

# “How much can one argue within a couple of seconds?”: an interview with Roberto Simanoswki

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Roberto Simanoswki.

Roberto Simanowski was one of the keynote speakers at the conference “[Teaching Digital Literature](#),” organized by the PhD Programme in Materialities of Literature at the University of Coimbra (July 25-26, 2019). His lecture for the occasion, titled “Literature and Digital Media: Notes on Theory and Aesthetics,”<sup>1</sup> represents one strand in his ex-

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto Simanowski, “Literature and Digital Media: Notes on Theory and Aesthetics,” *MATLIT* 8.1 (2020): 11-21. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.14195/2182-8830\\_8-1\\_1](https://doi.org/10.14195/2182-8830_8-1_1)

tensive work as theoretician of digital culture: the implications of digitalization for artistic and literary practices. Another major strand in his writings addresses the social and political consequences of the changes brought about by the large-scale control of the internet by cloud computing corporations, their relentless automation of data collection, as well as the alliance between big data companies and state surveillance. Developments in social computing and artificial intelligence during the last decade have accelerated the softwarization of human cultures, with far-reaching consequences that seem to affect the social contract enshrined in contemporary democracies, challenge current notions of citizenship and human rights, and undermine labour laws and other legal frameworks.

Roberto Simanowski obtained his PhD from the University of Jena (1996). After working as a researcher at the University of Göttingen (1997), he carried out a Humboldt-Foundation funded research project on cyberspace and literature at Harvard University (1998-2000), was a visiting scholar at the University of Washington, Seattle (2001-2002), and served as guest professor of media studies at the University of Jena (2002-2003). He taught German literature and digital aesthetics at Brown University (2003-2010), and, later, media studies at the University of Basel (2010-2013) and at the City University of Hong Kong (2014-2017). He is currently an independent author, dividing his time between Berlin and Rio de Janeiro.

He was the founder and general editor of *Dichtung Digital*, a bilingual (German and English) journal for digital aesthetics. Through the journal's 44 issues, published between 1999 and 2014, it is possible to chart the development of a critical vocabulary for writing about digital art and digital literature, and a growing network of international contributors from multiple institutional and disciplinary contexts. Simanowski's preoccupation with digital poetics is also reflected in a series of authored books (some of which were published only in German), such as *Interfictions: Vom Schreiben im Netz* [Interfictions: Writing on the Net] (Edition Suhrkamp, 2002), *Digitale Medien in der Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultur – Kunst – Utopie* [Digital Media in the Society of Event: Culture, Art, Utopia] (Rowohlt, 2008), *Reading Moving Letters: Digital Literature in Research and Teaching. A Handbook* (Transcript 2010), and *Digital Art and Meaning: Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping Art, and Interactive Installations* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

In the work published during 2010s, Simanowski's critical interventions have looked at the general impact of digital technologies on social practices and political structures, as witnessed by the following works: *Data Love: The Seduction and Betrayal of Digital Technologies* (Columbia University Press, 2016; German ed. 2014), *Digital Humanities and Digital Media: Conversations on Politics,*

*Culture, Aesthetics, and Literacy* (Open Humanities Press, 2016, a series of interviews with major thinkers on digital technologies), *Facebook Society: Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves* (Columbia University Press, 2018; German ed. 2016), and *Waste: A New Media Primer* (MIT Press, 2018; German ed. 2016). The diagnosis of the ethical implications of massive processes of data collection and automation of decisions is complemented by his eloquent defense of a critical pedagogy of the digital, two major topics in his latest book, *The Death Algorithm and Other Digital Dilemmas* (MIT Press, 2018; German ed. 2017)<sup>2</sup>. The following interview was conducted via email in July 2020.

**1.** Your latest book, *The Death Algorithm and Other Digital Dilemmas* (2018), takes its title from the name given to the programming of driverless cars, enabling these to decide who to kill when faced with an imminent crash. Given the contextual specificity and the difficulty in assessing all the variables associated with such moral problem, is it possible to program algorithmic agents to autonomously make ethical decisions at all?

