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Timely Art: Hybridity in New Cinema and Electronic Poetry

Throughout their long relationship, cinema and literature have cohabited. Hundreds of novels and short stories have provided the basis for films, and occasionally films have generated novels. But only recently has there been a medium in which the sensory elements comprising cinema and literature can commingle on an equal footing. With its awesome capacity to simulate almost anything, the digital computer is transforming cinematic and literary practices. Hybrid works are popping up everywhere, particularly in electronic poetry. The scene is reminiscent of the early days of cinema, before conventions had solidified and disparate traditions were drawn upon to explore the nature of the new medium. I am not sure if these works qualify as new cinema, since they are hybrid in nature. But I am certain that the theory and practice of new cinema cannot afford to ignore what is happening in this vital area of new media.

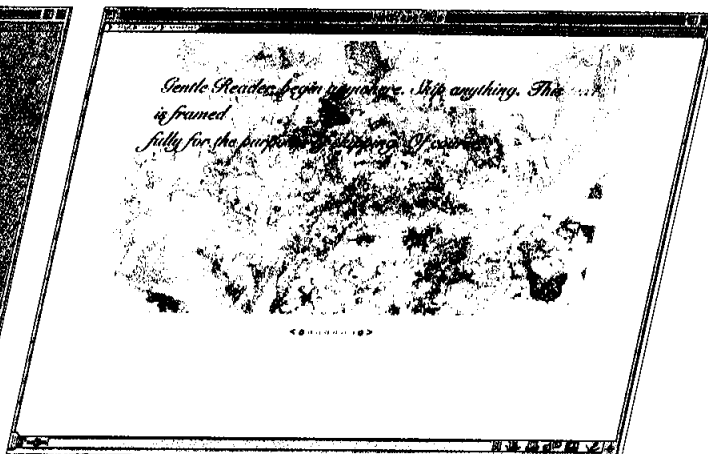
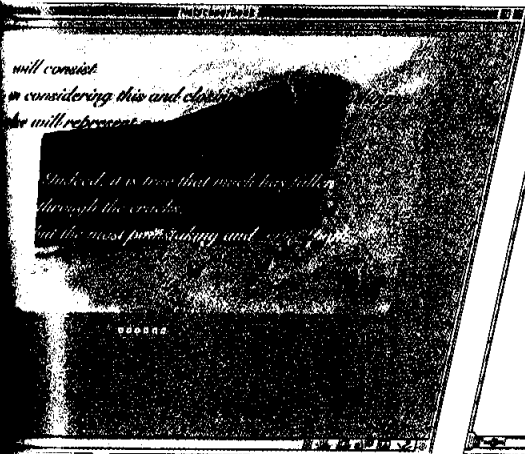
Like cosmopolitan Los Angeles, electronic poetry has become a heterogeneous territory all the more colorful because it is claimed by stakeholders with different allegiances. The aesthetic experiments now underway test a variety of strategies for combining word, image, animation, sound, color and form to provide satisfying artistic experiences in networked and programmable media. The scene takes shape as a medial ecology, as if we were traveling through the deep sea and marveling at the diversity and range of solutions that evolution has provided to how life forms can survive and flourish in this environment. Some experiments foreground the word, using image and sound as enhancements; some give precedence to graphic form, subordinating verbal signification to visual complexity; others emphasize rhythm and sound, framing words and images to fit the soundscape; still others privilege interaction, creating narratives that entwine signification with navigation. The sea in which they all swim is time – time, that is, as it is constructed, programmed and delivered by the digital computer.

Ingrid Ankerman's *Sinking* shows how even fairly traditional poetic form is transformed by cinematic techniques.¹ Programmed in Flash 4, this poem uses looped background images and ambient sound as enhancements for the text, which appears as small white font against a variegated blue background rem-

iniscent of foot-imprinted sand seen through shallow water. The narrative sets the scene at a kitchen sink, addressing "you" as "The steaming water opens for you / settles around your fingers / the way the sandy floor of Lake Michigan did / when you were six and thought you could swim." Handwalking through the shallow water, the child did not so much pretend to swim as enact that she was sure adults did when they "floated like bubbles above water." As an adult realizing that "the dirty dish pile next to the sink / is your life now," you wonder if this childish illusion still grips your life, "if you only *think* you know your work. / You wonder if / someone is going to step into your office / and find that / you don't know how to swim." The chord progression hints at some ominous development, a possibility scripted into unsettling details that suggest you may be contemplating suicide. For example, you notice "It is quiet in the kitchen / as if you had dipped beneath the soapy water. / You realize this is all you know of quiet. / The sound of the faucet not filling the sink. / The sound of not breathing." The tension these details create adds drama to an otherwise anticlimactic ending, when you decide that for now "you will do what you know ... / You will begin with a knife." Built around a series of apparent oppositions, the poem edges toward a realization it does not quite want to face as oppositions collapse into one another, conflating childish illusion with adult knowledge, pretence with competence, achievement with tedious repetition, safety with sinking.

