The Mediatisation of Contemporary Writing

Nick Thurston, 2015.

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Trying to figure out what marks contemporary literature as contemporary is a deceptively complicated job because the concept of contemporaneity at stake is itself complicated. Those complications are sustained by the unqualified way that the word *contemporary* seems to refer to both a quality of being with (*con*) in time (*temp*), in the colloquial sense of something being 'of its time', and to *simultaneously* identify our current moment as a historical period, a period that we're historicising as we live it because one of the qualities that distinguishes it from previous periods is an obsession with now-ness.[1] Within discussions of the arts, this doubling has been theorised at greatest length by those studying visual culture (usually vis-à-vis contemporary art, which John Douglas Millar has rightly pointed to as contemporary culture's placeholder – its unelected parent category), not least because premonitions about post- and post-post-modern life put forward during the late-twentieth century were most popularly obsessed with the growing presence and influence of images.[2] All such forethoughts focussed critical approaches to twenty-first century culture in terms of the visual: what can be seen (the visible) and ways of seeing it (visibility and our visualisations).

On the surface of contemporary life, the compression of multi-megapixel cameras into networked smartphones that feed data-streams like Instagram via one-click apps suggest those premonitions were well founded. What excites me and some other poets who have been at the forefront of the Conceptual Writing scene is a simple observation that problematises such premonitions and the visual bias they ground. In short, although the surface of life is constantly being flooded with images, its depths, structures, flows and our interactions with them have proved to be more dependent than ever on written language, not least because all computational data is a kind of emic, alphanumeric code. The really new features of twenty-first century life are reforming life under the surface – in relational networks that we only have limp metaphors to describe, like 'the cloud' – and so we need to read everything and anything legible below the surface in ways that go beyond seeing. As writers we seem to ask: what might it be interesting to write if we were to wager that, rather than being *over-written* by the visual, the contemporary world has become more fundamentally *textualised* than any period before it?[3] And as readers we seem to ask: what kinds of literacies might we need to read these new textualities forming on and below the surface?

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[1] As different from, for example, the futurology of modernism: new, new, new…

[2] As John Douglas Millar told me, winter 2013.

[3] Robert Fitterman re-defined the practice of Conceptual Writing as a wager on the unexpected textualisation of twenty-first century culture during a 'Literature and the Law' seminar that I convened for the University of Leeds, March 2014. See also Fitterman's *Just Another Soft Machine* published by Veer Books (London), 2014.

I don't want to stray from an observation to a clumsy truth-claim, I don't want to rehearse arguments about the textualisation of everything, and nor do I want to resuscitate out-of-date ideas about the difference between 'visual' art and literature. But I do want to take the above speculation seriously and to think about the importance of technical mediation to the changed horizons of new writing – to the new now-ish-ness of contemporary writing and the unprecedented (im)mediacy of public language acts. One of the strengths of the best Conceptual Writing is that it steps outside of the should-be territory defined by previous poetries and the nineteenth-century's epistemology of literature to concern itself with, and even begin amongst, what Gerald Bruns would call literature's elsewheres and I have started to call the (im)properly extra-literary.[4]

One aspect of contemporary life is that there are more people than ever producing and consuming public language, and more private language becoming public than ever before: there's more language, and a higher proportion of it ends up being public. This is happening in obvious ways, which have become common news issues over the last ten-to-fifteen years, but also in less obvious ways, as the NSA surveillance scandal has paradoxically obviated. Digital software-hardware combinations have standardised desktop publishing, seemingly naturalised the database as an organising principle for life, and now aggregate flows of data in constant streams around the world in volumes way beyond the limits of what we can actually read. Every time we type on a computational device our keystrokes are being published by default, to some degree of discretion, every few seconds. They're saved automatically into the file we're making, onto the archive drive of our devices, onto the linked backup servers our workplaces have installed, and evidently onto the monitored databases of international surveillance groups. That's an edition of four before you've even finished a sentence; and at least philologically speaking, it seems to me important to remember that the word 'publish' derives from the Latin *publicare* ('to make public') via the middle English *publicen* ('to get rid of', 'to let go of'). What this kind of *im*mediate and *in*visible reproduction demonstrates is that often, now, writing and publishing are the same action – that self-publishing is something we do to ourselves by default, even if only by allowing our writing technologies to do it for us.[5]

