Chapter 1
The Digital Situation of Poetry

Poetry in the twenty-first century finds itself in a media-technological situation that is both new and not new. On the one hand, it is not new because technology and media have always been part of poetry's environment. On the other, the situation is new because digital technology and media have configured novel frameworks and situations for the production, distribution and reading of poetry. Poetry books might contain programming languages. Using computer code, Mez Breeze, for example, has created a new language, "mezangelle." Algorithms write poetic texts, as in the case of the poet Johannes Heldén and Håkan Jonson's *Evolution* (2014) or Karen ann Donnachie and Andy Simionato's *The Library of Nonhuman Books* (2019), an autonomous art installation where artificial intelligence is programmed to create new books from old publications. Jason Edward Lewis produces visual and tactile poetry as apps to be read on a single mobile medium, preferably with a touch screen, in his series of poems called *P.o.E.M.M.*: "Speak," "Know," "Migration," "Bastard," "Choice," "White" and "Death" (2007–2013). Poetry travels between media with highly different technological and institutional affordances, i.e. between books, computers, theater scenes, performances and installation rooms.

These new technological conditions of poetry have had a direct effect on poets' and readers' everyday lives as well as on literary institutions. In Canada and the USA, the career of Rupi Kaur has been a powerful illustration of such changes. Her success demonstrates the ways in which social media intervenes with the field of poetry. The story is well known: Kaur established herself as a popular poet on Instagram, with an overwhelming number of readers. Following this online success, she made her debut with the collection of poems *Milk and Honey* (2015), topping the New York Times bestseller list. This instant success would have been unlikely without Instagram and other influential social media. Similarly, social media has played an important role for new voices such as R.M. Drake, Atticus, Nayyirah Waheed, Lang Leav, Yrsa Daley-Ward and, though on a smaller scale in terms of followers and financial success, Sabina Store-Ashkari, Alexander Fallo and Trygve Skaug in Norway.

Furthermore, in the digital era, sound poetry and poetry readings have expanded their fields of distribution and sites for performance, becoming at once more visible and audible. This phenomenon, in turn, has had an impact on poetry's appearance in physical rooms, on stages and in public and semi-public places. These shifts have not only been limited to poetry slams but have blossomed into widespread practices through which young and emerging poets have developed their own styles, as in the cases of Maren Kames, Amanda Gorman and Olivia

Bergdahl. Recorded poetry readings may not be new, but the explosion of digital archives and distribution networks have now made it possible to reach a broad audience almost immediately, wherein algorithms as well as humans have assumed the joint role of curator (see e.g. Urrihio 2019).

Likewise, in Scandinavia, YouTube has come to serve as both an archive and a distribution platform for poetry, be it in the development of YouTube poetry, as an exhibition site for poetry films or as a place for the distribution of older and more recent poetry readings, live or recorded. In Denmark, YouTube played a central role in the reception and popularity of Yahya Hassan's debut, the collection of poems *Yahya Hassan* (2013). Videos of Hassan melodiously reading and chanting his work, in imitation of an imam's recitation of religious texts, helped to intensify certain political aspects of the poems in the book. When these videos reached social media, Hassan almost immediately became a more popular, if decidedly more controversial poet.

Johannes Heldén is one of several contemporary poets in the Scandinavian countries who creates poetic projects that travel across digital and analog platforms and that materialize as digital poems, museum installations and poems in book format, among others. Other poets such as Christian Yde Frostholm, Cia Rinne and Ottar Ormstad produce digital poetry and installations where old and new media meet, developing conceptual poetic work for presentation on computers and in books. These and other well-known "print poets" like Mette Moestrup, Marie Silkeberg and Nils-Øivind Haagensen publish and distribute their poems online and on social media. They use digital media and create a variety of poetic forms, whether they are newer forms of poetry such as algorithm-controlled poems, poems that are "born digital," including Twitter and Instagram poems or older practices that are being revitalized, such as poetry readings on digital platforms and digital poetry films. Simultaneously, the same poets continue to publish poetry in books, magazines, separate chapbooks and anthologies. The situation, as it has been described by many scholars, seems to be that literature and poetry more than ever travel between media (Kjerkegaard 2017; Müller and Stahl 2021), a description that could be applied more generally to describe a significant aspect of digital culture (Hansen 2010; Uricchio 2019). Therefore, it may well be that the printed book is still among poetry's, and the poet's, preferred medium, even if it no longer reigns hegemonic.

When the media situation, the media environment that poetry is a part of, changes, the character of poetry inevitably changes with it. This transformation becomes especially noticeable when it takes place in digital media. Poetry on web platforms, on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as SMS poems and poetry in podcasts are aspects of a movement in which literature is partly released from print media and in which the non-print characteristics are a common defining feature of literary and poetic practice. Indeed,

poems differ from each other, and just as much as they will vary in form, content and function on their respective platforms, they all respond to changing media conditions.

Situating Scandinavian Poetry in the Computational Network Environment investigates how contemporary heterogeneous forms of Scandinavian poetry interact with and work in a digital media environment, how digitally programmable and network media intervene with and shape new poetic forms and remediate older forms of poetry and how this poetry, through self-reflexivity, reflects on media and material frameworks of which it is a part. Thus, an examination of poetry in digital media can shed light on the media conditions of some contemporary poetry and its situation, as well as more generally on certain aspects of the digital media technology that surrounds us and is part of our everyday lives.

I am particularly concerned with how poetry interacts in and with, constitutes and is constituted by a media environment, which, I will argue, is a computational network environment.[1] This is an environment dominated by programmable and network media, a media ecology wherein poetry travels between analog and digital media, where both medialization and materializations of poems appear in an egalitarian structure, in which no media or versions are valued as more important or are given a higher aesthetic status than others. Here, poetry enters into relationships with other art forms and travels across media. It is relational, at once configured by, co-configurator of and a reflection on the interwoven machinery of digital and analog media that makes up the creative space for poetry and the arts. Therefore, a central claim of this book is that poetry not only survives in or adapts to but also actually helps to develop the digital-analog environment of which it, intentionally or not, is a part. Among others, Ralph Müller and Henrieke Stahl make a similar observation, emphasizing how contemporary poetry is in a process of metamorphosis: "More than any other literary form, contemporary poetry is in transition." (Müller and Stahl 2021, 5) These critics point to the diversity of lyrical genres that have emerged and gained new relevance in the contemporary world, where the digital media situation is part of the reason for these changes. Consequently, in order to understand contemporary poetry in the digital age, it is important to explore how poetry changes and adapts and how such changes and adaptations in poetry entail new ways of writing, reading and thinking. Digital media is part of the situation of contemporary poetry, and it is obviously part of our everyday lives, but it is also becoming a more common mode of and media for experiencing poetry. Therefore, this book poses the further question of what poetry in digital media can

---

1 A more thoroughly elaboration of this concept is found in Chapter 2.

tell us about thinking and writing in a world that is increasingly dependent upon databases, algorithms, networks and collaborations between humans and machines. I ask what the media conditions for poetry in the digital age are, what changes have taken place in the media environment for poetry, how poetry has responded to these changing media conditions and how such changes are expressed through contemporary poetry in digital media.

