of freedom is therefore part of this term. The GNU[[3]](#footnote-3) operating system created by Richard Stallman gives a very precise definition of what “free software” is. The term:

refers to software that respects users' freedom. Basically, this means that users have the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software. Thus, “free software” refers to freedom, not price. To understand this concept, you should think of “free speech”, not “free entry”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As the father of free software, Richard Stallman is fighting harder than ever against what he calls the “tyranny” of the giants of proprietary software. Beyond the objective criteria that determine the qualification of “free”, we understand that this is primarily a position that invites users to stop depending on decisions made by global companies. This form of resistance challenges Chatonsky on the potential “tyranny” that free software could then exert – a tyranny in which the use of such software would become the norm – and a reminder of what McLuhan (1964; 1968) said about cultural phenomena reversing themselves to the point of becoming the very opposite of their ”raison d’être” and original meaning.

However, to make optimal use of the freedom provided by “free software”, creators need a greater capacity and more control over the code. In this regard, Chatonsky says that, even though it levels financial and economic inequality, “free software” actually creates another inequality, i.e., an inequality based on “cognitive” skills (programming skills); and he says that artistic creations or digital writings produced by “free software” may place greater emphasis on the use of a “standardized” tool than on creativity itself. The technology seems never fully autonomous, or stand-alone, because it is dependent on economic factors, and “the most sophisticated technologies are dropped if they are not profitable”, according to Serge Latouche (2013, 35). Jacques Ellul’s statement about technician totalitarianism (1988) seems to be inescapable. This is also the view of Ivan Illich, who denounces excessive recourse to a tool which, while user-friendly by nature, could be diverted from its original sphere of action (1973, 46). The monopolistic nature of tools designed for easy handling can apparently pervert their use.

In many respects, however, “free software” is developing an exchange between users and developers – usually amateurs – and is based on a logic of community. This can also be justified by controlling the research and development costs of the tools.

## Conclusion

The growing interconnectedness of communications technology accelerates our awareness – or gives us such awareness – of the inevitable globalization that inhabits our belief-based imagination, i.e., the structures and the social, economic and sociocultural processes that defy our national borders.

Would it be useful to increase our reflectiveness vis-à-vis the use of software-tools and to seek a deeper awareness of their socio-cultural implications, the practices they anticipate and their strategies of domination? In other words, do we need to rethink the shifting digital frontier dividing-lines that offer the possibility of networking and promoting cooperation? The tool allows communication without “taking physical borders into account”, and the use of digital technologies has changed our organizations. The Manifesto of the European Network for Post Development (READ)[[5]](#footnote-5) emphasizes the importance of the imaginary dimensions of globalization by affirming the urgency of “decolonizing minds” so as to establish another globalization, one that is aimed at fighting for a society in which economic values would cease to be central or unique – in other words, a real decolonization of our imagination.

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1. Tufte, E. R. (2003). The cognitive style of PowerPoint. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press LLC [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424053111903480904576512250915629460>> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. GNU literally means: “

*GNU’s Not UNIX*”. GNU is an operating system created par Richard Stallman in 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.gnu.org/home.en.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Revue L'Écologiste (hiver 2001-2002). Défaire le développement, refaire le monde, No 6, volume 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)