The New Apparatus of Influence: Material Modernism in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Throughout this paper, I argue for a reapplication of those theories set out by George Bornstein in *Material Modernism*. More specifically, I suggest that Bornstein's work should be considered in the context of the textual and literary constructs of the digital age. I begin with an account of those elements from Bornstein's argument that I consider to be of most relevance to this particular discourse, giving particular consideration to what he refers to as the "bibliographic code." I argue that this notion has gathered fresh momentum now that its potential has been enhanced through new forms of computer-based media. What the material modernists of the modernist movement sought to achieve with the material elements of their works, contemporary scholars and critics can seek to replicate and explore with greater clarity and creativity. The bibliographic code has gained new importance, as the degree by which it can be manipulated, I argue, has been extended significantly.

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Revisiting Bornstein in the Digital Age

The term "modernism" should be approached with a measure of caution. It has produced a certain amount of ambivalence within literary criticism as a result of what Alex Davis refers to as "[the] reductive versions of the modernist movement," a product of the emergence of a multiplicity of "modernis*m*s."[1] However, while modernity's mire of "isms" has contributed significantly to the fog of theory that literary critics and scholars must seek to pierce, there are those elements to have emerged from modernist ideology that appear to have had a converse effect, offering new insights rather than increased noise. Specifically, material modernism, defined by George Bornstein in his seminal work of the same name, has changed the way in which we perceive "the text," offering clarity to the increasing number of examinations that view "the text as a whole." Extending this theory to the works of the digital age is where the focus of this article lies. As we enter the age of digital literature and the electronic edition, and our perception of the text continues to evolve, Bornstein's theory allows us to better comprehend this evolution, and rise to the challenge of this current iteration in the remediation of literature. We have reached the next juncture in the "long lineage of first contact narratives in media history,"[2] and so rise to this challenge we must, as Jerome McGann addresses in his 2004 essay on the state of the digital humanities, emphasising our need to "emulate the humanists of the fifteenth century who were confronted with a similar upheaval of their materials, means, and modes of knowledge production."[3] The dominance of print – culturally, socially, economically and academically – is evidence enough of how effectively our predecessors responded to previous cultural shifts of this nature. This clarifies Alan Liu's allusion to "new media" as being a concept which isn't precisely new. Let's not forget that the codex was once the Kindle of its day.

   The recent shift in textual perception is not unfamiliar – our understanding of the text has adapted alongside socio-economic, cultural, and perhaps most relevant to this particular

discourse, technological trends. The frequency with which scholars grapple with the concept of electronic texts continues to rise, but it will be some time before a complete understanding and general consensus is achieved in relation to what constitutes such a construct, and how it relates to its predecessors. This paper, it is hoped, will contribute to this pursuit; offering a discourse founded on the application of various theories – shaped in relation to more traditional forms of textuality – to new forms and modes of writing. In doing so, this paper will separate the electronic edition and digital literature, examining each in turn. Distinguishing between literature and the edition allows us to independently explore native works of digital literature and textual reproductions. The distinction will become clearer over the course of this paper. We shall firstly delineate Bornstein's theory in relation to this topic, before progressing to an examination of more specific electronic works. While I reserve the word "electronic" for my discussion of editorial theory, and make use of "digital" within the literary strands of this discourse, little should be read into this distinction, as I am merely adhering to established conventions. Seeking to clarify or challenge these conventions would serve little purpose in this particular article, and doing so would only detain us unnecessarily.

Exploring the Bibliographic Code

For many scholars, the text is no longer viewed as a singular semantic entity, but rather, a composition of both a linguistic and bibliographic code, the latter of which is described by Bornstein in *Material Modernism* as the "apparatus designed to influence reception."[4] Such apparatus extend beyond the most recognisable elements of a text's materiality, such as the design displayed on its cover, to aspects like "page layout, or spacing," "as well as prefaces, notes, or dedications that effect the reception and interpretation of the work."[5] Gérard Genette viewed such elements as that which surrounded and prolonged a text, or more directly, "the means by which a text makes a book of itself."[6]

