Temporal Irritations of Code in Ben Lerner's *Mean Free Path* poems

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In this paper, I explore the unconscious effects of computer code, by reading how it is rendered — or 'negatively figured' — in the work of the contemporary lyric poet Ben Lerner. Lerner's book of poems *Mean Free Path* (2010) provides clear indications of a relatively rare post-digital tendency in contemporary poetry: it is a literature that emphasises the instabilities and problems of digital age communication, even as it admits to the absolute saturation of contemporary experience in digital processes, and therefore the impossibility of writing (reading) outside of them. The presence and pervasiveness of computer code, I suggest, forces the heightened, personalised language of the lyric poet into a new awareness of their role as storing and yielding a expressive intent. What I call 'Glitch Poetics' is a form of reading and writing with error that is sensitive to contemporary language as a system. In this case, I observe that language is infected, perhaps compromised, by the temporalities and structures of computer code. This short paper is an example of the way that Glitch Poetics readings of traditional forms of literature can help explore what the digital means to us at this historical juncture.

Keywords: *Glitch, poetics, code, digital, temporality*

1. INTRODUCTION

The word 'code' has a history which predates its current associations with computers. These pre-digital uses of code are implicit in the notion that experimental poetry and Kabbalah are 'codified' literature, which obscure and reveal their meaning only under certain conditions (Cramer 2005). But now code's dominant meaning is of those forms of data storage and executable scripts which constitute a computer's capacities, and the dominance of this (at least partly) non-human language has come to effect the texture of the linguistic itself. In this paper, I explore the unconscious effects of computer code, by reading how it is rendered — or 'negatively figured' — in the work of the contemporary lyric poet Ben Lerner (2010). The presence and pervasiveness of computer code, I suggest, forces the heightened, personalised language of lyric poetry into a new awareness of its role as storing and yielding a poet's expressive intent. What I call 'Glitch Poetics' is a form of reading and writing with error that is sensitive to contemporary language as a system. In this case, I observe that language infected, perhaps compromised, by the temporalities and structures of computer code. This short paper is an example of the way that Glitch Poetics readings of traditional forms of literature can help explore what the digital means to us at this historical juncture.

2. CODE AND LANGUAGE

In a sense, Glitch Poetics refer to the literary execution of a kind of language event that preceded the digital — the revealing verbal 'slip'. What necessitates the digital implication of the term 'glitch' is that contemporary textual errors now reveal something of the pervasiveness of the digital as an unconscious process at work underneath the language we use. N. Katherine Hayles uses this figure in her writing, noting that it allows it hovers "between a proposition and an analogy":

Code is the unconscious of language... just as the unconscious surfaces through significant puns, slips, and metonymic splices, so the underlying code surfaces at those moments when [a word processing] program makes decisions we have not consciously initiated (Hayles 2006).

Hayles is referring to the auto-correct function on her word processor, which 'appears' only when she makes a type-written mistake, and relating this to the popular notion of the 'Freudian slip': which suggests that the unconscious appears in the mistaken utterance. The implication here is that glitches in language operate, like Freudian dream-images or verbal slips, to show beyond what is immediately apparent, giving a glimpse into the

way the complex systems that relate us to machines — and to each other — are structured.

3. ALGORITHM IN POETRY

The contemporary lyric poet Ben Lerner produces an explicitly contemporary texture in his poetry by invoking the unconscious encounter with the digital as a kind of trauma that is repressed but whose influence is still felt in the way we experience life. The lyric's historical continuity, and its particular position as heightened form of self-expression, has always made it an ideal form in which to observe how language is predetermined by its context, as well as the material process of its performance. The specific quality of the digital that infects the language of Lerner's contemporary lyric is the new kinds of presence and temporality formed by the combinations of storage and executable code that constitute today's media artefacts.

Glitch artworks such as 'data-bent' digital images have played a role in helping media theorists conceptualise the nature of digital systems, and what they mean to us. In this paper, I use an example of this practice by glitch artist Rosa Menkman (2010) alongside contemporaneous media theory by Wolfgang Ernst to frame the context for contemporary poetry. The intention is to use poetry to extend the scope of these theories and conceptualisations — showing that impressions and discoveries about the digital can be made in ostensibly non-digital phenomena.