It might be that some readers find the scope and intention of this book vaguely stated. This is due both to the book's explorative approach and to its material, which represents a variety of poetic genres and practices in digital media. Additionally, in order to suggest what poetry can be and to describe the media situation of poetry and the environment of which it is a part, it will be vital to apply a broad and inclusive approach. As I have already hinted at, by analyzing a small selection of contemporary Scandinavian poetry, I will examine in detail some media technological conditions for poetic genres and practices that are representative for poetry in digital media. In this respect, *Situating Scandinavian Poetry in the Computational Network Environment* is an attempt to contribute to an understanding of the situation of poetry in digital culture and to promote an awareness of the interactions between poets and digital technologies as well as poetry and programmable and network media.

I would like to elaborate on an observation made by Müller and Stahl. They claim that poetry, because of the contemporary media situation and the diversity of poetic genres, has "gained new relevance in the contemporary world." (Müller and Stahl 2021, 5) In this context, I explore how Scandinavian poetry in digital media demonstrates its relevance for and engagement with political issues. Here, relevance must be understood in relation to the new media situation of poetry. Poetry has always been pertinent to individual and/or political situations. It provides knowledge about sensations, experiences, language and literature, and it engages in societal and political issues. Poetic works and political engagements are entangled. My point is that the contemporary media situation has changed matters slightly, one consequence being that digital media have stimulated, in a positive way, the potential of poetry to have a social impact and to function as a form of political and activist literature. Therefore, the book does not exclusively explore how web technology, social media platforms, applications, computer code and algorithms are related to the understanding of what poetry in digital media can be but also what it can do and how poetry can represent new ways of engaging societal challenges. The combination of the use of media technology and reflections on commitment to societal challenges underpin the fact that media technologies give way to new methods for poets to reach readers in a socially engaged fashion.

In terms of the Scandinavia context, Stefan Kjerkegaard and Dan Ringgaard have shown how contemporary poetry, across genres and media (and modalities,

including but not limited to writing) explores new ways of being political (Kjerke-gaard and Ringgaard 2017). Further, Louise Mønster points out that "[in] the new mil-lennium, poetry has to a much greater extent than in the 1980s and 1990s gone into clinch with current issues about e.g. climate, capitalism, consumerism, power rela-tions, ethnicity and gender." (Mønster 2019, 143) Peter Stein Larsen highlights the same tendency in his study of contemporary Danish poetry (Larsen 2016). This book follows these studies and examines how a small selection of Scandinavian poetry in programmable and network media is political.

The media situation

Situating Scandinavian Poetry in the Computational Network Environment posi-tions itself in the broader field of poetry and digital media studies. This field ac-knowledges that poetry cannot escape digital culture, despite how conservative or anti-technological poetry might at first appear to some readers – not to men-tion earlier approaches to the theory of poetry. Moreover, poetry's irrevocable sit-uation within digital culture remains the case whether we study digital culture in terms of artistic and cultural objects, expressions and practices that are produced, distributed and read on digital media platforms or in terms of artistic and cul-tural objects, expressions and practices in non-digital media. Poetry is part of a media environment and, as I will argue, is always technological, whether it is a medieval troubadour reciting poetry, a situation that among others involves the body as technology or AI-generated poetry that appears on computer screens. Such an understanding reflects the fact that historical, cultural and institutional environments always shape literature. For instance, it is well documented that the hegemony of the book medium in the emergence of modern Europe, including institutions such as libraries, universities and bookstores, as well as phenomena such as nation-states, copyright and freedom of expression have been crucial to any particular view of literature (see e.g. Hillis Miller 2002; Ringgaard 2017).

To acknowledge that literature changes whenever it interacts with different media technological preconditions is an observation that can be linked to contribu-tions by such media theorists as Marshall McLuhan, especially his emphasis on the meaning of media – "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964, 7–21) – and con-temporary theorists such as Friedrich Kittler, W.J.T. Mitchell, Mark B. Hansen and N. Katherine Hayles. In the introduction to the book *Critical Terms for Media Stud-ies*, Mitchell and Hansen claim that "media are our situation." (2010, xxi–xxii) The statement is a careful but significantly amended rendition of Friedrich Kittler's claim that "Medien bestimmen unsere Lage, die (trotzdem oder deshalb) eine

Beschreibung verdient." (Kittler 1986, 3)[2] The first part of the quote is well known, while the second part is included less often in quotes from Kittler's work. Kittler's claim has been mis- or over-interpreted as media-deterministic, most likely because of the verb "bestimmen," which in English is literally translated as "determine." Nevertheless, Mitchell and Hansen's observation is more open to what the media situation might be, that the situation is in flux, suggesting a variety of societal, communicative and aesthetic roles for media.

What the above-mentioned theorists – McLuhan, Kittler, Mitchell, Hansen and Hayles – have in common is that they all assume that technology and media are important for actions and events in our culture, not only for the twentieth and twenty-first century but also for a pre- and early modern cultural and social development. They all argue that media is not a neutral communicator of a content, be it a literary idea that materializes in a book or a poem that travels between books, digital platforms and a poet's body and voice at poetry readings. The lesson we have learned from McLuhan is that media has a social impact. Media structures society and is involved in creating its own content and use, as well as the meanings and experiences that unfold in the encounter with readers, viewers and users. Understood thus, this notion can be summarized in two words: media matters. It is this proposition that informs the position I take in this study on poetry in programmable and network media and its constituent medial situation.

