Remediafication

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mots-clés/key-words
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Criticism, media, modernity, nonlinearity, romanticism
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Critique, médias, modernité, non-linéarité, romantisme

Cet essai porte sur une problématique d'histoire culturelle. Il vise à décrire l'état stationnaire nouvellement atteint par une discipline sujette, au fil de son histoire, à une dynamique complexe. On peut le lire comme une "critique du média pur," autrement dit de la médiation redéfinie comme un objet épistémologique soumis à l'autorité triomphante d'une discipline; c'est cela que désigne le néologisme "remediafication". Je formule l'hypothèse que, pensées sur le modèle américain, les études littéraires et les cultural studies appliquées aux médias numériques révèlent une division profonde aux sein des disciplines relevant des "humanités"; en effet, elles ont dès le départ attiré deux tempéraments critiques très différents et tout à fait inconciliables, dont l'un se vante de sa capacité à renier l'autre, quand il ne va pas jusqu'à prétendre l'avoir vaincu, comme c'était le cas récemment.

I.

What follows is an essay in critical history. It is an attempt to inscribe the dynamic history of a field into its new stationary state. One may read it as a kind of critique of pure media, or of mediation reconstituted as an epistemological object and object of triumphant discipline—"remediafication," if you like. I propose that digital literary and cultural studies, in its United States context and on the United States model, is the site of a schism in humanistic discipline that attracted two very different and quite incommensurable critical temperaments, right from the start—one of which customarily honors itself by disavowing the other, and which has recently attempted to declare a kind of victory over its adversary.[1] My method here is to re-read two essays orbiting each other at the critical center of Noah Wardrip-

Fruin and Nick Montfort's *The New Media Reader* (2003), a monumental print and non-print archive that Paul Benzon has called "a history of the newness of what had by [2003] come to be known as new media" (Benzon). These two essays are the U.S. novelist Robert Coover's "The End of Books," originally published in 1992, and the Norwegian-born critic Espen Aarseth's "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory," which appeared two years later. I will suggest that the dialectic of these two essays, which might be said to speak both at and past each other, suggests digital media not as a site of postwar Euro-Atlantic literary- and cultural-critical modernity, as such, but as its critically violent contestation. As "a defining text in all the conflicted senses of the term," Benzon notes, *The New Media Reader* "is also a watershed moment in the field's self-conscious presentation of itself to the larger world as an intellectual enterprise with a past and a future extending beyond the present (and also perhaps the potential presentism) of the immediate, *fin-de-siècle* moment of cyber-ecstasy" (Benzon). I suggest that this moment of "cyber-ecstasy" has not yet passed—and that it is maintained most attentively by precisely those who go to the greatest lengths to disavow it.

The ideas that Aarseth developed in "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" were recast but not revised in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), an act that earned Aarseth the substantive place in contemporary U.S. academic literary- and cultural-critical history he desired (and deserved), while protecting him to date from any truly substantive critique. Coover's own sentiments led him to no such monumental cultural triumph; indeed, in time, as with his fellow "first wave" hyperfictioneer Michael Joyce, they led him the other way, to what the U.S. critic N. Katherine Hayles, writing in 2002, found an incredible secession:

> *She watched incredulously when Michael Joyce, a figure so esteemed in electronic literature that he was regularly referred to as "His Joyceness," announced he was leaving electronic literature and going back to print. When she wrote an urgent email asking why, he responded with an "open letter," sent to many of his colleagues and admirers, saying that he felt his continuing growth as a writer and thinker required it. Another blow was delivered by Robert Coover, a man she admired not only for his experimental print fiction but also for the stance he had taken in an influential New York Times article a decade ago in which he had put his considerable prestige at risk to come out in favor of hypertext literature. At the same Digital Arts conference where she had spoken, Coover stunned the audience of mostly younger writers and artists interested in pushing the envelope of the electronic medium by announcing that the Golden Age of hypertext was over and we were rapidly declining into the Silver Age, if not the Bronze and Iron.*
> *She could not imagine why Coover would make this pronouncement […][2]*

(Hayles 44)

To rescue some balance from this non-schematizable confrontation of critical substantiation with elision (it is the usual asymmetry, once the critic

has gathered stride), I will maintain my object here as a confrontation between two *essays*. By their historical light, we might see the New Economic cyber-euphoria to which Benzon refers us, in the non-beginning of a new U.S. American century, as precisely indexical and symptomatic, not at all deluded — and *The New Media Reader*'s remembrance or rememoration of the present as something of that sanguine and sober form of futurism we might as well call critical historiography in the long term.

II.