4. MEAN FREE PATH

Ben Lerner's *Mean Free Path* (2010) provides clear indications of a relatively rare Post-digital tendency in contemporary poetry: it is a literature that emphasises the instabilities and problems of digital age communication, even as it admits to the absolute saturation of contemporary experience in digital processes, and therefore the impossibility of writing (reading) outside of them. Lerner discusses his work as responding to a situation in which language is compromised — and therefore the individual lyric subject indebted — by its entanglement in a system where digital technologies execute the ideologies of the military industrial complex. As Lerner states: "We all know we can't do anything that isn't shot through with capital, but we also want to figure the outside — you can make works that can negatively figure what they can't actualise" (Lin 2010).

In *Mean Free Path* we encounter negative figurations of what compromises language at the threshold between what is readable and what is unreadable in the text — in particular, the

problematism of meaning-making that the poem performs. Lerner's work can appear reticent, as though coy about its relationship to an ethically unsound linguistic environment. *Mean Free Path* is written in such a way that each verse appears to be a remixed or alternative version of the one previous. The time of this poem is simultaneously in stasis and subject to innumerable temporal movements.

Unlike Freudian slips, the linguistic errors of these poems are consciously crafted, but there is a quality to what they reveal about our relationship with the digital condition that goes deeper than Lerner's own knowledge of these systems — this makes a reading of the poems relevant to a field of study outside of the literary. Shintaro Miyazaki uses the neologism "algorhythmics" to describe the ways in which the built-in time-functions of code form a "machinic reality" with its own temporal character: "An *algorhythm* is the result of an inter-play, orchestration and synthesis of abstract algorithmic and calculable organisational concepts, with rhythmic real-world signals, which have measurable physical properties" (Miyazaki 2012). Translated into a lyric poem, the cumulative effect of these interplays and syntheses between human and mechanic 'codes' is beautiful but unsettling. In the poems the 'functions' of the digital are imagined as a synecdoche of late capitalism's existential condition — everything is possible, but nothing is certain.

5. ECSTATIC TEMPORALITY IN MENKMAN

The media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst describes as an "ecstatic temporality" (Ernst 2017: 23) the media condition by which various layers and scales of time flow across and through digital images and sound. A major aspect of this, he notes, is that sound and imagery are subject to micro-archival processes — and that these media are subject to a variety of different speeds of process. The result is that the faces and voices of digital media are "irritated by the present" (ibid.): simultaneously of the past and totally contingent on a hybrid collection of present-moment interfaces.

In her workshop documentation *A Vernacular of File Formats* (2010), Menkman illustrates the diversity of micro-archival processes involved in storing and displaying digital images. By interfering with — or "bending" — the protocol that displays the image, Menkman causes image-data to display incorrectly. The images that result are visibly irritated by the traces of their (im)mediated presence. *A Vernacular of File Formats* takes the form of a series of distorted, warped, striated and pixelated images with clear instructions how Menkman bent or altered the data-structure of the

image file or the interface that showed it, and some comments on the conclusions that can be drawn.

Fig 1 & 2: Stills from Rosa Menkman's *A Vernacular of File Formats* (2010)

That the “irritation of the present” of digital media usually happens below the threshold of human perception suggests for Ernst a psychic restructuring on the unconscious plane of contemporary experience. The forms of ultra-speed transmission, measuring and processing taking place within the switches and diodes of digital media, Ernst suggests, affect human bodies and thinking in ways that, because of their density in administering contemporary experience, constitute a traumatic environment:

Human physiology and neuronal cognition are affected by such signal processing and signal transmitting technologies. In subliminal perception, there are tempo-real traumata which do not stem from individual or social interaction but are induced by the media shock of technological timings itself.
(Ernst 2017: 12)

6. THE GLITCHING THRESHOLD

In *Mean Free Path* (published in the same year as Menkman's glitched images), the temporal irritation of digital culture is reflected in the conflation of mistiming and a loss of contact. As Lerner -- or the narrator in the poems -- says: “A live tradition broadcast with a little delay/Takes the place of experience” (Lerner 2014: 14). Like Menkman's glitched digital images, objects and phenomena within the poems are difficult to make out directly, their structures blurring against the irritation of their present-ness.

Characteristically in the passage quoted below, the activity of reading or writing a poem is paired with an image of rain, itself only partially perceptible as a sequence of discrete events “those small/ Rain”. The suspension of the rain-image in the enjambment below precedes it being apprehended again momentarily as a distorting “holding pattern” on the view of the city:

I planned a work that could describe itself
Into existence, then back out again
Until description yielded to experience
Yielded an experience of structure
Collapsing under its own weight like
Citable in all its moments: parting
Dusk. Look out of the window. Those small
Rain. In a holding pattern over Denver
Collisions clear a path from ground to cloud
(Lerner 2010: 49)

Neither the surface effect nor the motion of the rain are allowed to predominate in this poetic image – instead we encounter the glitching threshold between “rain” as virtual category, and its surface appearance on the window – or rather, on the city of Denver — as corruption.

