

Anna Katharina Schaffner - Andrew Michael Roberts

Rhetorics of Surface and Depth in Digital Poetry

DIGITAL POETRY USUALLY APPEARS on a screen¹. A computer monitor screen is a surface with implicit depth, because it is the visible manifestation of something which is, almost inevitably, imagined as having an “inside” (the CPU) or, increasingly, an “elsewhere”: the file server, web space or network. Mainframe computers and free-standing PCs tended to evoke a rhetoric of depth because their “workings” seemed to be “inside” them; the exponential growth of networks, and web-based applications may suggest a model of rhizome rather than root: a dispersed, interacting set of nodes which nevertheless seem to remain in some sense “behind” the screen. The whole issue is bedevilled, of course, by metaphor: a “screen” used to be something designed to hide, but is now something which discloses (but hides as well?); “windows” used to be something one looked through but are now surfaces one looks at². What one might call the digital “rhetoric” of surfaces and depths has been strengthened by the dominance of Mac/Windows operating systems and applications – somewhat ironically since these are supposedly modelled on the metaphor of paper, which lacks depth (documents on a “desktop”). MS-DOS operating systems with their command-line interface suggested speech command and response, whereas Mac and Windows operating systems specifically create the illusion of surfaces and overlays, a fact

¹ The exception would be those works which, like John Cayley’s *lens*, move into the realm of virtual reality.

² There was considerable discussion on this point at the e-poetry 2005 conference, Birkbeck College, University of London.

which many digital poets have exploited. HTML and other languages which allow the viewing of source code imply a simple binary of depth: a “surface” made to be viewed and an “underlying” code which produces it, and which can be called to the surface.

If one is seeking a broader cultural context for considering depth and surface, theories of postmodernism, and especially that of Fredric Jameson, provide a powerful, though problematic, frame of reference. Fredric Jameson’s article «Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism» (and subsequent book of the same title) influentially claimed that postmodern culture was marked by depthlessness. This encompassed both a physical or literal depthlessness (which he illustrated with reference to corporate and leisure architecture in America), and a conceptual depthlessness arising from the theoretical critique of a range of previously influential depth models: the «hermeneutic model of the inside and the outside» (which Jameson associated also with the «concept of expression»); the dialectical model of «essence and appearance»; «the Freudian model of latent and manifest»; «the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity»; and «the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified» (Jameson 1984: p. 61-62). For Jameson

[w]hat replaces these various depth models is for the most part a conception of practices, discourses and textual play [...] depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth) (Jameson 1984: p. 62).

For Jameson, depthlessness was associated with a loss of expressiveness or emotional content in art (Jameson 1984: p. 9), and postmodern depthlessness also destroys «historicity», as the «new spatial logic of the simulacrum» has «a momentous effect on what used to be historical time»: specifically, «the past as “referent” finds itself [...] effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts» (Jameson 1984: p. 66). He deploys the idea of depthlessness, not only in relation to architecture (the Crocker Bank Center and the Bonaventura Hotel, both in Los Angeles), but also, for example, «the statues of Duane Hanson», polyester figures which have the effect, Jameson says, that «the world [...] momentarily loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density» (Jameson 1984: p. 24-25). The key points of his article are well summarised by Alex Callinicos:

Postmodernism has become [...] a “cultural dominant”. Art produced under its reign is characterized by a peculiar depthlessness, a draining

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away of any emotional content; instead, it celebrates the disintegration of the subject and offers mere pastiches of a historical past nostalgically reduced either to a lost world of political commitment or to a source of glossy retro- style images; the strange exhilaration Postmodern art induces is an instance of the “hysterical sublime”, of the excitement and terror with which we respond to the realization that the workings of the global economic system can no longer be represented or imagined (Callinicos 1989: p. 128-129).

A further key element is Jameson’s use of Lacan, as described by David Harvey:

[Jameson] uses Lacan’s description of schizophrenia as a linguistic disorder, as a breakdown in the signifying chain of meaning that creates a simple sentence. When the signifying chain snaps, then “we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers.” If personal identity is forged through “a certain temporal unification of the past and future with the present before me,” and if sentences move through the same trajectory, than an inability to unify past, present, and future in the sentence betokens a similar inability to “unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life.” This fits, of course, with postmodernism’s preoccupation with the signifier rather than the signified, with participation, performance, and happening rather than with authoritative and finished art object, with surface appearances rather than roots (Harvey 1989: p. 53).

