

Reading the Discursive Spaces of *Text Rain*. Transmodally. A Précis

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Lecture

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Abstract

Many multimodal digital works now transcend established conventions and forms of literature's essentially textual character by transforming, within their own structure, the presence and nature of text so that it is experienced in a new function, less lexically than in concert with other modalities. A proverbial instance of this transmodal text is exemplified by Utterback and Achituv's Text Rain. I begin with a distinction over the de-modalization that characterizes "pure literature" and move toward the larger *écriture* that occupies the discursive spaces of this transmodal work, in a reading that defines itself around experiential poesis and against interpretation..

The following synthesis condenses into eight points my conjectural methodology of the transmodal text or work of art as applied to the electronic art of *Text Rain*. These may provide entry points into the theoretical work of other thinkers at the RDL conference.

§1. I opened this talk alluding to the problematic relation between word and image in literary text, an unresolved cadence in the music of literature. Literature and imagery share a complex relationship, worth exploring theoretically in the space of digital/electronic literature. The production of imagery as *extension to* or *evolution after* pure literature can not be distanced from literature's essence - because such "essence" cannot be defined as either image-free or *imagery-free*.

§2. Works in this domain exhibit an unusually pronounced ability to be read not merely through a series of interpretations but as objects signifying on various levels, even wholly unrelated to the literary aspects of the work. This logic is informed by

the fact that what is evident in examples of work where text is made to seem like more than text is that its readerly function is openly challenged.

§3. In *Text Rain*, literature's complicated rapport with the image is not outside the interpretive conventions of much concrete poetry. This multiplicity of signification, extending old practices – for example, the Dadaists' play with text in a way that it is read visually, rather than lexically – mirrors observations about the transmodal use of media in artistic practices already observed for decades. Consider Dick Higgins's 1965 observation that "much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media", underscoring consciousness of the futility of unique or pure forms where performing, literary, and visual arts are entirely separate.

§4. As for the history and hermeneutics associated with this expressive domain, we may take the graphic novel, the comic strip, and the illustrated story as proof that the banishment of the visual from textual literature is unrelated to evolutionary histories of technology and, conversely, to technical constraints on the medium of print. The verdict of literature as "pure", as primarily textual is rendered under attitudes that are doctrinal, not technological. Defining notions of purity in literature on one hand and specific media for print and image production on the other evolved along entirely unrelated historical tracks. This partition will become central to works of digital literature whose medium affords the processing and presentation of the textual and the visual with equal dynamic range and geometrical possibility. And it is precisely – and perhaps *exclusively* – because of those extratextual affordances that digital literature presents complex extensions over and against this conventional and problematic bias entailed in "pure literature". What is clear from these ambiguities of causality is that literature's central preoccupation with text does not extend to questions over how that text was created.

§5. In the transmodal text, one methodological argument for modes of signification that transcend the lexical or literary alone was put forth in my paper on the three ontologies of literature, as distinctions involving *essence*, *form* and *instance*. The Essence of literature is the spirit or force of this expressive art that bestows on it all that is *literary* in its character. I add that such "essence" cannot be defined as either image-free or *imagery*-free; rather, it entails both (for, who governs the essence of literature? Indistinguishable from the *essence* of literature, this last word, *imagination*, implicates image-making directly). By Form in literature I refer to the *shape or structure* that a literary work takes, for example, its genre (poem, novel, essay) or stylistic conventions (e.g., rhyme-based; panegyric, etc.). By Instance, I refer to the moment of instantiation of the Essence expressed through a given Form. These three ontological levels define the most abstract modes of a work, or the first class objects of a work's transmodality. Another level of transmodality emerges in the rapport between textual and extratextually sensory elements (visual, auditory, tactile, and otherwise symbolic) of a work, as defined in the aforementioned (§4) hermeneutic history of media versus content.

§6. A proverbial instance of this transmodal text is exemplified by Utterback and Achituv's *Text Rain*, not only because it contains a lexical text itself, but also because the work as a whole is amenable to the kind of close reading that a literary text can sustain. A transmodal text need not be read in an exclusively *interpretive* mode (V means W; X means Y; ...) but may also be seen in a *significative* mode that is less the formulation of an equality or translation than the ontology of its being at one or various moments (X is produced and given; then Y is produced and given; ...).

§7. As a correspondingly transmodal text, *Text Rain* exists, or perceptually passes, through a series of five more or less distinct phenomenological stages, lives, or moments.

1. As **Cascade** - autonomous, separate. This is the very first observational encounter with *Text Rain*, a moment where it exists solely as a letter-based cascade. There is no consensus on the letterfall at the outset.

2. As **Mirror** - engaging, reflective. But this first moment of its being comes to a close when the work is redefined on the subsequent discovery that it is interactive in a personally engaging way, and this yields another phenomenon.

3. As **Partner** - responsive, synchronized. In the next moment of its being, the work will reveal the poem that alludes directly to this very interplay.

4. As **Literature** - a work is discerned. From this kinetic adjunctness of worlds emerges a new life or phase in the possibility of reading a poem out of *Text Rain*. For to locate a poem in the visual kineticism of this work requires that the participant now behave, move, travel, in a wholly different way, directed by the goal of piecing together the lines and yearnings in Evan Zimroth's poem.

5. As **Realization** - poem as prediction of play. In a fifth stage of representative being, *Text Rain* then unfolds fully at the moment that the participant reflects on how his or her motions have in fact been a relational dance more or less predicted by its poetic stanzas. This level of transmodality is highly existential; it is in the second-person's direct form of address that the poem establishes an I-Thou connection aligned exactly with the work of Martin Buber, particularly his Ich und Du, the "I and Thou" call for a post-dialectical intimacy, a relation of directness that transcends the prevailing objectification of one's alienated state with things - a relation that he termed as I-It. The poem's explicit desire for engagement, the "I like talking with you" that is its opening line, underscores how *Text Rain* operates in this subject-to-subject manner: beginning with dialogue or "simply that: *conversing*".

§8. In the transmodal text, what is evident in examples of work where text is made to seem like more than text is that its readerly function is openly challenged. Here then lies the essence not merely of literature, but of the transmodal work of art.