Such self-reflexive moments in the poem serve as allegories of the composition of the whole. The title *Mean Free Path* refers to the journey travelled by a particle or wave before it collides into another. Particle physicists detect movement through the energy released when particles collide, and the ‘mean free path’ of particles therefore are empty moments, when the particle is in motion and potent with information which will only be realised on its next collision. The reader of this is book is accordingly asked to survey a poem in which many of the lines are meaningless until they are brought together in alternative configurations later in the poem.

The arbitrariness of words in relation to identity and meaning is played out across sequences of phrases distributed throughout Lerner's book. For example, this typical sequence found in the early pages: “I'm writing this one as a woman / Comfortable with failure.” (9); “Reference is a woman / Comfortable with failure” (11); “I'm writing this one / With my nondominant hand in the crawl space” (14); “I'm writing this one / As a woman comfortable with leading / A prisoner on a leash” (15). The repetitions in the poem produce a negative image of what they don't explicitly state — the changing meanings of words as they shift from one location in the poem to another.

7. SPECKLED WITH GLEAMING PIXELS

In their incessant repetition and re-configuring, Lerner's poem's might be through of as a negative figuration of information overload: a kind of attention deficit as-text. As Kunin has it "the open-ended disjunction in *Mean Free Path* suggests a speaker less like the television and more like the viewer, suffering from a lifetime of information overload" (Kunin 2010). Kunin also notes that the poem "sounds like distracted speech, and it is; but it's also a speech designed to shock the distracted consciousness into attention through the estranging recombination of familiar echoes" (ibid). Distraction is a symptom of the trauma that plays itself out through many of the most memorable lines of the poem – most notably in relation to lovers' conversations that are abruptly cut off: "I promised I would never / Tell me, whose hand is this" (11); "you're / Breaking up. No, down (56). This combination of distraction and attention and the way they bear on intimate personal relationships is a strong invocation of the pervasiveness of the irritated temporalities of the digital that Lerner's observes.

Extending the theme of attention to the relationship to his readership, Lerner describes *Mean Free Path* as a kind of "choose-your-own adventure" (Lin 2010). But the persistent failure of the poems gives this 'choice' a slippery quality. The notion of *Mean Free Path* consisting of choice-paths is complicated by the mutating quality of textual units: words, phrases, images in the poem are only ever versions of a possible other, meaning that the linearity of the poem as a sequence is itself in crisis. If it isn't stretching the metaphor to far: rather than a sequence of paths to choose from, alternative versions of paths one might have taken appear in the midst of other paths we appeared to be on. Path and choices, we make are subject to the attention deficit of the poem, changing as we follow them into collision with one another. As a result, the experience of the poem as an actuality, its lines, words, images, stanzas, is compromised by an oscillation between an excess and lack of meaning. Perhaps, the poems suggest, 'information overload' and 'attention deficit' have become existential imperatives, infecting the substance of the world.

Accordingly, the poet's gaze is speckled with gleaming pixels as though it is are dissolving into the machine, composed of flickering units that shine, vanish and reappear: skin is "glitter-flecked" or "stone-washed", there is "Glass in her hair", and the ear also is open to a cascading fizzing quality to sound, as though it is only partially arriving from its own virtual state.

How it falls apart if read aloud, or falls
What we might call its physics

Together like applause, a false totality
Scales (56)

8. THE GLITCH POETIC

Lerner opens himself up to the contemporary linguistic environment composed of computer and human systems — each subject to different kinds of temporality. As a result, the textures of his poems are riddled with forms of corruption, crisis and instability — and it is in these textures we see something new or previously withdrawn about the contemporary condition. What is notable about these lyric poems is that the glitches in them are attractive, even absorbing, as much as they are problematic and startling. David Berry suggests that this condition, oscillating between involvement and attention, is actually the new normal in a "code-saturated environment" (Berry 2012) in which codes continually deal with their own crises in the process of administering our relations. This is the basis of the realism that we recognise in Lerner's glitchy lyrics – a realism in which we increasingly empathise with machines that falter and struggle. The poems draw us into an intimate encounter with glitching digital environments as a lived reality, or a new kind of formal realism: The Glitch Poetic.

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