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## Text as Event: Staring at and Looking through Processed Words in Digital Arts \*

### 1. Forms of Communication

In his 2001 book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich claims “the printed word tradition that initially dominated the language of cultural interfaces is becoming less important, while the part played by cinematic elements is becoming progressively stronger. This is consistent with a general trend in modern society toward presenting more and more information in the form of time-based audiovisual moving image sequences, rather than as text.” (78) The notion of the decline of the printed word tradition is in line with assumption that electronic media, computer and the Internet undermine the authority and cultural supremacy of the word. To mention only three significant books in this regard: Neil Postman claimed in *Amusing Ourselves To Death* (1985) that the inevitable message of the medium television is entertainment and distraction. Barry Sander holds in *A is for Ox. Violence. Electronic Media, and the Silencing of the Written Word* (1994) that literacy is on the decline because of our fascination with electronic media – television, videos, computer games – which fail to provide the narrative power of true literary sources. Nadin Mihai entitles his book about an unfolding civilization in which the language of the Internet, interactive multimedia, and virtual reality is the new languages of human interaction *The Civilization of Illiteracy* (1997). Hyperfiction author and theorist Michael Joyce foresees in 1995 that the “post-alphabetic image” soon “will either rob us of the power -or relieve us of the burden- of language” (42) and Jay David Bolter, who investigates in his 1991 book *Writing Space. Computers, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* the new opportunities for the words in digital media, speaks 1996 of the “breakout of the visual” in the digital world, observing that in multimedia the relationship between word and image is becoming as unstable as in the popular press, where images do not subordinate to the word anymore (258).

The claim and complain that the word does no longer obtain the cultural authority it traditionally had been given reminds of the many predictions we’ve heard in the 1990s about the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy. With millions of Weblogs the written word has certainly regained territory in digital media. Are those blogs the answer to the pictorial turn that took place more than half a century ago? Are they only a mistake of technological history, an interregnum in the immanent hegemony of the post-alphabetic image, as Joyce claimed in

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1995 with respect to the text-based MOOs (42)? While we have to leave the answer to future debates, in this essay I want to explore the role text plays when it becomes an event within an artistic digital environment. I am discussing a form of communication in mixed reality spaces

To a certain extent, in digital media text is always an event. Even the seemingly static text on the screen is the result of the computer's processing, as Katherine Hayles points out in her essay *The Time of Digital Poetry: From Object to Event* (2006). However, the reader may not be aware of this "eventilization" of the text (182), since the processing is invisibly embedded as what Ulrik Ekman in the introduction to this book calls "'calm' computing" (42). This is different, if text starts to move or to react to the reader's action. In *Overboard* by John Cayley a program of carefully designed algorithms allows letters to disappear or to be replaced by other letters, thus undermining the words' lexical relationship until the original letters are restored.<sup>1</sup> The poem about a man falling overboard during a storm continually drifts in (rising) and out (sinking) of legibility and thus renders visually its own linguistic message. While *Overboard* is processed independent of any user input, in Natalie Bookchin's *The Intruder* (1999) which combines several arcade-like game interfaces to tell the short story *La Intrusa* by Jorge Luis Borges<sup>2</sup> the reader moves forward through the text as a player, by shooting, fighting, or catching, being rewarded with a piece of the narrative, told in a voice-over.

Text as event inevitably shifts the reader's attention from the content of text to its materiality. While in *Overboard* and *The Intruder* the way the text appears contributes to its linguistic meaning similar to many cases of classical concrete poetry, in many other cases the event takes over the text turning it into the raw material for various transformations into visual objects, sound or (inter)action. In those cases words are more or less deprived of their linguistic meaning, which limits or liberates respectively the audience engagement with the text to a joyful play or intriguing fascination. While the words have not been replaced by the "post-alphabetic image," as Joyce predicted in 1995 for the digital world (42), they are turned into "post-alphabetic text."<sup>3</sup>

In the following chapters I discuss such transformation with respect to (2) the shift of words into non-linguistic artifacts, (3) the impermanence of the signifier, and (4) the prospect of reading in an interactive environment. All three works exemplify the "physical turn" in computing mixing the virtual world of the computer with real-

