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Contra Modernism: From the Mediatic to the Transmedial

Certain after-paths of 1960s conceptual art converge in post-millennial electronic display. To estimate their logic from a necessarily limited sampling, this essay operates within two broader and overlapping chronological brackets. In literary terms, it arcs between the late modernism of Samuel Beckett and the cyborgian posthumanism (and neo-Joycean phonetic cacophony) of Tom McCarthy. In art-historical terms, it moves between the essentialist reductions of high modernism and the reflexive digital composites of new media displays. Yet each bracket involves its own medial feedback loop: not just, in the former case, between sound and sign in recorded language (scripted or oral, traced or taped), but, in the latter as well, between medial platforms—however unlegislated or "impure"—and their manifestations in museum space. This is because the plastic or digital works (or both at once) to be brought forward here tend to compound their actual recursive spooling with a conceptual double helix that loops back through media history to orient their varying relations to obsolescence and renewal. And this is where, as it happens, the embedded archaeology of transmission (post-print, pre-digital) of McCarthy's backdated novel *C* can end up providing a kind of running proleptic gloss.

We confront in the process an influential proposition concerning media after modernism. According to Fredric Jameson, one defining aspect of the postmodern condition is signalized and enshrined in the late 1980s by a certain disposition of conceptual art practice that—long after the purist cult of surface and flatness under high modernist strictures—gravitates instead, in the new utopic but often apolitical space of installation art, to a looser "mediatic system" as a revised "reflexive" touchstone.[1] Jameson's leading example, to which we'll later return by fuller contrast with the works to be considered here, offers four

[1] See Fredric Jameson, the chapter on "Space" ("Utopianism after the End of Utopia") in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 154-180.

separate and medium-delimited objects in recognized categories—architectonic, sculptural, painterly, and textual—all made "room" for in one nonetheless heremetically designated gallery installation. Since then, under what I would call Conceptualism 2.0, just this cross-referential reflex is more often technically closed off within a single work's own integral feedback circuit. The mediation in play becomes not just "systematic" or intertextual but internally *systemic*. The broader band of media response is thereby cycled through the layered substrate of an inherently transmedial work. This is a process that not only frequently involves—but is figured in its involution by—a mode of celluloid or digital looping as the trigger (and model) of some conceptual closed circuit.

With McCathy's *C* (2010), we take our start from a contemporary "historical" novel whose spotty but obsessive early-media archaeology precedes the storage and retrieval functions mobilized in the electronic works to come. Yet this is a novel whose own linguistic (and, in readerly uptake, somatic) materiality, under the exerted pressure of just that archaeology, reveals—quite beyond its descriptive nest of evolving technics—a related force of *systemic* counterpull: in this case between phonic and retinal circuits. It is, of course, a more unmistakably mutli-channel dynamic that later mediations are often designed to exacerbate or finesse—but in either case to foreground and keep in circulation. But when, in McCarthy's *C*, the seen cues of alphabetic language, in resistance to their own phonic register, are recruited to track a posthuman field of networked and coded impulse rather than the outflow of an expressive subject, the textual (hence intrinsically audio/visual) effect of the prose emerges with special force as a transmediation degree zero—yet only as it foregrounds an ordinary fact of language disclosed in extremis. And only as it opens, here, onto the horizon of other medial transfusions in those experiments brought into comparison with its cross-wired prose.

From this linguistic lower-limit case, then, we will be moving to works of recent visual art, partly or wholly electronic, that are far more obvious in their specular rejection of the painterly canons of medium-specificity. Yet these are works that, through it all, remain decidedly medium-steeped—and, more than simply hybrid or narrowly remediated, actively media-*specifying*. For as I'm defining it, the transmedial work negotiates, at the level of its own technical substrate(s), an investigative transaction *between* media regimes. What stands *contra* to

institutional modernism, then, in these mixed pieces (and their differential parts) is their exploration of contrastive rather than crystalized means: a function cross-fed and intrinsically tensed rather than essentialist. Works of this stamp don't have to be medium-identified to identify, spotlight, and anatomize their own convergent mediations.

The ABC of Decoded Phonetic Feedback

A phantasmagoria of the techno body whose chronicle plot is embroiled in media archaeology and communications theory yet tethered at every turn to a polyvalent texture of run-on homophonic punning, the cryptically titled 2010 novel *C* by Tom McCarthy (occasional lecturer on media theory) reads as if it were written with James Joyce open on one side of the desk (or desktop screen), Friedrich Kittler on the other.[2] Less a novel than a fictionalized picaresque of media archaeology in derivation from the anatomical techne of language itself as cognitive prosthesis, *C* keeps its evolving electronics in recurrent touch with its own textual phonics. In an episodic arc obsessed with the body-machine interface—from forceps birth to cacographic death—the hero, Serge Carrefax, is born to a Victorian father who is a self-proclaimed "oralist" (18) in the debates over deaf-mute pedagogy, rejecting sign language as a semiotics too remote from the natural body, too cryptic, too much a secreting away of human subjectivity. This is a patriarch of phonetic instruction (variant of Kittler's maternal linguistic pedagogy[3]) who insists on the painstaking even when nonmimetic (i.e. deaf) generation of speech sound from the "engine-parts" (20) of the vocal musculature. Only then does *homo loquens* achieve, in Carrefax's etymology—as a model of anthropology itself—the true "suspirio" (18) of the "human spirit."

Vocal technique, therefore, is introduced well before (and prized above) encrypted gesture or sonic technology. This faith in a humanization through voice is first exemplified in a public demonstration of speech acquisition by the

[2] Tom McCarthy, *C* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

[3] Kittler's argument concerning the metaphysics, in effect, of maternal pedagogy in the acquisition of phonetic language develops across his sweeping chapter on "The Mother's Mouth" in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 225-69.

father's deaf pupils, where the onomatopoetic hum of "*hmmm*" (20) is followed by a forced vocalic series begun with the open-mouthed "*Ee-ah*" (22) of one student's effort at "ear" and further rechanneled by the father's "charcoal" on the blackboard into another student's four-letter "aih-ree-ah" (22): a permutational sequence that sets the pattern for the domino-like Joycean wordplay (often either anagrammatic or paronomastic) from here out. When one of the deaf students demonstrates his schooling in language via literature, his ironic proof text is the "withered pipes" passage from *Piers Plowman* (23), sounded out from a strange subzone between mute body and inchoate speech—what Mladen Dolar would call mere sonic voicing on the cusp of signage.[4] Like all reading, in fact, the voice of this particular textual recitation seems to "issue not from him but rather to divert through him" (24). It is a "sound spirited in" (24)—the supernatural aura of such a phrasal verb to be later ironized in the context of séance hokum, but here reformatting the previous blackboard prompts—"from another spot, some other area, eerie, ear" (24). So, too, in that later episode of post-mortem telepathy, faked or not: allegorizing the transmedial nature of human communication in a beamed signal received via chalkboard vocalics—scrawled acoustics—from beyond the grave.

