



REAL LIFE

WAYS OF SPEAKING

“Definition Not Found,” by Rahel Aima

“E*MO*JIS,” by Laur M. Jackson

“Free Recall,” by Britt Paris

“Gif Horse,” by Britney Summit-Gil

WHAT WE SAY IS ALWAYS ENTANGLED with how we say it. Form doesn't dictate content, but they mutually reshape each other in all media, and digital ones are no exception. Digital media have changed how readily ideas circulate, which in turn changes the sorts of questions we ask—of search engines as well as of each other. New ways of asking yield different ways of knowing, redefining what can be thought and who typically gets to be heard. A sense of information abundance brings a sense of omnipotence and hopeless inundation in equal measure. And meanwhile, what counts as speech itself changes with our new tools for talking, as we communicate visually and speak without words. How we listen, too, is altered, as we hear content in tandem with its virality, and momentum (rather than the medium) becomes the message. —NATHAN JURGENSON



DEFINITION NOT FOUND

The last refuge from #content
might just be asemic writing
by RAHEL AIMA

THERE'S A CATHARSIS in writing without something to say. Your pen becomes a needle or a mosquito's proboscis sucking from a well of lactic acid, the kind that settles just under your skin like cellulite. You do it when absently doodling in class or on the phone, making crosshatches, the coiled spirals of a rotary telephone wire, the onion sections of topographic contour

lines. You might do it just because, or to see if you can, as if testing out a pen you're not going to buy. Containing neither content nor value, these marks might be scanned as data but can never be parsed. It feels singularly seductive at a time when everything is made surveillable and where you don't need to speak to be heard or write to be read.

Whether or not you know it, and perhaps especially if you don't, what you're doing is a kind of asemic mark making, where meaning looks possible—are the crosshatches hiding something; is the doodle a code?—but easy interpretation is denied. Per its etymology, “asemic writ-

ing,” a mode coined as a term by the visual poets Jim Leftwich and Tim Gaze in 1997, is writing without any specific semantic content. Although they looked to describe their own textual experiments, the term inspired a new generation of artists and writers and, buoyed by its circulation on the blogs and listservs of the late ’90s, soon grew to become a global movement. There is no small irony in assigning a name to a form predicated upon resisting meaning, like penning a press release for a protest without demands. Yet it feels very right that asemic writing should emerge from that particular Y2K moment of hurtling globalization, techno-pessimistic paranoia and neon-lit fishtanks; a time of semiotic overstimulation where signs swarmed like white blood cells and where, in the immortal words of Horse_ebooks, *everything happens so much*.

What we mean by asemic writing, though, dates back to two Tang Dynasty calligraphers, “crazy” Zhang Xu and “drunk” Huai Su. Revered for their cursive styles, their scripts are at once tender and wildly explosive, with all the expressive aggression of a ribbon worm shooting out its proboscis. The 1,200 years since have produced numerous other proto-asemic examples, from the “interior gestures” of Henri Michaux and Roland Barthes’ “contre-écritures,” to the illegible writing of artists like Mark Tobey, Rachid Korai-

chi, and Cy Twombly (a former Army cryptographer). We might consider legibility, a successful end-to-end transfer of discrete information, as the liminal boundary here. Asemic writing is to ‘legible’ writing what abstract art is to its more representational analogues. And just like abstraction in art—consider the evolution from Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism, for example—legibility exists along a continuum.

Take the ribbon worm knot on the left below. Perhaps you understand it as a doughy coil or some kind of felt alphabet toy for a non-Latinate writing system. Perhaps you don’t read it as writing at all. Someone used to Latinate or Cyrillic scripts, however, would likely see in the worm on the right a ‘6’ or ‘b’ or ‘6,’ while an Arabic, Farsi or Urdu speaker might see a ٦ or a strong ‘T.’ Speakers of other languages may just see a pair of scribbles; what is legible to some might be entirely asemic for others. This is key: asemic writing turns on apophenia, or the terribly human tendency to perceive meaningful patterns in random data and to identify a signal where there is only noise. The intent of the creator thus becomes vital. For a work to be truly asemic, it should be illegible not just to readers and viewers but to its maker too, lest it be something more akin to a cipher. Conversely, some of history’s most impenetrable ciphers have later



been revealed to be asemic, as in the case of Luigi Serafini's 1981 illustrated encyclopedia *The Codex Seraphinianus*.

The absence of a *specific* semantic content does not mean that asemic writing is not inescapably semantic in form. We recognize something as asemic precisely because it bears the hallmarks of what we understand to be script. On the page or canvas or screen, the marks deploy a variety of lines, along with curves, strokes, serifs, and other fontlike or ideographic accoutrements. There is little to no attempt to depict depth, dimension or color, but there might be a sense of movement along vertical or horizontal axes. Sometimes, as in the work of artist Mirtha Dermisache, there is a lightly skeuomorphic attention to the modular columns and paragraph markers of the printed page. In this way, asemic writing might be better understood not as illegible but as 'post-literate,' to use the phrase of one of the contemporary movement's most important hubs, the *New Post-Literate*. To encounter a piece of asemic writing is to engage in a kind of pattern recognition, a database query that heavily relies on what we visually interpret as writing-or-not. As with the replacement Unicode characters that you might see when there is an error in rendering text or displaying foreign character sets, you cannot read it but you agree to understand it as language.

It's worth emphasizing that asemic writing can extend beyond representations of typography, and graphic notation presents a particularly beautiful example. Here, you might see some familiar markers of musical scores: staves, notes, dynamics markings, sharps, flats, naturals and other accidentals, key signatures, the slurs and accents of articulation, the angular slashes of ligatures, and so on. Sometimes there are directions, as in the score for Earle Brown's seminal 1954 work, *Four Systems*, which instructs the performer that it "may be played in any sequence, either side up, at any tempo(i). The continuous lines from left to right define the outer limits of

the keyboard. Thickness may indicate dynamics or clusters." To consider the score's geometric rectangles today is to feel a sense of frisson at its prefigurative qualities, at the way they resemble the horizontal bars of a midi editing software.

