

# Electronic Literature and the New Media Art: Introduction to the Thematic Section

Janez Strehovec

Pleteršnikova 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija  
Janez.Strehovec@guest.arnes.si

Electronic literature covers writing and programming that deploy new media bases (especially software) for forming electronic texts that are positioned at the intersection of experimental writing with literary features, literary avant-gardes, and the new media art. Its most talked-about branch is hypertext fiction, whose key works (e.g., “Afternoon, A Story” by Michael Joyce) were created in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the beginning of the twenty-first century is characterized by a number of other directions, in which hypertextual links between individual nodes of text give way to procedures that are based on new-generation software and are embedded in today’s algorithmic, software, mobile, locative, DJ, and VJ cultures; this means that various software applications, remixes, and mash-ups are also entering e-literature practice (just like the practice of new media arts). These efforts result in projects that are part of extended textuality, which is based on the coexistence of verbal and nonverbal signifiers. Verbal textual units are static or kinetic (e.g., in the genre of animated e-poetry) and include the signs of natural languages or programming and scripting languages (e.g., the poetic-artistic language *mezangelle* developed by Australian Internet artist Mez Breeze). In addition, one also comes across (static or movable) images, sounds, and even aromas (e.g., Eduardo Kac’s “aroma-poetry”; a type of poetry that is “read with the nose”).

Writing in electronic media places a paradigmatic (rather than syntagmatic) approach to verbal signifiers at the fore; this means the language is analyzed and its units are isolated, alienated, compared to and contrasted with absent signifiers, classified, and playfully combined into new wholes. In this regard, the focus is on the database discussed in Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* as a new symbolic form composed of equal elements altered by entering such a database in a random fashion.. The database is not organized according to a causal chain, and has no beginning, middle, and end; according to Manovich, it is therefore structured completely differently than the traditional linear narrative.

Electronic literature is not a continuation of literature-as-we-know-it by other (i.e., electronic) means (nor its higher or modernized stage), but an area of emerging electronic textuality that is significantly influenced by the new media and rooted in distinctly techno-cultural practices (e.g., the club and software culture, and the culture of playing videogames). In a way, projects defined with hypertexts are close to the directions in the familiar print-based literature that are characterized by combinatory texts and text labyrinths (e.g., Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*, and Jorge Luis Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*), whereas electronic poetry also enhances and radicalizes certain tendencies of the visual and concrete poetry of the 1960s and 70s (in terms of the organization of textual units according to spatial syntax) and spreads them to the area of motion and thus also temporal and cinematic) syntax. Even though e-literature pieces are placed into spaces that are not close to traditional literary culture (these types of projects are controlled by software and presented on the screens of various smart devices, ranging from computers to mobile phones), it also makes sense for literary theoreticians and practitioners to follow the developments in this. E-literature works namely provide an answer to the question of what happens with letters, words, and texts in the new-media condition of the computer culture (and social networks), and to questions regarding the fate of literacy within the context of the new media.

In order to gain a basic understanding of e-literature, it is important to consider its materiality in the sense that the text is now spread out in the "depths" of a (computer) screen, where it is available to the reader in a significantly more interactive way than when reading printed texts; readers can thus manipulate the text using their mouse, scrollbar, and similar devices and can even be in a tactile relationship with the text. In addition, it is also important that the text be saved in smart memory units (from where it can be retrieved at any time) and controlled by software. Of course, it also belongs to the algorithmic culture, which demands non-trivial efforts from the user (reader) in getting through the text; it often involves not only reading, but also navigation focused on a series of goals, which is reminiscent of playing videogames, whose theory can also be of great help when seeking to understand more complex e-literature works (e.g., formed as textual instruments). In addition to algorithms, databases (with verbal and nonverbal signifiers) and interfaces (which can also be very unusual, such as a wheel, hand, or dataglove) are significant elements of the most relevant pieces in this area.

Festivals and conferences at which these types of projects are presented are essential for the production, reproduction, and dissemination of e-literary practices. The best-known events of this type today are the Electronic Literature Organization conference and E-Poetry festival, whereas a series

of Digital Arts and Culture conferences greatly contributed to the popularization of e-literary creativity in the past; these conferences originated in Bergen, Norway, in 1998 and were initiated by Espen Aarseth, the author of the *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. E-literature is also institutionalized with various publications. Among the journals that first and foremost publish theory, *Electronic Book Review*, *ALT-X*, the *Cybertext* yearbook, and *Dichtung Digital* should be mentioned. Books of this genre started being published by WVU Press as part of the *Computing Literature* collection. The European Network of Digital Literature *DDDL* brings together European researchers and institutions in this area. It is chaired by Philippe Bootz, who has also organized intensive Erasmus programs in this area (e.g., the one in 2013 at the Complutense University of Madrid, where the author of this article delivered lectures and also invited several Slovenian students to join him).

