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Abstract

"The stagnation and repetition of already past contents and forms within contemporary poetry accompanies the absence of inventive literary criticism and theory, which in encountering contemporary poetry does not seem to know how to develop new concepts and paradigms." Glazier - scholar and poet - seems to be an exception. In his book *Digital Poetics* he discusses hypertext, visual/kinetic text, and e-poetry pieces in programmable media - useful not only for poets of the e-medium, but for all poets today.

1.

Writing poetry-as-we-know-it, which is meant for being published in the printed media and is, above all, thematically directed towards forming lyric atmospheres, is by no account self-evident at the beginning of the 21st century. Poetry remains a problem and a challenge for today's poets and readers. It appears that numerous poets of today (perhaps there are already more poets than truly competent readers well versed in contemporary poetry) are less inventive than contemporary artists working in the field of the new media and the visual and performing arts. Within the visual arts, painting is perhaps represented only by ten per cent at large trend-setting exhibitions (e.g. Documenta 11, Kassel 2002), meanwhile poets to a large extent, cling to poetic structures developed in the middle of the 19th century and altogether push the advances of the literary avant-garde and neo-avant-garde to the edge.

The stagnation and repetition of already past contents and forms within contemporary poetry accompanies the absence of inventive literary criticism and theory, which in encountering contemporary poetry does not seem to know how to develop new concepts and paradigms. It is no coincidence that in comprehensive

Readers & Guides within the field of contemporary literary theory, there are hardly any contributions on the analysis of contemporary poetry. In the middle of the last century, Martin Heidegger formed a whole set of basic paradigms for his philosophical thought through his encounters with Hölderlin's and Rilke's poetry. Also, Walter Benjamin's most striking concepts in his essays on Paris as the capital of the 19th century were developed by analysing Baudelaire's poetry and Baudelaire's attitude to life in big cities. Can we at all imagine today's leading theoreticians in philosophy and cultural studies finding any inspiration of worth for their theoretical work in the field of today's poetry? In a world of multiculturalism, globalism, post-colonialism, dot.com society, new media, techno science and new language encouraged by on-line communication, poets are not asking themselves about authentic forms of poetry-making today.

They do not pose fundamental questions on subjectivity within the expanded concept of textuality, creativity of language in dialogue with the trendy netspeak and with the language of commercial messaging. They are not familiar enough with the question: "Why have the lyric today and not only in trendy loops of self unwinding messages of music videos?" Alternately, is today's poetry still at all concerned about forming lyrical atmospheres? Is it not perhaps, more appropriate to look for the creative layers of language, with the help of different paradigms, let us say, in the form of digital writing stimulated by the trendy "mix, cuts and scratches" culture? Lyrical, distinctly subtle atmospheres, today undoubtedly still exist, however, we are perhaps looking for them in the wrong places, for it appears that the lyric is being deteritorialised. This is why it seems that authentic poetry occurs only when the author places the institution of poetry itself under question, writes even against its canons and creatively looks for answers also in the interactions of poetic language with the new media. It is absolutely clear that such subtle creativity as poetry will probably always remain, as far as readers are concerned, condemned to the "the happy few". All respect is also due to the very esoteric nature of poetry, however, this does still not mean, that it needs to definitely lock itself away into an ivory tower and leave out the experimentation and interaction of "unpoetic reality".

In his book on the language of new media, Lev Manovich finds that the tradition of the printed word is deteriorating in the present, as the mainstream within modern society is directed towards presenting as much information as possible in "the form of time-based audiovisual moving image sequences, rather than as text" (Manovich 2002:78). The language of film, rather than that of the printed text, is becoming more popular to younger generations. Does the author of this notion have a point? He does, if he is thinking exclusively about printed text, however, today e-textuality also exists that takes into account time-based moving text sequences, which means that we are encountering film-text that in its articulation often follows the paths and procedures of a film aesthetic and poetics. (For example, suspense in Claire Dinsmore's kinetic poem, *The Dazzle As Question*, which works on the reader's

uncertainty as to where the new unit of kinetic text will appear on the screen, which means that the reception of this poem is not a "safe ride".)

Besides poetry-as-we-know-it, by which we mean, metric textuality in printed verse (books, journals) and Concrete and Visual Poetry, as well as other neo avant-garde forms of poetry-making tied to the printed medium, which take into account also the spatial syntax and destabilise the traditional medium of the verse, e-poetry also co-exists today, which is tied to the development of the new media and its advances, especially the computer.