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<sup>1</sup> [www.shadoof.net/in/overboard.html](http://www.shadoof.net/in/overboard.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.calarts.edu/~bookchin/intruder](http://www.calarts.edu/~bookchin/intruder)

<sup>3</sup> The term "post-alphabetic text" has been used by Matthew G. Kirschenbaum to describe David Carson's design style that "refashions information as an aesthetic event".

world-data or with the physical world of the audience on the base of “context awareness”. All three works demonstrate how communication in mixed reality spaces shifts attention to the surface of text (materiality, appearance) thus drawing attention to “ubiquitous computing” and “calm embeddedness”. I will eventually discuss this factor with respect to the audience’s voyeuristic approach to text stripped of linguistic value and to the code behind it (5).

## 2. Playing with Letters

In the interactive installation *Text Rain* (1999) by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv, viewers stand or move in front of a large monitor in which they see themselves as black and white projections on which letters “fall” from the top edge.<sup>4</sup> Like rain the letters appear to land on the participants’ heads and arms, respond to their motions, and can be lifted and let fall again. The letters land on anything darker than a certain threshold, and “fall” whenever that obstacle is removed. Participants who have accumulated enough letters can sometimes decipher an entire word. The installation does not completely strip letters of their linguistic value but allows *reading* the text in addition to *playing* with it because it applies passages from the poem “Talk, You” from Evan Zimroth.



Fig. 1. Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv: *Text Rain*

Since the lines can hardly be deciphered even after the viewer has painstakingly collected all the letters, viewers don’t really engage in the reading process. The work functions primarily on the physical level;

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<sup>4</sup> [www.camilleutterback.com/textrain.html](http://www.camilleutterback.com/textrain.html)

the fascinating elements of the installation are the movements that it creates in front of the monitor as viewers interact with the falling letters. The letters have left language behind and turned into visual objects as part of an interactive installation. The viewer or “interactor” is liberated from reading the text and looking for meaning and can simply enjoy the moment of playing.

However, in this installation text does still play a certain role *as* text. On the one hand, it is letters that the interactor can collect in contrast to Zachary Booth Simpson’s similar installation *Sand* (2000) where a stream of liquid sand flowing from above reacts with the interactor’s shadow on the screen.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, if one reads the poem one realizes a deeper relationship between the text and the installation which allows understanding the installation as a performance of the poem. This is the more subtle intuition underlying this installation: that the extra-linguistic layer of meaning cannot be revealed before the linguistic layer has been grasped. It may not come as a surprise, however, that most visitors experiencing *Text Rain* never look up the text that is not provided at the installation venue. While the artists may (or may not) hope that the original text is consulted in order to understand the installation, the audience is likely to opt out of this opportunity and simply look *at* the letters as visual, interactive objects instead of looking *through* them to the deeper meaning of their particular way of appearance.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Reading Water

An example that provides ‘text rain’ in a more literal and legible way than in Utterback’s and Achituv’s installation is *Bit.Fall* of 2006 by the German artist Julius Popp (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> Behind this ‘waterfall of letters’ is a computer that scans news webpages, pulls keywords (nouns, verbs and proper names), and writes them as a package of water drops, designed in a way that they form, for a short moment, to words (there are magnetic vents that enable each of the several water jets to emit individual water drops). The shift in writing – from the invisible processing of words on the webpage to their spectacular processing within the installation – certainly addresses the question of ubiquitous computing. However, interested in philosophical rather than technological aspects of contemporary cultural Popp himself considers *Bit.Fall* a symbol for the fast change of what is currently valuable and meaningful to us.<sup>8</sup> Lutz Koepnick, Professor of German, Film and Media Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, attributes an

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<sup>5</sup> [www.mine-control.com/sand.html](http://www.mine-control.com/sand.html)

<sup>6</sup> For a close reading of *Text Rain* see chapter one in Simanowski 2010a.

