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Poetry and Contemporary Visual Culture / Lyrik und zeitgenössische Visuelle Kultur: An Introduction

Poetry and visuality have had an eventful history of medial correlations, ranging from poetic devices and genres such as ekphrasis and text-image combinations in emblematic poems to poetic forms like *carmina figurata* (*Figurengedichte*), visual and concrete poetry, right up to current poetic practices in audiovisual media. If we consider the further diversification of poetry in regard to inter- and transmediality, and the emergence of new poetic types across various media (cf. Mønster 2017, 235–236; Schaefer 2015, 169–170), it appears that the relationship between poetry and visual culture has intensified once more in the age of digitalization. The visual dimensions of contemporary poetry encompass, for instance, iconic and kinetic script in digital poetry, visual elements (e.g., drawings or pictures) in social media poems on networking platforms such as the photo and video sharing service Instagram, and spoken and written text in combination with moving pictures in poetry films. Going beyond poetry on screen and on the internet, poems can be found in public spaces in the form of light projections and murals (cf. Benthien and Gestring 2023), they adorn everyday items such as mugs or posters, and short poems or lyrics are sometimes even tattooed onto skin. Poetry employing visual layers in book publications has also endured and offers a different kind of aesthetic appeal in the digital age (cf. Borsuk 2018; Pressman 2020).

We are deliberately giving this overview here because the ERC project “Poetry in the Digital Age” (overseen by Claudia Benthien at the Universität Hamburg, 2021–2025) investigates these phenomena of poetry and visual culture alongside the complexes of poetry and performance as well as poetry and music. As part of the research project, this publication focuses on the visual dimensions of contemporary poetry and opens up the field to further objects of research and perspectives from different disciplines. It presents contributions by scholars from various countries working in a range of research fields, such as literary, media, and film studies, cultural and visual culture studies, and linguistics, as well as in poetic practice. In doing so, this book aims to broaden the scope of visual culture studies, which mainly considers approaches from art history, popular culture studies, and media studies, by bringing in objectives and methods from poetry research as well as from lyricology. The term *lyricology* is currently being established among European scholars and describes the ongoing endeavor to unite the international study of po-

etry and advance its genre theory (see, for instance, Hillebrandt et al. 2019; Müller and Stahl 2021; Zymner 2009).¹

Research on visual culture from the perspective of literary studies has so far generally focused on narrative texts and intermedial relations, e.g., between literature and photography or film (see, for example, Bathrick and Preußner 2012; Becker and Korte 2011; Beckman and Weissberg 2013; Brosch 2004; Cruz 2014; Lüdeke and Greber 2004; Voßkamp and Weingart 2005; Zima 1995). While visual culture studies has not adequately taken poetry into account, the visuality of poetry has played a major role in explorations that have been undertaken in poetry research: There is a significant number of contributions concerning emblematic, ekphrastic, and other visual poetic forms from various epochs (see, for instance, Bohn 2013; Dencker 2011; Ernst 1991; Krieger 1992; Robillard and Jongeneel 1998; Scholz 2002; Wandhoff 2003). Worth mentioning here is the special issue of *Humanities*, “Modernist Poetry and Visual Culture” (Kinnahan 2022), with articles focusing on poetry from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. Regarding contemporary poetry, research on the visual and multimedia aspects of poetry has mainly been conducted in digital literary scholarship, which views visuality as something inextricably linked with media and their interfaces (see, e.g., Chasar 2020; Hayles 2008; Morris and Swiss 2006; Rettberg 2019; Stein 2010). While some contributions trace developments from print to digital poetry, only few of them integrate approaches from visual culture studies in particular.

Taking previous investigations into account while examining objects of research ranging from twenty-first century poetry in digital media and books to poetry films, this volume attempts to map the field of poetry and contemporary visual culture from European scholarly perspectives – thereby performing a cultural survey of knowledge production in order to enter the global discourse on contemporary poetics. The main goal of this undertaking is to assess the significance of visual culture for the production of poetry today and, in turn, to sound out the insights poetry might generate into contemporary visual culture. Considering the great variety of poetry, this volume will also discuss how the genre is changing by first and foremost asking how visual culture is applied, exposed, reflected on, and debated in poetic practices. The central hypothesis is that the medial correlations addressed here have crucial political implications and that poetry in the digital age therefore holds considerable potential for digital as well as post-digital language, image, and media criticism (cf. Cramer 2016, 31; Schmitt 2021, 7–8; Stiegler 2014, 161–162). Since the notions, topics, and objects of research in question are as diverse as the disciplines examining them, the following delib-

¹ See also <https://lyricology.org/>.

erations about key terms and concepts serve as a general basis and starting point for the subsequent discussions in this volume.

