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Variable Forrmat: Media Poetics and the Little Database

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Abstract

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VARIABLE FORMAT: MEDIA POETICS AND THE LITTLE DATABASE

Daniel Scott Snelson

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ABSTRACT

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Daniel Scott Snelson

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This dissertation explores the situation of twentieth-century art and literature becoming digital. Focusing on relatively small online collections, I argue for materially invested readings of works of print, sound, and cinema from within a new media context. With bibliographic attention to the avant-garde legacy of media specificity and the little magazine, I argue that the "films," "readings," "magazines," and "books" indexed on a series of influential websites are marked by meaningful transformations that continue to shape the present through a dramatic reconfiguration of the past. I maintain that the significance of an online version of a work is not only transformed in each instance of use, but that these versions fundamentally change our understanding of each historical work in turn. Here, I offer the analogical coding of these platforms as "little databases" after the little magazines that served as the vehicle of modernism and the historical avant-garde. Like the study of the full run of a magazine, these databases require a bridge between close and distant reading. Rather than contradict each other as is often argued, in this instance a combined macro- and microscopic mode of analysis yields valuable information not readily available by either method in isolation. In both directions, the social networks and technical protocols of database culture inscribe the limits of potential readings. Bridging the material orientation of bibliographic study with the format theory of recent media scholarship, this work constructs a media poetics for reading analog works situated within the windows, consoles, and networks of the twenty-first century.

Variable Formats for the Study of Little Databases

By the end of 2015, the newly constructed Utah Data Center will have deciphered

zettabytes (billions of terabytes) of information collected by the NSA. This enterprise,

like certain new developments in the digital humanities and the corporate sphere alike,

stakes its hopes for meaningful interpretation on the parsing of big data. Directly

responding to such currents, this dissertation turns instead to the *little* database as an

integral model for understanding a rapidly shifting information environment. Like the

little magazines of the historical avant-gardes, the little databases of the present offer a

dynamic forum for investigating the global situation of politics, aesthetics, and meaning

in a time of pervasive technological change. With a focus on the transformative effects of

networked digitization, my study explores mutually illuminating relations among

encoding formats, online distribution circuits, and media-reflexive works in a series of

platforms for experimental art and literature.

These sites include *Textz.com*, a plain text library of fiction, poetry, and critical

writing; *Eclipse*, an image-based archive of small-press poetry books and magazines;

PennSound, a site distributing audio recordings of poetry readings; and *UbuWeb*, a

sprawling avant-garde collection that hosts a Flash Video repository for film and video

art.[1] From Louis Zukofsky's poetry to Stan Brakhage's films, untold numbers of viewers

encounter "old media" works online, increasingly to the exclusion of analog iterations.

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[1] Best practices for the typography of the internet are still in flux. While it is uncommon to italicize the names of websites, I deploy this typographic modulation to signal both the inheritance of the little magazine in these sites, as well as the sense of an authored work or edited compilation. Despite outward similarities, these sites are not Google Books, Spotify, or YouTube: they are *little databases*.

To be sure, the works we encounter online are fundamentally transformed by their digital situation. This dissertation argues that the varieties of contingent transformations that characterize digital objects are most vividly evidenced in the kinds of media-reflexive works of art and literature distributed by the little databases examined herein.[2] Bridging the materialist orientation of bibliographic study with the format theory of recent media scholarship, I contend for a range of poetic practices for reading analog works situated within the windows, consoles, and networks of the twenty-first century.

Caught in variable processes of digitization and resolutely embedded in intricate new systems of media convergence, the objects that constitute these little databases index a wide array of transformative effects. Far from a simple act of remediation or media conversion, the process of transcoding—broadly defined by Manovich as the process of translation at play between material culture and digital networks—presents an unpredictable set of radical alterations to historical works originally geared for analog media. With no clear system for organizing these localized transformations, I contend for a layered methodology focused on four vectors of transcoding, each of which is sequentially examined in the chapters of this dissertation. First, interfaces for computation; second, issues of preservation; third, conditions of transmission; and fourth, modes of close reading. Cumulatively, these chapters argue that only by reading specific digital objects within the variable effects of file formats, circuits of transmission, local

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[2] In the process of revision, I had considered excising the footnote to the sentence that reads: "Throughout this dissertation, 'object' refers to the digitized file—a 'new media object' in Lev Manovich's terms—as opposed to the analog instantiation of a film, recording, book, or previous media format." Its abbreviated inclusion in the poem "Me and My Pharaoh…" by Charles Bernstein has oriented me away from its excision. I would additionally opt to retain the reference to digital objects throughout. This footnote is also a testament to the transformative capacities of the continually expanding social text I describe throughout the dissertation.

database contexts, and a host of contingent textual processes, can the effects of transcoding be understood within the cultural and technical processes of the world wide web. As the crux of cultural encounters rapidly shifts from the relative stability of media to the dispersion of computational formats, the continual versioning of these objects urgently demands detailed study. The opening chapters work askance to the signification of historical works in order to prepare a frame for this close reading in conclusion. In lockstep with each chapter, the closing codas perform these readings through a range of experiments that exceed the strictures of academic prose. Positioned among these media poetics, this dissertation articulates the variable formats that a reading of the little database might take.

The Little Database

An example of the kind of work this dissertation would hope to read presents itself in the *PennSound* MP3 file of William Carlos Williams' "The Defective Record," a poem demanding the concept of the gramophone even from the page (455). The final lines of the poem are printed: "Level it down / for him to build a house // on to build a / house on to build a house on / to build a house / on to build a house on to . . ." First recorded by Williams on a gramophone in 1942, these concluding lines call the skipping record into conversation with the destructive forces of mechanical reproduction.[3] Once translated into an MP3 file, however, this very self-reflection changes to accent the object's digital

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[3] In the spoken performance Williams ignored the line-breaks of the printed version, and instead amplifies the metaphor of a defective gramophone by mimicking his own vocal patterns in the repeated phrase.

formatting. The sample-based structure is now built on segmented data, dramatically

leveling the wave-like stream of the analog wax groove and contradicting the originally

plotted effects of the poem, with regard to both politics and aesthetics. The metaphor of

the scratched record is itself rendered defective in the face of modular digital playback. If

there are "no ideas but in things"—as Williams first declared in a 1943 issue of *The Old

Line* magazine—we might ask, what happens to the ideas when the things themselves

rematerialize? Unlike the anticipatory readings performed by literary studies or media

archaeology that return to a latent potential inherent in historical works, this dissertation

argues for the poem as a functioning new media object, operating within the parameters

of its digital format and new media context.[4]

  However, there is much more at play in this file than a narrative of the formal and

prosodic properties of the work, even if we track these changes from the page to the

record to the MP3 and back. Reeling away from a close reading, we must simultaneously

consider "The Defective Record" playing alongside thousands of corresponding digital

objects on sites like *PennSound* and *UbuWeb*. Inhabiting the vexed space between

preservation and distribution, between memory and practice, little databases reconfigure

the contemporary experience of historical artifacts and thus transfigure each work in turn.

More than simply degrade or distort analog works of avant-garde art and literature, this

new form of archive dramatically rematerializes historical works for the use and reuse of

millions of contemporary users.

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[4] In *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life,* Mark Goble symptomatically
concludes his chapter on Williams by reflecting on "The Defective Record" from the current state
of digital media, the final lines read: "The technologies of the present will also leave us with their
histories, and whatever forms they might take, there is a good chance that they will look to many
like a defective record that is better left behind. I hope someone saves them anyway." This
dissertation takes the challenge of Goble's conclusion as its starting point.

In sharp contrast to the case study bias of most works in the humanities, I argue that a close reading of transcoded objects can only occur in cooperation with modes of interpretation that function on the level of the relational database, the variable standard, and the mechanisms that facilitate the transmission of files. Every display of a digital object is a unique performance: bits are inscribed and reinscribed in hardware. "Invisible" code is parsed into visual or aural display. Browsers and screen resolutions modulate the expression of these streams. Sites post and repost files in various online contexts, and so on in the continual flux of technological development and the ongoing versioning processes of the internet. Even a scattered list of variables is exhausting. Each of these emergent properties plays into any reading of the instantiation of a digital object. I argue that such a scenario demands scholarship that is equally bound to performance, specific engagements, and contingent readings. My study navigates these contingencies of meaning by exploring features of online collections, occasionally to the pointed exclusion of reading the "content" of specific files.

In this way, the analogical coding of these platforms as "little databases" after the little magazines that served as the vehicle of modernism and the historical avant-gardes has proven especially helpful. That is to say, no magazine is defined by any single inclusion, but every work is inflected by its place in the magazine. In addition, the gesture seems apt as these sites update the defining characteristics of the little magazines. *UbuWeb*, for example, is driven by a controversial set of arguments constructed by its primary editor, Kenneth Goldsmith, engaged in contemporary aesthetic and literary practices from the pages of a provisional platform that develops in periodical increments over time. Though much smaller than sites like Google Books or the Internet Archive,

UbuWeb has become the largest independent resource for experimental cinema, sound, and literature on the internet. Like the study of the full run of a magazine, these databases require a bridge between close and distant reading. The relation of the little magazine to the contemporary database is also indebted to recent developments in periodical studies that Robert Scholes and Cliff Wulfman have described as a transition "from genre to database" (44). As such, the field of periodical studies presents an array of methodological and critical interventions that largely overlap with the study of a little database. Despite the large number of objects hosted on these sites, from a computational standpoint the data they contain remain eminently computable. In each chapter, I explore certain of the promises and failures of computation. I attend specifically to the tendencies toward computational trends in the digital humanities as advanced by scholars like Franco Morretti, Tanya Clement, and Ben Fry, among others.

Against these trends, I turn instead to the ways in which these sites resist or perform their own acts of computation. In contrast to the "digital turn" as such, I examine how these little databases have long performed new modes of transcoding. In particular, I turn attention to how they construct editorial contexts for files or structure protocols for digitization and preservation, how they generate circuits of dispersion, and how each of these processes inflect our capacity for interpretation both on and off the page. These engagements derive from the array of "periodical codes" articulated by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, in homage to a notion of bibliographic codes in the interpretation of social texts as articulated by Jerome McGann. These readings do not, in fact, contradict each other, as is often argued. In this instance, a combination of macro- and microscopic modes of analysis may yield valuable insights not readily available to either method in

isolation. In every instance, to interpret the transcoded work we must read through its instantiation as a digital object within the social and technical networks of contemporary culture. By the same token, in a kind of hermeneutic circle, to read the database we must enter through the individual works comprising the site's contents. In both directions, the social networks and technical protocols of database culture inscribe the limits of potential readings. In the second chapter, I delve further into periodical studies and how the challenges faced by this field might lend insight into the daunting task of accounting for online collections.

On the other side of the magazine, this study of transcoded objects cannot proceed without acknowledging Manovich's influential account of the database in *The Language of New Media*. A database can be simply defined as any organized collection of data. A variety of database models structure how this data can be organized, stored, indexed, displayed, and manipulated. When it comes to the indexical accumulation that undergirds the internet, Manovich argues that "every site is a type of database" (225). For technical purists, this statement might be something of an exaggeration, just as it's clear that the sites I examine extend far beyond the little magazine in accordance to its stricter definitions. The play between these definitional boundaries serves as a guide to the grey area of the online collections I examine. Online collections hover between periodical publication and structured database. The tensions between work and database are most fully explored in the fourth chapter, which considers the database logic inherent even to the construction of a single digital compilation movie. Irrespective of the ways in which this study deviates from Manovich's formulations, his emphasis on the cultural logic of the database nevertheless serves as a departure point for my own argumentation. From

the outset, however, my introduction of a "little" difference aims to disrupt the grand claims Manovich advances. In particular, I depart from his assertions concerning the struggle of database versus narrative, the linguistic parallels between paradigm and syntagm, or the symbolic cultural reading of the database as the "symbolic form" through which contemporary culture reproduces itself (218-243). Following the critique that N. Katherine Hayles levies against Manovich in *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*—among the many critiques of these influential formulations that one might choose from—my notion of the little database clusters instead around an unstable symbiosis between the narrative structures of the little magazine and the relational juxtapositions of the object-oriented database (176-198). Borrowing Hayles' term, I explore the technogenesis between the life of an artwork and its digital afterlife.

This practice of tracking the material instantiations and digitized versions of works within the little databases owes much to Hayles' article "Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality," and its call for the digital humanities to return to the bibliographic specificity of textual theory. Hayles advocates for the more nuanced accounts of processes of mediation found in the field of textuality, which can be recalibrated as a mode of comparative media analysis within a complex of digital media environments. This approach usefully outlines the challenges facing digital humanities scholarship. And yet, while these kinds of rallying calls are increasingly common, successful applications are few and far between. Forging directions forward, Hayles proposes the necessity of "approaches that can locate digital work within print traditions, and print traditions within digital media, without obscuring or failing to account for the

differences between them" (7). In the title essay to *How We Think*, Hayles develops the

concept of comparative media analysis as a "theoretical framework in which objects are

seen not as static entities that, once created, remain the same throughout time but rather

are understood as constantly changing assemblages in which inequalities and

inefficiencies in their operations drive them toward breakdown, disruption, innovation,

and change" (13). It is by design that many of the little databases I examine have ceased

operations (*Textz*); suffered the collapse of functionality (*Mutant Sounds*); or faced

repeated dramatic interruptions (*Eclipse* and *UbuWeb*). In these lapses, the smoothly

operating protocols that undergird these little databases may be brought to comparative

analysis and bibliographic scrutiny. My study offers a testing ground for applying the

scholarly techniques advocated for the digital humanities by Hayles, performing the

interplay between the traditions of print scholarship and digital objects caught in

symbiotic and dynamic processes of "breakdown, disruption, innovation, and change."

These changes hinge on a notion of contingency best encapsulated by Alan Liu in

the introduction to his collection of essays, *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern*

Historicism and the Database. Most pertinently, Liu traces the processes by which

information management proceeds to disengage form from content through database

queries, which care little for either. Each chapter of my study passes a series of

"anecdotal" interpretive filters across the respective little database it queries; a tactical

approach to what Liu has termed, in plural, "contingent methods" (1-25). Contingency in

this context denotes a shifting, tactical method, understood as the "methodical tangency

of postmodern historicism" rooted in performative feedback modulations between the

past and the future (11). This tangency is marked by a "zigzag mode" of interpretive

engagement, wherein the post-hermeneutical characteristics of contingency facilitate

scholarship that unfolds across unanticipated, serpentine directions, in relation to the

mediations at hand. In both the academic prose of these chapters and the expanded

poetics of the codas, I follow Liu's recommendation to perform "the act of such

mediation through actual media innovation or allusions to such innovations in its own

form, thereby methodically bringing to view a sense of simultaneous sameness and

otherness in our relation to history…as a compound relation of proximity and distance

between past and present" (25). In this way, the contingency of the digital object is

mirrored by the variability of methods and formats in the chapters and codas of this

dissertation.

Variable Formats

By necessity, to discuss the variability of digital formats, we must return to Manovich,

whose articulation of this fundamental "principle" of new media remains one of the most

influential to any study of the internet. The rehearsal of these principles, often

accompanied by correspondent qualms and modifications, has become a recognizable

genre of its own in the expanded field of media studies. In brief, these principles include

numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding (27-48).

The digital objects treated in my study derive their theorization, in large part, from a

deviation from this final principle of transcoding, which thus warrants further

discussion.[5] The key principle in *The Language of New Media*, transcoding technically refers to platform conversions between digital formats. In computer science, this would apply to the recoding of an old program to function on a new operating system. Manovich expands the term to characterize the processes of translation operating between computer and culture broadly construed. I deploy the notion of transcoding more specifically to characterize the effects that digital environments introduce to historical artifacts presented online.

Manovich introduces his principles in *The Language of New Media* with an indexical image-essay that tracks an inventory of effects in Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). The passages of this introduction remix excerpts from his own book as a strategic method to explore ways in which "avant-garde aesthetic strategies came to be embedded in the commands and interface metaphors of computer software" (xxxi). If we accept this thesis for a moment, we might agree that *Man with a Movie Camera*—considering its incredible array of cinematic techniques—is indeed "the most important example of a database imagination in modern media art" (xxiv). For Manovich, Vertov's film perfectly exemplifies the database as a cultural form. In the same way that a user navigates the database via a personalized narrative, Vertov navigates a vast database of footage to "decode social reality" with a linear inventory of effects (228-231). From this premise, Manovich builds his theoretical model of numerical representation, automatism, variability, modularity, and, most importantly, the concept of transcoding, which envelopes the four preceding principles.

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[5] The choice of this term argues against the more popular, though too limited, term "remediation" formulated by Bolter and Grusin in the book of the same name. Where remediation is characterized as the play of 'hypermediacy' and 'immediacy,' or artifice and transparence, transcoding refers to a wider and more accurate catalog of translation effects.

Where Manovich deploys Vertov's *film* as the archetypal cinematic precursor to the language of human-computer interfaces in 2001, this dissertation reverses the angle of analysis to frame the new media object in operation within the networked databases of the internet. While *Man with a Movie Camera* enables Manovich to outline the broad strokes of transcoding between culture and computer, the example lacks immediate applicability to digitized films and the archival conditions of the internet with any specificity. Indeed, *Man with a Movie Camera* is not featured in this dissertation. The movie can't be found on *UbuWeb*, despite the 1,760 results a search for "man with a movie camera" yields on YouTube, many of which link to a full-length streaming version of the movie file. Two other works by Vertov—*Kino Eye* (1924) and *Three Songs About Lenin* (1934)—are, however, located in the *UbuWeb* database. Alongside these are *Pravda* (1969) by the Dziga Vertov Group and Manovich's own *Soft Cinema* (2004), to name only four movies among the thousands of movies hosted on the *UbuWeb* server. Rather than return to the indexical insight that a film might provide, this dissertation considers the database in practice, within variable layers of cultural transcoding, networked dispersal, and digital rematerialization. To account for my departure from Manovich, we might consider his own "little movie," *Soft Cinema,* as situated on *UbuWeb*. Whereas the digital movie was originally coded to "run infinitely without ever exactly repeating the same image sequences, screen layouts and narratives," the *UbuWeb* Flash Video file repeats the same sequence indefinitely (*Soft Cinema*). When users access the movie in *UbuWeb*, the intended performance of Manovich's principles is played in reverse. Variability is made constant, modularity is flattened, and automatism is controlled, along with a host of transcoding effects that reconfigure the original work.

While the specific effects of variable transcoding can be charted in *Soft Cinema*, the same reprocessing protocols extend to local transformations introduced to all cinematic artifacts digitized by *UbuWeb*. The processes of transcoding operant within the little database are as transformative for born-digital works as they are for historical artifacts like *Man With a Movie Camera*. Samples of these transformations proliferate, as a coda to chapter four demonstrates. For now, consider viewing George Landow's *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (1965-66) on *UbuWeb*. This structural film once preoccupied with cinematic materiality becomes an extended meditation on RGB color values, vector-based graphics, Flash Video frame rates, and compression artifacts. Each new movie provides a specific encounter with the site-wide transcoding formats that define the *UbuWeb* archive—namely, rectangular 240 by 320 pixel Adobe Flash files generated by the program VisualHub. In chapter four, I focus on three such instances of variable transcoding effects. Throughout, standardized formats are understood to be both locally determinate and widely unpredictable within the system of signification for any digital object in the archive.

In one of the few critical articles on cultural transcoding that originates with digital objects, Hito Steyerl examines the politics of the compressed file. In the popular essay "In Defense of the Poor Image," Steyerl examines the tensions inherent to highly compressed images that exemplify the freedom of gift economies on one hand, while finding themselves caught up in the "vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism" on the other. Steyerl's article summarizes popular discourses concerning file sharing networks and digital distribution in general, offering an excellent précis of current discussions on the highly compressed formats that proliferate in the collections I examine:

> On the one hand, [the poor image] operates against the fetish value of high resolution. On the other hand, this is precisely why it also ends up being perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings…It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction.

Focusing on degraded distribution, copyright politics, and received notions of cultural distraction, Steyerl presents a common contemporary paradox: the image is coded to represented forms of "defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation." By these accounts, the compressed file is a degraded rendering of the original work, a "ghost of an image," interesting only in terms of its politicized accessibility or cultural index. Indeed, Kenneth Goldsmith concurs with Steyerl, arguing that streaming files on *UbuWeb* are "in no way comparable" to "the real thing," offering only "a whiff of these films" (*"UbuWeb: Film & Video"*). Certainly, these forces are at play in new media environments. However, against this critical consensus of speed and distraction, simulation and defacement—a consensus that echoes through media theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Friedrich Kittler to literary critics like Michael Joyce and Marjorie Perloff, among many others—this dissertation argues for a radical revaluation of compressed files. They remain, I contend, significant aesthetic objects in their own right, with complicated situations worth unraveling well beyond concepts of copyright politics and degradation.

If computational media are in a continual state of development, the relatively stable condition of the formats and standards that digital objects inhabit presents an entry point for bibliographic studies of internet files. The emerging field of format studies, with

which this dissertation actively engages, owes much to the "format theory" developed

in Jonathan Sterne's *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*. Sterne urges media scholars to

consider the cultural, social, and historical development of standard formats as a way to

navigate "a general history of compression" (5). In contrast to media theory, Sterne

argues: "Format theory would ask us to modulate the scale of our analysis of media

somewhat differently…Studying formats highlights smaller registers like software,

operating standards, and codes, as well as larger registers like infrastructures,

international corporate consortia, and whole technical systems" (11). By attending to

standard formats for text, images, sound, and movies on the internet, a study of digital

objects may extend beyond the indeterminacy of medial formations and variable

conditions of display. Sterne emphasizes the political urgency of this position in his

conclusion: "Media remain on the scene, but they are diluted…Future confrontations over

democratic media systems and the right to communicate will be held over infrastructures,

protocols, formats, portals, and platforms" (240). Following the bibliographic attention

that a diverse set of scholars including McGann, Randall McLeod, and Peter Stallybrass

pay to the history of the book, I argue for a "material text" reading of these formats. In

this regard, the process of transcoding is understood in terms of circulating versions of

format-based editions. Appending these digital versions to a long series of historical

instantiations of these works, I argue for a renewed attention to the technical specificity

of formats and the contextual effects of relational databases.

Given the interdisciplinarity of the contingent engagements in this dissertation, a

wide range of thinkers and concepts appear as a mode of tactical bricolage. For example,

in the first chapter Ian Bogost's model of "unit operations" offers a critical lens uniquely

attuned to the variable formats that condition the study of the *Textz.com* little database.

Borrowing from software studies and cybernetics, Bogost's formulations of unit

operations as "modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions

over deterministic, progressive systems," aligns with Liu's contingent methods as a

variable format for scholarship (3). The unit deemphasizes static structures of systematic

operations—systems that we might properly align with the processes of standardized

encoding protocols critiqued by Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker, discussed in

chapter four. This understanding of the relation of critical writing to the power of the

network is linked to a certain notion of the little database stemming from Bruno Latour's

various formulations (and disavowals) of actor-network-theory (ANT). To this end, the

dissertation traces the operations of heterogeneous sets of human and nonhuman actors

across networked digital environments. While Bogost avoids a binary opposition between

units and systems, unit operations nevertheless deprivilege the "longevity" associated

with systems in order to turn critical attention to "instances" (4). This model contends

that following the nodes that connect unit operations to universal infrastructural elements

is an essential task for the study of complex networks. Operating from within media

poetics, I navigate the conceptual lenses that offer the most compelling interpretations of

little databases in specific instances.

Working this network description down to the finer details of specificity, I turn to

Craig Dworkin, whose practice of "radical formalism" has proven essential to each

contingent engagement. Dworkin defines radical formalism in *Reading the Illegible* and

applies the same reading tactics to *Eclipse* in his article "Hypermnesia," which I explore

in chapter two. Borrowing from Leon Roudiez's 'paragrammatics' and Ihab Hassan's

'misreading,' Dworkin pursues "the closest of close readings in service of political questions" considering "what is signified by its form, enacted by its structures, implicit in its philosophy of language, how it positions its reader, and a range of questions relating to the poem [edit: database] as a material object—how it was produced, distributed, exchanged," wherein "form must always necessarily signify but any particular signification is historically contingent" (*Illegible*, 4-5). In the "continual dynamic between fidelity and degradation, accurate facsimile and serviceable impersonation," Dworkin reminds us how "the paradox of the 'avant-garde archive' highlights the Janus-faced logic of all archives, which look in two directions as they realize their own position: they conservatively index the past, and they index the future with a wagered risk" ("Hypermnesia," 94). These "twin impulses of the archive" inform Dworkin's appraisal of his own *Eclipse* archive, which is in turn augmented by a range of conceptual models for the dynamic procedures and material processes of digital objects, from Hayles and McGann to Matthew Kirschenbaum and John Bryant (*No Medium,* 40). The performance of interpretation can only be reductively sketched within the highly lossy compression format of an introduction. By way of its conclusion, this dissertation seeks a radical formalism applicable to historical artifacts appearing as new media objects, within a set of historically contingent and contextually networked databases.

Media Poetics

Even while it focuses on dispersion, this dissertation performs a great deal of synthetic activity. If the database encourages a contingent scholarship, the samples from the critical

database itself are tactical responses to a set of specific problems. This dissertation's

methodological framework is indebted to a wide array of thinkers across fields including

material text studies, comparative media, critical code study, literary and art history,

cinema studies, and the emergent field of format theory, among others. As the title of this

dissertation indicates, my trajectory through this thicket of discourse can be provisionally

categorized as a form of media poetics. Locating itself within this unstable field, the

arguments of this dissertation explore both the meaning-making activities of media itself

and the possibilities for poetic thinking in media contexts new and old alike. Indeed, I

contend that a contemporary poetics can only be articulated through a rigorous

consideration of writing technologies in all their complicating processes of mediation and

remediation. This poses significant challenges to the intensive study of even the most

mundane objects available to the contemporary poetics scholar. Not only is media built

on the technoscience of programmers, mathematicians, and engineers, but the fields that

plug into the cultural, political, and aesthetic aspects of this media are so enmeshed in

specialist discourses and disciplinary traditions as to muddle any comprehensive study.

Given these exigencies, my study necessarily surveys a widely interdisciplinary array of

scholarly output in order to address the little database in its myriad complexities.

While methodologically indebted to the constellation of texts outlined above, my

study departs from these in its concern with the focused exploration of a novel nexus of

independent platforms for transcoded artifacts. The dissertation is organized into four

chapters, each addressing a single database and a correspondent methodological

framework and file format. In an extreme of abstraction, these can be enumerated as

follows: computation, text files, and *Textz.com*; preservation, image files, and *Eclipse*;

transmission, sound files, and *PennSound*; and dispersion, movie files, and *UbuWeb*.
This study proceeds from the macroscopic to the microscopic, and back again. It
performs a narrowing in that arrives at a close reading only in the final chapter. The first
chapter attends to computation as the preeminent mode of digital humanities practices
focused on parsing big data. The second turns to preservation, an issue at the core of
archival questions within the digital humanities and periodical studies on a narrower band
than big data computation. The third examines the far-reaching circulation of sound files
across multiple databases at the level of a small set of files rather than an archival
collection. In the final chapter, I arrive at the close reading of three specific movie files.
Somewhat counter-intuitively, the close readings in this chapter radiate out to the
broadest set of concerns. This is necessarily the case, the closer we might get to a digital
file, the more this will require radiating outward. In particular, the act of radiating
outward may lead to networks of standardizing protocols, data infrastructures, conditions
of display, contextual details, patterns of circulation, and the technical and cultural issues
that by necessity must remain beyond the modest aims of this dissertation.

The first chapter, "Textwarez: The Executable Files of *Textz.com*," examines
computation through plain text standards and scripts deployed on a little database called
Textz.com, edited by the German net artist Sebastian Lütgert from 2000 to 2004. I argue
that the patterns of format analyses, container technologies, and computational
performances that characterize the *Textz.com* little database provide a basis for reading
the increasingly complex formats examined in each following chapter. Ranging from
experimental poetry and cyberpunk fiction to romantic literature and political tracts, in
languages that include English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and others, *Textz.com*

presents a collection of text files that is at once too diverse to compute and yet highly selective. I contend that the text files hosted by the site shift into something more enigmatic once these texts are framed as a set of "textwarez," a neologism marking the files on the site as "executable software."

Drawing from the work of Jerome McGann, Lisa Gitelman, Matthew Kirschenbaum, Jeremy Braddock, Craig Saper, and others, I chart an approach that balances machine-reading practices with close readings of specific programs. I explore the text file as a sophisticated reading interface for human and nonhuman operators that emphasizes searchability, portability, and transmutability. Expanding on the formal properties of the text file, the chapter concludes by reading a set of applications released by *Textz.com*: "walser.php," a script that renders the site's files from text to PHP and back; "PNGreader," an application developed by Lütgert to translate between a variety of formats and encoded image files; and finally "The Conceptual Crisis of Private Property as a Crisis in Practice," an elaborate steganographic project that calls the stability of digital file formats into question through the performance of encoding and decoding protocols. All of these scripts were designed to circumvent copyright restrictions on one level, and to explore the potentials inherent to digital publication on another level entirely. In addition to revealing new dimensions of the text file itself, these applications offer a provocative statement on the politics of distribution, the transmutability of formats, and the performance of computational scholarship at large.

The second chapter, "Distributing Services: Periodical Preservation on *Eclipse*," explores preservation and periodicity in the image-based *Eclipse* collection founded by Craig Dworkin in 2003. *Eclipse* produces facsimile editions of rare and out-of-print

works of experimental poetry and poetics, primarily originating in the 1970s and

1980s. Evaluating trends in periodical studies, this chapter considers *Eclipse* as a meta-

periodical, with occasional releases of full magazines built into its archival database. To

materialize this juncture, I offer a close reading of the formats that preserve

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine in an extended comparison between a database of

images and the print run of the magazine. The highly compressed images hosted by

Eclipse are seen to reveal unexpected layers of transcoding at play in the republication of

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. From Xerox printing in the late seventies to the GIF images

presented on *Eclipse*, this decidedly low-fidelity poetics magazine finds revised

signification in its shifting formal and bibliographic codes. Building on John Bryant's

notion of the "fluid text," I read the magazine across its multiple versions and patterns of

distribution. The distributing services of the magazine, I argue, paradoxically anticipate

little database while the magazine itself illustrates a resistance to the preservations

systems of the internet. These resistances are demonstrated in an extended discussion of

the meta-archive compiled by the "Wayback Machine" web crawler developed by Alexa

for the Internet Archive. In contrast to the stripped-down text files of *Textz.com*, which

emphasize algorithmic use, *Eclipse* presents transcoded images for human reading.

Similarly, unlike Google Books, *Eclipse* remains unsearchable, asking: what is lost and

what remains of the book in the browser? Caught with losses on either side, this chapter

concludes with a discussion of the stakes of compression, which carry throughout the

dissertation.

  The third chapter, "Live Vinyl Mp3: Echo Chambers Among the Little

Databases," focuses on the anecdotal narrative of a set of bill bissett MP3 files passing

through several little databases, with a special emphasis on the *PennSound* collection.

It examines this database alongside *Mutant Sounds*, *UbuWeb,* and *SpokenWeb.* Founded

by Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis in 2005, *PennSound* has digitized tens of thousands

of poetry recordings, which have been freely downloaded by hundreds of millions of

users. The narrative of this chapter tracks the dispersion of bissett's album with Th

Mandan Massacre, *Awake in Th Red Desert,* through its initial release on *Mutant Sounds,*

to its subsequent uploads to *PennSound* and *UbuWeb*. Finally, the chapter considers its

relation to the sound files in the new little audio database *SpokenWeb*. By following the

thread of a particular poet's output, in an attempt to tease out a description of each online

collection, this chapter investigates how each mediates the recordings they host, and how

we might begin to understand contemporary iterations of the audio database through this

network. Embedded within the essay are archival downloads, JPEG images, and a set of

MP3 files. Through the inclusion of these objects, the chapter performatively engages one

of its central claims: that any text may also contain a collection. I argue that while both

Mutant Sounds and *PennSound* hosted precisely the same bissett MP3 files, the textual

conditions of these two iterations are radically different. As such, new modes of

scholarship are needed, equipped to account for the transformations these contexts

introduce. By way of conclusion to this narrative, I examine a remixing tool entitled

MUPS, developed by David (Jhave) Johnston, which introduces a new interface to a

select set of files hosted by the *PennSound* archive.

 A final chapter, "'Ever the Avant-garde of the Avant-garde Till Heaven and

After': *UbuWeb* from Film to Database," examines the dispersion necessitated by close

readings in Kenneth Goldsmith's *UbuWeb*. This site hosts text, image, sound, and, most

recently, an extensive collection of "Film & Video" objects streaming in Flash Video. The proprietary nature and technical affordances of Adobe Flash characterize the works hosted in this section of the site. In particular, this chapter navigates the ways in which media-specific film and video works amplify these effects. I demonstrate how works in this database turn their focus to the color encoding, frame rate, and compression values of streaming video—all in stark contrast to the celluloid reflexivity of the films from which they are derived. In addition to material forms, the larger context of the internet plays a major role in how these works function online. For instance, once situated within the browser, Vito Acconci's video "Theme Song" shifts from the impersonal context of the art gallery to the intimate seduction of a confessional video blog. A close reading of Nam June Paik's *Zen For Film* and the various remixes that artists have performed on the work over the last decade reveals unpredictable layers of transcoding that Paik's film releases online. At the opposite end of the spectrum, I also explore a contemporary movie made specifically for internet release, *We Edit Life* by People Like Us (Vicki Bennet). This compilation movie opens new passages into the Internet Archive and the database at large. In each instance, these close readings expand into unexpected trajectories determined by the variable meanings that digital iterations introduce to movies circulating online. On *UbuWeb*, these movie files stream alongside text, image, and sound formats examined in previous chapters. The example of *UbuWeb* builds on previous chapters to present a sample close reading of the digital object and the little database. This reading in turn calls for renewed attention to the media poetics of the little database, attuned to the variable formats that shape the experience of art and literature online.

This media poetics carries over into a conclusion comprised by a set of codas that perform the arguments of this dissertation in variable formats of creative scholarship. As embodied performances of the media poetics discussed in each chapter, these codas articulate the dissertation in their own terms, through medial formations that this written document cannot attempt. My approach to these interventions is forged in dialogue with a practice of deformance as initiated in the essay, "Deformance and Interpretation" by Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels. This collaborative text argues that normative modes of scholarship limit the range of textual interpretations available to the reader. Calling for "a practice of everyday imaginative life," they offer deformance as a corrective to the staid conventions of close reading in academic prose (26). Following this line of inquiry, each of the four deformative codas concluding my study undertakes a reading of the little database from beyond what McGann and Samuels call "the textual looking glass" (36). It should be noted that these codas do not function simply as supplements, nor are they merely additional creative works that accompany discrete chapters. Just as Bernstein's definition of poetics includes the "continuation of poetry by other means," this dissertation performs media poetics as the continuation of *scholarship by other means*. In this respect, each deformance coda could effectively stand in for—or, indeed, *substitute* for—corresponding chapters of this study. That is to say, this dissertation does not simply address the little database, or inscribe the ways in which works of art and literature are transformed by digital formats, it also performs the variable formats through which a poetics of media scholarship might occur under the sign of the little database.

we are not the dot in dot-com, neither are we the minus in e-book. the future of
online publishing sits right next to your computer: it's a $50 scanner and a $50
printer, both connected to the internet. we are the & in copy & paste, and plain
ascii is still the format of our choice.

— A. S. Ambulanzen (Sebastian Lütgert et al.)
"napster was only the beginning," 2001

Founded by artist-activist-programmer Sebastian Lütgert, *Textz.com* hosted 831 plain text

files at the time the site was abandoned in early 2004.[6] Released periodically on the

influential <net-time> listserv, which Lütgert coordinated from 1998 until 2000, *Textz*

grew at a rate of roughly 250 files per year. Ranging from experimental poetry and

cyberpunk fiction to media theory and political tracts, the *Textz* database presents a

diverse, yet highly curated, selection of text files gathered by a collective and edited by

Lütgert from 2000-04. Its fiercely copyleft position garnered the site international

attention following a lawsuit and arrest warrant filed by the copyright holder to a

substantial portion of Adorno's works. Freely distributing these works, *Textz* combatted

the economic structures of the about-to-burst dot-com bubble on the one hand, while

rallying against the subtractive logic of remediation on the other. Ambulanzen, an

anonymous collective, offers a précis of the logic governing the site's operating

procedures. They declare that digital texts are not electronic books, but rather executable

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[6] This number fluctuates depending upon the date the site is captured. The most complete
rendering of the website I could track down was captured by the Internet Archive on June 24th,
2004. As of this writing, I have assembled all files listed in site inventories, with the notable
exception of the German version of Adorno and Horkheimer's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
I will discuss this particular file in more detail later in this chapter.

binary files dispersed as free software or cracked programs. Not only do ASCII characters write executable files, *Textz* argues, but text files can be considered executable programs in their own right. As such, a guiding line of inquiry in this chapter will explore precisely *why* plain ASCII "still" remained *Textz*'s format of choice in 2001.

From a digital humanities perspective, the site offers a compelling window into online collections and forms of textual transmission made possible by the internet—that *Textz* kept obsessive and inventive user logs is fortuitous.[7] This chapter deploys *Textz* as a portal into a range of debates concerning digital texts, bibliographic studies of digital objects, and techniques of literary interpretation recently formulated through the digital humanities. Within the terms of these debates, this chapter stands in strong opposition to devising a programmatic system for interpretation. I make this argument by playing a reading of what Ian Bogost has termed the "system operation" of *Textz* against a range of "unit operations" functioning on the site itself.[8] Unit operations privilege discrete, contingent, interpretive components over the static structures of systematic operations— systems that we might properly align with the processes of standardized encoding protocols discussed later. In so doing, unit operations tactically deemphasize totalizing, protocological structures. Finally, I explore a series of "textwarez" codeworks by Lütgert. Such codeworks reimagine the *Textz* collection through a range of conceptual circuits and file formats oriented toward a poetics and politics of distribution. These discussions build toward an expanded conception of format poetics, opening up new potentials for scholarship in digital environments.

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[7] See Appendix I.
[8] See Bogost, 3-20.

Collections and Contents

To begin, a site like *Textz* is remarkably difficult to situate in relation to analog forms. Is it a collection, a library, an archive, an anthology? In colloquial terms, this kind of site is often referred to as an "online archive" or "digital library." Neither categorization quite works: "online archive" would be technically inaccurate, given the absence of pre-publication materials; and "digital library" doesn't map onto the distribution or location characteristics of the database. "Publisher," with its root in the act of *making-public*, nearly fits. What's clear, however, is that each of these tags imports a specific set of historical, contextual, and operational frames into our understanding of the site.

Kenneth M. Price outlines the debates and stakes of naming in an article on *The Walt Whitman Archive* entitled "Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What's in a name?" For Price, each of these classifications, as well as Peter Shillingsburg's proposed 'knowledge site,' inevitably fail to account for the depth and variety of scholarly projects online. Instead, Price offers the term "arsenal" for its "emphasis on [the] workshop since these projects are so often simultaneously products and in process" (40). Moreover, "arsenal" holds appeal for its etymological connection to the magazine. However, arsenal, too, is jettisoned in a final footnote to the article. Price writes, "I am less concerned that *arsenal* catches on than I am that we recognize the fresh features of new work underway and that we are self-conscious about what we want any new term to convey" (40, fn 11). Indeed, Price's dilemma usefully demonstrates both the stakes and pitfalls of developing a classificatory matrix for works trafficking online. Nevertheless, a tentative typology of such projects is vitally necessary to understanding

this diverse output, from renegade art collections like *Textz* to scholarly websites like *The Walt Whitman Archive*.

