

Chapter 9

Between Idea and Media: A Note on Some Preconditions for the Making of Poetry in the Computational Network Environment

There are numerous suggestions for how to grasp the contemporary situation of poetry (and literature and the arts). These attempts to conceptualize the present time not only emphasize the intervention of digital media in most parts of our everyday life, they also highlight some aspects of the cultural and aesthetic epoch sometimes referred to as post-postmodernism. More than two decades ago, Linda Hutcheon claimed that the postmodern era had passed. She encouraged, perhaps as an ironic gesture, researchers to come up with alternatives to what the post-postmodern era should be termed and described as: “Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century.” (Hutcheon 2002, 181) The proposals are by now many. Some draw attention to aesthetic-cultural peculiarities such as hypermodernism (Lipovetsky 2005), automodernism (Samuels 2008), altermodernism (Bourriaud 2009) and metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010). Others have more specifically linked the period to the dominant role digital media play in how we write, read, think and behave. These include Hayles’ “computational regime” (Hayles 2006), Allan Kirby’s “digimodernism” and Hansen’s “computational networks” (Hansen 2015). My contribution to this list is “computational network environment.”

In this book, I have presented, analyzed and discussed a selection of contemporary Scandinavian poetry in the computational network environment. I have done so in order to reflect upon some of the medial premises for contemporary poetry in digital media. More broadly, I have also been interested in questions regarding reading, writing and thinking in the age of the digital. Implicit in my explorative method is an interest in both the preconditions for poetry in an environment dominated by programmable and network media and the possibilities and limitations of this environment. Although there are several outcomes of this study, such as the analysis of the works I have discussed, I will use this concluding chapter to highlight two important findings in particular. Firstly, I have argued in favor of the importance of perceiving the situation of contemporary poetry as one in which poetry is embedded in a media environment. Moreover, I have suggested that this environment is a computational network environment. Secondly, I have argued for the necessity of closely reading poetry in programmable and network media, demonstrating its benefits, and, based on this, suggested contributions made by the

poets and poems in question. With regard to the question of method, I have followed in the path of such scholars as Roberto Simanowski in *Digital Art and Meaning* (2011) and N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman in *Comparative Textual Media* (2013), in addition to the work conducted in *Analyzing Digital Fiction* (2014). One significant difference vis-à-vis these earlier studies is that I direct my attention solely to poetry. By focusing on poetry, the method of close reading appears specific to the art form and the respective media under consideration. This method proves to be well suited to the computational network environment, helping us to grasp the medial situation of poetry without losing sight of the poems in question and these poems as poetry.

Medialized future, present and past

The material of contemporary Scandinavian poetry that I have analyzed is diverse. It contains both digitally born and digitalized poetry that is part of a media ecology in the computational and network environment. This environment makes the distinction between digital and digitalized less relevant, if relevant at all, and represents medializations that engage the respective works in conversation with some of the tendencies in contemporary theories of arts and media.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I explored two works, one by Johannes Heldén and Håkan Jonson and one by Heldén, in which digital parts are intimately linked in their formation to their respective platforms. These platforms' structure and interface are unique to the works. This is interesting for at least two reasons. First, we can assume that the platforms are part of the poet's or poets' aesthetic practice in creating poetry. The platforms are, so to speak, internalized in the works themselves and are part of the poetics of the works. Obviously, poetry in digital media needs a platform to be materialized and to be experienced by readers, but in *Evolution* and *Astroecology*, these two works are part of an intimate collaboration between poets, the materiality of language and media and digital technology. This collaboration takes place between human and non-human subjects and continues through the entire aesthetic process that precedes and follows other parts of the ecological work. In this ecology, it is a potentially never ending or unfinished process. Secondly, by studying the platform and programming language of the two works, one can identify aesthetic and communicative characteristics that can be linked more specifically to the poets' style, their way of writing, drawing, composing, taking photographs, designing, programming, creating intentions and moods and engaging readers. For the kind of poetry that *Evolution* and *Astroecology* represent, the platform, its design and interface can establish connections to other individual texts by Heldén and Jonson.

