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Digital Criticism is Coming of Age:
Reading Moving Letters – A Review

- Roberto Simanowski/Jörgen Schäfer/Peter Gendolla (eds.), *Reading Moving Letters. Digital Literature in Research and Teaching. A Handbook.* Bielefeld: transcript 2010. 380 p. [Price: EUR 32, 80]. ISBN: 978-3-8376-1130-4.

In the course of the last decade, digital criticism has come of age: the hype about hyper-text, and the conception of digital literature as a performative enactment of premises from post-structuralist theories which would bring about the death of book culture – notions which defined the beginnings of the academic discussion of digital works – have gradually been replaced by more measured claims about the new aesthetic and communicative possibilities engendered by interactive and interdisciplinary productions. The discussion of digital literature has long ceased to be the exclusive terrain of poet-practitioners and programmers, and has become an academic discipline in its own right, particularly in the United States, where numerous degree courses in ›Digital Studies‹ bear witness to this trend. ›Volume 1‹ (2006) of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, an extensive open-access anthology of digital works, edited by N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg and Stephanie Strickland, is another example of publication ventures which have facilitated further the academic establishment of the field as well as the canonization of particular works. It is thus not surprising that the emphasis in the digital discourse has gradually shifted from abstract, theoretical discussions of the specificities of digital literature and its aesthetic value towards close readings and more practical concerns, such as issues concerning the preservation and the teaching of digital works. *Reading Moving Letters. Digital Literature in Research and Teaching. A Handbook*, edited by Roberto Simanowski, Jörgen Schäfer and Peter Gendolla, provides further evidence for this more general shift of interest as it is specifically designed as a handbook: it is both a highly theoretically stimulating and valuable companion piece for researchers and teachers working in the field of digital literature. It is divided into two sections: part one, entitled *Reading Digital Literature*, provides definitions of digital literature and explores methodological and theoretical questions, while part two, entitled *Teaching Digital Literature*, addresses how and why digital literature should be taught in the classroom. Each contributor to the volume has provided a theoretical and a practice-orientated essay, which ensures an equal balance between questions relating to genre and media-specificity and practical institutional-pedagogic considerations, turning this volume into an original and rich resource book.

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In part one, **Noah Wardrip-Fruin**'s »Five Elements of Digital Literature« and **John Zuern**'s »Figures in the Interface. Comparative Methods in the Study of Digital Literature« stand out and are also representative of two dominant critical trends in the field. While Wardrip-Fruin is primarily concerned with categorizing the specificities of digital literature, an approach which is typical of the branch of criticism which is still occupied with defining the core characteristics of the objects and the fundamental theoretical concepts of the discipline, Zuern in contrast warns against such endeavours. In their attempts to emphasize ways in which digital literature differs from print literature, Zuern writes, critics such as Wardrip-Fruin are in danger of overlooking the literary singularity of each artwork, risking to »override our attention to aspects of

digital texts that are analogous, if not simply identical, to aspects of print documents« (61). Zuern instead advocates a return to close reading, to detailed studies of the materiality of electronic texts (Matthew Kirschenbaum and N. Katherine Hayles are other figures in the field who propagate such a return to ›new‹ New Critical methodologies). Digital literary criticism, according to Zuern, has a lesson to learn from Comparative Literature: not only should the field cease to define itself merely *against* a dominant other, i.e. print culture in the case of digital literature, and national canons in the case of Comparative Literature, but digital literary criticism, like Comparative Literature, should focus on the tropological nature of literary language. The figurative trope is a concept which can serve as a »fulcrum for a robust comparative method for digital literary studies« (63). However, like Wardrip-Fruin, Zuern insists that the preconditions for rigorous close readings are close attention to and fluency in the language of source codes, algorithms and calculations. Wardrip-Fruin also maintains that when reading digital works, »we must read both process and data« (38), i.e. not just the words, images and sounds that appear on the screen, but also the processes which generate them. This proposition, which brings us back to Zuern's original argument, is a well-established critical view in traditional literary studies, where the notion of the intricate interrelatedness of form and content has long been a basic methodological assumption.

In their contribution entitled »Reading (in) the Net. Aesthetic Experience in Computer-Based Media«, **Jörgen Schäfer** and **Peter Gendolla** ask whether computer-based and networked media have generated a new quality of literariness, and whether net-literature produces a unique and particular aesthetic, which sets it apart from print literature. What at first glance seems to resemble key features of modernist and avant-garde art, they argue, are in fact »symptoms of a radical change in media technologies whose mid- and long-term consequences we are only beginning to realize« (82). Schäfer and Gendolla analyse the social and cultural changes caused by new modes of dissemination and participation opened up by the new media. The key aesthetic difference between old and new modes of literary communication, they argue, is the information feedback loop, the existence of a principally open feedback channel between producer and recipient. The outputs generated by computers are no longer fully predetermined, but open to interferences on numerous levels: by the user, by multiple users, by the machine and by multiple machines. Traditional conceptions of the author, the work and the reader are thus becoming increasingly blurred in a potentially never-ending process of ephemeral creation.

Karin Wenz investigates ›fanfiction‹ as a case study of networked groups of authors who creatively engage with and transform source texts into new ones, while sharing and expanding their interpretations with other fans. ›Fanfiction‹ is cyberliterature located in the space between digital games and their afterlives, a form of meta-gaming that ›goes on after the credits‹. **Raine Koskima**, in »Approaches to Digital Literature. Temporal Dynamics and Cyborg Authors«, explores the notion of networked computers as partners in the creative process. Of particular interest is his discussion of the unique temporality of dynamic cybertexts, which he positions in between literature, cinema and games. Expanding on Genette's theories of temporality, Koskima suggests a reorganization of temporal issues through »the dynamics of system time (the succession of the processor cycles pacing the execution of the code), reading time, and textual (fictive) time« (136).

