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Beyond Binaries: Continuity and Change in Literary Experimentation in Response to Print and Digital Technologies

“The emerging new media technologies are not important in themselves, nor as alternatives to older media, but should be studied for what they can tell us about the principles and evolution of human communication.” (Espen Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature, 1997)

“...[L]iterature not only records and comments on the ruptures of social and cultural and—last but not at all least—medial conditions. It also participates constructively in their modeling...” (Peter Gendolla and Jorgen Schafer, “Playing With Signs: Towards an Aesthetic Theory of Net Literature,” 2007)

Introduction

Taken together these epigraphs point to the two things that I am ultimately interested in investigating in this paper—or perhaps more realistically--in my lifetime, namely “the principles and evolution of human communication” and literature’s role in that socially, culturally, and medially. These are, of course, rather large topics, which is just one of many challenges that this paper must confront. Most of the others are related to this first problem. However, all joking aside, I chose these two epigraphs because, in addition to actually representing what it is—however outsized--I am interested in, I very much agree with both statements and I find in each a unique rationale for a comparative study of relationships that exist between literature and technology from the past and in the present.

As a general disclaimer, I should note that I arrive late to the conversation about electronic literature, which means I am still getting my bearings with respect to core questions that concern the field. As a result, I may pose some questions in

what follows that are not at an appropriate scale. Nevertheless, like everyone here, I am interested in how technology shapes and is shaped by literature and literacy practices and the complex socio-cultural, hermeneutic, and aesthetic issues that the subject raises. [see Slides 2-7]

My interest in this subject stems from work as a writer, whose work investigates constraint based and generative approaches to story-telling, as a visual artist interested in constraint based and text-based images, as the author of DNA, a network fiction project, and as an academic who studies contemporary literacy practices, but whose background includes work in literary studies generally and in comparative literature in particular. To provide some context for the approach I will be taking today, I first wanted to tell you a bit about my current creative projects and how these relate to my current investigation.

DNA: A Network Fiction Project (<http://www.dnanovel.com>)

[DNA](#) is a Web-based fiction project set in the year 2075, in a future where genetic clones are commonplace and the unique identity of any individual is protected only by tacit consent. Taking the concept of identity theft to its logical conclusion, DNA describes a year in the life of a clone who begins plotting to take on the identity of one of his "[code partners](#)," and includes a series of hyperlinks to [real](#) and [fictional](#) Wikipedia entries that provide a peek into the dystopic future of [economic](#), [agricultural](#), [cultural](#), [social](#), and [political](#) systems.

Though influenced by a range of electronic and experimental literary works published over the last fifteen years, [DNA](#) is itself a text that is very much between the worlds of print and electronic literature. Conceived as a project for readers of literary and dystopic fiction, as well as for a new generation of readers who access texts exclusively via the World Wide Web, [DNA](#) is not, in its current incarnation, technically innovative. The project relies on html and the hyperlink, technologies that were being explored by writers in the early 1990s. However the subject matter of the novel and its formal structure both have to do with the use of technology and the implications for that use. The project is responding to how readers use the Web, to systems and publications that have evolved from the Web, and to its impact on contemporary literacy practices. Designed to pose questions about the definition and the construction of fictional narratives, DNA actively engages readers in questions involving the status of fictionality in a virtual world, how fictional worlds are constructed and/or deconstructed in online texts,

and the Web's almost potentially infinite intertextuality. The networked architecture of the project enables the reader to not only construct and engage with the narrative world of the fictional project itself but with other narrative worlds—both fictional and factual--that exist outside of the novel. Overlapping, relating to, and informing one another, the various narrative worlds created inside and outside of the novel draw attention to the dynamic and generative nature of digital narratives, as well as to their ability to challenge traditional notions and definitions of authorial intention, the role of the reader, and narrative point of view.

EXCEL DRAWINGS: Making Aesthetic Objects With Tools Designed For Numeric, Financial, and Business Purposes

My drawings have to do with issues involved with translation between different semiotic systems and like my constraint-based writing projects, actively invite participation from the viewer/reader. Presented as a series of drawings in which small alterations in line, color, or shape occur, the drawings actively engage the audience in the discussion of what constitutes originality and difference and meaning.