Another common feature of these two chapters is that they both explore one or more possible and probable “near” future(s). In this sense, the chapters not only draw attention to representations of possible futures but more specifically to the significance of media and the processes of medialization that are at stake in the performances. “Mediated futures” is a term that is also relevant for other works referred to in this book. Possible mediated futures are, for instance, staged in Ann Lislegaard’s *Crystal World* (2006), a work that, at least in terms of this concept, shares certain similarities with Heldén’s *Astroecology* (2016). Moreover, “mediated futures” is a trend that is not unique to poetry in digital media but which can also be found in contemporary art, literature and film. Jussi Parikka engages in the question of possible future(s) in the article “Planetary Goodbyes: Post-History and Future Memories of an Ecological Past” (2015) and asks what kind of future and memories contemporary art is able to produce (Parikka 2015, 130). There may be several reasons why such an aesthetic has appeared in contemporary literature and art, including as reflections on the end of history (Fukuyama 1989/1992), utopian pragmatism (Ingels 2013), our time as a planetary time (Moraru and Elias 2015), interrupted future prospects (Stiegler 2020) or our awareness of the Anthropocene. This last point implies that human interventions on Earth are irrefutable, that actions performed by humankind have made the Earth and, hence humans, vulnerable and that the present time bears traces of a future without humans, as is suggested by Roy Scranton in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015). Additionally, I would point out that the media situation for contemporary poetry, the computational network environment with collaborations between human and non-human subjects, or our awareness of these collaborations all open up new ways of reflecting not only upon our past and present but also upon our (lost or found) possible futures.

Both Heldén and Jonson’s *Evolution* (Chapter 3) and Heldén’s *Astroecology* (Chapter 4) thematize artificial intelligence. In so doing, they show how computers might create poetry and hence replace the poet (in this case Heldén), fieldwork and observations otherwise made by humans. Obviously, this media situation that they refer to, is contemporary, but because the development does not stop here, there is also a possibility, either utopian or dystopian, that is recognized on the horizon. Heldén’s *Astroecology* is a work that can be read as a response to or as a continuation of work by Scranton and others. Here, Heldén uses poetry as a way of thinking and imagining our present time and our future in an environment that is driven by evolutionary forces, wherein past, present and future are interconnected. *Astroecology* demonstrates a particular ecological mode of thinking and imagination and medializes a future in the Anthropocene. Moreover, it shows what kind of future and what memories of a past and future poetry can create.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I turned my attention to poetry in social media. Again, the poems that are discussed vary in form and expression, and they represent different genres and practices in social media. Chapter 5 focuses on Instagram poetry. Here, the analyses and discussions show how poets to a great extent, intentionally or not, accept the preconditions given by the logic of social media. Therefore, my analyses offer new insights and enhance new dimensions of the relationship between poetry and social media platforms. In this way, the chapter argues that platforms dictate or encourage certain types of poems, poetic styles and ways of writing. Instagram poetry is platform poetry, one wherein the platform is fixed, serving as a vehicle for the distribution of poetry, connecting people to people and people to algorithms. The platform and the given technical medium, most often a smart phone or tablet, set the conditions for responses to the poems, for how poets write and for when they publish their poems. As I have argued, Instagram poetry is typically occasional poetry and is often oriented towards a present now.

Rather than creating a sensory environment for the experience of a future, as is the case with *Evolution* and *Astroecology*, Instagram poetry, with its orientation towards a now, medializes the experience of a present. The poems contribute to a sense of a now in which presence is intensified. This presence is made possible by the platform technology and its culture and has come to replace a physical absence. This aspect is not only specific to Instagram. As Jérôme Bourdon (2019) claims, it is often the case for social media in general. This now is experienced and shared by many, because of network media, leading Jacob Lund to describe this experience as one of simultaneity (Lund 2016, 110; see also Chapter 7). For this reason, it is fair to say that Instagram poetry is made for the moment, not for the future. Generally, it is difficult to imagine how Instagram poetry could be canonized, unless the poems – as many of them indeed do – travel from digital to print, from Instagram to books.

