

Figures in the Interface: Comparative Methods in the Study of Digital Literature

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Abstract

This paper, which is part of the collection of essays *Reading Moving Letters* (see introduction) reflects on what the emerging field of digital literature studies and the more established (but continually evolving) discipline of comparative literature might contribute to one another in terms of defining concepts and methods of literary analysis. My discussion is guided by the tentative proposition that the vexed status of the "national language" for comparative literature can be seen as analogous to the status of the "digital" for scholars undertaking research on computer-based literary texts. Aiming to overcome the ideological strictures of nationalism, many present-day comparatists are returning to the old question "what is literature?" and are placing renewed emphasis on the role of figurative language as a defining feature of literary texts and, consequently, as the appropriate focus of comparative textual analysis. Should scholarship in electronic literature head in a similar direction and cultivate skepticism about the essentialism of the digital, opening up greater possibilities for comparative work across literary media? In support of an affirmative answer to this question, the essay undertakes a detailed comparative analysis of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Herbst" ("Autumn") and American artist Rudy Lemcke's digital video poem "The Uninvited."

1. Reading Digital Literature

For more than a decade, scholars of electronic literature have been searching for theoretical models and critical practices that can adequately account for the specific properties of digitally born literary artifacts. During the same period, their next-door neighbors in the field of comparative literature have been attending to the difficult rebirth of their own discipline, redefining their objects of study and reassessing the fundamental concepts and assumptions that have guided their

research for over a century. In 2006, the publication of the collection *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*, edited by Adalaide Morris and Thomas Swiss, made a major contribution to scholarship on digital literature; in the same year, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* released the results of a “state of the discipline” review conducted by a collective of leading comparativists (cf. Saussy).¹ These volumes are only two examples of a burgeoning culture of self-reflection, retrospective as well as prospective, in both areas of inquiry. Though the two fields have different foci, with digital literature largely emphasizing relationships across media and comparative literature concentrating primarily on relationships among linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts, both have been compelled to define “literature” in ways that counter deeply entrenched presuppositions: for the former, the dominance of print-based conceptions of literary production, and for the latter, the dominance of national (and nationalist) conceptions of literary culture and, more recently, the dominance of Euroamerican languages and literary traditions over those of other parts of the world. For each field, moreover, a retooled definition of literature has served as an organizing principle for innovative research projects, determining to a large extent scholars’ choice of primary materials, theoretical frameworks, and critical methodologies. In terms of their place within academic institutions that offer an increasingly flimsy shelter to the study of literature and the humanities as a whole, both the digital and the comparative modalities of literary scholarship face challenges to their survival that make their task of self-definition and disciplinary legitimation particularly urgent.²

In this paper I want to suggest that these two ongoing initiatives in literary studies, proceeding in parallel time but rarely intersecting, have something to learn from each other. My objective is twofold. First, in order to determine whether an explicit emphasis on *figuration* is essential to a functioning definition of digital literature, I want to bring to the fore an ago-old question to which comparativists have given a great deal of attention: does the trope, the figurative as opposed to the literal deployment of language, represent the *sine qua non* of the specifically *literary* text, regardless of the language (or, we must now add, the medium) in which the text is instantiated? Assuming an affirmative answer to this question, at least for the time being, my second aim is to argue that if we want to develop a procedure for the *close reading* of digital literary texts, a method we can pursue in our scholarship and cultivate in our students, we must endeavor to show how identifiable qualities of the medium in which a text is produced, displayed, and disseminated intersect *constitutively* with identifiable strategies of figuration that make the text recognizable as “literature.” The operative (and tendentious) term here is “constitutively” the strictures of such an approach would demand that we ask ourselves, in each instance of close reading, whether computation as such is essential to the specifically literary properties of the text or essential only to the existence of the text as a particular kind of physical artifact. This distinction between literary and artifactual properties of texts is routinely blurred in current critical

discourse on computer-based literary art. This confusion, I will argue, is structurally analogous to the confusion comparative literature has struggled to overcome: the blurring of the line between the specific “literariness” of a text (features that lend themselves to comparison with other instances of literariness across a broad spectrum of texts), and the text’s presumed linguistic, cultural, and national-political specificities (features that lend themselves largely to contrasts with “foreign” texts and clubby assimilation to others of its putative kind).

I am by no means implying that scholarship in digital literature has neglected comparative approaches. Many of the leading critics in the field of digital literary studies, among them N. Katherine Hayles, John Cayley, Jessica Pressman, and Brian Kim Stefans, undertake approaches that explicitly involve detailed comparisons across time, media, and literary traditions.³ From its beginnings, the field has worked productively across national and linguistic boundaries, as we see in the international scope of many projects and collaborations. I do, however, want to suggest that the history of comparative literature’s emergence contains an important caveat for the developing field of digital literary studies. For comparative literature, the “national language” continues to pose a dilemma: it represents, on the one hand, a set of linguistic skills that all serious students of literature must master and, on the other, a category that is far more ideological than it is “natural” and thus one that we hold in suspicion as a means of configuring our research agendas. My discussion in this chapter is guided by the heuristic hypothesis that we can establish an analogy between the vexed status of the “national language” for comparative literature and the status of the “digital” for scholars undertaking research on computer-based literary texts. Clearly we must endeavor to learn as much as we can about the codes and processes that comprise digital textuality; such knowledge is analogous to the language mastery required of the traditional literary critic. Roberto Simanowski is correct in his early recognition that the interpretation of digital cultural productions requires the “Entwicklung einer *Hermeneutik der Tiefeninformation*, die eine *Hermeneutik der Interaktion*, als den eingeplanten Faktor der Zeichenkonstituierung, einschließen muß” (‘development of a *hermeneutics of deep information* that must include a *hermeneutics of interaction* as the integral factor in the constitution of signs’) (121).