I propose that in the United States, there has always been a schism in digital literary and cultural studies, understood as both a culture *and* a research field attracting two very different critical temperaments. The first such temperament, and the one best suited to the administration of its object of study, is what I will call the *critical modernist*. Its decisive trait is an instinctive belief in modernity as an accomplished fact, from which there is no going back, under any even remotely likely, or reasonably imaginable, or even merely thinkable circumstance. In a sense that is deeply descriptive, and not necessarily or automatically pejorative, we might name the critical modernist temperament the *technocratic* temperament, as well, in so far as its view of modernity as an accomplished fact rests on faith in the progress of an impossibly complex and continually both "exploding" and differentiating division of labor, which limits (or even condemns) every researcher to a form of expertise — irrespective of whether or not one believes one chooses that condemnation freely, or otherwise welcomes it.

When I speak of a schism in digital literary and cultural studies, I am *not* referring to the most conventional critical division in the study of our scientifically and technologically revolutionary twentieth century: the rivalry of capitalism and socialism as rival modernities, implacably opposing the social individual to the social group, yet concurring in adamant secular hostility to the entire pre-modern world of "tradition." In the history of European and North American media theory, prominent and noteworthy critical assaults on Marshall McLuhan by Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Raymond Williams, during the 1970s, demonstrated clearly that the critical modernist ethos is equally and absolutely fundamental to socialism, and that what presents itself as a vision of technology as cultural form, in the critique of McLuhan's technological (or technical) determinism, also risks surrending "culture" to a humanist economistic determinism all its own.[3]

The second critical temperament I am concerned with here is a *romantic* one. For the romantic digital literary and cultural critic, our Euro-Atlantic modernity is nothing so decisive as an accomplished fact. Rather, it is a tenuous condition: a fragile, ultimately perishable exception to the scarcity amid which

life on earth is lived, by the peripheral and semiperipheral majorities of its human (and animal) inhabitants—and was *always* lived, by all its inhabitants, at one time. From the real fragility of our modernity, in its vulnerability to sudden and complete collapse, the romantic critic derives a radical realism, reminding us that human life on earth will in fact simply come to an end, one day, and that all our modernological desire, labor and knowledge will come to naught, at least in its own terms.[4] For the romantic critic, it is common sense itself that tells us that something is *not* (not *yet*), not that it *is*.[5]

Perfectly well aware of this, the critical modernist offers us visions of human life physically escaping planet Earth, or downloading its consciousness into a computer and continuing a modern voyage through history imagined as a geometric line into "outer space." Contrastingly, the romantic critic, in her conviction that all scientific ingenuity brings a destruction of life commensurate to its (undeniable and non-refusable) preservation and extension of life, demands a re-imagination of modern time as something closer to McLuhan's simultaneity in "implosion," or modernity in reverse.[6] The romantic critic is skeptical of the inherent value of an ever-expanding and differentiating division of labor, in *expertise,* and preserves the imagination of something "outside" the modern critical system (be that system vulgar *or* reflexive).

McLuhan's own imagination was the imagination of a critical romantic, through and through—though it certainly had its critical modernist elements. Enzensberger's and Williams's oddly vigorous attacks, on an enemy each appeared to feel was entirely beneath him, show us how the modernist element of critical romanticism becomes the object of a critical police action. Today, I suggest, we need to ask ourselves why that is—why romanticism, as a critical temperament, is permitted to *anticipate* modernism (the history of Romantic literature and culture provides us with no little demonstration of *that*), but "reversion," in something like McLuhan's sense, must be violently disavowed.[7]

Such a "reversion" (or *imagined* anarchic devolution) was an element of the romantic critical imagination of Robert Coover in his dual role as both novelist *and* critic or "theorist" of electronic textuality. Both Coover's "The End of Books" and Aarseth's "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" turned on distinctions between linearity and nonlinearity, understood as qualities or contexts of both literary texts and textual reading or non-reading practices. I suggest that both basic concepts and basic distinctions are different in each case, here—and that their difference includes the generative difference between conceptuality and nonconceptuality itself, as well as the social and institutional difference between a literary- and cultural-critical ethos, on the one hand, and primary productive or "creative" literary practice, on the other. What is constructed as an intimidatingly technically virtuosic knowledge-apparatus, in Aarseth's essay as the work of an insurgent digital literary and cultural critic seeking labor certification *as* a critic, is in the end really a modest and limited

taxonomic device contrived to negate, through productive exclusion, the philosophical exercise of thought. The apparently less trained discourse of Coover, the creative writer, meanwhile, can be understood to represent a more strenuous act of cognition, in the anticipation of the unanticipatable.[8]

III.

