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Rethinking Comparative Literature Literary Studies in the Age of Electronic Media*

Some months ago, the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* published a discussion on the question: “*How will we read?*”¹ Panelists were the novelist Juli Zeh and the publishers Michael Krüger of Hanser and Helge Malchow of Kiepenheuer & Witsch, two of the most prestigious German publishing houses. This conversation is symptomatic for the way in which key figures in the publishing industry publicly discuss the impact of the so-called ‘digital revolution’ on literature. As is inevitable in a debate of this kind, the panelists mainly address burning legal problems with copyright infringements, practical issues like the advantages and disadvantages of e-books for reading on trains, and occasionally they even touch on the possibilities of “experimenting with new forms”, for example by augmenting text with audiovisual and interactive elements—and so on. The main issue, however, is the economic pressure on publishers and book retailers resulting from the market power of global media and software companies. And, indeed, it cannot be questioned that it is not only the market-dominating publishing groups and trade chains but also the big software and Internet companies which increasingly affect the buying and reading behaviour of consumers—and thereby the catalogues of the publishers.

On the Internet, companies like Amazon, Apple and Google have become powerful gatekeepers to all different kinds of media contents, including works of literature. At present, the latest developments in media technology are confounding the structural coupling of the media, the economic and the legal systems that constituted the book culture throughout the modern era. Indeed, the e-book and new distribution platforms have certainly begun to transform the literary market. At first view, the e-book only is a ‘remediation’ (Bolter/Grusin) of the printed book. It guarantees that a text still consists of an invariable series of letters, words and sentences. However, this is the blind spot of debates like the panel discussion I mentioned earlier: All panelists take for granted that literature will still be categorized as novels, short stories, poems or essays, so that the only problem seems to be how to transfer them from the printed page onto the displays of electronic reading devices. Yet, if this was the only problem, the e-book as a device and

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the Internet as a distribution channel would rather promise to stabilize the functionality and semantics of the book culture.

However, the Internet has not only provided a plethora of new distribution and marketing opportunities. Rather, in accordance with Joseph Tabbi as well as probably most academics and artists in the electronic literature community, I argue that the Internet—and computer-based media in general—should be understood as a (potentially global) *writing and reading environment*.² As such, it imposes specific *constraints* under which writers have employed to create *distinctly literary* reading experiences for the fragmented reading environment of the network. In this understanding, literature remains a medium for artistic exploration and for critical reflection of the particular potentials and restrictions of a media system. Electronic literature is distinguished from literature in print media or customary e-books insofar as it produces narrative and poetic experiences particular to this digital environment. These works combine text, sound, image, performance and computation in manifold ways, thereby integrating modalities from multiple fields of artistic practice, such as internet-based distribution, electronic anthologies, live performances, gallery installations and locative-media works in urban environments.

I.

Given this rapid transformation of the global communication system, the humanities in general, and Literary Studies in particular, are faced with theoretical and methodological challenges, which, in my point of view, are difficult to meet within the conventional disciplinary boundaries. In particular, there seems to be a tension, as Roberto Simanowski puts it, between the “supra-departmental nature of these phenomena and the departmental model of most academic institutions.”³ In view of this institutional in-between identity of electronic literature, in various countries, electronic literature as a subject matter very often is not affiliated to literature departments, where it would have to be analysed in relation to literature in other media, but rather in Communications or Media Studies, where the focus lies more on the social and technological aspects of communication with digital media. In such an academic environment, however, literary communication is only one marginalized area. Alternatively, electronic literature is being taught in Art and Design schools, in Creative writing programs, or—at some places, particularly at some U.S. as well as French universities—even in applied computer sciences, where students are educated in producing electronic literature and arts themselves.

On the one hand, this is a welcome move towards more transdisciplinary research. This is absolutely essential, as a comprehensive study of electronic literature *should still apply* but *cannot only rely* on the traditional methods of literary criticism only. It can also benefit from the methods and

experiential background of social sciences, computer sciences, design studies, arts history, and so on, in order to understand the conditions under which the examined works have emerged. On the other hand, unfortunately, such approaches are still in contrast to the predominant departmental structures of most universities where the national literatures still dominate the field of Literary Studies.

In this dissatisfying situation, I regard it as essential to sustain or to revivify programs in *Comparative Literature*—or, complementarily, what in German academia has been called *Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft* or *littérature générale* in France.⁴ Such conceptions, which had successfully been established and developed as a supplementary or even as a comprehensive discipline, aim at analysing literature explicitly in its social, media-technological and, most notably, intercultural contexts *beyond* its national characteristics and also *beyond* its bookishness.

