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Do the Domains of Literature and New Media Art Intersect? The Cases of Sonnetoid web projects by Vuk Ćosić and Teo Spiller

For contemporary comparatism a fundamental dilemma persists: how to bridge the gap between the literature as was known since the 18th and 19th Century - or even before that - and the cybertexts of today's increasingly computerized reality. The deep misunderstanding prevails in Slovenia, too. In his book *Media, New Media, Postmedia* Domenico Quaranta emphasizes the success of public funding in the field of new media art in Slovenia, while in the domain of »contemporary art« in other countries a similar constellation of state funding in combination with weak art market was proven to lead to stagnation.¹ On the other hand, the recent vulgar politicization of the issue of the access to state archives in Slovenia still gravely misses the point, when seen through the controversies surrounding the *WikiLeaks* website.² The instant access and the possibility of viewing the archive through algorithmic filters inherent in the digitized archive were obscured by the photograph of a Slovenian political party leader sitting at a desk and reading piles of sheets of paper ... as if he were studying books. But the novels too are being read in new ways - e.g. at the Stanford Literary Lab, lead by Matthew Jockers and Franco Moretti, the literary scholarship gains access to greater quantities of texts that - like archives - cannot be read by individuals: the so-called »great unread«.³ The price to pay for a new kind of access is the shift from »close reading« to a potentially

1 See partial English translation on Rhizome (<<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/jan/12/the-postmedia-perspective>>, 12 Jun. 2011).

2 The complexity of the *Wikileaks* »dilemma« remains open - see the conversation between Julian Assange and Slavoj Žižek in London on 2 July 2011 (<<http://www.frontlineclub.com/blogs/WikiLeaks/2011/07/live-assange-zizek-and-goodman-in-conversation.html>>, 18 Jul. 2011).

3 Margaret Cohen's term (Moretti, *Conjectures*).

machine-supported »distant reading«.⁴ But, is this activity still justified to be called »reading«?

»In the Field of Letters«

The title of an exhibition curated by Peter Weibel in Graz in 2001⁵ points to a way of clearing the dilemma. He states that »the letters are the only binding element of literature«⁶ (Weibel 39). To read a text one has to gain access to letters in order to read words and their meanings. Are therefore the letters a sufficient condition in order for an artistic project spreading through different media to be experienced in ways similar to literature, i.e. that it can be, strictly speaking, read?

An illuminating illustration and an answer to this question can be found in one of the main works of arguably the most well-known Slovenian new media artist. *Deep ASCII* (VHS, 55 min., website, 1998)⁷ by Vuk Ćosić is a film displayed as a dark surface with green letters, as if on an old and obsolete version of computer display.⁸ The luminance of the film frame is represented by the relative luminance of a character: letters, punctuation, etc.

4 Moretti's term potentially entails an internal dichotomy: initially it was used to refer to a methodologically necessary refusal of reading primary sources, i.e. the literary works, to a »'second hand' [literary history]: a patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading*«. The reason for this is the otherwise unmanageable vastness of »world literature«. His research programme was: »Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*«. The methodological consequences are profound: new »categories« are needed, Moretti argues for experimenting in literary scholarship, he e.g. notes in passing that »the larger the geographical space one wants to study, the smaller should the unit of analysis be« ... (Moretti, *Conjectures*). The experimental and scientific aspects in the concept of »distant reading« speak in favour of linking it to Moretti's involvement with computer-based analysis of texts. In 2011 the Stanford Literary Lab published the first Pamphlet (Allison et al.) where another concept of »distance« to the literary works is used. If in 2000 Moretti was using other scholars' papers, that were themselves based on personal reading experiences, in 2011 the »quantitative formalism« dispenses with human interaction with written texts. In the two pamphlets published by Stanford Literary Lab it seems clear that the removal of the human reading poses a fundamental theoretical problem (Moretti, *Network*). For the discussion of theoretical issues regarding computer-based text generation and analysis see Vaupotič: *Who Chooses*.

5 *Im Buchstabenfeld*, Neue Galerie Graz, 7. 10.–4. 11. 2001.

6 [...] die Buchstaben sind das einzig Verbindliche der Literatur.

7 ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) refers to character encoding in 7 bits of information, allowing for 128 characters including the non-printable control characters. Programming by Luka Frelih, produced by Ljudmila and World Wide Video Festival, Amsterdam (<<http://www1.zkm.de/~wvdc/ascii>>, 9 Jun. 2011). Ćosić – together with Walter van den Cruisen and Frelih member of the ASCII Art Ensemble – has used ASCII-type visualization and intermedia transcoding in several projects from 1998–99: in a number of *ASCII Music Videos*, *ASCII History of Moving Images* (which includes an excerpt from *Deep ASCII*), *History of Art for the Blind* (the latter two are part of *The Official History of Net.art* series, vols. III and IV), *Instant ASCII Camera* (hardware by Borja Jelić), *ASCII Architecture* (projection of ASCII code onto buildings), *ASCII Unreal* (programming by Igor Kolbas; a 3-D virtual space covered with ASCII imagery – in fact a Russian or a Yugoslav Cyrillic version of the code).

8 In the description of the project's concept the choice of display references the Pong arcade game (<<http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/throat.htm>>, 12 Jun. 2011).

