Conclusion: (Re)-Reading Instapoetry

Thus far, the thesis attempted to constitute an excursion towards establishing poetry as an aesthetic experience, whereby the study registered the cruciality of the context of encounter. Moving towards the conclusion, it becomes indispensable to consider even the non-literary concerns that pertain to this reading context.[123] These concerns will be addressed here, not as a way to validate art for the sake of recording cultural development. Instead, they will be discussed as a way to locate the discourse around aesthetic experience of Instapoetry into larger implications that bear on bodies beyond just poets and readers of Instapoetry to attain a comprehensive understanding of the convergence of aesthetics, ideology, and technology within the domain of social media platforms.[124]

The very first question that arises is how bodies beyond those directly associated with Instapoetry—such as poets and readers in their capacity as users of the platform services—become involved. The answer is in the etymological premise of *Insta* poetry. Instapoetry can be understood as any poetry post—traditional or otherwise—that is "Instagrammed" for the platform. And thus, one may infer that it is the reading experience, not the content or the form, that keeps print media and Instagram apart. However, these are not exclusively defined experiences. They imprint on one another due to the fact that readers and poets are not discreetly discriminative in choosing a particular platform, as they freely choose both print and Instagram to read both traditional and "Instapoetry." In such a case, while the traditional reading experience extends and impacts Instagram reading experience, the latter also partially influences the former. But more or less, because these reading experiences are broadly diverse from one another, an individual who reads or writes on Instagram is considered a reader or poet of Instapoetry, while the same person reading or writing the same piece in print media is not.

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[123] The reading context here refers not only to Instagram but to all new media platforms that are embedded within the logic of Web 2.0 technology. Martin Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," which recognises that the relationship between humans and technology is not solely instrumental and, therefore, neutral by nature, necessitates consideration of the technology context. He suggests moving beyond *enframing* to ask questions whose answers do not end up in the explanation of technology itself but touch upon the causes, effects, goals, and mindsets behind the emergence of technology (1977).

[124] John Dewey (1934) believed that art is a part of the natural and ordinary flow of experience but art as an experience changes ordinary life. Scott Stroud (2011) looks into Dewey's account of aesthetic experience to see if it reckons the aspect of amelioration within its conceptual bounds. Stroud insists that art value and moral value need to be looked at together as concomitant to one another and not as means to an end for each other. Moreover, even though the thesis aims to only record the shift in aesthetic experience, it would be detrimental to the purpose of the research itself if it did not take into consideration the ramifications of this shift.

By this logic, then, entities not directly and exclusively engaged as poets and readers of Instapoetry come to be involved.

Besides, the contention that the "Instagram experience" influences the reading of traditional poetry is founded on two underlying assumptions: firstly, that the instantness of the experience does not just stem from its presence on Instagram but also extends beyond the platform in the wake of digital reading cultures, and secondly, that the residual experience of Instagram's visual reading and algorithmic effect has a certain grasp over how the traditional mode of reading is conducted by the same set of readers . The present section aims to examine these assumptions as it meanders through the questions regarding the (re)-reading of poetry, its criticism, its position in the wake of democratisation of art, and accordingly, its future.

Reading, rereading, or (re)-reading?

The debate over decreasing attention span and subsequent reading habits in the age of digital media parallels the discussions on assessment of Instapoetry: one faction contends that, like Instapoetry, these reading patterns hinder critical thinking and deep contemplation, thereby being detrimental to culture and causing a decline in the quality of works produced, while the other faction asserts that digital sources provide enough accessibility to revitalise the practice of reading, albeit a different kind of reading (Hammond 5-10).[125] The primary cause of these disagreements is the perception that reading is limited only to close reading. And such a perception obviously concerns the estimation of Instapoetry, as its reading experience does not align with the conventional norms for reading.

A more recent addition to the debate can be seen in Kathi Berens's emphasis of the significance of surface reading (2019b). She argues that surface reading, which is the initial encounter with any written material, serves as the foundation upon which all subsequent analysis depends. According to Berens, close reading, traditionally regarded as the primary mode of reading, should be seen as a secondary step that follows surface reading, where the surface is the focal point that demands one's attention, rather than something one needs to learn to see beyond. She maintains that surface is a locus of intersection, and associates attention to the surface with a method of critically describing something similar to Clifford Geertz's notion

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[125] Hammond delineates arguments from the Carr-Shirky debate, where Nicholas Carr (2008) holds that disruptive reading patterns are fallible and cannot result in critical discourse, while Clay Shirky (2008) holds a more optimistic point of view, believing that only the nature of reading has changed with digital media that has brought back the practice of reading.

of "thick description" rather than Frederic Jameson's approach of uncovering latent ideologies through close reading (2019b).

