

Eleonora Fisco

## Mapping Poetry in the Digital Age Methods, Practices, and New Directions in Poetry Studies

- Claudia Benthien, Vadim Keylin, Henrik Wehmeier (eds.), *Poetry in the Digital Age: An Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2025 (= *Poetry in the Digital Age*, Vol. 5). 631 pp. [Price: EUR 149,95]. ISBN: 9783111694061.

Defining poetry has always been a difficult task, not least because the category itself has continuously evolved across media, cultural contexts, and technological paradigms. During the first decades of the twenty-first century, this complexity has become even more evident. Poetry no longer exists primarily as a printed artifact but circulates through performances, festivals, social media platforms, audiovisual installations, podcasts, digital archives, and hybrid publishing practices. It is simultaneously a literary genre, a performative event, a social practice, and a multimedia object. While these transformations have profoundly altered both poetic production and reception, literary criticism has often struggled to develop conceptual frameworks capable of accounting for such diversity.

*Poetry in the Digital Age: An Interdisciplinary Handbook* addresses precisely this challenge. Rather than proposing yet another definition of contemporary poetry, the volume offers a comprehensive methodological guide for studying an impressive range of poetic practices in an era in which the printed page has lost its exclusive centrality. Conceived within the framework of the ERC Advanced Grant research project *Poetry in the Digital Age*, conducted at the University of Hamburg between 2021 and 2025 under the direction of Claudia Benthien, the handbook constitutes the team's principal scholarly outcome. As part of the *PoetryDA* book series by De Gruyter, it explores the interactions between poetry and performance, sound, and visual culture, bringing together an international network of scholars whose expertise spans literary studies, media studies, film studies, cultural and queer studies, digital humanities, theatre studies, musicology, and communication studies.

As Jay David Bolter<sup>1</sup> has argued in his book *Digital Plenitude* (2019), two major transformations have reshaped contemporary culture: the rise of digital media and the gradual erosion of traditional cultural hierarchies. Within this context, aesthetic value is no longer stabilized by a universally recognized canon but negotiated across multiple cultural institutions, communities, and media environments, enlarging Pierre Bourdieu's concept of literary field (1992)<sup>2</sup>. The »digital age« evoked in the volume's title should therefore not be understood as referring exclusively to electronic literature. Rather, it designates the broader media ecology within which contemporary poetry is produced, circulated, and experienced. As media scholars such as Bolter and Grusin (1999)<sup>3</sup>, Jenkins (2006)<sup>4</sup>, and Rajewsky (2005)<sup>5</sup> have demonstrated, analog and digital media coexist in complex processes of convergence and remediation rather than replacing one another. Contemporary poetry exemplifies this condition particularly well, as printed books increasingly coexist with spoken performances, audiovisual works, digital compositions, and social media publications. An interdisciplinary approach thus becomes not simply desirable but indispensable.

The handbook contains fifty chapters, eighteen of which are authored by members of the Hamburg research project, while the remaining contributions are written by internationally recognized scholars working across a wide range of disciplines. The volume is divided into four

sections that collectively offer a systematic mapping of contemporary poetry across multiple media constellations. More importantly, the editors combine this extensive survey with concrete methodological proposals and an up-to-date reconstruction of the most significant debates currently shaping international scholarship. The four sections are not conceived as isolated thematic units but constantly dialogue with one another.

One of the volume's greatest achievements lies in its refusal to reproduce traditional hierarchies between supposedly canonical and marginal poetic forms. This position represents a significant intervention in a field where formalist and philological approaches still often dominate literary curricula. The editors do not seek to replace one canon with another or simply celebrate innovation for its own sake. Instead, they ask a more productive question: what interpretative tools are required to understand poetry's manifestations in the digital age?

The first section, *Adapting the Concepts and Parameters of Poetry Research*, is dedicated precisely to this task. It revises some of the most established concepts of literary criticism – including the lyric, poetic function, poetic language, lyric subjectivity, versification, and meter – while simultaneously expanding the discussion to encompass categories such as musicality, typography, voice, and orality. Rather than discarding traditional literary concepts, the contributors demonstrate how these notions can be rethought when poetry exceeds the printed page and increasingly unfolds through multimodal environments. Layout and typography, for instance, are confronted, in the digital age, with forms whose stability is determined by the interface of platforms – as in the case of Instapoetry (II.7) – or whose materiality, as well as the conditions of reception, are grounded in the possibility of movement and in the successive appearance and disappearance of letters, spaces, and punctuation marks. A particularly interesting case is that of code poetry, which foregrounds the process of creation and requires a different mode of engaging with both the syntax of code and that of poetic language. As an output that blurs the boundaries between word and image, it challenges the reader to engage with the text both as something to be *read* and as something to be *seen* (I.12).