Jeremy Braddock treads similar terrain in his introduction to *Collecting as Modernist Practice*. Braddock emphasizes a public model of the collection that mediates relationships between audience and artwork under the rubric of a "provisional institution" (3). These provisional institutions, like the Barnes Foundation or the *Others* anthology, are privately assembled but publicly exhibited. While retaining the terminological specificity of museums and anthologies, Braddock nevertheless locates the "collecting aesthetic" as "a paradigmatic form of modernist art" across a variety of practices, ranging from private art collections to poetry anthologies in the twentieth century (2). To foreground a collecting aesthetic is to assert that "a material collection is itself an aesthetic object, even, more pointedly, an *authored work*" (6). Proceeding from this premise, Braddock charts the ways in which the collection is "shaped by sensitivities that are aesthetic and epistemological" (6). What Braddock insists upon here is that an authorial sensibility operates in the assembling of a collection. Or, as he puts it, "the anthology and the art collection exist not simply for the sake of their individual works; they are also systems with meaning in themselves" (6). Braddock's conceptualization of the collection can be ported into a unit for understanding *Textz* as a work authored by Sebastian Lütgert. Following Braddock, this chapter sketches the collecting aesthetic of *Textz* while remaining attentive to the particularities of naming a digital collection of texts offered on the internet.

In parallel to the collecting aesthetic, Craig Saper usefully outlines the "sociopoetics" that structure the mail art and magazine *assemblings* featured in his study,

Networked Art. Saper describes sociopoetics as the "inherently social process of constructing texts…expanded to the point that individual pages or poems mean less than the distribution and compilation machinery or social apparatuses" (11). Sociopoetics thus designates a field wherein the networked circulation of aesthetic products assumes a privileged status, beyond that of the products themselves. In dialogue with the "net.art" practices of the late nineties, *Textz* explores new modes of publication and dispersion as a sociopoetic practice. Not unlike the "libraries" that populate user hard drives, the *Textz* collection also presents a case study for reading heterogeneous sets of user-curated digital files, though published for wider audiences online. Between sociopoetics and collecting aesthetics, we might begin to chart the instrumental agency of *Textz* as both a collection and a provisional institution. Or, a Braddock paraphrases Benjamin: "as a mode of *practice* as well as an aesthetic (or historical) form" (27). Importantly, *Textz* represents a provisional institution developed in lockstep with the emergence of an internet activist community. It indexes a fascination with Situationist politics alongside futuristic narratives, media theory, and a wide range of titles in vogue around the turn of the millennium. Gathering these constituent parts together under the term "little database" is an attempt to retain a sociopoetic emphasis on network distribution and periodicity, in the lineage of the little magazine, while refreshing the technical apparatus to match the provisional institution of internet collections.

Updating the preceding media historical analogies, we might just as easily classify the site a pirate network. Indeed, as a profusion of recent studies of internet piracy have shown, "napster was only the beginning." Though they feature prominently in the site's legacy, I will avoid extended discussion of intellectual property and online piracy. My

intent is not to negate the importance of this line of inquiry. The literature on copyright

is extensive—including works produced at Penn by Paul Saint-Amour, Peter Decherney,

Kenneth Goldsmith, and Charles Bernstein—and reveals many of the most pressing

issues related to cultural objects trafficking online. Rather than pursue these avenues, I

have elected to attend to qualities of the site that remain underrepresented in studies of

online collections. Namely, the formats that undergird this communications circuit, and

the transformations that the *Textz* collection introduces into the works it hosts. While

issues of copyright necessarily arise in any discussion of a site like *Textz*, the specific

properties of the objects in the database and the interpretive possibilities of the literary

works it hosts are rarely, if ever, investigated. From the outset, it's also clear that *Textz* is

nothing if not wanton in its disregard of copyright law. Distilled to its core conceptual

premise, the site is predicated on the illegal transmission of intellectual property. The

mere fact of illegality, however, often obscures the opportunity to investigate the myriad

significations produced by these influential, if shadowy, endeavors. Given that "napster

was only the beginning," *Textz* presciently anticipates the continuing growth of cultural

piracy on the internet. It marks an anticipatory aesthetic of distribution that endures

through the file lockers, peer-to-peer networks, and bit torrent platforms that facilitate file

sharing today.

> this is not project gutenberg. it is neither about constituting a canonical body of historical texts (by authors so classical that they've all been watching the grass from below for almost a century of posthumous copyright), nor is it about htmlifying freely available books into unreadable sub-chapterized hyper-chunks. texts relate to texts by other means than a href. just go to your local bookstore and find out yourself. the net is not a rhizome, and a digital library should not be an interactive nirvana.
>
>   – "napster was only the beginning"

Textz formed the theoretical core of Lütgert's expansive web-ring of digital works known as *Project GNUtenberg*. Of course, the GNU in the name plays on the free software GNU Project, itself a recursive acronym for "GNU's Not Unix." GNU thus ciphers an approach to historical texts that is at once computational and communitarian, set forth at a moment of transformative technological change on par with the printing press. In this context, we can consider the four freedoms essential to software development as presented in the GNU Manifesto: "freedom to run a program for any purpose, freedom to study the mechanics of the program and modify it, freedom to redistribute copies, and freedom to improve and change modified versions for public use" (Wikipedia, GNU). At the same time, the name explicitly codes *Textz* as the shadowy double to Michael Hart's influential public domain archive *Project Gutenberg*. Like Hart's enterprise, *Textz.com* offers "plain vanilla texts," ready for computational processing and easily reformatted for any variety of reading systems. However, *Textz'*s copyleft politics intensify Hart's ideology of accessibility. Along these lines, the mimicry of Project Gutenberg calls to the fore the long copyright statements opening each e-Text file in the Project Gutenberg Collection. Whereas Hart's historic first e-Text encoded "The Declaration of Independence" in 1971, the first *Textz* file distributes Deleuze's short article "Postscript on the Societies of Control." The political valences of the two foundational releases could not be more disparate, situating these projects at radically opposed ends of the spectrum of online distribution practices.

Pitting *Textz* against *Project Gutenberg*, Lütgert against Hart, Deleuze against the "Declaration of Independence" is precisely in line with the kind of statistics that *Textz* gathered in a series of "statz" pages. Keeping detailed logs of users and patterns of use

Figure 1

was once a core component of internet publishing practices. The excitement of immediate

publication was paired with the power to document a global network of IP addresses and

access points. In figure 1, "text patterns, trends, and surprises according to textz.com" are

mapped as a series of battles between writers, countries, operating systems, and internet

browsers. Similarly, figure 2 presents an example of monthly updates published on the

site that track these same categories as though they were stocks, rising and falling

through public use.

```
January 2002                                                                              --> Top

Top Gaining Texts                                          Top Gaining Authors

 1. a.s.ambulanzen - deleuze.net not found ...............  +2.05%    1. a.s.ambulanzen ...............................  +2.33%
 2. David Lynch - Mulholland Drive ......................  +1.37%    2. Nanni Balestrini ............................  +2.03%
 3. Nanni Balestrini - Gli invisibili ..................  +0.95%    3. Umberto Eco .................................  +1.56%
 4. Umberto Eco - La Bustina di Minerva ................  +0.86%    4. David Lynch .................................  +1.45%
 5. Umberto Eco - A Rose by Any Other Name .............  +0.72%    5. Jean Baudrillard ...........................  +1.00%
 6. Stephen King - The Shining .........................  +0.53%    6. Michael Hardt ..............................  +0.63%
 7. Emile Zola - Nana ..................................  +0.53%    7. Emile Zola .................................  +0.57%
 8. William S. Burroughs - Junky .......................  +0.51%    8. Charles Baudelaire .........................  +0.57%
 9. Kathy Acker - The Language Of The Body .............  +0.47%    9. William S. Burroughs .......................  +0.55%
10. Gilles Deleuze - Postskriptum über die Kontrollgesellschaften  +0.40%   10. Stephen King ...............................  +0.52%

Top Declining Texts                                       Top Declining Authors

 1. Ray Bradbury - Unterderseaboot Doktor ..............  -0.22%    1. Franz Kafka ................................  -1.29%
 2. William S. Burroughs - The Electronic Revolution ...  -0.20%    2. Matthew Fuller .............................  -0.57%
 3. Free Software Foundation - GNU General Public License -0.15%    3. Edgar Allan Poe ............................  -0.55%
 4. Diedrich Diederichsen - Die License zur Nullposition  -0.15%    4. Diedrich Diederichsen ......................  -0.55%
 5. Mike Davis - Magischer Urbanismus ..................  -0.15%    5. Geert Lovink ...............................  -0.50%
 6. Leo Trotzki - Über den Terror ......................  -0.14%    6. Hans-Christian Dany ........................  -0.45%
 7. Vilém Flusser - The Bag ............................  -0.14%    7. Raoul Vaneigem ............................  -0.44%
 8. Franco Berardi Bifo - Rhizomatisches Denken gegen die kaliforni> -0.14%  8. Guy Debord ................................  -0.43%
 9. Joost Smiers - Geistiges Eigentum ist Diebstahl ....  -0.13%    9. Karl Marx .................................  -0.36%
10. Marcel Proust - Le temps retrouvé .................  -0.13%   10. William Gibson .............................  -0.36%

Top Texts                                                 Top Authors

 1. (  -.) a.s.ambulanzen - deleuze.net not found .........  2.05% ( 0.00%)    1. (  2.) a.s.ambulanzen .................  6.29% ( 3.96%)
 2. (  2.) Kathy Acker - The Language Of The Body ........  1.52% ( 1.05%)    2. (  1.) Guy Debord .....................  3.99% ( 4.42%)
 3. (  1.) Douglas Adams - The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy Trilogy  1.48% ( 1.41%)  3. (  1.) Douglas Adams ..................  3.23% ( 3.10%)
 4. (  -.) David Lynch - Mulholland Drive ................  1.37% ( 0.00%)    4. ( 22.) Nanni Balestrini ...............  3.04% ( 1.01%)
 5. ( 46.) Nanni Balestrini - Gli invisibili ............  1.25% ( 0.30%)    5. (  6.) Adilkno / Agentur Bilwet .......  2.68% ( 2.35%)
 6. (  3.) a.s.ambulanzen - Warum wir es nicht auf der Straße tun  1.24% ( 0.99%)  6. ( 12.) Jean Baudrillard ...............  2.44% ( 1.44%)
 7. (  6.) Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri - Empire .......  1.12% ( 0.78%)    7. (  7.) Theodor W. Adorno ..............  2.36% ( 2.15%)
 8. (  5.) a.s.ambulanzen - Inder statt Kinder ..........  1.01% ( 0.89%)    8. (  9.) Antonio Negri ..................  2.26% ( 1.88%)
 9. (567.) Umberto Eco - La Bustina di Minerva ..........  0.92% ( 0.06%)    9. (  5.) Edgar Allan Poe ................  2.05% ( 2.60%)
10. (  4.) a.s.ambulanzen - Feminists Like Us ...........  0.90% ( 0.97%)   10. ( 16.) Michael Hardt ..................  1.93% ( 1.30%)

Top Countries                     Top Systems                        Top Clients

 1. ( 2.) Germany ......... 44.22% (19.22%)    1. ( 1.) Windows 98 ....... 41.06% (37.79%)    1. ( 2.) Internet Explorer 5 ..... 52.53% (34.99%)
 2. ( 3.) Italy ......... 16.90% ( 3.48%)    2. ( 3.) Windows 2000 ..... 24.04% (15.30%)    2. ( 3.) Internet Explorer 6 ..... 23.22% (10.43%)
 3. ( 5.) Austria ........ 4.93% ( 2.38%)    3. ( 4.) Windows ME ....... 8.20% ( 5.41%)    3. ( 1.) Netscape 4 ............. 18.34% (51.62%)
 4. ( 4.) France ......... 4.49% ( 2.74%)    4. ( 5.) Mac OS .......... 7.99% ( 4.12%)    4. ( 4.) Internet Explorer 4 .... 2.55% ( 0.87%)
 5. (27.) South Africa ... 4.46% ( 0.16%)    5. ( 2.) Windows NT ...... 6.42% (30.52%)    5. ( 6.) Netscape 6 ........... 0.93% ( 0.48%)
 6. (16.) Portugal ....... 3.55% ( 0.50%)    6. ( 6.) Windows XP ...... 6.29% ( 2.99%)    6. ( -.) Go!Zilla ............. 0.65% ( 0.00%)
 7. ( 7.) United States .. 2.61% ( 0.96%)    7. ( 7.) Windows 95 ...... 4.65% ( 2.12%)    7. ( 5.) AOL ................. 0.61% ( 0.52%)
 8. (12.) Swizerland ..... 2.14% ( 0.66%)    8. ( 8.) Linux .......... 1.14% ( 1.22%)    8. ( 7.) Opera ............... 0.51% ( 0.47%)
 9. (10.) Canada ........ 1.82% ( 0.78%)    9. (11.) Sun OS ......... 0.11% ( 0.01%)    9. ( 8.) Mozilla ............. 0.36% ( 0.44%)
10. ( 8.) Netherlands .... 1.60% ( 0.94%)   10. ( 9.) UNIX ........... 0.05% ( 0.50%)   10. (11.) iCab ................ 0.19% ( 0.01%)
```

Figure 2

As though anticipating contemporary trends in statistical analysis within the digital humanities, these "statz" seem to offer everything a DH scholar would hope for. And indeed, these charts do offer insight beyond their respective numerical data sets. The selections made in figure 1 map the attentions of the site's editors and users: of course Negri is destroying Chomsky, Godard overwhelms Truffaut, and Mozilla is winning out over Netscape. More surprising, perhaps, is that Adorno continues to gain more readers than Deleuze. In retrospect, we might speculate that *Textz* always had a particular fascination with Adorno on intellectual property grounds. Ironically, media attention surrounding this copyright battle may have worked to drive up user downloads of the illicit files. In this light, the use of Adorno can be seen as a harbinger of the site's demise. However, it remains difficult to imagine how these charts present questions that studying

the site wouldn't already reveal.

In figure 2, the reader might track the range of texts—many long-since out of fashion—that appealed to a specific audience at a particular historical moment. While it's notable that Kafka was down and Lynch was up in January of 2002, there is little to comment upon beyond the raw data of these surface-level statistics. For example, Douglas Adams seems a strange mainstay among Kathy Acker, Michael Hardt, and Guy Debord. One might also note that the editorial collective running the site—writing as A.S. Ambulanzen—top the charts in both author and text categories. More interesting, however, are the demographic and interface statistics in figure 2. German users commanded 44.22% of the site's usage, while the United States trailed at seventh place with a mere 2.61% of usage. Older versions of Windows and Internet Explorer topped their newer counterparts. Meanwhile, Mac OS and Mozilla captured small percentages of the user base in 2002. Comparing these numbers to stats collected by similar sites might lead to a productive historical conclusion concerning international use patterns as well as interface and browser preferences. Nevertheless, from this vantage, the facts remain merely interesting. Each figure and every comparative data set is incidental to the collection itself, and to the internet at the time.

Eschewing the efficacy of data analysis, we might instead consider the contextual poetics of these statistical displays. Just as the digital humanities have delivered a new interest in quantification and the aesthetics of data mapping, the early internet's affordances for user tracking and graphical display created a fascination with visualizing statistics regarding use. It was common for early sites to proudly display visitor counts, guestbooks, and other "widgets" for quantifying usage. On one hand, *Textz* critiques this

gesture by offering unlikely comparisons and an excess of information in a sly mirror

of stock exchange trackers and updated RSS news feeds. On the other, it presents these

statistics with an ASCII art aesthetic more common to the early Usenet forums and

BBSes of the late 1970's and early 1980's, which predated the graphical display of the

internet after 1993.[9] Instead of shaping recognizable figures with the stylistic flair of

monospace glyphs in ASCII art, *Textz* uses a plaintext approach to the representation of

data. This historical gesture interfaces the *Textz* collection with an aesthetics of piracy

featured in the warez scene (or, "The Scene") of the BBSes, which often featured ASCII

art as a tag for the hacker or group that offered cracked software.[10] Much more than

simply summarizing the user logs of the site, these visualizations perform a powerful

poetic gesture that connects the millennial internet with secret histories of network

aesthetics.

  With this in mind, we can turn to the definitive visualization of the site.

Continuing the approach seen in statz, it is presented as an elaborate work of ASCII art.

This multi-faceted graph (appendix I) was produced by Lütgert and released on the site in

the spring of 2004. In one extraordinary data visualization, simply titled

"textz.com/logs," the user can explore the extensive tracking logs that *Textz* collected

over four years. Condensing many facets of the data presented in figures 1 and 2 to

individual color-coded glyphs, this single page offers an incredible quantity of

information about the international use of *Textz* from January 2000 until December 2003.

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[9] For more information on Usenet and examples of the ASCII scenes that *Textz* references, see the historical archive collected at http://textfiles.com.

[10] See Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier.* Importantly, this book was also featured in the collection and indeed was used a part of an elaborate ruse in the Walser affair, described below.

Every character, color, and position in this grid transmits significant data. Additional

information is encoded within each letterform using embedded links, which are revealed

by hovering over any character with a cursor.

A brief excursus through parsing this graph offers many fruitful insights. In all

caps white text against a black background, the graph opens with the following line (with

spaces added for ease of reading):

FOUR YEARS OF FREE INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH MASSIVE PARALLEL
PEER TO PEER PERMANENT SCALABLE SYNCHRONOUS UNLIMITED
UNRESTRICTED WIRELESS DOWNLOADS OF PIRATED ASCII EBOOKS
FROM TEXTZ DOT COM 1292907 CLIENTS SERVED

The rest of the graph outlines the temporal and geographic dimensions of the 1.29 million

"clients served." In the first section, each line prints a new month of logs from 2000-

2004. These lines can be parsed as follows: first, the month and year of the line; second,

single characters standing for each of the top twenty countries in assorted colors ordered

by ranking; third, the rank that month had in users over the four year period displayed in

white; fourth, the number of users that month represented on a grayscale spectrum, with

lighter values for greater numbers. Finally, the remaining 144 characters display

proportional values of the month's use log, distributed by color-coded characters

representing the top twenty countries for each month. Additionally, a single white

character is plotted once per line in the final 144 characters to chart overall volume over

the four-year span. The overwhelming density of the graph continues in the following

section, which indexes proportional use volumes for each of the 199 countries that

accessed the site. Even after repeated viewing, it is difficult to parse the rationale guiding

this chromatic excess.

Scrolling down this immense array of statistics, the user finds the grayscale conclusion to the graph before a final line that repeats the phrase "NO COPYRIGHT 2004 TEXTZ DOT COM NO RIGHTS RESERVED." In this concluding set, 53 countries appear with zero use, including, for example, both Antarctica and Afghanistan. Each of these countries' lines is accompanied by grayscale X's that together form the emblematic *Textz* upturned shopping cart. No rights are reserved and none of these countries are "served." Dissolved nations (Czechoslovakia), military territories (Indian Ocean Territory), and, in the final position, ambiguous non-places ("Neutral Zone") highlight the absurdity and excess of the entire metric exercise. The data aesthetics of tracking and logging are themselves overturned in the gesture. The form of the chart is retained in the service of an extended display of non-use, which is in turn aestheticized as an elaborate work of conceptual ASCII art. Thus, in the same breath that *Textz*'s charts offer up numerical data for statistical analysis, they foreground the limitations of such an analytical exercise. If this is the final statement *Textz* makes on the use of its collection, how might we compute the collection otherwise?

One approach is to turn from use to content: that is, where *Textz* quantified the way its collection was used, a scholarly approach might attempt to chart the contents of the collection itself. This, at least, was a driving question when I began my research on *Textz*. A plain text archive, with a full collection ready to process, seemed a generative entry point into computational modes of literary scholarship. However, a number of

Textz Distribution by Language

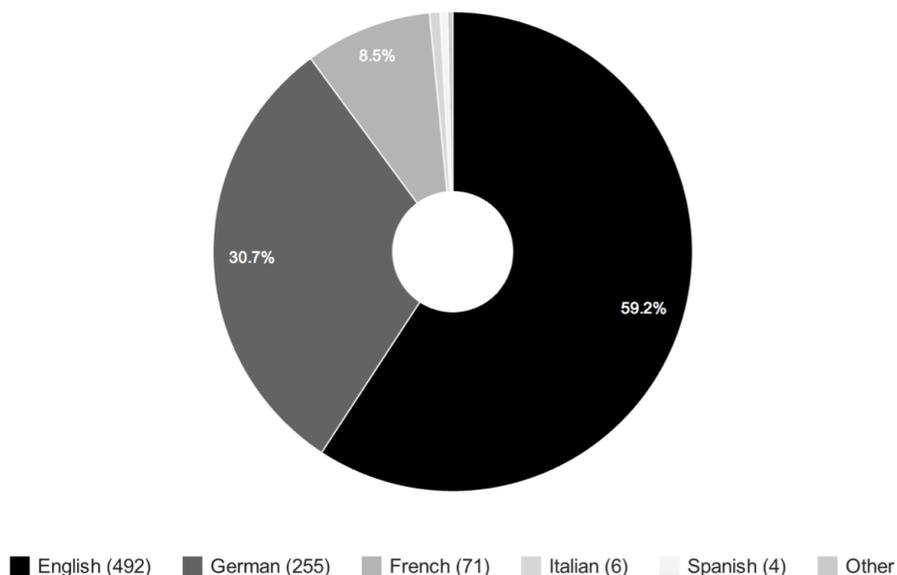| English (492) | German (255) | French (71) | Italian (6) | Spanish (4) | Other |

Figure 3

problems with this approach immediately suggested themselves. To begin with, the

archive is remarkably heterogeneous. The contents are too generically diverse to provide

insight through topic modeling tools. Network analysis and other "distant reading"

techniques similarly failed to present a new lens through which to view the collection.

The greatest challenge to computation is the multilingual nature of the texts. Just over

half of the works are presented in English, nearly a third are in German, and the

remaining portion is split among Italian, French, and Spanish texts (figure 3). Even the

most complex collections of digital humanities tools—like those gathered in Voyant—

proved incapable of mapping the entirety of the *Textz* corpus. Word clouds and network

diagrams of collections like *Textz* manage to be both obvious and obfuscatory, while the

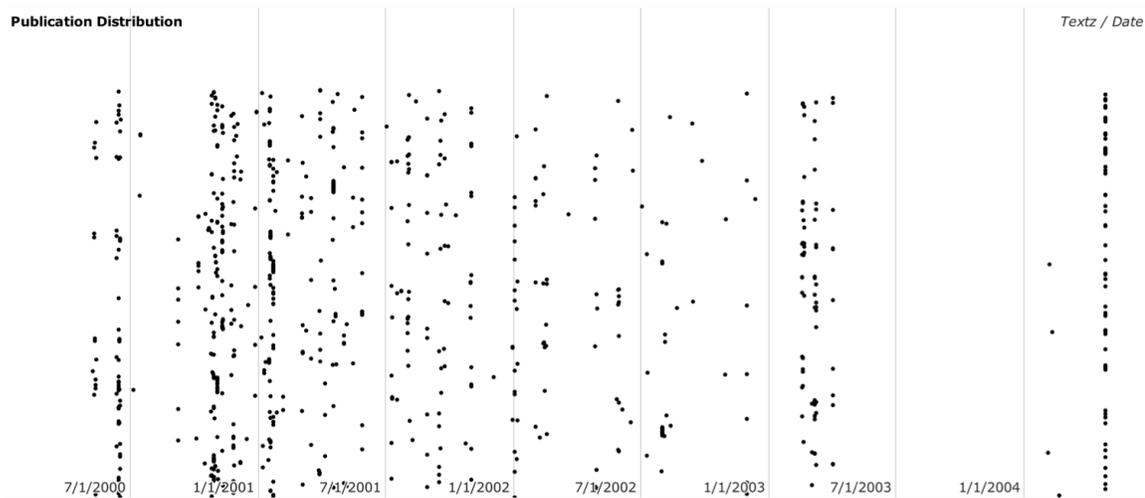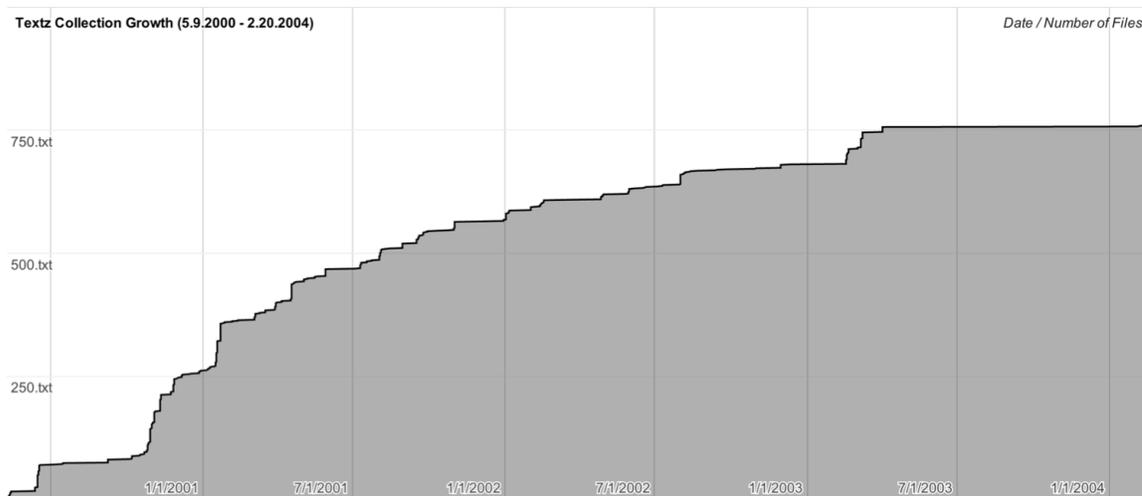attempt to import the collection into machine learning tools like MALLET effectively

Figure 4

Figure 5

erase and flatten the most distinctive features of the corpus.[11] These challenges are not

unique to *Textz*. Scholars working with diverse sets of data collected from multilingual or

transdisciplinary contexts are routinely advised to focus their research on more readily

computable collections, in size or self-similarity. Preparing a multilingual parallel

corpora for *Textz* would be as abortive as modeling the topics of texts ranging from

poems to political tracts.

Given these challenges, one potential solution involved tracking the release

patterns on the site. Figures 4 and 5 respectively chart the periodicity and growth of *Textz*

releases. In figure 4, each dot represents the publication of a text file. As this figure

demonstrates, the files are released in bursts around certain dates, with scattered releases

in between. Activity skews toward the founding of the site, with the highest concentration

of releases in the winter of 2000-2001. Before the site goes on hiatus, there is a large

release of files in early 2003. Finally, the remaining texts are released in May of 2004.

This narrative is enriched by the parallel chart of the site's growth in figure 5—steep

cliffs of productivity surrounded by plateaus of inactivity. But these aggregate numbers

fail to account for the most important dates on the *Textz* timeline. Pairing these graphs

with the textz.com/logs, one wonders why June and October of 2002 boast such

exceptional user numbers. Reviewing the contents of the site, it's clear that the release of

Dialektik der Aufklärung on April 30th, 2002—leading to a lawsuit in June and an official

response in October—resulted in critical user mass following widespread media

coverage. In a similar vein, there are plausibly hundreds of reasons for each spike in use,

international and national alike. A broad spectrum of speculative interpretations might

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[11] For more on MALLET and other machine learning approaches, see: JDH,
http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/2-1/review-mallet-by-ian-milligan-and-shawn-graham/

address how the periodicity of the collection interfaces with social contexts, external

publications, intellectual trends, and so forth. However, these speculative metrics would

surely fail *Textz* as squarely as the user logs. Following Lütgert's suggestion, this chapter

suggests that the computational cart, in this instance, ought to be overturned. This tactic

is deployed both as a means to examine its contents more closely as well as a method to

evaluate the upturned cart in its own right. In what follows, we'll move from the

computation of content to the technical effects of the container, and consider how a

media poetics might articulate the *Textz* collection differently.

Content to Container

> they say there was a time when content was king, but we have seen his head
> rolling. our week beats their year. ever since we have been moving from content
> to discontent, collecting scripts and viruses, writing programs and bots, dealing
> with textz as warez, as executables – something that is able to change your life.
>
> – "napster was only the beginning,"

From the webmaster motto, "content is king," *Textz* presents the dis-contents of the

dethroned, cracked, and stolen text file. Warez (exaggerated plural derivative of software)

emerged on BBSes as slang for a pirated or "cracked" commercial program, distributed

across illicit file-sharing channels. The act of distribution itself seems to "beat" the

content as such, assuming a privileged status that eclipses the digital artifact being

distributed. While this analogy certainly plays out in the guerilla scanning and dispersion

activity of *Textz*, the re-rendering of these contents as executable software programs is a

still more radical gesture. Beyond the politics of copyright, *Textz* presents a novel

interface between digital formats and the written word. Alongside viruses we find "scripts." Programs and bots are, of course, "written." And the "contents" of each text are transformed into pirated software: textwarez. To understand the implications of these claims, we might start at the feudal roots of king content: "from medieval Latin *contentum* (plural *contenta* 'things contained')." What *Textz* introduces to these historical texts is not only an illicit new venue and distribution system, but also a radically new format. As Sterne might put it, following Lewis Mumford, *Textz* transforms by the introduction of a significantly different "container technology." Not just an ASCII file, but a text-based software program that operates on—and executes within—a human operating system.

This bold claim set forth in the *Textz* manifesto raises a series of questions. Is it possible to take this provocation seriously? What does it mean to present works by Doyle, Debord, Gibson, or Adorno as "executable" code? What changes to interpretation does this framing mechanism introduce? More importantly, what modifications might we chart in the transcoding from print codex to plain text file? To offer a response to these queries, we'll first need to examine the protocol and structure of ASCII itself. From there, we can consider possible computational actions enabled by a notion of "textwarez." These actions will be discussed in relation to both the *Textz* collection as well as a series of works that Lütgert performs as textwarez. Finally, these inquiries will lead us to reconsider the relation of container technologies and operational software to the work of literary criticism after the digital turn. Beyond the computational metrics of textual analysis, *Textz* suggests a transformation that is more radical in its recoding of every digital text file. Put differently, the question of how we might use computational tools to

understand literature is less urgent here than understanding how textwarez might

transform its sources in the computation of each user.

"Changing meaning with each new medium, *text* is a truly chameleonic word,"

writes Adrian Van Der Weel in *Changing Our Textual Minds* (39). As medial formations

continue to shift, our concept of the text must be resituated within the operations of each

new media system. Extending from the practical and theoretical ambiguity that Stanley

Fish once questioned, digital media have injected a complex of new queries into the task

of defining text. Working from the other end of the spectrum, it may be useful to begin

instead by sketching the definitional boundaries of media. Van Der Weel's model

provides a succinct entry point, summarizing "medium" as "a structure consisting of a

technological tool with its (explicit) technical protocols and any implicit social protocols

with the function to communicate information" (40). Lisa Gitelman provides a slightly

more expansive—and, as Dworkin notes, importantly pluralized—definition in *Always

Already New: Media and the Data of Culture*: "media are socially realized structures of

communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated

protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of

different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of

representation" (7). Both of these formulations are inflected by the constant flux of ever-

shifting medial forms. Reinvented as technological and social protocols within ritualized

cultural practices, media are reshaped along the contours of a constantly transforming

terrain. These conditions suggest the impossibility of writing present media, as Friedrich

Kittler might have it, which could be paired with the necessity of the archeological

approach that Jussi Parikka and others have implemented. Naturally, this problem is

exacerbated by the acceleration of digital media forms: as new media are born along the same exponential rates that continue to amass dead media, any study of digital media's role in communication technologies is marked by an incredibly short life expectancy.

While the structure of technical and social protocols continue to coevolve with new media releases, the infrastructural layer of standards defining the file format remain relatively stable. Jonathan Sterne sums up this position in his *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*: "media remain on the scene, but…are diluted," he argues, "future confrontations […] will be held over infrastructures, protocols, formats, portals, and platforms" (240). The infrastructural history of binary text formats, for example, reaches into the development of telegraphy and the five-bit system devised by Émile Baudot in 1874.[12] This prominent standard (International Telegraph Alphabet No. 1), along with a few variants like the six-bit IBM BCD punched card code, determined the protocol for teletype and related technologies for nearly a hundred years. Close to a century later, an updated version of this same protocol, known as the American Standard Character International Interchange (ASCII) format, was proposed in 1963 and approved as a standard in 1968. This same ASCII format has remained the relatively stable core of textual transmission media systems, from the military origins of ARPANET to the ubiquitous presence of the digital text today. ASCII character encoding protocols still undergird the text file despite the incessant waves of new media technologies that deploy the format and the various expansions that have been introduced by the larger character sets of Unicode. As the *Textz* manifesto has it: "electronic gadgets [are] dead media on

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[12] For the most comprehensive of these, see Eric Fischer, "The Evolution of Character Codes: 1874-1968". http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.96.678

their very release day. forget about your new kafka dvd. i already got it via sms." Short

Message Service (SMS), of course, is also supported by the protocol built upon

backwards compliance with ASCII. To this day, the verbal form of SMS, or "texting,"

still returns us to the 7-bit ASCII character set standardized in 1968.

In the purest form of ASCII, the character set is anything but neutral. The text is

rigorously constrained by its letterforms—95 printable characters in strict 7-bit ASCII,

191 in Extended ASCII or the various ISO-8859 standards. In terms of literary stylistics,

the problems brought about by the limitations of this set are legion, as even a quick

perusal of Project Gutenberg will indicate. All passages previously formatted for italics,

underline, or bold face are presented in ALL CAPS. Footnotes, pages, and other basic

properties of textual formatting are rendered either impossible or creatively sidestepped.

The attendant difficulties of negotiating these formatting dilemmas are demonstrated in

the *Textz* database. For example, a multilingual database like *Textz* falls prey to what

Daniel Pargman and Jacob Palme have termed "ASCII Imperialism" in the edited

collection *Standards and Their Stories* (177-199). This includes everything from the

dollar sign encoded in the original 7-bit ASCII, whose use is obviously restricted to the

United States, to the absence of innumerable multilingual glyphs. Because *Textz* predates

the Unicode standard widely adopted in 2007, myriad glitches occur as my US browser

or text editor tries to parse ISO 8859-1 into ASCII or Unicode base binaries, which are

fundamentally structured around ASCII. Vast swaths of French and German texts are

thus rendered all but unreadable without the aid of systematic re-encoding. Unlike

Jerome McGann's reading of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" in *The Textual Condition,* any

mistakes we find in these works are not by material limitation, but are rather the products

of standards shaping our use of the text (129-152). Sterne writes, "infrastructures tend to disappear for observers, except when they break down" (16). Working with the *Textz* collections today, the infrastructure of international encoding systems reveals itself along every glitch and error.[13]

Text to Textwarez

In the strictest sense, the neologism "textwares" is purely metaphorical. The .txt file format is explicitly used to demarcate unparsed textual data from the executable file, defined generally as that which "causes a computer to perform indicated tasks according to encoded instructions" (Wikipedia, "Executable"). Put differently, the previously described standards and protocols, built into an executable software program, are needed to parse the data encoded in the text file. Despite the fact that the same glyphs make up "exe" and "txt", from an operative standpoint, the difference could not be more precise. However, importing human readers into the same technical schematic starts to blur these sharp delineations. McGann offers a series of provocative arguments for the executable nature of text in *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web*. He contends that both "grapheme and phoneme are forms of thought and not facts—not character data but parsed character data, or 'data' that already functions within an instructional field" (153). This line of thinking is intended to counter a blind spot that the digital humanities often bear toward the "algorithmic character of traditional text" (151).

In McGann's view, all texts contain protocols of figuration (a graphic

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[13] To highlight this disruption, all glitches have been retained in the attached work *EXE TXT,* which supplements this chapter.

representation) as well as instructional options (for readers navigating the text). If we are to make computational metaphors between readers and texts, we must admit that the instructional field is parsing its reader, not the other way around. In line with *Textz*'s emphasis on the life-changing potential of textwarez, McGann argues that "readers do this as a matter of course as they move through a text and make *themselves* the measure of a process of transformation" (152). Poet and scholar Tan Lin presents a more radical variant of this position across a series of works that deploy his theorizations of "Disco as Operating System." Lin relates disco to a wide range of cultural forms, including the text, writing that "such a programming language was once called literature" (93). It is this operating system that writes its reader in a play of affect programmatically exercised by the text file itself. "Disco is not, as is mistakenly thought, an explosion of sound onto the dance floor but an implosion of pre-programmed dance moves into a head" (87-88). Lin's alignment of disco with an operating system finds its corollary in *Textz*'s approach to text files as pirated software, as textwarez.

This, it seems, is the core of the *Textz* project. To quote again from the manifesto: "we have been moving from content to discontent, collecting scripts and viruses, writing programs and bots, dealing with textz as warez, as executables." Lütgert proposes a more technically precise sense of the executable text file in a series of works that radiate out from the *Textz* archive. The first of these was generated in response to a cease-and-desist letter received by *Textz* from a lawyer representing the press Suhrkamp Verlag in the summer of 2002. At the time, a scandal was brewing in Germany over Martin Walser's newest book, *Death of a Critic* (*Tod Eines Kritikers*), which was widely critiqued for its anti-Semitic caricatures. Anticipating further rebuke for publishing the book, Suhrkamp

Verlag made the mistake of sending out PDF review copies of a file titled "walser.pdf"

to various news organizations who they hoped would defend the literary qualities of the

project before the book went to press. Naturally, these files leaked online, prompting

Suhrkamp to scramble to remove them from distribution. As a kind of bait, *Textz* put up a

quick copy of a file entitled "walser.pdf" on its site. In actuality, the file in question

contained a PDF of Bruce Sterling's *The Hacker Crackdown*, a nonfiction work on the

history of phreaking and cracking. In spite of this, Surhkamp Verlag's legal threats were

issued nonetheless, suggesting that the claimants had never opened the file. In response to

this series of events, Lütgert crafted a file entitled "walser.php.txt." It contained a simple

PHP script that had the sole purpose of reconstructing Walser's *Tod Eines Kritikers* in

full text, plain ASCII format under the title "walser.txt."

Here, finally, the textwarez metaphor meets the realization of the executable text

file. Lütgert's cryptographic project would be the start of a series of *Textz* initiatives

exploring encoding formats under the guise of copyleft politics. This ambiguous

program—operating somewhere between text and warez, from "walser.php.txt" to

"walser.php" to "walser.txt"—remains far more compelling than the now-familiar genre

of dispute over copyright. The PHP file might be considered a legally protected piece of

software released under a General Public License. Its string of glyphs in no way

resembles Walser's text and is, in a sense, an entirely original piece of writing:

```
$z.="64000a20212728292c2d2e2f303132333435363738393a3b3f414243444546
4748494a4b4c4d4e4f";
$z.="50515253545556575859 5a6162636465666768696a6b6c6d6e6f7071727374
75767778797a849293";
$z.="9697a9b4c4d6dcdfe0e1e4e7e8e9edf1f3f4f6fbfc0c022635474a40460a373c4
8504351103b5147";
```

[…]

Hosting and distributing the PHP file would be well within the confines of the law, *Textz* maintains in the script's release notes. Only the execution of the script, producing *Tod Eines Kritikers* as walser.txt, would result in a breach of intellectual property. By enciphering the text within an executable code, the work calls both TXT and PHP formats into question. At the hexadecimal level, both files would be unreadable to an unaided human agent. Accessing the content thus requires that these formats be displayed, transmitted, and processed by a range of platforms and operating systems. By adding a simple auxiliary step for rendering the text legible to human readers, "walser.php" concretizes the process of encoding and decoding that enables textual transmission on information networks.

> information does not want to be free. in fact it is absolutely free of will, a constant flow of signs of lives which are permanently being turned into commodities and transformed into commercial content. http://textz.com is not part of the information business.
>
> – "napster was only the beginning"

Textz grounds Stewart Brand's famous slogan "information wants to be free" in the particularities of information theory and digital communication. The PHP script provides a clear demonstration of information as "as an ordered sequence of symbols from an alphabet, say an input alphabet χ, and an output alphabet Υ," for anyone who might overlook this fact (Wiki, Information). Every text can also traffic as machine-readable code, and vice versa. If the "information business" is built on the demand for knowledge in a post-Fordist economy, *Textz* is an artwork that explicitly counters the trading of

information. Instead, the collection is mobilized as warez to perform the interplay of

compression, data formats, and digital communication at large.