It is important to keep in mind that Literary Studies had developed in the 19th century in the course of nation-building and of cultivating national identities, and that this process was shaped by the existing media system of that time, mainly by print media. In most countries, Comparative Literature as a discipline was not established before the post-war period of the 20th century. In the 1960s and 70s, it appeared to become the seminal form of Literary Studies.⁵ Since then, however, it suffered a severe setback. With notable exceptions, programs in Comparative Literature have been squeezed by the traditional philologies on the one hand, which still divide faculty according to national terms, and by programs in Media and Communication Studies or in Cultural Studies on the other. This particularly applies to the situation in Germany where the specific *Sonderweg* of Media Studies as a discipline has successfully absorbed many topics, students, and academic positions.⁶

That said, however, one should not ignore or dispute the fact that a certain sense of definitional uncertainty of Comparative Literature is partially to blame for this situation. Reservations were already expressed in René Wellek's seminal essay "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" as early as in 1959 and have been replicated countless times ever thereafter.⁷ As Haun Saussy argues in his introduction to the 2005 *ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline*, it has often been regarded as a disadvantage that Comparative Literature can neither be defined simply by method nor by matter. While "[m]ost disciplines are founded on successful reifications", Saussy notes, "[n]ot to reify is to settle for a weak hypothesis about the identity of the thing one is describing".⁸

As 'comparative' is a relative term, not an absolute one which would stipulate certain qualities, the acceptance and the legitimation of Comparative Literature depends on combining three decisions convincingly, which presuppose the definition of research problems and phenomena accordingly: to select the *comparanda* coherently, to decide on the quality on which to compare them,

and to determine similarities, equivalences and differences or, in a generic perspective, continuities and discontinuities between the *comparanda*.⁹ The outcome then are either *sequential* studies that depict influences, identify branches and differentiations, mostly in the shape of genealogical trees, or rather *contrastive* studies that turn the observers' attention to disruptions, breaks or upheavals.

In most cases, comparative study of literature gains knowledge by comparing literature from different nations, cultures or languages, particularly from the analysis of inter- or supranational cultural interchanges. Note, for example, how scholars like Edward Said, Homi Bhaba or Gayatri Spivak have renewed Comparative Literature with a post-colonial grounding by merging it with cultural studies. Alternatively, of course, there also are other possible areas of comparison from which research orientations can derive, most notably from the comparison of literary communication in different *media systems*. Saussy himself realizes that “[i]f the standard demarcations observed and transgressed by degree programs and books in Comparative Literature—language, genre, period—derive from the frameworks of national literary histories, the new orientations suggested here come from media studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and the ‘politics of recognition’ enacted by late-twentieth-century social movements.”¹⁰

My focus on Comparative Literary Studies *as* Comparative Media Studies follows a tradition that, particularly in Germany, was initiated in the 1980s, perhaps most paradigmatically in the works of Friedrich Kittler or in the influential collection on the ‘materialities of communication’, edited by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer.¹¹ Yet, ever since then, most comparatists have only referred to the materialities of print media and have regarded themselves “as archaeologists of the information order of print”¹² only. They have thereby neglected to deal with the current transformation in the written word caused by digital media.¹³ Therefore, Literary Studies now are in danger of missing a fundamental media upheaval whose impact on literary communication quite certainly can only be compared to the invention of the printing press and the successive development of the book culture from the 16th to the 18th century. Most literary scholars have either not yet realized or are not willing to admit that computational media like networked and programmable personal computers, mobile devices or mixed-reality environments have become so pervasive that the trend towards faster communication and closer integration of humans and machines will also have a significant effect on their disciplines.

Literature is affected by this development in two ways: First, the traditional literary system is currently endangered by the distribution of e-books, which can easily be read on e-readers like the Kindle, on tablet computers and on smartphones. But neither does this automatically lead to the ‘death’ of literature nor is it a danger for Literary Studies. If we understand Comparative Lit-

erary as Comparative Media Studies, it becomes possible to enrich print literacy, in Katherine Hayles' words, through "comparison with other media, so that print is no longer the default mode into which one falls without much thought about alternatives but rather an informed choice made with full awareness of its possibilities and limitations."¹⁴

II.

However, media upheavals are never clean breaks. Therefore, it is evident that not only Literary Studies has its blind spots in regard to electronic literature. The problem in those media theoretical approaches that only focus on the technological differences between books and the latest media technologies is that literature cannot be defined in a medium-specific way only. It rather has been *exemplified by* media like the book, but, as Francisco Ricardo puts it, "never credibly *defined* through, within, or by implication, *because of* them."¹⁵ If we take the label 'electronic literature' for serious and regard the subject as 'literature', a *theory of literature* has to be developed that allows for reconciling the consequences of the media upheaval with the continuing question in what way any notion of *the literary* still is connected to the tradition of literature in other media.

In the current situation, I argue, it is necessary to identify both common ground and differences between literature in the book culture and that in new media. Electronic literature must somehow contain what may be called invariant structures or frames that only enable us to talk of 'literature' as a single field—in spite of any differences caused by distinct media and social practices. My main assumption is that for reading and analyzing electronic literature as 'literature' the semantics of literary concepts is to be more durable than the pragmatics of communicative acts. Therefore, the discussions regarding the prevalent literary theories are by no means finalized. On the contrary, basic assumptions of literary theories such as the Formalist approach of defamiliarization that defines 'literariness' as a differential concept in relation to everyday language use or Wolfgang Iser's considerations about the reading process still should be reappraised much more closely regarding the question whether and to what extent they can be applied to electronic literature.

