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How to Construct the Genre of Digital Poetry

A User Manual

1.   Conceiving "Genre"

 "Beyond Genre: Transformations of Narrative, Poetic, and Dramatic Structures"—my reading of the title of this section implies two theses: Firstly, that we can observe transformations of traditional genre structures in literary works with digital technology. Secondly, that this leads beyond a conventional theoretical concept of "literary genre."

The triad formula "poetic-epic-dramatic" may indicate a classical, traditional, not to say outdated concept of genre as a natural form. It may indicate a concept of ontological literary studies, which systematically and historically describes and interprets objects existing per se. In fact, with such a concept we don't get very far "beyond the screen."

Concepts heading in the direction of "reflexive literary studies" (Jahraus, *Literatur als Medium*), which have been developed since the 1970s, are far more useful. By situating literary phenomena like the classic author-text-reader triad within the highly complex fields of society, communication, cognition, culture, or media, we see literature and its scientific observation to be mutually dependent. At this point, the study of literature becomes reflexive, asking how and why it constructs what it observes.

From this perspective, genres can be conceived in two ways: Firstly, they are constructions of a literary, artistic process of understanding, and they serve within the self-organization of art. Secondly, and accordingly, they are academically constituted as something to be understood and unfolded under certain conditions. Only under specific circumstances will these two forms of genre construction interact.

Bearing in mind a systems theory concept like "self-organization," I observe genres as cultural means that help to develop certain subsystems within the art system, which are socially, culturally and medially organized. Genres, therefore, are forms of institutionalization, which treat a variety of phenomena in communication and cognition in terms of invariety and a reduction of complexity.

Therefore, it is necessary to reflect how genre is constituted before we can discuss relations to historical structures and transformations. I will concentrate on what is called "Digital Poetry," and try to take it *as* a genre. Being a participating observer, I will try to sketch some conditions of systemic genre constitution. In doing so, I can also refer to the question of whether and how we can realize references to earlier concepts of genre, their influence and possible transformation. I am also interested in the question of whether genre concepts and programs are emerging bottom up from works of individual production or in a more top down manner, being promoted discursively and organizationally. Where can we locate the making of the genre of digital poetry? From this relatively abstract perspective, it should also be possible to conceive of poetry as something beyond the fixation on media technology. How can we understand a general concept of poetry that includes the developments of digital poetics?

2.   Discussing the Genre

The discussion addressing digital poetry as a genre developed during the last seven years—above all in the first monographies on digital poetics by Loss Pequeño Glazier, Saskia Reither, Brian Kim Stefans, and Chris

Funkhouser. In the introduction to his highly recommended book *Prehistoric Digital Poetry*, Chris Funkhouser offers a "Discussion of Genre." Initially he deals with the problem whether digital poetry can be seen as a genre at all and how it can be defined.

The fact that this question is being discussed controversially is largely due to Brian Kim Stefans who argues that "Cyberpoetry does not exist" (44). In his investigation on "digital poetics," he asks if anything in the field he calls "cyberpoetry" can be characterized by positive aspects. He sees no alternative to negative descriptions only: "(1) the lack of limitations to black and white words on the page, (2) the lack of the possibility for mechanical reproductions . . . (3) the lack of closure and the lack of the lack of choice" (46). This is a clever rhetorical move to evade a positive definition of cyberpoetry in order to use the term throughout his book to encircle the phenomena he is writing about. This shows something about the function and the power of genre names—I will come back to this in a moment.

Funkhouser contrarily commits himself to a minimal definition: "computerized literary art that can be appreciated in the context of the poetic tradition" (24). This makes sense as he tells the story of poetic digital texts from 1959 to 1995 in detailed analyses. Besides Saskia Reither's remarkable historical research study, which has, unfortunately, only received limited recognition, Funkhouser's book is the most ambitious attempt to give an extensive historical and systematic form to the genre of digital poetry.

Glazier's much noticed book *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*, the first monograph on the subject, puts emphasis on what he calls "innovative" poetry, concerned with the materiality and the processuality of writing, and on siting digital poetry within the historical evolution of innovative poetry. If nothing else, he has aimed at profiling digital, or what he calls "electronic poetry," against the dominant hypertext discourse in the U.S.

We are dealing with a genre discussion here which can be located in an academic context, within the scholarly system. However, Funkhouser, Stefans, and Glazier also write as poets and participants in the art system, Glazier explicitly so as the director of the *Electronic Poetry Center*. Accordingly, this genre discussion is also part of the artistic self-organization. From a systemic art perspective, we can register a coupled form of institutionalization from both inside and out, or better: an inter-systemic development of genre.

