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In Search of Sustainability

Institutional and Curricular Limitations of Teaching Electronic Literature

Presentation at the Electronic Literature Pedagogy Workshop, hosted by Blekinge Institute of Technology, Karlskrona (Sweden), June 15, 2011

I'd like to preface my argument with an anecdote whose significance will hopefully soon become apparent. Some weeks ago, I got an email from one of the editors of a German Studies journal from Eastern Europe who was preparing a special issue on the impact of “new media” on the everyday use of the German language, on language acquisition – and, last but not least, on German *literature*. I was asked to be one of the reviewers of a paper that promised to discuss recent developments of electronic literature in Germany. At first, I thought “wow! That’s good that German Studies people in Eastern Europe take note of electronic literature.”

This joyful expectation, however, was disappointed very soon. The paper had nothing to offer than repeating the prejudice of computer-based media as danger for literature, which probably is all too familiar to most of us. The only works discussed by the anonymous author originate from the late 1990s, and s/he completely ignores the research that all of us – and many others – have done over the last decade.

So far, so bad! This paper, of course, was rejected by me and apparently by the other reviewer as well. It will therefore never be published! But I have still thought about this afterwards: Why does somebody submit such a paper to a journal in the year 2011? What does this tell us about the situation of electronic literature in Germany and of its status as subject within German Literary Studies at universities?

1. The situation of electronic literature in Germany

It cannot be denied that there is more than a grain of truth in the impression that, within the last decade, almost nothing has happened that could be described as “recent developments” of electronic literature. In contrast, German electronic literature has **largely become invisible**, so

that it is no surprise that it has not been recognised as an important area in German literature – and consequently not as an essential teaching subject at universities.¹

Having said that, at the same time quite a lot of **research on electronic literature** has been done *in Germany* – or more precisely: in the *German-speaking countries*; or even more precisely: *by people from the German-speaking countries* – to name just a few: by people like Roberto Simanowski, Friedrich Block, Florian Cramer, Christiane Heibach, Karin Wenz, Fotis Jannidis, Uwe Wirth, Beat Suter, Florian Hartling, Thomas Kamphusmann or by Peter Gendolla, Patricia Tomaszek and myself at Siegen.

But if you look at the professional careers of these people, it is apparent that their research and teaching activities in Germany over the last years have rather moved away from electronic literature instead of further specializing on it. Or some of these scholars even left Germany, like Roberto Simanowski. Those who have continued their academic careers in Germany have turned toward other areas of interest and do only occasionally publish on or teach courses on electronic literature (e.g., like Jannidis, Wirth or Heibach). The funding of the research project of Peter Gendolla and myself at the University of Siegen will expire next year, which means that it will also be necessary to shift the focus to other areas; other people like Friedrich Block have always been working outside the universities anyway.

It fits in this picture that the publications from most of these scholars have been widely noticed throughout the world – if they were published in English; in Germany, however, they have been widely ignored, be they published in German or in English.²

What makes me concerned about this is that it is apparently very difficult, if not impossible to establish electronic literature as a teaching subject within *literary studies* if it can not be easily integrated into the **contexts of national philologies**, which are still dominant in the curricula at most universities and – what is essential! – also in job advertisements.

Having said that, I have to admit that from the point of view of “Germanistik”, it is not of the utmost urgency to deal with electronic literature, if it hardly exists in the national language. (I myself, in my own work, have also only referred to works in English.) We may discuss later on whether these impressions from Germany are in agreement with other presenters’ impressions from their home countries. I just wanted to use them as my starting point for analyzing in a more systematic manner where I see the main institutional and curricular limitations for establishing electronic literature as a recognised or even compulsory subject on

¹ Cf. Patricia Tomaszek: “German Net Literature: In the Exile of Invisibility”, in: *OLE Officina di Letteratura Elettronica - Lavori del Convegno*. Naples: Atelier Multimediale edizioni, 2011, pp. 418-436.

