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RELOAD

Liveness, mobility and the web

Convergence on the digital coast

DURING THE HEYDAY of the dotcom years, otherwise known as the late 1990s, I spent some time attending many of the 'Digital Coast' events which the Los Angeles new media industry frenetically sponsored, events most often framed around a rhetoric of convergence that insisted on the inevitability of a collision between the internet and television, a vision of the future of the screen that in many ways wed the two media tightly together. While the earliest of these events framed television as the bad object to be overcome by all things web-like, a more symbiotic relationship between the two media quickly emerged.¹ Drawing on the tropes of television and the channel surfer, some 'convergence' executives began promoting what they called a 'lean back interactivity,' which, in their words, provides 'little snippets of interactivity to enhance the broadcast experience' (Pillar C6). Further described as a 'minimal interactivity,' this mode was promoted as an 'enhancement' to the conventional broadcast which offered consumers a wider array of click-and-buy shopping. A 'give the buyer what she wants' logic buttressed the move, as Wink Communications chief technical officer (CTO) and chairman, Brian Dougherty, maintained that 'if the interactivity is so complex . . . consumers aren't going to want it.' Corporate chief executive officers (CEOs) proclaimed that 'the really cool digital application turns out to be about TV,' while the Pseudo website suggested that the web just may end up 'anointing talk shows as the killer app for next generation, two-way broadband networks.'

Such talk framed the web as a 'better' version of television, stressing particular aspects of the medium which illustrate its superiority to television while simultaneously linking the two media in a seemingly natural convergence. Here, the rhetoric revolved around notions of personalization and empowerment, focusing, in the words of Rob Tercek, the former vice-president of Digital Media at Columbia's



Figure 41.1 Pseudo farewell screen, accessed December, 2000

Tristar Television Group, on the web as 'software that gets familiar with you.' He also insisted that 'controlling an audience' is an old idea more suited to broadcast than the niche markets of netcasting, which privilege 'a consumer-centric point of view.' Pseudo.com, a now-defunct New York interactive television company that until recently produced over sixty web-based television shows a week, promoted their programming as 'the next logical step in the development of entertainment media,' describing this 'major deconstruction of television into niche programming' as opening up the possibility for 'deeper, focused, interactive content tailored to individual interests, style and taste' (buzzwords courtesy of the old Pseudo website). DEN, the Digital Entertainment Network, another crashed and burned internet television venture that was LA's answer to Pseudo, included on its website a promotional video which presented DEN as a 'media revolution' intent on providing 'more interactive,' 'participatory entertainment.' The clip went on to castigate television's essentially passive format while celebrating 'the DEN' as providing 'what you want to watch when you want to watch it. It's completely in your control.' Chairman and CEO Jim Ritts championed both the customization the web would allow and DEN's capacity to meld a 'click-and-buy' element to more traditional modes of television viewing.²

Now, it's fairly easy to simply mock this rhetoric and certainly, after listening to DEN's president David Neuman talk about how 'empowering' and interactive it would be to click and buy Jennifer Aniston's sweater while watching an episode of *Friends*, I couldn't help doing so. I've written elsewhere about the degree to which this industrial rhetoric of convergence can actually work as self-fulfilling prophecy, obscuring larger questions about whether or not the internet is really (or really should be) tied to corporate traditions of US television while framing the internet as essentially a commercial medium, intent on servicing consumers rather than citizens. In his work on early radio, Tom Streeter reminds us that a similar logic of functionality and inevitability worked to close down alternative, grass-roots forms of radio, bringing broadcast firmly under corporate control in less than thirty years and lessening its potential as a democratizing technology. With this history in mind, it is certainly important to question corporate rhetoric, querying the seemingly natural links being forged between television and the internet by companies ranging from the privately owned DEN or Pseudo to the increasingly prevalent corporate mergers manifested in sites like MSNBC or CNN.

