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Editorial: Reading Digital Cultural Objects

By Patricia Tomaszek

No. 40 – 2010

Dear Readers,

this edition reflects upon the need of techniques to approach the ongoing upheavals taking place in today's technology-driven production of (literary) art. The contributions assembled here all discuss ways of reading cultural objects created with digital media. The objects of interest are: a computer game (Soderman), a performance of a work that houses and visualizes its literary artifacts on a website - a huge database of texts by different authors (Rettberg), default settings and electronic poetics in an age of technological determinism (Heckman), literary artifacts in between book and programmable media (Vincler), story-telling in the Gulf (Lenze), and signs in a culture of mashups (Navas). In a time when cultural objects in digital culture reconfigure the reception of their addressees, it is important to develop not only a proper understanding of the impact of these ruptures on literary communication but also an interpretation of the presented moves into the scope of scholarly discussion. Such an engagement calls for what Roberto Simanowski proposes in his contribution: "digital hermeneutics."

Simanowski's paper, "Understanding New Media Art Through Close Reading. Four Remarks on Digital Hermeneutics," provides a sort of theme-umbrella for all submissions that could serve as one hypertext linked to keywords and concepts all the authors, in one way or the other, elaborate on. This holds true for Martina Pfeiler's book review, "(Re-) Reading Moving Letters: Love Notes, Codes and Digital Curtains: A Review,"¹ a careful investigation on the publications scholarly and educational engagement with the aesthetic specificities a reader is confronted with when reading animated "moving" letters in electronic literature.

But let us start with a panoramic reading Braxton Soderman presents with his analysis of the game *Every Day the Same Dream* (Molleindustria 2009). Soderman's reading, "Every Game the Same Dream? Politics, Representation, and the Interpretation of Video Games," begins in the mode of a first-person-narrative that, similar to a minutes writer, vigilantly notes all the observations made in a particular action. In the course of his nuanced game-analysis Soderman offers not only a critical discussion on interpretative strategies for analyzing games from an allegorical perspective but also critically analyzes approaches that solely pursue the

games mechanics or narratives. Framed in a discussion on interpretative methodologies, Soderman initiates a dialogue on the labour of interpretation between Fredric Jameson, Susan Sontag, and Terry Eagleton, and provides a convincing argument for analyzing the game through the lens of historic contours and politics, as well as the games representational elements.

For reading signs across diverse digital spaces, Eduardo Navas also takes up critic Fredric Jameson in speaking of intertextuality and blends his thoughts with Barthes, who analyzed a panoply of cultural forms, wrestling matches included. Navas' objects of analysis are mashed-up works of electronic literature that were published in a recent magazine-mash-up edited by elit-scholar Mark C. Marino (*Bunk Magazine*) and Carol Novack (*Mad Hatters Review*). *Distant Place* and *Playing Jeff* (both published in 2010 by Cecelia Chapman and Jeff Couch) are two works in which he identifies literary aspects that are presented in form of videos. Here, textual and visual language fuses. Intrigued by how electronic literary narratives are sometimes told almost exclusively through visual compositions, Navas also discusses Donna Leishman's literary controversial work *Deviant: The Possession of Christian Shaw*. His overall analysis builds on Barthes notion of the "difference in reading signification across culture."

Different layers of modes of signification (code, form, and content) in single works of electronic literature might be regarded as commonplace. In his contribution "Inside Outside the Box: Default Settings and Electronic Poetics" Davin Heckman presents us with a techno-philosophical discussion that addresses human beings, technology, and poetics. Heckman evokes an interesting tension in the pictured human being that usually tries to achieve agency not only on technology but also on his (techno determined) life.

With *This is How You Will Die* by Jason Nelson, *Interstitial* by David Jhave Johnston, and the non-digital steel-sculpture *Die*, by Tony Smith, Heckman brings together three works that, on a techno-poetical level, engage with human life and its end by default: death. In the chosen works, interactive vs. non-interactive mechanisms create different poetic commentaries on the same theme. Along with a discussion of technology *as* and poetics *of* default (via Martin Heidegger and Bernard Stiegler), Heckman also raises an issue encountered as a problem in the interpretation of digital artworks: technological failure.