Though informed by my own creative projects, what I am proposing today is also informed by my work on authorship studies, constructions of authority in the composition classroom, and the history of copyright (cf. *The Social Construction of Authorship: An Investigation of Rhetorical Authority and Identity in the College Writing Classroom* (2009); “Defining and Experiencing Authorship(s) in the Composition Classroom: A Qualitative Study of Undergraduate Writing Students at the City University of New York” (JBW, 2011); by my interests in the history of media and technologies and their impact on socio-cultural and communication practices (cf: [DNA, What Is Writing?: A Brief Introduction to Writing As An Act of Communication](http://www.whatiswriting.org) (<http://www.whatiswriting.org>) , *Technology: A Reader for Writers* (OUP, forthcoming); as well as by my love of eighteenth century literature, in particular certain “novels” published in England and France from 1650-1750, and in many other countries prior to that period. As a fiction writer, a literary critic, and a reader, I point to a number of texts from the late 17th century and early 18th centuries—for instance, *Clelie*, *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, *Arabella*, *The New Atlantis*, *Julie ou la nouvelle heloise*, *Clarissa*, *The Female Quixote*—that I return to again and again as I think about what fiction is and the many roles and functions it plays in the past and in the present.

I am here today to present not an argument, but some ideas and observations related to the possible benefits of placing works of electronic literature and the critical discourse surrounding them in dialogue with works of print literature produced between 1700 and 1750 in England and the critical discourse surrounding those. For, while there are clearly more differences than similarities between the two periods, there are certain issues related to the production and reception of literary texts that connect them and that may be productively brought into dialogue and by doing so allow further discussion of the following questions:

What if there are some shared concerns connecting literary experiments that occurred in response to print technology and those that are taking place in response to digital technologies?

How might understanding and naming these shared concerns expand or inflect the ways in which critics describe, critique, and contextualize electronic literature?

Might such connections emphasize the importance of studying contemporary and historical works of print and electronic literature as socio-cultural artifacts that are responding to and shaping new literacy practices?

Media Specific Analyses of Early Eighteenth Century Literature in England

Though I will in the process review what is certainly common knowledge to most here, I want to explain why it is that I am interested in looking specifically at literary works from the first half of the Eighteenth Century in England, a period that the 18th c. scholar Alvin Kernan refers to as a time when “Europe was changing from an oral-scribal to a print society” (4). In both periods, the first half of the Eighteenth Century and today, significant changes were taking place in literacy practices. Furthermore, in both periods new publishing technologies were/are being explored and adopted, new genres of literature were/are being formed, and traditional models for the distribution and circulation of literature were/are changing. As a result of the significant medial (writing to print) and

modal (oral to visual) changes happening in the Eighteenth Century, scholars who work in that period have dedicated a lot of energy and time to thinking about issues related to the impact of print technology on literacy practices and literary texts. In fact, J. Paul Hunter recalls in his essay “From Typology to Type” having been interested even in the 1960s in designing a course that would be dedicated to an investigation of “textual technologies,” and in which he would “teach only texts that would demonstrate how thoroughly, often in spite of authorial claims, changes in artistic direction depended on technological innovation” (42).

In addition to Hunter, Patricia Meyer Spacks, Margaret Ezell, Alvin Kernan, Janine Barchas, William Warner, Christopher Flint, and Thomas Keymer are some of the other Eighteenth Century scholars whose work focuses on relationships between the culture and technology of print and the production and reception of literary texts. In fact, the kind of medium specific analysis that N. Katherine Hayles advocates for in her 2004 article “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis,” one that places materiality, conceived “as the interplay between a text’s physical properties and its signifying properties” (67), at its center, has been since the early 1990s central to the work of these 18th c. literary critics. Though Hayles acknowledges her debt to book historians and textual scholars in that article, she does not, I believe, spend enough time considering how the medium-specificity of electronic literary works, which cannot be read and interpreted as dematerialized verbal constructs, may lend further support to the need to study print works as material artifacts, as well as the critical and theoretical implications of re-joining text (verbal construct) and book (material artifact).

