(Re-)Reading Moving Letters: Love Notes, Codes and Digital Curtains: A Review

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A review of: Simanowski, Roberto, Jörgen Schäfer, and Peter Gendolla (eds.) *Reading Moving Letters. Digital Literature in Research and Teaching*. A Handbook. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010.

Reading Moving Letters. Digital Literature in Research and Teaching. A Handbook (2010) is a collection of articles by internationally recognized pioneers in the area of digital literature from several European countries and the United States: Astrid Ensslin, Peter Gendolla, Maria Goicoechea, Raine Koskimaa, James Pope, Alexandra Saemmer, Jörgen Schäfer, Roberto Simanowski, Janez Strehovec, Patricia Tomaszek, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Karin Wenz, and John Zuern. The contributors are all one way or another involved in the research and teaching of digital literature and digital arts at the university level. Some of the contributors are even digital artists themselves.

The book's multi-layered title promises a deep scholarly and educational engagement with the processes of reading moving letters in the sense of computer-based, animated, kinetic letters – or at least that is what my first expectation towards the book was. The white font of *Reading Moving Letters* inverts the traditionally blackness of print, while the screenshot of the interactive installation piece *Text Curtain* by Daniel C. Howe (2005) further hints at the multiple layers and reading processes that one enters in the world of literature in programmable media. The image is a reminder of how one is unable "to look behind that curtain", if one is digitally illiterate. *Reading Moving Letters* (one learns later) alludes also to the legendary computer-generated (yet less heart-warming) epistolary love notes developed by Christopher Strachey in the early 1950s, which is discussed in more detail by Noah Wardrip-Fruin.

Moreover, the title evokes Janez Strehovec's article <u>"The Moving Words. Towards the Theory of Web Literary Objects"</u> from 2000, in which he describes "moving

words" in the light of a revival of verbal texts in web environments at the turn of the millennium:

> (…) the word which we find in the web literature medium is no longer a word within its traditional syntactic and semantic role in the process of representation, neither is it simply a word within the postmodern play of signifiers (as it has been defined by the poststructuralist theory). It is a word which has turned to a new generation of moving, techno-accelerated words-images-bodies, which are units in the immersive environments of artistic and non-artistic web projects. It is a word with *kinematic energy* (term coined by Paul Virilio) that is put into cyberspace in a way which resembles the code of film and video more than that of literature in the printed codex book.

With that in mind *Reading Moving Letters* places itself historically into a continuation of ongoing research. It investigates digital literature as a phenomenon that opens up new computer-based trajectories for creative literary expressions in the midst of multimedia and hypermedia environments. One can encounter these new literary phenomena on the Internet, in exhibitions of installation art, or as part of live performances such as at the biannual E-Poetry Festivals or conferences organized by the Electronic Literature Organization.

While most universities in both Europe and the USA have not fully taken account of the cultural developments in the formation of computer-based creative, literary texts, the University of Siegen, the University Paris 8, Brown University, or the University of Maastricht (to name just a few of the universities that are represented in this book) already look back at a decade or more of teaching digital literature, art, and media. The enormous work that has been done locally and oftentimes individually at these universities over the past few years arduously reveals itself in each of the articles in *Reading Moving Letters*. In terms of the manifold educational reflections and self-reflections that this book is filled with, one is tempted to read some of the articles as 'moving letters', if not out-cries, from within academia. A number of scholars in the book have lived through, and now openly share, institutional difficulties in their efforts to implement digital literature and digital art as subjects to choose from a 21st century university curriculum, or to study at media art or creative writing programs.

Reading Moving Letters, therefore, marks a crucial point of departure for reading digital literature as it embodies the first programmatic book compiled by scholars who critically reflect on what it theoretically as well practically means to read and teach digital literature.

In their preface, the editors Roberto Simanowski, Jörgen Schäfer and Peter Gendolla rightly assert that up until recently, little scholarly attention in the humanities has been paid to the teaching of digital literature in the classroom: –[w]hile we have a number of impressive theoretical texts about digital literature, we as of yet have little

in the way of resources for discussing the down-to-earth practices of research, teaching, and curriculum necessary for this work to mature" (9). To fill this scholarly and didactic gap, *Reading Moving Letters* is structured in two parts, entitled "Reading Digital Literature" and "Teaching Digital Literature". Both of the two sections are written by the same set of authors, who go against the grain of institutional academic life in the humanities and act as theoretical ambassadors as well as educational experts in the field of teaching digital literature. Whereas the first part introduces and investigates concepts, methods, and definitions concerning the subject of the book, the second part shares discussions of classroom activities related to the teaching of digital literature. Here, close-reading techniques are high up on the agenda.