Across visual culture studies and poetry research

Visual culture studies, a research field that is interdisciplinary in itself, emerged in the 1990s with the objective of investigating contemporary visuality at large and flourished until the 2010s. It started with the observation that, due to the rapid development of media technology in the twentieth century, postmodern life is centered around visual media, that there is an image (and information) overload, and that pictures hold power over societies and individuals. In the light of this “hypervisuality” (Mirzoeff 2002, 4) or “new power of images” (Maar and Burda 2004), advocates of visual culture studies and *Bildwissenschaft* have proclaimed a pictorial, iconic, or visual turn. Referring back to the linguistic turn, they have criticized the enduring dominance of the text-image distinction in cultural and literary studies (cf. Benthien and Weingart 2014, 1–4), most frequently discussed in relation to the Laocoon debate.² The distinction between poetry as a time-based art form and the visual arts as spatial art forms has been challenged multiple times throughout this debate. At the latest since the advent of the personal computer – the epitome of the intermedium – it has become especially evident that it is no longer possible (and probably never has been) to maintain this dichotomy. Just as there are only mixed media, or in Mitchell’s words, “the very notion of purely visual media is radically incoherent” (Mitchell 2008 [1992], 15; cf. also Rimmele and Stiegler 2019, 17), all cultural production now relies on digital technology, even when it is presented in analog form – which is what is meant here by the term *post-digital*, i.e., that differentiating between analog and digital today is near untenable (cf. Bajohr and Gilbert 2021, 14; Cramer 2016, 31).

Closely related to the suspension of dichotomies like spatial and time-based art, text and image, and analog and digital spheres is the dissolution of the dis-

² As the history and emergence of visual culture studies have already been broadly surveyed in previous research, we will refrain from providing an in-depth review here. For a discussion of the differences between Anglo-American visual culture studies and German *Bildwissenschaft*, and their relationship to media studies, see, for example, Stiegler 2014; cf. also Rimmele and Stiegler 2019, 158–164. For a disambiguation of the terms *pictorial*, *iconic*, and *visual turn*, and their interrelation with other cultural studies turns, see, for instance, Bachmann-Medick 2006; Benthien and Weingart 2014; Mitchell 2008 [1992]. References to and discussions of the Laocoon debate can be found in the aforementioned articles and many more on image-text relations (see also Mirzoeff 1999).

inction between “popular” and “high” culture that was promoted in the field early on. Whereas art history has focused its study on products of so-called high culture and the fine arts, visual culture studies has aimed to develop a comprehensive theory of the visual that allows scholars to investigate visibility in every domain – from literature to the visual arts and mass media (cf. Benthien and Weingart 2014, 5; Mitchell 2008 [1992], 15; Rimmele and Stiegler 2019, 15–21). The term visual culture therefore encompasses a vast area of visibility that includes objects from the arts and products of popular culture as well as visual aspects of everyday life and therefore indicates a wide notion of culture (cf. Benthien and Weingart 2014, 7; Mirzoeff 1999, 12–13). As a theoretical discipline, the scope of visual culture studies ranges from investigations into the objects of traditional art history analysis such as paintings, to architecture and photography, right up to everyday items and manifestations of visibility on websites and social media, in commercials, and on the news. At present, its main focus lies on digital images, not only regarding their technological nature and circulation but also as a source of knowledge production in scientific and scholarly research and institutions.³

Hence, there are various approaches in visual culture studies: Whitney Davis (2018), for instance, tries to access visual culture in a way that mainly relies on art history. Scholar Irit Rogoff (2005), who is also classically trained, has moved beyond pure art criticism and conducted research on various visual cultures and their participatory ideals for a few decades now. For Nicholas Mirzoeff (2017; 2023), who has been greatly influenced by cultural studies, however, the boundaries between high and popular culture no longer exist – to be more precise, he actually renounces the addressing of any differences. Today, both visual culture studies and poetry research have resolved this distinction as it does not seem to serve any valid function and, moreover, does not account for a great variety of contemporary poetic forms. For instance, code poetry, i.e., poems written in source code that can sometimes even be executed by computer programs, have some characteristics that could be associated with a traditional understanding of high culture. These include the hermeticism and complexity of codework, its small, distinguished audience, and therefore the lack of a mass market value for the poems (even more so than for book poetry). On the other hand, they often use

³ Of mention here is above all the research center *Das Technische Bild* (“The Technical Image”), founded in 2000 by art historian Horst Bredekamp, which is dedicated to exploring knowledge production through technical images in research, institutions, and networks with the aim of expanding visual history with the addition of perspectives and methods from technological, social, and media history. The research center’s findings are published annually by De Gruyter in the book series *Bildwelten des Wissens: Jahrbuch für Bildkritik* (see <https://www.kulturtechnik.hu-berlin.de/en/research/the-technical-image/>).

popular culture content – such as intermedial references to various “nerd cultures” (see Kohout 2022), online discourses, and typographies with chat aesthetics – and they are mainly distributed on the internet (cf. Holden and Kerr in this volume).