<sup>7</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygQHj1W0PPM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygQHj1W0PPM);  
[www.artnet.com/artist/424543553/julius-popp.html](http://www.artnet.com/artist/424543553/julius-popp.html); <http://sphericalrobots.org>.

<sup>8</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AICq53U3d18](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AICq53U3d18)

element of cultural and media critique to this installation stating that it “foregrounds the utter transience of what we consider news in our world of increasingly global and instantaneous connections” (69). In a similar way Popp’s former teacher at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig, Astrid Klein, considers *Bit.Fall* a critique of technology which addresses the ephemeral and manipulable nature of information.<sup>9</sup> Since the technology employed embodies itself the logic of flux and manipulation, one wonders, however, to what extent the installation undermines such critical impetus.



Fig. 2. Julius Popp: *Bit.Fall*

It is obvious that critical statements about the transience of text in modern life made within the medium text (as an essay, a novel or a poem) would hardly be as fascinating as is the case in this installation. If words are written by falling water it is likely that the criticism on culture is eclipsed (shall we say ‘watered down?’) by the fascination of technology. The sensual pleasure of the incessant flood of words and their medial transience as water droplets inevitably erodes the philosophical point of view. A media-archeological perspective may illustrate the problem.

The technology employed in Popp’s installation was invented as early as 1982 by Stephen Pevnick, professor of computer art at the University of Wisconsin. The “Graphical Waterfalls®”, as Pevnick coined his technology in 1990, was first exhibited with the Klein Gallery in 1988 at the International Art Exhibition at Navy Pier in

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<sup>9</sup> <http://netzspannung.org/cat/servlet/CatServlet?cmd=document&subCommand=show&forward=%2fnetzkollektor%2foutput%2fdigital-sparks.project.xml&entryId=342596&section=context&lang=en>

Chicago but soon also and primarily outside the art content presenting for example the word “Jeep” or the image of the Mercedes Star at spectacular auto shows. “Graphical Waterfalls provide the ultimate WOW factor”, Pevnick states at his website.<sup>10</sup> This factor survives in Popp's installation. The more critical content is contaminated by the sustained aesthetic framework compromising the announced intention of the artwork. It is the “WOW-factor” that makes this writing technology so interesting for entertaining and commercial use.<sup>11</sup>

Popp, who declares he was unaware of Pevnick's work, holds that his technology is different – it is simpler, smaller, cheaper – and used for a different purpose.<sup>12</sup> He considers technology as a tool similar to a brush or camera with which one can create completely different content and form. One wonders, however, to what extent this technology itself is a message no matter the specific content provided. Is the (political) content in *Bit.Fall* only – to use Marshall McLuhan's phrase from the appropriately titled essay *The Medium is the Message* – the “juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (32)? This seems at least very likely given the fact that the car industry is not concerned at all the perishability of the signifier this technology renders could be perceived as devaluation of the signified. But does *Bit.Fall* in fact undermine the signifier?

At first glance *Bit.Fall* seems to question the stability of words through the utmost instability of writing material, thus addressing the assurance of meaning itself. Such understanding could be challenged from a deconstructive perspective which links phonocentrism to logocentrism because of the illusory presence and transparency of the phonetic signifier in contrast to the distorting materiality of the written signifier. Writing with water imitates the temporality of oral language and equally avoids re-contextualisation (or: *differance*) to which the written word is subjected. Popp even artificially intensifies the ‘phonocentric’ nature of the word by accelerating its transience with a dimmed environment and spotlights set up at the top of the construction in a way that the word disappears in the dark before the water hits the ground. This does not only make the word's real disappearance invisible, but also means that the word remains (though only for a short moment) present in its absence. In a deconstructive reading such contradiction could be explored as the passage in which *Bit.Fall*'s undermines the very dichotomy its announced message is based on. However, here it must suffice to note that the words uttered

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<sup>10</sup> [www.pevnickdesign.com](http://www.pevnickdesign.com)

<sup>11</sup> Jan Karabasz, former collaborator of Popp, utilizes the *Bit.Fall* installation in the context of the *Rhythmus Berlin* revue at Friedrichstadtpalast Berlin (opening night on March 2, 2007) where a 20 meter wide installation (*Bit.Fall*'s size is 5 to 8 meters) presents images and words representing Berlin. Karabasz' company *Elektronische Steuerungen* also offers commercial applications of *Bit.Fall*'s technology ([www.el-steuerungen.de](http://www.el-steuerungen.de)).

