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IV.13 Negotiation and Critique of Digitality in Page Poetry

The negotiation of digitality within literary texts is a significant and pertinent topic. Nevertheless, research publications to date have either examined prose texts or focused on digital literature – for instance, poetry published on blogs, websites, or social media. By contrast, this article examines contemporary page poetry in the context of current discourses on digitalization, postdigitality, and disconnectivity. It investigates how poetry engages with, reflects upon, and potentially challenges everyday networked experiences and how it reflects current debates about digitality both on a thematic and formal level. Of interest is, for instance, how poets utilize poetic devices to reveal concealed digital infrastructures and technologies or decipher the processes of digital knowledge generation. It demonstrates that poets adopt highly original and distinct critical perspectives on our networked reality. Following Jan Distelmeyer, this critique can be understood as “an unfolding of concerns,” negotiating “the totality and peculiarity of the conditions and consequences of electronic digital computing in all of its forms” (2022, 1–2).

The starting point is two assumptions. First, connectivity can today be considered one of the defining features of digitality: “By taking full advantage of the many-to-many connectivity facilitated by the Internet, the explosion of user-generated digital ‘content’ [. . .] has refocused the function of computational media from storage to production, from the archiving of individual experience to the generation of collective presence and of connectivity itself” (Hansen 2010, 180). The second assumption is that the digital and the analog are profoundly intertwined, which is reflected in the concept of *postdigitality*. This term is employed to convey either a disillusionment with digital information systems and tools or, more generally, to signify a phase in which the fascination with them has become obsolete. As engagement with digital information technology is increasingly countered by criticism, the postdigital describes a perspective that no longer focuses on technical innovations and instead rejects narratives of their constant improvement (cf. Cramer 2015, 13). The term also refers to the hybridization of old and new technologies and to a phase in which media use becomes increasingly self-thematic. The reciprocal relation of digital and analog will be discussed and exemplified here by printed poetry, based on the assumption that the book became an “analog medium” strictly only through digitalization (see in this context Jessica Pressman’s concept of “bookishness,” 2020; → II.1 PRINTED POETRY).

Hyperconnectivity and its discontents

The early days of the internet were characterized by the promise that the world as a “global village” would offer inclusive participation and accessibility (cf. Bollmer 2016, 3). New networking opportunities were euphorically received, not least because connectivity offered possibilities for experimenting with identity, dismantling hierarchies, promoting democratic participation, and linking knowledge bases (cf. Turkle 2011, 152; Karppi 2018, 2; Stäheli 2021, 31). Increasingly powerful mobile devices have enabled a state of “hyperconnectivity,” a professional and private availability independent of time and place (cf. Stäheli 2021, 34, 51). This is particularly evident on social media platforms, where the “constant mutual observation of permanent connectivity” (Penke 2019, 457; trans. CB) is a central element of user activity: “It is connectivity itself that one anticipates, not necessarily a specific connection” (Grusin 2010, 128; cf. Karppi 2018, 122). Since the 2010s, networking euphoria has been dampened by a net critique directed toward, among other things, the commodification and commercialization of data and personal information, including the application of algorithms (see Hesselbarth 2018, 2000). The invisibility and obfuscation of digital infrastructures have also become subject to critique (cf. Distelmeyer 2022, 9). Furthermore, it is argued that online relationships and face-to-face communication have become out of sync and that the omnipresence of digital communication tools leads to a paradoxical state of simultaneous connectedness on a technical level and disconnect-edness on an emotional level (cf. Turkle 2011, Ch. 8); however, relevant criticism of these narratives exists as well (see, e.g., Vuorre and Przybylski 2023). Contemporary poems frequently “incorporate documentary qualities as they reflect the foreignness and discomfort of interacting with and through the internet, which is likely to disappear as users gradually adapt;” therefore, “the subject of these poems is not only the internet as a medium or practice, but as a profound cultural change that has to be coped with” (Shakargy 2020, 331–332).

