



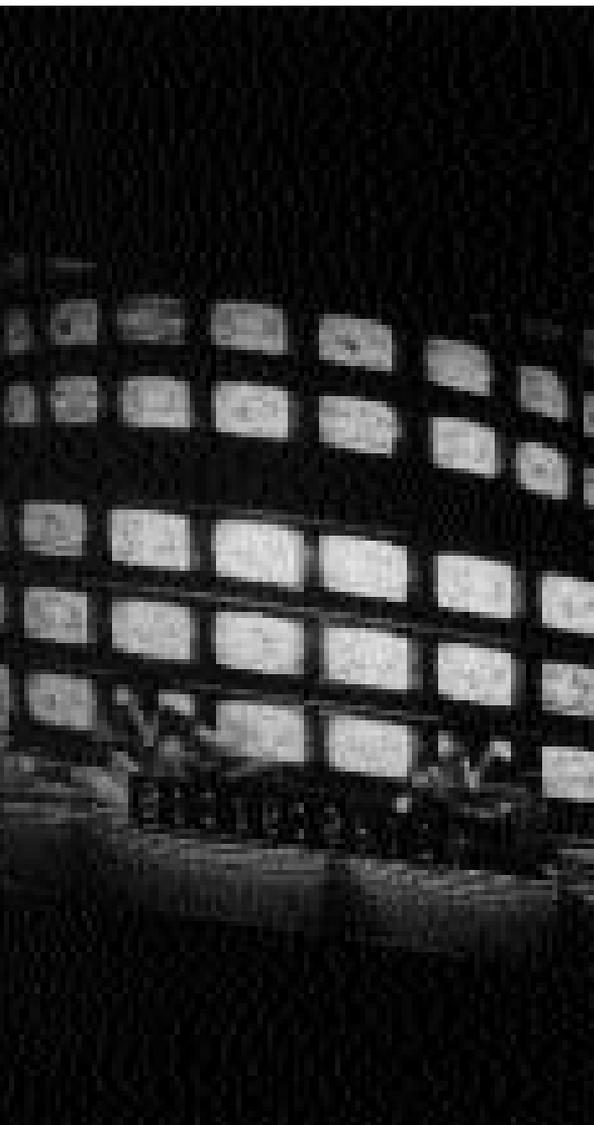
The State of the Art

At roughly 15-year intervals—“The Literature of Exhaustion” in 1967 and the “The Literature of Replenishment” in 1980—John Barth has filed reports on the state of the novel. Now, amid the fin-de-siècle buzz of hypertexts and electronic-fiction, the novelist submits an update.

by John Barth

The art whose state I mean to review is that of the novel in particular; the art more generally of printed fiction, especially in the United States; and the art most generally of fic-

tional narrative in whatever medium—again, especially in this country, where certain aspects of the scene are changing more rapidly, for better or worse, than they seem to me to be changing elsewhere.



Detail from Sistine Chapel by Nam June Paik (1993)

to be true), again in the *American Book Review*, declares, “The zine scene is alive and well. . . . Offhand, I can think of a dozen zines that are doing wonderful stuff: *Further State(s) of the Art*, *Puck*, *Sensitive Skin*, *Red Tape*, *Taproot Reviews*, *Dissonance*, *boING boING*, *Frighten the Horses*, *Central Park*, *Nobodaddies*, *Science Fiction Eye*, *MAXIMUMROCKNROLL*, just to name the first dozen that come to my mind.” (Those are not the first dozen that come to my mind, but let that go.)

And one Lance Olsen, likewise in the *ABR*, in an essay entitled “Deathmetal Technomutant Morphing,” declares, “Me, I’m going down reading Mark Leyner and Jean Baudrillard simultaneously, a copy of *Wired* in my lap, hypertext by Carolyn Guyer on the computer screen, television turned to MTV, windows wide open . . . my fire-retardant corrosion-resistant nickel-base alloy robo-enhanced methyl isocyanate flamethrower exploding, while I listen to Sonic Youth’s *Dirty* turned up real, REAL loud.”