By the broadest theories of media, one can argue that languages themselves should be understood as a technology. By the corresponding sociologies, members of each society co-develop a version of this technology to mediate their expressions and relationships with both one another and their self-understanding. By more narrow theories of media, one can argue that the technologies of language are only the apparatuses made to carry a language, rather than any language itself. Any sociology that involves such an idea has, at some point, to distinguish the carrier (medium) from the carried (language), and to do so in terms of *technics*: the former has to be a technical construction, something made by people, and the latter has to be something else.[6] Figuring out what kind of 'something else' language might be

[4] Gerald Bruns developed the idea of literature's 'elsewhere' (or 'otherness') from the work of Maurice Blanchot and Hugh Kenner. See, for example, Bruns' *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* published by John Hopkins University Press (Baltimore), 1997.
[5] For a fuller discussion of self-publishing and Conceptual Writing see my article 'Conceptualist Reading Performances as a Praxis of Publishing' in *Journal for Writing in Creative Practice* vol.6:3 published by Intellect (London), winter 2013-14.
[6] Understanding 'technical' objects as products of human innovation, and as thus distinguished from 'natural' objects, is an extension of the philosophical difference between technical (*techne*) and

has in the past depended on distinguishing between some independent presence of language (as if language were a thing-in-itself regardless of people) and the technicity of its being represented (language as a thing-in-itself that people *produce* representations of). These are natural language theses, as when people maintain that language is natural because, for example, the word is God's and so we can only speak imperfect second-order representations of His true word.

Without some such faith that language has a natural state, status and presence, it's difficult to think of writing as anything other than a representation of a non-presence, or rather, a present representation, as many high modernists believed. The idea that any language is anything other than the collective history and practice of that language being enacted – its materialisations – plus the temporality of those representations as material – material that only has a 'being' insofar as it gets engaged with – dissolves, like a faith unravelled, with the demystification of the idea that our languages could've ever been anything other than made and re-made by societies. Written language *isn't* 'something else', something other than what we make it, something with an innate constitution. Language acts are representations of a schema of representations, they're representations of representations, and all representations try to re-present something that they're not. Language is the thing in between, in the middle, the medium; but it's also always socially constructed and the mediator of anything made public in or with it (i.e., *within* it). The 140-character limit on Twitter doesn't only constrain Tweets; it has echoing effects on attention spans, contractions of spelling and punctuation, and the skills expected of marketeers. It's not that words no longer represent concepts, as the bandying of Marshal McLuhan's famous 'the medium is the message' can mislead people to think, but that we have to recognise the increasing significative power of all the re-mediating processes and institutions that intersect to make any language act public.[7] In short, we have to find new ways of *reading* publishing.

Every language act re-mediates the mediality (the in-between-ness) of its language in a specific way, and every act enters into sequences of language networks, networks that in turn re-mediate the remediation…etc, etc. As the networks become more accelerated, pervasive *and invisible* so too do the acts. It should come as no surprise that some of the poets who inherited the consequences of the above debates are interested in exploring how the newly accelerated *im*mediacy of language is, perversely, an expression of the mediatisation of contemporary writing in the contemporary world generally.

I'm calling this change perverse because it flips the modification performed by the prefix *im-*, and so formulates a productive paradox: Now the *im-* in *immediacy* can be read as signifying a 'movement toward' the quality of being mediate, rather than signifying a 'lack of mediality' or a being 'not mediated'.[8] That second, negative sense of the prefix *im-* has until now modified the meaning of *immediacy* to signify an experience of direct contact between an *I* and another *thing-in-itself*, a contact that is direct because there's nothing in between them. I'm not claiming that this definition is now somehow wrong – that now, when people have

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empirical (*episteme*) qualities. See, for example, Bernard Steigler's *Technics and Time* book series (1994, 1996, 2001, to date), which have been published in English translation by Stanford University Press (Redwood), 1998, 2008 and 2010.