<sup>12</sup> Private email from May 18, 2009.

by *Bit.Fall* are not only ephemeral but also de-contextualized and that their “re-contextualisation” in the random order of their appearance hardly allows a deconstructive reading. *Bit.Fall*, a second glance reveals, stabilizes rather than undermines the signifier.

However, while the materiality of water makes the written text as ephemeral as the spoken word, it does, despite its transparent material, not provide the same transparency. In fact, the striking material markings – the “WOW factor” that here ink is fluid not before but after (while) letters have been written – affect the audience's attention and distort their thinking. Rather than (re)considering the meaning of the appearing words and rather than reflecting “the utter transience of what we consider news”, to use Koepnick's words, people will dance beneath this kind of ‘text rain’, walk through it with an umbrella, try getting to the other side without the text/water hitting them or just enjoy the beauty of words represented by water drops.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to oral communication they will not look *through* the signifiers but *at* them. They will do so not to discover how the text deconstructs its own rhetoric strategy but to enjoy the spectacular way of its presentation. *Bit.Fall* does not correct (or undermine) but neglect the semiotic value of the text by shifting it into an artifact just as paint and shape in nonfigurative painting, although, much cooler than abstract painting ever could be.

The notion of coolness may surprise as rather non-academic language. However, it refers to the theoretical concept of cool as developed in Alan Liu's 2004 study *Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* according to which cool is an ethos of information, which is against information, the uselessness of useful information, the use of information to abuse information (185f.). By presenting information out of context and furnishing them with the “WOW factor” of their bizarre materialization *Bit.Fall* certainly carries out such abuse of information. It does so in contrast to Pevnick's advertisements that stabilize the fluid words through their repetition and contextualization within a clearly defined situation. In those advertisements the fluid words add, because of their specific appearance, the notion of cool to the companies the words present and are, precisely for communicating this information, not cool in the sense of Liu. Reading Pevnick's installations against Popp's reveals the different message in the use of the same technology. While in Pevnick's case the signified is stabilized, in Popp's case it is not undermined nor is the process of signification as such really addressed as Popp and others suggest.

However, in a different way than the artist declared the shift of attention from the meaning of words to their appearance does endow *Bit.Fall* with an element of cultural critique. Namely, if the ethos of the

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<sup>13</sup> Such forms of connecting with the text in *Bit.Fall* demonstrates a video from the Nuit Blanche Festival in 2005:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbsAqNlvXE4&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbsAqNlvXE4&feature=related)

uselessness of useful information is understood as a critical reaction to the information society. The “WOW factor”, we may conclude, does not necessarily undermine the critical impetus of this technology but actually represents it in itself.

#### 4. Reading as Event

*Text Rain* and *Bit.Fall* – as well as many other installations – demonstrate the prospect in digital art that text can lose its linguistic value and turn into an ornament. This aspect is picked up and played out by some artists applying sophisticated digital technology not to marginalize text but to demand attention for it. Thus, *Still Standing* (2005) by Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis aims to discipline the movement of the body in favor of the text. This installation puts – similar to *Text Rain* – the interactor in front of a big screen and features letters – here at rest on the floor – reacting to her movements.<sup>14</sup> The interactor can keep moving around, pushing the letters left and right. When she stops, the letters will be attracted towards her position and move up, shaping her silhouette in a legible way (Fig. 3.). The participant can then contemplate the textual content which has been produced especially for this installation and naturally comments on its interface.<sup>15</sup> When she starts moving again, the letters fall back to the floor.

