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Eight Digits of Digital Poetics

By Friedrich W. Block

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Abstract

I. Aesthetically speaking, digital poetry will not gain so much by operating within its very specific media, as by operating with or against said media.

II. Nothing radically new occurs with digital poetry.

III. Digital poetry does not improve on, redeem or translate (post)modern ways of writing.

IV. Digital poetry's place within the net of varying literary forms is to be found in the program of literary experiment.

V. Digital poetry presents and exemplifies the use of languages, or codes, in symbol processing computers and in digital networks.

VI. Digital poetry broadens the spectrum in which time and space may be poetically formed.

VII. Digital poetry illustrates and externalises technology, including technologies of self.

VIII. Digital poetry may prompt the discussion on poetics.

I. Aesthetically speaking, digital poetry will not gain so much by operating within its very specific media, as by operating with or against said media.

This is a deliberate question of definition, enabling anything to be excluded from the discussion on "aesthetic gain" which need not necessarily be produced electronically, stored, spread and received. Projects which could develop equally well in another way are therefore of no interest, for example Thomas Hettche's well known NULL-Project, Norman Ohlers "Quotenmaschine" (ratio machine), and also Rainald Goetz' "Abfall für alle" (waste for all), to name three prominent German examples, which were obviously conceived with a view to book production. We are

not merely restricted to hypertext or Internet literature, however. In fact, everything that can be done under specific hyper-medial conditions is valid. e.g.: work with programming languages, text generators, data bases or space-accessing interactive installations, which would be inconceivable on the Internet. To me, an electronically interconnecting 'link' just isn't one of the most poetically exciting examples of digital poetry. And American-style hyper-fiction usually has the dubious charm of card index boxes. The prepositional placement "not so much within, as with or against" reads as follows: taking slightly exaggerated prerequisites, most of what passes for "net-literature" in the field of German language lacks aesthetic gain. To a large extent net-literature consists of diary productions, or production of autobiographical fragments. Frequently it consists only of written discussion, and at worst it is chat on the net. Therefore, net-literature is often just another technically legitimised contribution to an outdated 'new inwardness' ('Neue Innerlichkeit') - simplified, but lacking artistic ambition. Naturally there are interesting exceptions.

II. Nothing radically new occurs with digital poetry.

Here two issues are addressed: first of all, newness as a real aesthetic value, and secondly the question of how digital poetry and tradition are related. In the past few years very few terms have celebrated their comeback with such a vengeance as newness. The new media make this possible. Within the catchment area of digital aesthetics, there is even an avant-garde consciousness once more. An avant-garde consciousness which often as not reminds us in style and gesture, as well as in substance, of historic communist manifestos. It is questionable that with the focus on new media technologies, the most aggressive modern concept of time has been revived, i.e. progress. Thus media art - and digital poetry as its part - is subjected to the "logic of economic exchange" (Boris Groys). With the 'new' we paradoxically catch the oldest or most traditional idea developed by Modernity and Modernism. It is my opinion, however, that art or literature does not progress. Rather, it extends steadily, and the concern with digital media has supplied some impulses here. A different question is the relation to tradition. Avant-garde consciousness comprises to make a clear break with tradition. How, however, is this tradition portrayed? Hasn't it often enough been portrayed so coarsely, that tradition reminds one somewhat of windmill sails: books, print literature, the Gutenberg galaxy, and connected to these: linear narrative techniques, one-dimensionality, depth of sense, finalism etc.. At the latest, Romanticism had cleared up with all this to a large extent, and since Mallarmé, Chlebnikov or Ball it is acknowledged that books and printing are, poetically speaking, leading lights no longer. Thus the question of tradition must be asked more positively. And this makes the next thesis necessary:

III. Digital poetry does not improve on, redeem or translate (post)modern ways of writing.

There is a common theory which states that with the computer, modern age or post-modern literature has come into its own. That it has found an adequate or - compared to printing - an improved medium. Hypertext Pope Jay David Bolter speaks of the "redefinition" of Modernism. And Philippe Castellin sets a large equation in the editorial of "Alire 10", a French journal for digital poetry: on one side of the equation there is a long list: poetry, individuality, inter-media, collage, Cadavres exquis, permutation, Poésie totale, synaesthesia, multi-sensor technology, Queneau, Schwitters, Pound, Joyce, Petronio, Hausmann, Zaum etc.. On the other side there stands only one French word: "L'ordinateur": computers seem to have completely bagged Modernism! I consider this to be technologically narrow-minded, and arrogant with regard to the achievements of the last century. Modernist ways of writing cannot be translated medially. If this is tried, then the results are disappointing, flat and trivial. At best they are didactic. Concepts may, however, be taken up and run through changed medial conditions. Then things can start to get interesting.

IV. Digital poetry's place within the net of varying literary forms is to be found in the program of literary experiment.

