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The Text that Reads Itself

¹These can be found mainly under the category 'Kinetic Typography.'

Looking at the proliferation of word animations on YouTube¹, one could be forgiven for thinking that all the dreams and experiments of the typographic innovators of a hundred or so years ago have been fulfilled. All text can now be instantly accessed, freely positioned, modulated, animated and vocalised.

The growth of these 'motion poems' (or, in some cases, typographic cartoons) appears to be a cultural trend that is significant in a number of ways: it heralds a change in literacy from print to screen; it could well redefine poetry; it offers greater authorial control over how text is expressed and received; it demonstrates the cultural continuity of modern movement typography; it provides a new and accessible creative exchange.

Of course, all or many of the above claims could be contradicted: it may be a short-lived phenomenon, already dated and soon forgotten; it may be deemed facile and conformist; its motives are mostly promotional; it marks a shift from print literacy to screen culture.

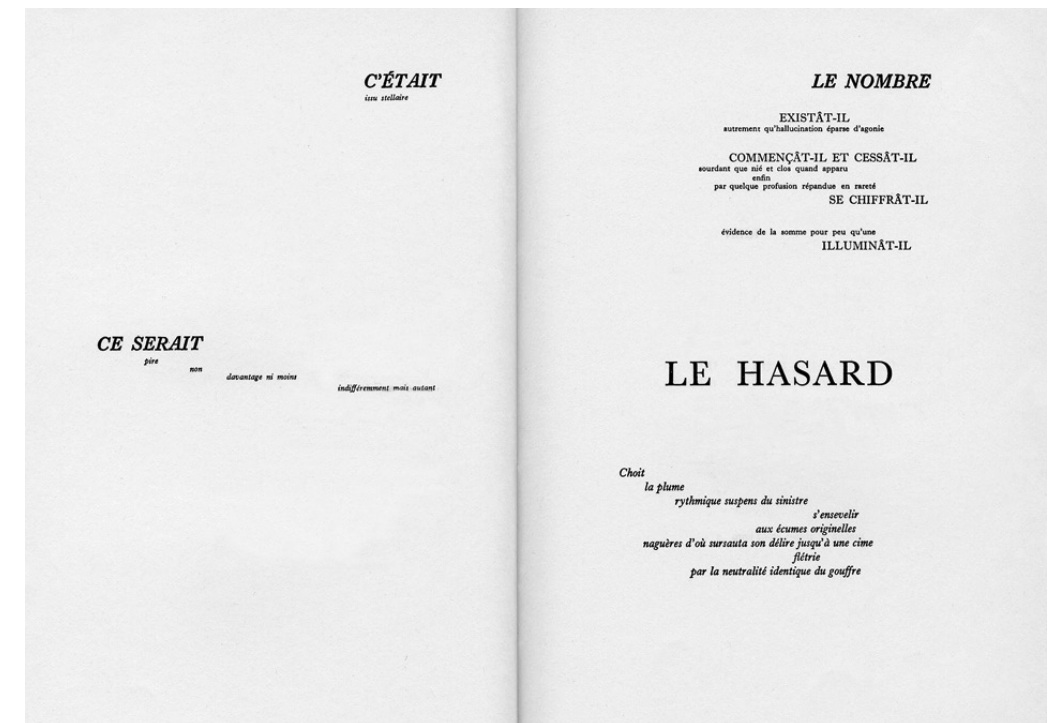
²Drucker, Joanna. (1993). *The Visible Word*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 138

Whichever view one takes, and it depends on what is actually viewed, what is central here is the notion of a text that 'performs its own reading'. This was once a radical idea proposed by the Modern Movement, one that sought to eliminate the rift between writer and reader, signifier and signified, speech and page, mimesis and actuality. That drive to make words perform their meaning, to be visual and material, which was begun by Mallarmé and made famous by the 'onomatopoeic imagination'² of Marinetti has nowadays shed much of its radical apparel; however, it re-presents itself in vivid and eloquent new forms, now supercharged by technology and promising all kinds of textual liberation.