Bornstein's treatise offers various examples of how interpretations of the linguistic meaning are influenced by the bibliographic code, reinforcing his contention that "different arrangements carry claims of both social and authorial construction."[7] Davis further illustrates this theoretical approach in his essay on W. B. Yeats' preoccupation with materiality. He examines the cover design from *The Secret Rose*, commenting that it was "analogous to the occult work described therein."[8]

This strand of editorial theory, derived from the typical modernist approach to publication, allows us to re-problematise textual construction, facilitating greater examination of the text as a semantic object rather than a mere vessel for the meaning contained within its linguistic content. This approach to textual and editorial theory satisfies the desire of many scholars to focus on the cultural transmission of the whole of the text, or more simply, the text as an object. This desire derives from the power of the object, and its place within a material culture which is comprised of varying expressions of "apparently inanimate things" which exist within our environment and "act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity."[9] As scholars, many of us have been caught up in this intense focus on the object, but perhaps justifiably, if one adheres to the editorial theory outlined and defended by Bornstein. Focusing attention on the textual object as a whole, rather than just the linguistic content, facilitates a more complete assessment of the semantics of a particular text. The objective of this

discourse is to apply this particular strand of editorial theory to electronic works, in an effort to assess the mode as a textual construct.

  Material Modernism begins with reference to a point originally made by James McLaverty in his article, "The Mode of Existence of Literary Works of Art": Bornsteins asks, "If the 'Mona Lisa' is in Paris in the Louvre, where is *King Lear*?"[10] The question is altered slightly from the original as posed by McLaverty in 1984, which queries the whereabouts of *Hamlet* and *Lycidas* in a similar fashion.[11] McLaverty himself was offering a response to Frederick Wilse Bateson, who uses the question in *Essays in Critical Dissent* as a basis to his argument that the physical basis of the text lies in "human articulations."[12] Rhetorical as the question may be, it is a useful precursor to the task of defining textual materiality. For Bateson, the textual edition was little more than "a substratum of articulated sound."[13] His suggestion is that the original, in its most absolute sense, is the object of art; the progeny of that object being inferior reproductions. Bateson is not the first scholar to hold such a view, nor is McLaverty the first to argue with his contention. The most convincing argument against the existence of a superior original comes from Bornstein, to my mind, who in the same chapter in which he poses the aforementioned question, answers it thus: "If the 'Mona Lisa' is in the Louvre, *King Lear* is on pages all over the world."[14] Let us progress with this response in mind.

  Bornstein does not hesitate in outlining his position on editorial theory: "Later copies may be superior to the original," he states.[15] He uses the "Mona Lisa" question as the foundation of his argument that "the literary work exists in more than one place at the same time,"[16] arguing that "texts emerge as constructed objects, not as mystified transparent lenses giving us the 'real' Keats or Shakespeare or Dickinson."[17] Each textual construction is unique in itself, not an object to be compared alongside the accepted original, but rather, an object to be considered as a singular entity possessing its own contextual code, derived from the bibliographic code in which its linguistic content is encapsulated. In this respect, Bornstein and supporters of this strand of editorial theory see the text as a protean object, each one a unique reincarnation rather than reproduction. Version theory supports this thesis, as the literary critic typically does not base their scholarship upon all versions of a text, but rather on one or a few editions, each of which will have its own editorial differences and contextual inconsistencies. Furthermore, reproduced versions of particular texts are often more suited to academic pursuits than the original from which they have been drawn: many first editions were abridged by publishers; many original manuscripts unreadable in comparison to the printed text. Each text is "a construction, one of many possible in a world of constructions";[18] considering it is not feasible for literary critics to examine each of these constructions, we must accept the reality that particular constructions, not necessarily the first, will be best suited to any given scholarly purpose. One can point to a multitude of texts when seeking evidence for this claim, as demonstrated by McGann, who uses *Ulysses*, amongst other texts, to support his argument that "textual and editorial theory has heretofore concerned itself almost exclusively with the linguistic codes."[19] McGann insists that the time has come to "take greater account of the other coding network which operates at the documentary and bibliographical level of literary works," as evidenced in Hans Walter Gabler's edition of James Joyce's text.[20] The Gabler edition, a critical and synoptic edition published in 1984, sought to correct many of the errors inherent within the text's first edition,[21] but the approach to doing so was based on the use of multiple copy-texts by the editor, resulting in a final edition that was attacked by many prominent Joyce scholars, most notably John Kidd, whose comments in "The Scandal of Ulysses" in *The New York Review of Books* turned into a heated and lengthy exchange that "spreads over some 18 columns of newsprint."[22]