Likewise, the poems that I analyze in Chapter 6 are medializations of a contemporary, subjective and collective experience expressed through a poetic language. Still, poetry on Facebook, which is the material analyzed in this chapter, is not a genre. The platform seems to be more of a tool for distributing poetry and a medium for testing unfinished poems. Where social media logics like programmability, connectivity, popularity and datafication comprise a framework for Instagram poetry, these social media logics seem less significant for the understanding of poetry on Facebook, the goal of which seems to be to preprint-publish poetry, at least for the material I have analyzed. Of course, if a poem does not receive many likes, it might be that the poet chooses not to publish it in print. Nevertheless, the value of responses from readers (expressed in likes, comments and sharing) – at least in the case of Nils-Øivind Haagensen’s practice – are not part of a

financial economy but are concerned with the function and quality of the poems as print poems. These poems, in contrast to Instagram poetry, are not in any particular way media- or platform-specific. Overall, it is not obvious to what extent the logic of Facebook affects the conditions and rules of social interaction. It is also not clear that this logic informs the way the poet writes, except insofar as the poems that are published on Facebook are typically revised to a greater or lesser degree before being printed in a collection of poetry.

The perspective taken in this chapter denotes a counter-chronology from medialized futures to medialized presents, potentially suggesting a time reversibility that ends in a medialized past. Chapters 7 and 8 do not deal with the past in this sense but engage in two poetic practices that represent remediations in the network environment: digital poetry reading and digital poetry film. Remediation is to be understood here neither as an inverted process, nor as a concept that underlines a linear change of poetry. Rather, it is applied as a perspective that allows us to explore how two poetic practices and genres, developed in other media and for other situations, appear in digital media. It is a dynamic interaction of imitation and intensification in which digital poetry reading and digital poetry film are informed both by old and new practices and genres. The analyses in chapters 7 and 8 show how digital poetry reading and digital poetry film can be approached in terms of a continuum between a “traditional” approach based on imitation and one that is “innovative” or “adaptable” and, therefore, emphasizing intensification.

Some poetry readings are easily adapted to their new media situation, while others have evolved and changed the media, genres and practices from which they have unfolded. Some are distributed on already-existing platforms, while others are elaborated in accordance with the production of a specific platform. Some are distributed for the present moment, while others are archived for the future. One might argue that the play between imitation and intensification is easier to identify in digital poetry reading than in digital poetry film. By and large, digital poetry film tends to utilize the affordances of digital technology to develop the art form less than digital poetry reading. For instance, poetry films on YouTube might be intermediations of certain poems and of a poetry film in analog media, but the computational and network environment in which the films are produced, distributed and viewed, does not, in any significant way, interfere with the development of the art form in a strict sense.¹ Still, it is important to notice that digital media have indeed left their marks on poetry film. Techniques like layering are easier to implement with digital technology. Further, digital

¹ Here it is important to recall my discussion about poetry film from Chapter 8 and the discussion of similarities and differences between media art and poetry in digital media in Chapter 1.

poetry film is based on codes and, for this reason, can easily travel between media platforms. The history of poetry film implies that the art form has always developed by exploiting media affordances and combining them with features of poetry like voicing, rhythm, syntactic sequence, movements through time, rhyme, meter and enjambment.

The variety of poetry readings in digital media implies that poetry readings more than ever are available for a vast number of listeners. These readings are available (in the so called Western world) in almost any situation that a listener might be in. This simple observation underlines claims that poetry is more often heard than seen nowadays (Middleton 2005, 7; Mønster, Rustad and Schmidt 2022, 9). Similarly, the contemporary media situation has provided digital poetry film with new possibilities, because it is more available than ever before and can be watched on demand. Still, even though the distribution situation in the contemporary network environment provides new possibilities for both poetry reading and poetry film as well as their political potential, the situation also highlights how vulnerable the accessibility of poetry in digital media might be. This does not only relate to the two practices and genres in question but for poetry in digital media more generally. Distribution and availability of poetry depend on the existence of platforms, on private, public and semi-public archives and on initiatives taken with the purpose to restore and preserve poetry in formats that rest on a certain hardware and software. The situation of poetry in digital media is also one in which, if deprived of adequate platforms, archives and initiatives for restoring and preserving poetry, this poetry will no longer be available, seen or heard (see Chapter 7).

