

# Literal Aurality? Digital Poetry and Temporal Poetics

Juri Joensuu ([juri.joensuu@jyu.fi](mailto:juri.joensuu@jyu.fi))  
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

MIT6: MEDIA IN TRANSITION INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, 24 – 26 APRIL 2009  
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

## Abstract

Diverse types of digital poetry base their meaning production on temporal dynamics of digital media. This yields an important difference to historical concept of writing and its non-temporal materiality. It seems that time and temporality are the central signifying components in every type of digital poetry. Session is often used term to describe the one temporal unit of reception. Videopoetry, animated poetry or programmed poetry have all somewhat different ways to use time as part of their poetics. Benjamin's own comments on writing were scarce and rather unproblematized. This is why it seems fruitful to examine the new types of literal and literary aurality that temporally dynamic poetic texts call forth.

## Benjamin and writing

In his groundbreaking essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", Walter Benjamin's comments on *writing* or *literature* are somewhat scarce. It is quite natural that for him writing is not in the centre of media transition, but a rather unproblematized medial mode. Writing has already gone through the most remarkable technological change, namely the printing press and movable type. For Benjamin print is simultaneously an example of technological reproduction and "outside" it.<sup>1</sup> This is the case when print, writing or literature is compared to sound and picture technologies. In

---

<sup>1</sup> "[...] written language became reproducible by movable type. The enormous changes brought about in literature by movable type, the technological reproduction of writing, are well known. But they are only a special case, though an important one, of the phenomenon considered here from the perspective of world history." Benjamin, 20.

Benjamin's own contemporary point of view the most massive, influential and interesting changes are happening, and have happened in photography, film, and sound recording. For Benjamin especially the sound film is natively technological art form, owning multimodal composite power.

Still, Benjamin views are remarkable also from the point of contemporary writing and digital textual media. First, some of the concepts Benjamin creates and uses seem appropriate for the use of readers and scholars of digital texts (like digital, dynamic<sup>2</sup> poetry, which is my main interest here). These include distance, uniqueness, exhibition value (presentability) – possibly aura as well. These terms I will discuss briefly later. Even if the terms are not always totally analogic or transferable to digital media, it is clear that converged digital media are as natively technological and multimodal as film. Their relation to the concept of reproduction, as well as the division between master and copy, has become complicated. It has been said that in the virtual digital web the “original copy” does not exist at all while at the same time everything is original.<sup>3</sup>

Second, his formulations on the logic of media history and the changes in the development of media are usable also in the scope of writing and reading in the programmed systems. According to Walter Benjamin, there is three major conformities in the history of artistic media. “First, technology is working toward a particular form of art.” “Second, traditional art forms, at certain stages in their development, strain laboriously for effects which later are effortlessly achieved by new art forms.” “Third, apparently insignificant social changes often foster a change in reception which benefits only the new art form.”<sup>4</sup> Benjamin uses, again, film as an example, but there is also clear analogies found in the newer history of poetic writing, to which I will return soon.

Compared to handwriting or the medieval book production industry in the European monasteries, movable type meant technological disconnection from the writer's hand, her personal handwriting and the connection to *body* that it brings along, as well as the here-and-now moment of the (materially) unique text's apparition to its surface. Although it can be argued that all writing (including writing by hand) is always defined by instrumentality and

---

<sup>2</sup> By dynamic (and its derivatives) I mean here a text's ability to *action*: movement or change; either spatially or visually, or in the chain of signs.

<sup>3</sup> Järvinen, 150–152.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, 52.

reproduction,<sup>5</sup> and that writing *as such* is technology,<sup>6</sup> the gutenbergian reproduction means *temporal* and *physical* disconnection from human inscription. This – essentially technological – figure of disconnection does not disappear, although transforms considerably, in the programmed and automated textual objects and our contemporary digital practices of writing. There the actions producing, transmitting, and reading the text always happen partly in the hidden, coded procedures.

In *literature*, according to Benjamin, technological reproducibility is “externally imposed condition”<sup>7</sup>, unlike in film, where it is always inherently present. This means simply that literature, unlike film, can exist outside its technological reproduction. But the “technological reproducibility of films is based directly on the technology of their production.”<sup>8</sup> In the age of digital media it is easy to see the change in this production logic of texts. Whether we think of “native” digital works, or internet publication (like web pages or PDFs), or blogs, or even books written, edited, and laid out in digital, networked tools and then printed in digital printing press, one can conclude that the production technology and the reproduction technology have – somewhat – merged together.

