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CHAPTER FIVE

"your visit will leave a permanent mark": Poetics in the Post-Digital Economy

DAVIN HECKMAN AND JAMES O'SULLIVAN

We live in an age of "disruptive innovation." Radical change happens to us daily, and we readjust our labor, our dwellings, our social communities, our attitudes, our moods. Change comes from on high and, all the way down the ladder, we adjust or die (or, more likely, are shuffled off to the margins). Of course, theories of disruptive change under technological progress are nothing new. Hegel's term *aufheben*, or "sublation," describes the outcome of the dialectical process, in which past conditions are superseded through the actions they entail (Froeb). Marx and Engels (1848: 16) noted that "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (a phrase which Marshall Berman [1983] references for his extended study of Modernity). Herbert Spencer, adapting mid-nineteenth century takes on evolution to social behavior, is considered the starting point for "Social Darwinism," the belief that social order is defined by the "survival of the fittest" ("Herbert Spencer" 2016). Mikhail Bakunin (1971) sees the impulse for destruction as a sublime political force: "the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life," while Friedrich Nietzsche identifies in nihilism an occasion for the "renewal of the creative cycle" (Tomasi 2007). Durkheim (1951: 246) devotes an entire chapter of *Suicide* to deaths that can be traced to *anomie*, connecting them to "disturbances in the collective order." Schumpeter (2003: 83) calls it "Creative Destruction," noting that capitalism, in its essence, "incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one" (emphasis in the original). Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* (2007) identifies this tendency as a key motive for war and global conflict. The "Accelerationists" see institutionalized tumult as a *deus ex machina* (of the Left or Right) that will propel us toward a better tomorrow. And, of course, there are a variety of institutional attempts to incorporate upheaval into the social order (from planned obsolescence to actuarial science, from insurance to perpetual professional retraining). Michel Foucault's lifelong illumination of discourse explores the psychic and social upheavals critical to the harnessing and establishment of power relationships, a process which becomes inextricably tangled with the turn toward neoliberalism (see Lemke 2001). Most

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recently, in "The Sublime Language of My Century," McKenzie Wark (2016) documents the relentless churning of capital at the heart of contemporary material conditions:

> The other side of the eternal essence of capital is its ever changing appearances. Change is accounted for via the use of modifiers. Its appearances can even be periodized. There was merchant capitalism then industrial capitalism, then monopoly capitalism, then neoliberal capitalism. There's some ambiguity as to what to call the current stage, however. It could be multinational, cognitive, semio, late, neoliberal, or postfordist capitalism, to name just a few. Note that the last two of these are temporal modifications to a modifier: neoliberal, postfordist. Could there be any better tribute to the complete enervation of the imagination by capitalism, or whatever it is, that this is the best our poets can do? Modify the modifier? Capitalism must be very disappointed in our linguistic competence.

So constant is this tendency that Wark ultimately rests upon flux as the condition, musing sardonically at the inability to imagine a beyond.

Wark distills the predominant approach to disruption in the phrase "this is not capitalism, it's better!" Following the logic of the "California ideology," we can imagine a transcendence by which capitalism has succeeded in disrupting itself. In this way, we have (whether by choice or under duress) branded this process of upheaval, and we now spin it into a pop affect that pretends at a mastery over a game that is played in boardrooms and at trade summits, embedded in proprietary code and massive databases, facilitated in network infrastructures and large-scale industrial practices. Of course, disruptive innovation's subjects do not all occupy the same spaces within the network. To use Wark's taxonomy from *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004), there are the vectoralists, those whose chief privilege is to harness the means of production and mobilize it for their benefit. And the hackers, who create new knowledge and culture, and whose labor is captured by the vectoralists. Some of these hackers are rewarded and enjoy the buffers of neo-yuppie existence, with degrees from the best schools, office jobs, investments, and the resources to consume disruption. Furthermore, many of these heroes are rewarded with symbolic reach in social media flows, a reach augmented by the dynamics of informatic differentials which privilege "engaging" news, concise messaging, and the self-interested slant of the social media business which enfolds everyday interactions into strategic communication. Much in the way that Puritans knew they were "saints" based on their capacity to succeed in the socioeconomic machinations of seventeenth-century New England, the vectoralist class attempts to habituate subjects into an affect which cannot itself imagine its future salvation.

And while the ubiquitous and relentless monetization of everything is so poorly critiqued by those who manage to keep their heads above water, it is hard not to notice the relentless disruptions that see everything as an occasion for optimization—and the way in which disruption itself is presumed to be a kind of revolutionary behavior. Most people know enough to scorn the predatory practices of "pharmabro" Martin Shkreli, whose pricing schemes effectively blackmail those whose lives depend on the patents he has acquired (Chandler 2015). Similarly, we might be scandalized by rumors of Jeff Bezos's mercurial outbursts at Amazon and Travis Kalanik's Uber *uber-alles* attitude, enlightened rage has been incorporated into the ideology of our technocentric culture. As a recent article in *Forbes* suggests: "The temper tantrum has not only become a fixture in corporate America, but it has been central to the management style of many of technology's most successful CEOs—namely Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Larry Ellison—and

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management experts say when handled appropriately, this style can even be beneficial to employees and the company as a whole" (Kendall 2013). Perhaps it is this sheer brutality that creates the impression that the other captains of industry are more gentle or humane. Zuckerberg doesn't jack up the price of your pills, he only manipulates your consciousness. Dorsey doesn't run bookstores out of business; he just coordinates the affect of billions with Twitter. And Google merely wants to help everyone. It's as if we have settled on disruption as the new normal, and have come to internalize the logic that everything can be instrumentalized, optimized, and, eventually, automated because there is no alternative. At the very least, it works. The trains not only run on time, they are on demand, and at a discount (for the moment).