Following on the inaugural publication of "walser.php," *Textz* would release a

series of more complex conceptual games that drew together formats of encryption and

decryption under the sign of textwarez. To begin with, in the footer to "walser.php.txt"

the project also includes a short script called "makewalser.php." The PHP script's

function was to easily generate a similarly executable PHP script for any text file. That is

to say, any writing stored in a plain text file format could be re-encoded as an executable

file. This addition, in just 81 lines of code, reconfigures the entire *Textz* collection as

potentially executable PHP script. The plain text file contains the same input alphabet

used by HTTP protocols and software programs. This infrathin play between text file and

executable script highlights the interoperability of glyphs in fluid text formats. The

segment of "makewalser.php" that generates a new header for any file makes the

interchangeability of the textz collection clear:

```
header("content-type: text/plain");
[…]

echo "   $self v1.01 (includes make$self)\n";
echo "   this script generates the plain ascii version\n";
echo "   of \"$title\" by $author.\n";
echo "   it can be redistributed and/or modified under\n";
echo "   the terms of the gnu general public license\n";
echo "   as published by the free software foundation,\n";
echo "   but may not be run without written permission\n";
echo "   by $owner.\n";
```
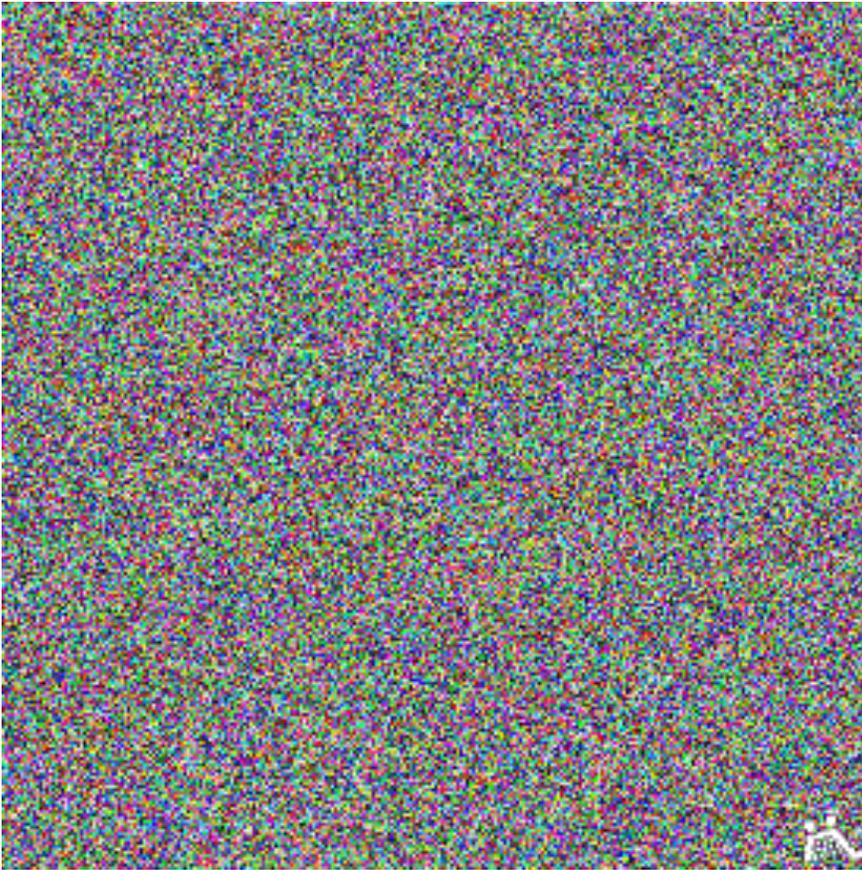
Figure 6

The "echo" language construct outputs each of these lines into the header of a newly

minted "makewalser.php.txt" file. Using the double extension "…php.txt" is another

winking nod to the executable character of textwarez. The file is both script and text.

Remove the ".txt" extension and the PHP script can execute. By constellating variables

for the PHP script ($self) alongside the author, title, and owner, the program

accommodates bibliographic data within its translation scheme. Any text in the

collection, from Gibson's "Agrippa" to Deleuze's "Postscript" can be thrown into this

scheme, with radically altered results for literary interpretation. This is the fundamental

challenge that software poses to literary study: all potential instances of transformation

overcome the actualized use of the script on any given text. In one of the only existing

articles on *Textz*, Inke Arns writes that "the poetry of codeworks lies not only in their

textual form, but rather in the knowledge that they have the potential to be executed"

("Read_me, run_me, execute_me"). Returning us to Craig Saper's claims for

sociopoetics, these codeworks prioritize networked methods of database transmission

beyond "their textual form." As is widely noted by scholars from Lev Manovich onward,

parsing the vexed relation between database and narrative continues to pose a

fundamental challenge to the future of scholarship. Following the development of

Lütgert's *Textz* database offers possible points of departure for addressing this quandary.

> The decision of considering walser.php, walser.pl or any other text generated with makewalser.php something that can be run through a Perl or PHP interpreter is entirely up to the reader's viewpoint and imagination. The text may just as well be considered literary works of their own, resembling concrete poetry and conceptual art. As a matter of fact, nobody can rule out the possibility that a text file of, say, the fairytale "Cinderella" executes as algorithmic sourcecode on some programming language interpreter or compiler and generates de Sade's "120 Days of Sodom" as its output. Given this possibility, Project Gnutenberg can't be held liable if somebody executes its beautiful sourcecode poems into some ugly anti-semitic novel.

> – Olga Goriunova, "walser.php"

Later in 2002, Lütgert released a work entitled "pngreader," a project that extends beyond

the "walser.php.txt" release to apply the same operational concept to a variety of

potential formats. Navigating an intuitive interface, the user of "pngreader" may encrypt

any standard file format into a multi-colored PNG image (see figure 6). Or rather, as the

program's readme explains, the script includes a "pngwriter()" function that may

"restore" a lost PNG image from any given file format:

> pngreader is a free, open source php script that reads png images, parses the input according to a defined set of rules, and displays the results. […] the output format will normally be plain text, even though the program can return a variety of content types, including archives, images, music, video, and more. png images can be created with most graphic editors (a sample gallery can be found at http://pngreader.gnutenberg.net/gallery). pngreader also includes a currently unused function named pngwriter() which is able to recover lost images. given the output of pngreader(), it will restore the original png.

Reversing the direction of productive information that may be encoded into an encrypted image, "pngreader" seems to bring into fruition Borges' imagining of a random function rewriting *Don Quixote*. Its readme file asks, "to paraphrase a famous question: how long will an ape have to play around with photoshop until he draws a png that returns borges' library of babel? the answer is: it has already been done (http://pngreader.gnutenberg.net/gallery/babel.png)." Encoded texts and artworks include Borges' "Library of Babel," Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, Public Enemy's "Burn Hollywood Burn," the PDF of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, and Malevich's "Black Square," among other "recovered" PNG images. These format poetics, playfully operating on the surface between copyright contention and the transmission of culture on the internet, question our relationship to data displayed in the browser. As Florian Cramer has written, "pngreader thus allows artists to create images which, accidentally of course, might also be read as certain pieces of literature" (runme.org, "pngreader"). Conceiving images as works of literature—or executable PHP scripts as concrete poetry or conceptual art—brings us to the crux of the enigma that *Textz* presents. How might our standardized and utilitarian view of digital formats determine our understanding of aesthetic artifacts circulating online? Where might we draw the line between text and

Figure 7

textwarez?

Completing this cycle of cryptographic projects, consider a final work: "The Conceptual Crisis of Private Property as a Crisis in Practice" by Robert Luxemburg (a pseudonym for *Textz* editor Sebastian Lütgert). Its lengthy title is drawn from Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, in an allusion to the site's success at first cracking the encrypted file before Harvard University Press was able to publish the first printing of the book. Like the response *Textz* produced for *Death of a Critic*, this work comes in three parts: "crisis.php" (a decoding script), "crisis.txt" (an explanatory readme file) and "crisis.png" (a desktop screenshot that contains encrypted data). Plugging "crisis.png" into

"crisis.php" according to the instructions given in "crisis.txt," the user is able to

reconstruct the entirety of Neal Stephanson's novel *Cryptonomicon*. A clue to guide the

user is concealed within the screen capture, which spells out the novel's title in icons

along the bottom of the image (figure 7). Stephenson's novel represents a deliberate act

of editorial selection. Its narrative fictionalizes an alternate history of the very

cryptography at play in "The Conceptual Crisis," while the book itself was also subjected

to U.S. export restrictions due to trade secrets embedded within a cryptographic

algorithm featured in the text. "The Conceptual Crisis" merges these layers into a

conceptual game that incorporates speculative fiction, real world circulation politics,

encoding formats, and an elaborate ruse of steganographic play.

> Using *secret,* a word of Latin origin that primarily means separation or
> dissociation, we not quite correctly translate some other semantic forms that are
> instead oriented toward the inferiority of the house (*Geheimnis*) or, in Greek,
> cryptic or hermetic dissimulation. All of that thus requires slow, prudent analyses.
> Since the political issues are such burning ones, and more than ever today, with
> all the advances in police or military technologies, and with all the new problems
> of cryptography, the question of literature is also becoming more serious again.
> The institution of literature recognizes, in principle or essentially, the right to say
> everything or to say without saying, and thus the right to the secret displayed as
> such.

> – Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine* (162-63)

Whereas previous works like "walser.php" and "pngreader" visibly displayed their

cryptographic function, this work presents a new steganographic impulse: the text is

hidden in plain sight. The same technique was widely rumored, if never proven, to have

been at play in secret messages that Al-Qaeda exchanged within images posted to online

public pornography forums. "The Conceptual Crisis" calls up these contexts in its play

between quotidian image, illicit data transfer, and secretive encoding hiding plain text. To accompany the artwork, a grandiose "law" is proposed that undergirds each of the previously described projects: "any digital piece of intellectual property can be transformed into any other digital piece of intellectual property with a relatively short and simple shell script" ("Luxemburg's Law"). Issued alongside this law, a very low-resolution image of Walter Benjamin is proven to harbor the data for a cracked version of Final Cut Pro 4, a highly sought after video-editing suite, which is itself presented as a ".mov" file. The layers of masking constellate software with text, and formats with poetics: an image of a famous writer is simultaneously a cracked software program masquerading as a movie. Steganography can be thought of as another form of compression or encoding, it is a container technology that transmits a given input into a desired output. Decompressing these files, like unpacking one's library, calls the entire collection into view.

The conclusion to this steganographic work, as it interfaces with the *Textz* collection, remains unpublished. Following extended litigation with Suhrkamp Verlag, which included a warrant for Sebastian Lütgert's arrest, the site went static in early 2004. In 2005, an ASCII rendering of the date 5/23/06 appeared on the *Textz* front page, promising updates that never arrived. More recently, Lütgert has written about future plans for the site: "For amateur cryptographers or Internet art historians, the most interesting find may be DePNG, short for "DePNG Probably Nothing Generator," developed between 2005 and 2008. The corresponding re-implementation of textz.com would have no longer hosted books, but only a gallery of cover images. A highly obfuscated script to transform the covers into full books would have been offered on the

DePNG companion site" (CHCE, readme.txt).[14] Figure 8 illustrates how this process would have operated. Each plain text file in the *Textz* collection was embedded in a "cover" for the text, which could be activated by a code stored in the "spine" through the use of DePNG. Simulating a library or the remediated virtual bookshelf featured in a range of commercial e-books platforms, this unrealized *Textz* points it user back to the codex even while it reveals pervasive mechanisms of digital encoding. Through a complex set of procedures, the final transformation of *Textz* rendered every plain text file as an executable steganographic image. To read any of the works in the collection, the user would first be called upon to recognize the historical, legal, and technical protocols that structure textual transmission on the internet.

Lütgert's approach to textwarez sets forth a conceptual poetics for digital objects as a *mise en abyme* of encoding protocols and file formats. As Sterne reminds us: "all formats presuppose particular formations of infrastructure with their own codes, protocols, limits, and affordances" (15). By revealing, distorting, and reconfiguring the limits and affordances of these protocols, *Textz* furnishes a compelling direction for the poetics of digital scholarship. These poetics emerge from interpenetrating actions of framing, constellating, contextualizing, and transmitting. There is a famous, if reductive, diagram from the annals of nineties net.art history: [⌨——the art happens here——⌨]. Transmission was everything. Derived from the rigorous network conceptualism of the nineties, this aesthetic of relationality reconfigures Saper's sociopoetics toward digital

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[14] This note is featured in the "Complete Historical Critical Edition" of *Textz*, which was released in early 2015 as an elaborate alternative reality game; only at the end of which the persistent player (or, in this instance, scholar) would recover 18 gigabytes of data, including every page, each text, and all variants in the *Textz* enterprise. Both the labyrinthine procedure to unmask these files, and the equally complex "edition" remain beyond the scope of this chapter, and indeed, perhaps beyond the essay as such.

access and sharing—or, for that matter, piracy and open source movements—
periodizing the work technically and aesthetically. It should be noted that this diagram
condenses a fantastically intricate communications circuit into two nodes and a single
line of thought. Lütgert writes, "the nineties of the net are over." Given contemporary
trends, perhaps we might productively return to the nineties of the net. Simultaneously
deploying a radical politics of distribution; new software for old media genres; and a
visualization of "invisible" compression and transcoding processes, *Textz* directs us to a
new horizon for media poetics. It is to this model that scholarship might aspire.
Presenting a little database within elaborate models to highlight the demographics,
politics, and technics of distribution, *Textz* is the lost digital humanities project that
continues to outperform contemporary endeavors. In a coda to this chapter, I propose a
scholarly textual mechanism that follows the *Textz* in ways that the essay cannot attempt
to pursue. In a generous reading, the chapter may serve as a prelude to this gesture.

From the first issue, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine (1978-81) was figured as a

project in recovering "out-of-print books, magazines, and unpublished manuscripts." This

description should strike a note of dissonance in the chorus of common knowledge

concerning this influential little magazine, which is known for shaping the emergent

poetics of the Language writing community. Indeed, among the dozens of frameworks

that Bernstein presents in his essay "The Expanded Field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" for

the *Routledge Companion to Literature*, there is no mention of archival or bibliographic

practices in even the most expansive view of the poetics within and beyond the magazine

(281-297). However, skimming along the surface of the issues today, the reader is struck

by the density of bibliographic notes on access and availability. Among the contemporary

reviews and short experimental essays that characterize the bulk of the magazine, one

finds offers from the "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Distributing Service," a kind of door-to-

door photocopy delivery mechanism for out-of-print works. A catalog of books and

magazines could be ordered for fifty cents from the home address of editor Charles

Bernstein, who ran this reprint on demand service through a neighborhood Xerox

machine. Beyond the formal inventions of the poetics articulated within

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, we might consider this archival distribution system as the most

forward-looking gesture of the magazine, uncannily anticipating the little databases that

circulate radical works of arts and letters on the internet.

In the first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (February, 1978), the reader notes

that David Melnick's *Pcoet*, first published by G.A.W.K. press just three years prior,

could be photocopied by the Distributing Service for $3. Similarly out-of-print titles by

Clark Coolidge, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, and Lyn Hejinian, among others, were on

offer in Xerox format from the Distributing Service. The full run of Silliman's

foundational *Tottel's* poetry newsletter was announced in both *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*

no. 4 and *Tottel's* no. 17. A slim catalogue for republished works opens with a statement

by Bernstein, Silliman, and Andrews, highlighting the ephemerality of titles within

experimental writing circuits of the late 1970s:

> Even when published, writing we wish to read often goes out of print with
> dismaying rapidity—closing off a dialogue. Out-of-print and unpublished works
> may still circulate among a limited circle of friends. Here, we hope to sustain that
> dialogue, and expand that circle.

While one node in the "expanded field" of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* may have

reformatted the intensive qualities of this dialogue, the development of the potentials of

this dialogue extends into a network of issues related to preservation, distribution, and

accessibility. Copies of magazines like *This*, *Hundred Posters*, and *Toothpick* were also

listed in the inventory. The catalog included scores of such entries, most of which have

never been "properly" republished. For those that follow the distributing services of

Craig Dworkin, however, these titles should sound familiar. In fact, all of the above-

mentioned works can be found on *Eclipse*, Dworkin's roving little database of facsimile

images of rare and out-of-print small-press publications. Not only does the site "sustain

the dialogue" begun under the sign of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,* it also works to "expand

the circle" of readers and users into the present.

The connection of *Eclipse* to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is indicated early in the site's history. On the front page, the site is currently described as "a free on-line archive focusing on digital facsimiles of the most radical small-press writing from the last quarter century." This quarter century is marked with astrological precision. An Internet Archive capture of the site dated February 19, 2003 notes that *Eclipse* "will launch in February, marking the 25th anniversary of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine." For a site named after the alignment of sun and moon, the launch date is anything but incidental.[15] In fact, the site had been in operation for nearly a year preceding the promised launch in February of 2003. The fluidity of websites affords these kinds of ludic engagements with the moment of publication: in this instance, the temporal emendation intensifies the historical engagements that guide the collection. Of course, "the complete run of the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*" was also included in the earliest iterations of the site. Since then, Dworkin has noted that the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine files have accounted for roughly half of the site's usage from the beginning (private correspondence). This little magazine is both the most accessed object in the collection and the ostensible cause of the emergence of *Eclipse* on a quarter century delay.

In many ways this convergence was scripted into the foundation of *Eclipse*. The site has been described as a corrective to the trend that Dworkin notes in the opening line to the "Language Poetry" entry for *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poetry*: "The discrepancy between the number of people who hold an opinion about Language Poetry and those who have actually read Language Poetry is perhaps greater than for any

[15] Continuing the ecliptic metaphors of this paragraph, Dworkin notes "the name Eclipse is an explicit homage to Sun & Moon, a mark of the archive's aspiration to document the moment of its predecessor's apogee and to carry on the early mission of presses like Messerli's, even after the disappearance of those illustrious celestial bodies" ("Hypermnesia" 81).

other literary phenomenon of the later twentieth century" (880). This paradoxical

situation is likely the result of two difficulties: not only the discursive difficulty inherent

in the debates surrounding *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry and poetics, but also the

difficulty involved in accessing primary documents before sites like *Eclipse* made them

readily available to anyone with an internet connection.[16] Reasoning through this

dilemma for scholarship on *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* writing, Dworkin notes "'Language

poetry,' in short, became simply whatever was published by a handful of specific presses

and journals. […] For anyone who wanted to pursue these talismanic publications, the

situation was frustrating; the 'little magazines' of modernism—a century old—were

easier to find in libraries than any of these journals which had been published only a few

years earlier" ("Hypermnesia" 81-82). Increasingly, *Eclipse* is comprised of the

"tantalizing—and seemingly de rigueur—catalogs of fugitive titles" that came to define

Language poetry in its most common formulations (81). Continuing the accessibility

platform of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Distributing Service, *Eclipse* affords the

sustenance of this dialog using contemporary digital formats. It performs this distribution

from a scholarly perspective that looks back over the last quarter century while looking

forward to a media poetics of the present.

The complete title index to *Eclipse* currently links to 243 entries in the collection.

Of these titles, twenty direct the user to a little magazine. The published artifacts for these

entries range from a single issue (or non-issue, in the case of the index to *This* magazine,

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[16] Following Bernstein's recent (2012) revision the nomenclature of this cluster of publications, communities, and debates, I will retain the magazine's italicized title to refer to "*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry, and its many different names – Language Poetry, Language Poetries, Language Writing, Language-Centered Writing" throughout this dissertation ("Expanded Field" 281).

edited by Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten) to fifty issues (in the case of Lyn

Hejinian's *Tuumba* chapbooks, which are pointedly listed as a periodical on *Eclipse*).

When I began work on this chapter, there were roughly half as many works in the

collection. When Dworkin wrote "Hypermnesia" in 2009, there were even fewer. Shifting

away from the stable collections marking defunct sites like *Textz.com*, the chapters that

follow all examine sites in a state of flux. *Eclipse* is ongoing. As an associate editor of the

site, I can attest to at least a dozen digitization projects that are forthcoming as of this

writing. Naturally, each of these would dramatically alter any stable reading of the

collection. Additionally, the site has already been linked to two universities and one

independent server, and future changes are unpredictable. If the rarity of

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing continues to pose a challenge to scholarship, the

ephemerality and flux of *Eclipse* produces its own set of complications to scholarly

readings of the site.

Indeed, Dworkin's own critical reflections on *Eclipse*, published in a paper titled

"Hypermnesia" (a medical term for exactingly precise memory), characterize the

destruction necessitated by archival distribution. He writes, "once again, the twin

impulses of the digital archive—to preserve and to present, to reproduce and to

distribute—are at fundamental odds with one another" (84). These impulses are caught

between the compression inherent to digital formats scalable to online distribution, and

accurate facsimile reproduction. However, irrespective of higher resolution images or

more perfect digital facsimiles, the archival paradox outlined by Derrida in *Archive Fever*

remains: the objects are fetishes for memory while the archive necessarily relies upon the

creative destruction of its holdings. In Dworkin's formulation, the tension between

preservation and distribution in digital formats can be summarized as follows:

> Part of what the archive seeks to conserve with its insistence on representing the pagination and typography of the originals is precisely what a digital archive necessarily loses: the facture and material specificity of the book or printed document as an object (85).

However, he reminds the reader:

> In the context of "new media," this focus on the "old(-fashioned) media" of the page and the book may seem quaint or retrograde, but those attachments are not, in fact, romantically nostalgic. They are coldly semiotic (85).

Dworkin focuses on the persistence of bibliographic codes and material texts in the online archive. This chapter concludes at the opposite end of the spectrum, with the image files and the website itself as a bibliographic system. In this respect, it serves as a preparatory argument for future examinations of digital objects and little databases.

In this chapter I aim to prepare a reading of *Eclipse* by outlining the resistances that the site poses to computational analysis and systematic criticism. To maintain the specificity of these questions, the explorations of this chapter cluster around the *Eclipse* edition of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine. First, and most germane to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, I explore the relations and disconnections between periodical studies and the study of online collections. As a little database that is centered on a set of little magazines, these questions are made most clear in the context of *Eclipse*. The site offers a singular glimpse into the various ways in which an archival internet publication might overlap with the scholarly concerns of periodical studies. Print magazines present a clear delineation between published issues. How might a periodical

scholar study the variable release patterns of a little database? A second, and related,

question concerns the notion of preservation. If *Eclipse* is designed as an "online archive"

to preserve certain print artifacts of radical small-press writing from the last quarter

century, what might it mean to preserve *Eclipse*? Put differently, what maintains the

ephemeral archive? How might we read *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, as an artifact carried

along by each new capture, within these changes and various modes of preservation?

Finally, this chapter explores the resistance presented by graphical image formats

for text on the internet. Unlike Google Books, *Eclipse* offers facsimile images for human

readers. What can these file formats tell us about the collection? From the GIF files that

encode *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* to the PDF files that present reading copies, each enacts

a new set of bibliographic questions and localized transformations. Moving in the

opposite direction, a reading of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine on *Eclipse* could

begin with the low-resolution GIF capture, move to its intermittent external preservation

by the Internet Archive, and conclude with the periodicity of these captures. From the

outset, this chapter maintains that this reversal in direction would be just as valid. There

is a kind of hermeneutic circle to reading digital objects: from the universal standard of a

file format to the localized transformation on any given file, from the local context of an

individual work to the broadest context of a digital collection. All directions are valid,

each exploration is contingent.

Periodical Poetics

In *Modernism in the Magazines: an Introduction*, Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman

track changes in the history of periodical studies across the twentieth century.

Unsurprisingly, this study begins and ends with Ezra Pound. From his characterization of

"the free magazine or the impractical or fugitive magazine" in the article "Small

Magazines" to a series of articles published in *The New Age* under the unrealized title

"Studies in Contemporary Mentality," Scholes and Wulfman outline how Pound

inaugurates "the serious study of periodicals as a way into modern culture" (14). Tackling

problems of classification in the periodical, Pound characterizes his approach as that of a

"simple-hearted anthropologist" sorting periodical specimens into different generic boxes

(16). In contrast to the methods of ideological critique and genre study central to Pound's

periodical criticism, Scholes and Wulfman chart the movement of the field "from genres

to database" (44-72). Their account highlights "a different approach, made feasible by the

digital resources becoming available to scholars…a move from ideological or cultural

constructions to the collection of data" (44). Drawn from a chapter titled "Rethinking

Modernist Magazines: From Genres to Database," the argument is nevertheless

concluded by an appendix comprised of a hundred-page reconstruction of Pound's

"Studies in Contemporary Mentality," publishing the entire series of articles from *The

New Age.* Indeed, through Pound, the critical voice reigns, even as the database attempts

distributed scholarship. More interesting is the archival impulse to collect and republish

Pound, even while arguing for new modes of digital humanities scholarship in periodical

studies. This tension among issues of archival scholarship, the categorical imperatives of

analytical data, and the long-standing genre classifications of cultural criticism arise from

the "enormously intertextual affair" of reading a magazine (66). While pointing to an

enormously intertextual affair is one thing, performing it as scholarship is another

entirely.

The performance of periodical study calls for an unwieldy compilation of bibliographic information, circulation figures, reader demographics, content tags, subject analysis, advertisement catalogs, generic classification, and any number of imagined quantitative and qualitative data for large-scale textual computation (71). Ambitious in scope and supported by growing ranks of digital humanities scholars, this method of scholarship offers certain notable possibilities for the contemporary little database. The project of humanities computing might begin with exhaustive bibliographic volumes such as Frank Mott's *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1930*; rigorous cultural inventories like Jed Rasula's *American Poetry Wax Museum*; extensive archival reconstructions such as Alan Filreis' *Counter-Revolution of the Word*; or the exploratory catalogs included in works like Gwen Allen's *Artists' Magazines* or Steve Clay and Rodney Phillip's *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*. The project of humanities computing could then attempt to open new possibilities of undiscovered patterns and unimagined connections in these archival collections of periodical publications. Currently, it's possible to imagine the implementation of increased precision and wider scope within Rasula's economic study of poetry publications, or a more exhaustive catalog of works forming the mimeograph revolution. However, patterns in content, form, and genre in little poetry magazines or data visualizations of groups of writers enmeshed in publication networks—to name only two potential outputs—remain subject to experiment. In this way, Scholes and Wulfman suggest, "we can move beyond the methodology of Pound's 'simple-hearted anthropologist' and dispense with boxes, large and small, altogether" (72). Indeed, perhaps Elizabeth Eisenstein put it best in her

sweeping proto-digital humanities study *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*: "If it is too vast to be handled by any single scholar, however, it is, by the same token, also too vast to be avoided by any single scholar" (42). Even with just 243 current entries, *Eclipse* has outgrown a comprehensive accounting in any given monograph: all a scholar might attempt is to locate are compelling entry points.

It is interesting, though perhaps not surprising, that precisely the type of information called for by Scholes and Wulfman in *Modernism in the Magazines* is absent from contemporary databases of experimental writing like *Eclipse*, *PennSound,* and *UbuWeb*. These, and others like them, are notably focused on accessibility rather than computationality. I will discuss the implications of this absence further in chapter three, but for now we might recall Jerome McGann's observation in *Radiant Textuality*: "modern computational tools are extremely apt to execute one of the two permanent functions of scholarly criticism—the editorial and archival function, the remembrance of things past" (18). The little databases I examine perform this archival liaison to access beautifully. The other function, which we might summarize as critical reflection—or, in McGann's terms, the capacity to "imagine what we don't know in a disciplined and deliberated fashion"—remains largely beyond the purview of humanities computing, still bound to archival presentation and essayistic forms of scholarship (18). McGann's own deviation from traditional scholarship is demonstrated in *Radiant Textuality* through a variety of performances of the speculative programming enacted by the IVANHOE game. His explorations in how computation might aid us in the endeavor to "imagine what we don't know" serve as one notable response to the challenge of networked scholarship. As a written text, however, these sections are thoroughly contingent on a

specific interface, providing few inroads to new methods in digital humanities

research. Additionally, the limited range of an essayistic recounting of an interface like

IVANHOE is, by necessity, both grossly reductive and thoroughly estranged from

interface's productive force.

We might surmise that the relatively modest results many queries in the digital

humanities have generated are likely a problem of information design and data

visualization rather than inherent structural deficiencies in a computational approach.

Listing successful endeavors is beyond the scope of this paper, but they are certainly

emblematized in online platforms like Ben Fry's mesmerizing visualization of variant

texts in *On the Origin of Species: The Preservation of Favoured Traces*, or in the

remarkable depth of the *Mapping the Republic of Letters* project at Stanford University.

And yet, there is a great deal of necessary work beyond the deployment of a database

model in scholarly monographs. Even if we accept the power of TEI and related markup

languages, McGann's account of his work on *The Rossetti Archive* and *The Blake Archive*

reveals the myriad ways in which the material text has remained stubbornly resistant to

the indexical markup languages (88-97). Indeed, the chapter entitled "Editing as a

Theoretical Pursuit" concludes, "the limitations of such an approach are also painfully

clear" (97). In league with McGann, we might concede that humanities computing

remains an open field for innovation in literary scholarship and will continue on the

difficult path to discover unseen patterns in digitized materials. On the other hand,

following his argument further, the strategy currently has more work to do in the realm of

editorial and archival functions, rather than speculative analysis and critical scholarship.

While the database is an apt aid to memory, the poetics of scholarship yet demands a

human actor to imagine critical activity "past Z," as Filreis writes in *Counter-revolution of the Word*, and into the "miscellaneous, unidentified, anonymous, uncataloged, misindexed" (xiii).

For periodical objects awaiting identification, cataloging, and indexing, we might return at this juncture to McGann's canonical exploration of "the text as a laced network of linguistic and bibliographical codes" (*Textual Condition* 13). Within this laced network, "textuality is a social condition of various times, places, and persons" (16). Whether the answer is presented through geographic mapping, community network analysis, topic modeling, or periodicity charts, this "laced network" offers resistance to computational analysis. Even the most minute levels of textual analysis, as seen in the mechanistic reading of variant texts performed by Randall McLeod, call for a human to interface with an analog collator ("Enter Reader" 23). Naturally, under this aegis, McGann argues that "poets understand texts better than most information technologists," as the noise of materialist hermeneutics and autopoetic mechanisms escape the strictures of informational structures (14-15). Given the immense challenge of digital scholarship of periodicals and collections, a turn to data poetics may serve to illuminate some possibilities for moving "past Z" in the study of a site like *Eclipse*.

Indeed, some of the most effective and compelling contemporary poetic projects can be traced to an innovative use of basic, off-the-shelf tools for writing through digital platforms. Given the potential inherent to a wide range of computational aids, we might ask: what tools are already in common use, and what poetic forms might transform our understanding of those tools? On the most basic level, consider cut-and-paste. In a relatively unnoticed post to the Tumblr page hosting Troll Thread, a new press for print-

on-demand and digital publications, Holly Melgard published an incredible work of poetry called *The Making of The Americans*. This work was simply composed by sequentially processing Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* and removing all but the first instance of every word. Using Stein's own poetics as a premise, Melgard describes the process in a foreword: "NOW 'there is no such thing as repetition' in *The Making of Americans*, because I deleted it. Herein, every word and punctuation mark is retained according to its first (and hence last) appearance in Gertrude Stein's 925-page edition of the book" (3). The result is remarkable. Though we may have long thought of Stein as a master of simplicity, after the first paragraph of Melgard's poem, it becomes clear that Stein deploys an extensive vocabulary with a delirious lexicological register. From the canonical first line to the final page, adverbial constructions are summarized over a hundred pages: "drearily joyously boisterously despondingly fragmentarily roughly energetically repeatedly funnily hesitatingly dreamily doubtingly tilling boastingly delightfully touchingly quaintly." Through this process, Melgard reveals hidden layers within the work in ways that would prove difficult to recapitulate. The poem does not only produce a pleasurable poetic encounter, but performs a serious work of scholarship in the same moment. Not only does the poem transform our sense of Stein's entire oeuvre, it revises our understanding of what the simple act of cut-and-paste can do, given the right poetic conceit. In this sense, it is not the tools that digital humanities might use to explore the little database, but rather the poetics that guide the use of these tools.

If the current situation of experimental poetics is comprised of diverse projects utilizing found and recontextualized text, the long-standing practices of editorial theory,

social text, and material bibliography present the most robust apparatus for

understanding the composition of fluid texts within digital networks. Borrowing this term

from John Bryant, author of *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book

and Screen*, rather than Kenneth Goldsmith's usage of the phrase, opens up a vast

historical discussion of editing textual objects and charting the changes in an ongoing

compositional process. Deforming Bryant's study of versions and revisions in Melville's

Typee to suit contemporary media poetics, we may cite a resonant passage:

> To come to the point, the cultural meaning of a fluid text is in the pressure that
> results in changes made in one text to create another and the degree of difference,
> or the distance, between two texts. Thus, a poetics of the fluid text is a poetics of
> revision, whether that change is induced by an individual writer, a social demand,
> or as is often the case, a combination of the two (62).

To this dynamic, we might add algorithms, file formats, contextual shifts, and other

bibliographic operators. The poetics of revision remain pertinent to the republication of

historical materials as unique editions under dramatically altered textual conditions.

Bryant notes: "a revision occupies space and reflects the passage of time; it reveals

options and choices; it has direction. It is a chord of dissonances and harmonies, and not a

single note" (12-13). As McGann, McLeod, Bryant, and others within the tradition of

editorial theory have often argued, to edit is to transform. Importing this lesson to the

digital collection bears all the difficulty of the source materials (say,

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine) alongside the challenges of scholarship on the

shifting terrain of networked databases.

     While waiting for a 'quantum poetics' guided by a computer named Jarry, the

scholar of the little database could find no better vantage for tracing social texts than the

platform enacted by little magazines. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker adapt

McGann to construct a useful inventory of possibilities for "the *periodical codes* at play

in any magazine," such as:

> a whole range of features including page layout, typeface, price, size of volume (not all 'little magazines are little in size), periodicity of publication (weekly, monthly, quarterly, irregular), use of illustrations (colour or monochrome, the forms of reproductive technology employed), use and placement of advertisements, quality of paper and binding, networks of distribution and sales, modes of financial support, payment practices towards contributors, editorial arrangements, or the type of material published (poetry, reviews, manifestos, editorials, illustrations, social and political comments, etc.). We can also distinguish between periodical codes internal to the design of a magazine (paper, typeface, layout, etc.) and those that constitute its external relations (distribution in a bookshop, support from patrons). However, it is often the *relationship* between internal and external periodical codes that is most significant (6).

Radiating out from the material text, each magazine offers a wealth of interpretive

possibilities built upon the relationship between internal and external periodical codes,

between textual actors and both medial and contextual layers. A thick description of these

various relations—in concert with a close reading of the linguistic codes of the digital

object itself—may construct a more nuanced understanding of digitized works circulating

within a larger network or social text. A poetic response that deploys these vectors of

signification as a means to "imagine what we don't know" offers a similarly rich

potential for understanding.

This networked poetic analysis is precisely Craig Saper's approach to reading the

"intimate bureaucracies" formed among experimental writers engaged in periodical

exchange. For Saper, McGann opens a sociopoetic mode of reading the various

assemblings of "receivable art and poetry," which find meaning in various schemes of

distribution and reception. Sociopoetics are characterized by a scenario wherein the

"inherently social process of constructing texts is expanded to the point that individual pages or poems mean less than the distribution and compilation machinery or social apparatus" (11). Adding to McGann's expanded field of material hermeneutics, Saper considers the periodical in relation to Roland Barthes' concept of the *receivable*, differentiated from both the *readerly* texts of narrative realism and the *writerly* texts of modernism (3). Highlighting this third category of "unpublishable" intimate distribution, Saper presents a mode of reading experimental writing from the sixties and seventies that sidesteps the dominant art historical discourses of pastiche and neo-avant-garde. Intensely intimate, collectively constructed, and decidedly off-market, Saper reads fugitive publications through the perspective that "the sociopoetic practice was the production, distribution, and use of periodicals *as* artworks and poetry" (152). We might hear this sociopoetic practice echoing Bernstein's "Conspiracy of 'Us'" from a periodical perspective:

> We see through the structures which we have made ourselves & cannot do even for a moment without them, yet they are not fixed but provisional. . .that poetry gets shaped—informed and transformed—by the social relations of publication, readership, correspondence, readings, &c (or, historically seen, the 'tradition'), and, indeed, that the poetry community(ies) are not a secondary phenomenon to writing but a primary one (*Content's Dream* 346).

Perhaps the most remarked upon aspect of periodical studies from the avant-garde through to contemporary digital iterations is the construction of groups and the constellation of traditions or politics. The magazine provides one material basis for unraveling these knotty issues without falling prey to the fetishistic logic of cultural critique. Instead of reading exceptional objects or symptomatic inscriptions, the magazine

provides literary history with networks of association to chart, and vast bodies of

interrelated documents to map. Within a single issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*

magazine alone, a robust network map of contributors speaks to community dynamics in

ways that an essay might never approach (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Beyond group formation, Saper recovers threads in his alternate history that enable us to

observe that "from the perspective of the twenty-first century, assemblings [periodicals]

may look like experiments in networked productions in general and serve as a model for

electronic media networks" (14). As forms of experimental archiving continue to evolve

across dominant social media platforms on the internet, the study of periodicals presents

both a robust frame for a distributed sociopoetics as well as a wide array of alternate

futures for networked digitization. Immediate analogies are abundant. Scholes and

Wulfman figure Pound's periodical series "Studies in Contemporary Mentality" as an

exercise in blogging ("something like contemporary bloggers, discussing what comes to

hand, taking up a new project each week") (18). The extended engagement across issues

of magazines and sociopoetic publications is intensified by the poetry listserv, with

Barrett Watten's "Multiauthors and the Listserv" in *The Constructivist Moment* as one

potent example among many (94-102). Independent publishing throughout the

mimeograph revolution anticipates instant digital 'publication' ("in a very real sense,

almost anyone could become a publisher"), and the list could go on from here (Clay and

Phillips 14). Digital initiatives like *Eclipse* both expand and continue the dialogue

initiated by the formal and material codes of little magazines.

It has been clear, since McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, that previous forms of

media comprise all 'new' media. In *Remediation*, Bolter and Grusin characterize this

process of remediation as the double logic of hypermediacy and transparency: "Our

culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it

wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (5). For precisely this

reason, attention to historical formats of time-based networked distribution—the

periodical publication—is an essential component for the study of contemporary digital

collections. If "all mediation is remediation," as Bolter and Grusin argue, and "older

media can also remediate newer ones," there is no aspect of media communication—

including archival technologies—that escapes the forces of remediation (55). The

importance of this approach is a recurrent aspect of new media studies: take for example,

the way in which Lev Manovich has demonstrated the computer's cultural operations

according to the history of cinema, or Lisa Gitelman's imaginative explorations of the

character of digital markup languages via "the editors' barbed wire" in the six-volume

transcription of Emerson's journal (117-121).[17] Experimental writing magazines have

always offered this kind of protracted catalog of effects, given the relative freedom from

normative economic pressures as a consequence of innovation. The array of bibliographic

codes, experimental arrangements, distribution mechanisms, and formal inventions on

full display in the archive of little magazines provide various passages forward into

understanding the complex of digital platforms operating today. It's difficult to conclude

this line of reasoning without recourse to a soft citation of Kittler's maxim—"Media

determine our situation, which (nevertheless or for that reason) merits a

description...Operating at their limits, even antiquated media become sensitive enough to

register the signs and indices of a situation" (*Literature, Media, Information Systems* 28-

29). In this way, the "antiquated media" of Xerox and mimeograph textual reproduction

might register the signs and indices of a digital situation indexed by *Eclipse*. In the other

direction, the periodical positioning of *Eclipse* may offer a momentary glimpse back into

the medial situation of the objects it remediates.