The above-mentioned theorists apply a concept of media which is predominantly technological or denotes technical forms. In this book, I will also make use of a different concept of media, one which signals the single noun "medium" and is applicable to intermedial and multimedial poetry. Following Lars Elleström, these two concepts of medium or media represent what he names respectively technical media and basic media (Elleström 2010). The first involves the physical or tangible devices that are needed in order to materialize 'content' (Elleström 2010, 30). The second concept, basic media, which is another expansive concept, involves media in terms of social media platforms, web-pages and media as for example film, photography or computer games. This second meaning of the term is particularly engaged with such concepts as inter- or multimedia poetry, while technical media refers rather to physical objects such as printed books, human bodies, mobile phones, musical instruments and even the walls of buildings. In this regard, poetry is an art form that is materialized in several media. To be experienced, a poem in digital media needs a technical medium, like a computer; it requires a platform, like a

---

2 In the English translation of Kittler's book, the quote says: "Media determine our position, which – in spite or because of it – deserves a description." (Kittler 1999, xxxix).

website or a social media platform; and it must engage computer codes as well as written and spoken language, often in interaction with music and images.

Poetry is another concept in which the relation to media is not easy to define. It is a verbal art form that belongs to a range of traditions in different cultures, and often definitions disclose a certain media-specific bias. For instance, when James Longenbach defines poetry as "the sound of language organized in lines" (Longenbach 2007, xi), he reveals that his main concern is the reading of printed poetry, because "organized in lines" would not apply, for instance, to sound poetry. It is important to acknowledge that Longenbach emphasizes poetry as a particular sound of language. Still, the relationship between the poem in print and the poem as a material event, between the media involved, is not made clear since one reading of the definition suggests that the poem as the sound of language is determined by the poem as organized in lines. Likewise, Terry Eagleton writes that a poem is a "statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end." (Eagleton 2015, 25) Eagleton's main interest is poetry as print. He is one among many who emphasize line breaks as significant for poetry. In the quote, he interestingly mentions a few technical media, which make his definition thought-provoking for at least two reasons. One is that he, like Longenbach, excludes poetry in non-print media. It seems to be, as Jason Nelson writes about digital poetry, that just as the print medium "constrain[s] the poem to line by line, pressed letter by bound page," digital technology encourages poets to search for other ways to organize their poems, such as multi-dimensional and multi-temporal organizations (Nelson 2019, 337). Secondly, and more interesting for the scope of this book, Eagleton places the human being ("the author") in opposition to technical media ("the printer or word processor"). His purpose is obvious. He wants to make a distinction between poetry and prose literature, but he ends up with (at least) two unfortunate consequences. Not only does Eagleton exclude prose poems, but he also turns media into neutral devices. In other words, Eagleton's definition does not recognize that media matters. In addition, Eagleton excludes computer-generated poetry where the computer's algorithms would at least partially decide where the line should end. These are only two recent examples of how some definitions of poetry are made print-specific, even if they are presented in terms of an ambition to define poetry prior to its medialization and materialization.

This does not mean that media are the blind spot of poetry research. Approaches to poetry the last decade address ways in which changes in the media landscape have an impact on poetic genres. Virginia Jackson (2008, 183) engages the role of media when she argues that the understandings of poetry as an expression of the poet's individuality and subjectivity has led to what she calls the "lyricization" of poetry. She claims: "an idea of the lyric as ideally unmediated by

those hands or those readers began to emerge [by the early nineteenth century] and is still very much with us." (Jackson 2005, 7) With the lyricization of poetry, Jackson writes, poetic subgenres and such media as scrolls, chapbooks and recitation manuals collapsed. In other words, she points towards one moment in the history of research on poetry where media, with the exception of the poet's language as a medium, escaped the attention of researchers.

An even stronger emphasis on media is to be found in the research on the historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde poetry and in historical research on visual poetry, sound poetry, conceptual poetry and speech performance. The research on experimental genres and movements, such as those just mentioned, has, for a long time, argued that these art works appeared among others as a reaction to the standardization of literary writing and as a consequence of the domination of the book medium. Among others, Magali Nachtergael, in her book *Poet against the Machine: Une Histoire Technopolitique de la Littérature* (2020), shows how these poetic movements attempt to rethink the social and political dimensions of poetry by searching for the materiality of language – often language close to the language of everyday life – in other media, be it on a stage or on audiotape. These attempts were carried out by media-awareness and media-sensitivity. The same goes for approaches to the neo-avantgarde. As Marc Matter shows in an essay on E.E. Vonna-Michell and Balsam Flex, media and materiality were put in the middle of the attention in experimental sound projects released by this small press publisher (Matter 2022).

Likewise, the notion of media is omnipresent in the research on poetry, such as Loss Pequeño Glaziers' *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (2002), a work that according to Scott Rettberg significantly expanded the field of critical inquiry towards emerging poetry (Rettberg 2019, 14), Adalaide Morris and Thomas Swiss' *New Media Poetics* (2006), Marie Engberg's *Born Digital: Writing Poetry in the Age of New Media* (2007) and Chris Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry* (2007). More recent studies include Hannes Bajohr's *Code und Konzept* (2015), Ralph Müller and Henrieke Stahl's *Contemporary Lyric Poetry in Transitions between Genres and Media* (2021) and Claudia Benthien and Norbert Gestring's *Public Poetry: Lyrik im urbanen Raum* (2023). These exemplary studies show that an awareness of the meaning of media has emerged in recent poetry studies.

Why *poetry*?

Situating Scandinavian Poetry in the Computational Network Environment is the first monograph to explore fully both digital and digitalized poetry in digital media and contemporary poetry as an art form that travels in the media ecology

of digital and analog media.[3] While the research on literature in digital media, including electronic literature, has had prose literature as their main object of inquiry, academic books on contemporary poetry in digital media are few. Scholarly studies that are engaged with the situation of digital prose include Anne Mangen's *New Narrative Pleasures? A Cognitive-Phenomenological Study of the Experience of Reading Digital Narrative Fictions* (2006), N. Katherine Hayles' *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008), Astrid Ensslin's *Literary Gaming* (2014), Jessica Pressman's *Digital Modernism* (2014) and Bronwen Thomas' *Literature and Social Media* (2020). Likewise, the field of research on poetry in digital media mostly engages with digitally produced poetry. These studies include the works referred to above by Glazier, Morris and Swiss, Engberg and Funkhouser.

