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Lineages of German-language electronic literature: the Döhl Line

Abstract

Pour présenter un aperçu de la littérature électronique en langue allemande, nous avons filtré quelques axes historiques qui peuvent expliquer comment différents genres ont émergé et se sont développés. Les toutes premières expériences de poésie générée par ordinateur constituent un bon point de départ car c'est un sujet sur lequel la communauté internationale s'accorde en général. Nous les avons examinées selon 5 axes de développement actuel : expériences en poésie concrète, écriture collaborative et environnements auteurs, hypertexte de l'hyperfiction à la net littérature, l'art du code, l'écriture des blogs et plus. Une analyse historique montre que ces cinq axes de la littérature numérique sont principalement issus de deux lignées philosophiques, poétiques et artistiques de la culture allemande remontant aux expériences des années 60 : L'école de Stuttgart de Max Bense dans laquelle s'inscrivent Reinhard Döhl et Theo Lutz, et les expériences d'image numérique de Kurd Alsleben et Antje Eske à Hamburg. Cet essai se concentre sur la première qui est également la plus ancienne en langue allemande.

Mots clés : littérature électronique en langue allemande, lignes historiques, générateur de poésie électronique, e-littérature en ligne.

Abstract

In order to present an overview of German language electronic literature, the author of this essay filtered out historical lines that show and explain how the development of individual genres came about. A good starting point for this may be the very first experiments of authors with computers to generate

electronic poetry, a subject the international community mostly agrees upon. The following model of five historical lines of development is suggested: Concrete Experiments, Collaborative Writing and Authoring Environments, Hypertext ô from Hyperfiction to Net Literature, Code Works, Blogging and more. A historical analysis shows that these five lines of net literature are based upon two prior German strands going back to philosophical, poetical and artistic experiments in the 1960s: On the one hand, the Stuttgart School by Max Bense with exponents Reinhard Döhl and Theo Lutz, the latter producing a first example of digital poetry in 1959. On the other hand, the computer graphics experiments of 1960 and the punched-card linker projects by artists Kurd Alsleben and Antje Eske in Hamburg: I. Stuttgart School or Group (Bense/Döhl/Lutz etc.) > Stochastic Texts, II. Hypertext/ Mutuality (Alsleben, Eske) > Computer Graphics, Linker. The focus for this essay is set on the strand « I Stuttgart School » and the line « 1. Concrete Experiments ». For all other lines the sympathetic reader finds descriptions and historical examples in the essay « From Theo Lutz to Netzliteratur » in *Cybertext Yearbook* 2012.¹

Keywords: German language electronic literature, historical lines, electronic poetry, net literature, concrete experiments, conceptual art.

Introduction

Today, there are only a few articles on German-language electronic literature available in the current universal language of English. This makes it difficult to bring the rather diverse German-language scene of net literature to a closer attention of our European and American colleagues. On top of this, there are virtually no forums and archives of German-language net literature existing anymore. Many sites and forums have been deleted from the net, while others remain virtually inactive for years and have to be perceived as internet archive corpses. Just a few are still active and provide material for current discussions.

First of all you may have to sight what is still there: For one, there is the *Mailingliste Netzliteratur*.² The list has existed since 1996 and was the main forum for discussion on German-language electronic literature and digital poetry for some years. The mailing list still exists, but is rarely used anymore for