### **The Work of Literary Art in the Age of Temporal Dynamics**

Before cinematic and electronic media the ontology of writing was mainly characterized by material inscription or imprint: static traces drawn, carved, or pressed on a tangible surface, like paper. However, artistic or poetic ways of manipulating writing have included a certain fascination in “*dynamism*” of text, even if operating on static media and fixed signs. It would seem appropriate to separate two historical kinds of pre-digital or pre-electronic textual “*dynamisms*”.

---

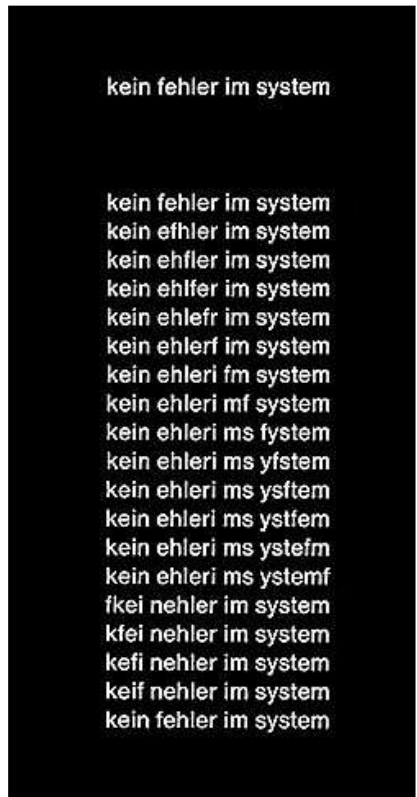
<sup>5</sup> “But when we write ‘by hand’ we are not in the time before technology; there is already instrumentality, regular reproduction, mechanical iterability. So it is not legitimate to contrast writing by hand and ‘mechanical’ writing, like the pretechnological craft as opposed to technology. And then on the other side what we call ‘typed’ writing is also ‘manual’”. Derrida, 20.

<sup>6</sup> “[...] we find it difficult to consider writing to be a technology as we commonly assume printing and the computer to be. Yet writing [...] is a technology, calling for the use of tools and other equipment [...]. Writing [...] initiated what print and computers only continue”. Ong, 81–82.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, 44.

First, literary avantgarde movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like the Futurists or Dadaists, shared the interest in loading the text with “imitation” of movement. Many of their poems were based on “analogies of movement”.<sup>9</sup> These analogies aimed to introduce “motion and velocity to literature”,<sup>10</sup> to blast the typographical order and graphic slots holding lines, words, and letters together, and to put the graphic space of page to use. Also the tradition of Concrete Poetry, a strong international movement in the 1960’s, showed interest in the *friction* between static printed marks on paper and the potentialities of charging the words and letters with “pseudo-movement”. One of the classic examples of this is the poem *Kein Fehler Im System* (1969) (“No Error in the System”) by Eugen Gomringer:



© Eugen Gomringer

---

<sup>9</sup> From Ikonen, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ikonen, 2.. Experimental film *Anemic Cinema* (1926) by Marcel Duchamp must have been one of the first artworks presenting actually moving text. Whether Walter Benjamin saw it or not remains a mystery, but it is an example of the film used in its quite early state merely as an textual medium.

Gomringer's poem shows writing as a programmed, deceitful system. The very same system that says that there is no error, is contaminated by a viral error that moves through the message and obscures the message. The work resembles a generator, looping the same phrase again and again, resulting in "pseudo-action".

"Kein Fehler im System" is also linked to the second example, the (surprisingly) long history of text generators, "mechanical devices, which have been constructed in the course of the last centuries for the generation of texts."<sup>11</sup> Along with, for instance, plate devices from the Baroque era, or the innovations made by Fluxus poets and other experimental writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or the loose-leaf novels for "self-assembly", the most noted pre-electronic generator is the book ("mechanical device" indeed) called *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961) by Oulipo writer Raymond Queneau. It is a collection of ten sonnets with interchangeable verses, thus producing one hundred thousand billion potential sonnets. This kind of works clearly strives out from the static lines of their own signifiers, toward a structural dynamism and openness.

From these examples we can see that "proto-dynamism", "proto-temporality", as well as openness and usability directed to the reader, makes a historically continuous tradition. When one thinks of it, Benjamin's three major conformities in media history spring to mind. When "technology is working toward a particular form of art", certain tendencies are already "there", awaiting to be realized. Also, earlier art forms "strain laboriously for effects which later are effortlessly achieved by new art forms." To create dynamisms in static poetry has an "effect" that has been later "effortlessly" achieved by digital textual media. But at the same time some of the fruitful friction and the (material) challenge has gone. A curious thought occurs: were writers, who, in different (media) historical phases, made proto-dynamic texts, operating with a *imaginary* medium? The third historical conformity, that "apparently insignificant social changes often foster a change in reception which benefits only the new art form", can be located in the triumph of the Internet, which has familiarized digital text (that has a history a lot longer than Internet has) in its all forms.

