

The Dis-Appearence of Writing

Literature and the Imaginary

Kiene Brillenburg Wurth

Abstract

In this article, I want to raise the question about the future of *literary* writing in the age of digital media. The future of writing is at stake in coded, networked societies where writing is morphing into a technical image: a screen image. The increasing importance of the technical image raises questions about the stability of writing as an “analog”, linear code. How is writing being affected by the dominance of the technical image, and how is writing mutating *into* such an image? I answer this question by focusing on Hari Kunzru’s novella *Memory Palace* and Zachary Sifuentes’ graphic work *Fugitive Sparrows*.

Résumé

Dans cet article, j’aimerais m’interroger sur l’avenir de l’écriture *littéraire* dans l’ère des médias digitaux. Dans les sociétés réseautées et dominées par les codes numériques où l’écriture est en train de se transformer en une image technologique (écranique), le futur de l’écriture est un enjeu fondamental. L’importance croissante de l’image technologique suscite une interrogation sur la stabilité de l’écriture en tant que code « analogue » et linéaire. Comment l’écriture est-elle impactée par l’hégémonie de l’image technologique ? Comment est-elle en train de se muer en image elle-même ? Je tenterai d’apporter quelques réponses à l’aide de deux œuvres récentes : le roman *Memory Palace* de Hari Kunzru et la création graphique *Fugitive Sparrows* de Zachary Sifuentes.

Keywords

writing, orality, visuality, technical image, graphic presentation, exscription.

In this article, I focus on a long-standing issue in humanities research: the question of writing. I want to raise the question about the future of *literary* writing in the age of electronic writing. By raising the issue of writing I do not want to address clichéd assumptions about the impending death of literature in the age of mass and digital media. Alvin Kernan, Sven Birkerts, Robert Coover, and many others have done this already—and to no avail.¹ The death of literature is a fate foreseen ever since the rise of the novel in the 18th century. By contrast, what I aim to show is how contemporary literature is announcing the future, or possible futures, of writing. The future of writing is at stake in coded, networked societies where writing is morphing into a technical image: a screen image. In the last decade and a half, we have witnessed the rise of Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, virtual programming and mobile technologies that have facilitated the rise of digital images as (what Vilém Flusser once called) “mosaics assembled from particles” rather than imagined surfaces.² These mosaics, I argue in line with Flusser, are not at all discontinuous with the world of writing.³ However, the increasing importance of the technical image raises questions about the stability of writing as an “analog”, linear code. How is writing being affected by the dominance of the technical image, and how is writing mutating *into* such an image?

One way of answering this question, I argue, is to show how literature is presently working through the remains of “analog” writing: handwriting. Writing, we have known since Harold Innis, Eric Havelock, Jack Goody, and Walter Ong (but also since the more critical receptions of Ong and Marshall McLuhan),⁴ has helped to shape our cultures, our thinking, and perhaps even our capacity for

1. See for this, Kernan, A. *The Death of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Coover, R. “The End of Books.” *New York Review of Books*. June 21 (1992), at: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/specials/coover-end.html> . Last visited 18-12-2014; Birkerts, S. *The Gutenberg Eulogies* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006).

2. Vilém Flusser. *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1990)/*Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Trans. Nany Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p.6.

3. See for this also Alan Shapiro’s excellent comparison between Marshall McLuhan and Vilém Flusser on the issue of the image, whether this is a return (McLuhan) or rather a development out of literary and scientific writing (Flusser): the culture of the technical image is “[a] culture of images that is a continuation of the culture of literature of the past.” [no page indication]. Alan Shapiro, “The Future of the Image, Part 1” at *VJIC, Journal on Images and Culture* [no date indicated]: http://vjic.org/vjic2/?page_id=476 Last visited 18-12-2014.

