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Conclusion:

Whither American Fiction?

The death of the book is good for literature. At least, one can draw this conclusion from contemporary American fiction. The threat or promise of an increasingly paperless society prompts innovation through interaction with digital technologies and, as a result, reinvigorates literature in both print and digital formats. To assess where American fiction is and where it is going, I examines a few case studies of recent print and digital literature that share a commitment to pushing literature's boundaries by experimenting with its media. My focus is cutting-edge, avant-garde literature because these works blaze the paths others will follow. Instead of withering away, such works show how fiction finds new sources of inspiration in and from digital technologies and networked reading practices. So, whither American fiction? At the intersections of new media and traditional literary practices.

An examination of recent literary engagements with the digital exposes two significant trends: fiction that embraces new media to experiment with ways of representing digitality and fiction that retreats from the digital through acts of aestheticizing and fetishizing the printed book. These trends are not opposites but are mutually dependent, and their dialectical relationship, I argue, revolves around the concept of remediation. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define remediation as "the representation of one medium in another," and they see remediation as "a defining characteristic of the new digital media."[1] Building upon Marshall McLuhan's famous claim that the medium is the message, that, in other words, the content of any medium is

another medium, Bolter and Grusin put forward a theory of media evolution that focuses on the interactions between older and newer media forms. As we will see in the examples that follow, contemporary fiction turns the media theory of remediation into an aesthetic practice.

Of course the novel genre has always engaged with other media forms. The act of repurposing other genres in fact could be identified as the novel's primary defining trait. Yet, the remediation at work in contemporary fiction, I would like to suggest, takes this tradition in new directions. Contemporary novels not only consume other genres and media formats but also, as we will see, configure their bodies within an actual network of other media forms that often include the Internet. In other words, remediation serves to extend the reader's gaze beyond the text to larger systems in which it exists and operates. Katherine Hayles reminds us that all contemporary print literature is marked by digital practices so thoroughly that "intermediation" is the status quo and "digitality has become the textual condition of twenty-first century literature."[2] This new literary situation demands that we approach the age-old novelistic technique of remediation with newfound attentiveness. In what follows, I focus on literary acts of remediation that represent and enable examination of how digitality affects literature in the contemporary moment of medial shift.

We begin with the most obvious instance of contemporary fiction that embraces digitality: electronic literature, born-digital works that are made on the computer and read on the computer. Electronic literature encompasses diverse genres from hypertext to dynamic poetry, generative narrative to interactive fiction, virtual reality to augmented and locative narrative. What unites these works is the fact that they appear as a

processural performance across codes and circuitry within the computer and in response to interactions from the reader. For these reasons and more, electronic literature challenges traditional notions of what it means to read as well as what defines a literary text. Yet electronic literature often seeks alignment with the print tradition, both to provide inspiration for digital adaptations and, often, to validate the newer creations through alignment with more canonical cultural capital. An exemplary instance of electronic literature that both remediates the printed page and the literary canon is in the online, Flash-based animations of Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI).

Within the first few seconds of the first flashing screens, you know you are seeing something new but also familiar. All of YHCHI's works share a simple but sophisticated style: sleek text in capitalized Monaco font flashes onscreen, speeding in synchronization to jazz or electronic music.

THE ALL NEW AND IMPR0VED
Y0UNG-HAE CHANG
HEAVY
INDUSTRIES
PRESENTS

Figure 1: Screenshot from YHCHI's Flash animation *Close Your Eyes*. Used with permission from the artists.