I confess to being addicted to such catalogues of *Where It’s At*, catalogues with which the *American Book Review* particularly abounds. Here is another from the same lively source, by one Martin Sheter, in an essay called “Writing As Incorrectness”:

By way of beginning, I submit the following gleanings from my recent and by no means systematic reading on the subject. The reader unfamiliar with some of the names I am about to drop should not feel particularly left out. I’m unfamiliar with many of them too, and once I’ve dropped them, I intend to drop them.

“We are [in] . . . the late age of print,” declares the hypertextualist Michael Joyce in the *American Book Review*, “a transitional time when the book as we know it gives way to writing the mind in lightforms.” (By “lightforms” Joyce means reading and writing on computer screens; more on “hypertext” presently.)

A writer named Mark Amerika (too good

And then there’s what I call the “third rail”: the remarkable . . . resurgence of all sorts of creativity going on in the nineties, right under the nose of all these [American academics]—people ranging the spectrum from Hakim Bey, *Fact-Sheet 5*, R U Sirius, *ACT-UP* graphicists, feminist collaborators, black and Native-American oralists, and shock performance theoreticians, all the way to . . . MTV’s “Liquid Television,” the San Francisco “transgressive” school, Brown-University-sponsored “unspeakable practices,” various cyberpunk and slipstream fiction-alists . . . (no doubt I’ve left out quite a bit here).

Perhaps he has, but the afore-cited essay by Mark Amerika goes far to fill in any gaps in Sheter's checklist of the contemporary Action. I quote again from Amerika:

all kinds of viral shit festering there, not the least of which would include dissident comix, wigged out zines, electronic journals, quick-time hypermedia CD-ROMs, a voluminous melange of hardcore industrial grunge post-everything music, the Internet, surfpunk technical journals, interactive cable TV . . . hypertext novels . . . the list goes on.

And on and on and on: avant-pop, splat-terpunk, cybersex—you name it, if you can, or make it up, if you can't. Indeed, it's tempting to imagine that the pugnacious contributors to the ABR invent these wonderful catalogues as they go along, but I am assured by my more with-it informants—if scarcely reassured—that the items, however ephemeral, are for real.

If among the intentions of such in-your-face lists is to make us dinosaurs from “the late age of print” feel our dinosaurity, then they quite succeed. I confess that I am out of the loop of contemporary American letters in their most aggressively avant-pop aspect. I cannot sing along with the “voluminous melange of hardcore industrial grunge post-everythings”; I cannot line-dance with the cybersexual splat-terpunk avant-poppers. And while I do not revel in my end-of-the-century dinosaurity, I am inclined to shrug my shoulders at it. I scan the *American Book Review* with considerable interest and amusement; likewise some of those “wigged-out zines” when my former students publish in them and kindly send me copies. I maintain a benevolent curiosity about hypertext (of which more presently) out of my long-standing interest in the nonlinear aspects of life and of literature. But the American periodicals that I actually subscribe to and

thoroughly read are the *New York Review of Books*, the *Sciences* (the journal of the New York Academy of Sciences, which my wife and I enjoy as much for its art as for its articles), and *Scientific American* (the latter two partly as a source of fictive metaphors). Also *Sail* magazine, but never mind that, and *Modern Maturity*, the journal of the American Association of Retired Persons, which subscribes to me more than I to it; I look through it, but I don't inhale. The current American fiction that I most relished while preparing this essay happens to have been John Updike's latest collection of short stories, *The Afterlife*, and William H. Gass's monumental novel *The Tunnel*—two comparably masterful though radically different works of literary art from “the late age of print.” They make me pleased to have lived before the transition from “the book as we know it” to the “writing [of] the mind in lightforms” is complete.

Let me say at once, however, that I do not doubt the reality of that transition. Granted that a few writers still compose on typewriters, even on *manual* typewriters. Saul Bellow says that he uses two, one for fiction and the other for nonfiction; my Johns Hopkins University colleague Stephen Dixon worries that his prolific fiction-writing career will crash when he can no longer find anybody to service his brace of Hermes manual portables, or to supply ribbons for them. Believe it or not, a very few of us—myself and my Baltimore neighbor Anne Tyler, for two—still prefer to draw out our first-draft sentences the even older-fashioned way, with fountain pen on paper. “The muscular cursive,” Tyler calls it: scripted words, their constituent letter-atoms physically bonded into verbal molecules instead of merely side-by-siding like reciprocally indifferent subway passengers. Despite these exceptions, however, most of my comrades in arms and all of my recent students compose their fiction on word processors, and of the few of us who do not, most (myself

