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When Literature goes Multimedia: Three German Examples

By Roberto Simanowski

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Abstract


In February 2000 Robert Coover noticed the "constant threat of hypermedia: to suck the substance out of a work of lettered art, reduce it to surface spectacle". Coover's message seems to be: When literature goes multimedia, when hypertext turns into hypermedia a shift takes place from serious aesthetics to superficial entertainment. What Coover points out is indeed a problem of hypermedia. If the risk of hyperfiction is to link without meaning, the risk of hypermedia is to employ effects that only flex the technical muscles. Can there be substance behind spectacle? In this paper I discuss three examples of German digital literature which combine the attraction of technical aesthetics with the attraction of deeper meaning.


The first example, "Das Epos der Maschine" (The Epic of the Machine) by Urs Schreiber, presents a visual image consisting only of words, since the words themselves represent pictures by moving in a predetermined way. For example, words that put technology into question form a question mark with the word 'Truth' as a period. If one clicks on the question mark, the words disappear behind the 'Truth' as if it had swallowed them. However, the question can be 'eaten' in this way, it cannot be erased, because if one moves the mouse the word 'Truth' moves and is followed by those other words as if they stick on the truth until the cursor stops and those words disappear again.

"Trost der Bilder" ("Consolation of Images") by Jürgen Daibers and Jochen Metzgers, tells the story of a man who falls in love with a mannequin and locks himself overnight in a store in order to gaze upon it. The mannequin's face can half be seen in the background of the text and is shown at the end of the story without the accompanying text, but only for a moment. This combination of image and time setting leads to the deeper meaning, because the readers who hit the return button in order to see the mannequin's face testify to their attraction to the mannequin. To be sure, they do not thereby become like the man in the story; nevertheless, their action re-enacts the reading process in general, which is also a materialization of life in our imagination.

The third example, "Digital Troja" (Digital Troy) by Fevci Konuk, uses words, sound and animated images, to discuss war both past and present time. One interesting effect here is the image of Paris, who obviously wants to run away from Troy but is

instead caught in an endless loop. There are two breaks within the loop. In the language of animation breaks are supposed to stress something. I see these breaks as allusions to the famous sequence in Hitchcock's movie "North by Northwest" where Roger Thornhill, alias Cary Grant, realizes the danger of an approaching airplane, and to Discobulus, the ancient discus-thrower. While Discobulus is associated with the Olympic ideal, Thornhill evokes the Cold War. Both bring important issues in the story. Thus breaks themselves serve as text and add meaning to the written text.

This paper was presented at  DAC (2-4, August 2000, Bergen/Norway). For an expanded version see *German Digital Literature: An Introduction*.

In February 2000 Robert Coover, who had once announced the arrival of hypertext to the broad audience of the New York Times Book Review, declared that the golden age of hypertext was over ( Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age). One reason according to Coover is that the web "has not been very hospitable" to serious hyperfiction but has rather supported superficial, opportunistic events: "It tends to be a noisy, restless, opportunistic, superficial, e-commerce-driven, chaotic realm, dominated by hacks, pitchmen, and pretenders, in which the quiet voice of literature cannot easily be heard or, if heard by chance, attended to for more than a moment or two. Literature is meditative and the Net is riven by ceaseless hype and chatter. Literature has a shape, and the Net is shapeless."

Concerning the multimedial web he states: "hypertext is now used more to access hypermedia as enhancements for more or less linear narratives [...] the reader is commonly obliged now to enter the media-rich but ineluctable flow as directed by the author : In a sense, it's back to the movies again, that most passive and imperious of forms." Coover notes the "constant threat of hypermedia: to suck the substance out of a work of lettered art, reduce it to surface spectacle".

Coover focuses upon the threat of visualisation and employs three prejudices concerning digital writing:

1. Digital writing has to be structured non-linearly.
2. The author has to give up her power to the readers, who are obliged to complete the work and are transformed from couch potatoes into mouse commanders.
3. Images and sound, animation and technical effects are little more than spectacle and gimmick.