Yet, as I surfed DEN or Pseudo and eavesdropped at Hollywood cocktail parties, I did notice a certain connection between the corporate rhetoric and my own expe-

riences of the web, suggesting that there's a level of accuracy within the corporate business plans, a glimmer of possibility and promise buried deep within their hype. 'Choice,' 'presence,' 'movement,' 'possibility' are all terms which could describe the experiential modalities of websurfing. In fact, as I'll argue, a phenomenology of the web might focus on its capacity to structure three closely related sensations, sensations I call *volitional mobility*, *the scan-and-search*, and *transformation*. It's crucial to think of these modes as both specific to the medium of the web itself, as related to its materiality and, in some ways, independent from content, and also as ideologies packaged and promoted within certain websites, that is, as corporate strategies of narrative and structural address. What a medium like the web is or will be, in its very form, is not separate from the discourse which surrounds it and which structures particular conditions of possibility. Yet, if these discourses shape what the web might become, they are also shaped by the medium and its particular material forms (even as it's sometimes difficult to think of the virtual realms of the digital as material).

For now, I want to turn away from considerations of corporate hype and rhetoric and instead look at the web itself, trying to describe and understand the experiences it structures. In an article entitled 'Print is Flat, Code is Deep,' N. Katherine Hayles argues for the importance of media specific analyses, noting that 'it is time to turn again to a careful consideration of what difference the medium makes' (2). Her concern is to investigate the insights a specific look at hypertext might reveal for literary theory, a field Hayles describes as 'shot through with unrecognized assumptions specific to print' (1). I am interested in how a look at the specificity of the web as a broader cultural form might illuminate certain aspects of both that medium and of television theory, perhaps suggesting the limits of these theories for analyses of new media while also limning their usefulness to an analysis of the web.

This is not to imply, despite the conjectures of the new media executives at DEN and Pseudo to the contrary, that one medium is structurally and inherently superior to the other, that the web is indeed 'better.' Rather, television and the web do reference each other, and, as Hayles maintains, 'media-specific analysis attends both to the specificity of the form . . . and to citations and imitations of one medium in another. [These analyses are] attuned not so much to similarity and difference as to simulation and instantiation' (2). What follows is an investigation of the web as an interface between users and digital data, the ones and zeros of the infosphere. In some regards, I take this notion of interface quite literally, and, thus, my methodology builds on Hayles in one key respect. Rather than simply cataloging a typology of digital data focused primarily on its formal elements, I am also interested in exploring the specificity of *the experience of using the web, of the web as mediator between human and machine, of the web as a technology of experience*. Put differently, I am interested in how the web constitutes itself in the unfolding of experience. This necessarily entails an appreciation of the electronic form of the web: after all, a web browser is a interpreter of digital data, a translator of code, and this relation to digital data profoundly shapes how the user experiences the web and what it promises. A media specific analysis can move beyond a certain formalism to explore what's before us in the moment that we are in. This exploration will finally return us to the realm of the corporate and the economic, for any understanding of the

forms of and the experiences provided by the web must necessarily account for the role new media technologies play in the changing economic landscape characteristic of neo-Fordism and transnationalism. The web's ability to structure certain experiential modalities for the user also helps to situate that user within particular modes of subjectivity and within the networks of capital. While the political possibilities of these emergent modes of being cannot be specified in advance or in the abstract, their relation to corporate capital must be taken seriously.

Tara's phenomenology of websurfing

When I explore the web, I follow the cursor, a tangible sign of presence implying movement. This motion structures a sense of liveness, of immediacy, of the now. I open up my 'personalized' site at MSNBC: via 'instant' traffic maps (which, the copy tells me, 'agree within a minute or two' to real time), synopses of 'current' weather conditions, and individualized news bits, the website repeatedly foregrounds its currency, its timeliness, its relevance to me. A frequently changing tickertape scroll bar updates both headlines and stock quotes, and a flashing target floats on my desktop, signaling 'breaking news' whenever my PC's on, whether or not a web browser is open. The numerous polls or surveys that dot MSNBC's electronic landscape (they're called 'live votes') promise that I can impact the news in an instant; I get the results right away, no need to wait for the 10 p.m. broadcast. Just click. Immediate gratification. Even the waiting of download time locks us in the present as a perpetually unfolding now.