Besides the representative monographical form, we can observe other powerful factors of this institutionalization such as: the fixation of a genre name, the identification of a huge variety of single phenomena, the efforts of definition, whether negative or positive, typologies, and especially the historization of the genre in a double sense: In the discourse, the genre gains its own history as well as a prehistory embedded in certain poetic traditions.

In the evolution of digital poetry these discursive forms can be connected to certain intra-systemic forms of organization, which means that they have or make history themselves.

3.   Naming the Genre

I will concentrate on the expression "Digital Poetry" and how it has been used. In the making of the genre 'digital poetry', forms of historization, efforts in the definition and the explication of terminology play an important role. However, this process is greatly aided by spreading the genre's name itself.

Genre names function as a rather effective means of institutionalization. They serve to orient toward a certain field of artistic activity, even without clear definitions. But for this purpose, the signifier or name has to have at least some connotative meaning which originates from using the expression. In order to create a genre, usage has to tie a multitude of differences and this is best done via social and medial organization. Thus, location, origin, and communicative function of an expression like "digital poetry" are of interest.

In our field of computerized language art, we can observe a huge variety of names, related in some way or another. In an unpublished essay on the "Digital Poetry Genre" from 2002, Jorge Luiz Antonio collected about 40 different significations just relating to the field of poetry (Funkhouser 22f.). Range and function of these expressions vary. We have to differentiate between notions which stand for a more or less individual position, an artistic concept—for instance, "Holopoetry" for Eduardo Kac's language works since the early 1980s—or which claim a more general validity.

This demand comes before any definition when an expression like "Digital Poetry" is ascribed to Internet sites, exhibitions, catalogues, journals, anthologies, festivals, or conferences; in other words, systemic forms of organization which tie together a variety of individual phenomena such as artistic projects and works, documents of description, criticism, and theory, a certain circle of active people, audiences, etc. In my view, the term "Digital Poetry" has this quality in common with "E-Poetry" and also with "(New) Media Poetry," which is why they stand out in the array of 40. Notions like "digital literature," "electronic literature," or "net literature" function in a similar way. The systemic location of such expressions reveals interesting information, also concerning their genealogy.

For instance, it could be shown that the notion of "Net Literature," the cover term preferred by the colleagues from Siegen, has been translated from the German expression "Netzliteratur," and that "Netzliteratur" refers to the three literary Internet competitions from 1996-1998 and the development of an especially German-speaking network with different but interconnected directions, represented by the websites "netzliteratur.de" and "netzliteratur.net." The English translation seems to claim a wider range, especially within the academic context, similar to the notion of "Electronic Literature" or "Digital Literature." "Digital Literature" is the genre name established with Roberto Simanowski's journal "Dichtung digital." Translated into English, "Dichtung digital" would be "Digital Poetry." But in this case the expression functions less as a genre name. It is simply the journal's name, whereas "Digital Literature" is the expression used to form a genre, including definitions and typologies, and here it has a similar historical background to "Netzliteratur," or "net literature."

In my experience, "Electronic Poetry" is widely used as a synonym for "Digital Poetry." For one, Loss Glazier is using it without any explicit distinction in the editorial to the online forum of the *Electronic Poetry Center*, as well as in his book *Digital Poetics*. Above all, however, "Electronic Poetry" indicates the connection to social and medial institutions, namely to the Center, which was founded in 1995, and, in its bold short form "E-Poetry," to the international *E-Poetry Festivals*, which have been organized at different places in the world since 2001. These festivals have a symptomatic form of digital poetics as they connect artistic contributions on the one hand and theoretical ones on the other. This coupling serves as a specific dynamic force in the self-organization of this genre.

It would certainly be worth while to take a closer look at the festivals, in particular at the interplay between curatorial concept, offer, selection, and content of contributions, representation on the Internet, social structure—curators, local organization, nucleus and periphery of the group. However, it is quite remarkable that on the whole the notion of "E-Poetry" is used in the context of these organizational forms and not by artists themselves to indicate their own production as part of the genre. This also counts for "Digital Poetry."