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included) depend absolutely on our computers for editing and revision, whether we do that on hard-copy print-outs or directly on-screen. Our publishers now routinely expect the finished product on disk as well as on paper, and the hottest, thorniest issue these days in the *Authors Guild Bulletin* (another “zine” that subscribes to me) is the protection of its members’ electronic rights in book and magazine contracts as more and more of our originally printed publication goes on-line one way or another down the road and our control of copyright tends to evaporate in cyberspace. Although I might disagree with Michael Joyce about the implications of his proposition, I quite concur with the proposition itself: that we are indeed “in the late age of print,” not only as a means of producing and publishing literature but, importantly, as a means of *reading* it. One New York playwright recently described all of us authors-for-print as “roadkill on the information superhighway.” He may be right.

To afford some perspective on this transitional time, I want to back up a bit—first just a few years back, then a few decades back, if not further yet—keeping a navigator’s eye on where we are and where we seem to be going, literature-wise, as I briefly retrace where we’ve been (this is the *Sail* magazine approach to navigating the State of the Art).

A mere 15 years ago, in 1981, we received at the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars our very first word-processed manuscript in an application to our graduate program in fiction writing. Although the piece itself was unremarkable, I was impressed by its virtually published look; it was, in fact, an early specimen of “desktop publishing.” Remembering how instructively chastened I myself had been in the early 1950s to see my own apprentice efforts first set in official, impersonal print in a student magazine—which seemed to me to make strikingly manifest both their small strengths and their large shortcomings—I imagined that this newfangled mode of manuscript production might afford our apprentice writers some measure of the critical detachment that print confers. The further

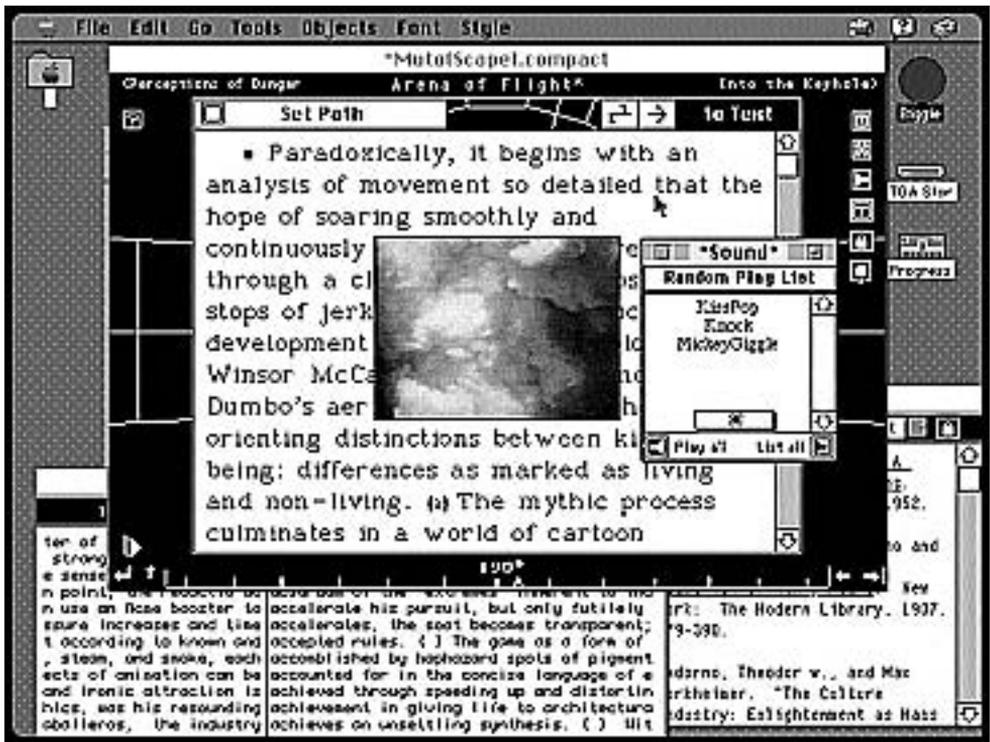
their words were removed from longhand, I reasoned, and even from homely old-fashioned typescript, the more objectively the apprentice authors would be able to assess them.