Musicologist and historian Richard Taruskin, in his weighty title *The Oxford History of Western Music*, says that electronic technologies have resulted in us entering a post-literate sonic era in which standard notation and convention-

Asemic writing turns on apophenia, or the tendency to identify a signal where there is only noise

al musical literacy have lost their primacy as a means of musical preservation. It's a phenomenon that graphic scores would seem to have pre-saged. Yet what graphic scores best illustrate are qualities beyond musical notation's communicative potential, as with intensifications of emotion in Marco Fusinato's 2007–13 series *Mass Black Implosion*. On archival facsimiles of avant-garde graphic scores, the artist rules a line from each note to a central point "as a proposition for a new composition, in which every note is played at once, as a moment of consolidation and singular impact." The result is a series of arresting sinkholes that suggest obsessive SEO link building for the end of the world.

How best might we represent sound? The delightful Wikipedia page "Cross-linguistic onomatopoeias" points to the failure of textual language to do so. I am particularly fond of its lists of common animal sounds in different languages: A horse trotting is "clip clop" in English, "deregín-deregín" in Arabic, "pocotó pocotó" in Portuguese, "tsok-tsok" in Russian, and "gadagung gadagung" in Danish. A pig grunting, meanwhile, is "ghnot ghnot" in Bengali, "kkul kkul" in Ko-

rean, “röh röh röh” in Estonian, and “oinc oinc” in Catalan. In an interview at *Scriptjr*, Finnish artist Satu Kaikkonen gestures to asemics as a possible democratizing, universalizing solution, saying “asemic art can serve as a sort of common language—albeit an abstract, post-literate one—that we can use to understand one another regardless of background or nationality. For all its limping-functionality, semantic language all too often divides and asymmetrically empowers while asemic texts can’t help but put people of all literacy-levels and identities on equal footing.” There is, on the other hand, a pleasing harmony between terms for TV static, which in Swedish, Danish, and Indonesian all translate to “war of the ants,” while Hungarian uses “ant soccer” and Romanian “fleas,” even if it portends a flattening of meanings engendered by technology gone global.

To the analogous question of how we might represent silence, John Cage’s 1952 opus *rasa 4’33”* provides the obvious answer, yet far more exciting are the works of sound artist Christine Sun Kim, who splices American Sign Language and musical notation in visual scores that deftly reconfigure concepts of both duration and futurity. In her drawings, time becomes spatialized, with waterlogged lines that loop and multiply like a series of dance notations rent asunder, all post-bombing filamentous rebars and Russian smiles. Sun Kim is herself deaf, and prefers to instead consider silence in terms of quietness, “because I still do not quite get what ‘silence’ means, especially since I grew up instilling your perception of it, not mine.” In particular, her work *How to Measure Quietness* (2014) suggests that we might consider quietness as degrees of interiority with a series of pianissimos that run the gamut from sleep (mp) and deaf breath (p) through to heartburn (pppppp), anxiety (ppppppp) and silent treatment (ppppppppp). The fortissimos of *How to Measure Pauses* (2014), meanwhile, offer that silence can be very, very loud.

Musical notation differs from other kinds of writing in that it is both a record and a set of reproducible instructions. Even as any standard score allows the performer a certain amount of liberty—a loosening of time in a rubato section, or a different color picked from a field of tone and timbre—it requires a fairly strict adherence to the piece as written. Another Sun Kim work, *Eighth Note’s Worst Nightmare* (2014), nods to graphic notation’s terrifying freedom with its jottings “no stem/no flag/no staff.” Failing to sound a whole note, or to sound a different one in its place, is as unthinkable as skipping or replacing the words in a recitation of a poem, the form of writing in which, at its best, the words and shapes are most fixed and the associations, even the meanings, most free. But if you don’t know and can’t hear the sounds that are signified as

Asemic writing might be better understood not as illegible but as “post-literate”

notes, a score on a page can become something close to asemic.

Perhaps those hi-def photographs of the ribbon worm aren’t the best depictions of asemic or post-literate writing, even as their proto-textual forms invoke the delicious possibility that insect life might one day evolve to camouflage itself against the regime of signs that now surrounds us—stick mantises that blend in with data center cables, maybe, or peppered moths with newsprint-patterned wings. Still, there’s something in their soft, corrosive brutality that speaks to the loss inherent in writing. There is always something we take away by standardization—that move from fluid line to letter or character; *tag yourself I’m the one who lost my mother tongue*—and refuse to give back. Think teaching children

cursive handwriting, or the linguistic devastation wrought by Canada's residential school system, whose program of forced assimilation resulted in the decimation of a number of First Nations languages. Or consider the plight of the nastaliq script of Urdu and Farsi, along with many other languages in the Central Asian stretch between Iran and China's Xinjiang province. With a writing system that moves both diagonally and horizontally it is notoriously difficult to code and is increasingly replaced online with the Naskh script of Arabic, or forced to circulate as .png or as .jpeg. A viral project *Tag Clouds* by French artist Mathieu Tremblin illustrates this especially neatly. Drawing analogies between graffiti tags and online depictions of keyword metadata, he paints over existing street art with a machine-readable translation that "makes shit graffiti legible," or more generously, privileges easily extractable semantic data over form and expression.