The scope of this examination is not to apply literary criticism to each of these texts, but rather, to use them as examples of how the bibliographic code has been privileged by the authors of the digital age, similar in style to many of the modernist movement's most prominent figures. This is perhaps most prevalent in creative works: new media, by its very nature, lends itself to new modes of expression. Electronic editions of existing texts must be given separate consideration, as one cannot automatically align remediated textual constructs alongside purpose-built creative pieces.

Materiality and the Electronic Edition

Despite it being a term that has by now been widely adopted, the concept of what we call the "electronic edition" remains somewhat ambiguous. As already remarked, a consensus on its specific construct is yet to be achieved. Arguing my own position on this matter is not the purpose of this article, and would serve only to detain us, so instead, I will simply outline the relevant assumption upon which this discourse will be based. The electronic edition, to my mind, need not be a complex construct availing of a wide range of new media technologies, but rather, simply any edition that has been reproduced in electronic form. For example, I would consider any standard e-book to be an electronic edition. Let us progress from this position.

Contextualisation plays a major part in why the bibliographic code is seen to influence the reception of a work. This reiterates Bornstein's view that every textual construction is just one of an infinite number of possibilities, each of which holds its own set of contexts from which a text may be historicised and interpretations may be drawn. Contextual deconstruction, Bornstein suggests, can have negative effects. He argues that the "erasure" of bibliographic levels can enable a "misconstrual" of a work, using *The Cantos* to illustrate his point: "Contemporary editions of *The Cantos* descend from the 1933 versions, which elide the elaborate bibliographical coding of the earlier versions and thus of the origins of Pound's poem."[23] He uses *The Cantos* to elaborate upon his contention that "modern editions clearly scant the bibliographic code, focusing primarily or even exclusively on the linguistic one."[24] Bornstein points to modern-day anthologies as the most prevalent example of such erasure, where texts are removed from their original context as a result of an erasure of the corresponding bibliographic coding.

One might suggest that the electronic edition does the very same thing; that by removing the text from the material elements through which it has been contextualised, you are creating a textual construction in which only the linguistic code can be privileged. Before examining this issue, it might be worth concerning ourselves with the notion of what Walter Benjamin so famously called the "aura" of a work, as there is a close connection between the bibliographic elements of a text, and what we commonly refer to as the "look and feel" of a book. One must query the notion of aura itself: what is the aura, and from where does it emerge? Bornstein argues that it radiates from "the material features of the text,"[25] a view which is commonly upheld; many critics associating the aura with something of a "capacity to experience."[26] Experience is central to the debate, each unique textual construction will offer its own experience, and thus, contribute to the dissemination, or scattering, of the aura. This activity is not necessarily negative: both loss and gain are encompassed within the act of reproduction. One must think of this reproduction of the aura as akin to the conversion of energy. Like everything else in existence, the aura is simply converted from one form to another, being transformed, mutated and dispersed dependent on the textual construction from which it is emerging in any

one instance. Without digressing, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is a transfiguration of this notion: "Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!" Bear Shelley's words in mind as we return to our exploration of the view that electronic texts are lacking in materiality, and thus the aura, much as is the case in anthologies, as argued by Bornstein.

Even accepting that each textual construction offers its own reincarnation of the aura, if the aura is tied to bibliographic, or material, elements of a text, we must consider if electronic texts, like anthologies, as Bornstein and others contend, suffer a loss. Bornstein summarises this argument thus:

> The bibliographic code corresponds to the aura and, like it, points to the work's "presence in time and space." Subsequent representations, particularly if they emphasize only the linguistic code, correspond to the withering of the aura. They tend to set the text free from its original time and place, locating it in our own principally as an aesthetic rather than historicized object.[27]

Here, I must disagree with Bornstein, and any strand of editorial theory that might suggest that electronic texts, like anthologies, suffer as a consequence of their dissipation of traditional material elements. By privileging the bibliographic code, critics argue, you are contextualising, or, "help[ing] to historicize the text."[28] I would suggest, however, that in electronic reincarnations of textual editions, like in anthologies, what we are presented with is a textual construction whose bibliographic code is not absent, but rather, intentionally established so as not to impinge on the linguistic code, creating a conscious lack of contextuality that privileges the semantics of the linguistic content.