Digital media as inspiration

The questions I posed at the beginning of Chapter 1 concerned the situation of poetry in the digital age. Over the course of this book, these questions have been narrowed down to a consideration of the impact of the computational network environment on poetry. This involves, for instance, how poetry is an event, how poetry can be regarded as unfinished, how poetry relates to preconditions identified in and made by media and how poetry is part of an environment that often involves collaborations between poets, programmers and computers. Some of these aspects are new or different with digital media. Many of these aspects, though, are not new or different but are rather intensified by the computational network environment. In short, this shows that digital media inspire and are co-creators of poetry. As discussed in Chapter 2, this claim is consistent with the theoretical position of this book and with arguments put forward by such scholars as

N. Katherine Hayles and Bernard Stiegler. The challenge for poetry research, as I see it, is how this interaction between human and non-human can be inscribed in the understanding of poetry and the making of poetry in order to recognize mutuality, reciprocity and the cessation of binaries like subject-object, dominator-dominated.

Research into literature in digital media often presents media technologies as important sources of inspiration and motivation for the development of literary texts. Scott Rettberg, among others, claims that digital media, more than merely being a tool for production and distribution, also inspires the authors. In his book *Electronic Literature* (2019), Rettberg writes that authors are “energized by the potentialities of the networked computer as a medium.” (Rettberg 2019) Similarly, Bronwen Thomas in *Literature and Social Media* (2020) rejects any assumptions that there should be a contradiction between social media and literature and claims that encounters between the two can be fruitful and lead to innovative literary works. Both Rettberg and Thomas argue that digital media technology can be a driving force for the development of new forms of literature. Embedded in such a notion is the idea that authors explore new technologies to discover the opportunities that these technologies offer literature. Hence, both Rettberg and Thomas emphasize the importance of programmable and network media for the creative process. While it is difficult to disagree with this view, it is not obvious what it implies that media can inspire the creation of literary and poetic texts, during which stage in the process this inspiration occurs or how we can understand the relationship between a poetic idea and media technology.

In the contemporary network environment, the making of poetry has to be considered in relation to the role of the media as both environment and situation. This position implies that the artistic idea and the creative process are always intertwined with other materialized ideas and media. Here, the freedom to create is not considered from the outside, as an a priori quality, but rather freedom and creativity are always situated and negotiated. This is a freedom, we might say, that is an emancipation from media regarded as tools or as deterministic, as being solely objects or subjects for each other, and toward media as part of the creative subjectivity at work.

In *The Poet's Freedom: A Notebook on Making* (2011), Susan Stewart distinguishes between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom refers to a freedom where the artist tries to move away from boundaries, limitations and other structures that control the creative process and the making of art. Such limitations can be art and genre conventions, or they can involve material and medial affordances, even though Stewart herself does not engage the question of media. In opposition to this, Stewart defines a positive freedom in which the artist approaches restrictions, not only in order to embrace them but, most importantly,

to avoid being defined by these restrictions, in terms of the artist's creative process and work. Stewart writes that positive freedom involves an act of affirmation (Stewart 2011, 6). Following Kant's notion of freedom as the only fact that bridges *posteriori* and *a priori* knowledge, that is, the knowledge we gain of the world through experience and knowledge made by reason – knowledge acquired regardless of our experience – Stewart elaborates on positive freedom as performed, constituted in the poet's action in and towards the world: "[F]reedom is exercised or played upon the world rather than wrested from it." (Stewart 2011, 6) Rather than to read this statement as a claim that one is free or independent of space, time and causality, it implies that positive freedom is freedom performed through these "limitations." This is, as Dan Ringgaard (2020b) writes, a way of thinking of creativity where the poet seems to be in control and have agency in the process of creation.