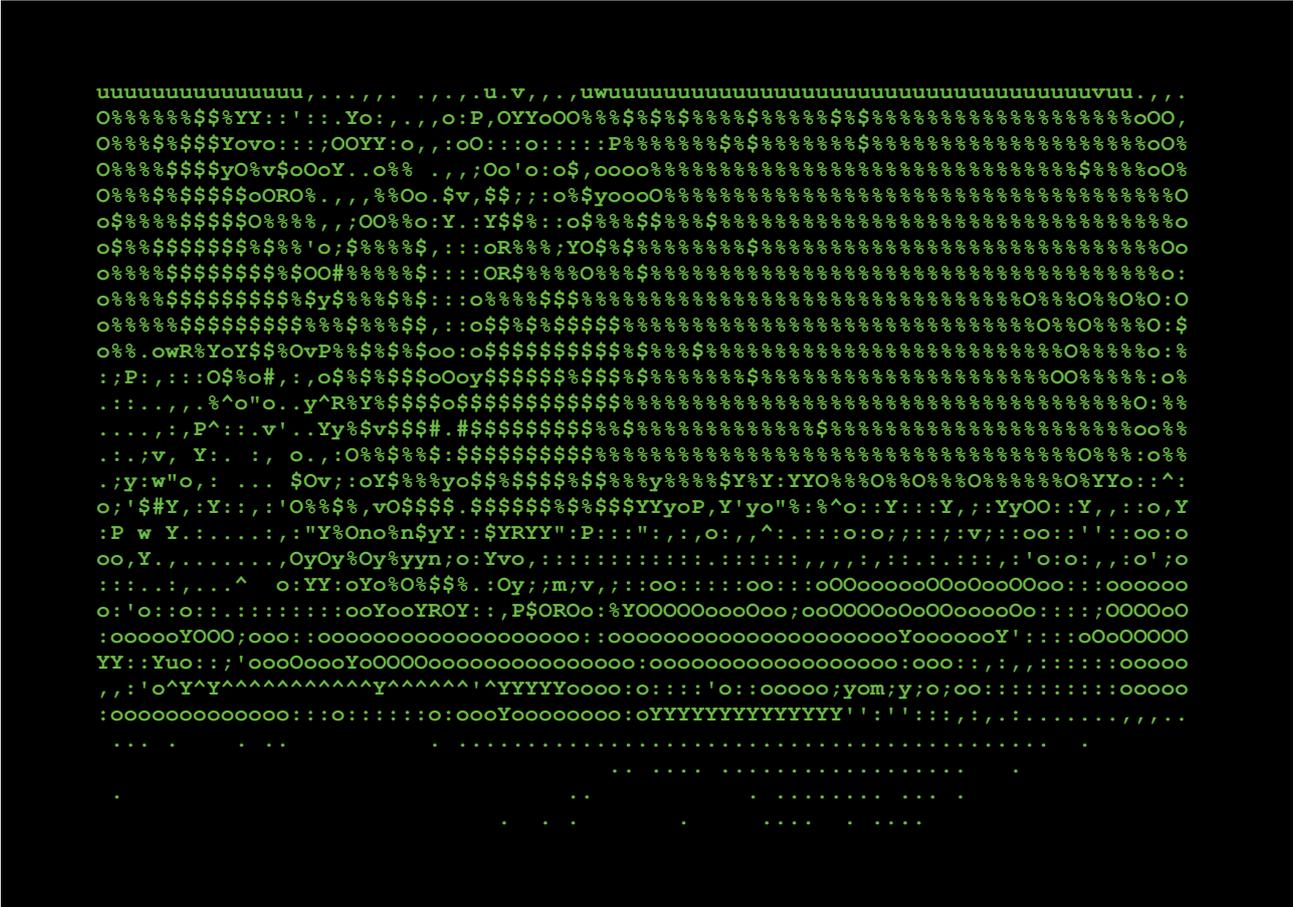


Figure 1. *Deep ASCII*, by Vuk Ćosić. A film frame presented as a matrix of ASCII characters (a palm-tree is visible on the left side).

The objects from the film are more easily recognized when the matrices of ASCII characters are animated with the same speed as the original film. Thus, e.g. by using the Java plug-in in a web browser, a digitized film material is displayed on a severely reduced quality. Still, the images and the action from the film are preserved.

In the animated Internet version a click on the surface covered with letters and other typographic units stops the frenetic flow of the *Deep ASCII* surface. The user now faces a static matrix of letter-like symbols that could potentially be read following the lines, columns or even contours - a planar »field of letters«. ⁹ The static array of ASCII characters is used in many derivative works following the basic principle of ASCII transcoding, e.g. Ćosić printed out individual »frames« as digital versions of graphic arts and displayed them on gallery walls. The most interesting parts of the image - from the point of view of the ASCII characters - are the soft transitions, the areas where the brightness value changes only slightly and therefore the software for ASCII

⁹ Ćosić programmatically associates his work with visual poetry (<http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/vuk_eng.htm>, 12 Jun. 2011).

transcoding contiguously displays different characters. The dark areas of the film, represented by a blank »space«, and the whites, rendered as green »0«, are much too repetitious to look like a written text.

Deep ASCII project features prominently in the conclusion of Manovich's influential monograph *The Language of New Media*. The subchapter *Cinema as a Code* links the two main strands of the language of new media: the programmable code, which is the defining characteristic of the »new« media (27, 47), and the – for Manovich's approach characteristic – emphasis on the cinematic.

