Skywriting, Signals, and Poetry Systems

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I.

Reading and literature have been crucial in the constructions of subjectivity during the modern era – within the framework of what Marshall McLuhan once called the Gutenberg Galaxy. However, with the advent of new technical media during the previous centuries, not only the space of literature, but also the configurations of an experiencing subject *in* time and space have been transformed and actively revised.

Here, I want to go back to the decades after World War II, and especially to the 1960s, in order to discuss, briefly, how such re-configurations were manifested in a set of artistic-poetic experiments. The overt aim is to historicize a contemporary media situation and to perhaps shed some light on the relation between, on the one hand, a current ideology of immediacy, transparency, and instant accessibility – circulating in a digital 24/7-society – which tends to reproduce ideas of a solid subject in control – *and*, on the other hand, the material and technical conditions

for reading and experiencing today, which might subvert the notion of such a subject.

My approach can, methodologically, be described as *media archaeological* in its ambition to trace a genealogy of the present through detours in recent media history. This entails not just a story about media, however, but also an analysis of affect and meaning. And just as media archaeology often turn to art for input, I will, as mentioned, approach a handful of works from the sixties that employed new technology, even code and signals – the stuff of digital computing –, in their exploration of how media shape the space of literature.

II.

Most literature and art in the years after WWII was haunted – haunted by the need to start anew, to move beyond a corrupt culture that had ended after two world wars. For many, technology became an asset in this endeavor. Radio, television, and even the awesome and futuristic computer was to be explored. Computer technology, moreover, arrived together with new theories of information, such as cybernetics, which not only challenged prevalent ideas of communication and knowledge, but also ontological demarcation lines between animal, man and machine, as well as established modes of representation.

Literature and art of course processed this in different ways – in everything from dystopian novels about the dissolution of the individual in sociotechnical systems, to an innovative use of new gadgets in the making of poetry. One of the most tech-savvy, but also tech-*critical* genres to blossom during the period was *sound poetry*, which would be practiced in a large number of places – from Europe over North and South America to Japan – and by a large number of poets, such as Bernard Heidsieck and Henri Chopin, Bob Cobbing and Lily Greenham, Ernst Jandl and Gerhard Rühm, Bengt Emil Johnson and Sten Hanson. Even if harking back to a long tradition of rhyming and chanting in poetry, the genre had a distinctly modern touch, finding its recent roots in nonsense verse, Futurism and Dada.

Still, it was to be radically rejuvenated in the postwar years

due to the employment of sound recording and radio. The tape recorder, for instance, became a writing tool which made possible an expansion and differentiation of the acoustic space of literature. Not only the articulated voice, but a number of bodily and other sounds were incorporated into poetry through the affordances of the machine. Cut and splice and other editing techniques, but also the use of contact microphones and sophisticated placements of loudspeakers, paved the way for a different literary experience. Most notably, the space of literature, which previously had been constructed as an intimate sphere around the reader, now became diffuse and fluid.

Sound poetry produced a space for reading/listening in which you had to navigate and find your bearings. As Steven Connor has observed, we are never passive in relation to sound: "we never merely hear sound, we are always also listening to it, which is to say selecting certain significant sounds and isolating them from the background noise which continuously rumbles and rattles, continually on the qui vive for patterns of resemblance or recurrence" (Connor 2003). But the acoustic environments that surrounded the listener in sound poetry complicated such pattern-seeking, and invited an indeterminate and inter-sensorial activity. A complex space or ecology is created, in which we are immersed and which passes through us – but in no way firmly positions us as autonomous agents.

What sound poetry achieved was then an opening up of literature and poetry toward the spatial and material environments in which they take place. Even if immersion was sometimes a sought-for aesthetic effect, the body and the active configuration of a situated experience was more pertinent. One might say that not only did sound poetry open up literature; it also brought to the fore the absences, gaps, and in-betweens – temporal as well as spatial – that are always part of reading and writing and which makes mediation and media constitutive for experience as such, as John Durham Peters have suggested (Peters 2015: 2).