To this, Wark (2016) introduces a productive heuristic: "what if we explored the idea that this is not capitalism, but worse?" Of course, a key element of the contemporary economy is to manage risk. This practice is obvious in relation to discourses about insurance, health, education, and investment. But it is entrenched in other ways as well. In the postwar period, massive institutions were understood as the engines of improvement, with media industries providing a level of coordination for the emergent mass society. The scale meant that innovation must be a managed process, with each cycle of development mined for maximum profit, and these profits invested in the next cycle with the promise that what comes next will necessitate change. However, as mechanical efficiency waned and (at least in concept) the postindustrial era emerged, the fecundity of the informational economy (both in its capacity to survey and mine subjects and its capacity to modify and transmit) would allow for an acceleration of risk perception and a management of its effects. The result is that we have seen an explosion of resource exploitation and per capita productivity, while at the same time feeling a total sense of depression. If there is a difference between the present and what preceded us, it is that the distance between massive institutions and the masses they manage has collapsed: corporations are people/people are brands. The difference between risk and its solutions has similarly collapsed: the big problems have no foreseeable solutions/the everyday is flooded with banal "solutions" for everything. It is a severe pessimism about the future that neutralizes systemic criticism and drives us into the short-term, tactical thinking that begins by being focused on short-term gains, but inevitably comes to find cheer in those aspects of the status quo that interpellate us. *This is not capitalism . . . it's worse.*

Under this scheme, the only competitor to institutional inertia is the disruptor. And disruption means not merely to introduce a competing idea, but to utterly crush the large institutional actors that interfere with market progress. This is not Adam Smith's humble entrepreneur taking risks to provide goods and services in competition with those who might be content to monopolize markets. This is a global phenomenon. Thus it is daunting, if not totally depressing, to imagine what you, we, or anyone can possibly do to resist the battle on Mount Olympus. When de Certeau's (1984) "tactics" are today's brand strategies, we must rethink our understanding of the term. The clash of the titans that rattles our foundations is big, it is total, and it is cultural. While we might agree that Anthropogenic climate change amounts to a crisis, we cannot help but wonder if its mythical function is as an apocalyptic alternative to the absolute failure of the present political moment to imagine a future. If we're all gonna die, then who cares if we surrender to the robber barons.

Inside the whale, outside the whale, the whale is dead. In the carcass of the social world, cultural studies scholarship has fallen from the dramatic (if imperfect) total

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skepticism of Adorno, through the discursive perspective of Foucault, past the working-class insurgencies of the Birmingham School, and now lives as a zombie of its former self through jargon-infused think pieces on whatever blockbuster film is surely going to be "sticking it to the man" this Friday night. (You might want to preorder your tickets online, just in case it is sold out!) Thus, we need to explore techniques to access radical possibilities beyond those that are circumscribed **by** the marketplace and its preferred methods of communication. The digital humanities, and every other niche organism in the cultural ecosystem, have to decide if they are going to be domesticated or feral. The feral perspective considers, for a moment, an occasion for pessimism about the present in order to permit an optimism in the future. It enacts gestures of estrangement from that which makes us most comfortable. And furthermore, it permits words and our ideas that are, following Wark, "more daring, modernist, de-familiarizing."

As Hai Ren (2015) notes, paraphrasing Colin Gordon (1987), for Foucault the modern state contains two tendencies, one that strives for totality and another that drives toward this control through individualism. Ren continues that "governmentality [is] the 'art' for dealing with the inner link between the conduct of individual existence and the regulation of the lives of the many." It is this disrupted process of individuation that Stiegler addresses throughout his work. Invoking Simondon, Stiegler (2014: 45) explains, "Individuation is conceived as a *process* which is always *both psychic and collective*—where *I* and *we* are therefore two aspects of the same process" (emphasis in the original). To Simondon's formula, he adds the "*technical system*" as a framework that coordinates the psychic and collective dimensions on individuation in space and time, that is, in culture (51). It is in "hyper-industrialization" that Stiegler finds a culprit for the dual tendency toward top-down management of subjects and the ideal of individualism that manages to reproduce hegemony under the auspices of free expression.

A key to understanding this, both the idea of industrialized culture from Stiegler and the notion of governmentality from Foucault is the way that power produces ways of being that are adopted by subjects within what Deleuze (1992) called the "control society." Ren (2015) explains: "In distinction from Weber's life conduct, that is inseparable from the economy, Foucault's "technologies of the self" are based on both the productive operation of power and on expert "know-how" (*savoir*). Technologies of the self may be developed and used for self-formation: knowing one's self and making one's self knowable." Advancing this distinction further, Stiegler introduces the difference between *savoir-faire* (know how) and *savoir-vivre* (knowing how to live), suggesting that the "disintegrated" societies reproduce cultural knowledge as "know how" or advice on personal conduct, which is to say, cultural knowledge is replaced by instrumental knowledge. The social is converted to a series of transactions, beyond which, it is difficult to imagine anything resembling *savoir-vivre*. Turning back to Wark's *Hacker Manifesto*, Stiegler (2011: 57) suggests that it is the hacker's potential to create externalities to this sociocultural trap: "the reconstitution of positive externalities and the support of work practices stemming from *otium* (that is, from noetic intermittence) is the necessary condition for the reconstitution of long circuits of transindividuation."

