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# The Monstrous Book and the Manufactured Body in the Late Age of Print: Material Strategies for Innovative Fiction in Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and Steve Tomasula's *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*

By John M. Vincler

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## Abstract

In recent decades a growing number of innovative writers have begun exploring the possibility of creating new literary forms through the use of digital technology. Yet literary production and reception does not occur in a vacuum. Print culture is five hundred years in the making, and thus new literary forms must contend with readers' expectations and habits shaped by print. Shelley Jackson's hypertextual novel *Patchwork Girl* and Steve Tomasula's innovative print novel *Vas: An Opera in Flatland* both problematize the conventions of how book and reader interact. In both works an enfolding occurs wherein the notion of the body and the book are taken in counterpoint and become productively confused. Jackson's book, alluding to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is about a monster composed of various bodies while the book itself is also a monstrous text: a nonlinear patchwork of links across networks of words and images. Tomasula's *Vas*—alluding to Edwin Abbott's 1884 satire, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*—is set in "Flatland" foregrounding the two-dimensional materiality of the page, all while the linear novel within the pages of *Vas* is under siege by supplementary information about the body in the form of collaged digital images, scientific facts, and historical citations that address such issues as body modification, in vitro fertilization, genetic code, and DNA. Both *Vas* and *Patchwork Girl* can be read as exemplary works in the late age of print, in part, because they effectively foreground the materiality of the book, while radically transforming the conventions of the book. In so doing, both works utilize paratextual and extratextual elements.

Literary production and reception does not occur in a vacuum. Print culture is five hundred years in the making, and thus new literary forms must contend with readers' expectations and habits shaped by print. Shelley Jackson's hypertextual digital novel *Patchwork Girl* and Steve Tomasula's innovative print novel *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* both problematize the conventions of how book and reader interact. In both works an enfolding occurs wherein the notion of the body and the book are taken in counterpoint and become productively confused. This calls attention to what I will call a *dual dualism*, a circuit of interaction between mind and body and the literary work and its interface (most commonly a printed book). Within this circuit, it is envisioned that the body engages with the book to facilitate the mind engaging with the literary work. *Patchwork Girl* and *VAS* problematize this dual dualism as their authors simultaneously exploit it for literary effect.

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Both *Patchwork Girl* and *VAS* are notable new growths in the field of literary production in the late age of print, and their authors also appear to be aware of the place of their works within the genealogical tree. This is evidenced in part by the fact that both works are built upon rich allusions to other works of literature. *Patchwork Girl* alludes to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and *VAS* to Edwin Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884). Both *Patchwork Girl* and *VAS* are firmly and self-consciously rooted in print culture, even as they move toward a future beyond it.

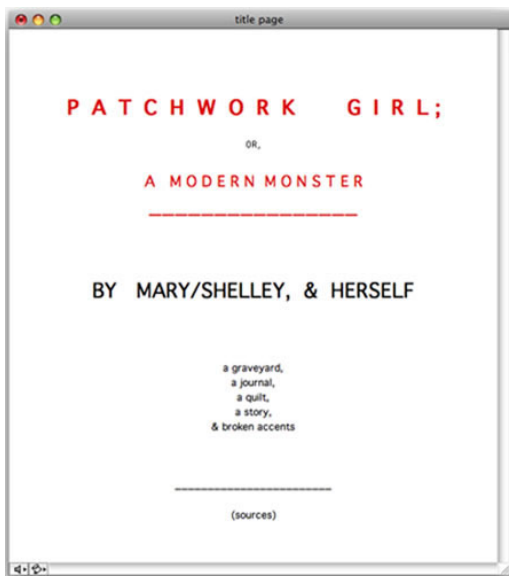


Fig. 1. Digital title page from Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*.  
Courtesy of Eastgate Systems.

*Patchwork Girl*, like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, contains a monster. But Jackson extends this metaphor to encompass the material form of the work itself. Eastgate Systems, Inc.—the notable early publisher of electronic literature on discrete media—first published *Patchwork Girl*, a hypertext novel, in 1995. It was developed using Eastgate's proprietary Storyspace hypertext authoring software and is currently distributed via CD-ROM (for Mac and PC). The simple black and white illustrations contained within the work recall seventeenth-century woodblock prints (a minimalist approach that also reduced file size in an era when the file size of multimedia elements greatly mattered). The "title page" layout mimics a nineteenth century title page on screen and reveals a full title different than that on the CD-ROM packaging: "Patchwork Girl; or, a Modern Monster by Mary/Shelley, & Herself [:] a graveyard, a journal, a quilt, a story, & broken accents." Shelley Jackson's name is literally fused with Mary Shelley's, and her expanded title further echoes the full title of *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus*.



Fig. 2. Screenshot from Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*.  
Courtesy of Eastgate Systems.

