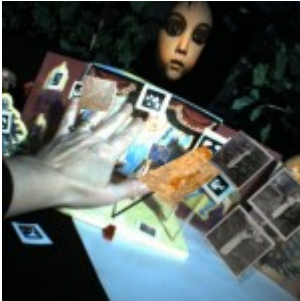


In Praise of the (Post) Digital

by [Anna Nacher](#)

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A riPOSTe to:

[*Thirteen Ways of Looking at Electronic Literature, or, A Print Essai on Tone in Electronic Literature, 1.0*](#)

Indirectly responding to Callus's and Aquilina's essay, Anna Nacher finds a 14th way of describing e-literature: employing the Deleuzian concept of a minor style.

In my dialogue¹ with 13 Ways of Looking at Electronic Literature I would like to trace some of the e-literature's trajectories from the perspective of what has been called – for the lack of better term (which, according to one of its proponents, sucks but is useful²) – post-digitality.³ I would like to ponder on two points made by Mario Aquilina and Ivan Callus: that electronic literature is not just about the letter and that it is posthuman (more about design than style). Specifically, what interests me, is HOW it becomes posthuman and HOW it is not just about the letter. Employing the notion of style might seem paradoxical in this regard but only at first glance. I am especially interested in the particular understanding of style, grounded in Guattari and Deleuze's figure of a minor literature and, following Guattari read by a French philosopher, Anne Sauvagnargues, understood as the collective assemblage of enunciation⁴, albeit the one that includes also non-human actors and forces.

Before clarifying how I understand the post-digital and how it affects the emergence of an e-literature, I would like to call attention to the fact that it has been insightfully and somewhat

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- 1 The article is actually inspired by the whole series of dialogues and conversations spanning across the online and the physical. I owe much to the exchange of ideas during several conferences and workshops. I am especially grateful to Scott Rettberg for inviting me to the ELMCIP Knowledge Base Workshop at the University in Bergen in May 2018, to Joseph Tabbi for the fascinating discussion on the notion of the post-digital and to Andreas Broeckmann for directing my attention to weaving, lines and fabrics (during the Politics of the Machines conference held in May 2018 at the Aalborg University in Copenhagen). The article is also based on the research project supported by National Science Centre Poland (The aesthetics of post-digital imagery: between new materialism and object-oriented philosophy, 2016/21/B/HS2/00746).
 - 2 Florian Cramer, *What is post-digital in: Postdigital Aesthetics. Art, Computation and Design*, ed. D.M. Berry, M. Dieter, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 13.
 - 3 A similar trajectory has been drawn by Laura Shackelford, albeit with the strong preference for the language-based phenomena and the discursive elements of the practices and digital literary works, Cf. Laura Shackelford, *Postmodern, Posthuman, Post-Digital in: The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*, ed. J. Tabbi, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Shackelford also underlines the fact of the digital technologies reaching out to the lived space and beyond the screen, the condition which in her opinion is best exemplified by Christian Bök in *Xenotext*.
 - 4 A. Sauvagnargues, *Artmachines. Deleuze, Guattari, Simondon*. Trans. S. Verdeber and E.W. Holland, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 2016, p. 20.