Well before this later supernaturalism of the voice, it is from the somatic to the technological that the novel makes its decisive first move. Growing up at the start of a new century, Serge learns of his oralist father's longstanding preoccupation with Victorian sound technologies associated with the somatic apparatus of speech.[5] He does so from the "lamp-blackened glass phonautograph plates" (52) found among the obsolete equipment in the family attic—along with early Edison phonographic rolls and later Berliner gramophone disks. The former plates are used to trace speech sounds without playback function ("bearing scratch marks laid down by voices moaning from deaf bodies" [52])—the etched removal of soot, that is, like charcoal script in reverse—so that they

[4] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

[5] In the process of this maturation both personal and historical—and in precisely the self's subsumption to communication and media systems along this same double arc—Serge survives the early death of a brilliant sister who was experimenting just before death with the electro-galvanic reactivation of dead animal limbs (and who was given wired entombment, with a telegraphic alarm system, in case of premature burial—through a tunnel otherwise "communicating" [95] with the crypt only in one direction).

become an inlaid emblem, ultimately confirmed in closure, of the novel's own inscription, finally petering out for the hero in the same guttural (and eventually punning) fashion. Smitten next with Edison's moving-image technology, the father, boasting one of the first private "Projecting Kinetescopes" (56), later intends to patent the "Carrefax Cathode" or "remote projection" (141), an early fantasy of TV—even as he warns, with his visionary anticipation of radio, against the cumulative danger of electromagnetic messaging bouncing back from the ionosphere and, with no phonic signal ever fully lost, causing environmental damage to plant life through this hypertrophic media ecology of recirculation without genuine recyclement (246-48).

Yet here we are returned to the precincts of vocal articulation as tutor scene, with its latent graphonic (rather than gramophonic) tension so carefully laid out. For even this later ironic premonition of the greenhouse effect for electromagnetic vibrations rather than carbon emissions is a phobia the son finds tacitly redeemed by the marvellous possibility of replay for any and every message ever transmitted, including the death gasp of the Logos Himself, the very "vowels and syllables" (248) of the Crucifixion. Playing in this way between textual and phonic traces—and thus conjuring an audiophonic rather than a just a bibliographic archive, if only through an irreversible tampering with natural air as a new aerial medium—the novel doesn't just evoke the phonautographic signatures of speech forms in such feared atmospherics but, as we are to hear, enacts them.

The modernist scion falling just far enough from the paternal tree to embrace a coded version of such mediation as well, rather than just its pure oral forms in a "natural language," Serge becomes an RAF cryptographer in WWI, his reconnaissance missions aided by time-coded aerial cinematography—and his cocaine addiction for bodily pain causing him repeated airborne erections which he releases along with his vibratory (and just somewhat less material) wireless transmissions. Then, in the mass grieving following the war, he is caught up in a séance community whose ruse he exposes by intercepting covert wireless transmits to a phony telepath with alternative combinatory letterings of his own that blow the cover of the public deception. Following that, and along the relentless metalinguistic trajectory of the plot, he becomes a Communications Officer in a new World Wireless initiative assigned to estimate the situation in

an unruly postwar Egypt, where the irony is not lost on him that he is implementing a telegraphic dream of global British outreach just as the empire wanes—and where the continuation of exotic tourism and sightseeing comes to seem one continually rewound "pornographic film" (339). As it happens, his own affectless erotic exploits in each stage of the plot—modelled on a first sexual act (the parental primal scene?) he saw reflected in shadow-play from behind the family's Kinetoscope screen when the projector was left running—are repeatedly figured in the terms of electromagnetism and pulsional radiographic suffusions, entirely unromantic, impersonal, posthumanist, cyborgian. By now, at least, we see how true to the phonetic ambiguity of his first name this subject of the galvanic surge really is.

In return from his posting near the origin of the Rosetta stone, there at the omphalos of modern cryptography, Serge ends up dying of fever on the boat home—or so it would seem; certainly fading from consciousness in a hiss and cluck of nonsense like a death gasp. Though he would be superstitiously protected against drowning by the caul (shades of *David Copperfield*) that the opening chapter of *C* has him born with (the bookended—and eponymous?—first and fourth volumes being "Caul" and "Call"), he now answers the seaborne call of death in a way that confuses a shipboard attendant into thinking that he's asking whether a message has come through for him on the ship's telegraph: through for or *to* him, rather than, as he has in fact mumbled, "*through me*" (387), his body returned (as at the advent of speech in his father's pedagogy) to its condition primarily as a medium of things beyond**.** It is as if the telos of Kittler's discourse network has been fulfilled in the unwired body as transmission device. Yet what remains to note here is that it is the reader's body, so soon forgotten in Kittler, that proves this on its own pulse. For I, too, become the silent enunciator of messages passing through me from novelistic imprint to (or at least toward) linguistic recognition on the sounding board of an immanent re-citation for its words. Always sound precedes meaning, and sometimes blocks it. Here is what Serge's receptors are trying to audit in his own onomatopoetic last rattle: "ssssss, c-c-c-c, ssssss, c-c-c-c" (388). This is a veritable death snore of graphonic sibilants and "voiceless" velar stops neither cohering into differential signage nor even keeping decisively separate from each other, as serially sounded graphemes, in order to prevent some dilated twofold phono/graphic pronunciation of the title letter *C* itself in impaired sibilant build-

up, both hiccup and hiss at once. Or are we confronted here, perchance, with the long-plus-four-short beats of Morse code in an arbitrary phonetic transcription of its irrelevant ciphering? In either case, if the message comes through at all to the guttering Serge, it will certainly come through the resonating bodily cavity, alive or dying, wheezing or (yes) reading.