Within the sphere of green anarchist thought there is a current that bills itself as primitivist, with all the condescending fetishism that "primitive" invokes. Avowedly anti-technology, the anti-civilizationist critique of capitalism extends beyond the environmental degradation and forms of domination of contemporary production to rail against the concept of civilization itself. The sphere of alienation is extended beyond labor; as theorist John Zerzan lays out in *Running on Emptiness*, it is the regime of symbolic thought that is believed to most deeply distance us from our authentic selves, which are arbitrarily defined as the way we once existed as hunter-gatherers. Art, music, mathematics, literature, speech: any mode of representation is highly suspect. It's the paleo diet, but for culture. Zerzan's vision for the "future primitive" would have us living in a silent, pre-pastoralist utopia where we exist wordlessly amongst the trees—beyond art and agriculture and beyond semiotics, or perhaps more aptly, before and unsullied by it. While Zerzan's concepts seem attractive as a thought exercise, they are unconvincingly and rather petulantly argued. Who would want to do away with the back catalogue of some of the only good things to come out of the morass of

humanity as we know it? Perversely, a reading of these texts makes me wonder about the possibility of an asemic writing made not by humans, but by bots and other algorithms.

In 2011, So Kanno and Takahiro Yamaguchi created the Senseless Drawing Bot, a kinetic drawing machine that is Jean Tinguely-meets-Mars rover. It pairs a motorized skateboard with an arduino, and a long-short double pendulum that induces an element of chaos, to spray graffiti on the wall. There's a lot of empty swinging and swaggering, a louche calisthenics. It makes a mark only when its randomized wobbles pass a certain pre-coded threshold, when it's sure all eyes are on it, and then its gestures are fast, flashy, and nonchalant, as if drawn from immense, tumescent muscle memory. It's all big words and it's trying hard to flex; if ever a bot has seemed like a blustery fuckboy, this is it. The outcome is surprisingly great, a dense accumulation of multicolored freneticism, neat on the bottom and looping wildly on top like an overgrown hedge. Unlike the aforementioned *Tag Clouds*, it points to a machinic tagging that does not mandoline work into strict taxonomies, is unreadable by human viewers, and does not—yet—appear to be machine readable, either, as well as the delightful paradox of generative bots which are programmed by people, yet also enjoy their own agency.

In the realm of graphic notation, Emma Winston's @GraphicScoreBot tweets out an image resembling a graphic score every hour. Each tweet features an outlined white rectangle, usually with stave lines, and often with a bass or treble clef and dynamic markings, so it's clear we are to read this as music. Except, instead of conventional note forms, its markup includes an array of colorful geometric shapes, squiggles, and dashes. Circles of varying sizes and transparencies especially make the images feel like musical infographics (to me, they seem to suggest duration; others might see in them chords or orchestra stabs). There are semantic ruptures: the bot will, at random, tweet out cards from Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies*, entreaties like "Trust in the you of now," "A very small object. Its center," and "Slow preparation, fast execution." Less bombastic are the double-spaced

“B E G I N” and “E N D” that pepper the scores, which Winston suggests can be taken as start and end points or altogether ignored. Though the scores are generally sparse, occasional plaintive adverbs and phrases like “sadly,” “casually,” and “as if tired” make suggestions as to mood. Cameos by Italian terms like *con moto* (with movement), *andante* (at a walking pace), and *quasi niente* (fade away to nothing) make the scores feel somehow more official. If the “post-literate” leads us to interrogate what we consider to be writing, this bot’s relative adherence to notational convention, more Fauvism than De Stijl, does the same for the musical score.

Also on Twitter, Darius Kazemi’s @reverseocr tweets out asemicisms more akin to those absentminded doodles, each cryptic scrawl accompanied by a random word, like “subtlety,” four times a day. It’s a study in impenetrable handwriting, only here the writer is not a shrink with a prescription pad but a bot. Without that accompanying word, the marks, while elegantly spare, are unrecognizable as anything but marks. So far, so asemic. Yet the way the bot works is by selecting a word and then trying—badly, endearingly—to draw it out. It keeps drawing, and failing, until an OCR or Optical Character Recognition program (the question of literacy is transposed to the algorithm, here) identifies a character. If that character matches the first letter of the word, “s” in the case of “subtlety,” that character gets drawn and the bot turns its attentions to the second character, “u.” If not, it perseveres until it gets a match, and eventually it manages, through trial and a lot of error, to draw out the whole word; we only see these successes. Of course all of these computational processes happen at lightning speed, but in a 2014 adaptation of the work for a show at Boston’s now-shuttered Find and Form Space Kazemi slows the algorithm down to a human timescale and makes visible the otherwise hidden work performed by the bot. The word here is, appropriately, “labor.” Yet there’s something in @reverseocr’s yearning to be understood—to be read, to be recognized by another—that makes me think it’s a kind of unrequited love. There is a 1973 interview with James Baldwin in

the *Black Scholar* in which he says, in response to a question about the role of political themes in his writing,

The people produce the artist, and it’s true. The artist also produces the people. And that’s a very violent and terrifying act of love. The role of the artist and the role of the lover. If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don’t see. Insofar as that is true, in that effort, I became conscious of the things that I don’t see. And I will not see without you, and vice versa, you will not see without me. No one wants to see more than he sees. You have to be driven to see what you see. The only way you can get through it is to accept that two-way street which I call love. You can call it a poem, you can call it whatever you like. That’s how people grow up. An artist is here not to give you answers but to ask you questions.