III.

Sound poetry would thus expose the seams in literature's cybernetic assemblage. And other experiments from the period would bring this exploration even one step further. In relation to the dissemination of cybernetics in the 1960s, many artistic and literary projects would investigate ideas about systems, media, and environments, while also attending to Marshall McLuhan's understanding of media as environments or ecologies. These ambitions can be connected to the contemporaneous tendency of displacing both the artwork and the traditional exhibition space through an investigation of its surroundings – in, for instance, system pieces by Hans Haacke or earth works by Robert Smithson.

Part of this aesthetics was also an interrogation of the standard roles and positions of artist and viewer. By seeking out and modifying places in nature, or by constructing artificial environments, other agential networks – including both humans and other-than-humans – were disclosed through such artworks. An example of the latter was the installation "Seek" (1969–1970) by The Archictecture Machine Group at M.I.T., described as "Life in a Computerized Environment" and presented at the important exhibition *Software. Information technology: its new meaning for art* (1970). While McLuhan in his analysis of media continued to place man at the center and considered media as his extensions, this artistic transformation of the subject-object-duo was more radical, and had more thoroughgoing aesthetic and political implications.

Since I want to focus on literature here, I will mention – briefly – a poetic project, which was directly connected to the works above, by its generic description as a "system" and by its partial presentation at the *Software* exhibition. The work in question is poet and Andy Warhol-collaborator John Giorno's *Giorno Poetry Systems*. The inception of this system was based on the idea – influenced by people such as John Cage and William Burroughs – of producing and distributing poetry by other means than paper, print, and books. In 1965, Giorno began to record and distribute poetry on LP-records. While packaging the art

form anew, this did not in itself transform the space of literary experience in a drastic way.

In 1968, however, the concept was expanded by the inclusion of telephone technology into Giorno's system, through the NY-based project *Dial-A-Poem*. Giorno linked his poetry recordings to a telephone network – 15 lines with individual answering machines –, which people could call up in order to listen to a poem. Since much of the poetry was of its time – i.e. colored by countercultural ideas and issues –, many kids and teens called to hear the salacious details and dirty words, which stirred a public debate after some parents found out what was going on. Thus, apart from re-configuring the geomedial infrastructure of literature and producing new spaces for literary experience – the public phone booth was just one such environment –, *Dial-A-Poem* also affected the social and political ecology of literature, as poetry reached new readers in new ways.

Most importantly, however, and this was even more pronounced in *Guerilla Radio*, which Giorno installed at the Software exhibition in 1970, the system exposed the media technological conditions for the aesthetic experience of the work. At the show Giorno had substituted telephones for radio and broadcasted poetry on the AM band. The material and judicial conditions were (parodically) underlined in the catalogue text: "Under FCC Low Power Transmission Regulations, it is legal to broadcast on the AM band without a license, if one transmits with 100 milliwatts or less power in a free space, not interfering with licensed stations, and have a 12 foot antenna or use carrier-current transmission" – and so on.

IV.

Work such as Giorno's explored – aesthetically – the media infrastructure of not only artistic practice, but, of phenomenological space and experience as well. More specifically, this infrastructure was exposed as the product of electric signals and the material means of transmitting them. The same can be observed in sound poetry, which actually practices and performs a "signaletic poetics". Thus, both can be said to prefigure a media condition of today.

In the last work I will take a look at here – which has also given this article its title – the *history* of such a signaletic materiality is outlined, at the same time as its aesthetic potentials are imagined in inventive ways. The work in question is a piece by the Swedish poet and artist Åke Hodell called *Skywriting* and subtitled "Experiment with Electronisms". The text-and-image piece was published in the experimental Swedish art and media journal *Gorilla* in 1967. Partly a comment on earlier literary activities of Hodell, from the 1940s and onward, the piece also contains poems and reflections on art, technology, LSD, and Zen as well as distorted photographs and collages. Moreover, the final part of *Skywriting* contains a score for an actual experiment with an airplane as the tool for production of poetic texts in the sky – a score that was meant to be performed at a festival of art and technology in Stockholm in 1966 called *Visions of the Now*.