Repeatedly in the novel, mishearing of words in vocal time is linked to their bodily generation and reception, from the simplest coded abbreviation like "FL for Eiffel" (81) to the at-first indecipherable cascade, after Serge's capture by a German soldier, of "*Enner . . . Enna. . . Engnis*" (sounding to him like "End this" or "Endless") until it becomes the ablauted "*Ins Gefängnis Prison*. You are prisoner" (244). He is fettered in discourse as well as in body, but only as the two continue losing their differences from each other. Then later, in postwar London, there is the staged interplay between telepathic cryptograms at the sham séance—*influe, influence, influenza*, or *emma-nations* (279-82)—followed by the hero's later puzzlement in Cairo over why an archaeologist has switched from German to English in speaking of "*Tod, Mort*, the Death," when all she has said is "Thoth . . . the god of secret writing" (357). And from there, in Serge's final fever, we move to the dreamlike slippage of the letter in the unconscious when he has come face to occluded face with his veiled dream bride before "peeling the gauze away and gazing" (384). Gauze contracts to gaze as if to measure the hairs-breath phonemic filament between. After which, his report undelivered, Serge disappears from physical consciousness into the punning sea (C) of black ink in the infinite replication of carbon paper CCs just before his sibilant death rattle: carbon, the basis of all life, especially (one might add) print life. Print, which comes to life only when c-een but also heard, cognitively cross-filtered, audiophonic, transmedial, phonautographic.

And in this novel, of course, the last not least. We keep being quietly—one should in fact say silently—reminded of that primitive instrument's place in the father's attic archive of audial paraphernalia from the Victorian century. In originally exploring this technological trove, Serge is surprised to learn from his sister, in the earliest instance of the book's metaphonic comedy, that the sheen of the early Berliner disks—the shellac or lacquer of these early "vinyl" objects—results (true enough) from secretions of the "lac bug." Serge's instinctive question concerns what "it lacks" (54). One thing missing in vinyl, as in the

mechanical throats of the deaf children recorded on it doing their alphabetic exercises, is the ability to guarantee a meaning in sound. Listening to their "sequences of letters," he hears finally, after an attempt at B and T, the hiss of "S-s-s-s-s, S-s-s-s-s . . ." (53). Anticipated here, in the first years of his narrated life, is the undecidable hiss and catch of the hero's last exhalation ("sssss, c-c-c-c"), his presumed death gasp—and glottal rasp. In this book less of magic realism than of mediatic postnaturalism, human agency has ceded to its own posthumous transmit. En route to signal static as psychic destiny, when the (again eponymous?) carbon basis of life is explained to him as manifested everywhere in chemical formulas, he misunderstands the oral litany of the *c* shorthand: "The sea?" (365). And it is a c-word that that trips him up in the last and dopiest of jokes, when an unknown man remarks on Serge's wound in a typography that forces the reader, as well, to mishear him: "You've got a nasty cysthair,' says the man—until, "more slowly," he reiterates: "cyst, there." (373).

Then, right before the end, when in a feverish state Serge imagines his shipboard body plowing across a shellacked black sea like a record needle on those early Berliner disks, he is heard "stuttering" his request—in a revealing anagrammar—to "bring the Berlin inner . . . In, I mean" (379). It is as if the very needle of enunciation has jumped grooves in attempting to figure an articulatory apparatus than has in fact, by this point, rendered all recorded noise "inner" for the strictly electromagnetic subject. The protagonist is therefore cast back—in his own perverse biomechanic loop—to the days in the attic at the turn of the media century, replaying now in his last moments, via a return of the mediatic repressed, that evolution of sound technology already traced: from blackened photautographic plates through soot cylinders and on past wax rolls with playback capacity to the subsequent grooves of gramophonic recovery with the Berliner recordings.

Yet it is, again, the earliest phonautographic rectangle, blackened and traceable, that offers the closest prototype for the typographic sheets of McCarthy's writing. Where the former technology involved tracing on soot-dusted surfaces, fictional print is, of course, written on clean white ones. But any sense of negative inverse gives way at this point to an insinuated common denominator, the apparatus of fiction reverting to its own embedded model. Speech transcription is a technology behind which the natural voice forever recedes from

the site of trace or impress, whether the initial tracking is analog (phonetic oscillation) or arbitrary (symbolic signs). Either way, there is still no sounding, no playback, but what the reader can bring to it, a reader baffled in the end, with McCarthy's novel, by an alphabetic decoding that won't quite happen. But every text is in this parabolic sense a self-antiquated machine contrived to await, in each reader's hands, its retooling anew for playback.

And each body is such a machine as well, according to McCarthy's figuration. In this light, one final epitomizing moment is worth attending to in *C*, whereby the uncertain buzz of syllabification rephrases itself on the run to conflate noise with cognition in the relentless biomediatics of Serge's world. Just before the plot's metatextual point of no return in the mortal cc-ing of s-sounds, there is a climactic mis/s/hearing of syllabic breaks. This happens when Serge's cryptographer's role in Egypt has been explained to him as part of the surveillance protocol involved in the interception of "telegrams, radio messages, acrostics, and keywords lurking within print"—only for him to founder aurally when his informant adds "HumInt too, of course." Instead, Serge hears a slurred participle across the assimilation of the doubled dental *t*, asking "What's humming?" (330)—more as if he were reading rather than listening to the first syllable, guessing at a short rather than a long *u*—only for the answer to indicate a return from electrical prosthetics to unaided forensic spy work: "HumInt: Human intelligence." For this is a bureaucratic function that is said, for all the contingencies of human hearing thus ironized, to require any interpreter "to keep an eye and an ear out for what's brewing" (330) in the hum and buzz of intercepted noise. By the codework of abbreviation alone, in the graphonic cross-wires of covert discursivity, the radiophonic imaginary has produced—in reduced or "telegraphic" form as tacit coinage—a new networked *humintity* as universal data stream.