The present book positions itself as a continuation of similar contemporary projects that deal with poetry and media in Scandinavia and other European countries. Peter Stein Larsen at Aalborg University and the Center for Research in Contemporary Poetry (CERCOP), led a key project on poetry and media called "Contemporary Poetry between Art Forms, Genres and Media" (2013–2016).[4] The research group applied traditional and interdisciplinary methods and identified contemporary poetry within the framework of genre and genre-deconstruction, of interart and intermedial perspectives and media perspectives as in poetry between print and digital. Similarly, at Universität Trier Henrieke Stahl led the project on poetry in transition, "Lyrik in Transition" (2017–2021), which explored how the use of media have provided new transnational space wherein Russian poetry interacts with different languages and literary fields across geographical and national boarders.[5] Another relevant project in this context is "Poetry off the Page" (2021–2025), with Julia Lajta-Novak at the University of Vienna as principle investigator. The goal of the project is, among other things, to write a history of British poetry performance.[6] Here, the question of media is engaged with the focus on body and voice but also on alternative publication channels, presentational formats and institutional structures. Most

---

3 The interrogative pronoun "why" and the cluster "Why Poetry" in the section heading, should not be confused with the question "why is poetry important?" That would be misleading. As a matter of fact, the latter is a question that does not need to be posed, much less answered. By asking why poetry is important, one assumes that poetry somehow is threatened, that it needs to be defended and that its reasons need to be articulated. The fact is that the situation of poetry, as described in the beginning of this book, tells us that poetry is well, that it is visible and audible and that it demonstrates more than anything, its value, function and reason. If at all, the public and research attention given to poetry in general and, more specifically to poetry and media, shows an increasing interest in and an acknowledgment of the vast varieties of the poetic art form.

4 https://www.en.culture.aau.dk/research/academic-networks/cercop/ (5 December 2022).

5 https://lyrik-in-transition.uni-trier.de (15 December 2022).

6 https://poetryoffthepage.net/ (15 December 2022).

relevant to *Situating Scandinavian Poetry in the Computational Network Environment* is Claudia Benthien's "Poetry in the Digital Age" (2021–2025), which sets as its task not only the project of mapping the literariness and the poeticity in poems across different media but also the exploration of a range of poetic forms and formats, in order to develop analytical models and concepts for print and non- and post-print poetry and hence to grasp poetry's movement across media. Consequently, the project is concerned with the dimension of visual culture, music and performance within poetry, with the purpose of acknowledging the vast spectrum of poetic forms and practices, including artistic, cultural, social and political characteristics.[7]

These examples of recent and ongoing projects on poetry and media prove that there is an ongoing interest in poetry for understanding the media situation of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These projects demonstrate that poetry is a central art form to pursue if one wants to explore the digital situation of reading, writing and thinking, of new sensations and experiences and of the arts and literature more generally. By turning our attention to poetry in digital media, this book seeks to make sense of the art form's flexibility, mutability, survivability and its *raison d'être* in a rapidly changing media landscape and to study new ways in which poetry can thematize and respond to medial and societal challenges. Moreover, poetry has proven itself to be significant if one wants to study the relationship between literature and digital media. Chris Funkhouser claims in the introduction to *Prehistoric Digital Poetry* (2007) that "[d]igital poetry is the contemporary site of intense concern with poetics." (Funkhouser 2007, xvi) To this, we can add that poetry in digital media is an integral part of contemporary poetry. In other words, if one wants to explore contemporary poetry and its media-technological situation, it is crucial to include different genres and media of poetry, including the digital environments of which it is part. Additionally, poetry is a fruitful source for exploring digital culture. It commits to forms and new and unconventional materials in programmable and network media and consequently explores what poetry can be and do. As Scott Rettberg writes in defense of electronic literature: "[it] helps us understand how digital technologies and digital culture impact writing in the broader sense." (Rettberg 2019, 17) Likewise, the environment of digital media is a central, if not also imperative, place to (re)visit not only the question of what poetry is but also to find out what poetry and the poetic language can be.

Rettberg further suggests that "these [digital] works provide us with opportunities to consider what is happening to our situation within a world increasingly mediated by digital technology." (Rettberg 2019, 18) Similarly, Øyvind Prytz writes

---

7 https://www.poetry-digital-age.uni-hamburg.de/en.html (15 December 2022).

in his study of the digital environment of literature that "[a]n important aspect of electronic literature is [. . .] that it concretizes and illustrates human interaction with its digital environment."[8] (Prytz 2015, 255) Furthermore, he emphasizes "that there are certain topics that electronic literature seems particularly suitable for exploring, precisely because digital technologies are part of its tools and its design language. The media is part of the meaning."[9] (Prytz 2015, 255–256) Funkhouser, Rettberg and Prytz all argue in favor of digital literature as a resource for understanding digital culture. Their argument for its relevance can easily by transferred to poetry in a broader sense and its digital environment, both because poetic works are interacting with digital media technologies and platforms and simply because contemporary poetry is already inscribed in a contemporary media ecological situation.

Moreover, contemporary poetry is written "from within" and can thus help to make us aware of how digital technology and digital culture affect the way we read, write and think. Therefore, poetry serves as a resource for understanding language as an expression of human and non-human subjectivity,[10] and how these two subjectivities are interwoven in the digital age. Interactions between these two subjectivities, the acknowledgment that digital media matters and the recognition of digital media technologies as subjects, make the ground for exploring how media technology creates new forms of poetic expression and how poetry in analog and digital media works in a media ecology where the influence goes both ways. Digital media inspires and helps to create new forms of poetry and to re-actualize already established forms of poetry.

Why *Scandinavian* poetry?

Another question that a reader might pose is why an academic book about Scandinavian poetry would be written in English. The most obvious answer to this question is that Scandinavian poetry is poetry and that research on Scandinavian poetry is part of an international research community. The study of Scandinavian

---

8 "[e]t viktig aspekt ved den elektroniske litteraturen er [. . .] at den konkretiserer og anskueliggjør menneskets interaksjon med sine digitale omgivelser." (My translation).

