

ON HERMINUTIA
Digital Rhetoric and Network Phenomenology

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Disclaimer

This (therefore) will not have been [an essay].
– *Derrida [sort of...]*

What follows is a meander through my hypermedia work and its methods of mediation.

This essay, or non-essay, will focus on some of the ideas in network phenomenology that are addressed in my hypermedia work, as well as various hyperrhetorical formations of these ideas. What follows – this non-essay – is organized something like my desk, something like my computer desktop – cluttered, in a perpetual state of disarray, arranged aphoristically, in clusters and stacks of varying interest without appreciable reason to anyone beyond, perhaps, its primary user, its author, myself.

Organized from what precedes it – namely, what can be found on *mychine*, and within the work I will mention below, the material presented here was initially brought together under the title *A Theory of...[?]*, for an address at the trAce Incubation conference in the summer of 2002. As such, the precursor to this essay, to this non-essay is based in orality and performance, rather than literary text. In my mind – text none-the-less... To a certain extent my talk at the Incubation conference functioned as a rhetorical retrospective of six of my literary hypermedia works – *Delivery Machine 01*, *A Machicolated Body*, *Reasoned Metagoria*, *Lexia to Perplexia*, *Delimited Meshings*, and *Translucidity*¹. Each of these works explores and investigates, in hypermediated ficto-critical terms, the

ways in which identity is constructed, desire conducted, language altered, and self extended through the network.

In regard to the ideas pillaged from the hypermedia works themselves, this non-essay (more so than the talk) is an odd sort of reverse engineering – a displacement of thoughts outside of their natural habitat; the already unnatural habitat of literary hypermedia – a reductive remediation from a heavily mixed semiotics back to the word itself. Though these works fall under the general heading network phenomenology, they are only loosely related one to another. While they share common themes and general intent, the surface subjects and their treatment are diverse. They are distant *cyblings*, linked yet unlinked, forming a family marked by progressive *gen[it]erations* of a few key concepts, ideas which are probably most encyclopedically rendered in *Lexia to Perplexia*.

Metagoria

Met'a-go'ri-a [*meta* between, with, after, above, beyond + *agora* an assembly (*agoria* to speak in public)]

1. Speaking or writing across, above, among, behind, between the lines.
2. To form arguments that are transitional, that cross a line, are out of line, or out of reach.
3. To signify openly, through openings and opportunities, through the gaps, in the gaps, to plug the gaps.
4. To meander and suspect... producing tangents – clues, balls of thread or wax – leading somewhere, or not – and, back again.
5. To signify by way of opening; by way of coupling – passing this from that, this to that...
6. Turning gap to gape – the open mouth or stare, the unfolding message.

Seeking, seeding the next, the exit

~ *What is solid, becomes liquid, becomes gas.*

I began using the term *metagoria* long before I was involved in hypertext, cybertext, literary hypermedia or any of the electronic literary forms. In fact, I had put the term to use before much experience with computers at all. I first used the term in relationship to theater, video and installation work I was doing in the eighties to describe some of the semiotic and post-structuralist interests behind the work. Though the term proved useful to my work at the time, I think *metagoria* may actually be more applicable, or its conditions more fully realized in my hypermedia work. Indeed, the term may apply to the rhetoric of hypermedia in general.

Literary Hypermedia confuses writing to and with its other by not allowing writing to be just writing... What is literary in the work is subsumed into a *mélange* of heterogeneous media, incorporated into the soil ~ maximized, minimized, made elemental, environmental. Eroded. Occluded by the sediment, the sentiment of its own forgetting... Metagorical subjectivity, an indeterminate, continued procession-as-progression (vice versa) of the sign seems implied in the very term hypermedia.

Metagorical signification operates on the premise of inference over readability.

In the expanded field of textuality that is hypermedia, signification is delimited within itself, occurring across and between sign regimes, modes of inscription and methods of sensory impression. Signs, less recognizable as they are (as they were – static), become understandable only in the *arc, the ‘tween – by sparking something...(else, elseif, or)... Hypermedia Authorship operates in a metagorical fashion by positing, positioning the literary as already post-literary – drawing upon sign regimes other than the *pure word* – placing the literary within a different body, as part of something a larger – as yet undefined.