This sense of being in the moment is further enhanced by the chat rooms included in many television-centered websites, forums intended to fuse the sites more clearly to the television schedule, allowing the computer user to join the television audience by posing questions to talk show guests as live shows unfold on dual platforms. From E-Bay to E*Trade to ESPN, the web references the unyielding speed of the present, linking presence and temporality in a frenetic, scrolling now. We hit refresh. We feel time move. We wait for downloads. We still feel time move, if barely. Processors hum, marking motion.

Of course, we know liveness from television studies. In prescient theoretical investigations of television in the 1980s, work intent on distinguishing television from film, Jane Feuer observed that 'the differences between TV and . . . cinema are too great not to see television as a qualitatively different medium, but granted this' (12), she pursued what *was* specific to television, both as a form and as an ideological and industrial practice. Liveness (or, more crucially, its illusion) was her answer, and she skillfully illustrated how liveness was continually represented as a core ontological form of television when it might more accurately be seen as an ideology used in the promotion of television and its corporate manifestations. Liveness remains with us a key dimension of our experiences of the internet, a medium which also promotes itself as essentially up-to-the-minute (one need only hit 'reload' or follow the scrolling updates), ideology once again masquerading as ontology.

Of course, as with television, this much touted liveness is actually the *illusion* of liveness: though the weather conditions may indeed be up to date, most of the 'breaking news' I access via my personalized MSNBC front page is no more instant

than the news I would watch at 6 p.m. on KTLA. Indeed, many websites display a marked inability to keep up with the present, recycling older stories in order to take advantage of the vast databases which underwrite the web, old content repackaged as newness. But, as with television, what is crucial is not so much the *fact* of liveness as the *feel* of it. Many television-centric websites capitalize on television's historic ties to liveness and thus present liveness as a given, as an essential element of the medium.

We might say, to paraphrase Feuer, that the web 'positions the [surfer] into its imaginary of presence and immediacy' (14). Yet this is not just the same old liveness of television: this is liveness with a difference. This liveness foregrounds volition and mobility, creating a liveness on demand. Thus, unlike television which parades its presence before us, the web structures a *sense of causality* in relation to liveness, a liveness which we navigate and move through, often structuring a feeling that our own desire drives the movement. The web is about presence but an unstable presence: it's in process, in motion. Interestingly, as we imagine ourselves *navigating* sites, following the cursor, the web *feels* more mobile than television, even though it relies more often on text and still images than on the moving video of television. Furthermore, this is a sense of a connected presence in time. The web's forms and metadiscourses thus generate a circuit of meaning not only from a sense of immediacy but through yoking this presentness to a feeling of choice, structuring a mobilized liveness which we come to feel we invoke and impact, in the instant, in the click, reload. I call this sensation *volitional mobility*.

If television, in the words of Bob Stam, obliges the telespectator 'to follow a predetermined sequence' exhibiting 'a certain syntagmatic orthodoxy' (32), the web appears to break down the preordained sequencing of television, allowing the user to fashion her own syntagmas, moving from link to link with a certain illusion of volition. Our choices, perhaps our need to know, our epistemophilia, seem to move us through the space and time of the web, and this volitional mobility implies our transformation, shimmering with the possibility of change, difference, the new and the now. From the dress-up mannequins of the Gap to the instant quizzes and horoscopes on sites like BabyCenter or Pseudo, the click propels us elsewhere and along. Volitional mobility is more about momentum than about the moment. The extensive database capacities of the internet structure the field upon which this sense of volition and movement unfolds, permitting the web surfer to move back and forth through history and geography, allowing for the possibility (both real and imagined) of accident and juxtaposition to an even greater degree than television.

