

Speaking with Machines & Machines that Speak: Spoken Word & Digital Performance Poetry

Abstract: This chapter serves as a survey and introduction to digital spoken word in the UK. As such the focus of the chapter is not the use of digital media for recording spoken word performances, but spoken word performances that actually use live digital media as a constituent part of the performance. The first part of the chapter provides a detailed typology and survey of digital and digitally-augmented spoken word in the UK. It considers the different ways that digital media have been used, and are being used, in and alongside spoken word performances and performance poetry. This includes canonical figures such as John Cayley, Caroline Bergvall, Simon Biggs and JR Carpenter, and new and emerging practitioners, as well as general observations on the inter-medial practices that are set alongside spoken word such as projection art and live coding. The second section discusses the poetics of reading, hearing and participating in digitally augmented spoken word poetics. This section consists of a semiotic analysis of the staging of digitally-augmented spoken word. It critically analyses the interpretative significance of both the physical and virtual arrangement of performance poet, screen, projector and electronic devices alongside their network of inter-relation. It also considers Spoken Word studies as a useful critical lens for interpreting digital poetics in performance. Inter-media digital performance poetics are often critically analysed in media-studies and fine-art contexts, but as live durational performances that feature speaking with machines and machines that speak, there is a strong case to be made for utilising the critical contexts of performativity, affect and spoken word studies.

Keywords: Digital Spoken Word, Digital Poetry, Digitally Augmented Performance, Performance Poetry, Secondary Orality, Performance Writing

Word count: 5178

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Introduction

How are digital technologies used alongside spoken word performance poetry? How do we read digitally-augmented spoken word? How does the code speak? What are the implications for space, the body, affect and performance? This chapter provides a summary of some of the ways digital media has been used in, alongside, and as spoken word poetry in the UK and then considers some of the implications for contemporary poetics; how might we read, hear and participate in digitally-augmented spoken word. Most digital spoken word performances are intrinsically intermedia artworks, and just as the poetics of digital literature have a bearing on spoken word studies, so spoken word studies can be seen more widely as a useful critical lens for interpreting digital poetics in performance. As such relevant to this intermedia field are a diverse range of research and practice activities including poetry practitioners in the UK, events and organisations which promote experimental intermedia poetry (such as The Other Room, Praxis, The Enemies Project), and research groups and activities whose focus is spoken word, performance, intermedia poetry and digital literatures (including Poetry Beyond Text, ELMCIP and the Ambient Literature project). Critically this field of study draws heavily on JL Austin's Speech Act Theory, Affect Studies and Performance Writing. There are also two substantial works of critical writing which explicitly address the intersection between digital literature and performance, Steve Dixon's *Digital Performance* (2007) which mainly focusses on theatre and performance rather than spoken word explicitly but does provide some useful general insights and background context, and a 2013 special edition of *Performance Research*, subtitled *On Writing & Digital Media* which focusses explicitly on that intersection and is largely dealing with the UK context.

It is worth noting at this point that 'the UK context' with regards to this field of arts practice is a somewhat flawed and artificial construct. The practitioners listed as examples in this typology of digital spoken word have all at some point lived and worked in the UK, but a number were not born in the UK, a number no longer live in the UK, and most are involved in trans-national collaborative practice. Indeed this is typical of digital

media practitioner communities who often have a consciously internationalist outlook and actively work to de-stabilise nationalist subject positions, as expressed in JR Carpenter's practice-based research:

'[My latest works] serve instead as sites of creative thought through which to formulate the problem of being in between places. As such, they may inform new narrative structures for networked writing resonating between sites, beyond nations' (16)

Consequently while significant work has been done in the area of digitally-augmented spoken word and performance poetry within the national geographic borders of the UK, this grouping of practices is not intended as a comment on a 'national tradition.'