³Lanham, Richard A. (1993). *The Electronic World: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 5

'I can reformat a text to make it easier to read, or using a dozen transformations, make it harder, or just different, to read. I can literally colour my colours of rhetoric. I can heal the long hiatus of silent reading and make the text read itself aloud.'³

Kinetic typography videos, animated poetry, title sequences—essentially all forms of motion graphics—are facets of the same technological package that has radically changed reading and readerships, and has endowed words with a mobile and compelling visuality.



The unlikely progenitor of all this is Stéphane Mallarmé, whose twenty-page poem, *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*, was published first in 1897 then in a new, definitive version in 1914.

Above: Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*, 1914, pp. 15-16

The poem is famed for its radical positioning of text on expanses of empty space, mixing fonts and point sizes, abandoning the conventions of both syntax and typographic layout. It makes numerous appearances in histories of graphic design—usually in the form of four of its most reproduced double-page spreads. It is interesting to note that its high profile is consistently matched by a widespread indifference to its content. Perhaps it is a measure

⁴Drucker, 1993:59

⁵Bowie, Malcolm. (1978) *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 120

⁶Drucker, 1993:52

⁷Bowie, 1978:121

⁸Bowie, 1978:118

⁹The link between Mallarmé and hypertext has already been made by Jerome McGann and Timothy Druckrey among others.

¹⁰Drucker, 1993:55

¹¹For a vision of words in every part of C.19th Paris see Edmondo De Amicis cited in Morley, Simon. (2003). *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, p. 19

of its success that the poem's intentions can be, to a degree, grasped visually. The impact and fame of *A Throw of the Dice* stem largely from what Drucker terms its 'figural, visual mode'⁴ where the author 'attempts to evolve a language which will be at the same time alphabetic and hieroglyphic.'⁵ It would seem that we are *seeing* the poem even more than we are *reading* it. For such an abstract, evanescent and hermetic poem it is surprising that it has such a material presence on the page.⁶

Mallarmé inscribes his pages with multiple routes of reading, false starts and a syntax that is hard to trail⁷, the lack of closure nags as metaphors and voices multiply. As we wander through the poem we leave semi-detached words and phrases behind for new ones that satisfy partially; we anticipate fresh possibilities, finding new semantic signposts to move us across uncharted space. The text of *A Throw of the Dice* is complex, unwieldy, varied, and also sparse and mobile in appearance, in the way of a musical score.

The emptiness plans to lose and consign us to indeterminacy, while the text delivers us to chance connections and a distracted reading, anticipating the restless processes of hypertext. For Bowie, 'no poem [...] from any age so firmly forbids the eye and mind to alight upon it and be still.'⁸

The Front Page

Looking back at the poem from our twenty-first century vantage point, it is impossible not to see it as a prototype for the discontinuous reading of hypertext⁹. However, the influences on the poem itself are from an earlier age of mass communications. It was, above all, the vast influence of the newspaper on mass society at the turn of the century that shaped readers, providing them with the means to process information in an abbreviated, fragmented way: entirely comparable to how Internet 'readers' of today navigate, skim, browse, and skip to keywords.

In fact, the design of the poem draws much from the elements of a newspaper¹⁰. Headlines, bylines, banners, subheads and jumps are all reflected here, in the way the reader is kept moving through fragments of information.

A Throw of the Dice presents a peak in a form of print literacy, and also the beginning of something quite different. With its polished, faceted phrasings and plottings it ushers in a new phase for both reader and writer, where the element of chance makes a generalised, depersonalised reference to the modern world of fragmented, fugitive and displaced words.¹¹ McLuhan notes that it was 'Mallarmé who

formulated the lessons of the press as a guide for the new impersonal poetry of suggestion and implication. He saw that the scale of modern reportage and the mechanical multiplication of messages made personal rhetoric impossible.'¹²

Random Thoughts

'The blank page is the nothingness—the silence—on which the words enact their epic journey, which is both a quest for meaning and a creation of meaning.'¹³

Mallarmé's *A Throw of the Dice* is a poem that is about thought itself: the process of emerging ideas, words forming, choices being made.