And so I showed the handsome specimen to our visiting fiction coach that year (Leonard Michaels) and expressed my pedagogical sentiments: wave of the future, etc. Michaels took one suspicious look at the justified right-hand margins, the crisp print and handsome typefaces, and said, “This is terrible! They’re going to think the stuff is finished. And it only *looks* that way.”

He was right, of course. Indeed, I have come to repeat this anecdote annually to each new crop of my graduate-student apprentices by way of cautioning them *against* fancy presentations of what is, after all, still work in process. No desktop publishing, please, I advise them. Just give us and your future editors tidy, well-copyedited pages, remarkable only for their author’s brilliance, and let’s leave publishing to the publishers.

That was 15 years ago. Then, year before last, we had our first ambassador from the vertiginous realm of Hypertext, a.k.a. “e-fiction”: interactive computer-fiction in which the “author” designs a matrix of “lexias” through which the “reader” navigates with clicks of the mouse or the keyboard, entering or exiting the narrative through any of many available doors and steering the plot along any of many optional way points.

The seminal work on the medium itself (*Hypertext*, authored by George Landow of Brown University but published by our Johns Hopkins University Press in 1992) declares hypertext to be the third great technological advance in the art of writing, after the development of the alphabet and the invention of movable type. Some curmudgeons have grumbled that the whole thing is more hype than text, but my comrade Robert Coover at Brown has become so involved in the medium that his official academic title these days is “Professor of Electronic Fiction.” In 1993, Coover published two landmark front-page essays on the subject in the *New York Times Book Review*, one called, provocatively, “The



Detail from Christopher Burnett's Muto(Scape), a 1992 interactive "hypermedia installation" in which the viewer navigates through words and images.

End of Books?," the other called "Hypertext: Novels for the Computer."

Invite those innocents still unfamiliar with hypertext to imagine a "text" (the word is already in quotes, the signal or symptom of virtuality) every word of which—or, at least, many a key word of which—is a window or point of entry into a network of associated "texts" (or graphics, music, statistics, spoken language, whatever a computer can reproduce), these several networks themselves interconnected and infinitely modifiable, or virtually infinitely so, by "readers" who can enter the "story" at any point, trace any of a zillion paths through its associated networks, perhaps add or subtract material and modify the linkages as they please, and then exit at any point, in the process having been virtual co-authors or coeditors as well as "readers" of their virtual text.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. Imagine a "loaded" display of that innocent proposition on your computer screen, such that "clicking" on any item in it opens a window menu of associations available for exploring, from the relative nimbleness of temperate zone quadrupeds, through the

history of fox hunting and its representation in painting, music, and literature, to sound tracks of hounds in full cry (with or without expert commentary) and disquisitions on animal rights—and every one of those associated "lexias" similarly loaded, another ring of keys with which one may open yet further doors, and on and on and on—no two routes through the maze ever likely to be the same, and every venturer thereinto not only a Theseus but a Daedalus, remodeling the labyrinth at will en route through it. That is hypertext, more or less, and as a potential medium of art it intrigues and disquiets me. If the prophets of the *American Book Review*, not to mention the *New York Times Book Review*, are correct, as no doubt they are, we'll be hearing more and more about hypertext as our weary century expires. (It has already made the cover of *Time*.) Indeed, a recent number of the *Authors Guild Bulletin* (Winter 1995), along with its now-standard cautionary piece on "Fair Use in the Electronic Age," included its first-ever mention of hypertextual narrative: "Electronic Fiction," by Sarah Smith (subtitled "The State of the Art"). Smith, an articulate practitioner of and apologist for her medium,

quotes a fellow hypertextualist's description of their art as "designing golf courses with holes that can be played in any order by players with greater or lesser degrees of skill and commitment." I like that metaphor—although I modestly submit that "ski slopes" would be an even better one, since, unlike golf courses, ski slopes have no prearranged sequence to be ignored or altered.