The ASCII code that results when an image is digitized is displayed on the screen. The result is as satisfying poetically as it is conceptually — for what we get is a double image: a recognizable film image and an abstract code together. (331)

In *Deep ASCII* and other ASCII-based projects by Ćosić Manovich recognizes a successful fusion of the cinematic and the abstract code. The fusion is in fact a »performance« or »staging«: »Vuk Cosic's ASCII films [...] effectively stage one characteristic of computer-based moving images – their identity as a computer code« (330-1). But, how is such a »double image« interpreted? First, of course, through the discursive framework of conceptual art:

[The] ASCII code [...] evokes not only a peculiar episode in the history of computer culture but a number of earlier forms of media and communication technologies as well. [...] The code was originally developed for teleprinters [...] ASCII code was itself an extension of an earlier code invented by Jean-Maurice-Emile Baudot [...] which] itself was an improvement over the Morse code[...] By juxtaposing ASCII code with the history of cinema, Cosic accomplishes what can be called an artistic compression. [...] he [...] “encodes” in these images many key issues of computer culture and new media art in these images. (332-3)

The ASCII encoding of films therefore foregrounds the medial identity of the message, which, presumably, leads to better understanding of the new media object. Ćosić himself goes even further, however with a slightly different twist:

Typography and issues of general graphic design are inseparable from the ambition to convey meaning with text. At the level of a single sign, writing IS a painting, a very well thought-of graphic leaning on millennia of work. (<http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/vuk_eng.htm>, 12 Jun. 2011)

He links his work not only with computer culture and new communication-technologies history but with the history of cryptography and even with the history of writing as such. Here a conceptual turn is possible, which would follow Vilém Flusser's theory of »techno-imagination«. The »technical image« is the visualization of a linear textual interpretation of a traditional image – i.e. it is an image of a theoretical concept

formulated in a text (Flusser, *Kommunikologie* 103). However, Ćosić's and Manovich's interpretations of the *Deep ASCII* project do not strictly distinguish between a »techno-image« and a traditional image, which allows them to project various meanings into the code. Nevertheless, from the literary scholarship's point of view at least, the question remains open: how does one read or »grasp«¹⁰ the code-level of the *Deep ASCII* imagery?

The *Deep ASCII* website suggests multiple ways of discerning the meaning of the ASCII code. Playback in word processors, such as OpenOffice.org Writer or Microsoft Word is possible - e.g. by means of copying text-like ASCII »code« into a document and scrolling it, which, to some degree at least, animates the encoded images from the original film source. The website simulates this by means of JavaScript technology.

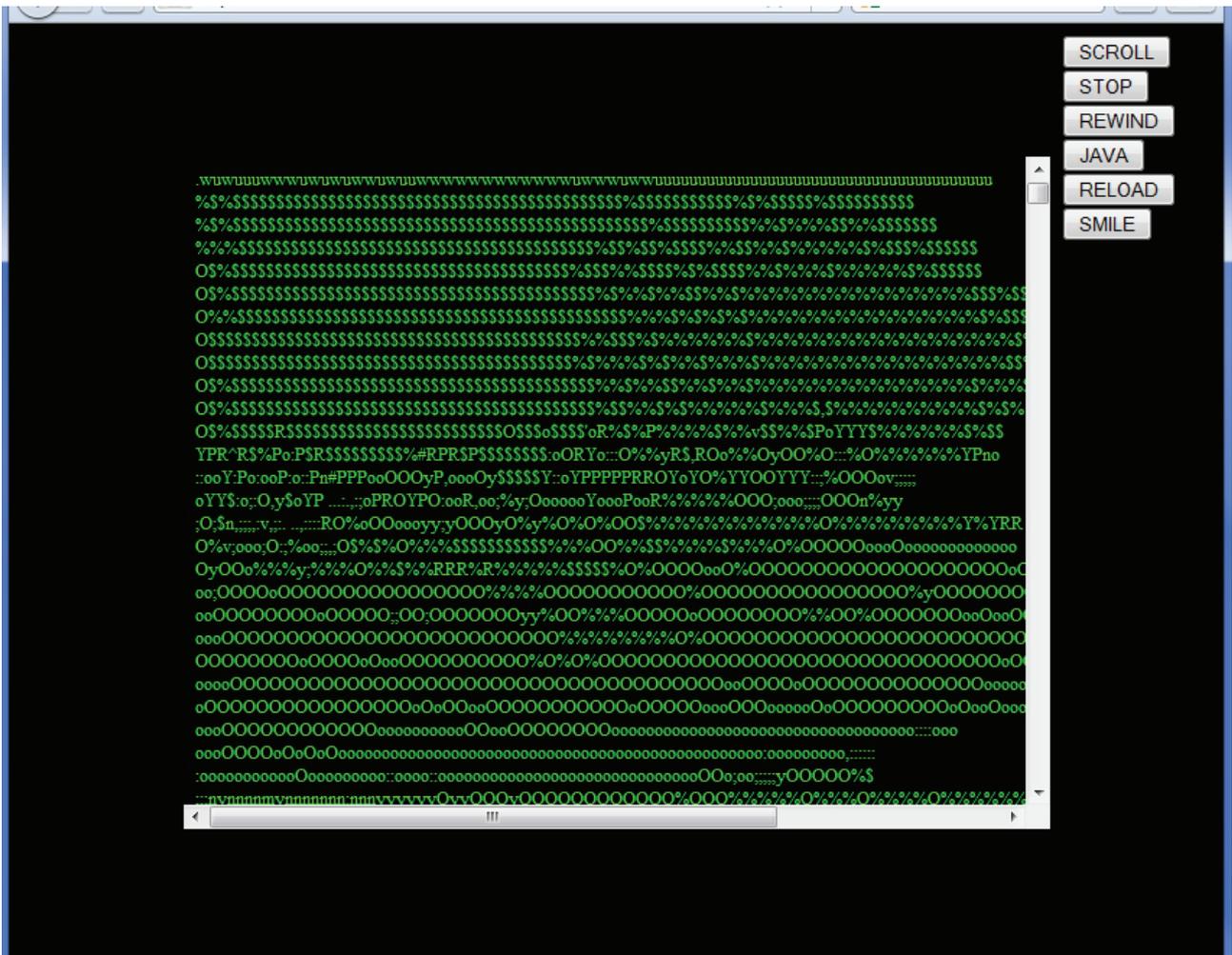


Figure 2. JavaScript animation of text on the *Deep ASCII* web page.

