

Claudia Benthien

The Literariness of New Media Art – A Case for Expanding the Domain of Literary Studies

(With Analyses of Recent Video Art by Keren Cytter,
Freya Hattenberger, and Magdalena von Rudy)

Abstract: This article explores media-related aspects of literariness and examines them on the basis of spoken and written language in new media art, in order to rethink the role of philology. The working hypothesis is that new media art does, in fact, possess the potential for literary analysis; the article is therefore intended as a case for the expansion of literary studies, its paradigms and methodologies.

Literature, poetic structures and elements play a significant role in many new media artworks – a fact that has been overlooked so far by both media studies and literary scholarship. The article investigates this new, complex interdisciplinary field in an exemplary analysis. To expand the application of literary studies to new developments in the arts, including new media art working with language, one has to acknowledge that orally performed texts are as complex in their aesthetic presentation and poetic signification as written and printed literary works, and are therefore to be viewed as just as relevant subjects of research.

In the introduction (part one), the research question will be contextualized within contemporary trends in research, in particular within discourse concerning the ›pictorial turn‹. It will be argued that the impulse to analyze audiovisual art from the standpoint of art history (*Bildwissenschaft*) or media studies generally overlooks or underestimates linguistic and literary components. However, in these artworks it is often the complex interplay between orality and scriptuality that creates poetic effects.

The second part of the article will introduce the concept and genres of new media art and distinguish four central aesthetic strategies that are relevant for ›philological‹ analysis: (1) the integration of written texts or printed words with a poetic intention into new media art; (2) the use of verbalized language in an explicitly poetic manner; (3) the handling of pre-existing works of literature and their transformation into audiovisual art; and (4) the exploration and adaptation of literary genres by new media artists.

The concept of literariness in literary theory will be discussed in the third part of the article, as it has been developed, amongst others, by Russian formalists, the Prague school and various literary scholars in the English and German speaking realm. The general aim will be the application of these notions of literariness to the poetic use of language in new media art. The main focus will be on the notion of poetic ›deviation‹ (*Abweichung*) and the increased self-referentiality of poetic language that is created by way of a »foregrounding of the utterance« (Mukařovský 2007, 19). Overall, poetic language can be perceived as such if it is ostentatious or if it intentionally creates alienation, a heightened awareness of its materiality, or an ›aesthetic surplus‹ that exceeds the mere communicative act.

In the parts four to six the article will then analyze three recent video art works: Keren Cytter's single-channel video *Dreamtalk* (2005), Freya Hattenberger's video performance installation *Pretty Girl* (2008), and Magdalena von Rudy's single-channel video *Regnava nel silenzio* (2008). These works have been chosen as divergent and aesthetically innovative pieces by young and upcoming female new media artists working in the German cultural context, and as representative examples for a recent trend in video art to generate complex narrative and aesthetic structures that strongly rely upon language. The three works will be examined in close readings focusing on the use of language and literary structures, both in scriptural and in oral language.

It will be shown that these video artworks integrate elements from all three literary genres – drama (e. g. choral speech, teichoscopy), poetry (repetitions, parallelisms, rhyme, semantic ambiguities, etc.), and epic prose (narrative voices, literary ekphrasis). Furthermore, it is argued that these new media art works create and make use of an ›aesthetic surplus‹ by way of a highly conscious and ostentatious use of language that is viewed and presented as an artistic material and a poetic ›tool‹. They also raise the question of agency inasmuch as all three video works play with inauthentic or figurative discourse, which is either articulated by someone else and only performed second-hand, or presented as ›re-presentation‹ as such. Moreover, in two of the three works discussed the speakers are not conceptualized as characters articulating ›themselves‹ at all, but as mere vocal instances mediating external content. Such experimental work with language definitively exceeds existing parameters of figural speech and character analysis both in film analysis and narratology. The language used by the speakers refers to its act of articulation as such, or works with iterations and other forms of language ›deviation‹ *in actio*. With regard to the concept of literariness, such linguistic strategies must be considered poetic.

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