Kazemi’s bot expands the field of how we might understand asemic writing. Illegible though its drawings may be to our eyes, it is without doubt trying very, very hard to communicate meaning. Humans are not its intended audience; rather, its visual language, like bar codes or the computer vision markup of Amazon warehouses, is entirely for bots, machines, scripts, and other denizens of the algorithmic world. It’s a robot laughing alone with salad, and its inner life, its own well of lactic acid that it draws from to express itself, is off-limits to us. We, however, are on view to them, from the moment we press our thumbprints into our iPhones in the morning to the moment we touch-type a 2 a.m. text message whose characters are so drunkenly scrambled as to form complete non-words, which an algorithm gently corrects to other words we did or did not mean, so long as they’re legible. Perhaps this is an imposition on our freedoms; perhaps this is that two-way street between us and the algorithms, learning from each other; perhaps this is love. •

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E•MO•JIS

Netspeak and chill by LAUR M. JACKSON

NETSPEAK IS HARDLY the first abbreviated language, but it was ours.

Perfected by the necessities of a pre-T9 cellular world and a flippancy embedded by the instant fact of now instant communication, the code gave us a standard to lean on with the A/S/L-level depth we desired. This is not a lead-in to diagnose the shallowness of a generation to whom shorthand merely meant halfhearted scramblings down a wide-ruled notebook.

Netspeak, for all its acronyms and grammatical grievances, transmitted the real feels infused by its users, evinced now by our potent reminiscences of both it and the late-'90s, early aughts internet on which we created it. (If we have to take responsibility for face-to-face connectivity problems, academic coddling, intergenerational workplace strife, political complacency, and participation trophies, at least give us this.)

We're far gone enough to nostalgia about

ROBIN MYERS, 14 MOUTHS.

Web 2.0, and it's worth noticing that its defining communicative features have come back in a big way. The general features that mark the cool of current internet vernacular—u, ur, r, k, proper noun i—also look rather old school. It's not quite the pages of a Lauren Myracle novel brought to life—ttyl, the best-selling young adult novel she published in 2004, was written entirely in instant messages—but nor would her characters' general disregard for case look out of place in today's digital communicative landscape. Promo material for the book's 10th anniversary reissue claims that with a visual and cultural makeover the novel is now “ready for the iPhone generation.” Ironically, as if the novelty of the full mobile keyboard has worn off, the iPhone generation now speaks more akin to the generation that inspired Myracle over a decade ago.

Animatedness means being moved, like a puppet by a puppeteer desperate to prove the humanness of their object.

Before we submit to our emoji lords, it's worth asking about these ghosts of internet's past that have wormed their way back into our language. Why are you back? Why, when Swype exists, when autocorrect has long surpassed its quaintisms, at a time when even basic dum-dum burner phones are equipped with slide-out keyboards?

Why do we need you?



ANIMATIVE EXPRESSIVE FORMS ARE the new normal.

Once limited to the domain of niche forums and Tumblr, reaction gifting is more accessible than ever. Gifs have not only made it onto the mainstream social media stage—with Facebook, naturally, the reluctant straggler—but all manner of platform-supported gif buttons and third-party plugins means that even users farthest from

hip to the corners of internet quirkdom can now be part of the fun. (As someone who still uses her carefully curated multiple folders of bookmarked gifs, I'll cry hipster on this one.)

Emojis, too, have received the gif treatment—or perhaps it's the other way around. Though their creation predates the iPod, many first encountered the unicode set as an obscure side benefit to iMessage.

Animatedness means being moved, like a puppet by a puppeteer desperate to prove the humanness of their object.

Now they are very nearly legible to every device out there (despite interpretive discrepancies between platforms, due to literal differences in representation of the very same emoji). The custom-made-celebmoji trend has jumped the A-List. An emoji Bible—subtitled “Scripture 4 Millennials” (*me: screaming*)—can be purchased in iBooks for \$2.99. An actual emoji movie is in the works. They've wreaked havoc for medieval-alphabet coders. They inspire albums, like Lemonade, or almost inspire albums, like Wave. They have leaped from the screen onto crop tops and been stuffed with plush. And we have just gotten 72 new ones.

And yet, the proliferation of both access and options for these forms seems rather oblivious to how they are used. As Amanda Hess writes in the New York Times, “when emojis and gifs are filtered through the interests of tech companies, they often become slickly automated.” In the case of the gif button (presented alongside the “photo” and “poll” options for tweets), neat categories—“Agree,” “No,” “Wink”—run contrary to the “curatorial sensibility” embedded in the

practice: Reaction gifs are often used to convey affects that escape pithy representation, such as “white people explaining diversity to me.” As per usual, it’s as if the techies behind the trend are pushing product with no thought as to who’s using it or whether it’s being used at all.

If Matt Grey and Tom Scott’s Emojli—an emoji-only messenger where even user names are emoji-only—were real and not satire, we might really have reason to believe “the end of [emoji] days” is near. Part of me thinks the quick end, like that of a good-time meme that burns too hot to last, might be more merciful than the current process: oversaturation, or slow death by drowning.

We have plenty reason to see this coming. We know what happens to idioms that reach critical mass; more important, how the process of popularity in fact necessitates a kind of ironic reduction of the object. The unique, inventive aspects that make us want to pass it on must be shorn off for maximum circulation and accessibility. The examples are endless: Consider the relatively recent fates of “basic,” “Netflix and chill,” and “squad,” words sourced and repurposed from Black vernacular for, it seems, the sole purpose of later writing a jaded testimonial about them. Linguists identify the processes that make up this phenomenon as entextualization, transduction, and—as many nonlinguists know—appropriation. Entextualization describes the making moveable of an idiom; induction is its actual relocation; and appropriation, taking on that which has been displaced as one’s own.

The ever encroaching desire of white people to be relevant is a heady fuel source, and not entirely unrelated is the ability of corporate voices to send anything cool to an early grave. Kate Losse on what she calls “weird corporate twitter” investigates the appropriative relationship between social media accounts verified and run by major corporations and absurdist accounts (“weird twitter”). Gifs and emojis are no exception. Denny’s remains a predictable repeat offender, and other examples include Taco Bell, DiGiorno, and even the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which shows how “an emoji can wreck your life” (if

you use them while, uh, driving).

