Digimodernism

Alan Kirby's idea of digimodernism began its life under a different name: 'pseudo-modernism'. (This coinage can be found in his essay 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond', in Part One of this book.) For Kirby, however, that term did not connote either the full extent or the precise nature of the shift away from the postmodern he had diagnosed. Deciding that 'pseudomodernity is finally a dimension of one aspect of digimodernism', he published a book in 2009, defining and exploring how a new digimodernist era had superseded postmodernity.

Like Robert Samuels's automodernism, digimodernism is a technologically inspired vision: it sees computers, mobile phones, and (so-called) interactive television as the vehicles driving the changes in the forms our culture and everyday lives take. These changes bear some superficial resemblances to the postmodern: for example, interactive media seem to embody such postmodernist ideas as Roland Barthes's 'writerly' text, with its transfer of agency from author to reader, or the non-linear, non-sequential nature of postmodern narrative – what, one might ask, is the internet if not a Borgesian labyrinth of forking paths, winding their unteleological ways through a Lyotardian diversity of petits récits? Digital texts are by nature always coming into being, and are therefore open-ended, like the postmodern artwork as described by Lyotard. Furthermore, from the cameras in our phones to reality television, digimodernism shares postmodernism's preoccupation with the category of 'the real'.

Kirby, however, does not share Samuels's ambivalence towards the new technological developments. Where Samuels flags up the sense of autonomy these new media bestow on their users as potentially positive, Kirby regards it as a tendentious step towards a solipsistic subjectivity he (problematically) compares to autism. Where some have regarded web-based platforms as forums for democracy and debate, Kirby sees instead the rise of a dumbed-down populism. Where postmodernism ironically juxtaposed the high with the low, digimodernism aggressively champions the low over the high – and it does so not ironically but sincerely, in the name of the (one time) postmodern value of anti-elitism.

Ultimately, then, the characteristics of digimodernism turn out to be significantly different from those of postmodernism, despite outward similarities that have obfuscated its distinctiveness as a new Jamesonian 'cultural dominant'. Digimodernism, as Kirby sees it, is the technologized face of a society given over to an unbridled consumerism – and in this respect, digimodernism resembles Lipovetsky's hypermodernism more closely than it does Samuels's automodernism.

It is certainly possible that Kirby's pessimistic criticisms of the digimodernist culture he describes may yet turn out to be premature, given the infancy of the technology he discusses. In the meantime, however, it remains a richly provocative analysis that offers, in a sense, an updated version of a basically McLuhanite position: the form *of the previous technology and culture (postmodernism's* bricolage, collaging, and sampling, or its refusal of linearity, teleology, and sequence) *has become the* content *of the new media technology, and will hold back the cultural expressions that use these new media until the potential for innovation in such media has been fully realized. Not till then will we be able adequately to judge the new digimodernist phase of our culture. Meanwhile, if 'the medium is the message', then is it surprising that digimodernist culture generates ephemeral, vapid, and throwaway texts, when the rapid pace of technological change guarantees that any attempt at using these media to make a lasting cultural contribution is doomed to built-in obsolescence? If this summary of Kirby's digimodernism is a valid one, then it is worth asking whether it is problematic that his diagnosis of a new 'cultural dominant' beyond the postmodern follows the same pattern of thought as Marshall McLuhan's work – a thinker firmly ensconced in the postmodern canon.*

The extract is from Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 1–3; pp. 50–54; pp. 58–72; pp. 139–50; pp. 223–4.

from Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture

Alan Kirby

Introduction

Now ... bring me that horizon.
                    (Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl, *2003)*[1]

Since its first appearance in the second half of the 1990s under the impetus of new technologies, digimodernism has decisively displaced postmodernism to establish itself as the twenty-first century's new cultural paradigm. It owes its emergence and preeminence to the computerization of text, which yields a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship. These in turn become the hallmarks of a group of texts in new and established modes that also manifest the digimodernist traits of infantilism, earnestness, endlessness, and apparent reality. Digimodernist texts are found across contemporary culture, ranging from 'reality TV' to Hollywood fantasy blockbusters, from Web 2.0 platforms to the most sophisticated videogames, and from certain kinds of radio show to crossover fiction. In its pure form the digimodernist text permits the reader or viewer to intervene textually, physically to make text, to add visible content or tangibly shape narrative development. Hence 'digimodernism', properly understood as a contraction of 'digital modernism', is a pun: it's where digital technology meets textuality and text is (re)formulated by the fingers and thumbs (the digits) clicking and keying and pressing in the positive act of partial or obscurely collective textual elaboration.

Of all the definitions of postmodernism, the form of digimodernism recalls the one given by Fredric Jameson. It too is 'a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm'; not a blanket description of all contemporary cultural production but 'the

force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses ... [including] "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production ... must make their way'.[2] Like Jameson, I feel that if 'we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference ... [The aim is] to project some conception of a new systematic cultural norm'.[3] Twenty years later, however, the horizon has changed; the dominant cultural force field and systematic norm is different: what was postmodernist is now digimodernist.

The relationships between digimodernism and postmodernism are various. First, digimodernism is the successor to postmodernism: emerging in the mid-late 1990s, it gradually eclipsed it as the dominant cultural, technological, social, and political expression of our times. Second, in its early years a burgeoning digimodernism coexisted with a weakened, retreating postmodernism; it's the era of the hybrid or borderline text (*The Blair Witch Project*, *The Office*, the *Harry Potter* novels). Third, it can be argued that many of the flaws of early digimodernism derive from its contamination by the worst features of a decomposing postmodernism; one of the tasks of a new digimodernist criticism will therefore be to cleanse its subject of its toxic inheritance. Fourth, digimodernism is a reaction against postmodernism: certain of its traits (earnestness, the apparently real) resemble a repudiation of typical postmodern characteristics. Fifth, historically adjacent and expressed in part through the same cultural forms, digimodernism appears socially and politically as the logical effect of postmodernism, suggesting a modulated continuity more than a rupture. These versions of the relationship between the two are not incompatible but reflect their highly complex, multiple identities.

On the whole I don't believe there is such a thing as 'digimodernity'. This book is not going to argue that we have entered into a totally new phase of history. My sense is that, whatever its current relevance in other fields, postmodernism's insistence on locating an absolute break in all human experience between the disappeared past and the stranded present has lost all plausibility. The last third of the twentieth century was marked by a discourse of endings, of the 'post-' prefix and the 'no longer' structure, an aftershock of 1960s' radicalism and a sort of intellectual millenarianism that seems to have had its day. Like Habermas, my feeling is that, ever more crisis ridden, modernity continued throughout this period as an 'unfinished project'. Although the imponderable evils of the 1930s and 40s could only trigger a breakdown of faith in inherited cultural and historical worldviews such as the Enlightenment, the nature and scale of this reaction were

overstated by some writers. In so far as it exists, 'digimodernity' is, then, another stage within modernity, a shift from one phase of its history into another.

Certain other kinds of discourse are also not to be found here. I won't be looking at how digitization actually works technically; and I won't do more than touch on the industrial consequences, the (re)organization of TV channels, film studios, Web start-ups, and so on, which it's occasioned. I'm a cultural critic, and my interest here is in the new cultural climate thrown up by digitization. My focus is textual: what are these new movies, new TV programs, these videogames, and Web 2.0 applications like to read, watch, and use? What do they signify, and how? Digimodernism, as well as a break in textuality, brings a new textual form, content, and value, new kinds of cultural meaning, structure, and use, and they will be the object of this book.

Equally, while digimodernism has far-reaching philosophical implications with regard to such matters as selfhood, truth, meaning, representation, and time, they are not directly explored here. It's true that these arguments first saw the light of day in an article I wrote for *Philosophy Now* in 2006, but the cultural landscape was even then my primary interest.[4] In that article I called what I now label digimodernism 'pseudo-modernism', a name that on reflection seemed to overemphasize the importance of certain concomitant social shifts. The notion of pseudomodernity is finally a dimension of one aspect of digimodernism. The article was written largely in the spirit of intellectual provocation; uploaded to the Web, it drew a response that eventually persuaded me the subject deserved more detailed and scrupulous attention. I've tried to address here a hybrid audience, and for an important reason: on one side, it seemed hardly worth discussing such a near-universal issue without trying to reach out to the general reader; on the other, it seemed equally pointless to analyze such a complex, multifaceted, and shifting phenomenon without a level of scholarly precision. Whatever the result may be, this approach is justified, even necessitated, by the status and nature of the theme. [...]