The detailed studies of the materiality of electronic texts that Matthew Kirschenbaum conducts in *Mechanisms: New Media and Forensic Imagination* and Chris Funkhouser’s technically precise account of the emergence of computer-based literature in *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995*, both illustrate the importance of a solid grasp of the technology for the foundational work of literary criticism, from establishing coherent bibliographic categories to categorizing and preserving individual artworks. Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s work, including his contribution to this collection, powerfully exemplifies the value of fluency in computer programming for artists and critics alike. Yet in terms of *reading*

these texts, an activity that attempts to demonstrate and conserve their meaning and cultural relevance, a preoccupation with media specificity threatens to override our attention to aspects of digital texts that are analogous, if not simply identical, to aspects of print documents, and thus to thwart critical and pedagogical projects that trace comparisons across differently formatted texts. Special pleading for the digital impedes our access to each artwork's "literary singularity," a quality that in Derek Attridge's terms "may be said to derive from—though it is much more than—the verbal particularity of the work: specific words in a specific arrangement (which may include spatial arrangement on the page or the use of pauses and other articulating devices in oral delivery)" (65). This oversight, in turn, limits the potential of our studies of digital literature to make meaningful contributions to the study of literature broadly conceived as an academic discipline, one that is increasingly downsized and sidelined in the American university system, and as an intellectual responsibility to the reading public.

In the following section I describe what recent debates in comparative literary studies, with their emphasis on the text's figurative dimensions, might contribute to the elaboration of definitions, theories, and methods appropriate for the critical treatment of digital literature. I then offer a brief demonstration of how a close reading practice for electronic texts that stresses their comparability with printed texts might come to terms with the problems I identify in current critical orientations within digital literary studies. My example aligns a conventionally "readable" print poem, Rainer Maria Rilke's "Herbst" ('Autumn') (1902), with a digital video poem produced a century later, Rudy Lemcke's "The Uninvited" (2005). I show how an orientation to the study of digital literature that takes into account the digital literature's departure from the print tradition, an orientation that finds one of its most sophisticated and compelling exemplars in N. Katherine Hayles's "intermediation," can open our eyes to vital, perhaps even definitive dimensions of the digital literary artwork. At the same time, I try to indicate how these approaches can lead us to overlook other features of the text, in particular its specific tropology.

Deviant by Definition: Comparative Literature's Defense of the Figure

As Hayles notes in the opening of *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, the definition of "electronic literature" developed by a committee of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) has the virtue of a broad compass, but it also begs the question of what "literary" actually means: in the ELO's terms, "electronic literature" comprises "work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or

networked computer” (qtd. in Hayles 3). The capaciousness of this definition affords individual artists and critics alike considerable latitude in developing projects. In its inclusiveness, it also resonates compellingly with Susan Bassnett’s recent argument about how the discipline of comparative literature ought to reconfigure itself:

The future of comparative literature lies in jettisoning attempts to define the object of study in any prescriptive way and in focusing instead on the idea of literature, understood in the broadest possible sense, and in recognising the inevitable interconnectedness that comes from literary transfer. No single European literature can be studied in isolation, nor should European scholars shrink from reassessing the legacy they have inherited. (10)

Bassnett’s emphasis on interconnectedness and, especially, on the reassessment (but not, presumably, the abandonment) of our literary legacies corresponds in important ways with the thrust of current efforts to stake out the intellectual territory of electronic literature studies. A leader in this endeavor, Hayles has noted that “as we work toward critical practices and theories appropriate for electronic literature, we may come to renewed appreciation for the specificity of print” (*Writing Machines* 33). The critical agenda Hayles terms “intermediation,” though it foregrounds the interaction between “human and machine cognition” (*Electronic Literature* x), is careful to acknowledge the connections between digitally born texts and their print forebears: “When literature leaps from one medium to another . . . it does not leave behind the accumulated knowledge embedded in genres, poetic conventions, narrative structures, figurative tropes, and so forth” (*Electronic Literature* 58). How, though, can critics mobilize these “legacy concepts” (84) in their work on digital texts without overlooking the specificity of the media and simply accommodating these new forms to older conceptions of literature? In the remainder of this section, I will pick up one of these inherited concepts—the “figurative trope”—and suggest that it can serve as a fulcrum for a robust comparative method for digital literary studies, in part by making the specificity of the media relative to the figural dimensions of literary textuality.

