

Paul Benzon

*Archival Fictions: Materiality, Form, and Media History in Contemporary Literature*

*Archival Fictions* traces a speculative history of media technology by reading the practice of formal experimentation in contemporary literature. Bringing interpretive approaches from media archeology, film studies, and the digital humanities to bear on a series of twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels, poetic sequences, and digital texts, I argue that contemporary authors who use form to represent and respond to the effects of media technology force readers to adopt technologically inflected reading practices, and thus to reconsider both literature's place within media history and that larger history itself. I focus on a series of texts from the 1960s to the present, first reading the print literature of authors such as Andy Warhol, Don DeLillo, Kevin Young, and Hari Kunzru alongside the specific technologies that their works address, and then turning to consider how the authors of digital texts utilize literary formal strategies. Within both print and digital domains, the authors I consider employ formal approaches including transcription, error, and paratextuality in order to foreground the material nature of their own writing, as well as of technological meaning production more broadly. In doing so, I suggest, they not only illuminate the integral importance of technology to contemporary writing in particular, but also call for a broader rethinking of how we understand the history of technology itself.

My work in *Archival Fictions* locates a place for literature as a critical and speculative voice within the emergent conversation regarding media history, attending to a series of crucial questions at the intersection of literary and media studies: how do forces such as ephemerality, obsolescence, and nostalgia shape our understanding of the history of modern media technology? How do literary authors situate their works and practices in relation to these forces? What does it mean for contemporary authors to treat literary texts as media objects, and what role does literary form play in this treatment? How do authors of print and digital literature each represent their relationship to the archive in terms of issues such as storage, circulation, and deletion? In addressing these questions, I synthesize and respond to several recent critical trends in the study of contemporary literature and technology. Recent scholarship in media studies has emphasized the material instabilities of technological change, tracing complex genealogies of contemporary media culture as an alternative to the dominant conception of the history of technology as characterized by linear, seamless development and transparent relations between media forms. Many scholars of contemporary literature, however, have tended to see media technology as a generalized cultural and ideological condition, an abstract force that is never directly claimed by literary authors, but rather only ever championed or critiqued to varying degrees. I argue instead for an understanding of literary writing as a productive critical force within the landscape of contemporary media. Focusing on historically charged instances of formal experimentation, I trace a literary history of contemporary technology characterized by productive incompatibilities between literature and other media, moments where the disjunctures between different modes of meaning production reveal new aesthetic, social, and historiographic possibilities.

I begin this history with Andy Warhol's use of the typewriter in *a: a novel* (1968). A writing machine that was once ubiquitous within postwar culture yet is now all but obsolete, the typewriter offers a useful starting point for rethinking the historical trajectory of writing technologies across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Tracing the typewriter's place in postwar office management theory, I argue that the mechanical standardization inherent in typewriting produces a relation between human and machine based on irreducibly contingent and uncertain moments of inscription. I pursue this aesthetics of uncertainty through a reading of Warhol's *a*. Warhol's novel consists of transcripts of roughly twenty-four hours of conversations among numerous members of Warhol's circle, taped with a portable cassette recorder, transcribed on typewriters by four women, and sent to press with virtually no editorial correction. I argue that *a*'s many instances of typographic

dissonance and error are moments in which the limits of technologized transcription become visible on the printed page, pointing towards the typewriter's complex, conflicted place within modern media history. By foregrounding error as *a*'s dominant textual feature, Warhol draws attention to both the ephemerality and instability of technologized writing and the larger historical contingency of the typewriter itself as a writing machine.

Chapter Two expands this attention to the materiality of writing through a turn to the relations between gramophonic and print inscription. I focus on Kevin Young's use of the phonograph as a structuring conceit in *To Repel Ghosts: Five Sides in B Minor* (2001), an extended sequence of lyric poems loosely structured around the life and work of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. As its subtitle suggests, Young presents his lyric sequence as a collection of five recorded "sides," imaginary vinyl records comprised of various poetic "tracks" about Basquiat's life, his paintings, and the cultural genealogy that informs his work. Juxtaposing the material and aesthetic conventions of visual art, phonography, and print literature, he plays the densely allusive language of his poems against a complex paratextual apparatus of frontispieces, indexes, and images. Setting Young's work alongside early moments in the histories of the phonograph and the book, I read his formal strategy as a reflection on the relations between different modes of storage— analog and digital, codex, canvas, disc, and drive— within a culture characterized by multiple overlapping regimes of information technology. His technique is also an extended meditation on the capacity of the literary to negotiate and reframe these relations. Posing an immanent critique of the rhetoric of digital exactitude, he imagines the earlier media forms of the canvas, the record, and the page as deeply interrelated technologies, connected through their shared capacity for error, static, and distortion.