Where we can find e-literature works? Because these are electronic projects, the Internet is an excellent place for saving and distributing this type of practice. In this regard, one should mention both electronic literature online databases published by the ELO—the *E-Literature Collection 1* (2006) and *2* (2011)—and the Elmcip Anthology of European Electronic Literature. A series of basic information on electronic literature is also kept by the Elmcip Knowledge Base.

Numerous e-literature projects are now being placed at the intersection of experimental writing in new media and the new media art; the spaces of the new media art such as galleries, clubs, and online locations (from online databases to Second Life galleries) are also often spaces of e-literature. In addition, a variety of basic concepts related to the new media art are also useful for understanding e-literature, whose works, on the other hand, also expand the boundaries of the new media art and are by no means its derivatives or extensions. This fact motivated the author of this paper to organize the international conference *E-Literature and New Media* in Ljubljana on 22 and 23 September 2012 as part of the Elmcip European research project included in the HERA network, which supports research projects in the humanities. The writer of this paper and the editor of this thematic section is one of the principal investigators of this project, which is taking place from mid-2010 to mid-2013 and includes seven partner universities (from Norway, Finland, Sweden, the UK, the Netherlands, and Slovenia), with the University of Bergen as the leading research organization (Scott Rettberg is the project leader). As part of their tasks, the principal investigators prepared seminars on various topics and the final conference was held in Edinburgh together with an exhibition of electronic works titled *Remediating the Social*. This exhibition was prepared through a call for entries that shaped the show; at both the exhibition and conference, non-European theoreticians and authors also took part.

Along with the conferences and the published papers, the research done by the investigators involved in the project, and training (of doctoral and post-doctoral students), important outcomes of this project also include the formation of the *Elmcip Knowledge Base* (an online e-literature archive that will continue functioning after the project is concluded), the publication (catalog) *Remediating the Social*, which was based on the outcomes of the final Elmcip conference (with contributions from the theoreticians that participated at the symposium, and artists included in the exhibition), the anthology of European e-literature in an online and USB version, and the book of reports and other contributions describing the most important activities taking place as part of this project.

The Ljubljana conference was organized as a minor symposium based on an open call for papers and featured seventeen papers by theoreticians and practitioners from eleven countries. Its final event was the public reading and performance by John Cayley, Scott Rettberg, Philippe Bootz, Alexandra Saemmer, Simon Biggs, Talan Memmott, and Jaka Železnikar. The presented papers, which were peer-reviewed by at least two reviewers, included the following: “Reflections on the Iconicity of Digital Texts” by Alexandra Saemmer, “Code, Interpretation, Avant-Garde” by Roberto Simanowski, “Reversed Remediation. A Critical Display of the Workings of Media in Art” by Saskia Korsten, “Poetry Confronting Digital Media” by Giovanna di Rosario, “Acoustic and Visual Imagination in Poetry from Neo\_Avantgarde to New Media Poetry in Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Poetry” by Dubravka Đurić, “E-Literature and the New Social Paradigms” by Janez Strehovec, “New Media ArtPoetry: A Textural Surface” by Maria Mencia, “‘Big Brother Really Is Watching You.’ Literature in Mobile Dataspace” by Beat Suter, “Why Digital Games and Networks Can Help Us to Change Reality and Generate Concrete Changes in Social Environments?” by Patricia Gouveia, “Do the Domains of Literature and New Media Art Intersect? The Cases of Sonnetoid Web Projects by Vuk Ćosić and Teo Spiller” by Aleš Vaupotič, “Literary Aspects of the New Media Art Works by Jaka Železnikar and Srečo Dragan” by Narvika Bovcon, “New Media Textuality and Semiotics” by Teo Spiller, “Is There a Message in This Medium? The Materiality of Language in the (Sound and) Light of New Media” by John Cayley, “The Four Corners of the E-Lit World. Textual Instruments, Operational Logics, Wetware Studies and Cybertext Poetics” by Markku Eskelinen, “The Extensions of the Body in New Media Art” by Maja Murnik, “Programmed Digital Poetry: A Poetry of the Apparatus; Media Art?” by Philippe Bootz, and “(Techno) dispositives in Contemporary Art Practice: Fifty-Year Theatre Performance Noordung 1995–2045: by Dragan Živadinov” by Bojan Anđelković.