Very soon, artificial intelligence will sit behind the wheel of our cars and algorithms will make life-and-death decisions in case of an accident. This “death algorithm” has already given rise to heated philosophical and even legal debates, as it is considered certain that the self-driving car is upon us and will come sooner than autonomous weapons and mechanical pets. The public is also being consulted on this issue. There is the courtroom theatrical drama *Terror* by the German writer and lawyer Ferdinand von Schirach, for instance, which has the audience sit in judgment on a major in Germany’s Bundeswehr who, acting on his own authority, shot down an airliner hijacked by a terrorist. In a quantitative decision, the fictional officer sacrificed the 164 people on the plane in order to save the 70,000 people in Munich’s Allianz stadium, where the terrorist intended to crash the passenger jet. In the stage productions of this play the decision whether the major should be charged with multiple counts of murder for his actions was delegated to the audience, the “real” grand jury in this thought experiment. The audience’s votes, not only in Germany but worldwide, generally resulted in an acquittal, which is at odds with the German Constitution which states the inviolability of human dignity to weigh lives against lives and kill a few innocent people in order to save many more. Contrary to the moral impulses of the majority of the theatre goers, the ethical foundation of German law

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2 Manuel Portela, “Ethicizing algorithms,” *MATLIT* 7.1 (2019): 283-287. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.14195/2182-8830\\_7-1\\_21](https://doi.org/10.14195/2182-8830_7-1_21)

holds that the lesser of two evils cannot be determined either by mathematical means or by discrimination according to age, gender, or cultural values. Entrusting the verdict on the problem at hand to the public is already part of the problem. Such public opinion poll follows the principle of experimental ethics, which works with empirical studies instead of contenting itself with theoretical conclusions of “armchair philosophy.” As a result, it is the majority rather than the best argument that wins. I am afraid, this kind of quantification of ethical problems is the approach that also will be taken with respect to the issue of driverless cars. A famous example for this is MIT's *Moral Machine*, which presents 13 accident scenarios and asks users: Who should die the driver or three pedestrians, two children or three senior citizens, three criminals or two women? The mathematical logic of algorithms incites an ethic that is based on numbers (be it the number of people rescued or the number of years the rescued still have to live) and thus demands a change from the deontological ethic (which so far is favoured by the German Constitution) towards the consequentialist or utilitarian ethics, which is focused on the result and considers the sacrifice of the few for the salvation of the many justifiable.

**2.** The present pandemic context has brought forward the public discussion about the use of tracking software, arguing for the sacrifice of individual liberties in the name of community and security. What do you think about the terms in which this discussion is being held?

The pandemic teaches us two well known facts in media studies: On one hand society can't escape the drive of technology, on the other hand, how technology is applied in society eventually depends on this society's political structure. As for the drive of technology, the German sociologist Georg Simmel derives, as early as 1911 in his essay “The Concept and Tragedy of Culture”, an intrinsic logic in all products of the human imagination, which future generations will find very difficult to escape. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan would later write that “Any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary,” adding, in his most famous formulation, that “the medium is the message.” For this reason, it is basically impossible to ignore or reject the possible help of high-tech tools in the effort to track and control COVID-19 infections. However, there are very different ways to employ such tools as we know from for example China, Taiwan, India, or Poland in comparison with Germany. In Germany privacy advocates immediately addressed the imminent privacy issue of tracing technology. As a result, the Corona-App in Germany is based not on tracking but tracing, data are gathered decentralized rather than centralized, the installation of the

app is not mandatory but people are called to participate in the name of the community. I consider this solution and the preceding debate a promising example of not only how society can balance the interest between individuals and community but also of how society can determine how it handles the inevitable, i.e. uses tracking tool on its own terms.