Another example is book publications of social media poetry, which reflect the existence of a phenomenon that is often considered “pop-cultural” in various media, “non-traditional” and “traditional” alike. Such publications expose specific digital aesthetics, writing practices, and parallel, overlapping modes of reading in an analog form. A case in point is Sarah Berger’s publication *Lesen und Schreiben* (2020), in which visual chats in varying colors and multi-layered pictures are superimposed onto the “original” poetry published online, thereby demonstrating the highly visual conditions in which it was written as condensed images (cf. Pflock 2022, 230–238). Thus, various media variations of and in poetry intersect with, and deconstruct, assumptions about “high” and “low” culture. Current poetry research and lyricology are therefore striving to expand upon existing genre theory, in particular regarding the remarkable development of contemporary poetic genres, which are “increasingly exploring previously unfamiliar publication formats and breaking away from conventional modes of publication” (Müller and Stahl 2021, 5; cf. Mønster 2017, 235). In this manner, the research on poetry and visibility being conducted, for example, by organizations like the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO)⁴ or in research projects such as Poetry Beyond Text: Vision, Text and Cognition⁵ refrains from drawing lines between high and popular culture, instead paying attention to (born) digital practices (cf. Hayles 2008, 3), multimedia aesthetics – e.g., of images and pictures – and their effects on readers.

Visual culture studies differentiates between pictures and images, which W. J. T. Mitchell formulated in the oft-cited phrase: “you can hang a picture, but you can’t hang an image” (Mitchell 2008 [1992], 16; see also Benthien and Weingart 2014, 10; Mirzoeff 1999, 7). Hence, the term *pictures* denotes, for instance, photographs or paintings but also virtual visualizations on screen and online (which one cannot hang physically but which do have a visible form). *Images*, by contrast, are understood in an immaterial sense as imaginations, *dispositifs*, motifs, or metaphors – which are equally important notions for poetic practice and poetry research – circulating in various media and pictures. Thus, pictures in poetry, as poems, or accompanying them do not stand alone but are embedded within discourses, i.e., images, their reproductions, and remediations. Since the pictorial turn postulated by Mitchell (cf. 2008 [1992]) and the interrelated iconic

4 <https://eliterature.org/>.

5 <https://www.poetrybeyondtext.org/>.

turn proposed by Gottfried Boehm (cf. 1994), the constant stream of pictures and images has increased once more as smartphones and social media platforms have become permanent fixtures of everyday life. The discussion has therefore moved into the digital sphere.

Olga Moskatova speaks of a “circulatory turn,” thereby describing “image mobility” as a marker of our present visual culture (Moskatova 2021, 13). In addition, Mark B. Hansen states that contemporary culture is being shaped by a “regime of the digital image” (Hansen 2004, 11–12) and that digitalization has altered the meaning of images as such. Rather than proclaiming a “dissolution” of the image in the tradition of Lev Manovich – with whose theory he contrasts his own – Hansen explains that the digital image is the “embodied processing of information,” thereby also portraying the human being as an integral component of the digital age (Hansen 2004, 9–10). In doing so, he refers to the digital image as an entity necessary for understanding big data experientially, as “it is in the form of the image [. . .] that digital information is rendered apprehensible” (Hansen 2004, 10–11). Thus, creating images – and furthermore new media art – from big data in an interactive, embodied manner can be and is a means of exploring the state of contemporary digital culture. Furthermore, the circulation of images is tied to networking and network effects: they mostly relate to scale and refer to how platforms are built around this structuring, meaning that “the more users who join a network, the more valuable that network becomes” (Poell et al. 2022, 37). As the growth of user numbers on platforms is linked with the distribution of images, pictures, and increasingly videos, and due to the logics of circulation as well as reproduction (cf. Moskatova 2021, 12), network effects can and do ascribe political as well as economic value to images and pictures.

Photographs of celebratory events such as representative gatherings (e.g., of politicians or celebrities at galas or weddings) but also horrifying pictures of wars as currently of the war in the Ukraine – at times even morbidly used as media spectacles – and of social media protests against oppressive regimes in Iran, for instance, are circulating daily through our media devices. These protest pictures are marked by their affectivity and are highly iconized, displaying and reproducing symbolic imagery, often in static pictures, e.g., photographs, which are frequently reenacted in varying political contexts (cf. Schankweiler 2019, 25–29; Sontag 2003, 29). Thus, it is not only possible to utilize aesthetics as a poetic means in themselves; rather, they can also become a political device, as Astrid Böger argues. Her contribution examines the participatory and activist functions of visual aspects of US poetry by looking at examples from Instapoetry, an online poetry magazine, and a virtual reality performance. For instance, the Poetry Foundation’s collection *Poems of Protest, Resistance, and Empowerment* displays a highly colorful and retro-style illustration by CHema Skandall, which is reminis-

cent of the poster art of Russian Constructivism. The poetic renderings Böger analyzes make use of visual playfulness to evoke seriousness, e.g., in the form of Blackout poetry that deconstructs the US national anthem or in Instapoetry created in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement that remediates photographs of street protests.