Jameson’s article is a virtuoso performance, incorporating examples from art, film, architecture, sculpture and literature into a broad theoretical narrative of economic and cultural development. From this arises both its rich potential for further interpretation, but also its problematic status. As Callinicos points out, Jameson’s «imperative to totalize» leads to him «forcing into a single mould a diversity of cultural phenomena which do not obviously belong together» (Callinicos 1989: p. 130, 131). The date of the article (1984) also raises the question of the possible supercession of some of the effects described. Nevertheless, his comments on the computer as a machine of «reproduction rather than production» remain suggestive:

The most energetic postmodernist texts [...] tap the networks of reproductive process and thereby [...] afford us some glimpse into a post- modern or technological sublime, whose power and authenticity is documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space in emergence around us (Jameson 1984: p 27).

While Jameson uses architecture as the paradigm of such space, his comments on what he terms «hyperspace» have relevance to the forms of cyberspace that have emerged since he wrote; in particular his

sense that the new forms of space may challenge our habitual habits of perception.

Digital work has the potential to engage with depth and surface in a highly “material” way, via the interaction of text and the visual field: text can approach and recede, appear in front and behind other text, and appear to move in three dimensions. The illusion of complex surfaces and multiple strata of visual and linguistic signs is a specific feature of the new medium, which many digital poets exploit creatively. Digital work has the capacity to explore space as a potentially semantic element and to engage with depth and surface in a more explicit and complex way than poetry on the page. Digital signifiers are temporal processes rather than permanent marks, and space, position and duration become new elements of signification.

The issue of depth and surface is most frequently addressed visually in digital poetry, as evident in pieces such as John Cayley’s *lens* (2004)³. *Lens* consists of six different groups of black and white migrating texts, drifting in and out of legibility which, by change of size, can turn from surface inscription into the backdrop for other inscriptions. *Lens* plays with the conventions of rendering spatial relationships and notions of conceptual and relative distance by means of scale, i.e. what is conceptually closest is biggest and what is furthest away is smallest. It thus turns the flat surface of the screen into an illusory three-dimensional space. The visual treatment of linguistic signs is an inherent potential of the medium, as Katherine Hayles has pointed out: «The computer restores and heightens the sense of word as image – an image drawn in a medium as fluid and changeable as water» (Hayles 1999: p. 26). The digital text, she writes, can be «manipulated in ways that would be impossible if it existed as a material object rather than a visual display». Hayles coined the influential notion of the «flickering signifier»: text as flickering image, as an immaterial temporal process rather than as a stable, durably inscribed mark (Hayles 1999: p. 26).

However, some digital poets do not rely on visual means alone, but rather question the validity of the screen representation by making explicit the schism between the surface screen event and the processes that take place in the depth of the processing unit. By means of working code or code elements into the interface text, they remind the user of the convention-based nature of screen representations and of the fact that code looms behind and generates the visible interface display.

³ Cayley’s online version of *lens* is actually a maquette, a model and study piece for an immersive four-wall VR Cave at Brown University.

In extreme cases, code or its aesthetic imitation becomes the actual artwork: the poetic and aesthetic qualities of code, code as material and as subject matter, are explored.

Some of the most well-known exponents of works of that category are JODI (the Belgian-Dutch duo consisting of Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans), who began to create this specific kind of net art, which is also referred to as «codeworks»⁴, in the mid-1990s. Their works stand in stark contrast to surface-oriented, graphically polished, glossy and smooth animation works, such as Fernando Strano's *Closed (after Hendrik Werkman)* for example. For JODI, as Paesmans states, «it is a bit of a personal matter to turn Netscape inside out [...]» (Interview with Josephine Bosma 1997). They systematically tap into and expose the productive process by pulling to the fore of the screen what usually occurs in the background, thus inverting the relationship between surface and depth and inside and outside: machine code symbols, fragments from diverse programming languages, network protocol code, graphic building blocks, log-in files and software liability agreements are upgraded from generative tools to the actual work of art. Florian Cramer writes: «Codeworks reflect the uncanny underbelly of network communication in an age where the Internet is accessed largely by graphical browser and client programs, but with the constant awareness that non-graphical codes are running underneath the system» (Cramer 2005: p. 98).