9 "at det finnes enkelte tematikker som den elektroniske litteraturen synes særlig godt egnet til å utforske, nettopp fordi digitale teknologier er en del av dens verktøy og dens formspråk. Mediet er en del av meningen." (My translation).

10 The idea of non-human subjectivity is elaborated in among others N. Katherine Hayles' *Unthought* (2017), in posthuman philosophy like Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) and in art projects like *Nonhuman Subjectivities* at Art Laboratory in Berlin (January 2016–November 2017). See also Chapters 2, 3 and 5.

literature is international in the sense that Scandinavian literature is not solely researched in the Scandinavian countries and distributed in a Scandinavian language but is a field of study at university departments on six out of seven continents.[11] The Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study (SASS), located in the United States, is one of the largest academic associations to represent scholars and institutions oriented towards the study of the languages and literatures of the Nordic region.[12] One of its sister organizations in Europe is the International Association for Scandinavian Studies, established at Cambridge in 1956.[13] Needless to say, Scandinavian poetry and its research are included in the organization and work of the International Network for the Study of Lyric (INSL).[14] Scandinavian poetry research is inter-Nordic and part of a transnational and international readership. Further, a considerable amount of research on Scandinavian literature is written in English for a non-Scandinavian audience. Or, as claimed by Gunilla Hermansson and Jens Lohfert Jørgensen in *Exploring Nordic Cool in Literary History*, "an interest in Nordic literature and literary history seems increasingly to make its presence felt outside the Nordic countries." (Hermansson and Jørgensen 2020, 26)

A book in English about Scandinavian poetry communicates with the abovementioned as well as other research communities. Moreover, it makes a contribution by reflecting on and analyzing Scandinavian poetry in a mode accessible for non-Scandinavian readers. Scandinavian poetry implies, in this context, poetry written in Norwegian, Danish and Swedish, all three North Germanic languages that are mutually intelligible for users. The book benefits from limiting the scope to poetry in a specific language region because this poetry is part of a national and inter-Nordic culture and literary history. Scandinavian poetry is, of course, also international in the sense that it is inspired by and inspires poetry in languages other than those of Scandinavia. Nevertheless, poets have the privilege to withdraw from the international scene and experience the regional community and the interchangeability between poetry across Norway, Denmark and Sweden, as well as Iceland, the Faroe Island and the Fenno-Swedish speaking part of Finland.

The material in this book opens an exploration into how Scandinavian poetry in programmable and network media is similar to but also differs from international tendencies. Further, it reveals how some Scandinavian poets are oriented towards an international readership, for instance in publishing their poetry in English in addition to one or several Scandinavian languages, as is the case for

---

11 See e.g. https://nordics.info/about-us/nordic-and-scandinavian-studies-around-the-world (15 December 2022).

12 https://scandinavianstudy.org/ (15 December 2022).

13 https://www.css.lu.se/iass/about/ (15 December 2022).

14 https://lyricology.org/ (15 December 2022).

poets like Johannes Heldén, Ottar Ormstad and Marie Silkeberg. Other Scandinavian poets write poetry in their native language or in one of the Scandinavian languages and hence signify that their primary communities are print and online readers from the national or inter-Nordic region. Other Scandinavian poets like Cia Rinne, Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl and Caroline Bergvall benefit from the language situation by applying multilingual strategies (see e.g. Schmidt 2019, Nykvist 2020).

The list of Scandinavian poets who write poetry in digital media or whose poetry travels between analogue and digital media is long and far too long for this book to treat them all with the respect and close reading that they deserve. In order to reach the above-mentioned goals of this book, I will argue for the value of closely reading poetry in programmable and network media. For this reason too, I must limit the number of poets and poems. Still, the poetry that I explore provides a variety of suggestions on the situation of contemporary Scandinavian poetry, and contemporary poetry overall, in the media environment of the twenty-first century. I write "contemporary poetry overall" to imply that even though I limit my scope to Scandinavian contemporary poetry, the situation, and the environment of which it is a part, is, despite the differences I have pointed to here, to a great extent similar to that of poetry throughout the Western world.

A critical, media-sensitive close reading of poetry

"With the increasing importance of digital media in all areas of social and cultural life, it is necessary to define a conceptual framework for understanding the social changes produced by digital media and to show students and readers how to interact with digital media and culture," Roberto Simanowski writes in his book *Digital Art and Meaning* (2011, 1). To this, we might add the need for a framework and method through which to make sense of aesthetic and poetic changes. By giving weight to the role of digital media in Western social and cultural life, an environment wherein digital art and literature are produced, distributed, transformed, read, shared, commented on and discussed, Simanowski argues for the necessity of close reading and the urgent need to develop a media-specific framework for analyzing digital works. According to Simanowski, such a framework should grasp both the surface of the texts and the media involved in aesthetic appearances (Simanowski 2011, 200–202). Both the position represented by Simanowski and the method he argues in favor of are significant for understanding poetry in digital media. This position and method demonstrate what poetry studies can add to already existing knowledge of the digital media situation. Moreover, a method for closely reading digital poetry might help us in recognizing the contribution made by poetry to the production of knowledge in the media situation of the twenty-first century.

Through analyses of contemporary poetry, I demonstrate that the situation of poetry implies that Simanowski's method could be reinvigorated in order to account for the media situation of the 2020s. Similarly, I combine methods of close reading with a media-critical and media-sensitive approach. Here, close reading implies careful attention to individual poems, while still keeping sight the poem's larger media environment. It is important to note, however, that close reading is by no means a method for "solving" a poem, in the way that one may solve a puzzle. Rather, I regard close reading as a mode of defamiliarization, one that highlights the untranslatability of a poem and demonstrates why poetry is poetry. It is, to use a popular phrase from Donna Haraway (2016), a way of making kin, of making kin with poetry, without turning it into something familiar, something other than poetry.[15] This media-critical and -sensitive approach comprises the framework for thinking about the media environment of poetry and how poetry appears different in different medializations. When combined, the two approaches make us consider poetry in digital media as both *digital(ized)* and *poetry*. A similar methodological approach, one that maintains a focus on both poetic or textual, as well as medial aspects of a literary work, is developed by Hayles and Jessica Pressman and is referred to as Comparative Textual Media (CTM). This is both a mode of thinking and a way of approaching works that draws its attention to media conditions for literary texts, including poetry. Hayles and Pressman write that CTM "pursues media as objects of study and as methods of study, focusing on the specificities of the technologies as well as the cultural ecologies they support, enable, and illumine." (Hayles and Pressman 2013, x) CTM offers a way to study systematically the significance of media technology for literature, for the development of genres and for literary history. Because of its focus on both literary texts and the media involved, it includes as part of its analytical apparatus how human and non-human agents interact in the development, appearance and experience of poetry.