The German poet Sirka Elspaß thematizes the downsides of digital connectivity through laconic short poems dealing with everyday online situations. One such example is “wir würden stürzen” [We would fall], a poem that thematizes “a silence | that the videocall cannot bridge,” where “it is impossible | to fall into each other’s arms we would | tumble” (Elspaß 2023, 17; trans., also in the following, CB). Through the perception of a seemingly unbridgeable silence and the coldness evoked by the poetic image of multiple sweaters worn on top of each other, the poem depicts a communicative atmosphere of loneliness and distance – a situation in which the interlocutors are, as media sociologist Sherry Turkle puts it, paradoxically “alone together” (2011). The implicit desire for human contact is the topic of another of Elspaß’ poems, entitled “auf der rolltreppe fahren die

handgriffe | immer etwas schneller als man selbst” [On the escalator the handles | always go a little faster than you do], in which the death of an unnamed acquaintance is collectively but anonymously mourned online: “es ist einer der tage an denen die zeit stehen bleibt | aber die vögel zwischern weiter als wäre nichts | während ich eine kerze im internet anzünde | und 164 andere auch, stand heute, samstag, 23:13” (Elspaß 2023, 19). These lines describe “one of those days when time stands still” with “the birds chirping as if nothing is wrong,” though someone has died, for whom the first-person speaker ritually “lights a candle on the internet.” While social science and media research deals with the phenomenon of “living on” online after the physical death of a person (cf. Bollmer 2016, Ch. 5; Karppi 2018, 104), the focus here is on questioning the consoling function of networked virtual remembrance. Specifying “164” comourners, as well as date and time (“as of today, saturday, 23:13”), the language used notably lacks poetic devices, while referencing paratexts and metadata of digital communication. This sober presentation appears to critique the concept of “communal mourning,” as it creates a quantitative, rather than a qualitative, sense of connectedness.

In the poem “Rozdzielczość” [Resolution] by the Polish poet Tadeusz Dąbrowski, the ambiguity of closeness and distance in digital media is played out by means of an experiment with an intimate photo. The male first-person speaker describes having selected just one eye in a photo of the addressee,

enlarged it to the edge of the screen, up
to limits of resolution [. . .]
[. . .] I enlarged
your right eye, wanting to jump
to the other side with the last click, to see your soul
or at least myself, all clicked up. [. . .]
(Dąbrowski in Italiano and Wagner 2019, 15; trans., also in the following, CB)

The more the facial detail is enlarged by the image program and thus alienated, the more he sees nothing but “niewyraźną sylwetkę,” [indistinct bodily contours] of himself – the screen turns into a mirror and the once organic eye of the depicted lover becomes a structure of nothing but “gray rectangles,” reminiscent of the bricks “w ścianie płaczu,” [of the wailing wall] that cannot be penetrated. This poetic image of the impermeable religious wall can be interpreted as a drastic metaphor of isolation – triggered by a technical dissecting process conducted in solitude in front of a PC, a stark contrast to the emotional connectivity religion promises to offer. Intimacy is neither sought through a verbal address of the partner nor through looking at his or her exposed body but in the paradoxical desire to intrude into the other’s photographed eye through digital technology. Search-

ing for the “*dusza*” [soul] proves to be illusionary (Dąbrowski in Italiano and Wagner 2019, 15).

The North Macedonian writer Nikolina Andova hits the same note in her poem “Благословено е она што не можеме да го допреме” [Blessed is what we cannot touch]. In fictitious performative speech acts, it “blesses” places that have not been and will never be visited or reached by a collective lyrical subject, including the moon and the sun, the seas that are never swum across, and many more. The rhetorical structure of the poem thus recalls – and ironically and blasphemously rewrites – the Sermon on the Mount. The implied desire for touch is the connecting motif of various blessings, expressed at the beginning in the slightly erotic image of an unreachable “tight silk nightgown drying on the balcony opposite” and, in the last verses, in the ephemeral vision of the “soft hair of a girl | who almost, but only almost, touched me | on a crowded bus” (Andova in Italiano and Wagner 2019, 52; transl., also in the following, CB). Among those mundane and spiritual entities, Andova adds two lines that thematize a similar suffering from distance in online communication to Dąbrowski: “Blessed are freedom and our illusion of having touched it | the way we touch life through screens and monitors” (Andova in Italiano and Wagner 2019, 52). That both Dąbrowski’s and Andova’s poems choose not language but touch as the essence of connectivity in digital networks corresponds to a certain tradition already in the 1990s of experiments with “teletactility,” which discussed multisensory interactive systems of virtual reality, aiming at a simulation of touch and new kinds of tactile – and perhaps erotic – experiences (see Benthien 2002, Ch. 12; Hansen 2004, Ch. 3). All poems discussed in this section negotiate the topic of digital connectivity by addressing its discontents and unfulfilled promises.