Berens proposes a kind of "rereading" as a reevaluation of reading practices that challenges and expands the definition of reading. She suggests subverting prior understanding of reading, as she contends that this revision should have been established prior to the emergence of the concept of close reading. However, the established conventions of reading cannot be completely disregarded, and the inconsistency of her argument shows itself when she recommends approaching third-generation electronic literature with surface reading, in contrast to engaging with electronic literature of the first and second generations, which are subjected to close reading. If surface reading, according to her, must precede close reading, it must do so, and evenly so, with all available literature and not be applied to a particular section of literature.

Therefore, there must be another way to redefine reading specifically for digital media instead of overstepping the established reading norms in general. N. Katherine Hayles[126] initiates an appropriation in this regard, saying that reading will differ owing to the digital age, which requires a distinct type of attentiveness compared to the previous modes of reading. She draws from Cathy Davidson, who, referring to her knowledge of neurology, submits that individuals who multitask are not paying attention in a worse manner, but rather in a different manner. Hayles follows Davidson in arguing that the brain finds confusion to be pleasurable, and suggests that incongruity, disruption, and disorientation can serve as sources of inspiration, creativity, and productivity. Hence, they posit that new digital modes of thinking could potentially bring about a creative disruption of one's ordinary cognitive processes (Hammond 19). Moreover, Hayles's formulation of *hyper* reading as the type of reading that is frequently done online is useful to identify digital reading patterns. Since this type of reading is not seen as a completely harmful parasite to close reading by creating a binary opposition between the two, it comes closest to addressing the shift from reading to re-reading. *Hyper* reading is associated with "hyper attention," which is characterised by a low threshold for boredom, the ability to switch between different information streams, and a preference for high levels of stimulation; and it involves quickly "skimming, scanning, fragmenting, and juxtaposing texts"

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[126] The thread of arguments from Hayles and Davidson, like Carr-Shirky debate, are borrowed from Adam Hammond's chapter on "Digital Medium and Message." Hammond discusses two texts here, i.e., *How We Think* (2012) by N. Katherine Hayles where she follows Cathy Davidson's conclusions from *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn* (2011).

(19). Nevertheless, not all the attributes of this re-reading have been thoroughly theorised and designated yet, which is why the researcher opted to parenthesise the prefix "re" in "(re)-reading."

Two major states that define *hyper* reading are: 1. high level of stimulation; and 2. low level of boredom. A significant contributor that gives rise to increased stimulation in *hyper* reading is the growing prevalence of visual culture in digital media. Its impact is gradually shifting towards reading that relies more on graphic elements that prove to be the strongest sensory input. On the other hand, the design of digital media under Web 2.0 defers boredom by utilising data appropriation features that analyse the data consumed and tailor the *Feed* to provide content that is more relevant and interesting to the user. This algorithm, which is not limited to Instagram but applies to Web 2.0 design as a whole, impacts *hyper* reading by enabling quick access to information. This in turn also allows for the customisation of art and manipulation of interpretations to suit one's individual needs. This phenomenon is evident in the manner in which users engage with and consume material across different platforms. Jeneen Naji talks about this routine of repurposing content by copying, remixing, re-appropriating and reusing it (6); and views the act of shaping content to suit the individual as a cannibalistic act. She also notes that Instapoetry, where such practices are observed, is an example of an anthropophagous posthuman literary artefact. Nevertheless, this conduct is not exclusive to Instapoetry. On the Internet, one frequently encounters numerous and innovative duplications of photographs, artworks, music, films, and virtually all other forms of information.

