

Clicklit | Cinelit & the Invisible Hand <skinborgs & poetmachines>

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ABSTRACT: This explores relationships between poets, texts and technology through the trace of the hand

KEYWORDS: Poetry, Spatiality, Electronic Poetry, Interactivity, Cyberspace, New Media, Flash Poetry, Hypertext, Embodiment, Hand.

FIRESTICKS AND OPPOSABLE THUMBS

In an exercise of anthropoetic dreaming and technopoetic acknowledgment I'd like to introduce the first trace of this paper, the trace of adaptation and evolution – from which emerged the physical and conceptual technologies that helped humans walk the walk, talk the talk, beat the meat and light the fires of our hearths and imaginations.

With these new sets of technologies, bodies were decorated, languages were born, musical instruments were crafted and the scope of human activity expanded. Bodies, as the first sites of *technologia* – the expression of *techne*, art or skill – used the *technologia* of vocal structures to help transform air into utterance, in acts of oral communication that early speakers had to make sense of in systems of rapidly developing neural and subjectivity substrates. *Technologia* enabled humans to grip objects and transform them into different objects. Around the campfires originary [1] cyberspace was born – i.e. cyberspace as an expression of dispersal existing in a world beyond the body in what William Gibson [6] defined as a site of 'disembodied consciousness' and 'consensual hallucinations' [6]. I prefer to use the neologism cyberspace than any of its alternatives. How is cyberspace different to the 'matrix' contained within human bodies that 'jack into' REM sleep to disembody consciousness in virtual realities called dreams?

SPACE ENGRAVERS

In recent posthumanism discourse, the rush to manoeuvre cyberspace as a dry, meatless territory full of virtual realities that satisfy ego-longings to extend beyond the limitations of our animalistic realities – has come under criticism. It has been argued that it is difficult to take seriously any claims about the redundancy of the body in cyberspace or even to claim that cyberspace is a disembodied regime. In this paper I align myself with theorists such as Kathryn Hayles and Vivian Sobchack who resist the idea that cyberspace and by implication, the texts that are written and published there, are purely electronic entities. In the words of Hayles [9]:

... embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it (xiv).

Hayles, rejecting the idea of the body as a social and informational poltergeist, introduced a re-examination of the subject's flesh into post humanism. As a result of first hand experience with amputation and learning to 'incorporate' a prosthetic leg, Vivian Sobchack declared that 'we must counter the millennial discourses that would decontextualize our flesh into insensate sign or digitize it into cyberspace...' [15].

I would like to expand on this with a proposition that the most intimate cyberspace I know is the network of spatial relationships sustained by my body. Spaces that crave connections to help interpret and communicate with the world. Our bodies expand the definitions and territories of cyberspace because they are the experiential sites of it. Cyberspace gives us forms of poetry that operate through structures designed to provide immersed, interactive, concrete, cinematic and/or generative models of experience and they are easy to locate online. For a gallery of links to some innovative examples of these approaches to writing poetry I recommend a visit to the ELO Symposium Gallery <http://www.eliterature.org/state/gallerytitles.shtml>

Invisible Hands

Inside this poet's fingers engaged in acts of writing, there resides complex dynamic systems, lattices of flesh, invisible energy fields and spatial architectures that remain mysterious to the dominant consciousness. Space is the invisible architecture that flesh has organized itself around to establish presence. By this I mean that as organic entities we are generally only aware of ourselves through our membranes, thoughts and feelings – a large percentage of which we don't see, don't realize or don't understand – rendering our identity largely invisible. I don't know myself as water, yet I am at least 70% water, according to current consensus on the body's composition. In an echo of Bachelard I am suggesting that presence is a responsive system that is organized culturally and biologically on a nanosecond to nanosecond basis and that it is largely unknowable to me. 'Being does not see itself' [2]. As such it co-creates many of the indescribable moments contained within the experience of writing, performing and reading. Positioning cyberspace as spatial other and vesting it with cultural privilege has important repercussions for our identities, freedoms, acts and art. These have been routinely critiqued for the past 10 years. My goal in this paper is to explore cyberspace and its associated discourse from the perspective of a poet interested in embodiment.