In her essay »From Revisi(tati)on to Retro-Intentionalization«, **Astrid Ensslin** introduces a promising phenomenological approach to reading digital works, a mode of what she calls ›cybersomatic criticism‹, which takes into account corporeality during the reading process. She illustrates this ›aesthetic of retro-intentionalisation‹ with a discussion of Kate Pullinger's »The Breathing Wall«. The bodies of readers of certain digital works, she writes, are double-

situated in the new media environment: first, user-readers are embodied, in that their bodies interact with the computer physically. Secondly, they are ›re-embodied‹ through visible feedback representations on the screen, for example as avatars.

In »Digital Literature – A Question of Style«, **Alexandra Saemmer** proposes an interesting transplantation of classical rhetorical figures into the realm of digital criticism, so as to be able to define the stylistic features of digital works with more precision. She deploys both conventional taxonomies and invents a new terminology in order to define complex interactive processes which entail relationships between interactive gestures, such as clicking and scrolling, the content to which the gesture relates, and the content which appears as a result of that gesture. When the processes triggered by the gesture are surprising and violate the user's expectation, Saemmer speaks of ›figures of manipulation‹. The discrepancy between the reader's expectation and the realized events on the screen, she argues, is a mainstay of digital literature. In a close-reading of Brian Kim Stefan's »The Dreamlife of Letters«, Saemmer defines a second corpus of figures, namely ›figures of animation‹, attempting to classify letters in movement. These include, for example, ›emergence‹, ›eclipse‹, ›kinetic allegory‹ and ›transfiguration‹.

María Goicoechea provides an overview of perspectives in Spanish criticism of digital literature in »The Reader in Cyberspace«. She argues that Spanish critics generally focus more on the social, economic and cultural history »that illuminates the technical history, and not the other way round« (185). **Janez Strehovec**, in »Alphabet on the Move«, proposes the Russian Formalist concept of defamiliarization as a tool for understanding how digital language performs differently from the language of print culture. »The literariness in digital poetry«, he writes, »refers first of all to making cyber›language‹ strange« (212), deliberately defamiliarizing our expectations about the appearance, the content and the function of digital texts. Like Ensslin, he argues that some digital works require both mental and physical activity, including tactile, haptic and motoric perception.

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It is noticeable that most of the contributors in part one are still preoccupied with enhancing and modifying existing definitions of digital literature and with creating new typologies. The field, it seems, is still primarily driven by meta-discourses in which questions concerning the nature of the object of study, its place in the history of experimental literature and adequate methodologies for its analysis are the dominant critical concerns. This might partly be due to the rapidly changing nature of digital artefacts, as well as to the fact that some traditional literary critics still question the literary merit of digital literature. *Reading Moving Letters*, moreover, is a handbook, which aims at communicating basics, providing overviews of existing critical positions in the field as well as at introducing novel approaches, all of which it achieves successfully. Finally, the dominance of genre and media-specificity theories might be explained by yet another factor: as Koskima rightly observes, digital works are experimental in nature, perpetually exploring the possibilities and limits of literary expression in programmable media. The nature of experimental works, both in print *and* in networked media, makes close-readings much harder than meta-theoretical discussions. Many digital works are more conceptual than narrative, ideas-based rather than content-orientated, and concerned primarily with defamiliarization, self-conscious expositions of underlying processes and with creating surprise and cognitive rupture. All of these strategies require a theoretical understanding of the traditions, conventions and processes which are interrupted in the first place.

However, the move towards discussions of stylistic devices and the call for close readings of digital artefacts, as practiced by Saemmer and Zuern, are welcome new developments. It is by way of concrete case studies, by close attention to details and aesthetic specificities, that the value of digital artefacts can become most apparent. These approaches can provide the strongest responses to the question whether digital literature is only interesting in principle, as a concept, or whether it really has yielded works which will hold up to scrutiny, which, as print works, can generate and stimulate rich, divergent and interesting interpretations that have the power to affect us on a variety of levels, to change our modes of reading and impact upon our conceptions of literature.

The merit of digital literature must also be communicable to audiences who are not special-ists, creative producers, or well-versed in high theory. Part two of this collection presents a welcome and original contribution to the field, strongly advocating the importance and bene-fits of new media literacy in the twenty-first century. The essays assembled in the second part address practical and methodological issues relating to the teaching of digital literature, rang-ing from institutional settings to code literacy. **Roberto Simanowski** draws attention to the ethical ramifications of making students able to cope with documents of diverse origins, and conflicting concepts, discourses and cultures in the web. Gendolla, Schäfer and **Patricia Tomaszek** argue that the boundaries between students and teachers become increasingly blurred, since students are now ever more likely to know more than the teacher about the pro-cesses involved in finding, navigating, and manipulating data online. Other contributors point out more problematic aspects, such as the lack of shared and stable reading experiences, which are typical of numerous interactive works. The absence of fixity and the unique tempo-ralities of digital works, moreover, render contemplative reading and a high degree of reader-absorption more difficult, and teaching humanities students the basics of algorithms and proc-esses is also not always an easy task. Most contributors, however, agree that discussions of digital literature in the classroom raise fundamental questions about what literature is, how we can describe it and what its functions are in the age of globalization. Digital literature, they argue, raises awareness about automatized responses which are already firmly established in the field of the digital, and thus fosters critical attitudes towards the new media. Digital litera-ture, finally, can shed light on classical literary techniques and strategies, such as narrative perspectives and focalization, questions of genre, media-specificity, a wide variety of theo-retical approaches, reader responses, and intertextuality. *Reading Moving Letters* is a rich, user-friendly and thought-stimulating contribution to the discourse, and provides both sub-stantial theoretical and new practical insights.

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