² For example, it is symptomatic that I have been invited to conferences and workshops throughout the world, from the U.S. to Australia or now to Scandinavia within the last twelve months only, but not to any German university with a presentation on electronic literature in the same period.

a sustainable basis. In contrast to my introductory comments, I will try my best not to be too pessimistic and also to make clear where opportunities may open up.

2. The “institutional in-between identity” of electronic literature

Roberto Simanowski, in his introduction to the teaching section of the handbook *Reading Moving Letters*, which Roberto and I co-edited with Peter Gendolla, related to the problem that lies behind what I reported as the “**institutional in-between identity**” of electronic literature.³ Therefore the first point I’d like to address is the **tension between** what Roberto calls the “**supra-departmental nature**” of electronic literature and the “**departmental model of most academic institutions**”.⁴ I agree with him that it is one of the key problems for all of us to find where the institutional home of electronic literature is – or better: where those **institutional homes** (in the plural!) in the “real” academic world *are* or where and how they *should be* established for a “better” academic world.

Today, as far as I can see, there are **four main affiliations** of research and teaching to academic disciplines and to departmental structures accordingly. Therefore electronic literature is being analysed and taught from different epistemological backgrounds and with different methods – which is fine! Of course, these approaches overlap and therefore necessarily require inter- or transdisciplinary approaches – what is even better and what certainly is one of the main reasons for the commitment of most of us to the subject (I will come back to this later on):

- a) In *Literary Studies*, electronic literature is analysed in relation to literature in other media, first of all in print media. This highlights questions like, e.g., what “the literary” of electronic literature is, how text, images, sounds are related to each other, how narrative structures change, how traditional conceptions of authorship and readership transform, and so on.
- b) In *Communications or Media Studies*, the focus lies more on the social and technological aspects of communication with digital media – with literary communication as one special area.

³ Roberto Simanowski: “Teaching Digital Literature: Didactic and Institutional Aspects”, in *Reading Moving Letters: Digital Literature in Research and Teaching*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007, p. 239.

⁴ Simanowski: “Teaching Digital Literature”, p. 239.

- c) In *Art and Design schools* or in *Creative writing programs*, e.g. in the Literary Arts Program at Brown University, students are educated in producing electronic literature and arts themselves.
- d) This overlaps with some departments in *computer sciences*, e.g. with Noah Wardrip-Fruin's and Michael Mateas's activities at the "Expressive Intelligence Studio" at Santa Cruz or with Jay Bolter's activities at Georgia Tech, which are dedicated to exploring the intersection of artificial intelligence, art and design.

My point is that – in order to legitimise electronic literature as an important topic – the links to the other disciplines should create **knowledge** that is important for the discipline itself. In literary studies, for example, research in electronic literature should put certainties about what literature is into question; in communications studies, the awareness for aesthetic differences should enrich the social and technological dimensions, and so on. To use Roberto's phrases again: If the disciplines realise that they benefit from the "supra-departmental nature" of electronic literature, than the acceptance may increase.

As somebody with his background in **literary studies**, I will mainly look at the current situation from the first point of view, and as a German I will continue to highlight the situation in this country, but I assume that there are similar problems and opportunities when looked at it from other disciplinary or country-specific perspectives. In general, it is my assumption that – if we take the label "electronic *literature*" for serious and regard the subject as "literature" – then literary studies should ask in what way *the literary* that has been analysed as a phenomenon of a quite specific experience for literature in book culture continues in digital media. This means that regarding the literary pieces we are focusing on in research and in teaching, we are always dealing with both complexly interwoven persistent chains of tradition *and* with discontinuous moments.

Certainly, a comprehensive study of electronic literature *should still apply* but *cannot only rely* on the traditional methods of literary criticism (such as hermeneutics, formalism, structuralism, ...). It is just as certain that it also needs to arm itself with the tools 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. Unfortunately such an approach still is in contrast to the predominant departmental structure of most universities where the national literatures still dominate the field of literary studies. Therefore students of literature mostly major in German, English or Romance Studies. Or they enrol in Media Studies, which

means that literature is only one – and unfortunately often an only marginal – subject in the program.