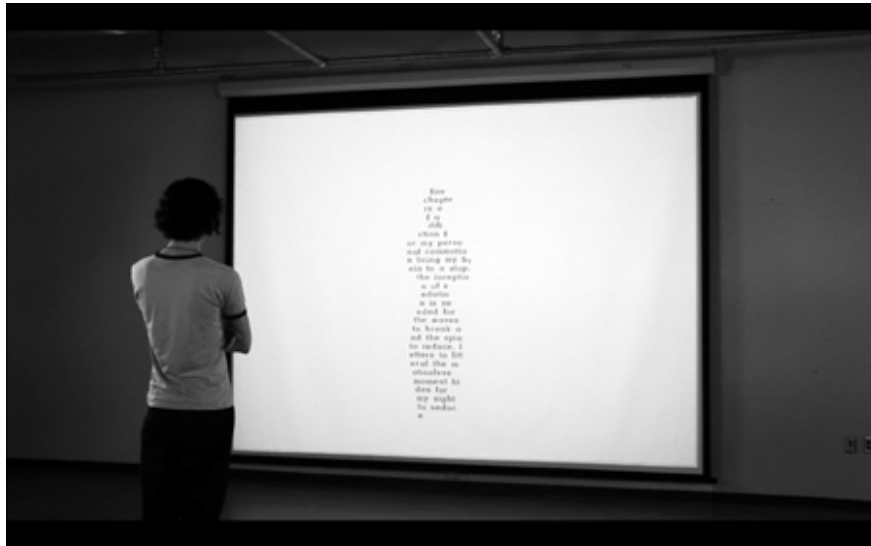


Fig. 3. Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis: *Still Standing*

<sup>14</sup> [www.brunonadeau.com/stillstanding](http://www.brunonadeau.com/stillstanding); the quotes following are taken from this website.

<sup>15</sup> The text presented reads: “five chapters of addiction for my perpetual commotion bring my brain to a stop. the inception of sedation is needed for the waves to break and the spin to reduce. letters to literal the motionless moment hides for my sight to seduce.”

As the artists explain: “nowadays, designs are created to be decrypted and enjoyed at a glance, requiring no attention span. the piece evolved as a response to the ‘collapse of the interval’. a phenomenon of fast pace culture that rarely allows us a moment to stop and observe.” The underlying subject of this installation is the rivalry among the semiotic systems of text and visual art or interactive installation respectively: The ‘consumption’ of text by replacing it with images, transforming it into image, sound, action or depriving it of its linguistic value.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, *Still Standing* uses new technology to enhance the cultural practice of reading endangered since the arrival of electronic and digital media. New technology turns out to be a kind of Trojan horse containing an old-fashioned paradigm of communication. The letters standing in line inside the user’s shadow resemble the Greek soldiers lined up within the Trojan horse.

This strategy reminds us of the use of cinema by Guy Debord who, in reaction to the voyeuristic transformation of the world into a society of images, declared war against cinema not by renouncing film but by freeing it from the dominance of the spectacle. An example of his iconoclastic re-appropriation of film is *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952) an eighty minutes long film without pictures and with almost no sound; only from time to time three voices recite without any expression fragmentary sentences taken from bodies of laws, modernistic literature and newspapers during which the screen changes from black to white. With this film Debord temporally occupied the cinema and interrupted the circulation of images, ‘hijacking’ the new medium in favor of the old. It comes as no surprise that the audience was not interested in spending eighty minutes this way in the cinema. The premiere on June 30 in 1952 ended in chaos and scandal, the film was stopped after less than ten minutes.

*Still Standing* translates Debord’s iconoclasm into the critique of bustling activity in front of the screen. Nadeau and Lewis interrupt the business of action and interaction which has become the new religion in art and an integrated element of contemporary *Society of Spectacle* (Debord). Forcing the audience to stand still in order to read text on the screen of an interactive installation is analogous to having the audience watch an empty screen in the movie theater. In contrast to Debord’s film, though, the installation is able to customize its statement by presenting the text (the ‘Greek soldiers’) in the particular shape of the interactor. *Still Standing* actually addresses every single person of its audience – not by her name but by her body – thus emphasizing the instancy of the message: The text in its materiality mimics the body of the reader. The customization, it should be mentioned, is carried out solely on the level of materiality not content

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of this rivalry and consumption with respect to the concept of “cultural anthropophagy” see Simanowski 2010b.

of the text (i.e. with respect to the signifier not the signified).