10 See Flusser's notion »erfaßen« as opposed to »lesen«, to read (Flusser, *Kommunikologie* 267) .

However, even while examining the static array of characters no proper reading experience takes place; the difficulty in discerning the image completely exhausts the viewer's attention. The »SMILE« button on the right in Figure 2 indicates a possible transformation from visual perception to the domain of reading, i.e. deciphering arbitrary notations in an unknown linear code. Čosić proposes the following conglomerates of ASCII characters:

:-)
or

:->
and subsequently more complex emoticons, such as

~~:-(
But also the following group of characters:

(alternately,
This is a randomly generated word with some contiguous punctuation, that is proposed as a point of entry into the text as well. But is this reading? No! It is either a serendipitous finding of meaningful patterns of signs - to which only the most devoted readers would commit - or a systematic computer-based pattern recognition. In both cases, it is the computer that reads the ASCII code - i.e. all of it -, since there is simply too much »text« for the human cognition to grasp. Also, it needs to be noted that the »smilies« are, according to C. S. Peirce's typology of the relations between the sign and the object, iconic interpretations of symbols (symbols, because they depend on the code), therefore the so-called »degenerate« symbols, grasped as images or diagrams.¹¹ It is evident that the code, which would allow one to decode the meaning of the quasi-letters,¹² is radically unclear.

That the irony serves as the foundation in all Čosić's projects is obvious, likewise the ASCII series includes the »logical« conclusion of the issue of reading the ASCII-encoded images. In *ASCII History of Art for the Blind* (1999)¹³ a selection of well-known images, e.g. paintings from Lascaux, are converted to ASCII and the resulting text is passed through the text-to-speech software. Black humour subsequently

11 See e.g. C. S. Peirce: »On the Algebra of Logic: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Notation« (1885), in *The Essential Peirce*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. 1:226.

12 It is clear that the characters are letters, but their use does not treat them as letters, they are (iconic – i.e. stemming from the material properties of the sign) substitutes for luminance values (<<http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/terms/icon.html>>, 19 Jun. 2011).

13 <<http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/blind/>>, <<http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/blind.htm>>, 19 Jun. 2011

invalidates any attempt to understand the ASCII-encoded images. Another eminently textual project by the same author is his famous (illegal) copy of the *Documenta X* website known as *Documenta Done* (1997).¹⁴ Florian Cramer comments on the specific relation of ASCII Art to literature: »Its poetics is a literary one to the extent, that it reflects on the textual encoding of all digital signs«¹⁵ (Cramer 3). However, the bare availability of the text as an artistic project is not a literary phenomenon, since it belongs mainly to the appropriation art practices or the initiatives focused on the on-line intellectual property rights.

Literariness in New Media

The issue concerning the literariness as a feature of some new media art projects demands an interdisciplinary answer provided through an interdisciplinary dialogue and negotiation between literary scholarship and theory of new media. In such interinstitutional exchange the theory of new media emphasizes and represents methodological aspects that are specific to new media communication and therefore differ from the methodologically constructed object, which is studied in literary scholarship. The literary scholarship in turn approaches the question from its own perspective, and the literariness of a new media object, e.g. a potential new media sonnet, has to show similar properties as forms of literature in traditional media, such as books, in order to meaningfully employ the same term. How - or, if at all - it is possible to describe the literary aspect of new media? A possible solution would be to delimit the share of the new media language in a media hybrid, e.g. a website that automatically builds texts in a sonnet-like shape. However, in this case the descriptive result would need to be based on a given theory, explaining how the new media language transforms literature, and on a clear definition, about what is the preserved literary core.

Slovene new media theorist Janez Strehovec explores the transformations of the basic element of a literary text - but also of texts beyond literature - by introducing a new unit, the »word-image-body-movement«. The term aims to inseparably link verbal, visually-perceptive, materially-tangible and dynamic features of texts that have

14 <<http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/dx>>, 9 Jun. 2011

15 Ihre Poetik aber ist insofern auch eine literarische, als sie die textuelle Codiertheit aller digitalen Zeichen reflektiert.

transitioned to new technical media. A methodological consequence of the terminological hybrid is the unavoidable interdisciplinarity. The literary scholarship's approaches are linked to the theories of visual communication and visual arts, and further to the explorations of the body in the theatre, in performance art or within interactive sculptural works and installations. But also to the research problems posed by the dynamic presence of a verbal sign, which is studied in animation theory, theories of film and video languages and within the framework of research focused on information manipulation in digital information technologies, e.g. information visualization.¹⁶

Compared to new media theory a much longer tradition of literary scholarship can provide an answer to the question about what is literariness.¹⁷ The classical study by Roman Ingarden *The Literary Work of Art* (*Das literarische Kunstwerk*, 1931) explicates the theory of the »literary-aesthetic experience«, which is a particular construct that results from reading, and which is the foundation for the existence of literature. For the question of new media literariness Ingarden's note on the relationships between different media is clearly relevant. He describes a number of »borderline cases« of literary works including »the stage play«¹⁸ (Ingarden 317-30; Vaupotič, *Literarno-estetski*). The theatre is a plurimedial discourse which foregrounds the intermedia hybridization. The audience in a theatre actively constructs - in each individual consciousness - complex worlds of meaning based on spoken words, which however are supplemented by paraverbal and other signs. And it is these additions that spread to the borderline of the literary artistic domain and cross over the boundaries of the verbal media, e.g. towards the art of acting and the visual language of set decoration, costumes and props. A person standing outside of the dramatic situation, such as a narrator present on the stage that comments on the dramatic action, nevertheless still uses primarily literary means of expression. Ingarden describes this situation:

16 See Strehovec *Besedilo in novi mediji*, pp. 36, 44, 69-71, 87, 185-216, 274.

17 There is another traditional way of defining literariness using Roman Jakobson's writings, which conceives it as a *differentia specifica* for language use in the domain of fine arts as opposed to religious, political or other non-artistic verbal communication. However, the question about art in verbal communication and in new media is beyond the scope of this paper. Ingarden's notion of »purely literary« refers to artistic as well as non-artistic use of language, e.g. to »the essence of a literary work (or a literary work of art)«, and at this point excludes the problem of »genuine works of art« that he discusses further on (Ingarden 320, 317, 330).

18 [die] Grenzfälle; das Theaterstück

Thus, in a stage play an element [real objects that take over the function of reproduction, and the actors' play] which in a purely literary work is not even present takes over part of the function of representation. Only when objects and events are only talked about and reported, objects that are situated or take place »off« stage, is the manner in which they are represented and depicted fully the same as in a purely literary work.¹⁹ (Ingarden 321)

Ingarden concludes that stage plays can be classed as »literary works, though not the *purely* literary«, i.e. »borderline cases« pointing towards the works of painting (322-3).

The criterion of literariness as provided by Ingarden's theory of the literary-aesthetic experience is mirrored in Adelaide Morris' introduction to the collection of papers titled *New Media Poetics*. By referring to Carrie Noland and Mark B. N. Hansen²⁰ she proposes a particular form of experience, which brings new media poem to life:

[...] the virtual space of the image [i.e. new media poem's database and display algorithms] is transformed from an impersonal cognitive schema—for example a set of equations [...]—into an immediately graspable, profoundly personal experience, one played out through its interface with the proprioceptive and affective body of the user. (Morris 17)

Using Hansen's term »digital image«, which transcends the visual,²¹ Morris proposes a kind of new media experience, which involves a user's body that participates in transhuman »dynamic information structures«. A virtual and schematic entity, with, using Ingarden's words, »empty spots« intended to be filled by the reader or the new media user/operator, is the basis for concretization – not a literary one but for something radically new and different. It seems apparent that the two types of literary and new media experiencing, at least for now, coexist. Also, it seems useful to take Ingarden's criteria for a literary mode of communication to distinguish it from other modes inhabiting a media hybrid.

It is obvious that *Deep ASCII* doesn't involve any literary concretization. It is worth looking at another new media project by Vuk Ćosić, which moves closer to using verbal means to convey its meaning. *Nation - Culture (Nacija - Kultura, 2000)* is a real-time projection of the search stream from the – at that time popular – Slovene web-portal *Mat'Kurja*.²² The queries submitted by the users were displayed in the

19 So übernimmt in einem Schauspiel einen Teil der Darstellungsfunktion ein Element, das im rein literarischen Werke überhaupt nicht vorhanden ist. Nur dort, wo es sich um Gegenstände und Geschehnisse handelt, von welchen nur erzählt und berichtet wird und die sich »außerhalb« der Bühne befinden bzw. Abspielen, ist die Weise, sie darzustellen und zur Erscheinung zu bringen, durchaus dieselbe wie in dem rein literarischen Werke.

20 The argument is actually founded in Espen J. Aarseth's notions of cybertext and ergodic literature.

21 See his *New Philosophy of New Media* (2006).

22 <<http://www.matkurja.si>>, the page, as it appeared in 2001, is archived on *Internet Archive* (the *Wayback Machine*):

shape of an Italian sonnet. The installation was included in an exhibition commemorating the 200th anniversary of France Prešeren's birth,²³ and the typeface used in the projection mimicked the typeface from the first edition of Prešeren's book of poems. *Nation - Culture*, being again a predominantly conceptual project, ironically linked to the national literary canon. In this case the project does indeed necessitate a »purely« literary element²⁴ that gives access to the project's message. In ASCII based projects the visual language provided »short-cuts« to the meaning of the cluster of letters, whereas here the bare sonnet shape just isn't enough, because it doesn't change at all - and it is, of course, a trivial element, because it faithfully copies Prešeren's visual layout. By reading the words the visitor of the exhibition is able to discern the boundaries of individual queries and, through repetitions, even individual on-line surfers behind them. In order to do this, the user has to »understand« and, in Ingardenian terms, »concretize« the textual fragments (i.e. the queries). The words evoke images in the viewer-reader's mind, such as the imaginary worlds that one experiences while reading literature,²⁵ but at the same time, the reading is essential also from the functional point of view - the recognition of individual voices by means of reading discloses the »result« of the project - the disclosure of the true nature of a Slovenian (web surfer).²⁶

New Media Sonnet? (The Slovene Situation)

The question of a new media sonnet as a poetic form that has transgressed the limits of a strictly literary domain is mirrored in the term »sonnetoid«, or sonnet-like, in the title of the paper. Here it alludes to the literature-immanent obstacles on the path to a new media

<<http://web.archive.org/web/20001206061700/http://www.matkurja.com>> (31 Jul. 2010). See also Vaupotič *Who Chooses*.

