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How Viral Poems are Annotated

On 'OCD' by Neil Hilborn

KILA VAN DER STARRE

For centuries poets all over the world have been performing their poems for small and great audiences. Only since 1877, however, when Thomas Edison famously recorded sound for the first time by capturing the words 'a little piece of practical poetry', followed by the first four lines of 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' on a phonograph, can poets share their performances without being present. The invention of the Internet significantly enlarged the potential audience for poetry performances, both in audio and visual form. The broad range of online poetry recordings, such as the digital archives of The Poetry Foundation, UbuWeb, Pennsound, the Academy of American Poets and Lyrikline, made poetry editor Jeff Shotts exclaim: 'The Internet is basically one big poetry audiobook' (Shotts cited in Orr 2015: 16).

An interesting form of online poetry recordings are YouTube videos of poetry performances that become so popular they 'go viral'. These so-called 'viral poems' are often English texts performed by young American, Canadian and British slam poets, characterized by strong narrative aspects, a dramatic style and emotional topics such as gender inequality, racism, rape, bullying and mental health.¹

This article focuses on how, where and by whom viral poems are annotated, by focusing on the performance of 'OCD' by Neil Hilborn, which went viral in the summer of 2013. Every text with an explicit reference to that performance, I will treat as an annotation. This article will touch upon many types of annotations that have been added to the performance, without in any way intending to give an exhaustive list. The many languages and media and the existence of offline annotations make the total number of annotations incalculable.

POETRY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Through a combination of the oldest form of poetry (oral) and the newest (digital) viral poems reach a big audience with annotating capabilities. Research on these performances and annotations can be seen as a new type of reception study in the digital age. This type of research can teach us several things about poetry in the twenty-first century. First, viral poems show us that poetry is more than 'lineated texts, usually divided into stanzas, surrounded by white space and designed to be read silently to oneself', as most academics and critics seem to believe (Perloff 1998: xii). Despite the low sales numbers of poetry books and the centuries-old debates on the death of poetry – from Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' (1583) to Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821), and from Freedman's 'How Dead Is Poetry?' (1995), to Hall's 'Death to the Death of Poetry' (2001) – the popularity, spreading and annotating of viral poems show that poetry does indeed play a role in early twenty-first century everyday lives. This new phenomenon underlines the historically based claim that 'poetry's normal or natural home is not in the book', as Mike Chasar states. 'Just because people aren't buying books, doesn't mean people aren't finding poems as they move through culture' (Chasar 2015). Also, viral poems show that poetry can engage, move and activate people. Not only are these poetry performances viewed and listened to by a great number of people, they are also transcribed, translated, adapted, remade, remixed, criticized, adored, shared and analysed. All these types

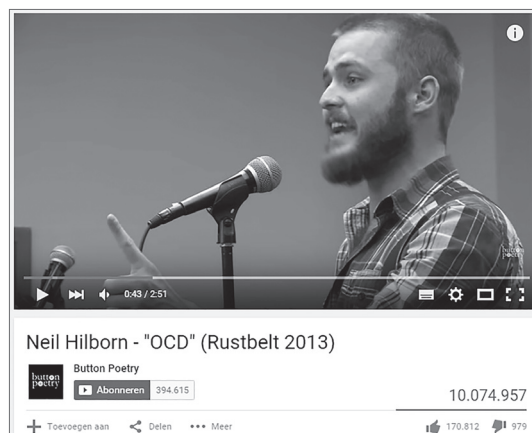
¹ For example:

'Embarrassed' by Hollie McNish; 'Shrinking women' by Lily Meyers; 'cuz he's black' by Javon Johnson; 'Piñata' by Pages Matam; 'Why I Hate School but Love Education' by Suli Breaks; and 'To this Day' by Shane Koyczan. Poems occasionally go viral in written form, such as Patricia Lockwood's 'The Rape Joke', but the popularity of a written poem is difficult to trace because it is often not documented or made public how often a poem has been read.

of annotations give us insight into how people experience and understand poetry. Finally, the ways in which online and offline annotations coincide give an alternative view on the idea that print and digital media are separate tracks that do not interact.