[7] Marshall McLuhan first proposed the phrase 'the medium is the message' in *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, published by McGraw-Hill (New York), 1964.

[8] All citations are from *OED Online* published by Oxford University Press and accessed July 2014.

sex, it's necessarily less immediate than it was, say, one hundred years ago – only that this definition is too simple if we're going to try to analyse our experiences of writing and reading in our mediatised age. If language-in-itself is a constructed representation then any immediate contact with language must be directly with a representation *plus* the schema(s) it's situated in. Representations can't be themselves without a context because the (albeit real) present-ness of a representation is insufficient-in-itself by definition. Contemporary public language has productively extended this insufficiency by converting it into a hyper-situated-ness, linking links to links – always elsewhere, always more, always multi-directional.

But what about the status of the *I* that comes to that immediate instance of direct contact with language-in-itself, language as a multiply-situated, impermanent and insufficient representation? The term *mediatisation* turns the stem noun *mediate* into a verb, which is a form (turning nouns into verbs) that seems to irritate a lot of people. In this compound the suffix *-isation* literally means 'to make x', and it gets us a little closer to articulating the tidal movement (below the surface, out of sight) of our contemporary medial condition.[9] The specific constellation of significant media at our 'now' moment in history structures something more than a media-scape for culture – something more effective than a passive backdrop – something more like a mediated-and-mediating-scape. Under the surface of the language we read, the tidal movement of these interacting media seems to mediate everything that has contact with it, to unlimited, accelerating, and ever-more pervasive extents.

Short of ethical objections, there's no reason to think that in this adolescent era of digitally-inflected post-humanism the human authorial subject *should* be invulnerable to this tide. In short, we can't just *use* these networks and networked technologies and maintain whatever integrity we come to them with; when we engage them 'they' (a clumsy shorthand, I know) begin a process of mediating us with soft and hard power. Some of those operations and their affects are visible, others not: Every time the predicative typing software on our mobile phones overwrite the letter order we actually key, or our web browsers syphon data about our search behaviour so as to customise the adverts we're shown, the medial network is mediating our use of the medium and us too in turn. These interacting media are doing so behind the veil of an interface, behind the lumpen presence of hardware, and behind our seeming ownership of both, according to chains of algorithms that are so long and so many and so changeable that we can't possibly *see* how they're re-mediating us. When I make a Google account to embed their Analytics HTML in a website I manage, and start to worry about the stats it returns, I'm performing my own interpellation – I'm pretending to be the policeman and hailing myself.[10]

These are crude examples of what I'm calling the mediatisation of writing, and of the fact that our medial condition will depend more and more on textualisation as the virtual and actual increasingly combine to mediate whatever it is that our contemporary reality is becoming, at least at the level of code-algorithm and software-hardware interactions. Lots of smarter people than me have pushed our knowledge of these emergent conditions further and more

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[9] Ibid.

[10] This characterisation refers to Louis Althusser's 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970), which contains his famous example of how individuals take part in their own subjectification if they self-identify as the addressee when a policeman shouts 'Hey, you there!'.

intelligently than my sketch above.[11] In tandem with their technical and philosophical advances, some poets have been willing to hyper-extend these re-mediations and hyper-extend the cultural register of poetry by again re-mediating such formations of language – this was the modus of Conceptual Writing – nominating such formations to a context where people are willing and able to read differently. The best such work has allowed us to experience otherwise unimaginable aspects of the fact that public language has never been so unstable.