Inside the hand that writes this paper lives other invisible hands and an infinite array of unknowable and un-lived stories – the residents of its own private cyberspace. This hand opens the books of others, clicks on the links of others, holds itself open to receive the knowledge and art of others. And if an artist such as Stelarc wishes to rub an augmented, articulated, synovial manus against my wrist, or asks me to whisper into his third ear when it has

finished growing, I could appreciate the poetry and theoretical elegance of such prosthetic gestures without necessarily agreeing with his configuration of the body as an 'object for designing' [16]. Such a configuration represents Stelarc's belief in our need to manufacture our own evolution due to our 'obsolete' bodies and their idioms of decay – as a result of excessive exposure to 'information radiation' [17]. A weakness of his rationale is that, by advocating *enhancement* of the body through prosthetics, he is exposing the body to greater levels of radiation – thereby amplifying the very effect he and other practitioners engaging in technobionic fetishism, are trying to design a way out of.

Nimble syntax

Scholars of Generative Anthropology such as Eric Gans [4], Rene Girard [5] and Richard van Oort [14], continue to speculate on the origins of language, which would appear at odds with postmodernism's rejection of totalizing theories. Nonetheless, in their belief that language is the 'definition of humankind' [14] they share theoretical zones with poststructuralists such as Derrida and Kristeva who mark us as beings of textual immateriality. Whatever trails this debate creates in the future, it is realistic to consider that sign language, coupled with facial literacy (i.e. the ability to recognize faces and their expressions and the grammatical referencing between the hand and the face that occurs in signed languages) formed an important part of early communication systems. Such systems dictated a spatially positioned grammar, as witnessed in the Sign Languages.

Studies looking at the use of sign language with animals, people with communication disabilities and babies, show that it not only crosses cultural, language, intellectual and developmental barriers, but also species barriers. It is therefore possible to read hands and sign language as the original Graphical User Interfaces – as systems originating from and between mysterious bodies rather than from paradigms of the machine-body membrane.

Having presented an idea of originary cyberspace and suggested that hands, bodies and faces can be read as Graphical User Interfaces that express the 'content' of the body through a coded system of spatially positioned signifying gestures, I would now like to move on to more recent scenes.

CHISEL LIT

When hands first picked up tools for writing, poetry began to lose its three-dimensional soul and became a product of a flat plane. In its first departure from the locus of the poet's body, poetry added a chiseled representation of itself to its identikit.

On May 4, 1999 the discovery of the world's oldest handwriting was reported by Dr David Whitehouse [19]. According to Whitehouse, at 5,500 years old, the handwriting found on pottery fragments from the Harappa community, in what is now called Pakistan, is 1,700 years older than writing found earlier on Egyptian clay tablets. The symbolic nature of this writing supports the idea that early writers preferred a visual method of signification. This method was adopted for thousands of

years of writing and is still evident in the pictorially based languages – such as Chinese, Japanese and writing systems such as Shorthand. The diversity of poetry residing in vernaculars of the signed, the scribed and the spoken offers insights into alternative approaches to writing and publishing on the internet.

Pixel Engravers

With New Media discourse moving away from notions of textually constructed selves towards visually oriented ecologies of self – as methods of engraving or marking identity in cyberspace – it is possible to imagine that unanticipated forms of internet poetry will emerge from cultures where language is pictorially based. The term New Media is often used to name works created or published in a digital format that use interactivity or multiple media. I have seen it used most frequently in relation to work created as a result of cinematic strategies – eg animation, film/video – and published on the internet or other electronic media.

The aesthetic of cyberspace as a virtual disembodied utopia buzzing with muzak from the click tracks of hypertext communications, has prevailed as an aesthetic *fait accompli* as much as the bleak world of Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Poetry may have demonstrated its pioneering spirit and enjoyed a resurgence in popularity through its engagement with the internet, but how does it reinvent itself? What are poetry's ecologies in cyberspace? To a limited extent I have addressed this later in this paper.

SKINBORGS

Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* [8] affirms postmodernism's project of removing the body from the scene of writing and constructing it as a scene of relational texts upon which identity is written in 'exhibitions of fragmentation and multiplicity' [11]. Bodies are transformed into virtual stories in a proposition that renders the contribution of biological presence meaningless beyond its life support functions and this makes it easier to transfer the scene of existence and identity from *terra firma* to *terra electra*. *terra electra* is a term I coined to signify the ecology of my website's dispersed and culturally determined body. *The Stalking Tongue Book II; Slamming The Sonnet*, is an installation of text, voice and gaze that engages with theories of embodiment and the role of cyber-representations of the body – using poetry as one of its tissues. It can be found at www.poetinresidence.com

By disputing the significance of the body's materiality, it does not have to be accounted for, except as an artifact interfacing with technologies that will free it from what Gibson [6] calls its 'meat prison' (84). This returns me to one of the earlier traces of this paper – that our 'meat' could be read as original cyberspace and to expand on that I would like to make a case for acknowledging our 'wetness' as a sign of the superiority of the body's cyberspace when compared with the current limited dry networks of *terra electra*. Scientists may fantasize about creating a computer or robot capable of reproducing biological systems of growth and sustainability, and post

humanists may crave an electronic utopian infinity where consciousness can drift eternally through multiple identities and incarnations, but in the end the body through its lifespan already offers most of these possibilities, and much more efficiently than cyberspace.