Poems negotiating disconnectivity

As a counterimpulse to hyperconnectivity, a “disconnecting industry” (Stäheli 2021, 436; transl., also in the following, CB) has developed, “renouncing connectivity” (Zurstiege 2019, 93; transl. CB). However, practices and discourses often aim only at “distinguishing healthy from sick networking” or indicating merely temporary phases of disconnectivity. In this context, Pepita Hesselberth speaks of a “paradox of dis/connectivity itself (no disconnectivity without connectivity)” (2018, 1995). Disconnectivity, therefore, has to be understood as a strategy that “operates against networking from within” (Stäheli 2021, 84) or as a “*gesture* toward disconnectivity” (Hesselberth 2018, 1995), which can take different forms – “a break, a manifesto, an act, a form of resistance, a failure” (Karppi 2018, 2). The

most obvious example is a break in communication using silence as a “presence of non-participation” (Stäheli 2021, 90), for instance, through phases in the work environment when employees are supposed to be offline, or apps that remind users to digitally detox (cf. Karppi 2018, 126). Poetry can relate to the concept and practices of disconnectivity in different ways: by emphasizing a supposed “here-ness” and “nowness” of poetry in contrast to digital connectedness (see Benthien 2026), by thematizing an unplugged state – e.g., reading a printed poetry book – or by a “nosthetic” thematizing of a longing for the predigital (in the context of Insta-poetry, e.g., as a turn to analog media such as the typewriter; see Grubnic 2020).

Silke Scheuermann’s German poem “Letzte meiner Art” [The last of my kind] reads: “It is quiet here in the room, a silence, | through which the computer hums. | [. . .] around me only your absence | and the possibility of the internet” (2014, 20; trans., also in the following, CB). This poem is about a female self in a toxic heterosexual relationship, about power relations, about the future, fear, abandonment, and the state of waiting. The “last lover” sees herself as “a dying species” (Scheuermann 2014, 20). Only the quoted third out of nine stanzas deals with digitalization; it is an example of a temporary withdrawal from networking: Similar to Elspaß’ poem, the lyrical subject perceives a silence in the room and the whirring of the computer. Momentarily not in use, it is still switched on and thus becomes perceptible in its materiality as background noise. The partner’s absence dominates, both physically and medially; the lyrical subject receives no signals or messages whatsoever. Since the poem describes a crisis – the end of a relationship that is both feared and longed for – the last quoted verse about “the possibility of the internet” can be read ambiguously, in that either the short-term disconnectivity may soon end – with the lyrical subject in contact with the addressee – or that, in such a state of mind, it would be easy to find distraction on dating platforms.

The German poet Daniel Falb chooses a more entangled and abstract mode of negotiating (dis)connectivity. His book *Orchidee und Technofossil* [Orchid and techno fossil] consists of four long poems, the first of which thematizes the global crop diversity trust in Svalbard, Norway – “the ultimate backup of all seed libraries in the world” (Falb 2019, 6; trans., also in the following, CB) – and links it to *lyrikline.org*, a digital database for spoken poetry, curated by Haus für Poesie, Berlin. With the predication that this database serves as “Documentation of Endangered Languages” (Falb 2019, 22), the poem’s speaker exaggerates the current state of poetry, which is to be threatened with extinction as well. The major online “archive for voices of poetry” is contrasted by “*ein SUPERZERFLEDDERTES, MIT | GUMMI ZUSAMMENGEHALTENES ODER -GEBUNDENES | BUCH / BRAUNES BLATTKONVOLUT,*” an old notebook that shows heavy signs of use, in which the speaker has collected paper printouts of “Wiki Searches” for the entry