This chapter uses 'digital spoken word' for those intermedia digital and spoken word performances where there is no clear hierarchy of media forms, and it uses 'digitally-augmented spoken word' where the digital media element is a clear subsidiary or addendum to an existing predominant spoken word practice. The term 'digital spoken word' implies not just the use of computers in producing or documenting performances but the intrinsic use of computational media as part of the performance, and as such can be seen as analogous (or even subsidiary) to Dixon's definition of 'digital performance:'

'We define the term "digital performance" broadly to include all performance works where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms.'(2)

Indeed Dixon's 'digital performance' can itself be seen as analogous to N. Katherine Hayles famous definition of 'electronic literature' as 'work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer'(1). The crucial distinction in all these definitions is that computational media plays a key or primary role in the creation and delivery of the art form. So digital spoken word includes things like the projection of digital media on stage during spoken word performances, the live use of text generators and interactive digital text during performance, live code as performance and digitally augmented sound poetry, but would not include things like video recordings of otherwise non-digital performances, performers reading from static scripts from phones on stage (all though both of these developments have a significant implications for spoken word in the UK). Digital spoken

word used in this context is also specifically referring to live performance rather than recorded media forms situated within an existing critical discourse such as Poetry Films and Poetronica. Furthermore this definition is also inclusive of 'Digital Performance Poetry' (where Performance Poetry is a genre closely related to spoken word rather than poetry in performance more generally). Overall then this chapter identifies a number of examples of digital spoken word, which is to say it identifies some of the ways that computational media have self-consciously been used in, alongside, and as spoken word and performance poetry in the geographical space of the UK.

Part 1: A Survey of Digital Performance Poetry

Historical Precedents and Practice Contexts

There is a long history of electronic media technologies used in relation to the production and performance of poetry and used in the performance arts more generally. In Dixon's survey the practical examples date back to the 1920s and the concept of the intermedia audio visual poetic performance is credited to Wagner's 'total artwork' in the mid-19th century (41). However it was not really until the 1990s that the digital media of networked computing was sufficiently developed to have a substantial widespread and growing application in contemporary theatrical production:

'During the last decade of the twentieth century, computer technologies played a dynamic and increasingly important role in live theater, dance, and performance; and new dramatic forms and performance genres emerged in interactive installations and on the Internet.'
(Dixon 1)

There are many examples of digital performance for theatre which lay down useful critical and practice precedents for digital performance of spoken word and poetry and they are substantially surveyed in Dixon.

Similarly there are pre-new-media intermedia digital poems produced throughout the 20th century which provide a precedent for the more recent work identified here. Twentieth century British examples include Christopher Strachey's 'Loveletters' (1952), a very early example of combinatorial digital poetry, and Margaret Masterman's

'Computerised Haiku' (1968) which appeared in the infamous ICA Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition. Indeed although Masterman's piece appeared in an art gallery context Dixon identifies it as an early example of digital performance poetry. Similarly a very comprehensive and relevant survey of pre-new-media digital poetry, including activity in the UK, can be found in Christopher Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms 1959-1995*.

Projection and Spoken Word

Perhaps the most overt and commonly observed form of digital spoken word is where digital projection is used as part of a spoken word or poetry performance. Digital content, text and otherwise, can appear on screens above, beside or in some cases projected directly onto the performer. Again these practices follow on from pre-digital practices and there is an observable intersection with projection art (as well as similarities with the stage use of projection in theatre and dance). One such early example in the UK is 'Where the sea stands still' (1997), John Cayley's hypertext remediation of the translated Yang Lian's poetry sequence of the same name. Cayley has worked extensively with projected digital texts alongside poetry readings throughout his career and this particularly early example featured a performance reading with cybertextual projections of live computed texts on three screens above a central performer. Another substantial contributor to this mode of digital spoken word is the multimodal poet and performance writer cris cheek [sic]. Like Cayley cheek has worked extensively with projection as part of and alongside performance poetry (as well as extensive intermedia sound poetry projects) and a particularly interesting example is 'Backlit' (2012) which features performed spoken word alongside a series of community generated digital art projected onto the bare back of the performers body. Indeed cheek frequently works with projection on to all or part of the performers body and this arrangement is seen often and to great affect (most recently for instance in the work of Jay Bernard as discussed later in this chapter). Digital projection and spoken word is used extensively and in numbers too numerous to mention, not least as part of many of the other types of digital spoken word identified in this chapter.