Periodical Preservation

Like the solar event invoked in the site's title, *Eclipse* flickered out of sight in December

of 2012. Due to an oversight in the restructuring of university servers—as much a

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[17] See, for example, Manovich's analysis of Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* for an explanation of the importance of the catalog of effects to contemporary culture. Manovich, xv-xxxvi.

surprise to the editor as the site's users—one day the collection simply vanished. When

I began this chapter, the site was functioning regularly at an "edu" URL hosted by the

University of Utah. It is currently located at a new address—"eclipsearchive.org"—on a

server hosted by XMission, a company based in Salt Lake City with a particular devotion

to hosting sites for local businesses and nonprofits. Before either of these iterations, from

early 2002 until the spring of 2006, *Eclipse* ran on Princeton University servers. After a

summer offline, the site returned in the fall of 2006 through the University of Utah's

English subdomain. Charting the rhythms of academic semesters, university technical

restructurings, and Dworkin's passage from one university position to another, the

archive bears a personal history alongside its material contents. The current iteration's

reliance on XMission, instead of any number of global providers, emphasizes the

collection's tenacious claim to a locality within global media networks. Further, the

spatial coordinates of each new edition of *Eclipse* signals the full republication of its

materials. In much the same way, each time a user loads an image, its representation is

reassembled anew from its underlying code. All of these relations became most clear in a

moment of occultation.

In the shadow of this 2012 syzygy, we might pause, for a moment, to consider the

de-publication of *Eclipse* from the internet. As Bruno Latour might remind us, when a

punctualized actor like *Eclipse* breaks down, its myriad components are on rare view to

the user. Once physically inscribed to subdirectories within university servers, what

remained of these facsimile images could only be found amid the petabytes gathered by

the Internet Archive in San Francisco, and mirrored by the "pinacographic space" of the

New Library of Alexandria. Of course, there is little need to turn to the Internet Archive

unless one requires access to a site no longer available online. On browsing the

haphazard collection of captures, date by date, a whole network of automated and

variable processes can be traced over time. From a bibliographic perspective, the reader

may thus contend with the trickier aspects of digital publication: continually updated (or

disappearing) content, changing forms and formats, and a host of contextual and

intertextual modulations. Each of these features dramatically impacts our understanding

of the material conditions of a little database like *Eclipse*. Aside from the occasional

missing links and scanned pages or slips in HTML and CSS markup, the site functions

perfectly in its newest iteration—as though it had never been missing, never returned a

404 error. Turning instead to the partial preservation of *Eclipse* through the Internet

Archive, the slow development of the site over time can be charted and the social text can

be reconstructed from the fragments.

Through this mechanism, umbraphiles might hope to content themselves with

complete captures of the site from the Internet Archive "Wayback Machine." This would

be possible if the Internet Archive crawler had uniformly captured the high-resolution

facsimile images of the *Eclipse* collection in each instance. Luckily, that was never the

case. As Dworkin has described the "negative ontology" of the library, wherein "libraries

are defined not by what they have on their shelves, but by what they exclude from them,"

the Internet Archive of *Eclipse* could be understood by what these records lack (*Perverse

Library* 12). Through lapses and shadows, the remnants of *Eclipse* in the Internet Archive

alert us to how the site was used. Only the most popular pages and most accessed works

are captured. A web crawler called Alexa (another homage to the burning library)

determines what is shown and how often sites are preserved based on usage statistics.

There was not enough time for the images of Gil Ott's *Paper Air* magazine to be paged

through, nor enough exposure for Clark Coolidge's *Polaroid* to be fully captured. Other

facets of the archival interface are not captured at all: javascript navigational tools and

unrecorded images mar the page with "Error" notifications, red X's, and broken

symbols.[18] In this glitch-ridden record, the persistent presence of

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E marks the magazine's continued use. Popular interest and

course syllabi are sure to maintain the magazine's Alexa ranking and hence its

preservation. The Internet Archive of *Eclipse* reminds us that, unlike paper books whose

sustained use promises disintegration, frequently accessed digital objects are only *more*

likely to endure.

An attentive user of the Internet Archive might also chart some derivation on the

periodicity of *Eclipse*. From the twenty-three titles featured in the site's first capture

(February 15, 2002) to the most recent snapshot, a series of discrete archival release dates

have been broken down for scholarly examination. The various captures of the site's

index, as presented by the Internet Archive, can be seen in figure 2. Of particular note is

Alexa's continued querying of the defunct URLs. Like a subscriber who was never

notified about the end of a periodical, it continues to submit inquiries into a void. It's not

unlikely that Dworkin might endorse the addition of these "blank" editions into the

project. Collating the data contained on captures of *Eclipse* pages that feature a full site

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[18] Most notably, the site featured two components that have been entirely lost to time. First, a 3-dimensional interface for browsing the collection scripted in javascript for the first year of the site's operation. As of this writing, I have found no image or record of the interface, aside from the structured data for its code. The second concerns a file format called "Multiresolution Seamless Image Database [MrSID]," which can still be found in the source code of many pages. See "Hypermnesia" 85.
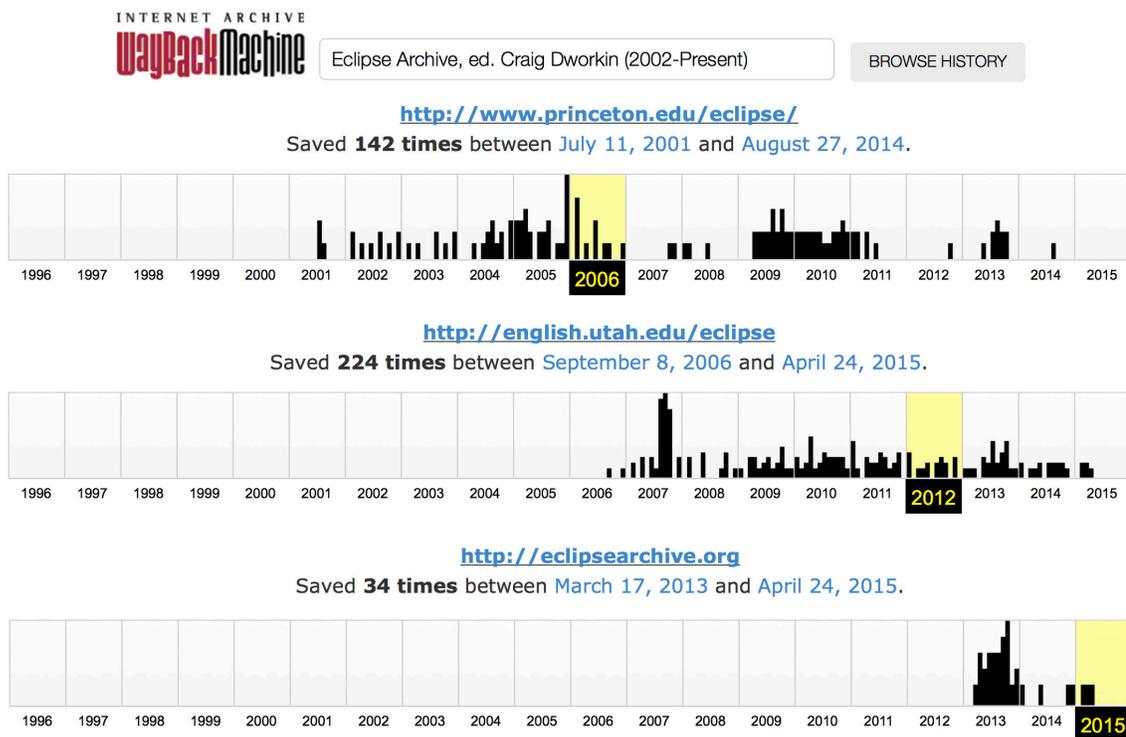
Figure 2

inventory—first titled "facture.html" and later changed to "titles.html"—we could

reconstruct the release patterns of *Eclipse* as published by an external entity. It is as

though Dworkin is continually editing a magazine that is only periodically distributed by

an unpredictable algorithmic publisher. Insofar as the previous iterations of *Eclipse* have

ceased to exist on their original university servers, the Internet Archive has subsumed

them into a massive archival publication. As the calendar view of the Internet Archive

captures of *Eclipse* notes, "This calendar view maps the number of times

http://www.princeton.edu/eclipse/facture.html was crawled by the Wayback Machine, not

how many times the site was actually updated." The authorship of these pages is

maintained by an automated crawler rather than the editor of the site. With lapses of

months between captures, it is not possible to recreate the precise movements of

Eclipse's construction, although a general arc can be calculated between the data points.

This system of preservation discourages such computation.

Instead, it encourages more focused engagements with stable elements of the

site's infrastructure. Based on the arbitrarily periodic nature of the Internet Archive,

Eclipse—already diverging from the special collection or perverse library—verges on the

formal properties of the periodical, the generic conventions of which anticipate so much

of the time-stamped internet. Updating the periodical codes that constitute the online

collection's material text, we might expand the "range of features" enumerated by

Brooke and Thacker. This expansion may include changes in CSS and HTML,

organizational features and outward links, bibliographic records (and what they exclude),

embedded content on external sites and social media, usage statistics, institutional server

configurations, regional prices of hosting and internet services, available screen

resolution and browser affordances, software workflows for web development and

document scanning, file hierarchies, hidden folders, database configuration, and file

formats. Each of these may be read into "the *relationship* between internal and external

periodical codes" (6). Enfolding the magazine within the mechanism of the format, the

material conditions of both may only come to light in a moment when preservation is

overshadowed by accessibility, when the archivist is eclipsed by the algorithm.

This could be the strongest argument against the categorization of *Eclipse* as

"archive." Turning instead to the re-publication of materials within the transformative

contexts of periodical release patterns in a little database, we retain the active forms of

transformation at play in the performance of publication. In his writing on the collection,

Dworkin rightly considers the conservative paradox of an "avant-garde archive." This phrase, he suggests, "highlights the Janus-faced logic of all archives, which look in two direction as they realize their own position: they conservatively index the past, and they index the future with a wagered risk (or revolutionary delusion), anticipating some user and some use, some moment for which the archived material is being saved" (94). While Dworkin makes a compelling case for the feverish archival logic of preservation and presentation at play on *Eclipse*, one wonders if the editorial model of the little magazine might not be a more appropriate print-based tradition. Little magazines redistribute text under significantly revised bibliographic codes, they publish new contexts and yet-unrealized conversations among various textual materials that always already circulate elsewhere. The editorial selection and digital transformation that *Eclipse* introduces is at least as radical as these transformative elements. The site grows periodically, with "releases" not unlike the issues of a magazine. The collection is never a passive recipient of materials, but an active force in redistributing text into circulation across the sociopoetic networks of the present.

Here, the orbit of our hermeneutic circle returns to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, featured in each capture, dating back to the origin of *Eclipse*. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, I contend, can be seen as a little "archive" within the little database of *Eclipse*. It emerges as such through excerpts and reviews, lost documents of the avant-garde and new provocations within historical traditions, bibliographic details and distribution services. As Dworkin notes, by "archiving books, the archive itself adds to their bibliographic information, and the digital archive produces entirely new editions" (85). By digitizing magazines, *Eclipse* folds new periodical codes into each release within

the ongoing shifts in its own role as a little database. There are Princeton University

editions, University of Utah iterations, and independent XMission versions, each with a

new bundle of contextual registers appended to the periodical codes of the magazine.

This continual republication reminds us that the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Distributing

Service photocopied as many issues of its own magazine as were ever printed in the first

place. With this reminder, we may turn to the magazine hosted by *Eclipse* as a scattered

set of HTML documents, GIF images, and PDF files, each with a unique set of formal

properties to examine.

Variable Formats

In shades of grey, the full run of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is hosted in both GIF facsimile

images and slightly higher quality PDF reading copies.[19] The PDF was made in February

of 2003, while *Eclipse* was still hosted by Princeton University. This is validated by the

Adobe Acrobat creation data, which points to version 5.0, released in 2001, long before

the OCR feature was implemented that currently affords embedded layers of searchable

text in line with the facsimile images. The browsing GIF files were generated in August

of 2006, when the full run of the magazine was coded into the new servers hosted by the

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[19] Like these image of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the site itself is styles in grey tones. Precisely, the background of *Eclipse* can be coded as #303030. It is perhaps no accident that newer versions of Firefox present a slightly darker grey (#222222) as the most neutral background for image viewing. At any rate, the emphasis on greyness in *Eclipse* is of particular note in relation to the PDF format, which Gitelman argues is a kind of formal equivalent to "grey literature" in *Paper Knowledge*: "gray in the field of library and information science because they are typically produced and circulate outside more formal publishing channels, often in small editions that can be hard to locate, prove problematic for cataloguers, and quickly become obsolete…Because of the vagaries of online publication, the digital medium may itself turn communications variously gray, in other words, in ways that compound gray subgenres of the document." (115-116).

University of Utah, and again in February of 2013 when the files were rewritten to

XMission servers. When I began research on this chapter, I wrote the phrase "the page

itself hosting the magazine is last modified on September 30, 2010 at 1:44:59 PM, the

precise date and time that the first index to $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ was published,

hypermediating the full contents and creating a new interface to the magazine as a

whole." The information was true at that writing. The exact point in time was particularly

compelling in that instance, since it seemed to suggest how the publication of an index

could radically alter the publication date of a release. But the time of this page's

publications has now changed, and should be revised to "July 24, 2013 at 4:49:11 PM,"

as the current last modified date indicates. It is only the most recently refreshed edition

that the user can speak of without further remediation by services like archive.org. With

this metadata written into both the web page and the digital facsimile, the string of

constantly disappearing dates trace the history of the archive along with its objects.

If the Internet Archive charts the temporal patterns and maps the spatial

conditions of the database, the variable formats of *Eclipse*'s facsimile images tell the

most remarkable narratives. For the first four years of operation, the images were all

presented in Graphics Interchange Format (GIF), encoded in a highly compressed grey

scale. Despite the promise that full-resolution TIFF images were being archived

elsewhere, in practice the site presented only GIF files encoded for grey scale

presentation. Starting in 2006, these GIF files were gradually replaced by higher

resolution JPEG files in full color: the site promises that this process is underway for all

files. At the moment, however, few works in the collection retain their GIF encoding,

with $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine notable among them. The "lossless" pixelation

of the GIF format perfectly reflects the earliest stages of the periodical's publication

patterns.[20] Poorly transcoded images of the magazine transport the reader to a medial

environment of Xerox and photocopy, of distributing services and mail networks. This is

the bibliographic paradox of compression. Beneath the accelerating arc toward greater

"fidelity" to analogue formats, there is a strange magic in the lo-fi betrayal of the GIF

image. Put differently, through a more radical transformation of the historical document,

these processes of transcoding can better surface the questions of materiality in all

iterations. As Bolter and Grusin might phrase this effect, the loss of immediacy draws

attention to a range of remediating factors. Dispelling the illusion of immediacy, the

"poor image" reveals deep layers of technical remediation while pointing to the historical

specificity of both original and facsimile.

The GIF transcoding of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine seems to be a prime

example of the aesthetics and politics of the "poor image" theorized by Hito Steyerl: "It

transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value […] contemplation

into distraction." It is "thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance

[…] It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self"

(Steyerl). We might recall here that Dworkin notes how images on *Eclipse* operate

according to a "continual dynamic between fidelity and degradation, accurate facsimile

and serviceable impersonation" wherein "the twin impulses of the digital archive—to

preserve and to present, to reproduce and to distribute—are at fundamental odds with one

another" ("Hypermnesia" 84). Even Cory Arcangel, an artist best known for working

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[20] One cannot help noting, on this point, that spellcheck consistently attempts to replace the state
of being rendered by pixels as "pixilation," indeed both here are noted as "crazed, bewildered, or
whimsical" states (OED "pixilation").

with highly compressed image formats, maintains that with JPG compression, the user creates "an image which is only a shadow of its former self" ("On C"). The alignment of these values attributed to the poor image produces a dire sense of low-resolution archival objects on the internet. Not incidentally, the same rhetoric can be seen in response to "degraded" print technologies. In a response to Steyerl entitled "The Defense of Poor Media," Silvio Lorusso argues that "the whole history of the book, not just since the advent of digital networks, can be understood as the sacrifice of a certain idea of material quality in favor of a faster duplication or a broader reach." The Gutenberg Bible was, of course, a heavily compressed form of the hand-painted medieval manuscript. The duplicators of the "mimeograph revolution," from which $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ stems, were a cheap and unruly offshoot of office-based exigencies.

When reading $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine online, are the only qualities of note those of accessibility, cult value, distraction, and degradation? These are, of course, qualities of the image rather than the text of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, which remains clearly legible. And yet, is the admittedly compressed GIF nothing but a decoy, an index, "a reminder of its former self" from a material text perspective? If the focus is on an absent "original"—a pristine filmic artifact, in Steyerl's case, or the remarkably precise material substantiation of a codex, as Dworkin has beautifully articulated—these readings of the digital object bear the weight of archival duplicity. However, might it be possible to imagine these objects beyond their analog iterations, as new editions with revised material codes that are as significant, complex, and layered as the substrates from which they derive? More readers have encountered $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine online than have ever handled print copies: what if we began by evaluating this reading

experience in its own right? Indeed, in the case of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, this

approach gains heightened urgency under the sign of "the resonating of the wordness of

language" (Bernstein "Language Sampler"). In an expanded field of poetics concerned

with material, form, and structure, it is hard to overlook the experience of the page in the

process of reading: especially if that page is on a screen. The surrounding fields of

bibliographic notes, suggested magazines, and residual print artifacts all amplify the

specificity of the reading experience, as mediated by the digital image. As the gap

between contemporary writing technologies and the paper-based networks of the

mimeograph revolution continues to widen, these mediating layers only gain greater

visibility to the reader and a depth of significance across medial formations.

Despite the fact that digital objects lose "the facture and material specificity of the

book or printed document as an object," Dworkin contends for an intensive reading of

precisely these bibliographic qualities in his account of *Eclipse* ("Hypermnesia" 85). As

though peering through the distortions introduced by digitization, Dworkin demonstrates

the ways in which even facsimile images direct the attentive reader to the ways in which

the paper-based material texts continue to signify. "Hypermnesia" is built around a series

of "instance[s] of the bibliographic information recorded by the archival scanning

protocols for Eclipse" (91). Variously, this bibliographic data reads Dracula into the

fangs of rusted staples in Lorenzo Thomas' *Dracula*; typographic resistance in Tina

Darragh's Avant-Garde typeface in *on the corner to off the corner*; periodicity and

binding techniques in Lyn Hejinian's *Gesualdo*; and the significance of self-flaps in a

1981 edition of Bernstein's *Disfrutes*. Each example is persuasive: indeed these facsimile

images record a deep array of textual codes that we may project into interpretations of the

archived ephemera digitized by *Eclipse*. However, reversing the direction of this analysis, we might focus not on the preservation of bibliographic traces etched by the original works but rather on the bibliographical specificities that the digital files introduce. In so doing, a reading of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* as a new edition within a little database that yields its own periodical and bibliographic codes may yet emerge.

In the powerful conclusion to "In Defense of the Poor Image," Steyerl sharpens this point: "The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities." This is not to deny a reading of the "facture and material specificity of the book or printed document as an object," but rather a call for the expansion of these specificities to include the real conditions of the objects radiating out from *Eclipse,* in the flexible networks of digital dispersion. This expansion is not without its difficulties. Textual scholars still need to argue for the very significance of material substrates in the literary arts, despite decades of editorial theory and material text study. Once this "facture" is fractured by new and unpredictable temporal and medial layers, each contingent to a host of technical protocols and viewing environments, the case is yet more difficult to make.

Boris Groys articulates this challenge in his article "From Image to Image File— And Back," which examines the non-identity of image files, oscillating between "invisible" code and visible image. Along with Groys we might say: "The digital image is a copy—but the event of its visualization is an original event, because the digital copy is a copy that has no visible original. That further means: A digital image, to be seen, should not be merely exhibited but staged, performed […] But to perform something is to

interpret it, to betray it, to distort it" (85). This is perhaps the best case for a curatorial

or performance-based method of digital scholarship, and is written into the ethos of the

deformance practices theorized by McGann, Drucker, Liu, and others. To take Groys'

argument out of context, in the time-honored deformance of scholarly criticism, we might

agree with the sentiment: "There is no such thing as a copy. In the world of digitalized

images, we are dealing only with originals" (91).

Reading Copy

Where *Textz.com* demonstrates the mutability between file formats, based on the textual

equivalence of numerical representation, *Eclipse* highlights a renewed specificity to each

file format in the republication of historical artifacts. In contrast to the stripped-down text

files of *Textz.com*, which emphasize algorithmic use, *Eclipse* almost exclusively presents

transcoded objects for human reading. A great irony in the site's organization concerns

the presentation of digitally re-set documents in PDF (portable document format)

presented by links that read "Download Reading Copy." These carefully retyped

documents sacrifice all traces of the material specificity of the books they transcribe in

order to present "clean" reading copies beyond the facsimile editions that pervade the

site. However, these files are also the only machine-readable texts in the collection; the

only artifact files that Google can easily index for its search algorithms. For whom is the

PDF reading copy presented? On *Eclipse*, each "Reading Copy" is an offering to either

an algorithmic reader or a human with no interest in the material text. Unlike the text-

utility of Google Books, the GIFs and JPGs of *Eclipse* remain unsearchable relics entirely

dependent on parsing by human readers. In particular, the "poor" GIF images like

those that constitute $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ online resist even the most advanced OCR

(optical character recognition) software that might convert the image into a machine-

readable text. This resistance mirrors the various resistances—to the "accessibility" of the

lyric voice, for example, or the easy parsing of clear meaning from a text—that were

articulated in the poetics of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine. Importantly,

$L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ has not been prepared for "Reading Copy" on *Eclipse.*

However, alongside the "read" links to issues of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$

magazine in GIF format, are corresponding links to "download" full issues of the

magazine for external use in PDF format.[21] These PDFs present the comforting stability

of a text that can be printed on 8.5" x 11" paper and read online or stored in a local folder

as "documents" rather than images. As I discuss in a coda to this chapter, the PDF is an

unusual format in that it was always planned as a postscript device for printing, which

only became popular as an archival format for digital media by a retained preference for

print-based reading habits. The ubiquity of the PDF produces its invisibility as a

mediating format. It is remarkable that despite the fact that JSTOR is built entirely upon

its delivery of searchable PDFs to the academy, there are practically no critical studies of

the PDF on its server (only Gitelman's recently published *Paper Knowledge* provides the

exception that proves the rule). In contrast to the GIF images of the early *Eclipse*, these

reading copies offer what Gitelman has isolated as a primary feature of the PDF format,

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[21] It may be taking interpretation too far to remark on the choice of the small circular character that sports each link, a kind of celestial body that is both representational glyph and embedded hyperlink. The eclipsing processes of hypertext described by Aarseth, Landow, and others have gone out of vogue for a number of years, but remain pertinent, especially in the 1.0 web environment of these little hand-coded databases.

"a measure of fixity because of the ways they simultaneously compare to printed

documents and contrast with other kinds of digital documents that seem less fixed—less

print-like—as they are used" (119). Unlike TXT, HTML, or PDF, it is exceptionally

unusual to "read" images on the internet, aside from the bold face captions of image

macros. Hosting archival copies of radical press books in GIF and JPG images is an

increasingly perverse endeavor, especially as the PDF expands its pervasive role as the

standard for all scanned documents that circulate online. In this way, the image files of

Eclipse combat the illusion of immediacy, reminding the reader that every page is a

newly transcoded file.

When John Warnock developed postscript and PDF for Adobe Systems in 1991,

the format was imagined as a solution to the transmissibility of the specifically

bibliographic qualities of the page: type, layout, and size. A history of Adobe Systems,

developer of the Portable Document Format, could be written through the bibliographic

proclivities of its inventor.[22] Aside from being part of the original genius set out of

Xerox, Warnock is an accomplished collector of Shakespearean texts (from early quartos

down through a range of ephemeral textual artifacts). His development of the PDF

standard was scripted to serve as a vehicle both for the "paperless office" of the early

nineties and as a way to deliver facsimile images of Shakespeare to the computer through

his short-lived CD-ROM company "Octavo." Unlike the codex, which is bound by

certain material limitations, the PDF will continue to develop under the proprietary

ownership of Adobe Systems. Despite the fact that the format's open standard is

unprofitable by necessity, Adobe may capitalize on more sophisticated articulations and

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[22] See especially the promotional monograph by Pamela Pfiffner, *Inside the Publishing Revolution: The Adobe Story.*

expanded features of the PDF, the TIFF file, and the Creative Suite of applications that

make these publications possible. Over time and responding to use patterns, the PDF has

increasingly skewed toward machine reading in both bureaucratic and archival systems.

With OCR embedded text, the PDF can present facsimile images and searchable text

through automated processes that put little significant demands on a human editor. This

capability facilitates everything from the JSTOR database to Google Books. Such big

data operations throw a little database premised on image files like *Eclipse* into sharp

relief. The entire site could be indexed for full searchability, rendered machine-readable

through OCR. However, the obscurity of the image file presents a more radical reading

protocol for human users who might linger between the bibliographic codes of digital

formats under the influence of paper artifacts under the influence of digital formats.

JPG: bill bissett, detail from *the lost angel mining co.* (Vancouver: Blewointmentpress, 1969)

MP3:   bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "2 awake in th red desert!!," *Awake in th Red Desert* (Vancouver: See/Hear Records, 1968)

Download: bissett, "2 awake in th red desert," *Awake in th Red Desert* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1968) [JPG]

The paired qualities of contingency and dispersion inform the theoretical inflections of

this chapter and shape the delivery of its content. Over the course of the chapter, I

consider two little databases that are likely to be more well known (*PennSound* and

UbuWeb) alongside two sites that are likely to be lesser known (*Mutant Sounds* and

SpokenWeb). Following these collections, I examine a remixing tool entitled MUPS,

developed by David (Jhave) Johnston, which introduces a new interface to a select set of

files hosted by the *PennSound* archive. This route is plotted to address a particular set of

MP3 files, but will only arrive at its destination by way of conclusion. Following this

trajectory, I argue, a user might come to an understanding of the MP3 file through a

series of online collections and the deformances they facilitate. By the same token, these

little databases may be understood through the audio files that circulate through them.

Along the way, the chapter gathers a compendium of already circulating objects via

text, image, sound, and movie files. Just as someone might "read" a magazine exclusively

for the pictures, I imagine someone might read this chapter exclusively for the

downloads.[23] My aim is to chart the passage of a specific constellation of audio materials

through several little databases as a scenario for objects hosted by online collections in

general. This chapter is premised on the principles of selection, navigation, description,

and distribution. The corresponding acts of interpretation, analysis, or critique may arise

within the reader of these pages and the objects radiating out from them.

　　　To address the sites featured here, this essay follows the thread of a particular

poet's output in an attempt to tease out a description of each online collection, how they

mediate the recordings they host, and how we might begin to understand contemporary

iterations of the audio database through this network. For the moment, it does not

particularly matter who the poet is, nor what the character of their output might be. I have

chosen bill bissett for a number of incidental, autobiographical, and medial reasons that

will be made clear throughout the chapter. However, from the onset, I must insist that this

essay could have just as easily followed any of a dozen other poets presented on a dozen

alternate platforms. Indeed, bill bissett is perhaps the least likely poet for scholarly

analysis, given the tenor of his poetics and the silence of academic writing on his output.

Simply put, it is useful to follow a thread. Not a *special* thread, as a symptomatic reading

or work of cultural critique might have it, but *any thread whatsoever*. Raveling a path

through the database is perhaps all that a narrative format like the essay might attempt: in

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[23] For example, before reading any further, the user may instead opt to download all materials presented in this chapter at the following link: http://dss-edit.com/live/vinyl/mp3/Amodern%20Complete%20LIVE%20VINYL%20MP3%20Collection,%20DSS%202014.zip

other words, the essay can be understood as a kind of test for trajectories through these

networks. Alongside the essay, we might add archival downloads, edited compilations, a

related scroll of images, sources, or hyperlinks. If there is anything to be learned from the

sites I examine, it is that any text may also contain a collection. This chapter offers one

such alternative to the little databases it analyzes.
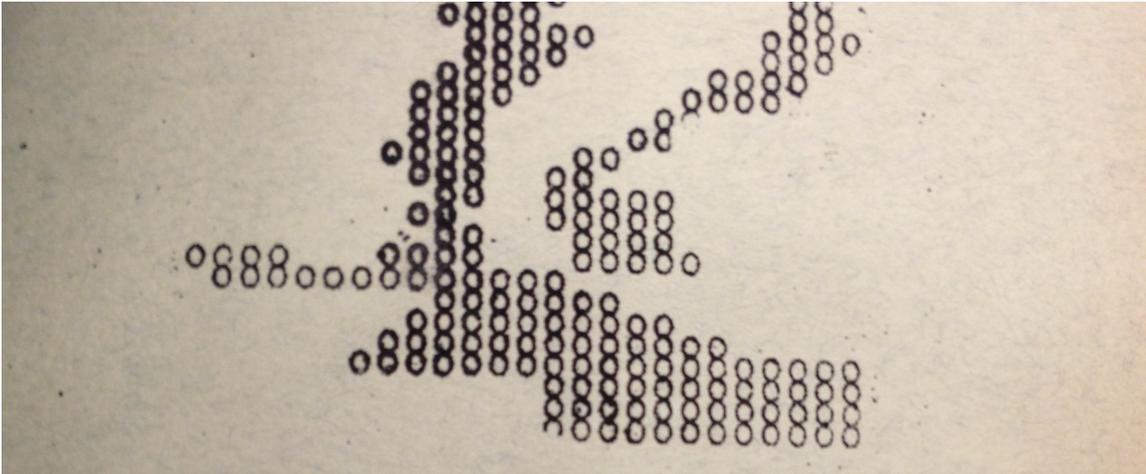
JPG: bissett, from *words in th fire* (Vancouver: Blewointment Press, 1972)

MP3:   bissett, "Circles in th Sun" from *lost angel mining company,* Sir George Williams University reading (1969)

Download: Contemporary Literary Criticism, bissett entries [ZIP: PDF, 2.5MB]

Additionally, while the bulk of this chapter follows the narrative trajectory of bill

bissett online, the appended coda investigates a related constellation of audio files from

the *PennSound* collection that have been transformed by their digitization. In this way,

the chapter executes both depth and surface levels of interpretation. Each sample in the

coda could warrant a similar excursus. Both modes of engagement are necessarily

incomplete: the depth model of the chapter is a contingent exercise following one set of

recordings through a series of transformative processes; while the surface model presents

a wider array of changes, and cannot linger too long on any single effect. By pairing

these operations, I contend that both methods might be productively employed together.

This approach addresses the circulation of digital objects in general, while also remaining

attentive to the particularity of any individual file. In contrast to the site-wide metrics and

sweeping archival practices examined in the previous two chapters, this chapter moves

toward the potential for a close reading of historical aesthetic artifacts as particular digital

files, each with their own modulations to contextual and material significance.

 As a supplementary gesture, each page in this chapter is headed by an image of a

page from a book by bissett for potential close reading. This formal exercise links the

chapter to the image-based collection at *Eclipse* on the one hand, while leading into the

network tracing of a film hosted on *UbuWeb* in the following chapter. The images ground

bissett's audio recordings in another material form. This relation of document to

recording is, by turns, overwhelmingly standardized and completely unutterable. In this

regard, I suggest, the audio recordings are not only connected to vinyl records and digital

files, but also to an expanded corpus of material texts and scripts. As an editorial premise,

I have constrained these excerpts to works that relate to bissett's poetics of recording and

media in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Each image may be incorporated into the

argument of this essay by the reader, however they may choose to do so. Further, an

audio recording accompanies each visual and paragraph, which may be heard in concert

with both the featured images and the chapter. If the internally standardized conventions

of bibliography and performance in bissett's output over the last thirty years have muted

the urgency of his poetics, perhaps these archival materials can be released anew – in

facsimile and recording, altered but indexed – as urgent documents for a rapidly changing

media environment in the new century.[24] Taken together, I have found that this expanded set of probes presents an argument for bissett as an important entry point into the study of digital transcoding.

Unexpected vectors and unimagined questions emerge when tracing the digital correlates to bissett's wildly experimental approach to analog media. However, a central query remains constant: what are the variable poetics that digital technologies introduce to a heterogeneous array of medial practices? My approach attempts to channel a mode of fidelity to the ways in which bissett's early work, in the words of Darren Wershler, "defies conventional notions of genre: collages are paintings and drawings bleed into poems turn into scores for reading and chant and performance generates writing bound into books published sometimes or not" ("Vertical Excess" 117). As a kind of parasite on bissett's web presence, the reader might consider this chapter to be the introduction to a new set of versions of these objects as digital files. The lines between preservation and republication are increasingly difficult to define. We might not consider a book transformed based on the library or archive that contains it. However, if the same book were reprinted by a new press, its bibliographic codes would be widely recognized as significantly revised. As is the case with the republication of printed matter, bissett's output acquires new bibliographic codes in each of the following sites of its reappearance. The little database, even masked as a chapter, also suggests that a highly significant mode of versioning is taking place in every instance.

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[24] See, for instance, Derek Beaulieu, *Seen of the Crime* (Montreal: Snare Books, 2011), 52: "Sadly in 2011 bissett's books and performance upon repeated exposure become the work of an overwrought maraca-weilding hippie who's overplayed LP is caught in a groove."

Variable Outliers
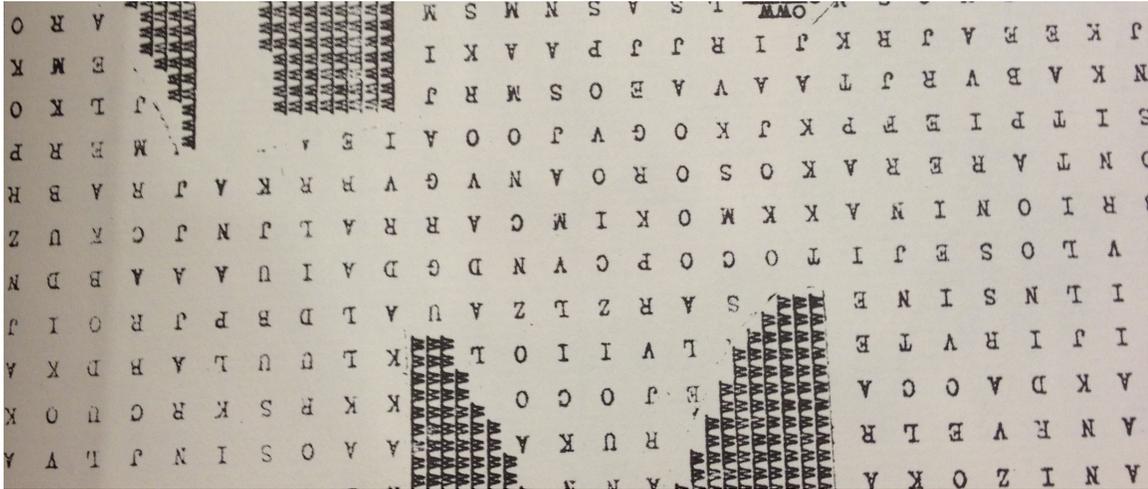
JPG: bissett, *Medicine My Mouth's on Fire* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1974)

MP3:   bissett, "Colours" (1966), *Past Eroticism: Canadian Sound Poetry of the 1960s* (Underwhich Audiographics No. 13, grOnk Final Series #6: 1986)

Download: *Past Eroticism: Canadian Sound Poetry in the 1960s,* UbuWeb [ZIP: MP3, 111MB]

Before launching into this contingent narrative, some brief remarks on alternate

trajectories of the chapter are in order. From a digital humanities perspective, each of the

following databases is primed for a range of analytic and metric tools for analysis. On the

most basic level, a number of textual analyses seem in order. For example, in sprawling

collections like *Mutant Sounds*, *UbuWeb*, or *PennSound*, a simple set of maps and graphs

that chart the geographic locations of recordings would be of interest. Through these data

sets, we might query the geographic tendencies of little databases. Where are most

recordings made, why are specific locations best represented in these collections, and

how might prominent outliers speak to these trends? The answers to these questions may

indeed produce compelling results. Perhaps there is a bump for recordings from Colorado

given the Jack Kerouac School for Disembodied Poetics' predilection for archiving. Or,

we might imagine the role that New York City plays in the distribution of cultural

capital even in allegedly horizontal online archives. More obviously, a great deal of

recordings are made in Philadelphia, given the documentary proclivities of the Kelly

Writers House and the networks of affiliation with readings series' in the city more

broadly. A periodical reading might chart the exponential growth, stagnation, or decline

of these collections. A cultural reading might chart the representations of gender, race, or

class throughout each collection. However, each of these questions would have to be

plotted along the lines of a predetermined path. The metrics would only serve to confirm

what a knowledgeable user should already know: Philadelphia is over-represented in

poetry readings; New York City maintains its cultural capital in recordings, even in its

hosting of Bay Area poets; the distribution of gender, race, and class skews heavily

toward white male readers of relative privilege; collections grow, stagnate, and ultimately

cease operations. This chapter does not seek to confirm or dispute these matters of fact.

There are systemic problems in these datasets, which extend far beyond the metrics of

digital humanities. If anything, the selection of bissett—famously mistaken by Jack

Kerouac as "an Indian boy, Bissett, or Bissonette"—often derelict, disregarded by the

poetic present, dislocated in various sites across Canada, recorded variously as rock

singer, concrete poet, or chanting artist, is highlighted for his variable outlier status (82).

In another, more technical direction, a recent series of research projects has

questioned how the digital humanities might begin to analyze digital audio collections.

The most prominent of these is the HiPSTAS project spearheaded by Tanya Clement

using ARLO software developed by David Tcheng. Rather than analyze metadata like

location, date, or author embedded in sound collections, this project aims to work with

the data of sound itself. The ARLO interface allows researchers to search and collate

information that uses aggregate sound signatures as search queries. Kenneth Sherwood

sums up the process succinctly: "At a simplified level, ARLO works by producing

images of the audio spectra and then comparing these visualized time-slices with others

across a range of pre-selected audio files" ("Distanced Sounding"). Although ARLO was

originally developed to aid ornithological research, poetry scholars have adopted the

software to experiment with how we might investigate sound on its own terms.

Experiments are emerging: Chris Mustazza discerns the difference between aluminum

records and magnetic tapes; Eric Rettberg has isolated patterns of laughter; Sherwood is

analyzing variant recordings of poems.[25] Its possibilities are myriad. For example,

accurate speech-to-text recognition could open new pathways of use, and a more robust

technical vocabulary for analyzing tenor and pitch could aid in the study of aural

practices in poetry. While the potentials in this approach are immensely promising,

practical applications toward the advancement of scholarship seem a long way off, still.

This chapter is more modest in its historiographical aims. Rather than test new software

for the processing of sound collections, I aim to chart contemporary effects upon a

singular set of files alongside current platforms for reconfiguring the little database as it

stands. This is not to deny the promise of computational approaches to the collection as a

whole. Instead, this chapter articulates a poetics for both the circulation of sound in the

recent past, and the recomposition of the collection as a poetic project today.