23 Prešeren (1800-1849) is the Slovene »national poet«.

24 Possibly a non-artistically verbal one.

25 E.g. William J. Thomas Mitchell argues within the framework of »visual studies« that all media - including literature - are mixed and hybrid media. »Instead of the stunning redundancy of declaring literature to be a 'verbal and not a visual medium,' for instance, we are allowed to say, what is true: that literature insofar as it is written or printed, has an unavoidable visual component which bears a specific relation to an auditory component, which is why it makes a difference whether a novel is read aloud or silently. We are also allowed to notice that literature, in techniques like ekphrasis and description, as well as in more subtle strategies of formal arrangement, involves 'virtual' or 'imaginative' experiences of space and vision that are no less real for being indirectly conveyed through language« (Mitchell 350).

26 *Nation - Culture* could, from another point of view, be considered as an example of a textual machine that disturbs reading by animating the text, such as *overboard* (2004) by John Cayley and Giles Perring (<<http://programmatology.shadoof.net/index.php?p=works/overboard/overboard.html>>, 25 Jun. 2011).

reconstruction of the sonnet form. According to Slovene versologist and poet Boris A. Novak sonnetoid genre entity is defined by some elements that characterize a sonnet, but at the same time the new genre is too different from a sonnet to consider it a special type of sonnet (*Sonet* 82). However, the sonnet is not just a poetic form:

a sonnet [is] essentially the only form that has survived the decline of traditional poetics during the revolution of the poetic language at the break of 19th and 20th Century, [therefore] it is also the only form still alive, in contact with which the creators and poetry lovers can still sense, what is the meaning and purpose of poetic forms.²⁷ (109)

Novak notes that the sonnet occupies a special place in contemporary poetry in general, but also within the limits of the Slovene literary canon in particular - »whenever a Slovene poet experiences the need to say something important, he reaches for the sonnet«²⁸ (94). The specific Slovene context has to be taken into consideration, where Prešeren's sonnets represent the very summit of the Slovene literary Parnassus, and at the same time they perform the cohesive function in the conception of the »Slovenian« (as a constructed property) in general (Juvan 227-30). As a consequence, faced with a sonnet the Slovenian reader does not think of Italian, German or Shakespearean sonnets, not even of a general example of Slovene sonnet, but of Prešeren's sonnets, *The Wreath of Sonnets* (*Sonetni venec*, 1834) in particular, and simultaneously thinks of Prešeren's sonnets' function within the Slovene literary and cultural system. From this point of view it seems that the »Sloveneness« of the sonnet scheme represents a counterweight to the elements of »Internet English« and the language of spam, e.g. in Teo Spiller's sonnetoid websites, in particular his *Spam.sonnets*.

New Media Poetry: Spam.sonnets (Soneti neželene pošte, 2004–)

Poetry unavoidably demands the maximized condensation of the verbal expression, which by now firmly remains beyond the reach of any attempts at an automatic production of verses and poems. The completely »free verse« in fact does not exist, what the term refers to are the *ad hoc* rhythms in the text lines that can be described using traditional versological means (*Sonet* 45). Poetry automatons, such as *Poesie-Automat* (1974, 2000)²⁹ by Hans Magnus Enzensberger that randomly repositions

27 sonet [je] tako rekoč edina oblika, ki je preživela zaton tradicionalne poetike med revolucijo pesniškega jezika ob prelomu 19. in 20. stoletja, [zato] je tudi edina še živeča forma, ob kateri ustvarjalci in ljubitelji poezije sploh še lahko začutijo, kaj je pomen in namen pesniških oblik.

28 kadarkoli slovenski pesnik začuti potrebo, da pove nekaj pomembnega, poseže po sonetu

29 <<http://www.poesieautomat.com/>>, on 25 Jun. 2011 the site seems to be infected with a virus.

verses and verse-parts within the poetic schemes, prove to be a problem, as soon as the resulting texts are read by humans. The disorder within the quasi-verses and quasi-poems blocks the reader's understanding. Enzensberger acknowledges the problem in the theoretical treatise and suggests some sort of solution which still seems to be looming the new media domain. Enzensberger refers to three domains that are necessarily bound together in the attempt to construct a poetry automaton: the mechanics of the automaton itself, the language and the poetic secondary (e.g. artistic) structure. Three authorial positions correspond: the programmer, the linguist and the poet (Enzensberger 3.2.2.). Enzensberger proposes two solutions that are theoretically very different. The first pursues the following continuum: automaton, poetry, language, and finally communication context. Automaton uses the poetic polisemy as a bridge to establish a meaningful relationship to the communicative context. The language is the medium between poetry and human understanding. What stands out are the inverted positions of language and poetry - it is not language that rises to the level of poetry, but the automaton generates poetry, which then problematically »descends« to the level of language. This model is in fact a form of compromise that presupposes the continuous work on improving the automaton, on the one hand, and the reader's investment of personal contribution in the meaningless text fragments, on the other, to bring the »automatic« poetry to life (2.4.6.).

However, by quoting Walter Benjamin, Enzensberger proposes another model for the logic of the poetry automaton. Following the Marxist traditions a different way from poetry *via* language to automaton, which is part of a material reality, emerges. In other words: poetry uses a simulated language to become better poetry. To understand this within Benjamin's system of thought his monograph *The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels, 1928)* needs to be recalled. There he refers to Johann Wilhelm Ritter, a physicist and essayist, a member of Jena-Weimar cultural circle in the early 19th Century, who experimented on his body, stimulating it with electricity, in order to grasp the laws of nature as philosophical synthesis and sensual experience (Benjamin 214; Daiber). The link between Benjamin's theory of *Trauerspiel* and the artwork without an aura is made explicit by Adorno (*Aesthetics and Politics* 121). From this point of view a consequence of

the automaton, that could justify such a mind-bending argumentative turn, is its elimination of all possible attempts to commodify poetry (Enzensberger 1.5.2., 2.4.4.). Nevertheless Enzensberger's proposal of *Poesie-Automat* that haphazardly combines verses does not realize the genuine technical artworks in Benjaminian sense, since they take chance in the recombination processes literally, as the irregular state of affairs, which cannot ever rise above the bare randomness. The collaborative approach among the poet, the programmer and the linguist should reach a mutual understanding and a potential new »language«, as opposed to »playing« different disciplines one against the other.

