Spring 4-30-2010

Re-Working Digital Identity/Man as a Metaphor that Escapes Itself

John Schell

John Schell

Professor Whalen

Engl 457

April 30, 2010

<p style="text-align:center">Re-Working Digital Identity/Man as a Metaphor that Escapes Itself</p>

The issue of locating terms associated with the human condition (identity, community, transcendence, and others) in a digital space is only made possible by a mentality that does not locate the power of text in one particular medium. With the emergence of poststructuralist thinkers, the autonomy of an aesthetic field seems to lose its credibility, largely because real life no longer serves as an adequate point of reference for the text, and printed words move from the transmitters of experience to the experience itself. It is in this new area of textual exchange that this paper positions its argument about identity. Because identity in a digital context only makes sense if the reader can read not just technical or literary language, but a whole panoply of different texts into the subject matter (anthropological, sociological, psychological, to name a few). If digital codes continue to be thought of in a strictly pragmatic and functional sense, from the perspective of the computer technician, engineer, or the businessman, then code always remains opaque and under the authority of its authors. The postmodern reader no longer accept the text as an extension of an author's voice, as interactions with the digital should no longer accept the computer technician as the authoritative point of reference. When the reader is able to acknowledge this break, the alienation from the author and the immergence of a critical space, then digital consciousness can take shape. An examination of identity then, the multifaceted dynamo with its cultural significances ranging across numerous discourses, helps mediate the changing material landscape of reality (increasingly digital) with the perceptual precepts into

which we are born. In exploring this issue of identity as a mediating term, this paper argues that the digitalization of identity does not mark its end nor its irrelevance, but rather, that code's material constraints force any articulation of identity to develop through the terms of its own undermining. We can think of identity, in this sense, as a process mimicking a substance, a necessary localizing of the subject in a digital context through means that instantly open the subject to discrediting and alteration.

Text and Anti-Text, and how the digitalization of identity creates a necessary and functional irony.

In 1974, the U.S. Government passed the Privacy Act, the first major legislation that specifically protects a consumer's electronic privacy from large companies and organizations who could exploit that information for financial gain. While the government obviously implemented this bill for the reasons of protecting the consumer and protecting privacy, the bill also signals a paramount shift in the cultural conception of digital technologies. The reaction to the growing importance of transmitting information electronically was to think of information in terms of a *conceptualized* self. Advocates for privacy framed the digital in terms of body politics, the consumer would not tolerate strangers robbing them of either money or their personal information (like a drivers license), and the consumer should then not tolerate this behavior digitally. Yet, the Act does more than state an obvious precondition for using electronic information; it actively shapes the parameters of digital technologies to fit the longstanding judicial and constitutional model of the body and identity. This idea is a problematic one, as it becomes apparent that identity is not only a product of material circumstances (the need for this law), but also a product of the material (hardware/software) on which it is constructed.

Even before the implication of the Privacy Act, the application of metaphor to the operations of computer code opens what can solidly be categorized as a digital space. The material artifact itself, be it a personal computer or a terminal, always engenders a metaphor because it requires interpretation. One cannot simply look inside a computer case and understand what is going on, but rather, the computer's unintelligibility implies the need for a new space (to make it intelligible). It is in this new space where, through multi-layered interpretations/operations, the substitution of the computer's unintelligibility with the meaning-making process of metaphor and the sign occurs. What is lost in this substitution then, is a referent- the apparent unintelligibility of the computer- that lacks natural dimensions; rather the referent is already a preconceived notion integrated into a capitalist mode of production (i.e. hardware for the purpose of schematically powering the computer). A more accurate phrasing would be a digital metaphor signals the loss of signifier-as-referent, and any interpretation foregrounds this sign system. In the first chapter of his influential book *Simulations and Simulacra*, Baudrillard indicates this shift in thinking, and applies the conditions of interpreting the computer to the human condition of existence more broadly. We, as westerners, all undergo what Baudrillard explains here:

> In this passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials — worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, which are a more ductile material than meaning, in that they lend themselves to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced: this is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection which no longer leaves any chance even in the event of death. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference. (Baudrillard 3)

