Decoding Dada:

Avant-Garde Poetry in Its Cryptographic Context

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In 1916, the *New York Times* publication *Current History* printed an article entitled "On a French Cruiser in War Time," in which the author waxed eloquent about the wireless signals over the Adriatic[1]: "For the initiated the electric radiations have a personality like human speech. Two posts, two ships have distinct voices, pronunciations. . . . They all use only secret languages. This perpetual chatter contains no word, no phrase which any one can understand unless he possesses the key on which rests the safety of ships. Cipher, cipher, cipher, nothing else circulates in space" (Milan 312). This description vividly conveyed the sense that the air was alive with voices, which could be understood with the aid of the proper instruments and a finely tuned ear. But the final sentences drew attention to another aspect of the wireless that was all the more vital in wartime: the messages were not only composed in many languages, they were also encrypted. As Shawn Rosenheim writes in *The Cryptographic Imagination*, "for millennia, cryptography existed in a kind of Masonic silence, in which knowledge of the art was confined to a tiny class of governmental practitioners or to those who employed it for amusement. With the spread of the telegraph in the 1840s, however, this pattern began to change, as cryptography worked its way [not only into] the hardware of civilization but into our imaginations as well" (6).

Ciphers, Codes, and Poems

Telegraph codes were initially adopted primarily for reasons of economy. Given the widespread use of per-word pricing for telegrams, many senders made use of telegraph code books, which offered single-word equivalents for thousands of pre-formulated messages. One widely used code book offered helpful phrases for commercial purposes, with "Badeplatz" standing for "Please remit balance at my (our) credit," and "Badger" for "Balance all accounts forthwith and come home" (Clauson-Thue 83). In general, the telegraph was used much more frequently for business correspondence than for personal matters; however, code books were marketed for the latter purpose as well, at times with a twist of humor. For instance, in the *Private Code and Post-Card Cipher* from 1914, the code word "Comedy" stands for "Please do not admit any suspicious-looking stranger," while "Comfort" translates as "Unless you send me a pleasant reply I shall enlist in the army. There is a recruiting station in the next block" (Johnson and Johnson 11). In addition to economic concerns, the introduction of the wireless and its implementation in wartime placed an added premium on secrecy, and made the use of both codes and ciphers all the more pervasive.

While the terms "code" and "cipher" were not always used consistently, and different definitions of these terms can be found in different sets of regulations, a typical explanation of the distinction is that outlined by the "Regulations of the International Telegraph Convention": "2. Code telegrams are those composed of words the context of which has no intelligible meaning. Proper names are not allowed in the text of Code telegrams, except in their natural sense. Words of more than ten letters are not allowed. . . . 4. Cipher telegrams are those containing series or groups of figures or letters having a secret meaning or words not to be found in a standard dictionary of the language. The cipher must be composed exclusively of figures or exclusively of letters" (Clauson-Thue 5). In other words, while a code telegram should consist of familiar words used in unfamiliar ways, a cipher telegram could employ combinations of letters or numbers with no apparent meaning at all. For instance, *The "Colorado" Code* issued by the American military in 1918 (actually a cipher according to the definition above) provided three-letter sequences corresponding to key phrases such as "Accidentally wounded" (XUO), "Advance guard" (BEF), and "Ammunition exhausted" (FGC) (fig. 1).
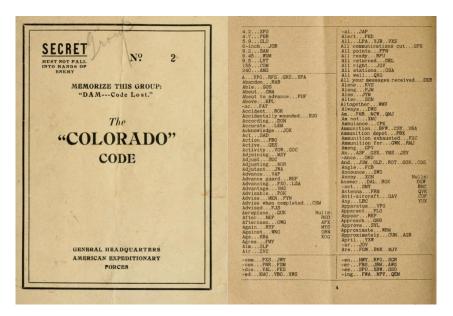
Figure 1: Title page and sample page from *The "Colorado" Code* (1918).
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As Katherine Hayles writes, these books "contributed to a sense that language was no longer strictly under one's control"; they "were part of a historical shift from inscription practices in which words flowed from hand onto paper, seeming to embody the writer's voice, to a technocratic regime in which encoding, transmission, and decoding procedures intervened between a writer's thoughts and the receiver's understanding" (130, 157). Hayles notes that over time these books underwent a "progression from natural language to artificial code groups, from code words drawn from the compiler's memory associations to codes algorithmically constructed," and argues that in the process, "the lifeworld of ordinary experience [gave] way to code calculated procedurally" (142) — in other words, the trend among these code books was towards a more and more radical departure from any natural language.

It is hardly surprising, then, that these code books appealed to avant-garde poets, who were fascinated with new technologies and their implications for poetry. While French poets such as Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars had paid tribute to the wireless in calligrams and odes to the Eiffel Tower, the Italian futurist F. T. Marinetti — whose manifestos called for a "wireless imagination" and "telegraphic lyricism" — went a step further, actually incorporating fragments of a telegraph code book into a 1919 collage (109). Dada poetry initially appears to be an exception among the avant-gardes; explicit mentions of the telegraph are not as common in the poems of the dadaists as they are in the works of their contemporaries in France and Italy. Indeed, the telegraph

at first appears to cut a rather minor figure in Dada poetry, surfacing mainly in the occasional reference or allusion — such as the "Telegraphenstangen" ("telegraph poles") in Richard Huelsenbeck's poem "Ende der Welt" (End of the World)[2] — or exerting a tacit formal influence. Nevertheless, the impact of the telegraph is in fact widespread in Dada poetry, even if it has often gone undetected, like cables running along the bottom of the ocean, or wireless waves permeating the ether. Just as those waves can be detected by a finely tuned receiver, this article will home in on the telegraphic signals running through these Dada poems, drawing on sources such as trade journals, technical manuals, and the popular press to provide a more finely calibrated assessment of what the telegraph meant to the Dada era, and how its impact was manifested in the poetics of Dada and related avant-gardes.