4. See for this, Bruce, Bertram C. and Maureen C. Hogan. “The Disappearance of Technology: Toward an Ecological Model of Literacy.” *Handbook of Literacy and Technology: Transformations in a Post-Typographic World*, David Reinking, Michael C. McKenna, Linda D. Labbo and Ronald D. Kieffer, eds. (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1998), pp. 269-81; Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Havelock, Eric. *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1963); Joyce, Michael. “No One Tells You This: Secondary Orality and Hypertextuality.” *Oral Tradition* 17.2 (2002): 325-45; Innis, Harold, *The Bias of Communication* [1951] (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1991); David R. Olson and Michael Cole, eds, *Technology, Literacy and the Evolution of Society: Implication of the Work of Jack Goody* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006); McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Ong, Walter, S.J., *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977) & *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Scribner, Sylvia, and Michael Cole. *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981); Soukup, Paul A., “Contexts of Faith: The Religious Foundation of Walter Ong’s Literacy and Orality.” *Journal of Media and Religion* 5.3 (2006): 175-88; Sterne, Jonathan, “The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36 (2011): 207-225; Street, Brian. *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy Development, Ethnography, and Education* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1995). I especially recommend Jonathan Sterne’s article on Walter Ong, also giving due attention to Harold Innis, as a critique of the so called orality/literacy divide.

critical thinking.⁵ Understanding how we express ourselves, and have done so in the past, is crucial to understanding our present, and projecting our future. As we have lived in the zones of writing for three millennia, we do not easily recognize that writing, or its cultural significance, may not always remain the same. Most popular histories of writing tend to project the past of writing as inevitably flowing toward an unchanging present: the fulfilment of the alphabetic world. However, the history of writing is itself a history of constant mutation.⁶ The future of writing cannot, therefore, be given. Indeed, I argue here that literature today is the ‘writing on the wall’ indicating that we may be moving from a ‘graphic’ into a ‘plastic’ age: an age of plasticity that connotes both the synthetic and the mutable. Using Hari Kunzru’s novella *Memory Palace* (2013) and Zachary Sifuentes’ graphic work *Fugitive Sparrows* (2008), I show how literary writing envisions writing’s possible futures.

The End of Writing and the End of Times

Let me start, then, with some literary writing:

I have been charged with membership of an internet. There has been no trial, just a meeting of thanes in the Great Hall of the London thing. Though they used these words—*charged, internet*—they don’t really know what they mean anymore. They are words from before the Withering... The men who gathered to question me have no more notion of information-age Laws than they do of *physics*, or *evolution*... They are the bringers of the Wilding, the ones who will make the world anew.⁷

Hari Kunzru’s *Memory Palace* evokes a world without traces. Set in a distant future, this is a post-information world.⁸ Nothing is left after a magnetic storm has destroyed all cyber networks, all channels of communication, and almost all knowledge and memories stored in these networks and channels (a phase known as the Withering). Words from a lost world—*charged, internet, hospital*—drift meaninglessly in a life sphere dictated by ecofascists and reality fundamentalists who are known as The Thing. Ecofascists: *everybody back to earth, to the Now, beyond the structure of time, the human, and history*. Reality fundamentalists: *back to the Thing in itself, beyond words and writing*. Only simple language is allowed. Even the slightest trace of words pronounced cannot remain drifting, dangling in the air. This phase is known as the Wilding: back to physical reality.

5. This connection between alphabetic writing and the possibility of critical thinking is, at least, hypothesized quite interestingly by Vilém Flusser in *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* (Göttingen: Imatrix Publications, 1987). I will return to Flusser below.

6. See for instance, Amelia Gnanadesikan. *The Writing Revolution. Cuneiform to the Internet* (Stephen D. Houston. *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

7. Hari Kunzru, *Memory Palace*, curated by Lauri Britton Newell and Ligaya Salazar (London: V&A Publishing, 2013), p. 12.

8. For an important study on literature and the future imaginary—the imaginary of the end—see: Bertrand Gervais, *L’Imaginaire de la fin : temps, mots et signes. Logiques de l’imaginaire. Tome III*, Montréal, Le Quartanier, coll. « erres essais » 2009.