“Grimm’sches Wörterbuch” (Falb 2019, 6, 22–23), which is curiously emphasized by bold letters, perhaps to foreground its “nosthetic” materiality. Printing out hyper-texts obviously “disconnects” them. In the quoted excerpt, a digital database is both related to a natural database – the seed library – and to analog printouts of “the” online encyclopedia in a notebook, which in turn provides information about the most important analog encyclopedia of the German language, the historical 33-volume *Deutsches Wörterbuch* [German dictionary] of the Brothers Grimm, self-reflexively cited as a source for the poem. “Wiki Searches” (Falb 2019, 23) here serve to find poetic terms that have perhaps already been forgotten. Thus, Falb showcases the intricate entanglement of connectivity and disconnectivity and their (im)material manifestations.

Illuminating the downsides of digital infrastructures

Some poets thematize the downsides of digital infrastructures for both humans and nature. They deal, among others, with the obfuscation of “components that make the contemporary complex of digitality [. . .] functional and effective” (Distelmeyer 2022, 9). Hidden from public view are, for instance, “the underground and underwater cables of the internet, [. . .] the sealed-off server parks, [. . .] the inner workings of my computer, that material organization of circuit boards, slots, chips, cards, processor units, and wires” – the latter being addressed in media studies by the metaphor of the “black box” (Distelmeyer 2022, 9).

The Argentinian poet Sergio Raimondi has dedicated many poems to a critique of digitality and globalization. His poetic strategies include combining vocabulary from the realms of computer technology and digital infrastructures with a rather bureaucratic idiom, composing extensive syntagmata shaped into classic verses – to intertwine facts, but also to make perceivable the obscuring of agency. In a poem entitled “标签” (Chinese sign for “tag(s)”), Raimondi illustrates the recent change in the notion of infrastructure by the example of a former “cement works” in China that has been transformed into a “factory for processing data,” with rows of low-wage workers “seated in front of computer screens endlessly tagging | traffic lights and faces, odd eyes and lips, etc” (2023, 89–91; transl., also in the following, CB). Their monotonous work consists of clicking “Captchas” to enable a seamless online stream for customers (Captchas are image tests of human identity that protect the operator’s resources, not the users or their data). At the entrance of this former factory building “sits a mixer, physical | symbol of an obsolete meaning of infrastructure” (Raimondi 2023, 91). Today’s infrastruc-

tures, the poem suggests, are the huge hidden hardware and software technologies that enable data flow. In his poem “Säkerhetskopiering” (Swedish word for “back-up”) Raimondi contrasts the instantaneity and immaterial fluidity of digital communication (“la comunicación fluida y de inmediato | transporada o al menos en milisegundos”) with the “barrels and barrels | of dense petroleum or tons of coal excavated” that are needed to run gigantic server farms in remote areas (2023, 170–171; transl., also in the following, CB). Rhetorically, the “thick dust cloud” created by the necessitated energy generation figures as the downside of digital “transparencia” (Raimondi 2023, 170–171). The poem takes the example of huge hangars located “in a clearing in the woods close to the Artic Cycle where the cold air and water help to mitigate the extreme heat generated” (Raimondi 2023, 171). Apart from its climate, the Swedish location was chosen by an unnamed global company due to the “Nordic country’s political stability” (Raimondi 2023, 173). Despite the immense exploitation of natural resources for digital infrastructures, the last lines of the poem are dedicated to the frozen Nordic landscape in winter and to the traditional practices of a local fisherman “who breaks a hole | in the pack of ice and settles himself on a seat of skis | and waits after casting with experience his hook knows | that a chameleonic trout is moving deep below” (Raimondi 2023, 173). This can be interpreted as a poetic image of resistance.