Paul Valéry, Mallarmé's friend and disciple was to write this on reading the poem:

'It seemed to me that I was seeing the shape of a thought, placed for the first time in our space [...] The wait, the doubt, the focus were *visible entities*.'¹⁴

No closure, no certainty: just possibilities, things emerging from inexistence: the void where patterns are read as constellations, allusions to the sea that holds a shipwreck, the white space of the page which the mind of the author has not yet decided to inscribe. The act of thinking exists in terms of randomness, the continuum of thought.

'For the distinction between mattering supremely and mattering not at all has not been established by the artist within the text: it is ours to make, and may be gained or lost in a blink.'¹⁵

A Throw of the Dice is a portrait of interiority, a high point and end point of the mind alone with itself: the act of thinking and creating represented in all its incompleteness and fortuity. The reader finds heightened awareness and singularity instead of guidance and kinship in relation to the author.

Although any notion of interiority is usually related to the book or the literary mind, it is equally possible to have a heightened awareness of the self in terms of other media: film, music, and even games.

It is likely that thought is changing, and tempting to think that without *it*, alienation, boredom or solitude we will end up thinking *it* even being—very differently. Maybe we are already finding the means and incentives to escape interiority; in the same

¹²Marshal McLuhan, 'Joyce Mallarmé and the Press', *Sewanee Review* 62(1), Winter 1954. In: (eds.) McLuhan, Eric McLuhan and Zingrone, Frank. (1997). *The Essential McLuhan*, London: Routledge, p. 64

¹³Hardison, Jr., O.B. (1989) *Disappearing through the Skylight: Culture and Technology in the Twentieth Century*. London: Penguin, p. 156

¹⁴Bowie, 1978:117 [My translation]

¹⁵Bowie, 1978:152

way that words are escaping the page to colonise new spaces, we may be discovering new locations for the self.

¹⁶Carr, Nicholas. (2010). *The Shallows: How the Internet Is Changing the Way We Read, Think and Remember*. London: Atlantic Books, p. 116

Mallarmé's famous claim that 'all the world exists in order to end up as a book' has, in a sense, come about, especially if we substitute something like YouTube for book: for us, the computer holds the access to the world in all its geography, its events, its culture, and its narratives. The Internet unfolds like a gigantic, four-dimensional newspaper that is relentlessly 'repetitive, intensive, interactive, addictive.'¹⁶

Technology offers us social spaces where individuality may be collectivised, harmonised diminished or possibly just redefined. In some ways it is a shared mind space that we are already connected to, and it is likely that as we internalise it we will come to a more evolved relationship with it.

However, for now, it is possible that most of us have already been reformatted in the multiple personalities of technology. We dream in shot and countershot, sentimentalise in song lyrics, fantasise in music videos, publicise our private selves on social media sites, and imagine in special effects.