The Joycean "phonemanon" once again[6]: not some faux spiritualist aura of speaking in tongues, but the continuous penumbra of aurality around penned

[6] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Oxford World Classics, 2012), 258:22. In a further and curious anachronic loop that yet again renders Joycean experiment as the paradoxical wake, rather than precursor, of postmodern aesthetic production, one result of such quasi-machinic wordplay (with its reverbs of posthuman transmission) returns us, in its staggered and stroboscopic momentum, to the alphabetic slippage of high modernist

letters. Back at the school for the deaf and dumb, that early nugatory monosyllable "hmmm" (not "humming" or "HumInt" yet) could be elicited in and from the speaker's inner silence. This was the case as well with the closed phonetic loop of "ee-ah" (ear) as cause and effect of lexical recognition. Not so when death closes down the circuits. On the hero's assumption that death is itself an electromagnetic transmission, a passing-through of negative energy, his ultimate reversion from *homo loquens* to pure organic sounding (without true voice) reverts to the thorax-in-action of the opening sequence, which like all reading seems (again) to "issue not from him but rather to divert through him" (24)—a sound "spirited in from another spot, some other area, eerie, ear" (24). In the lush tumblings and serial transfusions of the style to which we soon become acclimated as the novel proceeds: "eerier" ("eerie, ear") indeed. As in Joyce's "semic machine" (as it was dubbed by Jean-Michel Rabaté[7]), the stylistic and the computational converge in McCarthy's novel upon the new *algorhythms* of cadenced and quasi-proceduralist phonetics—or in other words, upon the speaking body in desubjectivized process.

Few books since Joyce, it seems fair to say, have ever—at the level of media archaeology as well as phonographemic irony—been more steadily bent on bringing out the sensory mix of inscription itself: its prompt to eye and ear simultaneously. Nor, given the inaugural tutelary context from which its continuing wordplay springs, could there be a narrative more deliberately designed to plot the difference of its own writing from unvoiceable "sign language." In contrast to phonetic articulation, signing is demoted at first to an externalized and gestural system from which the more deeply internalized regime of alphabetic (because phonetic) signifiers (internal to the morphophonemic structure of language) must return human transmission even in

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writing (as in my chapter "Modernism and the Flicker Effect," *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999], 265-314). Such is a prose poetics associated with the serial and "photogrammic" underlay of screen projection discussed by Marcus in connection with my broader claims (n. 9 below, 163)—and attended here, in the key of *C*, with overtones almost photogrammatical in McCarthy's spun letter clusters fading in and out of lexicon and syntax.

[7] See Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Lapsus ex Machina," in Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer, eds., *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 79-101.

writing. For all the debunked polemics attending the resultant metaphysics of voice on the patriarch's part, it is just such an enacted ambit of return—such a deeply transmedial linkage between graphic and phonic signals—that generates in the novel's own prose what I have termed a "secondary vocality": the sounded sight of letteral energies, felt mergers, sensuous blurs, and all but unconscious circuitries.[8]

But this entails, in McCarthy, a further archaeological—and finally evolutionary—irony, as we know. For this inward broadcast system serves (in a Kittlerian telos again) to cyborgize the human as a mere transmission antenna in a global discourse network of telepresent signalling, noise included, rather than securing the articulating agent's status as a centralized (speaking or listening) subject. That question of the mediated subject takes, and has previously taken, many forms, lodged famously at one point, in the modernist canon, within the rewired performative zone of theatrical presence and its phonographic alterity—and subsequently relooped through a telescoped recording and projection history to whose post-theatrical rehearsals, cinematic and digital, we now turn.

From Theatrical Presence to Audiovisual Storage

Some art installations, though not in any structural way site-specific, can still seem almost inevitably housed just where and when they belong, whether in their timeliness or even their belatedness. Such is the case, from February to March of 2002, with the projection of the 2001 DVD transfer of a 35mm film version of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (by Canadian director Atom Egoyan) screened in the disused rooms of a defunct London gallery. The fitness of venue is not thematic alone, but more deeply medial. True, as written in the late 1950s, this high watermark in the so-called Theatre of the Absurd can be thought to catch the turn, in theatrical as well as cultural history, from modernism to postmodernism. True, too, it can also be seen, in its function as a so-called psychological monodrama, to be giving way across its own duration to a now mostly vestigial and prosthetic humanism, where an old man's tape-

[8] In contrast to Walter Ong's sense of "secondary orality" in technological reproduction, this was the focus of my keynote address at the conference on "Modern Soundscapes" at the University of New South Wales in July of 2012: "Noises Off: Secondary Vocality and the Audial Unconscious."

recorded memory offers a machinic adjunct to the lived body: a proto-cyborgian consciousness under self-anatomy. If the title doesn't say it all, it does blazon the punning gist: the last excreta of involuted memory passing under stinging review in a recorded biographical voice. Here before us, all gone before and unwound in retrospect, is a life unravelling in the further metatheatrical demotion, for long stretches at a time, of the "live actor" to his prerecorded (younger) self**,** a subjectivity looped and duped by its own vanished technic double.

Beyond or beneath all this, at the level not of the drama but of its recorded screen capture by Egoyan, the audiovisual "play text"—seen in high-definition digital—is eventually manifest to us in cross-mediation with theatre's own previous means of a paradoxical "live record," namely film itself. But such "canned theatre"—as projected and viewed here at first only in its subsequent digital transfer—needs no actual canister now, being no longer stored on a reeled transparent strip at all. Beckett's French title, *La Dernière Bande*, would evoke more directly the common spooled ribbon of audiotape and celluloid that is here "upgraded" to nondegradable (or at least differently vulnerable) high-definition digital. The recorded stagecraft thus passes before us, in instantaneous lineation rather than in the wheeling of a photogrammic frameline, through compressed electronic files rather than a filing-by of discrete cellular images. In this relay of material supports, the transit from *on* the boards to *in* the can to *down*-loaded delineates one vector of "performance" in contemporary playback mode.