As far as I—maybe egocentrically—know, the expression "Digital Poetry" was used for the first time as a more general indication of the correlation between different artistic projects, when André Vallias and I organized the international exhibition *p0es1e: Digitale Dichtkunst/Digital Poetry* in 1992. In the preface of the little catalogue (Vallias), the attribute "digital" is etymologically developed with steps from "digitus" to "digit." To tell a bit of the inside story: We came from the background of concrete and visual poetry, especially with their Brazilian and European traditions, and had already realized some international events. Beginning in 1992, the *p0es1s*-project's contribution to the making of the Digital Poetry genre developed as follows: In 2000 another international exhibition was organized. Some works were and still are presented on the *p0es1s* Internet platform; other works, which were not internet based, were shown in a gallery (Block). A conference on the aesthetics of digital text was held at the same time and its contributions were published online on "Dichtung digital" linked to the *p0es1s* website, as well as offline in the *Kodikas/Code* journal of semiotics (Block, Heibach and Wenz "p0es1s"). Unlike at the beginnings in 1992, these events gained more attention thanks to the Internet presentations. Under the genre name "Digital Poetry" and the label "p0es1s," the website binds together what is usually displaced: works, commentaries, theoretical texts and links. In addition, the website functions as archive of the projects since 1992. *E-Poetry* works in a similar way. *p0es1s* added another larger, international conference on "the aesthetics of digital poetry" in 2001, which brought together artists and scholars. In 2004, we created the extensive *p0es1s: Digital Poetry* exhibition in Berlin in conjunction with a collection of essays on the "Aesthetics of Digital Poetry" (Block, Heibach and Wenz,

p0es1s). In the introduction, we as editors suggested what Chris Funkhouser critically calls the "strongest attempt at defining the genre" (22), connecting it historically with the program of experimental poetry. And, as in 1992 and 2000, we offered descriptions of each project in the show, which were published in a catalogue as well as on the website (literaturWERKstatt berlin 2004). This is another discursive layer which can mediate between artworks and theory.

Unlike "E-Poetry," the notion of "Digital Poetry" is not functioning as a project label here—that is the role of "p0es1s." The genre name is not monopolized by the project. But at the same time it is used more rigidly due to the curators' settings, which have been stricter compared to the conceptually more open and broader E-Poetry festivals. The emphasis on the curatorial factor results from the organizational form of an exhibition and its demand to represent the genre. Perhaps this also is a question of the curator's personal system including aspects such as his or her theoretical and practical background in experimental poetics as well as in language-oriented visual art, or experience with organizing shows of visual poetry and intermedial language art.

However, I wanted to illustrate how the genre "Digital Poetry" has been constituted by an interplay of genre name, development of social, medial, and communicative organization, presentation of artworks, different forms of discourse, and curatorial praxis. The meaning of the genre has emerged from this complex of mediation and observation and much less from individual artistic production. Artists develop more individual programs, but they are prepared to participate in organizational forms following the concept of Digital Poetry.

4.   Spinning Threads

We still have to touch on the problem of how the cultural construction of the genre can be assessed poetologically and historically. This also is a question of positions. Anyone telling stories about digital poetics is spinning threads: Loss Pequeño Glazier relates the general notion of "innovative poetry practices" to a series of historical names, from William Blake over Guillaume Appollinaire, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, to Concrete Poetry, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and Fluxus.

Eduardo Kac is relating "New Media Poetry" to the field of "experimental poetics" and draws a long curve of movements and genres in the 20th century such as Futurism, Cubism, Constructivism, Dadaism, and Lettrism for the first half of the century, and Spatialism, Concretism, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Beat, Visual Poetry, Fluxus, and Process-poem for the second half (Kac 98).

I myself have tried to embed Digital Poetry in a program of abstract concepts of experimental poetry, which have been differentiated since the 1950s: Reflexivity and self-reference, conceptuality, processuality, user activity, intermediality, and networking.

Saskia Reither and Chris Funkhouser wrote prehistories of Computer and Digital Poetry starting with the stochastic texts of Theo Lutz in 1959. Funkhouser presupposes—as I do—that Digital Poetry as a genre was constituted no earlier than the 1990s. Therefore, he is relating the expression "prehistory" to works, which were not created in the genre context of Digital Poetry and which often belong to different historical contexts, but are retrospectively inscribed into the genre. These forms of redefinition—I am not speaking about transformations yet—are definite parts of the genre constitution via historization.