Diverse types of digital poetry base their meaning production on temporal dynamics of digital media. These types include such as hypertext poetry, animated or kinetic poetry, videopoetry, and programmed or generated poetry

---

<sup>11</sup> Schäfer, 23 – 24.

(or poetry generators). Of many traits and compositional possibilities that are characteristic to digital textual medium (networking, multimodality, programmability, or ergodics) temporality can be labeled as the most central concept. Temporality – *action* taking place in real time – defines in some way all of the above mentioned traits of digital media, as well it is the central signifying components in every type of digital poetry.

My example – *Little Mermaid*<sup>12</sup> by Finnish poet, editor, programmer Marko Niemi (b. 1974) – can be called programmed or generated poem. Visually it takes place on black background, where, once the reader opens the work, text in three circular forms starts to appear. The poem consists of hidden source text, and visible or manifest text.<sup>13</sup> The source text is, as one can guess, the tale of little mermaid by H.C Andersen, without the punctuation marks and initials.<sup>14</sup> From this corpus of 9134 words unpredictable combinations of words or word chains are picked by the automatic, coded procedure, resulting in a dynamic, changing (unique every time) poem. The possible combinations are many, so the relationship between the code and source text is inexhaustible.

Time is in many ways in the core of *Little Mermaid's* aesthetics, its meaning production and its uniqueness. There is no end in the structure of the work. The temporarily is text-based – reader can not interact to speed. The reading situation is defined by *session* – one temporal unit of reception that ends when the reader feels like it. Session is determined by such stages as curiosity, insight (learning to follow the rules that the work suggests), pleasure, exhaustion and boredom.

Reading and interpretation of poetry is usually thought with concepts opposite to distance, which is quite a central concept for Benjamin.<sup>15</sup> Apart from, for instance, *close reading*, also the word “in-terpretation” / “inter-pretation” itself seems to suggest some kind of internalizing or ingestion. Poem is traditionally thought as a “thick”, enduring (and always static and constant) object that has to

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nokturno.org/marko/haynaku/mermaid.html>. To take image of *Little Mermaid* to accompany my text would be rather pointless.

<sup>13</sup> In Espen Aarseth's cybertext theory the first mentioned is called *textons*, the latter *scriptons*.

<sup>14</sup> The source text can be found in the source code.

<sup>15</sup> *Internet* is quite easily manifested as an absolute opposite of distance. “Everything” is rightly at hand for private reception, everything seem to be as usable or presentable as possible.

and can be opened, analyzed, dissected, that allows the reader to go deeper and deeper. The foundation of this lies in the static, fixed text that can be thought and treated as an object, and whose meaning can always be “gathered” and pointed to. Obviously, instead of this kind of *exegesis* the reader of *Little Mermaid* is faced with unique action and “reception in distraction”<sup>16</sup>, where the *text* and the *work* are relatively separate entities.

Benjamin connects aura with “one-time appearance” (43) and calls it a “strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be”. (23) Judging from this definition, *Little Mermaid* seems to be literally auratic, as it is *literally* one-time appearance, different combination of words every time it is opened. It enhances the central poetic resource, spatiality of the text (words and letters spread on their respective surface), and combines it with temporality, forming a tissue of space and time. A tissue: every word works in the combination of words it appears on, but also, importantly, is subordinated to the time it spend before the readers eyes, in that combination. The ephemeral verses in non-linear, circular loops stretch and test the very physical act of reading, its track and pace.

These short readings have hopefully proved that Benjamin’s concepts can be useful and heuristic when the poetry in new media is under consideration. They also suggest that digital texts, or writing, or literature itself can not be separated from the history and theory of media.

---

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, 40.

## Literature

Aarseth, Espen (1997) *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Benjamin, Walter (2008) "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version." Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Derrida, Jacques (2005) "The Word Processor." In *Paper Machine*. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Ikonen, Teemu (2003) "Moving Text in Avant-Garde Poetry. Towards a Poetics of Textual Motion." *Dichtung Digital*, <http://www.dichtung-digital.de/>

Järvinen, Aki (1999) *Hyperteoria. Lähtökohtia digitaalisen kulttuurin tutkimukselle*. University of Jyväskylä: Research Centre For Contemporary Culture.

Ong, Walter J. (1988) *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. London & New York: Methuen.

Schäfer, Jörgen (2006) "Literary Machines Made in Germany. German Proto-Cybertexts from the Baroque Era to the Present." In *Cybertext Yearbook 2006 – Ergodic Histories*. Ed. by Raine Koskimaa & Markku Eskelinen. University of Jyväskylä: Research Centre For Contemporary Culture.

<http://cybertext.hum.jyu.fi/index.php?browsebook=5>