I LEAVE THE DOOR UNLOCKED

In 2011 Neil Hilborn, born and raised in Houston, Texas, USA, wrote a poem entitled 'OCD' about the effects that an obsessive-compulsive disorder can have on a love relationship. He performed the poem in continually edited versions at several poetry slams throughout the US, winning prizes at the College National Poetry Slam Championship and the adult National Poetry Slam. In June 2013 Hilborn's performance of the poem was filmed during the Rustbelt Regional Poetry Slam in Madison, Wisconsin. 'The first time I saw her', Hilborn opens his performance, 'everything in my head went quiet. All the tics, all the constantly refreshing images just disappeared'. The poem narrates how, in the love affair that follows, the girl at first accepts and even likes the tics ('She loved that I had to kiss her goodbye sixteen times or twenty-four times if it was Wednesday'). But halfway through the poem things change ('Some mornings I'd start kissing her goodbye but she'd just leave because I was making her late for work') and the girl ends the relationship, leaving a devastated ex-partner behind. During the recording Hilborn not only thematizes compulsive tics by describing obsessive routines ('I spent more time organizing my meal by colour than I did eating it') and repeating words ('The eyelash on her cheek, the eyelash on her cheek, the eyelash on her cheek'), he also *performs* the tics by expressing frustration and making seemingly uncontrollable gestures. The performance ends in both a formal and thematic reversal. Hilborn's movements and voice calm down and the obsessions with the girl turn out to be more powerful than the compulsive obsessions: 'I want her back so bad. I leave the door unlocked. I leave the lights on.'



■ Neil Hilborn performing his poem 'OCD' during the Rustbelt Regional Poetry Slam in Madison, Wisconsin in June 2013. Recorded and uploaded on YouTube by Button Poetry on 22 July 2013. Screen shot taken on 14 August 2015. *Reproduced with permission of the owner.*

VIRALITY

The performance did not go viral until Button Poetry, an organization founded in 2011 by Sam Cook and Sierra DeMulder uploaded their recording of the poem on YouTube on 22 July 2013. On 8 August 2013 'antron81' shared the video on the website Reddit with the annotation 'Easily the most onion chopping thing I've ever experienced' (antron81 2013). Reddit users immediately started 'upvoting' the post by attributing points and leaving comments. The video subsequently gained attention on other websites, some of which are known as clickbait sites, such as Huffington Post, Gawker, Fox News, BuzzFeed, 9gag and on Flabber (The Netherlands), Konbini (France) and E-consulta (Mexico), prompting hundreds of thousands of people to share the video via social media and weblogs, resulting in the poetry performance being viewed more than 10 million times.²

Although it is nowadays common to say something 'went viral', the difference between a 'viral video' and a 'popular video' has not been clearly defined. In their book *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green do not attempt to fill this definitional gap, but they do emphasize the problematic connotations of infection and contamination that accompany the term 'viral' (Jenkins et al. 2013: 20). They advocate 'a shift toward greater acknowledgment that audience members are active participants in making meaning within networked media' (20). Media do not go viral by themselves. It happens through Internet users' active decisions and deliberate responses, whether or not prompted by sensationalist headlines and clickbait websites. A 'mix of top-down and bottom-up forces', together with our increasingly participatory culture, makes the public not

² Due to personal settings on social media and the legal and ethical aspects of crawling online social network data, mapping the detailed spreading of 'OCD' on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and more is methodologically constrained and problematic.

■ Eric Paquet's tattoo of Neil Hilborn performing 'OCD'. Still from the viral video (Paquet 2014). Reproduced with permission of the owner.



³ Although Jenkins treats convergence culture as something new, one can easily think of historical cases of transmediality. The many extensions of the Bible (songs, books, paintings, statues, films, websites and so forth) stretching over many centuries are just one example.

simple consumers of preconstructed messages, but 'people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined' (2).

This 'shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content' is the way that Internet users of today annotate cultural expressions, including poems. 'OCD' triggered a broad array of multimedia and multilingual reactions, including oral, written, creative, analytical, applauding and critical annotations. The performance received more than 9,000 comments on YouTube from 130 countries. The poem was transcribed and translated into at least thirteen languages. People used ['motion graphic animation'](#), ['kinetic typography'](#) and self-made films with [actors](#), [drawings](#), [stop-motion techniques](#), [footage montage](#) and [voice-overs](#) to produce adaptations of the poem. Probably the most common video reaction is one in which a 'cover' performance of the poem is recorded. Some recite the poem [in front of their computer](#); others film themselves performing 'OCD' in a [living room](#). A number of videos show that performances of the poem were done on stage for a live audience, in the original language or in translation, in the US, [France](#), [Germany](#) and [Serbia](#). Furthermore, critical analyses of the poem can be found in YouTube comments and on close reading websites such as Genius.com. Examples of non-lingual reactions to the viral poem are digital illustrations, [self-made paintings](#) and [tattoos](#) of Hilborn performing 'OCD'.