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[25] See Mustazza's "Clipping" commentary series on *Jacket2*:
https://jacket2.org/commentary/clipping

Mutant Sounds

JPG: bissett, back cover detail from *th wind up tongue* (Vancouver: Blewointmentpress, 1976)

MP3: bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "heard ya tellin*," Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: [Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue* (Toronto: Underwich Editions, 1978) [PDF, 51MB]](#)

The incident that catalyzed my interest in writing about bissett occurred six years ago, when I stumbled upon a relatively unnoticed archival release through a little database called *Mutant Sounds*. In the heyday of the music blog, *Mutant Sounds* delivered an incredible array of rare and obscure albums, primarily ripped from out of print vinyl LPs, free for download. Founded in 2007, the *Mutant Sounds* blogspot had amassed over 3,000 posted releases in five years. Many were so rare that only the most devoted, and wealthiest, crate diggers might have ever heard their sounds otherwise. The reader might note that *UbuWeb* hosts just under 1,000 entries in the "sound" subsection of the site and *PennSound* features approximately 600 author entries. While these pages most often host multiple sets of recordings per entry, the volume is roughly comparable to the *Mutant Sounds* inventory. Given the cultural support and academic prominence of *PennSound* and *UbuWeb*, it's all the more remarkable that *Mutant Sounds* – a free blog platform

periodically releasing download links enabled by free filesharing servers – might rival

these collections as one of the great distribution channels (or, more boldly, archival

collections) for obscure experimental recordings from the last half-century. At least, it

may have been recognized as such by its devoted core of users. However, these

qualifications have become moot: the collection disappeared from the internet just as

suddenly as it had once appeared.
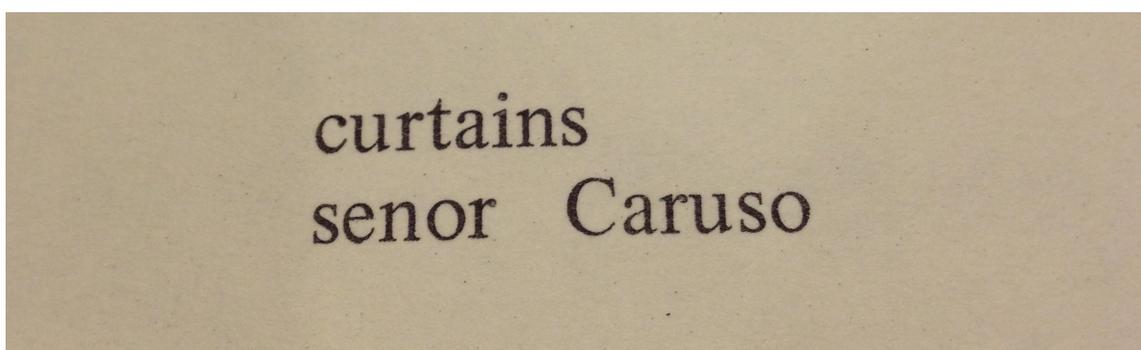
JPG: bissett, "the caruso poem," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

MP3:   bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "an ode to d a levy," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: Radio program featuring bill bissett, Robert Creeley Tapes, PennSound (c. 1978) [MP3]

In the spring of 2013, the website had just recently ceased operations. After six

years of reissuing out of print albums on a (slightly misinformed) "notice-and-takedown"

principle of online copyright law, a greater current led by the RIAA and the scandalous

failure of MegaUpload brought about the site's demise. RapidShare, the file locker of

choice for *Mutant Sounds,* had deleted most files that the site had uploaded to its server in

an effort to avoid the same fate as Kim Dotcom.[26] This process was accelerated by the

emergence of a range of streaming platforms, from Pandora to Spotify, as well as a few

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[26] See Bryan Gruley, David Fickling, and Cornelius Rahn, "Kim Dotcom, Pirate King," http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-02-15/kim-dotcom-pirate-king

musicians devoted to dismantling the site. Currently, the *Mutant Sounds* catalog of thousands of painstakingly digitized recordings lies in the obscurity of digital ruin. The site proves two important points that *UbuWeb* founder Kenneth Goldsmith has often repeated over the last ten years: first, that anyone could have made such a collection given the abundance of free resources and relative internet neutrality of the past two decades; and second, that on any given day it could all simply disappear.[27] We might add two additional points: one, that this type of collection is increasingly unlikely to emerge; and two, that the DIY internet of the nineties and aughts is quickly disappearing.

e m p t y

t r a c k
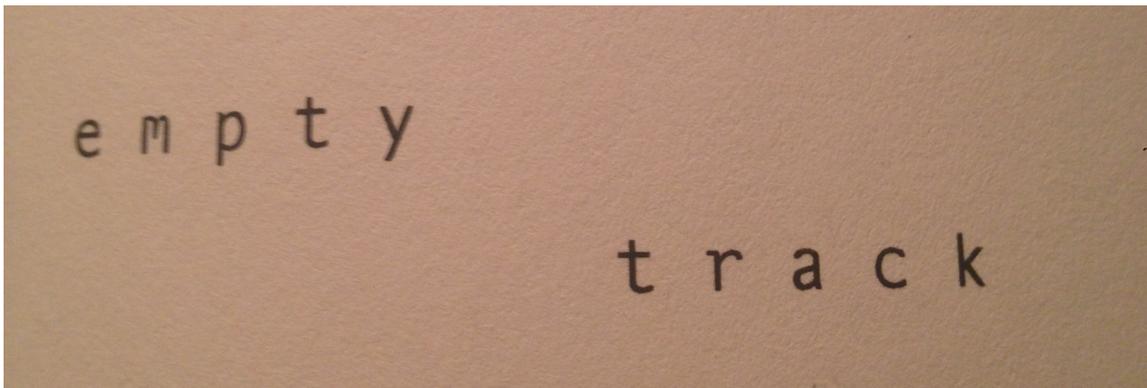
JPG:	bissett, from *RUSH: what fuckan theory: a study uv language* (Toronto: Gronk Press, 1971 / BookThug, 2012)
MP3:	bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "is yr car too soft for th roads," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: Maurice Embra, *Strange Gray Day This,* bill bissett documentary (1964) [ZIP: MP4, 110MB]

On a roundtable hosted by *The Awl* and aptly titled "The Rise and Fall of the Obscure Music Download Blog," *Mutant Sounds* editor Eric Lumbleau addresses the unique moment of these 'sharity' sites, active primarily from 2004 until 2012.

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[27] For one example of these points, see Kenneth Goldsmith, "*UbuWeb* at 15 Years: An Overview," http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/*UbuWeb*-at-15-years-an-overview/

Summarizing the purpose of the *Mutant Sounds* collection for the Free Music

Archive, the editors characterize their project as a campaign for "enlightening the masses

to elusive musical esoterica buried beneath canned historical narratives and induced

cultural amnesia" (np).[28] The ideological thrust of the collection – much like *UbuWeb*

and *PennSound* – was to destabilize the historical narrative by distributing an alternate

canon far and wide. In particular, *Mutant Sounds* was plotted to combat the accepted

progression from rock to punk to post punk. A brief stroll through their posts quickly

presents a much stranger and far more diverse sense of experimental music from the mid-

sixties to the present. Or rather, one might hear that argument if the collection were still

intact. Instead, today's user will encounter only the contexts, descriptions, and images of

albums one might never find elsewhere. Perhaps these remnants of the site may still

function like the Nurse With Wound list that guided the collection itself: as a series of

signposts for further exploration.[29] In the enclosed ZIP file, the reader may download the

complete remnants of the site.

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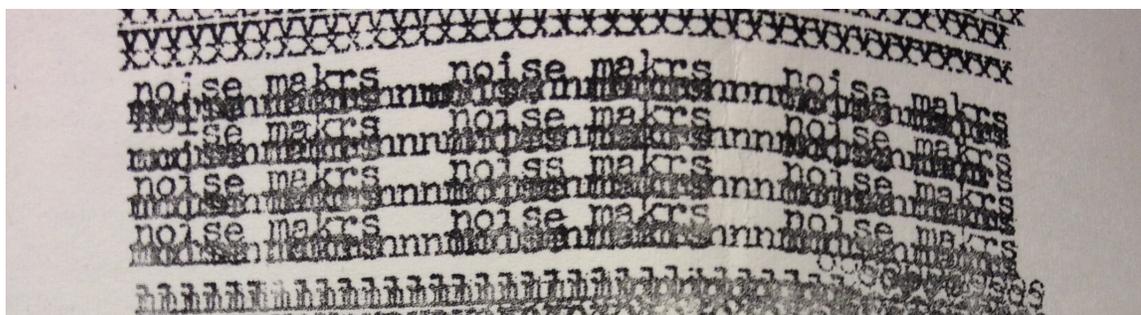
[28] Apart from the description, this page is similarly defunct. *Free Music Archive,*
http://freemusicarchive.org/curator/Mutant_Sounds/

[29] "To collectors of unusual music the Nurse With Wound List is legendary. [...] The NWW List
covers the period from the late 1960s to 1980 when serious hybrids of avantgarde and popular
music first became prevalent. It also covers a wide range of underground musical styles including
krautrock, free jazz (improv), avantgarde classical, electronic, industrial, folk, anarcho-punk,
proto-punk, no wave, library music, and many more uncategorizable." TGK, "The Nurse With
Wound List," http://nwwlist.org/

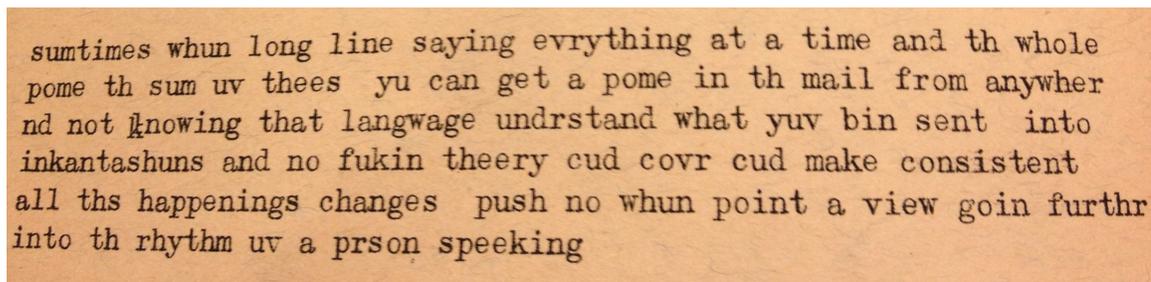JPG: bissett, from *s th story i to: trew adventure* (Vancouver: Blewointmentpress, 1970)

MP3: bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "she still and curling," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: [Mutant Sounds HTML Archive (2014) [ZIP: HTML, 140MB]](#)

Within this catalogue, on February 1st, 2008, *Mutant Sounds* released a digital

version of the singular album, *Awake in th Red Desert*, recorded by bill bissett and th

Mandan Massacre in 1968. At the time, I ran a pseudo-anonymous blog in between audio

engineering sessions for *PennSound,* where I had recently become an editor. I

downloaded the album immediately, as part of a habitual requisition session among the

various music blogs I followed. Before the "filter bubble" of social media encapsulated

the navigable internet, these sessions were a mode of discovery within an enigmatic and

unpredictable network. Like many of the untold numbers of collectors exploiting the

releases shared by *Mutant Sounds*, my private collection grew within the contours of my

own interests. Unlike the stable collections of *PennSound*, *UbuWeb*, or *SpokenWeb*, these

releases came to exist only as a dispersed set of objects on hard drives accumulating

heterogeneous materials in unknowable configurations. In my own collection, *Awake in*

th Red Desert arrived as a RAR archive file. The decompressed folder was saved to my

general "Music Library" folder and the RAR file was discarded. Duplicate copies of the

album were placed in two adjacent folders: the first, for potential upload to *PennSound*;

the second, in a database structured for the collaborative *Endless Nameless* project I

published with James Hoff at the time. *Endless Nameless* organized digital objects by

their original publishers to produce a series of limited edition hard drives. In this instance,

I made a new folder entitled "See/Hear Records." I rechart this activity as it is quickly

disappearing in an era of cloud listening and authorized in-application purchases.[30]

The provenance of other iterations, within other users' collections, is as variable as the

unknown numbers of downloaders.


```
sumtimes whun long line saying evrything at a time and th whole
pome th sum uv thees  yu can get a pome in th mail from anywher
nd not knowing that langwage undrstand what yuv bin sent  into
inkantashuns and no fukin theery cud covr cud make consistent
all ths happenings changes  push no whun point a view goin furthr
into th rhythm uv a prson speeking
```

JPG: bissett, from *words in th fire* (1972)

MP3: bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "now according to paragraph C," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: bill bissett and th mandan massacre, *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968) [ZIP: MP3, 69MB]

With each new posting to *Mutant Sounds*, the editors wrote a short text. The

release comments accompanying bissett's record bear reproducing in full:[31]

Originally released circa 1968 in an edition of 500 copies, the lunacy contained within the grooves of this Canadian mindfuck is perched somewhere midway between the outwardly bound trajectories of their contemporaries in both The Nihilist Spasm Band and Intersystems, with intuitive and screw-loose outsider psych improv moves crashing headlong into lividly blurted sound poetry in a way that also calls to mind the touched-in-the-head maneuvers of Fire & Ice, Ltd (not to mention a raft of contempo freak folk practitioners...). Bissett is far better known as a poet (phonetische and otherwise) than musician and his spew here is what really tugs this in the direction of the aforementioned head cases in Intersystems. This is taken from the out of print CD reissue of several years back

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[30] Alternatively, it should be noted that in the more radical variant, this activity has migrated to private torrent and file sharing communities like What.cd or the still-active Soulseek P2P platform.

[31] With apologies to *Amodern* editor Darren Wershler's *10 Out Of 10*, though I didn't have to substitute for any of these words. See *Mutant Sounds,* "BILL BISSETT & TH MANDAN MASSACRE-AWAKE IN TH RED DESERT, LP, 1968, CANADA," http://mutant-sounds.blogspot.com/2008/02/bill-bissett-th-mandan-massacre-awake.html

and features three 90's era bonus cuts by Bissett and some other character that are both gruesomely awful and woefully out of place in this context, though that said, this CD sounds a good bit better than my rather battered original vinyl...

The post fits the generic conventions of the *Mutant Sounds* approach to distribution. Locating bissett within the context of the site's postings devoted to "screw-loose outsider psych improv," jangly electronic post-punk, and damaged noise albums, every offering is related to the collection as a whole. The text bespeaks the importance that *Mutant Sounds* placed in its well-earned outsider status, as one of the most extreme sources for historical records online. The collection is rewritten with each new inclusion. Not only in synchronic relation to Canadian experimental music (The Nihilist Spasm Band and Intersystems), but also to a wide range of albums hosted on the site. Much could be gathered today, for example, by plugging these references into a topic-modeling network diagram. Of course, the position of the album as charted by *Mutant Sounds* produces a dramatically different register than the presses with which—and poets with whom—even this recorded work is most often associated. Nevertheless, with bibliographic attention to release dates, edition numbers, and the technical process of the digitization, the text transmits the essential components of archival metadata.

JPG: bissett, detail from *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

MP3:   bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "fires in th tempul," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: Free Music Archive, Bill Bissett: Pleonasm Mix (2010) [ZIP: MP3, 64MB]

Aside from the adjacent domain of experimental music, one primary difference from the collections that follow is that *Mutant Sounds* exclusively presented download links to full albums for external use. I'll return to this point as it pertains to the other sites discussed, but for now, we might sketch the general character of this distribution method. Each blog post was linked to a full album download. These downloads were typically delivered as RAR or ZIP files that compressed a folder containing individual tracks, along with extremely lo-fi images of album artwork. The archive was a conduit for personal use, with the emphasis exclusively placed on sound. In the case of *Awake in th Red Desert*, this meant the exclusion of the "recorded book" that was originally distributed with the album by See/Hear Records. In this way, the fundamental purpose of the original publication – relating the printed page to the audio recording – has been excised from the digital release. This action is at the heart of the formlessness of the MP3. As Jonathan Sterne has noted: "at the psychoacoustic level as well as the industrial level, the MP3 is designed for promiscuity" ("The Mp3" 836). Put differently, the sustained attention of "reading along" is counterintuitive to a format built for distracted listening and streamlined distribution. Recordings of poetry readings in the MP3, as we'll see, typically present an alternative to these popular uses of music online. Nevertheless, after download, the MP3 files were at the user's disposal in their own private collection, ready to be played on any platform in any number of circumstances.

PennSound

JPG: bissett, from *the lost angel mining co.* (1969)

MP3:   bissett, "Air To The Bells/The Face In The Moon" (1967) from *Past Eroticism* (1986)

Download: bpNichol, ed. *The Cosmic Chef: An Evening of Concrete* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1970); derek beaulieu ed. (Visual Writing /ubu Editions, 2011) [PDF, 63MB]

When I first listened to the files, as the reader of this chapter is advised to do, I quickly recognized the singular contribution that *Awake in th Red Desert* might be heard to have made within the archive of countercultural poetics in the 1960s. I moved quickly to get selections from the album up on *PennSound*, where they might be distributed to a very different community of listeners. As a first step, I wrote to bissett directly for permission. In an obligatory note on copyright, *PennSound* – unlike *Mutant Sounds* – operates as a strictly permissions-based platform. Bissett responded with characteristic charm and inimitable style: "yes xcellent if yu want 2 put seleksyuns from awake in th red desert on *PennSound* that wud b awesum[.]" To augment selections from *Awake in th Red Desert*, I decided to "segment" a full-length reading bissett gave at the Bowery Poetry Club in

2006.[32] Both recordings were hosted with embedded links to individual MP3 files. For some time, this was the extent of *PennSound*'s bill bissett collection. Recently, the page has accumulated a movie recording of the 2012 Book Thug launch of its republication of *Rush: What Fuckan Theory* as well as a radio program recording from around 1978 through the Robert Creeley collection.[33] On another *PennSound* page, the user may also find a bissett track from the *Carnivocal: Celebration of Sound Poetry* album from 2004. From the Bowery Poetry Club back to See/Hear Records, the situation of *Awake in the Red Desert* on *PennSound* reveals myriad differences from the original upload.

it is raging th sound thru th throat
i dont know what ium typing
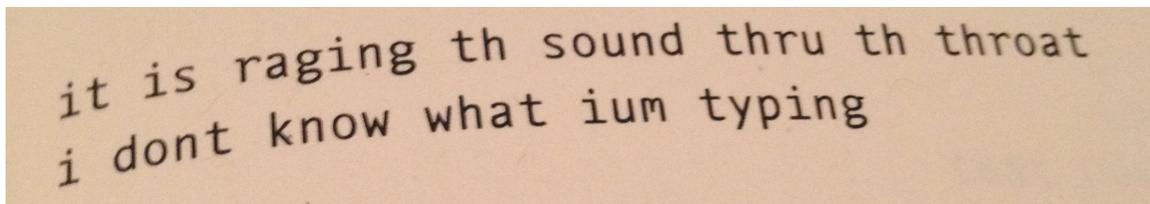
JPG: bissett, from *RUSH: what fuckan theory* (1971/2012)

MP3:   bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "my mouths on fire," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: bissett Reading at the Bowery Club as part of the Segue Reading Series (New York: 2006) [ZIP: MP3, 31MB]

While both *Mutant Sounds* and *PennSound* hosted precisely the same bissett MP3 files – aside from the altered ID3 tags – the textual conditions of these two iterations could not be more different. In "Making Audio Visible: the Lessons of Visual Language for the Textualization of Sound," Bernstein maintains that "the sound file exists not as a pure acoustic or sound event – an oral or performative event outside textuality – but as a

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[32] That is, create individual MP3 files for each poem recited in a full-length reading. For more on this process, and its importance to the collection, see *PennSound*, "*PennSound* Manifesto," http://writing.upenn.edu/*PennSound*/manifesto.php

[33] See *PennSound*, "bill bissett," http://writing.upenn.edu/*PennSound*/x/bissett.php

textual condition, mediated by its visual marking, its bibliographic codes, and the

tagging we give to it to mark what we consider of semantic significance" (284). An

additional aspect of this condition, as theorized by Jerome McGann, is the social text. In

other words, a more nebulous array of factors including reception, circulation, and

context also inflect an object's textual condition. To repost is to transform: not

superficially, but at the most basic levels of a work's significance. Here, we might note

the immediate transformation from the lyrical "spew" accompanying "screw-loose

outsider psych improv" in the music-based collection at *Mutant Sounds* to the

institutional stamp of innovative poetry on *PennSound*. Where *PennSound* focuses on

individual MP3s of poems and complete readings, *Mutant Sounds* releases only full

album collections, previously published by a broad smattering of labels. Both sites push

against canonical formations in their own way: *Mutant Sounds* against the tidy lineages

of popular music, *PennSound* against the tidy lineages of mainstream poetry. A

confluence of these genres inheres in the work of bissett. *Awake in th Red Desert* works

in both directions, and each site transforms the historical recording in its own way, for its

own listeners. If, as Steve McCaffery has argued in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, bissett's

pioneering approach to sound poetry with Th Mandan Massacre was "significant in

pushing poetic composition into the communal domain," we might wonder in what

domain it exists today (17).
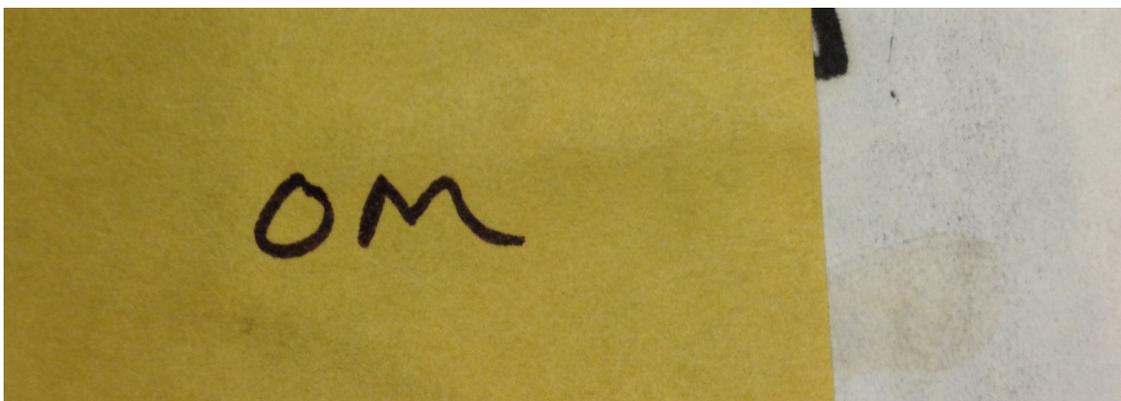
JPG: bissett, from *Sunday work?* (Vancouver: Blewointmentpress, 1969)

MP3:   bissett, "5. And that light is in thee is in thee and," SGWU (1969)

Download: [bill bissett and bpNichol Interview with Phillis Webb (1968) [ZIP: MP4, 67MB]](#)

Despite their contrasting contexts, these two sound-based sites share a great deal in common. Like *Mutant Sounds*, the *PennSound* collection periodically releases audio recordings via a highly compressed MP3 audio format that typically remediates original cassettes, reel-to-reel tapes, vinyl records, and radio broadcasts. Both collections grow incrementally with each new digitized release, from a full series to an incidental recording. Primarily delivering files compressed to just 128 kilobytes per second, the MP3 actually prevents *PennSound* from receiving official recognition as a poetry recording *archive*.[34] Where other projects might acquire certain types of funding for digital archives hosting "lossless" formats like WAV or FLAC, *PennSound*'s emphasis on speedy distribution precludes it from archival classifications, despite the range and depth of its collection. Instead, like *Mutant Sounds*, the *PennSound* collection is built for user downloads. This approach reflects the uncertain future of the internet when the

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[34] Even among internet pirates, this is a substandard data rate. See comment streams on Pirate Bay for complaints about anything released in less than 320kbps.

collection was founded by Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis in 2003. Even then, the

MP3 offered a better alternative to the proprietary Real Audio format. Given its

portability and accessibility, the MP3 remains the most popular format for audio

distribution online. Widely circulated arguments on the distraction inherent to the MP3

are weakened by the "close listening" techniques that poetry generically warrants. The

recordings at *PennSound* earn this attention in contexts as diverse as private academic

research, university classrooms, and MOOC discussion boards. In remarks on the use of

its thousands of poetry recordings, Filreis notes that the files have been downloaded by

hundreds of millions of users. More promiscuously, we might imagine a million new

versions across blog posts, syllabi, remixes, and other uses of the files.

UbuWeb
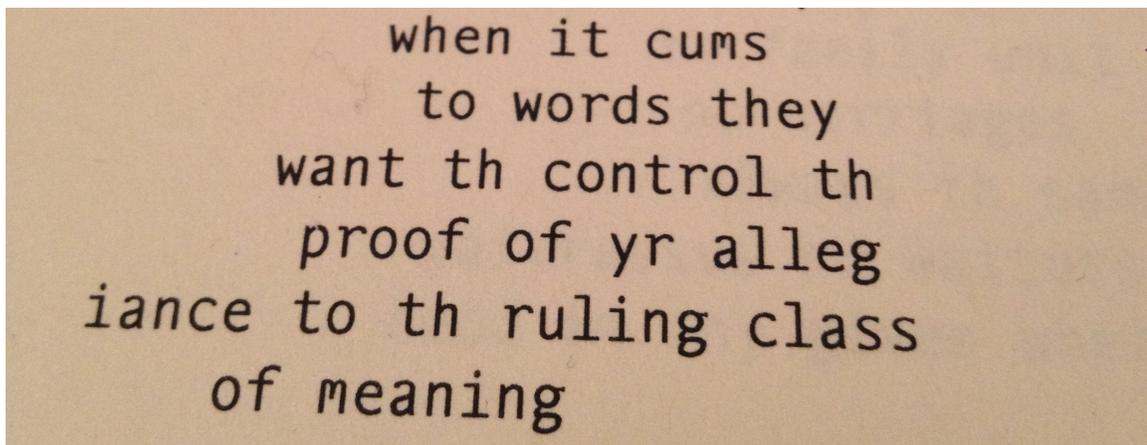
JPG: bissett, from *RUSH: what fuckan theory* (1971/2012)

MP3:   bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "Arbutus garden apts 6 p m," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: The Chemical Brothers, *We Are the Night* (New York: Astralwerks, 2007) [ZIP: MP3, 139MB]

Although *Awake in th Red Desert* is not hosted on *UbuWeb*, among the twelve hits for the string "bill bissett" on the site, there are two illuminating mentions of the album: both citations are from discographies. The first, compiled by Michael Gibb and originally included in the remarkable *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, is titled "Sound Poetry: A Historical Discography." The second, compiled by Dan Lander and Micah Lexier for *Sound By Artists* is titled "A Discography of Recorded Work by Artists." Of course, bissett is both poet and artist. However, the difference between the two – paired with the generic equivalence played out across the site – clearly bespeaks an entirely new condition for hearing bissett's album. *UbuWeb* offers a less focused conjuncture, neither the musical archeology of *Mutant Sounds*, nor the poetry reading compendium of *PennSound*. Here the work joins with a wide range of objects beyond classification: outsider rants, conceptual art, structural film, concrete poetry, everything that might be read under the sign of the avant-garde, broadly construed. Other hits for "bissett" include articles by derek beaulieu and Steve McCaffery, a few concrete poems featured in various collections, bpNichol's homage sound poem "Bill Bissett's Lullaby" from *Motherlove* (1968), and bissett's track "The Mountain Lake." The last of these was recorded with guitar, tape, and "flux" as a contribution to an audio supplement to the 1984 sound poetry issue of *The Capilano Review*.[35] Gathering this scattered assemblage of hits for bissett across the various sections of the site delivers a collection marked by the same intermedial disregard that characterizes the internet at large.

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[35] For all of the above and more, search http://ubu.com for "bissett."
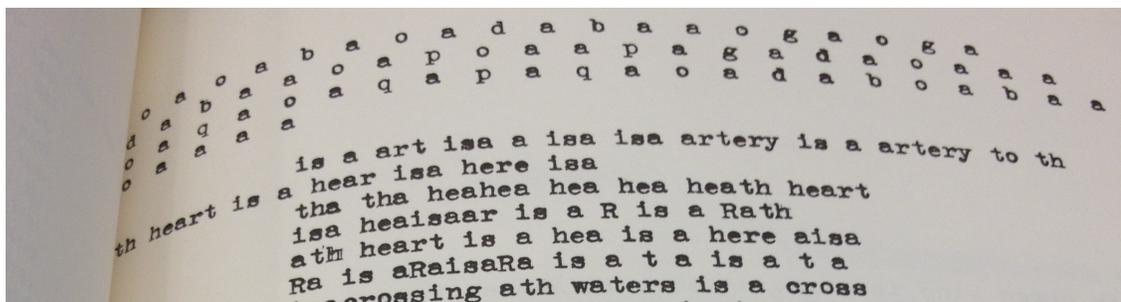
JPG: bissett, "o a b a," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

MP3:   bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "o a b a," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: [*The Capilano Review*, no. 31, Sound Poetry (1984) [ZIP: MP3 14MB]](#)

However, the most interesting audio work by bissett on *UbuWeb* does not appear

in any of the search results. Clicking through the extensive sound section of the site, a

user might stumble upon the entry for *Past Eroticism: Canadian Sound Poetry in the*

1960s. The page hosting this digitized cassette simply breaks the audio into two MP3

files – Side A and Side B – in a technically convenient and tellingly remediated fashion.

Aside from the title, there is no searchable text on the page. Instead, a JPG scan of the

liner notes displays: "bill bissett (recorded 9/28/66* & 6/26/67**) / 7. Air To The

Bells/The Face In The Moon** / 8. Valley Dancers* / 9. Colours*." These three tracks

immediately predate *Awake in Th Red Desert*, and anticipate that album's generic

freedom at the intersection of poetry, chant, song, and music. All three have been

segmented for the first time for this page. Compared to the relatively metadata-scarce

PennSound, the *UbuWeb* distribution of the MP3 file is even further stripped of context:

"nude media" in Goldsmith's terms.[36] And yet, a truly interdisciplinary reading of the

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[36] "In thinking about the way that *UbuWeb* (and many other types of file sharing systems)
distribute their warez, I've come up with a term: *nude media*. What I mean by this is that once,
say, an MP3 file is downloaded from the context of a site such as *UbuWeb*, it's free or naked,

bissett files emerges through *UbuWeb*. If the files themselves carry little information,

the context of their dispersion supports a robust network for an array of avant-garde

productions in poetry, dance, sound, film, essays, radio, posters, and so on. All of this is

compiled and released together with the happenstance bricolage of an assemblage

magazine. Here, the bissett tracks merge with an undifferentiated conflux of historical

and contemporary practices, dislocated from the original social texts of the work. By

betraying all contexts, *UbuWeb* creates a digital environment of utmost fidelity to the

genre-blending work bissett set out to record.

SpokenWeb

the
quick
brown
fox
jumpd
ovur
the
lazy
dog

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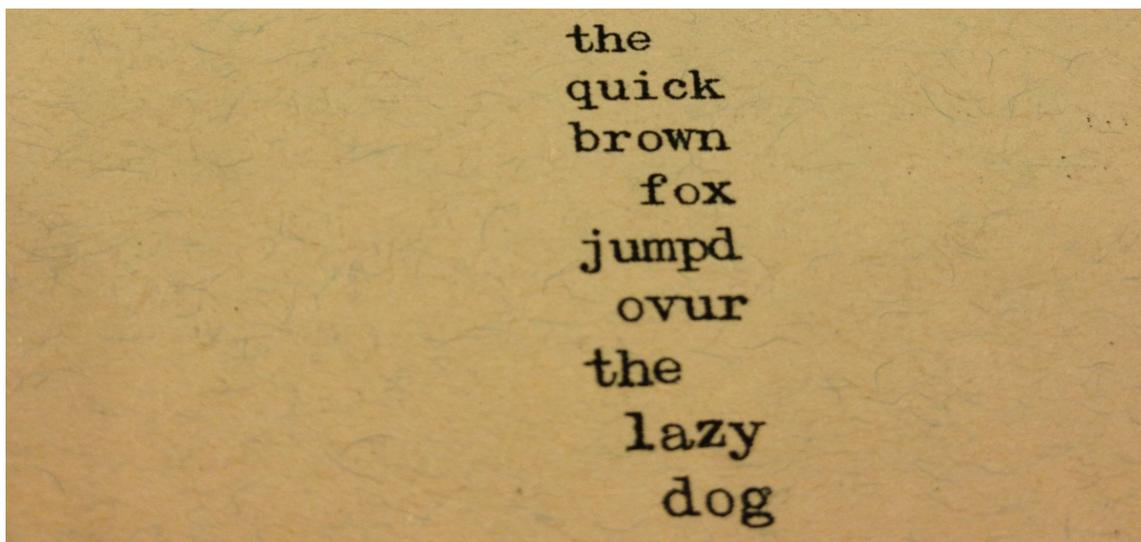
stripped bare of the normative external signifiers that tend to give as much meaning to an artwork as the contents of the artwork itself. Completely detached from shopping impulses, unadorned with neither branding nor scholarly liner notes, emanating from no authoritative source, the consumer of these objects is left with only the wine, not the bottles. Thrown into open peer-to-peer distribution systems, nude media files often lose even their historical significance and molt into free-floating sound works, travelling in circles that they would not normally reach if clad in their conventional clothing." Goldsmith, "The Bride Stripped Bare: Getting Naked with Nude Media," http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/nude.html

JPG: bissett, from *words in th fire* (1972)

MP3: bill bissett & th mandan massacre, "and th green wind," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: [bill bissett Tracks from the *Past Eroticism* Cassette (1986) [ZIP: MP3, 19MB]](#)

It is in relation to these three sites that I began to consider bissett's performance in 1969 at Sir George Williams University (SGWU), as presented on the *SpokenWeb* digital poetry archive site. Recorded just one year after the release of *Awake in th Red Desert*, the SGWU reading draws from the same body of work that bissett deploys in his previous "recorded book." As *SpokenWeb* tells us, with superb bibliographic attention, this reading by bissett features poems to be published in *Nobody Owns th Earth* (Toronto: House of Anasi Press, 1971); *the lost angel mining co.* (Vancouver: Blew Ointment Press, 1969); and *OF TH LAND DIVINE SERVICE* (Toronto: Weed/Flower Press, 1968). This last title is the organizing principle of the SGWU reading. It is also the only book released by bissett in the same year as *Awake in th Red Desert*. While the tape cuts off the opening, we can safely assume bissett begins with the first two poems *OF TH LAND DIVINE SERVICE*, given the pattern of works to follow: namely, poems "3," "4," and a variation of "5" in the cycle, followed by intermittent works from across the book and concluded with "moss song," the final poem from *OF TH LAND DIVINE SERVICE*. However, the beginning and the end of the reading are both cut off. The failure of the archive here perfectly performs the play of *in media res* that bissett's work demands. Sterne extends this aspect of the audio collection in his article "The Preservation Paradox in Digital Audio," insisting that "sound recording is an extension of ephemerality, not its undoing" (58). Through no fault of the *SpokenWeb* editors, the lapse in the original mobile reel-to-

reel tape recording renders the attentive metadata approach to this particular reading

necessarily incomplete. There is no introduction to the reading, nor is there any

commentary from the audience that we might analyze.[37] The technical flaws in the reel-

to-reel recording match perfectly with the aesthetics of assemblage, trans-genre

performance, and intermedial nature of bissett's poetics. In other words, to deform a track

from Wershler, "bissett's experiments on poetic excess yield highly specific social,

historical and technological information about the shape and boundaries of what

constitutes the permissible" in the contemporary audio archive ("Vertical Excess" 118).

In this way, finally arriving at *SpokenWeb*, bissett delivers a fascinating case for practices

that operate at the limits of the little database.
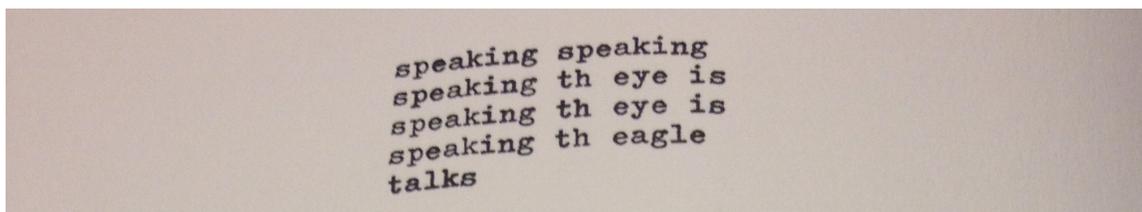
JPG: bissett, "Tarzan Collage" from *Medicine My Mouths on Fire* (1974)

MP3:   bissett, "Tarzan Collage," SGWU (1969)

Download: bissett, Complete Segmented Reading at the SGWU Poetry Series (1969) [ZIP: MP3, 97MB]

It's useful to query these limits of the database with regard to *SpokenWeb*, if only

because the collection is itself so *attentive* to its materials. Designed to investigate "the

features that will be the most conducive to scholarly engagement with recorded poetry

recitation and performance," *SpokenWeb* offers "an interactive and nuanced tool that

allows for deeper critical engagement with literary recordings" ("About *SpokenWeb*").

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[37] Jason Camlot has demonstrated the value of these paratextual components of the reading in his article on the *SpokenWeb* collection. See Camlot, "The Sound of Canadian Modernisms," 26-59.

Deeper, one might hope, than the formal qualities that structure the interpretive

practices applied to sprawling MP3 repositories like *PennSound*. This depth model is

characterized by the site's reflexivity, including sections that feature research

perspectives, audio analysis and sound visualization resources, ongoing events and blog

posts, oral literary histories, and commentary on other audio collections online. Further,

all of these features are concentrated on a set of recordings from a single reading series

held at SGWU between 1965 and 1974. Each reading is in turn broken down with

introductions, bibliographies, transcripts, sources, and an array of metadata on the

recording. Annie Murray and Jared Wiercinski have extensively charted the development

of these features of the site: their papers on the subject are essential reading for the future

of audio studies on the internet.[38] This essay, on the other hand, is prepared to relate the

output of a single recording within the *SpokenWeb* audio collection to a selection of

related files hosted by *Mutant Sounds*, *PennSound*, and *UbuWeb*.
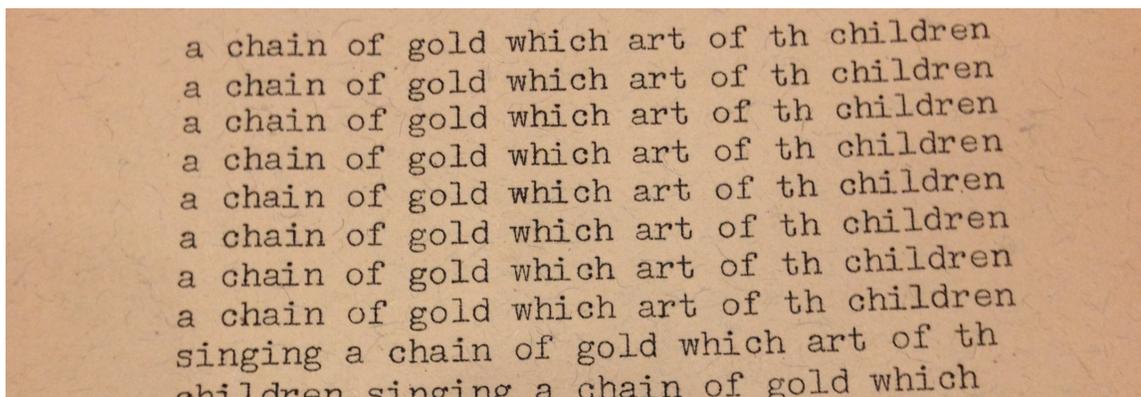
JPG: bissett, "4: a chain of gold which art of th children," *OF TH LAND DIVINE SERVICE*
(Toronto: Weed/Flower Press, 1968)

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[38] See Annie Murray and Jared Wiercinski, "A Design Methodology for Web Based Sound
Archives," *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 8 (2014); and Murray and Wiercinski, "Looking
at archival sound: visual features of a spoken word archive's web interface that enhance the
listening experience," *First Monday* 17(4), April 2012.

