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**The Ethos of ‘Walking’: digital writing
and the temporal animation of space**

Résumé

Nous défendons ici l'idée que la littérature numérique refonde les relations entre l'espace et le temps à travers le mouvement et surtout la promenade. Nous démontrons cette proposition par une analyse du livre d'artiste d'Emily McVarish *The Square*, des projets de bio-mapping de Christian Nold, et une vidéo de Will Luers.

Mots clés : flânerie, espace, temporel, livre d'artiste, GPS bio-mapping.

Abstract

In this paper we propose that in electronic literature, the relationship between space and time is reconfigured by movement, specifically by walking, as we show via analyses of Emily McVarish's artist book *The Square*, Christian Nold's bio-mapping projects and a video work by Will Luers.

Keywords: Walking, the flâneur, space, time, artist books, GPS bio-mapping.

Our contemporary digital age relies on the ontology of the hyperlink with its capacity to conflate time-space in ways that enable our immediate access to information. The hyperlink brings information directly to our computer and mobile media screens. We no longer walk (or drive) to the library, the art gallery or the travel agent. Instead, we now buy e-books and download documents, image and sound files, rather than dealing as we used to with the old materialities and technologies for storing those cultural artefacts that we want to access. Providing us with the fast convergence of information and cultural artefacts, the hyperlink radically alters our behavior, and this has equally radical implications for the ways in which we extend ourselves in time and space. On the one hand we can be « present » to a friend or colleague as we catch the bus or drive to work, or by downloading images and files we can bring the outside world to us. On the other, in doing so we are subject to processes below thresholds of human perception, and some of the consequences of this are what we want to tease out here.

The speeds at which digitised processes now occur appear to be instantaneous: they operate at the the sub-human, sub-visible, sub-audible level as Sybille Kramer notes in a seminal paper on the work of Friedrich Kittler.¹ She argues that for Kittler, phenomenology and art taken as « aesthesis » no longer exist « [b]ecause everything that can be switched is essentially invisible to the human senses, nothing that is significant can even be perceived »² ô in other words, what we see or hear onscreen or online is a the result of an invisible process as we can't see the operation of the digital, only its products In the resulting « technological ontology » decipherable in Kittler's work, the « machine substitutes man [sic] as the referent of communication: corporeality disappears, and with it, each and every trace with which the body is involved. »³.

The theme of eclipse of the human by technological media can also be found in the work of theorists such as Bernard Stiegler, however, we propose instead that the importance of movement in the distribution of space and time is one of the things digital media works can make palpable, and that this thereby re-introduces the dimension of human perception and the potential for human experience and corporeality into the processes of digitisation. Therefore, rather than treating digitality as a technological end in itself, we would see it more in terms of Brian Massumi's observation when he writes that « [t]he digital is sandwiched between an analog disappearance into code at the recording and an analog appearance out of code at the listening end. »⁴ Digitised information only makes *sense* through analogic experiences such as reading and writing ô and

experiences of viewing can also be interpreted in this respect as a form of reading. As Massumi notes, using the example of word-processing, what is processed by computers is not words, but code that gives shape and form to the text and images that we see onscreen. It is the analogic process of reading that makes words and their worlds ô as we « read » we transform the coded operation of words on a screen into the traces of sound and speech, or images associated with meaning.⁵ While digitality and the hyperlink mean that words, images and their worlds can be « linked » (« sandwiched » by digital technology, as Masumi would say), so that a reader or user can jump from one time-space to another, the digital work that we look at in this paper produces the human body in its relationship to time and space ô in this sense we maintain that the digitised connectivity made possible by the hyperlink is only sustained *through* human time.

The texts we analyse here perform the unfolding of time and space through movement, or else draw attention to the work of digitality through the disruption of movement (as durational consciousness), which is crucial to the performance of individual and cultural forms of memory. We begin by looking at the way in which Emily McVarish's artist books create a space of transition between print and digital platforms through their attention to the movement of reading, as a type of walking through the architectures of writing. We then turn to the locative work of Christian Nold whose digitised « bio-mapping » projects literally provide a new form of the inscription of writing as walking on urban spaces and the surface of the earth. Finally, we look at Will Luer's *Walking Man* as an example of data base cinema that draws our attention to the way that digital technology punctuates spatiality and disperses time. *Walking Man*⁶ exposes what we would call a « technological consciousness » associated with both the duration of time and movement produced by cinema and its reconfiguration by the digital database.