POETRY PERFORMANCES AND CONVERGENCE CULTURE

The number and nature of these annotations place poetry in what Henry Jenkins calls 'convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media

intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways' (Jenkins 2006: 2). According to Jenkins, today's culture is always produced and experienced through several media, resulting in transmedia storytelling and multimedia 'world building', for which participation and collective intelligence are essential (116).³

In his view on convergence culture, Jenkins makes a distinction between an adaptation, 'which reproduces the original narrative with minimum changes into a new medium and is essentially redundant to the original work', and an extension, 'which expands our understanding of the original by introducing new elements into the fiction' (Jenkins 2009). Following this definition with our case study in mind, transcriptions of the oral performance and 'cover performances' of the original poem would be adaptations, while interpretive comments on Genius and self-made stop-motion films would be extensions. Although this definition is intuitively legitimate, I would like to argue that every adaptation is essentially an interpretation, thus necessarily 'introducing new elements'. I will show that the introduction of these elements not only 'expands our understanding of the original', but also expands our understanding of the understanding of the original by others. In other words, by focusing on all types of annotations I will be exploring the ways in which active participants are 'making meaning' of the performance (Jenkins et al. 2013: 20). I will discuss how emotion, identification, translation, genre, authenticity, analysis and interpretation play a role in the way that people experience and understand the poem.

EMOTION

A primary reaction to the performance of 'OCD' is an emotional response. Just like the annotation accompanying the video on Reddit, captions on other websites attempted to appeal to the Internet user's emotion by presenting the video as 'Heartbreaking Poem about Falling in Love' (HuffingtonPost 2013), 'Man Met OCD laat je een traantje wegpinken' (Flabber 2013) (in

Dutch: 'Man with OCD Lets You Shed a Tear') and 'Hauntingly Stirring Love Poem' (Gawker 2013). On YouTube, 784 comments contain the verb 'cry', making explicit the commenter's admiration for the poem.⁴ These notes of affection also accompany transcripts, translations and video adaptations of 'OCD'. Dorothy Cheng writes on her weblog that she transcribed the performance because the poem 'touched' her (Cheng 2013). On YouTube, performers explain that admiration led to their covers of the poem: 'I really liked it, so I wanted to try to see if I could pull it off' (ExceptICan'tSing 2013), 'I stumbled across this poem and I loved it SO MUCH I just had to cover it' (EatPukeStarveRepeat 2014).

IDENTIFICATION

The poem also emotionally activates people to write about their own mental health. 'I can't even begin to explain how powerful this poem is,' an Australian YouTuber comments – '[h]ow much it means to me personally, as I watch everyone around me recoil at my unusual compulsions and constant anxiety' (NerdOfBookObsession 2014). 'I'm 15 and I have OCD,' Tristan from the US confesses. '[T]he thought of a relationship is scary and I don't know if someone would be able to handle me (even without the OCD;) But this kinda gives me hope:)' (Paulik 2014). Identification with the mental health issue thematized by Hilborn is also a motivation to cover the performance: 'I chose to recite this beautiful poem ... because I suffer from OCD and heartbreak myself,' Romanian YouTuber Lucian Hodoboc writes, 'and when I listened to it, it hit so close to home that I memorized it without hardly any effort at all' (TheLHShowChannel 2014).

TRANSLATION

Admiration and affection also seem to be an incentive to translate the poem. An anonymous group of Internet users collectively provided YouTube subtitling in four languages (English, Chinese, French and Spanish). On the website

Amara translations were made in Chinese, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Turkish. On fora, weblogs and Facebook, versions of the poem can be found in all those languages, besides translations in [German](#), [Polish](#), [Hungarian](#), Romanian and [American Sign Language](#). Translating an orally performed poem into written language means making significant interpretive decisions. Besides spelling and the use of capital letters and punctuation, translators inevitably decided on the lay-out. Most online textual interpretations chose to use line breaks, imitating the standard page composition of poetry in books and magazines. Others favoured a more prose-like layout, used typographical aspects as semantic elements or exploited the possibilities of the medium by adding hyperlinks. We can find an [English](#) transcript that defines keywords by using bold, a [German](#) translation that uses italics to show which words Hilborn emphasizes in his performance, an [Italian](#) version that integrates red hyperlinks to refer to other texts, a [Polish](#) version that uses capital letters to emphasize repeated words, a [Turkish](#) translation that displays dashes at the end of several lines, a [Hungarian](#) and a [Russian](#) translation that use enjambments to highlight repetition and a [Portuguese](#) and a [Chinese](#) text that use ellipses instead of break lines.