referrals, comments and discourse. An archive of texts does not exist. From here on you can easily find the websites of individual exponents of this mailing list. They are forming a not necessarily academic community of net literature. It includes writers Oliver Gassner, Dirk Schröder, Jan-Ulrich Hasecke, Claudia Klinger, Regula Erni and many others. Furthermore it involves the web sites of internationally known writers and artists such as Friedrich Block, Florian Cramer, Johannes Auer, Susanne Berkenheger, Frank Klötgen, Esther Hunziker, Jörg Piringer, ÜBERMORGEN, AND-OR and others. Finally, the initiatives of individual researchers and research institutes should be included. Over the years, at least some major research projects and initiatives emerged: so at the *ZKM (Centre for Art and Media)* in Karlsruhe, under the direction of Peter Weibel, the *POESIS* exhibitions of Friedrich Block (Kassel Art Temple), the first bringing together of the scene in the symposium *Digitaler Diskurs* in Romainmôtier³ and subsequent events, the online journal *Dichtung Digital* with reviews, analysis and references, the large-scale research project *media upheaval* in Siegen with an international focus and several influential publications, the incipient net literature preservation project by the literature Archives in Marbach, the archiving initiatives of the magazine archive Innsbruck and the Web archive of important authors and articles of electronic literature and digital poetry by *Netzliteratur.net*.⁴ Especially in academic discourse, there were many individual initiatives, that proved to be very important for the development and history of electronic literature, such as the numerous works by Heiko Idensen, the research on network science by Reinhold Grether, research on computer poetry by Saskia Reither, the study of literature in electronic space by Christiane Heibach, the various works of Roberto Simanowski, the thorough investigation of digital authorship by Florian Hartling, and the work of Norbert Bachleitner and others. Finally, one could also consider the connections to net art, performance art, Locative Art, Game Art and similar movements, but this is beyond the scope of this review.

Eskelinen stated in his report, *Electronic Literature Publishing and Distribution in Europe* (2011)⁵ that the German-speaking area was one of the three centres of electronic literature in Europe, but it is virtually ignored by the others.

Alongside France and the U.K., Germany or more precisely the German speaking region of Europe is the centre of European electronic literature. Interestingly, it seems to be more open to the two other European e-lit

centres than they are towards the German region or each other. Its networked orientation is towards Anglo-American e-lit and e-lit-theory, but until lately this has been a onesided effort, as the scene in the UK has favoured its transatlantic contacts while also establishing some connections with the French e-lit scene.⁶

Onesided efforts between the literatures as described by Eskelinen unfortunately lead only to isolation. How and where would we have to begin if we want to bring the rather diverse German-language scene of net literature to a closer attention of our European colleagues? Why not create a timeline of the important German-language net literature projects as a base for international researchers? Why not filter out some historical lines that may explain better how the development of individual genres came about? A good starting point may be the very first experiments of authors with computers to generate electronic poetry, a subject the international community mostly agrees upon.

The Döhl Line: Concrete Experiments

The *Stuttgart School* around Max Bense was the background for the first computer-generated poem by Theo Lutz in 1959 and the subsequent experiments by Lutz, Reinhard Döhl and other concrete poets.⁷ The group was one of the first that concerned itself with new poetic and media emergences. In the late 1950s they ventured to use the ZUSE machines for their first poetic attempts by computer. The focus was their interest in combining artistic production with new media, inscription systems and discourse networks. With the help of Theo Lutz, Reinhard Döhl and Max Bense realized that a computer like the *ZUSE Z 22* did not only offer a variety of possibilities and applications for practical mathematics but also provided you with properly interpreted mathematical functions for language.⁸ The subsequent first «interpretations» were of a scientific nature. And with the help of electronic computers the Stuttgartians put forth frequency dictionaries and used them for exact statistical and aesthetical text analysis. But soon a literary «interpretation» was added; Lutz, Bense and Döhl reversed the procedure of the production of word indices and instructed the computer, «to synthesize and issue texts with help of an entered lexicon and a number of syntactic rules».⁹ The first programme of 1959 with about 200 commands, that used sentences from Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle (Das Schloss)* did not result in intoxicating poetry, but Lutz, Bense and Döhl thus had

created an incunabulum of artificial poetry that did lead to Bense's important theoretical distinction of natural and artificial poetry. Consecutively, in the 1960s, experiments with computer-generated graphics, concrete music and the connection between language and electronics ran parallel to the experiments with concrete visual poetry, permutations, random texts and cut-up method. Döhl and Bense finally bundled all these experiments in their well known manifesto of the the Stuttgart group, *state of the union (zur lage)* (1964) but they added explicitly that they are not interested in these opportunities in a pure form, but much more prefer the poetry of the hybrids.

