

TEKKA

enjoying new media • software aesthetics

Boxing Digital Art.

<http://www.tekka.net/02/?Interfictions>

Roberto Simanowski

Interfictions: Vom Schreiben im Netz

Frankfurt: edition suhrkamp

ISBN 3-518-12247-9 , €10

Starting from a small group of "literature people" at the annual ACM Hypertext conferences, the digital literature scene -- artists, researchers, producers -- has grown into a far-reaching network of schools, departments and cooperations. Still, both in academic and non-academic circles, the mention of digital literature causes eyes to dart and lips to curl. Digital Literature? What Stephen King did? Not quite. Hyperfiction -- do you want to hear about it? Computer games? Ah, yes, my 13-year-old plays them ... And even among the digital arts people, cybertext, hypertext, hypermedia, digital literature are polynyms as often as synonyms.

This is why a book like Roberto Simanowski's *Interfictions* is such a welcome contribution to the current discussion. Simanowski introduces a wide range of digital fictions (in the broadest sense) and shows how they figure in the context of the still-developing genres. With its international focus, *Interfictions* caters to specialists as well as to amateur audiences and to the uninitiated.

But, like so many of his colleagues, Simanowski cannot resist setting up a new terminology for his purpose and a typology to go with it.

Terminology and its Discontents

Digital literature (or digital arts in general) is the first radically new genre (or art-form) to emerge after the formation of the academic disciplines and their descriptive systems as we know them. Other art forms developed from primitive examples that were studied and enhanced by succeeding

generations; rules and guidelines sprang up and became established traditions. The arts grow slowly. Even film developed at a rather leisurely pace over the past 100 years.

Digital art, now, is still in its twenties, and it has grown up under considerable pressure to make the grade as a "serious" genre of High Art, despite its youth. Even in the mid-1990s, one got the impression that a solid body of hyperfiction-theory existed rather forlornly on top of a handful of actual hyperfictions. The creation of an agreed-upon terminology and consensual criteria as a basis for a critique was a desideratum from the beginning. And from George Landow's taxonomy of the link ("Rhetoric of Hypermedia", 1994) through Espen Aarseth's endeavours to define *Cybertext* (1997) to the current struggle of game studies to distinguish between ludic and narrative games, terminology has been fraught; sometimes to the point where talking about digital art all but conflates with defining the words with which to do the talking. A little terminological consensus might leave more time for closer looks at actual works of digital art.

Roberto Simanowski is one of the pioneers of digital literature in the German-speaking area. He founded *Dichtung Digital* in 1999, easily the most prominent online magazine on digital literature in Germany, with a list of authors that barely falls short of a *Who's Who* of digital theory and with a number of bright new voices. *Dichtung Digital* is a platform for up-to-date digital theory and is especially concerned with introducing individual works to a wider audience. Simanowski himself writes about digital (and especially online) literature in general, laying foundations for an academic discourse while also keeping the non-specialist audience in mind. His aim is clearly to establish digital writing on the German literary scene, and he is making good headway. As an editor, researcher and avid writer, Simanowski has intimate and detailed knowledge of the international digital writing-scene. This knowledge allows him to base his theoretical considerations on illustrations and examples from a wide range of digital works.

Interactivity -- Intermediality -- Enactment

In *Interfictions*, Simanowski sets out to introduce digital literature to a (chiefly academic) audience, identifying and discussing a dozen works that can be considered formative and groundbreaking. He discusses at length "Beim Bäcker", "Das Generationenprojekt", "23:40", the "Assoziations-Blaster" (also available in English), "How are you", "Storyweb", "Same Day Test", "These Waves of Girls", "Die Aaleskorte der Ölig", "My boyfriend came back from the war", "Things spoken", "TelePhony", "Red Ridinghood", and "Troost der Bilder". Most of these texts were award-winners; some of them, like "Beim Bäcker" can be considered genre-starters. Altogether, on just under 180 pages, *Interfictions* touches over a hundred works of digital art. This turns *Interfictions* into an invaluable launch-pad for in-depth analyses of classic as well as comparatively current digital writings (fictional and sometimes non-fictional, both in English and in German).

Interfictions starts with a quick introduction to the genre and the history of its study. But reviewing the development of literary media over the past decade turns up the overwhelming questions: what exactly is online literature, how can it be described and what distinguishes it from other forms of literature and fictional media? And here is where the second focus of *Interfictions* comes in -- typology: the need not merely to contextualize individual texts and perhaps relate them to each other (e.g. via a common trait that links these texts), but also to create a system of boxes within boxes and to slot each text into place with a label attached. Simanowski quickly arrives at three key-identifiers for digital literature: interactivity, intermediality and enactment (*Inszenierung*) -- only to dismiss them immediately because they do not help answer what he then poses as his real questions: Is it art? And if it is, can it exist within established classifications or does it require new systems?