One of the differences between readers' movements in digital media and those in print media is that the reader of stable typographic print can backscan, can retrace operant movement through the fixed spaciality of writing. We would argue that the stability produced by the sequential structure of print, enabling « past time » to be represented in a stable form, is giving way to writing as the practice of temporalisation through movement which decomposes and recomposes space as fluid and plastic. As Sybille Krämer proposes, with technological media « time becomes one of the variables that can be manipulated » so that the symbolic time of writing and the book, « fixed in

space by linear syntactic structures, becomes repeatable and, to some extent, also moveable ».⁷ Cinema, too, is able to manipulate space and time through shot duration and editing practice. However, digitisation radically transforms and recontextualises the spatial and temporal stability characteristic of both typographic and cinematic form. It draws attention to the way techniques of « movement » and « liveness » characterise our relation to digital media.

Western aesthetics ô consonant with its spatialised images of subjects and objects ô has traditionally paid more attention to stilled spatial form (forms of sculpture, painting, photography, print) than to the reciprocal shaping of space and movement, but this is being challenged by new forms of mobility and hence temporality made possible by digital media. These provide both the opportunity for immersion in mediated and programmed/programmable environments, but also the opportunity to move through existing and technologically augmented environments in different ways, using different surfaces and forms of literary inscription. Here we consider one instantiation among number of possible models for this ethos. We begin with the idea of the promenade (walking).

Walking « is a mode of making the world as well as being in it, » writes Rebecca Solnit: it enables us to know « the world through the body and the body through the world. »⁸ Central to the poetics of Rousseau and Wordsworth, who theorized the practice of solitary rambling as a contemplative mode of being and thinking, and to the Lettrists (later the Situationists) who developed it in the form of the *dérive* as an aesthetic practice (a kind of poetry without traces), it is perhaps not surprising that walking should return in the poetics of digital writing. For, as Solnit clearly sees when she distinguishes between walking as movement and the motion of travel: « It is the movement as well as the sights going by that seems to make things happen in the mind ».⁹ The *flâneur* as a figure of the urban walker has a significant historical presence in both literary (novelistic) and cinematic modes of representation, and here we want to distinguish between the different forms of duration or temporality that this figure calls forth from the book, through the image, to the digital database.

In a series of letterpress produced artist books produced over a decade (*Was Here*,¹⁰ *The Square*,¹¹ *Flicker*¹² and *A Thousand Several*¹³), Emily McVarish creates a series of correspondences between the intimate, ostensibly private space of the book in the hands of its reader, and the apparently public space of the city as it is patrolled by walkers. McVarish uses the codex form as a space in which image and text are composed together in a process she figures as a kind of « speaking into pictures »: « When we speak into a picture, our words strike the

dead and departed », she writes.¹⁴ The picture here is a photograph, so reference to « the dead » recalls Barthes' writings on photography and the punctum, but while the nature of the photograph is obviously a major theme of *Was Here*, the work also engages ideas of inscription as it performs a psycho-geography in which the space of the book becomes a metaphor for the space of the city and psycho-geography comes to refer to a relationship to the page as well as to urban space. Reading becomes walking.

The lack of a subject in the title (*Was Here*) implies a passage almost without trace: perhaps of a few people through a brief moment in time, equally of a reader through a text. Who and/or what exactly *was* here? And what constitutes « here » under these conditions? The past tense conjures loss, and one of the genres in which this text « participates without belonging » is that of elegy, perhaps for the codex form of the book, perhaps for certain kinds of urban space or the « countless lives » which « have passed this way »,¹⁵ perhaps even for something else to which the dedication to HB might provide a clue, seeming to echo Benjamin's dedication of *One Way Street* to Asja Lascis who « cut it through him like an engineer ». ¹⁶ We are led through the space of composition, the codex form with its pages and spreads, with the help of the lone, somewhat sexually ambiguous, figure which first appears as a cut out silhouette against the asphalt grey cover, in the act of stooping as if to retrieve whatever has caught his attention on the pavement. This investigative gesture that invites us to enter the book. The image of this figure is repeated throughout the book, though its relationship to the speaker of the text (whose gender is unspecified) remains indeterminate, and seems to fluctuate between being a guide to the space (« Here we see... ») and a figure for the reader's own active work in moving through the space of the composition, voyaging in situ via the incipient action¹⁷ of reading.

