

Introduction: Mediation

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Over the last decade there has been increasing interest among literary scholars and cultural critics in the effects of media technologies and the ways in which narratives are influenced by the material conditions of their production and distribution. The pioneer in this field was Marshall McLuhan, whose work is now enjoying a kind of renaissance, but the more immediate cause of this trend is certainly the emergence of hypertext and the rise of new information technologies, such as the Internet, which promises to transform the act of writing and reading in ways we can still only imagine. Although hypertext has clearly not resulted in “the end of the book,” as was predicted in the early ‘90s, it has nevertheless forced writers and critics to reconsider the form and function of the book, and to develop new ways of thinking about the physiological act of reading itself. Much of this work has also been historical in its scope, offering new ways of interpreting both electronic writing as well as works of print literature. Critics such as John Johnston, Joseph Tabbi, and Michael Wutz, for example, suggest that the novel has repeatedly responded to the competition posed by new media technologies by internalizing, thematizing, and critiquing the effects of other media within their own narratives. Print texts have therefore been seen as a privileged site where conditions of mediality can be more clearly seen and scrutinized.

It is important to note, however, that this relatively recent trend has its roots in older traditions of cultural criticism, such as the work of Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer, who claimed that the construction of subjectivity was essentially linked to technological formations. And it appears that the disagreements between these critics, which largely concerned the question of whether or not the subject is nec-

essarily dominated and controlled by the technological apparatus through which it is constructed, are also being replayed today in debates concerning the “posthuman.” This term has received a great deal of attention through such recent books as Allucqu re Roseanne Stone’s *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston’s anthology *Posthuman Bodies*, Scott Bukatman’s *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Anne Balsamo’s *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, and N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. The origin of this concept is most frequently cited as Foucault’s claim that the concept of “man” is a historical construction which is now in the process of disappearing, and Jeff Lewis pointed out in our last issue that this pronouncement “has been taken up by a broad field of analysts interested in defining, even welcoming, a new historical epoch which would facilitate the radical expansion of human identity and expressive subjectivities.” Much of this work has once again focused on the role of technology in the formation of subjectivity because, as Friedrich Kittler points out, information networks are the structures upon which concepts like “man” ultimately depend, and thus the body has become the place where systems of inscribing, storing, and retrieving information can be most effectively measured and analyzed. However, many of these critics continue to disagree about where to locate the possibility for individual human agency in the absence of the liberal humanist subject, and there seems to be little consensus as to whether the effects of new information technologies are ultimately liberatory or oppressive.

Lisa Gitelman’s interview with N. Katherine Hayles offers a clearer illustration of how the current interest in mediation and materiality has its roots in these debates and in the question of how the body itself might potentially serve as a replacement for the liberal humanist subject as the location of human agency. Hayles begins this interview by describing her new book, *Writing Machines*, in which she calls for a new kind of “media specific analysis” which is “attentive to the materiality of the medium in which a literary work is produced.” Rather than seeing literary narratives as “immaterial verbal constructs,” Hayles argues that literary critics need to be more aware of “the interplay of a work’s physicality with its signifying practices.” Hayles illustrates this method by looking at a series of texts, which she refers to as “techno-texts” because they “foreground their interaction with materiality.” By examining the ways in which the content of these works is determined by or derived from their material conditions of production and reception, Hayles illustrates how their meaning is inextricably linked to the media they employ. While this project clearly follows in the tradition of McLuhan, Hayles ultimately encourages more “precise” and “rigorous” analyses of “how these transformations are being carried out by particular texts, both print and electronic.” Hayles also adds that this project is deeply connected to her previous book, *How We Became Posthuman*, in which she attempted to reinsert the notion of embodiment into accounts of cybernetics and artificial intelligence. The larger implication of this project, therefore, is that it is an attempt to reinsert the notion of embodiment back into the act of reading—not to reaffirm the notion of the liberal humanist subject, but to retain

some notion of the body itself as a site of individual autonomy.

The essays which follow this interview offer a variety of approaches to the study of literature and media, and they present a wide range of answers to the question of how media technologies impact subjectivity, the body, and human agency. Much of this work is focused on contemporary electronic and hypermedia projects, where these questions may seem the most urgent and relevant; however, we have also selected essays which position these issues within a historical framework by examining the ways in which our contemporary interest in information technologies encourages critics to consider older literary works in a new light. Erik Butler's "Writing and Vampiric Contagion in *Dracula*," for example, provides a new reading of Stoker's classic novel in terms of his representation of writing machines and recording technologies. Unlike most traditional readings of this novel, which argue that Mina Murray's secretarial skills ultimately result in the defeat of the hopelessly inefficient and out-of-date vampire, Butler suggests that the novel actually illustrates the degree to which media technologies are infused with vampiric powers because they invoke "the contagious and unanswerable anonymity that characterizes the undead." Butler then traces the ways in which these recording technologies serve to depersonalize and alienate the characters during the course of the novel, gradually stripping them of their identities and transforming them into the vampire's pawns. Instead of defeating the vampire, Butler argues that the heroes' use of information technologies ultimately serves to strengthen the vampire's control over them, and these technologies thus provide a "conduit through which vampirism creeps into the English social body." Stoker's novel, according to Butler, therefore illustrates the Victorians' fear that these technologies might efface individual identity and agency.