Much like meme attempts, these make for cringeworthy affairs akin to watching an early 20-something assert their “with it” chops to a bunch of high schoolers. As ironically cool as it might be to engage in a parental emoji exchange, Big Brother co-opting a beloved quote just bucks anything like the kind of in-group “it me” commonality of memes, gifs, and emojis that underlies each share. But corporations have always done the most to inhabit the language of their consumers. While Hess fears the effect of political and financial imperatives on digital culture, Losse hits upon a particularly distressing issue to do with authenticity and recognizability in digital non-space: Has corporate parasitism of internet vernacular actually outpaced our ability to sense it?

To really answer that question requires a guarded look away from corporate appropriation to the internet folk who shape digital language from below. From a user perspective, these once exciting features that are supposed to surrogate affect—by advocacy, if not etymology—look a bit too conventional to do so. As with many, many, many idioms before them, widespread and corporatized use hasn’t evacuated their meaning entirely (an impossibility?), but they do seem rather tainted by the tryhardism of it all. Emp-tied of ... something. Corny. Uncomfortable. Too much. Hyperanimative.



ANIMATEDNESS IS AN UGLY feeling. So identifies Stanford professor Sianne Ngai in her study of the aesthetic phenomenon in a monograph called *Ugly Feelings*. Animatedness, or excess liveliness, is compulsory: It involves not only the expectation that a body be agitated at will but requires “an unusual immediacy between emotional experience and bodily movement.” It’s quite literally the “state of ‘being moved’” like a puppet by a puppeteer desperate to prove the humanness of their object. And sometimes that object is an objectified subject who, too, aspires to a humanness at odds with the jerky movements of their manipulated body.

Animatedness, the aesthetic that makes the characters in Uncle Tom's Cabin, in Eddie Murphy's The PJs, and the exemplary Taylorist worker all so disturbing, also bears upon the gif. "Gifs are like haunted pictures," says writer Alyson Lewis, whom I asked about her general dislike for the format. Between "classic reaction pics," still images that "drive the message home on [their] own," and Vines, Lewis locates gifs in an uncomfortable space that gathers the best features from either side in the most fragmentary way. Something about them feels ... off. "There's text at the bottom when someone's speaking, but the snippet is usually such a fraction of the moment that the moving lips don't match up with it."

In Lewis's formulation, the gif as a social form aspires to something like the real-time nature of video yet inevitably fails by its formal properties—in practice, a disembodied, uncanny mimic of human emotion. As gifs, along with emojis, become more streamlined in the applications we use to communicate, the more puppeteer-like these platforms appear, demanding we move in time with the emotional range of the options given.

What must be attended to in a conversation about animatedness and the internet is the fact of animatedness as disproportionately distributed, specifically as produced at the site of racialization. On one hand, one's humanity is conditional on the capacity to be animated—for bodies to whom humanity is not a given. On the other literal hand, a body animated looks utterly unnatural, puppet-like, revealing the desperation and labor underlying the humanizing project as well as turning "the racial body ... into comic spectacle," to quote again from Ngai.

(And suddenly the voice didn't go with the hand.)

The internet has quite the sticky track record when it comes to the hyperanimated black body, from the frantic virality of, as BuzzFeed fellow Niela Orr describes, "black trauma remixed for your clicks" to the overrepresentation of black people in reaction gifs used by nonblack users. Though seemingly an aside from an inquiry that looks at online vernacular in a broad sense, to the extent that we recognize black improvisation

as critical to how that vernacular develops, we should at least consider how the disproportionate affects of hyperanimative forms might drive the emergence of a new or repurposed kind of expression.



HOW DO YOU COMBAT online animatedness?
You chill out.

For even as the characters look identical, it would be hard to characterize this (re)emergent language as a backslide into netspeak of old. There is an aestheticized edge, a jadedness that wasn't there before. Questions have periods. Statements have question marks. Hashtags have gone ironic. Emojis and gifs are as commonplace as ever, yet the simpler emoticons are starting to feel like the more acutely emotional or suggestive image. When punctuation and you-versus-u is no longer a matter of labor saving, there opens up opportunity for new meanings and inflection. The gap between "sure" and "sure" with a period is cosmic.

My suspicion is that fun and play—so crucial to the circulation and enjoyment of idioms—are ever undermining any ability to harness them. Internet vernacular just might be like those really frustrating latex tubules with glittery water inside: The harder you grasp, the more they wiggle, accelerate, break free, and return to the way more exciting place of chaos and nonsense.

This is perhaps best exemplified in what looks like the real next evolution for gifs and emojis: no image at all.

What is dead may never die. Or whatever :) •

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FREE RECALL

Search engines tell us everything except how they work by **BRITT S. PARIS**

OF CLOCKS AND TICKS

IT'S EASY TO OVERLOOK ticks. But these blood-sucking vermin that purvey Lyme disease and force anxious full-body inspections after summer walks have proved surprisingly useful for philosophers concerned with how we know time and space. In his 1934 essay "A Stroll Through Worlds of Animals and Men," naturalist Jakob von Uexküll uses the tick to illustrate his concept of the *Umwelt*, the environment that shapes in

specific ways the possibility of experience and knowledge for every individual organism. For the tick, the warmth of blood and the scent of mammal skin arouses it from dormancy; it can wait for up to 18 years to be provoked by these sensations. The willingness to wait must shape its experience of how time unfolds in the world.

Von Uexküll thought that humans' interaction with their environment also shaped how they know time: "Time, which frames all happening, seems to us to be the only objectively stable thing in contrast to the colorful change of its contents, and now we see that the subject sways the time of his own world." By altering the speed at which we come to know things, we alter our experience of the speed of life.