The anonymous first-person narrator tells what will be his last story in this world without traces. After many adventures, he became a member of a secret society that tries to preserve knowledge from a lost world. It is forbidden to inscribe this knowledge. Yet the society tries to preserve information through ancient mnemonic techniques:

Here is how to remember. First you must choose a place. It should be somewhere you know very well. Most people pick somewhere spacious and grand—a great hall, one of the ruined towers of the city. You get to know this place as well as you can. You walk around it, impressing every detail on your memory, until you can tour it in your mind when you are not there. Then you place the things you need to remember around the building, in the form of pictures. These pictures must be startling enough to trigger your imagination... when you need to recall something, you merely go in your imagination... (p. 9)

Kunzru's novella, we will see, materially performs this imaginative feat: it changes the genre of the novella into a collection of startling pictures that you can walk around. For now, let me remark that this art of memory does not always work out well. For *Memory Palace* illustrates the *dynamics* of memory—it revolves around acts of memory and how such acts transform the past, or even: create the past through the present. Thus, yes, the laws of Newton are preserved through the multisensory and shifting modes of oral communication, but also: the laws of relativity of milord & lady Ayn Stein, Darwing. All that is remembered in the post-information world mutates into something different: names are remembered erroneously, just as knowledge is passed on imperfectly.

It is striking to see how *Memory Palace* thus imagines a world that Harold Innis, Ong, Havelock, and McLuhan speculated on in the mid- and later twentieth century: a preliterate world. Innis already indicated in 1947 the impossibility of imagining such a world from the vantage point of the present: “[T]he oral tradition emphasized memory and training. We have no history of conversation or of the oral tradition except as they are revealed darkly through the written or printed word.”⁹ We are caught in the paradigm of writing and the dominant modes of knowledge writing has brought about. In Kunzru's novella, the violence of the magnetic storm that wipes away the world of writing—in a wider sense: the trace—only attests to its long-lasting cultural dominance:

An aura was seen all over the world, great waves of light shivering in the sky. They saw the great waves of light, and their screens spewed out their last sign and went dark. After that, all memory was gone, and the market was empty... It is said that the people had lived in the realm of the sign so long that no one could remember how to get food, and without pewter they no longer knew their own names... (p. 42)

This is Baudrillard: the realm of the sign that has closed in on itself, and multiplied itself *ad infinitum*. Using the novella for the laboratory of human experience, Kunzru offers us a version of “preliterate” society as we can only imagine it *after* and *according to* the realm of the sign. Yet he imagines this society more in the tradition of Innis than of Ong: Innis, as Jonathan Sterne has stressed, was always

9. Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication* [1951] (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 9.

at pains to show that in oral intercourse “the eye, ear, and brain, the senses and faculties acted together in busy co-operation and rivalry, each eliciting, stimulating, and supplementing the other.”¹⁰ Kunzru, in close cooperation with Laurie Britton Newell and Ligaya Salazar, who *curated* this novella, interprets and mimics oral intercourse in precisely this multimodal way. Collaborating with 20 illustrators and graphic designers, Kunzru offers a mode of story-telling that is medially undecided: every different passage has a different “illustration”, made from a different viewpoint on the novella. What is more, these illustrations were displayed in the Victoria & Albert Museum in the summer of 2013. The book became an [exhibition](#); the novella a walk-in novella: images to walk around and return to.

As Newel and Salazar point out, unlike “reading a book, visiting an exhibition is not usually a linear experience.”¹¹ Kunzru was commissioned to write the novella for the exhibition on the basis of his previous work that played “explicitly with sequence”.¹² *Memory Palace*, too, tends towards the fragmentary, rather than the linear mode of the novel that has become its dominant format: it is a collection of disparate memories. This tendency away from the linear at once performs the oral world that Kunzru conjures up: oral intercourse is not necessarily about linearity, about putting things in line. Oral communication, or how we now imagine it to be, may have a more circular and associative nature. As Flusser speculates: oral discourse “didn’t have a direction...it ran into obstacles (refutations), went backward, turned itself in a circle.”¹³ Its logic, according to many scholars on orality and early literacy, is additive (associative) so that oral discourses may create the impression of being stitched together out of fragments. Distraction and digressions are therefore familiar elements of oral discourse. Indeed, the way in which Kunzru has his narrator retrieve knowledge from the world before the magnetization, in lists, recalls the paratactic connections of orality. We encounter such connections as a “residual orality”, for instance, in the *commedia dell’arte*.¹⁴