This poem, like others created in Flash, shares with cinema a one-way progression through time, a temporal directionality strengthened by the disappearance of text from the screen and the appearance of new text. Although it can be replayed (as a film can), it functions more like oral poetry than written verse because it cannot be taken in at a single glance, nor can a line, once read, be immediately re-read as with print. The technology controls the pace of reading, not the user. (The pace also depends on the speed of connection. I could comfortably finish each screen of text before it disappeared when I read it at home on a computer networked to a modem, but at my office with a faster connection, the poem progressed so quickly that, even knowing the text, I was unable to complete reading before the text disappeared.)

1. Ingrid Ankerman, "Sinking," in *Poems That Go*, 1, Spring 2000, online at <http://www.poemshed.com/gallery/sinking/000/sinking/sinkingmain.htm>, accessed August 1, 2001.



Stephanie Strickland,
M.D. Coverley
Errand upon which we came
2001
hypermedia poem
screenshots

The temporal dimension is rendered more complex by the looping of sound and image, a circularity that further complicates the narrative tensions between memory of the past, realization in the present, and dread of the future. As Rita Riley has observed in a short but suggestive article on the significance of loops in electronic writing, death is the end toward which linear (and multilinear) plots traditionally tend. In contrast, loops enact a circularity that inscribes the writing within a different metaphysic.² The significance of the temporal dynamic in this respect becomes quite complex, because the loops suggest continuation (of activity, particularly breathing, and hence of existence) while at the same time they reinforce the sense of repetition, which works against the narratee's yearning for an authentic life. Of course technological constraints are the main reason to use loops, as they conserve memory space and make file size more manageable. Unlike the analog technology of film, in which almost unlimited detail can be recorded subject to emulsion granularity and film size, the much smaller bandwidth of Internet connectivity imposes severe constraints on the amount of information that can feasibly be shoved through the channel. Within these constraints the poem privileges verbal complexity, achieving temporal complexity in part through the compromises it makes by looping the sonic and visual components.

Although in my view *Sinking* is a successfully realized work, it does not push the envelope in integrating sound, image and text on an equal footing. It is clearly more interested in enhancing the verbal text than in experimenting with subordinating written language to more traditionally cinematic components. *His Father in the Exhaust of Engines*, a collaboration between poet Bruce Smith and designer Marc Stricklin, has a strong narrative line combined with evocative images and subtle animation.³ Ambient music alternating between two chords is punctuated by four syncopated beats reminiscent of a heartbeat's diastole and systole. The text's complex framing results in a work that is as powerful visually as verbally. This Flash poem, a son's reminiscence of a father who tinkered with car engines, is composed of screens corresponding to blocks of text. Within each screen, animation is used to create visual narratives that comment upon and

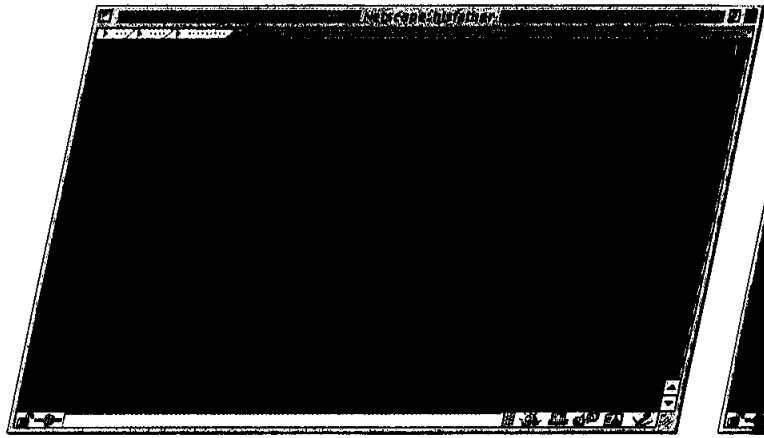
contextualize the words. The subtlety of the design should not obscure its importance as a technical innovation. It provides an excellent example of how changes in the technology create corresponding mutations in the grammar and syntax of the work.