Literature in computer-based media, as well as *every* literary text in *every* medium, activates expectations that then are disrupted and continued in imaginary form. In pieces like the *The Readers Project* by John Cayley and Daniel Howe, for example, the attributions of meaning have to be conceived of as interactive processes between humans and machines. Especially when such literature expands into the physical realm are the disruptions activated *technically* and therefore they are by no means only cognitively processed. In *The Readers Project*, we can observe the conceptual

re-formation of structure as the work reflects its own process. In text installations like *Text Rain* by Camille Utterback or *Screen* by Noah Wardrip-Fruin or in works like Philippe Bootz's *Le Rabot poète*, such disruptions invite direct corporeal activity *with* the sign processes, i.e., they stimulate the immediate *writerly continuation* with the whole body.

It is significant that already in the works of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauß a concept of Literary Studies had been developed that takes action and communication theories into consideration. Such theories aim at (re-)constructing the individual reading processes of readers with different reception tendencies as *different* creations of meaning for *one* (fixed and materialized) text. Already in Iser's *The Act of Reading* the constitution of meaning was attributed to the "interaction between the textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension"¹⁶; i.e., semantic attribution in the production of meaning had already then been conceived of as an interactive process of mediation between textually and knowledge-controlled processes. According to Iser, an entire process is manifested in the text—from the author's world-view to its becoming noticeable by the reader—that is, a process in which, however, the processes of establishing meaning are only just selective realizations of the given text.

Central building blocks of Iser's theory are the so-called *blanks* or *gaps*: They are hinges between different schematized perspectives of representation of a text and the (mental) activities of the reader. They introduce a disruption into the act of reading that causes an "impeded process of ideation."¹⁷ Thus, we are dealing with "potential connections"¹⁸ in which the earlier attributions of meaning by the reader are disrupted; he therefore has to test and possibly revise them in order to make the text coherent again. For this, Iser saw two possibilities: the range of semantic horizons either can be "narrowed down" or "modified", so that they establish on the temporal axis of reading a "dialectic [...] between illusion-forming and illusion-breaking."¹⁹ The specific oscillation between involvement and distance, i.e., that which Jauß calls "self-enjoyment in the enjoyment of something other"²⁰ in the recipient calls up the specific *aesthetic* experience.

Iser even describes these interactions of the reader with the literary text and its blanks as a "cybernetic mechanism":

If we view the relation between text and reader as a kind of self-regulating system, we can define the text itself as an array of sign impulses (signifiers) which are received by the reader. As he reads, there is a constant '*feedback*' of '*information*' already received, so that he himself is bound to insert his own ideas into the process of communication. [...] *The dynamic interaction between text and reader has the character of an event*, which helps to create the impression that we are involved in something real. [...] In literature, *where the reader is constantly feeding back reactions as he obtains new information*, there is just such a continual process of realization, and so reading itself 'happens' like an event, in the sense that what we read takes on the character of an open-

ended situation, at one and the same time concrete and yet fluid. [...] The text can never be grasped as a whole—only as a *series of changing viewpoints*, each one restricted in itself and so necessitating further perspectives. This is the process by which the reader ‘realizes’ an overall situation.²¹

This long quote is illuminating because with the example of the reading of a printed text Iser designs a scenario that also provides some theoretical building blocks for the literary processes in computer-based media. In particular, Iser’s emphasis on feedbacks between the text and the reading process had anticipated the importance of the reading situation. In changed media dispositives the mediation and the change of different horizons as fundamental conditions of aesthetic experience will have to be proven, for example, the initial horizon of expectations “as paradigmatic isotopy, which is transposed into an immanent syntagmatic horizon of expectations to the extent that the utterance grows”²² will eventually have to be mediated with the reader’s horizon of experience.

Nonetheless, at least three fundamental problems remain: First, despite pointing at the dynamics of the text, in Iser’s conception the text is an object that is fixated on the medium book whose materiality as a printed “immutable mobile”—even though it is “dynamized” in the act of reading—nevertheless cannot be questioned. Second, this concept seemingly is aimed at the actions of the reader, while the elements *controlling* the reading process in reality are hidden in the text. The famous “implied reader” is a *textual* figuration to which the empirical reader *has to* adapt. Here Iser’s theory regains a certain precision for electronic literature: As indicated, the question of control has to be asked on quite a different technical foundation and in an expanded version—in particular, the additional question has to be asked in what way the text and therefore also the activities of the reader are controlled by running programs and by interfaces that demand not only interpretative but quite concrete physical additional activities.

III.