In linking the poetry of the Dada movement to the technology of the telegraph, I intend to offer an alternative to the familiar narrative that casts the "nonsense" strain in Dada first and foremost as a response to the senseless violence of the First World War — sometimes even, ironically enough, as its perfectly rational consequence. In this, I follow Friedrich Kittler's argument in *Discourse Networks*: "The myths of the young and of provocation only obscure the complete extent of the young provocateurs' dependence on the discourse network of their period" (308). Rather than reading the dadaists' poetic experiments as a subversion or rebellion against the modes of communication that dominated in their era, I will argue that these Dada poems are better seen as echoes of and reflections upon the transformation of language that had been brought about by the telegraph, particularly the wireless, and its quantified, encrypted communications. By integrating telegraphic and cryptographic language into their poems, Dada poets such as Hugo Ball and Raoul Hausmann registered the drastic changes that new communications technologies had brought about, and suggested that traditional forms of poetry had lost their validity in the face of this radical transformation.

The shortcomings of the long-dominant reading of Dada "nonsense" poetry have recently been addressed in several important works of Dada scholarship. Matthew Biro, in *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, has sought to "reveal the constructive side of Dadaism in Berlin," hoping to "dismiss once and for all a number of different myths that have circulated about Berlin Dada: that it was just a critical or destructive movement; that it was simply concerned with creating nonsensical works of anti-art designed to inspire institutional critique; or that it was exclusively focused on the trauma of World War I" (255).[3] Arndt Niebisch, in *Media Parasites in the Early Avant-Garde*, looks to

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[2] Except where published translations are cited, all translations are mine.

[3] This complaint is hardly new; Michael Erlhoff, in the afterword to his 1982 collection of Hausmann's *Texte bis 1933*, writes: "that favorite explanation of literary and art historians that sees Dada (and other movements) as an unmediated reaction to the First World War is

technical media as a source for the dadaists' disruptions: "The outer appearance of [these] art works as a meaningless collection of syllables, objects, sounds, noises, or images is . . . not simply a provocation of bourgeois aesthetics but rather a mimicry of information processed by modern media channels and psychophysical laboratories" (10).[4] Matthew S. Witkovsky, in "Pen Pals," likewise links the "noise" of the Dada movement to the media environment of the war, writing: "Vaunting crossed signals of all kinds, [the dadaists] amplified the communications breakdown that characterized this conflict. . . . The Dada media circuit played off the wartime structures around it, responding to them with critical echoes of their own means and effects" (271).

As Kittler, Biro, Niebisch, and Witkovsky all argue, we cannot fully explain Dada's nonsense, much less explain it away, by merely identifying it as a gesture of protest, whether anti-war or anti-art. But whereas Niebisch and Witkovsky tend to characterize Dada as an amplification of noise or interference in the modern communications network, I find that even this media-conscious interpretation ultimately collapses into a more nuanced version of the claim that the movement's nonsense was fundamentally a form of protest, disturbance, or disruption. Without denying that an element of protest was present in many Dada works, I wish to shift the focus away from disruptive intentions or effects and towards the question of how the specific forms taken by the dadaists' poetry reflected, echoed, and drew the consequences of the transformations that the telegraph, to paraphrase Morse (and the Book of Numbers), hath wrought. I argue that we must seek the source of the dadaists' nonsense in the currents that were already coursing through Europe and around the world in the first decades of the twentieth century — not only on the battlefields and in the trenches, but through the telegraph cables and the air. It was not just the war that turned Dada poetry into a jumble of senseless signals — it was also the wireless.

Of course, the telegraph was far from the only significant media technology of the early twentieth century, and other media drew the dadaists' attention as well. Numerous studies have considered the ways that dadaists employed print and typography, advertising, photography, and film, even pioneering new forms such as the photomontage. Some dadaists even incorporated technologies such as the phonograph into their performances, perhaps unconsciously recalling Edison's staged demonstrations of his invention.[5] In light of this plenitude of media, the telegraph may seem like an unlikely candidate for extended attention. It is no great

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simply false in this one-dimensional form (indeed, it is the curse of almost all works about Dada and its authors that they either condemn Dada as chaos and anarchy or euphorically celebrate it on the same grounds, rather than enduring the contradictions of Dada and Anti-Dada)" (225). However, despite decades of discontent, this reductive tendency still plagues a great deal of Dada scholarship.

[4] See Kittler 208.

[5] See Gitelman 180–81.

surprise, then, that Dada scholarship, while occasionally suggesting the telegraph's relevance, has never examined it in depth. But as I will show in the pages that follow, the traces of the telegraph and its transformative impact on language are in fact widespread in Dada poetry, even if their source is not immediately apparent. To be sure, this telegraphic strain does not appear in all works of Dada poetry, or even in most. Dada poets also wrote cabaret songs, doggerel, and any number of more conventional poems. Consequently, my discussion will not offer anything like a comprehensive overview of Dada poetry, or even a representative sampling. Rather, it will concentrate on those Dada works that most radically broke with poetic tradition and most clearly displayed the influence of the telegraph.

Signals on Stage: Hugo Ball's "Karawane" as Wireless Reception

On 23 June 1916 — the same year that René Milan's account of wartime wireless appeared — Hugo Ball stepped onto the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich dressed in a conical cardboard costume with a metallic sheen and recited poems that seemed, at least initially, to be nothing more than strings of nonsense syllables: "gadji beri bimba / gladridi lauli lonni cadori / gadjama bim beri glassala / glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim / blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim" (*Flight* 70). The performance reached its climax in the poem later published as "Karawane"[6] — "jolifanto bambla ô falli bambla / grossiga m'pfa habla horem / égiga goramen" — before Ball brought it to a conclusion with a reprise of "gadji beri bimba."[7] Ball's diary describes how he worked himself into a frenzy, leading to a quasi-ritualistic conclusion:

> Then I noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic Churches of East and West.
>
> I do not know what gave me the idea of this music, but I began to chant my vowel sequences in a church style like a recitative, and tried not only to look serious but to force myself to be serious. . . . Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried off the stage like a magical bishop. (*Flight* 71)

Ball's account of the performance emphasizes its religious resonances, and in his diary he recalls the words with which he prefaced his reading: "In these phonetic

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[6] The poem appears as "Karawane" ("Caravan") in the *Dada Almanach*, but Ball refers to it in his diary as the "Elefantenkarawane" ("Elephant Caravan"), and it appears in his *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* under the title "Zug der Elefanten" ("Procession of Elephants"). See "Karawane," in *Dada Almanach* 53; *Flight Out of Time* 70–71; *Gedichte* 67–68, 216–21.