Creating a textual construct that removes those contextual elements that are drawn from the bibliographic code can sometimes be desirable from an editorial point of view, particularly if the linguistic code has been incorrectly historicised by the material elements of a particular edition. By incorrect, I refer to inclusion of overly-subjective bibliographic elements which contextualise a text in a manner unsuitable to the true meaning of the linguistic code. Bibliographic and linguistic codes should be constructed in complement, and where one or the other is privileged, it should not be to the extent that it misguides the reader in relation to their interpretation of either code. There is perhaps no more suitable a work than Yeats' "September 1913" as an example of this, and the debate that surrounds perceived misinterpretations of this text, each of which seemingly has emerged from varied bibliographic contexts with which the poem has been surrounded at various points in its history. Take, as an example, the debate that exists between Bornstein and Yug Mohit Chaudhry, which is centred on the supposed "thick political codings"[29] that Yeats attached to his piece by using *The Irish Times* as the venue for its debut publication on September 8, 1913. The exact details of why Bornstein and Chaudhry have differing positions are irrelevant, what is important is that the influence held by the poem's bibliographic code is aptly illustrated. My argument is that, where Bornstein suggests reproducing works without their contextual elements, as is often the case in anthologies and electronic editions, can cause a withering of the aura, even in such instances, the aura is reincarnated in the prominence of the linguistic code. If the materiality of a text is the aura, and that materiality offers a clear privileging of the linguistic content so as to avoid any bibliographic misconceptions, then such offers a contextual experience through which the reception may be influenced, and is a gradation of the aura, not a withering.

Conversely, electronic textual constructions, unlike traditional anthologies, can include, if required, all of the bibliographic elements necessary to create multiple contextual constructs. In *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, this form of textual construct is described by McGann as being the aim of the critical edition:

> What is especially important for us to see about the critical edition is its aspiration to transcend the historical exigencies to which all texts are subject. A critical edition is a kind of text which does not seek to reproduce a particular past text, but rather to reconstitute for the reader, in a single text, the entire history of the work as it has emerged into the present.[30]

In this respect, the electronic edition shares its objectives with the critical edition, though it has the potential to construct itself in the vision of a variety of editorial theories. To illustrate this aim, let us return to the example of "September 1913" once more. The architectonics of digital media is such that it would be possible to include, as well as facilitate visual comparisons, of all versions and iterations of the poem, which would offer yet another bibliographic gradation; transforming, not destroying, the aura in the reproduction. By facilitating a re-enactment of multiple bibliographic codes, the electronic edition re-enacts the aura, not as a reproduction, but as a reincarnation.

Where Benjamin contends that film holds the power to "reactivate the object produced," I would suggest that the hypertext holds the power to reimagine that very object. Central to this hypothesis is the concept of imitation: "Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men" is what Benjamin states in his essay.[31] Tied to this is what Benjamin believes to be the authenticity of a work of art:

> The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. Chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze can help to establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproductivity.[32]

Let us consider imitation and authenticity in parallel: as in any reproduction, they form a symbiotic relationship upon which the value of the work as a piece of art is based. Now is perhaps an appropriate time to return to the question upon which this discourse, and the material to which it has continually referred, is based: if the "Mona Lisa" is in Paris in the Louvre, where is *King Lear*? In examining how film has "burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second,"[33] Benjamin offers what might be the basis for an answer to this question, and the issues he raises on imitation and authenticity. He states, in relation to film:

> With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snap-shot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.[34]