I would like to enlarge upon a third aspect, namely that such procedural works are to be considered emergent phenomena of co-dependent agencies of human and non-human actors. For experiencing them, the coordinated participation of numerous media devices *and* persons must congregate at the particular time and place of the artistic performance. Therefore, in works like *The Readers Project* “both a dispersal and a unification of time and space, of creation and reception, of event and of place”²³, are made perceivable to the human reader. As Francisco Ricardo puts it in his eminent study on the *engagement aesthetic*, “the process in question is not presentation but rather the escape from presentation, where trajectories or acts of perception, understood as a line

traced from the object to the viewer, open out onto something different, where the work additionally behaves as its own viewer or reader. That is, the work assumes and performs the position of its Other, the vantage that we have historically occupied.”²⁴

This modification of feedback loops can be viewed in *The Readers Project*, which is “a collection of distributed, performative, quasi-autonomous poetic ‘readers’—active, procedural entities with distinct reading behaviors and strategies.”²⁵ These reader agents are released onto inscribed surfaces that are visibly or invisibly constituted by a wide range of textual material: from conventional found texts, through poetic reconfigurations of appropriated sources from databases or from Google searches, to original poetic compositions by the project’s collaborators or to user-generated content.

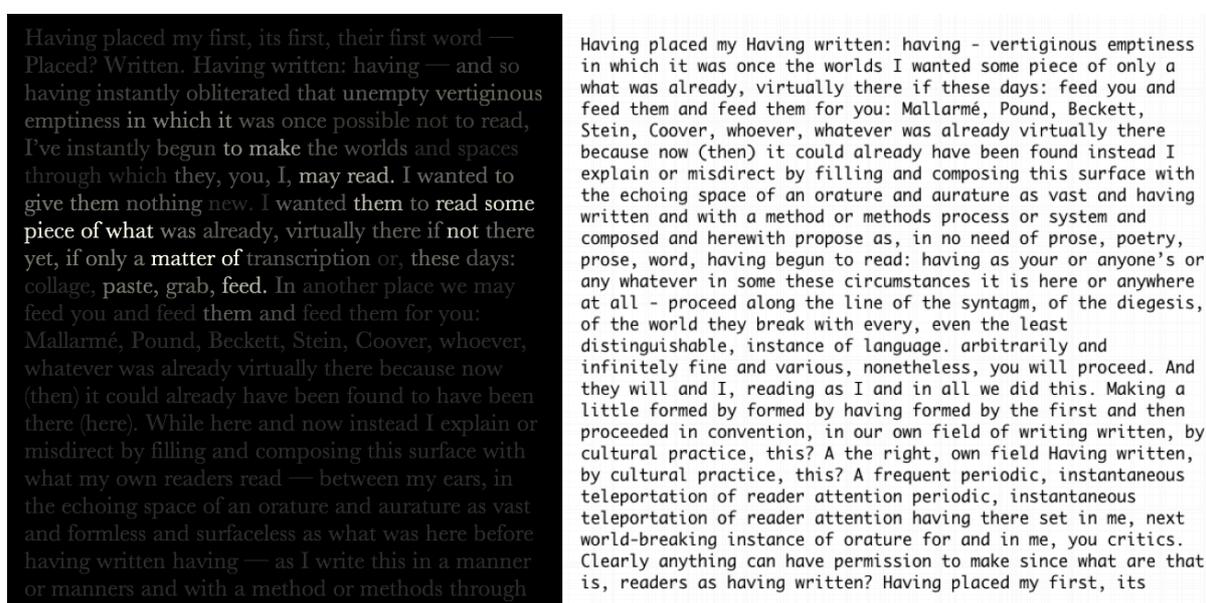


Fig. 1: A Perigram reader moving through a text written for John Cayley and Daniel Howe’s *The Readers Project* (left) and sample output from the reader moving through this text (right). © 2010 John Cayley

In other words, those ‘readers’ are not human beings, but rather software agents that visualize a process of reading and represent it in the artwork while traversing the projected page. Each reader agent follows a different behavior pattern: The so-called ‘simple reader’, for example, moves through the text in the way that every Western human reader would do from left to right. In addition, the ‘perigram reader’ does also point at the words above and below the word in focus, selects three-word perigrams and stitches them with Google findings to generate new meaningful sequences.

The human reader, however, experiences the operations of the reading agents on various displays, dependent on the arrangement of the gallery space. Most gallery installations of the piece, the

activities of the reading agents were represented in two ways: on a wall-mounted display, a highlighted portion of the text represented the reader's 'attention', while on separate monitors—or, alternatively, on the visitors' own smartphones or laptops—the individual words were displayed that had drawn the various agents' focus at the given time. While observing the operations of the agents, the human reader can simultaneously read the texts the system moves through.