This is exactly why Roberto Simanowski calls critics to be aware of "the demands or constraints of technology [that] may give rise to unintended situations and signals with no connection to the work's significance." These are "signs with no meaning" and he recalls a work by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in which a certain, non-intentional, "nonaesthetic" rupture in *Body Movies* (2001) was turned into a poetic silence that the artist now considers as "a fundamental feature of the piece" (Lozano-Hemmer 2002, 154). With a focus on technological determinism, he

reaches out to discuss the design of text in Mateas and Stern's *Façade*, an interactive drama based on artificial intelligence in which the narrative grounds on engineered "dramatic probability" (Mateas and Stern, *Interaction and Narrative*). All in all, Simanowski's discussion on digital hermeneutics builds on the suggestion of approaching new media art via a combination of new and traditional methodologies, such as genre and narrative theory, as well as stylistics and rhetorical figures known from literary studies.

While Simanowski pursues a scholarly method that intervenes "old and new" hermeneutics towards the interpretation of digital art practices, John M. Vincler brings together, contends, and discusses the strains of materialities in literature (gone digital). Vincler chooses Shelley Jackson's hypertextual-novel *Patchwork Girl* and Steve Tomasula innovative print novel *Vas: An Opera in Flatland* (designed by Stephen Farrell) as his tutor texts. When he identifies what he calls a *dual dualism*, a circuit of interaction between mind and body and the literary work and its interface (most commonly a printed book) he envisions "that the body engages with the book to facilitate the mind engaging with the literary work." Consequently, Vincler bridges both works' materialities by reading their para- and extratextual elements. In this way he illustrates how both works problematize the advent of reading and the reader's relationship to the (physical) text and its technology.

While technology, the mind and the body (of the text or may this be the reader's) form paratextual, extratextual, and also "innertextual" elements that can be read as sign-systems, one accordingly might also consider to read a works' body that manifests in different instantiations (e.g. as a live performance or installation) para- and extratextually. This is what Scott Rettberg accomplishes in his close reading of *The Last Performance [dot org]*, an exemplary work of electronic literature that manifests in conceptual performances, museum installations, and an online database of texts contributed by author Judd Morrissey and his collaborators – Mark Jeffrey, the Goat Island Collective, and numerous additional contributors who decide to partake in this collaborative writing project.

Similarly to Soderman, Rettberg begins his close reading from a perspective of a silent observer who narrates what he discerns. This mode of writing brings the work closer to us, their scholarly readers, who are also interested in deciphering the black box of the big corpus presented as *The Last Performance [dot org]*. In fact however, different from Simanowski who approaches his readings of digital literary artworks on a textual level that takes into account its linguistic and visual sign systems, Rettberg tests various methodologies derived from what the work offers. He suggests "Strategies for Attentive Reading", "Reading the work by Node / Lens", "Reading by Constraint" and context, its narrative and computational system, and last but not least, he approaches the works cannibalistic endeavour's (by also referring to Simanowski).

In turn, what Nele Lenze presents in her article, I will call "cultural collaborative writing": Collaborative (online) writing and remix that culturally manifests (as illustrated exemplarily) in Arab countries, where orally transferred texts were, according to Lenze, always a subject of remix. Lenze introduces us to a phenomenon of "wandering stories": literary texts posted in online forums that spread in different modifications on the basis on language, style, and content on various websites without providing the author's name of the text. While "the phenomenon of "moving" cultural products and a reworking of those is widely spread in the world of online literature in the Gulf" Lenze rightly notes that this is also a common phenomenon in remix culture (also discussed by Eduardo Navas in this issue). What is interesting however, is the nature in which texts change in a transmissive process on online networks in the United Arab Emirates. In *Creative Land* anthropologist James Leach describes "such cultural practices where the creation of new things, and the ritualised forms of exchange enacted around them, function to "create" individuals and bind them in social groups, "creating" the community they inhabit." (cf. Simon Biggs and Penny Travlou).² In the literary system of the United Arab Emirates, (online) texts travel, become a subject to change, appear modified in other venues, get responses and commentary, and move forward in a cycle as part of a cultural collaborative writing.

What is demonstrated with the language-driven digital artworks discussed in this issue is the fragility and strength of texts when it comes to its relationship to bodies, minds, objects, technological failures, materialities, and collaborative exchanges. Together with the authors of Dichtung Digital #40, I invite you to explore the individual methodologies applied for reading the digital cultural objects proposed in the articles.

Notes

1. *Reading Moving Letters: Digital Literature in Research and Teaching. A Handbook*. Peter Gendolla, Jörgen Schäfer and Roberto Simanowski, eds. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010. The book resembles another scholarly take on reading digital (literary) objects in a networked space - ostensibly - like in this issue: electronic literature.
2. This note references a paper that will be published in a forthcoming special-issue of Dichtung Digital (Fall 2011) that thematizes outcomes of the collaborative research project "Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice" (ELMCIP) guest-edited by Scott Rettberg and Patricia Tomaszek.