Bowker, Geoffrey C. "Commentary: Reading the Endless Archive." *The Digital Imaginary: Literature and Cinema of the Database*. . New York,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 95–100. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501347597.ch-009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 14:44 UTC.

Copyright © Roderick Coover and Contributors 2020. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Commentary

Reading the Endless Archive

Geoffrey C. Bowker

In August 2002, the active Taxacom listserv, which covers all things taxonomical, had a flurry of posts about the value (or not) of cataloging species while they were being destroyed—it was attached to the metaphor of a librarian racing around to finish cataloging their book holdings while the library was burning down.¹ Willy nilly, they were continuing a long tradition. The metaphor of the book of nature goes back to medieval times: this was the idea that the Christian god had written two books: one the bible, in manuscript form; and the other natural, inscribed into the nature of the world—study of one or the other would give us a more complete understanding of his ways. Charles Lyell, the great geologist at the height of the Industrial Revolution, argued that the earth was an archive—one not very well maintained, since archival practices meant that there were gaps in the record (only a subset of changes were preserved in the subsoil; and once a rock formation had recycled through the interior of the earth, it was fashioned anew).

Johannes Helden and Håkan Jonson's project *Encyclopedia* draws off and plays with this tradition; creating a sort of Voynich manuscript—that obscure anonymous work with impossible script and eldritch flora and fauna.² The “encyclopedia” in question for them is *The Encyclopedia of Life*,³ not to be confused (of course!) with the Catalog of Life⁴ or the International Barcode of Life.⁵ This flurry of cataloging has often collapsed the metaphor between the catalog and the library/archive (Kay 2001)—with one dream being that we could roll back the current extinction crisis as leisure, provided we had the genetic code (CAGT) and some sophisticated genetic manipulation techniques. The metaphor is one that seems to invite collapse—when books were our central knowledge artifacts, nature was a book; when archives moves into the fore in the

epoch of the database (Manovich 2002), the earth is an archive. There's a general argument in the history of technology that we use the dominant technology of the day to think about the world arounds—the brain was hydraulic (think Freud) when dams dominated; a switchboard when there were telephones abounding and is now a computer.

It has largely been since the Industrial Revolution that humans as a species have begun to recognize that we are in the business of planetary management (Elichirigoity 1999; Serres 2011). I refer to planetary “management” deliberately. There is a popular representation of the Internet of Things (IoT) that lumps into a single category: “vehicle, asset, person and pet monitoring and controlling”.⁶ It's all a matter of technique—with the right tools, the argument seems to go, we can flatten humans, manufactured objects and the natural world into a single control regimes. Barcodes may have come from the need for better stocktaking tools, but they work just as well for nature And over that period we have developed tools to catalog of knowledge—from the Encyclopédistes of the late eighteenth century (Diderot, Voltaire, D'Alembert—see Bender and Marrinan 2010) through the great nineteenth encyclopedias culminating in the magnificent eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in the early twentieth century to Wikipedia today. These sprawling efforts were accompanied by attempts to use the latest information technology (electromagnetism and microfilm for Paul Otlet in Belgium; electricity and computing for Vannevar Bush through the relatively ghastly attempts to build a semantic web today)—each failing separately on the grounds that the world is ontologically multiple and shifting, while the information technology demands singularity and permanence. The practice of mereology has been developing a language for things that are not identical to themselves over time (think of the turnover of cells in your own body), but process ontology (Stengers 2011) has not established a firm technological footing. Helden and Håkan's conceit of building time into their encyclopedia—having deliberately incomplete archives fading (or being taken) away—is a wonderful meditation on its surface of the burning library, and under the surface of the need for a process ontology.

Both their work and Gorman's are about how to read. Where the former invite us, through the deliberate incompleteness of the record (matching the deliberative incompleteness of the earth as an archive), Gorman invites us to literally read between the lines, as text and image emerge from the haptic act of separating two fingers on a tablet interface.

Lydia Liu's *Freudian Robot* (2011) explores the deep connection between writing and digital media. She goes back to Lacan (who studied automatic writing ... a resonant phrase for Gorman; and was closely linked with the emergent surrealist movement). Writing is a different kind of activity under the constraints of the digital—though it may take us a while to fully explore the potentials. The first PC “revolution” failed because people were using computers as very bad typewriters, just as portable electricity generators were very bad centralized steam generators (David, n.d.). A lot needs to change before one can “think” a new technology. People have to learn new skill sets; training and education need to change; institutions (such as universities, which are still somewhat locking into a late eighteenth century hierarchy of knowledge) need to change from within and so forth.