In Noah Wardrip-Fruin's Cave installation *Screen* the problem of remembering, of holding on to vital experiences is not only narrated but is acted out in literally physical interactions with the possibilities of the digital medium to *hold onto* memories. To be more exact: At first, this installation surprisingly does not require anything more than reading three introductory texts, which are projected onto the three walls of the Cave, accompanied by a reading from the off. After the memory text is projected and spoken, it slowly disintegrates, detaches itself from the Cave walls, the words separate in increasing speed from the walls, approach and whirl around the reader—and move through him as long as he is only reading with his eyes. But, as graphic and voluminous objects, the words are also situated in space or, as John Cayley notes, are paradoxically “inscribed on the background that *surrounds* us.”²⁶

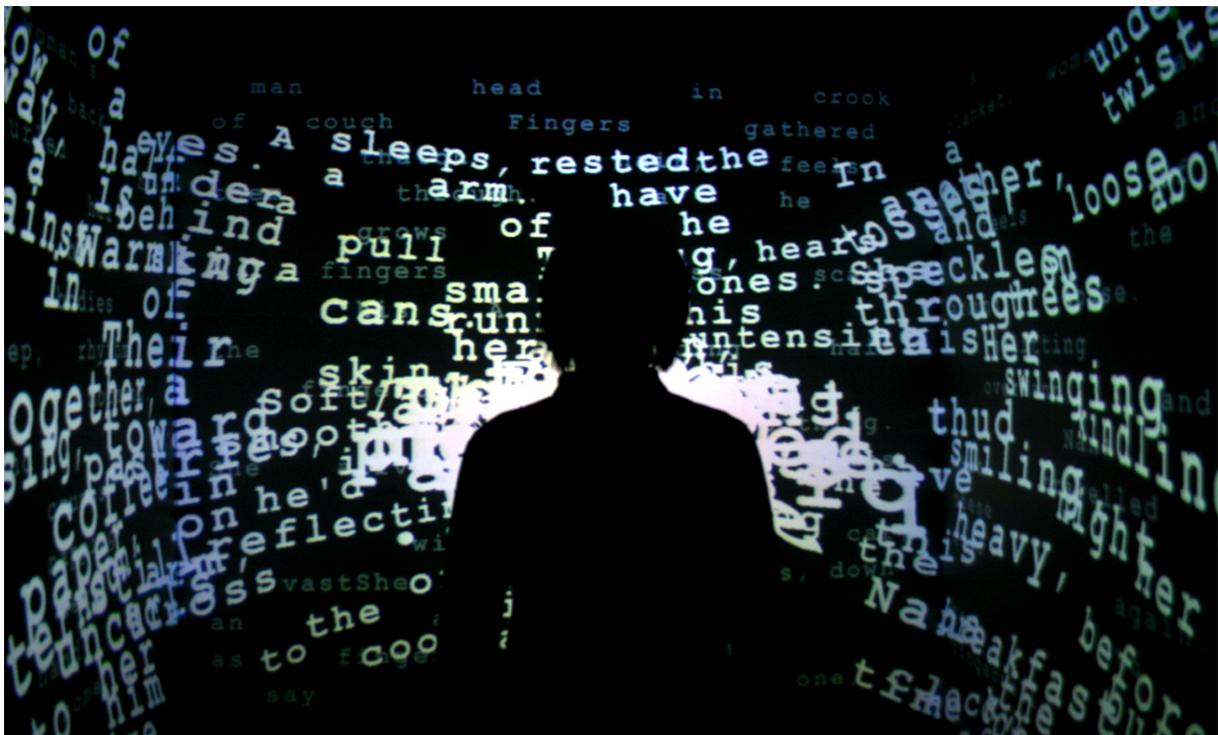


Fig. 2: The 'reader' in *Screen*, a Cave installation by Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al.

As soon as the reader is also 'reading' it with the sensor stick in his hand and with the respective physical movements, he can briefly hold onto the words of the text (in a very literal sense) and push them back, thereby collecting them—in German, interestingly, the etymological core of

‘lesen,’ *to read*, is ‘auflesen’ in the sense of *to collect, to gather, to pick up*. I could rephrase this and say: in the spiritual-physical interaction with programmed chains of symbols we are holding on to a part of a text that deals with the problem of holding on to something. Unlike the printed text, this filling of the blanks or gaps happens in a peculiar way: on the one hand, as a result of a sensually perceptible *and* machine-based activity, as closings of *spatial gaps* on the surfaces of the projection walls. On the other hand, these gaps also mark *blanks* in Iser’s sense, i.e., those enclaves in the text that are offering themselves to the imaginary fillings by the recipients’ prompting them “to supply what is meant from what is not said.”²⁷ This is what I would call the *specific aesthetic difference* of electronic literature: a momentary (and then possibly lasting) perception (*aisthesis*), a notion of ‘something’ and a simultaneous distancing of dictated, programmed meanings and the demand connected to this to act in a specific way.