ART: SASAMOTO, SKINNED LIES/PARALLEL STARE, 2015. PERFORMANCE VIEW, LUXEMBOURG & DAYAN, NEW YORK, JUNE 26, 2015. PHOTO BY ALLISON HALE.

In the 11th century, few would have understood the world in terms of standardized hours and seconds. According to historians of information and technology David Landes and Derek de Solla Price, the people of that age became suspicious of the tower bells that rang in accordance to clock time. Today, many are equally suspicious of the speed of digital information and how it seems to set the metronome for contemporary life. Search engines, now a central component of the human *Umwelt*, are part of this new temporality. Search engines make information appear infinitely accessible, seeming to connect us immediately to what would have once taken lifetimes to find. They make the expansive world of information feel omnipresent and instantaneous. But this dream of infinite information runs into limits to how we understand the world.

CLOCKS OF THE INTERNET

MORE INFORMATION MAY BE readily available, but our capacity for transforming it into knowledge has stayed the same. We multitask more even as we retain less, as studies from Clifford Nask at Stanford University and the 2015 Pew Project for Internet and American Life, among others, have suggested. We are lulled into believing we don't need to remember things—that we can always Google them later and the answers will be immediately forthcoming.

Search engines lead us to believe they are neutral tools that simply offer access to objectively valid and reliable information, provided users develop the correct sorts of queries. But in fact, the means of unearthing the information changes its nature. How we find something out changes what we want to know, and how we use what we learn. It's not merely that, in the course of life, we develop a need for some specific piece of information and then use a search engine to research it. Rather, our experience of search engines makes us see the world in terms of what

is Googleable. It makes us crave information we know will be readily accessible. The experience of an immediate answer becomes as important as the content of the information itself.

Finding information once meant time-consuming, site-specific investigations into documents of various media; the time and work of the research process would turn the pursuit of information into a contextualized acquisition of

Our experience of search engines makes us see the world in terms of what is Googleable. The question is the answer

knowledge. Now finding information is simply a matter of typing words into a search tool. The process feels instant, and it can be done over and over again from anywhere. The question is the answer.

This fast and continually easy access to information creates a sense of time flattened into space. Scholars Iina Hellsten, Loet Leydesdorff, and Paul Wouters have considered the way search engines update their indexes at different frequencies: "As clocks of the internet, search engines realize the present as a collection of extended presents that can exist in parallel on the Web," they write. "In other words, time is being represented as realities that co-exist in space." Search engines index recently created documents and older documents together as part of a continual present. The layers of information developed over time and within different contexts appear as though they are convened at the whim of the user. Everything happens at once, and can be done again if necessary.

NOWNESS

SEARCH ENGINES ARE ENGINEERED to flatten all previous information into one time scheme, regardless of its original context. When Google

is asked something, it returns old and new information together as if their different time frames have no particular bearing on their relevance, and with no indication of how the older material may have shaped the newer.

Though search engines are meant to ease our information access, their temporal flattening of knowledge is also disorienting, presenting a chaos of information instead of a sense of how ideas have been grounded over time. The feeling that all knowledge across all times is readily available inevitably comes with a feeling of information overload. By giving it all at once, search engines deprive us of a sense of having the time to process it all. Most users click on the first result.

For Bernard Stiegler, following Heidegger and Derrida, understanding how events interrelate in succession allows for the possibility that knowledge be developed, communicated, and acted upon. The duration of information over time matters, but today's communication

How do search engines win users' trust? With speed

technologies overcome the sense of epistemic distance by presenting information quickly—and therefore present information itself as quick. Search engines redouble this illusion of immediacy, which changes the human *Umwelt*. With respect to the speed of information, we begin to experience elisions between how we are expected to perform and what feels natural.

To adapt to the staggering and ever increasing amount of information we interact with daily, we make ourselves available to answer texts and emails not just at the office but also on the commute or at home. We sleep with information, phones rested on pillows. We multitask and do our best to assimilate information

into knowledge as best we can. In many cases, this means simply letting the information live in technology to be accessed if and when we need it. We remember that we used to remember phone numbers. We remember that we used to remember the capital of Nova Scotia without Googling it. The memory of memory is enough.

CONVENIENCE AS ACCURACY

SIMILAR TO THOSE IN the late middle ages who became suspicious of the ringing of tower bells, many now feel that fast information is restructuring their lives in ways they don't fully understand and can't control or readily resist.

How do search engines win users' trust? With speed. Search engine studies from Jerry Brutlag and others at Google and Bing have determined that people report higher satisfaction and longer sustained use if the search results are provided quickly, even if those results are not as suited to the users' informational needs. So search engines can overcome suspicion by making ubiquitous, omnipresent information seem easily accessible: As long as the information is convenient, we might worry less about questioning it, interrogating its relevance and reliability, or even retaining it for future recall.

Search engines' apparent immediacy helps allow them to appear primarily governed by efficiency and user-friendliness, obfuscating the economic, political, and cultural assumptions (not to mention the proprietary search and personalization algorithms) from which they infer the relevance of potential results. The speed with which search engines return results seems to suggest objectivity, but it also obfuscates the compromises they make to ensure smooth and "instantaneous" function. Google lets us feel as though we know everything—except how Google works. We can seemingly search for anything and get an answer, but we remain ignorant to how our omnipotence actually works.

The feeling of nowness is equated the feeling of accuracy, more salient to users than developing hands-on experience of thinking with empirical information, using it to make knowledge. Our desire for nowness becomes self-fulfilling, we adapt to it and feel comforted by its

convenience and eschew the effort of working to obtain knowledge.

