I wanted to thank the ELO, in particular the organizing committee – special thanks to Sandy – for the opportunity to talk about my research.

This paper is largely based on my recently completed doctoral dissertation and is a slight elaboration on two previous talks delivered earlier this year in March and May at Brown and Bergen, respectively.

In keeping with the specifics of this panel – Presence, Gesture, Event – I am interested in addressing what I shall refer to as *CAVE rhetoric* as it relates to Hans U. Gumbrecht's concept of *production of presence*.

Having had its *literary* status validated by many a scholar in the field, *Screen* by NWF et. al. has become somewhat of a VR classic and, as such, presents itself as an ideal tutor-text for theoretical extrapolations.

Before I proceed, a few brief remarks on THE CAVE

The CAVE is an immersive virtual reality environment – typically a small room slightly larger than a closet, where images are projected on four surfaces, three walls and the floor. In its default configuration, a primary user will wear a head-mounted display that produces the impression of 3D images. Polarized, shuttering glasses synchronize otherwise imperceptibly alternating right-eye/left-eye images, filtering projections into the corresponding eye and promoting something called stereo vision. The imagery on the normally darkened walls can be seen by all visitors to the CAVE, but only one person can control them, that is, can navigate, grab, or move textual-objects. In this way, the walls serve as both a surface of inscription and a map of sorts, a point of departure.

One generalization to be made about CAVE pieces is that they foster a tactile impulse, despite the fact that tangibility in VR is unachievable. As he dissects "the

gravity of the leaf," in his eponymous 2010 essay John Cayley speaks of a new phenomenology of language, one wherein floating textual strings would not constitute acts of remediation proper, but rather frame new instances of mediation because they present "graphically embodied language in a way that is entirely unfamiliar (…)" (Ibid.). If one considers linguistic materiality to always be, to some degree, a result of mediation, then one concludes that one "lives in language" (to again quote Cayley) only insofar as one is able to transcend what Derrida has famously termed "the exteriority of the signifier" and delve into the realm of representation.

The CAVE presents a significant variation on this deeply internalized linguistic/literary paradigm. Inasmuch as it introduces text as both dislodged symbolic inscription and virtual obstacle – though lacking a third dimension, text becomes perceivable in space as solid matter being assigned the semblance of position, volume and structure –, then one might argue that the CAVE recasts, rehabilitates and tremendously multiplies the paradoxes with which literary criticism has had to grapple in the past with the advent of Concrete poetics.

Recall that Concrete poetry's emphasis on design and spatial grammar triggered two essentially distinct (albeit inextricably conjoined) reception strategies, namely, those of "reading" and those of "seeing."

With respect to the demands of immersive 3D, one might argue that works produced in the CAVE might stand to benefit from the logics of presence.

A brief disclaimer:

My emphasis on presence should by no means be read as an attack on interpretation. I simply wish to propose that digital literature, as a space of negotiation, offers fertile grounds for the emergence of presence effects, and that these presence effects – because they can only exist in oscillation with their counterparts, namely "meaning

effects" – restore materiality and embodiment as topics of theoretical reflection. Ultimately, I agree with Gumbrecht in that the Cartesian dimension does not (and in fact should never) cover the full complexity of human experience.

That the debate on the distributed ontology of electronic language should emerge precisely when aesthetic theory grapples with the "neglected sphere of the body" must be indicative of a larger epistemic shift – evinced, no doubt, by an effort in both cultural practice and academic discourse to accommodate notions of embodiment, presence and affect.

Having said this, some years ago a term came up in the criticism of digital literature: "flickering signifiers," coined by one of the field's indisputable icons, Kate Hayles – signifiers that are created electronically and don't exist anywhere as such, except as code in a distributed networked system, acquiring form only as they are activated by a software program. This is a concept which I think should be expanded or clarified to encompass any semiotic object – icon, index or symbol – that is created, represented or instantiated by computer code rather than by itself or some physical phenomenon, like ink on paper. It is created more or less on the spot, by computational projection on a screen, for example, and then, just as quickly, passes out of existence.

So we have existence on the one hand, which is fleeting, and representation, equally fleeting, as a STATE OF BEING, a momentary stabilization. Now, something cannot represent if it doesn't exist. This is what I mean by the concept of ontology: the being of a thing as contingent upon something else. In this case, that something else is what is created by and within computer code.

If print allowed words to inhabit immutable surfaces of inscription, or pages, digital poiesis is transient. With Hayles, one might argue that digitally-instantiated text presents a distinct type of materiality, one which invokes proprioception as well as kinesthetic engagement (HAYLES, 2006, p. 184). I would posit that insofar as digitality "re-sensitizes us" to what Cayley reads as media-constituted diegesis (Cf.

CAYLEY), then it can be said to promote moments of disruption: breaks in signification mechanisms. The dislodged signifier – the floating, rotating A – prompts a cognitive shift from one of interpretation – within which literary works customarily operate – to one of optical perception (on par with the tradition of visual arts).

A few words on presence before we get to the specifics of Screen.