Silke Horstkotte's essay "Pictorial and Verbal Discourse in W. G. Sebald's *Exiles*" offers a different approach to the question of mediation and subjectivity by looking more specifically at the material properties of an individual text. Like a "techno-text," Horstkotte suggests that Sebald's book reflects on its own conditions of materiality through the interplay of written and visual elements. Following the work of McLuhan, Horstkotte is interested in "how the increasing presence of images alters the meaning production of literary texts." Horstkotte notes, for example, that the contrast between the book's photographs and their captions draws attention to the ways in which captions direct and control the reader's interpretation of certain images, and therefore, rather than simply using photographs to illustrate or legitimate passages in the book, Sebald's combination of images and text actually foregrounds the photograph's essentially constructed nature: "[The] reality invoked by the showing of photographs is a literary, and therefore constructed, reality: not 'real' reality at all, but a reality effect which is not mimetic, but poetic, and therefore the exact opposite of realism." Horstkotte adds, however, that these questions of reliability and credibility also extend into the domain of memory because "mental images need to be integrated with narrative frames in order to make sense to the subject." This project thus has far more broad implications: it is not only an analysis of the ways in which the material properties of Sebald's text alter its meaning, but also an examination of the limitations of media

and memory to store and process written and visual information.

Lindiwe Dovey's essay "Towards an Art of Adaptation: Film and the New Criticism-as-Creation" similarly looks at the ways in which written and visual information are related through the construction of narratives, but Dovey argues that the ultimate advantage of visual information is that, unlike narrative, it does not rely on a strict set of grammatical rules. Dovey argues that film adaptation thus contains the promise of disrupting "the hierarchical system in which the verbal predominates over the visual," and she calls for a new kind of film adaptation—an "interpretive" mode—which "could avoid mere utilitarian borrowing of story lines and could encourage the viewer to look for more than just narrative significance in the visual elements of the film—that is, to see the images as carrying a complex range of significations, rather than as subordinate handmaidens of plot." Instead of attempting to be faithful to the letter of the original text, interpretive adaptation opens up a dialogue with the original, which is "mediated by the screen separating the two media, verbal and visual." Dovey illustrates this concept through a discussion of her own film, *Perfect Darkness*, which is an adaptation of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, and she ultimately presents a much more positive view of the potential advantages of juxtaposing written and visual media—not simply to acknowledge their limitations, but also to overcome them.

Mark Poster's essay "Television, Tape, Internet: Dialectics of the Postmodern in the U.S. from 1950 to 2000" looks more specifically at the ways in which post-war media technologies, from television to the Internet, have introduced new kinds of subjectivities. Poster argues, for example, that the rise of postmodernism in literary and cultural criticism is inherently tied to the development of these new information machines, which introduce "a mediation in the construction of cultural reality" and "reconfigure the basic constituents of culture—the relation of the body to mind, human to non-human, space and time, subject and object." Poster suggests that the television was the first of these post-war media technologies to fragment the subject by introducing a "continuous flow of images" and a "continuous interruption of commercials," which disrupted linear, coherent narratives and transformed the subject into a consumer. This device was followed by a series of new information technologies in the '70s, such as the photocopier, the fax machine, the audio cassette recorder, and the video cassette recorder, which resulted in a "massive decentralization of information." Poster argues that the telephone answering machine similarly disrupted the modern subject by allowing it to occupy multiple points at the same time; the subject was therefore no longer "a point in Euclidean space from which perspective, in its Renaissance version, can be attained and stabilized." The Internet and the World Wide Web are the natural successors of these technologies, because they cause an even greater dispersal of the subject: "Just as the user is empowered by the tool of the Internet in a fully modern sense, so this user is also fragmented, dispersed, decentered, and marginalized by it in a fully postmodern sense." But the ultimate effect of these new information technologies, Poster argues, is that "identity emerges as a construct," which is performed through "typed signs" that are "lost as soon as the user turns back to real life." In contrast to critics like Donna Haraway, who celebrates the liberatory poten-

tial of these transformations, Poster thus argues that this medial shift will produce subjectivities which are essentially disembodied and without agency, and he concludes that “something monstrous, something postmodern, is likely to emerge from it.”