**3.** You have argued that the transformation of text into image, sound or action corresponds to the transformation of text into a post-alphabetic object, deprived of its linguistic value. Do you think the impact of the digital in literary forms consists of a regression of the literary and/or of literacy?

In my book I discuss two central art pieces that exemplify this turn of text into image and action: *Text Rain* by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv (1999) where letters fall down a screen and land on the viewers' silhouette, and Julius Popp's installation *Bit.Fall* (2006) where words culled from online news-sites are printed as a "waterfall of letters" by means of magnetic vents that enable each of the several water jets to emit individual water drops. In both cases the letters lose their value as linguistic signs and become artifacts to play with. The appeal lies in the fact that text is not replaced by other media but turned into a post-alphabetic objects at which we stare with "rapt, mindless fascination" as Fredric Jameson, in his 1992 study *Signatures of the Visible*, described the "pornographic" nature of images in contrast to the letters' common command for reflection. This remediation and 'devouring' of text is symbolic for the ongoing *reconquista* of the centre-stage of culture, which had been taken over by book culture during the time of colonialism and has been gradually taken back with the advance of audio-visual media since late 19th century. Art projects such as *Text Rain* and *Bit.Fall* symbolize the new quality of the move towards visual and immersive forms of communication proposed and carried out by new technologies and platforms such as Snapchat, Facebook Life, and Journalism 360. Such move is not only a shift from a culture of meaning to a culture of presence within the "society of spectacle," it is also a return to the origins of text. In the beginning of the word – at the time of hieroglyphs and pictograms – objects were not signified by a random assembly of letters but by icons of themselves: the (head of an) ox by an A upside down, the eye by an O, the tooth by a W. With the development of script from logographic to syllabic to alphabetic signs all visual and immersive aspects of onomatopoeic resemblance got lost. The irony of media history lies in the fact that with radical abstraction of the signifier – the binary system at the back-end of the interface – communica-

tion returns to a pre-abstract stage; to put it in linguistic terms: The acrophonic transformation of the logogram is overturned by the anthropophagic treatment of the text.

**4.** In your latest book you also refer to “regressive progress” as the decoupling between technological and social progress, which you identify as a characteristic of human history since the scientific revolution that began in the Renaissance. The notion of “regressive progress” takes its force from the semantic opposition between regression and progress. How do you articulate these two poles, and where do you identify a regressive movement?

At a 2017 conference on legal and ethical concerns in the digital world the German Justice Minister stated that technological progress cannot be allowed to socially regress. His point was that in the digital world one primary consideration is that human beings should never be reduced to mere objects of algorithms. Therefore, he underlined, we need a “transparency requirement for algorithms,” and the general “right to an analog world”. While the latter is an impossibility, the former is exactly what many civil-rights activists and critics of the “black-box society” fight for. The social advances jeopardized by such “backward progress” include privacy and due process but also political achievements such as the minimum wage, workers’ right to paid vacations, and other social benefits increasingly under threat from platform capitalism and the gig economy. In April 2017, the *New York Times* described the problem: “Uber and the like may be taking the economy back toward a pre-New Deal era when businesses had enormous power over workers and few checks on their ability to exploit it.” For that reason, by 2015, the German Justice Minister was already calling for a “digital new deal” to impose “democratic rules on big data” and to prevent a “digital day labor system.” Politicians have realized that the problems associated with digital society go far beyond just privacy and surveillance.

**5.** The twenty first century has brought about a new kind of public sphere in which reproduction of information and ideas is mediated by social media platforms. These filter content produced by other media (newspapers, radio, television), at the same time that they create their own genres and practices. How do you see the effect of social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, in shaping both the electronic public space and the general public sphere in which political and social discourse is being produced?