The Internet users seem to feel free to translate the performance into whatever form of written text they see fit. Outside the World Wide Web, however, 'official' written forms of the poem by the poet himself did actually exist. Due to the poem's occurrence in Hilborn's self-published chapbooks *High Lonesome* (2012) and *Clatter* (2013), in Button Poetry's e-book *Viral poems* (2013) and in Hilborn's debut full-length poetry collection *Our Numbered Days* (2015), four 'official' written versions of 'OCD' were published over three years. On the one hand, the existence of these texts may have not been known to online translators. All refer to the viral YouTube video. Not one mentions online transcripts made by others or the books published by Hilborn and Button Poetry. It is clear that the transcribers perceive the performance to be the original. On the other hand, more importantly, the

⁴ Based on all YouTube comments that appeared under the video on 6 March 2015 (8,489 in total).

translators do not seem to be concerned with the existence or nature of the 'official' written versions. Reaching a consensus on one correct transcript with one correct lay-out, is not the objective of these online users. Above all, the act of translating seems to be a performative act to express appreciation, while at the same time empowering the translator. Victoria Walker experienced translating and performing 'OCD' in American Sign Language as affective and self-assuring: 'I did it with so much emotion. I am so fucking proud of myself' (Walker 2013).

GENRE

Not all annotations, however, display admiration. Criticism of the performance can be found in discussions on whether it is poetry or not. Some believe 'OCD' is not, because the text does not rhyme, because it is not written but spoken or because the performance is too dramatic. 'This is storytelling, not poetry' (Motherspitchfork 2013). Others disagree: 'Doesn't need to rhyme to be a poem, hon. There are really many forms of poetry' (LoneBrokenWolf 2013). Within a few days after the poem went viral, metareflective commentary on this discussion occurred online. James Grimshaw devoted a blogpost to this debate under the title "That's Not Poetry": A Response to the Response to the Response to Neil Hilborn', thus annotating the annotations (Grimshaw 2013).

AUTHENTICITY

A second point of discussion in the YouTube comments is 'Does he really have OCD?'. On the one hand, people start discussing the matter of whether Neil Hilborn has an obsessive-compulsive disorder or not, by referring to other performances by him on YouTube, a Q&A with the poet on Reddit and a TedXTalk Hilborn did on poetry and health awareness. Some conclude that Hilborn's story is 'real'; others complain that the tics are 'fake'. On the other hand, people criticize the question itself, as they find the 'truthfulness' insignificant for the value of the

performance. As someone from the UK wrote: 'It doesn't matter whether Neil Hilborn has OCD or not[,] he made something beautiful through purely empathising with a condition' (Caryjrgalia 2014). As Takeo Rivera argued previously in *Performance Research*, there is within poetry slam 'an economy of authenticity construction' (Rivera 2013: 118). Poetry slammers and their audience find it essential that the performer is authentic, but this is less a case of 'telling the truth' than of convincingly constructing authenticity through the slam itself (118). Interestingly enough, in online annotations the authenticity of the commenters is as much a construct as Hilborn's performance. The users' metadata, such as the country they live in and their age and gender, is based on information they filled in on their YouTube and Google+ accounts and thus can differ from reality. Also, it is impossible to know whether people are sincere in what they write in a comment.

ANALYSIS

A reoccurring type of annotation is one that aims to analyse the poem. 'Do you think the amount of times he says "blows out the candles" signifies the number of years he dated her?' someone notes in a YouTube comment (Wagner 2014). The most explicit form of analysis is done on the website Genius. This platform, founded in 2009 as RapGenius, aims to 'annotate the world', as its slogan goes. Since 'Perfectthyme' added a transcript of 'OCD' to the website, forty-two 'scholars' have collectively worked on annotating the text, by adding textual analyses per line, discussing interpretation issues, adding hyperlinks and 'reviewing' one another's comments (Genius 2014). The annotations aim at interpreting the poem by explaining ambiguities and metaphors, marking turning points, analysing repetition and referring to Hilborn's performance. Here, annotating is done collectively and democratically. Jenkins calls this expertise of virtual community members 'collective intelligence': 'What we cannot know or do on our own, we may now be able to do collectively' (Jenkins 2006: 27).

INTERPRETATION

Not only annotations that explicitly articulate people's interpretation of 'OCD' are significant when talking about the way people understand the poem. A closer look at annotations in the form of videos give us insight into the way we understand the poem. There are, for example, many elements that reveal that annotators understand the poem to be an autobiographical recount of events from Hilborn's life. In a self-drawn stop-motion adaptation Sella Zelyana makes the female stick figure call the male stick figure 'Neil' – a word that does not occur in the poem – implying that the lyrical I is identical to the real author (Zelyana 2013). This autobiographical link between the lyrical I and the speaking subject is something that also live performers react to. Janisha Rodriguez, in her performance of the poem, changes every 'she' into 'he' and 'her' into 'him', implying that it would not make sense for her to perform a love poem about a woman (Rodriguez 2013). Other female YouTubers choose not to convert the personal pronouns, but feel the need to comment on this choice in the video's description: 'Feel like a right lesbian haha' (EatPukeStarveRepeat 2014).