The forms of languages, their ranges, their userships, and the demographic variety within each language's usership, all only add to the historical baggage that inevitably builds up as a language gets older. When lexicographers add webspeak terms to the *Oxford English Dictionary* news broadcasters react with chatter about how language is changing. But to do so by looking at the lexicon is to miss the more dramatically new change, which is fundamentally one of materiality – it's a change in what language *is* (as a multiply-situated, impermanent and insufficient re-re-re-…representation) not necessarily what it's used to say. Contemporary public language is clonable and fluid, overlaid and reproducible on-demand; it's polymorphic and regulated by vectors, relayed from spinning magnetic discs elsewhere and as unstable as the media that has mediatised our ways and means of writing *within* it. Now it's easy to feel like the language act is more immediate and dynamic than the supposed authorial subject behind that act. Now, more than ever, public language seems less and less like an expression of some already-public subject and more and more like that subject's post-human proxy, my all-too-real avatar. Administering a popular Twitter account, for example, can make that authorial subject's other contributions to public life seem inadequate. Mediatisation leads to our artificial subjectivity becoming more real (or more really dynamic) than any other aspect of our self-subject-hood. It's as if via our artificial artificial subjectivity we can become more immediate and immediately engaged with the contemporary 'real' world than any pre-, un- or less-medial subject-position could possibly allow.[12]

How and what do our avatar societies *output* as writing? What forms of literature are being written at the extremes of our contemporary real that weren't previously possible? Automated writing services that compose new texts using a method called narrative analytics are a kind of limit-less limit case. For example, the Long Tail algorithm has been used to write over 890,000 new books, which have been published by Icon Group International since 1999. So-called narrative analytics programmes not only analyse a dataset for you but also narrate that analysis and produce new findings.[13] Until now the latter at least – the production of new insights – which is to say, scientifically, the production of new knowledge – had been assumed to be the preserve of human authorial subjects. I can't imagine a properly contemporary poetry, in the complicated double sense of contemporaneity that we're now working with, that doesn't explore the modes of writing or questions raised by these kinds of

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[11] See, for example, McKenzie Wark's *A Hacker Manifesto*, written over a decade ago using message boards as a feedback loop for revisions, published by Harvard University Press (Cambridge MA) in 2004 and still eerily prescient.

[12] The hyper-extension of our lives via 'the Network' and 'the cloud' hyper-extend the artificial subjectivity we create through writing rather than negate it. Our artificial subjectivities are now too real to be simply artificial. This artificiality is not negated; it's doubled-back and doubled-up.

[13] The Icon Group International is an imprint begun by Philip M. Parker whose research work led the development of the Long Tail programme. Parker alone is the listed author of well over 100,000+ automated books already, available in e- and print on demand versions. All statistics are from spring 2014.

technical and non-literary developments. They cast a technical foreshadow in front of (*before*) all new writing.

Poets who promblematise the shade of this foreshadow, like those of us amongst the Conceptual Writing scene, do so by taking the risk of producing improperly extra-literary acts that often can't or aren't *seen* to be poetic. These communities of writers and readers bring into question commonly held assumptions about what literary output is by misusing their social status as cultural producers (authors) to turn attention to the growing gap between the form of literary products (publications) and the form of literary production (publishing). For example, if being a Conceptual Writer means, in a certain sense, being a performative reader in hyper-relational networks, then the actual authorial work for any such writer is to choreograph performances of (re-)publishing. By showing that any publication is an imago or illusory mirror image of a specific act of publishing, via which the real act or actual labour of writing and making language public come to consciousness, such work makes it possible to think of publishing itself as *the* meta-condition of public language acts, to think of choreographing the event of publishing as a creative act, and to therefore re-conceptualise reproduction as a form of production.[14]

It's complicated to establish quite what writing and literary output are in a situation where the industrial logic of manufacturing, which was honed during the Second Industrial Revolution, is turned on its head. Mainstream literary presses still depend upon a manufacturing flow of *production-then-reproduction*, buying or commissioning the writing of transferable manuscripts that get edited and then replicated in units. As we stumble into the age of the Third Industrial Revolution, where computer-driven logics of *mass customisation* are fundamentally changing massification, outputs are being modified in and through the process of reproduction.[15] For £120 the sportswear giant Nike will let me design my own trainer from a database of options on their website, displaying instant renders of my shoe, with its Volt-white heel loop, Wolf Grey swoosh, Medium Berry lining, Total Orange laces, Deep Royal Blue tongue loop, white speckled outsole and any twelve characters of text I want embroidered across the heels. These shoes are an output, a product, a materialisation, of a newly inverted manufacturing logic, a logic of *reproduction-as-production*.