The *pure word* is forced into a sort of *obsoletics* in which it cannot function sufficiently on its own. I use the term *obsoletics* rather than obsolescence because the word does survive, but its value is reduced and brought into relationship with other language technologies – visual, animated, diagrammatic, auditory, etc. Indeed, the literary itself is minimized by the electrated tension between the various sign regimes that make up hypermedia textuality. When we discuss the relationship of text to image in hypermedia works, to a certain extent we may be looking at the language of hypermedia with a sort of nostalgia for the *pure word*, a nostalgia that reinforces and romanticizes the page. This gesture adds to the *obsoletics*, expanding the referability of *just words* within a hypermedia

work by over-historicizing the page to screen evolution. I don't necessarily see screen-based hypermedia work as a disruption of the page paradigm, nor do I see literary hypermedia as in competition with the book.

Pagination and linear argument are replaced by an invagination of content and context within the programmed application – statements are encoded, folded in upon themselves. The Hypermedia author pre-dicts, inscribes, and scripts the texture and malleability of the application extending textuality to the manners of the work's users.

This seems an important aspect of digital rhetoric and can be manifest in a variety of ways. Some work may allow the user to participate in the actual creation of the content, relying upon user input to complete the writing, while other work may rely upon user decisions to expose what is concealed within the application. This moves narrative in the direction of a narra[c]tive rhetoricity that requires this other for its own de.scription. The authorial pre.dictive encoding of interaction within a work is performed in reverse by the user/reader of the work. Narractivity is the simultaneous deconstruction of the application and reconstruction of its culture. The reconstitution of a metagorical subject...

What then constitutes the document?

The document is not to be found in the object, but performed through its objects. Among the ruins we find bells and whistles, and other mercurial artifacts; half buried fragments of intent, scattered across a field of mediating pseudo-substance – evidence of a previous culture. Variable exposure to the customs of the application allows for different choragraphic, speculative readings based upon the narrative procession of the user.

Through a sort of archaeology of hyper-rhetorical fragments the user discovers the applied, environmental grammatology of an otherly enculturated location – unearths the site, the suspect document. The document is more than one; rather, the document is a variable, emergent and recombinant system of *documentia*.

We will no longer talk about what literary hypermedia *is*, because it is NOT. It is becoming... The Medium is media/um.

Technontology

Where are you when you are online?

OR

As Microsoft has asked in regards to its MSN service –
“*Where do you want to go today?*”

Where do you expect to go, seated there before the terminal?

Who are you then? There?

User!

I am.

“I” *is* no longer enough.

I am –

Already cyborg...

Attached, therefore I am...

Technontology takes as its subjective base *I+device*, assumes that technology and being are interlinked – that identity has always relied upon a conductive relationship between subject and device. That is to say, through the devices of technology one extends and reifies the self (which is something like saying we have always been post-human). By now, we know nothing of an unmediated life anyway... And, even of the self we see that identification is device, a technology of recognition, consensual or otherwise. The technontological subject is more project than subject, more subject than object.

The projective aspects of technontology as it relates to the formation of identity are made quite obvious through the Internet apparatus. One proceeds through the network, precedes the extension of identity deposited there (elsewhere), to form not a body without organs, but a body with organs elsewhere. The relationship – I to device – is more than casual.

The technontological project transforms identity, the subject, by making it a condition of digital rhetoric, a process (a pro-posal) – a condition of

writing across the various protocols of the network. There is first (and last) what occurs at the terminal, in the immediate, the interface between the user and the device, which is in fact a mere sfumato of the technological functions behind the screen. Beneath the surface, at and away from the terminal there are thick, hidden strata of inscription – code, scripting etc., a process[ion|ing] of data that allows for this reiteration of I to emerge, to become present, again, at the screen. Where identification suggests that the suspect, the subject be accessible – again and again – to self and other, that the object remain recognizable; network-identity is (per)formed through transmissive agency – the continuous writing, and rewriting of one’s self. We function, conduct ourselves categorically, allegorically, metagorically – through diverse signification.

We are defined by conductive extension, by our extensibility – the discerning and dissemination of I elsewhere. The production of remediant agents... A twittering, chimeric machine... In movement toward ad. entity, what remains accessible are these projective, transmissive fragments of identity; deposited elsewhere – particles of data dispatched deep into the network, to serve as diplomats for, and architects in the construction of *myself* elsewhere – defined, processed, delimited by external systems.

@body : I lie in wait. I am primarily interested in results.

What the network provides, in the immediate, is return – extreme mediacy, a re:membering of the deposited self to its originator. As the other, even of the other the result is the completion of the technontological circuit. The Device supplies de.vice, proof of the transmission of express desire through the apparatus by way of display; what is returned to the screen. We meet the fetish face to face, an Ap.proximate other... Face to Interface. The self, @body, I+device is both extended and reified by/in the reply.