Digitally Augmented Sound Poetry and Spoken Word

Another mode of digital spoken word common among UK practitioners is where the voice is digitally altered in some way (especially as a live process) and augmented with digital sound (and sometimes digitally altered music). Again examples of this type of digital spoken word are too numerous to provide anything like an exhaustive list so what follows is a range of examples of different structural arrangements. Some artists, especially recording sound poets, use electronic devices (some of which are pre-new-media technologies) to augment the audio signal between the microphone and the speakers, including for instance distorting, transposing and fragmenting the natural tone. This is the case in the performed work 'Subject to Gesture' (2017) by Mark Leahy. In this piece, made in collaboration with Ben Duvall, Mark's spoken word poetry is digitally distorted and mixed with treated guitars and drum in a live context. Another such example is where performers interact with recorded ambient literature, as in the works of Holly Pester and Mark Goodwin. Some performers take the interaction with computational media to a more involved level collaborating with machines that speak and using computer generated audio voices (text-to-voice software) as part of their performance practice, one such example of this is 'Ralph and Kathy After Dark' (1997) created and performed at The Leadworks by Mac Dunlop and Annie Lovejoy. Or indeed there are practitioners using a combination of these methods, digitally altering live spoken word while simultaneously collaborating with machines. In one of Caroline Bergvall's more recent digital performance poetry works 'Ragadawn' (2018) a vocal performance of poetry and music at dawn is digitally-augmented live to produce a set of mindful, spectral and humming sounds, as in relation to and accompanied by the buzzing of electronic drones rising with the sun.

Machines that Speak: Generative Spoken Word

There are a number of examples where practitioners of computer generated digital poetry have performed the output (or an edited version of it) as spoken word or performance poetry, in some senses giving voice to machine authors. In many of these instances the generated text is also projected onto the stage or a nearby screen as it is read and constitutes an intermedia performance. The work of JR Carpenter for instance often features generative or computational texts among more fixed textual forms and

readers are invited to navigate a virtual environment experiencing different fragments of text in different orders as they explore the space. In performance, as in 'Along the Briny Beach' (2011) and 'The Pleasure of the Coast' (2019), Carpenter navigates the textual environment (projected onto a screen above the stage) as a reader, and speaks aloud the fluid textual happenings. As the performance scripts and the route chosen shifts it's likely that no two performances will be the same. In a more explicit collaboration with a machine author David Jhave Johnston's 'ReRites' (2017) or sometimes 'Re(ading)Rites' (2017) constitutes what Johnston terms 'human-A.I. participatory poetry readings' (1). In 'ReRites' a neural network text generator writes and edits poetry live in-situ, and the shifting text is projected onto a screen above the reader. Johnston then reads through the shifting text as spoken word, not as a verbatim script but rather as a prompt for improvisation. In some variations of the performance Johnston also invites members of the audience to take the mic and perform poetry with the machine. Similarly in Caroline Bergvall's 'Drift' (2013), the navigation of an unstable digital textual environment constitutes part of the performance, as alongside spoken word and live percussion is a performance of kinetic electronic text in a dense visual landscape created by Thomas Köppel. Typically performances are arranged with Bergvall on one side of the stage and Ingar Zach (the percussionist) on the other, with Köppel's visual projected onto a screen at the back of the stage. The piece involves both the visual and audio over-layering of words (Bergvall's text drawing on Anglo Saxon vocabulary) which performs a political commentary on migration (especially migration by sea).