The second section, *Between Established Genres and Emerging Formats*, vividly illustrates the extraordinary diversity of today's poetic landscape. According to Bourdieu's conception of the literary and artistic field, every historical period offers poets a particular horizon of possibilities while simultaneously limiting others. For centuries, the dominance of print culture consolidated a distinctive understanding of poetry as lines of verse arranged within the white space of the page. Today, however, the interaction between print and digital media generates entirely new ecologies for both poems and books. As Daugaard argues (II.1), if print conventions still shape the cultural prestige of poetry, the book itself becomes a hybrid object whose materiality is repurposed in new and interesting ways, exploring connections with visual art and typographic conventions. Against this background, audiovisual poetry, oral performance, digital poetry, and social media writing increasingly occupy central rather than peripheral positions within contemporary poetic production. In this regard, Wiebke Vorrath (II.6) introduces a seminal distinction between *born-digital poetry* and digitized poetry, originally created through other media and only subsequently disseminated online.

The third section shifts the focus from poetic forms to the methodological frameworks through which they can be investigated. Rather than presenting interdisciplinarity as a generic aspiration, the contributors demonstrate how different disciplinary traditions offer concrete analytical tools for the study of contemporary poetry. Alongside literary criticism, readers are introduced to perspectives drawn from sound studies, speech and communication studies, theatre and performance studies, film and media studies, cultural studies, musicology, and the digital humanities. Each chapter reconstructs the state of the art within its respective field while identifying concepts that may productively be adapted to poetry research. The section thus

functions less as an inventory of disciplines than as a methodological toolkit, inviting scholars to move beyond exclusively text-centred approaches and to engage with disciplines not usually related to poetry.

In my view, especially innovative is the proposal to adopt a Digital Humanities approach (III.16). Although the Digital Humanities have undergone significant development over the past decades, they remain in fact difficult to define. Applying computational methods to the study of poetry entails a renewed attention to the processes of creation, production, and dissemination underlying emerging practices such as electronic literature. At the same time, these methods allow researchers to uncover the power structures embedded in digital infrastructures and to shed new light on computers as »non-conscious cognizers« and their relationship to the human.

Worth a mention is also the approach related to film studies (III.11). By providing both descriptive terminology for audiovisual design and theoretical frameworks, film studies offer essential tools to analyze how contemporary poetry is remixed and circulated across digital platforms. As a case study, Wehmeier discusses the well-known film *Howl* (2010), directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman and based on Allen Ginsberg's eponymous poem (III.11). Through a neoformalist analysis, the author shows how formal elements of the film – such as framing and the alternation between black-and-white footage and animation – guide viewers in the construction of meaning and contribute to shaping Ginsberg's representation as a historical figure. A phenomenological approach, by contrast, brings to the fore the kinaesthetic and sensory dimensions of film reception: the unstable camera, zooms, and jazz music contribute, through the specific affordances of the cinematic medium, to producing a corporeal experience of the poem in the spectator.

The final section addresses some of the most significant debates currently animating international scholarship. Rather than offering definitive answers, these chapters identify the conceptual questions that are likely to shape future research. Particularly valuable, after the COVID-19 pandemic, is the contribution devoted to the notions of liveness and the mediatization of performance (IV.1), which challenges traditional oppositions between presence and reproduction (Phelan 1993<sup>6</sup>; Auslander 1999<sup>7</sup>) by showing how the performances of liveness often circulate simultaneously across physical and digital spaces on different levels. For scholars working on live and oral poetry, the chapters devoted to spoken word and performance poetry represent not only a reliable introduction to current debates but also an indispensable starting point for future developments in the field. Contributions by Julia Novak, Daniela Silvia de Freitas, and Cornelia Gräbner engage directly with issues that lie at the heart of contemporary oral poetry practices, including the moving spectrum of live oral poetry subgenres (II.2), authenticity and activism (IV.2), embodiment and presence (III.10). Moreover, the discussion of the *aesthetics of access* (IV.4) fills a genuine gap in literary research, examining the ethical and political implications of making poetry accessible and how tools like alt-text or Braille open up the possibility of new poetic forms. Finally, the chapter devoted to artificial intelligence and poetic creativity proves stimulating, engaging with one of the most pressing questions currently confronting literary studies: how emerging computational technologies reshape established notions of authorship, originality, creativity, and artistic agency. Among the various positions on the question of AI's authorial status, Vadim Keylin and Wiebke Vörrath distinguish three main possibilities: recognizing artificial intelligence as an autonomous authorial voice; assuming that AI would not write poetry on its own initiative and therefore considering its output as a form of collaborative composition; and defining the poetic object on the basis of the agency of those who engage with it and assess its aesthetic value, as in the practice of found poetry (IV.11).