As Coover employed it in "The End of Books," nonlinearity is a strictly negative concept. It designates not something that is, but something that is not (is not the contrastingly positive concept it negates). Not just another (negative) conceptual object or thing, in a culture of knowledge of things—but a negation of that which constitutes things, which makes them cognizable *as* things. It is, in other words, a concept of *freedom*, strictly marking openness to the unknown and non-knowable. It is this *freedom*—the freedom marked by Coover's phrase and title "the end of books"—that is the real target of the critical modernist, who is seldom content to argue her case on its own terms, since she feels the weight of human history, in all its millennia of premodern stasis, pressing down on her with unbearable weight. All too often, perhaps always, the critical modernist can only make her case by denigrating and disavowing that history. "For all its passing charm," Coover observed,

> the traditional novel, which took center stage at the same time that industrial mercantile democracies arose—and which Hegel called "the epic of the middle-class world"—is perceived by its would-be executioners as the virulent carrier of the patriarchal, colonial, canonical, proprietary, hierarchical and authoritarian values of a past that is no longer with us.

(Coover 706)[9]

As the literary embodiment of the historical evolution of Western modernity, the novel is a form whose power "is embedded in the line, that compulsory author-directed movement from the beginning of a sentence to its period, from the top of the page to the bottom, from the first page to the last" (Coover 706). "The line," here, marks the cultural form of the codex as a stack of bound pages to be turned (usually in one direction), following the convention of reading in a language written in a script or alphabet written in rows or columns. As an artifactual analogue and embodiment, it would seem, of the progressive model of time spatialized as a geometric line. The resistance to "linearity" of Jay David Bolter and Stuart Moulthrop, in their own work of the 1990s, might be understood in just this way, with Moulthrop elaborating a *recursion* in which the "bad" linear control structure of the monologic-typographical print-capitalist order is turned or "recursed" into "linear control structures that militate against absolute linear control."[10] But where both Bolter and Moulthrop were extraordinarily (if

perhaps merely professionally) self-conscious about their own attraction to the "anarchy" of hypertext, to the point of negating that attraction through complex argumentative structures designed to forestall accusations of voluntarism, spontaneism, and so on,[11] Coover was cagily willing to endorse the suggestion that in electronic textuality, "the line in fact does not exist":

> *Of course, through print's long history, there have been countless strategies to counter the line's power, from marginalia and footnotes to the creative innovations of novelists like Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, Raymond Queneau, Julio Cortázar, Italo Calvino and Milorad Pavić, not to exclude the form's father, Cervantes himself. But true freedom from the tyranny of the line is perceived as only really possible now at last with the advent of hypertext, written and read on the computer, where the line in fact does not exist unless one invents and implants it in the text.*

> (Coover 706)

Now, the fact that the line *does* "exist" in any digital event or space—that in some ways the line is *all there is,* in an encoded world—is actually beside the point here. Coover was not endorsing a statement of fact or a falsifiable proposition, here. We would best understand him rather to be endorsing something of a declaration about the *nature* of fact, or of factualness or "facticity" itself, instead—and so a kind of declaration of independence from fact's legislations, of the kind that we entirely routinely and uncontroversially grant to the creative artist. That *routine* understanding of freedom is embodied in the concept of "poetic license," marking a horizon of expectation for creative activity.

One might say that the deepest appeal of digital media to the cultural critic, today, lies in the opportunity it presents to capture and enclose "poetic license," integrating it into the artificial intelligence of the critic's own technical domain and eliminating both the creative artist's privilege as primary producer and the critic's historically parasitic status. Bolter went out of his way to remind us that the electronic screen medium is a "Cartesian plane" of mathematically addressed and addressable points, and that that form of addressing is a "layer of control" diametrically opposed to the loss of control implied by the Surrealist literary exercise of automatic (human) writing (Bolter 80). Moulthrop, meanwhile, dwelled on the failed revolution of 1987, the "annus mirabilis of hypertext" and the reimposition of a "read-only" paradigm of database retrieval on a much more radically open moment of historical possibility (Moulthrop). Re-reading such work from its historical moment forward in time toward the critical present, one can feel the weight of a conventional kind of scholarly sobriety on both critics' shoulders, in the fear of being taken too literally. And all of this, we might say, really does reflect the critical Real of the digital, which in so many ways *im*presses what Matthew G. Kirschenbaum calls the "literally, inexorably, and grindingly absolute" linearity of computer ware (Kirschenbaum 199).

IV.