This strategy was already set in the beginning of the prehistory of Digital Poetry and it is continued today. In 1962, for example, Max Bense developed a poetological framework in which he names "kybernetische Poesie" ('cybernetic poetry') what we are calling Digital Poetry here. He precisely defines the concepts and embeds them into the so-called "künstliche Poesie" ('artificial poetry'). Artificial poetry is distinguished from "natural poetry," which is assumed to involve a personal poetic consciousness expressing a subjective world. In contrast, artificial poetry for Bense is created by rational programming including the help of machines. Thus, artificial poetry realizes material following what Bense calls statistic, structural, and topological programs. And Bense mentions the work of Gertrude Stein and the Concrete Poetry of Eugen Gomringer and the Noigandres group as prototypes. Cybernetic poetry then realizes such programmed texts with the help of computers and thus it brings the subjective factor down to zero. This close coupling of

digital and experimental poetics can still be found in the digital poetry discourse of today, although things have moved beyond the early concepts like Bense's strict rationalism.

Above all—just to touch on the issue of transformation here—I understand transformation as a shift of aesthetic concepts and values and practically as the intertextual work on pretexts. In his *Search Lutz* project from 2005, Johannes Auer transformed the very first computer text, the "Stochastic Texts" by Theo Lutz from 1959.

Bense's poetics were concretely realized by his student Theo Lutz who programmed a random generator for the Z 22 mainframe which produced grammatically correct "elementary sentences." The nouns and adjectives stored in the machine were taken from Franz Kafka'a novel *Das Schloss (The Castle)*. It is quite interesting that neither this predicision was reflected conceptually nor the fact that Lutz had corrected some misspellings of the telex printout for the publication in Bense's journal *augenblick*. I suggest calling this blind spot a latently subjective or "natural" factor.

This factor is conceptualized in Auer's *Search Lutz* project, in which Auer has not only honored and made accessible the *Stochastic Texts* by reprogramming them; he also created several extensions which connect the early project to the present internet culture and to subjective aspects. Users can choose between an original version with misspellings and a corrected version; they can insert their own vocabulary into the lexical storage and beyond: search entries which internet users enter into the search engine Fireball are fed into the vocabulary of the generator in real time, and last but not least, Auer invited actors to recite the sentences in an interaction with the audience and the machine.

Auer's transformative concept can be interpreted as a critical, even deconstructive reading of Bense's aesthetics, as a re-evaluation: The artificial, non-subjective, statistical determinacy is intertwined with indeterminacy and individuality—with "natural" aspects. Bense's binary distinction between "artificial" and "natural" has been transcended in a non-dualistic way.

But in my view the transformations of experimental poetics since the 1950s as realized in the digital poetry genre of today do not imply such a rupture or upheaval we would ascribe to the relation between early experimental poetics and the literary model as, for instance, it was represented by Kafka.

5.   (x) poetry : (x)

Finally, I want to ask about the poetic dimension in the genre of digital poetry beyond the affirmation or reflection of technology. It is helpful to keep the focus on the relation between digital and experimental poetics. This is still to be worked out more extensively. Now, I just want to heighten the poetic dimension within the aspect of the genre name. The expression "Digital Poetry" has a certain form, which has a lot of historical correspondences: Concrete Poetry, experimental, new, innovative, visual, spatial, sound, kinetic, TV, radio, video, intermedia, (new) media poetry, etc. These concepts have distinct but programmatically related meanings and they function as genre orientations.

However, the structural form all these concepts have in common can be abstracted to the formula "(x) poetry." And the question is what could be poetologically conceived for the variable "x" and for "poetry." An attempt: Connected to adjectives or as composites, the term "poetry" obtains a clearer profile of its aesthetic semantics in comparison with its usually vague usage and with the metaphorical differentiation from "prose." This is true for various languages—one of the characteristics of that form is its internationality.

"Poetry" then appears to be syntagmatically widened and semantically specified by way of variables. Certain additions illustrate basic aesthetic orientations, concepts and attitudes whose validity is conceptualized quite generally and that could therefore integrate other specifications. This holds true especially for the terms "concrete," "experimental," or "new." Most of the other terms—for example, also "digital" or "electronic"—are of a more specific nature and are focusing on certain areas of reflection or fields of knowledge, on modes of operation or realization—likewise with different ranges and connectivity.

The types of meaning or usage of these terms now could be traced more closely, at least in the way I have exemplarily shown in the earlier paragraphs on "digital poetry." Already a lot has been written about this and therefore a differentiated synopsis and its evaluation would be the program for a detailed study. Here I

would like to briefly attempt some paraphrases in order to develop a closing argument for the notion of poetry.