The logic of association also defines the relation between the written passages and the illustrations in *Memory Palace*: the latter do not serve the former but rather mark out a new territory. The plurality of the illustrations, each by a different hand, together forming a catalogue, reinforce the fragmentary nature of the tale and its telling. Thus, the different visual styles and interpretations underline a centrifugal movement—a destructive movement that is, of course, just as present in Kunzru’s world of Wilding.

Seen in this way, *Memory Palace* requires the kind of reading that graphic novels and comic books do: it requires multitasking, as we scan many different patterns at the same time. Here, the images do not simply support the story, they rather *distract* as they create so many different impressions of the story world. Often, the images take over, as on pp. 51-53, when Némo Tral’s evocation of the Campers (outside of the city, where the narrator grew up), the Shard, and the Limpicks (a London suburb) becomes a puzzling and tantalizing sequence in itself. The cluster of ancient palaces of the Campers mentioned in

10. Innis quoted in Jonathan Sterne, “The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality.” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36 (2011), p. 210.

11. Laurie Britton Newel and Ligaya Salazar, “Curating a Book” in *Memory Palace*, p. 85.

12. *Ibidem*.

13. Vilém Flusser *Does Writing Have a Future?* Trans Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) p. 32.

14. See for this, for instance, Robert Henke, *Composition and Performance in the Commedia Dell’Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Henke, however, starts from a binary opposition between oral and written discourse that may muddle our perception of the relations between the two.

the text (p. 50) only bears a faint relation to Tral's plastic configuration of it. His images convey darkness, rain, storm: a visual story in itself in five frames. That visual impression in turn triggers yet more stories; yet more narrative potentialities triggered in the reader's imagination. In this way, the images in *Memory Palace* present spaces of digression. Their relation to the text is defined by juxtaposition. What matters is the *in between* of image and text, the one upsetting, confusing, overtaking the other. In this way, a different kind of writing can emerge: a dialogic writing, negotiating between words and images, that emerges out of a co-production between author, curators, and illustrators. As such a co-production, *Memory Palace* continues the fashion inaugurated in the 1960s with what Jeffrey Schnapp has called the electronic information age book; Jarome Agel's verbal-visual books that typically involved a producer, an author, and a designer. Quentin Fiore's and Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Massage* is no doubt the most famous among them: a book predicated on the advertising industry.¹⁵

With the project that resulted in *Memory Palace*, Newell and Salazar had wanted to explore the potentialities of the book in an age "in which reading formats are rapidly changing, and print—as book, newspaper or magazine—is rapidly losing its dominance."¹⁶ When is something still a book? When can we still be said to be reading? Do we need to read in a line, or in fragments (as we have done before)? How can an exhibition become a novella and vice versa? Mikhail Bakhtin once wrote that the novel is "plasticity itself" because it never fixes itself—its framework is not (yet) hardened.¹⁷ This, then, is *why* a novella can assume the non-linear aspect of an exhibition: why it can accommodate and reflect new modes of perception, in its "living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the opened present)"—because as a genre it is younger than the book. By its nature, the novel/novella belongs to the experimental.¹⁸

What does this genre show us today, in an age that has been said to witness the death of the novel? Could it be that Kunzru's novel, by its very plasticity, shows us a transition that is taking place from what Catherine Malabou has called the graphic to the plastic—from the Derridean trace to a dynamic of mutability and metamorphosis?¹⁹ Is our age not so much witnessing the end of the novel as a constant transformation of the role of writing, and its relation to images, in our culture? I would like to answer this question by moving from the novella to poetry, yet remain with the fragment and the imaginary. I would like to turn to a work where writing *itself* has been transformed into an image—nearly illegible, yet readable, I will show, in a different, perhaps more effective way. We can mix words with images innovatively, but how can we make writing visible as such?