[7] On the order of Ball's performance in the Cabaret Voltaire, see White 125.

poems we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge" (70). Here Ball endows the performance with a distinctly religious aura, situating its ceremonial character in a Catholic framework — a framing that has led generations of interpreters to read this performance as the critical turning point that led Ball away from Dada, and back to the Catholic Church.[8]

However, there is ample cause to doubt the documentary value of this account. Although Ball was raised Catholic, he had left the church in 1912, and would not return to it until after he had abandoned the Dada movement. It was only following his rediscovery of the Catholic faith that Ball took up the project of revising his diaries for publication; and while the original diaries are no longer extant, available evidence indicates that the scope of these revisions was substantial.[9] As Ball wrote to Emmy Hennings in 1923: "I only want to publish a very transformed book" (*Briefe* 1: 479). Even contemporaneous reviewers expressed reservations about the extent of these transformations; the critic Wilhelm Michel wrote in 1928 — the year after the book's publication and Ball's death from stomach cancer — "The first parts have been revised in accordance with his later Catholic viewpoint, because it was simply impossible to reconcile them in their direct form with Ball's situation at the end of his life."[10] Thus it would

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[8] See e.g. Bernhard Echte 28.

[9] Ball's return to the church occurred in stages, so the exact date is open to interpretation, but it certainly did not occur before 1920. See e.g. Teubner 9, 19 and Braun 72.

[10] Cited in Teubner 23. See also *Dada Artifacts*: "After his early departure from Zurich, he edited his diaries, leaving out and changing entries that would conflict with his later Catholic religion" (48). P. H. Mann also raises questions about the accuracy of Ball's account. Based primarily on indications in several sources that Ball recited his sound poems at the First Dada Evening on 14 July 1916, Mann questions whether the Cabaret Voltaire performance recorded in Ball's revised diary really took place as described, reasoning that an encore performance would be unlikely given the traumatic character that the original reading ostensibly had for Ball. However, I consider it most reasonable to assume that the events themselves happened more or less as recounted in Ball's diary, but that his interpretation (including, perhaps, the degree of trauma involved, as well as the religious tone) is retrospectively colored. Mann's reading depends heavily on Ball's diary entry for 10 August 1916, in which Ball writes: "I am preoccupied with my bishop's costume and my lamentable outburst at the last soiree. The Voltaire-like setting in which that occurred was not very suitable for it, and my mind was not prepared for it." But it seems much more reasonable to conclude that Ball is referring here to the 23 June performance, his last in the Cabaret Voltaire (hence "der Voltaire'sche Rahmen" — the space of the Cabaret Voltaire itself, not a "Voltaire-like setting," as it is rendered in Raimes's English translation), rather than to the more recent First Dada Evening in the Zunfthaus zur Waag. Further, as Trevor Stark has noted, Ball sent a postcard of the famous "magic bishop" photograph to Tristan Tzara on 31 July 1916, and

be naïve to assume that this revised, "very transformed" version in which Ball's diary ultimately appeared provides any sort of unproblematic access to his experience that night.

And even if the revised diary could in fact be viewed as a faithful rendering of Ball's own impressions, there would be little reason to accept it as a definitive, authoritative analysis of the performance, or of the poems themselves. After all, Ball's account represents the religious inflection of his delivery not as an inherent feature of the poems, or even as a carefully planned part of his reading, but rather an instinctive response to a moment of uncertainty. In other words, what the diary offers is a subjectively colored, dramatically revised recollection of a spontaneous moment of improvisation, narrated from the performer's own perspective. There is no reason to assume that any of those who witnessed the performance from the audience, or even the other dadaists in attendance, shared Ball's impressions. Indeed, while Ball described himself in costume as a "magical bishop," Richard Huelsenbeck later recalled a figure who would have been more at home at a futurist soirée, writing that Ball "looked like a fallen angel or a robot, an electronic monster with literary interests" (*Reise* 146). Certainly Ball's metallic outfit was more reminiscent of the futurists' mechanomorphic costumes than it was of any ancient priestly raiments; the surviving photograph of Ball in costume suggests a cyborg-like fusion of man and machine, not a Catholic cleric.

Further, aside from these technological connotations (but by no means in opposition to them), the image of a "magical" figure, channeling incomprehensible words from the ether — until, in a moment of climax, the lights go out — resembles a spiritualist séance at least as much as a Catholic mass. Heather Wolffram has described spiritualist séances — particularly those conducted under semi-controlled conditions with quasi-scientific ambitions — as "a variety show combining conjuring and cabaret, . . . compounded by the sense of anticipation fostered by the dim red lights and the darkness of the medium cabinet and by the musical performances that tended to accompany mediumistic sittings" (146). If séances, even in this nominally scientific incarnation, bore traces of the cabaret, it is hardly surprising that the resemblance should hold the other way as well, that Ball's Cabaret Voltaire performance should carry with it a whiff of the spiritual. At times Ball even invoked the figure of the medium to elucidate his understanding of the artist's role. As he wrote in 1917: "Everyone has become mediumistic: from fear, from terror, from agony, or because there are no laws any more — who knows? . . . There are primitive peoples who remove all sensitive children from daily life at an early age and give them a special education as

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the published edition of Ball's letters indicates that he sent another such postcard to Hans Arp on the same day. If, as Mann suggests, Ball's performance had truly traumatized him so much that he would never perform the same material again, it seems equally unlikely that he would want to commemorate that performance by sending these postcards to his Dada collaborators. See Mann; Ball, *Flight Out of Time* 75; Stark 36; Ball, *Briefe* 3:119–20.

clairvoyant, priest, or doctor by order of the state" (*Flight* 108). He later emphasized the mediumistic character of the artist in the 1926 essay "Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit" (The Artist and the Sickness of the Time), writing: "In each individual case the same experience takes place as in the artist. The latter, as a medium, is merely affected sooner and in a more complex way" (113). What is notable in both of these passages is the constellation that Ball creates between sensitivity as such (particularly artistic sensitivity) and mediumship; the artist is depicted here not as someone who expresses internal, subjective emotional states, but rather as a medium who channels signals of external origin. John Elderfield later echoed this thought in his introduction to *Flight Out of Time*, writing: "As a 'medium,' Ball dramatized the irrationality of his times in the dada performances" (xlii).