At the heart of the motivation to remix and shape one's own experience lies the potential necessity to relate to the content and subsequently produce more content in the fashion. This is achieved through readily accessible images and pictures, which cater to the prevalent visual thinking of the current generation. As Kevin Stein points out, "In digital video culture, the eye rules as both benevolent king and churlish despot. The visual has come to circumscribe the landscape of our aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional lives" (99). Relating through images is nothing but a translation of *my way of seeing* concretised into the logic of an image that one may also use to influence and shape the perception of others around them (Tiidenberg and Cruz 79). Moreover, the published visual content, whether on Instagram or any other platform, holds significance due to its structure, its surrounding circumstances, and its communication objectives. These factors differ among individuals. Instagram postings benefit from the accompanying contextual information, such as *Captions*, *Hashtags*, *Profile* details, *Comments*,

and annotations. They are not standalone entities but are presented alongside the traffic of other visual and text-based content. And thus, visual reading can neither be taken as a binary opposition to dense reading nor be explained through the concept of surface reading suggested by Kathi Berens.

Returning to algorithm induced encounters with relatable content, a common desire among users to connect with content can be noticed on the internet, which makes them attempt to find relatable items in various situations. To illustrate, one may imagine attending a social gathering where there are diverse types of people - the internet can be likened to such a gathering, as it offers a vast amount of information. In this context, individuals tend to gravitate towards people that they can relate to, as it provides a sense of comfort and allows them to verbalise—or just represent—their unique identity within a larger group. By relating to certain things on the internet, users are able to carve out a space for themselves and find a niche. However, it is important to note that the experience of the so called "relatable content" by the users is often contrived and many a times detached from the actual circumstances surrounding its creation.

What if one were to say that poetry on digital media, in its capacity as content, could simulate a relatable experience? When poetry is read on social media, it undergoes a process akin to the construction of hyperreality that presides over the experience of viewing other content. Experience of poetry may be accompanied by thematic simulation, producing an aesthetic feeling without considering the material realities involved in the creation of art, such as the underlying thoughts or circumstances. An example can be found in the poetry of Rupi Kaur or in the daily poetry posts shared by @poetryisnotluxury, where readers establish a connection before attempting to have an aesthetic experience. And so, readers can easily and willingly avoid delving into a greater degree of engagement. Thus, (re)-reading positions digital literature outside the scope of criticism that applies to traditionally printed works. Subsequently, the inquiry that arises is what type of critique would truly apply to this form of (re)-reading?

Is criticism really possible?

(Re)-reading is instrumental in analysing art as an aesthetic experience that effectuates in the presence of an aesthetic field (as explained by Arnold Berleant). Such an analysis provides the necessary foundation for making aesthetic judgements because (re)-

reading is nothing but context-sensitive reading that does not inherently contradict aesthetic judgements. Although the analysis does not intend to render criticism impossible, it certainly makes it challenging because of the following reasons. Firstly, the aesthetic field is inherently unstable, as it is not just determined by fixed components and elements, but also by the dynamic emergence of newer aspects that stem from these components. Therefore, an understanding of art in a similar context and instance may also differ. Secondly, it is impracticable to simultaneously consider all the variables for analysis as they are always changing. Recording every alteration across various analyses may yield precise conclusions, but not everyone possesses the patience and resources to undertake such a meticulous task. Additionally, there is a constant risk of the analysis being biased towards certain elements over others.

Furthermore, the task, even if accomplished, cannot be executed in the manner that traditional gatekeepers previously employed. The presence of a gatekeeper or content filtering, where a small group decides what information is appropriate for the platform and what is not, contradicts the primary purpose of digital dissemination of information. It is not within one's purview to determine what is universally beneficial and appealing. It is difficult to establish definitive guidelines for determining what content is considered good and how to enhance the experience of reading it. But one thing is certain, introducing standardisation within these units of information would contradict their fundamental principles, as it would involve determining the superiority and inferiority of different works. Therefore, universal criteria will not be appropriate for making aesthetic evaluations. Only individual experiences must be considered because, in the digital sphere, content is a creation of the populace, and intended for the populace, where the algorithm and audience embrace the role of gatekeepers. Hence, when making aesthetic judgements, it is crucial to take into account the intent of these creative endeavours towards the democratisation of art and check them in terms of the outcome they produce. That being said, digital media is ambivalently democratic, which must be assessed by going through the process of criticism that adheres to the contours of (re)-reading. This leads the discussion towards the next question.

How democratised is new media?