prophetically articulated by N. Katherine Hayles, in the very same book that set the basis for her better known advocacy of media-specific analysis in writing that engages actively with its enabling medium. For quite some time the materiality of digital media has been analyzed (both in the e-literature and media art) mostly in terms of code and software, with more attention being paid to their ideological value, often in concert with the illusion of their supposed autonomy from the social issues, dominant discourses and the discursive power regimes. So I would refer to the *Writing Machines'* opening sequences, where Hayles brings up the idea of the material metaphor as the kind of traffic happening when the computers are hooked into networks in which they are seamlessly integrated with apparatus that can actually do things in the world, from sensors and actuators of mobile robots to the semiotic-material machinery that changes the numbers in bank accounts.⁵ My main argument is that in the post-digital condition of our time both the very understanding of materiality and the way it is positioned in relation to the digital have changed. The shift I am referring to affects not only the number of practices concerning the digital-born artefacts but also the way we think about agencies involved in their production. The major rearrangement might concern the fascinating debate on the dichotomy of old media / new media. One of its instances is the oft-analyzed tension between print and non-print (incarnated in a few theoretical attempts which contributed to the proposed sub-discipline of comparative media⁶). Yet with the computing technology and data processing getting increasingly embedded in a physical space and among tangible objects, the digital media as we have known it since at least the late 80s (desktop-based and endowed with the hard-wired communication networks), became the old media themselves. Saying this does not mean subscribing to the compromised and ideologically-laden rhetoric of the technological revolution; far from it. The change seems, however, fundamental and at the same time difficult to pinpoint due to the complexity of the processes involved. Partly, it concerns the major change of the perceptive regime (on many levels: cognitive, temporal, sensual) and stems from the fact that, according to Hansen, the technical mediation is currently undergoing a significant, paradigmatic shift. As he puts it, the technically enabled expansion of the visible world has reached its end point, with the consequence that a new correlation of media and sensation occurs beneath the temporal frame definitive of both image and conscious perception.⁷ First and foremost it means that ubiquitous computational environments solicit a far broader range of sensory contact from their users.⁸ Since we still seem to be in the middle of such reconfigurations – and they happen on many levels, including the collisions of temporal regimes underlying the computational processes and those related to the lived temporalities of organic bodies – the possibility to adequately grasp all the consequences of such a shift might be somewhat limited. However, it is crucial to note that ubiquitous computing – computation embedded in the minutiae of everyday embodied practices - appears to constitute the very backbone of the transformation in question. Hence, following Mark B. N. Hansen, it might

5 N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines*, Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2002, p.

6 Assembled in the seminal volume edited by N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman, *Comparative Textual Media. Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

7 Mark B. N. Hansen, *Ubiquitous Sensation: Toward an Atmospheric, Collective, and Microtemporal Model of Media* in: *Throughout. Art and Culture Emerging with Ubiquitous Computing*, ed. U. Ekman, Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2013, p. 67.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

be said that the ubicomp environments catalyze a form of sensation that obeys two masters at once: the neural logic of sensory fusion and the technical logic of computational processing.⁹

The notion of the post-digital, coined by Kim Cascone as early as in 2000, denoted primarily the fact that by then the relative newness of and the excitement generated by the digital technologies in the artistic practices had already started fading. Soon afterwards the then-nascent and promising digital culture got transformed into the popular (normalizing and normative) practices of the internet of platforms.¹⁰ As observed by Florian Cramer¹¹, the process brought the renaissance of neo-analog and the penchant for vintage older formats (not dissimilar, though, to the pop-cultural sensibilities of *retromania*¹²). He also points out to the whole set of convenient binaries being problematized in the process (with the wornout opposition of digital and analogue in the first place), summing up that the term 'post-digital' in its simplest sense describes the messy state of media, arts and design *after* their digitization.¹³ and insisting that disruption brought upon by digital information technology has already occurred.¹⁴ I find this articulation a bit limited though. In fact, disruption brought by the digital has already affected much wider areas, far transcending media, arts and design. Its premises and consequences have been summed up by David M. Berry and Michael Dieter: Computation becomes experiential, spatial and materialized in its implementation, embedded within environment and embodied, part of the texture of life itself but also upon and even within the body. Computation becomes something which operates while one walks around, is touched and touchable, manipulated and manipulable and interactive and operable through a number of entry-points, surfaces and veneers.¹⁵ For Berry and Dieter, then, the post-digital means, among other things, that the computation that now surrounds most objects and we encounter and communications we enter is closer to the lived reality and the physical world than it had ever been, which is why Hansen's diagnosis of the complexities inherent in the ubicomp sounds so convincing.¹⁶

In the wake of the growing wave of e-literary works located between page and screen and between screen and world, a phrase like literature was never only words, never merely immaterial verbal constructions¹⁷ or literary texts, like us, have bodies¹⁸ play a somewhat different tune than it once did in 2002. The aesthetic and literary strategies vary, as do tools, platforms and contents but increasingly the electronic literature is moving off the screen into the physical world or weaving the still tighter yet more sophisticated knots between them. The tendency may have first taken the form of locative narratives and poetry; e.g.: *34 North, 118 West* by Jeremi Hight, Jeff Knowlton and

9 Ibid., p. 72.

10 On the extensive analysis of the platformization of the Web cf. Tarleton Gillespie, 'The politics of 'platforms'', *New Media and Society*, vol. 12 no. 3 2010; Anne Helmond, "The Like Economy: The Politics of Data and Data Flows in the Social Web, *Proceedings BOBCATSSS 2012 - 20th International Conference on Information Science*, Bob + Herchen Verlag, 2012; Anne Helmond *The Platformization of the Web. Making Web Data Platform Ready*, *Social Media + Society*, vol. 1 nr 2 2015.

