

genstand Schreibfeder, aber unser Blick auf diesen Gegenstand hat sich nicht verändert. Es ist daher umso unverständlicher, weshalb Lothar Müllers fulminante Geschichte des Papiers, *Weißer Magie* (2012), nicht einmal erwähnt wird. Denn nicht nur ist sie Wernlis Publikation thematisch, sondern auch im methodischen Ansatz eng verwandt. Doch Müller hat ein vielfältig reflektiertes Narrativ für seinen Gegenstand entwickelt und eine materiell informierte Philologie damit methodisch vorangebracht: die Ausbreitung und den Rückzug des Schreibmaterials Papier nämlich. Wernli bleibt dagegen stationenhaft, reiht Unterkapitel an Unterkapitel und berichtet letztlich, wo Müller ‚erzählt‘.

Der Wert dieser kenntnis- und materialreichen Arbeit liegt daher in den einzelnen Studien. Zahlreiche Passagen bringen neues, zum Teil spektakuläres Material und sind sehr lesenswert; zudem lassen sie sich mit verschiedensten Forschungsinteressen fruchtbar verbinden. Wernlis Buch wird mit einigem Recht ein Referenzwerk werden für jeden, der sich über die Kulturgeschichte der Schreibfeder informieren möchte.

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### **Die Automatisierung des Schreibens & Gegenprogramme der Literatur.**

Von Philipp Schönthaler. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2022. 575 Seiten. €38,00 gebunden, €26,99 eBook.

Schönthaler is a German author (with a doctoral degree in literature) who has published essays, novels, and literary nonfiction. This book is none of those—instead this lengthy tome, initially a response to an invitation to lecture on contemporary writing, is a compilation of 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century commentary on cultural theories, philosophies, and literary groupings stimulated by encounters with computing. Fifteen chapters articulate how mechanization and automation entered textual production in general and literary writing in particular; Schönthaler sees inflection points around 1910–20 and around 1950–60, and again in the most recent decade as artificial intelligence is put to generative tasks.

A computer program, Schönthaler (and many of his references) will claim, is just a text that generates text: of course not every text is a literary text, but Schönthaler sidesteps this issue, as do many of his sources. If one took such claims at face value, they would certainly make the task of the critic impossible. How can readers recognize an object as belonging to a class of objects, such as poetry, yet in such a way that it does not resemble the other members of that class too closely, as in plagiarism or direct imitation? In 1984, literary critic Hugh Kenner collaborated in the development of a “travesty generator”—a piece of software that would simulate literary texts (Kenner/O’Rourke, “A Travesty Generator for Micros,” *Byte* 9:12, Nov. 1984: 129–31, 449–69). Kenner soon concluded that all literary texts already followed his travesty principles and claimed that in fact, language itself follows the rules of his software. While Schönthaler does not refer to this hyperbolic finding, a number of other studies pivot on the same fundamental insight: linguistic material is limited. It cannot come as a surprise, therefore, when Schönthaler’s book outlines how the assumption that

literature is the highest form of human language can seem obsolete under the conditions of computing.

Indeed there is no Turing test for literature. But before we hasten to the conclusion that the introduction of computers turns “even the most intelligent poetry into myth or anecdote,” as Friedrich Kittler famously mocked (“Die künstliche Intelligenz des Weltkriegs: Alan Turing,” in *Arsenale der Seele*, eds. Kittler/Tholen, Munich 1989: 198), poets have of course generated experimental computer poetry for decades. While Schönthaler focuses on what critics make of Beckett and Joyce, one could also refer here to William Carlos Williams, who seemed to grant us text-generative permission in suggesting “a poem is a small (or large) machine made of words” (“Author’s Introduction to *The Wedge*,” in *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*, New York 1954: 256). Schönthaler’s account opens and closes with the current hype over GPT-3 and its output, but a rigorous historical survey would have unearthed multiple predecessors. In 1962, the software “Auto-Beatnik” was introduced by R.M. Worthy in *Horizon Magazine*, “Auto-Poet” and “Scansion Machine” soon followed, and in 1984 *Scientific American* reported on “Racter,” a prose generator using a vocabulary database to generate complex, grammatically correct sentences; Charles Hartman’s program “Prose” was unstable in DOS but satisfying in its Apple OS version decades ago. Schönthaler offers neither a genealogy of literary software nor a clear sense of what he considers literary—arguably questions of genre or style tend to demonstrate that parsing software has become a capable reader of literary texts but not such a reliable generator of literary texts.