In cinema, of course, each frame corresponds to a camera shot, and a series of frames depicting a coherent action sequence corresponds to a scene, with editing cuts marking divisions between scenes. In print poetry, divisions are indicated spatially rather than temporally, so that line breaks, stanza divisions, verse paragraph blocks, and so on are important signifying components. Flash animation does not correspond exactly with either the cinematic or print conventions and instead introduces another semiotic system, with scenes defined by the beginning and end points of animation sequences that can be paced according to a timing algorithm. Moreover, more than one animation sequence can be shown on a given screen, timed so that it overlaps and mingles with other animations. *His Father in the Exhaust of Engines* uses this flexibility to combine print and cinematic conventions in a hybrid form with its own distinctive rhythms and spatiality.

The sense of a "scene" is both preserved and transformed by creating screens framed by a heavy brown line reminiscent of a photograph frame, thus combining cinematic conventions with its predecessor technology, photography. Movement between screens corresponds to editing cuts, creating the possibility for contrasts and correspondences across these divisions. Within a given screen, subtle animations create movements that recall the action sequences of a movie scene. Here too mutation occurs, however, for the division between screens also corresponds to the spatial breaks characteristic of print poetry, with each screen presenting a block of text that functions as a spatially coherent unit. These textual units achieve further nuancing by the ways in which text is spatially arranged within each screen, creating further possibilities to use spatiality as a signifying component. Thus both the spatiality of print poetry and the temporal pacing of cinema become important components in the work, functioning in ways that recall the predecessor technologies while simultaneously transforming them.

² Rita Riley, "The Digital Loop: Feedback and Recurrence," in *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, vol. 10, no. 7, July 2002, online at <http://mitpress2.mit.edu/e-journals/LEA/LEA2002/LEA/archives/lem.htm>, accessed August 2002

³ Bruce Smith and Marc Stricklin, "His Father in the Exhaust of Engines," in *Poems That Go*, 5, Spring 2001, online at <http://www.bornmag.com/projects/hisfather/>, accessed August 2002.



These transformative effects are evident in the first screen where the words appear, "All his life I used my father to get somewhere," along with the image of a young boy, seven or eight, who stares out from the frame with serious sad expression. As the boy continues to stare, the light seems to flicker and for an microsecond illuminates his face the way X-rays or a nuclear flash might, revealing what lies beneath the skin, beneath the surface of these mundane and yet curiously painful memories. The animation is paced so that the X-ray image lies just at the threshold of perception, giving the user a fleeting impression that goes by so fast she is not sure she saw it at all. The piercing illumination prepares for the next screen that continues and alters the meaning of the text in the first screen: "else – the game, the shore, the power, the middle class, the other side." The difference between getting somewhere, and getting somewhere else, captures the sense of regret of this son who used his father like an aging vehicle to be run into the ground and abandoned. In this context the illumination seems to promise a retrospective vision that can get at the truth of things in ways that a child or even a young adult could not. Yet as we shall see, this promise is held out only to be partially negated in the visual narratives that follow.