While this sense of volitional mobility seems to reside on the relatively analog surface of our monitor screens, a function of website design, the very form of digital data also helps underwrite this sensation. As Hayles notes, due to its very form, digital data is 'intrinsically more involved in issues of mapping and navigation' (15) than are most other media. Web browsers translate code on the fly, structuring a kind of mobility which does indeed respond to the click. Computers are processors; in a sense, mobile machines. There's a fluidity to digital data: processing involves data in motion. These processes of navigation or motion relate to the depth of electronic forms. At a simple level, there's code 'behind' a web page, underwriting a kind of perceived depth between code and the programs visible upon our screens, coding underwriting image and movement. A relatively simply program

may be hundreds of functions deep, yet the computer remembers and navigates these functions. As we roam the web, the computer remembers where we've been, even if we don't.

At the level of the interface, this sense of movement through space is most obvious in the various Quicktime virtual reality applications which dot our computer screens. A concrete example of the web's capacity to structure a sense of volitional spatial and temporal mobility is found on MSNBC's 'Kennedy Remembered' page, part of a multimedia repackaging of MSNBC's television program, *Time and Again*. At this site, a real-time plug-in called SurroundVideo allows me to move around Dallas's grassy knoll in a 3-D representational space via a fairly seamless patching together of digital photographs, navigating actual footage of the area. Once the image loads (waiting is also one of the web's temporalities), I am able to explore this Texan geographic terrain moving back and forth between the road, the book depository, the grassy arena. I am able to choose my own path with a click and drag of the mouse, zooming in and out for different perspectives and 'edits.' The sense of spatiality and mobility is fairly intense and certainly feels driven by my own desire. An even odder experience is created by clicking a button which maps black and white images of the 1963 assassination of the president *over* the color images, a slightly surreal collapse of space and time, still navigable. An archive of video and audio clips, various articles about JFK, transcripts of debates and speeches, and web visitors' own stories structure a roam-able space of JFK, evoking mediated memories of Camelot and a poignant affect of national loss and nostalgia. I am able to be both here (in LA) and there (in Dallas), both then (1963) and now (2002), but I am always present, moving, live, in command. For those not moved by mobile history, other SurroundVideo sites at MSNBC allow users to surf the solar system and tour the White House, each positioning the national via specific moments of geography and movement. Other websites tackle less hallowed ground: DEN offered up a virtual frat house in Quicktime format, designed to accompany the live (or replayed) webcast of its episodic series focused on campus life. While a given episode played out in a small video window, the websurfer could cruise the empty corridors of the frat house in a separate section of the browser, checking out sloppy rooms and communal showers, or post to an online chat which also shared the screen space. Here, the click-and-move mobility familiar from video games collided with the narrative world of television's teen dramas, all mapped out for maximum user navigability and choice. If early television promised to bring us the world, on the web, our own volition in relation to this travel gets foregrounded. Microsoft asks, 'Where do you want to go today?'

This sense of directed movement through space need not be so literal. The web is also a fly-through infoscape, a navigable terrain of spatialized data. The windows, folders and bookmarks which populate our desktops create individualized architectures for the infospheres of the web, building structures which allow us to inhabit realms of information, managing (or at least feeling as if we do) the vast database structures underwriting our web browsers. Search engines move through realms of data, more or less responding to our command. Chat structures information as a collaborative performance. Programs like Flash allow our cursors to activate lively sequences of motion via a simple rollover, charting movement in a colorful, pixilated dance and visualizing our mobility before we even click. Again, the cursor seems to

embody our trajectory, an expression of our movement and our will. We are increasingly aware of ourselves as databases, as part and parcel of the flow of information.