Introducing Coover's "The End of Books," Nick Montfort, one of *The New Media Reader*'s two editors, notes the "critical inflammations" produced by the essay, chiefly in the form of "heated humanist tracts" producing, he tells us, "little illumination." It's difficult to miss the hostility (to romantic sentimentality, critical or otherwise) in Montfort's observation that "Some have had difficulty in getting beyond the title of this essay, at least emotionally"— even if that hostility is not directed at Coover himself.[12] Montfort's introduction to Aarseth's "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory," by clear contrast, contains no such dismissive gesture aimed at anyone. Aarseth is praised, here, for his critical acumen in "noticing" (Montfort's word) all kinds of things that "existing literary theory," in the early 1990s, had been unable to recognize for itself. Rather than applying that existing literary theory, Montfort observes, Aarseth "has developed general and yet powerful theories, theories which apply outside of new media but are based largely upon the study of new media works and those unusual aspects of text that they highlight." "One of the signs of the maturity of new media scholarship," he concludes, "is that it has started to generate approaches that apply to objects outside the field."[13]

Note that what Montfort praises in Aarseth's work, here, appears to have two aspects. On the one hand, what is praiseworthy is its practical limitation to the project of describing new media in their specific novelty—and the limitation of the disciplinary power of grand literary theory that follows it. On the other hand, he praises also the modularity of that limitation, not only as the circumscription and control of a problem, but also and simultaneously in what we might call its "imperial" capacity for self-extension in disciplinary travel.[14] On the one hand, the discipline of modesty with which a problem—lack of descriptive clarity in United States literary-critical discourse of the early 1990s, when it came to matters of electronic textuality—is identified, circumscribed, and ultimately "solved," or otherwise managed. On the other hand, the discipline of immodesty, in the modular extensibility of the solution itself learning to exceed its own, originally limited application.

It is precisely this tension between modest or circumscriptive imperatives, on the one hand, and immodest or "colonizing" imperatives,[15] on the other, that underwrote one of Aarseth's most genuinely and strenuously brilliant insights in "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory." (That insight came in the context of a frolicsome demand for the anthropologization of literary studies, to which I will return in closing.) In and of itself, coming very late in the essay, it was a moment of both illumination *and* heat, at least for Aarseth, whose critical persona is orderly in the extreme and proud of it. Observing what he calls the "ontological embarrassment" of the "critical institution" by immersive simulations such as the early game *Adventure* and the TinyMUD

iteration of the MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) concept, Aarseth asked contemporary literary critics to ask themselves the question, "How can we be critics if we can no longer read?" (Aarseth 2003, 776).[16] Fundamentally, Aarseth observed, answering the question himself, the fact is that "a MUD cannot be read, only *experienced* from the very narrow perspective of one or more of the user's characters" (Aarseth 2003, 776, emphasis added). "If literary theorists and critics do engage in the study of indeterminate cybertexts," he continued, "it should be with an awareness that the old role of *a posteriori* investigator no longer suffices. Like the user, *the critic must be there when it happens*" (Aarseth 2003, 778-779, emphasis added).[17]

To have to be there when it happens: this would indeed change something fundamental in "our own strategic and creative investments" as critics. This is a radical proposition. And yet one thinks that it can hardly have failed to occur to Aarseth that what he calls the "old" role of the critic, incarcerated in the division of intellectual labor and prohibited from any contact with the evental "happening" of the literary or art process itself (until it concludes in a product), is not in fact the old role, but the *new* role of the critic. No one is born a critic: one *becomes* a critic, as one matures, entering the symbolic order of a modern world and its critical modernity. One might say that the incurious elision of this (both profound and banal) observation itself marked a brief and fleeting moment of genuine romanticism, at this point in "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory," as Aarseth's critical persona appeared for a moment to entertain the "implosive" restoration of immediate wholeness to the modern world of the division of labor. At the same time, one might suggest that that elision also functioned to disavow the embarrassing consequences, for Aarseth's *own* critical project, of the insights he so insightfully suggested imperiled the work of those who preceded him.

V.