To clarify, classic approaches to high and low culture, fine arts and the popular, have mutated. The fundamental categories have remained static (insofar as we bother to distinguish between elite taste and mass taste), while our thinking about them has changed (drifting away from tangible commodities and toward discourse itself). Formally, we fall back upon the old association of "high culture" with the rarified aura of the classically conceived objet d'art crafted under the auspices of inherited concepts of aesthetic

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practices. These objects are positioned opposite the ubiquitous artifacts associated with mass culture, and often they are framed as "democratic." However, simple ubiquity is not enough to make a popular item good. Within the flows of digital media, taste persists. Pierre Bourdieu's (1984: 6) observation that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" remains as relevant as it ever has, even if the markers of distinction no longer cling to vestiges of bourgeois status around which his observations circulate. Instead, the capacity for classification lives in Manuel Castell's (1996) "space of flows" and Paul Virilio's (1986) "dromosphere," with selectivity expressed as the ability to manage status: today, bourgeois class identities are increasingly less about access to and correct interpretation of rarefied commodities than access to networks, narratives, and cultural currencies. The accumulation of material commodities for establishing class hierarchies in consumer circles is shifted toward the mastery of informational commodities, and this process is linked to access to the repurposing of leisure under social media, attention to privileged flows, and the deep desperation that comes with watching one's cultural capital decay without perpetual updates.

This new populism, however, is not an organic vernacular, emerging from the informal practices of the weak as tactical responses to everyday conditions. Rather, it gentrifies affect along prescribed vectors that exist in mediated spaces. Distinction is expressed through a multitude of microscopic ventriloquisms that ride along sculpted paths of attention. Hashtags, clickbait, and viral phenomena animate everyday interactions while lending a veneer of cultural awareness to commonplace social behaviors: social identification, the fear of difference, scapegoating, ego reinforcement, aggression, libido, and so on. The effect is to create a system of incentives to circulate an ever-changing array of information within a network in pursuit of a transient status, the more well positioned one is in this flow (through the cultivation of taste, integration into playbour/gamification schemes,[1] access to software and networks, and locative positioning that supports this habituation). In this formation, old distinctions between high and low culture are largely vestigial and have been supplanted by a pseudo-populism that preserves structural inequalities while celebrating their abolition. The embrace of "pop culture" by the cultural intelligentsia still seeks to retain the cultural capital inherent in elite modes of consumption, while suggesting that these modes of consumption reflect a democratic impulse. Even if life never gave you a single lemon, you still get that lemonade.

However, there is a bias implicit in this shift. Namely, it is in substituting contemporary applications of power with popular culture and folk production. From this angle, the consumption and recirculation of mass marketed texts is construed as a form of critical making. Yet, if we understand the objectives of integrated marketing, choice architecture, behavioral economics, elite engagement with the everyday as biopolitical, such thoroughgoing consumer engagement, as fun as it may be, simply fails to achieve a critical perspective on the development of power. More importantly, the ideology that conflates consumer engagement with critical thinking serves to marginalize the theories and practices associated with "serious" cultural artifacts—close reading, skepticism, critical distance, rejection of "groupthink," and so on. In other words, the post-digital pivot from tasteful consumption of commodities toward informational currency retains

[1] For a background on the hybrid form of leisure and work in the digital economy, see Tiziana Terranova's 2003 article in *Electronic Book Review*, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." The term "playbour" is introduced in Julian Kücklich's 2005 contribution to *Fibreculture Journal*, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry."

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its normative component through viral content. Eccentric or marginal perspectives risk poor PageRank (the algorithmic rating scheme that Google uses to determine relevance). Anything requiring patience and care is tagged "tl;dr" (which means, "too long; didn't read," a passive-aggressive way of swatting away earnest efforts at argument).

To engage with systemic changes to communication and expression, we argue that one can look at the field of electronic literature to find instances of poetics that are consistent with the avant-garde approaches to language, but which are sensitive to the emerging modes of expression in the twenty-first century. Here, we refer to a wide range of practices that are not limited to:

- proto-digital works that make the emergent cybernetic, algorithmic, and informatic processes visible in media systems;
- digital works that highlight interactive, mutable, and extrapolating effects of interfaces, dynamic content, and algorithms;
- distributed works that reflect upon the way that semiotics, rhetoric, narratives, and poetics function within extended circuits of transmission; and
- database, network, and mobile works which interrupt the hermeneutics of media consumption by unveiling their domain of action.

While not all works overtly signal their defamiliarizing approach, nor is it reasonable to expect that the variety of emergent genres will retain their subversive character, it is fair to say that the decision to self-consciously work within a frame, the literary, whose connotations bear such heavy associations with the cultural legacy of print is to offer the work up for a confused interaction. With the exception of e-book formats, there are few forms of electronic literature that are read as such outside of subcultural audiences. Gamers play games. Cinema buffs watch movies. Social media enthusiasts use their platforms to socialize. At the time of this writing, electronic literature is a platypus, or as Hayles (2007) calls it, a "hopeful monster." Still, some works engage in their own monstrosity while others work toward a kind of user-friendliness. It is the monstrous sort that we use here to make a hard case for poetics.