The book's epigraph reads like a promise to reveal the object of this Situationist botanising on the asphalt: « Now, let us see / what the still holds / in store for us! ». ¹⁸ The « still »? An instrument of distillation, and also what Walter Benjamin calls the « archaic space of stillness », the space of absorption historically produced by the book as a cultural object.¹⁹ The narrator « plods rangelessly, composing [her] devices »²⁰ rather than carrying them, figuring herself in Benjaminian terms as a collector of « specimens »²¹ and a « taker of samples », ²² as both curator and custodian of the space under composition-exploration.

McVarish's typography insists on writing not simply as semiotic, something transparent to be seen-through to the meaning beyond, but as architectural: it

treats the alphabetic word as a thing to be explored, as a kind of material architecture, using type to suggest \hat{o} even to build \hat{o} the kinds of spaces (passages, portals, blocks, alleys, monumental buildings etc) that we encounter in the city. The square as a space, however, is not permanent and fixed, but rather the site of complex transitions between past and present, actual and virtual, here and now. The multiple levels of reference in the text evoke a sense of layered time and the brevity of the poetic line works to maximise ambiguity, while foregrounding thought as inherently affective and embodied, since it seems to reproduce the act of thinking the way Bergson describes it, taking form as a series of gestalts which are mixes of memory, emotion, and anticipation. Each spread can be viewed \hat{o} and read \hat{o} as a particular composition, but we can also follow the textual passages through the codex proposed by each of the different typefaces which lead us through the pages. As we read, our eye becomes a proxy for locomotion as we engage the spaces of her individual pages, and the space of the codex as a whole. The space of the book is a complex « scene » that eddies back on itself and opens onto unknowable futures: « And how arrange a scene not simply passing », ²³ the narrator wonders,

but studded with little times and states,
 tunnelled by miles of tracked attention,
 and papered with offers that remain to be seen?²⁴

McVarish creates multiple but overlaid or overlapping temporalities by breaking single sentences up across the pages over the length of the book, so that single apparently isolated words often appear in large type on a page along with blocks of smaller text that form a series of complete sentences. Sometimes text is shadowed by other text in a more literal process of overwriting. Reading then becomes a process of meandering, or retracing one's steps: a recursive process. The figure of the flaneur which traverses the pages of the *The Square* acts as an indicator of duration of both reading and walking, of reading *as* walking: the time it takes to walk a wandering path through urban space. But this figure can also be accessed digitally, simply by turning to a page on which it appears.

The Square, whose title refers to a public space (but also to the grid with which letter press printing extensively works), cuts its images from video of people walking through public spaces talking on cellphones and presents them as cut outs in black and white, and the text uses snatches of overheard phatic

fragments of talk which interrupt its meditations on the transformation mobile technologies make to both the concept of « space » and to that of « public ». Space is now perforated by the decalages in time created by cell phones and other devices through which the virtual world penetrates the physical one and arguably undermines the specificity of place, as, for example, « two screen-readers sit in and out / side by side and uncontemporary », each in touch with a different and unspecified elsewhere, simultaneously here and there. Amid this concatenation of physical place with virtual space, McVarish's composition wittily complicates the relationship between the sheets of the flatbed, which, folded between the covers of a book imply a certain kind of intimacy, and the public, ostensibly impersonal, space of the street where in fact advertising addresses us with imperatives and often interpellates us as if we were on intimate terms with the speakers it conjures, and where the swipe of a phone might bring distance into intimate proximity in the form of a voice from elsewhere.

