

Multimediality, Intermediality, and Medially Complex Digital Poetry

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http://www.rilune.org/mono5/3_brillenburg.pdf

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Wagner's ideal setting of the music drama facilitated an intense, willing suspension of disbelief. Wagner would have the orchestra completely tucked away so that nothing could distract the audience from the happenings on stage – and the music could tend to the dramatic action constantly yet unobtrusively. Thus, packed together in a dark amphitheatric space, the audience «forgets the confines of the auditorium, and lives and breathes now only in the artwork which seems to it as Life itself, and on the stage which seems the wide expanse of the whole World» (Wagner 1849, in Ashton Ellis 1895, 2006).

Reading *Multimedia*, it would seem as if nineteenth-century *Gesamtkunst* gradually adopted interactivity and hypermedia as the twentieth century progressed, evolving into the kind of aural-visualverbal computer games and multi-sensory interactive art works that have now grown so familiar to us. Likewise, in medially complex digital poetry joint medial actions often appear to draw heavily (knowingly or unknowingly) on such Wagnerian principles³. At the same time, however, these poetries also resist (knowingly or unknowingly) some of the specifically Wagnerian aspects of medial integration. I will illustrate this on the basis of digital work by the Canadian poet and computer programmer Jim Andrews, and the American digital poet Jason Nelson.

Jim Andrews' *Nio* (2001) is a digital “lettrist” poem that not only combines different medial processes, but also merges art with technology and technological applications⁴. Here, as in much other digital poetry, the concept of play has pride of place as a bodily (re-)activity: *Nio* only materializes in a ‘ludic’ interaction with the reader/users. Displayed as a circle of icons issuing images and sounds, *Nio*'s design and appearance is to a certain extent dependent on my actions and interferences as a reader/player: the icons I bring to live participate in a dance of letters that change their shape with every new addition or deletion, the music changing only minimally in its repetitive gestures.

If Wallace Stevens once claimed that «poetry is the subject of the poem», *Nio* performs this quite literally as the constant (re-)creation of lettrist shapes acting as the protagonists of the poem³. Packer and Jordan's definition of digital multimedia is predominantly geared at hypertext fiction – hence the emphasis on narrativity. Clearly, in digital poetry this aspect of narrativity need not be present at all.

⁴ *Nio* can be seen/heard/played at Jim Andrews' website:

<http://www.vispo.com/nio/index.htm> (June 2006)

⁵ “Ludic” derives from Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), in which he defines humans as playful creatures.