We argue that the fascination with disruptive innovation is a fetishized displacement of creativity and difference onto mechanisms of capitalist accumulation. In this world of meticulously branded superstars and the great masses of generic, off-brand, secondhand, and other forms of low-budget personhood, we argue for a very specific and necessary conception of poetics. In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger (1993) employs two terms for creation: poiesis and techne. He writes, "There was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called techne. The poiesis of the fine arts was also called techne" (339). Each word contains resonance for contemporary readers in that techne is associated with the technical, or the prescribed manner of doing and develops prescriptive mores for the kind of craft. Today we associate these ancient examples with artisanship, but the modern corollary would be those forms of production which have become techno-logical, rationalized, and converted into industrial processes. There remains room for the definition of handiwork that fits the definition of "techne" deployed in this sense, but it is the orientation of the process organized around the culmination of a kind of product. The work of poiesis also manifests in material form as an artifact, expression, or event that is orchestrated by the artist; however, the process of revealing is not organized toward a specific, preordained outcome, rather it is organized toward radical transformation. The poetic process exceeds the technical in the sense that

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it establishes a new form rather than simply culminates in the successful fulfillment of established forms. In this sense, the technically successful work can be measured in the execution of its anticipated form while the poetically successful work can be measured by difference from anticipated forms.

Many definitions of poetics hover around descriptive characteristics of generic forms. Ideas like imitation, tragedy, and catharsis prove to remain both interesting to readers and useful implements in the language of storytelling, yet as components of the habitus of the narrative self, exist as cultural constrains and affordances that the artist might choose to employ and modify for their own aesthetic aims. However, we might ask if an understanding of literature can rest exclusively on the technical aspects of writing. Certainly, one tendency simply accepts genre fiction and other pop formalisms as equivalent to all other regions of literary study because they employ the surface characteristics of "literature." It has words->They are in sentences on x number of pages->These words tell a story->It's not true, but you don't mind->It's a novel. It has words->These words don't resemble a narrative->They confuse me->But the writer is a poet->It's poetry. A close cousin of this approach repeats the logic from the outside in: "What do people say it is? Well that's what it is!" Both approaches offer reasonable starting points, but both fail to recognize the cultural short circuit that they imply. Both attempt to answer the question without sullying one's hands in the dirt of canonicity, inheritance, or high culture. Yet it is an entirely understandable mistake if we ask such questions without recourse to history, the archive, historical practices, that engage the formal and the social configurations of the literary in a dialogue with the future and past.

We can see the appeal of such approaches in the age of databases and logic machines. The databases preserve all units without any spatiotemporal consideration to the objects it contains and the software is simply a set of formal rules that performs its process on these objects. Add to this basic feature of the present, the aggregated influence of the billions of bots that inhabit our textual universe in the twenty-first century, organizing our content, interpreting our words, and making suggestions about what we want in an age of informational gluttony, all habituate us to read the world in a similar way. We are social creatures, we can behave like pack animals, and when we see everyone looking in the same direction, our heads turn to scrutinize the common object of fascination. It's not a surprise that we would be thus tempted to reduce the literary to a set of objective criteria. And if we were talking about assembling our dreams from a set of blueprints in the hopes that our dreams would perfectly resemble the dreams of those around us, such an approach might be worthwhile. Such protocols help our letters travel to reach our loved ones. But the point of a love letter, if people even send them anymore, is not the rationalized system implemented to carry such letters, but the mysterious contents and queer words that tangle two distant people into an imaginary, but no less visceral, unity.

This cultural homogeneity manifests itself throughout electronic literature, both in terms of poiesis and techne, through the events treated by digital artists, and processes which render the digital as literary. The inherent contradiction of those instruments favored by the electronic literature movement is that they are aligned with the forces they seek to disrupt (just consider, by way of example, the long-lived dominance of Flash), while nonetheless being disruptive. Advances in computation, particularly of the domestic sort suited to the fulfilment of most artistic purposes, have been borne out of capitalism, an expression of Western culture's "*computationalism*" (Golumbia 2009: 2). This ideology offers a fantasy of "liberation" from the barriers to progress imposed by human societies, while reproducing many of the structural problems of those societies

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by depersonalizing them, encoding them into massive organizational mechanisms, and placing control in the privileged hands of administrators. Lev Manovich (2003) traces the origins of digital art to the postwar era, and while we might read the development of culture and computation as commutative, the extent to which the masses have control of the virtual space is highly questionable. Electronic writers might well possess some measure of poetic freedom, but this is tempered by the confines of instrumentation, and the processes afforded to those seeking expression beyond the permissible. Even disruption, after all, is bound by the limits of the instrument which it seeks, or indeed utilizes, to disrupt. But there is poetic liberty nonetheless, and at the very least, electronic literature can reflect upon its own constraints, through its poiesis *and* techne. The bots may continue to habituate our reading, but there must be some value in reading, in casting, the bots.

If the digital is indeed the twenty-first-century manifestation of Bentham's Panopticon, then electronic literature, particularly Net-based pieces, are potentially subjecting their readers to the gaze of the watchman. Situating electronic literature outside of this paradigm may not be possible, but it might not even be desirable—for the literary to remain potent, perhaps its poetics must be confined to structures it might seek to subvert. Enter *1984*'s digital equivalent, *#PRISOM* (Campbell and Breeze 2013a), a work of electronic literature by Andy Campbell and Mez Breeze, and "degenerative"/"regenerative," two complementary works by Eugenio Tisselli (2005a and b).

In Campbell and Breeze's *#PRISOM*, readers traverse a panoptic glass city "of infinite surveillance" (Hudson and Zimmerman 2015: 120). Upon entering this prison of prisms, inductees are instructed that they are to be "re-educated," a procedure which is overseen by the "controller drones." Inductees are warned not to attempt interaction with the drones, and to avoid areas where "Terrorist Organisational Representatives may have infiltrated the facility" (see Figure 5.1).