For comparative literature, the “tropical” nature of literary language has served as a key common ground for a study of literature that extends its scope beyond the confines of national cultures and traditions. In her appeal for a renewal of the comparative project in *Death of a Discipline*, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes rhetoric as a distinguishing feature of literature and of literature’s distinctive effect on human consciousness: “The literary text gives rhetorical signals to the reader, which lead to activating the readerly imagination. Literature advocates in this special way. These are not the ways of expository prose. Literary reading has to be learned” (22). The trope introduces a kind of difficulty into the text, a departure from straightforward decoding that demands that readers exert their imaginations. One of the earliest theoretical accounts of figuration in Western

rhetorical theory emphasizes this operation of estrangement. In a remarkable passage in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle compares the reader's experience of a figure of speech with an encounter with a foreigner:

... to deviate [from prevailing usage] makes language more elevated; for people feel the same in regard to *lexis* as they do in regard to strangers compared with citizens. As a result, one should make the language unfamiliar, for people are admirers of what is far off, and what is marvelous is sweet. (221)⁴

Working out of a tradition of poetics that can be traced back to Aristotle, Spivak upholds literature's capacity to stage an encounter with otherness, an encounter that appeals to the reader's ethical imagination, as a crucial desideratum of a new comparative literature:

In order to reclaim the role of teaching literature as training the imagination—the great inbuilt instrument of othering—we may, if we work as hard as old-fashioned Comp. Lit. is known to be capable of doing, come close to the irreducible work of translation, not from language to language but from body to ethical semiosis, that incessant shuttle that is a “life.” (Spivak 13)

Spivak's suggestion that the text's impact on the imagination ought to be the focal point of comparative studies provides a valuable corrective to the preoccupations with “media specificity” that have taken a firm hold on digital literary scholarship. While our critical practices must still pay scrupulous attention to the qualities of electronic literature as *electronic* literature, this attention will result in richer and less circular interpretations if we ask ourselves how these medium-specific elements *figure*—in all senses—in the reader's imaginative, ethical engagement with the text.⁵

The work of another major contributor to the revitalization of comparative literature, J. Hillis Miller, goes a long way toward imagining a comparative literature that might encompass digital forms. Though he has primarily concentrated on how the digitalization of printed texts can “teach us to see earlier works of literature in a different way” (137), his affirmation of the “materiality” of literature can supplement—and productively redirect—the corresponding emphasis in the study of digital literary artifacts. Miller calls upon the comparative tradition for models of “genuine reading” that can counter the “mimetic, representational, descriptive methodology” he associates with the identity politics that have informed cultural studies in the U.S. academy (147). In pursuit of laudably progressive political aims, Miller suggests, critics too often treat literary texts as if they offered transparent representations of cultural identities, social practices, and ethical-political problems. The tendency of these critics to overlook the mediating and displacing role of language in literary representations frequently means that in their enthusiasm to diversify the curriculum with non-English-language materials, they tend to overlook the additional mediations, displacements, and even misrepresentations that come with translated texts. Opposing such approaches, Miller's “genuine reading” always

must have recourse to the original language of the work, however awkward and time-consuming this may be" (151). Miller's insistence on reading in the original is, he argues, only the most visible version of a need, even in studying works in the

same language as that of the critic, to get behind thematic reading and pay attention to what might be called the materiality of the work. The work's force as an event bringing cultural value or meaning into existence depends on a certain performative use of language or other signs. Such a reading must attend to what is internally heterogeneous, contradictory, odd, anomalous about the work, rather than presupposing some monolithic unity that directly reflects a cultural context. (153)

While we must not jump to sloppy analogies between the human languages studied by comparatists and the programming languages and design protocols that shape the digital texts we seek to understand, Miller's demand that we read texts in the original reminds us of the essential but often arduous task of digging through the strata of source codes, scripts, file formats, release dates, and all the other technical data that make up the digital artwork's original "language" as well as its materiality. His emphasis on the performative and tropological dimensions of literary text, however, directs our gaze toward those aspects of texts that differ from and "other" their native cultures and languages, whatever they may be, far more than they reflect them or confirm their stability. Even if we don't fully take on board the habits of mind of poststructuralist critics like Miller, his effort to call into question the ideological presuppositions with which many literary scholars approach their objects of study might draw our attention to the foregone conclusions that shape our critical reception of digital texts. How often do we find in any given computer-based literary artifact only what we've learned to look for? How often do our analyses merely confirm the digital format's difference from—and implicit superiority to—the print format? How often, regardless of the text's specific thematics, do we delegate it a representative of "cyberculture" or a reflection of the *Zeitgeist* of the Late Age of Print? Despite our appeals to the digital text's innovativeness, how often do we allow it truly to surprise us?

If we place undue emphasis on what appear to be large differences between the printed and the digital, we will overlook the edgier and more edifying little differences that can be identified only through applying to individual texts the rigorous close reading strategies that have been a mainstay of comparative literature's critical methods. Our cross-media comparativism cannot simply serve to reinforce the priority of digital forms, nor should it accommodate its objects to the critic's presuppositions about experimentalism or innovativeness. Furthermore, we need not limit our focus to those particular printed texts—Concrete or Language poetry, for example, or the typographically complex works of fiction Hayles frequently treats—that appear to share an aesthetic (or a production process) with works of digital literature. As Nathan Brown argues, "[t]he challenge that we might thus pose

to any art form, not insofar as we are indifferent to its particularity, but rather *insofar as it is specific to its medium*, is this: can it configure an assemblage whose force of resistance to what we already live is sufficient to *seize us*—into thought.” Insofar as a reaffirmation of figuration, and of figuration’s potentially transformative appeal to the reader’s imagination, has served comparative literature as a way of pursuing its disciplinary aims without falling into the traps of nationalist and identitarian essentialism, the same reaffirmation can guide digital literary studies out of the confines of an essentialist “digitalism.” In the next section, I endeavor to sketch out such a path by way of a comparison of two poems, one printed and one digitally produced, both of which push at the limits of their respective media in order to fashion complex, compelling, and ethically fraught figures.