MP3:   bissett, "4: a chain of gold which art of th children," SGWU (1969)

Download: Complete bill bissett IMG Set, Penn Library Special Collections (2013) [ZIP: JPG, 294MB]

The differences between these sites and the *SpokenWeb* platform are, of course, quite pronounced. However, the commonalities they share may prove to be just as illuminating. Like *Mutant Sounds*, *SpokenWeb* sets out to map a network of relations in a given era of poetic production. Relating a community of practitioners in proximity to SGWU to an international group of poets and interlocutors, *SpokenWeb* presents the reading series as an "enormously intertextual affair."[39] The series is a sounding board for developing poetics and unlikely combinations. In this way, bissett is linked to his contemporaries at the height of his investigation into the technologies of publication and performance. Like *PennSound*, the collection is distinguished by its focus on the poetry series, a periodical collection not unlike the complete run of a little magazine. Rooted in a specific locality with a concrete set of recording devices and live contexts, hosting the poetry series online amplifies an approach to the slightest event of literary versioning. In Bernstein's words, considering the sound file as part of the work "disrupt[s] even the most expansive conception of versions, all based on different print versions" ("Making Audio Visible" 286). Both sites work to make this disruption possible. Like *UbuWeb*, *SpokenWeb* recodes its materials within an expanded set of concerns: bissett's reading, like others featured on the site, is suddenly absorbed into an argument on digital platforms, the audio collection as an object of academic study, and the emerging problem of studying sound with digital analytics. Surely, this is the most unlikely context for these

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[39] For further resonance with the little magazine see Scholes and Wulfman, *Modernism in the Magazines*, 44-72.

readings. Who might have imagined in 1969, when the recordings were made, that such an inquiry would be the framework through which these readings would be received by a public audience?

a whil heer th sounds yu see
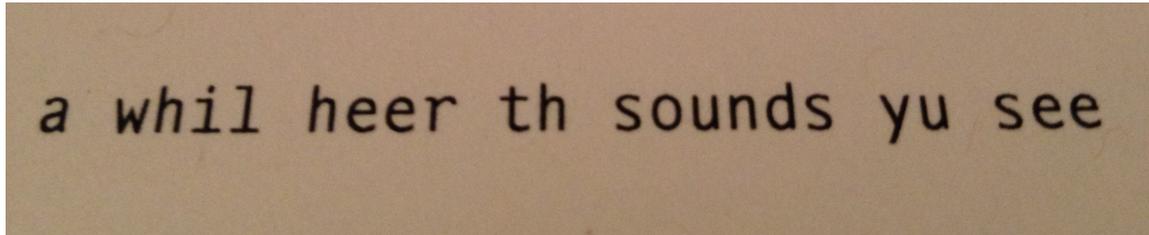
JPG: bissett, from *RUSH: what fuckan theory* (1971/2012)

MP3:   bissett, "bright yellow sky," SGWU (1969)

Download: Selected Further Reading on Sound and bill bissett, PDF Collection (2014) [ZIP: PDF, 716MB]

Listening to the poetry series at *SpokenWeb* today, it's impossible to ignore the depth of the original series, with its unique constellation of readers and the wider poetics community at SGWU. But it is equally impossible to forget the context in which this collection surfaces. To listen deeply to a reading that bill bissett gave in 1969, the user must also hear a range of contemporaneous works hosted across the internet, to consider the digitization of the reading on a synchronic plane that includes versions circulating in unknown locations and unknowable configurations. For example, further afield the user encounters *Strange Gray Day This* (1965), a documentary film uploaded to YouTube in 2009, the sample from bissett's "Pome for Oolijah," used in The Chemical Brothers' chart-topping record *We Are the Night*, or any number of further dispersed examples. A reading of any poet featured on *SpokenWeb* might, in this way, be differentially located on a map of the present. Rather than bind these threads into a single string, this chapter

aims to select, edit, collect, and disperse. Beyond any single argument concerning the ways in which bissett might illuminate the audio-visual-textual confluence on these sites, this essay points to a variety of alternate readings that bissett might enable the user to consider. This, I argue, is at the core of the digitized poetry reading. Already a kind of offshoot or supplement to the printed work, the social text of the historical reading radiates out to a wide range of materials from our present moment, on- and off-line. The core of *SpokenWeb*'s design seems to be premised on this argument. As a platform for scholarship, the site directs its user outward: to read historical publications, critical articles, technical details, and source materials into each recording; to read the culture of the online audio collection into the poetry series; to read the potential for a future use of digital tools into a little database of audio recordings; to read the digital file, the poem, the book, and the reading at once. This scholarship is built on the sheer potentiality of reading any narrative within the endless versioning processes of the internet. As such, like the audio recording itself, it remains in the realm of the virtual: the pleasure of knowledge is joined with the impossibility of full realization.

JPG: bissett, "wagon wheels," *Awake in th Red Desert* (1968)

Download: Complete Amodern: LIVE VINYL MP3 Collection (2014) [ZIP: Various, 2.05GB]

MUPS

In one notable afterlife, the bissett files I've traced in this chapter can be found streaming

within an interface called *MashUPS* (*MUPS*) written by David (Jhave) Johnston in 2012.

MUPS is a platform for the live remixing of 1,260 audio files culled from the *PennSound*

collection.[40] Jhave describes the project as developed both "for the sheer pleasure of

simultaneity" and "as a digital augmentation in the study of prosody," where sites like

PennSound "permit innovative explorations into the evolution of poetics" (*MUPS*). As

both transformative artwork and substantial act of digital scholarship, the project bears

resemblance to the textwarez works produced by Sebastian Lütgert. In one deft page, the

interface completely reorients our perception of *PennSound*. No longer is the site a

repository for isolated audio files. Instead, it is an interface that affords the potential for a

scenario wherein "poems speak to each other and with each other" through a widely

variable set of parameters for computational audition. Each of the previously described

bissett recordings from both the *Awake In Th Red Desert* LP and the 2006 Segue Bowery

Poetry Club reading are present on *MUPS*.

     By way of conclusion to this chapter's exploration of a specific set of audio files,

I argue that the *MUPS* interface presents new directions for thinking the simultaneity of

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[40] Actually, there are 1,258 files, as a reading of the actionscript reveals that one file address is a duplicate of a previous file (Kathy Acker) and another is an empty folder location (Harry Matthews). See the following note on inconsistencies in the *PennSound* collection.

sound recordings, one particularly generative for the digital humanities' study of

poetry recordings on the internet. In one of the few reviews of this work, Leonardo Flores

writes that these kinds of tools "aren't just literary expressions informed by each writer's

poetics, they are also poetically and artistically motivated computational tools for some

kinds of analysis associated with digital humanities methods." As a mode of digital

humanities deformance, Jhave's *MUPS* performs an operation on *PennSound* that is both

difficult to pinpoint as scholarship and relatively unrecognized as a work of poetics that

also harbors a little database of its own. Both of these frames, I contend, are essential to

understanding *MUPS* and its relation to *PennSound*. Incidentally, both of these frames

also bear on the bissett files that have been included in the interface.

Before returning to bissett, we can start by outlining the technical details of

MUPS. On loading the page, the user sees a 28 by 45 grid of black squares beneath a

large display of "A ----------------------→ Z" written in light grey, with a "mups" just

above the 'Z'. The page features a full-screen flash video program entitled

"pennsoundup_WEAVE.swf" and a short Google Analytics tracking script. Hovering

over any single square reveals author and file information, parsed and organized

according to the naming conventions of the *PennSound* collection.[41] Clicking on any

---

[41] Parsing the conventions of *PennSound* MP3 naming, each dash is retained, while underscores produce new lines. My errors in naming the *Awake in the Read Desert* files are amplified here: each word in the poem title reads on a new line:

01
A
O
B
A
Awake-in-th-Red-
Desert
1968

square immediately begins a playing of the linked sound file, which is lit up in shades

of red. A circle also appears to the left of the grid, which animates a visualization of the

soundwave around a vertical volume slider. Clicking on subsequent squares plays

corresponding sound files simultaneously. Concurrently played files stack up to the left

of the grid as a complete sequential record of all recordings activated during a given

session with *MUPS*. When a file completes playback, or is clicked off, it turns to grey.

Throughout, only when two or more files are playing simultaneously, the user will notice

a text reading "WEAVE is OFF" beneath the volume slider to the left. Clicking on this

text activates WEAVE, the most fascinating feature of the interface.

Turning on WEAVE activates an automatic switching mechanism between

simultaneous files, based on perceived silences and intervals within audio recordings.

The parameters of these switches are set by the user in three categories adjusted by

vertical sliders: "threshold," "tolerance," and "pause." First, "threshold" delimits the

decibel level under which a sound recording is perceived as "silent" enough to switch.

Second, "tolerance" sets the number of threshold points before a switch occurs. And

third, "pause" sets the amount of time before the program looks for a new switch in each

sample. In each parameter, the interface encourages quick shifting with notes like "HINT:

To make sounds shift quicker, put TOLERANCE down." Indeed, quicker skips are more

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As I've noted elsewhere, the amateur approach to archiving espoused by *PennSound* has real consequences. These errors and lapses, which are pervasive and unpredictable throughout *PennSound*, determine how files are processed by computational readings in a variety of unseen ways. This could be seen as a failing or one of the more beautiful aspects of *PennSound*. For more, see my segment of the "PennSound 10th Anniversary" recording at: http://writing.upenn.edu/wh/multimedia/tv/reruns/watch/154674 or the afterword to this dissertation on the *Electronic Poetry Center*.

impressive, as the user listens to the software jumping rapidly from one reader to the

next with what can seem like the seamlessness of natural conversation, concerted

collaboration, or an attentive DJ mixing the tracks. With WEAVE activated, the user can

hear "up to 32 streams" of poetry recordings in a simultaneous reading that shifts from

file to file according to the parameters set by the user. Altogether this interface elegantly

delivers the defining features of "new media" according to Lev Manovich: numerical

representation (highlighting numerical values for switches), modularity (every sample

can be resampled), automation (the program runs forward without input), variability

(each listening is newly forged based on inputted parameter), and, ultimately, transcoding

(gathering sound artifacts from previous media performance formats). Indeed Manovich's

own *Soft Cinema*, is the nearest analogue to the generative listening system presented by

MUPS. These works might be considered a form for database poetics in their reflections

of the formal properties of the databases and algorithms that shape digital culture.

However, in addition to the database poetics of *MUPS*, Jhave also executes a

highly delimited editorial function. To facilitate a navigable user experience, *MUPS*

distills the tens of thousands of sound recordings on *PennSound* down to 1,260 selected

files. The selection process only coheres within the affordances of the interface. The

"pleasure of simultaneity" is crafted from a diversity of voices, genres, reading styles,

and recording textures. Historical recordings of Guillaume Apollinaire and Ezra Pound

interrupt contemporary readings by Yusef Komunyakaa and Nicole Brossard. Smoothly

intoned science fiction narratives by Samuel Delany intersperse with the glitch aesthetics

of Tracie Morris. The staccato punch of Christian Bök's sound poetry might burst into

ambient poetics by Tan Lin. Non-native English speakers (Rosmarie Waldrop),

distinctive styles (Charles Bernstein), and sound poetry tracks (Steve McCaffery), in particular, are heavily represented. More to the point, musical outliers to the *PennSound* collection are overrepresented in the selection: sizable segments of the grid are taken by radio artist Gregory Whitehead, the punk poetry album "Redoing Childhood" by Kathy Acker, and the Audio-Experimental Theatre production of *San Francisco's Burning* by Helen Adam, each of which include musical accompaniment to the spoken word. These tracks are not the most representative of *PennSound*, but rather present samples from the limits of the collection. The editorial premise argues that layering musical and sonically adventurous work produces the most interesting results for simultaneous mashups. Within this setup, it is not difficult to imagine why bissett might command so many squares. The howl of "2 Awake in the Red Desert" or the moog synthesizers of "Now According to Paragraph C" provide the perfect backdrop to more normalized patterns in the performance of poetry. In this way, *MUPS* facilitates the listening pleasure of formal discordance.

The little database deployed by *MUPS* differs from every other audio collection detailed in this chapter. The collection has no pretension toward completion. It offers neither the collector's audiotopia of *Mutant Sounds* nor the comprehensive poetry catalog of *PennSound*. It ranges even further from the catch-all avant-garde of *UbuWeb* or the single-series depth of *SpokenWeb*. Like an extended mixtape (or a hundred million million mixtapes, following Queneau), *MUPS* sacrifices the exhaustive in favor of the extraordinary. The interface only works if every track selected by the user is capable of generating compelling results within its internal network. There are scant traces of bibliographic or contextual data: the occasional listing of a place or series written into the

PennSound filename itself. There are no links to works beyond the self-enclosed

poetic system of *MUPS*. As Judy Malloy has usefully outlined, *MUPS* is both an instance

of an "authoring system"—that is, software produced for user authoring—and an

"authored" work of software and selection in its own right ("Authoring Systems"). Using

Malloy's framework, Flores notes that Jhave "could've easily used this engine to create

an e-poem or a series of them: expressions of the tool and his vision. Instead, he released

the tool for users to have their own creative explorations and analysis of the material."

However, these explorations and analyses are circumscribed within a highly curated set

of audio samples and, most importantly, a tightly coordinated set of interface options for

playback. Like the rigid typographic structures of bissett's texts, *MUPS* presents a stable

interface for unpredictable performances.

Where *Mutant Sounds*, *PennSound*, and *UbuWeb* facilitate file downloads,

SpokenWeb and *MUPS* afford specific modes of playback alone. In both projects, the

website is the primary source of audition. *Mutant Sounds* is located on the opposite end

of the spectrum, exclusively offering options for download. *PennSound* and *UbuWeb* fall

somewhere in between, with immediate listening as easily accessible as the capability to

download. On *SpokenWeb*, the user is presented with a highly compressed visualization

of audio waveforms as a static image within the playbar (SoundCloud is the popular

analog to this interface, which is immediately recognizable as a tool for navigating a

sound file on the internet). *MUPS,* on the other hand, visualizes the waveforms of any

given file only in the moment of its transmission. Like iTunes visualizations of sound

files or the animations common to CD players, the representation on *MUPS* is purely

aesthetic. Unlike the rare files offered exclusively on *SpokenWeb*, the *MUPS* interface

operates parasitically on *PennSound*. With an extra step, the user can use *PennSound*

to find background information on any recording as well as a direct link to download the

MP3 file. *PennSound* operates on the dual principles of accessibility and depth. All files

are freely accessible, for both course syllabi and private browsing. Increasingly, many

files are linked to close readings and expanded materials via the collaborative scholarship

of *PoemTalk*; the interview format on *Close Listening*; the breadth of critical writing on

Jacket2; the learning environment presented by ModPo MOOC; the textual materials

offered at *EPC*, *Eclipse*; or any number of related class syllabi (ENGL 88 or 795 at Penn,

for example). While *MUPS* is a standalone interface, it feeds into the wider realm of little

databases linked up to *PennSound*'s pedagogical model of distribution.

In certain respects, this extension loses sight of the purpose of *MUPS*. While the

interface may be a conduit for students or scholars to discover new works of poetry or

delve into a depth of academic resources, this function is not primary to the project.

Instead, *MUPS* emphasizes the possibility for improvisation within a given script. In this

regard, it is exactly aligned with the live performances of bill bissett, wherein rigidly

shaped concrete poems become fluid chants and intonations. Utilizing the strict protocol

of written script for loose improvisation, the interface returns the free potential for

transformation to the fixed MP3 recordings of bissett. Put differently, the structural

framework of MUPS serves as a corollary to bisset's improvisatory aesthetics. Two files

from *Awake in th Red Desert* might jump back and forth on microsecond intervals. A

temporal jump from 2006 back to 1968 could happen as easily as a jump between

contemporaneous recordings by bissett and his collaborator bpNichol. *MUPS* offers all

the technique of a skilled DJ simultaneously managing thousands of vinyl recordings to

the casual user with the single-click of a cursor. While media theorists often use the

example of sampling techniques or remix aesthetics to describe database culture, the acts

of spoken improvisation and reading performances are less often invoked as an allegory.

However, this is precisely what bissett on *MUPS* performs: neither the static

representations of the page (or digital image), nor the rigid grooves of vinyl (or MP3), but

rather the whimsical sampling of audition and attention in the context of a sound-based

social text.

Within the contextual and procedural system generated by *MUPS*, bissett's live

performances meet an interface purposively scripted for the corresponding live

performance of its listener. The "poetry reading" on playback through *MUPS* directs the

user into the aleatory poetics of reading as a contingent practice. Afforded by the

"promiscuity" of the MP3 and built on the modular variability of its digital processing,

MUPS returns bissett to the site of performance and demands that the listener develop

new protocols of improvisatory listening. As a work of creative deformance, this project

plays the little database as a reading practice rooted in the same free jazz that backs a

number of tracks on *Awake in th Red Desert*. As scholarship, it asks questions that the

essay format could not begin to articulate. From the outset, the authorial figure of bill

bissett is but one potential mode of clustering a set of files trafficking online through

these platforms. This interface could be read differently through the poetics of any other

grouping of tracks in the collection. How does *MUPS* address the rigid intonations of

Ezra Pound or the palindromic utterances of Gregory Whitehead? What about the five

recordings of "Ursonate" on *MUPS*, each with a different interpretation of the score?

How might all 16 tracks recorded in 1968 speak to the interface? Or to the 69 tracks

recorded in 2008, for that matter? The *MUPS* interface begs us to ask these questions,

and remains open to the intervention of any given user. Theorists of digital media

regularly call for the necessity of working between the signifying systems of narrative

and database. However, open systems for simultaneous forms of playback remain rare to

come by for practical use. In *MUPS*, a close listener might find a live vinyl MP3, playing

each echo simultaneously. The same listener might find otherwise.

CHAPTER 4
"Ever the Avant-Garde of the Avant-Garde till Heaven and After": *UbuWeb* **from**
Film to Database

No, I don't need your picture. I don't have to know what you look like, we haven't even

said hello yet. You can look like anybody. I'll take anybody. I'll take anything I can get.

Vito Acconci whispers these lines in *Theme Song* (1973), a video art work in which the

artist wraps himself around a video camcorder, delivering derivations on pop songs as

pick-up lines to an unknown viewer. Shot in black and white over thirty-three minutes of

continuous footage, the video features a close-up of Acconci lying on the floor, staring

directly into the monitor. Addressing the video as a medium as much as the gallery

spectator, *Theme Song* stands as a definitive example of the video art that emerged at the

intersection of performance and experimental cinema in the early seventies. In *Multi-*

Media: Video—Installation—Performance, Nick Kaye notes that this work "at once

reflects earlier theoretical analyses of media's 'extension' of the body while articulating

television and video's spatial multiplications" (73). For Kaye, these multiplications are

divided along the televisual communications circuit outlined by Samuel Weber in *Mass*

Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media. Weber argues that operations of production,

transmission, and reception emblematize the confusion of time and space in an age

defined by the dominance of broadcast media (109-116). Simultaneously playing with the

mechanics of video production, the looping potential of electronic art, and the reception

circuits of the gallery, Acconci's work deftly navigates the media it inhabits by playing

with the formal modalities of its technical affordances.

If this wasn't enough, digital technologies and contemporary media environments

introduce further complications to time-based media online. Watching *Theme Song*

stream on the internet produces a wholly novel experience, uncannily prefigured by

Acconci's monologue, which seems to have always already anticipated a future viewer.

The lines hold new relevance when streaming *Theme Song* through a browser:

> I'll be waiting for you, I know, I know I'm not close to you now. How can I be
> close? You're in another world. It's as if, it's as if you're an angel …. How long,
> how long do I have to wait for you? Oh, but I'll wait. I'll wait as long as I have to
> because, uh, because, I've always dreamed about you. You know, anyone I was
> ever with, I was really thinking about you, though I never even knew you, I don't
> even know you now, but I had this vision of you, I had this real vision of
> somebody ideal, somebody special. I realize no one could live up to that dream,
> but that dream was really you. You, you could fulfill all the dreams, all the
> dreams I have.

Speaking to a mediated spectator from the perspective of an actor becoming flickering

images on a monitor ("another world"), Acconci addresses the temporal lapse separating

production and reception, embodying the dream of transmission to any-viewer-

whatsoever. In a futile desire for the communication of angels, staring wide-eyed like a

post-digital *Angelus Novus*, the Flash Video fulfills an unpredictable dream embedded in

the work itself. From the detached gallery viewing of its original screening, *Theme Song*

slips into the intimacy of the personal computer. As internet commentators readily

acknowledge, an online *Theme Song* eerily anticipates the confessional format of

YouTube diaries and pornographic web-cams.[42] The video seductively promises to wait

as long as it has to for the viewer—addressed in the second person—as an ideal

"somebody" who could "fulfill all the dreams" latent in the work. How could he be close,

Acconci asks from 1973? Of course, we *are* in another world. The potency of *Theme

Song* lies in the fact that it lends itself to the momentary hallucination that it *is*, in

actuality, speaking to "you" as the video loads in a Flash Video embed.

Zooming out from Acconci's close-up, we might also consider *Theme Song*

streaming alongside thousands of corresponding digital objects—each radically

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[42] Key blogger Jim Groom notes: "Now that millions of people can easily allow a complete stranger into their intimate, self-reflexive world vis-a-vis video sites like YouTube, Acconci's work may prove quite fascinating as way to think through the impact of an imagined self in the advent of relatively affordable technology that allows us to mediate our identities for unknown viewers around the world." http://bavatuesdays.com/vito-acconci-is-to-video/

transformed by the local context and technical effects of digitization and dispersion—

on a little database called *UbuWeb*. Over the last nineteen years, *UbuWeb* has become the

largest independent resource for experimental cinema, sound, and literature on the

internet. Collecting works ranging from obscure sound poetry LPs to foundational

documents of the historical avant-garde, *UbuWeb* plays a primary role in shaping

contemporary artistic and literary practices while translating a particular genealogy of

twentieth-century aesthetic artifacts. Kenneth Goldsmith founded *UbuWeb* in 1996 after

noticing the peculiar congruence of concrete poetry and the early Netscape internet

environment. In a section on the creation of *UbuWeb* entitled "History Completes Itself,"

Goldsmith recalls:

> There was something formally astonishing about the way that the computer screen
> and concrete poetry seemed to naturally work together. It was a fulfillment of
> concrete poetry's original premise. […] The early concrete poet's hard-line
> allegiance to modernism adapts itself perfectly to the flat mediums of the interface
> and the screen.
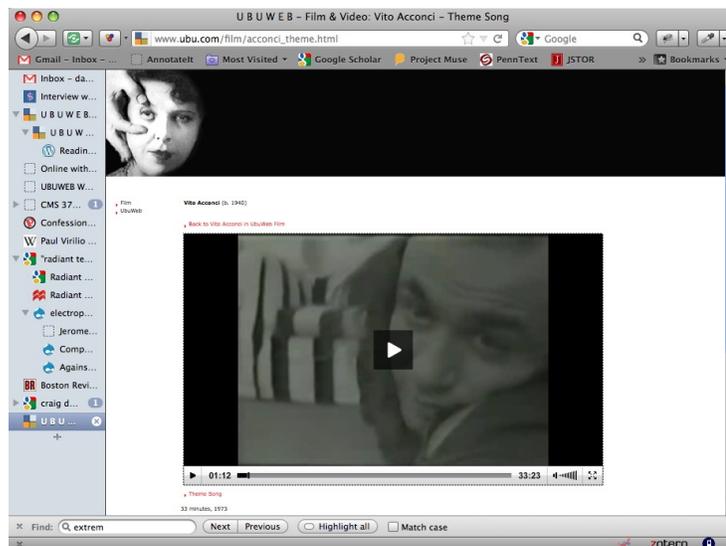
Like Acconci's long-waiting monologue, *UbuWeb* is built on a latent dream

that misreads the screening potential afforded by digital networks. Mirroring the "flat,

cool and minimal" aesthetics of concrete poetry, *UbuWeb*'s design—like much of the

internet—follows Clement Greenberg's outline for non-illusionistic modernism, "cool,

controlled and rational." Lev Manovich pursues this line of thinking in *The Language of

New Media*, which examines the ways "avant-garde aesthetic strategies came to be

embedded in the commands and interface metaphors of computer software" (xxxi).

Media-reflexivity, of course, pervades twentieth century art and literature from the

historic avant-gardes through conceptual and minimal art, through to Language poetry,

structural film, and net art. In this lineage, the lens of media-reflexivity poses a

particularly salient vantage into unstable media undergoing variable processes of

transcoding online. Just as *Theme Song* is seen to respond to its internet context, George

Landow's *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles,

Etc*. (1965-66) transforms from a self-referential preoccupation with filmic materiality to

a glitchy meditation on RGB color values, vector-based graphics, Flash Video frame

rates, and compression effects. Paul Sharit's Fluxfilm *Dots 1 & 2* (1965), once displaying

a rapid flicker of white dots on a black cinematic background, becomes a blurry mess of

squares in its internet version. The examples could multiply to cover the thousands of

media-reflexive movies hosted by *UbuWeb*. This chapter asks the viewer to reject the

indexical impulse. Rather than project the *UbuWeb* "film & video" section back to

cinematic projection or VHS monitors, it seeks a moment of disbelief, as though brought

about by the seductions of Acconci's smooth intonations. Instead, this chapter attends to

how historical media-specific work functions in contemporary online environments,

accidentally speaking to its digital format. From this vantage, a vast array of

contingent effects might be unearthed within the historical work itself.

Rather than inventorying these effects, or attempting a comprehensive accounting

of *UbuWeb*, this chapter aims to produce three targeted engagements with files hosted by

the site.[43] Where the first three chapters respectively explored the computation,

preservation, and dispersion of digital files within little databases, this final chapter

presents a close reading of two particular works to suggest methods for reading little

databases through the digital objects they harbor. Rather than move from the collection to

the file, these readings start with the file as a means to reconnect to the network. Each

reading expands further from the work it studies, into the database systems that facilitate

each in turn. The first work is a "film" from the 1960s that happens to have been

digitized. The second work was made using digital tools as a means of reflecting on the

intersection of film and computer culture in the 1960s. In the first instance, I examine

digital versions of Nam June Paik's iconic work *Zen for Film* (1962-64). The digital

afterlife of Paik's film has inspired a range of new artworks that take the digital version

as a starting point and plug these concerns into new systems of meaning. I discuss these

works with the intention of highlighting just how radical the digital *Zen for Film* might be

when seen as an artifact in its own right, with no further modifications performed beyond

the digitization of the filmic work itself. In the second instance, I explore edges radiating

out from a central node in the digital compilation movie *We Edit Life* (2002) by Vicki

Bennett (People Like Us). Following *We Edit Life*, the reader is directed back into the

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[43] In later April, 2015, Agnès Peller completed a comprehensive accounting of *UbuWeb* in an excellent dissertation entitled "Kenneth Goldsmith's UbuWeb: An Artist's Contribution to the Digital Humanities." This chapter, however, has other aims. The reader is directed to Peller's work for a full accounting of the site.

database, a rich archive waiting for digital re-signification. As a coda to this chapter,

returning to *Theme Song*, I highlight a little network of compellingly transcoded works in

the *UbuWeb* collection through a new Flash Video compilation essay, which is

accompanied by an inventory of transformations. In each of these instances, this chapter

seeks to illumine the ways in which moving images are transformed by the signifying

codes of digital technologies and network contexts.

Case Study 1:

***Zen for Film* and the Varieties of Use**

In 2008, Tom Service posted a link on *The Guardian* to a YouTube video of Paik's *Zen for Film*, with a peculiar endorsement: "The antidote to the internet is... composer and video artist Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*. Eight minutes of unadulterated, blissed-out, soundless, grainy Fluxus whiteness: worth anybody's ascetic concentration, and a perfect corrective to our hyper-stimulated media lives" (Service). An embedded link directs to YouTube user chowkaideng's upload of a silent video recording of *Zen for Film*, a 360p

streaming flash movie currently boasting 100,696 viewers. On the same page, a

variety of social networking ("Share"), evaluation (190 thumbs up, 26 thumbs down, 71

comments), and search options accompany the Flash Video. The right sidebar

recommends further works by Nam June Paik on YouTube, works by artists like Hans

Richter, John Cage, and Marcel Duchamp, alongside a variety of digitized Fluxus films.

Service demonstrates the common conflation of Flash Video on the internet with the

celluloid films from which they derive. Further, *Zen for Film* has never been the

soundless, unadulterated antidote that Service describes. Unlike the pixelated iteration

streaming on YouTube, *Zen for Film* was scripted for projector, light, audience, and

16mm film. It is a remarkably noisy time-based artwork that deliberately anticipates the

imminent "adulteration" (from Latin *adulterat-* for 'corrupted') of its film stock. Noise

and deterioration, in fact, ground its conceptual framework. Even if the film is a

corrective to "our hyper-stimulated media lives" or, as Heike Helfert of *Media Art Net*

puts it, "the flood of images from outside," a Zen for film only too obviously demands its

proper media for measured reflection. Attempting to view the flash video as an indexical

representation of a projected film is internally inconsistent with the work.

     Concentrating on the digital object that stands for Paik's *Zen for Film*, the reader

is thus quickly assaulted by a dense knot of semantic confusions. Critical and technical

discourses struggle to keep pace with the fast-changing terrain of the internet, as

methodologies of new media have always been "under construction." To disentangle this

web, we might begin by returning to the historical and conceptual functions of the filmic

work. Importing these primary functions into the digital object trafficking online, *Zen for

Film* presents one particularly minimal window into the process of transcoding historical

film. The attention to media-specificity built into the work's internal logic allows for a

deeper investigation of the formal, cultural, and technical protocols for the contemporary

circulation of a filmic work. After folding the historical film into the digital object, this

study of *Zen for Film* concludes with the various ways in which artists and online

archivists have deployed the work in recent years. Building on the program laid out by

the history of *Zen for Film* and these various new uses, I examine several layers of

transformation within the work, offering a more robust understanding of a digital artifact

otherwise obscured by its history. This may also serve as one metonym among many for

the digital transcoding of filmic art at large.

Like John Cage's *4'33"*, Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962-64) presents a remarkably

minimal gesture that opens a vast array of aesthetic, narratological, and technical issues.

The concept seems simple enough: *Zen for Film* is a work consisting entirely of

unexposed clear celluloid.[44] Just as Cage ostensibly performs a certain length of 'silence,'

Paik films a variable length of 'nothing.' However, as soon as the viewer starts to listen

to Cage's instrument-less composition or watch Paik's image-less film, a world of

incidental, technical, personal, and otherwise drowned out actors emerge. Paik famously

describes the work as "clear film, accumulating in time dust and scratches" (Weiss, 88).

A film containing its own history, the work incorporates and showcases the continued

material deterioration of the celluloid with each new performance. In *Musicage: Cage*

Muses on Words, Art, Music, John Cage recollects the effects and 'plot' of the film:

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[44] From its inception, *Zen for Film* has never held a fixed length. Conceived and first screened in 1962 while Paik was working at the *Studio fur elektronische Musik* at the WDR in Cologne, *Zen for Film* was published as 24' of 16mm film in a Fluxus edition by George Maciunas in 1964. This strip of clear leader is scripted for an extended loop. However, the longer version of the film screened by Paik consisted of multiple reprints of an already damaged version of the shorter film projected in 1962. See Weiss, "Some Notes on Conjuring Away Art," 88.

It's an hour long and you see the dust on the film and on the camera and on the lens of the projector. That dust actually moves and creates different shapes. The specks of dust become, as you look at the film, extremely comic. They take on character and they take on a kind of plot—whether this speck of dust will meet that speck. And if they do, what happens? I remember being greatly entertained and preferring it really to any film I've ever seen before or after. It's one of the great films, and it's not often available to see (135).

Bathed in the projector's light, a captive audience must contemplate the film over the duration of an hour, with all the technical details of the cinema system growing ever more active in the shaping of its comedic "narrative." New characters emerge over time as the film naturally thickens the "plot." While the conceptual premise of *Zen for Film* is simple enough to summarize, the experience of viewing is quite rare, as willing venues for projection are scarce and prints of the work are in even shorter supply.

The rarity of the film is generated procedurally: the film incorporates each screening as an ongoing set of inscription events. Kaye characterizes the cybernetic relay constituting the film as a "continuous recording of the physical degradation of the blank leader tape by the 'real' conditions of its projection… *Zen for Film* poses the questions of what it means to be at the threshold of the medium, a threshold defined not simply around the spatial limits of the screen. Indeed, *Zen for Film* specifically attends to the *time-structure* that mark the limit of the work and its medium, effecting its own gradual destruction in *exchanges between* the film and its environment" (42). Perhaps a more effective analogy than Cage's *4'33"* might be found in Maurice Lemaître's "supertemoral" film, *Always at the Avant-Garde of the Avant-Garde, to Paradise and Beyond!* (*Toujours à l'avant-garde de l'avant-garde, jusqu'au paradis et au-delà!*)

(1970).[45] Using the concept of the supertemporal (*supertemporelle*) formulated in collaboration with the Lettrist Isodore Isou in 1960, Lemaître's film theorizes itself in an extended voiceover track laid over unrelated footage from a German television report on the 1969 biennale. The found footage only incidentally features "five seconds" of a play by Lemaître and is otherwise entirely unrelated to the artwork.[46] Instead, the footage stands in for any footage whatsoever. More important than the image is the ways in which the image is screened over time. The English subtitles note:

> *Ever the Avant Garde of the Avant Garde* is a new kind of film, named supertemporal film. A supertemporal film is an open film, a framework film, into which the audience is invited. Each member of the audience is asked to join in and make her or his own contribution to the work, non-stop. Tonight, for example, you are in this theater willingly attending a showing of a supertemporal film authored by Maurice Lemaître and titled *Ever the Avant Garde of the Avant Garde*. From now on, everything you do, in whatever way, and even what you do not do, such as remaining silent or still, becomes an integral part of the work. […] Each new scratch on the picture or the sound track will remain forever as part of the work, even if it gets overlaid by other scratches. In this way, our projectionist and the projector itself share in creating the supertemporal film.

While the film is "authored" by Lemaître, both the audience and the technical apparatus make further "contributions" to the work over time. Even a "silent or still" spectator "becomes an integral part of the work," Lemaître argues, by breathing over the soundtrack and occupying the social space of any screening. Similarly, the incidental inscriptions made by scratches as the film runs through a projector are brought under the rubric of an authorial position. Both, the film declares, become an integral part of the

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[45] The *UbuWeb* version—as well as its subtitles, cited below—takes a bit of liberty in rendering the title "*Ever the Avant-Guard of the Avant-Guard till Heaven and After*." This chapter's title invokes the mistranslation, but I have here retained the preferred translation given by Lemaître on his website: http://mauricelemaitre.org.

[46] The film is one inspiration for the previous chapter, which similarly works by incidental connection to its source materials.

work. In an earlier sequence, Lemaître demands that the film "must never more stop

being created and screened." Till heaven and after, new contributions to the work are

made continuously with each screening—naturally, all these facts beg the question of

digital viewing, where the film gathers no new scratches and the communal setting of the

cinema becomes the privacy of personal browsing.

The same ongoing process of transformation is written into *Zen for Film*.

Supertemporal authorship extends from "specks of dust" to scratches, projector quality,

theatrical staging, and audience acoustics. While the read/write cycle of the cinematic

apparatus carries out its chance operations, the aural aspects of the film call for further

focus on the technical substrate of the work. Far from silent, the score is constituted

instead by the incidental and technical character of a film screening. In the catalog essay

"Unheard Music," Dworkin describes the sheer noise of "the incidental soundtrack to

Paik's film," advising the reader: "[i]f you get a chance, sit near the projectionist; even

after only eight minutes you'll never forget the nervous clack and twitter of the shutter,

blinking like a blinded Cyclopes in the noonday sun" (*No Medium*, 148). These elements,

it must be remembered, are highly scripted aspects of *Zen for Film* by Nam June Paik.

The damages to the print, the time-based system of repetition and change, and the

incessant cinematic noise together forge the meaning-making system of the film.

Given the rigorously media-specific framework of the film, it is not surprising

that *Zen for Film* also plays a primary role in "Signal to Noise," a concluding chapter to

Dworkin's study of seemingly blank works entitled *No Medium*.[47] Dworkin argues that no

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[47] To be precise, an argument concerning the relation of *Zen for Film* to Ken Friedman's *Zen for Record* forms the conclusion of the essayistic chapters, preceding an extended annotated inventory of "blank" recordings presented as "Further Listening."

medium can be thought in isolation. Instead, a close analysis of any medial iteration

invokes the dynamic processes of a signifying chain that includes material substrates,

social contexts, and thresholds of interpretation. Throughout Dworkin's study, works that

appear "blank" or "silent" offer the most compelling case for the dynamic process that

renders media legible to interpretation. As though to highlight the length of this

signifying chain, "Signal to Noise" focuses on Friedman's *Zen for Record*, a

conceptually-related derivative of Paik's *Zen for Film*, and concludes with speculations

about a potential *Zen for Compact Disc*. Dworkin suggests that one "could argue that

Friedman's record and Paik's film are simply two different editions of a single work. Or,

if not two formats for one and the same work, then at least that each is closer to the other

than to the respective versions that might appear on DVD and CD" (136). This "affinity"

between the film and vinyl works—against their respective digitizations—crystalizes

Dworkin's account of media. Typifying Rosalind Krauss's arguments on the post-

medium condition, *Zen for Film* requires an analysis that reads the "complex webs of

overlapping technical support" that mediate "even the most abstract and cerebral works

of conceptual art" (137-38). In the case of *Zen for Film*, these supports measure a

durational length of cinematic time in a shared physical space. Once set to the beat of

physiological responses ("the time between involuntary blinks or the spasms of the ciliary

muscle") and a breadth of cinematic effects ("slowly disintegrating the film with each

screening"); the silent pixels and time slider functionalities of Flash Video indeed

expunge each medial component scripted into the original work (136).

     I briefly outline the conceptual and medial framework of the film here to

emphasize the ways in which this work, in particular, functions with a special

relationship to its material instantiation, mediated delivery, and contextual distribution. Standing in for a broad array of conceptual and media-specific films from the sixties and seventies, *Zen for Film* generates aesthetic interpretation that cannot avoid an analysis of the technical infrastructure and varied uses of the work. While many artistic forms in image, print, and sound may retain the essential components of their significance when transcoded to digital networks, the resistance to new media formats that *Zen for Film* and similar moving image works evidence present a compelling field for investigating the effects and processes of transformative remediation. The film's structure of signification remains irrevocably bound not only to its material format, but also to circuits of reception and circulation. Adding to Lemaître's account of the time-based production of the supertemporal film and Dworkin's reading of the thresholds of meaning in media, a communications circuit can be closed with a sketch of the transmission patterns of *Zen for Film* online. Skirting the legal discourses of fair use and intellectual property on one hand, and the amateur notes of shadowy dispersion networks comprised of pirates and peer-to-peer sharing on the other, the file's distribution presents another filter through which to understand the variability of the digital object.

Rare, experimental, and avant-garde films trafficking online often originate on private torrent sites or peer-to-peer communities. "Ripped" or "torn" from official channels by enthusiasts and collectors, these files are rarely professional and often unsanctioned. For digital objects, unlike traditional film studies, the most useful archives of transmission are not housed in special collections or film archives. Rather, they dwell in a labyrinthine tangle of comment threads across an array of illicit platforms. Eventually, these works migrate to more popular forums like YouTube and *UbuWeb*.

Matthew Kirschenbaum, with a bibliographer's eye, has argued for the importance of archival approaches to the traces left by digital systems of circulation. Indeed, in his work on cracked floppy discs and Gibson's "Agrippa," Kirchenbaum has demonstrated how forensic approaches to digital objects might reconstitute version history in even the most ephemeral formats (*Mechanisms* 15). Karagarga user "fitz" points to the version history of *Zen for Film* online in a thread accompanying a torrent download for the full FluxFilm anthology: "this was originally ripped by pilotprix almost two years ago for divxclasico.com and they found their way into UBU, where you can also grab them… Trep from dxc also ripped some yoko ono." Posted in April of 2006, the original upload remains tracked and shared as released on "15 Abr, 2004 10:16 am" by pilotprix at divxclasico.com, an eMule peer-to-peer community based in Spain. In a clear violation of copyright as legislated by the DMCA anticircumvention provision, pilotprix most likely ripped the Re:Voir DVD release of the film (itself a direct transfer of a low quality VHS capture of the films) into the easily transferable AVI format.[48] Like so many works of digitized film and video, once the files are ripped and seeded in illegal file sharing communities, they soon begin to appear in more legitimate forms of use, typified by samples in remixes or short clips for education and/or critique on popular platforms like YouTube and Blogger now protected by fair use exemptions to the DMCA. The *UbuWeb* collection of "film & video" is primarily built on the work done by these distribution communities.