Making Writing Appear As Such

In modern Western culture, literature—literally: *quantities of letters*—is an art of writing. We know very well, and we have just seen, that literature is also—and is now increasingly becoming again—an art and

15. Jeffrey Schnapp and Adam Michaels, *The Electronic Information Age Book* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Quentin Fiore and Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2001).

16. Laurie Britton Newel and Ligaya Salazar, "Curating a Book" in *Memory Palace*, p. 84.

17. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Houston: University of Texas Press, 1981), p 39.

18. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel", p. 7.

19. Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing. Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*. Trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

practice of orality and visuality. Yet as a cultural institution literature is (still) a function of writing, and studied as such. The connection between writing and temporality; between writing and a linear code that is unrelentingly progressive, unrepeatable, is conceptually still very strong. This linear code has been programmed into our writing machines such as the computer, the typewriter, the telegraph, or the printing press. Automation has speeded up the progressive tense of writing, as machines can write much more effectively than we do. Vilém Flusser already noticed this in the 1980s: “It is enough to observe the breathless speed with which videotexts appear on terminals,” or, for that matter, subtitling.²⁰ For us today, it is enough to observe electronic text-works of the last decades, such as those made by Young Hae Chang Heavy Industries in flash, or Jim Andrews and his rapidly mutating Spastexts.²¹ Writing here has become an object within an image, a surface—barely legible, racing past, too quickly for us to read. We know from Flusser and his ideas on the future of alphabetic writing that this is the fatal transition: into the universe of technical images we go, leaving writing to the machine, as algorithm or otherwise.

So, it may be that analog writing is about to be morphed—the writing that we have known so far and for so long. In his *Ethics of Writing*, the philosopher Carlo Sini remarks that precisely in such an epoch as ours, writing “shows itself as something ‘finite’... ‘historical’, ‘contingent’.”²² We no longer live in the house of writing, we are somehow beginning to distance ourselves from it. This is when writing becomes visible *as such*.

How could such writing work? This is what literary writing, as a *novel* writing, explores, or *can* and perhaps should explore, even if such writing may never really take place, now or in the future. What matters for literary writing is the exploration of *potentialities* of writing. How, for instance, does a graphic designer create a reading experience without creating a text? How does that affect writing and our idea of writing and reading? Just as the memory devices that Kunzru invokes in *Memory Palace* relate back to the most ancient and primitive of writing techniques, so graphic presentations of ideas and events are now known as aspects of “embryo writing” (cf. the Lascaux cave paintings).²³ Present-day experiments with such embryo writing abound, both in screenic and paper-based zones. What is “novel” about these experiments, in Bakhtin’s sense of the word?

In *Fugitive Sparrows* (2008) Zachary Sifuentes has rewritten by hand all of Emily Dickinson’s poetry into an abstract painting.²⁴ Sifuentes has written out Dickinson’s poems as a transformative writing: a writing that becomes purely graphic. *Fugitive Sparrows* is a drawing that measures 90 by 45 inches and that offers all 160,000 words of Dickinson’s poems at once on a canvas, in the shape

20. Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* p. 21.

21. Young Hae Change Heavy Industries display their work online at <http://www.yhchang.com/>. Jim Andrews’ Spastexts are highly sensitive electronic texts that mutate every time a user touches them: they are unstable palimpsests and to that extent answer to Marjorie Perloff’s idea of a “differential text”. Jim Andrews’ work can be found at <http://vispo.com>. Perloff’s idea of the differential text is elaborated in her article “Screening the Page/ Paging the Screen: Digital Poetics and the Differential Text”. *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*. Ed. Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss (Cambridge: MIT, 2006), pp. 143-64.

22. Carlo Sini, *Ethics of Writing*. Trans. Silvia Benso with Brian Schroeder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), p. 39. It is important to stress that Sini relies heavily on Havelock in his philosophy of writing as historically contingent.