In this situation, it would be very helpful to reanimate – or where it is still alive – to sustain programs in **Comparative Literature**⁵ – or what in the German “reform universities” of the 1970s and 1980s was called “**Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft**” (s.th. like “General Study of Literature”). This approach aimed at analysing literature explicitly in its social, media-technological and cultural contexts beyond its national characteristics and thereby opened up new topics, new methods and new theories (“inter”-...).⁶ It turns out to be surprisingly up-to-date as good example of an approach that is grounded in a particular discipline and yet transcends its theoretical and methodological limitations towards the other disciplinary homes of electronic literature.⁷

I do still expect the humanities to develop into this direction in the long run and become some sort of such a hybrid – be it called literary, cultural or media studies. But still then, establishing electronic literature as regular teaching subject to a large degree depends on whether there is somebody with a strong **individual interest and enthusiasm among the local professors** or lecturers. This is true even for those younger universities at which – like at the University of Siegen – from its very beginnings in the 1970s, literary studies operated with a particular focus on the media in which literary texts are being written, distributed and read – and how texts are transformed into films or radio plays – or later on into computer-based media and onto the Internet. First, this took place as “Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft”, later predominantly as “Medienwissenschaft”. From this starting point, Siegen developed a distinctive profile within the new academic discipline of Media Studies in the 1980s and 90s by focusing on research in media aesthetics and cultural studies. Between 2002 and 2010, a so-called “Collaborative Research Center” had been funded by the German Research Council entitled *Medienumbrüche* (‘Media Upheavals’), of which Peter Gendolla’s and my research group on electronic literature has been a sub-project. Siegen had also introduced the first

⁵ Cf. Gayatri Spivak: *The Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia UP 2003.

⁶ Cf. Carsten Zelle (ed.): *Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft: Konturen und Profile im Pluralismus*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1999; Rüdiger Zymner (ed.): *Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft: Grundfragen einer besonderen Disziplin*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1999; Peter Gendolla: “Literaturwissenschaft im Gravitationsfeld neuer Medien”, in: *Der Deutschunterricht* 50.6 (1998): 55-61.

⁷ The comparatist Oliver Lubrich, however, expects the opposite to happen: “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. his “Comparative Literature – in, from and beyond Germany”, in: *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.1-2 (2006): 47-67, p. 65f., n. 43.

For the last decade, Peter Gendolla and I jointly taught classes on electronic literature in the context of a course program derived from the activities of Siegen's Research Center on "Media Upheavals", e.g. two-semester seminars on "Literature on the Internet" and on the "History of Interactive Literature" from Antiquity and the Baroque era to contemporary developments such as hyperfictions, interactive installations, or locative narratives. In addition to these classes, we repeatedly offered compact seminars in cooperation with Roberto Simanowski, two of them at Siegen and one as a blended learning seminar with students from Siegen and from Brown University. I will talk about this in more detail in program panel this afternoon.

In such seminars, students get an introductory impression of what electronic literature is. For most of them, this will remain the only contact to the subject before they complete their degree. From time to time, some of them go deeper into it and write their Bachelor thesis or specialise in a neighbouring subject such as computer games, online communication, etc. The rare exception is somebody like Patricia Tomaszek (who most of you know very well) who stood out in Peter Gendolla's and my seminar on the history of interactive literature, then became our student assistant, spent a year abroad at Brown, obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees at Siegen, before moving to Bergen where she is now working as a PhD fellow in Scott Rettberg's team.

3. Problems and opportunities of transdisciplinary approaches

As I said, one of the fascinating things about electronic literature is that it not only allows but imperatively demands working with transdisciplinary approaches or in interdisciplinary working groups. Having said that, unfortunately speaking of "inter"- or "transdisciplinarity" sounds good in political statements on university reforms, and it is one of the aspects that should not be missing in any grant application. But it very often turns out to be difficult in practice when this ideal is to be implemented in university structures. If we aim at more than just a strategic simulation of transdisciplinarity, that is: if we are really interested in what other academic disciplines may offer for our own research and teaching (and I presume that we all are), then we are inevitably forced to do a tightrope walk between our own professional competence and mere eclecticism⁹ – and make the best out of it!