The omnipresence of visual representations may benefit media companies, voyeuristic readership or witnessing, practices of “astroturfing” (Schankweiler 2019, 45), or the visual and commercial appropriation of protest movements, but at the same time, these images are also intricately intertwined with the dissemination of crucial information (cf. Schankweiler 2019, 37), not only in poetic activism. Questions relating to the relationship between media, power, and perception that are shared by visual culture, media, and literary studies have therefore lost none of their relevance. The tasks of scrutinizing the power relations and dimensions of the visual, and developing a critique of both their hegemonial structures and the medial dominance of certain types of visibility, visuality, and also imagery (*Bildlichkeit*) are still at the heart of visual culture studies (cf. Stiegler 2014, 160–161) and are discussed in this volume. Karin Nykvist analyzes Caroline Bergvall’s multilingual and multimodal poetry with a special focus on the poet’s examination of representations of forced migrants⁶ in the media and their societal (in)visibility. Regarding Bergvall’s collaborative practice of creating poetry with other artists online, e.g., in livestreams during the Covid lockdown periods, Nykvist moreover suggests some innovative terminology for situating different kinds of contemporary poetry: she defines live performances of poetry as “here” poetry, printed poems in book publications as “there” poetry, and poetic formats on the internet as “everywhere” poetry.

Contemporary poetry is therefore situated within the media environment and the specific (post-)digital image culture described above, not only on platforms but also in contemporary visual culture in general. Poems range from conscious utilizations of pictures and/or images for socio-political purposes to aesthetic, formal, and critical examinations of images on a conceptual level in various print, online, multimedia, and performative formats. Additional layers of meaning emerge in all aesthetic aspects of poetry (i.e., visual, audio, tactile) that we need to consider when encountering contemporary poems. For example, digital multidimensional computer illustrations may stand alongside “pure” text in book poetry that has been remediated or influenced by weblogs or social media; three-dimensional poetry

⁶ See <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/migrants-refugees-terminology-contested-powerful-and-evolving>.

also exists as holograms or sculptures in exhibition spaces,⁷ questioning the distinction between poetry and the visual arts once again. Not only is contemporary poetry taking on sculptural forms and expanding into new spaces, the concept of time-based art is also experiencing constant changes. For instance, Twitter poetry about real-time societal events with intermittently added user comments is ongoing and exists until it is taken down, although it does not exhibit physical materiality (cf. Pflock 2022, 223–227). Poetry film displays multilayered aesthetic elements simultaneously, e.g., written or spoken poetry and moving pictures (see Konyves 2012; Orphal 2014; Tremlett 2021). Here, reading processes break with linearity and the chronology of the solitary reader focusing on a book page and left-justified, black-and-white, text-only poems – an outdated image of poetry that remains prevalent, despite the genre’s manifold forms. Considering the seriality and reproducibility of images and pictures on the internet, it can be said that poetry stands alongside “meme aesthetics” (Goriunova 2014, 62), i.e., humorous, subcultural, mediated, and repeatedly circulated motifs that dominate digital spaces.

Poetry attempts to sustain its position in the flow of innumerable online pictures by adapting or resisting specific visualities. The intricacy of the relationship between art and the economy becomes especially visible in online spaces and in light of the seeming commercialization of poetry, as Heinz Drügh argues. In his article, he presents his reflections on the relationship between contemporary poetry and commodified images and pictures – by looking at examples from Instapoetry and book poetry that incorporate or refer to the advertising aesthetics of commodities, from designer clothing to gummy bears. Poetic references to such media content stand in a longer tradition, e.g., of neo-avantgarde poetry that addresses visual culture, often in a critical manner. For example, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann utilized pictures of celebrities and pinups from advertisements or poems about photography itself to problematize text-image and interart relations as well as questions of gender and media conditions (cf. Weingart 2005, 228–232).

To summarize: of interest for the examination of poetry and contemporary visual culture are not only pictures as material, tactile objects but also many more facets of visibility (cf. Benthien and Weingart 2014, 7; Davis 2018, 279; Mirzoeff 1999, 12–13). In regard to the production and reception of poetry, this involves questions of text-image relations, of iconography and iconology, the visual

⁷ Most recently, sculptural and 3D poetry, as well as other poetry objects from the 1960s to the present, were displayed in two exhibitions in Germany, namely *Skulpturale Poesie* (“Sculptural Poetry,” Weserburg in Bremen, March 26 to August 14, 2022; <https://weserburg.de/ausstellung/skulpturale-poesie/>) and *Dichtung in 3D* (“Poetry in 3D,” Deutsches Buch- und Schriftmuseum in Leipzig, April 8, 2022, to January 8, 2023, <https://www.dnb.de/DE/Ueber-uns/DBSM/DBSMAusstellungenarchiv/dichtung3D.html>).

dimensions of writing, books, and film, and, furthermore, practices of watching, seeing, and reading, as well as dynamics of cultural visibility and invisibility (cf. Davis 2018, 197; Dencker 2011, 863–864; Stiegler 2014, 160; see also Bucher 2012; Cancik-Kirschbaum et al. 2012; Horstkotte and Leonhard 2006; Mergenthaler 2002; Mirzoeff 2017; 2023). This volume’s contributions explore these aspects of visibility in the form of case studies of recent poetry books and films as well as digital and social media poetry in order to examine their aesthetic effects and political implications.