Like Poster, Lisa Nakamura similarly questions the Internet’s effect on identity and its potential for either social empowerment or oppression, although she addresses this topic in terms of postcolonial theory: is the Internet ultimately a tool of western imperialism or can it be introduced into other cultures without compromising “cultural authenticity”? She opens her essay, “Alllookslike? Mediating Visual Cultures of Race on the Web,” by comparing this issue to the debates concerning the use of English in world literature. Critics have argued, for example, whether language should be seen as a tool of imperialism—a “carrier of national cultures”—or as a medium that is also subject to forces of colonization and reappropriation. Nakamura concludes that the “rift between the two camps in postcolonial literary theory maps well onto the impasse between thinkers in postcolonial Internet theory” because “some fear miscegenation between media, and worry that uneven encounters between ‘pure’ non-Western cultural forms and ‘tainted’ electronic media must necessarily result in a muddled, deracinated mediascape” while others “welcome the opportunity that multimedia may give them to produce new cultural forms which are hybrid, multicultural, and by implication multiracial.” Nakamura argues, however, that it is important “to avoid repeating the same arguments regarding cultural purity versus cultural hybridity,” and she calls instead for a different approach to the postcolonial Internet debate, which would more effectively address the uniquely visual qualities of the medium: “If we shift our focus away from the discourse of *literary* postcolonial theory, we can better perceive the possibilities that the *visual* culture of the Internet can have for challenging notions of racial and cultural essence and identity.” Nakamura illustrates this approach through an analysis of Dyske Suematsu’s website alllookslike.com, which asks visitors to identify a series of faces as Chinese, Korean, or Japanese. Rather than confirming visual markers for race, Nakamura argues that the website actually complicates viewers’ assumptions, thus critiquing “vision itself as a way of understanding race, culture, and the body on- and off-line.” Unlike Poster, who sees the Internet’s dispersal and fragmentation of identity as having an essentially limiting and disempowering effect on the subject, Nakamura therefore suggests it might also present new ways of conceiving of racial identity that could help critics avoid repeating older postcolonial debates.

The remaining essays focus more specifically on hypertext and hypermedia, and they offer various perspectives on both the history and future of electronic writing. This section begins with essays by two of the most well-known hypertext writers, Michael Joyce and Shelley Jackson, who address some of the fears and anxieties that critics have voiced concerning hypertext. Joyce, for example, takes a retrospective look at his work over the last ten years—from his hypertext work to his recent collaborative projects and “augmented reality fictions”—and by examining these texts in terms of their construction of space, he offers a new way of thinking about embodiment in relation to electronic writing. These texts, Joyce

argues, allow readers to act as “virtual archeologists . . . exfoliating an endlessly regenerating set of surfaces and volumes alike.” But Joyce quickly adds that this is largely the same role that people perform in the “real” city, where “we oscillate between detachments and attachments.” Joyce ultimately claims that the city of text is ultimately inseparable from the real city because

as soon as we allow ourselves the gesture . . . of considering the real city to be socially constructed—as soon as we make the claim that different populations occupy different cities within the actual one by virtue of their interactions, their perceptions, and their status—then the city’s being seems to depend less and less upon embodied presence and more upon the mediated story of its forms, whose unfolding, however paradoxically, depends upon the embodied reader.

In other words, rather than conceiving of hypertext as essentially disembodied, Joyce calls for a paradoxical notion of the reader as simultaneously disembodied and embodied, a state that reflects the conditions in which we live today because we all occupy spaces mediated by our own memory and experience.

Jackson similarly attempts to dispel the fear that people have expressed concerning hypertext (and computers more generally) by pointing out that it is actually “one tendril of the larger fear of loss of authenticity that haunts our culture, as it has done since long before computers presented this latest threat.” Jackson adds that our culture is essentially “terrified of the fake, the copy, the machine . . . because we are afraid we might be the copies, the fakes, machines run amok.” In some ways, Jackson seems to admit that this fear is justified, because the boundary between humans and machines is becoming increasingly unclear, but she also points out that we are not very effective machines, because there “is too much accidental motion, eccentric gestures, inefficient behaviors.” In short, Jackson argues that humans have “too much ‘personality,’” which makes us more often resemble wind-up toys than machines. This playful essay thus suggests that we might find actually pleasure in the blurring of boundaries between humans and machines, and that there is also beauty and humor in the technologies which mediate our identities.

The rest of the pieces in this section are taken from the *START HERE>* project, a gallery of new electronic writing produced for the *Version>02* Festival in April 2002 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. In his introduction, Scott Rettberg notes that these works do not constitute a canon, but rather “a set of experiments in electronic literature,” which “should generate further questions rather than clear answers.” One of the most remarkable features of this project, however, is the wide variety of different fields which are represented, and Rettberg adds that electronic literature has now developed into a range of new disciplines, including “new media studies programs in literature departments,” “interactive cinema programs based in film schools,” and “digital arts programs based in visual arts and design programs.” Our hope for this brief overview, then, is that it will offer some sense of where these disciplines have come from, as well as the possible directions they may go in the future.