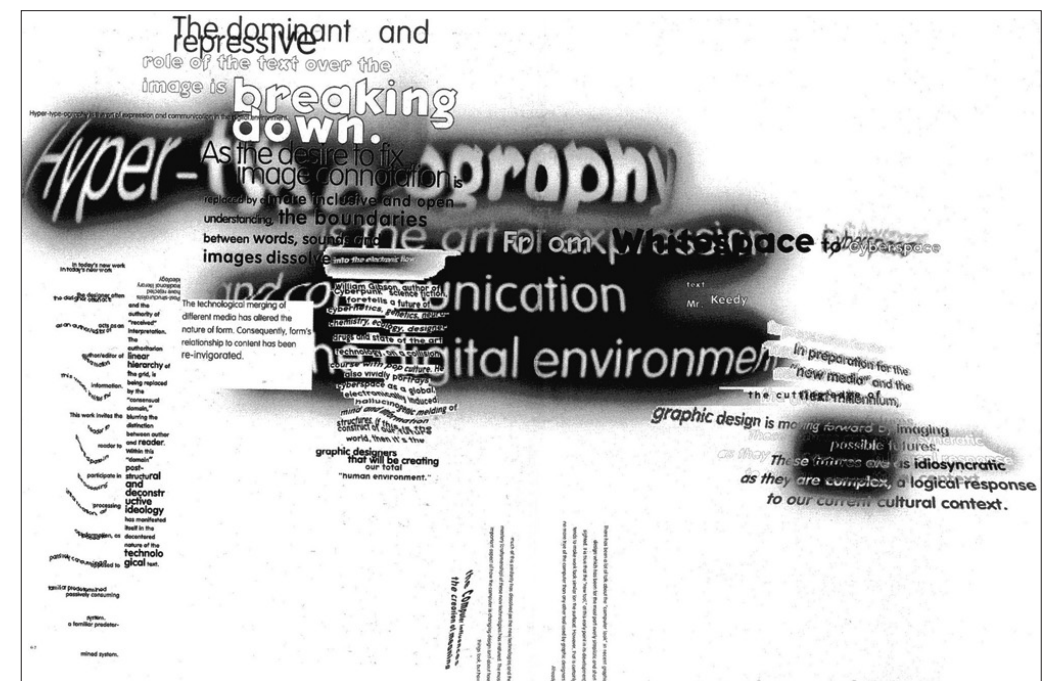
Liberating Words

In the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of digital technology imparted a distinctive, visual expression to the postmodern phase of graphic design. Numerous designers used computer graphics to convey exciting and fashionable ideas about chance, chaos and deconstruction.

In Jeff Keedy's *Fast Forward* we can clearly see elements of Mallarmé's poem: the elegant, typographic disunity and spatial drama of *A Throw of the Dice* acquire a postmodern exuberance in this affirmation of new technology. Phrases emerge, articulate, liquefy; announce themselves randomly, dissonantly, portentously. Everything, although printed, is about the dynamic nature of hypermedia, where words no longer want to stay as words.

This liberation of text by software is matched also by a desire for actual content, and this became a feature of some of the more famous graphic design work from the 1980s on. *Fast Forward* has the feel of a manifesto, made up of McLuhanesque slogans, commenting on way technology converges and redefines form and experience.

The emergence of online poetry collections – one of the foremost being *Born Magazine* – has led to a search for new literary forms.

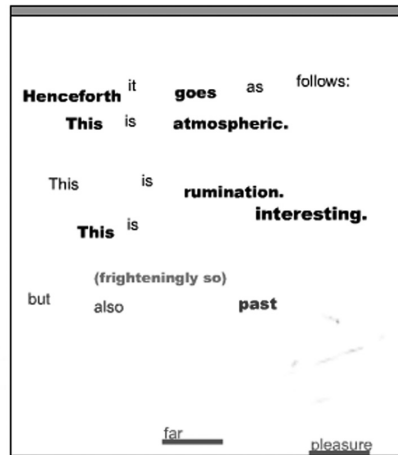


Above:
Jeff Keedy, *Fast Forward*, book spread, California Institute of the Arts, USA, 1993

¹⁷Aarseth defines this more demanding form of reading as 'ergodic.' Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 1

The Language of New Media by Thomas Swiss and George Shaw is a silent, animated, interactive poem that demands effort of hand and mind from its readers/users to summon words, then twist, capture and consume them.¹⁷ The initial inscrutability of the poem recalls *The Throw of the Dice*, as does the sense of uncertainty about how to

Right:
Thomas Swiss (text) and George Shaw (design), *The Language of New Media*, *Born Magazine*, 2003



proceed, bring forth the text, conclude. What is distinctive in this collaboration is that technology is not used uncritically, and it is not just new media that is ironized here, but poetic reflexivity too.

A rarity in the field of kinetic typographic is the author who creates both text and design. Jeff Smith-Luedke (aka Azrieno) is a

Right:
Jeff Smith-Luedke (Azrieno), screenshot from *Minimalism*, typographic poem, 2009



versatile cultural producer, and what could be termed a visual writer. His animated poems are different from most kinetic typography in that he is the sole author. Two of his poems appear on YouTube: *X vs. O* (2009), poem on a war between two letterforms, and *Minimalism*, a staging of reflections on an abstract painting. Both are graphically rich, witty and fluent, although *Minimalism* appears to conform more to the conventions of kinetic typography, by including mixed fonts and faces, continual movement, variation and frequent flipping of text, whose purpose is to sync imaginatively to the declaiming voice.