In comparison to the reading of the identical text from a printed page, the experience in the Cave is fundamentally different: In the interplay of physical activities, computer-controlled processes, voices from the off reading parts of the text, and the continued reading by oneself, the recipient’s expectation is disrupted in a double sense: On the one hand, *Screen* does not attempt to create a virtual reality environment but instead confronts the recipient with a literary text. Thus, the—admittedly not yet widely spread—expectations in the medium Cave are jarred. However, a new text, a new environment, a new reading-experience are simultaneously also interactively *de-lined* which are made possible only by way of the multiple recursive co-operations of human intentions and computer processes.

IV.

Since Literary Studies usually deal with finalized books or manuscripts that, according to Bruno Latour, are “device[s] that make both mobilization and immutability possible at the same time,”²⁸ it has become a matter of course to rely on a high degree of textual stability. All previous theories of aesthetic reception like Iser’s or Jauß’s could therefore focus on analyzing the complex interdependencies of the agencies involved in this process by muting the dynamics of one of these agencies in order to make it into a stable starting point of a linear chain of cause and effect that is supposed to describe the process of establishing meaning.²⁹ This is the material precondition for the specific dialectic of protention and retention. In every moment of reading, the reader of a printed text is, as Iser notes, “conveying a future horizon yet to be occupied, along with a past (and continually fading) horizon already filled; the wandering viewpoint carves its passage through both at the same time and leave them to merge together in its wake.”³⁰ In the case of computer-mediated communication, however, this dialectic does not refer to an immutable text

but, in contrast, to a situated event that is only taking place at the one single moment of its performance. In such a situated interaction, the reader is confronted with the “permanent mutability” of data that can only be observed as it happens.³¹ Both writerly and readerly activities of human actors are interwoven with each other as well as with computer processes in a way that cannot be adequately described using the traditional models of authorship and readership. Instead, it may be useful to describe these relationships in terms of ‘co-production’ – but, as could be seen in *The Readers Project*, also of ‘co-reception’.

Readers’ activities—be it writing textual contributions, navigating from menu bars, activating software agents, or moving around in space—are integrated into the literary artwork just as computational processes that manifest a certain degree of ‘self-activity’ of the computer and of interfaces. The reading process itself becomes an integral component of the work—an activity that in turn is captured, analyzed, or: ‘read’.

In a paradoxical manner, the reader is closely connected to the automatical data processing, yet, at the same time, the aesthetic experience is permanently disrupted—exactly because there is no fixed text as a point of reference. As a *theme*, the question of the forces and powers that control the behavior of characters has always been one of the central issues of literature, as, for example, the mysterious ‘Tower Society’ in Goethe’s ‘Bildungsroman’ *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* or the bureaucracy in Franz Kafka’s novel *The Castle*. The characteristics of Internet communication have also played an important role in contemporary literature, for example in recent German novels as different as Günter Grass’ *Crabwalk* (2002), Thomas Glavinic’s *Lisa* (2011) or Joachim Bessing’s *Untitled* (2013). In electronic literature, however, the control of the individual through surveillance technologies as well as the everyday use of digital devices is not only significant on the level of content. At the same time, these control mechanisms have been integrated into the literary procedures of the pieces.

Though the ‘blank’ between expectation and aesthetic realization sets in just as much as in the reading of a book, the outline of a different semantic horizon triggered off in the process does not remain only in the imagination of the reader. Rather, the recipients are invited to *physically* interact directly with the sign processes, to promptly fill ‘gaps’ which they themselves continue to create in interaction with programmable and networked media. Therefore physical, cognitive, psychological, social, cultural and media-technological factors of the *empirical situation* during the act of reading have to be taken into consideration as well. If we speak of *aesthetic* reception as a frame of reference for expectations that can be objectified in texts and that then are varied, corrected and changed, thereby disrupting the horizon of expectation, then the scope of change and reproduction definitely remains observable. However, it has emigrated from the relation between

texts into a connection between software, author-written texts, their dynamic projection onto diverse displays and the activities of their readers, including bodily activities

V.

Advanced philological methods such as French *critique génétique* ('genetic criticism') or current German approaches of *Schreibprozessforschung* ('research on the writing process') have successfully been used to describe the development of the text and the origination of the literary artwork from the handwritten manuscript to the published book.³² But they do not suffice to explore the 'gradual production' of texts as well as works resulting from manifold relations between writers, texts and readers in digital media.

I believe that in order to be able to describe such distributed processes with programmable and networked media, particularly those using site-specific media in physical space or in computer-aided mixed-reality environments, Comparative Literature has to take a *praxeological turn*. In line with a theoretical framework that has to be elaborated, analytical methods have to be developed that are able to conceive of and to observe the textual development as an open and potentially unfinished process between humans and non-humans that only lead to ephemeral materializations on displays instead of finalized works distributed in books. Therefore, traditional hermeneutics or even advanced reader-response approaches have to be complemented by methods from media ethnography, workplace studies and qualitative social research as well as game studies. Therefore my own thoughts regarding future work are aimed at integrating the results of the above-mentioned theoretical and methodological considerations into a sort of *literary pragmatics*: One could, for example, think about conducting case studies of media ethnographic observations as systematic combinations of participant observation, interviews, video recording and surveying computer logs—thereby identifying patterns of interaction in concrete contexts of action and communication. This includes the physical movements of human actors, their literary knowledge as well as their 'tacit' knowledge of how to use the media devices, the media-technological and spatial conditions, and the institutional parameters, etc.