One advantage of applying the method of CMT, is that it does not favor specific textual cultures, media forms or technologies over others. Rather, it establishes an egalitarian approach for discussing both print and digital media and examining how these two develop in complex relationships. In other words, this method can be used to approach code as well as print poetry. Hayles and Pressman refer, for example, to Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* from 2010 and argue that, since it is both a novel and an art object, it represents a new material form through its use of digital media. Further, they argue that in our time, digital and print media are so intertwined in the production and distribution of literature

---

15 I owe a debt of gratitude to Yasmin Seals, in her presentation at the INSL's zoom seminar on translation on 9 June 2022, for the idea of close reading as a way of making things stranger.

that in order to understand the processes in which literature is involved, we must look at them comparatively (Hayles and Pressman 2013, xiv). In other words, Hayles and Pressman's description of contemporary literature is close to the situation of contemporary poetry that I referred to in the beginning of this chapter.

In the study of poetry in the age of programmable and network media, CMT offers a preferable and adequate approach because of its egalitarian view of literature in different media. As I will show throughout this book, the media environment that contemporary poetry works in, foregrounds intermedial kinships where no one text and no one medium is valued more than any other. Simultaneously, because of the focus on texts and media, this method provides the opportunity to disclose how central terms in poetry studies are, as described above, media-specific, even though they might be concepts developed from, adapted to and entrenched in a print culture in which the book or other media have been the preferred medium.

CMT is, according to Hayles and Pressman, developed out of a range of genres, art forms and media, such as "film, installation art, electronic literature, digital art, emergent narratives, and a host of other computational and analog media forms." (Hayles and Pressman 2013, xiii) One can, of course, discuss to what extent a general text and media analytical method that is developed to fit a wide range of art forms, genres and media, is suited for conducting media-specific and media-sensitive analysis. Such a sweeping ambition always risks the attempt to become universal. Still, in the approach to poetry in programmable and network media, where the poems include and combine a great variety of genres and art forms, I claim that one is in need of an approach that is both sufficiently broad and fine-tuned.

In addition to being a method that is suitable for capturing poetic features and medial affordances, the comparative text and media perspective can disclose how poetry in digital media might reflect on itself as poetry and as materialized and medialized works and events situated in a computational and network environment. Hayles has suggested elsewhere that these metareflective aspects of a text turn it into "technotext". The term refers to the ways in which a text emphasizes and reflects on "the physical form of the literary artifact [that] always affects what the words and other semiotic components mean." (Hayles 2002, 25) In the CMT model, these metareflective dimensions, contained in the concept of technotext, serve, according to Hayles and Pressman, as the starting point for the analysis. They write that "it would recognize that recursive feedback loops between form and content are not only characteristic of special cases [. . .] but are necessary ground from which inquiry proceed." (Hayles and Pressman 2013, x) In this way, studies of poetry in digital media can, as previously argued, make important contributions to the understanding of the ongoing changes in the field of poetry. By shedding light on its own situation, poetry reflects how the new

sensible worlds of digital media contain and develop in collaboration with new literary forms and genres of poetry.

Finally, I will argue that a critical media-sensitive approach to poetry in digital media is much needed. The poems are part of a revolution where the scope and commercialization of programmable media and its networks have established, and continue to establish, new technologies and platforms for writing, reading and thinking. If it is true that we are not even close to grasping the larger consequences of digital media, then the need for a critical text- and media-sensitive method is imperative. For instance, a media-sensitive approach to poetry in digital media serves as an alternative to a post-critical position, one of the most discussed methods in literary studies of the last decade. Post-critique has evolved during the past decade as an attempt to find alternative approaches to literature other than those offered by post-structuralism and post-colonial theory and which includes critical, ideological and allegorical interpretations. This position uses among others digital culture to fuel its argument that critical theory and suspicious, close readings are out of date and need to be replaced. In the introduction to a special issue on post-criticism in *New Literary History* in 2014, Rita Felski argues that a digital culture requires a post-critical position. She legitimizes such a claim by placing traditional concepts of reading, often associated with critical theory, in opposition to alternative and, according to Felski, more attractive concepts of reading: "close reading versus distant reading, surface reading versus deep reading, and reading suspiciously versus reading from a more receptive, generous, or post-critical standpoint." (Felski 2014, v) Based on her construction of these binary reading positions, Felski argues that digital culture calls for generous approaches, and she claims that established interpretative and reading practices in literary studies, and critical reading based on a hermeneutics of suspicion in particular, have outlived their usefulness.

Furthermore, Felski and Elisabeth Anker call for a study of literature and the humanities that facilitate more attractive approaches: "At a time when higher education is under siege, it seems urgent to articulate more compelling accounts of why the humanities matter and to clarify to larger audiences why anyone should care about literature, art, or philosophy." (Anker and Felski 2017, 19) It is hard to disagree with the idea that humanities need to demonstrate their relevance to society, though I will refrain from entering into a more comprehensive discussion of Felski's post-critical reading and literary studies. Rather, I will confine myself to clarifying Felski's notion of digital culture. Even though I broadly follow her main argument that we need reinvigorate methods for reading literature, I regard several of her reflections as examples of post-critical shortcomings in the approach to literature in programmable and network media. I argue that while the post-critical method might be of relevance for analyzing some aspects of digital culture, it lacks a necessary notion of the role of media and medialization. To illustrate this, I will