But here the vector of progress stalls—or at least lingers—in remembrance over the assaulted membrane of a predecessor medium. For next door to this digital projection, in an adjacent gallery within this abandoned museum space, is the "recycling" of celluloid itself: the actual plastic trace from which the DVD transcription was made. Looping around a gallery over rollers guyed by pulleys and passed through a dimly lit editing monitor, the whole performance unwinds less persuasively as filmed play than as the sheer play of film: very sheer, and, after a month's collected dust and abrasion, gradually frayed and scratched on both visual and audial tracks, slowly enfeebled, dying out. Museum-framed in this way, here the very idea of the collectible is instead, in its very display, gradually effaced, expunged. Indeed, by not being a gallery holding so much as a one-time material installation, preservation time is no longer on the side of the artifact.

The ironies of this, though immediate, also spread wide. The so-called Museum of Mankind, in London's grand but cramped Burlington House, had cabined the ethnographic wing of the British Museum from 1990 to 1997. Between then and its new rehabbed use by the Royal Academy of Art in 2005, midway through almost a decade's languishing drydock between anthropology and aesthetics, it provided the temporary and wryly chosen home for this museumized piece of modernist psychic ethnography crossed with media archaeology: the multi-platform homage and elegy to Beckett's study of human alienation and self-obsolescence. On the way to the gallery space set aside for this "program" by Egoyan, viewers had to pass through corridors of display cases littered with empty film canisters and celluloid strips from a seemingly abandoned archive of ethnographic films and outdated audiovisual equipment, including a curatorial ledger of former exhibits at the museum—all metonymic for cinema's own lapsed hegemony as modernist form.

Past this clutter and debris, attention is first channelled, then, into that high-definition screening room in its typical postmillennial incarnation: projecting the digital transfer of Egoyan's originally filmed, then televised, production of the Beckett play, with John Hurt in what we might call the auto-ethnographic solo lead: a reminiscing consciousness looking back at the figuratively unwinding traces and tracks of human impulse. From the viewer's position there in front of the digital screen, it is only a few yards, a short historical step, and a full ontological lunge backward to the original film version in its dishevelled form as unspooled and criss-crossed "footage," reeled past us in a makeshift chamber of material wear and tear answering to the one conjured in different terms by Beckett's stage set. For it is in that adjoining "film lab" that the overloaded 2000-foot reel of celluloid—rendered necessary, in a kind of purist medial stunt on the director's part, to record the whole last monologue in one unedited take—has been unreeled and "strung up" in its friable roller-coaster of vulnerability. As if reversing the ordinary logic of screen production, its destiny is to be fed only at this point into the gnashing sprockets of the traditional Steenbeck editing machine, where, still uncut, it is now—in the discrete feed of its separate frames—to be slowly devoured, worn thin, rubbed out.

The title of the play may refer to the last tape from Krapp's own biographical archive that the title figure chooses to hear in the 1958 year of production. This

is a tape made when he was a young man in 1939. It is rewound on a dated and clunky playback deck as his older self speaks back to it in rage and regret and then begins recording—in a new monologue (and another claimant for the title spool)—his present dismissive cynicism about youth's spent "fire." In the eponymous gallery installation by the punning name *Steenbeckett* (a Joycean or, if you like, McCarthyian portmanteau), the last tape is, by coiled and unwound association—and the last film strip as well, that final spun *bande* of cinematic apparition—not so much archived and museumized as atrophied, frayed raw, over days of exhibition time. No accident, surely, that this transmedial installation, playing between platform and manifestation, finds its cues in the play itself. When Hurt follows Beckett's own original theatrical instructions and all but personifies his aged recording machine during a remembered amorous incident, hugging it like the lost object of desire whose description it can only broadcast, not embody, it is then that a medium, varying the sense of Egoyan's fellow Canadian Marshall McLuhan, submits to its own *massage*.

But so, too, does the medium that has once filmed this scene, this whole last monologue, incur its own physical pressure in gallery execution, its own tangible but non-erotic friction. It does so precisely as time runs out not just on a human life and an antiquated magnetic technology but on the signature modernist medium of photomechanical film. Thus has the director materialized in ritual sacrifice his own belatedly plastic footage—Egoyan's last reel—as a symbolic counterpart to the "wearish" man, time-worn and thread-bare, mentioned in the first stage direction: scraped raw by time and disappointment like film itself, as opposed to the less (or differently) abradable material support of its afterlife in digital transmission.[9]

[9] Egoyan thus exacerbates an intractable condition of the filmic track to the point of a mourning rite, very much in the spirit of Paulo Cherchi Usai's reflections on the medium's plastic fragility in exhibition, as discussed for the inaugural number of this journal by Laura Marcus in "The Death of Cinema and the Contemporary Novel" (*Affirmations* 1.1 [2013], 64, quoting Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 13. Marcus notes, too, how the friability of the substrate anticipates the supersession of the medium all told. But in a sense of compensatory "affirmation," as it were, to be detected in certain modern fictions (Paul Auster and Don De Lillo among her examples)—texts concerned with the nature of filmic record and succession in a way very different from the modernist "cinematic novel" (177)—she stresses the technologies of "remediation" in contemporary

From Computation to Digital Imageering

What follows in the paired final exhibits—though in two separate installations: one celluloid spool and before that (if by a merely residual nomenclature) one digital "loop"—will continue to probe the continuities and disjunctures of medial imageering from the technical initiatives of modernity down to the postmachinic (and, if only tacit, posthuman) epoch. But here, first, we can usefully step back to that watershed moment in this regard, from an earlier phase of postmodern art, theorized by Jameson as a kind of open-ended conceptual rather than formal "spatialization" (over against modernism's trademark aspiration to "spatial form"). Well along in the developments of conceptual practice, Jameson's analysis is keyed to the late-1980s nonelectronic installation by Robert Gober: an architectonically contained assemblage of sculpture, painting, and codex textuality fitly convened under the plurality of *Untitled*. This piece of pieces offers Jameson his chief exhibit for a politically disengaged utopianism, in explicit if passing contrast to the time-based video work of Nam June Paik. A quarter of a century later, in what I am calling Conceptualism 2.0, video art itself has been rendered further "mediatized" by the new digital hegemony. In respect to installation practice, at least, Jameson's *Postmodernism* had thus named—as symptomatic of its period—a tendency barely begun at the time. And very much with us still.