The rhetorical gambit of "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" consisted in the claim, negotiated by appeal to the priority of mathematics, that nonlinearity is a positive, not negative quality, which literary *studies* had been unable to *study* adequately, which literary *theory* had been unable to *theorize* adequately, and which was best understood as the encompassing superset, rather than the opposite or negation of "print" linearity. The positivity of this concept of nonlinearity, as of the work Aarseth would conscript it to do, was marked by the statement, very early in the essay, that the project of "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" was to "propose a typology of nonlinear texts" (Aarseth 2003, 762).[18]

Now, one can only propose a typology (a systematic hierarchical classification of types) of the "nonlinear," or of objects with the quality of

nonlinearity, if one has already decided to treat nonlinearity as a positive quality or thing, rather than a negation *of* a quality or a thing. In a way, the law is laid down here, right away: if you are not willing to begin with a positive concept of nonlinearity, Aarseth implied, there's nothing for you here. It is not that what fails or negates a typology is necessarily denied, by such a gesture. On the contrary (almost): what potentially fails or negates a typology— nonlinearity understood as the negation of the positive quality *linearity*—was simply declared irrelevant to the practical goal of world-organizing and problem-solving critical inquiry. Aarseth did not deny the capacity of what confounds typology to confound the positive project of textual ontology, or "textonomy," that he offered to a waywardly romantic literary theory and literary studies, in his essay, as a corrective of their cultural dominants (a certain sentimental ignorance, and the critical clumsiness that went with it). Rather, he merely and simply declared that capacity irrelevant to his enterprise.

Or so it seems. The truth is that such critical modernism is hardly ever content to argue its own case on its own terms, as it senses quite correctly that to circumscribe a problem so radically, in this way, is to render it entirely trivial. Indeed, one might say that once the circumscribed technical problems they set themselves had been "solved," and those problems' value as diverting puzzles had faded, many of the great engineer-intellectuals of the early history of computing quite deliberately embraced the role of motivated generalists, writing essays and books for a real or imagined public in a concerted effort to expand their work to non-trivial ethical and moral problems. In that effort, the honesty of their eagerness to enter the ethical and moral domains of indeterminate "big" questions more than compensated for the intellectual imperialism they (sometimes entirely involuntarily) brought to the U.S. American cultural conversation.[19]

In "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory," many of Aarseth's most inspired claims—claims that are both plausible and persuasive on their own terms— mimicked the most basic method of technical research: first, circumscribing a problem or a concept, so as to isolate it from the many disorderly flows of non-scientific (here, humanist literary-critical, and especially literary-theoretical) discourse; then inverting that circumscription, integrating what was previously excluded as a newly positive element within a typology or "textonomy." And yet one might say that Aarseth's critical project, here as elsewhere, preserved very little of the *shame* that the great engineer-intellectuals seemed to feel for the technical triviality of their work in the "grand" ethical and moral scheme of things.[20] Today's research technicians need no longer feel such shame (which was rooted in the predicament of an earlier, much less self-assured science, as much as in horror at what World War II made it capable of): operating in its own mostly separate and mostly secure institutions, today, contemporary technical research feels no particular or pressing need to go out debunking the

metaphysical pretensions of philosophers, religious mystics, artists and writers, or literary critics and theorists, because the grounding premise and presupposition of contemporary science is a thoroughgoing and entirely unchallenged secularism, in the very broadest social-historical sense of that word. (At the same time, it is precisely this manifest self-assurance that gives contemporary scientists the *leisure*, both professional and personal, to contemplate the role of metaphysical questions in modern life, and to feel that they, too, ought to pursue them—as they often do.)

Knowing that it can never enjoy this contemporary scientific isolation from metaphysical problems, debates, and challenges, literary-critical science is not so secure. Rather more like the insurgent science that gave us the dawn of Western modernity, to secure itself it must work actively to banish metaphysics from its domain. Aarseth was visibly far from content with the typology of nonlinearity he proposed, in "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory," or with its jargon of inauthenticity, in itself ("texton," "scripton," "traversal function," "ergography," and many more), since he knew all too well that the intrinsic appeal of his matrix of concepts, to the intractably romantic temperament of the larger part of the readership he was forced to address, in his choice of an area of study, was limited. No: insufficient in itself, the modest precision of such constructive work had to be buttressed by polemic against the values of an older culture—its hallucinatory investment in metaphysical questions, its putative belief in the transcendence of sacred texts, and its "lack of respect" for the modern world of reproducible, origin-less copies and iterations (Aarseth 2003, 764); the "eschatological claims" through which both humanist converts to and resisters of new media project their archaic sensations, with a special "danger" attached to the "just another metaphysics" of the converts (Aarseth 2003, 765); the irresponsibly expansive "political conjectures" and confusedly particularist ideological applications (Aarseth 2003, 771) that made the concept of hypertext "useless for critical discourse," when it fell into the wrong hands (Aarseth 2003, 772); the "clearly irresponsible" indiscipline of applying the jargon-concept of one structuralizing project (literary narratology) to another's objects, with all the "confusion and unnecessary ambiguity" that creates (Aarseth 2003, 779); in short, the "big questions" that Aarseth's critical persona, parading a rather dashing false modesty, told us explicitly "this essay will not answer" (Aarseth 2003, 778).