Coover's message seems to be clear: When literature goes multimedia, when hypertext turns into hypermedia a shift takes place from serious aesthetics to

superficial entertainment. Don't get me wrong: What Coover points out is indeed a problem of hypermedia. If the risk of hyperfiction is to link without meaning, the risk of hypermedia is to employ effects that only flex the technical muscles. Of course, it is not enough to have nice images or fancy animation. Effects are only justified insofar as they convey a message. There are hundreds of examples that fail. I will discuss three that may have succeeded.

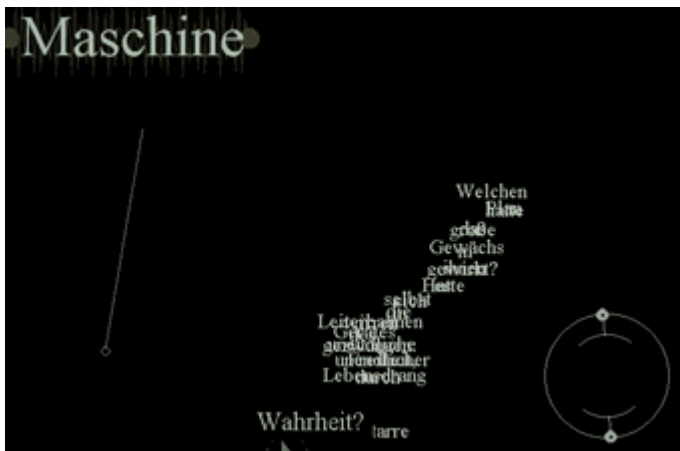
Epos der Maschine



✚ Epos der Maschine (The Epic of the Machine) is a piece about humankind's relation to technology. From the aesthetic point of view it is what Robert Kendall would call a *kinetic visual poem*. Here words themselves receive an additional significance by their presentation in space and time. If we for example click on the word 'Maschine' it produces words which pushes the earlier words away, as technology displaces nature. The motion of the words is predetermined, and we soon realize that this piece not only addresses technology as a doubtful god that controls us, but also lets us *feel* that fact. This creates discomfort, as we begin to feel the pressure exercised by technology. And indeed we are under its thumb. Everything is programmed, reading is not as free as it used to be with books or hypertext.

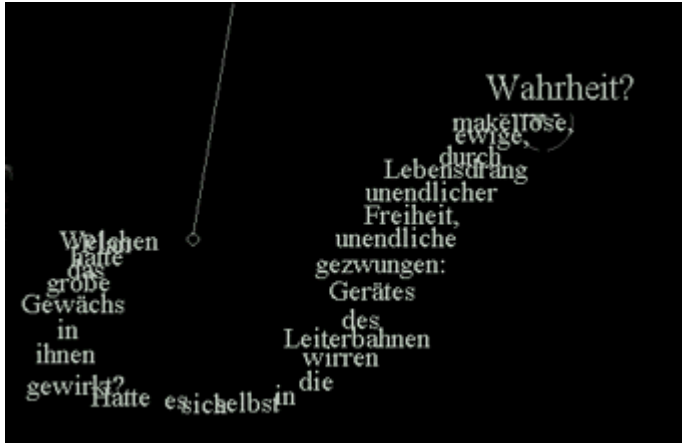


One remarkable effect is when words, which call technology into question, are *themselves* formed into a question mark. The visual realisation separates all words but one from a previous one, namely the word 'truth', with a background like a barcode. This might lead us to the conclusion that one can price and buy truth. This separation - or opposition? - is underlined by different fonts and, more importantly, by the fact that these words are moving. It seems as if the question is alive, whereas the word 'truth' stays stiff and rigid.



The kinetic aspect is itself based on the fact that in the digital realm visual poetry employs the syntax not only of text and space, but also of time. There is a fourth syntax in the game: interaction. If we click on the word 'truth' the other words disappear behind or within the word 'truth'. This can be read ambiguously: doubt has escaped into unshakeable truth or truth has swallowed, what called it into

question. However we read the removal of that separation or opposition we soon realize that it only lasts a short time. Once we move the mouse these words reappear. The words adhere to the word truth, they follow truth wherever it goes, and they can be 'eaten' again, but never erased. Once a question has arisen, the message would seem to be, one can't get rid of it any more, one will encounter it again and again, provided there is movement in the discourse.