The interview with Gorman brings out so beautifully the fact that it's not only the act of writing that needs to change, but also the act of reading. While there have been some rich histories of reading (e.g., Manguel 2014) and some magnificent writing about it (Pound 1987), many digital scholars do not engage sufficiently with the need to learn new reading skills, which must in principle complement any new writing activities. I well remember laboring over a website that contained as much research and argumentation as a book, but because it was in multiple formats (script, sound, video) and had a non-linear arrangement—as well, doubtless, because it was badly designed—we just could not get a reader to spend more than twenty minutes on the site. The idea of investing more than that amount of time in any one digital object is hard to sell. I was thus entranced to see the reference to the “completionist” gamers, who “would try to find everything, and you would have to get them to leave because they would be sitting there for an hour with it.” After all, we are all used to spending countless hours on a screen with a game—I still remember my shattered dreams of completion when playing the original *Myst*.

The link with PTSD seems so organic in this setting. Both Gorman and Helden and Håkan (species extinction) are dealing with an ongoing trauma. I do find Lacan somewhat unavoidable here: his reading of dreams was that one should never listen to the narrative (this is the dream's author trying to fool themselves with structured action) but to the array of symbols that irrupt in the course of the telling. For Gorman, the text doesn't so much have a hypotext (Génette 2001) as its own intertext—a carnival of images and prose that just await the promissory separation of the fingers. I am not sure that completeness would be my goal here: the very beauty of the medium is the many paths one can

take through it—skimming the surface, diving deep at various points, coming up for air. For PTSD, there are two ways to go: follow cognitive behavioral therapy and never try to revisit the trauma, or follow the darker, Freudian path and try to revisit and learn from it. Gorman's work allows us to toggle between these options in ways that no single text could support.

There is a line in Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1996) that our unconscious is changing with the instauration of our grand new archive, the Cloud: fleeting thoughts that before would have been graciously repressed can now come back to haunt us through their digital traces.

Though it must be said that this is being matched with new forms of suppression, repression, and tinkering of memory—so as ever we do not have access to an ever deeper truth, but at least to an every varying one.

There is, as Eisenstein (1979) once argued, a temporal tyranny to the book form—it's one damned thing after another, from top to bottom and left to right: there's never room for any playful boustrophedon. She argues, indeed, that our own perceptions of absolute (Euclidean) space and linear time were natural outcomes of the form of the printed book. A lot can be at stake, then, in the exploration of new media. It's not just about finding new ways to say old things nor even new ways to say new things; it can fundamentally change who we are in the world. It's hard to look out from within Flatland and imagine the world of spheres. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine what new forms time and space might take if we had a radically new knowledge technology. All that is certain is that we need one and that we will be different people once we have it.

Which brings me to the question of the platform. Gorman rightly points out that there is no point in opting for the premature closure of this field of writing constituted by a platform. We are just not there yet. It's not about a set of technical fixes for technical problems: we are in a period where we can change the technologies through which we think about and experience the world, and so doing can fundamentally (hopefully) change who we are and how we interact with it. The time horizon for this work to achieve some kind of stability is of the order of 100 years, if the history of the printing press is any indication—let's close off then, or at the end of the human race, whichever comes first.

Both these works speak to the apparent plenum of data we are adrift in. In both the humanities and the natural sciences new forms of interacting with data (see Ruth West's work) and new forms of publishing are coming into play. There's a historical arc one can trace from the ebullient optimism of the first Encyclopédistes that knowledge was finite and we could put it all down; to the

jaded late nineteenth-century recognition that we may never be able to do this, but we should keep adding a brick at a time in the noble cause; to the idea today that the books of life and nature are infinitely long. We are, if you like, inhabiting Borges' Library of Babel; these works give us tools that go far beyond a mere catalog.

Notes

- 1 <http://ailman.nhm.ku.edu/pipermail/taxacom/2002-August/thread.html#41466>.
- 2 Clemens, R., Harkness, D. E., & Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. (2016). The Voynich manuscript.
- 3 <http://www.eol.org/>.
- 4 <http://www.catalogueoflife.org/>.
- 5 <http://www.ibol.org/>.
- 6 <http://saphanatutorial.com/introduction-to-internet-of-things-part-1/>.

Works Cited

- Bender, J. B. and M. Marrinan. *The Culture of Diagram*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- David, Paul (n. d). The Computer and the Dynamo - https://eml.berkeley.edu/~bhall/e124/David90_dynamo.pdf
- Derrida, J. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Eisenstein, E. L. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge. England: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Elichirigoity, F. *Planet Management: Limits to Growth, Computer Simulation, and the Emergence of Global Spaces*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999.
- Genette, G. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Kay, L. E. *Who Wrote the Book Life?: A History of the Genetic Code*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Liu, Lydia H. *Freudian Robot*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Manovich, L. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.
- Manguel, A. *A History of Reading*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.
- Pound, E. *ABC of Reading*. New York: New Directions, 1987.

Serres, M. *The Natural Contract*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011.

Stengers, Isabelle. *Thinking with Whitehead : a Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Stengers, I. and B. Latour. *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.