Surface metaphors are abundant: the reflective and refractive surfaces of the city and its prisms assume the place of digital culture's many ubiquitous devices, while Google and

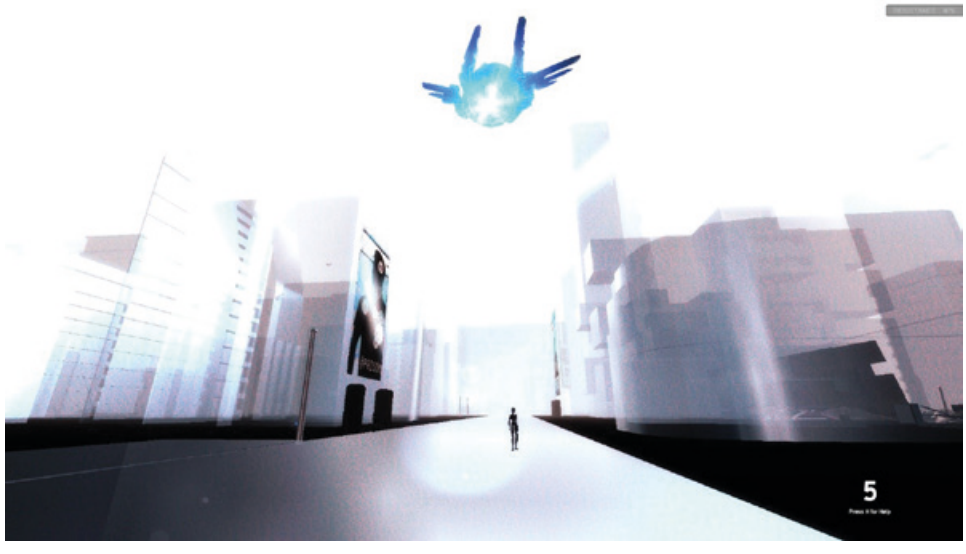


FIGURE 5.1 A scene from *#PRISOM*, by Andy Campbell and Mez Breeze.

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Facebook are transposed by drones, the tentacles of control. The "Terrorist Organisational Representatives" (or T.O.R.) gestures toward the Tor anonymity project, a real-world tool which seeks to protect everyday users from surveillance. This work is, at its most essential level, "a strong argument against the systemic stripping of civil liberties," particularly those offenses against liberty highlighted in Snowden's revelations (Aardse 2016: 54). Despite some variance in how one arrives at the narrative's conclusion, the end product is always the same—assimilation of thought to match the preexisting homogeneity of the appearance of the avatars.

#PRISOM challenges the role of the individual, the balance between privacy and security, and the role technology plays in imposing control over all of the aforementioned. But it does so within this very context, "perform[ing] best on a PC/Mac with 1GB graphics or higher/4GB memory or higher" (Campbell and Breeze 2013b). There are limits, requirements, and capitalist forces driving a space that seeks to challenge those very forces. Breeze and Campbell are aware of this—their aesthetic is one of subversion, presenting users with fictional tech-driven totalitarianism with which they interact using the instruments of reality's tech-driven totalitarianism. One can even see the figure of the artist represented in *#PRISOM*'s terrorists, infiltrating the facility, but nonetheless existing within its confines. For any work of digital art, there is nothing, technically, beyond the interactive space—the medium refuses such a possibility. But as noted, this is precisely the value of the literary, the potential to manipulate the connections between art and its space. Our spatial existence operates within a troika: spatial practice, conceived space, and lived space (see Lefebvre 1992).

Lefebvre's (1992) schematic is transferable to digital space, but with a twist. Before any content was added to the Web, the space was produced by engineers with keyboards and code, displacing the organic process by which perceived spaces are produced in favor of its active construction as a conceived space (the prototypes, perhaps, being shopping malls, theme parks, gated communities, and other neoliberal endeavors, where construction is determined through planning rather than imposed through the dialectical movement of discourse). As users, we layer our lived space on top of this foundation, imposing our own movements upon those of the underlying institutions. It is in this sense that the practitioner's appropriation of space "speaks" to their art (42). In the Heideggerian sense of *aletheia* (or revealing), the subversion of digital space requires an engagement with the technical (not as a process performed on nature, as trees become timber, but) as a mode of poetic production. Reclaiming the space of difference within a structured world, such work pulls back from Adorno and Horkheimer's (1972) conception of techne as estranged from high culture practice, and returns to something resembling the preindustrial conception of poiesis and techne. Under the regime of the digital, by contrast, electronic moments of reciprocal ecstasis turn surveillance into art, and art into surveillance.

To adapt Lefebvre's (1992) framework within the digital ecosystem, we can see how the practices of digital artists feed in to the notion that space is not passively rendered. Through an electronic literature's many methods and conventions—hacking, perversion, creative coding—we see how the space that this form of art occupies has emerged. If this is a consequence of "the shift from one mode to another [entailing] the production of a new space" (46), then deep consideration must be given to the relocation of any work of digital art. Embedded in space, and its reciprocal relationship with artistic practices, are all the histories and contexts which make both the space and the art precisely what they are and might become.