Back to my story. We welcomed our young graduate-student pioneer, who had already worked with Coover in Brown's vigorous hypertext program, into our Hopkins seminars (as did our university library into its burgeoning CD-ROM operation). We thought him a genial and knowledgeable harbinger of things inevitably to come. Fortunately for us, who have neither equipment nor expertise nor, for that matter, sufficient departmental enthusiasm, yet, to deal with this novel medium, Mr. Ho Lin's Hopkins project was a straightforward, engaging, traditionally linear print-novel ("p-fiction," I guess we have to call it now) about young Chinese Americans dreaming of Hong Kong and heisting computer chips to get there. At my urging, however, he obligingly arranged "e-fiction" demonstrations for us at the university's computing facility, and we did a certain amount of disk-and-software swapping.

Now, I'm a book person myself, but I try to keep an open mind and a mindful eye on the parameters of the medium, the edge of the envelope. I had already read Coover and others on the subject of hypertext; if I were 25 instead of 65, I daresay that I would be vigorously exploring its possibilities for my fictive purposes. I rather expected our roomful of talented Hopkins apprentices, who, after all, grew up with desktop computers, to take to hypertext fiction like grade-schoolers to Nintendo. Has it not been the job, after all, of each new artistic generation since the advent of Romanticism to render its senior mentors gently obsolete (what one sociologist has called "filiarchy," the rule of the young over their elders, and what others might call parricide)? To my surprise, however, I found that *I* was doing the prodding—"Better expose yourselves to the virus, if only to build up your antibodies," etc.—and that they, for the most part, were taking the skeptical Leonard Michaels role. Reading and

writing literature in the normal way, most of them felt, is interactivity enough: when we're being writers, we'll plot the course for you; when we're being readers, leave us alone and steer the boat yourself. My feelings exactly—more or less exactly, anyhow—but it was a touch dismaying to hear them voiced by young apprentices.

Their sentiments were sound, I believe, if unadventurous. Note that their reservations were not about the tiresome business (as many of us find it) of reading for pleasure off a video display terminal rather than curled up in a comfortable chair. We agreed that, by this century's turn, the hardware for hypertexts will likely be as portable as, and maybe even no harder on the eyes than, that jim-dandy item of low-energy, high-density information technology, the printed book. Nor had they anything against hypertext as a high-tech mode of reference browsing, as in those wonderfully manipulable CD-ROM guides to certain art collections, or the menus of menus of menus on the Internet. What they objected to, and in this I am much more with them than not, was mucking around with the traditional job descriptions of Author and Reader. "You don't like the restaurant? Then dine elsewhere—but stay out of my kitchen while I'm cooking for you, please, and I'll return the favor." (You ought, however, to try the hypertextual broccoli before making up your mind.)

I mention these two instances, from 15 and two years ago, as straws in the potentially much bigger wind of Electronic Virtual Reality, which I will not attempt to consider here. My point is that, although a few of us still prefer to compose our sentences in long-hand before turning them into pixels on a computer monitor en route to their returning into print on a page, and a few more prefer still to eschew computers altogether, the super-convenient word processor has become, in only a dozen-plus years, the production mode of choice for most writers of most kinds of writing, whether or not it affects the quality of the product. Interactive computer fiction (especially as it comes to include whole repertoires of graphic, cinematic, and auditory effects) is too fascinating not to become yet another competitor for audience attention, but one doubts that it will have nearly the market-share effect on

“straight” fiction-reading that movies and television—and, more recently, surfing the Internet—have had already. Those of us who still read literature for pleasure at all (no more than 10 percent of the adult U.S. population, says the *New York Times*) are likely to go on preferring, most of the time, the customary division of labor between Teller and Told. The Authors Guild’s justified concern with the protection of authorial electronic rights down the Infobahn is more commercial than aesthetic, a concern more about copyright than about readership. E-fiction versus p-fiction is apples versus oranges, really. In the case of either of those versus Electronic Virtual Reality, however, the difference is so enormous as to be a matter not of apples and oranges but rather of lotuses and rhinoceri, or perhaps hawks and hand-saws.