If computers have no need to distinguish between a poem, a portrait, a video file, or a chunk of Unix code, and sounds, images, and texts all disappear into binary states and are only simulated on screen, it does not follow that literature is either threatened by computing or displays the symptomatic defensive formations announced in this book’s subtitle. Schönthaler focuses on historical avantgardes, both from the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and from the 1960s, before clamping them together with a survey of the past decade and a half in the debate. But his overall point actually seems to be that literature is in fact a rearguard discourse. Since Hegel, writing and calculating machines have been portrayed as a threat because they interrupt and disperse the cultural fabric of sublation, recollection, idealization, and the history of spirit; the mechanical prevents any recuperation into complete and infinite self-presence. Neo-Luddites and technophiles share the assumption, enthusiastically or apocalyptically, that machines are omnivores, imploding all referentiality and excluding humans by means of their illegibility. But when many of the commentators assembled in Schönthaler’s volume praise the impressive advances made in meeting challenges posed by electronic textuality, it does not follow that literature is therefore functioning as a counterprogram.

The book rehearses a lot of the material a graduate student in literature is likely to encounter: transitions from handwriting to typesetting and typewriting, the influence of technology on writing styles, surrealist montage and *écriture automatique*, cybernetics and information aesthetics, digital poetry and hypertext, and of course lots of historical avantgardes. We encounter Kafka and Nietzsche, Dada and Heidegger, Gertrude Stein and Frank Bunker Gilbreth, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Norbert Wiener, James Joyce and Claude Shannon, Max Bense and Oswald Wiener, Samuel Beckett and Donna Haraway, Georges Perec and Friedrich Kittler in these pages, but

without a sense that an overall qualitative argument emerges. Considering its title promises reflections on literature, the book features a lot of theoretical references (from Adorno to Deleuze, Flusser to Foucault, Hayles to Latour), but it does not try to perform critical readings of literary texts—instead the accent is on reporting what impact computing seems to have on cultural studies.

Schönthaler does not pursue the interpretive potential of info-aesthetics or cybernetics far enough to establish stochastic qualities of literary language or to discuss the role of contingency and chance in aesthetics; instead he pursues the concept of telepathy in the last section of the book, as if taking science fiction literally might yield clues about the future of technology. But he does a competent job outlining where computing has split the literary landscape and stimulated debates over creativity, imagination, aesthetics, and cultural patrimony. While I disagree with his hypothesis that artificial intelligence radicalizes the debate about the literary potential of generative technologies, such considerations need not ring in either an apocalyptic or a techno-utopian outlook for literary futures.

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### **Grenzen der Komik. Ergebnisse des Kasseler Komik-Kolloquiums.**

*Herausgegeben von Friedrich W. Block und Uwe Wirth. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2020. 390 Seiten + 19 s/w und farbige Abbildungen. €40,00 broschiert oder eBook.*

Satire, irony, and sarcasm have had a difficult time of it lately, amidst scandals surrounding performers Lisa Eckhart and Dieter Nuhr, the *#allessdichtmachen* campaign, Florian Schröder's appearance at a Querdenker rally, or Tübingen mayor Boris Palmer's shocking tweet about racism. Kurt Tucholsky's question "Was darf die Satire?" has gotten constant exercise, but his answer, "Alles," proves problematic in light of recent comic transgressions. Struggles over identity, language, and power continue to destabilize the ground for humor. The volume at hand explores the ambiguous nature of the comic through fourteen essays from two conferences, eight on "Grenzen der Komik," 2016, and six from "Komik und Religion," 2013, the latter of which are effectively subsumed under the former title. All work from theoretical foundations to attempt practical applications drawn from an international but largely German-language sampling of the comic, comedy, humor, and laughter, be it literary, performative, filmic, or visual.

Many of the essays concern satire and humorous critique, but other manifestations of the comic earn attention as well, such as the grotesque, involuntary humor, jokes, or humorlessness. The scholars explore on the one hand the imposed or functional limits placed on the comic by culture and convention, and on the other the comedy of borders and margins, which explores and transgresses. The comic lives from breaking rules, be they social, cultural, formal or genre-oriented: upsetting expectations and norms, shattering taboos. Thus it violates our sense of control, order, normality, and sense. As Uwe Wirth writes in the opening chapter, the comic not only probes borders but tests our own concepts of limits. A number of the authors emphasize the self-referential, self-reflective qualities of the meta-comic, whereby humor