This characterization of Ball's artistic identity — not as a magical bishop, but as a medium — provides the basis for a telegraphic reading of his performance as well. As I detail in my book *Wireless Dada: Telegraphic Poetics in the Avant-Garde*, recent scholarship on spiritualism has demonstrated that the spiritualist belief in phenomena such as mediumship and telepathy relied heavily on concepts drawn from telegraphy, and particularly from the wireless. The possibility of transmitting words (or thoughts, or ideas) through the air at the speed of light, apparently without any physical means of conveyance, lent a new plausibility to the spiritualist doctrine of immaterial thought transference among the living, or even between the living and the dead. In John Durham Peters's words: "the spiritualist haunting of the [telegraph] decisively shaped the popular reception of the technology. Spiritualism, the art of communication with the dead, explicitly modeled itself on the telegraph's ability to receive remote messages" (94). Such comparisons were used frequently by spiritualists themselves. The prominent French spiritist[11] Allan Kardec, for instance, wrote that the task of spirit mediums

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[11] Kardec used the term "spiritism" to distinguish his philosophy from that of spiritualism more generally, writing: "Strictly speaking, *Spiritualism* is the opposite of *Materialism*; every one is a Spiritualist who believes that there is in him something more than matter, but it does not follow that he believes in the existence of spirits, or in their communication with the visible world. Instead, therefore, of the words SPIRITUAL, SPIRITUALISM, we employ, to designate this latter belief, the words SPIRITIST, SPIRITISM, which, by their form, indicate their origin and radical meaning, and have thus the advantage of being perfectly intelligible; and we reserve the words *spiritualism*, *spiritualist*, for the expression of the meaning attached to them by common acceptation. We say, then, that the fundamental principle of the *spiritist theory*, or *spiritism*, is the relation of the material world with spirits, or the beings of the invisible world; and we designate the adherents of the spiritist theory as *spiritists*. In a special sense, '*The Spirits' Book*' contains the doctrine or theory of *spiritism*; in a general sense, it appertains to the *spiritualist* school, of which it presents one of the phases. It is for this reason that we have inscribed the words *Spiritualist Philosophy* on its title-page" (*Spiritualist*

"is that of an electric machine, which transmits telegraphic despatches from one point of the earth to another far distant."[12] This analogy functioned not only to make the spiritualists' claims on behalf of mediums more credible (since the telegraph truly achieved communications akin to those claimed by the mediums), but also to excuse the imperfections in the mediums' acts of channeling; Kardec explained that just as atmospheric influence might interfere with the transmission of a telegraph message, so the "moral influence" of the medium might interfere with the reception of messages from beyond the grave. For Kardec, then, not only did technological innovation legitimate claims for mediumship, but the fallibility of telegraphic instruments also shielded spiritualism from impugnment on the grounds of its own failings.[13] In other cases, the analogy between technological and spiritual mediums became strikingly literal. Cromwell F. Varley, a British electrician and telegraph engineer who also took an (initially skeptical) interest in spiritualist phenomena, wrote in 1874 about tests that required a medium to be physically integrated into an electrical circuit to ensure that she was not merely deceiving séance attendees by mundane sleight-of-hand methods: "Miss Cook took the place of a telegraph cable under electrical test," with "the current passing through the body of the medium the whole evening" (194).[14] Here the line between human mediums and technical media becomes vanishingly thin.

Such comparisons made their way into artistic discourse, as well. The artist Franz Marc — who, like Ball, was a close friend and collaborator of Kandinsky's — wrote in 1914: "And the *spiritual*, which we so solemnly prophesied? I would like to attempt to at least indicate the relationship of the spiritual to the external form of our works with an analogy. . . . Isn't our telegraph device a mechanization of the famous knocking sounds? Or wireless telegraphy an example of telepathy?" (275). While spiritualism, like the Dada movement itself, is often seen as a reaction against the materialistic modern world that produced technologies such as the telegraph, reflections such as Marc's indicate how profoundly the discourse of the spirit was suffused by that of technology. Indeed, as Richard Noakes has noted, in many cases "investigators and supporters of spiritualism embraced late-nineteenth century machine cultures," adopting the tools of empirical science in hopes of refuting its premises.[15] Returning to the Cabaret Voltaire, it is easy to imagine that the performer who stood on-stage in a metallic costume, channeling incomprehensible voices from the ether, would have appeared to straddle this divide. The audience in the Cabaret Voltaire might well have seen Ball as a

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Philosophy i-ii). Spiritism was also distinguished from many other variants of spiritualist belief by its emphasis on the reincarnation of souls.

[12] *Experimental Spiritism* 292–93. Kardec's account was quoted extensively by German clergyman Joseph Dippel (82).

[13] See Enns; Jill Galvan; Peters 65.

[14] See also Noakes, "The Sciences of Spiritualism in Victorian Britain" 47–48.

[15] Noakes, "'Instruments to Lay Hold of Spirits'" 126. See also Pytlik 25.

"medium" in two senses at once: a channel of psychic signals and a wireless receiver.

The latter interpretation is supported by a closer look at the language of Ball's sound poems and their resemblances to the codes that were in widespread circulation at the time. To be sure, the syllables that Ball uttered that night can be compared (in keeping with his own account) to religious glossolalia, or (in light of the discussion above) to a medium's sometimes incoherent speech; but their (nearly) senseless syllables also resembled those found in books of telegraph codes or ciphers. While some guidelines, such as those quoted above, had clearly differentiated between "code words," which must be proper "dictionary words," and "ciphers," which could be any arbitrary sequence of either letters or numbers, in 1904 the International Telegraph Union ruled that "any combination of letters not exceeding ten in number, will be passed as a Code Word provided it is capable of pronunciation according to the custom of any of the 8 languages to which code words have hitherto been limited" (qtd. in Hayles 140). In other words, by this definition a code word did not have to be meaningful, or even to exist in any of these languages; it merely had to display a pattern of vowels and consonants that would allow it to be pronounced in at least one of them (a constraint that did not apply to ciphers).