In his introduction to "Part One" of the book, Roberto Simanowski starts out by "Defining Digital Literature". For him, digital is not just "digitally born." (16). He understands it as a form of literature that draws on technological prerequisites within the computational realm, such as "connectivity, interactivity, multimodality, non-linearity, performativity and transformability" (15) and "aesthetic use of the features of digital media" (17). Simanowski's introduction, which includes a critical reflection on the diverse articles in the book, is followed by Noah Wardrip-Fruin's article "Five Elements of Digital Literature", in which he shares his ideas of how to read digital literature. Taking Espen Aarseth's book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) as a basis, he elaborates on what he has identified for himself as essential elements to focus on in this still ground-breaking endeavor: data, process, interaction, surface and contexts. These elements as well as Simanowski's outline of digital literature highlight technological, medial and literary specificities with which one can systematically start out to address a fictional work of digital literature. Wardrip-Fruin propagates a reading of both process and data, arguing that "there are examples of digital literature we simply can't understand without investigating their processes" (49). In addition to the historical take on computer-based literature, his more than anecdotal reference to Christopher Strachey's computer-programmed combinatory love letters, sounds convincing, if one understands and appreciates the program skills and technological advancements with which the letters where developed.

At this point in the book, one begins to wonder how exactly one would begin to teach students the legacy of a whole range of artists, whose works have crossed disciplinary boundaries between the literary realm and that of computer science. Even on the level of experimental literary writing, as for example in the case of Gertrude Stein, it takes quite some effort to convince students of her ingenious contribution to the world of literature at large. The problem as regards the reading and interpreting of digital literature for many teachers and students seems to ground in the difficulty of convincing oneself that the level of code is at least as relevant as the story, the poem and the (new) media experience. Noah Wardrip-Fruin

suggests to "distinguish process and surface, rather than collapse both into the 'medium' [...]". (47) This then, is where the reading of moving letters actually begins; although surface, defined by Wardrip-Fruin "as the output of the processes operating on the data" (48), should not be confused with lack of conceptual subtlety or narrative depth. As such, the first two articles by Simanowski and Wardrip-Fruin provide a comprehensive (self-)reflection on how to possibly approach digital literature from a theoretical point of view.

From then on, one best switches right into a "handbook" mode, accessing individual articles from the contents page, based on one's interest related to genre, style, concept, reading methods or a specific account of teaching experiences at a particular university in a particular country - which must be deduced from the titles themselves. Also, despite the many well-explained terms and concepts in the book in each of the articles, one wishes for a glossary or for a web page that fulfills a similar function to pass on to students. This, however, seems difficult as even the term "digital literature" itself is still contested. For example, Peter Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer (i.e. two out of the three editors) would rather favor the term "net literature" (83) used in the classroom and provide a fair set of arguments for it. However, as long as no common vocabulary exists, it will remain relatively hard to convince those teachers and students who have not yet encountered digital literature as a compelling form of literature that is worth investigating both on a theoretical and analytic level. Despite risking the old trap of canonical rigidity, a text book titled "Net Literature. An Introduction", if it were compiled, could improve the teaching and learning of various kinds of net literature(s) that have by now stood the test of time. This of course, would be a different endeavor and places itself outside the scope of Reading Moving Letters, which consists of specialist accounts about digital literature in research and in teaching and is not directly targeted at students.

Along the way, however, there is a lot to learn from *Reading Moving Letters*. As regards genre, for example, Janez Strehovec in his article "Alphabet on the Move. Digital Poetry and the Realm of Language" questions whether (some) digital poetry "can still be considered poetry or has already developed into something else [...]" (211). So far only a few books such as Carrie Noland's *Poetry at Stake. Lyric Aesthetics and the Challenge of Technology* (1999), Saskia Reither's *Computerpoesie. Studien zur Modifikation poetischer Texte durch den Computer* (2003), or my recently published book *Poetry Goes Intermedia. U.S.–amerikanische Lyrik des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* (2010) show that poetry – as one of the most traditional literary genres–has been affected tremendously by new technological ways of creating poetic texts. In this context, Alexandra Saemmer provides an enlightening discussion of Brian Kim Stefans' *The Dreamlife of Letters.* Despite an unsettled dispute about the actual legacy of concrete poetry within the digital realm, Saemmer convincingly presents Stefan's work as an augmentation of the genre.