Making Print Visible to Rethink Relationships Between Print and Electronic Literature

Of course, as Hayles writes in her 2008 book Electronic Literature, “To see electronic literature only through the lens of print is, to a significant extent, not to see it at all,” (3), a statement few, I believe, would contest. And yet I can’t help but make note of how much this statement changes if print itself is seen and understood again as a medium with all of the complications that term entails. The Eighteenth Century scholars whose work I have mentioned above are involved in the study of print as media and I believe it is worthwhile to take this into consideration as we reflect on what print is and the effects it has had on the production, distribution, and study of literature and on the formation of literary genres. For, the very disappearance of print as a visible communications technology has in itself had profound effects on the study and reception of literature, the history of copyright, and the status and conception of the author.

Furthermore, before print becomes invisible, it had profound effects as a communications technology on the production and reception of literary texts. Though Laurence Sterne's typographic experiments in *Tristram Shandy* (1759) may be one well known example of this, as Thomas Keymer explains, Sterne is not initiating, but rather re-working and "digesting" some of the most innovative features of a range of literary works published between, roughly, 1700 and 1755, which combine a literary and stylistic self-consciousness with a "more directly practical self-consciousness about the mechanisms and institutions of print culture: specifically, about the relationship between authorial production and its materialization as a printed object, and about the overdetermination of both by the forces of literary commodification, consumer fashion, and regulatory reviewing" (52-53). In other words, self-conscious experimentation with print media and its signifying, socio-cultural, and commercial properties is an important feature of a number of literary texts published in the first half of the Eighteenth Century. I'd like to look at a few of these examples and the characteristics that they share with some contemporary electronic literary texts. (See Attached Slides)

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS THAT PRINT TEXTS IN ENGLAND PUBLISHED FROM 1700-1750 AND ELECTRONIC LITERARY TEXTS SHARE

How are print and electronic texts created by author-producers in periods of changing literacy practices functioning rhetorically in relation to readers and in response to technology's impact on literacy practices? In addition to issues related to the time and space of reading, which both print and electronic texts address in various ways, there are at least five additional characteristics that texts printed in the early part of the Eighteenth Century and some electronic literary texts share. Texts from both periods can be described as:

1. **Multimodal:** Employ semiotic systems other than written language
2. **Interactive:** Invite and/or require reader participation
3. **Self-Referential:** Characterized by literary and material self-referentiality, these works are about reading, and writing practices
4. **Didactic:** Content, form, and material properties are involved with teaching people how to read and interpret texts in given media
5. Employing **Remediation:** Address and respond to "old" and "new" media

SOME TEXTUAL ARTIFACTS:

Some Historical and Contemporary Textual Artifacts That Use New Communications Technologies to Respond to and Shape Changing Literacy Practices

Alexander Pope's Dunciad Variorum (1729)

Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland's Sea and Spar Between (2010)

Samuel Richardson's Clarissa (1748)

Stuart Moulthrop's Under Language (2007)

POPE'S DUNCIAD VARIORUM

The *Dunciad* (1728), what Hunter calls "Pope's fullest account of what writing was about in his time...begins (in the very first line) with a frontal attack on printers, booksellers, and other commodifiers of verbal art, and throughout the poem argues that contemporary deterioration of taste and debasement of values derive explicitly from the proliferation of print." (Hunter 57)

"For all Pope's antimodernism there are some very modish things here, especially in the visual presentation of the text, the typographical manipulation of information, and the pregatory matter and appendices." (Hunter 58)

"Plainly, Pope made a conscious decision to construct this machinery, which employs the devices parodically but still manages to use—straight—the effects of the machinery. His first published version included only verse, presented in the traditional way, one that pretended print was merely a necessary convenience for circulating was essentially an oral form." (Hunter 58)