Of course, these codes were meant to be transmitted and decoded, not read aloud. The requirement of pronounceability was not devised with an eye towards oral performance; rather, it served as a guarantee that telegraph operators would be able to easily parse these words into syllables and transmit or receive them quickly with minimal errors. The fact that code words (even meaningless ones) cost less to transmit than ciphers was due entirely to these practical considerations. Nevertheless, in the foreword to his 1913 book *Bauers Code: Der neue deutsche Telegramm-Schlüssel* (Bauer's Code: The New German Telegram Key), Ludovic N. Bauer described his code words as "easy to read and euphonious" (iii), implying that they were suitable for oral recitation. Although none of the words in Bauer's book actually appear in Ball's sound poems, many of them, such as "goramiko" or "kusagavo," would not have looked out of place there. Thanks to code books like Bauer's, a wireless receiver tuned to the right frequency in 1916 Zurich could have received a message very much like "gadji beri bimba" or "Karawane." Rather than following Ball's own lead, then, and interpreting his performance as a moment of religious inspiration or an act of protest against the decay of language in the modern age, I suggest that we think of Ball as a wireless receiver, channeling the invisible signals that permeated the air around him.

83348	gopzifuv	**Nachahmung** (Imitation)
83349	gopzogaz	mit der Nachahmung
83350	gopzuheb	durch die Nachahmung
83351	goraboza	von der Nachahmung
83352	goradube	in der Nachahmung
83353	gorafadi	vor der Nachahmung
83354	goragior	nach der Nachahmung
83355	gorahius	nach der Nachahmung zu urteilen
83356	gorakage	betreffs der Nachahmung
83357	goralehi	infolge der Nachahmung
83358	goramiko	infolge der Nachahmung seitens
83359	goranolu	infolge einer guten Nachahmung
83360	gorapuma	infolge einer schlechten Nachahmung
83361	gorarone	bitte die Nachahmung nicht zu beachten
83362	gorasupi	bitte die Nachahmung zu unterlassen [achten
83363	gorataro	ersuchen (ersucht) die Nachahmung nicht zu be-
83364	goravesu	ersuchen (ersucht) die Nachahmung zu unterlassen
83365	gorazita	telegraphieren Sie wie die Nachahmung
83366	gorbakid	telegraphieren Sie ob die Nachahmung hinderlich

Figure 2: Left: An excerpt from *Bauers Code.* Reproduction: Hathi Trust. Right: Hugo Ball's *Karawane*, as it appeared in Richard Huelsenbeck's 1920 *Dada Almanach.* International Dada Archive, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries.

This reading allows us to better understand the fragments of meaning that do occasionally break through the apparent nonsense of Ball's poems. Arndt Niebisch has identified semantic resonances in "Karawane," including not only the obvious "jolifanto," but also "russula" ("Rüssel," the German word for "trunk") and "habla" (from the Spanish "hablar," "to speak"). And Ball's own comments make clear that the poem was in fact intended to conjure up the caravan scene that its title suggests (*Flight* 71). But what can we make of the poem's formal strategies, which seem designed to frustrate comprehension? Why should this particular motif be refracted through layers of noise — not to say encrypted? One answer might be found in the pages of the *Jahrbuch der drahtlosen Telegraphie und Telephonie* (Yearbook of Wireless Telegraphy and Telephony). In a 1912 article entitled "Drahtlose Telegraphie in den deutschen Schutzgebieten" (Wireless Telegraphy in the German Protectorates), Gustav Eichhorn had listed new telegraph stations in German East Africa, noting that one site, Bukoba, "is an intersection of caravan routes and has great value in economic terms" (428). Two years later, in "Drahtlose Telegraphie in den Kolonien" (Wireless Telegraphy in the Colonies), Eichhorn reported "that by now all German colonies are outfitted with at least one station for wireless telegraphy," noting: "The question of creating a direct wireless connection with Africa has moved forward a good step in the course of the past year, and thus approached its definitive solution." Looking to the future, Eichhorn envisioned "a purely German system of wireless lines encircling the earth" (458, 461-62).
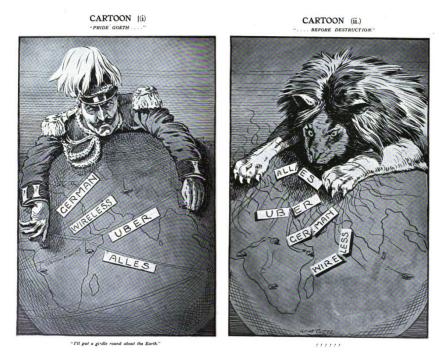
Figure 3: "Cartoon: 'Pride Goeth Before Destruction,'" *The Wireless World* 3, no. 35, February 1916. Reproduction: Hathi Trust.

The vision outlined here typifies the imperialist aim of using telegraph networks to bring distant colonies under the homogenizing influence of a unified, centralized communications network. As Carolyn Marvin writes, with a focus on the Anglophone world: "accounts described land and telephonic lines covering 'most civilized countries' with a network of wires, and the rest of the world as 'within a few seconds' or minutes' communication with London or New York, always orienting the rest of the world to its own center" (193). Just a few years after Eichhorn's articles appeared — and only four months before Ball performed his "Karawane" — these imperialist dreams would inspire a cartoon in another trade journal in which these German aims were thwarted by the British lion, with the words "GERMAN WIRELESS ÜBER ALLES" fragmented and rearranged into "ALLIES ÜBER GERMAN WIRELESS" (Crots). The "I" in "ALLIES" is stealthily inserted just before the break in the word, where it can easily be overlooked, but this insertion lends additional emphasis to the already unmistakable challenge to a purely German wireless world (fig. 3).[16]

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[16] In fact, this "I" had escaped my notice even after many viewings; I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for *Dada/Surrealism*, who drew my attention to the transformation of "ALLES" into "ALLIES."

It is telling, then, that the signals Ball received that night were *not* purely German signals. While they did contain fragments of German, Spanish, and other European languages, significant portions of these poems would have struck European ears as decidedly foreign, including a number of words that were either real Swahili words or close approximations thereto.[17] By breaking the German language into fragments and intermixing it with bits of other languages, "Karawane" both echoes the cacophony of wireless signals described by René Milan and calls into question the ambitions of global domination. Although Ball himself framed his sound poems as a protest against the corruption of language by journalism and commerce, they can also be read as a channeling of the codes and nonsense that already filled the air, as a wireless signal sent back from Africa, interfering with European wireless traffic and frustrating any aspiration to a "purely German system of wireless lines." If the telegraph itself was never explicitly mentioned in Ball's "Karawane," perhaps that's because it didn't need to be named — it was embodied by Ball himself, as he stood in his metallic costume on the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire.