consider an example taken from the work I have already cited by Simanowski. In the poetic installation *Text Rain* from 1999 by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv, letters fall down on a screen as if they were raindrops. The installation is interactive in the sense that when the letters hit the silhouette of the viewers that is also projected on the screen, they change course, and with it, the poem changes too. It is fair to say that one approach to the digital installation is to take part in it and enjoy the visual event, embrace the affective dimension of the work and read receptive and generously, as would be the case with a post-critical approach. Still, it would also be necessary to read critically, to explore the role media technology plays in the work and to what extent *Text Rain* is also a comment on our contemporary digital situation. The poem ends with the line "turn to nothing. *It's just talk.*" Perhaps a receptive reading could be one that recognizes this as a comment on the poem itself, that the poem has turned into nothing, that it was just talk. Simanowski gives a satisfying interpretation of this line when he writes that it "is understood as a celebration of the aimless conversation, which does not turn into a linguistic message as a practical result. Such aimless talk is exactly what users do in their interaction with the letters in the installation." (Simanowski 2010) Still, could it not also be that it is a non-celebration, a somewhat dystopian comment on how conversations in our contemporary time, whether or not they take place on a digital platform, might have been transformed into mere talk, that is, as if letters and words, though shared by humans, never really reach us – that they inspire, in other words, neither feeling (the readers, cannot of course, feel the letters as they hit the silhouettes of their bodies projected on the screen) nor thought (the letters just bounce off the silhouette)? If so, the installation and the poem make a critical comment on society and call for a critical approach that is appropriate for what the installation (also) does. Furthermore, this example demonstrates the need for an approach that also pays attention to how the installation creates an environment of poetry and new technology. In *The Literariness of Media Art*, Claudia Benthien, Jordis Lau and Maraike M. Marxsen describe this environment in more general terms as "complex, interwoven connections among media technologies, culture, and script." (Benthien, Lau and Marxsen 2018, 81) The collaboration between poetry and digital technology is one that is both egalitarian and reciprocal, that is, one wherein the poetic event makes us aware of the presence of technology and the technology makes us aware of the text and the way it moves.

Felski legitimizes a post-critical approach to digital culture by claiming that new media technology has made practices of critical interpretation less relevant, writing that the media technological situation requires what she calls generous, receptive and post-critical ways of reading. Among others, she refers to Hayles' research, which has shown how reading, writing, drawing and thinking evolve in accordance with digital technology (see e.g. Hayles 2012, 55). It is, for instance, in

such a framework that Hayles develops three modes of reading: deep reading, hyper reading and machine reading (Hayles 2012, 55). These three modes signify that reading is an activity that involves both human and non-human agents and actions. Further, Hayles also underlines how deep and hyper reading are human activities developed in and adapted to different media cultures, e.g. print culture and digital culture, respectively. Lastly, Hayles describes the reading of digital texts as "reader directed, screen based, computer assisted reading" (Hayles 2010, 66) and stresses once again that reading in digital culture is a human action that is partly assisted by a computer. Similar to the case of *Text Rain*, this tells us that we are in need of theories, methods and analyses that enable us to critically grasp the notion and role of media technology. Such approaches would make us able to reflect deeper on the appearance of texts, the development of genres, medializations and digitalizations in the digital age. In so doing, we are better positioned to understand some of the impacts of non-neutral programmable and network media on poetry.

In Hayles' model, deep and hyper reading are not conflicting activities, as Felski claims. Rather, the digital media situation contributes to the development of both modes of reading. According to Scott Rettberg, digital texts require both modes: "The process of reading any configurative or 'ergodic' form of literature invites the reader to first explore the ludic challenges and pleasures of operating and traversing the text in a hyperattentive and experimental fashion before reading more deeply." (Rettberg 2009) Rettberg argues, in line with Hayles, that without this combination of deep and hyper reading, the reader is at risk of losing vital information. To this, I can only add that the combination of these two, which includes a critical media-sensitive approach, like the one provided by CMT, is crucial because in interacting with digital technology, neither we nor poetry can escape machine reading, the algorithms and network. These are among the fundamental features of digital media and therefore highly important for understanding digital culture, how media technology works and the impact that digital media have on our everyday life. Consequently, reading digital poetry from a "more receptive, generous, or post-critical standpoint" would imply that we would lose sight of how media technology works and how programmable and network media involve processes and information, "shadow texts", as Shoshana Zuboff calls them (Zuboff 2019), that affect the production, distribution and reception of poetry. Poetry is an important source for revealing mechanisms and ideologies that might control the contemporary media situation, including technologies that connect machines with machines, people with machines and people with people in a network that affects our sensory life in decisive ways.

In order to uncover and reflect on the complexity that follows digital medializations of poetry, a media-critical and media-sensitive approach is required. It

may well be that poems on social media ask for compliant readings and ordinary readers, a concept developed by Torill Moi (2017) that reflects some of the same critique of critical theory as the one Felski employs. Further, it might also be that some of the responses by readers of social media poetry, whether in the form of "likes" or comments, are receptive and generous and have a phatic function. Nevertheless, in the digital age both poets and ordinary writers and readers engage with extraordinary or non-human writers and readers. A computer with its algorithms would be an extraordinary agent, one who conducts machine reading by collecting and categorizing huge amounts of data over a large timescale, by identifying patterns and by generating outputs such as recommendations on digital platforms. Therefore, it is evident that digital culture strengthens rather than weakens the need for critical, media-sensitive analysis.

The material and organization of the book

The selection of works to be analyzed in this book is motivated by how each text creates a simultaneously surprising and apparent connection between the poem and its contexts, including the programmable and network media environment of which they are a part. Some of the chapters focus on single works, while others examine a small cluster of poems. The material includes both digital and digitalized poetry, i.e. poetry that is "born digital" and poetry that has been transferred from an analog medium to a digital medium. Examples given in the beginning of this chapter demonstrate the media ecology of poetry in practice, that is, how poetry travels between digital and analog media, a journey that, as I will argue in Chapter 2, challenges the relevance of distinguishing between digital and digitalized poetry. The term "digital poetry" denotes poetry that is produced to be distributed and read in a digital medium. Technically, "digitalized poetry" refers to poetry that was "originally" published in an analog medium and has later been reproduced as digital data, as combinations of the digits zero and one (see e.g. Prytz 2015, 15). This means that even if a digitalized poem was not written to be published, distributed and read in a digital format or exclusively for a digital medium, the poem has through the process of digitization materially changed, and medial properties have been added as a consequence of the medium in which the poem is presented. Furthermore, as I will argue in this book, contemporary poetry is part of a computational network environment in which the poems float between analogue and digital media, in a media ecology that exceeds the digital network and in an environment that is more-than-human.