As the soundtrack speeds up, so does the text. There are no control buttons, no options to pause or slow the work. Readers find themselves glued to the screen, unable to look away

for fear of missing something, and undeniably spellbound. This is why YHCHI is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed collaborations in digital literature and art. Their work generates buzz on blogs and bulletin boards across the Web; it is taught on university syllabi and inspires scholarly articles. This is in part due to the fact that YHCHI's work appeals to multiple audiences; it is a merger of high art, with its serious or "heavy" affect, and popular culture inflected with the mass-production of "industries." Their work is available free of charge and in a variety of languages online, and a visit to the artists' website imparts a sense that their oeuvre speaks to a globally networked, multilingual readership, one created by and for the Internet. But as the Internet increasingly develops social networking capabilities and fucntionalities that allow consumers to become content producers, YHCHI remain steadfast in retaining a minimalist aesthetic that rejects interactivity. This rejection is a motivating force of their work and expresses their alignment with the print literary tradition. Although they build their works in the Flash authorware, the standard propriety platform for creating web-content, YHCHI use only a nominal percentage of the software's capacity. What little they use, they use to pursue a retro-aesthetic that foregrounds typography and narrative content over flashy design or interactivity. Their innovation is dual: they retain tight control over the pace of their animation and thus refuse readerly control of works that are accessed within the interactive environment of the Web; they also retain a minimalist aesthetic of text onscreen that remediates print media and earlier literary forms.

While digital writers like YHCHI remediate print literature into the electronic literature, some authors strive to appropriate the digital into the pages of print fiction. Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006) is a print novel that revels in its book-

bound form but is deeply informed by the Internet. The narrative follows two young

lovers, Hailey and Sam, who are "always sixteen," as they pursue a picaresque road trip

across the US and across time. Their first-person perspectives depict the same actions

told differently, from different sides of the page and from different moments from

American history. The two perspectives that comprise the narrative are printed at

opposite ends of the page, and a publisher's note suggests that one read eight pages from

one narrator before turning the book around to read the other narrator on the other side of

the page.

—to screaming.
—he's gone.

Parkland Hospital.
1:00 PM.
Oak Cliff & 2 cartridges,
JD Tippit goes.
—This is it.
Lee Harvey Oswald.
—I haven't shot
anybody.

2:41 PM
Love Field.
Air Force One. LBJ &
Judge Sarah T Hughes.

—defend, protect and.
—OK, let'S get this
plane back to.
John W McCormack's
security squad.
—Serious but not.
—a giant Cedar.
Broadway.
Half-mast.

—Would you come
with US?

—That is all I can do.
I ask for your help.

—a tragedy for all
of US.

Dow down 21.16.

Samsara! Samarra!
Grand!
I can walk away
from anything.
Everyone loves
the Dream but I kill it.
Atlas Mountain Cedars gush
over me: —*Up Boogaloo!*
I leap free this spring.
On fire. How my hair curls.
I'll destroy the World.
That's all. Big ruin all
around. With a wiggle.
With a waggle. A spin.
Allmighty sixteen and freeeeeee.
Rebounding on bare feet.
Trembling Aspens are pretty here:
—*You've nothing to lose. Go ahead.*
Have it all.
Tamarack Pines sway scared.
Appalled. Allso pretty. Perfumed.
Why don't I have any shoes?

I could never walk away from you.
but who cares for it? O Hailey no.
Everyone betrays the Dream
and allways our bushes returning anew.
petals & stems bending and lush,
so long it keeps turning with flurry & gush,
I'll destroy no World
what your Joy so dangerously resumes.
And I, your sentry of ice, shall allways protect
By you, this World has everything left to lose.
By you, ever sixteen, this World's preserved.
Garland of Spring's Sacred Bloom.
And all her patience now assumes.
Solitude. Hailey's bare feet.

—Out! Out!
Head. Lup. 80 MPH.
Greer & brakes. Roy Kellerman. Jagu
—Art shot.
—My car. You.
Adeline Harvey.
John B Connally.
Genral Hank. Rufus Youngblood.
Texas School Depository. 411.
Elm Street. Dealey Plaza.
Motorcade. 12:35 PM.
Van Thanh Cao & 31 others.
South Vietnam Revolutionary Council.
Democrats. Trade Mart & 200,000.
Love Field. 11:37 AM. Grassroots.
—we are going to the with Plans.
& a taxi.
United Arab Republic. North Korea
French & Alouette crash. 5 go.
Margaret Oswn.
8:45 AM. Fort Worth Dallas.