THE NOSTALGIA FOR MEMORY

TECHNOLOGY SEEMS TO PROVIDE the answer to feeling constantly behind. But its very design is the cause of these feelings. Networked computation—the technology that powers search engines—can sort, quantify, and organize information at speeds much faster than the onflow of human time. For computers, time simply structures knowledge. For humans, time is something we live in. It is where we become ourselves.

It is hard to imagine a way of reversing search engine temporality, or a way of developing a search engine that encourages deliberate knowledge production rather than “user engagement.” A return to pre-Google methods of having human gatekeepers vet and organize information in search engines seems impracticable, an unimaginable return to darkness. Much less of the internet would be indexed. Having to feel around blindly for information in hopes that it

has been categorized somewhere by institutional experts seems like a less than desirable solution, even if it would force one to frame their informational needs more carefully.

Search engines want us to think that we will always be able to access the same information and it will always be true, available, and up to date: always Googleable. This masks and reduces the multiple presents the we all exist in, across a number of platforms, to a homogeneous “real time.” Meanwhile, these multiple presents remain as ungraspable as ever. •

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GIF HORSE

Gifs reiterate an oral tradition as old as *The Odyssey*

by BRITNEY SUMMIT-GIL

AN ADORABLE BLACK kitten is sitting on a bookshelf, eyes fixed on an insect. It sits, paws perfectly aligned. Then, out of nowhere, it pounces—leaping off the shelf and into the air, wild and frantic.

An adorable tuxedo kitten is sitting on a bookshelf, eyes fixed on a housefly inches from its face. Behind it sits what appears to be the entire collection of Little House on the Prairie. You left those books at your parents’

house when you moved to college. It sits, paws perfectly aligned and head cocked. Expectedly, it pounces—leaping off the shelf wild and frantic and hilarious as it experiences the terror of free fall.

An adorable tuxedo kitten is sitting on a bookshelf, eyes fixed on a housefly. It has a tuft of white at the end of its tail and looks just like your friend Rebecca’s cat that she had when you were children. The blinds in the corner are bent and broken, something any kitten owner can relate to. It sits, paws perfectly aligned and head cocked. Inevitably, it clumsily pounces.

You send the gif to Rebecca: “Lol looks just like Leo, remember?!”



IF EVERY PICTURE TELLS a story, a gif tells a story as a series, each version a slight variation on the previous one. With every loop, a viewer can take in more information, as inert details come to life and new elements are noticed, while the emotions triggered can be experienced repeatedly. The majesty of a rubber-band ball regaining its dignity after being crushed under a hydraulic press, or the shock of a car crash caught on a dashboard camera, can be felt again and again.

Once a sign of internet savvy, sharing a gif now has been streamlined and democratized by the rise of searchable databases like Giphy and by the integration of gifs into phone apps. Finding just the right clumsy puppy or celebrity eye-roll is as easy as finding the right word in the moment, making communicating through gifs commonplace. As often happens with new modes of communication as they become mainstream, gifs have been dismissed as stunted and insincere; they have been saddled with the same stereotypes that have been applied to those presumed to use them most: lazy millennials who want everything pre-packaged for their short attention spans. *Maybe if we turned Jane Austen's works into gifs, kids would actually want to read them!*

But gifs are less an impoverished form of digital shorthand than a new iteration of one of storytelling's oldest and richest traditions. The qualities that define gifs were also fundamental to oral traditions, to how the stories and epics that gave shape and substance to the everyday life of oral societies were transmitted.

Walter Ong, a 20th-century philosopher who wrote extensively about oral culture, claimed that "sound has a special relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence." This ephemerality, in his view, gives speech a sort of magical quality, a momentousness. In oral societies, the spoken word has unique transformative power. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski claimed that, unlike literate peoples, oral societies used language as a "mode of action and not an instrument of reflec-

tion." As Ong noted, in ancient Hebrew *dabar* means word, but it also connotes "event" or "action," especially regarding the word of God.

Because the stories, theories, and pedagogies of oral societies exist only in people's minds, they are stabilized and canonized far differently than in literate societies. Memory is necessary for knowledge preservation, and mnemonic skills like repetition, metrical speech, and rhyme become key to knowledge transmission. Expression relies on formulas and epithets to guide memory: not the "princess" but the "beautiful princess"; not the "oak" but the "sturdy oak." These mnemonics are not only practical, but an integral part of making performance pleasurable and engaging.

As classicist Eric Havelock has described in *Preface to Plato* (1963), poet-performers in ancient Greece relied on such devices to remember and transmit long, winding tales like *The Iliad*, complementing them with foot stamping, swaying, and music to make them richly communicative events. This suite of mnemonic devices and formalized bodily movements stabilized epics as rhythmic, visceral performance, while limiting the ways one telling might vary from another. These were the original technologies for outsourcing memory.

Gifs rely on similar mnemonics and limitations. As the Greek poet used repetition so the audience could follow along, the gif shows the same information over and over again to allow for maximum retention. Just as the poet maintained a palette of meticulous bodily movements and rhythmic phrases to hold an audience and communicate something memorable, we too might now load a gif keyboard with eye-roll gifs so that we may swiftly express a full range of "can't even." Gifs' tiny file size can make them as succinct as proverbs, another key mode of didactic knowledge transmission in oral culture—easy to remember and repeat. Like proverbs, gifs unload their message quickly and can be applied in many different situations. And like epics, gifs often vary through slight moderations that recontextualize them while remaining faithful to older versions already lodged in memory or tradition. Hence the popularity of gif macros like Javert looking through a window, Robert Redford nodding, and Side Eye Chloe.



TO BE SURE, A sad Javert gif and the mythopoetic tradition in Greece differ greatly. They cater to different cultural imperatives: The oral tradition serves memory in a culture where writing is uncommon or nonexistent, whereas gifs are often a conversational tactic that helps us navigate the experience of omnipresent text.