Pseudo and Den archived their episodic series, allowing a movement back through their 'broadcast' histories. The Pseudo web site insisted that 'you can search for and play any episode you want, any time you want.' This movement felt temporal, an aspect of the 'on-demand' nature of the web, as well as of its more material forms: its lack of fixity, its mutability, its variability. There's a sense of process to the web that does not simply equate to liveness but also to promises of change. E*Trade, email and E-Bay all manage time, producing and transforming temporalities; we feel connected to others within these temporal zones. There's a sense of presence with strangers. Community on the web, via chat but also auctions, is as much about meeting times as meeting places, as the empty chat rooms of Pseudo's archived shows suggested. This temporality can be multidirectional and also simultaneous, both forward and backward at once, taking timeshifting to a different level. Recycling on demand. Michael Nash has said that 'temporality connects our bodies to the computer' and joins us in digital space, via the 'dynamic of a connected presence.' We might see volitional mobility as the experience of choice (or its illusion) within the constraints of web space and web time.

This aspect of choice, of volition, is closely tied to what I categorize as a second modality of web experience, the *scan-and-search*. Writing in the 1970s, the British scholar Raymond Williams proposed the concept of 'planned flow' as 'the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form' (86). Flow unites the disparate bits of information, advertising, and narrative comprising an evening's television into a seamless whole, establishing a planned sequence which is more important than the individual segments which might seem to categorize television programming. Thus, as viewers, we are as likely to say that we watched television as to say what we watched, indicating the power of televisual flow. As a conceptual framework, flow has been amply explored and debated within television theory, with Jane Feuer arguing that television might more accurately be seen as a dialectic of segment and flow (15) and with John Caldwell similarly challenging the notion that television watching might be characterized by flow's boundlessness (163).

While websurfing might seem to operate in a manner similar to flow, bringing the vast array of data that categorizes the web into an experiential sequence, segmentation on the web – what we might more accurately call 'chunking' – is not identical to the segmentation of television. The web's chunking is spatial as much as temporal; our experience of moving through these chunks may seem akin to our experience of television's flow, but this is also a boundlessness we feel we help create or impact. It structures a different economy of attention than that underwritten by flow. We move from the glance-or-gaze that theorists have named as our primary engagements with television (or film) toward the scan-and-search.³ The scan-and-search is about a fear of missing the next experience or the next piece of data. Whereas this fear of missing something in the realm of television may cause the user to stay tuned to one channel, not to miss a narrative turn, this fear of missing in the web propels us elsewhere, on to the next chunk, less bound to linear time and contiguous space, into the archive and into what feels like navigable space that responds to our desire. We create architectures as we move through the web via bookmarks and location bars, structuring unique paths through databases and archives. This is not just

channel-surfing: it feels like we're wedding space and time, linking research and entertainment into similar patterns of mobility. The scan-and-search feels more active than the glance-or-gaze.

The web, less strictly a time-based and time-moving medium than broadcast, combines sequencing with discrete bits more robustly than television, encouraging the scan and the search as modes of engagement, structuring a spatialized and mobile subjectivity which feels less orchestrated than the subject hailed by televisual flow (a subject moving forward in time – or back with the VCR – but less likely to feel a movement elsewhere, spatially, a kind of sideways or lateral movement). With the web, we feel we create the sequences rather than being programmed into them. Feuer sees television's use of flow as imposing unity over fragmentation (including spatial fragmentation), but the web is less invested in such fictions of unity. While the web certainly is about structuring movement, particularly in sites like MSNBC or DEN, with careful attention paid to information architectures which strive to orchestrate the visitor's path through a site with precision, it does so while also structuring a heightened sense of choice and mobility through navigable spaces. The solicitation of our interaction overcomes a sense of disparate, chunked information, creating a feeling of mobility across data. DEN's site included the tagline 'All Available On Demand,' and its crowded browser windows demanded a different kind of attention than that of the glance while rarely sustaining a fixed gaze. We move through such sites searching and scanning, looking for the next thing.