23. Leila Avrin, *Scribes, Script, and Books. The Book Arts from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago: ALA Press, 1991), p. 19

24. See for this Zachary Sifuentes, *Fugitive Sparrows* (2008) at Fugitive Poetics [no dates or page indications given]: <http://www.fugitivepoetics.com/> Last visited 18-12-2014.

of sparrows, drawn in illegible writing. We know that Dickinson's work, especially her later work, handwritten on envelopes, already opened up poetry to a space beyond the confines of the book. Spatial arrangement and eccentric word design were crucial aspects of her poetics. Sifuentes externalizes and expands the visuality of Dickinson's poetry—and in so doing renders her work illegible as verbal work. Her poems are integrated into a multimedial plane that invites you to look at the word-drawing and [listen to Dickinson's poetry at once](#).

Rewriting Dickinson, Sifuentes' drawing is also an erasure: Dickinson's words have become the building blocks of a near-illegible surface. He has turned her into art, and made writing turn itself away from us. One of the peculiarities of alphabetic writing, Carlo Sini observes, is that it is in a sense invisible, and it can only work *as* such an invisible vehicle: "One does not look at it, one must not contemplate it. Rather, one must overcome it. One sees *through* it... In reading, the look does not aim at a seeing, but rather at a meaning and a meant."²⁵ *Fugitive Sparrows* interrogates writing as a window onto the invisible, but it is part of the logic of plasticity that this interrogation indicates new potentialities of writing *as overwriting*. This new potentiality is what I would like to call visual archiving. *Fugitive Sparrows* allows us to read without reading: it allows to *see how Sifuentes has read Dickinson's poetry*—we 'read' his reading of her; the drawing is a record of reading her. On his website, Sifuentes puts it as follows: "A poem's language can be represented to apprehend graphically how the poem functions linguistically: its rhythms and rhymes, its images and metaphors, and its tangential and ulterior reasoning."²⁶ A graphic rendering of a poem's linguistic functioning: how it *works*. Thus, the drawing presents and preserves—archives—a way to navigate Dickinson's work. As such, indeed, the drawing is a means of preservation, as much as, say, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* archives (*by cutting out*) Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*.²⁷

Fanning out into a network of lines and visual intersections, what Sifuentes' drawing foregrounds is the force of *exscription* at work within Emily Dickinson's poetry. I use Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of exscription in the sense of expressive richness: certain texts trigger the imagination so vividly that they become a living memory in the mind of the reader.²⁸ Inscribing meaning into a text, an entire network of relations is *exscribed*, beyond a designated meaning. What is thus at stake in exscription is "the infinite retreat of meaning...what instigates all possible meaning". This is the power of suggestion, association. A little later, Nancy speaks of an "infinite discharge of meaning" when he explains the *accidental* logic of exscription: "in inscribing significations we exscribe the presence of what withdraws from all signification"—what comes to mind that had not been specified.²⁹ The freedom of "being in exscription" is thus the freedom of writing having "unburdened itself, emptied itself of itself". Tellingly,

25. Carlo Sini, *Ethics of Writing*, p. 71.

26. See for this Zachary Sifuentes, <http://www.fugitivepoetics.com> ("Drawings"). Last visited December 17, 2014.

27. I have proposed reading *Tree of Codes* as such an archive (of Foer reading Schulz) in my "Old and New Medialities in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*". In: *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*, ed Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela Azcárate, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 13(3) (2011): 2-10. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes* (London: Visual Editions, 2010); Bruno Schulz, *Street of Crocodiles*. Trans Celina Wieniewska (London: Penguin, 1977).

28. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*. Trans. Brian Holmes and others, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993).

29. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, p. 339.

Nancy *contrasts* this “being in exscription” to linear thinking (“the movement of a man who walks straight ahead”) and links it to the writings of the ancients, where thought “seems to proceed by the movement of a bird which soars and whirls as it goes forward.”³⁰ It is centrifugal.