JODI very deliberately treat the user interface as screen surface, comparable to that of a TV screen, a flat volume-less surface which is not based on layout and deliberately shuns and avoids the usual visual and spatial metaphors and representational conventions of web page design (cf. Interview with Josephine Bosma 1997). They state: «The computer presents itself as a desktop, with a trash can on the right and pull down menus and all the system icons. We explore the computer from inside, and mirror this on the net» (Interview with Tilman Baumgaertel 1997). JODI do not use many of the conventional markers or icons which usually facilitate navigation and orientation for the user, like hypertext, they boycott standardised browser layouts, and leave their work relatively unmarked⁵, unexplained and difficult to

⁴ The term was actually coined by Alan Sondheim in 2001.

⁵ However, in some of their works they make ingenious use of the headers and footers of the web page, in which they insert titles or other clues, such as in *HAVOCS* for example, where they appropriate, reassemble and defunctionalise ready-made computer game graphics. Aggressive men with hats carrying sacks and hysterically jumping frog-like figures pointlessly whiz across the screen, going nowhere in an endless repetitive loop, only the size of the visible detail can be changed by the user,

access on their rhizomatic web page. JODI also engage with the issue of surface and depth on a visual level, albeit one which is very different from works such as Cayley's. They convey the theme formally. Theirs is an implicit graphical engagement with the problematic, enacted on the screen surface: «It is obvious that our work fights against high tech. We [...] battle with the computer on a graphical level» (Interview with Tilman Baumgaertel 1997), they state. Nothing is negotiated on the level of content, signifiers do not fuse into any meaningful units but remain monadic, fragmentary building blocks. Though they are using numerical and linguistic symbols, they treat them in an abstract, formalist manner, without concern for explicit semantic content.

When opening *Text* for example, the user is confronted with a jumble of instructions and commands, executable code, scripts, variables and statements, machine language instructions and text strings consisting of representable signs (ASCII) and non-representable signs (binary ones), as well as basic graphic symbols in the form of colourful blocks. The user clicks his or her way from one page scattered with these symbols to the next, in a hopeless and ultimately frustrated quest for meaning⁶. *Text* consists of an endless sea of ciphers and colours with no discernible meaning, and while it conjures up the disturbing visual symptoms of system crashes, malfunctions, interferences, a graphic program causing havoc, it is still at the same time strangely aesthetically appealing. This is a juncture where codes merge, where human and machine languages are getting mixed up, where the inside procedures are turned inside out and invade the monitor.

What we are witnessing in *Text* is the simulated result of a memory dump, where raw and unformatted data, often in unreadable form, are copied from the main memory to the screen⁷. Memory dumps occur automatically after fatal program errors, and their function is to allow the (code-literate) user to analyse the contents of the memory at the time of the crash in order to diagnose the causes of the program

who is merely allowed to randomly zoom in and out. The only clues are in the top page header descriptions, like chapter markers, mocking the disabled normal computer game commands and activities, like “%Kill”, “%Abort”, “%Pull”, “%Hit”, “%Forward” etc.

⁶ Again, the web page headers suggest some sort of order, a sequence of numbered plates to which one keeps being redirected in a random fashion.

⁷ Caroline Jäckel, in contrast, has suggested that *Text*, rather than being the simulation of a system crash or glitch, is a reference to the masses of data which accumulate in the cache after surfing the web. Cf. Caroline Jäckel: 1998.

failure. The dump provides a record of the complete, raw and unstructured state of the dumped memory regions at a specific time. It is, in some ways, a massive error message containing the secret cause of the breakdown cryptically encoded at its core.

