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# Distributed Cognition in/at Work: Strickland, Lawson, and Ryan's *slippingglimpse*

By N. Katherine Hayles

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## Lecture

The Literary as Distributed Cognition in Strickland, and Jaramillo's *slippingglimpse*

## Abstract

*slippingglimpse* by Stephanie Strickland and Cynthia Jaramillo stages a three-way conversation between poem-texts, with phrases appropriated from photographers, videographers, and programmers, with Paul Ryan's videography of dynamic fluid systems, with complex algorithmic interactions between text and dynamic images. The two main conceptual issues at stake here, as I see it, are 1) the relationship between human and non-human cognizers, and 2) the intricate play between dynamic and static systems. The first involves natural systems such as wind/water interactions, human readers/writers, and machine cognizers; the second involves emergent patterns amidst continually changing flux (and implicitly, electronic text vs. print). There are also meta-issues involving interactions between the two main issues, for example, how deterministic machine operations can nevertheless lead to emergent and unpredictable results, and how human cognizers excel in recognizing patterns amidst noisy systems (perceiving the emergent patterns as such).

The ways in which distributed cognition is being imagined and instantiated in contemporary electronic literature is illustrated with *slippingglimpse*, a digital kinetic verbal-visual collaboration between Stephanie Strickland, a prize-winning poet, programmer Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo, and videographer Paul Ryan. *slippingglimpse* unfolds through ten sections, each consisting of one of Paul Ryan's videos of moving water, which are incorporated using Flash video format within the work's Flash files. The videos are dynamically associated with a poem text in each

of three possible views: high resolution, full screen, and scroll text view. In the first two views, the words and phrases from the poem text appear in the image. In the scroll text view, the poem text, in addition to appearing in the image, also appears in its entirety below the image, where the reader can choose to scroll or stop it. *slippingglimpse* is located within philosophical, technical, and aesthetic contexts that create a richer sense of information than the disembodied version that emerged from early cybernetics. Moreover, it both requires and meditates upon multimodal reading as a whole body activity. These features are analyzed using three major axes of interpretation: structure, dynamics, and modes of interaction.

The structure enacts a three-fold recursive cycle between human and non-human cognizers in which the water "reads" the poem text, the videography "reads" the water, and the poem text "reads" image capture technology. The dynamics are both represented within the work and performed by it. Ryan's videos focus on "chreods," dynamic structures within turbulent water flow that, following a general pattern, nevertheless vary unpredictably within the pattern, similar to strange attractors that wander unpredictably but nevertheless stay within a confined phase space. The complex dynamics that creates unpredictable variation within a general pattern also appears in the poem-text through the theme of the artist working dynamically with her material in such a way to allow chance and accident to create unpredictable emergences. Finally, the algorithm generating words from the poem-text within the chreod image of turbulent water flow also follows the same thematic of random variation within overall pattern. As the interactor reads the dynamic image and manipulates the poem-text, a recursive loop is set up that extends to include the interactor within the complex dynamics represented within the work. Thus, by implication, the work extends beyond its computational environment by gesturing toward the dynamic complex systems pervasive in the systems pervasive in our natural real-world environments.

Through its structure of nested recursive loops, the dynamics that set the recursive loops in motion, and the interactions that include both humans and natural systems, the work raises profound questions about the nature of "reading" in the digital age, the collaborations possible between human and non-human agents, and the significance of the recursive loops that connect humans to the environment.