Thus, literary writing morphs into a visual graph *about literary reading*. What Sifuentes allows us to grasp graphically about Dickinson’s poetry is this movement of *fanning out* and *unburdening* (of content, of meaning) that is the movement of exscription itself. Apparently, the “end” of alphabetic writing and linear thinking is something, a movement, a desire, that has always been internal to it. The end does not come from the outside, from the digital or the post-digital: this end is the very condition that has rendered writing, and more so *literary, imaginative writing, possible*. If, as Carlo Sini assumes, writing functions through its invisibility, Sifuentes’ graphic rendering of writing show us that *opacity* (illegibility, here: excessive visibility, as the surface of writing *qua* surface is what counts here) *may become a form of communication in itself*. Opacity, after all, here communicates graphically how a text has been experienced.

Literature, Forgetfulness, and the Future

The questions that Flusser posed in the 1980s—does writing have a future?—are the questions that literary writing is now trying to come to terms with: it is working through writing in its relation to overwriting, erasure, and rewriting as graphic design. That is to say, literary writing is working through the *remains* of writing: what remains of alphabetic writing today, as writing is rapidly being overwritten by code and overtaken but also reimagined by the machine. Literary writing is now already drawing attention to the possibility of the dramatic undoing of writing as a constitutive force of historical consciousness. This problem of the receding power of writing also surfaces thematically in contemporary cinema and literature: From Christopher Nolan’s film *Memento* and Tom McCarthy’s novel *Remainder*, to Steven Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts*, Paul Auster’s *Travels in the Scriptorium*, or Kunzru’s *Memory Palace*, writing—and more particularly handwriting—is powerless against the forces of oblivion. Writing in these works still inscribes memory, but it is the kind of un-lasting memory that Flusser and McLuhan have associated with oral culture.³¹ It is a memory constantly overwritten by another present, another connection. Amnesia, Dementia, Alzheimer: the catchwords of our time.

Still, as we have seen in Kunzru’s novella *Memory Palace* and in Sifuentes’ drawing *Fugitive Sparrows*, this ominous demise is but one side of literary writing’s on the wall: forgetfulness and oblivion in times of information overload. The other side, after all, is the opening of the book. As Newell and Salazar quote the Dutch book designer Irma Boom: “in older days, a book was made for spreading information, but now we have the Internet to spread information. So to spread something else—maybe sheer beauty or a much slower, more thought-provoking message—it’s the book”.³² If the machine has taken over writing (if only as technical image), the machine has given ample space to that older machine of the book and paper to imagine writing differently. This is a writing that is more

30. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, p. 328.

31. I have written about this development of memory erasure and writing extensively in “[Posthumanities and Post-textualities: Reading The Raw Shark Texts and Woman's World](#)”. *Comparative literature*, 63(2) (2011), pp. 119-141. For the works cited: Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Steven Hall, *The Raw Shark Texts* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007); Paul Auster, *Travels in the Scriptorium* (New York: Picador, 2006).

32. Laurie Britton Newell and Ligaya Salazar, “Curating a Book” in *Memory Palace*, p. 84.

punctually, to recall Sifuentes' work: less time-consuming, visually exciting, plastic. *Memory Palace* and *Fugitive Sparrows* are typical instantiations of the plasticity of writing in the digital age. We may have witnessed this plasticity already in the modernist era. It is true that literary writing in the digital and post-digital era rehearses that modernist plasticity to a great extent: verbal-visual writing, illegible writing, overwriting, erasure—we have seen it all before. The question, however, still remains: why is that plasticity being rehearsed and re-imagined today, and on such a grand scale? What is literary writing announcing that we perhaps cannot yet fully grasp? Is it, indeed, its (altogether) smooth transition into the universe of technical images? Whatever the answer, my exploration has indicated that we need not only study literature for its relevance to our engagement with the past. We should turn to literature for the potentialities of the future. This is what reinforces the relevance of literature—precisely as an art of *letters*—in our contemporary reality of information overload.

Dr. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth is profile professor of Literature and Comparative Media at the University of Utrecht and project leader of the [VIDI-project *Back to the Book*](#) (2011-2016) funded by the Dutch Research Council. She has been Director of Graduate Studies since December 2013.

Email: C.A.W.BrillenburgWurth@uu.nl