The web's activation of our desire for what's next hints at a third modality of web experience, the promise of *transformation*. Janet Murray notes that transformation is a 'characteristic pleasure of digital environments' (154). She goes on to frame this particular pleasure via its relation to narrative structures (and narrative structures of a very particular kind), but we might instead think of transformation as endemic to the web in a broad sense, motivating an extensive variety of narrative and non-narrative forms. Of course, popular culture has long traded on the lure of transformation, from the glimmer of hope embodied in each sexy tube of MAC lipstick to the mighty morphing power rangers to the promise of the makeover in *Glamour*, *Oprah*, or *This Old House*. But computer culture introduces a new level of personalization and sense of choice in relation to transformation in forms as diverse as architectural cd-roms, the ill-fated Microsoft BOB, endless pink Barbie products, and the flash-enabled dress-up spaces of e-commerce. Even my MSNBC homepage or My Yahoo turn on transformation, as the faceless dataspace of the web are made-over via my demands. Personalization holds out the tantalizing lure of transformation, remaking information into a better reflection of the self.

From the VR frat house of DEN to the countless 'live' chats which populate the internet, the movement of the web harbors hopes of transformation. Regardless of content, there's a haptic potential to these spaces, both the literal 3-D spaces of Quicktime VR and the seemingly flat spaces of chat, of scrolling text. When one enters the space of chat, the dialog that unfolds can equal a loss of self, structuring a transformative space. To borrow a phrase from Amelie Hastie (writing about doll houses), these environments are consumed by both the mind and the eye, an imagined space of possibility and change.

Again, this sensation is tied to the actual form of digital data, to programmability, to the fragmentation and recombination which Hayles notes as intrinsic to

the medium (9). Digital code is malleable and subject to manipulation, at levels both accessible and inaccessible to the average user. In a language as simple as HTML (which my UNIX-coding husband refuses to even call a programming language), changing the descriptor 'FFFFFF' to 'FF6600' on a lengthy block of code seemingly transforms the page from a predictable white to the bold orange so hot circa 2000. Likewise, a lone missing comma can override thousands of lines of code, producing only error messages and frustration. As web browsers render pages on the fly, transformation's literalized; code is broken down and reassembled; new forms appear possible, recombination rules.

But, before I get too carried away in the heady realms of possibility, it is well to sound a cautionary note. Both Marsha Kinder and Susan Willis have alerted us to the often illusory status of promises of transformation. As Willis notes in relation to transforming toys, there is always the risk 'that everything transforms but nothing changes.' She describes toys that 'weld transformation to consumption' and ascribes the fascination with transforming toys to a 'utopian yearning for change which the toys themselves then manage and control' (cited in Kinder, 136). Thus, while the web may indeed foster the related sensations of volitional mobility, scan-and-search, and transformation, our understanding of these modalities needs another working through in order to discern how they underwrite particular spatialities and temporalities, enabling specific selves and particular publics.

On sensation and the corporation in the age of neo-Fordism

While volitional mobility, the scan-and-search, and transformation are at least partially structured by the very forms of digital data, our experience of these modes is also shaped by the more analog representations on our screens. For example, the MSNBC website is highly controlled, severely curtailing the user's movement in subtle yet limiting ways, and, yet, the promise and feeling of choice, movement, and liveness powerfully overdetermine its spaces. MSNBC.com self-consciously constructs itself as a projected fulfillment of what seems missing in the status quo (both on television and in real life), becoming a solution to the oft-voiced dilemma of having a hundred channels and still nothing to watch. We could say it promises everything and changes nothing.

The illusion of a mobilized liveness in a website like MSNBC actually masks the degree to which the site already stages a linear, largely unidirectional model of the internet, a model predicated on television's broadcast modes of information delivery and encouraged in web design manuals which illustrate modes of information architecture orchestrated to move a user through a site in very predetermined fashion. Many entertainment executives have taken to pitching a model of internet access based on television's network structure. This model, predicted to come on-line in less than a decade, would limit internet access to three or four providers who would function much like television networks, offering their own programming, directing users to approved parts of the web, and limiting the capacity to post a home page or web program to specialized producers. While this may sound farfetched, small steps in this direction are already under way. For instance, if you want to cruise around the grassy knoll in MSNBC's recreated Dallas, you had better be using a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser. Netscape can't take you there.