Baudrillard's proclamation appears grim in this context (and almost apocalyptic in the book as a whole), and it is precisely this pessimistic tone which is both problematic and interesting. This "liquidation of all referential" that leads to an "orbital recurrence of models" suggests a materiality that neuters all constructions of dichotomy (through an inescapable "system of signs"), first and foremost the real and the imaginary. Yet, implicitly, this paragraph reinforces two dichotomies, chronology/anachronism and positive/negative, and it does so in order to deconstruct the real/imaginary. The tone demonstrates the deployment of this positive/negative along the lines of pessimistic/optimistic, and the distinction that this is the "age of simulation" connotes a linear sequence of time in the context of a chronologic/anachronistic divide. These binaries may seem contradictory to Baudrillard's purpose and the "perfect descriptive machines" of code he is describes, until the reader remembers that Baudrillard himself is not working with a referent body (some permanent subject or individual), but a *signifier* that is already a conceived body. His attack is on the cultural meaning of the body, not the body prior to meaning, and as such this attack is already preconfigured by a rich rhetorical tradition (which includes a heavy amount of binary and dialectical thinking). Baudrillard's introduction to his text is then a performance as much as an analysis, and shows how identity mediates between this digital expectation of the slippery referent/signifier with the cultural expectation of the stable subject. As Baudrillard shows the de-centering of the subject, he must utilize a language that compulsively looks to re-incorporate a center, and subsequently this interplay (slowly) shifts the locus of this semiotic play. Identity, as self destructive and self reflexive, mediates this locus of play.

Baudrillard becomes so important in articulating this compulsion for the center because, as he explores how material circumstances effect peoples conceptions about identity, the material

constraints of his own book act on the interpretation of identity for the reader. As the reader must accredit a singularity of voice and topic to Baudrillard's writing (in order follow his argument), this desire to see him talking with absolute authority becomes an active part of the text that needs resisting. Authority is embedded within the text itself and, in the resisting of it, provides the reader with a framework of deconstruction applicable to other assertions of authority. An example of this comes with William Gibson's classic piece *Burning Chrome*, where notions similar to Baudrillard's permanent cultural body collide with Gibson's presentations of body in interesting ways.

The poetics of *Burning Chrome* complicates the cultural representation of identity precisely because he focuses on a digital landscape. Gibson forcefully includes this landscape by making the protagonist Jack dependent on it; because any assessment of Jack's physical character is intractably tied to his virtual self. As a first person narration the reader lacks a distance from which the events can be told and everything is shown through Jack's eyes. Gibson works with how this creates a visual metaphor and applies it to a cyberspace landscape to imply a sense of identity developed solely in that space (or rather, non-space). This is seen in the invasion of Chrome's cyberspace, which is described as such:

> bodiless, we swerve into Chrome's castle of ice. And we're fast, fast. It feels like we're surfing the crest of the invading program, hanging ten above the seething glitch systems as they mutate. We're sentient patches of oil swept along down corridors of shadow. (Gibson 184)

Jack could have given the reader raw code for how this hacking occurred or used more pragmatic language, but he felt that this imagery of invasion was a better representation of how the events transpired. This helps to underscore the value Jack places in his interaction with digital code; that it is a source that merits a poetic description. The reason for this specific description is twofold; Jack finds something intrinsically enjoyable in the hacking experience, and the actual

ramifications of this hack have direct consequences for his economic situation. By casting these

types of romantic images as necessary plot points throughout his text, Gibson is able not only to

show the interlocking of the digital with Jack's reality, but the sense of empowerment and

agency Jack feels in this digital space. The remarkable amount of energy Jack invests in these

descriptions of hacking dispels any anonymous or cold association he may have with it, but

demonstrates a sense of self in this digital mainframe. It is a sense of self that flies in the face of

the (dominant) functional logic applied to computers and the network Jack and Bobby frequent.

The logic that applying notions of identity to digital code (which is void of any substance or

landscape) is a false application, because identity refers to reality or a sense of landscape that is

earned by people through the various social constructs available to them. Nevertheless, Gibson

is compelled to craft a story around this code and, in doing so, he locates the inspiration for his

text in the logic and rules of computer code, not in the logic and rules of natural law or "reality."

As Gibson advocates the values of a digital poetics, his most valuable consideration of

the body appears in his implicit assumption of how a character's agency comes prior to their

identities. Consider the quotation earlier as it is juxtaposed against this description of Bobby,

Jacks partner in crime and best friend, which reads:

> Bobby was a cowboy. Bobby was a cracksman, a burglar, casing mankind's extended
> electronic nervous system, rustling data and credit in the crowded matrix, monochrome
> nonspace where the only stars are dense concentrations of information, and high above it
> all burn corporate galaxies and the cold spiral arms of military systems. (Gibson 181)

In the preceding quotation the reader has the description of Jack in cyberspace as "bodiless" and