Cadavatars and Herminutia

The network phenomenology works I listed at the beginning of this *non-essay* explore the subject matter through a variety of means and material. One of the methods employed in these works is the remediation, and exploitation of classical or ancient subjects. Various mythological agents are appropriated and made to perform as remediants of network attachment and technontology.

In *Lexia to Perplexia*; the Bronze Age sea-trading network centered at Crete, the Minoan Empire that spread throughout the Aegean, island to island – terminal to terminal – is used to indicate the meta-historical tendency to connect here with there, to network – to get in each others space and business – the will to exchange. In *Reasoned Metagoria* the Knossos Labyrinth is used as model for the microprocessor. Knossos was the center of the Minoan Empire and in this work the Labyrinth is referred to as the *Daedelos 2000bc MacroProcessor*.

The will to exchange, to construct networks and conduits is not the only meta-historical tangent traced in these works. In *Delimited Meshings*, the relationship of User to projected technontological matter is allegorized as the relationship of Dante to Virgil. Virgil is the Virgule – the break, the block, the gateway. The Virgule, the slash introduces the wilderness, the next protocol, guiding the User toward and along a divergent trajectory; toward a breakthrough or expansion – the continued progress of adentity. The double, or doubling agent leads (knows) the way... The close relationship between generic protagonist and facilitating agent is repeated everywhere – from Gilgamesh and Enkidu to the Skipper and Gilligan – and is perhaps a metahistorical referent for extended agency. The technontological subject, I+device is something of a collation of timeless agencies... The Now, to the Never-Ending...

The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* is another important resource utilized throughout the six network phenomenology works. I am not the only Hypermedia author to recognize the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and Osirian Mythology as a significant *pre-mediation* of certain network phenomena. M.D. Coverley's brilliant *The Book of Going Forth by Day*² recognizes and reinforces some of the metahistorical aspects of technontological desire.

The *Egyptian Book of the Dead's* relevance to network phenomenology is recognizable in its general narrative, and in the acts of its protagonist – the User becomes Osiris. It is interesting to note that Osiris is the Greek translation of the Egyptian Ausar, which is nearly an anagram of A User; but similarities between the acts of Ausar and the acts of A User are not limited to this fanciful bit of etymology.

A User and Osiris proceed along similar lines, progressing deeper into a netherworld – the Neterkhert, or net[w]erkhert. Like Osiris, A User participates in a series of cryptic tasks in its passage through to elsewhere. In both cases the body remains static, while a double, or doubles – double, or

doubling agents (Ka, Khu, Kha, Ba in the *Book of the Dead*) – move about an elsewhere to construct the *cadavatar*.

If the User is Osiris, then the apparatus and its applications play the role of Thoth – the Egyptian Scribe God. Thoth is central to one of the key scenes in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* – the weighing of the heart in the Double Hall of Justice. This vignette is a sort of individual last judgment, in which the ‘heart’ of the deceased – ex.terminated at the terminal; the potential Osiris, A User is weighed against the heavy protocols of the net[w]erkerhert...

In *Lexia to Perplexia*, the vignette is repurposed as a model for network authentication. The User, the potential Osiris – the active originator of the current process @body, is verified against what the foreign system already knows of the User. Current data is weighed against the archive... In the scene Thoth serves as gatekeeper of the application and mysterious blog-master of the projective technontological agent. Thoth plays something of a computational role – documenting and processing the proceedings, tabulating, announcing and archiving the results – as such, (re)writing A User into the elsewhere.

Thoth is relevant aside from his specific relationship to Osiris – the facilitator of countless meta-historical tendencies. Classically, he is the inventor of writing and of law, of engineering and navigation, philosophy and war machines. In his association with the Greek Hermes, the Roman Mercury, and the Alexandrian Trismegistus he is the god of travelers; of those that are found in nomadic [li]quiddity... A messenger god and patron of alchemy, of exchange and transformation... The conductor of souls...

Of my own work – Thoth plays his blog-master role in *Lexia to Perplexia*, in *A Machicolated Body* he mediates a dinner date, and in *Reasoned Metagoria* he is the keeper of secrets, and the developer of suspense.

The Pilot Program, which will be my next work to deal with issues of network phenomenology, explores the Thoth-Hermes-Mercury hybrid. Utilizing various Greek and Egyptian mythological sources as well as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, various attributes of Thoth-Hermes-Mercury are deconstructed and remediated, recontextualized to address the agential operations of the technontological subject.

Thoth still stands as the timeless inventor of writing, present before inscription – at its inception; before the document – at its inscription – at both ends of the conduit – @ body and n/@body.