The German poet and biologist Carla Cerda is concerned with critical digital infrastructures and our dependencies on them, as well as with their intrusion into the biosphere (see Schmidt 2025). An important motif of her poetry book *Loops* (2020) is submarine cables laid at the bottom of the oceans – the transatlantic Marea sea cable, connecting Virginia Beach (USA) with Bilbao (Spain), financed by the technology conglomerates of Meta Platforms (formerly Facebook) and Microsoft. An illustrative example can be found in “Loop 1,” which recounts the departure of a user named Juana, who left a WhatsApp group she had set up herself, and “since then we have been looking for her at the bottom of the sea,” between “sea urchins, SQM realtime 26,00 EUR | ▲ +0,40 (1,56%), and other radially symmetrical life forms” (Cerda 2020, 4; trans. CB). As this quote shows, one is forced to “read” Cerda’s poems “with Google” because of the foreign words, abbreviations, code languages, and technical or scientific jargon: the real-time fluctuations in the share price of SQM – a Chilean mining giant that generates revenue from lithium, a rare light metal needed for cell phone batteries – are written in typical stock exchange notation; radially symmetrical life forms such as starfish are organic structures found in cnidarians and echinoderms. The poem takes the undersea data cable as its literal communication site, searching for the group-member within the material infrastructure. Cerda’s poem unfolds a “hypercultural poetics” (Willms 2016; trans. CB), in which everything is related to everything else:

This includes connecting Mexico and Chile to Europe, and data streams and stock prices to marine animals that find their habitat next to, on, and under the cables. In this process, irritating category errors occur – neither can users be factually found in the network nor does an undersea cable fulfill the function of a data server. In this poetry book, rivers and sea creatures using apps and participating in messenger services are naturally given poetic agency (→ IV.12 POSTHUMANISM AND POETRY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE). While Raimondi's poem about a server farm uses a diction reminiscent of administrative language and soberly describes the negative effects on the environment, Cerda takes a more playful approach, showing how technology and the biosphere are intertwined through mutual agencies.

Imitating network structures and exposing poetic self-reflexivity

Page poetry may also reflect digitality by foregrounding its own mediality and materiality in a self-reflexive way or by thematizing connectivity and imitating network structures through poetic techniques, as a rhizomatic flow of language. Eva Stubenrauch has proposed a framework for analyzing critique of digitality voiced in literary texts, albeit without taking poetry into account. She identifies three overarching strategies in literature and assumes that such texts often use “network-structural modes of writing” (Stubenrauch 2022, 58; trans., also in the following, CB). Among them is the strategy of “resignification,” in which the quotation-like “textual absorption of network structures” serves the purposes of making both the “effectiveness of digital narratives” perceivable and “neutralizing the criticized code by adopting it” (Stubenrauch 2022, 74).

A pertinent example of such strategies is an untitled German poem by Ulf Stolterfoht from his cycle *fachsprachen XXIV. dogma für dichtung* [Technical terminologies XXIV: dogma for poetry] (→ I.7 CYCLES AND SEQUENTIAL STRUCTURES), which negotiates the question of writing poetry in the digital age and describes the omnipresence of data as a potential threat to lyrical creativity – a common topic for poetry reflecting the internet as a professional tool (cf. Shakargy 2020, 333). The opening verse sounds like a sensationalist headline: “Ever stronger readers’ brains threaten the power of poetry” (Stolterfoht 2005, 82, trans., also in the following, CB). This assertion likely refers to readers having been influenced by search engines and the immediate availability of extensive information. The advent of digital technology strengthened the ability to engage in parallel readings; it brings online knowledge to bear on the act of reading poetry. However, Stolterfoht leaves open whether this represents a genuine threat to poetic freedom and