From visual and digital literacy to poetic criticism

At the beginning of this introduction, we claimed that contemporary poetry holds considerable potential for (post-)digital language, image, and media criticism. In this section, we will flesh out how this hypothesis relates to both visual culture studies and poetry research, and to our previous discussions of poetic reflections on visibility and their political potentials. Considering the global dissemination of pictures and images, and the changing qualities of visibility and visibility, one of the key concepts of visual culture studies is “visual literacy,” meaning the development of strategies and skills to critically analyze, understand, and deconstruct visual artifacts and their (political, ideological, cultural) implications (cf. Benthien and Weingart 2014, 6; Mitchell 2008 [1992], 11–12; Mirzoeff 1999, 3; Stiegler 2014, 161–163).

Whitney Davis, for instance, also speaks of an “aspective view” (Davis 2018, 321) as a method for analyzing visual culture, which takes a diverse array of aspects into account (e.g., analogies and ruptures in “seeing as”/“seeing-like”), moving beyond solely visual, objective, material interpretations. This means that the “visible salient features” of analyzed works of art or other visual objects “are embedded in a network of forms of likeness including external aspective relations, or analogies” (Davis 2018, 321). Thus, a comparison of “visible” Instapoetic retro-style writing may evoke the “invisible” presence of the Blackout poetry movement of the 1960s and 1970s (“seeing-as”), which alters the final interpretation with consequences for the poetic field. Similarly, visually comparing code poems with the poetry of neo-avantgarde movements influences their reception, for example, in academia. In her contribution, María Mencía examines visibility in digital poetry as an aesthetic strategy that she uses in her own poetic practice. In doing so, she connects her digital art with avantgarde movements in visual poetry. She furthermore speaks of “in-between” spaces – between sound or text and images as the

“poetic-aesthetic space” – in order to explore experimental strategies concerning materiality but also social issues in what she refers to as a “poetics of data.”

The terminology from visual culture studies is to be seen in general correlation with the demand for “digital literacy” often made, especially in the past ten years, with regard to the constantly expanding impact of digitalization in every domain of contemporary life. With this term, scholars from different contexts formulate the need for a media competence that allows users to critically interact with and reflect upon digital technologies. Johanna Drucker, for example, investigates visual knowledge production in digital environments in her monograph *Visualization and Interpretation* (2020). In addition, calls for “source code criticism” (as in the workshop of the same name held by Hannes Bajohr in March 2022) proclaim that people should require skills to read, interpret, and understand source code and algorithms, which Mark. C. Marino also postulates in his publication *Critical Code Studies* (2020). Digital literacy is furthermore inextricably linked with the often-cited concept of *affordances*, i.e., the general properties of digital spaces, which are dependent on technology as well as the media competence of poets and users in general. Extending the approach taken by Jenny Davis – who updates the earlier concepts defined by James Gibson and Don Norman – and applying it to poetic production, affordances can thus be understood in a twofold manner: they can positively facilitate artistic creation or production, but they can also alter or diminish possibilities for action as well (cf. Davis 2020, 18–22; cf. also Gibson 1986 [1979]; Norman 2013).

But what do the terms *visual* and *digital literacy* have to do with poetry? Contemporary poetry and its encounter with visibility manifests and questions the medial correlations addressed here and their political potentials in various ways: In continuation of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde poetic practices, recent poetry oftentimes foregrounds layers of the visual (and the auditory) that generate meaning. In doing so, poems display automatisms in the use of images, pictures and language (relating to speech and writing), now in an updated manner regarding the further developments that have been made in media technologies (cf. Mønster 2017, 243; Müller and Stahl 2021, 12). Alongside image and media criticism, this is where the question of language criticism comes in – which, of course, is also interconnected with the literary dimensions of text, visibility, and picturality. It is worth mentioning here that the terms visual literacy and digital literacy themselves employ literature as a metaphor for a highly constructed system that we can only understand, interpret, and criticize if we acquire its language. As the term *literacy* furthermore possesses a pedagogical connotation, we propose speaking of poetic visual and digital criticism instead.