On peer-to-peer new media platforms where the audience and algorithm determine which content reaches each user depending on their participation activity, it is evident that the arrangement aims to promote democracy and democratise art. Nevertheless, this cannot provide a comprehensive depiction. Henry Jenkins examines the level of democracy in

participation in new media by proposing four criteria: *content,* which sees if information necessary for a democratic society is emphasised; *effects,* which expect encouragement to increase the involvement of young people in the democratic process; *values,* which assure promotion of rational discourse and a stronger understanding of social responsibility; and *process,* which consolidates expanding access to the tools and channels of media production and distribution (2006, 241). Even so, these criteria are interdependent, meaning that their success or failure relies on each other. An example of this is how the content produced is influenced by the individuals involved in its creation and the participatory politics that concern these individuals. Similarly, the values built are dependent on the people involved and the type of content they create. This, in turn, affects the larger participatory pool, which also determines the process. Put differently, even if there is access to tools for a broader audience, this access will only be meaningful if there are values that prioritise inclusivity, which will enable the creation of democratic content that allows others to productively access these tools.

The heightened level of involvement among the audience of new media has led some critics to argue that there has been a greater "democratisation" in new media compared to traditional media. Undoubtedly, it can be argued that the internet is evolving into a cyber democracy where information and perspectives are shared, ultimately shaping public opinion. But this is only portraying one side of internet technology understood as a means to enhance audience engagement, foster creative participation, and promote democratic values. One example among many that demonstrate how more and more "ordinary" users can now actively participate in the creation of media, shifting power from the "author" to the "audience," is "citizen journalism," which involves using "blogs, photos or phone footage to create and comment on the news of the day" (Creeber 20).

Adopting the premise of absolute democracy in digital media is taking on technological utopianism, wherein solely the positive aspects and potential benefits of digital media are focused on, disregarding its potential drawbacks. For instance, although there is engagement through *Likes* and *Shares* and the exchange of ideas in *Comments* section, Instagram remains only partially developed as a public space. This is because the platform is not entirely free from a governing mechanism known as the *Instagram Algorithm*, which is influenced by prevailing aesthetic tastes. Once again, the participation culture is shallow, as "unbecoming" comments can likely be removed and posts can also be discarded off the platform if reported. These problems reflect the fragmented state of democracy on the platform. Moreover, it is important

to recognise that content can only be partially democratic because not everyone has access to it or the ability to create and control it, such as corporations and privileged individuals. Further, the process of judging content is subjective and varies greatly among individuals. Consequently, particular classes of viewers are responsible for determining the criteria for what is considered uncomfortable (commonly denoted as "cringe") or aesthetically appropriate (Nene). These requirements are highly subjective and arbitrary, resulting in the inference that the content is only partially democratic, rather than entirely so.

In addition to these factors, interactivity itself has been regarded as a myth. On the one hand, the myth of interactivity implies that the level of active participation facilitated by new media has been overstated. And on the other hand, it is argued that the audience itself is not highly interactive, as mere physical actions such as clicking or commenting do not constitute true interactivity on a psychological level. Vito Campanelli discusses this lack of interactivity in his book *Web Aesthetics* (2010), where he shows how users only traverse through information (97) for the sake of "usability" (93) without truly engaging with it. Following Geert Lovink, he also refers to the new media audience as "data dandies" for this reason and cites Baudelaire's example of a book collector who values the presence of books in their collection more than the individual importance of each book. Marking the transition in audience focus Campanelli also provides analogies of *flâneur* and *planeur*[127] (146-47). Clay Shirky has called a similar tendency towards consumption of information on digital media as "interrupt-driven info-snacking" (Hammond 7).

This conflict between two perspectives on networked communication—one that believes it fundamentally changes the way audiences engage and another that believes it doesn't significantly alter existing structures—is just one of many competing viewpoints that feed the arguments under debates on "lurking versus legitimate peripheral participation, resistance versus participation, audiences versus publics, participation versus collaboration, hearing versus listening, consumers versus co-creators" (Jenkins et. al. 2013, 155) that inform the understanding of online participation today.