More precisely, it is the difference between virtual reality, which deals in *real virtualities*, and the purely virtual virtuality of literary texts, especially printed texts. The sights and sounds and feels of EVR are literal physical sensations generated by artificial stimuli. The printed page, on the other hand—except for illustrated texts and scratch-and-sniff kiddie books—is strictly anesthetic, however incidentally appealing to the eye and hand may be its typeface, paper stock, and binding. Even in the greatest, most spirit-stirring novels, there are no literal sights/sounds/feels/tastes/smells, only their names, artfully invoked in silent language. The virtual worlds of literature are unencumbered by literality. It is both their great limitation and their indispensable virtue that their virtuality is virtual, that they exist not in our nerve endings but in the pure hyperspace of our imaginations.

I will make my way back shortly to that distinction between the hyperspace of hypertext (not to mention the cyberspace of virtual reality) and the “meditative space” afforded by the silent, privileged transactions of the human mind and spirit with the fixed, anesthetic medium of the printed page. Before I do, however, I want to back off again, this time by 30 years or so, to explain why the electronic-fiction and virtual-reality phenomena give me a strong but rather comforting sense of déjà vu. In the late 1960s I

was living in Buffalo, New York, at the very edge of our troubled republic, and teaching at the state university there while the U.S.A. appeared to be more or less auto destructing. I vividly recall flying cross-country on a lecture tour in 1968, just after Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination, and seeing the smoke of protest rise from one burning American inner city after another, sea to smoke-obscured sea, as in a World War II newsreel. Frequently, the campuses I visited, like the one I came home to, were occupied either by war-protesting students and faculty members or by tear gas-firing riot police and National Guardsmen. I quite remember one of my graduate students—late in the war, when the exasperated riot police moved in on us for the how-manyeth time with their gas grenades—sniffing the campus air calmly and observing, like a wine connoisseur, “Pepper-gas, Berkeley, ’66 or ’67.” All about the city, between campus strikes and trashings, pop art was popping, happenings were happening, street theater and new electronic music were ubiquitous, young American men were fleeing across the Peace Bridge to seek refuge in Canada from the draft. And back across the polluted Niagara River, from Toronto, came the siren song of Professor Marshall McLuhan, author of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, that the medium is the message and that we “print-oriented bastards” had better *get* the message that the electronic global village had rendered our hopelessly linear medium obsolete.

It was in this apocalyptic, death-of-the-novel, death-of-the-print-medium ambience that in 1968 I published a book called *Lost in the Funhouse: Fictions for Print, Tape, Live Voice*. Its title says it all, or enough anyhow for my purpose in these pages. My own attitude was that, whether or not the world ends, if enough thoughtful, intelligent people suspect that it’s ending, then that shared apprehension becomes a significant cultural-historical datum, which an artist in any medium, even poor old print, might well take note of and even turn to good account. The threat to p-fiction back then was not hypertext and EVR; we did not yet have even desktop personal computers. It was movies and television—the movies increasingly since the end of World War I, television

increasingly since the end of World War II. The “Death of the Novel” was one of the classical riffs of Modernism, that regnant aesthetic of the first half of the 20th century. The semiotician Robert Scholes quotes a mid-1960s colleague’s description of the novel as “a moderately interesting historical phenomenon, of no present importance,” and I remember my Buffalo colleague Leslie Fiedler predicting at about the same time that, if there’s any future for narrative at all, it’s up there on the big screen, not down here on the page. (This was before VCRs, when people still went out to the movies.)

But I also remember Fiedler adding, winningly, that the novel was born dying, like all of us (he had in mind the form’s origins in parody and self-satire), that it has gone on dying for several centuries since, and that we may hope it will continue its robust terminality for some time yet. Ron Sukenick, founding editor of the *American Book Review*, even published a little book in 1969 called *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, and I myself used to like to say that, inasmuch as I had not been born in time to write the first novel, maybe it would be fun to write the last one. In short, you did not have to be a weatherman back then to know which way the wind was blowing. (One of Fiedler’s more recent books is titled *What Was Literature?*—the same Modernist riff, rescored for full orchestra.)