VI.

To the romantically negative "nonlinearity" of such literary, literary-critical, and literary-theoretic disorder, Aarseth counterposed two positive concepts of nonlinearity. The first was the mathematical nonlinearity of

topology, which Aarseth told us he deliberately "transposed from geometry to textonomy rather than metaphorized," to ensure that "its formalism is left intact" (Aarseth 2003, 766).[21] Both critical source and critical gesture, here, were openly and unapologetically grounded in a presumption of critical continuity: as the appropriation of a practice of description of properties of geometric objects that remain stable during continuous deformation (stretching and twisting) but not ruptural deformation (tearing), the appropriation of topology *was* precisely and unavoidably a metaphorization, marking the flexibly continuous *limited* criticism Aarseth wished to introduce into methodological and disciplinary competition. The Möbius strip of Aarseth's proposed critical field, as much as its objects, presents us with a continuous, non-ruptural quality of nonlinearity, intriguingly problematic where any demand for critical distance is concerned, in so far as it presents us with ("only") one surface and one edge.[22]

The second was taken from cybernetics, in the "cybernetic agency" producing arbitrary combinations—and especially in the capacity of what Aarseth called "indeterminate cybertext" to *surprise* us, in an effect he might be said to have presumed and asserted, rather than demonstrated. This appropriation of the regulation of all potentially disruptive change *under ideal conditions* imagined in the concept of cybernetic feedback (ideal conditions being that one's house does not collapse, so that the thermostat can continue its interminably discursive work of regulating the house's climatic "system") was no less metaphorical in its operation.

Aarseth's insistence that these introductions of mathematical and cybernetic concepts to literary-critical discourse represented a "transposition," *rather* than a metaphorization ("carrying-over"), was evasive at best. In some ways, it suggested quite strongly that Aarseth's persona's critical motive, in "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory," was necessarily as destructive as it was constructive, the project of delimiting a new critical field being deeply, perhaps inextricably dependent on the disavowal of an older one. This was best evident in Aarseth's attacks on the "colonizing" association with literature and literariness that drove early U.S. hypertext theory. Observing that "Hypertext theorists frequently employ spatial imagery to describe the relations made possible by links and textons: maps, three-dimensionality, textual landscapes, navigation, topography, and the like," Aarseth noted insightfully that

> *This rhetoric fails to hide the fact that the main feature of hypertext is discontinuity—the jump—the sudden displacement of the user's position in the text. Pure hypertext is actually among the least topographical modes of nonlinearity.*

(Aarseth 2003, 771)

Aarseth recognized that to the extent that it is a *systemic* artifact, any putatively "literary" hypertext, such as Michael Joyce's *Afternoon: a story,*

is in fact a cybertext: a closed system of "self-changing text" in which "all the parts are known, but the full potential of their combinations is not," and in which the "ergodic" confusion of the navigator of the immersive simulation is an unknowability and undecidability that has been *engineered* or programmed in advance, even in what Aarseth calls "indeterminate" cybertexts demonstrating semi-autonomous "emergent" behavior (Aarseth 2003, 765; 773). We might say that such *confusion* is the very antithesis and cancellation of Babel, that constitutive cultural myth that palpably haunted the engineer-intellectuals.[23] For Babel, the database substitutes a patently modern and secular uncertainty, always conditional and contingent, capable of being addressed and overcome as a *problem*—and so never anything like absolute.

It is not too fanciful to suggest that it is a kind of "absolute" change and transposition, by contrast, in the absolute difference of unimaginable or even unthinkable systemic collapse of life, that is obliquely indexed by Aarseth's word "pure," in the phrase "pure hypertext," here. One might say that Aarseth's own argument gave us that. And that in contrast, in the jargon-concept "cyberdeath," describing the infinite, iterative re-incarnatability of the ergodic navigator of a game as a constructed closed system, we were offered nothing less (and nothing more) than the secular immortality of modern homogeneous empty time, the time of accomplished fact.

VII.