The digimodernist text

sea change: *(unexpected or notable) transformation*
watershed: *line of separation between waters flowing to different rivers or basins or seas . . . (fig.) turning-point*

(Concise Oxford Dictionary, *1982*)[5]

There are various ways of defining digimodernism. It is the impact on cultural forms of computerization (inventing some, altering others). It is a set of aesthetic characteristics consequent on that process and gaining a unique cast from their new context. It's a cultural shift, a communicative revolution, a social organization. The most immediate way, however, of describing digimodernism is this: it's a new form of textuality.

In this the passage from postmodernism to digimodernism bears no resemblance to the way that the former broke from its predecessor. Textually, *The Bloody Chamber* or *Pale Fire* differs from *The Waves* or *As I Lay Dying* only on the surface, as an evolution in the codes and conventions and the manner of their manipulation; in their depth they rely on the same textual functioning. The author creates and sequences a quantity of words; these solidify as 'the text'; the reader scrutinizes and interprets that inherited, set mass. The author precedes the material text, which may outlast him/her; the reader makes over their *sense* of what they receive but neither brings the words into being nor contributes to their ordering (I distinguish these two functions since 1960s' avant-gardism found ways [...] to give the reader some control over sequencing). Traditional texts were once thought to possess a hermeneutical 'secret', a fixed meaning placed there by the author which the reader was to locate and treasure; later, texts were seen as hermeneutical free-for-alls, their meanings multiple and scattered, which the reader chose to bring pell-mell into play. In either case the physical properties of the text remained solidified and inviolate: no matter how inventively you interpreted *Gravity's Rainbow* you didn't *materially* bring it into existence, and in this Pynchon's postmodern exemplum exactly resembled *Pride and Prejudice*.

The digimodernist text in its pure form is made up to a varying degree by the reader or viewer or textual consumer. This figure becomes authorial in this sense: s/he makes text where none existed before. It isn't that his/her reading is of a kind to suggest meanings; there is no metaphor here. In an act distinct from their act of reading or viewing, such a reader or viewer gives to the world textual content or shapes the development and progress of a text in visible form. This content is *tangible*; the act is physical. Hence, the name 'digital modernism' in which the former term conceals a pun: the centrality of digital technology; and the centrality of the digits, of the fingers and thumbs that key and press and click in the business of material textual elaboration.

Fairly pure examples of digimodernist texts would include: on T V, *Big Brother*, *Pop Idol*, *100 Greatest Britons*, *Test the Nation*, *Strictly Come Dancing*, and *Quiz Call*; the film *Timecode*; Web 2.0 forms like Wikipedia, blogs, chat rooms, and

social networking sites; videogames such as *Mass Effect, Grand Theft Auto IV, BioShock, Final Fantasy XII,* and *Metal Gear Solid 4*; SMS messages; '6-0-6' and certain other kinds of radio phone-in; or the Beatles' album *Everest* [...]. Digimodernism is not limited to such texts or even to such a textuality; rather, it is more easily expressed as the rupture, driven by technological innovation, which permits such a form. They are not by virtue of their novelty 'great' texts; indeed, the quality of the digimodernist text is moot. The distinctiveness of their functioning interests us, not their ostensible content. Instead, it is in the functioning of such a textuality that the irreducible difference of the digimodernist becomes most palpable.

The digimodernist text displays a certain body of traits that it bequeaths to digimodernism as a whole. These will recur throughout the rest of the analysis. Such characteristics relate to the digimodernist textuality almost as a machine: considered as a system by which meaning is made, not as meaning. Postmodernist features denote either a textual content or a set of techniques, employed by an antecedent author, embedded in a materially fixed and enduring text, and traced or enjoyed by a willful reader/viewer. The traits of digimodernist textuality exist on a deeper level: they describe how the textual machine operates, how it is delimited and by whom, its extension in time and in space, and its ontological determinants. The surface level of what digimodernist texts 'mean' and how they mean it will be discussed later in the book. We can sketch the following dominant features:

Onwardness. The digimodernist text exists now, in its coming into being, as something growing and incomplete. The traditional text appears to almost everyone in its entirety, ended, materially made. The digimodernist text, by contrast, is up for grabs: it is rolling, and the reader is plunged in among it as something that is ongoing. For the reader of the traditional text its time is after its fabrication; the time of the digimodernist text seems to have a start but no end.

Haphazardness. In consequence, the future development of the text is undecided. What it will consist of further down the line is as yet unknown. This feels like freedom; it may also feel like futility. It can be seen as power; but, lacking responsibility, this is probably illusory. If onwardness describes the digimodernist text in time, haphazardness locates in it the permanent possibility that it might go off in multiple directions: the infinite parallel potential of its future textual contents.

Evanescence. The digimodernist text does not endure. It is technically very hard to capture and archive; it has no interest as a reproducible item. You might happily watch all the broadcast hours of *Fawlty Towers*; no one would want to see the whole of a *Big Brother* run again (retransmission has never been proposed), and in any event the impossibility of restaging the public votes renders the exact original show unreplicable.

Reformulation and intermediation of textual roles. Already evident, and explored at greater length in this chapter, is the digimodernist text's radical redefinition of textual functional titles: reader, author, viewer, producer, director, listener, presenter, writer. Intermediate forms become necessary in which an individual primarily the one acts to a degree like another. These shifts are multiple and not to be exaggerated: the reader who becomes authorial in a digimodernist text does not stand in relation to the latter as Flaubert did to *Madame Bovary.* These terms are then given new, hybridized meanings; and this development is not concluded.

Anonymous, multiple and social authorship. Of these reformulations what happens to authorship in the digimodernist text especially deserves attention. It becomes multiple, almost innumerable, and is scattered across obscure social pseudocommunities. If not actually anonymous it tends to a form of pseudonymity which amounts to a renunciation of the practice of naming (e.g., calling yourself 'veryniceguy' on a message board or in a chat room). This breaks with the traditional text's conception of authorship in terms tantamount to commercial 'branding', as a lonely and definite quantity; yet it does not achieve communality either.

The fluid-bounded text. The physical limits of the traditional text are easily establishable: my copy of *The Good Soldier* has 294 pages, *Citizen Kane* is 119 minutes long. Materially a traditional text – even in the form of a journalist's report, a school essay, a home movie – has clear limits; though scholars may discover new parts of a whole by restoring cut or lost material their doing so only reinforces the sense that the text's physical proportions are tangibly and correctly determinable (and ideally frozen). Embodying onwardness, haphazardness, and evanescence, the digimodernist text so lacks this quality that traditionalists may not recognize it as a text at all. Such a text may be endless or swamp any act of reception/consumption. And yet texts they are: they are

systematic bodies of recorded meaning, which represent acts in time and space and produce coherently intelligible patterns of signification.

Electronic-digitality. In its pure form, the digimodernist text relies on its technological status: it's the textuality that derives from digitization; it's produced by fingers and thumbs and computerization. This is not to be insisted on excessively; however, this is why digimodernism dates back only to the second half of the 1990s. Digimodernism is not primarily a visual culture and it destroys the society of the spectacle: it is a manually oriented culture, although the actions of the hand are here interdependent on a flow of optical information unified through the auspices of the electronic.

Much more could be added here, but there is space for only two further clarifications. First, an ancestor of the digimodernist text is Espen J. Aarseth's notion of 'ergodic literature' in which, he argued as long ago as 1997, there is '*a work of physical construction* that the various concepts of "reading" do not account for … In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text'.[6] The description of pageturning, eye movement, and mental processing as 'trivial' is misleading, while the implication of textual delimitedness contained in 'traversal' has been outdated by technical-textual innovations. However, his account differs from mine most notably in its lack of a wider context. For I see the pure digimodernist text solely as the easily recognizable tip of a cultural iceberg, and not necessarily its most interesting element. These characteristics can be found diffusely across a range of texts that I would call digimodernist whose consumer cannot make them up; though digimodernism produces a new form of textuality it is not reduced to that, and many of its instances are not evanescent, haphazard, and so on. But the discussion had to start somewhere. Digimodernism can be globally expressed in seven words (the effects on cultural forms of digitization) and historically situated in eight (the cultural-dominant succeeding postmodernism prompted by new technologies). It can be captured, as I said, in a pun. Yet all in all it's a more complex development than this might suggest. Ergodic literature is then no more than the forerunner of a distinctive feature of digimodernism.