3. Rilke’s “Autumn” and Lemcke’s “The Uninvited”

An exegetical tradition spanning at least two millennia has taught us how to read—and how to teach others how to read—literary artifacts like Rainer Maria Rilke’s well-known poem “Autumn,” published in 1902 in the first volume of *Das Buch der Bilder* (*The Book of Images*), which will serve here as an object lesson in “classic” literary figuration. We are only beginning to develop techniques of close reading that can account for the cross-media figurations in the kind of literary artifact the San Francisco artist Rudy Lemcke offers us in his digital video piece “The Uninvited,” first exhibited in 2002, which combines photography, poetry, animation, music, and display space to represent the hallucinatory thoughts of a homeless Vietnam war veteran. The following comparison of “Autumn” and “The Uninvited” takes as its starting point a simple thematic similarity: both texts take up the image of autumn leaves, one of the most banal and sentimental images in all of poetry, and through a process of figuration both poems transform and elevate this clichéd *topos* into an emblem of ethical responsibility. I will first conduct a more or less standard explication of Rilke’s poem, as if I were discussing it in a class, and then I will try to adapt these close-reading techniques for an examination of Lemcke’s work.⁶

The first half of the first line of “Autumn” launches the poem with a declarative statement of fact which is immediately followed by two similes that introduce a “counterfactual” element into the description: “Die Blätter fallen, fallen wie von weit / als welkten in den Himmeln ferne Gärten”) (‘The leaves are falling, falling as if from far away / as if distant gardens were withering in the skies’). The doubling of “falling” in the first line inaugurates a pattern of *polyptoton*, the repetition of a word in different grammatical forms, which makes up a conspicuous structure of the poem. In “Autumn” this repetition is marked by an intensification of figuration. The next line anthropomorphizes the leaves: “Sie fallen mit verneinender Gebärde” (‘They’re

falling with gestures of denial'), and the poem's remaining stanzas gradually transform "falling" from a physical movement to a metaphysical condition of existence.

The second stanza shifts from the human-scale image of the falling leaves to a cosmic-scale image of planetary movement, an image that shifts, in turn, from concrete heavenly bodies to an abstract state of alienation: "Und in den Nächten fällt die schwere Erde / aus allen Sternen in die Einsamkeit" ('And in the nights the heavy earth is falling / From all the stars into solitude'). From this all-encompassing perspective, the stanza that follows zooms back to the humans who occupy this "heavy earth," introducing a moral dimension into the motion of falling that has now been established as the poem's central theme: "Wir alle fallen / Diese Hand da fällt / Und sieh dir andre an: es ist in allen" ('We're all falling / This hand falls there / And take a look at others: it's in them all'). From the movements of the dying leaves, the poem itself moves to the orbit and rotation of planet Earth and then on to the movements of a collective humanity and its individual hands. The curiously detached reference to "this hand" prepares for the key image of hands that concludes the poem, an image that further complicates "Autumn's" elaborate metaphysics by invoking an unnamed but benevolent agency: "Und doch ist Einer, welcher dieses Fallen / unendlich sanft in seinen Händen hält" ('And yet there's One who holds this falling / Infinitely tenderly in his hands'). As we will see, the capitalized indefinite pronoun "One" serves as the catalyst for this poem's entrainment not only of our conscious attention but also of our ethical imagination.

A responsible teacher of this poem would insure that students have some inkling of its biographical and literary-historical contexts. Anyone familiar with Rilke's uneasy relationship with his Romantic forebears will recognize "Autumn" as a riff on the metaphysical nature poem; anyone familiar with Rilke's religious preoccupations is likely to hypothesize that the "One" in the last stanza refers to the elusive, yet awe-inspiring divinity who appears in so many of Rilke's poems. The poem is also replete with rhetorical figures that any undergraduate student of literature should be able to identify. Rilke employs end-rhyme (*Gebärde/Erde; fällt/halt*), assonance (*ferne/Gärten/schwere/Sternen; unendlich/Händen/hält*), alliteration (*Gärten/Gebärde*), apostrophe (the direct address to the reader in "take a look at others"), and a primarily iambic meter to fuse the poem into a densely articulated semantic, rhetorical, sonic, rhythmic, and visual object. Through its figural language, the poem effects a kind of "motion capture," seizing the kinetic image of "falling" and propelling it through a sequence of grammatical and tropical transformations that culminate in the strange indefiniteness of the last stanza's pronoun: if this "One," the guardian of this "falling," is indeed God, why doesn't Rilke just say so? Elsewhere he does not shrink from naming God, as he does, for example, in the opening of "Herbsttag" ("Autumn Day"), a companion poem in the same collection. A second glance at the ending should provoke us to ask who, after all, is this "One?"

In an effort to resolve the dilemma in terms of Rilke's own poetic practice, we might recall the famous imperative direct address to the reader in the last line of Rilke's "Archaischer Torso Apollos" ("Archaic Torso of Apollo"): "Du mußt dein Leben ändern" ("You must change your life"). We might also refer to his lesser-known poem "Der Leser" ("The Reader"), also included in *The Book of Images*, which gives a sensuous description of the physical experience of reading a book that grows heavier as the reader tires. Is it possible, then, that the hands at the end of "Autumn," with their infinite tenderness, belong to *me*, the reader, who holds the poem—"dieses Fallen," this cascade of figurative iterations of falling—literally in my hands or figuratively in my attentive gaze? Could it also refer to the hands of the poet, whose manual and moral effort have brought this specific instance of "falling" into being?