Text is a highly ironic piece, effectively mocking the user's quest for meaning, by conflating the perceived "reader" with an imaginary debugger. The reader on a hermeneutic quest in search of the "text" promised in the title of the piece is not only confronted with a hotchpotch of symbols, but, moreover, with a jumble consisting of signs and symbols of a language he or she is very unlikely to be able to decode. While a professional debugger could use tools to interpret the dumps and to translate the raw machine language and binary elements back into other symbolical variables, the ordinary reader is hopelessly overtaxed, and is left in the dark about the nature of the "error" at the heart of this piece – is it to be sought in the symbols, or rather in the expectations of the observer?

The other important aspect of this work is of course its shock value: the monitor becomes an unstable, volatile territory and the latent and repressed danger of a breakdown becomes manifest. This sea of signs is strangely disquieting. Though the user soon notices that disorder and malfunctions are only artificially simulated, the visual display on the screen initially seems to be the symptom of a broken down operating system⁸. *Text*, and other works by JODI such as *OSS* in particular⁹, thus serve as a powerful and disconcerting reminder of the thin threshold between being in and loosing control over the technology we are using¹⁰.

⁸ However, in the interview with Tilman Baumgaertel, JODI are keen to emphasise their hacker credentials, and leave no doubt that they could easily create works which would cause *real* system crashes. There is always the possibility that they might be in *our* computer, getting inside the respective user's PC, it might be (though it is not) the inside of our own machines which is displayed here, as Heemskerk disturbingly declares: «When a viewer looks at our work, we are inside his computer. There is this hacker slogan: "We love your computer". We also get inside people's computers. And we are honored to be in somebody's computer. You are very close to a person when you are on his desktop. I think the computer is a device to get into someone's mind» (Interview with Tilman Baumgaertel 1997).

⁹ *OSS* illustrates the shock of loosing control most vividly. It generates a frantic dance of rapidly proliferating browser windows with black screens, which seem to be unruly, manically whizzing over the monitor. The monitor seems to develop a life of its own, and the process on the screen suddenly seem beyond the control of the user, which is a rather disconcerting experience.

¹⁰ Cf. Heibach 2003: p. 255.

Moreover, as Christiane Heibach has pointed out, by means of violating established representational rules and conventions, JODI also reveal the arbitrariness behind these symbolical assignments and relations: Heibach argues that computer surfaces are based on metaphors derived from other media, which are all random and not essential for the interaction with these machines. «Processes are hidden beneath static representations» (Heibach 2003: p. 256), she writes. This is an important point, since the graphical icons and visual and conceptual metaphors which dominate our interaction with the computer nowadays, such as the idea of the desktop, the model of page layout, the notion of different layers of superimposed windows etc., are indeed all just that: metaphors and conventional ascriptions. They have nothing to do with the processes inside the computer, and are just userfriendly surface metaphors facilitating the interaction with the machine on a graphical level. Once the surface is purged of these auxiliary symbolical ascriptions, JODI seem to insist, the ordinary user will be rather lost.

An even more ironic inversion of the familiar construction of depth and surface is manifest in *%Location*. This piece consists of a long continuous string of unintelligible ciphers which look like code, white/green on black ground. The key to *%Location* is in the source code window, which, when opened, features a graphic representation of an H- Bomb, made up of spatially arranged ASCII signs. This piece of “ASCII art” is subsequently interpreted as HTML code and represented on the screen. Here, the actual code itself, usually hidden “behind” the surface, is the viable art-work with a concrete figurative dimension, while the surface screen representation is just the random outcome of this shaped algorithm. *%Location* seems to suggest that an H-bomb, when unleashed, or literally, in this case, when it is executed as code, turns orderly structures into chaos. Moreover, by equating code with a bomb, it reflects on the potentially destructive force of code and its latent power to annihilate and cause destruction.