This brings me in closing to the anthropologization of literary studies, which Aarseth, unaware of or uninterested in the roots of contemporary literary studies in colonialism, imagined as a "new departure for literary hermeneutics" (Aarseth 2003, 778). In this call for "an anthropological approach" with cybertext as its kinship structure, "in which the object of study is a process (the changing text) rather than a project (the static text)," we were offered nothing less than the destructive discipline of the thought— of Aarseth's *own* thought, no less—of art as experience. It is an offer that the discipline of literary studies in the United States continues to decline, today, even as it continues to be tempted by new impresarios. (What *has* developed is something of the reverse: the intensified appropriation of literary criticism and literary theory by cultural anthropology.) For the cybertext critic "who must be there when it happens," the model is the cybernetic enclosure of the social-anthropological participant observer, who is driven to "mingle with the natives," as Aarseth puts it, in an integration of exteriority within the system, itself, as product and artifact—but unwilling or unable to *go* native, to *vanish* into or out of the system itself, *as* a process and an experience:

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> *If literary theorists and critics do engage in the study of indeterminate cybertexts, it should be with an awareness that the old role of a posteriori investigator no longer suffices. Like the user, the critic must be there when it happens. Not only that but, like the participant observer of social anthropology, he or she must make it happen—improvise, mingle with the natives, play roles, provoke response.*

(Aarseth 2003, 779)

Now, the simple truth is that a process simply *cannot* be an object of study: when it becomes an object of study, it "is" no longer a process in the same sense, or in any sense at all. In the same way, a participant simply *cannot* be an observer: as she is or becomes an observer, she ceases to be or become a participant. It is in just this way that the negative concept of nonlinearity, as it is imagined by and in what I have been calling the *romantic* critical temperament, cannot be integrated as a positive concept of nonlinearity, "in" a typology. For when that happens, it is merely "the line," again. No academic sophistry can ever extract us entirely from this impasse.

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NOTES

1. Matthew G. Kirschenbaum writes of the "latent Romanticism" of "first-wave hypertext theory" in the United States, suggesting that "the poststructuralism that has held sway over discussions of electronic writing since the late 1980s is a demonstrable medial artifact, one that had more to do with its moment (and marketing) than with the fundamental nature of electronic textuality." (Kirschenbaum 166, 201, 206). Of a symmetically motivated "call to banish vapor theory" in the recent work of Lev Manovich, Geert Lovink, and Alexander Galloway, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun observes that "this rush away from what is vapory—undefined, set in motion—is also troubling because vaporiness is not accidental, but rather essential to, new media and, more broadly, to software" (Chun 301). Espen Aarseth's most suggestive articulation of such positivism can be found in his *Cybertext:* "Just as psychology attempts to explain psychic phenomena without recourse to the existence of ghosts, so the study of cybernetic sign

production should attempt to describe its objects without the existence of ghost signs" (Aarseth 1997, 40-41). More recently (but equally unsympathetically), in an important essay articulating the "philosophical preconditions of media discourse" in European intellectual history, John Guillory writes of nineteenth-century spiritualism as "a nice joke of history underscored by the tenacity with which the spiritualists sought to use media technology to capture the voices and images of the dead." (Guillory 321, 347-48).

2. Elsewhere in *Writing Machines*, Hayles described a "first generation" (27) of hyper-text theory (in the work of George Landow, Jay David Bolter, and Michael Joyce) emerging during the 1980s and early 1990s, followed by the "second generation electronic literature" (27) of the late 1990s, which Hayles associates with the critical perspective of Aarseth in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. If only implicitly, Hayles's own proposed mode of "media specific analysis" (29) clearly suggests itself as representing a third generation of work in the field. In *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*, meanwhile, Matthew G. Kirschenbaum writes of "the first wave of academic writing on electronic textuality" (26) and of "first-wave hypertext theory" (206); much in the book's argument suggests that Kirschenbaum too envisions his work joining a third "wave" or generation of digital criticism. For more on Michael Joyce's "secession" from the early disciplinary formation he helped to create, see Lennon 2009.

3. See Enzensberger; Williams 1964 (an early, partly affirmative review of McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*); Williams 2003, esp. pp. 129-132. It might seem fanciful to align this "anti-McLuhanism" with the ethos of Max Weber's formative resistance to anarchism, or of the impatience with Algerian peasant millenarianism that underwrote Pierre Bourdieu's critique of the utopianist French left. But *fancy* is precisely what the research technician disdains. See Sam Whimster, ed., *Max Weber and the Culture of Anarchy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Jane E. Goodman and Paul A Silverstein, ed., *Bourdieu in Algeria: Colonial Politics, Ethnographic Practices, Theoretical Developments* (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2009).

4. One of the virtues of Werner Herzog's 2008 documentary film *Encounters at the End of the World* is to put strong arguments for the inevitability of human extinction into the mouths of scientists themselves.

5. See Jürgen Habermas, "A Generation apart from Adorno (an Interview)," James Swindal, trans., *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 18.2 (1992), 121: "[T]o [Habermas's] accusa-tion that his dialectic abandons itself at its 'darkest point' to a 'destructive vortex of a death wish,' [Adorno] responds: 'I would say above all that the desperate dependence upon the posi-tive emerges from a death wish'."