Spoken Word and Interactive Media

A number of poets have used digital media to create interactive and participatory performances. In Simon Biggs's 'reWrite' (2007), which exists as both a gallery piece without spoken word and as a spoken word performance of the same name, the physical gestures of the performer's body are captured with CCTV and used to interactively explore a shifting digital text. In the gallery installation the piece invites the audience to become performers as their gestures are projected into the text and begin to shape a durational performance of poetry, just as to some extent the technology choreographs their movements. In Mark Leahy's 'Answering Machine' (2014) audience participation is also integrated into the performance. Leahy performs spoken word in a pair of headphones which feed him an audio stream that using text-to-speech software reads a

text consisting of audience text-messages and related search engine results. In a similar way to Johnston's 'ReRites', Leahy then uses this text (partly generated through live audience text messages) as a prompt for an improvised spoken word performance. In this example the digital interactivity comes before the 'writing' of the text by the poet. Whereas in the case of Jerome Fletcher's 'Doedentaptoe' (2013) Fletcher's writing has taken place and is recorded before the text is interactively assembled. In 'Doedentaptoe' a variety of audio recordings of Fletcher reading his own poetry are assigned to the pads of an electronic drum kit, and in performance a professional drummer (Adam Loveday-Edwards in the case of the 2013 performances) then improvises an assembling of spoken words using the kit.

Live Coding as Performance Poetry

This chapter also interprets live coding as a form which can be understood as performance poetry and it makes the case live coding might also meet many of the definitional requirements of spoken word. There are a number of instances where this is clear cut, for instance where live coders are using the form to produce something that resembles traditional poetry which is then read aloud and/or projected onto the stage in a durational performance, as in Sean Cotterill's 'To Code a Dadaist Poem' (2015), described by the author as follows:

"I will be accessing, splitting up and re-combining on the fly a large bank of poetry in the public domain using SuperCollider (and displayed using Processing). The lines and snippets of poetry will be sequenced using random and probabilistic programming techniques to form an evolving, shifting new poem, which will develop throughout the duration of the performance. During the performance I will also improvise live-coded sound using SuperCollider derived from the evolving poem, teasing out semantic and mimetic relationships between sound and text, and in turn adapting the sequencing and usage of poems according to the development of the music."

However even in cases engages with 'traditional poetry' less explicitly and perhaps where the 'end product' is music, the presence of poesis performed on stage is still observable. In the work of Alex McLean for instance, especially when performing as 'slub' with Dave Griffiths, McLean uses his system 'TidalCycles' (2016) to live code music, in performances where the text of the code is projected as onto the performer and screen

live as he types it. This durational performance of technologized words generates sound simultaneously. In John Cayley's 'The Code is Not the Text (Unless it is the Text)' he makes the case that one of the exceptional times that code functions as literary or performance text is when the code is explicitly made visible on screen to a reader or audience member. This condition is precisely satisfied in McLean's work where the presence of animated digital words on the stage is an integral part of the performance. Live code, in that it performs and does, can be seen as a performative speech act, analogous to the phatic, and meeting many of the criteria of the performative poetic function (as framed in terms from Roman Jakobson and J. L. Austin). This link between live coding and performativity is explicitly identified in Emma Cocker's 'Live Notation: Reflections on a Kairotic Practice':

'He asserts that, 'self-modifying code blatantly breaks the determinism of code and makes its explicitly performative' (2013: 61). For Cox, code 'says and does what it says at the same time. Such utterances are not conventional but performative' (2013: 35-6). Rather than 'users' of existing software products (whose source code remains undisclosed), for live coders the production of the program is often an intrinsic part of practice. Implicitly political, live coding takes back the power to write rather than be written.' (70)

And indeed McLean himself relates his own practice not just to the performative word but that performative word related to the poem:

'How does writing a program compare to writing a poem: does it even make sense to speak of these activities in the same terms? They can at least in an arts context; computer language poetics has been a running theme in software arts discourse.' (68)

In much live coding the digital word made by an on stage performer is manifest for a durational performance which results in the performative generation of sound; in the context of a post-literary 'secondary orality' (Ong, 133) this mode of performance is so close to spoken word and performance poetry as to suggest their associated critical discourses might be productive forums of exchange for one another.