The point I want to make is that a number of the talented graduate-student apprentice writers in my workshop back in those years seriously wondered whether to abandon the sinking ship of print while they could and get themselves a movie camera instead. It seemed to them quixotic, at best, to be apprentices in a very possibly moribund medium, and although I reminded them that *Quixote* is just about where we came in, that 1968 workshop turned itself into a seminar on alternatives to the line and the page. The room was alive with pop-up fictions, three-dimensional fictions done on Buckminster Fuller polyhedrons, serial fictions on scraps of paper like fortune cookie fortunes, shaken up in a cereal box (appropriately), poured out into a cereal bowl, and read serially as the members of the group passed the bowl. At one defining moment that year, we received a solicitation from a

professional avant-garde anthologist (Richard Kostelanetz) who was assembling a collection to be called *Untried Forms in Fiction*, and who was offering to pay his contributors by the page. My young pioneers were appalled: “By the *page*? Where has this guy *been*?”

But—and here is the moral of this tale—a number of us, myself included, learned from all this experimentation two lessons that I regard as equally important. The first was that the medium of print is, indeed, almost inescapably linear—*this* word and then *this* and then *this*; this line after that, this page after the one before it (what Sven Birkerts has called “the missionary position of reading”)—whereas a very great deal of our experience of life is decidedly *not* linear. We think and perceive and intuit in buzzes and flashes and gestalts; we act in a context of vertiginous simultaneity; we see and hear and smell and touch and taste often in combination, whereas print is a peculiarly *anesthetic* medium of art, the only one I know of that appeals directly to none of the physical senses. Linearity and anestheticity: two tremendous limitations of the medium of print.

However—lesson two—what a few of us, at least, came to appreciate is that to be linear is not necessarily to be obsolete, much less wicked. While much of our experience of life is of a nonlinear character, an important portion of it turns out to be of a quite linear character. We live and think and perceive and act in time, and time implies sequence, and sequence is what gives rise to narrative. *This* happened and then *that* and then *that*, and if we want to recount what happened, to share it with others and even with ourselves, we have to proceed in narrative sequence—the story of our day, the stories of our lives. Those stories are linear, even when their subject is often not, and they remain linear even when the order of narration is dischronological; even when, as Horace recommends, we begin in the middle of things. And for those aspects of our experience of life that happen to be of a linear character,

the medium of print may be a uniquely appropriate vehicle of rendition.

In short, there are lots of things you can do with a camera that you cannot do on the printed page, but there are also important things that you can do on the printed page that cannot be done with a camera. Most important among these, obviously, is the rendering of sensibility, as apart from sensation itself. Fiction cannot give us the sights, sounds, feels, and smells themselves—language itself cannot, except for occasional onomatopoeic suggestion—but fiction is uniquely privileged to tell us what things look/taste/sound/feel/smell *like*, to particular human sensibilities in particular situations. Aristotle declares that the subject of literature is “the human experience of life, its happiness and its misery.” I would add that the true subject of printed lit is the human *experiencing* of that experience; not sensation, but the *registering* of sensation in language; the typically interior, unphotographable universe of perceiving, feeling, and reflecting, as well as the visible manifestations of those feelings and perceptions. (Compare the sensuousness of Diane Ackerman’s book *A Natural History of the Senses* with the surprising aridity of its PBS-TV version.)

Forget for the moment television, movies, stage plays, and virtual-reality devices. Why can hypertext narrative not do all that I have just been praising print for doing, since its medium remains (mainly) “written” words? Well, it can, to some extent, and the proponents of electronic fiction incline to declare further that their medium “sets us free from the domination of reader by writer, from the traditional concepts of beginning and middle and end, and of fixed, permanent texts”—from, in Coover’s own words, “the tyranny of the line,” not to mention the traditional concept of copyright versus public domain. But what’s typically missing from e-fiction, precisely, are good old linearity and those traditional job descriptions of author and reader, which at least some of us find to be not oppressive or tyrannical at all. On the contrary.

It is in this connection that Sven Birkerts (in *The Gutenberg Elegies*, his lament for the passing of the Age of Print) speaks of “meditative space.” Interactivity can be fun; impro-

visation and collaboration can be fun; freedom is jolly. But there are dominations that one may freely enjoy without being at all masochistic, and among those, for many of us, is the willing, provisional, and temporary surrender of our noisy little egos to great artistry, a surrender which, so far from diminishing, quite enlarges us. As my Johns Hopkins coachees pointed out, reading a splendid writer, or even just a very entertaining writer, is not a particularly passive business. An accomplished artist is giving us his or her best shots, in what he or she regards as the most effective sequence—of words, of actions, of foreshadowings and plot twists and insights and carefully prepared dramatic moments. It’s up to us to respond to those best shots with our minds and hearts and spirits and our accumulated experience of life and of art—and that is interaction aplenty, without our presuming to grab the steering wheel and diddle the driver’s itinerary. The kind of reading I have just described requires not only meditative space but, as Birkerts observes, a sense that the text before us is not a provisional *version*, up for grabs, the way texts in the cyberspace of a computer memory always are, but rather the author’s very best, what he or she is ready to be judged by for keeps.