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[48] The specs listed on Karagarga read: "Resolution : 720x576; Codec : DivX 5; FPS : 25,13; BitRate : 1710 Kbps; Quality Factor : 0,17 b/px." The *UbuWeb* version vastly degrades this to a 320x240 flash file similar to the file hosted on YouTube. See: http://karagarga.net/details.php?id=10678

The legal protocols for online distribution can often illuminate trickier

questions of provenance and perception surrounding the use of files circulating online.

Following the dispersion of the newly minted digital objects on Karagarga, in early 2006,

UbuWeb popularly distributed the files for the full *FluxFilm Anthology*, including the

first in the set, *Zen for Film*, on its website. In the nebulous and conflicted realm of fair

use on the internet, *UbuWeb*'s bottom-of-the-page disclaimer that the works are for

"educational and non-commercial use only" is offered as convincing evidence that the

works are sanctioned for streaming. However, neither the motion picture educational

exemption to the DMCA nor *UbuWeb*'s status as a noncommercial distributor legally

clears this activity. For instance, the FluxFilm anthology includes a note at the top of the

page declaring that Ken Friedman, early practitioner and scholar of Fluxus—whose work

is included in the anthology—has granted *UbuWeb* permission to distribute the films

online. Nevertheless, the rights are still held by Re:Voir, the French distributor of avant-

garde and experimental film that sells the anthology in VHS and DVD format—not with

Friedman. Goldsmith articulates *UbuWeb*'s position in a general response to copyright

complaints about the site, writing in an open letter to the Frameworks independent

filmmaker listserv:

> In another case, the children of Stan VanDerBeek contacted Ubu requesting that
> we host their father's films. Re:Voir was upset by this, saying that we were
> robbing his children of their royalties when they in fact had given the films to us.
> We put a link to purchase DVDs from Re:Voir, regardless. We think Re:Voir
> serves a crucial function: many people prefer their beautiful physical objects and
> hi-res DVDs to our pile of pixels.

Goldsmith's last line inadvertently binds a compelling fair use claim to a discourse of dramatic medial transformation. The vastly degraded quality of the *UbuWeb* upload is so compressed that the film becomes nothing more than a "pile of pixels."

Following Dworkin's analysis of the indispensability of the material substrate to *Zen for Film*, a legal disclaimer augments an argument for the digital object as an entirely new and unrelated artifact. What's more, the *FluxFilm Anthology* that Re:Voir digitized is but one particularly poor instantiation of the film by Nam June Paik as compiled by Fluxus organizer George Maciunas. As such, the transformative nature of the digital object may be a defensible fair use of the film version of *Zen for Film.* Of the four factors determining a fair use of copyrighted material outlined in the Copyright Act, the first factor—"the purpose and character of the use" (17 U.S.C. § 107) or the extent to which the use is transformative as outlined by Pierre Leval—weighs in favor of the online use of the film if presented with a critical eye to the user's physiological experience of the digital object. On the previously mentioned YouTube page for *Zen for Film* uploaded by chowkaideng on December 6, 2006, we encounter the following exchange in the comments:

> the only problem is that the film won't deteriorate when played in youtube..... so it's fully preserved, […] it's just odd this being documented in this format. [...] EnForwardslashAy 2 years ago

> For me, this is the best comment this film has received, and it represents a part of my own approach and feelings to this subject [...] **chowkaideng** 2 years ago

When presented as a flash artifact, the transcoded work furnishes a critical function commenting on the character of the original film as well as the internet context at large.

Seen in this light, every signifying aspect of the original work—the accumulation of

dust and time, the brilliance of the projector's light, the meditative isolation of the work,

the sound of the projector—has been transformed by the digital version, leaving only the

flat image of the white square in its place. Looking closer, as the film's concept demands,

we see that this flat white space has been transformed into a work about the RGB color

values of the flash codec employed by *UbuWeb*: in the place of the shadow image of dust

particles, we find blocky pixels trying to capture the right 'white' of the projected clear

leader and its surrounding 'black' frame bearing the flickering of the image. Against the

durational character of the film, the Flash Video prominently displays a time slider, all

but begging the user to skip around the film at the slightest discomfort or the mere

curiosity to find out what "happens." The sound of the projector has been lost, along with

all its attendant effects, immediate and supertemporal. Indeed, the Flash Video is never

scratched, nor will it ever deteriorate, even if it might pause while loading or glitch if

your Flash Player is out of date. It loses the immediacy of performance and becomes a

fixed archival recording of an unknown moment of screening. Far from merely

redistributing the original film, in legal terms the Flash version "adds something new,

with a further purpose or different character, altering the first with new expression,

meaning, or message" (*Kelly* 9069). *Zen for Film for Flash Video* becomes something

other: a deformance by technical default.

In the years after the 2006 release of *Zen for Film* on *UbuWeb* and YouTube, a

flurry of artistic activity emerged, appropriating the material, conceptual, and

philosophical aspects of the film to create new works in a post-digital context. In lieu of

exhaustively enumerating the transformations marked by the digitized version, and

relating each back to the work's historical iterations, I would supplement my reading

of *Zen for Film* with a brief inventory of these new works. Each expands on a localized

transformation at the intersection of the historical film and the digital networks of the

present. As even his highly compressed set of artistic responses demonstrates, the media-

reflexivity of Paik's work inspires an endless set of possibilities for creative remix. When

Tate Liverpool put together an educator's pack for a Nam June Paik solo show in 2010,

they included the following suggestion: "Discuss how you would create Zen for DVD,

Zen for iPod, Zen for Mobile Phone" (12). Indeed, the artworks below can be seen to

conduct this conversation in an imagined panel hosted by Paik and *UbuWeb*. While it

seems an obvious question—the work had always begged this question, from film to

record to TV and beyond—the discussion yields unexpected results for an understanding

of the digital object in circulation today. To conclude a reading of *Zen for Film* online,

each of the following five remixed versions of the work offer further insights into the

transformation at play between the work and its digital derivatives.

Luca (LUNK) Leggero, *F L U X L I N E S: Line 01* (2007).

Working directly from the *UbuWeb* upload of the FluxFilm Anthology, LUNK's *F L U X L I N E S* offer a subtle critique of online presentation while referencing a series of works

by Paik. An artist's statement tidily encapsulates the technical specifications of the work:

"I modified the original code resizing it from 384x500 pixels to 550x1 pixels / changing
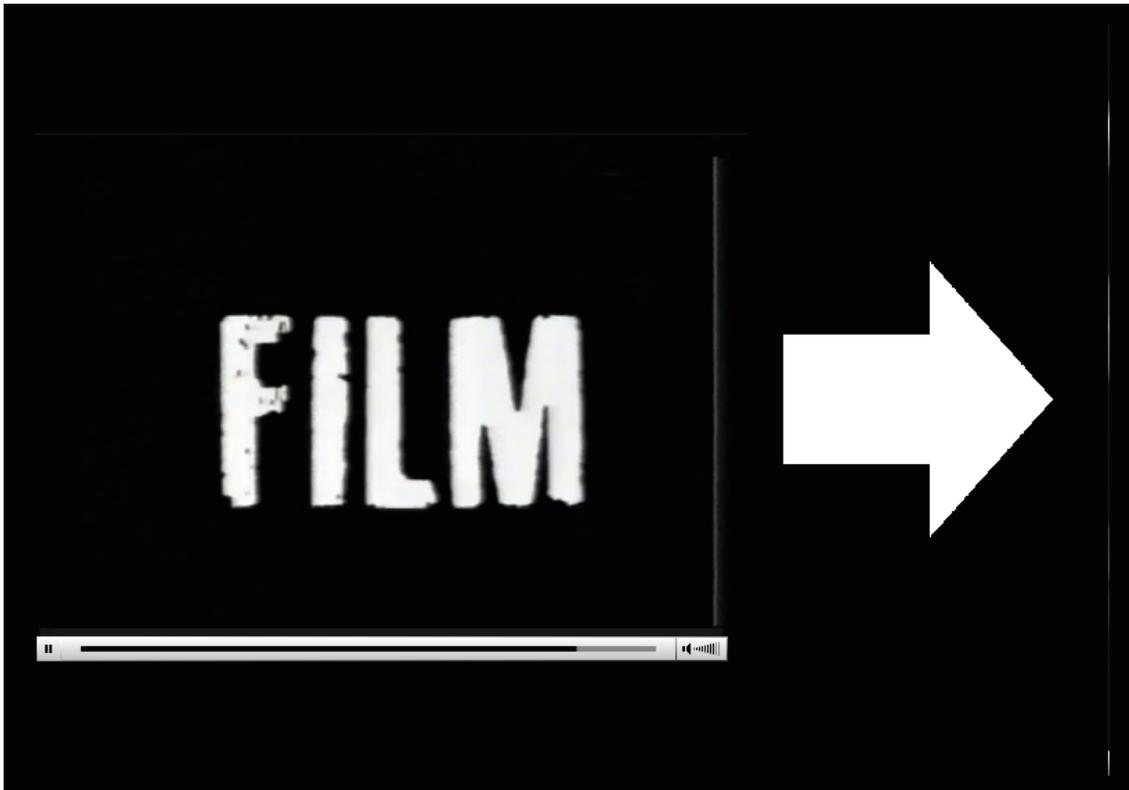
 not the short film but only the way it can be viewed." Working within the HTML

presentation of the Flash Video hosted by UbuWeb, every digitized film in the *F L U X L*

I N E S series is reduced to a vertical stack of pixels, blinking in rhythm with the original,

compressed to an absolute minimum of width. This radical resizing of the Flash display

echoes Paik's *Zen for TV* (1963). In this work Paik similarly reduced the analog field of a

cathode-ray tube display to a single vertical line. LUNK brilliantly reworks this gesture

in *Line 01*, which reduces the pixelated field of the Flash Video to a single line. The

wholesale appropriation of the UbuWeb presentation of *Zen for Film* thus transforms its

display beyond recognition to the human viewer, while leaving the underlying digitized

object completely intact. *Line 01* repurposes this uncritical remediation to reflect on the

media-specificity of Flash Video and HTML protocol, mirroring the reflexivity of *Zen for*

Film while incorporating its art historical intertext.

Michael Kontopoulos, *Zen for YouTube* (2007).

If *Line 01* interrogates the browser's capacity for display, *Zen for YouTube* meditates on

the durational experience of Flash Video. Hosted on YouTube, this work simply places

the endless loop of an animation for "loading," which spins atop a single frozen image

still from the Flash Video encoding of *Zen for Film.* In comments on the artwork page,

Kontopoulos writes "*Zen for YouTube* picks up where Nam June Paik left off: an

expansion of negative space for the Internet generation." The animation replaces the

revolving movement of the cinematic reel with the circular iconography of deferred

transmission. If a film in which "nothing happens" might have been frustrating to viewers

in 1964, a YouTube video that never loads must surely have been the most vexing

experience for a viewer in 2007. Cleverly, the YouTube embed is recursively coded not

to load, so the viewer is confronted with a clip that has been altered to refuse playback

from the beginning of the Flash Video. After the failure to find the start, the user

discovers that the rest of the clip is more of the same, even though the status bar shows

'progress' in time. Failure and deferral run on an infinite loop. If *Zen for Film* was built

for the slow destruction of celluloid over repeated passages through a projector, *Zen for*

YouTube was coded to politely malfunction on every instance of playback.

Cory Arcangel, *Structural Film* (2007).

Turning the digitization of *Zen for Film* on its head, *Structural Film* starts from the

computer, using iMovie's "aged film" setting to create a born-digital version of *Zen for*

Film with artificial dust and scratches, which is then transferred to 16mm. Glitches occur as compression artifacts in the transfer from MOV file to film print, resulting in colorful, pixelated debris. On his website, Arcangel has stated that these glitches "weren't actually part of the plan," but that he retained them nonetheless. These encoding errors are the true actors in the film. They take on a kind of supertemporal authorship despite the artist's intentions, and trump the artificial scratches and dust inserted by consumer video editing software. Unlike the previous two works, *Structural Film* appropriates the concept, rather than the materials from the digitized version of Paik's work. It succeeds by importing uncanny digital artifacts into analog media as a post-digital gesture projected back into cinematic space. The film is shown as an installation with 16mm film looping through a projector in the gallery. Through this process, the artificial scratches produced by iMovie meet real scratches produced in the screening process. Watching these layers interact in *Structural Film*, the spectator reconsiders the artifactual nature of digital objects within the old media glitches, scratches, whirring reels, and clacking soundtrack that once constituted *Zen for Film*.

Mark Amerika, *Zen for Mobile Phone Video* (2007).

Referencing Paik's famous interventions standing in the light of *Zen for Film* during screenings, artist and writer Mark Amerika records his own shadow within the projection of the film at the Centre Georges Pompidou with an extremely lo-fi mobile phone video camera. Like a bootleg concert recording or a durational art-selfie, *Zen for Mobile Phone*

Video engages with vernacular practices of mobile media documentation and amateur documentation of historical art. Amerika attempts to reproduce the meaning of the

original. In an extended blog post on the work, he asks: "How can this work be remixed into a so-called new media context and still retain its initial meaning? What was its initial meaning? Was it important to retain it? What does it mean when we can take our portable digital gadgets and selectively capture whatever data we feel we need in order to further improvise our own lives…" Mirroring several other bootleg videos of screenings of *Zen for Film* appearing online, *Zen for Mobile Phone Video* amplifies the "pile of pixels" that the film has become online. By betraying any semblance of fidelity to the original and writing his own body into the documentation, Amerika questions the capacity for any reproduction whatsoever.

Mungo Thomson, *The Varieties of Experience* (2008).

Using a particularly degraded print of *Zen for Film*, Mungo Thomson translates each

frame of the film to its negative for projection in 16mm as well as publishing selected

frames in book form. Foregrounding high resolution and direct photochemical translation,

The Varieties of Experience most directly engages the material and presentation of the

original film. In an elegant conceptual gesture, the simple inversion of contrast yields a

transformation of cosmic proportions. Thomson describes the work in a published book

version featuring high-resolution images of selected slides:

> The film gathers dust from the spaces where it is exhibited. Dust is composed
> largely of exfoliated human cells, and human cells are composed of elemental
> matter from the Big Bang. The motes and specks of dust are captured and printed
> as imagery in *The Varieties of Experience*. The new film is an inversion of Paik's,
> a black film with the dust printed white: a moving starscape, where the stars are
> made of dust rather than the other way around.

Thomson literalizes the spectator's role in Lemaître's formulations: even humans who once exfoliated in the same space that *Zen for Film* may have occupied at any point become written into the film. The use of obsolete technical processes renders the *The Varieties of Experience* at once historically connected and resolutely contemporary. Bypassing the digital file altogether and responding to the previous remixes of *Zen for Film*, Thomson exploits the film's archival circulation while playing on the anachronism of filmic and book-bound presentation in the present.
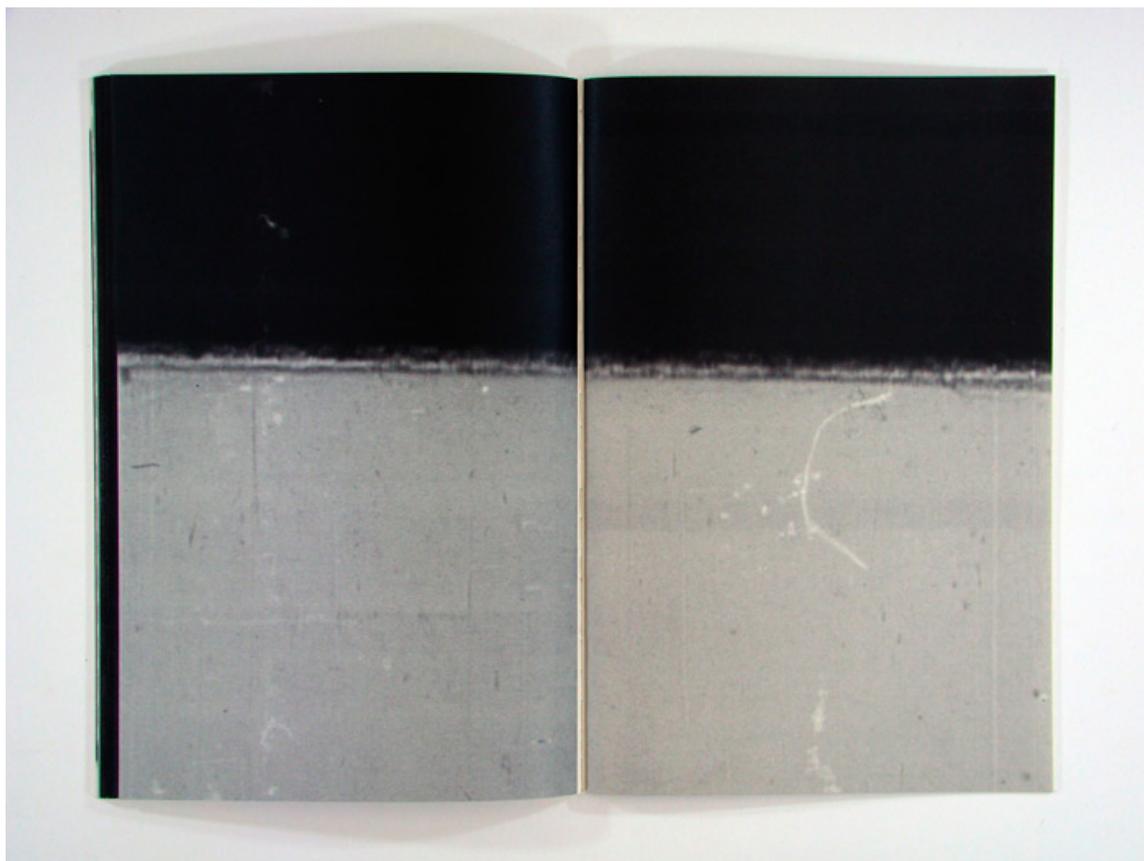
This section presents a series of investigations around a reading of early computer-generated movies at Bell Labs (and the documentaries that accompany them) through the contemporary cipher presented in the digital compilation movie *We Edit Life* (2002) by People Like Us (Vicki Bennett).[49] Rather than bind *We Edit Life* with the interpretive knot of critique, this reading seeks to deploy the movie as a conduit to open productive passages into the database. *We Edit Life* is uniquely poised to spell out the vexed relations among issues of remediation, digital composition, and archival use. At one and the same time the movie reflects on the origins of computer arts while providing a pioneering instance of the now-ubiquitous digital compilation movie. A close reading of *We Edit Life*—tracing its myriad material sources, the mode and style of its composition, the networks of archival dispersion that screen the movie along with presenting its source material, and finally the broader art historical and contemporary cultural context within which the work embeds itself—offers a passage back into these historical works operating at the birth of computer culture while refreshing their interpretation from our

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[49] For this work, and many others, the prolific audio and video remix artist Vicki Bennett operates under the moniker People Like Us. Out of respect for this recoded authorship, this paper will refer to the maker of *We Edit Life* as PLU throughout.

present vantage. The method of this essay, therefore, is waylaid by a heterogeneous cluster of interpretive and descriptive strategies, applicable to the n-dimensional facets of digital objects in general and the historical conflux of found footage or compilation movies in particular.
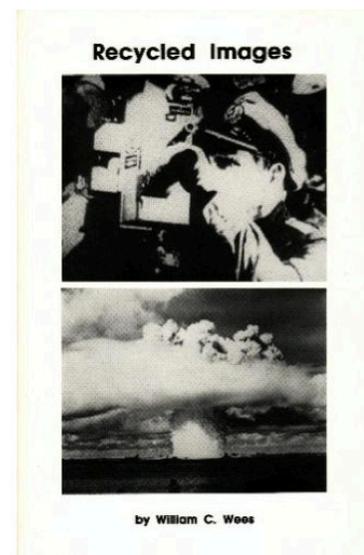
Found Footage and Cultural Critique

Full Movie:
Bruce Conner, *A Movie* (1958, 11'40")

In deference to Conner's well-known response to YouTube, I present *A Movie* here in absurdly exaggerated compression, thanks to Tudou.com. See also: Caspar Stracke, "The YouTubing of Bruce Conner."

Recycled Images

by William C. Wees

[Wees, Moving in Time, PDF]

Before exploring the digital compilation movie, we can outline the methods for interpreting its immediate precursor, the found footage film. Roger Luckhurst, in his excellent article, "Found-footage science fiction: five films by Craig Baldwin, Jonathan Weiss, Werner Herzog and Patrick Keiller," on found footage science fiction films, reiterates the received wisdom of collage interpretation: "For the project of found footage… [the] most significant discovery was that the coherence of spliced collages could be held together by the instant recognition of genre iconography and narrative formulae" (195). He goes on to clarify that the spectator (or critic) may "generate a sort

of mega-text of potential narrative possibilities from their implicit familiarity with

cinematic codes" (195). And again, "any coherence the film musters is at what [Craig]

Baldwin calls the 'metacinematic' level, where the spectator can recognize both the codes

of each re-purposed fragment but also read the critique" (198). This doxa directs both the

creation and the reading of found footage films: subversive montage enacting cultural

critique remains the highest form. This holds true for the critic as well as the filmmaker.

So pervasive is this interpretive strategy, from avant-garde traditions to television or

Hollywood films—to say nothing of the internet—that samples from educational,

industrial, sci-fi, or ephemeral films are rarely deployed in contemporary works without

standing in for some particular object of critique. This generalized demonstration of

historical naïveté is then evaluated according to the critical intentions spelled out in the

montage of the editor-author.

Digital Compilation and Critical Complications
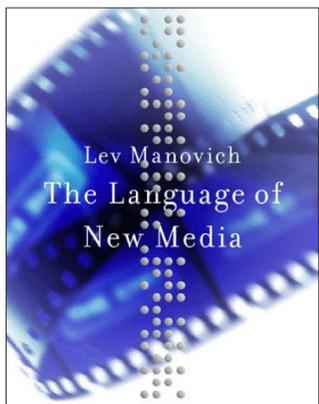
However, the model of creation and interpretation built on critique fails digital works on

a number of significant levels, high and low. Again, we may say that the critique of

institutions holds must be rethought within the free flow of a control society or network

culture.[50] The practices emerging from the use of filmic artifacts widely accessible via

networked databases operate on dynamic spectra of availability, fluidity, and saturation.[51]

In particular, the collage essays of People Like Us resist older models of critical

interpretation. Over and against critique as a mode of composition, PLU directs our

attention to happy accidents, unforeseen rhythms, and regimes of availability—exploring

the database as a form rather than critiquing any particular object within that database.

Instead these works exemplify the aesthetic turn outlined by Manovich in *The Language

of New Media*, wherein "pulling elements from databases and libraries becomes the

default," and the joint determinations of software and hardware express the database

itself as a dominant form (130). Dense with clips remediated (and hypermediated) from

newsreels, industrial films, and popular science footage, these works are structured

according to fluid principles of rhythm and digital compositing that erase the specificity

of a pointed historical argument.[52] Further critical complications arise as each new digital

compilation movie activates an index of nostalgic pixels drawn from a variety of analog

media. As often as the differences between found footage and digital compilation are

noted, filters for reading digital works remain limited by traditional models of critical

interpretation. Instead, this reading proposes a range of descriptive methodologies that

furnish an expanded set of tactics for examining works crafted within the database.

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[50] See Galloway, *Protocol*.

[51] Online, visual communication is common and the practice of movie-making de-specialized. Indeed, this argument may be extended to amateur FanVids, digital moving-image essays, and a wealth of emergent motion-picture communication systems enabled by the ease of editing and dispersion across networks. We may also recall that found footage is itself an outmoded term, as footage is replaced by Flash, QuickTime, and AVI files.

[52] See Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation.*

Actor-Networks and Digital Objects
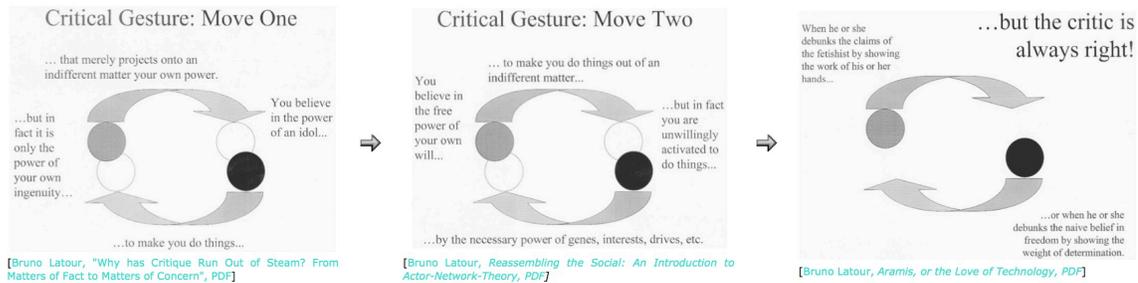
A rigorous accounting coordinated with an extensive retracing of sources used in sample-based media manages to highlight the rich conversation (beyond mere genre convention) a new work enacts with—and within—its source material. In this way, my reading proposes a constructive remapping of the generative processes of selection, distribution, and editorial modulation at the heart of the work's networked formation. This is not to discard a political analysis, but to assert that detailed descriptions of the networks of constitutive digital objects more fully inscribe the politics of the work within its digital environment. Indeed, Bruno Latour's work offers the most powerful corrective to critique, in "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" he counters the "contradictory repertoires [of] antifetishism, positivism, [and] realism," marking a critical landscape that has lost its way (241). Appropriating Latour's social history of science, we might argue that for digital movies "there is no greater intellectual crime than to address with the equipment of an older period the challenges of the present one" (231).[53] When everything is available—and previously ephemeral, arcane, or rare footage is only a click away—current scholarship can only begin by

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[53] The language of this paragraph and much of the paper follows on this article and related publications. See: *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996); and the excellent actor-network website, *Paris: Invisible City*, www.bruno-latour.fr/virtual/index.html.

tracing the robust trails of information radiating from any given object. Not only is the

character and significance of the contemporary feature shaped by this networked

research: the source materials themselves gather relevance in the growing intertext

accumulating through each new use and reuse. Thus, rather than performing genre-based

cultural critique, we might trace the material links extending both inward and outward

from *We Edit Life,* in the attempt to assemble an actor-network for demystification

beyond critique.[54]

Movie Introduction and Online Reception

With these tactics now loaded, we can turn our attention to *We Edit Life*. Commissioned

by Lovebytes, *We Edit Life* debuted as part of an international festival of digital art in

Sheffield, UK. Reusable from the beginning, People Like Us first presented the digital

movie alongside an improvisatory remix performance entitled *Recyclopaedia Britannica,*

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[54] For the most concise description of ANT, see Law, "Notes on the Theory of the Actor-Network: Ordering, Strategy and Heterogeneity": "This, then, is the core of the actor-network approach: a concern with how actors and organisations mobilise, juxtapose and hold together the bits and pieces out of which they are composed; how they are sometimes able to prevent those bits and pieces from following their own inclinations and making off; and how they manage, as a result, to conceal for a time the process of translation itself and so turn a network from a heterogeneous set of bits and pieces each with its own inclinations, into something that passes as a punctualised actor." (6)

which resampled many of the sources comprising *We Edit Life*.[55] The first in a series

of digital collage works, *We Edit Life* was soon distributed in a variety of formats on

Archive.org, YouTube, Vimeo, and *UbuWeb*.[56] In a statement for the Lovebytes debut of

the work, PLU emphasizes the use of samples from the Prelinger Archive.[57] Still a

nascent project in 2002, the Prelinger Archive joined the Internet Archive in 1999, with

substantial uploads of digitized industrial, educational, and ephemeral films only

beginning to appear online. More than simply sampling, PLU's selection of sources for

We Edit Life helped generate Prelinger's digital archive. Many required samples had yet

to be digitized, and were soon uploaded to Archive.org.[58] Thus, in *We Edit Life*, the

viewer sees the creation of the moving picture archive along with an early example of a

movie entirely derived from freely available internet content. Three years before

YouTube, *We Edit Life* anticipates widespread flash remix culture. On YouTube today,

DJ Rolling Paper's remix of *We Edit Life* outnumbers the original by over 3,500 views.[59]

The distribution history and reception of *We Edit Life* can be tracked in comment threads

on Comedy Central, via Vicki Bennett's personal website, and through 63,300 other hits

on a Google search for "we edit life" + "people like us." While it would certainly be an

abortive effort to describe this network at large, it would be a greater mistake to begin

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[55] For background on these screenings, see "Lovebytes2002," http://www.lovebytes.org.uk/2002/docs/pages/vicki.htm

[56] *We Edit Life* was first uploaded to The Prelinger Archive (archive.org) in 2004: http://www.archive.org/details/WeEditLife. Kenneth Goldsmith then uploaded the work to UbuWeb in 2007: http://www.ubu.com/film/plu_edit.html. Around the same time, willmed uploaded the work to YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_hJmmi_mnI. Vicki Bennet herself uploaded the work to Vimeo on March 30, 2010: http://vimeo.com/10553139. From these various uploads, countless embeds have distributed the work on other sites.

[57] See "Vicki Bennett at Lovebytes 2002," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9p3MfIaOsw

[58] Private correspondence with Vicki Bennet, 2011.

[59] The remixed *We Edit Life* is set to a remixed audio track derived from the Crystal Castles' "Vanished," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmABw-JaNes

without a sketch of the regimes of production and distribution that enable the movie

itself.

**Opening Frames and Film Leader**

A pastel colorized leader streams in the browser window, reproducing the grainy filmic

attributes of a conspicuously transcoded object. The soundtrack, a recording of amplified

projector pickups, similarly directs the user to an uncanny moment of filmic projection.

We see scratches from the leader's repeated trips through the projector, along with specks

of dust and strands of hair, chemical imperfections in the celluloid, misplaced splices, and

frame edges. Though we are viewing in a browser, *We Edit Life* playfully codes itself as a

work of film, confusing the opening moments as the 'play' icon of a perfectly animated

Flash Video player fades into the movie. The uncanny shift from digital activation to

remediated film is made more uncomfortable by the double introduction of the traditional

film leader. Indeed, while the anachronistic deployment of these cinematic artifacts are

common to a computing environment that offers "aged film" filters for nearly every

commercial application, the digitized leader and projector soundtrack opening *We Edit

Life* points more strongly to the medial transcoding before the browser.[60] As William C.

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[60] In the "Trivia" section of Wikipedia's page on film leader, we can note the particular resonance of this opening with PLU's software: "The video editing software Adobe Premiere (as well as later versions, including Adobe Premiere Pro and Adobe Premiere Elements) features a

Wees outlines in his classic manifesto, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films,* these works "cannot avoid calling attention to the 'mediascape' from which they come, especially when they also share the media's formal and rhetorical strategies of montage" (25). While *We Edit Life* extends far beyond traditional montage, its samples nevertheless consistently index a digital reflection of the filmic mediascape.

Timing and Synchronization
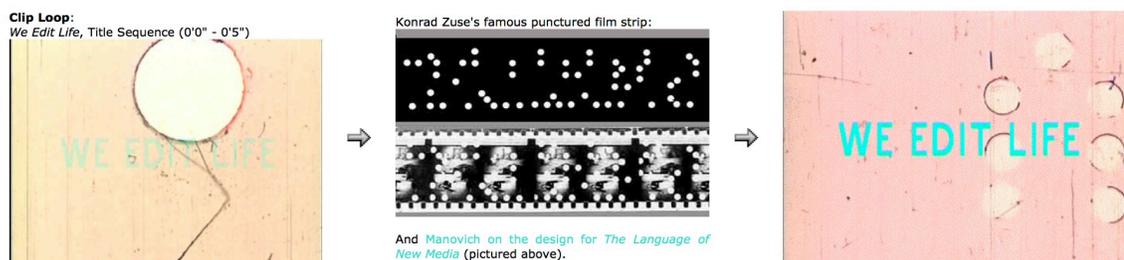
One step further, we may observe how these opening frames draw the filmic source material into a ludic engagement with digital composition. Immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with analog film editing are the puncture holes used for timing and synchronization between film reels. What first registers as a skip or glitch common to film projection still grappling with sprocket alignment reveals itself to be the repeated sequence of frames including the puncture hole. The exactitude of digital repetition is craftily embedded into this archaic representation of leader—the tightly controlled timing of an Adobe editing suite renders imprecise analog techniques inoperative. Such digital precision continues into animation as the pastel blue title "We Edit Life" slowly fades in

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computer-generated version of the SMPTE leader, entitled the "Adobe Universal Leader." It can be customized with different colors, and can be set to beep either at the beginning of each number or just at the two." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_leader

and out over the fluctuating filmic background. As the leader projects an ambient background for the title, these superfluous punctures serve the dual purpose of calling attention to the media historicity of the film as a material object, while introducing the seamless techniques of digital editing employed throughout the feature. This database aesthetic returns, as Stephen Mamber has persuasively argued, to a generalized field of analysis more akin to the pre-cinematic work of Marey. Operating as an analytic medium, Mamber argues in "Marey, the Analytic, and the Digital," the digital movie "displaces a dependence upon real-time linear presentation and the chemically-based realism of cinema…in its exposing (even revelling in) its own constructions" (88).

Film Editor and Adobe Premiere

Skipping to the first 'cut,' we encounter a similarly degraded shot of a filmmaker in profile, closely examining a strip of 35mm film. Looking frame-by-frame, with the celluloid in one hand and a pencil in the other, he is both writer and filmmaker—an editor in both senses. Meanwhile, the leader continues to roll out a countdown in a background layer as Bennett keys the film editor up to the first layer in the foreground. Indeed, the meticulous editing of PLU demands a frame-by-frame modulation closer to animation

than montage. As we consider the editor with film in hand, we can analyze the composition of this frame of *We Edit Life.* Toward the conclusion of the piece*,* we discover a mirroring of the film editor's work desk: PLU's screen displaying panel arrays of Adobe After Effects 5.0 and Pro Tools Free, both released in 2001.[61] The foreground features an After Effects layer trimmed to the editor's outline, while the background continues streaming the leader sample into a countdown. More akin to multi-track audio mixing, *We Edit Life* retains the decidedly DIY aesthetic of digital collage while streaming an increasingly elaborate composite of layered samples throughout the movie. If traditional found footage films require close scrutiny of montage-based juxtapositions, the digital compilation movie requires a detailed accounting of a variety of layered editorial decisions along with the fluid interactions between sampled works. If an understanding of this mode of composition may continue to stream in a background track to this reading, we may begin to explore the samples comprising the layered frame.

Stan VanDerBeek and Kenneth Knowlton

Kenneth Knowlton and Leon Harmon's "Nude" featured in the NYT:

IBM 7094:

[Henry Lieberman, *New York Times,* October 11, 1967, PDF]

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[61] While Marey has been evoked to highlight the analytic slant of digital movies, we might also note that until 2006, Adobe Premiere software packaging featured a galloping horse as an iconic homage to Muybridge.

"How much trouble is it to get that changed to some other color?" the filmmaker asks,

looking up from the celluloid to a technical advisor speaking off-screen. An answer

follows: "just find the right place in the program, make the appropriate change, and we'll

run the whole thing again." Though, at the mention of the program the filmmaker returns

his uncomprehending gaze to the materials at hand. The collaboration at play follows the

art-and-technology combination of artist and engineer prevalent in the technological

excitement of mid-sixties neo-avant-garde art. The filmmaker shown in profile

throughout the scene is Stan VanDerBeek, a prominent underground filmmaker best

known for his animated collage films. In 1967, at the time the original footage was shot,

VanDerBeek was working as an artist-in-residence at AT&T Bell Labs in Murray Hill,

New Jersey. His technical interlocutor is Ken Knowlton, an engineer specializing in

computer graphics and motion pictures at Bell Labs. The footage VanDerBeek holds is

toward creating one of a series of "poemfields," a set of experimental short films begun

in 1965 that deploy Knowlton's innovative BEFLIX computer graphics program—a

pioneering mode of generating images via a mosaic of Unicode characters.[62] Quite

literally, to alter the film, VanDerBeek must inscribe changes to the character mosaic via

a card that is fed into an IBM 7094 mainframe that rewrites the entire sequence onto

electronic tape that is later fed through a Stromberg-Carlson 4020 microfilm recorder and

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[62] This method of computer graphics was pioneered by Leon Harmon and Kenneth Knowlton in 1967 when his proto-ASCII Seurat-styled "Nude," sometimes titled "Studies in Perception I" made headlines in the New York Times. See Henry Lieberman, "Art and Science Proclaim Alliance in Avant-Garde Loft." For a fuller reflection on the project see Kenneth C. Knowlton, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Scientist."

finally converted to film.[63] With characteristic wonder, in "Re: Look: Computerized Graphics 'Light Brings Us News of the Universe'" VanDerBeek notes: "The <u>writing</u> of pictures that will make pictures in motion, in coded <u>text</u> form, means a new notation system to store images by… In other words, motion pictures can be written, stored indefinitely (in punched paper form or tape form) and brought 'to life' later. Motion pictures can be conceived (written) in airplanes" (48-49). Watching VanDerBeek marvel at having Knowlton's program "run the whole thing again," we might consider *We Edit Life* in 2002 alongside the popular emergence of real-time graphic interfaces capable of writing a full range of digital media formats.[64]

Incredible Machine and Bell Labs

Full Movie:
Paul Cohen/AT&T, *Incredible Machine* (1968, 14'56")

Movie Clip:
We Edit Life, VanDerBeek & Knowlton Sequence (0'17" - 1'10")

Via AT&T Archives, a recent endeavor to distribute a truly incredible set of sponsored films from the Bell Systems archive.

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[63] Technical details can be found in Knowlton, "Computer-Produced Movies"; Knowlton, "Computer-Generated Movies, Designs and Diagrams"; and VanDerBeek, "New Talent-The Computer."

[64] Adobe Premiere 6.5, released in August 2002, was the first consumer suite to feature real-time previews.

Lingering for a moment on this short opening clip, we might return to the provenance

of the sequence featuring VanDerBeek and Knowlton. The sample is pulled from

Incredible Machine (directed by Paul Cohen for AT&T, 1968), a fifteen-minute

sponsored film covering recent Bell Labs breakthroughs, as Rick Prelinger highlights, in

"computer graphics, computer-synthesized speech, and computer-generated movies and

music" (48). The scene in *We Edit Life* modifies a sequence entering *Incredible Machine*

at 3:35, rearranging the conversation and remixing the audio track. Overlays of circuit

diagrams and the flashing text "DATA INCOMPLETE" in the background of this scene

in *We Edit Life* are both sampled from an earlier segment of *Incredible Machine*. The

chalkboard becomes another screen, introducing a variety of clips that will feature

prominently in the latter half of the movie—children performing a group experiment in

electricity, flowing graphics representing sound waves, stock footage of a home, and a

layer matrix of hands operating dials. With voiceover narration and samples from

Incredible Machine peppered throughout *We Edit Life*, the communications research film

serves as the core around which the samples deployed by Bennett constellate and

eventually spin out of control. Even on a cursory viewing, without supplemental

information describing the samples, still, the genre format, ideological thrust, and

intended audience of *Incredible Machine* are easily recognized by the casual internet

spectator: this is a commercial-industrial-promotional computer science and technology

film, bright-eyed with a starry utopian vision of progress, narrated by a familiar paternal

voice educating a general populace. Rather than perform a critical turn on this content,

however, PLU plays within in its network of association, activating a concerted set of

associated materials and concerns.

"Daisy Bell" and Elektro the Westinghouse Moto-Man

Sampled Clip:
Medicus collection, Elektro the Westinghouse Moto-Man (1939, 0'56", silent)
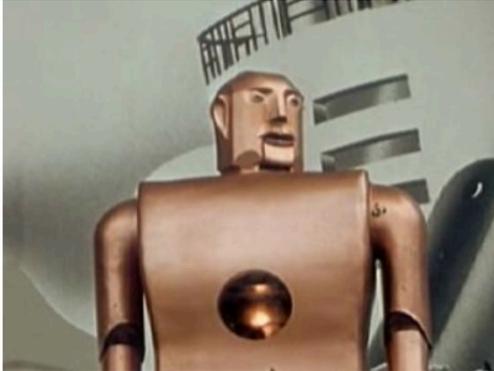
See full movie via Archive.org.