The interfaces deployed by MSNBC (and most other commercial websites) suggest a sense of liveness and movement even while the very programming which underwrites them works to guide and impede the user's trajectory. The increasing popularity of 'portal' sites leads to a web architecture which works to constrict the surfer's movement, effectively detouring users along particular paths or containing them within particular sites. For instance, both MSNBC and AOL work as portal sites which make it hard to leave their confines, functioning as the kind of locked-in channel television executives have long dreamed about. The increasing vertical monopolies characterizing the mediascape as well as the death of smaller (if well-funded) players like DEN and Pseudo take the meaning of convergence to a new level, naturalizing the relationships between television and the web. Rather than simply accepting the link between these two media, theorists need to investigate the ideological implications of actual interfaces and other programming choices; we need to foreground the political effects of burying the author function within the code. The standardization of temporality and style via channels, regular programming, and published schedules are a central part of the history of television and radio's commercialization. Television's much-heralded 'flow' worked to move viewers through segments of televisual time, orchestrating viewership, and web programming could allow for an even more carefully orchestrated movement, all dressed up in a feeling of choice.

Another example of the illusory nature of the web's modalities could be drawn from search engines, powerful programs which promote the illusion that one is actively surfing the web. Of course, when you use a search engine, you're not really moving through the web but through fairly limited databases. You might say that these databases structure volitional mobility to mask their own algorithmic structure, giving users the sense of control and movement through cyberspace when really you don't even touch the web when you initiate a search. Rather, you remain within a contained database, usually cataloguing less than thirty to forty percent of the web as a whole, processes which increasingly privilege commercial sites, enacting a very particular politics of information and design.⁴ All of which introduces questions of representation, underscoring that the analog representations on our screen are powerfully connected to life off-screen: certain constructions of space enable certain spheres of domination; digital metaphors and representations are powerful processors.

In corporate structure, technological form and modes of experience, the web and television increasingly interact in mutually supportive modes reinforcing what Margaret Morse has called the institutions of mobile privatization (118). If, as she maintains, freeways, malls, and televisions exist in a 'kind of sociocultural distribution and feedback system' (119), the web operates within this circuit of exchange, albeit with slightly adjusted modalities. Choice, personalization, and transformation are heightened as experiential lures, accelerated by feelings of mobility and searching, engaging the user's desire along different registers which nonetheless still underwrite neo-Fordist feedback loops. Eric Alliez and Michel Feher characterize the neo-Fordist economy as a shift away from the massive scale of factory production in the Fordist era toward a regime marked by a more supple capitalism. There is a move toward flexible specialization, niche marketing, service industries, and an increasing valorization of information, which is now awarded a status 'identical to the one assigned labor by classic capitalism: both a source of value and a form of merchandise' (316). The separation of the spaces and times of production

from those of reproduction (or leisure) which was central to an earlier mode of capitalism is replaced by a new spatio-temporal configuration in which the differences between work and leisure blur. This leads to a 'vast network for the productive circulation of information,' structuring people and machines as interchangeable, equivalent 'relays in the capitalist social machine.' Rather than being *subjected* to capital, the worker is now *incorporated* into capital, made to feel responsible for the corporation's success.

While Alliez and Feher first described this mode in 1987, locating its emergence in the late 1960s, their description of neo-Fordism brilliantly predicts the logic of the dotcom era. The fanatic and frenetic work habits of the denizens of Silicon Valley and the Digital Coast modeled the incorporation of the worker within capital, while the proliferation of networked existence via the internet, pagers, and cellular phones helped fuel the dissolution between the spatio-temporal borders of work and leisure. In the new networked economy, 'regular' readers help drive the databases of Amazon.com by freely posting their book or movie reviews and avid video game players help fuel corporate capital by posting homegrown game add-ons to corporate sites without compensation, succinctly illustrating their incorporation into capital and its flows. Likewise, we might see our web-enhanced experiences of volitional mobility, scan-and-search, and transformation as training us for a new neo-Fordist existence. Old (narrative) strategies of identification and point of view give way to information management and spatial navigation, underwriting the blur (or convergence) between research and entertainment that so characterizes much of life under the conditions of virtuality.