One example of current poetic practices that implement media and language criticism is digital poetry: generative poems and code poems employ digital lan-

guage technology in order to explore the functions of algorithms and source code. They thereby lay bare the often hidden functional logics of digital media such as “the dissolution of the text/image difference in multimodal AI,”⁸ which Hannes Bajohr addressed in connection with the readability and visibility of algorithmic works of poetry. Moreover, and returning to code poems, it can be argued that they reflect on the relationship between programming languages and “natural” languages. In doing so, they not only raise questions concerning human-machine relations and challenge concepts of authorship but also make visible the underlying programs in the form of scripts of (the predominantly visual) media interfaces (cf. Cayley 2002, 1–2; Funkhouser 2007, 320–321; Mirzoeff 1999, 3, 6; see also Vorath 2022). Transformation, for example of bits and bytes into linguistic and visual signs, is therefore a crucial aspect that must be scrutinized.

The poet Chris Kerr and the programmer Daniel Holden specifically create and inspect these interwoven aspects of visibility, auditory meaning, and language as a material in their own code poetry. The question of how the visual qualities of different script systems in code poems can then be further transformed into oral performance is at the heart of their article. Moreover, the fusion of human and machine languages could be taken as a form of multilingualism, which – in the traditional understanding of the use of two or more “natural” languages – is still an integral component of some contemporary book poetry. In her article, Esther Kilchmann investigates visual aspects of translation in Heike Fiedler’s multilingual book poetry and in Jörg Piringer’s digital poetry. She thereby pays particular attention to minimal, formal interventions such as vowel shifts and line or break placements, and argues that visual strategies bring forth new meanings between the languages and language technologies used within the poems.

Reading and writing between media

In the digital age, poetry books are still favored by various authors as a publication format and they persist as relevant works alongside the manifold poetic genres in different media. With her concept of “bookishness,” Jessica Pressman explains that book publications offer a different kind of aesthetic appeal, which demonstrates the validity of the book in the face of digital developments and as “a creative moment invested in exploring and demonstrating love for the book as

⁸ Hannes Bajohr. “Digital Ekphrasis: The Dissolution of the Text/Image Difference in Multimodal AI.” Talk at the conference “Poetry and Contemporary Visual Culture / Lyrik und zeitgenössische Visuelle Kultur” held at Universität Hamburg from May 19 to 21, 2022.

a symbol, art form, and artifact” (Pressman 2020, 1). Nevertheless, printed books now rely on digital technology during the production process (cf. Bajohr and Gilbert 2021, 19). What is more, they sometimes even deliberately engage with digital themes and aesthetics, as the example analyzed by Hiroshi Yamamoto illustrates: he explores intersections between text and image in the collaborative poetry book *Ignatien* by poet Gerhard Falkner and visual computer artist Yves Netzhammer. While Falkner’s poems reveal a negative view of a digitalized world, Netzhammer’s images exhibit a clear-cut digital aesthetic, which develops a prolific tension between the verbal and visual layers. Concerning the interrelation of poetry and film, Tijana Koprivica investigates interart connections in book poetry by looking at the example of Vlado Krečković’s poetry collection *Pariz, Teksas*. Of particular interest in her contribution are transfers of filmic elements from Wim Wender’s movie *Paris, Texas* to Krečković’s poetry. Koprivica argues that the poet transforms cinematic techniques into poetic ones, and that this relationship between poetry and film creates specific visualities and atmospheres within the written poems.

The cohesion of visuality and writtenness in general can be described as a dynamic but inextricable constellation. A good example of the fact that texts and images as well as reading and seeing should not be conceptualized as complete opposites is the German term *Schriftbild* (literally: script-picture; cf. Benthien and Weingart 2014, 6, 9–10; see also Cancik-Kirschbaum et al. 2012). It encompasses the specific appearance of something written, the way the typography and layout of a text look, but it can also mean a picture consisting of letters and words, for example. The concept’s abstractness therefore reveals itself in a double-vision, in how written words are themselves visual constructs that can be read and seen in two ways: as visible and visual typographic elements embedded within a certain layout or as carriers of meaning (cf. Strätling and Witte 2006, 7–9). The display of the interrelations between the verbal and the visual becomes particularly evident in concrete and visual poetry (for an overview of their varieties, see Greber 2004). Two articles in this volume provide an insight into these poetic forms and their development, from the avant-gardes to their updated versions in digital media:

Roberto Simanowski discusses how the interrelation of reading, seeing, and clicking influences or brings forth diverse layers of meaning in kinetic concrete poetry. He thereby outlines the history of concrete and experimental poetry, from print to digital forms, which exhibit further levels of expression. This article can be referred to as a historical document in itself as it was first published in German in 2005 and therefore illustrates a particular moment in the development of digital poetry. Now, Simanowski’s article is finally available in English and has been updated for this volume with examples from the 2020s. In their linguistic article, Vladimir Feshchenko and Olga Sokolova look at the historical context of deixis in visual poetry before turning to contemporary poems. They analyze examples

that display deictic units, e.g., highlighted by colored font or combined with photographs, with a particular emphasis on the visual properties of language-based poetic practices in US, Russian, and Ukrainian literature. According to the authors, poets utilize deixis as an integral component of everyday language and deictic markers of spatial relations in their poetry to exhibit the materiality of language in the digital sphere. In doing so, the discussed poems also address current issues and societal conditions such as the Covid pandemic and the war against Ukraine.