Second, this textuality has been described as 'participatory'. There's a political rhetoric to hand here, all about democracy, antielitism, the common man, and so on. Al Gore has celebrated Web 2.0 for offering such a mode of popular expression (debate, forums) and overcoming the top-down manipulation imposed by

spectacular television.[7] But, as well as suggesting Gore hasn't watched TV since the 1980s (it has reinvented itself in the direction of Web 2.0), this way of thinking presupposes a cleaned-up, politically progressive but traditional text. 'Participation' assumes a clearly marked textual boundary (even if fuzzy a line is necessary to take part *in*), an equality of text-makers (you don't 'participate' by controlling), a communally visible and known group of intervenants, and a real-life situation (you can participate in theater but not in a novel). The participant too is condemned to action. Digimodernist textuality, as I hope I've made clear, goes beyond all this. The political consequences of digimodernism are more likely to be desocialization and pseudoautism than an upsurge in eighteenth-century notions of democratic practice.

[...]

The antilexicon of early digimodernism

One sign of the novelty of the digimodernist text is that none of the traditional words describing the relations of individuals with texts is appropriate to it. The inherited terminology of textual creation and reception (author, reader, text, listener, viewer, etc.) is awkward here, inadequate, misleading in this newly restructured universe. So new is it that even words recently developed to step into the breach (interactive, nonlinear, etc.) are unsatisfactory. Of course, in time this new kind of text will evolve its own seemingly inevitable lexicon, or perhaps existing words will take on new and enriched senses to bear the semantic load. Aiming to contribute nothing directly to this linguistic growth, I am going instead here to assess the wreckage of the current lexical state, thereby, I hope, helping to clear enough ground to open up the conceptual landscape a bit more to view. Like all dictionaries, what follows should really be read in any order: the reader is invited to jump nonsequentially around the entries, which inevitably overlap.

A is not exactly for Author

Central to postmodernism and to post-structuralism was their vigorous repudiation of the figure of the author. Roland Barthes in a famous essay published in 1968 declared that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' and called for the latter's 'destruction' and 'removal' from the field of textual criticism.[8] Coupled with Michel Foucault's subsequent weak

conception of the 'author-function', this stance became orthodoxy among post-structuralist critics.[9] Written selfconsciously 'in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes', John Fowles's postmodern novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* critiques and dismantles the myth of the Author-God, finally revealed as an 'unpleasant ... distinctly mean and dubious' figure.[10] Postmodernist culture returns repeatedly to this debilitated or tarnished image of the author. Martin Amis's are obnoxious and louche: a priggish nerd with 'sadistic impulses' in *Money*, a murderer and murderee in *London Fields*, and twin pretentious morons in *The Information*: 'Like all writers, Richard wanted to live in some hut on some crag somewhere, every couple of years folding a page into a bottle and dropping it limply into the spume. Like all writers, Richard wanted, and expected, the reverence due, say, to the Warrior Christ an hour before Armageddon.'[11] As a symptom of this degeneration, almost all of the major fictions by one of the greatest of all postmodern authors, Philip K. Dick, are only, and read like, first drafts: messy, clunky, wildly uneven, desperate for polishing. Redeemed by their content, these texts' achievement implicitly junks the Romantic conception of the author as a transcendent donor of eternal beauty in favor of the haphazardly brilliant hack.

Digimodernism, however, silently restores the authorial, and revalorizes it. To do this, it abolishes the assumed singularity of authorship in a redefinition that moves decisively away from both traditional post-Enlightenment conceptions and their repudiation. Authorship is always plural here, perhaps innumerable, although it should normally be possible, if anyone wanted to, to count up how many there are. The digimodernist authorial is multiple, but not communal or collective as it may have been in premodern cultures; instead, it is rigorously hierarchical. We would need to talk, in specific cases, of layers of authorship running across the digimodernist-text, and distributions of functions: from an originative level that sets parameters, invents terms, places markers, and proffers structural content, to later, lower levels that produce the text they are also consuming by determining and inventing narrative and textual content where none existed before. The differing forms of this authorship relate to this text at differing times and places and with varying degrees of decisiveness; yet all bring the text into being, all are kinds of author. Though a group or social or plural activity, the potential 'community' of digimodernist authorship (widely announced) is in practice vitiated by the anonymity of the function here. We don't even get Foucault's author as social sign: the digimodernist author is mostly unknown or meaningless or encrypted. Who writes Wikipedia? Who votes on *Big Brother*? Who exactly makes

a videogame? Extended across unknown distances, and scattered among numerous zones and layers of fluctuating determinacy, digimodernist authorship seems ubiquitous, dynamic, ferocious, acute, and simultaneously nowhere, secret, undisclosed, irrelevant. Today, authorship is the site of a swarming, restless creativity and energy; the figure of the disreputably lonely or mocked or dethroned author of postmodernism and post-structuralism is obsolete.

If I is for Interactive, there's a love-hate relationship with 'inter'

The spread of the personal computer in the 1980s brought with it a new associated vocabulary, some of which, like 'interfacing' or going 'online', has been absorbed permanently into the language. If the emergence of the digimodernist text has had a comparable effect you might point to the discourse of 'interactivity' as an example. Videogames, reality TV, YouTube, and the rest of Web 2.0 are all supposed to offer an 'interactive' textual experience by virtue of the fact that the individual is given and may carry out manual or digital actions while engaging with them. I talk about the difficulties of the passive/active binary elsewhere, so will restrict myself here to the term's prefix, one that has, indeed, spread across the whole digital sphere.

The notion of '*inter*action' seems inevitable and exciting partly because it evokes the relationship (or interplay or interface) of text and individual as a dialectical, back-and-forth exchange. This very reciprocity can be seen, to an extent, as the kernel of digimodernism; the new prevalence of the 'interactive' nexus and of the prefix in general is a sign of the emergence of a new textual paradigm. Older terms like 'reader' or 'writer', 'listener' or 'broadcaster' don't convey that doubled give-and-take, its contraflow; they focus on one individual's role within an inert textual theater. The word 'interactive' then is as textually new as the digimodernism with which it is identical because it reflects the new textual dimension that has suddenly opened up: not only do you 'consume' this text, but the text acts or plays back at you in response, and you consequently act or play more, and it returns to you again in reaction. This textual experience resembles a seesawing duality, or a meshing and turning of cogs. Moving beyond the isolation of earlier words, 'interactivity' places the individual within a diachronic rapport, a growing, developing relationship based on one side's pleasure alone.

I like 'inter' both because it captures the historical rupture with the textual past in its new ubiquity, and because it highlights the structuration of digimodernism, its flow of exchanges in time. It's highly misleading, though, as well, because it

suggests an equality in these exchanges. In truth, just as the authors of the digimodernist text vary in their levels of input or decisiveness, so the individual is never the equal of the text with which s/he is engaging. The individual can, for instance, abandon the text but not vice versa; conversely, the text is set up, inflected, regulated, limited and – to a large extent – simply invented well before s/he gets near it. Engaging with a digimodernist text, s/he is allowed to be active only in very constrained and predetermined ways. In short, the creativity of this individual arrives rather late in this textual universe.

A better understanding of digimodernist authorship would clarify the nature of interactivity too, which often seems reduced to a sort of 'manuality', a hand-based responsiveness within a textuality whose form and content were long ago set. Your 'digital' interventions occur here when, where, and how they are permitted to. But I won't let go of the glimpse of the new textual machinery that is conveyed by and contained within 'inter'.

L is sort of for Listener

Two versions of listening are familiar to us: the first, when we know we are expected to respond (in a private conversation, in a seminar, meeting, etc.); the second, when we know we will not respond (listening to music or a politician addressing a rally, etc.). The social conventions governing this distinction are fairly rigorously applied: they make heckling, the act of responding when not supposed to, inherently rebellious, for instance. Listening has then a double relationship with speech or other human sound creation, like music: it can only be done, obviously, when there is something to listen *to*; and it differs qualitatively according to whether the listener knows s/he is expected to respond. In one case, we can probably assume that s/he listens more closely, does nothing else at the same time; in the other s/he may start and stop listening at will, talk over the discourse, and so on. Varying contexts produce varying intensities of listening, though it remains always a conscious, directed act (distinct from the inadvertency or passivity of hearing). The corollary of this is that the grammar of what we listen to also embeds these social conventions. When we are expected to respond, the discourse offered will tend to the second person ('you'), either explicitly (e.g., questions, orders) or implicitly (e.g., a story that provokes the response 'something similar happened to me'). When not expected to respond we will probably listen to first-person plural modes ('we', the implicit pronoun of the stand-up comic) or third person ('s/he', 'they'), although politicians and others

will sometimes employ rhetorically the second person to create an actually bogus sense of intimacy ('Ask not what your country . . .').