"sentient patches of oil," indicating that there is something non-corporeal about how he is

imagined in this space. But, the reader also has this description of Bobby which connotes a very

different type of representation, and seems to contradict Gibson's earlier claim of the non-

corporeal. It becomes apparent then, that a representation in cyberspace does not correlate with a

real world counter part. Jack is not intrinsically a little Jack online, but his sense of self can be

infinitely malleable. What counts are the skills a person possesses in cyberspace. Every time

they must log into the network, and every time they must rely on their skills. This configuration

of identity fits with the insights of Roland Barthes in his essay from "From Work to Text," as

Barthes locates this in a larger semantic discourse. Consider the juxtaposition of these two

quotes, "The difference is this [between work and text]: the work is a fragment of substance,

occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological

field." (Barthes 1) and:

> Text, on the contrary [to work], practices the infinite deferment of the signified, is
> dilatory; its field is that of the signifier. The signifier must not be conceived of as 'the
> first stage of meaning', its material vestibule, but, in complete opposition to this, as its
> *deferred action*. Similarly, the *infinity* of the signifier refers not to some idea of the
> ineffable (the unnameable signified) but to that of a *playing*; the generation of the
> perpetual signifier (after the fashion of a perpetual calendar) in the field of the text
> (better, of which the text is the field) is realized not according to an organic progress of
> maturation or a hermeneutic course of deepening investigation, but, rather, according to a
> serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations. (Barthes 3)

The author of the work, according to Barthes, would be one that produces in order to solidify a

type of symbolic hierarchy. The desire is to be a "fragment of substance," and in the author's

fervor for this completeness transforms him/herself into a "material vestibule," locking the

symbol as this transformative principle (from lower to higher planes of conception). When the

reader considers how corporeal stability is meaningless for Bobby and Jack in establishing their

identities, these vertical categories that work implies seem inapplicable. It is in fact *through* a

compulsive desire to think of Bobby and Jack as complete symbols that this inaccuracy is

exposed, as the expectation for many readers is a sort of ontological categorization of the

characters, that Bobby and Jack exist prior and in totality to their excursions into cyber space.

Instead, the reader is left with this "infinity of signifiers" written onto the body of the characters

themselves, as no corporeal form seems to affect Bobby or Jack's interactions in cyber space. The significance of Gibson's text then, and digital technologies more broadly, is that through the digital he brings the labeling act of identity into the "methodological field" of text, and repositions once permanent categories (the body) as culturally appropriate tools to negotiate identity. Identity does not stand prior or outside this "methodological field," but finds its expression inside the same terms of its construction. And the reader sees with Bobby how even the generic category of a Hollywood figure, an identity itself, can be applied to help constitute an identity that slips away almost as soon as it is conceived.

With the opening of body to semantic play of other bodies (that interaction with digital technologies provides), it is important to define and locate terms specific to digital medias. Gibson's text serves to inform the reader about digital identity through the formal style of the novel which, though never fully absent from digital medias, does not encompass the entirety of the field. Consider a point made from Kirschenbaum's essay *Extreme Inscription: Towards a Grammatology of the Hardrive*, were he explains the grammatical problems with trying to talk about a hard disk:

> The commonplace is to speak of writing a file to a disk; to say writing "on" a disk sounds vaguely wrong, the speech of someone who has not yet assimilated the relevant vocabulary or concepts. We write on paper, but we write to a magnetic disk (or tape). Part of what the preposition contributes here is a sense of interiority; because we cannot see anything on its surface, the disk is semantically refigured as a volumetric receptacle, a black box with a closed lid. If we were writing on the disk we would be able to see the text, like a label. Instead, the preposition of choice, "to," becomes a marker for our intuition that the verb "write" is not altogether appropriate, a rough fit at best. The preposition is also a legacy of the von Neumann model, where storage is a physically as well as a logically distinct portion of the computer. Writing data "to" the storage element thus entails a literal as well as a conceptual displacement. (Kirschenbaum 101)

From this example it is not hard to imagine the difficulties and misnomers for the reader who, learning his/her grammatical concepts and vocabularies entirely from conventional narrative

formats, must make narratives through new types of material that have very different properties.

As Kirschenbaum notes in dealing with the hard drive the difference is literal and conceptual,

more analogous to writing that disappears as soon as it is written, and the interconnectivity plays

on different material constraints of the narrative. In this case it is not just inter-textual readings,

but inter-procedural as well, writing that literarily requires the reading of other writings to be

read.

        In Kirchenbaum's attempt to map out a new type of language, he implicitly draws

parallels to Hayles' *Writing Machines*, a short novel which offers an exceptional example of the

analysis/performance quality present in Baudrillard's narrator and Gibson's characters.