11 Florian Cramer, *Post-Digital Writing in: The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*, ed. J. Tabbi, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

12 Simon Reynolds, *Retromania. Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, New York, Faber & Faber, 2011.

13 Florian Cramer, *What is...* p. 19.

14 Florian Cramer, *What is...*, p. 20.

15 David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, *Thinking Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, in: *Postdigital Aesthetics. Art, Computation and Design*, ed. D.M. Berry, M. Dieter, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 3.

16 This is also one of the reasons why the affective turn is such a prominent and productive theoretical thread.

17 N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing...*, p. ??

18 Ibid.

Naomi Spellman; *Entre Ville* and *in absentia* by J.R. Carpenter, *La casa sota el temps* by Isaias Herrero, *Senghor on the Rocks* by Christoph Benda, *Transborder Immigrant Tool* by b.a.n.g.lab (the team comprising Ricardo Dominguez, Brett Stalbaum, Micha Cardenas, Amy Sara Carroll, Elle Mehrmand and Jason Najarro), *Implementation* by Scott Rettberg and Nick Monfort. The might have been augmented books (*Andromeda* by Caitlin Fisher, *Between Page and Screen* by Amanda Borsuk and Brad Bouse, the book projects by Andrzej Głowacki or Wojciech Bruszewski). We have also modalities of close interaction with our environment's physicality, like *Gateway to the World* by Maria Mencia (based on the visualization of data on maritime traffic of goods through the harbor of Hamburg), *Snow* by Shelley Jackson (making creative use of the natural surface and photo-sharing platforms prone to the logic of cloud computing), *slippingglimpse* by Stephanie Strickland and Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo (where the process of reading occurs between the movement of water, the code and the text on screen), *xenotext* by Christian Bök (with E.coli bacteria as the operator of the poetic text) or – on the more popular side of spectrum - the documentary, locative, interactive online story *Migration.trail* by Killing Architects (with the story of fictional protagonists based on the social media feeds of the real immigrants and the data on a number of migrants missing or found in the Mediterranean Sea between 2014 and 2017). Each of the above-mentioned works is based on an individual topical choice and aesthetic strategy, and each opens out to new worlds through its distinctive repositioning of the digital versus (or rather as related to) the physical. *Circle* by Caitlin Fisher, a project where the story is composed of the physical objects belonging to four generations of women and enhanced with QR codes, seems a particularly suitable illustration of how the Deleuzian and Guattarian notion of a minor style might include the weaving of semiotic-material assemblages. The physical manipulation of the physical objects and actual data on the part of the reader (user? interactor?) is crucial for a story that seeks to operate through a variety of ontological realms, communication networks and devices. According to Jessica Pressman, the objects in *Circle* not only *represent* symbolic and familial networks of interpersonal relationships but also *operate* through a digital network of programmed code, software, and hardware.¹⁹ *Circle's* highly hybrid quality is grounded in how it binds code, communication protocols, software and analog objects to produce a literary experience far exceeding the confines of linguistic text and textuality. It is one of the works showing how the electronic literature is not just about the letter and how it is neither (or not anymore) just about multimodality, it is rather about weaving the code into and through the tangible, the experiential, the elemental. Jessica Pressman insightfully sums up its way of operation: We read *Circle* by entering and interacting with its relational network of things. Hence *Circle* is about relationality: relations between human readers and analog objects, between these objects and the digital devices that scan them, between this transmedial format and the literary performance that it produces.²⁰ For indeed it is relationality that moves to the very center of the experiential, spatial and atmospheric computation of the post-digital condition, as epitomized by the basic layer of wireless communications which only provisionally glue the networked digital

19 Jessica Pressman, *Circling Back: Electronic Literature and Material Feminism*, in: *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism*, eds. T. Oren, A. Press, forthcoming. (I would like to thank Jessica Pressman for kindly sending me the pre-print version of the chapter).