Telegraphy and Typography: Raoul Hausmann's Cryptic Creations

Just two years later, the Berlin dadaist Raoul Hausmann took this telegraphic logic to new extremes in a variety of poems that emphasized the visual and/or aural aspects of language. In April 1918, Hausmann began composing his *lettristische Gedichte* (lettrist poems), and that October he produced his *Plakatgedichte* (poster poems). Some of these early experiments are chaotic in appearance but still contain recognizable words; the poem "grün" (green), for instance, includes elements of a woodland scene such as "Wald" (forest), "Blatt" (leaf), and "Halme" (stalks), along with meaningless groups of letters that can be understood as onomatopoeia or bird-song. This poem is also notable for Hausmann's handwritten imitation of typography, which suggests a hybrid of human and mechanical creation. While the poem visually resembles Marinetti's hand-lettered battle scenes, its content situates it closer to nature poetry in the Romantic tradition, with a diminutive "Mensch" near the bottom of the poem seemingly overwhelmed by the nature that surrounds him, à la Caspar David Friedrich. While demonstrating that futurist-inspired techniques can represent more than battles, Hausmann's Romantic transformations conversely imply that even timeworn motifs can be revived by new poetic forms.

In other poems, Hausmann went further, eliminating meaning entirely and privileging individual letters. As he later wrote in his history of sound poetry: "the phonetisms of Ball were made of 'unknown words,' whereas my poems were based directly and exclusively on the letters, they were lettrist" (*Courrier Dada* 57).

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[17] See Eckhard Faul's notes to Ball's sound poems in Ball, *Gedichte* 223, 311.

These more radical *lettristische Gedichte*, and particularly the *Plakatgedichte* such as "fmsbw" and "OFFEAH" that Hausmann executed a few months after his first lettrist poems, represented a decisive step towards the logic of cipher and code.[18] Hausmann produced his poster poems in October 1918 with the help of a typesetter in a print shop in Berlin, as he later recounted:

> I saw by chance that one of the typesetters was working with big poster letters, distributing them, as they say in the trade — and I had an absolutely new idea! Couldn't he just arbitrarily assemble some letters like that for me on a few posters according to his own whim? I explained my proposition to him, and in the course of a good hour four poster poems had been produced, the first of which read: fmsbwtäzäu, pgiff? Mü. (*Am Anfang war Dada* 156).

In contrast to his earlier lettrist poems, these poster poems had never been sketched out by hand. Rather, their "composition" took place in two senses at once: the text's initial formulation and its preparation for print were accomplished in one and the same act. Their typographic character is emphasized by their visual organization, particularly the grouping of all letters with descenders in the bottom line of each poem: in "OFFEAH" this is accentuated by a finger pointing downward, as if to draw attention to the poem's visual structure. The viewer is invited to see these letters not as parts of words (or of non-words), but simply as the material product of a typographic process.

The interposition of the typesetter also distances Hausmann from the act of production, severing any link between authorial intentions and the letters that appear on the page. The importance of this intervention is clear in Hausmann's retrospective characterization of "fmsbw" as a "readymade." While Hausmann's use of the term "readymade" is clearly a backward-looking appropriation of Duchamp's terminology, the notion of "readymade" text also resonates with the telegraphic practices outlined above, in which code words or ciphers took the place of original composition. By the time that Hausmann composed his poster poems, the "readymade" character of telegraphic code, and its potential consequences for linguistic usage, were widely recognized. In 1904, the American critic Robert Lincoln O'Brien had written: "If the typewriter and the telegraph, for mechanical reasons purely, are encouraging certain words, certain arrangements of phrases, and a different dependence on punctuation, such an influence is a stone whose ripples, once set in motion, wash every shore of the sea of literature" (464). The use of pre-formulated abbreviations and code words in particular, he argued, "puts a tremendous premium upon the inordinate use of the already overworked phrases" (466). Ludovic Bauer had gone even further in the introduction to his code book, asserting that "with the constant repetition of phrases and parts of sentences, the user of the code will quickly become so familiar with it that he will

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[18] "fmsbw" and "OFFEAH" are reproduced in *Der deutsche Spiesser ärgert sich* 162.

very soon think in the language of the code when assembling a telegram. His train of thought will move within the boundaries of the underlying system, and he will not have to take his chances when searching for sentences"(iii).[19] Rather than adapting language for the purposes of individualized expression, Bauer suggests, the author of a telegram will train him- or herself to think according to the dictates of the code.

But if the "readymade" aspect of Hausmann's *Plakatgedichte* already reflects the logic of the telegraph code or cipher, the most radical aspect of these poems might be their complete indifference to meaning, given that — if Hausmann's own account can be believed — there is no sense to be discovered behind the apparently meaningless sequences of letters. In this, as well, they mirror the transformation of language in telegraphy; while actual code or cipher telegrams were, of course, intended to be decrypted and understood, from an engineering perspective the presence or absence of meaning was a matter of indifference. As the electrical engineer Ralph Hartley wrote in 1928 (in an article later cited by Claude Shannon in his groundbreaking essay "A Mathematical Theory of Communication"), "in estimating the capacity of the physical system to transmit information we should ignore the question of interpretation, make each selection perfectly arbitrary" (Hartley 538). Paul Gilmore has assessed the consequences of this reconceptualization of language, writing that in Morse code "language moves from the level of words to letters or, even something prior to letters, strokes of the keys that make letters" (91). This understanding of language as information is exemplified in one of the founding episodes of wireless telegraphy, Guglielmo Marconi's transmission of the single letter "S" across the Atlantic on 12 December 1901 (Coe 145). Rather than holding out for anything resembling meaning, Marconi was content with a series of three clicks, a single meaningless S. The goal was not the communication of *meaning* from person to person, but rather the transmission of a *signal* or *information* from machine to machine.

It is only fitting, then, that an advertisement in the Berlin-based journal *Der Einzige* touted a performance by Raoul Hausmann on 12 March 1919 by announcing that "The President of the Sun, the Moon, and the little Earth will proclaim the newest radio telegrams" in the Club der Blauen Milchstraße ("Club der blauen Milchstraße"). The "President," of course, was Hausmann himself, who had had this title printed on his visiting cards.[20] As for the telegrams, there is no

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[19] Hayles cites the story of a woman trained in Morse code who began to hear Morse code "everywhere — in traffic noise, bird songs, and other ambient sounds — with her mind automatically forming the words to which the sounds putatively corresponded" — suggesting that such an intuitive acquisition of telegraphic language was indeed possible. (128).