My Nike Roshe Run Flyknit ID shoes would be assembled in a sweatshop where computers drive the factory and human employees fill in the gaps. But how would a literature based on reproduction-as-production work and what work would writers do to produce it? Speculative answers are being shared, around the world, all of the time, in extra-literary forms that hyper-extend the new status anxieties of poetic voice (maybe best articulated as 'status_anxieties')

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[14] This model of misidentification was borrowed by Jean Baudrillard for his 1973 critique of Marxist productivism, *The Mirror of Production*, translated by Mark Poster for Telos Books (London) in 1975, from Jacques Lacan's 1949 paper, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', featured in *Écrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan, published by W.W. Norton (London & New York), 1977.

[15] Against Jermey Rifkin's Internet utopianism in *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy, and the World*, published by Palgrave MacMillan (London), 2011, I find the questions raised by current changes in manufacturing to have been well introduced by *The Economist*'s editorial, 'The Third Industrial Revolution', published 21 April 2012, and brilliantly demonstrated by the London Design Museum's 2013 exhibition, 'The Future is Here'.

and the seemingly infinite ambience of its formations.[16] During summer 2013, my most recent collection of poems was published in a formally conventional book entitled *Of the Subcontrac. Or, Principles of Poetic Right*. All one hundred poems had been written for me by low-paid workers on the Mechnical Turk labour pooling service run by Amazon.com. I arranged the content they sold to me according to cost-of-production, from 1-cent to 1-dollar, rather than by thematic affinity. I typeset a standard layout, prescribed four sections based on my financial investment, and paid freelancers to generate the texture of *my* text.[17] People like me who share these new textual objects may or may not have engaged in conventional acts of writing-as-composition but are non-the-less exercising some kind of cultural authorship. And the new intensity with which we have been doing so seems to modify the question of authoriality that is central to the epistemology of literature. Now, instead of asking 'who wrote that text?' it seems more apposite to ask 'who is taking responsibility for that text?' *in the present tense*, and to expect answers that are as liquid, multiplied and impermanent as contemporary life.

Re-theorising this theoretical question is a reaction to the change in how we work as writers -- it is a symptom of the fact that certain forms of authorship are, now, primarily an act of taking responsibility for particular cultural object(s) in contextually-specific circumstances. The improperness of this reduction is only proper to our circumstances. Communities who make these new forms of language public -- new publishing communities -- seem better able to approach the fact that there's never been so much public language and yet public language has never been so insufficient, and seem better able than most to turn that fact into a conceptually productive (and shared) problematic. The (im)mediacy of much such work manages to quickly capture, then just as quickly lose, the interest of lots of poetry readers by inverting the status of reproduction and production and letting the categories of poem, poet and poetry be spun in the process. Given that the prefix *im-* is a variant spelling of *in-*, we might better bend English grammar to describe the (im)mediate public language acts as *in*mediate. I suggest so not least because the artificial artificial subjectivities that we re-re-re-…produce through inmediate public language acts seem to make the mediatisation of writing starkly legible where it might otherwise remain invisible and culturally unread.

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[16] For a longer speculation on how the problems of contemporary poetic voice seem to be characterised by certain status_anxities see my article 'Status_Anxieties' in *Convolutions: The Journal of Conceptual Criticism* vol.1:3, September 2014, available on the Electronic Poetry Center's online archive: http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/thurston/.

[17] For a broader discussion of *Of the Subcontract*, see Stephen Voyce's long interview with me in *The Iowa Review* vol.43:3 (2014), also available online: http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/thurston/, or Rita Raley's 'Outcourced Poetics', in *American Book Review* vol.35:2, 2014.