The ubiquitous apocalypticism of the High Sixties turns out to have marked, in the aesthetic sphere, the windup not of printed literature or even of the novel, quite, but of Modernism, for better or worse, as a “cultural dominant.” Here in America, the writers who perhaps commanded the most critical respect back then were the likes of Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, William Styron, and young John Updike. To some of us literary deckhands, however, those indisputably talented writers seemed of less impressive stature than the preceding generation of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein—not to mention Joyce, Kafka, Mann, and Proust. My own living navigation stars and ship’s officers in those days were Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, and Vladimir Nabokov, joined presently by Italo Calvino and Gabriel García Márquez. Although the vessel did not have a name yet—Ihab Hassan’s *Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern*

Aesthetic was not published until the early 1970s—a number of us felt that we were working something out that would honor the high artistic standards and radical innovations of our great Modernist predecessors while maintaining a degree of skepticism and modest irony with respect to their heroic ambition. (What self-respecting Postmodernist would presume, like Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, to “forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race”? If they were the century’s Homers and Virgils, we would endeavor to be its Catulluses and Ovids and Petroniuses—an honorable aspiration.

All of that was a generation ago. When one considers that the iconoclastic, filioclastic spirit of 19th-century Romanticism has persisted right through our own time, it was to be expected that the second generation of (lower-case) postmodern culture would look to distance itself from its immediate forebears; that impulse is as American as Immanuel Kant and Friedrich von Schlegel. I do not know how much and how consciously it has impelled younger writers in the ever-more-beleaguered medium of American trade p-fiction. I do suspect it to be among the impulses behind the phenomenon of e-fiction.

And that is quite all right: “Let a thousand flowers blossom,” etc. If the edifice of printed lit is tottering, long may it totter, like the Pisan campanile, and become all the more appealing in its totterment. If we are in the late-Cretaceous era of print, and if e-fiction turns out to be the asteroid whose impact spells our doom “in lightforms” (which I doubt), let us take comfort in the reflection that the great dinosaurs not only hung in there for another million years or two before realizing that their time was up, but in a few instances attained their most ultrasaurian proportions even as those newly evolving mammalian critters scampered between their tremendous feet—and occasionally got squashed flat. It was the same with cathedrals

and square-riggers and zeppelins and ocean liners. *Que será será*, but not always in a hurry.

Someone might assert that the sentiments I have expressed here are an example of what the aforementioned e-fictionist Michael Joyce has wittily called “modality envy.” So be it, if so it be, although I believe “modality curiosity” to be a more accurate characterization. Mine is the ongoing curiosity of a postmodern romantic formalist about the state of the art, as well as about the state of such new and, after all, essentially different arts as I believe e-fiction to be—in case there is something there that a writer like myself might make use of in my venerable medium.

This just in from *Scientific American*, one of those “wigged-out zines” to which I subscribe: it appears that we late-Cretaceous p-fictionists may have an unappreciated edge in the evolutionary competition down the road. Give us acid-free paper, a source of light, and familiarity with our language, and we are in business for the long haul. Digitalized information, by contrast (including e-fiction), turns out to be only theoretically invulnerable to the ravages of time. The alarming fact is that the physical media on which it is stored, not to mention the software and hardware required to get at it, are far from eternal, either as items in themselves or as modes of access. Jeff Rothenberg, a senior computer scientist at the RAND Corporation, declares (in print) that “the contents of most digital media evaporate long before words written on high-quality paper. And they often become unusably obsolete even sooner, as media are superseded by new, incompatible formats (how many readers remember eight-inch floppy disks?). It is only slightly facetious to say that digital information lasts forever—or for five years, whichever comes first.”

Good luck, electronic fictioneers. Even golf courses and ski slopes last longer than that.