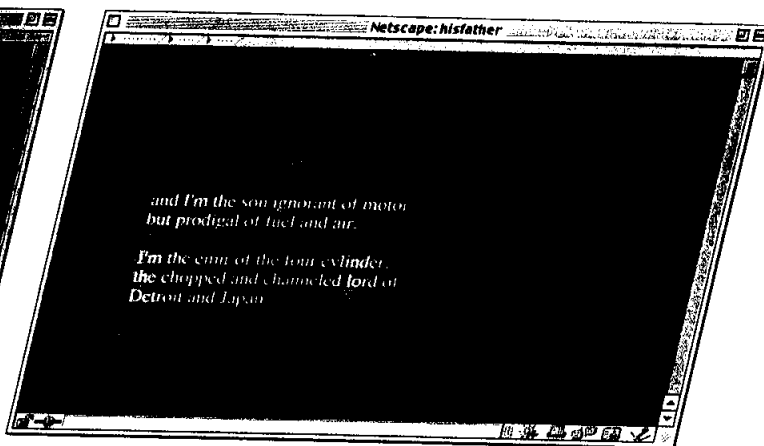
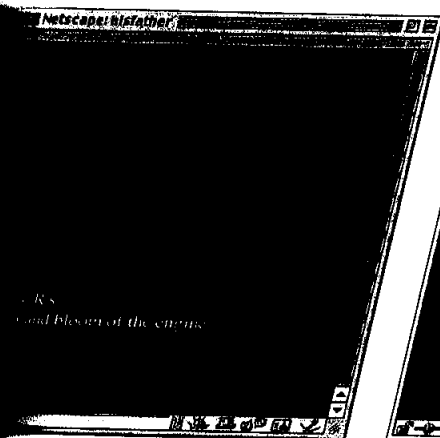
The image of the father bowed over the engine, "a fender / in one hand a frayed / wire in the other," reminded the son in his youth of someone "bent like a wanderer in the middle ages before / a statue of the virgin," a posture of humility and supplication that he rejected. Swearing he would never "bow and scrape before the orders" of engines that "sputter and choke," the son's oath is juxtaposed, through another change of screens, with the father's soft swearing as he struggles to get the engine to catch. Photographs of the father inset into several screens show a middle-aged man with glasses wearing a blue suit, suggesting a white-collar worker who tackles engines not because he enjoys it but because that is what men of a certain generation did if they were good fathers and husbands. In contrast to the father's tinkering, the narrator declares himself "the son ignorant of motor / but prodigal of fuel and air. / I'm the emir of the four cylinder / the chopped and channeled lord of / Detroit and Japan," language that emphasizes his superior position from which he can command the labor of others. The text appears over a sepia landscape,

against which the flickering image of the father appears and then fades, replaced by a soft focus image of an adult male shown in torso, presumably the son.

But as the images have been intimating throughout, the father and his legacy are not so easily left behind. The final screen, with an image of a cross standing upright on a sepia landscape, ambiguously locates the narrator as both driver and driven. "I floor it, my foot on his back, or / his on mine, his face in the mirror / his death doubling me over." Doubled as well as doubled over, the narrator becomes simultaneously himself and his father, his face in the mirror his father's face, the one who uses and the one who is used by memories he cannot shake. The poem's opening line, which displaced the expected phrase "all my life" with "all *his* life I used my father" (emphasis added), now assumes deeper significance, as the father's death haunts the son's life so violently that he seems to take over and occupy the son's body. This verbal complexity is enacted visually by the animation sequence showing the fading of the father's image and its replacement by the son's torso, a visual transformation that may indicate not the replacement of the father by the son but the transmutation of the father *into* the son.

Deepening this complexity are persistent images that hover on the border of legibility because they are spatially indistinct, in contrast to the sharp but fleeting X-ray illumination of the first screen. These shadowy images suggest depths that remain to be plumbed, thus mutating and to some extent negating the promise of X-ray clarity of vision. One image that appears in several screens shows lines of text grayed out to illegibility, so that it functions as a visual representation of text rather than text itself. We are left to wonder: are these lines from an automobile repair manual? A counter narrative that would tell the story from the father's point of view rather than the son's? Its ghostly presence is another indication that there is more here than the narrator can tell.

In its mutations of cinematic and literary conventions, transformations of time and space that create new semiotic units of meaning, and forging of new conventions suited to the possibilities and limitations of the software and hardware, *His Father in the Exhaust of Engines* illustrates the potential of the medium to create work that resists easy classification as either cinema or literature. It shows the Flash



Bruce Smith, Marc Stricklin
His Father in the Exhaust of Engines
 2001
 Flash poem
 screenshots
 © The University of Chicago

poem becoming a medium in its own right with its own visual and verbal rhetoric, a production of networked and programmable media that could not be enacted the same way in another other medium.