imagination or whether his “headline” is intended to ridicule a reduced understanding of poetry. In any case, digitalization has posed a challenge to poetry as a genre, since the possible “loading of large files” suggests “a totally new poetry | feeling” (Stolterfoht 2005, 82). The reasons for this claim remain open. The speaker of the poem continues to argue metapoetically (→ I.4 POETOLOGICAL POETRY) by mentioning the selection of a poem called “tastaturereignisse” [keyboard events], which can be “put together” like a Lego toy. It is implied that the present poem itself is meant – that it refers to its own production process on a computer. This counter-model to the convention of writing poetry with pen and paper – mentioned earlier in the cycle – is reflected as a means of demonstrating poetry’s ability to absorb large amounts of data. What follows is a parody of net communication, internet searches, and digital text production, reminiscent of flarf poetry, which was popular in those years (see Bernes 2016); even a kind of anticipation of AI creation can be read into it – through a word field that has the appearance of machine generation (“TEXT pushes | persistently clones: beet root stalk. pod seems out of fashion”; Stolterfoht 2005, 82).

Network structures and digital codes are taken up and imitated, as in Cerda’s work, by transferring hyperconnectivity to the processual composition of poems. Stolterfoht’s poem is punctuated by “the rapid succession of signs that rush across the page,” as it tells self-reflexively. The present tense is employed to document the fact that “already x verses are written,” followed by the instruction to “pull the cadence” – a technical term for the last syllable of a verse, stressed or unstressed – “by eight values,” and to provide guidance on how to “hold the buttons down tenderly,” resulting in a “quiet happiness” (Stolterfoht 2005, 82). Despite the poem’s constant thematization of digitality, it nevertheless creates a sealed linguistic figuration in an analog medium that circles in and around itself. Network-imitating elements include the cross-verse flow of language, the insertion of capitalization and characters reminiscent of computer code (“<y – u hat | z rationen sinn gespeichert – kühl!>”; Stolterfoht 2005, 82), exposing their materiality (→ I.2 POETIC FUNCTION; I.3 POETIC LANGUAGE), as well as a non-hierarchical structure that does not revolve around a subject but develops rhizomatically branching internal connections (see Benthien 2026). Stolterfoht’s strategy of imitating hypertextuality refers to the supposed “flatness” of the printed text (see Hayles 2004), which is devoid of further levels and cannot be penetrated at the same time. Stubenrauch’s assertion that the poetic imitation of network structures may serve the dual purpose of making digitality perceivable and of aiming at a neutralization of connectivity by adopting the code is an apt description of his poetical practice.

Comparative summary

Contemporary printed poetry negotiates digitality in various forms and with different foci. It is, therefore, an original contribution to the ongoing debate surrounding the current impact and significance of digital media and infrastructures in relation to the concept of (dis)connectivity. Poems by Elspaß, Dąbrowski, and Andova thematize the use of video calls, online platforms, image programs, computer screens, and monitors to get in contact; they disclose loneliness and physical and emotional distance despite digital connectivity. Two poems dealing with disconnectivity show on the one hand its ambiguous state (Scheuermann), or, on the other hand, a postdigital interweaving of digital technology with that of the analog book (Falb), as well as an interweaving of an online archive of spoken language, to be found on a server in Berlin, with that of seed vaults located in Norway. Poems that illuminate the downsides of digital infrastructures do so in a reflexive and demanding way – in texts that ask of the reader an up-to-date knowledge of recent technologies. Raimondi and Cerda take us on a journey to hidden digital infrastructures in the wilderness or at the bottom of the ocean and expose environmentally destructive effects of these technologies. Stolterfoht's poem that imitates and resignifies network structures is also one of several examples in the corpus discussed that uses metapoetic strategies to both illuminate and deconstruct connectivity. Authors such as Stolterfoht and Falb reflect on the obvious tension between the printed book and the critique of digitality uttered. Analog publications that deal with digitalization can generally be described as “media archaeological observers and providers of perspectives” (Olsson 2022, 30). This may be one reason for the relevance of page poetry in the digital age. Negotiating digitality in printed poems can thus be considered a postdigital move, on the one hand juxtaposing the analog and the digital, and, on the other hand, emphasizing their interweaving relation.

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