In the work Thoth is related to Trismegistos, the Hermes of the Alexandrian *Corpus Hermeticum*. The name, Trismegistos – Thrice Great – is transformed, remediated and reapplied to read Transmediatos. Nous – the immaterial any/everything, the divine intellect and transcendent goal of the Hermetica – is conflated with the Egyptian NU – a watery mass, the beginning, and the end. Where Trismegistos is in contact with the null.edge (knowledge) of timeless Nous, Transmediatos perpetuates the modern, the monument at and of the moment, the impulse and transmission– as a metahistorical gesture...

The classical Greek Hermes is a pivot between two primary agencies – as messenger and conductor of souls. *The Pilot Program* applies these agents to network phenomenology by transforming the Psychopompos (conductor of souls) into the *Technopompos* – the conductor of extended selves across the apparatus; and, Diactoros (the messenger) into *Digitoros*, the sprite of electronic expenditure, the double-dealing diplomat for local and remote concerns. Where the Technopompos can be related back to Thoth by way of his actions in the *Book of the Dead*; the Digitoros has much more in common with Mercury, the Roman extension of Hermes.

The remediated Thoth-Hermes-Mercury is a potent character, with multiple points of relevance to network phenomenology. At the threshold of the terminal, and beyond, Thoth-Hermes-Mercury leaves marks, *Mercurial artifacts* – graffiti, codes, he marks the crossroads thereby performing the plus of I “+” device while plotting and piloting our terminal hopscotch.

Desire and Faciality

Before *signing off*, I would like to mention a few things concerned with faciality and what occurs at the screen.

In my work *Delimited Meshings*, in a segment titled *Narcisystems I* state “it is not what I see, but where I see it that carries the seductive force at the terminal.” In this statement I am referring to our orientation to the screen, the computer monitor as it differs from the cinematic screen and that of the television. In an early essay on digital cinema, and in my hypermedia work *Reasoned Metagoria* I laid out these differences in rather simple terms. Our orientation to the cinematic screen, the public cinema is social and consumptive. The film screen is larger than life and

serves as something of a mythmaker. Narratives and images are consumed collectively without variability, and though filmgoers may have differing perceptions of a particular film the images themselves are consistent. The television screen serves its viewers in a much more familial sense. Families and friends gather around this cool-blue hearth in their homes, in private yet social spaces. The experience is still consumptive but more selective than cinema, and the collected viewers are generally familiar with one another.

At the terminal, our orientation to the computer monitor is privatized and much more intimate than either of these former points of media consumption. This is true even in busy office situations, computer labs, or Internet cafés. Generally, user and monitor are positioned at a distance from each other that is about the same as two people engaged in fairly intimate conversation. This proximity affects how we relate to the display and what we expect to be returned to the screen through our interaction with the computer.

The intimate proximity of the screen establishes a convincing faciality for the monitor that does not occur for the cinematic or television screens. The faciality of the screen is further reinforced by the tactile interactions of mouse and keyboard that lead to a somewhat responsive display. These gestures operate like caresses, and what is displayed on the screen becomes the *result* of express desire – like light is the result of flipping a switch. The complex operations behind the screen, the actual conduction is of little concern – unrealized in its effect. We recognize this *other* at the screen, and our influence upon it without regard to how the output is reasoned or constructed. To a certain extent, rather than transparency, we should perhaps be talking about the extreme opacity of the apparatus – its transParental rather than transparent qualities.

This sort of feedback – user input returned to the screen – establishes an [*Ap*]proximate Other that is in fact a connotation of the primary Narcissistic desires of the user as performed through the network. Indeed, what is displayed on the screen is the temporary reification of the technological subject. At the screen, the face, the interface we encounter not the fetish; but surrogate fetish, a small, simulacraphic approximation of the original object, as imagined, desired by the originator of the impulse – the attached user. The severe faciality, and the super-imposition of an [*Ap*]proximate Other to this abstraction of express desire allows us to look beyond the shortcoming of the (suspect) object on the screen. To this

extent, it is not what is made visible that is key but that it is made visible, that through the network desire finds such a convenient circuit. The screen may be alluring, but the basis of this allure is not really in the displayed objects, but in desire's conductivity. The display is a short-circuiting of the actual transmission of desire through the device of its device.

I recognize the contradiction in stating that conductivity is of little concern to the user, yet is the manufacturer of the screen's allure. In fact, it is this oscillation, this contradiction that permits our seduction and subsumption by the possibilities of a media rich network. One could say that this is entirely apropos of desire even outside of network phenomenology – another metahistorical tendency – and that the conditions and expressions, the devices of want are always something of a fiction. As is this non-essay.

All of these works are linked from:

<http://memmott.org/talan>

<http://califia.hispeed.com/Egypt>