Concluding with this ambiguity, the poem tropes on its own materiality as a hand-held text-display device. In doing so, it loops its figurative play with language through its own physical existence as an object, an existence that impinges upon *my* own corporeal, agential being. "Und sieh dir andre an" ("Take a look at others"), the poem has demanded; its last line implies that I must now look directly at myself, at my hands, recognizing that I am called upon to be responsible to the "others" with whom I am conjoined in a precipitous, precarious existential "falling." In the course of ten lines, "Autumn" unfurls from a humdrum remark about the falling leaves into an ethico-aesthetic-theological conundrum. We need not choose only one among the alternative antecedents of "One." In fact, holding them all in suspension intensifies the poem's philosophical density. Furthermore, in terms of what Spivak identifies as "the role of teaching literature as training the imagination," the poem requires a kind of "fault tolerance" in our interpretative efforts, simulating the necessity for tolerant, imaginative judgments in other spheres of our social lives.⁷

Rudy Lemcke's animated poem "The Uninvited," one of the video experiments in Lemcke's series *Light F/X*, enacts another deviation from the cliché of autumn leaves, another kind of poetic motion capture, and another ambiguous ethical appeal to the reader by way of its specific materiality. Exhibited at the Stonybrook University Art Gallery in Stonybrook, New York, in the last months of 2002, the single-channel video is designed for display on a gallery wall. A little over thirteen and a half minutes long, the piece plays in a continuous loop, allowing no intervention on the part of the viewer. Appearing in white letters against a burnt-orange background, single lines from the poem fade in and out, accompanied by a brash, almost wailing arrangement for gamelan and voice. What appear to be shadow puppets made of leaves and plant material, their elongated limbs reminiscent of the articulated stick-puppets in the Indonesian tradition of *wayang kulit*, move gracefully across the screen behind the words of the poem, duplicating and overlapping to form dense patterns (fig. 1).⁸



Fig. 1. Rudy Lemcke. Screen shots from "The Uninvited" (2005). Single-channel video. Used with permission.

As a text in which "sight is in-mixed with sound, texture with vision," "The Uninvited" clearly requires the kind of "synesthetic" reading Hayles exemplifies in her examination of Michael Joyce's *Twelve Blue* (*Electronic Literature* 64). The words of Lemcke's poem are meant to be *read* as well as "looked at" as visual details in the overall ensemble of images, yet their transient appearance before our eyes makes a stringent demand on our attention, and they must compete for that attention with the choreography of the much-larger animated images that dominate the screen.⁹

The most conspicuous visual elements of "The Uninvited," the leaf-puppets are also the locus of the work's most intense figuration. Whereas the cascade of tropes in Rilke's "Autumn" issues from the declarative statement "the leaves are falling," Lemcke's tropology departs from actual leaves and plants; the images in "The Uninvited" are digital photographs of three-dimensional puppets Lemcke constructed from dried plants he gathered in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Lemcke posterized the image files in PhotoShop, then composited and animated them, along with the text of the poem, in AfterEffects. Thus Lemcke's leaves, like Rilke's, have been poetically *processed*, submitted to an artistic procedure that redirects the literal signifiers that refer to them—the word "leaves" and the photographic images of leaves —toward deviant, indeterminate signifieds. Anthropomorphism confers on Rilke's leaves the capacity to make "gestures of denial." Lemcke anthropomorphizes his leaves by sculpting them into abstract humanoid bodies, abstracting them further through photography and editing, and animating them. At times Lemcke's text appears to refer to these figures directly, but the reference is never explicit; the wraith-like images do not so much illustrate the verbal text as they extend and complicate its connotations. In this regard they are more symbolic than they are iconic, "figurative" in the sense of "tropological" rather than "representational."

The opening stanzas identify the poem's speaker as a homeless person who dreams of "going home" but suspects that the home he dreams of "could have been / something I saw on TV / I guess I don't remember clearly / my america." An

outcast in American society, he lives “under those bushes / the ocean isn’t very far.” References later in the poem to “napalm,” “the children of Saigon,” and “the Mekong” suggest that he is a veteran of the war in Vietnam. He may be an amputee, and he is certainly suffering from psychological distress induced by the trauma of his experience in combat. One stanza of the poem makes the “phantom pain” of an amputated limb into a metaphor for the speaker’s sense that he may already be dead, that his entire existence is only a lingering, illusory anguish:

I am alive
maybe not
phantom pain: the doctor calls it
after a limb has been severed from
the body
I am dead
and this is all just some fucking phantom pain

Like the kinetic image of falling in Rilke’s “Autumn,” the psychosomatic image of phantom pain provides one of the guiding metaphors for “The Uninvited.” Lemke’s poem consists of a hallucinatory monologue in which the speaker relives incidents from the war, including the suicide of a platoon mate who “shot himself in the head one night.” He seems confused about when and where this particular event occurred; “it happened over there,” he says, apparently referring to Vietnam, then “no / just there,” which seems to indicate a place in the speaker’s present environs. The traumatic past event, like the missing limb, retains its painful immediacy.