Radio, traditionally, offers sound to which we know we will not respond: third person, easily capable of being talked over or ignored or sung along to or switched off in mid-flow. DJs, like politicians, try to create warmth by generating the illusion that they are speaking to *you* (this is the whole art of the DJ) but without using literally a second-person discourse – their mode is also the comic's implicit 'we'. Digimodernist radio, in which 'listeners' contribute their texts, e-mails, and phone voices to the content of the show, gives us a different kind of listening, pitched halfway between the two familiar versions. We are neither expected to respond or unable to, but suspended between as *someone who could respond*, who *might* respond. We could, as easily as anybody else, send in a text or e-mail or call up the phone-in line and speak. And perhaps we do: some people will become regular callers to such programs or repeat contributors of written material, and their voices and writing take on in time the assured, measured delivery of the seasoned professional. In so doing, they achieve the conversational parity of the responding listener. It's noticeable that such programs permit their external contributors to make only very brief and concise points. This is usually explained by 'we've got a lot of callers' but in some instances, especially on sports phone-ins like those following an England soccer match, many of the callers make roughly the same point – they're not curtailed to allow space for a vast wealth of varying opinions. E-mails and texts are short too even though they tend to be better expressed and less predictable than the improvised speech of the presenter. This could again be due to the psychological effect being sought: the more people who contribute, the more it could be you contributing, both in terms of the show's mood and identity, and as a brute numerical fact.

Similarly, the discourse thrown up by digimodernist radio lies curiously stranded between the modes typical of the two traditional versions of listening. It consists, on one level, of the first-and-second person of ordinary conversation: I think this, why do you, and so on. Yet it cannot in fact be *about* either of them, partly because the external contributor, in digimodernist fashion, is virtually anonymous – to be 'Dave from Manchester' is to teeter on the brink of being anyone at all. So the content of the show becomes an intimate exchange about public matters, which is why it resembles stereotypical male conversation, like bar or pub talk (and the majority of contributors are always men). Accounts of personal experience are tolerated here, but only to clarify a general point. Unlike bar talk, this discourse has no chance of becoming oriented on private matters

since, though intimately formulated, it belongs to a broadcast public discussion. The effect, finally, is that the exchanges feel neither really intimate (a faked I-you-I) nor generally interesting (they make no new intellectual discoveries but just stir around the quasi-knowledge and received wisdom of the presenter and their callers). It's an attractive model of spoken discourse because, synthesizing the traits of both common forms, it promises an unusual richness and potency. But it actually provides neither desired outcome of listening, neither personalization and intimacy, nor clarification and action. Listening to digimodernist radio does tend to be listening, but never.the sorts we used to know.

N isn't yet for Nonlinear (a mess that needs clearing first)

Nonlinear: such a contemporary term! We are always hearing that new technologies prompt new, nonlinear experiences of texts, though this is a highly confused terminology. It's popular because it suggests freedom: to follow doggedly and obediently a 'line' is more oppressive than to scatter whimsically away from it (compare use of 'the beaten track', which everybody boasts of getting 'off' and nobody wishes to be seen 'on'). If linearity means to construct the textual experience as running necessarily from its beginning through its middle to its end, then some digimodernist forms are in fact ultralinear. Videogames, for instance, pass through these stages; although you can freeze your position within them for the next time, you will nevertheless simply resume your linear progression when you return. You can't do a bit near the end of the game, then a bit near the beginning; you follow a line. The innovation of videogames, it seems to me, is that they are multilinear: you follow, each time, a slightly *different* line, and these various strands lie virtually side by side as ghostly or actual lines taken. To a degree this is true of any game (it's certainly true of chess), but in videogames it's textually true: there are characters, plotlines, tasks, and so on, opened up along one line that are denied another. The multilinearity of videogames is precisely what differentiates them from other textual forms. A duller version of digimodernist ultralinearity is the DVD. If you had wanted, in the age of video, to show a class the similarities between the hat-passing scene in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the lemonade stall sequence in the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*, you could have cued your two tapes just before the bits in question, then slid them into the seminar room VCR at the appropriate time. Try to do this.with DVDs and you spend five minutes per film trudging through studio logos, copyright warnings (ironically), adverts and the rest of the rigmarole, because DVDs

enforce a beginning-middle-end textual experience. Again, though, they are multilinear: whereas a video offers only one version of the movie, a DVD offers twenty, with different audio and/or subtitle settings, with the director's or a critic's commentary overlaid, and more. They sit side by side on the DVD, mostly ignored by the viewer; ultralinearity here is multilinearity.

What is often called nonlinearity is actually nonchronology, the jumping around in time of stories such as *Eyeless in Gaza*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento*, or *Waterland*. They are still, though, linear textual experiences. Reading and viewing are necessarily linear – you might skip, but you wouldn't jumble the chapters or sequences – whereas rereading and re-viewing will often focus on fragments, episodes, scenes; I've only read *Ulysses* from start to finish once, but I've read the 'Cyclops' section five times at least. To return to a text is to permit a nonlinear experience. Yet in practice this is only the replacement of a totalized linearity with a restricted one: I still tend to read the 'Cyclops' pages in order or, if I jump around, I read the lines in order – the linearity is ever more straitened, but indestructible.

As for new digimodernist forms, like the Internet, the terms that seem to me most apposite are antisequentiality and ultraconsecutiveness. By sequence I mean a progression in which each new term is logically produced by its predecessor or a combination of its predecessors (compare the Fibonacci sequence); by consecutiveness I mean a progression in which the new term is simply adjacent, in time or space, to the previous one without there necessarily being an overall systematic development. Clicking your way around the Internet or one of its sites, each shift of page takes you, inevitably, to one that is cyberspatially adjacent, even if that adjacency is found via the intermediation of a search engine. Moving from one page to the next contains its own logic, but a series of ten or twenty moves will produce a history with no overall logical arc; it's not random but it's not governed by a totalizing pathway either. The fact that it has no beginning, middle, and end (its mooted nonlinearity) is not very interesting for me, partly because, like rereading *Ulysses*, they are reproduced at more local, straitened levels, and partly because it's more useful to define it as a presence, an activity, than as a lack. Internet sweeps (what used to be called surfing) seem to me *necessarily* consecutive, condemned to the tyranny of the adjacent at the expense of the overall. They therefore bear two hallmarks: they are one-offs, virtually impossible to repeat, and, the corollary, they are intrinsically amnesiac – the brain cannot reconstruct them in the absence of a logical, overarching shape, so finds it difficult to remember them. Such sweeps tend to be antisequential, but not absolutely: each term may derive logically from the last, but a more complex, developed sequence becomes

increasingly hard to discern. This is a complex field, where terminological precision is so far somewhat elusive, but stopping the habit of mindlessly boasting of nonlinearity would help.

P isn't for Passive (and Active is in trouble, too)

One of the most misleading claims the digimodernist text and its proselytizers can make is that it provides an *active* textual experience: that the individual playing a videogame or texting or typing Web 2.0 content is active in a way that someone engaged in reading *Ulysses* or watching *Citizen Kane* isn't. This is self-evidently something ·in its favor; no one wants to be 'passive'. It's typical of digimodernism that its enthusiasts make vigorous and inaccurate propaganda on its behalf; the vocabulary of 'surfing' the Internet common in the 1990s, where a marine imagery of euphoria, risk, and subtlety was employed to promote an often snail-paced, banal, and fruitless activity, seems mercifully behind us. But the hype differentiating the new technologies' supposedly terrific activeness from the old forms' dull passivity is still extant, and very misleading it is too.

It's true that the purer kinds of digimodernist text require a positive physical act or the possibility of one, and the traditional text doesn't. Yet this can't in itself justify use of the passive/active binary: you can't suppose that an astrophysicist sitting in an armchair mentally wrestling with string theory is 'more passive' than somebody doing the dishes just because the latter's hands are moving. Mere thought can be powerful, individual, and far-reaching, while physical action can become automatic, blank, almost inhuman; in terms of workplace organization, a college professor will be more active (i.e., self-directing) than a factory worker. The presence of a physical 'act' seems in turn to suggest the word 'active' and then its pejorative antonym 'passive', but this is an increasingly tenuous chain of reasoning. It's one of those cases beloved of Wittgenstein where people are hexed by language. Yet the mistake is symptomatic: how do you describe experientially the difference between the traditional and the digimodernist text? It's a tricky question, but one that at least assumes that there are such differences, which here is the beginning of wisdom.