This type of creativity (at the moment it has an altogether marginal status) is a big challenge for both poets-programmers and theoreticians since, for e-poetry, a programmable nature of textuality is essential, as well as, text displayed in the computer window (with its own specificity), digitalisation and also new forms of perception that are based on "reading with the mouse" as an activity, which is far more complex than traditional reading, which in turn, is based on following the noted syntax in a linear fashion and turning pages. In English and Spanish writing, poet and scholar Loss Pequeño Glazier, otherwise also director of Electronic Poetry Center at SUNY in Buffalo, has accepted the challenge of this emerging new field and has tried, in his *Digital Poetics*, to define the specificities of e-poetry from the poet's, as well as scholar's viewpoint. In this book, Glazier discusses three principal forms of electronic textuality: hypertext, visual/kinetic text, and e-poetry pieces in programmable media. He considers avant-garde poetics and its relationship to the on-line age, the relationship between Web "pages" and book technology, and the way in which certain kinds of Web constructions are in and of themselves a type of writing.

2.

The first question in e-poetry, which in its kinetic, animated and ergodic poetry, hyperpoetry, code poetry and poetry generators variations, falls into the expanded concept of textuality and new media, is the question connected with the nature of the medium itself, which is something that the author of this book (that was not actually written in one go but predominantly links essays and papers which were previously published in various e-zines and journals) was aware of himself. Certainly this is why already his opening definitions and illuminations dealing with the code of e-poetry and its perception as well as with the spaces of e-writing in general, are of importance to this field. "Writing in electronic media, whether simple Web pages, text generated by an algorithm, or pages that display kinetically, is writing that exists within specific *conditions* of textuality. Such writing has different properties than the writing to which we are accustomed" (2).Amongst these properties, it is important

that the word does not take on the function of physical object but rather is displayed and programmed. We meet with "smart" parts that function as writing about a subject and at the same time also about a medium, with the help of which they become mediators, for we write with words but at the same time we must also take into account grammar and the politics of code. Electronic poetry expands the space of poetry and also that of its perception. It is here that the eye is clearly active for, in this type of reading-looking-decoding, more effort and attention is required than in turning pages during the reading of a book or magazine. An important quality of e-texts is also their malleability and this malleability's related characteristics, which arise due to the flickering and fragile signifier. We are meeting a text that functions as a body, which can be manipulated with a series of programme commands.

Glazier, who in the field of theory quotes a lot from McGann's text *The Textual Condition*, is certainly not only a theoretician but also a practician in the field of writing and programming e-poetry, even one of the pioneers within electronic kinetic poetry (in the book he often asks himself about the role of poet as programmer). This is why the chapters in *Digital Poetics* devoted to the programming of e-poetry and e-textuality in general, are undoubtedly important, for example, in chapter Hypertext/Hyperpoesis/Hyperpoetics in which he discusses also the alphabet of coding and largely looks into applications in the HTML language in the field of e-poetry. In this, he is discovering the richness of poetic language on the basis of including signs that do not have the characteristics of the alphabet but function as visual tropes and also have rhythmical qualities. Here we should also mention a special chapter of this book in which Grazier talks of the importance of the "grep" command in e-poetry; otherwise he has expressed his affinity for meaningful code in writing poetry, by saying that also "writing a 'href' is writing "(3).

What kind of book is *Digital Poetics*? Is it merely a specialist book meant to raise questions about the pure theory of e-poetry? Not at all. In terms of genres, this book is by no account united, including literary-theoretical writing and approach influenced by theories on the new media intertwined with poetics as the poet's (self)reflection on poetry-making under conditions of digital code. A noticeable part of this reader-friendly book (there are lots of examples and illustrations) is also dedicated to the historical overview of e-poetry, followed by an overview of important international studies in the field of e-poetry. At the same time the author also dedicates special attention to reflections on possible perspectives of this type of creativity. One of the more important chapters in this book is therefore dedicated to the historical overview and a genuine inventory of digital poetry between the years 1970 and 2001, in which the author shows much attention to also considering digital poetry from outside the Anglo-American territory. Here he justifiably draws our attention to the important contribution of French and Brazilian e-poetry.

Glazier's book opens up a series of questions on poetry-making and the conditions inside which e-poetry is written/programmed and distributed, as well as, questions

on its perception and institutionalisation. The author's surveys and chronologies are exhausting, even though he leaves out certain authors and phenomena (for example, text based electronic installations, web poetry objects and projects by Mez, Alain Sondheim and Simon Biggs) that have an important place, especially in the field of introducing programming languages into e-poetry. Also, some of the more prominent theoreticians within this field have been omitted (for example, the German authors Florian Cramer, and Roberto Simanowski and Central and Eastern Europe scholars).