Nevertheless, the oppositional categories that Jenkins mentions are neither theoretically nor practically disparate; i.e., lurking is never completely non-participatory, participation is not

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[127] Whereas "flâneur" connotes sauntering through information and viewing content just for leisure, "planeur" suggests the desire of viewers to be everywhere simultaneously, never reaching a destination, only moving for the purpose of escaping the present site.

always non-resistant, publics are not forever non-audience and audience not non-publics elsewhere, consumers may appear as co-creators at times, and so on. They retain their agency, subjectivity, and uniqueness to some extent and utilise it in ways that have however not been fully explored. The activities of audiences when they are objectified hold less significance as compared to the manner in which they execute tasks, make decisions, and determine their motivations. Although the origin may be the same, the effects of the content on all audience members are not always identical. Thus, while Web 2.0 consumers may be drawn to relatable content, it is critical to closely understand their engagement and utilisation behaviours. Understanding participation in praxis expands the scope of the clashing views that define it.

As previously mentioned, when considering participation with relatable content, it can be said to be misleading because relatable content removes the participant users from the material context, resulting in responses that are directed towards flawed universals. Relatable content puts everyone on an equal footing without considering their distinctive circumstances of existence (Zizek). At most, this will lead to the formation of a participatory system in which democracy has an "effect" that lets the audience believe that they are liberated from consumerist institutions. However, in reality, peer-to-peer networks merely contribute to the dissemination of dominant aesthetic forms.

When similar conditions are seen to be applicable to the participation pertaining to Instapoetry, and so also its circulation, eventual production, and reception too, it becomes inevitable to know how Instapoetry affects the art form of poetry in general and where its position is in the present discourse on poetry in general.

Future of poetry or poetry of the future?

Kathi Berens, in her discussion on the future of Instapoetry, cites Scott Rettberg, the inaugural director of the Electronic Literature Organisation. Rettberg asserts that despite the brief life span of many electronic literature works, the genres within electronic literature persist and do not diminish over time. It is more suitable to contemplate how genres and forms function as fundamental elements for subsequent forms that derive from them (Berens 2019b). The developmental history of any art form, for that matter, is a witness to the fact that art flourishes on this principle. But when it comes to Instapoetry, one of the primary causes of disagreement to this principle stems from the conjecture that Instapoetry is likely to exert a detrimental influence on traditional poetry. Conservative advocates of traditional poetry express concerns

about the future of poetry, worrying that it may undergo changes, lose its significance in society, or even disappear entirely (Rue 15). This is comparable to the criticisms expressed against hyper reading, which warn that such reading methods may ultimately eliminate reading as a practice altogether. However, this statement does not hold strong ground. One must only observe that it is not the act of reading itself that comes to an end, but rather the manner in which reading is conducted that undergoes a transformation.

Moreover, if, by detrimental effect, one means impact on the distribution of poetry, it can be argued that in the majority of instances, traditional media is not adversely affected by emerging media. Kevin Stein's book *Poetry's Afterlife* (2010) explores the coexistence of popular poetry with mainstream genres, which is evidence enough to suggest that the former rarely affects the production, distribution, and reception of the latter. Instapoetry's experience is different as afforded by the platform and its algorithm, not because of something that is innately different in its form or content. Therefore, it does not pose a significant challenge to contemporary traditional poetry and has minimal impact on its aesthetics. Instead, it exists alongside traditional poetry as a complementing presence, not as something foreign, merely preferred due to its accessibility on a different medium.

While this remains, it is timely to take note of Jeneen Naji's accurate observation that Instapoetry, with its ability to transcend boundaries between the human and cyborg realms, will have significant impacts on human subjectivities (2018). And so, Instapoetry may not displace traditional forms of poetry altogether, but it will definitely revolutionise the perception of poetry as an art form due to its reconstitutive nature towards the aesthetics of poetry. It can be concluded, by the same currency, that Instapoetry will not be the sole potential future of poetry, though it will undoubtedly be one of the poetic forms that holds great promise for the future and has a long way to go. This is apparent in how the presence of this phenomenon, as well as the subsequent discussions it generates, have created opportunities for research in various other domains. These include investigating the impact of community on aesthetic preferences in the formation of a collective aesthetic, exploring how aesthetics contribute to community development, and examining the role of aesthetics in the posthumanist reading of texts.

Thus, the present research, in its pursuit to revive the discourse on aesthetics and in its aim to keep the tradition of poetry buoyant in the wake of rising online activities, has congruously attempted to engage with the fundamental queries on art and aesthetic experience concerning Instapoetry, which serve as a point of departure for further research on the subject.