Another useful take on both the question of genre and digital literature itself is given by Astrid Ensslin in "From Revisi(ati)on to Retro-Intentionalization":

> By the same token, genre boundaries are increasingly blurring between literature, art, digital film, photography, animation, and video game. That said, we can only use the term 'digital literature' if and when the reception process is guided if not dominated by 'literary' means, i.e. by written or orally narrated language rather than sequences of image—no matter how short and allusive text chunks, or lexias, may be (145).

As a result of the blurring genres, new genres such as fanfiction seem to emerge in the social sphere of the Internet. In "Storytelling Goes on After the Credits. Fanfiction as a Case Study of Cyberliterature", Karin Wenz looks at fanfiction in conjunction with computer games as a forming cultural trope in the humanities, in which new social networks and new narrative strategies have met, if not merged. Wenz classifies online fan literature as one example of popular net literature and suggests approaching it semiotically. In her critical analysis of this emerging (still unknown) genre, she also persuasively integrates studies of intermediality and convergence theories. Moreover, her contribution to the "Teaching Digital Literature" section of the book provides a critical reflection of her own and her colleagues' courses on digital and narrative media at Maastricht University. The essay on "Digital Media@Maastricht University. Problem-Based Learning as an Approach to Digital Literature" introduces a variety of examples for the program's problem-based learning tasks and focuses on important concepts in the study of digital literature as well as on every-day-issues that may come up when teaching them. In her classes, students work collaboratively and discuss digital art from a literary, philosophical, and technological point of view. The article may have profited from an outlook on how Karin Wenz teaches fanfiction, which has been addressed in her theoretical paper. Nevertheless, her second essay poses an insightful account on how students can actively be engaged in digital art and digital literature at the university level.

In the article "Net Literature in the Classroom. Teaching Practice at the University of Siegen" Peter Gendolla, Jörgen Schäfer and Patricia Tomaszek, too, present a very practical, down-to earth report on teaching 'net literature' (aka 'digital literature'). It sets the stage for what is a report on a transatlantic blended learning seminar that was carried out in cooperation with Roberto Simanowski at Brown University in Providence, RI, USA. Their seminar outline is well-explained and can be used as a best-practice example for anyone interested in employing a blended learning approach in their courses. The article provides a syllabus with research questions on a selection of literary and artistic projects that students had to critically investigate by engaging in an intercultural dialogue, uploading material and making use of a web-based discussion board. Given the special transatlantic set-up of the seminar, an emphasis on a joint research of students on both sides of the Atlantic

is certainly a stimulating approach. The article also includes a critique of a current major upheaval within German academia: the recently introduced modularized Bachelor and Master system. It is interesting to observe that Peter Gendolla and Jörgen Schäfer are not the only ones in the book who mention that the politics of the Bologna Process has reduced their flexibility regarding which courses they can offer.

This specifically European issue is also addressed by Maria Goicoechea in "Teaching Digital Literature in Spain", who additionally draws one's attention to a "conservative tendency in a large portion of the Spanish academia and the publishing industry that covertly censures digital literature, since they perceive these new creations as a threat that challenges their own intellectual and economic interests." (346) Although not mentioned explicitly, this statement points to the importance of evaluating the literary and cultural legacy of print culture in the light of a growing digital culture. It also strongly calls for a necessity of discerning the specific underlying power-structures that are at work as part of this important medial juncture. A concern like this one can be seen as a propeller for future research that this book opens up.

Likewise, the more apparent the educational merits of the teaching and reading of digital literature on various levels becomes, the more curtains will hopefully be lifted. Given the diverse cultural backgrounds of the contributors, *Reading Moving Letters* provides a current and vivacious transnational view on an important academic field that has not only created networks beyond the university level but has also left national borders behind.

Any teachers and students who come across this handbook will definitely acquire a deeper understanding of the subject, but like everyone else involved in it, will have to put their own shoulder to the digital wheel …

Works Cited

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