Figure 4: Page 1/360 from Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*

Dizziness is produced by rotating the book and from the overwhelming amount of information contained on its pages. For example, along the spine of the book, dates and events from American history are interspersed with poetic lines whose decontextualized presentation produces a database aesthetic — the sense that this content is the result of a search engine query.

    Only Revolutions bears the imprint of the collaborative, social networking environment that is Web 2.0. The novel incorporates emails from readers of Danielewski's first novel, *House of Leaves* (2000) — another ambitious work of experimental fiction that stretches across media formats. On August 17, 2005, Danieleswki sent a message to members of the *House of Leaves* Bulletin Board (a large and vibrant online discussion space) titled "THAT." The posting began, "Yes, it's about time for something new/ but before bringing their long run to a close/ it makes sense first to turn to you."[3] Readers and fans of *House of Leaves* dedicated enough to join the Bulletin Board knew that "THAT" referred to the much-anticipated work-in-progress, *Only Revolutions*. The message asked readers to identify important dates in history as well as favorite types of animals, plants, and cars. Some of the responses were incorporated into the pages of *Only Revolutions*, but Danielewski does not clearly demarcate the labor of his readers. A reader approaching the book without knowledge of "THAT" would have no reason to assume that the extraordinarily experimental typography (including the large, bolded, colored words that appear in the middle of lines) represents and traces the communication process between author and readers across the digital network. The digital is enfolded into the book's pages in ways that situate the novel in a digital network of reader/writers via the Internet. Yet, only a reader who

accesses the *Only Revolutions* website (connected to the *House of Leaves* Bulletin Board)

will discover the specific details of intermediation in this novel's publication history. It

takes an innovative and *digitally* literate reader to move between book and Internet and

back to the book in ways that illuminate the novel's layers of medial complexity. The

text's bolded words retain traces of the Internet and act as metaphoric hyperlinks that

connect the book-bound novel to the digital network while also animating the novel's

title by showing that all trajectories return back to — or revolve around — the book.

Thus, while *Only Revolutions* engages with and, to some extent, remediates the Internet,

it also exemplifies the other trend in contemporary fiction emerging at the nexus of print

and digital media. *Only Revolutions* retreats from its engagement with the digital into its

book-bound form and fetishizes the codex as a reading technology. Reading is shown to

be an act of rotating the book, of learning to drive the now-defamiliarized reading

machine, and of navigating the content of its printed interface. This work of

contemporary print fiction displays how engagement with digitality transforms print

literature and promotes its evolution and refashioning. The novel's title expresses the

circularity of remediation and presents a dialectical relationship between print literature

and new media as the central tension in this exemplary work of contemporary fiction.

Contemporary digital literature also participates in this exchange between older

and new media by remediating bookish forms and adapting print-based reading practices

for the screen. Some works remediate lined notebook paper and hand-drawn scribbles as

backdrops for extensive Flash-animated narratives (Jason Nelson's "Game, Game, Game,

and Again Game") or use the computer's folder icons (which themselves remediate paper

objects) as a literary device for creating and containing narrative fragments (Jeremy

Douglass's "Eight Was Where it Ended"). Other works remediate the aesthetic of paper crafts and genres such as scrapbooking and postcard epistles (Travis Alber's "30 Days of Rain" and "Who is Flora?" respectively). And, as we saw with YHCHI, digital literature also takes inspiration for narrative content from print literature. Mark C. Marino's *Marginalia in the Library of Babel* (2007) embraces all of these aspects of remediation as aesthetic strategy: it imitates a print media form for presenting text, references an older reading practice, and takes as its narrative inspiration a work from the print literary tradition.