"The *Dunciad Variorum* pulls out all the stops in its effort not only to define the enemy [print culture] but also to claim an audience among the uncommitted, even including those new readers from the developing classes whose reading experiences were narrow or slight." (Hunter 59)

MONTFORT AND STRICKLAND'S «SEA AND SPAR BETWEEN»

A similar exploration of the «machinery of reading» is found in Montfort and Strickland's «*Sea and Spar Between*,» a text that the authors, in an unpublished paper, describe as offering at least «seven different ways to seek and grasp text,» but which I believe actually presents several more possibilities for how the text instructs and interacts with readers. For, in addition to the human/machine

reading paths described in the unpublished paper, in a note that accompanies the original 2010 publication and explains «How to Read Sea and Spar Between», the authors also mention a “human/analog element involved” in selecting words and in “inventing a few ways of generating lines.” “We did this” they write, not quantitatively, but based on our long acquaintance with the distinguishing textual rhythms and rhetorical gestures of Melville and Dickinson.” In other words, the authors are using their accumulated learning and experience as readers of print texts to, in a way similar to Pope instructing those without the accumulated learning of an oral tradition, to instruct and thus “include new readers.”

CLARISSA’S MUSICAL SCORE

A musical score, which is referred to in one of Clarissa’s letters to Anna Howe and which is included as a fold-out engraved sheet in the first four editions of the novel—those that Richardson printed himself—is in later editions transformed into a mere illustration even in 19th c. editions of the novel and is relegated to an appendix in 20th century editions. At considerable expense, as Barchas notes, Richardson commissioned the music written to accompany the previously unpublished poem by Elizabeth Carter entitled “Ode to Wisdom,” which forms the libretto of the piece of music. Carter was a “lady poet” whose work Richardson had read when it was circulating in manuscript and whose permission, interestingly, he did not seek before commissioning the music for the poem. His reasons for choosing this poem and having it set to music are numerous and include his belief that it would make the novel less solemn. Barchas highlights the performative elements of the score and interprets the score as placing Clarissa the character and Clarissa the novel and Clarissa’s readers in the genteel Vauxhall tradition, which the score is reminiscent of. Clarissa, an epistolary novel, which is itself very much about writing and the relationships between writing and (mis)communication practices was described by Richardson as a work that he wished readers to be actively involved in, making them “if not Authors, Carvers.” The score is but one example of Richardson’s use of print to actively engage his readers, guide and direct their interpretations of the novel, bridge communal and solitary reading practices, and, most importantly, as a result of all of these, clearly distinguish his “history” and its readers from the romance tradition, which Clarissa is clearly akin to, but which Richardson must separate his readers and thus his novel from.

MOULTHROP’S UNDER LANGUAGE

As a “textual instrument,” that, like Richardson’s musical score explores the relationships between different semiotic systems and modes, Moulthrop’s “Under

Language” likewise invites reader participation in a text that is itself about reading and “writing,” though the writing referred to is not the act of composing letters but of code. In his note on the text, Moulthrop explains that despite the focus on play, “Under Language” attempts to express something serious about words: namely, that in the era that succeeds the old Age of Print, we need to notice how *writing* intersects *code*.”

Towards a Material, Socio-Cultural, and Rhetorical Analysis of Texts

Thinking rhetorically about literature means that there is a focus on readers, or more correctly the interaction between readers and a text in the co-construction of meaning. The textual dynamics that were evident amongst authors, readers, and communications technologies in the first half of the eighteenth century can via this type of material, socio-cultural and rhetorical analysis be compared to those textual dynamics that exist amongst authors, readers, and communications technologies in the production and reception of electronic texts today.

By situating electronic literature in a socio-cultural, historical and material context, it may be possible to then study these works as part of a much longer, ongoing negotiation amongst literacy practices, communications technologies, and literature, and possibly even as analogous to past experiments in response to changes in media and communication practices. In such a context, electronic literature would then represent not so much a disruption as an evolution of literary forms and practices that are always changing in response to socio-cultural and technological factors.

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