The fields of possibilities lived during a lifetime are a product of a self-modelled cartography. According to Felix Guattari [7]

...every individual and social group conveys its own system of modelling subjectivity: that is, a certain cartography - composed of cognitive references - with which it positions itself in relation to its affects and anguishes, and attempts to manage its inhibitions and drives. (11)

If, as Guattari advocates, we are all self-determined cartographies, how do we describe the potential fields of impossibilities that also occupy the spatial architecture discussed earlier and to what extent are they also self-determining? There is as much of the unknown contained in the spaces inside the meat as there is in the engineering of cyberspace. The flesh is full of 'polyphonic' subjectivities [7(16)] and full of water.

A problem with the body is that it is prone to illness and decay, and mortality is a problem for humans. When Freud introduced Western thought to the idea of the Ego as central to the mediation between an organism and its environment, he inadvertently created the psychological foundation for digital culture's fascination with prosthetically engineered virtual realities, by establishing a rationale for the body as a host for psychic subsystems that operate independent and interdependent levels of consciousness. Ever since humans believed in an afterlife, poets have been trying to reconcile the meaning of existence. When Emily Dickinson wrote [10]

Behind Me—dips Eternity—
Before Me—Immortality—
Myself—the Term between—

she was re-stating an ancient belief that life was a brief term on a continuum of existence, often controlled by a process of divine judgment. Religious or spiritual belief in the afterlife can therefore be read as the first prosthetic moment in human history because it posited the body and life as disposable wetware for an eternal soul. In spite of this prevailing belief however, the ego can't bear to be annihilated, according to Freud. Post humanism and its pre-occupation with ego preservation could therefore be read as traces in cryogenics discourse. Guattari also claims we are 'haunted by a desire for eternity' [7(37)]. Exactly what is desirable, utopian or idealistic about being scanned, spammed, cammed and cloned inside cyberspace's rendition of Dante in a kind of electro inferno - a regime ordered by surveillance and commerce - is difficult to imagine.

Now we are becoming more connected and accessible in the 'outside' world due to mobile phones, portable computers etc, we have already become our own virtual realities. The question that springs to mind is, why bother with cyberspace? Why not invest the energy in creating a

more desirable world? Cyberspace gives great theory but its strengths still reside in research, community building, communication and art functions. Many businesses have failed to succeed there but poetry has flourished. Why? Although it would be impossible to answer this in a theoretically valid way in a four-page paper, I would like to speculate on some possible reasons for poetry's popularity since moving online.

- its form is mutable and easily capable of being adapted for the eye-byte literacy of the TV educated attention span
- its historical 'chronotype' [3] or genre definition, positions it as the medium for sharing feelings and ideas in a responsive, immediate and personally derivative manner.
- it can be animated, linked, soundtracked and published online with the acquisition of some basic skills and then it encourages the development of these skills or collaborative partnerships - which makes it appealing to pioneering individuals
- it seems easy and millions of people write it
- it offers a variety of experiences [18]
- 'Most writers... tend to work alone and often enjoy being physically solitary. The web offers controlled contact with a worldwide community of support, advice and inspiration' [18]

POETMACHINES

Poetry has been handed a great opportunity to develop alternative ways of expressing itself, yet most poets do not know how to register this concept, let alone approach the task. I include myself in this group. I acknowledge that cyberspace makes genre distinctions difficult to sustain or defend and that they probably don't deserve defending. However because limits can sometimes be useful, I'd like to advocate that poetry's logic is situated inside language and that though this can be expressed across multiple media, it can be distinguished from the visual logic expressed within the visual arts.

Poetry was already a multimedia form before cyberspace and it has been easy to transmute its existing identities for internet publication but cyberspace has created only a few examples of poetry that could not be duplicated outside it. Poetry on the internet is an evolving creature with currently limited manifestations.

Clicklit - a term I am advocating to express the relationship of the hand to poetry and the idea of the page on the internet - is predominantly a form emerging from hypertext. 'Hypertext' is used here, to express what Stuart Moulthrop names as a method of creating and

navigating alternative reading sequences which are articulated by a series of links running among the discursive elements, or lexias, which make up the body of the text. [12]

Hypertext may be the closest thing there is to a cyber literature at the moment and it may conceptualize its lexia outside of the page, but it still looks and reads like systems of pages for the most part.