Some of the chapters in this book address technology in an explicit way. This is for instance the case with poetry that partly or wholly is written by self-learning

algorithms, where genetic codes challenge our conception of the poet's autonomy, subjectivity and creativity. Other chapters explore a small selection of poems by contemporary poets with the purpose of investigating how they use social media and what role social media can play in the creation, distribution and presentation of poetry. Here, the selection criteria include popularity, for instance, the most popular Instagram poets in Norway, and noteworthiness, meaning that the poems in question have received significant attention, are widely distributed and have qualities that make them interesting in a book about poetry in programmable and network media. Again, other parts of the material draw attention to how digital media has led to a remediation of poetic genres and practices, such as poetry film and poetry reading. In addition to the focus on the encounter between poetry and digital media technology, all chapters show how digital genres and practices engage in the question of poetry and its role in society and how the genres and practices are constituted by and constitute the computational network environment.

Chapter 2 deals with the historical and theoretical situation of poetry in digital media. It presents a history of poetry in digital media, a historical review that includes both digital and digitalized poetry and argues for a rationale for a computational network environment for contemporary poetry. The term "computational network environment" serves as an alternative to what Hayles calls "the regime of computation" and what Alan Kirby calls "digimodernism." Additionally, it comprises a discussion of how to understand the relationship between poetry and digital media, how to overcome the question of media as neutral and the concept of media determination. As an alternative, I suggest how to grasp media as an environment, especially as one that includes both human and non-human subjectivity. Consequently, the chapter ends with a clarification of poetry in relation to concepts like programmability, network, events and intermediality.

While Chapter 2 concerns historical and theoretical frameworks for the study of poetry in digital media in general, Chapters 3 to 8 are comprised of analyses of Scandinavian poetry in digital media. **Chapter 3** discusses the role of the poet in the computational network environment, in particular the relationship between the poet and the computer in terms of poetry and genetic algorithms. This is done partly through the framework of what Hayles calls "technogenesis" and partly by reading the algorithm-based and media-ecological work *Evolution* (2014) by the Swedish poets Johannes Heldén and Håkan Jonson. The purpose is to show how *Evolution* creates new understandings of what poetry and poetic language can be. I argue that with *Evolution*, Heldén and Jonson perform a poetic thinking about and an exploration of a possible future relationship between poetry and artificial intelligence. Therefore, *Evolution* can be regarded as a collaboration between Heldén, Jonson and the computer's algorithms where they, as creative and cognitive subjects, as assemblages, create the poem that is constantly evolving on the screen.

Further on, **Chapter 4** pays attention to another poetic and media-ecological work by Johannes Heldén, namely *Astroecology* (2016). The chapter looks into what *Astroecology* can tell us about the situation of poetry in the twenty-first century, how poetry in the computational network environment can contribute to knowledge of the Anthropocene and engage in questions regarding imagined futures. I argue that Heldén's work is an attempt to develop poetry in the computational network environment, as both a response to the Anthropocene and a poetic and astroecological thinking about a future horizon that is disconnected from human consciousness. Heldén makes visible the coexistence of nature as an ever-ongoing evolutionary process alongside technological medializations, demonstrating how media prefigure archives and memories of the past (and the future).

In **Chapter 5,** I focus on Instagram poetry, particularly in terms of how the logic of Instagram prefigures the what, how and when of this poetry. Through the concept of media logic, developed by José van Dijck and Thomas Poell (2013), and by integrating the existing research on Instagram poetry, I argue that Instagram is not a neutral platform, not even for poetry, and that it largely determines the genre of Instagram poetry, including how the poets write, what they write and when they publish. The chapter explores texts that can be analyzed as platform-specific poetry. In particular, it focuses on Instagram poetry in Norway. Because the poems are written in a language understood only by a fairly small community of Norwegian and other Scandinavian-language readers, this material offers poems that in some respect differ from the poetry that seems to dominate the international field on Instagram.

Chapter 6 continues with a focus on poetry in the context of social media and is concerned with poetry that moves between Facebook and the medium of the book. Here I read a few poems by the Norwegian poet Nils-Øivind Haagensen. These poems were first published on Facebook before later being republished in one of Haagensen's book collections. Haagensen is a well-established Norwegian poet who, since his debut in 1995, has written print poetry and prose. In recent years, he has included Facebook as a platform for exploring how many of his poems work, i.e. as occational or political poems. First, I conduct a media-comparative analysis that emphasizes changes that appear in the poems as they travel from Facebook to print and ask how the function of the poems differs in the two media. Then I discuss the value of intermedial analysis and concepts such as "intermedial poetry" and "unfinished business."

For the past three decades, we have witnessed a significant increase in poetry readings in public and semi-public spaces (Middleton 2005). According to recent studies in poetry and sociology (cf. Benthien and Gestring 2023), public spaces do not include event sites such as bars, theaters etc., since you need to pay to enter these places. Public spaces allow entrance without restrictions. With the digital

revolution, the number of public event sites for poetry readings have risen even further. That is why **Chapter 7** explores two digital platforms in Scandinavia that offer poetry readings, either as live performances or as recorded poetry readings that are archived. The chapter includes a discussion of what a poetry reading is, what a poetry reading online is, the function of poetry readings in digital media and how to analyze poetry readings in digital media. The chapter includes poetry readings in Swedish and Danish on social media platforms, as podcasts and on "regular" websites.

As with poetry reading, poetry film has become a more visible, usable and accessible form of poetry in the digital age (Orphal 2014; Benthien, Lau and Marxsen 2019). Therefore, **Chapter 8** discusses what a digital poetry film might be and consists of an analysis of a multilingual poetry film in Swedish, Arabic and English by Marie Silkeberg and Ghayath Almadhoun. The poetry film titled *Your Memory is My Freedom* (2012) deals with the war in Syria, the persecution of minorities and the question of how to find a language to describe or deal with the situation of being in exile. Therefore, in addition, the chapter discusses the contribution of digital poetry film as a form of politically-engaged literature and activist poetry.

Chapter 9 concludes the book by revisiting the concepts and arguments that have been developed across the analytical chapters with the purpose of situating these in the framework of specific media, platforms, genres and practices explored in the respective chapters. Since one of the main arguments throughout the book has been that computational network environment includes human and non-human subjectivity, forming a constitutive and creative environment for the making of poetry, the concluding chapter focus on the preconditions for the understanding of the making of poetry in the digital age and how to account for media in poets' "freedom to make."