Marino's work serves as an excellent example of electronic narrative literature that uses Web 2.0 applications to expose and aestheticize the overlap between digital literature and the print tradition it both extends and transforms. As the title implies, *Marginalia in the Library of Babel* is inspired by Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Library of Babel" (1941). Borges's story about a universe that is an infinite library has been retrospectively admired for its prescient depiction of a cyberspace-like archive of infinite information. But "The Library of Babel" is actually a story about books; the Internet-like universe is comprised completely of codices, and an obsession with them is central to Borges's story and to Marino's digital adaptation of it. *Marginalia* exists on the Web as a web of marginalia; its narrative is contained in remediated post-it notes injected onto webpages created by others through an Internet annotation application called Diigo.
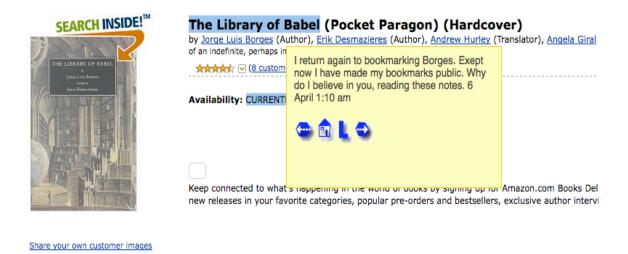
Figure 5: Close-up of screenshot from the online hypertext *Marginalia in the Library of Babel* by Mark C. Marino. Used with permission from the author.

This parasitic narrative attaches to webpages created by others with post-it notes that contain rambling commentary and personal confessions of an insomniac narrator as he weaves a web around the short story that stimulated his Internet search. "It starts with Borges," the work begins; "It always starts with Borges" (n.p.) Like Borges's narrator, Marino's roams the infinite library, searching in solitude for answers that lead him back to questions about himself: "At night, I search for Borges, alone, hunched in the solitary chamber of an internet browser… If I were not seeking him, I would be seeking myself."[4] The work promotes a meta-awareness that reading is always partly an act of reading over the shoulder of a previous reader, and that electronic literature, with all its novelty, still relies on the humanistic and perhaps even voyeuristic desires that prompt readers of fiction to follow their narrators and the narratives they leave behind.

Marginalia is both new in its digital form yet also deeply engaged with older literary traditions and media. It is a hypertext narrative built from marginalia, exemplary of Web 2.0's social networking practices, but it uses the Diigo web-application to

encourage readers to recall the pleasures of hypertext. Hypertext is a literary genre that produces nonlinear narrative through a link-and-node structure of chunked text (called lexias) connected through hyperlinks. Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (Eastgate, 1995) and Michael Joyce's *afternoon: a story* (Eastgate, 1987) are examples of classic electronic hypertexts, and both have been included in literary anthologies (including the Norton's print edition of *Postmodern American Fiction*) and thus enfolded into the literary canon. Yet, hypertext has been largely displaced by shorter Flash-based works (such as YHCHI's oeuvre), Marino's remediation refashions this earlier electronic literary form even as it also adapts the codex-based culture of annotation that has its roots in early modern manuscripts. With its remediation of post-it notes, its foregrounding of annotation, and its intertextual adaptation of Borges's bibliophile story, *Marginalia* exemplifies both trends I have been charting here: the embrace of and retreat from digital technologies. In so doing, Marino's *Marginalia* shows that the technology supposedly threatening to books — the Internet — can actually serve to turn the reader's attention back to them.

