



Review

News and commentary about new media writing, issues and events

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Laura Sullivan reviews the first collection of essays by the feminist collective subRosa, an "upstart politically savvy group of writers and artists"

A Bad Machine Made of Words

Nick Montfort reviews *Bad Machine* "an intricate, compelling work of interactive fiction (IF)"
Winner of the New Media Article Writing Competition in the Review category

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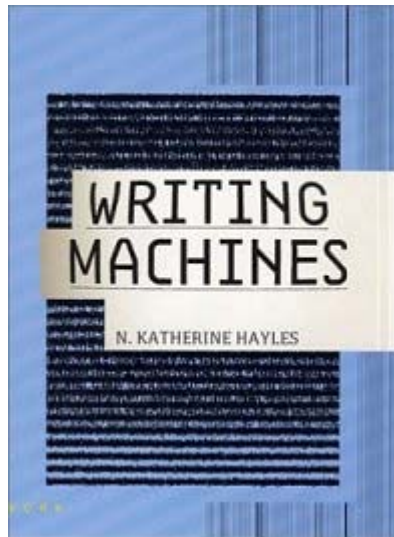
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Writing Machines

by Sue Thomas

09/Dec/2002



I read N. Katherine Hayles' *Writing Machines* for the first time during a flight from London to Los Angeles. I had glanced at it once or twice in the weeks before leaving England but it wasn't until the plane that I finally got the chance to really immerse myself. Its physicality is well-suited to travelling – a smallish paperback with a finely-corrugated cover, sensuously smooth inner pages and a frisson of extra text along the cut edge which makes it into a flicker book. Run your thumb across the edge one way and it spells Writing. Run it the other way and

it spells Machines. It may seem trite to open the discussion of a serious work by referring to the way it looks and feels, but in this case it's very appropriate. *Writing Machines* is as much about the physical as the virtual.

Literature was never only words writes Hayles, never merely immaterial verbal constructions. Literary texts, like us, have bodies, an actuality necessitating that their materialities and meanings are deeply interwoven with each other.

Writing Machines combines the subjective experiences of 'Kaye', the invented persona of a reader new to hypermedia writing, with the discursive critical writings of the 'real' N. Katherine Hayles, Professor of English at The University of California at Los Angeles. Kaye's initial bewilderment with the material she encounters is very recognizable to anyone who has introduced new media writing to a novice audience. A first reading of M.D.Coverley's *Califfia*, for example, does not satisfy her, and it's only when the author personally demonstrates how to approach the work that light finally dawns and she understands how to 'read' this new form:

[Coverley] patiently pointed out features that Kaye had noticed but had not really integrated into her reading – the navigational structure, for example, which offered at least twenty different pathways on every screen and which, with two or three clicks, could be used to access any of the work's 800 screens.... Finally it hit her: the work embedded the verbal narrative in a topographical environment in which word was interwoven with world. The world contained the words but much else besides, including layered images, complex navigation functionalities, and simulated documents. By focusing on the words alone, she had missed the point.

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This volume sets out to help us get the point with detailed discussions of four selected pieces, two of which are print. Artist Tom Phillip's *The Humument* was first published in 1970. It resulted from his experiments with a second-hand copy of a Victorian novel, *The Human Document* which became for him, says Hayles, an 'inexhaustible hypertext'. He 'treated' the book by obliterating words, drawing over them, and highlighting the spaces in between to create rivers of text. Two of Hayles' graduate students at UCLA, Adriana de Souza e Silva and Fabian Winkler, created a similar effect by building a kind of reversed printing system which obliterated marks instead of making them. Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) is a postmodern palimpsest of multiply inscribed narratives which Hayles believes shows what print can achieve in the digital age as well as recuperating the vitality of the novel.

The fourth work examined in *Writing Machines* is Talan Memmott's now legendary *Lexia to Perplexia*, winner of the second trAce/Alt-X New Media Writing Competition. No commentary on the field is complete without a discussion of Memmott's work. Where Tristram Shandy took the novel apart before it had barely staggered to its feet, so *Lexia to Perplexia* challenges not just what we assume new media writing might be but also the way we perceive the networked environment itself.

The shift in materiality that Lexia to Perplexia instantiates creates new connections between screen and eye, cursor and hand, computer coding and natural language, space in front of the screen and behind it.

Indeed the essay pages themselves, designed by Anne Burdick, are an emulation of this complex work, so that we navigate with some care as fonts change and the text fish-eyes itself as we read. This is beautiful in some places, but in others the book feels a little over-designed. The capitalised underlined words which appear here and there are hard to absorb, especially since in today's email culture upper case always denotes shouting. When one comes across a word written like THIS it's hard not to hear it louder in your head as a rather uncomfortable intrusion. And the page images at the end don't really work – they're too small, and the black and white format loses the richness of Tom Phillips' colours.

But these are small complaints about the kinds of issues which always manifest themselves in this kind of digital/print merge, because this is not an easy or automatic journey. That's why *Writing Machines* is such a valuable read. It is the first study I have seen which honestly acknowledges that acquiring digital literacy takes time and thought – it needs application, a willingness to learn to read and write all over again, and an openness to rethinking narrative from scratch.

Whilst in Los Angeles I recorded an interview with Katherine Hayles which can be accessed at the end of this article. Towards the end of our conversation she made an remark which has immense implications for those who cannot move their thinking beyond the linear. She speculated about a literary world in which the novel could have initially evolved, not as a print book, but as something else:

"Print has so deeply influenced writers through the centuries that it's almost impossible to imagine the novel emerging and developing as a form without print as its medium."

Can we imagine the novel without print? Now is the time to try.

N. Katherine Hayles was interviewed by Sue Thomas at UCLA in October 2002. This interview was made possible by funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board. The sound is rather uneven in places, for which we apologise. Due to length, the recording has been split into

two files as follows:

Part 1: differences between science and the arts; issues raised in 'Writing Machines':

<http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/transition/audio/hayles1.m3u>

Part 2: imagining the online space; issues raised by Mapping the Transition from Page to Screen:

<http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/transition/audio/hayles2.m3u>

N. Katherine Hayles is Professor of English and Design Media Arts at the University of California at Los Angeles. She is the author of *How we became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Anne Burdick teaches in the Media Design program at Art Center College of Design and is the design editor of the *Electronic Book Review*.

Sue Thomas is Artistic Director of trAce. Her books include *Correspondence, Water and Wild Women*. Most recently, her work was featured in *Reload: Rethinking Women & Cyberculture* (MIT Press 2002). She has just completed *The Virtualist*, an exploration of virtual and physical landscapes.

Links

N. Katherine Hayles:

<http://englishwww.humnet.ucla.edu/faculty/hayles/>

University of Chicago Press - an interview/dialogue with Albert Borgmann and N. Katherine Hayles on humans and machines:

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/borghayl.html>

University of Iowa - *The Materiality of Informatics*:

<http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/configurations/1.1hayles.html>

An interview with N. Katherine Hayles By Lisa Gitelman - *Materiality Has Always Been in Play*:

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/tirweb/feature/hayles/interview.htm>

Califia by M.D. Coverley:

<http://califia.hispeed.com/frame2.htm>

Electronic Book Review

<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/>

trAce Links

Lexia to Perplexia by Talan Memmott:

<http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/newmedia/lexia/>

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<http://mitpress.mit.edu/mediawork>

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