Part 2: Reading, Hearing and Participating in Digitally Augmented Spoken Word

Digital and digitally-augmented spoken word and performance poetry are relatively young and emergent performance practices in the UK. While the first section of this chapter attempts to identify and list a number of major types and structural formulations of these emergent practices, this second section of the chapter asks questions about the potential implications of these structural formulations and identifies a number of critical fields which intersect with the form and might provide fertile ground for new research. Much as the typology in part 1 does not claim to be anything like an exhaustive survey, so the following typology of new questions and contexts for critical discourse is very much intended to be open-ended.

Space and the Body

As with any live performance the physical space in which the performance of digital spoken word takes place, the presence (or absence) of the body of the performer, the presence of the audience, and the relationship and relative positioning of all these three situational contexts provides a semiotic field relevant to the interpretation of the performance practice. Andrew Roberts has identified that the semiotics of space and the body in traditional performance studies is relevant to the performance of digital literatures:

'The tendency to performance of digital literature could be seen as a countervailing tendency, while drawing on traditions of performance poetry and "happenings". The presence of the performer's body is significant and sometimes foregrounded in these performances, as is the physical voice in some cases. The bodily presence of the audience members, and their multi-sensory awareness of both work and venue, are also crucial to the aesthetic experience.' (170)

However the introduction of digital media, usually in the form of projected digital media, onto the spoken word stage provides an additional frame for interpretation. As we become increasingly conscious of the politics of space and the body (embodied, gendered, racial, social and environmental) it becomes increasingly evident that the positioning of bodies within spaces can perform a variety of structures of power. For instance it would be possible to read a substantial difference in projecting digital text

above the performer (as in Cayley's 'Where the sea stands still') compared with projecting digital text directly onto the body of the performer (as in cheek's 'Backlit') or even projecting digital text across the whole field of screen, stage, performer and dancefloor (as in some of McLean's performances). For instance in the performance edition of Jay Bernard's recent work 'Something Said' (2018) based on the earlier 'Surge: Side A' (2017) live poetry is presented alongside digital audio and digital film which is projected directly onto the stage and the body of the performer. Bernard's poetry gives voice to the marginalised black victims of the 1981 New Cross fire, and Bernard literally gives voice to those stories while projecting digital media onto their own bare back, a choreographic choice which performs an embodiment of the disenfranchised (both in terms of the political potency of using a black body as a canvas but also literally a form of embodiment).

Digital media often engages with layering as a linguistic and aesthetic function, indeed fundamental to the structure of computing is the fetching of information between a complex framework of linguistic and pseudo-linguistic layers (*cf.* the OSI model described in Mitchell). When digital spoken word uses a layer of digital media in performance it can work to enhance and emphasise a singular voice, but it is also capable of presenting an additional and perhaps even divergent or contradictory voice and subject position. For instance in Bernard's 'Something Said' the historic telling of the story is concurrently performed in a dynamic tension with a contemporary spoken word re-telling of the story. In this way digital spoken word can be structured to perform a sort of many-voiced quality or 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin) traditionally associated with page based prose writing.

Of course there are almost incalculable permutations of performer, audience, projected image, and digital media layering available to digital spoken word practitioners, each performing different structure of power and meaning. Consequently a critical discourse which readily considers the politics of space, voice and the body would be well disposed to engage with this media form.

Performance, Performativity and Affect

Another way of interpreting digital spoken word is through the critical lenses of performativity and affect, considering the practice not a fixed creative artefact but an

ongoing socially negotiated process. Performativity is precisely the critical position called for by Jerome Fletcher in the introduction to *Performance Research: On Writing and Digital Media*:

'However, there is another way of approaching performativity in relation to digital writing. Rather than seeing it as the end-point, the outcome of the digital device or apparatus, we can consider the question of how writing performs throughout the entire apparatus/device. The word 'apparatus' is being used here as the equivalent to the French dispositif with the history of that word as given in, for example, Foucault, Agamben, and Deleuze. In other words, 'apparatus' refers not simply to the physical object, the hardware, but to the whole assemblage of hardware, software, code, writing, performance, usage, texts, ideology and so forth... Digital texts then are events that are performed, which perform themselves and that increasingly perform us – the interaction between body and machine is a major theme in these papers. Under this schema, digital text would find one of its fullest articulations within performativity and the discourse of performance studies.'(3)