So they were among the spokesmen of the concrete visual poetry movement of the 1960s, an international literary movement, that arranged the linguistic materials with the terms « cybernetic and material poetry »¹⁰ in a new and different way.

In place of the poet as a visionary, and a juggler of content, emotion and atmosphere, the craftsman re-entered. He handles the materials and sets the material processes of transition in motion and keeps them going. The artist today realizes accomplishments on the basis of conscious theory and deliberate experiment. [...] We speak again of a Poietike techne.¹¹

Eventually decades later in 1994, these experiments had paved the way for a new electronic literary movement with the Stuttgart exponents Döhl, Johannes Auer, Susanne Berkenheger, Martina Kieninger, Oliver Gassner and others.¹²

Second Wave of the Stuttgart School

A symposium to Max Bense in 1994 started Döhl's second phase of his pursuit of literature and computers. The symposium was held on September 9 and 10, 1994, in Stuttgart's city library in the Wilhelmshaus and addressed the topics of semiotics and aesthetics, disobedience of ideas and results in Max Bense's thinking. In addition to Elisabeth Walther-Bense and Reinhard Döhl, among others Eugen Gomringer, Helmut Kreuzer, Manfred Esser, Ilse and Pierre Garnier, Bohumila Grögerova and Josef Hirsal attended the symposium. In the audience was, among others, the Stuttgart artist Johannes Auer, who, as head of the artgroup *Das Deutsche Handwerk (The German Craft Movement)* just then prepared the first major exhibition at the *Württembergische Kunstverein*. He was particularly fascinated by the stochastic programming texts

and experiments of Theo Lutz from the 1950s and 1960s, which were to be seen at the symposium in a PC-emulation, and were presented at a workshop by Lutz himself. This work became a double bridge: on the one hand, it showed that the group around Bense – especially with Lutz and Döhl – had already used the computer as a literary medium in the 1960s, and with Bense's distinction between natural and artificial poetry had theoretically reflected upon the topic. Within this context there was the opportunity to build on the knowledge and experience of Bense's Stuttgart Group and tie in with new literary experiments involving the Internet that had only just been launched in the German speaking countries. On the other hand, they offered young people a common foundation on which they could build. After the talk, « Stuttgart-Tokyo and back » Döhl and Auer started their dialogue on digital poetry. Auer was particularly interested in the concept of the experiment and the harmony of experiment and reflection, which is so characteristic of the *Stuttgart School*. In the exhibition « 8 Gruppen 8 Räume » (8 groups 8 spaces) at the *Württembergische Kunstverein* in December 1994, in which *Das Deutsche Handwerk* linked individual work, installation, self-curating and self-interpretation. The craftsman Frieder Rusmann (the former artist-pseudonym for Johannes Auer) at the same time appeared as bogus art historian who interpreted all parts of the exhibition for the audience, including his own. These interpretations in turn, were also included in the exhibition. Theory, as well as paint, canvas, or concepts can be used as material for art. This conviction was shared by Auer with the *Stuttgart School*, but mainly with Reinhard Döhl, who had lived this alliance of theory and practice all of his professional life in its properties as an artist and scientist. He also had an abundant wealth of experience in combination and interfacing of text and image.

In addition to the *symposium Max Bense* in autumn 1994 other events were organized with the mottos « max bense. zeichen und konkrete texte » (precise pleasure. max bense signs and concrete texts) and « Als Stuttgarter Schule machte » (When Stuttgart made the school). They showed cooperative and multi-media aspects of the artistic activities by this network around Max Bense: community readings by Esser and Harig, current literature by Mon and Döhl, a retrospective of typography at the *Wilhelmshaus*, an exhibition « Aus den Pariser Skizzenbüchern » (From the Paris sketchbooks) at *Buch Julius* with contemporary art. There were exemplary radio plays of the Stuttgart group from the 1960s broadcasted via *Westdeutscher Rundfunk*, and the *Wilhelma* theater featured a recent piece on Gertrude Stein, performed by the group *Wortissimo*