Contemporary developments in the tradition of visual poetry that have brought about new forms such as interactive poems, multimedia adaptations of concrete poems, and poetry installations demonstrate that the interrelation between verbal and visual representation is even more profound than the dual nature of written letters – in fact, the alphabet itself possesses auditory dimensions, too. As Mitchell has pointed out numerous times, there are no purely visual media; rather, media can be described as mixed formations with complex correlations between diverse (e.g., semiotic, symbolic, perceptive) modes (cf. Mitchell 2008 [1992], 15; Gil 2014, 193–194) which also accounts for poetry, not only but especially in its multimodal and intermedial forms. Poetry’s inherent multimodality can be most visibly detected in the increasingly popular genre of poetry film, as discussed by Lucy English. Her article focuses on this poetic form as a truly collaborative endeavor between poets and filmmakers, situated in between text, images, sound, and a seeming tactility. By scrutinizing terminology pertaining to poetry films and her own collectively created poetic work, the author proposes the term “lyrical spoken word poetry film” for the specific type she analyzes. She thereby focuses on the various influences and consequences this kind of artistic interart practice has on conceptualizations of poetic speech and writing in cinematic examples.

Furthermore, concepts of authorship and reception, of reading, seeing, and writing, are increasingly being challenged in new media and post-digital environments when, for instance, poetry on social media platforms or code poetry utilizes non-human, that is, algorithmic authors. As algorithms “read” or interpret data and then “write” or produce a textual output, Lori Emerson speaks of circular *reading writing* practices (cf. Emerson 2014, xiv). Poets sometimes creatively explore these developments and display the resulting visual materiality or hidden “invisible visual culture” (Rothöhler 2021, 82) of multiple authorships or of the internet’s black box. We can even speak of “algorithmic ‘platform seeing’” (Rothöhler 2021, 82) as a further visual influence on the aesthetics of poetry, with algorithms and the accompanying technology on platforms as additional relevant agents. Platforms “see,” meaning they play a decisive and integral role in the uniformity of certain forms of social media poetry, for instance.

One related topic, to which correlations of poetic language and audiovisual media call attention, are changes in production as well as reception practices.

New poetry formats with their specific materiality and mediality not only result in a transformed writtenness and literality but also contribute to the reevaluation of reading and writing practices in digital spaces. While poets are becoming “poet-programmers” (Funkhouser 2007, 330), interaction can transform readers of poetry into “producers” (Bruns 2008, 21). The boundaries between reading, seeing, and using, or interacting blur, resulting in altered modes of perception. “Readers” likewise engage with the poems as with each other, thereby establishing online communities revolving around sociopolitical agendas and participatory cultures (cf. Jenkins 2009). Sociopolitical agendas, moreover, were and are still marked by specific, immediately recognizable aesthetics, e.g., influenced visually by brightly colored, flat Russian Constructivist poster collages (cf. Brunner 2021) as indicated above. Contemporary poets continue these practices of unifying aesthetics, for instance, in socio-politically engaged forms of poetry on the internet, in protest poetry on weblogs, or on social media.

Collaborative and participatory artistic practices can also be found in online poetic collectives or anthologies and in the genre of poetry film, where they are often visibly exhibited, as Sophie Ertel’s contribution demonstrates. With regard to its community-building potential, she argues that poetry film can become a space for discussions of queer and lesbian sexuality. By looking at the example of *LESBIAN* by Rosemary Baker, Ertel analyzes how the poetry film deconstructs the stereotypical images and pictures perpetuated by the news and in digital media, and thereby calls for a diversification of the gaze. The interrelation of visibility and invisibility is relevant to mention in this context again as many poetry formats reflect upon these aspects of “visibilities” which are, according to Donna Haraway, connected to social power. She argues that “politicality [exists] in the rift between representation and non-representation” (Haraway 1991, 188), referring to the visibility of bodies as a crucial aspect of belonging and being (cf. Leese 2016, 144). Seemingly democratic online spaces are highly ambivalent, enabling minoritized community-building but also diminishing and simultaneously suppressing it, i.e., consistently alternating between granting visibility and creating invisibility. For instance, minoritized bodies are seen but also “sensored” (Olszanski 2014, 83), controlled, used and appropriated as “visual capital” (Mirzoeff 2019) in social media practices. This further influences poetry on networking platforms, which brings about an ambivalence that Magdalena Elisabeth Korecka discusses by investigating the example of feminist Instapoetry and its visual (in)visibilities. The described strategies result in varying stylistic communities, from a black-and-white aesthetic to colorful carousel posts on Instagram, which she examines in terms of platform features and affective community interventions, in particular by paying attention to the work of Hollie McNish.