[20] Hausmann's visiting card in the archive of the Berlinische Galerie can be viewed online at http://sammlung-

precise record of what texts Hausmann performed that night, but some of his lettrist or poster poems were presumably included. By breaking language down into individual letters, these poems recapitulated the act of decomposition and the estrangement of language brought about by the telegraph. *Plakatgedichte* such as "fmsbw" and "OFFEAH" thus present language on the one hand as pure typography, on the other as pure information, but from neither perspective is language considered as a bearer of meaning. These poems take the apparent nonsense of telegraph codes and ciphers to an extreme, turning the appearance of meaninglessness into a reality.

In fact, Hausmann's typographic poems not only *resembled* telegraph codes or ciphers, they were also *perceived* as such by his contemporaries. On 4 May 1918 — the month after he began composing his lettrist poems — Hausmann wrote to Hannah Höch that the police had paid him a visit, asking: "why do you paint like that, why is that printed that way, yes, that's a cipher language, don't try to fool us" (Höch 138); the police commissioner, he complained, "took my Dadaist typography of the cover of *Freie Strasse* as a secret code."[21] The impression made by Hausmann's typography can be described, in Matthew Witkovsky's words, as one of "blatant secretiveness" (287) — although the *Freie Strasse* did not in fact conceal a secret message, its appearance of opacity was enough to earn him the ire of the police. Perhaps it can be seen as a sort of poetic justice, then, that a journal that Hausmann and Johannes Baader published the following year really did include a code in the typographic composition that graced its cover, as I have shown in my article "Dada Futures" (fig. 4). When the cover is rotated 90 degrees clockwise, the composition "dadadegie" appears vertically in the center of the page, with the series of letters "IOADGDATTTSAe" running down the right-hand side, while a series of numbers (5.9.2.1…) appears across the bottom. When the letters are read in the order indicated by the numbers (i.e. beginning with the fourth letter, indicated by the number "1," then proceeding to the third letter, indicated by "2," etc.), the message revealed is "DADA IST GOTT."[22] Whereas

online.berlinischegalerie.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=147101&viewType=detailView.

[21] Bergius 37 (qtd. in Rasula 58). See also Lindlar 252–53. Hausmann was not the only dadaist whose typography raised the suspicions of authorities. Tristan Tzara was also suspected of spying by the French authorities, on the basis of a "brochure, bizarrement composée" that he sent to Paul Dermée (Sudhalter 25). As Sudhalter shows, dadaists often communicated in a sort of code in their international correspondence, disguising their references to problems with the authorities as discussions of illnesses.

[22] The remaining letters "Ae" can be interpreted as "May 1919" according to Baader's own calendar, which is laid out in Johannes Baader, *Das Oberdada* 45. See also Raoul Hausmann, *Dadaplakat (Club der blauen Milchstrasse)*, 1919, BG-G 7149/93, Berlinische Galerie. As Michael White notes, the characters "Ad1," which appear in the lower right-hand corner of the front page of this issue, just below the riddle, follow the same system, in which "A is the year 1919,

Hausmann's poster poems had presented letters as meaningless information, this composition actually contains a hidden meaning that must be deciphered, thus representing a full-fledged intersection of literature and cryptography.

Figure 4: Raoul Hausmann and Johannes Baader, "dadadegie," in *Der Dada* no. 1 (June 1919). International Dada Archive, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries.

Of course, not every instance of cryptography — even within the confines of the Dada movement — is explicitly tied to the telegraph. Other authors associated with the Dada movement took an interest in allegedly cryptographic practices in literature that far preceded the telegraph era. Walter Arensberg, for instance, claimed in his books *The Cryptography of Dante* and *The Cryptography of Shakespeare* to have discovered hidden meanings in the works of those two canonical authors,

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d the fourth month, and 1 the day" (231). Those characters thus refer to 1 April 1919, the date of Baader's fictional death.

though his claims were received with skepticism by scholars like William and Elizabeth Friedman (137-55). Marcel Duchamp, himself well known for punning and wordplay, indulged his patron Arensberg's penchant for cryptography on at least a few occasions (Moffitt 170-73). And Tristan Tzara engaged in a similar search for anagrams in François Villon's poetry several decades later (Hentea 283-85). But in *Der Dada*, Hausmann's encrypted message appears alongside other themes characteristic of the telegraph age, themes that cumulatively indicate a link between Hausmann's employment of code and new communications media.

In particular, as I have argued in my earlier article, "the attitude that pervades *Der Dada* No. 1 is one that exploits the future's inherent uncertainty, treating the future as such as a field for speculation and profit, transforming *the future* into *futures*" (1). This concern with speculation and futures in turn reflects the economic transformations brought about by the telegraph, as described by James W. Carey in his essay "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph." Whereas speculators had previously made their profits by means of arbitrage, buying goods cheaply at one location and selling them at a higher price elsewhere, the telegraph largely did away with dramatic differences in price between locations, causing speculators to shift their focus to the fluctuation of prices over time. In this way, Carey writes, the telegraph effectively replaced space with time, arbitrage with futures: "In a certain sense the telegraph invented the future as a new zone of uncertainty and a new region of practical action" (168). For Carey, the rise of this form of speculation — and the concomitant necessity of standardized, graded goods rather than products closely linked to specific local producers — "can be thought of as part of a general social process initiated by the use of money and widely written about in contemporary semiotics; the progressive divorce of the signifier from the signified, a process in which the world of signifiers progressively overwhelms and moves independently of real material objects" (171). In other words, not only did the technical constraints of the telegraph prescribe a new economy and standardization in the use of language; the telegraph also brought about analogous forms of standardization in social and economic practices. This is not to suggest that Hausmann's use of an alphanumeric code on the cover of *Der Dada* was in any way consciously intended as an allusion to the growth in futures markets in the nineteenth century, or to the proliferation of graded goods; but neither can the presence of a real code in an issue so concerned with the future, and with futures, be chalked up to mere coincidence. Rather, this co-occurrence is indicative of the wide-ranging impact of telegraphy on seemingly independent spheres of culture, and it is typical of the way that the logic of telegraphy manifests itself in Dada works — while not always conspicuous at first glance, the telegraph provides a thread that ties together the fragmentary patchwork of these Dada texts.