Another accomplished example of the genre (despite being only a university project), and one that seems closer in spirit to Futurist poetry and the calligrammes of Apollinaire, is the typographic animation of a verse from the Tom Waits track, 'What's He Building In There?' from *Mule Variations*, 1999, where words take on the shapes of doors, branches, swings, mailboxes and steps, as the sinister implications of the narrative accrue.



Left:
Stephen Elliget (Stevadore), screenshot from *What's He Building In There?* Kinetic Typography, 2010

The various animation software programs available to contemporary designers have facilitated the integration of text and image that was being envisaged by the likes of Marinetti in the early twentieth century. A later and far more direct influence on typographic animation is Saul Bass whose innovative designs of title sequences in the sixties established the model for the industry by unifying words, moving images and music.

However, Google lists the (contested) first example of kinetic typography as *Amore Baciarmi* by Oliver Harrison. It was first made in 1988 as a graduation film in 16mm, and subsequently used in an advert for the Royal Mail.¹⁸

¹⁸www.oliverharrison.com

Harrison followed it with *Time*, 1990, and looking at these two films, it seems that both belong as much in the music video category as they do to kinetic typography: while visual words are the subject-matter of the films, they perform only in relation to music, unfurling hand-in-hand with the melody.

Music, rhythm and timing are key elements in both title sequences and kinetic typography. Although the latter usually uses the human voice monologuing, it still relies on the tempo of speech to deliver the word-pictures on cue, like punchlines.

It could be argued that a form of timing is also present in *A Throw of the Dice*, but here nothing moves, and it is down to the reading mind to supply the pauses and the falls; it is in the way that words are spatialised and modulated by their isolation or emphasis on the page that we evoke a sense of time.

The viewer-reader of motion graphics is provided with not just the timing of words, but also a heightened sense of their spoken-ness. We hear and observe words unfolding in space and time – words that account for themselves visually. But there is the further, compelling illusion that, as the words present and spread before us, we are somehow witness to the moment of writing.

Kinetics and Memetics

Kinetic typography – the text that reads itself visually, aurally and temporally – has established itself since 2006-07 as a distinct and highly videogenic genre. Here is an exciting, inventive, accomplished and ultimately redundant medium that is both rewarding and faintly disquieting.

It is as if no sign can go undecoded, unanchored, unillustrated. In many ways, the point of these typographic packages of pop-poetics is to delight the eye with sustained connotation, to ease the effort of reading, and to keep moving. Everything is hyperactive, all signifiers are on steroids, everything is visible and audible. Familiar and favoured speeches from films¹⁹ are supplied with visual words that are in turn transformed into energetic, typographic performers, acting out meanings figuratively, allusively or arbitrarily. The result is often merely to furnish the written word with a universal and at times multipurpose onomatopoeia.

The irresistible flow of text is indeed kinetic, as it advances, flips, mixes, rotates. It seems less concerned with words as with a depersonalised dynamism, and the representation or, more accurately, enunciation of speech patterns.

Typography is used almost aphoristically, to pin a phrase, make memorable the one-liner, confirm the dialogue. Ultimately it could be seen to function as a new form of phonetics.

On one level, this typographic genre seems to be bringing about a renewal of reading: in the hands of the new author-designer who makes use of all creative means digitally available, the text will become a *gesamtkunstwerk*. Our experience of words will be at once aesthetic and functional: both beautiful and easy.

On another level, much of it has little to do with reading. It is primarily oral, and nearly all the words we see are figurative and recycled, rather than literary and original. The authors have generally very little interest in literature, or even typography, but their practice has everything to do with interpretation.

What can be found in the 'kinetic typography' category on YouTube is, for the most part, an array of talented graphic designers (practitioners, students, amateurs) showcasing technical virtuosity, imagination and a keen understanding of advertising. All of kinetic typography is posted in social media, which is part gallery, part chat room, part marketplace and part indefinable cultural space where things happen and there is always feedback on tap.