Ultimately the space McVarish creates is a space of \hat{o} if not transition, then of the of print and digital cultures, which mirrors the « in-betweenness » of the complex public spaces through which we regularly pass on our way elsewhere. The horizontal lines of deliberately imperfectly registered typographical marks create a blur resembling lines across video or television between channels that runs right through the work. She constructs the artist book as a mediator between print and electronic cultures, refracting these cultures through each other so that we see the book \hat{o} and electronic media \hat{o} in new ways. Her work then, effectively disclose[s] the complex historicity of all writing » to which Steven Connor refers, and for which he argues that « a model of cultural relationship based on topology rather than succession, on palimpsest rather than erasure: on *overwriting* is required ». ²⁵

Locative media yield precisely this kind of topological inscription. In locative media works the focus on walking as tracing foregrounds the reciprocity and overlay of movement, bodies and their environments in the mutual creation of images and writing. Contemporary locative projects foreground and reproduce a performative immediacy of the human body and its relations with its environments, and this is an effect of the media they use.

Christian Nold's bio-mapping projects, for example, record and make reproducible the affective and emotional movement of bodies through their environment, making something hitherto unseen and « felt » visible. Using a bio-sensory device that monitors a person's galvanic skin response for changes

in emotional intensity, and a GPS which allows the monitoring of location anywhere in the world, Nold has engaged in a series of projects that track and trace the emotions of the wearer, converting data gathered during walking or moving into a visible trace using geographical mapping software such as Google Earth. He describes his technology as

[í] a unique device linking together the personal and intimate with the outer space of satellites orbiting around the Earth. The device appears to offer the colossal possibility of being able to record a person's emotional state anywhere in the world, in the form of an « Emotional Map ». ²⁶

Nold's maps overlay an experiential, narrative structure onto a material landscape, and this overlay of an alternate « reality » or potential narrative structure onto a given landscape or location is typical of other forms of locative media projects. As Marc Tuters and Kayzs Varnelis point out, these projects can be roughly characterised as two types of mapping « either annotative ô virtually tagging the world ô or phenomenological- tracing the action of the subject in the world ». ²⁷

What we see with Nold's work is a transformation of writing from the representation of speech to inscription as the production of force. Like Jacques Derrida's theorisation of writing as primarily a trace or marking that underwrites and exceeds speech, Nold's projects are graphemic performances which can be considered writing because they are *read* as forms of inscription which encode communicable meaning or at the very least, something to be deciphered. Nold's maps in this sense, function « typographically », allowing a reader to « backscan » or reproduce an event or experience in stable represented form, so while maps can be seen as a diagrammatic representation of a territory, (they only mark an environment in terms of a limited relationship with it, eg. roads or elevation, or galvanic skin response) it's what they can be made to do and mean by being reproduced in performance that is significant.

To date, Nold has used his bio-mapping tool to produce narrative maps of the way in which individuals respond to their environments for civic purposes: he writes of developing « bottom up socially constructive tools » and of working with individuals, groups, companies and institutions that are trying to develop new hybrid forms of technology that are socially and economically sustainable ». ²⁹ His projects include emotional maps of the cities of Stockton, Paris East, Greenwich, and San Francisco. These maps are compiled through

mapping the walking habits of project participants (usually people from local communities) and the maps are then used to discuss the relationship of affect to community architectures/institutions with the aim of finding ways to develop stronger community bonds through a better understanding of how and why these affective and material structures affect flow and frequency of use. His year-long project « Sensory Journeys » (2009-10) was commissioned by Sustrans, the U.K. sustainable transport charity, and involved the Sustrans Bike-it-team and four schools in Bristol.³⁰

For Nold, the practice of bio-mapping is based on the promotion of civic culture, for example by bio-mapping travel routes civic authorities are able to see emotional « hotspots » for school children and how these might relate to structures in the urban environment. However, Nold's own account of the interest generated by his work reveals that his practice lays the groundwork for a less salutary use of a technologically mapped (or should we say « captured ») reciprocity between human body and material environment. After featuring in a news item, he reports being plagued by people with interests in the applications of his work:

People approached me [he writes] with a bewildering array of commercial applications: estate agents in California wanting an insight into the geographical distribution of desire; car companies wanting to look at drivers' stress, doctors trying to re-design their medical offices, as well as advertising agencies wanting to emotionally re-brand whole cities.³¹