The irony, however, is that Nadeau and Lewis are sending an almost empty horse into Troy. It does not refresh the text once the interactor has finished reading it, though tracking the eyes should be no problem, nor replacing one text sequence by another. But could *Still Standing* have kept the interactor still standing still after three, ten or even a hundred text fragments have been presented? Could it capture its audience longer than Debord's film did? It doesn't dare to try. And for good reasons I think.

The equally weighted proportion between the time the text requires assemble into a readable form and the time one needs to actually read the text allows experiencing this moment of standing still as an *action* in its own right. The text (and its reading) appears as event. By abstaining from requesting a longer period of immobilization and thus challenging the audience's patience, *Still Standing* compromises its "response to the 'collapse of the interval'" and contributes itself to the fast pace culture it criticizes. The installation betrays itself as deep-seated part of the system it originally set out to undermine. The paradoxical result of this implicit complicity is that the meaning of the work is not disclosed in the bodily experiences of immobilization present at the scene but by recognizing the bodily experience *absent* avoided if not suppresses in order to survive the rivalry among text, image and action.

## 5. Revealing Code

The deprivation of text of its linguistic value can be situated within the aesthetics of the spectacle as part of the contemporary "society of the spectacle" and as offspring of the "postmodern condition."<sup>17</sup> As is well known, Jean-François Lyotard – in his writing on aesthetics following the description of the erosion of grand narratives in *The Postmodern Condition* – focused on the event and the intensity of the (sublime) moment on the expanse of message and signification. This focus has been described as a shift of attention "from the determination of a general truth or general operating strategy to an interest in 'performativity'," as Marvin Carlson notes in the context of performance art (138). With respect to new media genres, such as film, MTV, and computer games, Andrew Darley similarly notes a "shift away from prior modes of spectator experience based on symbolic concerns (and 'interpretative models') towards recipients who are seeking intensities of direct sensual stimulation" (3). The reader, Darley holds, becomes a sensualist "in pursuit of the ornamental and

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<sup>17</sup> Guy Debord's term "society of the spectacle" from 1967 has been used since to describe the postmodern time, as for example by Frederic Jameson (1998: 87).

the decorative, modes of embellishment, the amazing and the breathtaking” (169).<sup>18</sup>

As far as text in digital media is concerned, I mentioned at the beginning the fear (or at least: report and prophecy) of the “breakout of the visual” (Bolter: 258) and the dominance of the “post-alphabetic image” (Joyce: 42). The transformation of text from a linguistic artifact to an audio-visual object can also be discussed with the concept of the visual as pornographic developed in Frederic Jameson’s 1992 *Signatures of the Visible*. According to Jameson “the visual is *essentially* pornographic” because “it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination”; pornographic films are therefore “only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body” (1992: 1). Similar to McLuhan’s dictum of the medium as message and Postman’s use of this dictum with respect to television as inevitable medium of amusement, Jameson questions the critical-utopian potential of film. For him, film is part of mainstream culture to the extent that it presents a phenomenon as interesting, attractive and seductive as a naked body at which the spectator is staring with astonishment and affection.

Jameson’s concept of the visual has been applied to the role text plays in electronic media. Thus, Janez Strehovec – who picks up Manovich’s notion about the cinematic character of the language of new media quoted at the beginning of this essay – holds that an important part of the textual production in contemporary culture is based on words in motion and that a great amount of it is “performed as the naked body” (2009) in terms of Jameson.<sup>19</sup> As a case in point, Strehovec refers to Brian Kim Stefans’ *The Dreamlife of Letters*, a flash animation of moving letters which ends, quite adequately, with the sentence “Thanks for *watching*” (emphasis added by R.S.).<sup>20</sup> Like in many other examples of kinetic text in digital media – and in contrast to earlier text films such as Michael Snow’s *So Is This* (1982) – *The Dreamlife of Letters* owes, with its syntax of surprise and short cuts, much to the aesthetic of cinema and music video. Hence, Strehovec notes that text, formerly representing the rather elite medium of literature, is refashioned, appropriated, or ‘hijacked’ as something adequate to contemporary movie industry and club culture.