In this optic, the conceptions of *distributed agencies* between human and non-human actors provide us with an outline that may help *to relate* corporeal activities, variable activity roles of human actors in the literary system (as 'author', 'editor', 'reader', etc.), changing media technologies as well as various literary procedures. Then, research questions arise that are far from being answered and that can almost certainly only be answered in transdisciplinary research settings:

- How is agency distributed between writers, computers with interfaces, and readers?

- How can we come to detailed descriptions of the ‘translations’ between humans and non-humans? How does the translation between the agencies of human actors acting in the ‘real world’ and those of literary characters or actions *in* the fictional space of a story or an interactive installation or those of an avatar in a computer game take place?
- How is cognitive processing related to software processing? What role does the human body play?
- What does this mean for concepts of human creativity as ‘intentional’ act?
- How can the relationships between ‘text’ (as a particular configuration of letters), ‘work’ (as a communicable entity) and the ‘material medium’ be described, when the literary ‘artwork’ no longer is a closed object, but itself a processing entity?
- How, when, and through what does a specific aesthetic experience develop for the recipient?

While new media artists and writers of electronic literature have already come a long way towards a vision of artistic creativity and literary communication for the 21st century, the established humanities have not even begun to realize the impact of the ongoing shift from ‘book culture’ towards the ‘network society’. Or even worse: Instead of facing the challenges posed by digital media, they prefer to entrench themselves in their disciplinary domains. At an ELO conference, large parts of my paper may seem like carrying coals to Newcastle. If I had given the same presentation to the annual meeting of a philological association, maybe even to a conference of comparatists, I would quite certainly be looked at with raised eyebrows or even a disapproving glance. But this, hopefully, rather proves that electronic literature poses challenging fundamental questions, which may be a starting point for theoretically and methodologically rethinking and institutionally reviving Comparative Literature.

¹ Juli Zeh, Michael Krüger, and Helge Malchow: “Digitale Revolution: Wie wollen wir lesen?” *Die Zeit*, 15 Nov. 2012.

² As Joseph Tabbi argues, the trend towards Web-based real-time communication may allow for connecting the cross-cultural emphasis of comparative literature with media-comparative research interests under the paradigm of ‘world literature’. ‘World literature’ can be considered to be one of the foundational ideas of any comparative approach to literature since Goethe coined the term in the 1820s. I agree with Tabbi that this notion gains momentum today as literary works increasingly are informed by the circumstances of cultural globalization. ‘World literature’ as a collaborative trans-national practice, which was conceivable but never fully realized in Goethe’s time, has a chance of being achieved through real-time communication today, although the literary objects themselves will certainly appear different, and circulate differently. When Goethe envisaged the upcoming ‘world literature’ of his time, the idea was based on the emergence of the European book market *as well as* on the free intellectual commerce between fellow writers from different nations and various cultural backgrounds: the “geistiger Handelsverkehr”, in Goethe’s own words. This proves that already Goethe did not regard ‘world literature’ as a canon of the ‘greatest’ works from all over the world, nor did he confine the idea to intertextual relations alone. Rather, he aimed at establishing a continuously expanding social network of writers, publishers and readers that enabled the constant international interchange and