Hausmann's lettrist and poster poems thus subjected poetry to the crypto-logic of the telegraph. But the telegraph had other meanings for him as well: in later

works, the wireless became a key metaphor in Hausmann's evolving theories of art and human perception. As Arndt Niebisch notes, Hausmann

> became fascinated with the idea of an 'eccentric form of perception' — a concept developed by the German neo-Kantian thinker Ernst Marcus, who described perception as an interaction with the ether. . . . In general, Marcus' theory implies an externalisation of sense perception and subjectivity. The inner self is no longer an internal system, but a dynamic system both receiving information from and sending it to the ether.[23]

In Hausmann's rendering, this process comes to explicitly resemble the wireless: the function of the rods in the eye "consists in projecting the excentric [*sic*] beam into space, similar to a 'Marconi Station', which after being charged with a certain amount of electricity emits the same charge in short intervals as diminished waves."[24] While Hausmann would argue in a much later work that "eccentric sensorality has no connection whatsoever with occultism or with magic, or with any electronic device" (*Sensorialité excentrique* 51), his metaphors in this text suggest otherwise. Just as Hausmann had come to think of artistic production on a hybrid model, in which the artist's creative powers are shaped by interactions with technologies, he here imagines human visual perception as a quasi-technological process modeled on the wireless.[25]

In his 1921 manifesto "PRÉsentismus" Hausmann declared that technology had fundamentally transformed human psychophysics, using the wireless telegraph as a model both for the human senses and for artistic production, specifically for the sort of "optophonetic" technology that he envisioned. In a passage symptomatic of Hausmann's idiosyncratic understanding of twentieth-century physics, he writes,

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[23] "Ether Machines" 162-63, 165. A concise summary of Marcus's theory and its significance for Hausmann is found in Züchner 25–27.

[24] Translated in Niebisch, "Ether Machines" 165–66. In the same essay, Hausmann writes: "The common denominator of our senses is the time-space sense. . . . Our consciousness of it takes an electro-kinetic-chemical form, the nature of which entails the possibility of transforming the individual emanations, which until now have been considered to be rigid, into simultaneous emanations. Radio technology and optophonetics are parts of this consciousness" (*Dada-Wissenschaft* 75).

[25] A further indication of the importance of such hybridity in Hausmann's optophonetic poems is his use of the term "Seelenautomobile"; as Christopher Phillips notes, "At times Hausmann referred to his sound poems collectively as 'soul automobiles,' the product of an extended wordplay with the similarity between the Greek word *pneuma* (wind, air, breath, soul) and the German word *Pneumatik* (auto tires), which was in common use at the time. Hausmann must have seen the idea of the modern soul as an automobile, conveyed by divinely 'inspired' tires, as a particularly felicitous fusion of the ancient and the modern" (62).

> The waves of sound and light and electricity differ from one another only in their length and frequency; in view of the successful experiments with mobile, free-floating color forms by Thomas Wilfried in America, and the sound experiments of the American and German wireless stations, it is a small matter to use these waves to create spectacles of color or sound in the air, by applying suitable large-scale transformations.[26]

Later in the same essay, he adds: "Electricity enables us to transform all of our haptic emanations into mobile colors, into noises, into a new kind of music," urging, "Let us build haptic and telehaptic transmitters!" (2: 28-29). The wireless thus not only becomes a technological model for new innovations in the realm of artistic production; Hausmann also sees it as fundamentally analogous to the basic character of the human senses, and consequently well positioned to expand the possibilities of human perception.

Even decades later, when he and Kurt Schwitters reinitiated their correspondence after the Second World War in a final attempt to found their long-delayed magazine *PIN*, Hausmann was still employing a similar metaphor of wireless hybridity. Attacking the French lettrists, whom he accused of stealing the invention of lettrist poetry from him and Schwitters, Hausmann wrote: "But we have had an interview with them by the medium of telebrain (B.T.B.) and we reproduce it here for our readers. / Qu: h gf egh, mjh ert gguhnjjj mn, Uz egb effgehejtrzebsg. . . .A: D ghtn djt gjh mnnebgdvdfdsce fg hgnbefdvfr. . . ."[27] With a certain amount of self-irony, Hausmann composes his fictional interview in a lettrist mode; but the imaginary medium of its transmission is the "telebrain," a hybrid instrument, half telegraphic, half telepathic. The linguistic economy and the opacity of telegraph transmissions provide Hausmann and Schwitters with an essential point of reference and inspiration for their development of an experimental poetics that privileges the signifier over the signified.

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[26] *Texte bis 1933* vol. 2, p. 27. While a generous reader might suggest that Hausmann is thinking here of the radio waves used to transmit sound over long distances, not of sound waves themselves, passages elsewhere in his writings suggest a genuine misunderstanding about the nature of sound: "With an adequate technical construction the Optophone is capable of demonstrating an equivalence of optical and sound phenomena; in other words, it transforms the vibrations of light and sound — 'since light is vibrant electricity, and sound, too, is vibrant electricity'" (*Sensorialite excentrique* 67). Hausmann's suggestion that sound is a form of electromagnetic wave is, of course, incorrect, but the mistake is not original with him; even the chemist and physicist William Crookes placed sound waves and light waves on the same spectrum: see Hagen 96.

[27] "B.T.B." 74. In a letter to Schwitters, Hausmann explains that "B.T.B." stands for "British Tele-Brain": see Toschi 254. Hausmann also recorded a version of his "Interview avec les Lettristes" in 1959, which is included on the CD *Poèmes phonétiques.*

Conclusion

Returning to Katherine Hayles's contention that code books "were part of a historical shift from inscription practices in which words flowed from hand onto paper . . . to a technocratic regime in which encoding, transmission, and decoding procedures intervened between a writer's thoughts and the receiver's understanding" (157), we can read the dadaists' telegraphic, cryptographic poetics as a reckoning with this shift, and with its consequences for poetry. The reconceptualization of language as information was fundamental to telegraphy, and to Dada poetry as well. The creation of meaningless typographic poems such as Hausmann's *Plakatgedichte* had been possible in principle since Gutenberg; and mysterious messages like Ball's had had a place in religious traditions for millennia. But in the wireless era, with its new economy of language and its new integration of cryptography into everyday communication, such seeming nonsense had become the norm. In their most radical experiments, the poets of the Dada movement took the measure of this change by transforming telegraphic language into a medium for poetry.

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