But the Gober first, from a show called "Utopia Post Utopia" that the artist himself organized at Boston's Museum of Contemporary Art in 1988. According to Jameson, under the logic of late capitalism, not just "social relations" but aesthetic functions have been projected into the *u*-topos of the isolated site, with its supposed room for cultural rethinking (both *eu* and *ou*, one wants to stress: somehow euphoric in its artificial nowhere). "Spatialization, then, whatever it may take away in the capacity to think time and History, also opens a door onto

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visual practice that are transforming "the ways in which literature and film encounter, and inhabit, each other" (177). Within a given work, it is something like this mutual "inhabitation" of technical means that I am attempting to specify as the transmedial function, so that the novel this essay has looked to for evidence is concerned with cinema mostly for its place in the continual succession of recording and playback media that have lent new valence to the death not just of the movies as we knew them but to the human subject itself of such perception: a subject rendered now as thoroughly mediatized and prosthetic in its own right.

a whole new domain for libidinal investment of the Utopian and even the protopolitical type" (160). Indeed, that dead metaphor in "opens a door" takes on a more literal and dubious sense in the particulars of Gober's installation. The parameters of this immediate example of "bad or nonpolitical Utopianism" (160) aren't difficult to reconstruct (by filling in some of the details passed over rather quickly by Jameson), though its "concept" may at first seem elusive. As we walk into a demarcated museum space—a putative "room" that is only a zone of tacitly cross-referenced objects—we do so through a portal whose entrance door is not exactly "open" but rather unhinged and transferred to the opposite wall, though appearing not *in* but merely leaning *on* that far wall. It is as if have wedged our way into a non-space, a wholly liminal aperture. Between us and that displaced and functionless door—with no exit thereby implied from the circulatory space into which we move—we see first, directly in front of us, the modest mound of an artificially installed earthwork (contributed by a separate artist unmentioned by Jameson, Meg Webster). And next to it a nineteenth-century landscape painting hung traditionally on the wall. Nearby, as if representing an entire art moment by stand-in, there is a book lifted, so to say, from the very book of postmodernism (by appropriation and pastiche artist Richard Prince, whose piece is cited unnamed by Jameson as a typifying period work). Together, then, with the book as cultural third term, the sculptural mass and the painterly vista cohabit the field of exhibition as two compromised and displaced versions of the thing itself, natural formation: one in 3D dirt by a contemporary minimalist sculptor, one in 2D oil from the archive of romantic landscape by Albert Bierstadt of the nineteenth-century Hudson River School. Within this less built than zoned space, these objects, these touchstones, are triangulated with nature's founding opposite in bibliographic culture, the displayed book—the whole bracketing disposition being "curated," as *metteur en scene*, by the artist of the dilated door/way himself (a conceptual work elsewhere installed as a separate minimalist trope by Gober: a self-telescoped space paradoxically including, rather than entered from, its own material perimeter).

All bases would seem covered—and at a level of semiotic abstraction not pursued by Jameson. Joining those two "instances" of the American landscape in mounded earthwork site and oil-painted hilly scene—say land's synecdochic trace and its representation, or otherwise index and icon—is the third sign function in classic semiosis, an arbitrary symbolic text. In this inner sanctum of

museal space, then, deconstructed architecture houses the sculptural, the pictorial, and the textual in a way that lets the signature postmodernism of the last seem almost—Jameson doesn't quite say this—to "textualize" the whole furnished field, in the interplay of its ensemble, as a discursive network. What Jameson does say is that the collective (collectivized) work, this intermedial work-up, performs a reversion from the aspirations of modernism's "symbolic" form to a horizontal or longitudinal "allegory" (167) of the postmodern stance toward media and their self-conscious manipulation. And in the conjunction of romantic landscape and sculpted earthen plot, Jameson sees not the reincorporation of the world, the real, by a no longer hermetic modernism but rather the very "grave of Nature" (170) in the wholly virtualized space of its evocation, its mere signification.

Not organized by a vertical idea, the concept here is for Jameson entirely lateral, where one thing refers to the other by way of deferred shared terms in the knowingness of no longer discrete mediations. In this u-topic nowhere, the viewer enters a mediascape in little, yet at its most dispersed and discrepant—and even non-technological. In the resulting mock *summa* of the sibling arts, rivalry is levelled at once to their reflexive common denominator, with meaning emergent only in the passive cross-fire among these selected instances of medial activity, not in the made or shaped things themselves. So it is that space has been articulated so that its dimensions and features are understood to stage themselves, in the very mode of display, as a media-determined though no longer medium-specific field of representational linkage. In this sense they do not contradict Rosalind Krauss on the "post-medium condition" (her later term, from the end of the decade) since in moving beyond the autonomy of any one medium, they are no less, indeed all the more, strictly "mediatic."[10]

Such is the clinching term of Jameson's broad-gauged assessment: "We may speak of spatialization here as the process whereby the traditional fine arts are mediatized: that is, they now come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a *mediatic system* in which their own internal production also constitutes a symbolic message and the taking of a position on the status of the

[10] See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

medium in question" (160; emphasis added). Even (and especially) conceptual art must form its ideas, and fashion them, from within the pre-conceptions of media templates, operating therefore "from a place not above the media but within their system of relationships: something it seems better to characterize as a kind of reflexivity rather than the more conventional notion of 'mixed media'" (162). Modernism's involuted purist watchword has become postmodernism's convoluted byword: reflexivity now stripped of specificity; transpeciation, as it were; the "mediatic" per se, which more and more often comes to be materialized, I would add, in the transmedial features of a given composite (though, again, not strictly "mixed media") work—where common denominators seek less than strictly abstract form in the reflex of an instance.

In their gravitation toward ironic discrepancies maximized across medial platforms, such installation procedures have thus departed from the attempted dialectical syntheses of high modernism staked out for literary art by Julian Murphet, where a generalized "media ecology" comes to organize the playing field (and interplay) of aesthetic production—including a symbiosis, for instance, between the advent of cinema's motorized image system and the discursive function of literary operations.[11] This account builds on Jameson's insights into the uneven development of modernity and its modernisms, with Murphet locating such disjunctures in poetry, fiction, film, radio, painting, and so forth, each medium out of sync with the others at any one point in the borrowings and push-back of its technique, its intermedial leanings or allusive resistance. Yet in the subsequent era of capitalist postmodernism, and all the more under the millennial sway of digital ubiquity, we might say (in light of Jameson) that each medium may seem to have caught up with the alternatives on which it battens under the indifferent and blanketing rubric of "the mediatic system." Highlighted thereby is a tendency toward convergent platforms and interchanged technical substrates that is not simply analogous to, but historically fulfilled by, the global computerization of all means.