'Performativity' has a rich critical history, as mentioned earlier in the chapter dating back to the concept of the speech act in J. L. Austin, but also augmented and expanded with regards to gender and the body in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and substantially developed by Derrida:

'[The performative] produces or transforms a situation, it effects; and even if it can be said that a constative utterance also effectuates something and always transforms a situation, it cannot be maintained that that constitutes its internal structure, its manifest function or destination, as in the case of the performative.' (13)

As spoken word and computation are both necessarily durational events, so digital spoken word can be approached from a critical discourse which readily engages with durational performance, especially those discourses which situate the text-event within a set of social interactions. For Fletcher this critical discourse is the field of Performance Writing, but an equally appropriate approach to the practice would be from the field of Affect Studies (predominantly set in motion by Clough and Halley's *The Affective Turn: Theorising the Social*) and which considers the process of affect transmission across and within social contexts.

Using Spoken Word to Understand Digital Performance

The previous considerations are towards identifying critical avenues which might prove fruitful for reading digital spoken word, however this sub-section proposes that spoken word studies might prove to be a fruitful critical avenue for reading digital performance. Even in works which don't have an explicit textual component 'poetry' and 'poetics' are frequently referred to as a way of describing the performative exchanges which take place between the digital and the material in digital performance practice. For example in describing audience responses to 'Biped' a digital media and dance performance, Dixon explains reviewers 'were drawn into the poetry of the interactions between the live and virtual dancers' (192). Later in *Digital Performance* Dixon quotes theatre director Robert Lepage:

'Lepage replies: "I don't think there is any kind of magic about what I do. . . . All of the connections are there, somewhere in the subconscious or in the collective unconscious." Moreover, he maintains, "the theater is implicitly linked to technology. . . . There is a poetry in technology, but we try to use it in a way that does not eclipse the action on stage' (360)

As described earlier in this chapter, all computational media is underpinned by linguistic structuring, and the layering of digital media alongside, above or within a stage environment contributes to an interpretable semiotic field, so perhaps in the context of a post-literary secondary orality it is not surprising that people interpret non textual digital media as though it were linguistic. Indeed in 'Reading and Giving Voice and Language' Cayley argues that such an approach (performing into language) is imperative in our critical evaluation of code and the way we interact with it today:

"Our situation calls for a reading and a performance of the virtual, pseudo-language with which we now constantly transact" (10)

Supposing we highlight the poesis of digital media, in which textual code performs actions and events across a duration, then any digital performance might be interrogated through the lens of digital spoken word.

Conclusion

As digital and digitally-augmented spoken word and performance poetry practices emerge and develop in (and beyond) the UK so a wide range of formally inventive structural arrangements have become evident (many of which draw on pre-digital traditions such as projection art, electronic literature, and of course spoken word and performance poetry). Digital spoken word, which consists of spoken word with an integral element of computational digital media, can be seen as closely related to digitally-augmented spoken word (where digital media is presented alongside and subsidiary to an existing spoken word practice) and reasonably analogous to digital performance poetry. Although not an exhaustive list, this chapter identifies a number of key types of digital spoken word that have taken place in the UK geographic context including spoken word performances which use the projection of digital media, digitally manipulated sound, text generators and machine authorship, interactive media and audience participation through digital mechanisms, and live coding alongside spoken word and performance poetry. The chapter then asks questions about the potential implications of these modes of digital spoken word and begins to identify a number of potential critical discourses through which to read, feel, interpret and participate in digital spoken word and related practices, including a discussion of the semiotics and politics of space and the body, and the identification of performance studies and affect studies as potentially potent and inclusive modes of study. Finally the chapter echoes Cayley's call for an interrogation of code, and suggests that the critical understanding of spoken word studies of the importance of field and performativity in social and political spaces, might be a valuable mode of approach to digital performance and computational media in general, as a form of performative poesis which ought not be exempt from critique.

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