20 Ibid.

objects, never fully reliable, prone to architectural barriers, meteorological conditions and sometimes even the presence of the human bodies.²¹

With such instances of the post-digital literary praxis we are once again reminded that materiality cannot be specified in advance, as if it preexisted the specificity of the work. An emergent property, materiality depends on how the work mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact as well as on the user's interactions with the work and the interpretive strategies she develops – strategies that include physical manipulations as well as conceptual frameworks.²² So Hayles' concluding remark that materiality emerges from the dynamic interplay between the richness of a physically robust world and human intelligence well resonates with the idea of the becoming environmental of computation²³ proposed recently by Jennifer Gabrys. Indeed, Gabrys's brilliant analysis of dispersed sensing technologies embedded in the environment concerns the very basis of the post-digital condition understood as the mundane computing of our everyday lifeworld. Saturating the space with the sensing and low-range communicating technologies of various types contributes in a significant way to how ubiquitous computing enables the emergence of datafied lived space. In her main line of argumentation, following Whitehead, James and Simondon, Gabrys understands the physical environment and the sensing technologies as mutually co-evolving rather than bound through the decisive cut of representation positioning the computing as the outside of the fixed environmental background. Gabrys sees the process as generative of the relations that join up entities and environments, with the necessary Whiteheadian remark that relations do not precede the acts of relating and are specific to the entities and environments that concreate.²⁴ Post-digital writing is located in the very center of such a machine of relationality – forging the alliances, crossing the ontological realms of the digital, the physical and the elemental (meteorological, atmospheric, geological etc.).

So it is in such a context that I think of post-digital literary practices as a Deleuzian and Guattarian minor style, with its imminent tendency to seed the variation, heterogeneity, polytonality and transgression at the very heart of the system, transforming it and contributing to further restructurations. Forging the assemblages and sediments across domains and actors: language-like, wet, organic, polluted, carbon- and silicon-based. Following Deleuze & Guattari, Anne Sauvagnargues reminds us that style becomes a tension that puts language into relation with its intensive border: unformed matter, musical sound, or asignifying cry, in other words, the deterritorialisation of sense that carries language to its limits.²⁵ It is meant to test and transduce the state of equilibrium of a language as a system, in order to try out a new assemblage.²⁶ It also infuses language with the power of event and bears witness to the fact that its purpose is not to represent the socially defined person, social redundancies, or the familiar cast from our pre-school alphabet books, but instead to capture new existences in order to topple syntax and expand its

21 I develop this argument elsewhere, inspired by Adrian Mackenzie, *Wirelessness. Radical Empiricism in the Networked Culture*, Cambridge – London, MIT Press 2010. Cf. Anna Nacher, „Internet of things and automation of imaging: beyond representationalism“, *communications+1*, vol. 5 2016 (Machine Communication) <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cpo/vol5/iss1/6/>

22 N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing...* P. 107.

23 Jennifer Gabrys, *Program Earth: Environmental Sensing Technologies and the Making of a Computational Planet*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, loc. 324 (Kindle version)

24 Ibid.

25 Anne Sauvagnargues, *Artmachines...* p.22.

26 Ibid.

power to make us experience new affects. And post-digital writing does precisely that – it generates the discursive-material hybrids which might be our chance to place variation, relationality and hope in the very center of the forces that otherwise tend to unify, homogenize, normalize and standardize our networked experiences in the age of platforms. In doing this, post-digital writing might follow the strategy exemplified by the material metaphor of the Arachnean (*Arachnéen*) conceived by Fernand Deligny, the French visionary and social activist. He established several communities aimed at accommodating children and adults with various form of autism who would otherwise end up in institutionalized psychiatric facilities. *La Grande Cordée* founded in 1948 was one of the earliest communities of this kind. Deligny was often associated with anti-psychiatry and his initiative is often likened to Guattari's experimental and much better known center of alternative psychiatry, *La Borde* (with whom Deligny at some point collaborated writing for the clinic's journal, *La Borde-Éclair*), yet he was mostly concerned with establishing innovatory ways to live together with people whom he considered to be outside of language. His oeuvre is equally difficult to confine to any particular genre or mode, as it was constantly oscillating between philosophy and poetry, anthropological observation and quasi-prophetic (if emphatically secular) aphorism.²⁷