⁹ On the one hand, we can neither do research in electronic literature nor can we teach it to students without combining theoretical input from all the disciplines I mentioned; but, of course, on the other hand this confronts us with an – at least latent, sometimes manifest – scepticism from two sides: from the purists

We must accept that research and teaching electronic literature cannot encompass all relevant aspects in a true sense – as every transdisciplinary approach always is bound to be particular, partial, contingent. It is by necessity highly dependent on its local, disciplinary, institutional, curricular and methodological positionality – and the interdisciplinary connections to other disciplines that are possible and helpful *in this specific environment*. Then it can open up insights into literature to students and to ourselves that we would not have achieved otherwise.

It goes without saying that these circumstances “translate into every course on this subject concerning content and structure”.¹⁰ Teaching electronic literature then is not simply the continuation of teaching the established literary forms with new electronic means. Therefore it cannot represent these new forms comprehensibly with the known didactic methods for the very reason that literature in computer-based media no longer creates firm “objects” such as printed books. The series of letters on the new surfaces have become mobile; only in the process of “reading” the stories or poems emerge in varying degrees, qualities, and intensities and this also means that the roles of researching, teaching, and learning are becoming blurred in a (still) disturbing way.

As teachers in literary studies we still know more about the literary forms and conventions, its historical and cultural backgrounds, in short: the various components that so far have comprised the literary field. Of course, this continues to remain a central requirement for working with electronic literature. But this recognition of intertextual references is merely *one* of the requirements. Already when navigating, for example, within the possibilities of reading or composing a literary work, the advantage lies no longer necessarily with the teacher; often it is the students who are the more experienced users and discover or produce combinations that surprisingly widen the literary field. I think we are therefore well advised to make stronger use of problem-based learning methods and create a teaching environment in which teachers and students co-operatively study and explore works of electronic literature in class. The students become “teachers” and only in the next step, when poetic qualities are explained—or when the nonsense produced is being criticised—can the teacher again take on his or her customary role. Again, I will go into details in the program panel later on.

among our own peers who fear an erosion of their own field, and from academics from the other disciplines who miss the complexity of their discourse.

¹⁰ Simanowski: “Teaching Digital Literature”, p. 239. – As anybody who already taught interdisciplinary classes can tell from her/his own experience, this has positive as well as negative effects. There may be students of Computer Studies who know a lot more than I do about information technologies and electronic networks but have little knowledge of literature and the arts sitting next to students of pure literary studies who are well acquainted with literary theories and traditions but only have a vague idea of the impact of computers on writing and reading.

4. What can be done?

To sum up: It should have become clear that I regard it as essential to strengthen the **transdisciplinary intersections** between disciplines and departments and to translate them into curricula. This, of course, is dependent of many – often very specific – institutional and curricular limitations on disciplinary, on national or even on local level.

If there already are B.A. and M.A. programs in which electronic literature is being studied as a compulsory module, be it in degree schemes in Literature, Media Studies, Digital Culture or whatsoever, many of the problems I have mentioned so far have already been solved. At other places, where this is not the case, co-operative seminars seem to be an interesting approach. This may include joint seminars with local colleagues who share an interest in electronic literature, arts, computer games.

Beyond that, we may turn the problematic in-between identity of electronic literature in an advantage and may use it for bringing together students from various disciplines – and also from various countries. As I mentioned, Peter Gendolla and I made good experiences with our joint seminars with Roberto Simanowski, be it as multi-day compact classes with Roberto as guest lecturer at Siegen, be it in a joint seminar with German and American students that also used CSCW technologies, video conferencing tools, social networks.

The colleagues from Bergen co-operate with American Fulbright scholars; there also are European initiatives, such as the “Intensive Erasmus Programme” which is currently being prepared by Philippe Bootz in cooperation with colleagues from France, Spain, Portugal and myself from Germany, and networks like ELMCIP may also develop co-operative models.

To close with an optimistic vision, we should not forget that there are not many other subjects and international research communities that are as well-suited for crossing the borders and closing the gaps between disciplines, countries, languages and teaching methods as electronic literature.