Poetic programs consist of certain concepts, principles, values, work attitudes, questions, and aims, which orient and control individual artistic events according to poetics. The program of literary experiment accommodates my first thesis: experimental literature has always been about language or the signs themselves, their technical, material, semantic and pragmatic possibilities. It has been about breaking bounds in the direction of fine arts and music, and also towards science. It has also been about observing the formulation and understanding process of producers and recipients. Therefore, experimental poetry has always been media poetry. There is simply no other literary terrain, where technological questions have always been raised so intensively - this also applies to audio engineering, broadcasting, photography, film, video and holography. So it is hardly surprising that the beginnings of literary preoccupation with computers are to be found in the associated area: for the first time, at the end of the fifties in the group surrounding Max Bense in Stuttgart, and then in Canada and the USA, in the seventies in France with OULIPO, the workshop for potential literature, and also with individual personalities such as Jacques Roubaud, Richard Kostellanz, Jim Rosenberg,

John Cayley, Reinhard Doehl or Augusto de Campos, one of the fathers of concrete poetry. Sooner or later, within the context of their literary experiments, they all concerned themselves with the possibilities of the computer, not to mention the theoretically farsighted designs of Max Bense and Oswald Wiener. The p0es1s collection has developed against this background.

V. Digital poetry presents and exemplifies the use of languages, or codes, in symbol processing computers and in digital networks.

With reference to the 'experimental' program one must expect, especially with digital poetry, those procedures in particular by which source codes, programming and interfaces are produced self referentially. Such exemplification is present - also visibly - in desired clarity, for instance, when the difference between HTML code and browser interpretation is staged, as in the Japanese group Exonemo's "Discoder" (the "Jodi" group is another classic), or when different symbol formats are contaminated as in the ASCII-Art-Ensemble, which experiments with the "American Standard Code for Information Interchange", also when Perl scripts are used to compose (at the same time being a reconstruction of historical speech machines: viz. Florian Cramers permutations). Of course any other demonstrations of computer-based features naturally need to be included here, such as hypermedia networking, animation, interactivity or also simply the discrepancy between hard and software e.g. in Frank Fietzek's Bodybuilding installations, which use a prime mover as interface for text production and text reception.

VI. Digital poetry broadens the spectrum in which time and space may be poetically formed.

Spatial extension concerns e.g. the leap from the blank page of a book - starting position of say modern visual poetry - into the three-dimensional space simulated on the screen, which is filled with writing and images - first seen in the late sixties in the Cybernetic Landscapes of Aaron Marcus. They concern space-accessing hardware in installations - for instance in the mentioned work of Fietzek or in Jeffery Shaw's legendary Legible City. In both cases, not seen before, the user is both represented and really embodied in the writing space. And of course spatial extensions are found in connection with computer networks, when the Webstalker

visualises data streams in the Internet, and especially in collaborative writing projects, which originated in France in the early eighties, and which Heiko Idensen has promoted and is variously responsible for in this country. It was also the French, who concerned themselves early on with time in digital texts. For instance with the relation of movement on the display or text animations on the one hand, and perception possibilities, as well as interactive direct access possibilities within this course of motion on the other. Also the concern was to explore the tension between the time units of programmed text, perceived text and read text - for example the longstanding work of Philippe Bootz on "Passage", a 'poème à lecture unique' where the activity brings about irreversible results in text generation (exists only off-line). Following on from this understanding of time and movement one is today particularly interested in forms of data-processing, such as for the digital conversion of text input into pictures in the Verbarium by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, or for collaborative inputs into a collective memory with strict time frames in the context of 23:40 by Guido Grigat. This concept of movement between animation and cybernetic process is, by the way, already explicit in the Brazilian Noigandres group's "pilot plan for concrete poetry" dating from the year 1958.

VII. Digital poetry illustrates and externalises technology, including technologies of self.

The attribute "digital", the definition of digital poetry and the examples show: we are here concerned with, in particular, the testing of technical possibilities and conditions under literary circumstances. But caution is called for; one loses oneself all too easily in the cold fascination of constantly changing developments - as well as in the complexity there of. Don't forget the mentioned avant-garde consciousness. The consequence is technique positivism, which is not opposed by any current aesthetic ideology criticism of technology. The Cebit syndrome! Even if one interprets technique, including the tools of hard and software, in the ancient world's sense of techne, dynamically, symbolically and as a process (techne as creative and productive workings or as art), then it is clear that the aesthetic gain of digital literature cannot be reduced to technology. Things start to get interesting when the dynamically technical is not only charged to the computer, but also to those, who deal with it, and who therefore deal always also with themselves. This includes all the techniques, which we must mentally and physically input here. It is also interesting, when these are then short circuited: the artistically deliberate and frequently ironical, even amusing analogy of man and machine in the aesthetic process. This is valid e.g. for a set of text generators, which may well produce just as meaningful or unreasonable sentences or poems as myself; initial steps were

taken in this direction as early as the fifties with automatic texts. In addition I consider the fact, that the viewer or reader may literally be transferred into the text and that his actions in the data space become observable to himself and to an audience: exemplified in the Legible City. Or I recall that reading can be hard work, as in the mentioned work of Fietzek, where one is degraded to a module for arduous text call, only to be rewarded with a few ironical pornographic scraps.

VIII. Digital poetry may prompt the discussion on poetics.

I hope, that the current trend of interest in new technologies will stimulate the theoretical discussion on their significance for art and literature - and thus the poetics discussion concerning production and perception of literature in general. To be honest, I don't have too much hope here; even though the most ambitious theorising has been done within the program of experimental poetry, these offers receive hardly any attention when compared to the literary mainstream. They will continue to suffer a fringe existence - in the same way that presumably also digital poetry will in the long term prove to be no more than an episode and just another branch in the ramifications of advanced text formation.