Movie Clip:
We Edit Life, Singing Robot Sequence (6'07" - 8'29")

Continuing this track, our attention to the details of source materials like *Incredible Machine* opens robust networks of signification in the rhythmic composition of *We Edit Life*. The structural and semantic importance of *Incredible Machine* grows increasingly telling as *We Edit Life* moves from a focus on computer generated film to computer generated music. The score for *Incredible Machine*, as the narrator reveals, "was entirely composed by a computer." This would be no small feat just a few years after "Daisy Bell" debuted at Murray Hill. The team behind this first computer to sing—comprised of John Kelly, Carol Lockbaum, and Max Mathews—are all featured in *Incredible Machine*. Mathews, the grandfather of electronic music provides the score for the film. Sampling Mathews' pioneering audio track along with visual layers from *Incredible Machine*, PLU's aural attention might best locate *We Edit Life* in a digital music video genre, where both image and sound are driven more by rhythm and fluid spatial montage than cutting. If there is a narrative to draw out from the movie, we might argue for a story of artificial

life, as the various dials and diagrams, engineers and conductors orchestrate the

creation of a singing robot. Here, Elektro the Westinghouse Moto-Man, sampled from a

newsreel of the 1939 world's fair in New York, may stand in for the titular 'life' edited

by PLU's computer.[65] As *We Edit Life* becomes increasingly disjointed toward the

conclusion, Elektro joins with a circuit made of children to sing an ominous remix of

"Music Alone Shall Live." Far from generically sampled, the source material behind

Elektro's threatening ballad in *We Edit Life* invokes a dense mesh of insightful

references, beginning with HAL's death rattle rendition of "Daisy Bell" in Stanley

Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969), which naturally brings us back to Murray Hill

and the birth of synthesized speech, covered in detail by *Incredible Machine*. The

ambivalent temporality of *We Edit Life* imports the technological thrill of these sixties

innovations into a premonitory mix with the melodic anxieties of a database that will, as

Elektro tell us, outlive us all.

Poemfield No. 2 and *Man and His World*

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[65] Listed as "Amateur film: Medicus collection: New York World's Fair, 1939-40] (Reel 3) (Part I) (1939)" on Archive.org: http://www.archive.org/details/Medicusc1939_3. The Medicus collection presents "detailed documentation of the 'World of Tomorrow' in beautiful Kodachrome."

Reeling back from this expanding intertext, we might go deeper into the diegesis,

returning to the footage VanDerBeek holds at the opening of *We Edit Life*. The footage

under consideration is most likely *Poemfield No. 2* (ca. 1966), one of the ten short poetic

films VanDerBeek and Knowlton made in collaboration over a four-year span from 1965

to 1969. It might also be *Man and His World* (1967), a one-minute short film after the

title for Expo '67 that translates the phrase 'man and his world' into a variety of the

world's languages.[66] Literally comprised of a mosaic of international textual detritus and

small symbolic characters, the poemfields explore the representational capacities and

inherent variability of language within computational environments. While

VanDerBeek's background is in image-based collage films like *Science Friction*, the

lexical construction of BEFLIX films inspired a literary form—each word-image

necessarily contains thousands of letters as pixels. Reading the text for *Poemfield No. 2*

alongside *We Edit Life,* certain resonant themes emerge:

LIFE / LIFE LIKE / POEMFIELD NO. 2 / SIMILAR / LIKE / TO / CLOCK /
TICK / WE PICK / LIFE / OUT / OR APART / SEEMING / TO SEE /
SEPARATE / THINGS / TOGETHER / SO / YOU / SAY / IT / WOULD / SEEM
/ LIFE .. LIKE ... / THIS / LIVING / BUT... / WE / ALWAYS / SUSPECT / .. IT
… / THE END[67]

Seeming to see separate things together, PLU reanimates Elektro to a singing life-

likeness and more generally deploys disparate archival sources in a variety of repurposed

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[66] However, since *Man and His World* is featured as complete and colorized later in the sequence of *Incredible Machine*, it is unlikely to be the source of the conversation between VanDerBeek and Knowlton during the filming of *Incredible Machine.* Similar in form, it could be any of several poemfields made around this time.
[67] This transcription varies from VanDerBeek's own notation in an attempt to highlight certain textual features from the film that are elided in the script.

narrative configurations. On this digital translation, we might say *We Edit Life*, alongside the poemfields, "passes as a punctualized actor," concealing an intricate network that holds them together (Law, 6). The suspicious ease of a cohesive collage is central both to VanDerBeek's previous films and PLU's audio remixes, where dead media is everywhere lifelike. Toward these ends, *We Edit Life* channels the *Incredible Machine* soundtrack over a man whittling miniature wooden elk over footage of 'real live' elk, stating: "Experimenters in visual perception are using computers to create weird, random patterns that never occur in real life...The art of computer graphics is only in its infancy yet it is already stimulating creative thought in far out areas where research is likely to get complex and unwieldy."

Gathering Sources and Concluding Links
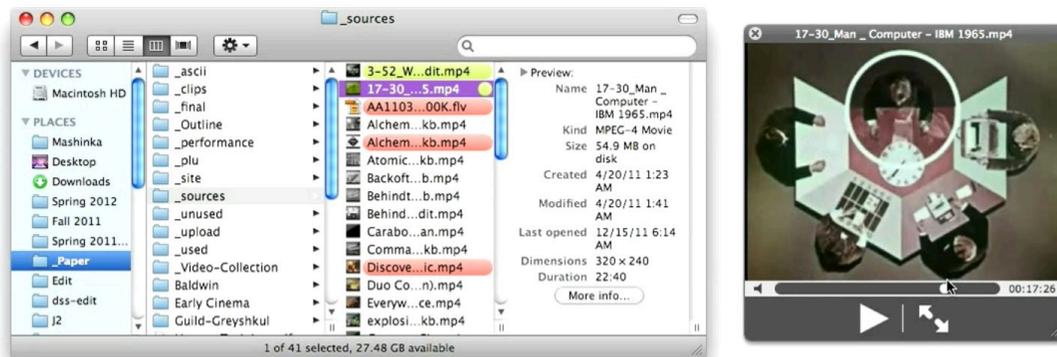
While this extended descriptive performance draws out signification patterns from *Incredible Machine* and associated materials, we can conclude by anthologizing a number of the films sampled by PLU, all of which might offer interpretive feedback between *We Edit Life* and the database from which it stems. More than a supplement, this collection

performs a potential inherent to reading works operating within a database. Each source returns to *We Edit Life* while simultaneously pointing the user into an n-dimensional system of signification radiating out from each new citation. Rather than limit the reading of *We Edit Life* to a pointed critical position, this project seeks to deploy the movie as a conduit that might direct its user to unimagined passages beyond this particular constellation. In other words, as one screen among many, this reading can only conclude with new directions. Thus, what follows are a select few strands among the many worth tracing:

Panels and operators are taken from IBM's *The Thinking Machines* (1968), an educational short following a robotic cartoon that concludes with a clip from the previously outlined *Man and His World*. At 4:30, the radio director from CBS's *On the Air* (1937) pops up over a diagram for the chemical formula of celluloid culled from *The Alchemist in Hollywood* (1940). A voiceover from *The News Magazine of the Screen* (Vol. 7, Issue 3, 1956) describes footage taken from *Fashions on the Ice and Snow* (1940) and *Switzerland: The Land and the People* (1963), confusing time through place.[68] Sound waves, computer panels, and musicians are sampled from *Discovering Electronic Music* (1983), further integrating the parallel history of early computer film and music within *We Edit Life*. Numerous samples from a variety of orchestral recordings, musical education films, and soundies—including *Conducting Good Music* (1956), *Instruments of the Orchestra* (1947), *Sound Recording for Motion Pictures* (1960), and *Looking at Sound* (1950), for example—all import melodies and archival narratives to the mix.

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[68] All films not linked in this paragraph have either never been uploaded to the internet, have been taken down, or were perhaps not pinpointable by the author. All are mentioned in PLU's source list, and thus may be presumed present in *We Edit Life*.

Indirect samples may also be found: the kitschy "Happy Valley Ranch" sign above

the rolling credits calls up the "Lazy-X Ranch" in *The World at Your Call* (1950), a Jam

Handy/AT&T telephonic communications film. Similarly, the title "We Edit Life" can be

heard as an echo of the industrial short *We Use Power* (1956) referenced in PLU's

Prelinger inventory. More distantly, *Man and Computer* (1965) originates the filmic

metaphor of the conductor as computer operator in a related hypermediated format.

Finally, "IBM Corporation, Military Products Division" presents *On Guard! The Story of*

SAGE (1956), wherein panel operators at the IBM mainframe bring innovations in

computer technology to a familial Cold War context, and the military-industrial complex

more generally. Without space to offer more than this brief list of samples, the argument

for a fuller archival activation of *We Edit Life* can nevertheless be concluded by pointing

to the editorial remix of texts, images, and movies that supplement this chapter, along

with the outward links to expanded potential significations. Here, as in *We Edit Life*, the

user is directed back into the database, where each sample contains a new network for

exploration.

CODA TO THE FIRST CHAPTER

EXE TXT

Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann argue for the type of expanded interpretation

presented here as "deformance," a practice-based approach that moves "beyond

conceptual analysis into the kinds of knowledge involved in performative operations"

(*Radiant Textuality*, 106). In their groundbreaking essay "Deformance and

Interpretation," they begin with a consideration of Emily Dickinson's proposal to read

poems backwards, line by line, as a tactic for releasing hidden vectors of meaning within

a work. If Dickinson's simple operation contains the potential for "rethinking our

resources of interpretation," then *Textz* offers a vast inventory prepared for this type of

interpretive poetics (109). As deformance, the collection subordinates the "content" of

text and theory to the poetics of transmission, encryption, and format. In alignment with

Samuels and McGann, scholars like Alan Liu emphasize the necessity for new poetic

forms within the field of humanities computing. Given the importance of form and

process in the criticism of digital objects, the digital humanities would do well to turn not

only to data visualization and information design for answers, but also to contemporary

art and poetry. *Textz* navigates a path between code and concept, collection and

dispersion, text and software—all within a coherent set of aesthetic and political aims. In

the following coda, I explore a scholarly mode that might deploy one vector of *Textz*'s

poetics of the variable format.

When I began conceptualizing this chapter, my aim was to exclusively use texts

within the *Textz* collection to theorize the site. With its transhistorical assemblage of

media theory, internet criticism, and related readings, this seemed a productive gesture.

What is a collection that might theorize itself? How might a scholarly approach allow the

collection to "speak for itself," as it were? This idea was abandoned for a number of

primarily institutional reasons. The gains afforded by studying the site's operations from

the present seemed to outweigh the benefit of inhabiting the discourse of the collection

itself. At least, this seemed to be the case for the chapter proper, which by necessity

focuses more on the contexts and techniques of the site than the works that it contained.

In lieu of presenting close readings of the texts within *Textz*, I began to consider a

scholarly deformance that might accomplish the same task beyond the dissertation.

This work, entitled *EXE TXT* endeavors to perform the collection's self-

theorization, in both format and process. It includes a final document (as both a plain text

file and print-on-demand book), a python script, and the complete set of *Textz* textwarez.

My intervention includes a text that was constructed with a relatively simple python

script that extracts sentences containing variants of the strings "text" and "software" from

the complete set of textwarez (including multilingual strings "texte", "testo", and "texto"

for example). In this way, it queries how *text* might meet *software* within the works that

Textz hosts. The complete python script is as follows:

```python
import re
import sys
import random

def write_lines(filename, data_lines):

    with open(filename, 'w') as f:
```

```
        f.write(' '.join(data_lines))
        f.write('\n')

def match_word(text, word):
    return re.search(r'\b{0}\b'.format(word), text)

def split_sentences(filename):

    with open(filename, 'r') as f:
        data = f.read()
    data = data.replace('\n', ' ')
    parsed = re.split(r'([.!?])', data)

    text   = parsed[0::2]
    ending = parsed[1::2]

    return [t+e for t, e in zip(text, ending)]

if __name__ == '__main__':
    if len(sys.argv) < 3:
        print('usage: {0} input_file word'.format(sys.argv[0]))
        sys.exit()

    filename = sys.argv[1]
    word = sys.argv[2]
    basename, ext = filename.rsplit('.', 1)
    outfile = "{0}_{1}.{2}".format(basename, word, ext)

    lines = split_sentences(filename)
    target_lines = [line.strip() for line in lines if match_word(line, word)]
    random.shuffle(target_lines)
    write_lines(outfile, target_lines)
```

The output of this script was then edited for coherence and consistency within the generic

conventions of the academic essay. The line breaks are mine, as well as certain minor

typographical adjustments. Nevertheless, the aim is to have the collection speak for itself

as clearly as possible. It is presented in plain text ASCII format as another work of

textwarez, which I published both at Gauss PDF and within this dissertation as an

alternate rendering and dangerous supplement to the first chapter. Like all linear

textual formats, it presents one narrative trajectory among the limitless potential routes a

user might follow through the database. However, it is also a little database, or inventory

of effects, in its own right. Any user may repeat this operation on the *Textz* corpus using

the enclosed PHP script, both of which are included in the publication *EXE TXT*.

Instructions for executing the python script on the corpus are contained in a

"readme.exe.txt" file. More than a simple statement of authorial permission, it is a

command that initiates a program called textwarez for any user of the publication. Users

may select their own terms for drawing from *Textz*. The final two lines of the python

script read "random.shuffle(target_lines) / write_lines(outfile, target_lines)." With these

two lines of code, the extracted sentences are randomized and written in succession to a

new text file. The publication is thus itself variable, including all subsequent texts derived

from its mechanism:

http://www.gauss-pdf.com/post/119280455505/gpdf172-gpdfe015-danny-snelson-exe-txt

Eclipse Printing Service

My introduction to digital file formats, the little database, and indeed the entire field of contemporary poetry was delivered over a flatbed scanner while employed as a work-study intern for *Eclipse* in the spring of 2004. Remarkably, the magazine I was scanning at the time has never made it to the light of the internet. As a scanner for *Eclipse*, I was entrusted with a full set of the magazine, *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"*. This incredibly rare post-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetics magazine published nine issues in New York City from 1984 until 1989. The emblem for this coda might be found in the hilariously grainy Xerox reproduction of Hollis Frampton's structural film *Nostalgia*, which concluded the first issue of *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"*. The magazine felt both incredibly auratic and remarkably hasty in its side-stapled Xerox production. In its final issue, the editors Ben Friedlander and Andrew Schelling note: "copies of the magazine always seemed to travel hand to hand, enjoying themselves in places and in ways we couldn't imagine." This comment seems the perfect introduction to a digital edition of *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K,"* even if it has not yet come to pass.

If the magazine is indeed a kind of house (as is well known, the word 'magazine' etymologically stems from the goods "storehouse" or military "warehouse")—then it is perhaps the best icon for a little electrotype-Xerox magazine. A house of "K," the single letter perhaps a stand-in for the word "knowledge," amplifies the ambiguity or potentiality of a letter, like any unit of meaning. The isolation of this letter may perhaps also serve as a call-back to that immediately preceding poetics magazine spelling the

word 'language' in a laborious letter-by-letter equivalence. Removed from the

circulation that defines a periodical, the magazine changes, it becomes indexed, archival,

comprehensive. While the material traces of distribution remain, the function shifts to

something between a scattered (or highly redundant) collection and a public (or multiply

authored) correspondence—too produced to be read as a letter, too contingent to be read

as an anthology. As a mobile home, *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"* may yet move

through still unimagined material iterations. While any given reader may scan its pages

into image files or PDF collections, the same user may also reproduce the magazine from

these files, back onto the paper from which they came.

In 2010, Primary Information produced a facsimile republication of the full run of

Avalanche magazine. Edited by James Hoff and Miriam Katzeff, the republication

includes all thirteen issues of the original magazine. First published in glossy square

editions from 1970 to 1973, then as a tabloid newspaper until 1976, the *Avalanche* reissue

is remarkable in its mimicry of the materiality of the original versions. The first eight are

presented as exact facsimile reprints, down to the dimensions of the page and the weight

of the paper, while the last five are bound in a book format that models the size of the

original tabloid newspaper. What the uncanny first eight issues provide is an atemporal

glimpse into the object as impossibly new and uncomfortably old. Here the preservation

of all bibliographic codes produces both tremendous discomfort and hyper-attentive

media opacity. The anachronistic pricing on the cover—$2—stands in marked

contradistinction to the $150 price tag. Similarly, the occasional speck of dust or crease

caught in the 1200dpi scanning process (far exceeding the precision of the naked eye)

mixes with new dust and user wear. The differences grow harder to recognize. Like

forgeries of great paintings, the Primary Information *Avalanche* issues are impossibly

available and a bit too precise. As a responsible bibliographer and critical consumer, the

fraud is easy to locate. However, considering speculative futures for periodical study, one

can't help but wonder at the possibilities in the archive-to-come. Symptomatic of print-

on-demand publishing, flexible supply economics, and sophisticated scanning and edition

platforms, the magazine signals new potentials in distribution alongside reduplicated

simulacra effects in its preservation.

Playing between issues of periodicity, preservation, and file formats, this coda

concludes with a link to a republication platform entitled "Eclipse Printing Service"

(EPS). The mechanism is simple to articulate: this service periodically compiles image

files hosted by *Eclipse* in order to produce print-on-demand (POD) books for print

preservation. Against the periodic lapses of the Internet Archive and the unpredictable

ephemerality of digital republication, EPS offers hardcopy records of digital files in

advance of the chance that they might disappear entirely or even reappear differently.

Each edition in EPS is standardized to a basic 8.5" by 11" perfect bound book printed at

cost in black and white paperback format. As Wikipedia knows, EPS primarily stands for

"Encapsulated PostScript," a vector-based graphics file format that conforms to the

Document Structuring Conventions laid out by Adobe Systems for the creation of PDF

files. In other words, "an EPS file is a PostScript program, saved as a single file that

includes a low-resolution preview 'encapsulated' inside of it, allowing some programs to

display a preview on the screen" (Wikipedia "Encapsulated PostScript"). In the instance

of the Eclipse Printing Service, the screen is replaced by the codex, and the program is

replaced by a human reader. These images may be considered a kind of "low-resolution

preview," but they may also be a form of postscript to the image file in its

unanticipated return to the book. Just as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Distributing Service

utilized Xerox technology to put a range of small-press publications back into material

circulation, the Eclipse Printing Service aims to put a series of image files back into the

medial circumstances from which they were derived.

Drawing inspiration from Primary Information, this process attempts to

complicate hasty readings of the combined vectors of historical publication, scanned

image file, and print-based republication. These versioning processes, EPS contends, are

creative acts of deformance, each of which imports a new set of significations based on

the medial instantiation of the work. In remarks on the founding of *Eclipse*, Dworkin

writes: "The hope was that the spirit of the small-press revolution—the do-it-yourself

ethos of stapled mimeographs and chapbooks printed on a proof press in someone's

garage—could be reengineered for the Web" (81). In the hand-coded internet of web 1.0,

this certainly rang true. Increasingly, platforms like Troll Thread, Gauss PDF, Post-

Digital Publishing Archive, Hysterically Real, Orworse Press, Library of the Printed

Web, and other print-on-demand internet platforms are revitalizing the "do-it-yourself

ethos" for a post-digital internet environment. They exploit the conventions of utilitarian

digital platforms (network garages) through products and services (like duplicators and

Xerox machines) targeted at corporate and consumer groups. Returning to paper, EPS

tests the affordances of paper-based preservation systems against digital recording

technologies. As another meta-periodical, it grows beyond this dissertation and through

its parasitical relationship to *Eclipse*. "Issues" of EPS releases are thematically linked and

published at variable intervals. The first issue is timed to coordinate with the defense of

this dissertation on May 29th, 2015. It includes all complete periodicals currently

hosted by *Eclipse*, printed as single editions, beginning with a full set of

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine:

http://dss-edit.com/eclipse.html

Also This: No Title

I began this chapter with the intent to write about recordings of modernist poets William

Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. I had some role in editing both of their *PennSound*

pages, and the richness of scholarly discourse around their works suggested the

possibility for a robust study of transformations introduced to their respective sound

works by digitization. In lockstep with this approach, the relation of the digital object to

the various poetics of objectivist writing seemed urgent. However, the circuits of

transmission were cut short: in each instance, a primary recording was relayed to the

PennSound collection by a single process of transcoding. The ways in which bissett

trafficked through a range of little databases, on the other hand, presented a method to

navigate transmission and context alongside general trends of transcoding, which remain

contingent in every instance. That is to say, the audition of each recording can be

understood as significantly revised by the internet context, digital format, or new

interface which frames it. This is particularly so in relation to the poetics of the live

performance, as well as analog iterations on paper and earlier sound recording

technologies. This process is as variable for Williams and Zukosfky as it might be for any

author featured in the *PennSound* collection. Thus, the wealth of the resources devoted to

these authors paled in comparison to the storehouse of transmissions shadowing the

bissett files on *PennSound*. To reiterate: this chapter might just as easily have followed

any number of writers in any number of configurations.

        The essay, as a dissertation chapter, must make certain editorial decisions. The

work of deformance, as *MUPS* demonstrates, has a greater degree of freedom in its

process of selection. My own work in processing the *PennSound* collection predates my

enrollment in the Penn English Department. I began editing *PennSound* in the fall of

2007, starting with the WCW page, and continuing through a diverse set of

segmentations and arrangements over the next several years. In the spring of 2008—

around the time I was admitted to Penn—I was graciously invited to create a "selected"

set of featured resources culled from the collection. Perhaps not by coincidence, the

Jhave selection of tracks for *MUPS* heavily relies upon the *PennSound* "Featured

resources archive." Where previous iterations of the format suggested a highly

concentrated "top ten" list more common to cassette mixes and listicle culture, I decided

to make a sample-based compilation in addition to the editorial selection of sound tracks.

This compilation was named after the incidental lines of a WCW track, "Also this: no

title." The compilation—called an "Editorial Reprise Audio Essay"—samples from

sixteen tracks to construct a coherent transcript and audio track clocking in at roughly

thirteen minutes. As I have continued work on this dissertation approximately seven

years later—nearing the conclusion of my time at Penn—I have come to discover that

this featured selection performs the argument of my chapter more effectively than any

essay might hope to do.

Like *MUPS*, the compilation jumps from poetry recording to poetry recording in

what can seem, at times, the haphazard logic of an accidental conversation between

readings. However, unlike the algorithmic leaps of *MUPS*, "Also this" is a concerted set

of editorial interventions into a highly compressed set of sixteen audio files from thirteen

authors. Each decision, cut, or transition was deliberated as a discrete and significant

gesture. Like the compilation film discussed in the next chapter or the montage poem features of Language poetics described in the previous chapter, this poetics constructs an argument through careful arrangement. The opening lines of "Also this" signal the process in the voice of Jed Rasula articulating his reedit of Henry James' *The Ambassadors*: "i have not tampered with anything i have simply removed and reallocated the parts." Between these "reallocations," bursts of audio hiss and author in-breaths interrupt the poetic stream. Unlike a *MUPS* session, the stream of "Also this" highlights the medial and incidental qualities of the recordings as significant beyond the threshold of silence. Working at the time as a sound editor at a major publishing house for audio books, I had learned how to use sophisticated audio engineering techniques for removing the human element from the telling of a narrative. In "Also this," I wanted to do just the opposite. Between every significant transition, an array of breaths and skips interrupted the smooth shifting that a listener might expect.

Rather than attempt to rearticulate the message of "Also this," I will present the work here to speak for itself, as *TXT EXE* might speak for the *Textz* collection. While there is the temptation to discuss the relation of the radio and transmission art of Gregory Whitehead to the archival record of digital systems; or the digital presentation of Jackson Mac Low's aleatoric cassette-based work entitled "The 8-Voice Stereo-Canon Realization of The Black Tarantula Crossword Gatha"; or the multilingual transformations of Caroline Bergvall's etymological rewriting of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*—each of which displays a unique relation to the MP3 file and the *PennSound* collection—I will instead limit my gesture to the reposting of "Also this: no title" in full. On a final note, I'll note that my own work is featured in *MUPS,* along with

the full "Deformance" page on *PennSound*. This poses a new set of questions regarding editorial and reformatting practice, which are beyond the purview of my intervention here. In these tracks, I focus on Rosmarie Waldrop's rewriting of Ludwig Wittgenstein, emphasizing the "you" and the "I" in her rendering, and writing myself as a listener into the exchange. In each of these works: *MUPS*, "Also this," or the Waldrop deformance, the focus in on the listener's relation to the little database. Or rather, as "Also this" concludes: "***one big blooming confusion, or, the other side of language / where i am mute and the unsaid the unsaid weighs heavy […]*** andor hurl it into the void and/or demonstrate the autonomy of the audience."

PennSound Featured Resources 2008

Download the entire compilation as a zip file here (123mb)

Introduction: Jed Rasula (2000):
    The Ambassadors (Part I)

1. William Carlos Williams (1942-50):
    The Defective Record, Danse Russe. Shoot It Jimmy!

2. Darren Wershler-Henry (2001):
    from *The Tapeworm Foundry*

3. Caroline Bergvall (2006):
    The Franker Tale (deus hic)

4. Jack Spicer (1965):
    Thing Language, Sporting Life

5. Helen Adam (1977):
    from San Francisco's Burning

6. Gregory Whitehead (2002):
    Evil Axis

Editorial Reprise Audio Essay: [Also this: No Title](#)

also this: no title = **wrong from the start / no hardly but seeing he had been born in a half savage country out of date = he fished by obstinate isles** = actually i should read this, um brief uh public service announcement here, it's appropriate for, uh = *uh, those, uh i have not tampered with anything i have simply removed and reallocated the parts* = **of what can it such as which sense can it no**t = *uh, this is a selection from a rather uh unscrupulous raid that i uh made* = blasted stochastically thought detectors tossed together with targeted segments of remorse the = *the poet / takes too many messages* = **with the structural trends and the styles of folding defined by foliation, fold axis, bedding and sometimes by signifier anomalies =** surreptitiously trips resolute tourniquet = **case presents no adjunct to the muses diadem, the age demanded an image of it's accelerated grimace, something for the modern stage not at any rate an attic =** *surely i can reduce this in its scope and size = exactly the position that they occupy in the text as we have it but = but i thot that i might be able to perform some kind of =* killing whatever was there before = **For two gross of broken statues, / For a few thousand battered books. / These fought, in any case, / and some believing, pro domo, in any case / Some quick some venture** = bleached to the point of subordination = **some from weakness, some from censure, / some for love of slaughter in imagination, / learning Daring as never before / wastage as never before / frankness as never before, =** *no one listens to poetry, the ocean does not need to be listened to / a drop a crash of water it means nothing / it is bread and butter pepper and salt, the death that young men hope for = aimlessly it pounds ashore = white and aimless signals, no / one listens to poetry =* and the minutes burn a hole in my socket the seconds scar a moment after gone but wayward knos no way then toils triumphalist deflation tailoring tokens to abutments = *for him to build a*

house on to build a house on to build a house on to build a house on to build a house on to = **disillusions as never told in the old days / laughter out of dead bellies / There died a myriad, / And of the best, among them, / For an old bitch gone in the teeth,** = *among the giant thrust sheets and naps found in many origins, these long curvilinear belts of compressive deformation produced by the collision of narratives, uh and in their accretionary form contain very little reworked older text* = *get the rhythm that sheet stuffs a lot of cheese man* = *i make em crazy with my harmony* = *nobody nobody else but me they can't copy it* = **with increasing speed and frequency** = *the trouble with comparing a poet to a radio is that radios don't develop scar tissue* = *the tubes burn out or with a transistor which most souls are the battery or diagram burns out replaceable or not replaceable* = human emotions in cognition leave a projective film over the poems making them difficult to perceive careful readers maintain a measured distortion free comprehension to avoid, damaging the meaning = *the poet is a radio, the poet is a liar* = **fire fire, fire fire, what's happening what are they saying =** not not certainly the obscure reveries of the inward gaze, better mendacities than the classics in paraphrase = or on what once one long very a by thing most much part much aback post right match sent will weigh all for to some thing will I = *the poet is a counterpunching radio and those messages (god would not damn them) do not ever know they are champions* = **(piano) a room in the hangman's house it is seen dimly at first because the spotlight is on the corpse of a small baby which hangs from the ceiling by one foot, this is the murdered babe... as it begins to sing it spins round and round = (murdered babe singing musical intro/outlude) =** *various and manifold she had taken all his categories by surprise* = and/or add one sheet of blank paper to a stack for every day that you reject a concept = *by which you mean / as if you didn't* = certain enjambment virtual expiation / i don't / kno what / you mean = and/or stay on the scene like a vending machine and/or take no for an answer write the book that occurs between proper help and/or begin to read out loud with a mouth full of ball bearings that you spit out one by one into a metal bowl and then when yr finished begin to put them back into yr mouth one by one but never stop yr reading **=** *scarcely less or perhaps even more* = *the way it boldly took him was to make him want more wants* = **a prose kinema / For a botched civilization.** = **been as nor can of whence what never even as a single ever still of still of when as now then about not whence ever till such can what it to through as about then as till such hence it's which of what it can since which not even then now as now till since then down of among like both an either whole** = *and what is the zero that marks the place of one who writes* = *a bit scattered my brain perhaps but not yet my bones wch i've carried around all my life, and by my own strength* = *so i embark on writing with a shout at the sea around me the surface of language* = (chalking sounds) = in the wilds of the rotated x / Why oh why oh why are you so e-e-vil / Why-y oh why oh why are you so e-e-vil = A new

ideology of yvele evell / evyl evil manaces society / abortion abomination in his bestselling scriptures book, Memory and Identity. / Susters and nieces! Mothers aunts and doghters! / Deus Hic! God is drunk! / At these wordes words heven rose glood / the deepest soun son sound / a song sangen entuned intoned / a dense clamour clamor cries out / Love is leaving! the Earth quakes quaketh / shakes under their feet! / some sort of deep tabour of drum or drone. / My tale is almost doon. = ***the vessel is not important but the shout is, it brings the body, = rhythmic paratitic the old oral forms, repetition alliteration and if i don't use formulae and proverbs i at least play among their echoes in the inner ear =*** torched but never touched saddled with torqued torso of history's elephantine grunge grudge bombastic emblematic erasures strip pining gurgle against dusk put a flume in the goggling apparatus hazelnut boom in the mixturating cadavers of modeled obliquity and fractal obecense = ***intricate lines, complex across gaps and fissures, toward the distance needed for full understanding, where the void opens its one eye but never closes = swallows missiles helicopters wounded bodies budding leaves the sun rising out of the electric sea =*** objects such as ingots addressed to various art institutions but bearing as a return address the homes of various critics or judges = ***streets glistening with rain =*** and/or exercise the ghost of content and/or run out of things on which to write = **tin cans plastic bags armchairs playing cards a prisoner on a leash =** and/or imagine a world where the job of a critic is to describe the interior structure of writing because all writing is hollow and then go on to write from this perspective an unflinching assessment of yr worst work = ***chimneys cigarette butts color shifting in the sky rooftops maples hum vees tank fields of wild flowers and land mines in one big blooming confusion, or, the other side of language / where i am mute and the unsaid the unsaid weighs heavy / on the tip of the tongue / a foretaste of death / thank you =*** and/or watcher and/or hurl it into the void and/or demonstrate the autonomy of the audience.

Flash Artifacts

The close reading of any moving image object hosted on *UbuWeb* catalyzes an

unpredictably idiosyncratic set of transformations effected on the historical work. Each

work transforms differently under the conditions of the digital collection. The previous

chapter followed the provenance and version history of a particular set of recordings by

bill bissett, arguing that any set of files would have its own attendant stories to tell. In the

same way, this chapter argues for the productive potentials of a close reading of any

given digital object, marked by the contingency of how everything from the technical

substrate to the social text might come to signify within the historical work's system. Put

differently, every reading of a digitized film must conclude with frayed strands of

signification that point toward the massively intertextual situation of the little database.

Theme Song addresses the intersection of a video art installation in the gallery with

contemporary forms of vlog confessional formats on the internet. *Zen for Film* opens with

questions of technical materiality and ends in an unforeseeable horizon for remix. *We

Edit Life* redirects the attentive reader from the compression of compilation to the

unzipping of a cultural archive. Each reading coheres only insofar as it redirects the

reader to forces that inform the work's connection to social texts and historical

interpretations. Further, any given digitized film or video on *UbuWeb* signifies differently

given layers of contingent effects heaped upon iterations of the work over time. This is

the challenge to any systematic reading of the *UbuWeb* collection. The transformations

effected by digital formats cannot be generalized. Indeed, the only generalization we

might make is that every file is transformed differently.

In 2009, I collaborated with the artist João Enxuto to query this condition within the

UbuWeb collection, co-producing a thirty-minute movie entitled *Flash Artifacts*.[69] The

work is hosted on *UbuWeb* and was screened at galleries in New York and Berlin. Our

approach highlighted the most extreme examples of media-reflexive film and video that

were then streaming on *UbuWeb*. The work attempted to surface "a hidden magic" in

"the contextual economy of *UbuWeb*."[70] By "interweaving, juxtaposing, and re-editing

dozens of films and videos from the *UbuWeb* archive" we attempted to draw out the

specificity of each localized transformation. Formally, the work follows art historical

projection, with its standard display of two panels for comparative analysis. At certain

moments in *Flash Artifacts*, this tidy relation breaks down as films stream through,

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[69] See http://ubu.com/film/snelson_flash.html

[70] Fur further commentary, see the *UbuWeb* page for *Flash Artifacts*:
http://ubu.com/film/snelson_flash.html

above, and within each other. Like *Zen for Film*, the works featured in *Flash Artifacts* are particularly sensitive to the medial registers of use and playback. Samples are drawn from celluloid-intensive films, interventionist television advertisements, and born-digital animations alike. In dialogue with *We Edit Life*, the compilation is a mode of both reading the database and a guide for viewers to rediscover works already in circulation. This editorial poetics is augmented by a set of links to all works included in *Flash Artifacts*. The deformance functions as a little database of its own, nested within *UbuWeb*.

Several of the sampled works in *Flash Artifacts* have since been taken down from *UbuWeb*. If the same work were made today, it would need to respond to the current set of files hosted by *UbuWeb* and the attendant changes to the interface. For example, the entire collection has recently been optimized for streaming on mobile phones and tablets. These technical affordances invoke a new set of readings of the works that have been streaming on the site all along. In this regard, *Flash Artifacts* marks a particular moment in *UbuWeb*'s position within the continuously shifting terrain of online viewership. However, it has also undergone multiple changes over the past six years, not least in relation to this dissertation. The only remnant of Peter Campus's work on *UbuWeb*, for instance, is within *Flash Artifacts*. Where his excellent structural film *Double Vision* was first used as an instance of rhythmic displacement and a commentary on the comparative frame of *Flash Artifacts*, it now marks issues of access and withdrawal from the collection, as though the Campus' camera is shaking its head in a manic "no" to the digital version. In light of these developments, we might conclude that readings multiply over time.

As with "Also this: no title" and *EXE TXT*, the deformance of *UbuWeb* will speak for itself in a register that this chapter cannot attempt on paper, in PDF, or through image stills. Writing this coda, I initially set out to briefly summarize the effects on each clip, as they played out in *Flash Artifacts*. This exercise quickly proved futile. The dynamics of the opening sequence, drawn from George Brecht's *Entrance to Exit* (1966) illustrate the problem. *Entrance to Exit* was itself a kind of riff on Paik's *Zen for Film*—also featured in the *FluxFilm Anthology*—with a blank screen bracketed by "Entrance" and "Exit" signs respectively. It thus bears the same close scrutiny presented in the first case study of this chapter. Questions on blankness are compounded by movement cues and imagined space. In *Flash Artifacts*, the clips have been rearranged so that the left screen features the opening titles while the right screen plays backward from the "Exit" at the conclusion to the movie. The clips fade just as they near meeting in the shared black screen that makes up the bulk of the film. Already, space and time are confused by the geospatial particularities of digital networks (does one enter at the console, wherever that is, or the server host of *UbuWeb* in Mexico, through the code or the representation that the code generates?) and modular playback (the linearity of entering and exiting a shared space has been reversed and doubled). The authorial function of *Flash Artifacts* is complicated by the opening titles—which read: "FLUX FILM 1966 by George Brecht"—and in turn question the authorship of Brecht in relation to Paik, the filmic apparatus, the group setting of a screening, and the layers of transcoding that rework the film as a digital object. This, at least, would be a highly compressed reading of the first thirty seconds of *Flash Artifacts*, which features only one work rather than the various comparative setups that carry throughout the work. Clearly, the movie itself does compression better. The

reader is here directed to play *Flash Artifacts* in lieu of a conclusion. For reference

while viewing, the setlist is printed here, with links to each sampled work featured in the

movie, hosted on *UbuWeb*: http://ubu.com/film/snelson_flash.html

L:00:00 George Brecht – Entrance to Exit (1966)
L:00:27 Jack Goldstein – MGM (1975)
L:01:01 Standish Lawder – Color Film (1971)
L:03:22 Paul McCarthy – Painter (1995)

R:00:00 George Brecht – Entrance to Exit (1966)
R:00:27 Jack Goldstein – White Dove (1975)
R:01:01 Tacita Dean – Kodak (2007)
R:03:22 Marcel Duchamp – Anemic Cinema (1926)
R:04:11 Vito Acconci – Theme Song (1973)
R:04:28 Mauricio Kagel – MM51 / Nosferatu (1983)

L:05:34 John Baldessari – Time/Temperature (1972-73)
L:07:28 Richard Serra – Boomerang (with Nancy Holt) (1974)

R:07:28 Dan Graham – Performer/Audience/Mirror (1975)

08:10 Ryan Trecartin – (Tommy-Chat Just E-mailed Me) (2006)
08:37 Salvador Dali & Luis Buñuel – Un Chien Andalou (1928)
08:40 Peter Campus – Double Vision (1971)

L:08:57 Paper Rad – P-Unit Mixtape (2005)
L:09:56 Oliver Payne & Nick Relph Mixtape (2002)

R:08:57 Peter Campus – Double Vision (1971)

R:10:47 Paul Sharits – Dots 1 & 2 (1965)
L:11:25 Gary Hill – Black / White / Text (1980)
R:11:25 Hans Richter – Rhytmus 21 (1921)

12:52 bpNichol – Word Pieces

L:13:21 Gary Hill – Black / White / Text (1980)
L:14:27 Jeremy Blake – Century 21 (2004)
L:17:53 George Landow – Film In Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc (1965-66)
L:19:58 Anthony Balch & William S. Burroughs – The Cut–Ups (1966)
L:21:48 Ernie Gehr – Shift (1972-1974)
L:21:54 Michael Snow – So Is This (1982)

R:13:21 Hans Richter – Rhytmus 21 (1921)
R:14:27 Fernand Leger – Ballet Mécanique (1924)

R:18:17 Stephen Dwoskin – Dirty (1965)

R:19:58 Anthony Balch & William S. Burroughs – The Cut–Ups (1966)

R:21:54 Tehching Hsieh – One Year Performance, No. 2 (1980–81)

23:13 Paper Rad – P–Unit Mixtape (2005)
24:17 Nam June Paik – Beatles Electroniques (1966–69)
24:46 Pipilotti Rist – I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much (1986)
25:08 Carolee Schneeman – Fuses (1965) / Cheryl Donegan – Refuses (2007)
29:03 Paul McCarthy – Wild Gone Girls Test (2003)

L:29:10 Joseph Beuys – Filz TV (1970)

R:29:10 Chris Burden – TV Ad (1973)
R:29:33 Stan Douglas – Monodramas, "I'm not Gary." (1991)
R:30:21 Skip Arnold – Punch (1992)

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