Anne Sauvagnargues, reappropriating the Arachnean metaphor for the purpose of her reflection on the relationship between the language, the symbolic and its outside, traces how Deligny's concept inspired the well-known tropes, so central to Deleuze's and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (including the rhizomatic thinking and the notion of fugitive lines). Deligny belongs to the generation of thinkers who significantly contributed to the deconstruction and dismantling of the primacy of individual, autonomous subject – often proved illusory and / or ideological. His ideas were based on an ethology of the non-speaking human²⁸, which did not preclude the possibility of communication but rather might suggest the efforts at conceiving its different modes: collective, in connection to other living beings who – although habitually excluded by humans from the domain of the symbolic – are capable of transmitting the meanings and affects in silence, beyond language. To Deligny, Arachnean materiality is the alternative network woven upon what already exists, like the spider's net, imperceptible at the first glance and taking advantage of what is available at the moment, always impermanent and precarious, a kind of resistance woven in response to and disappearing from along with a threat.²⁹ a network acts upon existing assemblages and plays with them.³⁰ In seeing the post-digital literary practices as a minor style and as *arachnéen* it is worth quoting Sauvagnargues at length:

It is not anthropomorphic. This is why it is difficult to theorise this reserve (resource), which is permanent rather than eternal, precarious in all circumstances because defined by the experiment. The network must necessarily fail. This is one of its most propitious traits and should not be seen as a lack; it is provisional. According to Deligny, we must take into account the full sense of the ambiguity of the term 'completed': a network that is completed becomes institutionalized and dies. Networks are sketches

27 Leon Hilton, Mapping the Wander Lines: the Quiet Revelations of Fernand Deligny, Los Angeles Review of Books, July 2 2015, [lareviewofbooks.org/article/mapping-the-wander-lines-the-quiet-revelations-of-fernand-deligny/!](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/mapping-the-wander-lines-the-quiet-revelations-of-fernand-deligny/) Accessed: June 12 2018.

28 Anne Sauvagnargues, *Artermachines*...p. 169.

29 Ibidem, p. 164.

30 Ibidem.

that must remain incomplete because if they are completed, they become institutionalized and end. Or, better yet, they offer a stable support or enveloping milieu to new undertakings, new fabrics being woven or stitched together, taking upon itself or unravelling them."³¹

Reaching out to the metaphor aimed at grasping the relationship between language as a system and its Other (the domain resting outside of discourse or beyond it) might seem paradoxical. Yet in the case of post-digital literary practices bridging the digital (the code, the algorithmic and procedural writing, often functionally dependent on the data shadows, ubiquitous monitoring of our data processing activities as well as various platforms and their politics) and the physical (be it the physical objects, movements in space or DNA sequencing) it might serve as a call for experiencing (and exploring) the new entanglements. They are forged through the many acts and processes of weaving our bodily, affective experiences into the milieus and environments we explore with our mobile devices in hand, looking for the new narratives and poetic acts, in which linguistic signs are no longer predominant but rather coexist with nonverbal semiotics³², even if they almost immediately get translated into traceable data. As Sauvagnargues reminds us : Deligny proposes the topos as a version of living together, and this comprehension of enlarged, corporeal space includes children as well as adults but also the landscape, with its heavily travelled zones, its notable immobile entities (the mountain, the path), the 'ultrachose', as Wallon termed it.³³ And because ours is the time when we live together also with cybernetic and algorithmic entities, we need the metaphors which help to capture both the language in its all systemic power and glory and the space that effectively is opposed to it, quiet yet persistent in its ongoing revolt masqueraded as mimicking.

31 Ibidem.

32 Anne Sauvagnargues, *Artermachines...*p. 176.

33 Ibid, p. 179.