P is also for a doubly different idea of Publishing

A friend of mine (though he's hardly unique) thinks that Web 2.0 offers the biggest revolution in publishing since the Gutenberg Bible. Anyone can now

publish anything; it's democratic, open, nonelitist, a breaking down of the oppressive doors of the publishing cabal which for centuries repressed thought and decided what we could read; it's a seizing of the controls of the publishing world by the people for the people. If this were true, it would indeed be as exciting as my friend thinks. Sociologically, publishing has always defined itself as the sacrilizing of speech: whereas speech dies the instant it is spoken, and carries only to the geographical extent reached by the volume of the voice, the publishing of text enables utterances to endure for centuries, even millennia (though increasingly unstably), and to be transported to the furthest point on our planet, even beyond. Temporally and spatially published text is, at least potentially, speech equipped with wondrous powers, furnished with immense resources. It isn't surprising that such text has accrued a similarly wondrous and immense social prestige (even if, in practice, the great majority of it is soon destroyed). We all talk, but few of us talk to everyone forever. Publishing a book is the educated adult's version of scoring the touchdown that wins the Super Bowl. It's this glamour, this prestige that my friend assumes Web 2.0 lets everyone in on, and that he's gotten so excited about.

Leaving to one side for now the issue of whether everyone can or ever will access Web 2.0, let us imagine a world in which they do. The Web is indeed responsible for a stupendous increase in the volume of published material and in the number of published writers. Though held in electronic form rather than on paper, this text fulfills the definition of publication: it is recorded, in principle, for everyone forever. This is the first new idea of publishing. However, and more problematically, this innovation comes at the expense of a second: the loss of the social prestige associated with the publishing of text. It isn't only that so much UGC is mindless, thuggish, and illiterate, though it is. More awkwardly, nothing remains prestigious when everybody can have it; the process is self-defeating. In such circumstances the notion of a sacrilizing of speech becomes obsolete. To argue that the newly opened world of publishing is a newly devalued world seems patrician, antidemocratic, even (so help us God) 'elitist'. Furthermore, it's not strictly valid. Through, for instance, the placing of academic journals online, the Internet has also increased the quantity of easily accessible, highly intelligent, and well-informed written matter, and it sits cheek-by-jowl with the vile and ignorant stuff on search engine results pages. What will probably occur in the future will be a shift in our idea of publishing toward greater stratification and hierarchy, internally divided into higher and lower forms. The quantity of publication will continue to rise to unimaginable heights, but unendowed now

with social prestige. How long it will take for the sacred aura of published text to go is anybody's guess, but the likelihood is that there will be nothing 'nonelitist' about it; differentiation will simply re-form elsewhere according to other criteria. This may be a meritocratic hierarchy, whereby text is judged for what it says rather than what it is, but I wouldn't want to bank on it.

R is, amazingly, for Reading (but don't rejoice yet)

Authors of best-selling jeremiads about contemporary society frequently bemoan a widespread decline in reading. Young people today don't know about books, don't understand them, don't enjoy them; in short, they don't read. Christopher Lasch, decrying in 1979 the 'new illiteracy' and the 'spread of stupidity', quoted the dean of the University of Oregon complaining that the new generation "'don't read as much"'.[12] For Lasch himself, 'students at all levels of the educational system have so little knowledge of the classics of world literature', resulting in a 'reduced ability to read'.[13] Eight years later Allan Bloom remarked that 'our students have lost the practice of and the taste for reading. They have not learned how to read, nor do they have the expectation of delight or improvement from reading'.[14]

   Such comments – repeated so regularly by commentators they have become orthodoxy – assume the prestige of publication: 'reading' will be of 'books' which will often be 'good', or at least complex and mindstretching. A quantitative decline in reading (fewer words passing intelligently before a student's eyes) can therefore be safely conflated with a qualitative decline (fewer students reading Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Plato). But the digimodernist redefinition of publishing goes hand in hand with a recasting of the sociocultural status of reading. In short, digimodernism – through the Internet – triggers a skyrocketing rise in quantitative reading as individuals spend hours interpreting written material on a screen; but it also reinforces a plunging decline in qualitative reading as they become ever less capable of engaging mentally with complex and sophisticated thought expressed in written form.

   You do wonder what Lasch or Bloom would have made of the sight of a campus computer suite packed with engrossed students avidly reading thousands upon thousands of words. Yet although the Internet has brought about a vast sudden expansion in the activity of reading among young people, it has done so at the cost of heavily favoring one kind: scanning, sweeping across printed matter looking for something of interest. If literary research is like marriage (a mind entwined with the tastes, whims, and thoughts of another for years) and ordinary

reading is like dating (a mind entwined with another for a limited, pleasure-governed but intimate time), then Internet reading often resembles gazing from a second-floor window at the passersby on the street below. It's dispassionate and uninvolved, and implicitly embraces a sense of frustration, an incapacity to engage. At times it's more like the intellectual antechamber of reading, a kind of disinterested basis to the act of reading, than the act itself. Internet reading is not, though, just scanning: it accelerates and slows as interest flickers and dies, shifts sideways to follow links, loses its thread, picks up another. What is genuinely new about Internet reading is the layout of the page, which encourages the eye to move in all two-dimensional directions at any time rather than the systematic left to right and gradually down of a book.[15] The screen page is subdivided by sections and boxes to be jumped around in place of the book page's immutable text and four margins. This, along with the use of hyperlinks, makes Internet reading characteristically discontinuous both visually and intellectually. It's interrupted, redefined, displaced, recommenced, abandoned, fragmentary. It's still unclear how the revolutionary layout of the Internet page will affect reading in its broadest sense, but there doesn't seem much good news here for advocates of training in sustained, coherent, consecutive thought. In the meantime it's noticeable that many student textbooks and TV stations have adopted the subdivided layout (oddly, when you can't actually click on anything).

The view that would probably be found among most people who had seen message-board comment on something they had published online would be that Internet reading is just bad: quick, slapdash, partial. Much comment is so virulent in tone it suggests a reader seething with a barely suppressed impatience to leap into print. As academics know, reading-to-write (e.g., book reviewing) is very different from just reading, and while alert subeditors will channel critics into some semblance of fair judgment, message boards impose no such intellectual quality control. But bad reading is as old as reading itself: *Lolita, Lucky Jim*, and Ian Fleming's James Bond novels are only the first examples that come to my mind of preelectronic texts widely misunderstood by their readers. This impatience and virulence are surely linked to the frustration inherent in reading-as-scanning. It presumably has a second cause as well, one that will affect the success or otherwise of the e-book should it finally ever be commercialized (it's been promised half my life). If Internet reading is on the whole qualitatively poor, as I think it is – it's often blank, fragmented, forgetful, or congenitally disaffected – then this can be explained by the unconscious intellectual unpleasantness of trying to make sense of something while having light beamed into your eyes. The

glow of the screen pushes reading toward the rushed, the decentered, the irritable; while the eye is automatically drawn to the light it emits (explaining the quantitative surge), the mind is increasingly too distracted to engage with, remember, or even enjoy very much what it is given to scrutinize.

T definitely is for Text (but not that one)

Pace Barthes, digimodernism's emblematic text is very different than post-structuralism's key term. Derrida and Lacan were fascinated by the letter and the postcard; technological innovation produces a newer form. The text message, several billion of which are digitally created and sent every day, is by some criteria the most important 'textual' mode or recorded communication medium of our time. It's ubiquitous, near-permanent, a hushed element of the fabric of the environment; on the street, in cafés, bars, and restaurants, in meetings and lecture halls and stadia, on trains and in cars, in homes, shops, and parks, thumbs are silently darting over displays and eyes reading off what's been received: an almost-silent tidal wave of digital text crashing upon us every minute of our waking lives.

Manually formed, the text message concentrates, in a happy semantic coincidence, most of the characteristics of the digimodernist text. Constantly being made and sent, it exists culturally in the act of creation more than in finished form; though you see people texting all the time, the message inheres only in its formation and immediate impact (like a child's cry). Almost the whole lifespan of the text is comprised by its elaboration. It is ephemeral and evanescent, even harder to hold on to than the e-mail; biographers who depend professionally on stable, enduring private messages written and received by their subject look on the SMS and despair. It's almost anonymous: if the letter has no author (Foucault), it at least has a signatory, regularly elided by texts. Indeed, it's the lowest form of recorded communication ever known: if speech tends to be less rich, subtle, sophisticated, and elegant than writing, then the text places itself as far below speech again on the scale of linguistic resourcefulness. It's a virtually illiterate jumble of garbled characters, heavy on sledgehammer commands and brusque interrogatives, favoring simple, direct main clauses expressive mostly of sudden moods and needs, incapable of sustained description or nuanced opinion or any higher expression. Restricted mostly to the level of pure emotion (greetings, wishes, laments, etc.) and to the modes of declaration and interrogation, it reduces human interaction to the kinds available to a three-year-old child. Out go

subclauses, irony, paragraphs, punctuation, suspense, all linguistic effects and devices; this is a utilitarian, mechanical verbal form.