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by Elaine Richard

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DISCREET OVERNIGHT PHARMACY!,
 something se*xy,
 Whats the best time?!

Men! Enlarge_your_manhood,
 Special Offer, 1 Month Free,
 Women s Health, Impotence, Heartburn, Migraines and MORE!
 (<<http://www.netartist.eu/textuality/forbiden-sonnet.html>>, 25 Jun. 2011)

Teo Spiller's *Spam.sonnets* website is an original and (arguably) successful way of solving the dilemma of how to endow the stream of texts, that the author necessarily loses grip of, with meaning. Spiller has collected a database of over 1000 email header subject fields from which the computer then randomly selects. Fifteen lines are placed as verses in the visual layout of the Italian sonnet: the title and the four stanzas. There are no real strophes or even verses, however, what Spiller's website does successfully produce, are meaningful lines of text in a special language, that - since it is a sign used in marketing - possesses some aesthetic qualities.³⁰ The quasi-verses are utterances made by authors - »Buy a Viagra!« - and ready-mades at the same time. The

³⁰ But no artistic qualities, of course.

only sonnetoid element of the spam.sonnets is their graphic layout, which nevertheless suffices to evoke the tradition of the sonnet genre (*Sonet* 87). Being sonnet-like is here for all intents and purposes a surrogate for Sloveneness (see above).

Literature and Time: News Sonnets (Novičarski soneti, 2010–)

"C'est un vrai soulagement !"

(Monday 18th of July 2011 14:48:36 UTC)

Mort du PDG de la société Caravelle dans l'accident d'un avion de tourisme,
Amsterdam en lutte contre les squats,
les investisseurs se reportent sur l'or,
le mythe de la chanteuse et du marin sous l'assaut du couple Dietrich-Wayne.

Amsterdam en lutte contre les squats,
La France va reprendre l'adoption d'enfants haïtiens,
Les hackers d'Anonymous s'attaquent au géant Monsanto,
la liberté de la presse est menacée.

plus de 200 voitures incendiées en petite couronne,
après les régionales, la colère de Jean-Paul Huchon,
état des lieux, enjeux et propositions pour une rénovation.

La piscine fantastique de Marine Blandin,
Les Bleues qualifiées pour les demi-finales de l'Euro de basket,
Peut-on se fier à l'indication de radiofréquence de son téléphone portable ?
(<http://www.netartist.eu/textuality/news-sonnet.html>), 18 Jul. 2011)

In 2009 Spiller returned to his exploration of the artistic possibilities of the new media sonnet. He created a new website, which collects news headlines from different news web pages in real-time (using the RSS protocol) and displays them in the shape of an Italian (or a Prešernian) sonnet. Individual lines are tied to the domains the news relate to and are therefore thematically ordered. The generated »news sonnets« are displayed in the following languages: English, Slovene, German, Italian, French, Spanish. The project »explodes« as soon as the user touches (with the cursor) the lines: the letters of the quasi-verse are enlarged to cover the whole screen (making the text unreadable).³¹ The reading experience provided by *News Sonnets* is highly unusual because the texts brutally evoke literary experiences of real referents. The text is stylized by the mediating journalistic language, but, because of the real-time aggregation of content, the visitor of the website experiences it as real news. While reading the lines (i.e. the news headlines) the

³¹ This feature works in Mozilla Firefox browser, while the Internet Explorer merely blacks-out the line.

reader learns potentially relevant information that might require an immediate response, such as in case of flooding etc. This reconfiguration of literature in new media changes the by now constant property of poetry at a fundamental level: the quiet thoughtfulness and its orientation towards the timelessness of the message (e.g. in Prešeren's works the focus on the consolidation of the Slovenian essence) gives way to the intent observation of the contingent and fleeting moment of new media experience. The temporal dimension of the reading experience in poetry thereby virtually reverses.

Literature of Proximity: SMS Sonnets (SMS soneti, 2010)

Figure 3. *SMS soneti*, by Teo Spiller.

The *SMS Sonnets* website focuses on how literature occupies the space. The book-reading - or *mutatis mutandis* listening to a person reading or reciting - presupposes spatial proximity between the book and the reader, the author of the text printed in the book however is spatially and temporally distant and does not intervene into the reader's interaction with the text. The literary scholarship distinguishes between the primary and the secondary existence of the literary work, of which the former is inaccessible to the author too, except in the fleeting moment of the

inscription, when the word-material is fixed on some external medium that can be read subsequently. Every reading, the author's reading too, takes part in a multiplicity of readerly concretizations of the secondary existence of the literary work (Kos 70-1). Spiller's *SMS sonnets* turn this situation upside down, the reason being the previously unimaginable speed of information exchange facilitated by the new communication media. The communication system of the Spiller's project consists of three roles: (1) the passengers on the city buses in Ljubljana, who - for the most part unaware of the *SMS Sonnets* project - use interactive displays installed on buses to display publicly text messages sent anonymously from mobile phones, (2) the user of the project's web interface that displays the last 500 text messages intended to be recombined into the Prešernian sonnet scheme,³² (3) and Spiller as the author-initiator and the designer of the multiuser sonnet-production project. The user of the *SMS Sonnets* website, a sort of reader-author constructing a sonnet, is constrained by a list of possible short jokes and other pointed text fragments, but may, if needed, add textual fragments - by using the cellular phone -, which are subsequently added to the list and available for use in the sonnet.³³ Spiller saw that also »hacking« attempts took place, in which the users programmed code to add verses to the sonnet bypassing the list - and the apparent intentions³⁴ of the project designer. This mode of use adds a supplemental layer to the project.³⁵

