

FRAGMENTARY POETICS - MEDIALITY IN *THE TIME MACHINE* IN  
*ALPHABETICAL ORDER*

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Thomson and Craighead's 2010 single channel video, *The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order*, reworks the 1960 film of HG Wells's classic 1895 novella *The Time Machine*. The piece is organised so that every recognisable word in the film dialogue becomes a distinct clip. As their title suggests, the clips are rearranged in a new timeline so that each word-slice is played back in alphabetical order. The resulting effect is a stuttering, though organised, sequence of utterances cataloguing the content of the script according to a database logic.

This paper considers the piece (hereafter referred to simply as *The Time Machine...*), from a perspective of mediality – that is, it develops a mediatic analysis. It will explore Thomson and Craighead's manual algorithmic approach as a temporal probe that develops a poetics and interrogation of media temporality—and indeed, aspects of contemporaneity—reproducing cultural artefacts anew for a context swimming in data.

To consider mediality is to examine the articulation of things, how meaning, affects and outcomes are mediated, and what this process of mediation means: this certainly goes beyond technology, but it is also characterised by what Jonathan Sterne describes as 'cross-reference as routine'.<sup>1</sup> Outcomes are always the result of networks of actants, operating at both discursive and non-discursive levels, from the material and processual, to the semiotic and cultural.



Figure 1 Stills from *The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order*, 2010. Thomson & Craighead.

The paper therefore explores the explicit subject matter of the original *Time Machine* film-text and the semiotics of Thomson and Craighead's work, along with the material and processual conditions underlying the piece. Thomson and Craighead consistently work with both 'discursive' and 'non-discursive' registers as active constituents of their practice. Indeed, the piece is considered here not only for its exploration of media temporality, but also its method: as with all their work the material, processual and ecological elements of the work play as much a part in

meaning-making as audiovisual semiotic markers; and it might be argued that since contemporary experience is both produced and problematised by a rich interplay of media technologies, practices and aesthetics; art which recognises and responds to this situation has the potential to be hugely instructive for our understanding of the ‘contemporary’ contemporary.

The two key characteristics of *The Time Machine*... are its use of archival material, and the reordering of this material according to a rule-set, which Thomson and Craighead describe as a form of ‘time travel on the movie's original time line through the use of a system of classification’.<sup>2</sup> The system they refer to derives from the work of the Oulipo group—the Workshop of Potential Literature—writers and mathematicians that sought to employ various rule based systems (that they referred to as “constrained writing techniques”) in the production of literature.

Such techniques include for example, Raymond Queneau's re-configuration experiment ‘n+7’, in which every noun in a work is exchanged for the seventh noun appearing after it in a given dictionary.

Original British National Anthem	Constrained by Phil Ellis, using Raymond Queneau's N + 7 rule (With reference to Oxford Paperback Dictionary 1979, and applied to all words excluding the definite article and possessive pronoun)
<b>God Save the Queen</b> God save our gracious Queen Long live our noble queen God Save the Queen Send her victorious, happy and glorious Long to reign over us God Save the Queen	<b>Goggles Scandalize the Quickie</b> Goggles scandalize our graphic Quickie Lop-eared lock our nonchalant Quickie Goggles Scandalize the Quickie Set her violent, harmless and golden Lop-eared to reject overnight us Goggles Scandalize the Quickie

Figure 2 Constrained editing using N+7 rule, 2007. Dr Phil Ellis.

Figure 2 takes the first verse of the British national anthem, and constrains it with the N+7 rule, with reference to the Oxford Paperback Dictionary, 1979. Another example of ‘constrained writing’ technique is the ‘lippogram’ (in which texts are written while entirely avoiding use of a

particular letter). For example, George Perec's 'The Disappearance', is a novel written entirely without the letter "e".

Thomson and Craighead frame their approach in *The Time Machine...* as an experiment in using a 'constrained editing technique'<sup>3</sup>, signalling but evolving Oulipean methods by changing emphasis from writing to media culture; specifically time-based, audiovisual imagery. Such a move has various consequences of course. While the likes of Queneau's n+7 rule subtly alluded to its source material by leaving the structure, definite article and possessive pronouns in tact<sup>4</sup> the translation of constraints to an audiovisual register maintains many more characteristics of the source material.