Describing this conflation of past and present in the speaker’s mind, the verbal text of “The Uninvited” alludes directly to the work’s visual and musical components:

the shadow of his body in the moonlight
joins the other shadows
“... I in their midst.”

and the sound of gamelan music in the wind
this paradise

Although these lines seem to suggest that the shadow-puppets represent the “uninvited” specters of dead comrades who haunt the speaker’s memory, the poem as a whole resists any definitive alignment of its words and images. Rather than merely offering a “visualization” of the verbal text’s meaning, the animation serves dynamically to stage a range of possibilities for signification, providing an example of what Talan Memmott ingeniously refers to as a “*mise en écart*” whereby “the media/medium makes intentionality, poesis, and poetics negotiable, rendered through various sensual and experiential stimuli rather than limited to the word” (304).¹⁰ Like the indefinite “One” in Rilke’s poem, Lemcke’s animated leaves are the locus of an ambiguity that keeps our interpretive options in play. The

anthropomorphic shapes of the shadow puppets allow them to operate like indeterminate yet nonetheless *personal* pronouns, stand-ins for the assembly of unnamed and politically “unrepresented” human others—“the uninvited”—on behalf of whom the poem solicits our compassion.

As is the case in “Autumn,” the ambiguity in “The Uninvited” also serves to invoke some sort of super-human, if not divine, agency. The line “. . . I in their midst” quotes Jesus’s words in Matthew 18:20: “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Although we might easily read this citation from the gospels as an ironic indictment of American society, which relentlessly claims Christian values even as it routinely betrays them, the inclusion of this precise passage, describing a human fellowship into which the godhead comes essentially “uninvited,” complicates the frame of reference of the work’s title. Evoking the zero-degree of social collectivity (“two or three”), the scrap of scripture allows us to interpret the small cast of puppets as the emblem of the *polis* to which the poem’s speaker and the poem’s reader belong by default, but within which they must negotiate the terms of their gathering (“in my name”). “The Uninvited” does not preach a Christian ethics, but its compositing of this particular text from the Christian tradition into its array of signs compels us to introduce the themes of mutuality and responsibility into our effort to assemble a coherent meaning from its component parts.

As does “Autumn,” “The Uninvited” employs its particular material configuration to call our attention to the potential moral agency of our own hands. Lemcke originally conceived his poem as an interactive Flash piece in which each of the puppets would serve as a clickable link to parts of the poem, but he ultimately rejected this idea in favor of the uninterrupted flow of the poem and the continuous, painstakingly choreographed movement of the images.¹¹ The decision to exclude interactivity has the effect of intensifying the implication of its adaptation of shadow-puppet form. Moving “on their own,” propelled by some invisible impetus (unlike *wayang kulit* puppets, these have no tell-tale stick indexing the hand of the puppeteer), Lemcke’s puppets implicitly raise the question of agency. Like Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries’ aggressively non-interactive Flash pieces, “The Uninvited” makes its very lack of interactive options a dimension of its overall aesthetic and of the “ethical semiosis” it stimulates in its audience. We might take the risk of arguing that Lemcke’s work imaginatively “disables” its viewers, and in doing so demands that its audience re-imagine the ethical and political abilities it does possess but does not always exercise. The ambiguity of agency—the question of who controls the puppets, in the poem and in our social lives—is posed with particular intensity in the final lines, in which the speaker apparently becomes at once an active “master” and a passive “memory” of the shadow-play:

strange theater
of shadows
lingers
a moment between
chaos and absolute silence
its sweet poisonous music
this haunting
and I
shadow master
its memory

these uninvited

While the conclusion of Rilke's poem moves in the direction of generalized metaphysics, Lemcke's conclusion moves in the direction of a highly specific politics. Golden Gate Park has recently become the residence of a new cadre of homeless people who use laptops and public wireless hotspots to sustain viable alternative lifestyles, but Lemcke's speaker is by no means one of these "urban outdoorsmen."¹² He is not participating in the "consensual hallucination" of Gibson's cyberspace; his delusions have been induced by the technology of twentieth-century warfare. As the poem was produced and exhibited during the war in Afghanistan and the buildup to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, its references to the Vietnam War cannot help but be drawn within the hermeneutic horizon of current American military operations in those countries. The "boxes of dead boys" represent the causalities of both past and present conflicts, and the devastating experience of the poem's Vietnam veteran also emblemizes the psychic and physical suffering of today's veterans. The prescience of Lemcke's vision of the similarities among these wars is sadly borne out in recent coverage of the disenfranchisement, and in some cases the homelessness, of men and women returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹³

"The Uninvited" reminds us of something that critics of digital literature too often appear to be in danger of forgetting: that literary texts have on the whole tended to concern themselves with topics other than their own material conditions of possibility. Even those texts that make references to their own physical nature—Rilke's gesture toward the hand-held printed page, Lemcke's gestures toward his "strange theater of shadows"—do so in order to trope on this physicality, engaging figuration to apply literal, material means to poetic and often ethical ends. Our critical practice must keep up with this movement of the properly literary beyond literature's now breathtakingly expanded means of production, or it will lose sight of literature's still far more expansive aesthetic and ethical ends.

What *matters* in both these works, in terms of their status as literary objects, is the juxtaposition of verbal, visual, and auditory components that produce complex multimodal figures: metaphoric fusions, metonymic contiguities, tantalizing and philosophically compelling ambiguities. While Hayles' definition of materiality as "an emergent property created through dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and signifying strategies" unquestionably applies to texts in general (*My Mother Was a Computer*3), when we seek to apply the definition to specifically *literary* texts, must we not isolate a subset of these "signifying strategies" that are specifically figural, even if they are not specifically digital? Hayles and the critics who follow her example are hardly blind to figural language, yet the role of the trope as a distinctive feature of the literary tends to get eclipsed by their detailed, provocative assertions of the distinctiveness of the text's machinic substrate and of the revolution in reading borne out by the partnership of intelligent, literate humans and purportedly intelligent, literate machines in the processing of the text's layered codes. In the case of Lemcke's digital video work, the programming and machine-language codes that contribute to its constitution are, as Cayley has put it, "largely sublinguistic, or on the outer margins of paratext" ("Time Code Language" 314). In his production of "The Uninvited," Lemcke certainly required photo-editing and animation software to accomplish the text's figural nuances, yet it is this figuration rather than computation that takes the literary upper hand.