The text is, of course, a very useful communicative tool, so useful there is no good reason to go without it. The danger lies in the effect it may exert, if used to excess, on all other forms of communication. Teachers who spot their teenage charges texting under their classroom desks have noted the use of similar verbal styles in their formal school work (e.g., writing 'cus' for 'because'). They may also identify in them a parallel tendency to a speech that is equally abbreviated, rushed, and fragmentary, reduced to simplistic and jumbled bursts of emotion or need. The comedy characters Vicky Pollard and Lauren Cooper, so successful recently in Britain as emblems of a certain kind of contemporary adolescent, speak with the expressive poverty and the breakneck fluency of the text message. The SMS is to discourse what fries are to nutrition: all depends on the wider communicative context.

T isn't for Typist, but it's very much for typing

Truman Capote famously and sourly remarked of Jack Kerouac's work: 'that's not writing, it's typing'. By this he meant that 'writing' was a creative and intelligent action, whereas 'typing' was mechanical, mindless, and reactive. In the world of work, this bifurcation was reflected in his day by the employment of women as 'typists' whose task was to uncomprehendingly and automatically convert the creative, intelligent outpourings of their male superiors. Challenged by feminism and by industrial restructuring, this hierarchy was finally demolished by the spread of the word processor in the 1980s. In the digimodernist age, everyone types all the time (to be a 'typist' is increasingly just to have a job). In this dispensation, typing is no longer the secondary and inferior adjunct to writing, but the sole method of recording discourse. There is no other term (more and more Capote's sarcasm will become unintelligible). What digimodernism therefore looks forward to is a world without writing, that is, one where nobody manipulates a pen or pencil to record discourse; it suggests a time when children will never learn how to write and be taught, instead, from infancy how to type. There is something scary about a society where no one writes, where no one knows how to hold and wield some sort of pen, since writing has always been the symbol of and identical with civilization, knowledge, memory, learning, thought itself. The idea, assumed by Capote, that writing's absence is somehow dehumanized, haunts us; not to teach a child how to write feels like consigning

him or her to an almost bestial state. And yet there is no reason today to imagine that we are not heading toward such a world. Already the e-mail and SMS have largely superseded the phone call, which itself saw off the letter; we have passed from writing through speaking to typing, and while the newer form can coexist with its downgraded forerunner, something must logically at some stage become obsolete. Negotiating that may be a key challenge of our century. For now, we early digimodernists are stranded: we can write but have less and less need to, and we type but have never been trained to. It's a part of the characteristic helplessness of our age.

U is hardly for User (or up to a point)

The term 'user' is commonly found in expressions such as 'user-generated content' to describe someone who writes Wikipedia text or uploads YouTube clips or develops their Facebook page or maintains a blog. It has also been employed in TV, especially through the intriguing new portmanteau word 'viewser'. Yet it brings its own set of linguistic problems. The idea of 'use' suggests a means to an end (a spanner used to tighten a nut, an egg-whisk used to whisk an egg) whereby a tool plays an instrumental role in achieving a logically distinct objective. Here, however, it is difficult to identify such an objective since the acts in question appear to be their own end ('communication' is too vague an ambition, and incompatible with the anonymity of the Web). Equally, there's no identifiable tool involved: contrary to the egg-whisk or spanner, which were invented to answer an existing need, the computer predates and exceeds any of the applications of Web 2.0. Furthermore, 'usage' would seem grammatically to refer more to reading or watching material than creating it (compare 'drug-user', where the consumer and not the producer is denoted), rendering UGC a contradiction in terms.

Despite its final inadequacies, it's easy to see the initial attractiveness of the word. For one, it conveys the crucial digimodernist quality of a physical act, and it gives to this act the vital connotation of working a machine. True, it's misleading in that it distances us from the elaboration or manufacture of text or textual content, for which terms drawn from publishing (author, reader, etc.) have already been tried and found wanting. Filming your friends and putting the result on YouTube is so much more like writing a short story than it is like using a trouser-press that the rejection of a publishing jargon for a mechanistic one is unhelpful. Nonetheless, the word 'user' does succeed in taking the necessary step

beyond the overspecificity of 'reader', 'filmmaker', 'writer' toward the polyvalent and shifting textual intervenant of digimodernism. This figure slides typically between maker and consumer, reader and writer, in a seamless complex singularity; and even in its vagueness 'use' does suggest both engagement with a technology and the inescapable multiplicity, the openness of that act.

V is no longer for Viewer (you might think)

Given all of this, can someone sitting on a couch in front of a digimodernist TV program really be called a 'viewer' any more? The term struggled initially into existence, finally being deliberately selected from an assortment of words indicating sight; it lacks naturalness, or once did, and while a change of terms several decades into a medium's existence seems unlikely, it already jars the ear in certain contexts with its incongruity. Some have suggested the portmanteau word 'viewser' to describe an engagement with TV that is both optical and manual, as in the combined act of watching and voting in *Big Brother* or otherwise actively participating in the editing and production of a show while gazing at it from outside. A clever pun, the term nevertheless inherits all the problems faced by 'user' – it's like correcting a car's faulty steering by removing a wheel. It should also be borne in mind that the viewer is far from obsolete, in two senses: first, many TV shows, like soaps and sitcoms, invite no manual action and imply a reception that can be defined optically; and second, even in the case of the digimodernist program the manual action relies on a prior optical experience – you only vote meaningfully on *Big Brother* after watching it, while many of its viewers won't vote at all. Viewing hasn't become *vieux jeu*: it's the essential condition of 'use', and not vice versa; more precisely, digimodernism builds beyond it.

However, there is no word at all (yet) for the individual who watches and votes, votes and watches in a spiraling weave of optical/manual actions. Digimodernist TV invents, then, an (extra)textual person for whom we do not have a name since their actions and standing are so new. And the attraction of the term 'viewser' is that it can be transferred to any Internet site privileging UGC: on YouTube or Wikipedia or message boards, an optical act (reading, watching) intertwines with a potential or real act of creating text. What do you call such a person? A reader, yes, a writer too, or some new term beyond both?

[...]

The rise of the apparently real

The apparently real, one of digimodernism's recurrent aesthetic traits, is so diametrically opposed to the 'real' of postmodernism that at first glance it can be mistaken for a simple and violent reaction against it. Postmodernism's real is a subtle, sophisticated quantity; that of digimodernism is so straightforward it almost defies description. The former is found especially in a small number of advanced texts; the latter is ubiquitous, a consensus, populist, compensating for any philosophical infirmity with a cultural-historical dominance that sweeps all before it. And yet there are also signs that the apparently real is beginning to develop its own forms of complexity.

For postmodernism, there is no given reality 'out there'. According to Baudrillard: '[t]he great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these *death pangs of the real* and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation'.[16] The real is, at best, a social construct, a convention agreed in a certain way in a certain culture at a certain time, varying historically with no version able to claim a privileged status. Invented, the real is a fiction, inflected by preceding fictions; if the real is something we make up, it has also been made up by others before us. In Cindy Sherman's celebrated series of photographs *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), a solitary woman appears in a variety of urban settings in what seem to be images from 1950s–60s' movies: this one surely is from Hitchcock, that one must be Godard, doubtless this other something by Antonioni. But which movies? You can't quite remember … Of course, this woman, variously dressed, wigged, and made up, immersed in her narratives of anxiety and ennui, alienation and off-screen perversity, is always Sherman herself; the photos can be seen as self-portraits of unreal selves. The films don't exist; the 'real' here is a movie, and not even a 'real movie' at that. The photos are fictions, or, rather, they are fictive fictions, invented fragments of what would be, if they existed, inventions. The plates of the real shift; '[t]here are so many levels of artifice' here as Sherman herself says, and what is finally represented is the act itself of representing a woman, or a woman's historicized act of self-presentation, in an ontological hall of mirrors redeemed by Sherman's wit, her subtlety, and exhilarating feminism.[17]

As a result, to believe in a reality 'out there' becomes a form of paranoia, the unwarranted ascription of meanings to a universe that cannot bear their load. Oliver Stone's film about the Kennedy assassination *JFK* (1991) mixes historical footage with fictional material shot thirty years later to propose a welter of

conspiracy theories explaining what 'really' happened in November 1963. If the textual real is a mishmash of manufactured film sources, all equal, the functioning of the 'real world' is inevitably going to wind up seeming overdetermined and paranoid. Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) follows Oedipa Maas's quest, similar in some respects to that of Stone's Jim Garrison, to uncover the 'truth' about what appear to be secret activities cascading through American life. She finally arrives at four possible conclusions: that there really is a conspiracy out there, or that she is hallucinating one, or that a plot has been mounted against her involving forgery, actors, and constant surveillance, or that she is imagining such a plot.[18] Pynchon doesn't resolve these multiple and incompatible versions of the 'real'. Other postmodernist novels and films, like *The Magus, Money, The Truman Show*, and *The Matrix*, would also dramatize fabricated realities involving professional actors and round-the-clock surveillance, and yielding similar interpretive options.