#PRISOM, like many works of electronic literature, is precisely that—*literary*—because it adopts a poetics of perversion in a reflection upon cultural practice and knowledge of

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form by orchestrating events and facilitating writing within the system it seeks to problematize. We see this in the narrative, the visual aesthetics, the elements of the piece which draw the reader in to its political interrogation. But beyond the poiesis we see that poetics can also be embedded in techne. *#PRISOM* made its début at the 2013 International Symposium on Mixed and Augmented Reality as part of the Transreal Topologies exhibition, hosted at the Royal Institution of Australia in conjunction with the University of South Australia's Wearable Computer Lab. At this event, *#PRISOM* was showcased on a wearable augmented reality headset, coupled with an Xbox 360 controller. The work can now be experienced within a browser, or alternatively, as a download, capable of being traversed beyond the prisms of the Web. Developed through game-based frameworks upon game-based conventions, *#PRISOM*, in keeping with a core fundamental of the e-lit aesthetic, manipulates these structures to facilitate the literary. In such a manner, *#PRISOM* occupies many spaces. When dealing with the politics of the digital space, we are more concerned with the symbolism of that space as a representational, or, what Lefebvre (1992: 42) calls "spaces of representation," rather than functional, construct. Different spaces are envisioned to host different practices, but the practices which occupy these spaces are not always those which were initially conceived. It is significant to note that Lefebvre's work is informed by the events of 1968, which on the one hand was the site of radically utopian outpourings of imagination and the source of deep disappointment in its political outcome. This tension can account for the potential for difference and the liberality expressed in Lefebvre's model. *#PRISOM*'s digital space contains no implicit utopianism in the world it depicts. There are no niches for making do. The only heterotopic spaces possible are those that exist in revolutionary desire, as imaginary ideas (Foucault 1994: xviii).

To properly understand contemporary digital spaces, it is necessary to see them in relation to solutionist myths of technology, which frame innovation as the means to transcend all obstacles—all manner of human frailty, environmental threats, systemic evils, and, even, failures of technology itself. In this light, the creation of the network itself is engineered as a solution to communication challenges, the construction of platforms is engineered to use these frameworks to provide unforeseen opportunities, the remedies to social pathologies expressed in these networks attempt remedy errors. From a critical vantage point, technology is inherently political and can be as oppressive as it is liberating. Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) view mass media as instruments of control, with contemporary society's reliance on pervasive computation only serving to increase technology's hegemonic capacity. More precisely, this notion of "Enlightenment as Mass Deception" carries with it the understanding that even in the early twentieth century, they considered the technologies of production, transmission, and consumption to be trending toward an expressive convergence—aesthetically, rhetorically, and cognitively reducing the social as a mode of control. In this respect, Adorno and Horkheimer differ from Heidegger, seeing the techne from the post-liberal perspective of emergent neo-Marxism, as a logic of control rather than a relative of poiesis. Yet the phenomenological framework does not preclude Heidegger from seeing technology as totalizing and treacherous in the modern world.

It is worth noting that Heidegger's (1971: 163) viewpoint of convergence ("All distances in time and space are shrinking . . . Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness") is not without its own treachery. The same speculative framework that allows him to see the emergence of a totalizing system falls profoundly short insofar as it contributed to his identification with Nazi ideology. Indeed, the pitfall of social theory

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that engages with sprawling, often mystifying, systemic structures in pursuit of fundamental principles is the tendency to compensate by identifying reductive causes, essentialisms, or scapegoats.

In the case of virtual worlds where the code that makes the system work frames all possible actions, technology can only be liberating insofar as it is oppressive. Perhaps digital art has only served to strengthen this hegemony, bringing the capitalist-driven digital apparatus into artistic play (certainly, biopower, governmentality, and discursive framing followed by control, digital analytics, choice architecture seek to convert the everyday into resources). As it was with the industrial age, capitalism propels the information era—the modes of production have shifted somewhat, and the commodities are now digital, but the structure is relatively consistent. Where art can appropriate and pervert the productions of capitalism, capitalism can dictate the processes by which that art is produced, and consequently, dismantle any symbolic spaces that might exist within the digital labyrinth.

Technology breeds new creative and disseminative potentialities—giving the author both a new platform and palette—while intuitive tools open the gateway for writers and creators that would otherwise have lacked the technical proficiency necessary to take advantage of digital media. Vibeke Sorensen (2011: 242) addresses this issue, pointing out that technology "allows for a different kind of meaning and experience to take place," with the important cautionary note that "access to these practices is still limited and exclusionary." The digital space is not isolated from the global socioeconomic picture—in truth, the infrastructures from which creative technologies emerge are arguably more connected to the political landscape than any of their predecessors. Electronic literature, certainly in its earliest days, was dominated by expensive technologies controlled by profit-driven enterprise. An author wanting to use Flash in their work faces a significant initial investment, both in terms of technology and training, which underlines the exclusionary nature of digital apparatus. However, there are reactions, movements, and perversions of this technology which are inherently political expressions, and it is essential that such expression should contribute to our understanding of electronic literature.

Flash, a proprietary platform, was for a considerable time one of the dominant instruments of digital artists and writers. Tensions between morality and pragmatism form the context within which software development, in this case, electronic literature, is conducted (Durity and O'Sullivan 2014). Authors of electronic literature were drawn to Flash for a variety of reasons, creative and disseminative, but such affordances must always be weighed against the cost of placing an artistic work within the system it seeks to challenge. By the same token, displacement is often better served from within, and if the innovation of electronic literature is to be disruptive, then it must occur through a reaction against a platform's intended function. Holding ideological and generic significance, hacktivism "indicates programming, modifying digital media, exploiting computer systems, and otherwise working with networked computing to further a political goal, by analogy with other sorts of activism" ("Keywords" 2011).