led by Gerdi Sobek Beutter. This may show well how current the Stuttgart group and its influence was from the 1960s all the way to the early 1990s. And at the same time this may depict how logical and smooth the transition was from the concrete projects to the net projects of the Stuttgart group in the 1990s. Döhl himself interpreted this development always as a consistent continuance and progress of the Stuttgart tradition of concrete and stochastic poetry. This way younger people gradually found an entry into the network of the *Stuttgart School*. A « school » that had always seen itself as an open and fluctuating group. On the basis of the *Stuttgart School* of Bense and concrete poetry, in the mid-1990s, a new group in Stuttgart started to develop, that dealt with experimental poetry and literature on the Internet. Besides Döhl and Auer, authors like Martina Kieninger, Klaus Thaler alias Klaus F. Schneider, Frank Amos, Dirk Schroeder, Bastian Boettcher, Oliver Gassner and Susanne Berkenheger belonged to this new group, that was able to shape the German-language net literature thoroughly, even if the media and the critics hardly took notice of them.

In 1992 Friedrich W. Block had turned his attention as curator and artist to e-poetry. Together with André Vallias he had organized a first exhibition of computer-generated poetry under the title « p0es1e »¹³ in the gallery on the market in Annaberg-Buchholz (Saxony), Germany. The shown works from Brazil (Augusto de Campos, Eduardo Kac, etc.), the U.S. of A. (Richard Kostelanetz, Jim Rosenberg) and Germany / Austria were part of the movement of concrete poetry and had a unique electronic background. Concrete poets had already worked with the topic of electronic poetry for some time.¹⁴ It is no surprise that precursors existed and that there was some kind of tradition in working with mechanical, electric and electronic elements in concrete art and poetry. Only in recent years some researchers have re-discovered this track and ventured on the task of describing the connections of electronic literature and the works of the French *Oulipo* movement (since 1960) and the *Stuttgart School* in more detail. An excellent work is the comprehensive presentation of computer poetry by Saskia Reither (2003). In her study of computer-based poetry that does not use the dispositif of the network or Internet, she chiefly traced the international character of this movement over a period of more than 40 years from the *Stuttgart School* and *Noigandres*, *Po.Ex* to *OuLiPo* and *A.L.A.M.O.*, *L.A.I.R.E.*¹⁵ The actual precursors of the 1960s found the way into the memories of academics, mainly by contributions of Philippe Bootz (2006), with international appearances, and the Stuttgart artist and curator Johannes Auer

with his replication and adaptation of Theo Lutz' « Stochastic texts », which he performs at various festivals since 2005 (Auer 2005, 2006). *Oulipo's* first electronic work goes back to 1964, four years after its founding, and led to a movement with still active groups and literary activists like Bootz, who has dealt with the topic since 1977/78 as an artist and academic researcher and who might be considered to be one of the most active participants in the network of *ELMCIP*.