The poems and reflections in Hodell's piece are quite interesting in relation to the context of media, infrastructure, and experience being explored in this article. They revolve around the various ways in which human experience has been displaced with the emergence of new technology during the 20th century. Being a former pilot himself, Hodell is especially attuned to the mediation of experience in the cockpit of an aircraft, symbolized by the meters and instruments that are *partly* to be read, *partly* to be just reacted upon within a signal-feedback-system, which regulates the pilot's relation to space and earth. It was also this biographical experience that propelled Hodell to start writing what he called "electronisms" in the early 1950s, i.e. language intermingled – or as Katherine Hayles would have it, "intermediated" (Hayles 2005: 15–17) – with code. After reading McLuhan in the early 1960s, Hodell would define his electronisms accordingly (my translation):

> extensions (expansions) of the sense organs through e.g. radar antennae and TV-cameras // transmutation of the technical "sense data" through electric amplification and fusion on electronic screens with maps unpredictable simultaneous visual-audial chains of events combined with blips, invisible rays hit the viewer in unused nerve

centers and de-couple indoctrinated functional patterns … the electrical voltages become so highly frequent that they collide with each other, it leads to electric satori …

(Åke Hodell, "Skywriting", Gorilla 2, 1967: 4)

This somewhat cryptic description points, on the one hand, to how the poetic mixture of code and language, image and text, electric signal and sound (in Hodell's sound poems) allegorizes the inescapable conditioning of experience by media technologies. On the other hand, it tries to incorporate the effects of this within a postindustrial information society characterized by a complex and manifold media ecology – of visual and acoustic as well as computational technologies –, which *also*, as we have seen, constructs new environments for literature and literary experience. This becomes emphasized in the planned *Skywriting*-performance, which includes not only the aircraft and its smoke-based text, but also radio signal transmissions from the plane to computers with screens placed in the festival area on the ground, and intended to be read and interpreted by the audience.

Hodell's work, consequently and explicitly, makes manifest a new media ecology for literary practice during the postwar decades. This entails not only a reconfiguration of the subject in order to present a more complex environment of agencies and forces, but also challenges the borderlines between nature and culture – which the first parable in *Skywriting*, about the sounds of an aircraft and a bumblebee, shows in a humorous way. It is an ecology of humans, animals, machines, and other entities that must be understood in relation to cybernetics and the emergent technologies of the postwar era.

V.

In a recently published book, the German media theorist Erich Hörl presents and outlines the concept of a "general ecology", indicating, as he writes, "a breakthrough of a new historical semantics" (Hörl 2017: 1). With this breakthrough, the concept

of "ecology" has become "increasingly denaturalized" – an ecology without nature, to speak with Timothy Morton (2009). At the same time, it has gotten rid of a set of restricting political connotations – "dogmas of proximity and immediacy; of the familiar and of kinship" (Hörl, 2017: 1). And not least, "dogmas of authenticity", to quote Hörl again (2017: 2).

Such dogmas and ideas were crucial for the conceptualization and understanding of reading in the Gutenberg Galaxy – the space of literature was intimate and marked by proximity and immediacy between written word and reader. In a related manner, the modern subject was built and consolidated through such concepts and ideas, as is well-known from the critique directed at such notions by Derrida and others. However, such connections are more severely damaged through the multiplication and expansion of ecologies today – in a general ecology it becomes obvious how nature and culture, man and machine, artefactual and organic, are always already intermingled.

But if this expansion has become imminent in cultural and media theory today, its aesthetic and poetic exploration began quite some time ago – and historically and materially it is linked to the poetic activities from the postwar period addressed here; an observation that is corroborated, for instance, in Siegfried Zielinski's investigations in *[…] nach den Medien* (2011). If literature was once – and still often is – considered and experienced as an intimate bonding of book and reader, it has for half a century also focused on and explored the medial and material in-betweens in the space between reader and book.

Literature:

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