The speed with which, in the very first chapter, leading questions and guiding patterns overthrow and replace each other seems to point toward the futility of all efforts to create consistent typologies and terminologies for the fast-evolving digital medium. And although Simanowski admits to this futility in an aside or two, he still pushes ahead in his quest for the overall symmetric pattern in the rhizome. Simanowski proposes *Interfictions* as the term that will solve at least his first dilemma: "fictions" emphasizes the artistic quality of digital texts, while "inter" points toward the internet, interactivity and intermediality. Of course, this is a rather circular argument: in order to determine whether or not an entity is art, we paraphrase it under a terminology that defines it as art. In addition, apart from referring vaguely to the internet, the term *Interfictions* does not denote a sharply defined body of works -- it thus leaves us without even the "it" of "Is it art?". There is no innermost box. Incidentally, the system Simanowski establishes in *Interfictions* is only partly mapped onto the table of contents, which is half system-driven, half content-driven. Instead, the description of part of the system often features in the book on the same level as the analyses of actual digital fictions. So despite the ongoing endeavor to establish categories, there is rarely a working match of texts and categories.

The proposed types and categories are multiple: *Interfictions* separate into *Mitschreibprojekte*, Hyperfiction and Multimedia. *Mitschreibprojekte* are determined by "writing as sense-making", "limited appropriation of existing characters", "appropriation of future events", "appropriation through legitimization", "crossover between writing the story and writing about the story", and "unstoppability" (33). The main types of *Mitschreibprojekte* are (1) the successive creation of a linear story, (2) multiple authors creating multiple branching threads of a story, and (3) individual contributions getting interlinked through key-words (p. 35/36). Hypertexts are characterized by semantic links and multiple perspectives and there appears to exist a sub-genre "Russian Hypertexts" (91-96). Multimedia works fall into aural presentations, visual presentations, representations of time, and digital concrete poetry. Simanowski's attempt to formulate a "digital aesthetics" names as starting points for digital art: innovation, utopias and archives. Digital

aesthetics comprise the aesthetics of technology, the aesthetics of the screen and synaesthesia. And finally, a poetology of digital art is made up of interactivity and reflexivity.

A Surfeit Of Criteria

This leads to a surfeit of criteria that never arrives at a consistent system. In fact, Simanowski admits from the beginning that the differentiation between collaborative writing projects, hypertext and multimedia is by and large idealistic, and that most specimens of digital art carry traces of more than one of these types. So why stick primly to what appears to be merely a traditional academic practice: the enforcement of typologies? (Unless, perhaps, one must supply unquestionable criteria for literary awards -- not a purely theoretical scenario as the histories of the Pegasus and Electronic Literature Organization awards show.)

A better approach might have been to look at individual texts from different, perhaps conventional, certainly mutually exclusive, perspectives. A good-bye to neatly labeled boxes might yield the awareness that multi-media is also multi-genre, and yet we could still return to concepts and terminology that can describe digital art: not many specimens fit in one box, but many labels could apply to one specimen. For example, quite a few of the texts Simanowski is talking about appear both in the Hypertext and in the Multimedia chapters (e.g. "These Waves of Girls", "Red Ridinghood"). On the other hand, in *Interfictions* there is no crossover between *Mitschreibeprojekte* and Hypertext.

At face value, the net gain of *Interfictions* is yet another typology that has to be memorized and will, in all likelihood, make it harder, not easier, to talk about digital literature. On the other hand, the proposition of a new typology may well re-ignite the discussion of familiar assumptions about digital literature in general. And Simanowski is well enough immersed in an international context, so that although *Interfictions* is written in German, there is little danger that this discussion will be limited to a German-speaking environment alone.

The big benefit of *Interfictions*, however, is the wealth of digital texts that Simanowski presents alongside his classifications. The analysis-starters and insider's knowledge of the production-history he supplies for the 12-15 central pieces make *Interfictions* a resource and reference book for contemporary online literature. And after all, no matter which terms we use to denote their subjects, the lack of in-depth, research-based analyses of digital texts is still keenly felt in the field.

Interfictions appears in the *edition suhrkamp*, the renowned theory-series of the Suhrkamp Verlag. It is certainly a distinction to be admitted among the Bourdieux and Barthes -- for the author as well as for his subject matter. But the spartan outfit of the paperback does not do justice to the multimedial fictions Simanowski is talking about. I miss screenshots. I miss diagrams. And to counter the fleetingness of the "least secure of all archives" (p. 7) , a CD-ROM would have come in

handy. Simanowski's website, www.interfictions.com/buch, is a helpful compromise, though, and the author can be counted upon to keep the links as up-to-date as possible.

(c) Anja Rau

Sponsored by Eastgate

Tekka, 134 Main Street, Watertown MA 02472 USA. email: editor@tekka.net info@tekka.net