- collaboration of the “lebendige[n] und strebende[n] Literatoren”. Today, a wide range of collaborative creativity of writers, artists, software programmers as well as ‘readers’ or ‘users’ is developing, which in analogy to Goethe’s expectations is again based on the literary knowledge circulating through the contemporary social networks of writers. Cf. Joseph Tabbi: “Electronic Literature as World Literature; or, The Universality of Writing Under Constraint.” *Poetics Today* 31.1 (2010): 17-50.
- ³ Cf. Roberto Simanowski: “Teaching Digital Literature: Didactic and Institutional Aspects.” *Reading Moving Letters: Digital Literature in Research and Teaching*. Eds. Roberto Simanowski, Jürgen Schäfer and Peter Gendolla. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010, p. 239.
 - ⁴ Cf. Peter Gendolla: “Literaturwissenschaft im Gravitationsfeld neuer Medien.” *Der Deutschunterricht* 50.6 (1998): 55-61; *Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft: Konturen und Profile im Pluralismus*. Ed. Carsten Zelle. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1999; *Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft: Grundfragen einer besonderen Disziplin*. Ed. Rüdiger Zymner. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1999.
 - ⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the world’s most distinguished comparatists, once stated that she “thought Comparative Literature should be world embracing at the beginning of my career” (*Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003, p. 4). In Germany, for example, controversial publications like *Ansichten einer künftigen Germanistik* (Ed. Jürgen Kolbe. Munich: Hanser, 1969) or Helmut Kreuzer’s *Veränderungen des Literaturbegriffs* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) paved the way for the development of both a ‘Reformgermanistik’ and new disciplines and programs such as Media Studies or Cultural Studies.
 - ⁶ The German comparatist Oliver Lubrich notes: “This situation is undergoing rapid change, however, since many universities are adapting to the new requirements of the recently introduced Bachelor and Master of Arts. German comparative literature is being squeezed by the traditional philologies on the one hand and more vocational programmes of study on the other which seek to offer students the practical knowledge they need for the working world (e.g., ‘Applied Literature’). With German universities no longer educating their students primarily for an academic market, the necessity of a more vocational approach is becoming ever more evident.” Cf. Oliver Lubrich: “Comparative Literature—in, from and beyond Germany.” *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.1-2 (2006): 65 f., n. 43.
 - ⁷ René Wellek: “The Crisis of Comparative Literature.” *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Comparative Literature*. Ed. W. P. Friederich. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1959, pp. 149-159.
 - ⁸ Haun Saussy: “Exquisite Corpses from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives and Selfish Genes.” *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization: The 2005 ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline*. Ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006, p. 21.
 - ⁹ Cf. Catherine Brown: *The Art of Comparison: How Novels and Critics Compare*. London: Legenda, 2011, p. 20.
 - ¹⁰ Saussy: “Exquisite Corpses from Fresh Nightmares,” p. 19
 - ¹¹ Cf. Friedrich Kittler: *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990; *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999; *Materialities of Communication*. Eds. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994.
 - ¹² Saussy: “Exquisite Corpses from Fresh Nightmares,” p. 33.
 - ¹³ Cf. Ted Striphas: *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009; Michael Giesecke: *Von den Mythen der Buchkultur zu den Visionen der Informationsgesellschaft: Trendforschungen zur kulturellen Medienökologie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002.
 - ¹⁴ N. Katherine Hayles: *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2012, p. 9.
 - ¹⁵ Francisco J. Ricardo: “The Engagement Aesthetic: An Introduction.” 2010. *Postmediumcritique.org* <<http://postmediumcritique.org/blog/2010/07/the-engagement-aesthetic-an-introduction>> (27 June 2013).
 - ¹⁶ Wolfgang Iser: *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978, p. 9.
 - ¹⁷ Iser: *The Act of Reading*, p. 188.
 - ¹⁸ Iser: *The Act of Reading*, p. 182.
 - ¹⁹ Iser: *The Act of Reading*, p. 127.
 - ²⁰ Transl. from Hans Robert Jauf: *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982, p. 84.
 - ²¹ Iser: *The Act of Reading*, p. 67 f.; my italics.
 - ²² Transl. from Hans Robert Jauf: *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970, p. 175.
 - ²³ Francisco J. Ricardo: *The Engagement Aesthetic: Experiencing New Media Art through Critique*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 111 f.
 - ²⁴ Ricardo: *The Engagement Aesthetic*, p. 172.
 - ²⁵ John Cayley and Daniel Howe: *The Readers Project: Overview*. 2009. <<http://thereadersproject.org/index.php?p=contents/overview.html>> (27 June 2013).

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- ²⁶ John Cayley: "The Gravity of the Leaf: Phenomenologies of Literary Inscription in Media-Constituted Diegetic Worlds." *Beyond the Screen: Transformations of Literary Structures, Interfaces and Genres*. Eds. Jürgen Schäfer and Peter Gendolla. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010, p. 213.
- ²⁷ Iser: *The Act of Reading* 168.
- ²⁸ Bruno Latour: "Drawing Things Together." *Representation in Scientific Practice*. Ed. Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1990, p. 31.
- ²⁹ Cf. Sven Strasen: *Rezeptionstheorien: Literatur-, sprach- und kulturwissenschaftliche Ansätze und kulturelle Modelle*. Trier: WVT, 2008.
- ³⁰ Iser: *The Act of Reading*, p. 112.
- ³¹ Michel Chaouli: "Was bedeutet: Online lesen? Über die Möglichkeit des Archivs im Cyberspace." *Text + Kritik* 152 (2001): 65-74.
- ³² Cf. Almuth Grésillon: *Éléments de critique génétique. Lire les manuscrits modernes*. Paris: PUF, 1994; "SCHREIBKUGEL IST EINDING GLEICH MIR: VON EISEN": *Schreibszenen im Zeitalter der Typoskripte*. Eds. Davide Giuriato, Martin Stingelin and Sandro Zanetti. Munich: Fink, 2005; "System ohne General": *Schreibszenen im digitalen Zeitalter*. Eds. Davide Giuriato, Martin Stingelin and Sandro Zanetti. Munich: Fink, 2006.