The aesthetic of the apparently real seems to present no such predicament. It proffers what seems to be real ... and that is all there is to it. The apparently real comes without self-consciousness, without irony or self-interrogation, and without signaling itself to the reader or viewer. Consequently, for anyone used to the refinement of postmodernism, the apparently real may seem intolerably 'stupid': since the ontology of such texts seems to 'go without saying', more astute minds may think they cry out for demystification, for a critique deconstructing their assumptions. In fact, the apparently real is impervious to such responses. While it's true that a minimal acquaintance with textual practice will show up how the material of the apparently real has been edited, manipulated, shaped by unseen hands, somehow as an aesthetic it has already subsumed such an awareness. Indeed, though paradoxically and problematically, it seems to believe it has *surmounted* Sherman's and Pynchon's concerns, perhaps considering them sterile or passé. In 2007 it emerged that a number of apparently real British TV shows had in fact undergone devious trickery at the hands of their production companies or broadcasters. Newspapers reported this as 'scandal', the supposed betrayal of their audiences, while TV insiders explained that this aesthetic's reality was only *apparent*, as its name suggested, not absolute; viewers, unfazed, carried on watching them. The apparently real is, then, the outcome of a silent negotiation between viewer and screen: we know it's not *totally* genuine, but if it utterly seems to be, then we will take it as such.

In truth, apparently real TV, such as docusoaps and reality TV, has to be considered 'real' to a decisive extent to be worth spending time on. Its interest

derives from its reality; reject the latter and you lose the former. The reality in question is narrowly material: these are genuine events experienced by genuine people; these are actual emotions felt by actual people. It's a shallow, trivial reality, the zero degree of the real: the mere absence of obvious lying; hence the importance of 'appearance' within the aesthetic, of visible seeming. This supremacy of the visual makes the aesthetic's natural environment television, film, and the Internet; the triumph of appearance carries it beyond the true/false dichotomy and the wrought 'fictiveness' of Weir or the Wachowski brothers.

The difference between the docusoap and reality TV, genres born in the 1990s, is not clear-cut, nor is it significant here. (Reality TV is sometimes distinguished by its celebrity participants or its pseudoscientific premises.) The child of the traditional documentary, the docusoap inherits all the *truth* of a form once defined in opposition to TV *fiction* (sitcoms, drama); to this it splices, in accordance with its name, the stuff of soap, of 'ordinary' life – these are true accounts, then, of everyday experience. People are filmed at work, on vacation or at home doing nothing very special; everything that is most recognizably stressful or tedious about contemporary life – learning to drive, getting married, renovating or cleaning or buying houses, checking in at airports, disciplining small children – is foregrounded. These semiuniversal (hence 'ordinary', that is, 'real') situations are portrayed from the perspective of 'ordinary' people, the supposedly humdrum individuals embroiled in them. This personalization and apparent intimacy are intended to convey an interior reality corresponding to the banally genuine exterior.

In either case, the digimodernism of reality TV and the docusoap is clear: *the participants improvise the immediate material*. Such shows create structures and manage recording processes around essentially extemporized content. They present haphazard material, captured and molded by a semi-invisible production company. Traditional TV (sitcoms, news, drama, etc.) monopolizes the creative roles; apparently real TV hands over the writing and direction – the fabrication of dialogue, the choice and sequencing of actions – to the wit, moods, and duties of the people taking part. As the production company don't back off completely, the 'reality' can only be apparent (what would've happened had they not been there?[19]); and yet the direction in which the content of the show will move genuinely does become haphazard in a manner similar to the openness of a Web 2.0 text. Web 2.0 depends so critically on the apparently real that it gives a name ('trolls') to those who reject it. Wikipedia, message boards, and social networking sites clearly require, in order to function at all, a level of sincerity in their users

(impossible to measure objectively). Writing what you don't believe or know to be untrue defeats the object of these sites. The apparently real is prevalent on amateur YouTube clips, and underpins blogs: 'Honest blog writing is universally cited [*sic*] as a requirement of the genre ... all bloggers demand attempted truthfulness at all times'.[20] Indeed, newspapers, in a familiar move, have highlighted the 'scandal' of the 'sinister' machinations of businesses or institutions to pass themselves off online as 'real' (or 'viral'). The exception to this reliance might be chat rooms, where fictive selves wander free, but even they have a pressure toward encounters in the 'real' world that imposes on participants a permanent engagement with the appearance of their authenticity. In the world of the performing arts, David Blaine's shift from 'conjurer' of fabricated, 'magical' realities to the subject of apparently real feats of physical endurance is emblematic of the spirit of the times.

The apparently real may be thought such a naïve and simple-minded aesthetic that it vitiates any text it dominates, and examples of this can be found. *Jackass*, in both its TV and film formats, deploys the aesthetic as a kind of inverted pornography: instead of young people performing pleasurable acts for the (erotic) delight of watchers, *Jackass* has them perform agonizing ones for the (comedic) pleasure of its viewers. To gain any enjoyment from watching it's necessary to believe in the reality of its set-pieces; moreover, it's probably essential to feel that this reality outweighs any other consideration. At one point in *Jackass: The Movie* (2002) a cameraman genuinely throws up on-screen; the guys roar with laughter, doubtless because their aesthetic creed states that any actual, filmed physical suffering must be hilarious. This is the apparently real as personal degradation. Indeed, the aesthetic has often been exploited to record the harassment of members of the public; along with *Jackass* and myriad prank shows, perpetrators of 'happy slapping' attacks, where cell phones are used to film actual assaults on people for the later amusement of viewers, are also fond of this. The apparently real can in such cases become no better than a guarantee of suffering.

[...]

There are three concomitant observations that can be made about the textual functions of the apparently real: its deployment of a (pseudo)scientific discourse; its engulfing of the self ('addictiveness'); and its immersion in the present.

The postmodernist real favored a rhetoric of the literary: since the real was a fiction it made sense to read, to decipher it; similarly, it was conceptualized as written, created as an aesthetic object. The literary became the metaphorical

model for interpretation through the text's supposedly fictive ontological status. The digimodernist turn toward a scientific discourse-repertoire is audible in the evening highlights shows during a run of *Big Brother*, where clips frequently start with a voice-over solemnly intoning something like: 'Day forty-seven in the *Big Brother* house' or '11.07 p.m. Dale, Bubble, and Mikey are in the bedroom. It is forty-three minutes since the argument in the kitchen'. This is the discourse of laboratory research, where records of results are kept carefully documenting dates, times, places, and the identities of participants. The function of this log-keeping is confirmed by *Big Brother*'s use of a resident academic psychologist whose role is to interpret the program's human interactions as though they formed part of some experiment s/he was conducting. Elements of the show's format, such as the isolation and continuous observation of the subjects being studied, do indeed suggest a putative experiment. Other docusoaps and reality TV shows have adopted this research-lab structure, adding to the isolation and surveillance a third essential feature, the introduction, whereby a foreign body is placed inside the observed environment to see what abreactions (explosions? assimilations?) would ensue. *Wife Swap* (2003–) is perhaps the most successful of such programs, and ends each time with an analysis of 'results' as if a genuine experiment has taken place leading to an advance in human understanding. Provided it was alien to its new surroundings anything could be introduced anywhere, with 'interestingly' unpredictable and filmable consequences; and so classical musicians were trained to perform as club DJs, regular families were inserted into the lifestyle of the Edwardians, and TV professionals dressed and ate as if in the 1660s.[21]