The Dead Tower, also by Campbell and Breeze (2012), is a Flash-based work, but the narrative poem is largely composed of "mezangelle," the poetic language developed by Breeze (2012) throughout the 1990s. Thus, *The Dead Tower* is a juxtaposition between capitalism and creativity, the rigid, and the unstructured. While the space is rendered within a proprietary system, it is populated by codework that is utterly unbound. Yet, the poetics of electronic literary techne are reflected in this very content. Recombinative in the extreme, its formalization as a language gestures toward homonymy, but its underlying textual and

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technical hybridity make it more of a techno-lingual mashup that simultaneously insists upon structure, while refuting order. The essence of mezangelle resonates throughout the poetics of *The Dead Tower*. This is a space in which the traversals are relatively few, and easily identified. The tower, operating as a beacon in an otherwise bleak environment, is clearly a signal designed to draw in the reader (see Figure 5.2). Structure is everywhere—it is a limited space conceived within the constraints of Flash—but within that space, within the computational schematic, there are infinite points of relation, signified by the polysemic, fluid language that drives the disruption—how can there be so much uncertainty in such a certain space? In this sense, the space itself is representational, and any sense of schematic is superseded by the further aesthetic relations afforded by the multimodality of the platform. Its lyrical narrative is fragmented, if even a narrative at all—the mezangelle snippets can be experienced as clusters or in isolation, traversing forward, or in reverse. There is a great measure of freedom granted to the reader, as while the navigable space is confined, it is also representational. The visualized artist's objects are crumbling—resembling the proprietary platform in which they were created—but the narrative remains in a state of constant expansion.

With an aesthetic that contrasts sharply with Mez and Campbell's sculpted gamespaces above, Eugenio Tisselli's (2005a) "degenerative" probes the potential of transmedia poetics through a different route. "Degenerative" is a work rendered inaccessible through interaction, a Schroedinger's Cat interface that is systematically deleted with every visit. Tisselli (2005a) describes the piece: "each time the page is visited, one of its characters is either destroyed or replaced." Today, a visitor to "degenerative" will only see its ghost, an empty space where a message once existed. The entropic decay is preserved in an archive, where readers can view degeneration of form and content as a series of freeze frames taken over its lifetime.



FIGURE 5.2 A scene from *The Dead Tower* (2012), by Andy Campbell and Mez Breeze.

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At any given moment, the text is witnessed as a triangle of interactions: The author establishes a set of rules. The reader seeks the work. But it is in the encounter between two machines, the apparatus of the reader and the apparatus of the writer, that the work is constructed (or in this case, deconstructed). Here, the reader does not control, but nevertheless is implicated in the singularity of the work as a series of events that belong, if they exist at all, in memory. Even the archival version must block its function in order to reproduce moments of life in the work.

The surface level of the work, then, documents the fall of human language. Yet, underneath (and remaining hidden, still) is the code by which the work itself is degenerated. A logical question for a persistent reader of this work is: "What is the work?" Can it be found by reading Tisselli's manifesto (2005a) on the violence of panopticism?

> *¿repeated viewing can kill? ¿are our eyes predators of their targets?*
> *your visit will leave a permanent mark. this page will not be the same after you visit it. the only hope for this page to survive is that nobody visits it. but then, if nobody does, it won't even exist. ¿does this happen with all the products of visual culture? ¿why is everything getting renewed constantly? ¿does everything contain the seed of its own destruction?.*

Interestingly, this expression of authorial intent exists only as a snapshot of the nonfunctional page. The mechanisms by which Tisselli enables his readers to *kill* his text is ironically the same mechanism which renders it beyond reach of readers: "the effect of code that lies within." Tisselli's human-readable text exists only as something that once was, presumably before even the first reader initiated its collapse. But more importantly, Tisselli's machine-readable text exists, also, in this case, perpetually unaltered, an algorithmic code that exists somewhere in its ideal state of functional perfection, beyond the eyes of his readers. We could not find the code. We could only find its consequences.

What we can read of "degenerative" is a document of the work's four months of alphanumeric signification. As encoder/conduits/decoders, the broken "readers" of the twenty-first century, our literacy only extends to the throbbing of the algorithmic drums that provide pattern, drive, and pacing for cultural life. But we do not see inside of proprietary structures. Like readers of "degenerative," we can feel the process by which culture mutates, slides from carefully considered words toward the end at which the machine no longer has anything to say to us.

Elaborating further on this process, Tisselli follows "degenerative" with its sequel, "regenerative." From Tisselli's (2005b) remediation of the original page (again, reproduced without the mechanism that animates the work):

> in the regenerative web page, text degenerates with each visit, but it also attempts to regenerate itself by trying to extract some text from the referring page. if extraction succeeds, the new text is implanted within the degenerating text and becomes part of it. this gives way to a cycle of degeneration-regeneration.

Like its predecessor, "regenerative" is corrupted by each visit to the page. But unlike the previous work, this one destroys its past self through addition, incorporating traces of the reader's Web-browsing history into each instance of the page. Tisselli (2005b) asks (he uses the lowercase for the entire text): "does everything we see contain a part of us? maybe what we see is only a reflection of ourselves. is our own self the only image we can see?" Rather than simply reversing the dynamic of "degeneration," Tisselli directs our

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attention to the process by which creation and destruction are integrally linked in digital space, specifically to digital surveillance.

A randomly selected snippet of text copied from "regenerative" reads as follows:

> Element("a");t.hre_/fon->----------t> o заправио заправilor="#FF 000">
> olor="#FF0000"> var s = documengiew_ До*); (fu*cont>* _ **
> Большо_ / -терком пont>0"
> эcounter.yaзробont color="#FF0000">*7.2014/03:05 >/*ont>
> , olor="#FF0000"> $(fun00">Last Deca_hadow_-px
> -5pe bsp; &> rt ки_ал000"_clor="#FF0000"> ьнe _ор-y 1253 t
> (Tisselli 2005b)

Which is to say, it barely reads at all. More powerfully, it offers a mutated text, an artifact of fractured interface. In our day-to-day activities—broken links, 404, the page cannot be found—mark gaps in transmission. More practically, they prompt the workarounds that are commonplace for those foraging for information. One might check the URL, search for the file, or simply move on toward the next best thing. Such is the prosthetic reach of the digital ready-at-hand of the shallow Web. But with "regenerative," there is nothing to work around. Here, the medium is the message. And the message is to make the operations of the code apparent, unavoidably obtrusive. In a world of user-friendliness, Tisselli offers us a hopeful monstrosity (see Figure 5.3).