In the 1990s Döhl and Auer developed a series of collaborative works with artists and for artists of concrete poetry, and thereby manifested the proximity of the new digital poetry and the experimental movement of concrete poetry. This is how the open international works « H. H.H. ô Homage to Helmut Heißenbüttel »¹⁶ (1996) and « Epitaph Gertrude Stein »¹⁷ (1996) developed as Internet projects with participation of more than 30 poets each. These two projects show the importance of an intense system of dialogue for Döhl's preoccupation with the Internet. Using simple means, he managed to transpose the dialogic approach of the *Stuttgart school* into the new medium. For Döhl, this included the involvement of active fellow artists, a big reason why Döhl succeeded in establishing a seamless connection to the concrete poetry and to his numerous previous cooperations at the borderline of art and literature, of which especially the mail art projects had a clear influence on the new digital activities. The issue of cooperation between artists of different disciplines and alignments was the main topic for many other literary web projects too, such as the project « TanGo » of 1997, « ein schwäbisch spanisches Mehrautorenprojekt zwischen Stuttgart und Montevideo » (a swabian spanish collaboration of authors between Stuttgart and Montevideo),¹⁸ initiated by Martina Kieninger and developed in collaboration with Auer and Döhl. There was the multilingual project « Poemchess » (1997/98),¹⁹ that was based on a japanese chain poem. There was the project « Avantgardez vous ! Kettenmails aus der Badewanne » (Chain mails from the bathtub) (1998),²⁰ organized by Klaus Thaler alias Klaus F. Schneider, that emerged by means of dialogic emails from five authors. And finally there were the tributes « Vorhang für Ernst Jandl » (curtain for Ernst Jandl) (2000)²¹ and « Trauerseite für Jiri Kolàr » (Threnodical page for Jiri Kolàr) (2002).²² The influence of these cooperative projects was so strong that even the younger fellow artists could not resist starting cooperative projects as a tribute to Reinhard Döhl. Thus the project « Utopia » (1999),²³ « eine Klebcollage zum 65. Geburtstag » (a glue collage for the 65th Birthday), initiated by Auer and supported by 16 participating artists; and finally the spontaneously started

« Denkseite für Reinhard Döhl » (Thinking (of) Reinhard Döhl page) (2004)²⁴ initiated by Dirk and Franziska Schroeder shortly after Döhl's death. The last collaborative net project that Döhl was involved in, was « The Famous Sound of Absolute Wreaders » (2003),²⁵ in which the author Döhl as reader Döhl as well as a reading and read, a listening and listened to entity, was multiply and concretely interwoven and made to disappear or dissolve in his acts as author and reader. Organised by Auer, this project involved six authors and resulted in an hour-long artistic radio broadcast²⁶ that the *Kunstradio* (art radio) programme of Austrian Broadcasting (Channel *Ö1*) emitted in fall of 2003, thereby also tying in with the radio plays by Döhl in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the same year, the concrete project was awarded the Audience Prize of the « Netzliteratur Wettbewerb » (net literature competition) of *DTV* and *T-Online*.

In addition to the cooperative projects, individual projects evolved as well. Döhl and Auer, both experimented with the new techniques and possibilities of the medium as much as it was possible at the time. Their kinetic experiments lived by a simple application with animated characters and an ingenious combination of hyperlinks and animated GIFs, which joined each other as dance partners and on a level of technical methodology started a tango on stage of the computer screen. The best known example is probably Auer's visual poem « kill the poem »²⁷ (1997), that appears in a precise formally stripped visual and auditory execution, which is also reminiscent of the Pop Art movement. A draft of this by Auer shows the gun and the outline of the victim with the pun « Gun-Gone »: Valerie Solanas shoots Andy Warhol. The tango is back. The dance becomes a shooting of the poem, the reader initiates it her-or himself: an active destruction of the text.

The prime example of « worm applepie for Döhl »²⁸ by Auer offers concrete electronic poetry in perfection as well. This animated poem is based on Döhl's concrete incunabulum « apple » (1965). This apple comes with the proverbial worm in it. The animated poem « worm applepie for Döhl » (1997) adds a playful aspect to the original work ô not only in the title, which gives hope for a warm apple pie. Auer added a worm in the animated form of the word worm to the apple. This worm does not hide in the apple anymore, but starts eating the apple right before the eyes of the beholder. The red worm is getting bigger, and the apple smaller until it has been completely eaten up. But shortly after completion of munching, the game starts all over again and thus makes possible an endless repetition of this process. A process that also draws attention with a wink to the disastrous consequences of the apple/serpent mythology.²⁹