4. Conclusion

Works such as Lemcke's "The Uninvited" qualify as "electronic literature" because they estrange the practices of digital photography, text animation, and visual display from their conventional applications in industry and commerce in ways that compare to the "making strange" of language's declarative, information-bearing functions in more traditional modalities of literary discourse. Groundbreaking though they may be in terms of form, digital texts are no less rooted in this fundamental dimension of the literary. In human-computer interfaces made literarily deviant, we certainly find an opportunity for reflection on the hyper-mediated world in which now we live our lives and engage with the lives of others, but we are also sent back to the deep and richly varied history of our practices of reading and writing, which are bound up with the perennial conundrums of our curiously human being-in-language.

The close reading practices that have developed within comparative literature demand that critics, grounded in a knowledge of the text's codes, look closely at the linguistic specificity of a given work and at the same time look across a broad set of works, taking a synoptic view that allows them to make inferences about

literature's functions and values. Maintaining this broad perspective without lapsing into pat generalities has required a constant negotiation with pre-determined categories and entrenched critical prejudices. Comparatism always entails relativism; some aspects of the text's totality will take a back seat to whatever dimensions the critic chooses to privilege. To a large extent, we assess the validity and relevance of critical interpretations by weighing the costs of these choices. Throughout this chapter I have tried to stress the expense of passing over the problem of figuration, whether it occurs in verbal, visual, or procedural forms, in order to emphasize the material differences between digital and non-digital literature.

I have focused primarily on what comparative literature has to teach digital literary studies, but obviously arguments can be made in the other direction. Comparative literature is on the verge of being digitally remastered: as it continues to engage with the different human languages and cultures that have been its traditional focus, comparative literature will now have to cross the many systems of encoding and modalities of discourse that increasingly shape the production of literary texts in contemporary culture.¹⁴ "We must learn to 'code-shift,'" as Sander Gilman puts it, "moving elegantly between a command of the language and culture of our object of study and an awareness of the purpose of that research for the culture in which we live, learn, and teach" (23). My emphasis here on the need for digital literary studies to maintain a focus on the conditions of figuration that pertain to the literariness of digital texts has its corollary in the need for comparative literature to become more attentive to the material conditions of textuality and their impact on figuration.

It is tempting to conclude with a prediction: it seems likely that we will find the results of our present-day efforts to establish a class of literary objects that are by definition "digital" to be no more philosophically sound or methodologically useful, in the long run, than were the results of the efforts of scholars a century ago to establish a class of literary objects that were by definition "German" or "French." Such an assertion obviously requires the invocation of *mutatis mutandi*: digital formats like hypertext and animation are not natural languages like Russian and Urdu, and the values driving the definitions and disciplinary formations appropriate for digital literature are for the most part untainted by nationalist chauvinism. Few critics have been so bold as to claim that the digital medium should be the only consideration when it comes to interpreting digital texts, and most recognize the complex interpenetration of digital forms and their printed precursors. Furthermore, it remains clear that in order to understand the historical development of digital literature, as Funkhouser does, and their complexity as material objects, as do Hayles and Kirschenbaum, a deep knowledge and close critical attention to the digital dimension of these artifacts is indeed essential to building the foundations of a robust field of literary study. Nevertheless, an insistence on the alleged "flatness" of print still pervades critical discussions of digital literature, and this

recognition of the printed page's literal two-dimensionality frequently slips from a more or less empirical, more or less trivial observation about the materiality of printed documents to a denigration of the aesthetic and cultural potentials of literary language that happens to have been printed.¹⁵ This over-emphasis on literature's material substrate seriously underestimates the dimensionality introduced into all properly literary texts by way of the diverting, distancing, layering, and deepening operations of figuration. At stake here is hardly a defense of print, but rather a defense of the virtuality of the trope, the deviancy and illusionism that constitute the defining characteristic of the literary. By the time print finally disappears, no one is likely to shed a tear for it. By the time figuration disappears, we will have taken leave of a fundamental capacity of our linguistic and ethical existence as human beings, a departure we might be wise to bewail in advance.

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Notes

1. *New Media Poetics* is the outcome of the October 2002 New Media Poetry Conference at the University of Iowa. The American Comparative Literature Association assembled the review committee and gave it its charge in 2004; *Comparative Literature in an Era of Globalization* represents the final report on the review process.
2. For a discussion of the institutional challenges that are shaping the intellectual expansion comparatists are attempting to foster in the academy, see the essays in the 2006 issue of *Comparative Critical Studies* devoted to the future of comparativism, in particular Susan Bassnett's "Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century" and Jonathan Culler's "Wither Comparative Literature?" Sander Gilman's *The Fortunes of the Humanities* provides a cogent diagnosis of the imperiled state of humanistic study as a whole in the U.S. university system.
3. Hayles's extensive examinations of the connections between digitally born texts and print texts that leverage the capacities of their digital production is clearly comparative, although her work also demonstrates the tendency to fuse

the questions “is it literary?” and “is it digital?” Other examples of careful comparative work in the field include John Cayley’s “Writing on Complex Surfaces: which links his work in CAVE with Joan Retallek’s ethopoetic practice and, in an inspired cross-medium move, Saul Bass’s film-title design; Jessica Pressman’s efforts to show how digital literature builds on the traditions of literary Modernism in her dissertation *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media*; and Brian Kim Stefan’s attention to the legacy of experimental poetry in “Privileging Language: The Text in Electronic Writing,” as well in as many of the essays in his *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics*.