6. See Willmott. Willmott makes a very compelling argument for McLuhan as a mod-ernist and structuralist, explicitly *not* a romantic or "theological" thinker. It is a very rigorous and sensitive reading of McLuhan, but a flattening one nonetheless.

7. Thus Enzensberger, mocking McLuhan as a "new Rousseau" (29).

8. For a profoundly self-interrogative defense of a certain anarchic spontaneism, as *apparently* uncritical enclosure within the world as it is that nevertheless preserves, in the open-ing to the unanticipatable, the ground of political life (if not automatically a politics itself), see Rosalind C. Morris, "Giving Up Ghosts: Notes on Trauma and the Possibility of the Political from Southeast Asia," *postitions: east asia cultures critique* 16.1 (Spring 2008): 229-258 (esp. 253-55).

9. Citations of this essay to follow are from *The New Media Reader*. "The End of Books" was originally published in *The New York Times Book Review*, June 21, 1992.

10. Bolter: "Early Greek writing was linear in concept and appearance, while all the subsequent development in papyrus and parchment manuscripts and in printed books has served to reestablish the second dimension in the visual structure of the text" (63). Moulthrop: "The wonder of hypertext and hypermedia lies in their capacity to escape these limitations by using the microprocessor to turn linear, monologic typography recursively back upon itself—to cre-ate linear control structures that enable an escape from linear control."

11. Bolter: "Scientific graphic writing, particularly with the aid of the computer, distances writers from their writing (data) in such a way that the writing no longer seems to belong to them at all. We might compare this situation to the automatic or trance writing practiced at various times in history, most recently by the surrealists. But in those cases the goal was to lose control, to annihilate the conscious censor and allow unconscious images and ideas to pour forth. In the automatic writing of science, a layer of computerized control is imposed between the world and writing space. The space itself is disciplined by the numbering scheme imposed on it" (78). Moulthrop: "The telos of the electronic society-of-text is anarchy in its true sense: local autonomy based on consensus, limited by a relentless disintegration of global authority."

12. Montfort, "Introduction: Robert Coover, 'The End of Books'," *The New Media Reader*, 705. That hostility is here mobilized in *defense* of Coover against those who reacted in an overheated, emotionally uncontrolled fashion to Coover's proclamation of "the end of books" (which as Montfort correctly emphasizes, was hardly meant to be taken literally).

13. Montfort, "Introduction: Espen J. Aarseth, 'Nonlinearity and Literary Theory'," *The New Media Reader,* 761.

14. "Imperialist" is one of Aarseth's own favorite epithets for literary-theoretical approaches to what he calls cybertext. See, for example, Aarseth 1997, 75; 83.

15. In Aarseth's *Cybertext,* "colonizing" accompanies "imperialist," as a descriptor of literary theory. See Aarseth 1997, 83.

16. Citations of this essay to follow are from *The New Media Reader*. "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" was originally published in *Hyper/Text/Theory,* George Landow, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), 51-86.

17. See also Aarseth 1997, 2; 142.

18. See also Aarseth 1997, 15.

19. See, for example, Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings;* Weaver; Bush. Wiener insisted that "We must make a great many changes in the way we live with other people. We must value leisure. We must turn the great leaders of business, of industry, of politics, into a state of mind in which they will consider the leisure of people as their business and not as something to be passed off as none of their business" ("Men, Machines, and the World About: The Linsly R. Williams Memorial Lecture," 26-27). Bush wrote of "the physicists who have been thrown most violently off stride, who have left academic pursuits for the making of strange destructive gadgets" ("As We May Think," 101), and Weaver of "the problem of translation" as "[a] most serious problem, for UNESCO and for the constructive and peaceful future of the planet" ("Translation," 18).

20. "I say that the medieval attitude is the attitude of the fairy tale in many things, but the attitude of the fairy tale is very wise in many things that are relevant to modern life" (Wiener, "Men, Machines, and the World About: The Linsly R. Williams Memorial Lecture," 28).

21. See also Aarseth 1997, 41-42.

22. But only until one tears it! This is a re-imagination of discontinuity as a form of continuity *under ideal conditions*.

23. "Students of languages and of the structures of languages, the logicians who design computers, the electronic engineers who build and run them—and specially the rare individuals who share all of these talents and insights—are now engaged in erecting a new Tower of Anti-Babel. This new tower is not intended to reach to Heaven. But it is hoped that it will build part of the way back to that mythical situation of simplicity and power when men could communicate freely together, and when this contributed so notably to their effectiveness" (Weaver, "Foreword: The New Tower" vii).