Here, Benjamin is outlining what I previously referred to as a reincarnation of the aura. The process of reproduction does not wither the aura, but rather, transforms it, offering new perspectives which may not have been present in any of its predecessors. This issue is perhaps

most prevalent in literature, not because the potentials offered by new media are in any way greater than those found in other forms of artistic endeavour, but rather, because imitation and authenticity are not nearly as readily defined in literary spheres. The "Mona Lisa" very clearly hangs in the Louvre, and any such reproductions, even those that disseminate and transform the aura in a variety of manners, can be identified as being imitations of the authentic Paris-based artwork. The imitation, the authenticity and the aura of the reproduction have a clearly identifiable original work from which they emerge, and can be measured. From where, however, does the reproduction of a work of literature emerge? Where is the original *King Lear*? Where is the original of any particular text? First editions are simply reproductions of manuscripts, and manuscripts are often lost to time, or presented to archives in illegible or incomplete collections. Even still, who is to say that these manuscripts, often uncovered by historians or donated by descendants, are the original manuscripts of the work, and not revisions of previous notes by the author, and in turn, imitations of the original thought? This further contributes to the legitimacy of each textual reproduction as being a unique textual construction that, as expressed by Benjamin, "reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject."

Materiality and Digital Literature

At the beginning of this paper I distinguished between the electronic edition and digital literature. The electronic edition, I have argued, presents the opportunity to either free a work of contextualisation and historicisation, or alternatively, use the power of electronic media to offer a complete view of all of the differing bibliographic elements that contribute to the varied receptions of a work. Editors need no longer choose between contexts – they may construct a network of contexts, allowing the critic to base their interpretation on a more complete picture. For writers, new media has also presented opportunity, the opportunity to extend the complexity and influence of the bibliographic elements found within their work.

Consider the ideology of the material modernists once more. Such writers harnessed the materiality of their literature in an effort to encode semantics beyond that which was to be found in the linguistic content that such works offered. Where writers like Yeats availed of cover art to exert such influence, authors in the digital arena are presented with a host of technologies with which they can create works of literature with unprecedented bibliographic significance. In an effort to justify this claim, I will focus on the work of Stephanie Strickland, and briefly, a number of other digital poets, not from a critical perspective, but as a means of illustrating how the bibliographic code may be transformed through digital remediation, presenting a dialogism of discourses typical of digital literature.

Take Strickland's *V*, a complex composition comprised of symbolism that transcends the semantic code of the text, extending the meaning of its bibliographic code. Strickland attaches the semantic value to the material features of her collection through an absolute juxtaposition of the old and the new. Disregarding the traditional separation between the electronic and physical edition, Strickland uses both forms in complement. Central to this juxtaposition is the symbol of the "V," which also assumes the title of the collection: made up of two texts, encapsulated within the same physical binding, which point the way to the hypertext at their centre.

Strickland's work is of particular interest as she uses physical and digital media in complement. Her symbolism is encapsulated in both the materiality of the poem's physical book, and its web-based interactive section. This offers us a rare opportunity to contrast the two media within the same piece of literature. In exploring how Strickland structures this particular work,

we can perhaps gain some insight into what it is that we mean by literary "materiality." The materiality of a text does not simply refer to the whiteness of its page or the thickness of its cover, but rather, those tangible elements by which the linguistic contents are surrounded. Strickland's work demonstrates that such elements are not exclusive to the printed work, as they serve the very same purpose in both the physical and digital portions of her work – they present the reader with the text in a fashion that carries its own inherent meaning.

Through this materiality, Strickland's V resonates throughout the text, becoming the instrument with which she merges both codes in the fashion of the material modernist. As mentioned, the V symbol is not only bound to the materiality of the physical text, but it is also a recurring image throughout the collection's hypertext. In places it alludes to the philosophy and Christian mysticism of Simone Weil, to whom the collection is dedicated, while elsewhere it is a tool through which Strickland plays with form. She likens it to several images: "the open book," "lifted wings," "a witch's hat," portraying the V as the "waveshape" of her literary and bibliographic structure.[35] Contemporary juxtapositions of traditional and modern literary practices of the fashion demonstrated by Strickland illustrate how authors are extending the potential of the bibliographic code. This extension applies to both the semantics of the bibliographic and linguistic codes. The textual instruments of the digital age have given authors new modes of form with which they can project meaning in electronic literature, justifying Marcel O'Gorman's view that merging technology with literature offers new linguistic opportunities; the potential for "new media to produce their own visual rhetoric"; new "modes of writing."[36]