Kirchenbum's reading is important to a notion Hayles puts forth of the material metaphor, which

she describes as:

> Traditionally metaphor has been defined as a verbal figure. Derived from a root meaning bearing across, it denotes the transfer of sense associated with one word to another. In Egan's fictional scenario, the transfer takes place not between one word and another but rather between symbol (more properly, a network of symbols) and material apparatus. This kind of traffic, as old as the human species, is becoming increasingly important as the symbol-processing machines we call computers are hooked into networks in which they are seamlessly integrated with apparatus that can actually do things in the world, from the sensors and actuators of mobile robots to the semiotic-material machinery that changes the numbers in bank accounts. To account for this traffic I propose *material metaphor*, a term that foregrounds the traffic between words and physical artifacts. (Hayles 22)

Hayles argues that what Kirchenbaum is trying to establish is a natural consequence of a

symbolic system adapting to a changing material landscape. Material metaphor places the

adjustments to language (that Kirschenbaum hopes for) within this broader category of a cultural

dialectic, where symbolic interaction is in dialogue with its material borders as it affects the

position of the observer.   It is in the same vein of thinking Walter Benjamin deploys in "Art in

the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," when he states that:

> During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with
> humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is
> organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but
> by historical circumstances as well. (Benjamin 3)

Benjamin and Hayles both find it impossible to disconnect the symbolic process from a material

reality, or its "historical circumstances." Hayles argument fits within the model Benjamin

provides, and she substitutes the need to study code and the digital for the more established

mediums (such as film and painting) because it more adequately expresses humanities "mode of

existence". Like Baudrillard and Gibson, she purposefully shifts cultural criticism into the

relationship between symbol and code, in order to understand symbol and "reality."

An important strategy Hayles uses in emphasizing code is to locate artistic examples of

material metaphor, as well as turn her own text into an artistic piece. For example, the process

Kirschenbaum talks about in his quotation has a striking similarity to how Hayles defines a

hypertext. In talking about *Califia* by M.D Covely she describes the properties of a hypertext:

> Finally it hit her [Kaye]: the work embedded the verbal narrative in a topographic
> environment in which word was interwoven with world. The world contained the words
> but much else besides, including layered images, complex navigation functionalities, and
> simulated documents. By focusing on the words alone, she had missed the point. Now
> she was able to evaluate *Califia* in a different way, from an integrated perspective in
> which all components became signifying practices. (Hayles 41)

Hayles (like Kirschenbaum) identifies this literal spatial displacement implicit in all code, art

piece or not. *Califia* makes this displacement visible, by requiring the reader to not only

associate words to each other, but also requires the contemplation of what device transmits the

word. The reader accesses many different platforms of transmission, links embedded in the text

that go to other pages, images, etc, that form an intractable bond with each other. It is in these

moments of transmission, this literal yoking together of discontinuous process, where the

material metaphor becomes visible. It is a synthesis of the analogous process of metaphor with

the functional necessity of materiality. The piece thus demands very different constraints on the perceiver, transforming the passive reader into the active user, and bringing the materiality of the hypertext into the cultural discourse of Californian history, landscape, and nationalism that the piece conveys.

Such transformations of the position of the reader are a hallmark of post-structuralist thinking. The closing lines of Barthes' essay "Death of the Author" seems to prophesize this position when he states "the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (Barthes 2). Gibson's characters signals the same configuration as well, in that they are bodies that serve as the sight for a play of signifiers, threatening to empty them of autonomy and ontological permanence. Yet, as it becomes apparent with Baudrillard, this de-centering can only ever be a threat as it is coupled with a compulsion for the center, and it seems to be capable of taking place at the level of the narrator itself. Unlike with Gibson or Hayles' discussion of *Califia*, however, Baudrillard stresses the importance of this type of identity playing out in the most banal and uninteresting scenarios (hyper-text as not only an artistic type, but an everyday reality of electronics).