The interest elicited by Nold's bio-mapping work reveals the way in which the relationship with an environment is stored (memorised, if you like) in the corporeal habits of the body, which can then be mapped, and reproduced. Commercial interests see this relationship as manipulable or else as a manner of scripting, and hence, prescribing in advance a possible relation with a « product » (cars, the design of offices, offices, the city as brand). Bio-mapping as a species of biometrics thus has strong resonances with the Foucauldian concept of bio-power and the disciplining and governance of populations. Yet, irrespective of its potential positive or negative implications, bio-mapping reveals something important about the habits of the body through its ability to specify the affective conditions of performance. What bodies actually do both enacts and reproduces cultural forms and ritual (including modes of consumption), but what they do also affects how we perceive and think about

ourselves and our world. In other words, different media technologies and « habitats » ô as WJT Mitchell³² has it ô make bodies do things differently, altering the ways their sensory-motor structures are deployed, and these differences then produce different forms of perception. In these media habitats, local situations are also potentially modified and transformed by the actions of the perceiver.

Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz argues that when we isolate material systems, processes and objects, as the result of practical thought, or in this instance walking and writing, as McVarishø texts and Noldø bio-mapping do, « we cut them out of the lived continuity in which they occur, we transform them and enable them to be schematised, outlined rendered manipulable, to become the objects of scientific knowledge and predictability ». ³³ As forms of media, McVarishø and Noldø work both demonstrate in different ways how information is both stored and retrieved in relation to the activity of walking ô the mediations of walking take shape as forms of both reading and writing. We tend to think of writing as memorial in the sense of an attempt to still and fix so as to preserve for later access, but here memory is active and performative, working by way of the registers and habits of the body (which both shape and are shaped by the affective and performative dimensions of human motivation), rather than through classical rationality, and the reflective interiority routinely associated with it.

Will Luersø « Walking Man » (a digital video work Luers terms « net cinema ») opens yet another aspect of the experience of duration in digital media work. Like McVarishø work, it analyses the relationship between space and duration through the figure of the walking man, an avatar of the *flâneur* traversing urban space, though in « Walking Man » he appears as the subject of an experiment by researchers (or spectators?) who provide the digitally generated voice over, commenting on his responses as he follows their instructions for a dayø itinerary. The transposition of the flâneur into the context of digitised film with its manipulation and repetition and distortion of scene continuity, its multiple points of view, produces, in Luersø work, a critique of duration while rendering visible the technological « consciousness » which condition and isolate contemporary experience and its representation. Luersø work draws on the resources and techniques of cinema (cinematic « language »), but it does so in the context of the database, where time « is no longer a universal form of our perception or experience, but rather [...] becomes a universal form of technological accessibility ». ³⁴ As the digitised voice of the

researcher-narrator says, « the moment, once whole and continuous, splits into a million pieces ». Here, we are no longer simply subject to the Bergsonian duration of so much cinematic narrative. These pieces could potentially be recomposed in innumerable ways, each generating different narratives and different kinds of experience. Where film has often (though by no means always) worked to create an immersive space of contemplation, a mode of habituation made possible by the technicity and historicity of the medium itself, Luersø work actively solicits attention to the material affordances of digital video. Yet this is not in the spirit of demystification (as in so much of the experimental film of the 1980s) so much as in the service of a new realism. In a brief video interview³⁵ he speaks to the way the digital seems to correspond to our actual experience of contemporary life as composed of varying speeds, subject to the radical discontinuities of the cut and, we might add, distractions of split-screen-like multitasking. We might say that Luersø work counters the continuity of Bergsonian duration with the Lefebvrian discontinuity of the moment. This is consonant with the current plethora of reworkings of key cinematic moments in gallery installations « Necrologue » (1999, dir Mathias Mueller) excerpts the famous tears of Ingrid Bergman in « Under Capricorn »; works by SodaJerk or Tracey Moffat mash together moments culled from multiple sources to highlight the recurrence of particular instances (for example of specific forms of violence), while Christian Marcleayø's film « The Clock » composes twenty-four hours as a series of hours synchronised with real time and racing toward climactic showdowns or pressing deadlines, and does so without constructing any overarching plot. It is also consonant with the broader shift to a « networked locality »³⁶ in which everyone is potentially locatable at any given moment, and this increasingly conditions networked social interaction. As Lefebvre³⁷ showed, spaces are not simply physical locations but complex social constructions produced by particular practices — including, now, the use of mobile phones and GPS enabled location services — that shape our experience of them. Crucially, Lefebvre's analysis shows that when spatio-temporal experience is recomposed, so too is the social itself. This reconstitution is what the works under discussion begin to make palpable.