As I mentioned before, what makes the handbook particularly remarkable is its epistemological stance. While in many literary departments poetry is still predominantly approached through close reading (Kramnick 2023<sup>8</sup>), philology, and formal textual analysis, these frameworks often continue to privilege a relatively narrow understanding of what constitutes poetry. The present volume successfully overcomes this limitation by refusing to establish hierarchies between more canonical and less canonical poetic practices. Mass phenomena such as slam poetry enter the scholarly discussion with the same legitimacy as highly experimental forms of sound poetry or digital artistic production. The book's objective here is neither to celebrate popular culture uncritically nor to replace one literary canon with another. Rather, it acknowledges that contemporary poetry unfolds across multiple media environments and therefore requires a plurality of hermeneutic strategies. Different poetic objects demand different analytical instruments, and no single methodology can claim exhaustive authority. The editors repeatedly demonstrate that interpretative categories are historically contingent rather than timeless. Concepts such as lyricity, voice, textuality, or authorship acquire different meanings depending on the media ecology within which a poem is produced and received. Consequently, the handbook encourages readers not simply to adopt new methodologies but to reflect critically upon the assumptions underlying inherited scholarly frameworks. Its interdisciplinary ambition therefore extends beyond the accumulation of different perspectives; it invites a genuine reconsideration of what poetry studies might become in the twenty-first century. The structure of the volume further reinforces this objective. Rather than encouraging a linear reading, the handbook is conceived as a reference work whose chapters may be consulted independently according to the reader's interests. At the same time, the extensive cross-reference system creates meaningful connections between concepts, disciplines, and case studies, fostering unexpected intellectual trajectories across the volume.

The breadth of the project also entails certain limitations, which are clearly acknowledged in the *Preface*. Given the relatively short format of the individual chapters, some topics can only be introduced rather than examined in depth: gender and queer studies are, for example, addressed in a brief outline of key terms in the field (III.3). These limitations, however, appear to be the inevitable consequence of the handbook's ambition to provide a broad methodological overview rather than exhaustive theoretical treatments. Every chapter successfully situates its topic within the wider landscape of contemporary poetic practices and provides readers with extensive bibliographical references for further exploration. A second limitation concerns the geographical scope of the volume. The editors aim to address an international readership and to represent poetry as a global phenomenon. They themselves recognize, however, that the majority of the contributors they have brought together are affiliated with institutions in Western countries, particularly in Germany, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Consequently, the case studies predominantly reflect Western literary traditions. While postcolonial perspectives are included, a broader representation of poetic practices from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other cultural contexts would have further strengthened the volume's international aspirations. Comparable initiatives with a national focus have recently emerged within other academic projects – notably Antonio Rodríguez's<sup>9</sup> *Dictionnaire du lyrisme. Poésie, arts et médias* (2024), centred on French literary criticism.

Overall, *Poetry in the Digital Age* stands out as one of the most comprehensive and intellectually ambitious contributions to contemporary poetry studies published in recent years. More than a handbook in the conventional sense, it offers a persuasive methodological intervention that challenges scholars to reconsider the categories through which poetry has traditionally been understood. Rather than proposing a new canon for the twenty-first century, the volume maps the expanding field of contemporary poetic practices while demonstrating that methodological plurality is more and more essential at a time when poetry is created, circulated,

and experienced across multiple media environments. This handbook provides both an essential guide to the current state of the field and a compelling vision of its future directions.

Eleonora Fisco  
University of L'Aquila and  
University of Lausanne

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jay David Bolter, *The Digital Plenitude. The Decline of Elite Culture and the Rise of New Media*, Cambridge/London 2019.
- <sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris 1992.
- <sup>3</sup> Jay David Bolter & Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, Cambridge/London 1999.
- <sup>4</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York/London 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Irina O. Rajewsky, Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality, *Intermédialités / Intermediality* 6 (2005), 43–64, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005505ar>.
- <sup>6</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*, New York/London 1993.
- <sup>7</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness. Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, New York/London 2023.
- <sup>8</sup> Jonathan Kramnick, *Criticism & Truth. On Method in Literary Studies*, Chicago 2023.
- <sup>9</sup> Antonio Rodriguez (ed.), *Dictionnaire du lyrique. Poésie, arts, médias*, Paris 2024.

2026-09-07

JLTonline ISSN 1862-8990

**Copyright** © by the author. All rights reserved.

This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and JLTonline.

For other permission, please contact [JLTonline](#).

### How to cite this item:

Eleonora Fisco, Mapping Poetry in the Digital Age. Methods, Practices, and New Directions in Poetry Studies. (Review of: Claudia Benthien, Vadim Keylin, Henrik Wehmeier (eds.), *Poetry in the Digital Age: An Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2025 (= Poetry in the Digital Age, Vol. 5).)  
In: JLTonline (07.09.2026)  
Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-004881  
Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-004881>