Deeper than the individual work, the poetic gestures can be taken in aggregate as soundings of the information in the age of networks. A habit in this field is to think in terms of "media ecology." This colorful metaphor for the function of media systems, itself an indispensable approach developed by Innis, Ong, McLuhan, and others, carries with it an implicit naturalism.[2] Initially, the "ecological" innovation offers an opportunity to step away from the individual genius/revolutionary artifact conception of cultural history, instead seeing subjects and their objects as situated in networks. But this metaphor is not without its own liabilities. One being its "naturalism" and an affinity for related concepts in digital media studies, perhaps in turn aided by the cyberlibertarian fascination with "emergence" and "spontaneous order" as dynamic tendencies made possible in the age of the home computer and then the networked computer. The roots of the word "ecology" are *oikos* and *logos*. Oikos is "the house," which can slip between the household (family), the home (environment), and property (capital). Logos slips between reason, study, and law, with the unifying feature being the desire to find consonance between what is, what is knowable, and, thus, that order to which one must necessarily conform. As a result, it is metaphysical.

In the word "ecology," we understand it to mean, broadly, the rational study of any system of habitation, and within the natural sciences, it retains shades of its innocence. As applied to social scientific fields (like communication, sociology, psychology, and anthropology), the notion of a socially formed "ecology" loses its innocence. As a creature within an ecology, the hopeful monster is a mutation, a theoretically welcome aberration that can survive systemic upheavals and establish a new equilibrium that serves the health of the system. Within such a system, the modest innovations of style and design within digital discourse exist to keep it interesting, to drive attention, and ultimately to enhance and preserve its role as a market. In other words, art is largely a technical practice which serves an instrumental purpose. Indeed, it is this tension between the apparatus

[2] Joseph Tabbi (editor of this volume) and Michael Wutz (1997) introduce the term "Media Ecology" to North American literary scholarship in *Reading Matters: Narrative in the New Media Ecology*.

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FIGURE 5.3 Screenshot of Eugenio Tisselli, "regenerative" (2005b).

and impulse that Tisselli himself takes up in his November 2011 statement, "Why I Have Stopped Creating E-Lit." He writes: "But what I really need to express, before I can continue creating e-Lit, is that I feel an urgent need to achieve a more complex and holistic vision of what I am doing and reflect on its implications, unless I agree to just blindly collaborate in the vertiginous destruction of our world."

Yet, once the study of human sociocultural practices transforms from the impulse to the apparatus, from the political to the biopolitical, technology extends its dominion over the natural sciences. This is the realization of the Anthropocene: that the planetary ecosystem is determined (though unpredictably) by human action. The term "Anthropocene" is now commonly used to recognize the paradigm shift in thinking about "ecology" in the wake of wide-scale technical transformation of the natural environment. Hence we, too, may invoke this term even if it contains distortions in that it positions humans rather than human systems of social organization as the definitive culprits in this shift. As Jason W. Moore (2013) notes in his text on "the Capitalocene," "the modern world-system becomes . . . a capitalist world-ecology: a civilization that joins the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the production of nature as an organic whole." In any case, the *enframing* perspective described by Heidegger (1993: 19–20) of the world as a "standing reserve" becomes, itself, nature.[3]

[3] Here, we might say that the cultural frame (the *dispositif*, in Foucault) ceases to function as a metaphor for the power of discourse and becomes inscribed into materiality. This is, in fact, a key difference between human language and machine language—one functions semiotically (in extreme cases, *as if it were real*) and the other operates within a logical regime as a command. As Alexander Galloway notes, "*Code is the only language that is executable* . . . code is the first language that actually does what it says" (quoted in Chun 2011: 100). Agamben gestures toward this emergent reality in *What Is an Apparatus?* (2009).

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This shift is intermingled with a second revolution, at the cultural or expressive level: the arrival of a digital convergence. The increasing digitization of all communication at ever more specific levels and its generalization via global networks has obviated the relational dynamics of singular subjects and their interactions. As a paradigm for the study of social systems, "ecology" functions as a simulacrum, a way of *thinking about* organized social behavior to facilitate management and industrialization of resources, rather than a description of actual conditions as expressions of an underlying "natural" state.

Thus, deprived of a world in which "human nature" and "human spirit" play their parts, Media Ecology is an incorrect term for post-digital ecosystemic approaches. There is no transcendental law of the world to which one appeals. Instead, we refer to the declarative law of "nomos." Nomos identifies the juridical power of code and structure without recourse to the metaphysical status of logos (and the understanding of ecology and nature). Hence, "economy" is the appropriate term for the programmed oikos. And against this economy, the question of poetics is reframed.

With this conception of the economy (*oikos* + *nomos*), we turn to the revelatory function of poetics. To unsettle the *milieu* of the digital economy is to create estrangement—to remove ourselves from its comfort or to make its comfort strange: to make it uncanny (*unheimlich*—un-home-like). Thus we can understand the poetic practices employed by Tisselli, Mez and Campbell and their radical potential. The poetic wrangling with systems of signification strives to disrupt the seamless façade of large-scale disruption as social ecology is transformed into economic material. The hope of such poetic acts is to make us live again, to live with each other.

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