A different type of aesthetic piece explains this commonality of the hyper-text format and begins to access many of the underlining ironies of digital code (and what it means to construct identity in such a scenario). Consider the interactivity of the website http://wwwwwwwww.jodi.org/, part of a larger project jodi.org, in this regard. The piece is at first glance unremarkable and confusing; it is literally a website and holds no special parameters for access (besides a computer and a web connection). When the user accesses the pages the screen flashes with incomprehensible type in a bold neon color, and the user can click anywhere

to be taken to another site in the jodi.org nebulous that is equally incomprehensible. Yet, if the user continues to click the links available this incomprehensibility starts to give way to navigational patterns the same as more elegant hyperlinks. http://wwwwwwww.jodi.org/, however, robs the user of the symbolic payoff of a narrative coming together that more sophisticated hypertexts provide. The site actually frustrates the user who, if trying hard enough to find a larger meaning, may turn to view the source code only to find an image of a bomb that seems to have nothing to do with anything. It is at this moment that the site exposes the user and their ironic position, because turning to the source code implies a *readable link* between the code and what is present on the website, when in fact there is no link and even the code can be turned into an image (and a place of symbolic meaning itself). Any user accessing this type of permanence on the web or on the computer, be it a facebook account, bank account, or desktop folders, falls into this trap of thinking he or she can mediate between the incongruous code and the image that that code "represents." However, this permanence, a sort of digital signature, must set its origins in the context of an arbitrary and unrelated code. The productive irony of digital signatures then, accepts the precepts that the "connected code" can alter without justification or accountability, and the signature/identity can become unrecognizable because of this. http://wwwwwwww.jodi.org/ may seem like an error message, but it demonstrates that all meaningful code has within it the possibility to become an error message

An explanation must be provided for the question, if constructed permanence only becomes ironically self-destructive, why bother to force this centralization? Why create digital identities, why not strive for a new type of configuration? Why, in fact, is this sort of permanence to a digital identity such a ubiquitous notion? For example this type of permanence becomes so important that the U.S. Government in the Patriot Act states, with regards to

allowing law enforcement of theft online, that "This change made the law technology-neutral; it

placed electronic trespassers *on the same footing* as physical trespassers. Now, hacking victims

can seek law enforcement assistance to combat hackers, just as burglary victims have been able

to invite officers into their homes to catch burglars." On this account the insights of Derrida are

crucial, and he also gives a new type of understanding to Hayle's book and the workings of

digital identity more broadly. In Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign, and Play," he states that:

> Henceforth, it became necessary to think both the law which somehow governed the
> desire for a center *in* the constitution of structure, and the process of signification which
> orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence- but a central
> presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its
> own substitute. The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow
> existed before it. Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center,
> that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no
> natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an
> infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play…. The absence of the transcendental
> signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (Derrida 280)

From Derrida, the reader understands then this compulsion for a center as a *necessary* "process

of signification" itself. It is in "the constitution of structure". These ironic gestures of

permanence then, ranging across all examples mentioned, have always been a part of a sign

system. Hayles seems to be conscious of this notion, constructing the character Kaye to

represent herself in the story yet simultaneously distancing herself (Hayles) from this character.

She expresses some of her anxieties in the introductory chapter:

> I am under no illusions that I can write myself, for so many reasons I cannot list them all
> here, from the inevitability of the partial perspective to the passing of time that makes the
> person who writes incrementally or vastly different from the one written. Although there
> are autobiographical elements in the persona who will be written in these narrative
> chapters, no one should confuse her with me. To mark that crucial difference, she needs
> a name related to mine but not the same. I will call her- Kaye. (Hayles 10)

This construction of Kaye is recognition that the centralizing tendencies of authorial domination

are not an accurate interpretive model for text. If Hayles simply reports this as an auto-

biographical account, she would not account for "partial perspectives" and "the passing of time" which undermine the authorial position. The construction of a third person allows Hayles to falsify autobiographical readings and, as Barthe's notes, puts the emphasis of interpretation on the reader.

Though Hayles' intentions may be to decenter, the compulsion for a center is an immensely pervasive rhetorical construct (inescapable according to Derrida), and it finds its place within Hayles' text. It is no more telling and no more important than in Hayles' great discussion of the internet browser game *Lexia To Perplexia*, where her description and analysis of the game seems to turn against itself and make it (the analysis) inaccessible. Consider her concluding remarks on the game:

> Admist these complexities, what is clearly established is not the superiority of code to flesh but metaphoric networks that map electronic writing onto the fluid bodies. *Lexia to Perplexia* intervenes at beginnings and boundaries to tell new stories about how texts and bodies entwine. The shift in materiality that Lexia to Perplexia instantiates creates new connections between screen and eye, cursors and hand, computer coding and natural language, space in front of the screen and behind it. Scary and exhilarating, these connections perform human subjects who cannot be thought without the intelligent machines that produce us even as we produce them. (Hayles 63)