In Chapter Three, I turn to literature's response to archival and historical questions within the visual culture of the 1970s. This period saw both the material disintegration of mid-century celluloid film and the cultural rise of electronic imaging. I consider the literary response to this situation through the trope of the missing film, a narrative conceit that appears in the work of influential postwar authors including Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Joseph McElroy. DeLillo's *Running Dog* (1978), for example, is a densely plotted conspiracy novel centered on the search for the only print of a home movie featuring Adolf Hitler. Scholars have often treated *Running Dog* as a critique of the ideological implications of reproductive media. I argue instead that it is an appropriation of the formal operations of reproductive media on behalf of the print novel: its most thorough and vital engagement with issues of technological mediation emerges not through its conventional narrative elements but rather through a series of extended textual transcriptions of a number of films, moments in which DeLillo uses form to draw upon and refashion the moving-image archive. Using Gilles Deleuze's writings on cinema as a critical lens and examining DeLillo's recently released working notes and manuscript materials for *Running Dog*, I show how his techniques of appropriation and transcription use the form of the novel to construct a conception of film history in terms of material absence and disappearance, imagined at the localized, microscopic scale of cinematic objects and images.

Following the questions of analog archival materiality I pose to print literature in my first three chapters, the second section of *Archival Fictions* uses literary texts and methodologies to rethink received narratives regarding the material and historical dimensions of digital media as a global force. My fourth chapter initiates this shift by considering the impact of the computer upon writing. While earlier critics have emphasized hypertextuality as the salient characteristic of digital writing, I focus instead on the computer's storage of information as virtually indecipherable binary code, a form whose impenetrability paradoxically constitutes the necessary conditions for its free circulation through global digital networks. In order to consider how print literature registers this conception of media change, I show how Hari Kunzru uses literary form to trace the dispersion and circulation of digital information in his novel *Transmission* (2004). Kunzru's novel centers on a devastating global computer virus, a figure

that functions as a limit case for the formal and social dimensions of information within the novel, disrupting both the text's narrative and its formal meaning-making processes. I read these moments of disruption—fragmentary eruptions of raw data within the flow of the novel's text—as literary evocations of the impact of a computer virus, freezing the operations of novelistic form in a way that gestures towards the opaque inner workings of the digital technology that the novel addresses. Using recent critical work on cultures of circulation to read Kunzru's novel, I argue that these instances of simultaneous collapse and innovation within its otherwise largely conventional form constitute one possible way in which print literature might approximate the discontinuity and invisibility of globally circulating digital information.

In my final chapter, I consider how electronic literature's relation to the Internet as an archive reflects the historical multiplicities and instabilities of digital writing more broadly. I pursue these issues through the work of Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI), an electronic literature collective that produces black-and-white, text-only Flash animations set to music. I trace how several of YHCHI's seminal pieces circulate in multiple different forms and contexts online, from the inexact, syncopated transcriptions of their texts found in Google's cache to online Flash animation communities that parse these works as a series of individual frames and numerical values. Understood in terms of this multiplicity, the historicity of electronic documents is neither inaccessible nor permanent in any simple fashion, as it is often thought to be, but rather complexly distributed over the global archive of the Internet. I argue that these processes of replication and recombination not only constitute the full and necessary history of YHCHI's particular mark within the digital archive, but also suggest the need for a reexamination of how we imagine the larger history of writing on the web.

By establishing complex lines of formal affiliation between literary writing and the numerous and diverse technological forms of the modern and contemporary periods, *Archival Fictions* argues for a new way of formulating the relation of that writing to the history of media technology both prior to and during the current digital moment. In doing so, it contributes to a growing conversation, including work by scholars such as Matthew Kirschenbaum, Lisa Gitelman, N. Katherine Hayles, and Alan Liu, that seeks to make visible how the material particulars of inscription shape textual meaning across different media and different historical moments. Indeed, while every contemporary inscription is technologically mediated in one way or another, not every one foregrounds or attends directly to this mediation, either through form in the manner of the texts I discuss or through other means. Yet precisely in their textual idiosyncrasies, irregularities, and extremities, the works I focus on pose a test case for a broadly applicable conception of the relations between literature and technology. By framing literature's connection to media technology in terms of relations that are deeply interwoven yet fundamentally incompatible, my project both imagines a limit point for literary production within the moment of contemporary media saturation and sees that limit as the condition of possibility for literature's speculative reconceptualization of the aesthetic, social, and material relations between media forms across history.