Though such shows adopted some of the methods and the language of anthropological or historical or sociopsychological investigations, it's unlikely that any finally made a contribution to knowledge. By the standards of actual scientists, the 'experiments' were inadequately prepared (insufficient samples, contamination of participants, no control group, etc.), while some of the 'experts' interpreting the 'results' seemed of dubious academic authority. In *That'll Teach 'Em* (2003), a documentary series made by Channel 4, a group of high-achieving teenagers was placed in an isolated house and subjected to the practices of a 1950s' private school: heavy uniforms, draconian discipline, period English food, daily organized sports, separation of the sexes, science practicals for the boys (stinks and bangs) and home economics for the girls (cooking), ferocious exams, and so on. They were filmed for a month and at the end the 'results' studied: the boys had fallen in love with science, they all hated the food and the uniform, each had lost

on average about seven pounds in weight, they seemed happier and more natural, they had mostly failed the exams, and so on. Though fascinating and suggestive in itself, the show did not, as educationalists hastened to explain, actually produce any usable research findings: the discourse and rhetoric of the scientific experiment had been only that. The number and variety of programs during the 2000s ringing changes on the tropes of the experiment (isolation, observation, introduction, results, experts) have been so vast that sometimes viewers might have felt like apprentice anthropologists or psychologists themselves. If occasionally the rhetoric seemed a fig leaf for voyeurism and trash TV, the producers of such shows would defend them as offering 'insight' into, for example, 'gender differences', stealing the language of academics filling out an application for funding for their research. More elaborate uses of the apparently real would turn these tropes inside out. The stunts shown in *Jackass* or mounted by David Blaine could be read as grotesque parodies of medical research; *Borat*, as its subtitle makes clear, is a work of pseudoanthropology; the disappeared filmmakers [in *The Blair Witch Project*] were engaged on a university research *Project*.

Moral panic has also surrounded the digimodernist text's alleged addictiveness. It is commonly reported, both by researchers and the mass media, that such digimodernist forms as text messaging, e-mail, chat rooms, videogames, reality and participatory TV, and the Internet in general have addictive properties. It is, however, problematic to describe any form of text as addictive since it produces no heightened physical reaction (unlike drugs) and is rarely a trigger for intense emotion (unlike gambling); much digimodernist text may actually induce a sense of monotony. However, the keyboard trance is a recognizable phenomenon, whereby users click half-bored and semihypnotized endlessly from electronic page to electronic page, to no visible end. The digimodernist text does seem to possess the property of overwhelming the individual's sense of temporal proportion or boundaries; it can engulf the player or user or viewer, who experiences a loss of will, a psychological need for textual engagement that exceeds any realistic duration or rational purpose. Digimodernist texts can be hard to break off from; they seem to impose a kind of personal imperialism, an outflanking of all other demands on time and self. This derives from their apparent or experiential reality: combining manual action with optical and auditory perception, such a text overpowers all competing sources of the real.

There are two possible explanations for this: first, that our seeming impotence before the digimodernist text stems from its novelty and our consequent inexperience and incapacity to control the (semi)unknown; or second, that

the digimodernist text truly affords an intensity of 'reality' which is greater and more engulfing than any other, including unmediated experience. Evidence is conflictual, and it may be too soon to say.

Finally, digimodernism's sense of cultural time also differs from that of postmodernism. Delighting in the quotation, the pastiche, and the hybridization of earlier texts, postmodernist culture was often backward-looking; historiographic metafictions such as Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* explored their very contemporary attitudes through an encounter with the textual past. Postmodernism also emphasized a new sense of history as constructed in the present, and, in novels like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Graham Swift's *Waterland*, a sense of the past as a haunting of the present. The apparently real and digimodernism are by contrast lost in the here and now, swamped in the textual present; they know nothing of the cultural past and have no historical sense. The difference is clear in cinema: where Baudrillard or Jameson identified a depthless 'nostalgia for a lost referential' in 1970s' films like *American Graffiti* and *Barry Lyndon*,[22] digimodernist historical movies like *The Mummy*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *King Kong* make no effort to reproduce the manners and mores of the past. Instead, their actors behave like people from the 2000s, clad in vintage clothing and rushing through their CGI-saturated story. All attempts at mimicking past human behavior are given up by a digimodernism which assumes, in TV costume dramas like *Rome* (2005–07) and *The Tudors* (2007–), that people have always talked, moved, and acted pretty much as they do today, and have ever had today's social attitudes (equality for women, sexual outspokenness, racial tolerance). In short, digimodernism is, as the debate on addictiveness confirms, the state of being engulfed by the present real, so much so it has no room for anything beyond; what is, is all there is.

The apparently real also has a wider context, of course, evident in changing social notions of the textual hero. Classical Hollywood fashioned the 'star', the impossibly glamorous, absolutely remote, and seemingly perfect figure produced by and identical with its movies. By contrast, infused with a tarnished romanticism, post-1960s rock culture foregrounded the artist-hero, the on-the-edge voice of a generation grafted into his audience's context yet far more insightful and brilliant than you or me. The contemporary notion of the 'celebrity' is something else again. Its distinctive feature isn't that so many people portrayed as famous are almost completely unknown – an effect of the collapse of 'popular culture' into niches – but the virulence and loathing, the spitefulness of the discourse surrounding them. Celebrity magazines and TV programs picture famous

women with their hair all messy, their makeup undone, their cellulite on show, or their grotesque weight gain (or loss) to the fore; lovingly dramatized are their relationship hells, their eating disorders, their career meltdowns, and their fashion disasters. You'd think the readers or viewers had a personal vendetta against them. What's happening is that the assumed 'realities' of the female reader/viewer (her supposedly actual anxieties) are projected as the apparent reality of the famous female; it's a globalized, textual version of a malicious idea of woman-to-woman gossip. In consequence, this discourse strips the 'celebrity' of everything but her fame: rather than see her as competent in some sense (talented at acting or singing, physically beautiful, etc.), she is constructed as exactly the same as anyone else, except famous. This is a prevalent coding: the aesthetic of the apparently real is a textual expression of the social death of competence.

[...]

Such a catalog of struggles and problematics within established media provokes a last, unanswerable question. Is digimodernism finally another name for the death of the text? Most of the crisis-ridden forms discussed here provide a closed, finished text: you buy, own, and engage a film or TV program or song as a total artistic entity, as a text-object. This objectivity endures over time, is authored, reproduced; it has become, in its material already-createdness, the definition of a text. Videogames and radio shows are markedly weaker in this regard; they are less culturally prestigious too; but socially they are thriving. The onward, haphazard, evanescent digimodernist 'text' may seem finally indistinguishable from the textless flux of life. Is digimodernism the condition of after-the-text? [...] Kevin Kelly has dreamed of all books being digitized into 'a single liquid fabric of interconnected words and ideas' to be unraveled, re-formed, and recomposed freely by anyone for any reason.[23] There are signs across the media landscape of such a development. Yet, unquestionably, this would resemble a mass of unauthored and unlimited textualized matter. A text, though, must have boundaries and a history, in the same way that the distinction between 'life' and 'a life' ascribes to the latter physical circumscription and biography. With the reception and commodification of the individual text already imploding, will there be room under digitization for *a text*?

There are two optional answers to this. The first sounds a futuristic note of doomy jeremiad: early digimodernism will perhaps be remembered as the last time one could speak of a new, emergent form of textuality, before the singular object-text was drowned forever by the rising tide of undifferentiated text; the 2000s naively saluted a textual revolution before it revealed itself, in its

totalitarianism, as the genocide of the text. The second entails turning away from texts and the consideration instead of history, or of contemporaneity placed in the long term. The survival of the object-text depends on the continued valorization of competence, skillfulness, and know-how, because these are, *ipso facto*, excluding forces: they delimit, isolate, close. These are social and moral issues, and so we come to the final chapter.

Notes

Editors' note: In the interests of internal consistency, the notes in this extract have been re-numbered to make them sequential.

1 Gore Verbinski (dir.), *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2003).

2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

3 Ibid.

4 Alan Kirby, 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond' in *Philosophy Now*, November/December 2006, http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/58kirby.htm Retrieved January 23, 2009.

5 Adapted from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 946, 1215.

6 Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 1. Emphasis added.

7 Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

8 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Flamingo, 1984), 148, 145.

9 Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 141–60. For a more recent view, see Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

10 John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Vintage, 1996), 97, 388, 389.

11 Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin, 1985), 247; Martin Amis, *The Information* (London: Flamingo, 1995), 300.

12 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus, 1980), 125, 127, 129.

13 Ibid., 150.