Thus, it's important to recognize that these emergent modes of experience are neither innocent nor neutral, simple expressions of the material forms of the digital. They model particular modes of subjectivity which can work all too neatly in the service of the shifting patterns of global capital. Yet, even if the mobility offered by a search engine or a corporate website is both technically limited and central to our incorporation into capital, this does not mean that search engines (or MSNBC for that matter) aren't experienced by their users as offering up choice and possibility; rather, it highlights the degree to which these experiences are doubly constructed, an element of both the very forms of the digital data and the ideology of mobility and change created by the sites themselves.

In conclusion, we might ask why, in a culture increasingly subject to simulation, volition (or its illusion) emerges as such a powerful modality of experience, such a visceral desire. If Walter Benjamin reminds us that early film served to drill the viewer in the modes of perception structured by the mechanical era, how do web spaces function as instructions for our bodily adaptation to virtuality? Mark Hansen has characterized the two main forms of experiential alienation of the digital age as the 'ubiquitous encounter with estranged, rootless images . . . and the loss of agency ensuing from the increasing distribution of perceptual and cognitive tasks into systems centrally involving non-human components' (9). In the face of these forces, then, the volitional mobility, the scan-and-search, and the transformation promised by the web might offer a glimmer of hope, a hope not entirely foreclosed by corporate rhetoric, the will of interactive companies like DEN and Pseudo, and the hegemony of Microsoft. While the 'click-and-buy' logic of DEN certainly overrides the ontology of volitional mobility with an illusory ideology of volition, that these modalities are also part of the *forms* of the web suggests a redemptive

possibility, if only in the ways they activate our very desire for movement and change, a desire that might be mobilized elsewhere.

Notes

- 1 I trace the emergence and stakes of this rhetoric of convergence in my 'TV predicts its future: on convergence and cybertelevision.' My theorization about the web's modalities took initial shape in that essay, and 'Reload' draws from and expands this earlier work.
- 2 During the dotcom boom, Pseudo was hailed by many as an excellent example of the web's capacity to leverage and improve upon conventional television. While the site, begun in 1994, did offer some innovative and interesting programming in a format which in actuality drew as much from radio as from television, it still was a victim of the new technology slowdown and of uncontrolled spending, having burned through in excess of \$32 million in funding without becoming profitable (Blair). The site was officially shut down in September 2000, a closure described by *The New York Times* as 'one of the most visible casualties of the dot-com sector's downturn' (Meyers). The company's assets were purchased in January 2001 by INTV (www.intv.tv), another 'interactive television' company which maintains a circumscribed site at www.pseudo.com. This site promised an imminent (and unrealized) relaunch of Pseudo throughout fall of 2001. DEN (an acronym for the 'Digital Entertainment Network') was launched to incredible hype in Los Angeles and more clearly drew from television's series format. At its height, it had over 300 employees as well as investments by Microsoft, Dell Computer, NBC, and other large technology and entertainment companies. After speeding through more than \$60 million in capital in about two years, DEN closed shop in June, 2000 amid heavily reported scandals, both financial and sexual.
- 3 In *Visible Fictions*, John Ellis argued that television viewing was more accurately characterized by the glance than by the sustained gaze that film theorists had posited as key to cinema's power and allure. This reading was at least partially based on television's domestic setting, a context likely to encourage distracted viewing. As John Caldwell notes, 'glance theory' now functions as a truism of television theory, although Caldwell argues that newer modes of televisuality do demand a more concentrated gaze and a less distracted viewer. I'd suggest that television might be seen as playing to both the glance and the gaze, depending on particular modes of programming, and that neither of these modes adequately explains how we engage with our web browsers.
- 4 The particularity of this politics of information and design is further driven home when one realizes that over 50 percent of the registered domain names for the Internet are in the United States and that 11 percent are in California. English is by far the predominant language on the web.

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