Approaching literature by focusing on the intersection of print and digital media provides opportunities to reflect upon what we consider to be the more traditional aspects of literature. For example, in foregrounding annotation, Marino highlights the materiality of the literary object and its capacity to be altered in interactions with readers; *Marginalia* thus challenges the idea of a stable or transcendental text. Incorporating readers' submissions into his narrative, Danielewski seems to subvert the author function in a work whose vast complexity paradoxically reinstates the need for an author capable of explaining it. The collaboration that is YHCHI challenges the notion of a single author

and of a national identity for fiction: is their oeuvre American literature, Korean literature, or something other? Moreover, YHCHI adopt a guise of anonymity that they claim is constitutive of the Internet and, thus, consciously challenge the efficacy of nationality as a meaningful category in a global, networked world.[5] These works also challenge the genre of fiction. YHCHI's works are, after all, both prose and poetry. Text is choreographed to produce a poetic rhythm and generate line-breaks while presenting a linear narrative. Similarly, the cover of *Only Revolutions* proclaims it "a novel," but its pages — the visual arrangement of text on the page, the line breaks and structures — reveal it to be poetry. But pushing the envelope is what the avant-garde does, right? So, how does a focus on remediation at the cutting edge of fiction inform more traditional and mainstream print fiction? To answer this question, I turn to a popular print novel, a bestseller of middlebrow variety that seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with the digital technologies or their effect on literary practices. Upon closer examination, however, it exemplifies my argument that print fiction engages with the digital and the threat it presumably poses to books as a means of reinventing and reasserting the stakes and significance of fiction.

  The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society (2008) by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows is trade paperback fiction that topped the *New York Times* bestseller list and spent 43 weeks on the list. A favorite of book clubs around the country, the novel centers around a female journalist in London, Juliet Ashton, who, in the aftermath of World War II, learns about a book-club formed on the Guernsey Islands during the war and begins writing to the people involved in it. The eponymous book-club was formed in an act of subterfuge by inhabitants of the Guernsey Islands during the Nazi invasion as a

means of escaping punishment for a breeched curfew. This act of "self-defense," as one reviewer aptly calls the genesis of the literary society,[6] can also be understood as a meta-critical effort by a work of fiction to assert the power of print in a moment wherein the dominant threat is not the Nazis but Google. This is a novel about books, and it begins when the protagonist receives a letter from a stranger in Guernsey: "I have an old book that once belonged to you . . . Your name and address were written inside the front cover."[7] Juliet responds, "I wonder how the book got to Guernsey? Perhaps there is some secret sort of honing instinct in books that brings them to their perfect readers. How delightful if that were true."[8] Readers become writers in this novel as they correspond with Juliet in written letters about their experiences in the wartime literary society. It is an epistolary novel and is thus composed from the dead (or dying) art of letter writing, a genre killed by computing and email. Although digital technologies never enter into the novel, it is, I suggest, a book about fiction in the digital age. It imagines the scenario wherein books unite people and produce a web of social networking in print and on paper. The novel thus shows how the aesthetic of remediation — which involves exploring and exploiting the boundary between print and digitality — is not limited to the avant-garde, but penetrates mainstream American fiction. To answer the question posed by this essay's title, then, the place to look for the continuing evolution of American fiction is wherever print and digital media interact and produce innovation. Rather than withering, literature revives when it engages head-on with digital technologies and Internet reading practices.

Further Reading

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  translated by Andrew Hurley. Penguin, 1999: pp. 112-118.

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Notes

[1] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 45.

[2] N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 186.

[3] Mark Z. Danielewski, username "MZD", "THAT". Post to HouseofLeaves.com (08-18-2005, 12:27 AM). http://www.houseofleaves.com/forum/showthread.php?t=3967 [Accessed December 10, 2010]

[4] Mark C. Marino, *Marginalia in the Library of Babel*. (2007). Online <http://bunkmagazine.com/diigo/> [Accessed December 10, 2010]

[5] Thom Swiss, "'Distance, Homelessness, Anonymity, and Insignificance': An Interview with Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries" (2002), *The Iowa Review Web*, <http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/tirweb/feature/younghae/interview.html>

[6] Norah Piehl, "*The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* Review" *Book Reporter*. <http://www.bookreporter.com/reviews2/9780385340991.asp>

[7] Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* (New York: Dial Press, 2008), p. 9.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 10