We find in Strickland's work a unique textual construction, the type of which we have not seen in traditional literary practice – the bibliographic code is privileged over the linguistic content. Strickland's V takes its meaning from the structure of its physical text, which leads readers from both ends to the hypertext at its centre, which she calls the Vniverse. The semantic potential of Strickland's bibliographic code is clear, particularly in the electronic portion, where the reader's interaction determines the sequence of the linguistic code, causing "shifts in meanings [to] transpire as new poems begin."[37] The text of the poem is either displayed based on the user's entry of a numerical value, which corresponds to a portion of the poem, or alternatively, on where the cursor is placed amongst the star-scape that appears on the screen, where constellations form, providing visuals alongside the text. The resulting effect is that Strickland's hypertext may be traversed in either a linear or more digressive fashion, which further extends the importance of the bibliographic code to the semantics of the piece, and draws the attention of the critic away from the words to the way in which they are encapsulated.

This trend – privileging the bibliographic code as a tool of meaning – has been replicated by a range of leading contemporary authors working in the field of digital poetry. Robert Kendall's "Dispossession," while reliant on the linguistic content, is also heavily reliant on the bibliographic features of the hypertext to achieve its semantic purpose. Like Strickland's V, the potential to reincarnate the text as an exclusively physical construct would negate much of its meaning. The poem follows the progression of a Caribbean immigrant, making his way to the United States for the first time: "that solid American capital / would be his new home," it reads.[38] The uncertainty that surrounds the future of Kendall's protagonist is expressed in the linguistic code, the new world to which he travels portrayed as a land "of / concrete and aluminum," where he would be forced to "speak / against / the whiteness in ways / he couldn't / understand."[39] The anxiety that accompanies this uncertainty is reinforced through the bibliographic code, which tasks readers with choosing the path that the narrative takes, a material

construct which could not have been achieved in printed form. Constructing the hypertext in this fashion allows Kendall to place an emphasis on the ambivalence of the text's meaning – meaning that is significantly reliant on the material construct.

Elisa Carlotti resembles this approach in her piece, "Il Fiume Delle Parole," a poem about the fleeting nature of time. Temporality is examined not only in the linguistic code, but also in the hypertext's construction, which varies the time allocated to the user for reading the poem depending on their control of the cursor. Containing semantic importance within the bibliographic code in a fashion similar to what Carlotti achieves would be difficult to replicate with such success within the constraints of traditional textual constructs.

As one final illustration of this semantic effect, consider Richard Kostelanetz's "One Letter Changes." Kostelanetz avails of the functionality of an electronic medium to demonstrate how minor alterations can disturb the entire meaning of a piece, which is facilitated using HTML rollovers, a feature of the hypertext that has no bibliographic equivalent in physical constructs, other than the inclusion of multiple versions of a text. Kostelanetz's approach has the potential to negate the requirement for version theory, which holds the potential to complicate the interpretation of a text, but while this further exemplifies the influence of the electronic bibliographic code, it is a separate issue to those with which this assessment is concerned.

Material and Digital

Materiality is concerned with experience: it governs the reception of a work, and the ways in which its audience might interact with it. The implication of new and evolving electronic modes of production is that materiality has been redefined to no longer refer to the physical text itself, but rather, the medium through which that text is presented. Marshall McLuhan truly was ahead of his time. Electronic textual constructions may avail of the new modes of discourse available to them, whether that be linguistic or bibliographic, or both. Electronic editions do not exist independently of materiality, but rather, as an evolution of that very concept.

What the material modernists attempted to achieve through their cover designs – or more esoteric elements like pagination – authors within the digital space may now replicate, but with far greater freedom in terms of how semantic expression may be encapsulated within the bibliographic code. In electronic editions and digital literature, linguistic content remains as it has always been. What has undergone transformation is the venue through which the words are presented. This transformation goes beyond dissemination, it offers new avenues through which meaning can be formed and expressed – a new apparatus of influence. Herein lies the true revolution of electronic and literary remediation.

Acknowledgements

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