In this introduction, we have laid out a theoretical foundation to explain the reciprocal relationship between poetry and visibility, building upon approaches from visual culture studies and poetry research. We have thereby outlined the diverse types of and publication formats for contemporary poetry, including the highly accessible and instantaneous genre of Instapoetry, collaborative efforts in multimodal online formats such as live streams and audiovisual poetry films, experimental renderings in digital poetry like kinetic poetry and code poems, protest poetry in magazines and on social media, multilingual poetry in book and online publications, and interart and ekphrastic strategies in poetry books and films. The following contributions from various research fields investigate this great diversity by asking how contemporary visual culture and the facets of visibility addressed here are applied, reflected on, exposed, or debated in poetry today in order to examine their potential for poetic (visual, linguistic, digital, and/or media) criticism.

Structure of this volume

This book is subdivided into four thematic sections which focus on different aspects of the complex of poetry and contemporary visual culture. The first section “Sites and Sights: Modes of Contemporary Poetry,” comprises four contributions written from the perspectives of literary, media, and cultural studies, and linguistics. KARIN NYKVIST discusses current visual and spatial practices in contemporary multimodal poetry and the influence of poetry’s spatiality on visual aesthetics in the multidimensional works of Norwegian artist Caroline Bergvall. VLADIMIR FESHCHENKO and OLGA SOKOLOVA examine spatial relationality by looking at the explicit linguistic as well as poetic strategy of deixis in examples of historical and contemporary poetry from the US, Russia, and Ukraine. The influence of space is also relevant in ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI’S contribution, which not only traces the evolution from print-based to digital concrete poetry but also places emphasis on the dynamic situation of audiovisual, kinetic renderings in the digital sphere in a discussion of Jim Andrews’s poetic work. Moreover, the placement of poetry within a culture dominated by advertising both on- and offline results in several types of poetry, as HEINZ DRÜGH asserts: on the one hand, serial, commodified pop artifacts in the form of Instapoetry appear on networking platforms like the photo- and video-sharing service Instagram, while, on the other, poets like Marion Poschmann and Dirk von Petersdorff critically engage with the sensory dimensions of consumerist pop culture in their poems.

“Visibly Visual: Sociopolitical Poetry on the Web and in Films,” the volume’s second section, deals with issues of sociopolitical as well as algorithmic visibility

and invisibility and their relation to the visibility of online protest poetry, Instapoetry, and poetry films. ASTRID BÖGER analyzes the issues manifest in US protest poetry on Instagram and beyond, focusing on the Black Lives Matter movement and racial inequality. MAGDALENA ELISABETH KORECKA investigates the visual intimacies in Hollie McNish's multimodal feminist Instapoetry as an aesthetically appealing and platformized entity and as a part of various stylistic Instapoetic communities. In her contribution, SOPHIE ERTEL explores a collaboratively created poetry film by poet lisa luxx and filmmaker Rosemary Baker that addresses the lesbian gaze and the creatively implemented aesthetic dimensions of in-between spaces in the audiovisual rhythms of the production's film shots.

In the next section, "Viewpoints: Artistic Practices in Digital Poetry and Poetry Films," contributions from poetic practice reveal the valuable research positions taken by digital and spoken word poets themselves: the code poetry duo CHRIS KERR and DANIEL HOLDEN present their online and printed poetry collection *./code --poetry* and connect its specific audiovisual as well as performative aspects to the traditions of avant-gardist poetry performances. Digital and e-poet MARÍA MENCIA gives insight into her poetic practices with examples such as her data visualization piece *Gateway to the World* by discussing its poetics of data as well as its historical connections to experimental visual and concrete poetry. Spoken word artist LUCY ENGLISH analyzes her collaborative poetry film projects *The Book of Hours* and *I Want to Breathe Sweet Air* with regard to poets' speaking practices and filmmakers' visualization techniques, proposing a new approach to spoken word poetry films.

Finally, the section "Poetic Images: (Audio)Visuality in Contemporary Book Poetry" concentrates on the enduring relevance of book publications by looking at the example of contemporary German, Serbian, and multilingual poetry. ESTHER KILCHMANN investigates visual strategies in poetry books, with a focus on translation practices in the multilingual works of Heike Fiedler and in digital poetry by Jörg Piringer. HIROSHI YAMAMOTO examines text-image correspondences in the collectively created book *Ignatien* by visual computer artist Yves Netzhammer and poet Gerhard Falkner. Furthermore, TIJANA KOPRIVICA analyzes the relationship between cinematic and poetic techniques in Vladan Krečković's anthology *Pariz, Teksas* as an artistic artifact of engagement with Wim Wender's film *Paris, Texas*.

This edited volume is written in German and English due to the disciplinary background of the editors in German and Anglophone literary and cultural studies, and as an endeavor to bring together decentralized European poetry research, and diverse practices of poetry and visual culture studies in the digital age. Furthermore, the contributions cover poetry in German, English, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Norwegian, and Serbian, as well as a number of multilingual works. The book thus aims to promote international exchange between poetry re-

searchers and stimulate further investigation into current relations between poetry and visuality from additional research perspectives and languages.

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