Insights into how people immerse themselves in the poem's story world and in the characters' consciousness can also be found in video adaptations, by looking at words that annotators add to the poem's text. In his typographical animation, Alexandru Cioanca adds the sentence 'I should lock the door' to the original text to articulate the lyrical I's thoughts and emphasize the constantly present obsessions (Cioanca 2014). Leaveittorylee explicates the lovers saying 'I love you' to each other in her post-it stop-motion film, depicting imagined conversations outside the existing story world (Leaveittorylee 2014). In her hand-drawn film, Sella Zelyana turns indirect speech from the poem into direct speech: the film zooms in on a text message that the female character sends to end the relationship (Zelyana 2013). In Valina Gug's video the add-ons are taken to a next level: the poem is embedded in a greater story by the introduction

of a narrative framework. The video starts with a young man talking to his psychiatrist about problems he is having with his girlfriend. A transition is made to the narrative level of the poem, which is performed by a voice-over, while footage of a couple is shown. At the end we return to the extradiegetic level, where the man has finished telling his story and is sobbing (Gug 2013). Léo Noël's video demonstrates that for him imitating the performance is more important than getting a message across. His French accent is so strong that large parts of the English poem are incomprehensible. He does, however, copy Hilborn's intonation, gestures, changes in emotion and silences. The recording shows that the live audience reacts with laughter and despite the content not being entirely clear, his performance is experienced as a successful adaptation (Noël 2015).

FROM DIGITAL TO PRINT

Most of the abovementioned annotations to Hilborn's performance are online annotations. In *How We Think* Katherine Hayles states that digital and print media are two separate things: 'The two tracks, print and digital, run side by side, but messages from either track do not leap across to the other' (Hayles 2012: 57). A last example of an annotation shows, however, that this idea may not be entirely true. Last year, Dutch poet Ingmar Heytze selected his forty most favourite poems and published them, together with short columns explaining his choice, in an anthology named *De Veertig van Heytze* (*Heytze's Forty*). A self-made translation of Neil Hilborn's 'OCD' is one of these forty poems. If we follow Hayles' train of thought, it is not only striking that Heytze selected a viral poem to be published in his printed book, but also that the annotations he added to 'OCD' in the accompanying column are similar to the annotations online. Heytze discusses whether 'OCD' is poetry or not, whether it matters if the poem is autobiographical or not and whether it is relevant if the poem is spoken or written. Just like many online annotators, Heytze writes he made his translation 'out of admiration and

envy' (Heytze 2014a: 96). On 23 February 2014 Heytze appeared on the Dutch television programme *Kunststof TV* to talk about his anthology. Comparable to hundreds of comments on YouTube and beyond, Heytze confessed he found Hilborn's poem 'so moving that I even cried while translating' (Heytze 2014b). After Heytze's personal and emotional reflection, *Kunststof TV* showed a fragment of the YouTube video, resulting in Hilborn's performance being broadcasted on national Dutch television for forty-two seconds, while 151,000 people were watching (SKO 2015).

CONCLUSION

Researching the way that Hilborn's poem 'OCD' is annotated has shown that poetry in the twenty-first century is a widespread, actively experienced and annotated, transmedia genre. In contrast to what Hayles and others may think, online and offline annotations are similar and linked. Messages in different media are 'leaping across' all over the place: live stage performance to YouTube, from YouTube to social media, personal blogs and close reading websites, from the Internet to a printed book, from a printed book to television and back to the YouTube video.

Michael Mlekoday, who 'had the pleasure of being in a car with Neil Hilborn ... when his poem, "OCD" went viral', explains in the preface to *Viral Poems* (2013) that the virality did not so much change his opinion on the poem. Rather, it changed his view on poetry: '[H]ow glad it makes me to know that so many people have been touched by a poem!' he writes. '[Poetry] is not navel-gazing, is not solipsistic, even at its most personal – and it certainly isn't dead. Poetry has a place in our everyday lives, in the everyday life of our culture and our society' (Mlekoday 2013).



ANNOUNCEMENT

Videos referenced in this article are available to view on the Performance Research YouTube channel; visit the 20.6 On An/Notations playlist on www.youtube.com

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/continued on p. 126

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/ continued from p.64

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