To Stewart's elaboration of the poet's freedom to make, one should also add the dimension of media as an active subject in the creative process. From this perspective, negative freedom would imply the poet's attempt to break free from the determining processes of media, that is, to overcome restrictions defined by media. Following Stewart's reflections, these attempts would only end in a situation in which media defines poetry and thus the poet's freedom. In the computational network environment, we might imagine that the poet will not let herself be restricted, because her writing, reading and thinking are also always writing, reading and thinking in media environments. She always already performs her freedom of making in this environment. To some extent, the conception of positive freedom applies well to this environment. Still, Stewart's reflections on the artistic freedom to create takes on a humanistic perspective, one in which the artist, through the idea of positive freedom, is placed at the center of the creative event. As should be clear by now, with regard to the computational network environment, poets think and work with and through programmable and network media. Hence, a positive freedom in this sense is a freedom not from thinking about media restrictions but a freedom located in the environments constituted by the poet and computational machines, poetry and media.

With regard to the making of poetry in the computational network environment, the idea of media as an environment implies that a binary thinking of negative and positive is dissolved. The romantic notion of a non-material poetic idea is replaced by the notion that information, ideas, experiences, sensations, subjectivity, etc., are always embodied and medialized. This implies that in the (liberal) humanities, one would assume that a poet possesses certain qualities; the poet is an autonomous individual who is essentially the proprietor of her own capacity to create (see e.g. Hayles 1999b). This too is a freedom to create because one is in possession of certain qualities or talents. This is a talent for poetry, for exploring

and discovering the materiality of language, for making images and music, but it is also a talent for programmable and network media and an ability to see the potential for poetry in the encounter between computers and words, images and music. In the computational network environment, and in posthuman thinking more generally, poetic and aesthetic properties are not regarded exclusively as the poet's. Rather, they derive from a network of actors directly and indirectly, explicitly and implicitly involved in the creative process. Similarly, the freedom of making is a freedom that springs from this network as a consequence both of the poet's talent and the qualities of the network, which are both constituted by and constitute the poet and the poetry.

The computational network environment is both a human and non-human environment in which the role of digital media for poetry varies. Poetry and digital technology can collaborate to create an environment in which the creative process that presents poetry on the screen is partly run by algorithms and where the poet appears (partly) as a technological subject (see Chapters 3 and 4). Further, social media as environment gives way to the testing and distribution of poetic texts at the same time as social media appears as a new sensory and social world for poetry (see Chapters 5, 6 and 8). Similarly, digital remediations and intermediations of forms of poetry demonstrate how particular artistic arrangements are inscribed in the computational network environment. While imitating some features of poetic forms and genres, developed in non-digital media, a practice of imitation that is crucial for recognizing the remediated forms as remediations, the new environment provides these remediated forms with new functions, intensifying them as digital artistic arrangements in the computational network environment (see Chapters 7 and 8).

In short, in this environment, creativity in writing, reading and thinking are both human and non-human activities. Therefore, digital media technology must be regarded as a creative agent in collaboration with a poet or poets. In this respect, Stiegler's notion of a co-evolution of the human and technology and Hayles' concept of contemporary technogenesis and the posthuman comprise a philosophical rationale for the understanding of contemporary poetry and its media situation. Here, creativity is performed and experienced as a collaboration of human and non-human agents, underlining how, in the media environment, the freedom of poets' is not a freedom from medial constraints or a freedom to overcome restrictions made by media but a freedom that is always situated in a contemporary media environment. For this reason, the freedom of making is not a concept that can be measured against negativity and positivity, an attempt to escape or embrace media affordances, because creativity and the freedom to make poetry are always already embedded in the media environment. To the extent

that we can consider such a concept as freedom, it is a freedom conditioned by an environment that is more than human. It is an environment of posthuman and technological subjectivity – a subjectivity, moreover, located in deep rationality with computational and networked media. Consciously or subconsciously, such media are the poet's fellow non-human agents.