

Media modes of poetic reception Reading lyrics versus listening to songs[☆]

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Abstract

This paper introduces the comparative study of modalities of poetic language (print/song) and corresponding modes of reception (reading/listening). Results of semi-standardized focused expert interviews are presented on the background of a constructivist model of media self-organization. The interviews were conducted with 18 creative professionals in Austria and Canada and focus on Laurie Anderson's song *Kokoku* (1984). The aesthetic experience of the example and the systematic comparison of "reading lyrics" and "listening to songs" allow for the inductive differentiation of the categories "perception of media modality" and "metaelaboration of media mode." Detailed explication of these categories suggests that media-specific perception and text processing occur independently of linguistic competence. Based on the interview results, four dimensions of the media specificity of song reception are outlined: (1) nonverbal dimensions of language; (2) text fragmentation versus text coherence; (3) genre-specific interplay of lyrics, text performance and music; and (4) intermediality of listening and reading.

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1. Medium print: the blind spot in empirical studies of literature

In his introduction to cognitive poetics, a rising field in the empirical study of literature, Peter Stockwell (2002) frankly states on the first page: "Cognitive poetics is all about reading literature." Despite the emergence of digital media, which enable the convergence of audiovisual and verbal signs, the majority of literary scholars continue to observe poetic communication within the print-dominated paradigm of written texts and reading audiences. Accordingly, most

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empirical studies in literature refer to reading processes in (post-)modern societies, which are realized in individualized situations, foster silent reception and follow the conventions of polyvalent interpretation and fictional reference.¹ In contrast to this “monomedia” perspective, media historical studies in literary communication have demonstrated that the dominance of print is a relatively recent development. The wider distribution and the reception of literature emerged in the centuries that followed the rise of the printing press. Gutenberg’s groundbreaking invention, the reproduction of script with movable type, enabled more efficient publishing structures and finally contributed to the spreading of literacy in the 19th century (McLuhan, 1962; Schön, 1987; Triebel, 2001). Accordingly, the aesthetic value systems of a reading bourgeoisie inform literary studies to the very day. In focusing on a canon of printed “high literature” and its reception by academic readers – most often scholars and their students – literary researchers tend to overlook that poetry is right out there, on radio channels, on the Internet, in music stores and in concert halls. Songs and their lyrics bear witness to the pertinent presence of oral genres in contemporary systems of literary communication. Moreover, multimedia performances of the historical avant-garde (dadaism, expressionism, futurism), beat literature and the performances of the 1960s and today’s spoken word artists brought orality back into the literary canon. While being treated as mere folklore, romanticized as “natural” by the idealistic aesthetics of the 19th century and put into sharp opposition to the “high art” of aesthetic distance (Finnegan, 1977:30–41; Storey, 2003), spoken, recited and sung poetry has in fact been a vibrant part of artistic linguistic practice throughout the 20th century.

From a historical perspective, poetic practices throughout the world originally occurred in the form of song and musical, multimedia performance (Finnegan, 1977:13; Zumthor, 1990:142; Danesi, 1993:7). Songs are a multisensorial mode of linguistic communication which has never ceased to exist. Until today, the vast majority of oral poetry is communicated through the various genres of popular music in the tradition of African-American music that represents a vibrant counterpart to print-oriented “high culture”: blues, jazz, rock ‘n roll and its diversification into uncountable subgenres – hip hop, punk, new wave, soul, funk, reggae and grunge to name but a few – spread the sounded word up to the present and reach wide and diversified audiences. It may be true that in multimedia societies printed poetry does not reach wide audiences, since functions of literary reading such as entertainment or identity formation are increasingly fulfilled by audiovisual media offerings (cf. Schreier and Rupp, 2002:262–263); however, given the prevalence of popular music in everyday life, it is likely that poetic texts are experienced, interpreted and enjoyed as song lyrics by a significant number of people. The question remains how exactly the oral reception of poetic texts takes place and in which respect it differs from reading processes. So far, few empirical researchers have paid attention to the fact that lyrics occur in different media modalities, namely oral (e.g., on CD or on the radio), printed (e.g., CD booklets) and audiovisual (e.g., music videos). When studied by psychologists and literary

¹ For a documentation of this focus on reading processes see for example the online proceedings of the more recent congresses of the *International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and Media (IGEL)*: <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/igel/igelconf.htm>. Out of 28 empirical studies concerned with literary communication on the conference in Pécs 2002, 71% focused on printed texts, one of them investigating the reading of song lyrics. From the 28 papers from the congress in Edmonton 2004, 61% were concerned with the reading of written texts; topics and readings of the summer institute preceding this congress exclusively discussed the reading of literature. Participants of a symposium entitled “literature in oral cultures,” which was held at *IGEL 2006* in Chiemsee, Munich, did not investigate reception processes but focused on the linguistic and rhetorical analyses of historical texts.

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