This way of playing with words must be distinguished from the play with words we encounter in projects like Mark Napier's [!\[\]\(eafc244b53721dd1ec133f0772f70fc7_img.jpg\) Shredder](#) or the [!\[\]\(cb741e910ae1fce3b15fcd4605753ff5_img.jpg\) Discoder](#) by exonemo. Whereas those projects perform the deconstruction of representation of language, "The Epic of the Machine" doubles the representation of language by contrasting it with an additional visual semantic. Needless to say that the latter makes a deeper impact since it provides a certain message *behind* the message of deconstruction itself.

Trost der Bilder



✚ Trost der Bilder, was the first-prize-winner of a German competition for literature on the Internet in 1998. The title translates as "Consolation of Images", though, it should actually be entitled "Consolation of Stories", since the work itself consists of several short stories which can be read by clicking on them in a table of contents. Each story comes with images, which mostly illustrate the text and are therefore hardly justified in terms of conveying a message by visualisation. However, there is one story, where the image turns from illustration into a means of rereading the story. This story, entitled "Die Schaufensterpuppe" ("The Mannequin"), is about a man who falls in love with a mannequin. The first slide translates the following.

My friend had fallen in love with a mannequin from the winter collection from Horten. After closing he would stand in front of the window for hours no matter how cold out it was. He was aware of the strangeness of his love; however, he wanted to be near the mannequin at all costs. // One evening he hid in a changing room in the women's department. Once the light had been

turned out and the room was empty, he snuck over to her. "I took her out of the window and freed her arms and legs from their unnatural position", he later told me.

Clicking on the image we get the next file this time with the other part of the mannequin's face.

He set the mannequin onto a chair. He did not undress her. He did not touch her improperly. "I just sat in front of her and looked at her. Everybody claims that her eyes are glassy and lifeless. But she looked at me. I swear she looked at me, in a way nobody ever has looked at me." // Next day P. was discovered by the store detective. // Having determined that nothing had been stolen, the detective did not report the incident. P was banned from the store. He now shops at a different chain. His sweetheart disappeared in March, just when the first buds emerged on the branches of cherry trees. The color of her face had peeled off; she wasn't suitable for the spring collection.

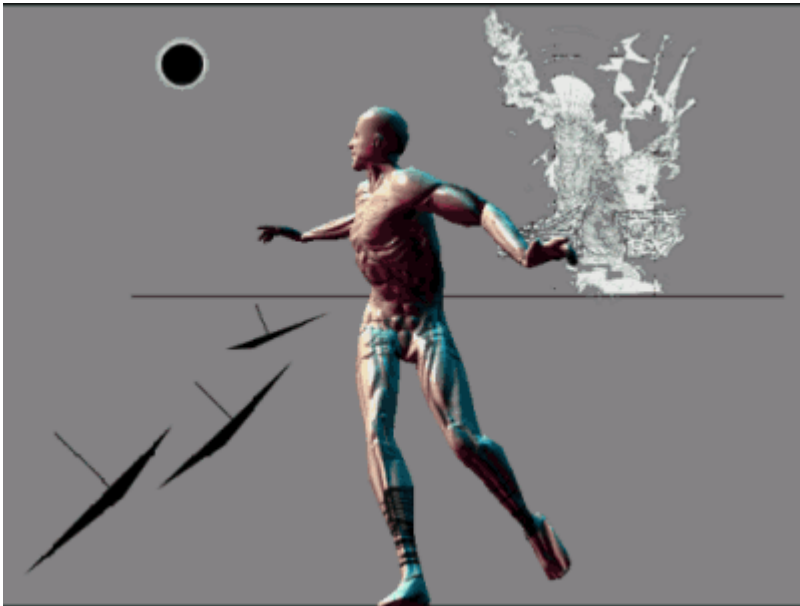
The next file shows only one sentence: "When nature dawned she took a long beauty sleep." After this file we get a file without any text but with the mannequin's entire face.

The point is that we get the face only for a moment. This makes the story interesting, which is otherwise rather banal and, in its last sentence, even kitschy. The predetermined disappearance of the mannequin begins the second part of the story. Those readers who hit the back button now in order to see the mannequin's face thereby betray the presence of an attraction compelling them to look again. Of course, this doesn't render them exactly the same as a man who locks himself overnight in a store in order to gaze undisturbed upon a mannequin. However, hitting the back button readers start to justify, thought unconsciously, the read action. As they imitate the character in the text, they themselves turn into the story's main character. Being in the play does not necessarily have to be realised by navigation or contribution. Some times, as we see here, clicking repeat is enough.