Illiterate Hands

Unfortunately poets are generally not blessed with the programming skills necessary to manifest these kinds of developments, which is why internet poetry is emerging as a form dependent upon the skills of programmers. Programmers are becoming co-authors. The beauty of hypertext is that it can be learned and adopted by poets. Partnerships with programmers will be a necessary part of the evolution of poetry until a generation graduates that is able to program as easily as it can write poetry. New poetry can be expected when there is convergence between literacies.

‘New Media’ practitioners manifest a different kind of editorial aesthetic in cyberspace. New Media hands edit and create narratives through assemblage and montage situated in visual significations of space. By this I don’t mean ‘visual’ in terms of image production, but ‘visual’ in the sense of a logic requiring a different kind of literacy to language. The editing hand harks back to the signing hand.

The rise of a cinematic logic within cyberspace does not alter the difficulty of reconfiguring an understanding of space, time and distance as part of narrative. Cinematic logic has practically defined twentieth century western experience of these concepts, and the computer, by becoming another pseudo television set, will not offer poetry the radical creative departure that virtual and post-human discourses crave.

The failure of current poetics to represent space as an intimate sensory realm which articulates the body –through the hand – with an extended site of being, may say more about the unrealistic expectations placed upon poetry than about the failure of poetry to engage with cyberspace more successfully. The internet as a medium for poetry may simply not be able to live up to its poststructural, postmodern, post human rhetorical fantasies.

Each day cyberspace becomes more and more like the territorializing, surveillance regimes of Gibson's capitalism and less and less like the utopian fantasies of early writers. It is this tension between possibility and reality that sustains my interest in the internet as a space for writing. Existing forms need not be dismissed simply because of their reproductive qualities. The possibilities reside not only in the poetics of cyberspace and the posthuman discourses surrounding it, but also the implications of access and production and co-modification that have not been touched upon in this paper. I have argued for a cyberspace situated inside my body as a method of understanding the difference between the kinaesthetic experiences of engaging with poetry on and offline. This allows me to ask questions that I find interesting. For example, if I carried

cyberspace within me, how would I choose to engage with the poetics of hypertext and what would be the implications for my writing? Working inside the space as opposed to inside its technological framing, is a strategy I adopt to understand the limitations inside it and to discover exits to other possibilities.

Poetry is the product of both a public hand and a private hand. Poetry often exists as a secret life expressed by an invisible hand, so it is not surprising that the capacity of the internet to support multiple identities has resulted in millions of poems surfacing that would not have reached out from their locked journals or shoe boxes in the pre-internet days. Poetry purists may not like the way people are building communities around poetry because of the proliferation of bad poetry. But poetry has served many functions throughout its history, with the idea of the well-written poem being an aesthetic emerging from another technological development in poetry’s history – the invention of paper and pens.

The hands that scribed the paper then concerned themselves with ornamenting poetic texts through calligraphy, crafting language and telling stories – it was only much later that signing the paper, asserting authorship – became an important part of the evolution of poetic texts. Later still, the printing press supported the translation of handwriting into typography, which in turn created new forms of poetry.

CLICKLIT & CINELIT

The hand that writes the clicklit brings certain ideas to this writing. In its early days this hypertext marked hand operated inside the anxiety of knowing it was expected to manifest ‘original writings’ ‘new genres’ and ‘modes of thought’ to address the question ‘what difference does hypertext make?’ This question, pitched 12 years ago by Mark Bernstein (cited by Moulthrop, [13]) is as relevant as it ever was, not just for hypertext, but for the whole idea of writing on, for, in and about the internet.

While hypertext has successfully disrupted notions of reading and writing by introducing a method of interactivity inside poems and for expanding on the video poem’s idea of scenes, I still can’t help but think that it often bears more of a resemblance to channel surfing and home shopping than a truly convergent internet poetry.

Even if cinematic logic – which includes tracking, panning, framing, story-telling inside timelines etc – is replaced by alternative strategies for creating poetry, audiences may not be able to make sense of them. Thousands of poets and publishers will continue to use the internet as a surrogate book, and while this is a positive development for access and experience, it does not explore the concept of a poem beyond framings of form and content.

Flash poetry – poetry created using Flash animation software – is rapidly establishing itself as an emerging genre. Flash poetry can be created and navigated using ideas from hypertext, video poetry and filmmaking. It represents an alternative strategy for poets wishing to engage with more than words.

What does it mean to hold cyberspace in our hands? This is the question that I will continue to hold between my invisible fingers, as I continue my investigations in cyberspace.

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