Even by taking a brief look at the papers presented, one can see that the conference also included contributions that do not focus directly on e-literature but, by extending to the areas of *techno-dispositifs* in new media art, videogames, and the body (in performance art), stimulate a broader discussion on the interactions of e-literature with the new media and contemporary art. In addition, it should be noted that the Ljubljana symposium was also the first meeting of this type that brought together Slovenian e-literature writers and theoreticians, who presented papers, performed live reading (Jaka Železnikar), or participated in discussions (Vuk Čosić, Srečo Dragan, and Peter Purg).

As the conference organizer, I selected six authors that prepared papers for publication in the journal *Primerjalna književnost*. The articles use a variety of approaches and thus demonstrate the complexity of the area explored: e-literary theory. The issue of e-literature as an emerging textual practice is discussed by **Markku Eskelinen**, the coeditor of the *Cybertext* yearbook (in addition to Raine Koskimaa) and author of *Cybertext Poetics* (2012). He examines this area from the perspective of textual instruments, operational logics, cybertext poetics, and a “wetware” study. This perspective reveals the boundaries and dangers of e-literature that are defined through the new-media art, (social) sciences, games, and one’s own stagnation. Eskelinen emphasizes the cybernetic nature of e-literary textuality and cybernetic thinking in the sense that in this area one can witness feedback loops not only between the text and its user, but also between various components and stages of the text, between two or more users, and between two or more texts.

The insecurity of the reader that is challenged by unpredictable tasks posed by electronic literature, which is based on images, sounds, and words in motion, temporal dimension, and interaction, encouraged **Giovanna di Rosario** to direct her paper on electronic poetry into three close readings of e-poetry works. With Rui Torres’ generative *Poemas no meio do caminho* (Poems in the Middle of the Road), the author drew upon the important role of the reader in transforming the unpredictable text, in which many words are variables included in new links that are machine-generated by means of the reader’s selection. In this way, the authors lose control over their texts, and their roles are limited to shaping the environment for poetry combinatorics, in which the reader and the text generator are involved.

As one of the pioneers of electronic poetry and its theoretician, **Philippe Bootz** deals with Eduardo Kac’s biopoetry; specifically, his project *Genesis 2* (1999), which is based on biology, optics, and Internet application in the sense that a sentence from the *Genesis* is transcribed into Morse code and thence into DNA. In analyzing this project, he uses his own semiotic theory

of the reading event with its specific concepts: the transient observable state (*transitoire observable*), text as seen (*texte-à-voir*), and authorial text (*texte-auteur*). This theory is characterized by the fact that both the program and its implementation are integral parts of an e-literary project; the programming is even understood in the sense of an aesthetic work component. In this regard, Bootz critically establishes that Kac's project involves technopoetry rather than media poetry because one deals with a texhnotext, in which poetic elements are derivatives of technological elements. He concludes his paper by introducing another difference between reading in the narrow sense and meta-reading as an activity that extends to the program itself—that is, formal machine language.

“The online, partially automated ‘literature’ reaches beyond the sphere of printed books as a new medium that demands new cohesive energies. Something other than Shakespeare’s ‘mighty mind that produced the whole’ that was described by Coleridge and began the period of the novel” is the conclusion **Aleš Vaupotič** reaches in his essay. Vaupotič dedicates his attention to the projects by Vuk Čosić (*Deep ASCII* and *Nacija-Kultura* [Nation-Culture]) and Teo Spieller (*Spam-* and *Novičarski soneti* [News Sonnets]), in which he considers examples of cybertextuality as a great challenge for modern comparative studies. **Narvika Bovcon** analyzes works by Slovenian writers Jaka Železnikar and Srečo Dragan and also focuses on their new-media-specific features such as the errors and malfunctioning of advanced technologies in Železnikar's projects *Aberration* and *Spreminjevalec* (Changer). In discussing the works by Srečo Dragan, who is known to connect textuality with his conceptual works and video, she draws special attention to *Mobilni e-knjižni flanker* (E-literary Flaneur) as a project that connects the spatial arrangement of literature in the real urban environment of Ljubljana with reading literature on wired mobile devices and positioning words on a virtual map.

In his essay “Elektronska literatura in nove družbene paradigme” (Electronic Literature and New Social Paradigms), **Janez Strehovec**, the editor of this thematic section, discusses e-literature in its interactions and mutual effects with the new media art, and also contextualizes both areas within postindustrial society, in which the importance of services, events, and performances is increasing. In this regard, he introduces the concept of e-literary service, which he uses to describe the shift from a completed e-literary work to algorithmic and performative goal-oriented activity broken down into economically selected steps. In addition, he also discusses e-literature within the wider context of algorithm culture, which differs significantly from the culture of literary intellectuals, which represents the predominant stream in the Slovenian humanities and the arts.