Mark Katz, discussing a parallel distinction between musical quotation from one score to another, versus digital sampling, argues, 'sampling offers the possibility of what I would call performative quotation: quotation that recreates all the details of [...] a unique sound event'.<sup>5</sup> With digital sound sampling, events are measured, quantised and transcribed tens of thousands of times a second. Similarly, 'constrained editing techniques' represent a move from the symbolic register of writing, to the signaletic register of light, sound and information. While both Queneau and Thomson and Craighead's techniques use forms of quotation, the latter does not only cite a particular piece of work, but also temporal events, and the archival documents that index them.

Their use of George Pal's film as subject matter is curatorially significant at both a level of semiotics, and of media artifacts; though from a perspective of mediality it is important to note that these are two aspects of the same thing: form and content cannot be separated but instead emerge together.

Well's original plot—which uses the protagonist's journey through time as a dystopian critique of progress and anthropocentrism—is both referenced and transformed in the process. The narrative of the film is partially obscured by the constrained editing technique, but the choice to work with this material nevertheless foregrounds themes of time and time-travel through the consistent appearance of clocks, ticking, dates as represented through the interface of the time-machine and calendars, time-lapses, retro-futuristic mise-en-scene, costume and the like.

War, ecology and civilisation are also firmly signified through explosions, weapons, volcanoes, and contrasts of verdant natural landscapes with aged and decaying monuments, utopian

architecture and so on. For those that already know the story, further meaning is invoked: the central character is the inventor of a time-machine who, in travelling through time, is forced to contemplate the ignorance of the human race when he encounters these various disasters. Subsequently he arrives in an apparent utopia, yet becomes further disillusioned when he finds humankind has evolved into two new species: one that has become unthinking and apathetic; the second, a monstrous subterranean race, who hunt and feed on the first.



Figure 3 Stills from *The Time Machine*, 1963. Dir. George Pal.

In the narrative, H G Wells contrasts the utopian and techno-positivism of the time-traveller against the dystopian realities of human nature and the class divides that have evolved into cannibalistic practices. If this narrative arc is shattered by the new editing techniques, it lingers in the memory of those who know the story, and appears as series of unexplained flashbacks for those that don't. Each section is haltingly cut short by the overarching system, cyclically shifting the emphasis from diegesis to constraints, as we are reminded of the title, the choice of archival subject, and the temporal manipulations we are witnessing.

All media constitute ways to 'construct and constrain time'<sup>6</sup>: Writing stores otherwise ephemeral words and thoughts, photographs freeze the visual, films sequence still-images played back at multiple frames per second. The temporality of media becomes abundantly clear with the possibilities of replaying images and sound in slow-motion, fast-forward, reverse or—as with this piece—when there are jarring cuts from shot to shot, based on the alphabetisation of clips.

Digital information takes temporal control several steps further, as Cubitt outlines: 'Visual media govern time through the cinematic principle of successive frames, interlaced scans, the clock function governing the period of latency in digital capture, the flickering of DLP micro-mirrors,

the TTL of packing switching, and the Fourier transforms of fiber optics, the analysis of the frame into discrete and temporally separated sub-frame components.’<sup>7</sup>

The source material Thomson and Craighead draw upon contains a variety of competing temporal registers: the multiple versions of Wells’ manuscript; David Duncan’s screenplay written some sixty years later; the pro-filmic events of actors performing in front of the camera and the edited fusion of multiple shots into a linear narrative. But there are other temporal registers too: the time of the theatrical release, its commercial life, and its subsequent archival existence. Indeed this archival quality—the obvious age of the source material—perhaps most clearly signifies temporal concerns. These themes can be teased out further: while conducting time travel on the existing timeline of a work, Thomson and Craighead choose an old work; and one that is specifically about time. We look at a past’s vision of its own past and of the future, rendered with a whimsical range of special effects, awkward sets, colonial costumes and mid-atlantic accents. The result is a naive tone which, when destabilized by garbled strings of non-sequiturs, feels playful; but that moves beyond a rootless postmodern play of signs as it comments directly on the availability—and malleability—of digital archival content.