Let us initially come briefly to the general concepts: "concrete" means—as it has been consistently articulated in commentaries and manifestos—that language itself, its materiality, mediacultural conditions, cognitive and communicative pragmatics, constitution of meaning and understanding, its limits, etc., are reflected upon. Even though this self-referentiality is more or less clearly an element of all artistic products or activities concerning language, the attribute "concrete" indicates a primacy of this self-referentiality before all allo-referentiality. And "classical" Concrete Poetry has aimed at reducing allo-referentiality as much as possible. This paradigmatic change (with a long pre-history) has been programmatically implemented with the term "concrete" on an international terrain.

The term "experimental" is oriented on the expectation of reckoning with the openness of artistic functions and the variation of expectations, with not accepting a definite canon of themes and procedures, and that options for activity are developed and shaped by trying out possibilities without predisposition. Cognitive interest is in order—obviously flirting with the sciences, but under other circumstances and in quite different ways. Also, the etymologically related term "experience" plays an important role here. The protagonists literally create experience; they experimentally test themselves, or rather they observe themselves essayistically.

The attributes "new" or "innovative" then can not be understood (any longer) as an aggressive postulate of progress or even in a logic of economic exchange; it has to be seen as experimentally open and flexible, marking explorations of a not yet or no longer conscious realm, reorienting the works into processes, expanding the realms of possibilities for perception, thinking, acting as well as productive sensitivity for cultural, social, political and artistic developments.

From all this, it becomes clear that here it is less the characterizing of poetic results that is at stake but more the orientations and value systems in principle that are inscribed into a poetological program and that determine each other.

We now can filter out certain tendencies from the entirety of the more specific terms that in principle correspond with the earlier mentioned more general ones. Specifically, the reflection of the materiality of language and perceptions is displayed with words like "visual," "auditive," "sound." Of special importance here is the difference between materiality and semantics, as is the transgression into other genres of art. And closely connected is the display of the conditions of information technology, and the sensitivity for mediacultural developments that result in attributes like: "typewriter," "radio," "film," "video," "holo," "code," "computer," or "digital," etc. Within this great variety, intermedial or intermediary elements consistently play a major role—the interest in differences, interfaces, interferences, and passages: an aesthetics on the margin stimulating meta-observations.

The language game "(x) poetry" and its theoretical and practical realization can be abstracted to a general concept of poetry. This concept is radical and therefore of a strong connectivity and it is oriented to the principles of *reflexivity, potentiality, and performance.*

Poetry self-referentially conceives of *reflexivity* as the basic mechanism in cognition and communication, respectively in identity and sociability (Schmidt 35ff.). Poetry, as a medium of reflection and communication is a medium of the second order. It operates by differentiating form and medium (understood in its most abstract meaning as the potential meaning of form, Grizelj 65ff.)—"signifying every cause whereby anything proceeds from that which is not, into that which is" (Plato 54). Poetry, in this medium generates itself in all possible ways and therefore it corresponds to the autopoiesis of human being and society.

Beyond all the abstraction the concept of poetry has received here and in its history, the association in and with language and the outcome of or the direction towards it remain the essential criterion differentiating it from other forms of creation—language in all its micro- to macrological complexity. In other words: in poetry all kinds of things that happen within and in relation to language can be touched upon in spirals of reflexivity.

But with this we have already formulated the principle of *potentiality*. Poetic reflexivity continues being fluid and open, if nothing else, because it sensitively adapts to linguistic evolution—for example in the area of

information technology. Potentiality functions as unity of variance and reflexivity in all areas of poetic activity; it quasi appoints the cosmological openness of poetry.

With this combination of reflexivity and potentiality, poetry becomes so "radical" because it is literally conceived as the radix, the root of all possible phenomena of language art. In principle, this integrates what Bense called "natural poetry," if the concept of "natural" is poetically reflected. Potentially it could integrate all lyrical, narrative, and dramatic forms, the genres of novel and verse poems as well as code poems; it would integrate literature as it is followed by the literary system, but it would not be dissolved into this system, but function as its *basic potential sense*.

Finally, always connected to this is the generally *performative* character of poetry (Fischer Lichte, Wulf and Zirfas): i.e., processuality, creativity, experience, activity, the many ways in which poetry appears and among which the silent reading of a printed text is only one of multiple possibilities. If poetry is alive today especially in festivals and symposia, in exhibitions, stage presentations, electronic networks or in poetry centers, then this type of social and mediated activity currently corresponds soonest to the performative and open character of poetry.

This is how I would interpret the word "Beyond" which introduces the subject of this chapter.