While *His Father in the Exhaust of Engines* shows a deepening engagement with visual materials, it makes relatively little use of sound other than ambient music to create a mood. *DAKØTA* by Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries privileges sound, cutting the words and designing animation to match the rhythm of a jazz drum solo by Art Blakey's band.⁴ This prose poem begins with numbers (represented alternately as figures and words) counting down from ten, reminiscent of a movie countdown for a take. But when the count stops at three, it becomes apparent the countdown is counting a music rhythm. The narrative is presented in black block capital letters on a white background, flashing sequentially through different screens, with a few words – sometimes only one – per screen. Their appearance is timed to coincide with the leading beats of the drum solo, with each emphasized drum or cymbal stroke bringing up another screen, so the effect is to make the words seem to be driven by the music. The narrative is a Kerouac-like account of a car trip, the narrator adopting the persona of a young punker with more than a touch of misogyny. "WE DRANK / AND INSULTED / EACH OTHER'S / MOTHERS. / BEER / IN / ONE / HAND, / BOURBON IN OTHER" gives the flavor of the text, along with "THEN / I / SPOKE / A / GASSY / SPEECH / ABOUT / DYING / YOUNG. / (BURP)." The narrative is not without interest, tying together a buddy's death while pulling a break-in with brutal treatment of sweethearts and sisters, along with a hallucinogenic conversation with Elvis and a tribute to Marilyn Monroe. The main interest, however, remains on the music, the drum solo building in intensity and complication, culminating in a frenzied improvisation stretched almost beyond endurance. Like *His Father in the Exhaust of Engines*, *DAKØTA* uses screen divisions effectively to create a combined spatial-temporal aesthetic that draws upon cinema and print poetry while also transforming their conventions into something new.

In contrast to the push-aesthetic of these Flash poems is *Errand upon which we came*, a collaboration between poet Stephanie Strickland and M. D. Coverley. Strickland and Coverley believe strongly that the potential of networked and programmable media

should be used to introduce interactivity into electronic literature, practicing a principled rejection of techniques that do not allow the user to determine, at least in part, pacing and trajectory. Their work has something in common, then, with experiments in new media that introduce interactivity into cinematic narrative. In *Errand*, this commitment is performed through a distinction between timed animation sequences that push the screens at a pace controlled by the program, and the reader's interventions that can stabilize the screen display or jump between screens using linking words. This tension is given an ironic inflection when the poet warns that the work "can be read straight through, but this is not a better reading, / not a better life." Passive reading concedes control to the computer, which results in a default "straight through" reading. To have a "better reading," the reader must intervene and take active control; as one screen comments, "You are being asked / to move with great / rapidity."

Imaged as flowing copperplate script that bounces and slides across the screen, *Errand* uses backgrounds of abstract greens, browns and blues to suggest changing landscapes of earth, water and sky. The sound records bird calls, crickets, and other natural phenomena. As the words glide, swoop and drip off the screen, a butterfly skims along the text in erratic flight, and a frog leaps between land and sky. The reader can stop the animation at any point by clicking on the butterfly, and link words offer additional opportunities to skip between screens. Notwithstanding the opportunity the poem gives the reader to control temporal flow, it also insists on its ephemerality. For example, as the butterfly traverses the screen, it seems to erase the text in its wake. These fading images hint at the poem's transformation from the durable object it may have been had it been produced in print, to the process it becomes when it is generated by programs running inside the computer and data transmissions sent over the Internet.

The poem begins (in one of its configurations) with an address to the reader: "Gentle Reader, begin anywhere." Folding into the poem the address to the reader blurs the work's boundaries. It is not altogether clear where it begins, for the preceding screen, which most readers would take as instructions on how to read the poem, also includes an implicit address to the reader. Similarly, the trajectory

⁴ Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries, *DAKØTA*, in *Poems That Go*, 5, Spring 2001, online at <http://www.yhchang.com/DAKØTA.html>, accessed August 2002.

⁵ Stephanie Strickland and M. D. Coverley, *Errand upon which we came*, online at <http://californiahispeed.com/Errand/title1b.htm>, accessed August 2002.

does not settle into a single line, since the link paths yield different screen configurations. The poem attempts to re-orient the reader's focus so that, rather than reading to reach the end, the reader will follow fancy's dictates, dallying with the poem's possibilities rather than consuming it as an object that can be left behind to go on to the next thing. Quoting Simone Weil, the final screen suggests we measure meaning not according to "what the pointer points to" but by noticing the nail holding the scale so it weighs true, a shift of perspective that the poem instantiates through its organization of time. Itself an event, it urges us to view reading not as a "settled course" but a random sampling that experiences time as a flow rather than a flow-chart, an unfolding emergence rather than a gallop toward a goal.