In the USA predominantly, hypertext was (especially in the genre of hyperfiction) for a long period accepted as a basic model for writing in the electronic medium, even though the specificity of the new medium comes to the fore more in other, more often, minimalist and within coded language intertwined forms. One of the most important things in Glazier's book is, for exactly this reason, his critical "dialogue" with the hypertextual medium, in which he has, even with regard to Mary-Laure Ryan's standpoint towards this problematic topic, written: "We need to ask ourselves what is the actual advance of the new medium, in order to define writing that will put that medium to task. The basic defining feature of hypertext, its ability to link, is operationally identical to the codex with its footnotes, index, table of contents, see also's, lists of prior publications, parenthetical asides, and numerous other devices of multilinearity" (4). The author of *Digital Poetics* is therefore closer to a textual experience that is "less about telling a story and more like a plunge into pure textual possibility" (5).

Important is also his notion that poetry, not prose, is the arena for the e-medium to be explored and that poetry needs to be active in inventing the future of the word. As examples of creative searching in this direction he mentions some works of poetry by John Cayley, Jim Rosenberg, Eduard Kac and his own, leaving out many, let us say, pioneers in the fields of poetry generators, text based electronic installations and code poetry.

Glazier also directs our attention towards the widest conditions of e-poetry for he is dealing with questions of architecture of Web pages, with the specificity of the World Wide Web, and with questions on the nature of the electronic medium itself, even though, we must emphasise, he does not go into any particular philosophical depth of writing or writing stimulated by cultural studies of new technologies (also his possible dialog with striking notions and devices from state-of-the-art literary theories, e.g. by Wolfgang Iser is lacking), but predominantly remains with the medium of poetics, even with the history of e-poetry, which does actually constitute for an important contribution in this book. E-poetry is a new field, similarly to its theory, which is only slowly placing itself into academic institutions. (*Between the Academy and a Hard Drive*, is ironically named the Epilogue of Glazier's book.)

3.

Glazier's *Digital Poetics*, pioneering the striking and provoking field of e-poetry, would make useful reading not only for poets of the e-medium, but for all poets today. The more demanding reader however, would find it difficult to find any consistent and pure (literary) theory of e-poetry in this book. On the other hand, with this book, the genre of poetics is excellently affirmed and justified, which is due to its close intertwining with contemporary art and theory a very logical field, proper for the conceptualisation of contemporary poetry. How is poetry possible today? What is poetry that is extended beyond the lyric? Why poetry and not a condensed, macdonaldised textuality of comics and placed in clouds commentaries featured alongside music videos? How do the lyric and its subject function today? These are questions that should be considered and used more often by poets especially in view of today's little inventive situation in this field.

Is our note too critical toward contemporary print based poetry and does it try to sway towards preferring e-poetry, which is more often generated by powerful visual special effects? Not at all. E-poetry is only among the genres of poetry today that belong to the expanded concept of poetry. It is a practice which is undoubtedly only at the beginning and is more often closer to new (above all visual) media than poetry-as-we-know-it. (Brian Kim Stefans finishes his statement on his kinetic e-piece A dreamlife of letters with "Thanks for watching" and not "Thanks for reading".) A series of theoretical devices for it yet need to be invented; let us just think of perception of e-poetry objects, which includes, among others, "mouse reading", perception of the whole mosaic-like screen in one quick snapshot and jumpy reading, full of forward glimpses and backward glances. With this note we have tried to draw attention to the complex position of today's literary/poetry coded textuality, for which it can undoubtedly be said, as T.W. Adorno has written on art: "It is self evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist". (6)

Poetry is also no longer a self-evident field but an area, which must constantly strive to rescue the word from the mainstream of verbal triviality and banalness and creatively preserve its authority in the face of macdonalisations and MTV-fication. This is the task for both, poets working in print-based poetry and poets-programmers of e-poetry.

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Notes

1. Lev Manovich , The Language of New Media, Cambridge, Mass.:The MIT Press, 2002, p.78

2. Loss P.Glazier, Digital Poetics.The Making of E-Poetries, Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Albama Press, 2002, p.20

3. ibid. 103

4. ibid. 94

5. ibid 21

6. Theodor W.Adorno, Aesthetic Theory. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.1