In his other works in the broadest sense, Auer revisits the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. His performance projects always include algorithms and specific instructions. « The starting point, » Florian Hartling notes, « is a development of conceptual art that reduces art to an idea or an instruction for the beholder. Such instructions for the audience, however, are easily programmable via an algorithm. »³⁰ By way of action instructions the performance has a direct connection to the algorithm. Projects like « The Famous Sound of Absolute Wreaders » or « Search Lutz » use and process these interconnections aesthetically and offer artistic reflection. Here, the concept gets a higher importance than the finished product. The idea of the concept dominates the physical product, and the recipient becomes part of the artwork. Right in all three parts of « Search Trilogy » (2006-2011),³¹ this shift towards the concept clearly occurs and the recipient is interactively integrated into a work of art as an assisting force. And finally, as an even more important component the computer-generated poetry in turn requires an interpretive component, in order to unfold its effect. The three works « Search Lutz » (2006), « Search Songs » (2008) and « Searchsonata 181 » (2011) show these conceptual components very clearly. All these works work with live streams of search terms from the Internet and input from visitors. They convert these data into language, into musical notation or convert them into encrypted sounds.

Towards Conceptual Art

The movement of this experimental line of net literature in the wake of the *Stuttgart School* grew more and more conceptual with Auer and was accompanied by a continuous development of events in the City Library and the house of literature of Stuttgart. The years 2005, 2008 and 2009 saw three net literature festivals with the title « Literatur und Strom » (Literature and Electricity).³² The first festival featured an award (« Junggesellenpreis ») for best net literature and may have been the signal for the second stage of the development of German-language net literature and digital poetry. Earlier in 2004 an event including the publication of the memoscript « \$wurm= (\$apfel>0)? 1:0; »³³ had been organized as a tribute to Reinhard Döhl, the concrete poet and thinker of the *Stuttgart School*, who had died the same year. A fourth net literature festival, which connects exponents of concrete poetry and experimental net literature, was held in May 2012 on the topic sound poetry with the title « Laut P ».

It may be added at this point of the essay that only a selection of all works of a specific historical line can be described and mentioned here. Surely works of Ubermorgen, Sylvia Egger, Oliver Gassner, Joerg Piringer and various other authors may need to be included in this specific line. Unfortunately there is room only for a few more references. The artgroup Ubermorgen from Vienna exerts a great influence on the conceptual branch of net literature. Ubermorgen's works all operate on a conceptual level. The group imports elements of media activism into net literature and Internet art. Inke Arns talks of the works « [V]ote-auction »³⁴ (2000) and « Google will eat itself »³⁵ (2005) as a « Detournemet of digital technology », that is an alienation and thus a re-appropriation in a situationist sense. In Ubermorgen's adaption this turns into a so-called « shock-marketing ». Hans Bernhard and Maria Haas achieve this by launching campaigns in media stories about media through media. They scatter their information in guerilla manner into mass and individual media channels and make highly regarded public controversies happen. At the end, the user and participant sometimes does not know anymore whether these stories are fiction, or whether the conceptual construct in the background does really exist. This shows that the conceptual aspect is by far the most important element of this art by Ubermorgen. A similar but somewhat more concrete « Medienaktionismus » (media activism) is operated by Dragan Espenschied and Alvar Freude in their actions « insert_coin » (2000), « freedomfone » (2002) and « OmniCleaner » (2002), all belonging to their well debated « online demonstration platform for human and civil rights in the digital age ODEM ».³⁶

Sylvia Egger is also working with a strong conceptual approach, referring to the Dadaist movement with a special respect to Walter Serner and more current neodadaist poetry. Jörg Piringer's works,³⁷ though less conceptual, impress mostly with their playful and dynamic poetical approach and their proximity to modern music. Piringer creates auditory and visual poetry mostly with individual letters, sounds or words, and many of his pieces are generative poetry. Some time ago Piringer started developing his own apps for his projects with which his readers can interact on mobile devices. Complementing this, Piringer operates as an experimental musician as well as a voice artist, and creates hardware applications and inventions, which he uses for auditory and interactive performances.

NOTES

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⁵ Eskelinen, Markku et Giovanna di Rosario. *Electronic Literature Publishing and Distribution in Europe*, Preliminary Draft, University of Jyväskylä, 03.04.2011, 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14f.

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