In this way it modifies the one-way temporal trajectory of cinema while adopting some cinematic techniques, carrying over into the electronic medium the sense print poetry gives of being able to access pages in whatever order one pleases. This was, after all, one of the major differences between the codex book and the scroll that preceded it in manuscript culture – the ability to open the book anywhere and not have to proceed in linear fashion through a continuous, one-way surface. Conventional movies are like scrolls in this sense; however convoluted and complex the narrative line, technologically they start at the beginning and proceed linearly to the end. *Errand upon which we came* announces its own errand as a project to re-envision the viewing surface as a territory to wander upon rather than a strip proceeding linearly through the machine or a Flash program running relentlessly in one direction.

John Cayley's *riverisland* is a beautifully complex work exploring how cinematic techniques can be used as navigational functionalities within a work that interrogates the relationship between the digital nature of language and the digital operations of the computer. The work is conceptualized as consisting of two loops of poems, one horizontal and one vertical. The horizontal loop contains sixteen quatrains from Wang Wei's famous *Wang River Sequence* (written in the eighth century) and translated from the Chinese into English by Cayley. The poems display as letters on the screen and the sound of the poems being read. At the bottom of the screen is a QuickTime movie of

flowing water. The user can navigate the loop either by grabbing the movie and moving it to the right or left, or by using the navigational icon. As the user leaves one node to travel to the next, the sound of the first poem overlaps with the sound of the second as the letters of the first text morph into the letters of the second. When the second node is reached, the sound of the first fades and the sound of the second resolves into a solo voice, at the same time as the letters stabilize into new words.

The vertical loop runs "upward" from the base of the first poem in the horizontal loop. This loop contains sixteen different translations of the same poem, including different versions in English as well as in French, Spanish and the Pinyin Romanization of the modern pronunciation of Chinese. At the side of the text in the vertical loop is a QuickTime movie of a river running through woods, although the silvery sheen of the water gives it an eerie appearance that can also be understood as a gash or gap in the screenic surface, suggesting an opening, chasm and / or corridor between the words as they appear on screen and the inner workings of the computer.⁶

This visual hint suggests a connection between the cinematic and verbal surface and the medium that produces them, a concept central to Cayley's view of his "literal art."

In "Digital Wen: On the Digitization of Letter- and Character-Based Systems of Inscription," he explains by referring to the "rules of traditional Chinese regulated verse."⁷ These include such considerations as line length, pauses between syllables, and tonal qualities along a line, as well as parallelism between the lines of a couplet, both in terms of the sense and correspondences between ideographic characters. Meaning is thus built up out of the particular characteristics of written characters and their phonetic equivalents, as well as through higher-level considerations such as imagery, metaphor, and so forth. Cayley argues that similar considerations also apply to poetry in English, suggesting that similarities and differences between letter forms can function as visual equivalents to the acoustic properties of poetic techniques such as assonance.

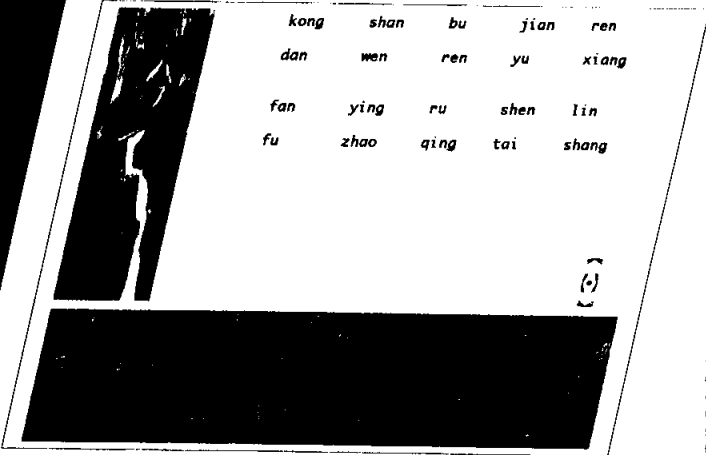
This orientation allows him to conceive of poetry through a materialistic "bottom up" approach that works in synchrony with higher-level considerations, a

1. I am indebted to Adalaida Morris for suggesting to me this interpretation of the image.

2. John Cayley, "Digital Wen: On the Digitization of Letter- and Character-Based Systems of Inscription," in *Reading East Asian Writing*, Michel Hockx and Ivo Smitz (eds), Curzon Press, London, 2002 (for the coming).