»SMS sonnets« are proper sonnets. They were not built automatically by a machine, to the contrary, each belongs to a concrete author, who is invited to sign it with her or his name. It is the user-author, who is responsible for the literary quality of her or his particular sonnet. What is new is the circumstance that the web-based poetess or poet is confronted with a multiplicity of voices of people travelling on Ljubljana city bus network as a sort of »atmosphere« that engulfs and influences the writing. A more important new feature is the phenomenon of spatial condensation of the project: the display of Ljubljanian's text messages is dispersed along the lines of the city buses, whereas the

32 <<http://www.netartist.eu/SMS>>, 18 Jul. 2011

33 The building of the sonnets resembles game playing, which is an important element in Aarseth's interpretation of cybertexts.

34 Of course, belonging to net.art culture Spiller potentially previewed and explicitly approved such systemic interventions.

35 It would be interesting to invite the traditional literary sonneteers to use the *SMS sonnets* web service in order to link the new media sonnets with the traditions of sonnet writing.

Internet user is globalized and despatialized, connected to the ubiquitous website, depending only on the link to the Internet. The space of the *SMS Sonnets* project therefore radically differs from the way how traditional literature occupies the space. Regarding the innovative use of the new media language and the new techniques of information exchange it is important that the participants in the communicative system are able to enter a dialogue (or a polylogue) – a very specific and a regulated one –, since even the people riding buses in Ljubljana may react to the new texts submitted to the network of bus-mounted displays by the web-sonneteer. Therefore the reconfiguration of the space of (new media) literature doesn't concern mere physical distances, but recasts also the interhuman experience of proximity, as it is determined by the literary communication (Flusser, *Kommunikologie weiter denken* 248-9).

A Plethora of Sonnets

It is not unexpected that Spiller continues to build sonnet-engines that use the sonetoid energies to foreground different aspects of our contemporary world. The web-based projects that were described above – *Spam.sonnets*, *News Sonnets*, and *SMS Sonnets* – are bound together by a progressive tendency to endow meaning into the automaton-based textual artefacts; as a sort of collection of new media poetry Spiller published an artist's book based on the output of these poetry engines under the title *New Media Textuality (Besedilnost novih medijev)* in 2010. In 2011 Spiller published a new artist's book which virtually subverts the synthetic tendency of the previous works. In the *New Media Semiotics (Znakovnost novih medijev)* Spiller foregrounds the materiality of digitized and algorithmically manipulated inscriptions, the errors and misunderstandings that are necessarily produced as a side-effect. E.g. the *Add Sonnet (Reklamni soneti)* project reuses the mechanism that drives *SMS Sonnets*, only the database of available quasi-verses is replaced by verbal advertising messages from the Facebook website. The ready-made algorithms and the complete meaninglessness of content provided by the commercial texts discloses a void, which is characteristic for the poetry automatons. *Sonnets for Machines (Soneti za stroje)* go even further, since the binary code of zeroes and ones is ironically addressed to the machines without allowing any human access.

The inflation of textual material represents a limit of the artistic use of texts in new media. The human measure is exceeded. But what is, in fact, the »human« in the last sentence. A tentative answer is provided by a historicizing glance on literariness, which places its beginnings at the end of the 18th Century. E.g. Jonathan Arac links the book medium and the author-construct (Shakespeare) as forces that evoke the modern literary work of art.

[...] the special force of literature in its form as a book—was crucial for Coleridge [...] as he reflected on why so fine a critical mind as Ben Johnson had been unable to recognize Shakespeare's greatness so fully as Coleridge thinks he should have. The answer is that Johnson had only the plays, one after another »as acted,« to respond to; only since 1623 have we had the book that allows us to think about the plays in relation to each other, and thereby »to form a just notion of the mighty mind that produced the whole.« (Arac 21)

The web-based and partially automatized »literature« steps beyond the universe of books as a new medium, which requires new cohesive energies. Something different from the Shakespeare's »mighty mind that produced the whole« of Coleridge (which, historically, inaugurates the age of the novel), which will mediate the interhuman communication on-line.

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Abstract

Franco Moretti's notion of "distant reading" as a complementary concept to the "close reading", which emerged alongside the computer based analysis and manipulation of texts, finds its mirror image in a sort of "distant" production of literary works - of a specific kind, of course. The paper considers the field, where literature and new media creativity intersect. Is there such a thing as literariness in "new media objects" (Manovich)? Next, by focusing on the three web sites that generate texts resembling and referring to sonnet form the paper asks the question about the new media sonnet and, a more general one, about the new media poetry. A mere negative answer to the two questions doesn't suffice, because it only postpones the unavoidable answer to the questions posed by existing new media artworks and other communication systems. Teo Spiller's Spam.sonnets can be viewed as an innovative solution to the question, how to find a viable balance between the author's control over the text and the text's openness to the reader-user's intervention. In conclusion two concrete reconfigurations of the experience of (new media) literature - and through it the world that surrounds us - will be considered: the experience of time in Spiller's News Sonnets and the spatial dimension as implied in his project SMS Sonnets. News Sonnets use current news obtained via RSS feeds from various sources, which makes the "messages" contained in the lines of the sonnet a potential incitement for the reader's immediate action. The SMS Sonnet spreads the territory, where the communication takes place, beyond the text-reader confrontation and into the community of participants of an interactive (non-artistic) communication system.