One significant linguistic development is the emergence of the 'meme' as an Internet unit of momentary, cultural currency. The word originates from Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*²⁰ where he coins the term as a contraction of mimema, 'something imitated or reproduced,' to refer to a unit of cultural selection.

The Internet meme is essentially a positively-charged cliché, which is traded, developed, elaborated, drawing creative dialogue around it in response. Memes range from obvious commercial plants, sound bites, famed cinematic moments to more original, occasionally hilarious found phrases, picked up and refined with dark or cruel wit in more esoteric chat rooms. With few exceptions, these animations require a common currency content to transact.

Musings on a Single-Function Device

At the heart of the debate on the nature of old and new forms of literacy is the fact of the static text and the limits of the page. What is there is all there is, sequenced and stacked into a cultural container that is the codex, enough for the mind to convert into meanings, associations, sounds and pictures.

¹⁹There are numerous postings of kinetic typography depicting scenes from *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, 1999) and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (dir. Guy Ritchie, 1998).

²⁰Dawkins, Richard. (1989). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 109

²¹Carr, 2010:9

With the rise of hypermedia the book will seem too material and unchanging to the 'post-reader,' too isolated and devoid of functions. In much the way that Cubists saw Renaissance perspective as incapable of describing the changing age, so too are new readers deeming the book unable to process the flux of the present. The great divide (which can possibly take place within single individuals) has already opened. On the one side, we have the post-reader becoming restless and dissatisfied around books²¹ that appear static, solitary and tardy when compared to the socially addictive habits of the computer, which, in contrast, is versatile, instantaneous and connected to the external world. This reader reads in a non-methodical, nonlinear fashion, responding to cues and distractions (hotspots, keywords, textboxes).

On the far side, is the book-reader, perhaps less concerned with the here-and-now, and ready for the long haul of a sustained and anti-social relationship to text. This reader is capable of solitude and interiority, committed to the finite and reassuring physicality of the book, and to its prescribed spaces and fixed sequences.

²²Ibid.

The seismic shifts in reading are already leading to changes in mental generativity, as Carr²² sets out: the capacity to retain knowledge, to imagine, and even, conceivably, to be individual and sustain a mental space or 'noosphere' are seen as being impaired by the structural distractions of the Internet. Bolter points out, that 'hypertext and all other forms of electronic writing are participating in the refashioning of our notions of self in the late age of print'²³ while Ong, writing nearly a decade before Bolter, reprises a key McLuhanist theme:

'Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word.'²⁴

However, we need to remember that important changes to reading have happened before: word separation, punctuation, silent reading, writing styles, printing, education, newspapers.

²⁵Hardison, 1989:264

²⁶Carr, 2010:74

Hypertext – like a more successful Tower of Babel – is always being built. The open-ended nature of digital knowledge, with all its expansions, updates and multiple links has had one result for reading: we don't know where to stop. Further readjustments to our reading processes will be inevitable. For Hardison, literature encountered online 'tends to disappear into hypertext like water in a sponge' in a 'process [that] is interactive and discontinuous—almost the opposite of reading.'²⁵ This disintegration of the text reverberates in other cultural forms as we seek out the 'director's cut' reissue of a DVD, the remixes of famous songs, or pick up the 'author's preferred text' in a bookshop. The text, as many have proclaimed, is losing its identity and, with it, its authority as it is eased out of its preferred – and

obsolete – containers. In this context it becomes hard to imagine how 'the reader becomes the book.'²⁶

²⁷Bolter, 1991:2

It would seem safest to agree with Bolter in his measured and McLuhanist prognostication that the 'shift from print to the computer does not mean the end of literacy. What will be lost is not literacy itself, but the literacy of print, for electronic technology offers us a new kind of book and new ways to write and read.'²⁷

These new forms of writing are now here – interactive books, electronic readers, kinetic typography – but they may never definitively 'arrive,' for the simple reason that a Gutenberg is always turning up with a new idea, and a new system to propose. But if any form of literacy is established long enough for a poem to appear, one that is hard to navigate, nearly unreadable, and defies all conventions of writing, then we should read it carefully.