JODI very clearly work in the tradition of self-reflexive avant-garde artists and poets, who thematise the means, the signs, the tools and channels of communication and the conventions governing their usage, rather than generating readily interpretable messages. They too privilege the signifiers over the signifieds, and programmatically create rupture, subverting our habitual expectations and frustrating our usual responses and strategies in the web. They neglect the level of content for the exposure of conventions, processes and materials. Meaning is *not* located on the surface, but has to be sought elsewhere (in the source code for instance, or the general conceptual premises the works are

based upon). By implication, they question the ideologies latent in representational conventions. JODI's politics are implicit rather than explicit, since they are evident in the formal treatment of the means of communication. These works expose software conventions as mind control, which filters, mediates, organises and structures information in a certain way. Again there are parallels to the poets of the avant-garde, who attacked linguistic boundaries in order to liberate themselves from conceptual, epistemological and social frameworks and preconceptions. Moreover, JODI shatter the illusion of being in control, thwarting normally efficient strategies, throwing the user back upon his or her preconceptions, thus revealing the arbitrary nature of conventions of representation. Heemskerk remarks: «The work we make is not politically oriented, except that it stands in the net like a brick» (Interview with Josephine Bosma 1997).

In *%GoodTimes*, they appropriate the symbols and language of commerce in order to turn it into its opposite, to mock and invert it and turn it against itself.

JODI very deliberately and self-reflexively operate on and with the surface, for, as Paesmans has pointed out, «[m]edia art is always on the surface. You have to get people very quickly. You need to give them a karate punch in the neck as soon as possible» (Interview with Tilman Baumgaertel 1997). However, JODI put a new spin on the dialectics of depth and surface and essence and appearance: the slick smooth screen surface event, and Katherine Hayles' depthless «flickering signifiers», which are the basic and often uncritically accepted common currency of much digital poetry, are unmasked as optical illusions, as convention-based mirages, and the material generative processes behind are reinstated in a deeply ironic yet at the same time transgressive gesture.

We would not wish to draw any glib general conclusion, either about digital poetry in general or about the fate of postmodernism, from one set of digital works. But reading or viewing these works in the light of Jameson's formulations raises some intriguing questions. Does such "codework" fulfill Jameson's programme of the triumph of multiple surfaces over hermeneutic depth? It could be argued that JODI's works are legible only on the surface, that they constitute a play of surfaces which ironise both technological and hermeneutic ideas of depth: the depth of the system or "deep meaning" remain absent. They might also serve as a contemporary example of Jameson's «schizophrenic art». While the form of Language poetry that he cites as an example has perhaps been tamed by twenty years of exegesis and theorisation, so that we can "read" disjunctive poetry with some

confidence, JODI's codes and error message seem, for the present, more effectively disorientating; more akin to «schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers». On the other hand, in subverting the slick surface illusions of both user-friendly software and glossy animation works (which would more resemble Jameson's «glossy skin [...] stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density»), JODI's works might alternatively be seen as a critique or supercession of a postmodern aesthetic of depthlessness. The most useful conclusion to draw at present may not be in terms of categories (postmodern, post-postmodern or a critique of the postmodern), but in terms of the challenge to our perceptual and conceptual frameworks which Jameson invokes under the name of the «post-modern or technological sublime» (Jameson 1984: p. 27):

This latest mutation in space - postmodern hyperspace - has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surrounding perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world [...] this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment [...] can itself stand as the symbol and analogue of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communication network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects (Jameson 1984: p. 31-32).

Since Jameson wrote, that network has become digital and web-based; we have had time to get used to the idea, but hardly, perhaps, time to work out the terms by which we might map such a network in a way which connects with individual subjects and bodies. An attempt to think about surface and depth in digital poetry shows most clearly how much we remain caught in an incoherent structure of spatial and temporal metaphors when we try to think about human interpretative responses (such as art works evoke) to the dynamics, structures and imperatives of our networked communication systems. Such mapping is surely a central task of the still emergent genres of digital poetry.

Anna Katharina Schaffner*
(University of Edinburgh)

Andrew Michael Roberts*
(University of Dundee)

* Anna Katharina Schaffner has worked as a post-doctoral research assistant and as a literature tutor at the University of Edinburgh until May 2006. She has completed her PhD on language dissection in and textual politics of historical avant-garde, concrete and digital poetry at the University of Edinburgh in 2006. She has published essays on language dissection in historical avant-garde, concrete and digital poetry.

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* Andrew Michael Roberts teaches contemporary literature and Modernist poetry at the Department of English at the University of Dundee. His research interests are the application of psychoanalytical theory to literature and the representation of masculinity in 20th Century fiction.

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