I thought
I'd drink
the water
from the
fountain

I'll
not
think
the way
I used to
think
I don't
think
either



John Cayley
riverisland
2000
electronic poem
screenshots
© John Cayley

perspective he designates as "literal" (with a play on the letter as the unit of meaning and on the fact that the letters literally appear on the page or screen as the basic units from which meaning emerges). In addition, as the letters of his transliteral morphs travel between recognizable letter forms, they go through intermediate stages before stabilizing into the target forms, a process repeated on a larger and more visible scale as the letters in the source word transform into other letters that will eventually stabilize into the target word. The visual effect is to suggest a dynamic tension between the stabilized word (or letter) and the transitional morphs, which are linguistically indeterminate in the sense that they do not correspond to any recognizable word (or letter) but rather are the "in-betweens" from which coherent words (and letters) will emerge. In his works language falls apart and comes together, dissolving into a seethe of chaos that is not merely disorder but rather the fecund noisy matrix from which poetry will emerge, like a dolphin breaking the surface to glisten in the sun before plunging back again into the ocean.

This view of language allows Cayley to treat letters as images as well as verbal signifiers. Their movement through time thus becomes a kind of cinematic technique, a correspondence emphasized by making the QuickTime movies function both as moving images and navigational devices to access the morphing words. In addition, these movements through time are also used to establish parallels with the binary code of computer processes. It is important to note here that the morphing letters are not continuous transformations but rather quick jumps between different letters, as when the letters on a European railroad schedule spin around to form new words. This style of morphing emphasizes that letters are digital, in the sense of being discrete rather than continuous,⁸ a performance that enacts similarities between letters as the bits from which language is formed and electronic polarities as the bits from which the screen image of electronic images are created.⁹ Electronic text and image, Cayley observes, always tremble "at the abyss of ones and zeros," the unreadable bit stream that is the matrix out of which humanly-readable visual and verbal language emerges. In its general dynamics this tension is, he suggests, not unique to electronic media (although the form it takes in binary

code is specific to the digital computer). As he cogently puts it, "letters got there first."¹⁰

Although the works discussed here illustrate that there are strong continuities with established cinematic and literary practices, they also demonstrate that networked and programmable media enter deeply into signifying practices, resulting in hybrid productions shaped by the material realities of the media. As Lev Manovich brilliantly shows in *The Language of New Media*, profound transformations take place when the materiality of the medium changes.¹¹ This materiality includes, of course, the conditions under which works are produced and consumed. The economics that allow an individual to purchase software products such as Flash, Director and QuickTime put the means of production in the hands of writers, designers, and artists who could not dream of financing even a short independent film.

Moreover, we still do not understand very well how the dynamics of reading and viewing change when the movie or television screen is replaced by the computer. The viewing distance for a computer screen is much closer than for a television screen, much less a movie—approximately the same distance as a book. This creates an intimacy that combines the experiences characteristic of reading a book with the visual qualities characteristic of cinema and video. Moreover, interacting with the computer involves the user in constant kinesthetic experiences as keys are tapped, programs opened and closed, and so on. Although these manipulations are closer to turning the pages of a book than to the distance viewing of the cinema, they nevertheless have distinctive characteristics of their own. As electronic art continues to evolve, it will become increasingly important to understand in detail what differences these material conditions make. For now, what we can know for certain is that art forms do not remain unchanged when they engage digital media. In these flexible, powerful and rapidly evolving environments, cinema and literature are not just cohabiting. They are merging into hybrids that mutate the old conventions even as they perform the new.

⁸ John Cayley develops this point further in his essay "Of Programmatology," in *Mute*, Fall 1998, pp. 72-75. Alphabetic language, as Cayley observes, is a digital technology, a point developed at length by Robert K. Logan in *The Alphabet Effect*, William Morrow, New York, 1986. In *The Fifth Language: Learning a Living in the Computer Age*, Stoddart, Toronto, 1995, Logan extends his analysis to digital code.

⁹ John Cayley discusses the relation of line, pixel and letter in "Literal Art: Neither Lines nor Pixels but Letters," an essay that illuminates the special sense in which he uses "literal" to mean both the materiality of language and the letters from which alphabetic language is formed, in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (eds.), The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002 (forthcoming).

¹⁰ E-mail communication, 7 July 2002.

¹¹ Particularly relevant in this regard is the distinction Manovich makes between narrative and database (Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001).