So that years after Gober's *Untitled* assemblage, in the launching decade of a new technological century—with works looking back on media evolution every

[11] Julian Murphet, *Multimedia Modernism: Literature and the Anglo-American Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2009).

bit as keenly as did Egoyan's 2002 exhibition (or McCarthy's *C* more recently)—we arrive now at two further technological loops of transmediation ferrying us from the earliest computer engineering to the latest protocols of digital transmit. Empty Gober's utopic "room," including the Bierstadt on the wall, and replace it, at canvas height, with an electronic monitor in digital simulation of a comparable Hudson River School painting—and you have, by influential web artist Wolfgang Staehle, a work at the Baltimore Museum of art identified by wall plaque as "*Eastpoint Sept 14 2004* (2004-06), Unique composite of 8,189 digital photographs, in a 24 hour cycle." This temporal composite began with a tripod-braced camera placed on a hillside along the Hudson, originally beamed in real-time to a downstate and downtown gallery, but now in a video loop synchronized with the museum's own clock time, night and day, its frame-captures scooping up at 8-second intervals the micro-increments of real duration—as serial electronic snapshots—from a single overcast September day. Given the museum context, adjacent to wall after wall of oil canvases, including instances of the Hudson River School, it is clearer than otherwise how Staehle's intermittent digital feeds intercept realist painting by turning the privileged moment of recreated epitome into the time-based dissection of change.

But what I am calling the transmedial effect, internalizing Jameson's "mediatic system," is more complex than that—and in this case fully art-historical as well. There on the museum wall, the myriad adjustments of leaf movement or reflective ripple across the Hudson are in fact easy to mistake at first, even at fairly close range, for the unsteady glitches of low-grade pixilation in the image plane—rather than controlled intermittence. Moreover, on evocation's way back to the mid nineteenth-century landscape in oil (a representative sample affixed in pallid B&W photocopy next to the high-tech monitor), Staehle's video also seems passing through the post-photographic manner—and analytic—of impressionism and pointillism both, now actually motorized to transmit (rather than merely simulate) the kinetic shimmer and blur not just of eyed motion but of retinal uptake. For even in the earlier stages of that nineteenth-century "perceptualist" movement, artists like Monet were interested in the virtual time-lapse treatment of a plein-air scene across different canvases in a daily or seasonal cycle. More explicitly yet, of course, Staehle's work also passes through an exaggerated version of the very cinematic flicker of frameline

seriality ("8,189 digital photographs") historically overcome by both analog and digital video. In other variants of his electonic tableaux, there is a similar reflex of binary mediation. This is especially effective in his cityscapes of Manhattan under a volatile sky, shot from across the Hudson in the New Jersey docks, where the rectangulated cascade of changing light and shadow showering down on the facets and caverns of the skyline jump from frame to staggered frame with the abruptness of a digital break-up: a volatile checkerboard of second-order optic rather than architectonic collapse.

But not second-order without exception. For one of his webcam samples, eliding the interstices of rapid motion, gives us the live-cam but jump-cut frames of a national and global catastrophe. In the more routine effect of his skyscraper work, as noted, we find the dimensionalities of urban modernism stuttering into bitmap-like (dis)array. The logic is almost fractalized: jittery rectangles magnifying the unseen shifts of the pixel scan in a transmediation between the pictorial and the technological. But this breakup effect in one of his 24/7 transmissions—from early morning on the 11th of September in the last year of its installation, 2001, and in this case clocked in at one frame every four rather than eight seconds—happened to bracket, by ellipsis, now the approach of the first plane from an ambiguous distance, now its penetration of the first World Trade Center Tower. Two *nows*, with no chance of reaction time, in the increments of technological disaster—and this under accidental surveillance by an arbitrarily discontinuous electronic programming. Staehle's work departs from the continuous time-stamped image of the CCTV cam, in this case, by a tragic fortuity, to find itself figuring (rather than simply picturing) the virtual instantaneity of disaster. Up the Hudson, by contrast, and as stored for replay on the Baltimore museum wall, the effect is to render for analysis certain subliminal shifts so minimal they hardly matter to our normal optic.

There's an uneven development again, let's say, in the surveillant versus the aesthetic use of live-stream video. But Staehle's work seems attempting to close certain gaps—if only by distending other interstices—in a way that may appear to update the dialectic of modernism recently proposed by David Trotter.[12]

[12] David Trotter, *Literature in the First Media Age: Britain between the Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), reviewed in this issue by Julian Murphet.

Marked especially by the presence or subtext of telephony in interwar writing, according to Trotter, and this within the transnational proliferation of new communication technologies in this "First Media Age," the modernist aesthetic discovered itself pitched (because never quite steadily poised) between the paradigms of connectivity and strict depiction, messaging and pure mimesis, virtual contact and impersonal rendering—amounting, one might say, to a new and technologically modeled version of rhetoric versus representation, address not fully aligned with impress in their conjoint textual functioning. Staehle's neo-"perceptualist" work certainly treads a fine line, in a comparable mode, between transmit and representation, data-retrieval and pictorial experiment.

And with this further sense in mind, from Trotter, of a "multimedia modernism" (Murphet's term again), it is a longer arc yet in such a history of disembodied "messaging" as we find in Staehle's "narrowcast" videos—a longer trajectory disclosed by its deliberately anachronistic capture on dated film stock—that will now complete our third technological loop. Turn, then, to a 2009 work by the Turner Prize-winning British conceptual artist Simon Starling: an installation that returns the remote wireless connectivity of our latest communication procedures to the dawn of computerization itself. Here, at the height of our Second Media Age, is a quintessential experiment from the ranks of Conceptualism 2.0. Starling has executed what amounts almost to a visual pun on "computer modelling." He has, that is, reconstituted by digital simulation (one step short of digital printing) the very first programmable computer, the Z1 from 1936, with its punched bites originally taken out of standard 35 mm film strips as the most convenient feeder material (and totalling in its first version only 172 bytes of memory). The ratio-format of the installation's parenthetical title suggests the scalar leap of its evolutionary irony. For *D1 - Z1 (22,686,575:1)* is a thirty-second sound film made by recording the digital modeling, with its multi-millionfold data input, of this original and primitive binary apparatus. The effect makes the head spin along with the gears of its cumbersome projection from yesteryear.

