Electronic Literature: Affiliations

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(Ghosts of) Generative Literature in Italy between Past, Present and Future
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ABSTRACT
This paper focuses on Italian literary works based on generative practices, from the first combinatorial examples up to the most recent developments related to the use of AI systems. A comparative approach is used in order to highlight themes, tools, practices and methods of Italian authors.

KEYWORDS
generative literature; electronic literature; Italy.

RESUMO
Este artigo centra-se em obras literárias italianas baseadas em práticas gerativas, desde os primeiros exemplos combinatórios até aos desenvolvimentos mais recentes que recorrem a sistemas de IA. Usa-se uma abordagem comparativa para destacar temas, ferramentas, práticas e métodos de autores italianos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
literatura eletrônica; literatura gerativa; Itália.
This paper is part of a larger research project which aims to reconstruct the history of Italian electronic literature, with a specific attention to its relation to the international context. My purpose is to highlight its themes, tools, practices and methods. This analysis will focus on those literary works based on generative practices, from its first generative combinatorial examples up to its most recent developments.

Generative literature can be described as a subcategory of generative art, that is, art wholly or partly created with the use of an autonomous, generally not human system by virtue of processes created by the artist. Although generative “metatechnique” (Levine, 2010) does not strictly require the use of any machine in order to automatize its process, as Ward observed (Ward, 1999), this paper focuses on computer generated artworks that are algorithmically determined.

In the first part, the earliest examples of “computer assisted literature” created in Italy are analyzed, namely those created by Nanni Balestrini: Tape Mark I (1961), Tape Mark II (1963), Tristano (1966/2007) and Tristanoil (2012). A comparison between these works will be provided, also with respect to the “non-electronic” artistic production of the author, and to the coeval international generative experimentation. Such analysis will highlight some aspects which have been little investigated so far, such as the reception by the Italian audience, the relationship between Balestrini and technology, and the recent rediscovery of Balestrini’s works. In the second part, a comparison between the Italian and international context of the period known as “classical age” of electronic literature is provided. The analysis then focuses on Italian examples of automatic text generators. Finally, the third part considers Italian generative practices related to the use of AI systems.

I. “CIBERNETICA E FANTASMI”

Since 1952 — when Alan M. Turing and Christopher S. Strachey programmed Love Letters, the first text generation with the aid of an electronic calculator — numerous “computer poems”, as they were referred to by the title of the first anthology published in the USA (Bailey, 1973), have been created. Due to the limited possibilities offered by the mainframes of the time, those works are mainly generative combinatorial: i.e. predefined text fragments are entered