Classical journalism has suffered for some time from the fact that more and more people are getting their information from social networks. Of course

it is true: Facebook's social model aims, to the maximum extent possible, to corral its users within its own sphere of influence, since this is what generates the data and attention that it is then able to sell. Fears about Facebook as a media monopoly and Zuckerberg as uber-censor are justified, as are complaints about the media's financial dependence on advertising revenues, which now forces many news outlets into a kind of horse-trading with Facebook. The real problem, however, is neither Zuckerberg nor commerce, but the Internet itself. The Internet's dispositives—hyper-reading, multi-tasking, power browsing, filter bubble, instant gratification, quantification, and so on—are diametrically opposed to the public sphere that we learned to celebrate as the realm of political debate. With the next distraction only a click away, patience for anything that requires effort evaporates. Anyone who doesn't have quick responses to complex questions is promptly and publicly punished by a withdrawal of likes. So is the medium responsible? Is it the human condition as such? Is the anthropological and technological constellation an overlay over political and economic interests in the background? There are people who welcome the fact that TikTok is turning from a medium dedicated to more or less funny and silly jokes into one of political engagement as for example in the case of #blacklivesmatter-TikToks. Moreover, the duet-feature, i.e. the juxtaposition of a TikTok clip with another one to which it may object or offer commentary even nurtures the hope for a new culture of dialectic discussion where people engage with the argument of others. But how much can one argue within a couple of seconds? Doesn't the disposition of TikTok require even more simplification, vulgarization, confrontation? The medium is the message, McLuhan states, and the message of TikTok is certainly not a well-balanced political debate. Thus, the politicization of TikTok is actually first of all the spectacularization of the political. This will not bring back the public sphere of a deliberative democratic society.

**6.** You have argued for a digital critical literacy that educates citizens about the digital not as a set of software and hardware tools, but as a social and political formation that is creating a new kind of social contract. This algorithmic social contract, based on permanent data collection and analysis, undermines specific human rights defined in our current legal systems and embodied in political practices. What is a critical digital literacy and how important is the notion of data rights for the education of the citizen?

These days media literacy seems to be the business of the police: The police produces videos showing “smombies” who, as they wander the streets aloof to their surroundings, their eyes glued to their smart phone screens, get hit

by cars; the police systematically come to the schools to educate youngsters about such issues as identity theft, ransomware, and cyberbullying and to warn them about the perils of illegal downloads. The aim is to prevent students, on their travels on the Internet, to become victims or perpetrators. It is no surprise that the certificates students are issued are called “media driver’s license” or “computer driver’s license”. Such approach to media literacy from the perspective of traffic or crime is surely inspired by the early definition of the Internet as a “data highway.” In the German case the metaphor is all the more adequate as “digital infrastructure” it is under the purview of the ministry of transportation, with the ironic twist that it is this department (and not that of education) that issues the award for best pedagogically valuable computer game. However, the function oriented perspective in media literacy is also determined by the office of education which increasingly defines education as vocational training rather than *Bildung*. As a consequence, the question “How can I use new media most effectively and securely?” is hardly accompanied by the question “How do new media change our culture and society?” Hence, the computer tends to be a didactic and methodic tool in teaching and research rather than being itself a subject of political and philosophical discussion. So called “digital immigrants” as well as scholars of the humanities cannot help but nurture a certain feeling of inferiority toward “digital natives” and computer scientists who may well be less able to speak about the cultural impact of new media but know all too well how these work. Media literacy which does not consider the cultural role of media is as affirmative as consensual governing which reduces politics to the police. Thus the deeper meaning of the police in the classroom may be understood as a symbol for the political status quo. We ought to understand media literacy and “digital citizenship” as the possibility to prepare students for the new social contract that the “digital revolution” generates. Very often digital citizenship is understood and taught in terms of Driver’s Education to prepare young people to navigate the Information Superhighway safely and confidently. While it is certainly important to teach young people how to effectively and safely use digital media, it is mandatory that they also understand the cultural, economic, political, and psychological impact those media have on society, i.e. their effect on the equality of opportunity in the marketplace and on the ability to participate as democratic citizens. Only such critical digital literacy is a sustainable preparation of the next generation for the future to come.