It is useful to point out that Hayles also describes this process of playing as the immergence of a "Creole" language, merging computerized language with English. The integration of the user in *Lexia to Perplexia* relies on principals specific to *each* user who experiences the game, and the materiality of each user's position becomes an integral part of establishing this experience of identity. The kid sitting in his chair in Maine playing Lexia to Perplexia may have a similar experience to the man playing it in Idaho, but many elements of the experience are irreconcilable because they take place on the specific body of the user. Hayles' analysis then problematically becomes contradictory, in that it looks to ground the experience (her experience) as an explanation for a function that is always relative, to ground her voice-as-authority when we are

to believe that voices in this practice (*Lexia to Perplexia*) are always changing. She inadvertently writes her history with *Lexia to Perplexia* over all the potential histories of her readers, a type of description that changes what it describes. It is even more problematic and interesting considering that this falsification seems to be the only type of articulation available, because there is no other way Hayles could talk about this experience.

It is this revenge of the compulsion for the center that pervades all the examples mentioned and gives the reader an understanding of how digitally constructed identities operate. To return to the title of this section, it appears that any interaction with code locates every identity as a text through its anti-text. The knowledge is that the field is a nebulous of signifiers and horizontal associations, yet this becomes visible only through the stubborn localizing of signifiers (often masquerading as the point of origin) and attempts at centralization. These are only perpetual attempts however, as each digital identity holds the threat of its anti-identity double, and this *act* of construction/deconstruction is the important aspect of a codified self because it is also culturally verified.

Hyper audience, the penetrated reader, and problems of a globalized perspective.

If the parameters of the identified body shift in a digital context, then the interaction between identities undergoes a transformation that reflects this shift. In initial investigation into what constitutes a digital audience, a good starting point is drawing a (rather extended) analogy to architecture. Benjamin's insights in this regard are invaluable, as he states in the aforementioned paper that:

> Buildings have been man's companions since primeval times. Many art forms have developed and perished. Tragedy begins with the Greeks, is extinguished with them, and after centuries its "rules" only are revived. The epic poem, which had its origin in the youth of nations, expires in Europe at the end of the Renaissance. Panel painting is a creation of the Middle Ages, and nothing guarantees its uninterrupted existence. But the human need for shelter is lasting. Architecture has never been idle. Its history is more

ancient than that of any other art, and its claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art. (Benjamin 6)

Art, and more importantly the interpretation of art, appear not only as a result of human intention but can be found in the *infrastructure* of existence itself. When the building, "man's companion", enters the aesthetic discussion then so do the masses (with all their inequalities and their political strife as well). From this insight it is not hard to imagine how code, with its countless trillions of dollars and ubiquitous place in society, adopts this infrastructural position. It is also important to think of code performing in a more literally architectural sense as well. For example, if a group of people gather around the obelisk in Rome they constitute an audience through their ability to potentially *communicate* the experience to each other. A similar scenario is active in users responding to an image or to the title to a thread on an internet forum, though it demands a very different type of interpretation. It is at this crossroads where this paper finds itself, the reification of code (into art) and simultaneously the need for an interpretive model to understand this reification.

The development of an audience in digital landscapes accesses patterns of constructions which threaten the spatial consistency of an object. As the reader sees with *Burning Chrome* that the body is potentially no longer a site of physical consistency, then it is possible that the agreed-upon object of viewing (which constitutes an audience) is no longer a reflection of this ontological permanence. Because the actual location of a digital audience is not a singular space, the inside/outside dichotomy no longer seems applicable and, paradoxically, the object of viewing is included with the viewer. Such assumptions interestingly open the body up to not only the many forces of capitalism and consumerism, but competing cultural narratives as well. Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* addresses these issues through its conscious subversion of the thematic and structural tropes of the inside/outside when crafting its narrative.

A few ambiguities initially jump out at the reader in investigating *House of Leaves*. The theme of architecture is of course one of these, and the idea of the house transcending its expected dimensions. A great example of this is when Tom drops a quarter inside the mysterious region of the house and it appears to fall for 50 minutes, prompting Zampano to add a cliff note stating that "the quarter would have fallen 27,273 miles exceeding even the earth's circumference" (Danielewski 305). While there is a certain mysterious ethos that comes with the odd phenomena of the house, Danielewski presents this strangeness as the inability to translate the house into human discourse. Time and time again the fields of mathematics, physics, psychology and even geology try to justify the house, only to have the house appear inaccessible to these seemingly unchallengeable paradigms. The problem actually manifests itself at a more basic level, which is the insistent desire to read a space syntactically. With these large amounts of deletions, gaps, blank space, and unconnected text, the reader is presented with the uncertainty of whether meaning should coincide with a grammatical rule system (simply the text) or if it registers in a more pictorial format. The ambiguity coincides with a similar dilemma that W.J.T. Mitchell comments on in his essay "Metapictures", when he states (talking about Magritte's pipe) that:

> Magritte's pipe is a third-order metapicture, depicting and deconstructing the relation between the first-order image and the second-order discourse that is fundamental to the intelligibility of all pictures, and perhaps of all words. It isn't simply that the words contradict the image, and vice versa, but that the very identities of words and images, the sayable and the seeable, begin to shimmer and shift in the composition, as if the image could speak and the words were on display. (Mitchell 68)

This type of metapicture Mitchell describes, the slippage between word and text, appears on every page of *House of Leaves* both in the descriptions of the house *and* the format of the book. As the house resists the paradigms assigned (to investigate) it, the narrator (s) describing the house lack the ability to *understand totally* the object with which they are describing. In lacking

this totality the narrators can never delineate to the audience the closure of this space of the

house, a closure that would allow the reader to internalize this house as a static object in space,

but rather the slippage between the thematic and material properties of the house continually

positions the house as a dynamo of ambiguities.

The incomplete perspective of the three "narrators" in *House of Leaves* translates as

problem of origin and authority with regards to the construction of a digital audience. The issue

of talking about the House falls to three separate voices in three different time periods. Zampano

talks about the house initially, Johnny edits Zampano, and finally the Editors edit Johnny. The

reader first understands this hierarchy on page four of the text, where The Editors clarify that:

> In an effort to limit confusion, Mr. Truant's footnotes will appear in Courier font while
> Zampano's will appear in Times. We also wish to note there that we have never actually
> met Mr. Truant. All matters regarding the publication were addressed in letters or in rare
> instances over the phone. (Danielewski 4)

While the Editors explain to the reader that there are these three major sources for the House,

they also note that the only distinguishing marker between the three is the font choice (which has

been chosen by the Editors). The illusion of chronology becomes evident here, as the reader

realizes that they have no access to either of these editors *separate* from The Editors. While the

reader trusts the Editors to leave these initially edits in tact, there is no guarantee and things may

have been added or deleted post facto. This problem extends all the way to the origin of the

House and criticism more broadly, namely that there does not seem to be a distance between the

critic and the object of criticism. It is impossible to determine whether Zampano/Bobby/Editors

(or even some other source) record, distort, erase, plagiarize, or simply fabricate each others'

observations. The issue is analogous to what cultural critic Frederic Jameson describes as

wrapping in his book *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Jameson cites

wrapping while talking about the dilemma of architecture and the inside/outside, and he states

that:

> The problem [of the text/critic, and the inside/outside] then seemed to reorganize itself
> into a formal one: what kind of relationships are we now to establish between these two
> distinct sets of data or raw materials if the figure/ground relationship is excluded from the
> outset? "Intertexutality" was always an exceedingly weak and formalistic solution to this
> problem, which wrapping solves much better, being first of all more frivolous (and
> thereby instantly disposable), but also and above all, because unlike intertexuality, it
> retains the essential prerequisite of priority or even hierarchy- the functional
> subordination of one element to another- but makes that now reversible. What is
> wrapped can also be used as the wrapper; the wrapper can also be wrapped in its turn.
> (Jameson 101)

As Jameson notes, context seems to be something impossible to pin down because it rapidly

becomes interchangeable with the text itself. When the reader considers the House in this

regard, then its inconsistencies become more intelligible. The interaction between the Editors is

only temporary sites of description that do not hold up continually through the entire *material*

artifact of the book. The narrative gives way to a more puzzle-oriented approach, where the

reader has to de-code the book for clues and sequences, only then to find the narrative reemerge

with different priorities (for example from Zapano as the focus to perhaps Bobby, Holloway,

Karen, etc). It is not as if the book breaks under its own inconsistencies, losing all points of

references and origins, becoming a collage of unlinked and random points of reference. *House*

of Leaves is much more dynamic than that, the origin of the house reinvents itself with each

significant articulation (instead of remaining consistent throughout), linking the reader and the

editors in this shared space of their object and their comments about that object.