Ong argued, from an admittedly Western-centric perspective, that all cultures could fit on a spectrum spanning from oral to literate. This dichotomy seems to suggest that texts are linear, dead documents, and oral communication is alive. But the presence of textual elements need not be seen as the determining factor in what is “alive.” That depends more on how people in a particular culture engage with and interact through media. The societal implications of the written word have more to do with how text is distributed and blended with other media forms than with any intrinsic qualities of typographic communication. Furthermore, what gets defined as “text” has changed rapidly with the advent of electronic and digital media. Today, media scholars refer to everything from television shows and films to blog posts and selfies as “texts,” and the contemporary experience of media objects relative to the days of print media supports this redefinition.

The gif, along with a great deal of mediated communication, does not fit comfortably on Ong’s oral-literate continuum. If the written word exists in space and the spoken word in time, then gifs synthesize these, fleeting yet durable and ever redeployable. Gifs are both text and speech, and neither. Though concretized as digital files, they

are not quite “dead” the way the written word can seem to be. Gifs not only move before the eye, echoing the poet’s gesticulations, but they also retain the magical quality of orality to change a conversation in real time, to perform an action rather than afford “introspection,” as Malinowski put it. All of this, despite the fact that the gif is a silent medium. It is oral but not aural.

In the earliest days of real-time digital text communication, it quickly became clear that letters and punctuation alone were not sufficient for the kinds of communication afforded by instantaneous, conversational connection. Emoticons, acronyms, and a variety of “text speak” tactics quickly emerged, and these have evolved into emojis, shruggies, stickers, and gifs. The right gif in the right context can be more effective at evoking emotions and acting on subjects than the gestures and intonations of face-to-face conversation. While a heated discussion about veganism in a café might end with “if you saw the videos, you’d understand,” a Facebook disagreement can include the visual element missing from spoken words. A friend on your couch may cheer you up with a condolence or a warm hug, but online they can send you a cute puppy carrying a stick that is far too large, or a happy bouncing Pusheen the Cat exuding hearts. Who’s to say which is more cheering?

It may be that our world is becoming less a culture of literacy, in Ong’s sense, than one of *textuality*, characterized not by the mere presence of reading and print language but by the massive proliferation of media texts and their centrality to the human experience. Digital practices—message boards, comments sections, and SMS as well as gifs—are textual without producing the decontextualization, distancing, and abstraction that Ong associated with the culture of literacy. “Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another,” Ong writes. “It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle.” But much of what Ong attributed to oral culture also applies to textuality. Implemented in real-time networks, text can

**Gifs’ tiny file size can
make them as
succinct as proverbs**

shrink distance across time and space rather than emphasize it as the written word did. It destroys abstraction through immediacy.

Gifs are less abstract than writing and thus also closer to the human lifeworld. They are more agonistic, as Ong thought oral culture was (see: gif battles or snarky reaction gifs). They are also experiential. Even when representing an abstract concept such as despair, gifs are firmly embedded in concrete human experience: the person breaking down into tears, throwing up their hands, eating ice cream directly from the quart container.

They also convey lessons less abstractly: The recipe gifs popularized by BuzzFeed and other content creators are categorically different from written instructions, or even instructional videos on television or online. They offer an abbreviated recipe more akin to an apprenticeship than a training manual and are inarguably more enjoyable to watch. You don't have to peer over a list of directions wondering how finely to grate the cheese or what exactly a julienned carrot looks like. When the abbreviated gif recipe is paired with a list of ingredients, the oral-literate binary is altogether collapsed. Recipe gifs epitomize information transmission in an era that relies less on lessons passed down through generations or through traditional cookbooks, and more through online forums laden with reviews and comments. Such comment sections, like oral culture as Ong describes it, are additive rather than subordinative: Items are merely added on—"and this, and this"—rather than integrated hierarchically ("then this, but that").

Since it lacks the efficient linearity of written language, oral communication is redundant and copious; things must be repeated again and again to ensure that speaker and hearer are keeping up with each other. This is not a flaw. Oral communication is often improved by this repetition, becoming mesmerizing. Havelock claimed that during poetic performances, both the poet and the audience would enter a sort of hypnotic state, completely immersed in the experience. For Plato, this hypnotic state gave the poet immense power. By enrapturing auditors with music, dance, and rhythmic wordplay, the poet wielded undue sway over the polis. Anyone who's ever been hypno-

tized by a gif can probably understand.

Repetition draws the audience's attention to the most substantive parts of the performance. Gifs work at a smaller scale, and through their ceaseless motion draw the eye, making an element of conversation stand apart from the surrounding text. Newer social media add-ons like bouncing stickers serve a similar purpose; they bring a liveliness that characterizes orality to the surrounding text's uniformity and "deadness." Though not ephemeral, their short length mimics the dynamics of fleeting oral communication. The gif captures the power of the spoken word's ephemerality through brevity and repetition, replicating the aesthetic pleasure of orality through visual affordances that typographic language cannot accomplish on its own.

These visual, moving modes of communication in digital environments offer a vital response to Havelock's complaint that people in the modern Western world have lost the pleasure and relish for life that he believed the ancient Greeks had: "They seem to enjoy themselves. They seem to take natural pleasure in fine shape and sound which we too sometimes recognize as beautiful but only after we have first pulled ourselves up by our own boot straps to an educated level of perception." Gifs help us reclaim some of this everyday pleasure without the bootstrapping. Because they synthesize the oral and the literate cultures, they have the potential to resolve what Havelock saw as "the warfare between body and spirit" that arose with literacy's abstractions. Speech was never a more "natural" form of human consciousness and communication that has been spoiled by inauthentic printed and digital texts. In fact, orality never disappeared, but rather is always continuing to emerge, in broader, more all encompassing forms. •

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