Let us imagine any human experience as being comprised of two major constituents. One is the immediacy and spontaneity of sensation, such as when we feel a sting on our bodies. Another is the interpretation of that immediacy, such as the thoughts that assign a cause or association to that sensation: could that sting have been caused by a bee, a wasp, a shard or a splinter emerging from the chair? A theory of presence is, of necessity, interested in the transitional state between these two aspects of experience, the one that accompanies sensation but which precedes – or rather exists in oscillation with – interpretation; as per strict phenomenological tradition that intermediate state is defined as *Erleben* ("lived experience"). Standing in direct contraposition to both *Erfahrung* ("learned experience") and *Wahrnehmung* ("perception"), *Erleben* corresponds to that moment when we feel or sense something but before we think about it or attempt to interpret it. This moment, after sensation but before thought, is the realm of presence.

Although this is a gross oversimplification, the distinction is hopefully somewhat clear for where we are going next.

Presence from the Latin *prae-esse* refers to a pre-reflexive and non-metaphysical engagement with the world – i.e., tangibility to the body. Something that is "present" is supposed to be tangible for human hands. Likewise, production is here deployed in accordance with its etymological Latin root *producere*, denoting the effect of tangibility, "the act of bringing forth an object in space" (GUMBRECHT, 2004, p. 1).

Built into the expression "production of presence" is a clear emphasis on substance and spatiality.

Now, because different media (or different "materialities of communication" to apply Gumbrecht's early terminology) will "touch" our bodies in distinct ways, presence – a direct result of varying degrees of tangibility – can then never be thought of as a stable entity.

This is where Gumbrecht's reluctant affinities with the work of Heidegger become particularly. Without dwelling on the exceedingly complex ramifications of Heideggerian thought, suffice it to mention that Gumbrecht equates the unconcealment of Being to the happening of presence.

> unlike the Platonic ideas, Being is not supposed to be something general or something metahistorical "below" or "behind" a world of surfaces. (…) Being is tangible things, seen independently of their culturally specific situations – which is neither an easy feat to achieve nor a probable thing to happen. (GUMBRECHT, 2004, p. 76)

It stands to reason that in predominantly meaning cultures, presence will figure as an improbable occurrence, a state of exception fundamentally divested of or free from cultural/historical specificity. This accounts for both the author's claim that poetry is perhaps the most cogent example of the simultaneity of presence and meaning effects (2004, p. 18) and for my personal equation of the epiphanic logic of presence with the fleeting, which is to say processual, nature of electronic language.

SHOW *SCREEN*

Let us consider *Screen*, one such VR work for the CAVE environment. The creators of this work have written of it as inviting a three-layered "reading" effort, bracketed as follows: the first stage is relatively conventional, operating like an ordinary video installation: three introductory texts are projected onto three separate walls whilst a voice-over reads the text back to the users in poetic cadence.

The second stage is more dynamic and starts when a word peels off one of the walls and flies toward the interactor – an action, which is accompanied by a ripping noise. At this point, the user is allowed to intervene by striking words with a tracking glove. This bodily and non-trivial gesture of "batting at" words in what often turns out to be a vain attempt to fill the empty slots initiates the third stage of reading/playing, which consists of the results of the interactions from the second stage. Because words will come loose at an increasing rate and quantity and because these words can crumble into syllables and fragments, the third stage's (final) output results in a different arrangement of wall-text each time.

As we can see, a user's engagement with the CAVE involves interaction with visual, auditory (in this particular instance, rhythmic) and quasi-tactile structures that are seen, heard, and which give the appearance of three-dimensional volume. When, as CAVE users, we interact with a work like *Screen*, which appears to be composed entirely of text, our initial mode of engagement with it is one of reading/listening. That is, our mode of engagement is interpretive – we are looking at words and trying to see what they mean. But when those words acquire the appearance of volume and can be manipulated, our engagement changes: they are not only words, they are now floating objects that can be moved around and controlled in a manner that is non-textual, it is much more immediate, it is non-interpretive. This new mode is what Gumbrecht has subsumed under the rubric of "the non-hermeneutical field." It is the quasi-inversion from interpretation BACK TOWARD the earlier, more primal moment of experience, which is sensation – the feeling of having something close to one's skin: the Aristotelian coupling of substance (i.e., that which is spatially present) and form (i.e., that through which any substance will become perceivable as such). It is like moving from the perception of a musical phrase back to the original point of sensation – the sound.

Naturally, one of the consequences of the "enthronement of interpretation" as the chief practice in the humanities is the lack of a suitable repertoire of "noninterpretive concepts" (GUMBRECHT, 2004, p. 52). A hermeneutical reading of *Screen* would

suggest that the piece's demand for tactility is a metaphorical reflection on the theme of memory. By attempting to place words back in their original slots, the interactor emulates the precarious act of remembrance. Except, because words will not "stick" and will often "break," cognition is translated into non-trivial ergodic effort. Borrowing from Brian Massumi's terminology, I would posit that CAVE works invoke a palpable urge to sense: sensation being, let us say, an extreme of perception (MASSUMI, 2002, p. 97). But if sensation is to be taken as the threshold at which, per Massumi, perception "is eclipsed by the sheerness of experience (Ibid.)," then one must assume immediate (non-mediated) experience to be theoretically possible. This is obviously a discussion to be elaborated on and continued. I look forward to your questions.