This intractability of the object of viewing/discourse from the commenter on that object

is the phenomenon of the digital audience. There is neither priority nor continuity in a

digitalized object, but every comment that requires a type of digital signature (for example an

internet chatroom or forum) re-images their object of commentary. Such a configuration

explains the perpetual ambiguities in fields of perception for the reader, the uncertainty of the

image and the text, as indeed an inexhaustible amount of sources may deploy the same bits of

information in different ways. These redeployments not only affect the local materiality of an

artifact, the re-prioritizing of authority that goes on in *House of Leaves* for example, but also

activates broader registers of the same process. Jameson diagnoses how this process plays out,

when talking about the spatial implications of "cross-disciplinary thinking." He states that:

> Indeed, we may speak of spatialization here as the process whereby the traditional fine
> arts are mediatized: that is, they now come to consciousness of themselves as various
> media within a mediatic system in which their own internal production also constitutes a
> symbolic message and the taking of a position on the status of the medium in question.
> Gober's installation- which includes what might once have been called painting,
> sculpture, writing, and even architecture- this draws its effects from a place not above the
> media but within their system of relationships: something it seems better to characterize
> as a kind of reflexivity rather than the more conventional notion of "mixed media," which
> normally implies the emergence of a kind of superproduct or transcendental object.
> (Jameson 162)

The inside rapidly becomes the outside, the "internal production also constitutes a symbolic

message," and the audience adopts not a specific but ubiquitous position. Because the computer

only operates as a communication network, the audience reflects this through its shifting

position. The audience is everywhere and always in this "system of relationships" with regards

to code. An individual finds themselves as both addressing their specific concern and also

negotiating the larger position of the "mediatic system" in which they operate. Their place

resembles less the individual in awe of a monument or edifice, but rather a transmission tower

that signals to others what it receives.

The globalizing implications that come with such a pervasive apparatus as code is

troublesome for international interaction as it makes the simply act of viewing an aggressive act.

House of Leaves provides a fantastic example of this in the marginalization of Delial by

Navidson. To a large degree Navidson establishes his credibility, certainly his most far reaching and global fame, through the visual recording of her death. This recording however gives way to a doubling of this atrocity because, while the camera renders Delial plainly visible, it simultaneously makes her invisible because the photo is never separate from Navidson's artistic intentions. There is nothing of Delial (even the name) in this photo that can be segregated from Navidson's manipulation of the scene, he even alters the vulture by keeping it "to the left and Delial toward the middle, thus purposefully leaving the entire right portion of the frame empty" (Danielewski 420). The reader finds him or herself in the similar dilemma of a commentator's inability to separate from their object of commentary, as the photograph does not link referential reality with a representational double (rendering the body/photographer transparent). Rather, the photographer looks to substitute his/her identity for this referent, only to find (like Baudrillard) that this referent is already a signifier. Navidson vainly tries to control his photo, initially presenting it to the public for validation, then to retract its influence in a drunken confessional, never realizing that the image instantly signals a larger cultural discourse. Here it is the discourse of global imperialism, as the photo is a product of consumption (to consume an image of the suffering third world) that displaces the physical space of Delial. Delial's unnamed home shrinks then, as the demands of global visibility and the global subject project their construction over the physical realities of these marginalized people through the asymmetries of the photograph.

A conversation about digital identity must mediate between dual registers, between the expectations of the material mechanics of code and the expectation of broader cultural and ideological forces. The digital is not alone in this regard, but parallels the struggles of postmodernist and poststructuralist who see the implications of a language often incongruous

with the ideas that it supposedly transmits at large. It is in this deconstructive process that (ironically) the digital subject is acknowledged, as its space seems constructed through the competing material metaphors of code and capitalist production. The user surfs along this divide, and the appeal of "jacking in" to the computer always comes with this complex and dynamic mediation.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text" *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist*

    Criticism. Ed. Josue V. Harari. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979: 73-81.

Barthes, Roland. "Death of the Author" *Image-Music-Text.* Trans. Stephen Heath. New York:

    Hill and Wang, 1978. 1-10.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacres et simulation*. Paris: Galilee, 1981.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt

    Books, 1968.

Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. Random House, Inc., 2000.

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing*

    and Difference. London: Routledge, 1967.

Gibson, William. "Burning Chrome." *Burning Chrome*. New York: Arbor House, 1986.

Hayles, Katherine. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002.

"http://wwwwwwww.jodi.org/" *Jodi.org*. Web.

Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Greensborough,

    NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

Kirschenbaum, Mathew G. "Extreme Inscription: Towards a Grammatology of the Hard Drive."

    TEXT Technology: The Journal of Computer Text Processing. 31.2 (2004).

Mitchell, W. J. T. "Metapictures." *Picture Theory*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago

    Press, 1994.

"What is the US Patriot Act?" *The USA PATRIOT Act: Preserving Life and Liberty*.

    Department of Justice, n.d. Web.