As Wolfgang Ernst argues, the informational quality of our archives and cultures constitutes a crisis for historiography and (one could add) for contemporaneity. ‘Repositories are no longer final destinations but turn into frequently accessed sites. Archives become cybernetic systems. The aesthetics of fixed order is being replaced by permanent reconfigurability.’<sup>8</sup> Relational databases, native to computation, take precedence over the human emphasis on narrative and communication. As Cox and Lund suggest, “We seem to be living in an expanded present, in which several temporalities and times take part in what is perceived as present, and presence”.<sup>9</sup>

Both past and present are produced through a rich interplay of processes, ranging from the micro-temporality of signals, storage processing and packet-switching, to the macro-temporality of historical events. The result is a thickening and problematisation of the present that could be thought of in terms of contemporaneity. The mounting weight of the techno-cultural past that engulfs the present in a tide of fragments, brings to mind David Joselit’s emphasis on ‘intelligible patterns’ within contemporary art: ‘...what now matters most is not the production of new content but its retrieval in intelligible patterns through acts of reframing, capturing, reiterating and documenting’.<sup>10</sup>

As media and communications are transformed into patterns coursing through near frictionless digital architectures, their manipulation and configuration becomes central. By banishing the material constraints of entropy (though not, of course, the material substrate information relies upon), new arbitrary temporal, spatial or logical constructs can be introduced. Forms native to computation take precedence. As Lev Manovich, discussing database cinema, argues:

Indeed, if after the death of god (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard), and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berners-Lee), the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database. But it is also appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database.<sup>11</sup>

One could think of such a poetics as making sense of, or reconciling, issues of fragmentation, yet as Thomson and Craighead's work hopefully makes clear, such a response need not simply resolve these tensions but embody them. Their work defracts these issues through the prism of The Time Machine as both media artifact and allegory. That is to say, they do not reinscribe a meaningful narrative into the fragmented text, but instead prompt the viewer to reflect on the status of communication, meaning and media-usage today.

The significance of referencing Oulipo, which deployed algorithmic (even if not technologically mediated) techniques, can be understood as a response to the dominant computational logics manifest in contemporary culture. Their use of archival material does not simply illuminate 'intelligible patterns' of techno-dystopianism that were already present within the Wells plot, but implicates our day-to-day relationships with digital media, framing us as the time-travellers whose faith in technology might ultimately fail us.

As with many examples of post-digital aesthetics, the rule set and editing processes, become signifiers in themselves. The algorithm is the true subject of the work. The untimely and uncomfortable nervous energy of their editing stands instead as both a critique of this archival collapse, and a post-humanist recognition that human perception is no longer the dominant organisational structure of culture.

So [this is a] quite a good example of where one of our core interests lie, which is about our agency as artists, in looking at the cracks between things. [We try] to look at systems and architectures that surround us in the world, [...] how they control us [...] and] inform how society is generated or cultures built...<sup>12</sup>

Their ‘constrained editing technique’, provides a switch that brings the ideas of Oulipo into conversation with concepts of contemporary media and media-temporality. The work operates at multiple levels then: there is a sense in which it critiques the jolts of a fragmented network culture, a thickened media temporal present and the drag of a digitally accessible past; but conversely, they maintain a playfulness which allows them to assimilate and navigate the aesthetics of fragmentation. Indeed, I would argue that their work operates in exactly the manner of ‘an advanced laboratory’,<sup>13</sup> that Cox and Lund call for in understanding issues of contemporaneity.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Sterne. *MP3 – The Meaning of a Format* (London: Duke University Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead. “The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order” [thomson-craighead.net. http://www.thomson-craighead.net/thetimemachine.html](http://www.thomson-craighead.net/thetimemachine.html) (accessed April 7th 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Phil Ellis. *An investigation into the fluidity and stability of the ‘ScreenPage’ in new media with particular reference to the techniques of OuLiPo* (Plymouth University, 2007) 28-33.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Katz. *Capturing Sound – How Technology Has Changed Music* (London: University of California Press, 2004), 141.

<sup>6</sup> Sean Cubitt. *The Practice of Light: A Genealogy of Visual Technologies from Prints to Pixels* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 235.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Ernst. *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2013), 99.

<sup>9</sup> Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund. *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity & Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Terry Smith. *The Contemporary Composition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 44.

<sup>11</sup> Lev Manovich. *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 219.

<sup>12</sup> Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead. “Maps, DNA and Spam” Dundee Contemporary Arts. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8eAgxDNAKc> (accessed May 16<sup>th</sup> 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Cox and Lund. *The Contemporary Condition*, 1.