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<sup>18</sup> For a critical discussion of the prevalence of excessive decoration in postmodern aesthetics and the shift from contemplative distance to sensual immersion see Hal Foster’s 2002 book *Design and Crime* referring to the Austrian architect Adolf Loos who, in his 1910 essay *Ornament and Crime*, confronted the aesthetic hybridity of Art Nouveau.

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that Jameson’s presupposition that the “closest relative” of film is the novel rather than theater or video experimental (1992: 4) helps him making the point of a shift away from the cognitive action of reading to the voyeuristic action of staring, at which Strehovec is aiming with his reference to Jameson.

<sup>20</sup> *The Dreamlife of Letters* can be watched at:  
[http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans\\_\\_the\\_dreamlife\\_of\\_letters.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/stefans__the_dreamlife_of_letters.html)

Such observation can also be made concerning the installations discussed. Text appears as a captivating event and physical body to be stared at rather than as a linguistic object to be read and understood. Jameson, describing the visual and musical as the physical, not essentially linguistic elements of text, notes: “the more advanced and rationalized activity [i.e. the engagement with text as a linguistic object – R.S.] can also have its dream of the other, and regress to a longing for the more immediately sensory, wishing it could pass altogether over to the visual, or be sublimated into the spiritual body of pure sound” (1992: 2). *Text Rain* and *Bit.Fall* surely carry out such sublimation into the sensory and even *Still Standing*, as has been seen, does not really force the viewer to engage with the text as reader. The text, in its physicalness, is stared at in “rapt, mindless fascination” to use Jameson’s words.

To be precise, what is stared at is the hidden, unexposed, embedded text: the programming code. The code makes the text on the surface – the poem in *Text Rain*, the words pulled from websites in *Bit.Fall*, the statement in *Still Standing* – appear in its particular, fascinating way and is, during this process, in fact exhibited itself. However, we don’t stare at the code as alphanumerical equation but as materialization on the screen or on the scene: the ‘raining’, the ‘fluid’ and the ‘mimicking’ letters. Staring at the code processing the text is inter-reliant with stripping this text of its linguistic value. To phrase it as a blend of McLuhan and Jameson: the pornographic message of digital media is code concealing text. To put it with respect to this book’s issues of “ubiquitous computing” and “calm embeddedness”: The “eventilization” of the text (Hayles: 182), invisibly and permanently taking place with each letter in digital media, is brought to attention by a mode of processing much more sophisticated and spectacular than in regular digital text production. In this perspective the pornographic turns into elucidation: making the text illegible makes the code visible.

Such conclusion can be made with respect to the installations discussed, many other installations employing text as audio-visual objects, as well as further genres of digital arts, such as kinetic concrete poetry and mapping art.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the focus on code may, applying the title of another seminal text by Jameson, even be considered the inherent ‘cultural logic’ of digital technology. Even though digital technology is primarily invisibly embedded in our life world, we may say, it is the natural (narcissistic) intention of this technology to center stage its own basic material: code-work. The shift from the linguistic to the physical of text, from the expression of ideas to the thrill of technical effects demonstrates the desire for publicity and recognition. This desire, however, builds completely on discipline

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<sup>21</sup> See my discussion of kinetic concrete poetry and mapping art in chapter two and five in Simanowski 2010a.

(i.e. the skill of virtuosic programming) for it is the faultless code that generates the ‘perfect body’ (or: visual) which we can’t help staring at.

The discipline of coding has its counterpart on the side of perception. As the readings of *Text Rain*, *Bit.Fall*, and *Still Standing* have shown, the thrill of the technical can, beyond sensual stimulation, also be approached within a hermeneutic model. While text deprived of its linguistic value does no longer utter a specific message, the way such text is presented, with no doubt, is meaningful. At the end, the pornographic of the medium lies in the eyes of the beholder: Staring at the materialization of code can always (and finally should) turn into looking *through* it down to its deeper meaning.

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