Following are some clarifying snippets from the accompanying description of Starling's multiple-loop projector and the virtual reality of its beamed image, each of equal weight in his metahistorical conjuncture: "The footage for *D1 - Z1 (22,686,575:1)* was generated using state-of-the-art computer animation

technology including surface-rendering programs developed in Berlin." It thus returns in this sense to the home base of its German inventor. And that's only part of its conceptual circuit—or double helix: "Generating this simple 30 second long animation sequence, depicting the punched film reader (a tiny part of the vast machine), required 3,992,837,240 bytes of information—over 22 million times the memory of the Z1." Finally: "This computer-generated, 'virtual' reconstruction was then transferred onto traditional 35 mm film stock and exhibited on another piece of mid-century German technology—a Dresden D1 projector." Cause and effect swallow their own tails in this half-minute, half-century circuit. Through the auspices of a lumbering and outmoded apparatus with over half a dozen vertical film loops snaking their way up and down on the outside (rather than interior) of its mechanism, interwar film procedure in laid bare in the act of projecting here (as it now regularly does in the cinemas) the very digital technology that has eclipsed its material (and even at times indexical) substrate.[13]

But for once this process takes place with full transmedial irony. Film goes through its motions in an estranging overexplicit simulation of cinema's own eventual (but at that point unrecognized) successor in nonindexical record, limited at first to computational tracing and machinic tabulation. Within the expressly figural loop of this long-media history, one might say that the "mediatic spatialization" (in Jameson's sense) incurred by this installatiaon display is measured by exactly the throw of light itself (and quantum leap) between analog transparency and CGI mirage. Where the depurposed film strip, exiled from its photographic or cinematic use, was once tactically commandeered as the material support of wholly binary operations, it is now the case that advanced binary operations—sans plastic altogether—are often the digital basis of both still and cinematic imaging.

[13] On the more than self-referential, the actively circuitous, conceptualism inflecting many of Starling's works, see mention of the recurrent "ouroboros" motif in Dieter Roelstrate, *Simon Starling: Metamorphology* (Chicago: MCA Monographs, 2014), 16, 22: an irony of self-ingestion that could apply as well not only to Starling's metahistorical loop of computerized celluloid, *D1 - Z1 (22,686,575:1),* but to the self-feeding cogs of the editing deck in Egoyan and the self-sampling frame captures of consumed and regurgitated duration in Staehle.

In the quarter century since Jameson's encounter with the "mediatic system" of conceptual art, what we have examined, in both video and textual machination, might be called (varying his subtitle) the cultural logic of late postmodernism**.** Not polemically counter-modernist so much as openly incorporating their own medial *contrasts* rather than distillations, the conceptual laminates—turned perceptual loops—of the contra-modernist works sampled here serve, as we've seen, to transmediate their own conditions. And preconditions: their own medial lineage. Yet within dovetailed historical arcs. A palpably elegiac circuit (Egoyan) takes us from magnetic tape on stage through its celluloid record and on to its digital iteration: from spooling to electronic retooling. Another complex circuit has routed us from pictorial modes at once of romantic realism, impressionist and pointillist modernism, and cinematic intermittence down through pixel sampling in both real-time transmit and video-loop replay (Staehle). Still another conceptual rotation, in the further mode of computer-generated imaging and virtual reality (Starling), loops all the way from film stock as denuded plastic surface for automatic computation through the pixel simulation (in CGI) of its own workings in retrofilmic projection.

And "behind" all these works in a sense, because couched in a medium that precedes them, we have seen how the inherently transmedial system even of narrative prose (McCarthy) has spooled forward in its plot from the earliest media technology to a radically impersonal textuality of signaletic skid. It has thereby traversed a piecemeal history of media from phonography and its antecedents through radio and TV to wireless cryptography while tracking, in the very noise of alphabetic feedback, the morphophonemic—deformed to *morphonemic*—plasticity of language itself as a remote-encoding apparatus.

The novel that parses and then conflates again in this way its own transmediality as linguistic system—its sounded impress, its scriptive audio, its conditioning graphonics—ends up redefining the human sensorium (with however little surprise at this late date) as a sheer ciphering device of channelled neural impulse: a function, in its own non-autonomous right, more transmedial than interpersonal. With sex itself turned unemotive and electro-machinic, the body juiced for emission and transmission equally, the elemental *C(c-c-c)* of life's carbon base is now indistinguishable from the body as copy machine, the automatized iteration of its own synaptic script. Reconceived within the largest

spans of media evolution cycled through in this essay, each with its traced history of human prostheses—as micromanaged in *C* by the condensed feedback loops of deciphered signs as the unstable fluxion of self-morphing acoustic prompts—the human being as tool-using animal has, in McCarthy's trope, become all mediatic signalling (and interference), less agency than surge: a storage system without a subject, a medium without a message.

Krapp's last tape may well have heard this coming. But Egoyan's triple spin on Beckett's unrecoverable reel-to-reel valediction (rather than validation) is displaced from subjectivity to media history before our eyes. As is Staehle's digital history of wall-work perceptualism, with no eyes blinking but the electronic camera's own. As is Starling's telescoped metahistory of the celluoid loop in a new closed circuit of computational precedent and computer-generated illusion. No more ingrained in their transmaterial effect than is the deep lineage of somatic text production in audio/visual prose, these are nonetheless aggressively post-purist (as well as variously post-humanist) works that go out of their way—in closed circuits of recursion—to stage the play of their technological substrates. In the mode of Conceptualism 2.0, and beyond any broader summoning of the "mediatic system" in a routinized "postmodernist" vein, they are works that do their most systemic and reflective thinking trans-medium.