NOTES

- ¹ Krämer, Sybille. « Cultural Techniques of Time Axis Manipulation: On Friedrich Kittler's Conception of Media. » *Theory, Culture, & Society* (23/7-8, 2006): 93-109.
- ² *Ibid.*, 06.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ⁴ Massumi, Brian. *Parables For The Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002,138.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Luers, Will (collaboration with Joel Sugerman), *The Walking Man (pahese 1-9)* (2009), [online] <<http://rhizome.org/artbase/artwork/48796/>> (visited 22/2/2014).
- ⁷ Krämer, Sybille. « Cultural Techniques of Time Axis Manipulation: On Friedrich Kittler's Conception of Media. » *Theory, Culture, & Society* (23/7-8, 2006), 96.
- ⁸ Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: a history of walking*. New York: Viking, 2000.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ¹⁰ McVarish, Emily. *Was Here*, New York: Granary Books, 2001.
- ¹¹ McVarish, Emily. *The Square*, New York: Granary Books, 2009.
- ¹² McVarish, Emily. *Flicker*, New York: Granary Books, 2005.
- ¹³ McVarish, Emily. *A Thousand Several*, New York: Granary Books, 2010.
- ¹⁴ McVarish, Emily. *Was Here*, New York: Granary Books, 2001.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Benjamin, Walter. *One Way Street*, London: NLB, 1979.
- ¹⁷ Massumi, Brian. *Parables For The Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002, 138.
- ¹⁸ McVarish, Emily. *Was Here*, New York: Granary Books, 2001.
- ¹⁹ Benjamin, Walter. *One Way Street*, London: NLB, 1979, 62.
- ²⁰ McVarish, Emily. *Was Here*, New York: Granary Books, 2001.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ McVarish, Emily. *The Square*, New York: Granary Books, 2009.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Connor, Steven. « Modernism and the Writing Hand. » 1999. *Steve Connor* <http://www.stevenconnor.com/modhand.htm> (accessed 22 October 2011)
- ²⁶ Nold, Christian, ed, « Emotional Cartography: Technologies of the Self » (ed. 2009) [online] <<http://emotionalcartography.net/>> (visited 22/2/2014).

²⁷ (359).

²⁸ Tuters, Marc, and Kazys Varnelis. « Beyond Locative Media: Giving Shape to the Internet of Things. » *Leonardo* (39/4, 2006) : 357-363.

²⁹ Nold, Christian. [online] <http://www.softhook.com/about.htm> (visited 22/2/2014).

³⁰ Nold, Christian. [online] <<http://www.sensoryjourneys.net/>> (visited 22/2/2014).

³¹ Nold, Christian. « Emotional Cartography: Technologies of the Self, Creative Commons » (ed. 2009) [online] <<http://emotionalcartography.net/>> (visited 22/2/2014).

³² Mitchell, WJT. « Addressing Media. » *Media Tropes* eJournal (I /2008): 1-18.

³³ Grosz, Elizabeth. *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*. Crows Nest NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2004,197.

³⁴ Krämer, Sybille. « Cultural Techniques of Time Axis Manipulation: On Friedrich Kittler's Conception of Media. » *Theory, Culture, & Society* (23/7-8, 2006): 93-109.

³⁵ Luers, Will. [online] < <http://honoured.wordpress.com/2013/06/14/will-luers-speaks-of-the-walking-man/>> (visited 22/2/2014).

³⁶ Gordon, Eric and Adriana Souza de e Silva. *Net Locality: Why Location Matters in a Networked World*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

³⁷ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, Oxford Eng.; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991.