4. Countless efforts to define literary figurality have returned to this notion of the trope’s strangeness; in the twentieth century, several important schools of thought have built on this notion that the literary is constituted by an estrangement of the instrumental operations of language. The best-known versions of this idea are the Russian Formalist conception of “ostranenie” (‘defamiliarization’) put forward by Victor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht’s “Verfremdungseffekt” (‘alienation effect’). Though their political investments in tropology are quite different, each of these theorists asserts that a text fulfills its properly “literary” function by way of a departure from naturalized protocols of linguistic usage.
5. Animation and kinesthesia are examples of medium-specific elements that can in some cases provide the basis for figuration. Literary texts that solicit physical responses on the part of the reader, whether in small-scale forms such as clicking a hyperlink to large-scale forms such as full-body immersion in virtual worlds exemplified by texts written for CAVE environments, certainly promise to effect something like a translation “from body to ethical semiosis” (Spivak 13) In *Writing Machines*, for example, Hayles includes “kinesthetic involvement” in her list of features of electronic literary texts that distinguish them from print (20). See also Dene Grigar’s “Kineticism, Rhetoric, and New Media Artists,” and in particular the extensive treatment of embodiment in relation to digital literature and art in Mark B. N. Hansen’s *New Philosophy for New Media* and *Bodies in Code*.
6. The translation of Rilke’s poem is mine; it is an “occasional” translation aimed at highlighting Rilke’s figural language and clearly conveying the poem’s central images rather than at offering a definitive rendering. Despite the awkwardness of the presentation, I provide the original German to preserve the language-specific details of its stylistics and to allow readers of German to cross check my English version.
7. I understand Spivak to be claiming that in our serious engagement with the simulated, “virtual” reality of a literary text we acquire a certain kind of skill: insofar as literary reading often confronts us with difficulties, uncertainties, and ambiguities that nonetheless demand an effort to make meaning, we gain from it a

capacity to fashion provisional, qualified, but nonetheless *active* responses to real people and in the face of real ethical and political problems. The important point is that we do not draw “morals” from exemplary situations depicted in the text, but rather that we build up our ethical capacities by way of our encounter with textual alterity and through the heavy lifting of interpretive work.

8. The entire text of “The Uninvited” and a clip of the third section of the video are available on Lemcke’s Web site at <<http://www.rudylemcke.com/Pages/VideoPages/UninvPg.html>>.
9. In *Words to Be Looked At*, Liz Kotz gives a detailed account of experimental artworks of the 1960s that incorporate text in ways that make the words’ semantic values relative to their visual impact as images. Both Brian Kim Stefans in “Privileging Language: The Text in Electronic Writing” and Warren Batten in “Poetics in the Expanded Field: Textual, Visual, Digital . . .” address the influence of this artistic tradition on the attitudes regarding words-as-words and words-as-images in contemporary digital literature.
10. Though I certainly affirm Memmott’s formulation as it applies to Lemcke’s text, as well as to a great many digital works that integrate text with images, animation, and sound, we must acknowledge that it applies equally well to other non-digital multimedia art forms that put verbal language into play alongside other signifying systems (opera is an often-cited example). The phrase “limited to the word” (304) and the mysterious suggestion that words are not sensual, is symptomatic of the effort to establish a “digital difference” at the expense of precision.
11. “I’m really aware of the choreography of it,” Lemcke reported in a 2006 interview, “and I really think of it as dance. I spent hours and hours with it, trying to get the motion the way I wanted it. The slowness of the piece, but not so slow, slow enough to be moving at a kind of elegant breathing pace, exhale and inhale on the screen at a very gentle pace.” Animation and video-editing software has made the “writing” component of the terms “choreography” and “cinematography”—dance-writing and movement-writing—even more literal; Lemcke’s composition of the kinetic dimension of “The Uninvited” compares to Rilke’s careful attention to the sounds and rhythms of words as much as does his composition of the poem’s verbal text.
12. See C. W. Nevius’s article on Tom Sepa, a self-described “urban outdoorsman” who holds down a full-time job as a telemarketer while living in Golden Gate Park.
13. See, for example, “Surge Seen in Number of Homeless Veterans,” in which *The New York Times* reports that by the end of 2007 “[m]ore than 400 veterans of

the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have turned up homeless.” <http://www.ny-times.com/2007/11/08/us/08vets.html?_r=1&oref=slogin>.

14. Though it was completed before the explosion of literary creativity in digital forms that followed the expansion of the Internet and the emergence of the World Wide Web, the 1993 American Comparative Literature Association report, “Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century,” contains a premonition of this transformation in recommending “that comparative literature turn from a concentration on literature to the study of cultural productions or discourses of all sorts” (Culler 87).
15. I have in mind Hayles’s “Print is Flat, Code is Deep” and Cayley’s “Writing on Complex Surfaces.”