The condition here is that language of images dispenses with the language of words. The process of imagination is limited by the use of images. Only because the mannequin is not described in words but materialized as an image can it be taken away. The deeper meaning of this piece lies in the feature of intermediality, as well as in the incorporated refresh-tag, which may amounts to an animation of the reading process.

Digital Troja

My third example, Digital Troja (Digital Troy) by Fevci Konuk, uses words, sound and animated images, to discuss war both past and present time. One interesting effect is the image of Paris, who obviously wants to run away from Troy but is instead caught in an endless loop. According to the caption - "The time of power and sex (poor Bill, poor Paris)" - we should take this to mean that there is no escape, no learning from the past, that things happen over and over again. I will abstain from discussing the disanalogies between Clinton and Paris and Monica and Helene. There are obvious shortcomings throughout the work. However, I want to show another example how an image conveys meaning through of its time setting.



If we look at this animation we notice two breaks within the loop. In the language of animation, breaks are supposed to stress something. What could it be? I want to draw your attention to the famous sequence in Hitchcock's movie "North by Northwest" where Roger Thornhill, alias Cary Grant, realizes the danger of an approaching airplane as he stands in a wheat field. You probably remember how slowly he turns to start running. And you may be reminded of this scene while watching this piece of animation. It is the same posture. Paris looks back at the eclipsed sun as Cary Grant does at the approaching plane. I will discuss the meaning behind this allusion in a minute. Let us first look at the other break. To what could Paris' posture allude?

My suggestion is Discobulus, the ancient discus-thrower. Yes, there is a difference in the position of the arms and the arching of the back. But still, Discobulus is the first thing that comes into mind when thinking about this break. And, he makes perfect sense. While Discobulus is associated with the Olympic ideal, Cary Grant's Thornhill evokes the Cold War. We might remember 1984, when the Olympic ideal failed to bridge the gap between East and West and separate games were held. Thornhill also brings another issue in the story. Whereas Paris stands for deliberate decisions, Thornhill is a pawn in a power game and, for a long time, does not know what to do. This difference points up to the contrast in power structures between past and present. The atomic bomb explosion that is shown in "Digital Troy" again and again stresses the theme that power and danger are no longer a matter between two persons.

Resume

The growth of digital literature in Germany is in part due to the "Pegasus" competition for digital literature organised by the newspaper "DIE ZEIT" and IBM from 1996 to 1998. The first two competitions explicitly favoured the word and rejected multimedial projects already by limiting applications to 200 KB. The third competition dropped the limitation and honoured two *hypermedial* works, one of which, "Consolation of Images", I have discussed. It is characteristic of the German digital literature scene that pure hypertext, as we know it from Eastgate Systems' writers, never really developed. Instead there are mainly two types of digital writing in Germany: one favours interactivity, the other the multimedia power of the digital realm.

The earlier derives from the ideology of collaboration, the latter from the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the Wagnerian "total art work". One could call the former a "social sculpture", referring to Josephy Beuys' concept of art, the latter a "multilingual sculpture", since it employs the language of words, images, sound and time. To some extent both provide an aesthetics of event and spectacle. Collaborations are mostly interesting and enjoyable only if one is part of them. Being in the play compensates for the mediocre quality, which remains a problem for those who only watch the play. Multimedial works, on the other hand, are often driven by fancy surprise effects. The umbrella term may be *digital animation*, but with collaborations, users are animated i.e. act as participants, whereas in multimedia images are animated so that they move and blink and change.

In both cases one might say: the more animation the more one can neglect substance and semantics. However, as I have argued, animation and visualisation do not necessarily have to suck the substance out of the work, reducing it to Robert

Coover's surface spectacle. There can be substance behind spectacle, the attraction of technical aesthetics can be combined with the attraction of deeper meaning. The task of the author should be to facilitate this oscillation between the technical and semantical level. The task of the reader is to think twice in order to comprehend and acknowledge the author's intention.