The seeded allusions that permeate the work move from para- and extra-textual elements to the central metaphor of the work. Just as Mary Shelley used the letter or epistolary novel as an initial frame within *Frankenstein* (with the central narrative emerging from a written letter reporting on the telling of a tale—a movement that takes the reader from the printed book to written letters to spoken words), in *Patchwork Girl* this “framing” mechanism takes on new meaning and new form. Jackson seems to be asking and addressing an important question that hovers everywhere over the incunabula of electronic literary writing: How do you situate the literary work outside of the book or beyond the pages of the codex?

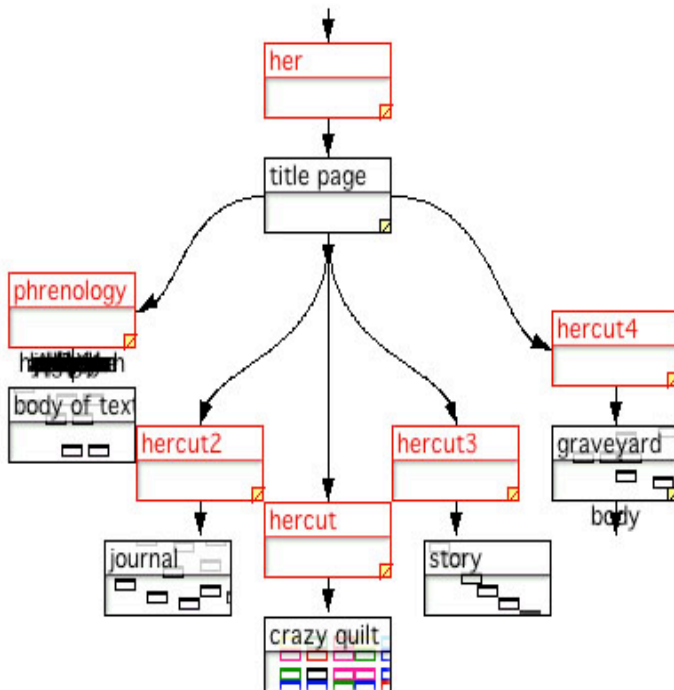


Fig. 3. Navigation in *Patchwork Girl*.  
Courtesy of Eastgate Systems.

*Patchwork Girl* foregrounds the text itself as a monstrous creation. If the central tale of *Frankenstein* is seeded at the core of a series of letters bound within the pages of a printed novel, *Patchwork Girl* seems to bemoan the loss of this center, while in practice exploiting the nonlinear potential this decentering initiates, freed as it is from the linearity of the codex and bound in the hypertextual web of digital narrative. Like Mary Shelley's fictional monster, Jackson's text – the physical manifestation of the work itself – is played up (metafictionally) as a monstrous work that is out of the author-figure's control:

Assembling these patched words in an electronic space, I feel half-blind, as if the entire text is within reach, but because of some myopic condition I am only familiar with in dreams, I can see only that part most immediately before me, and have no sense of how that part relates to all the rest. When I open a book I know where I am, which is restful... I am here on the page, here on this line, here, here, here. But where am I now? I am in a here and a present moment that has no history and no expectations for the future. (n. pag.)

This foregrounding of the nature of the text both deepens the power of the allusion to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* while also serving to nudge the reader into this new unsettling territory of the electronic literary space. The inevitable anxiety of reading an early electronic work is interwoven into the work itself and informs the architecture that structures the reader's experience of it.

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*VAS: An Opera in Flatland* postdates *Patchwork Girl* by seven years. It was first published in 2002 by Station Hill and rereleased in a paperback edition by the University of Chicago Press in 2004. Both works are products of the personal computer, utilized in non-arbitrary ways. Yet clearly one work, namely *Patchwork Girl*, is a "born-digital" work meant to be displayed and interacted with on a computer, and the later work, *VAS*, takes the form of a printed codex if a notably unconventional one. While not a work of electronic literature, *VAS* is self-consciously a product of the digital age managing to gesture beyond print via print. It does so both as an unconventional, highly designed product born of the computer as design environment and, more explicitly, in that it reproduces within its pages images of websites, visualizations of (biological/genetic) datasets, and remediated facsimiles of previous textual technologies (e.g. medieval manuscripts). In this way, *VAS* can be read as a proto-electronic literary work, not because of where it falls in the chronology of the field of electronic literature, but because it seeks to expand the scope and potential of the traditional novel through a nuanced media-rich approach.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 4. VAS. Courtesy of Steve Tomasula.

I was reminded of Tomasula and Farrell's *VAS* when attending the 2009 *&Now* conference on innovative writing in Buffalo, New York. (I had read *VAS* several years ago soon after the release of the first Station Hill edition, when a colleague at the Newberry Library where I then worked loaned his copy to me.) Two papers given at the conference, one by Flore Chevallier and the other by Anne-Laure Tissut, both addressed this question of the body and the book when discussing *VAS*. Both paper titles suggest change: "Literary and Bodily Evolution in Steve Tomasula and Stephen Farrell's *Vas: an Opera in Flatland*" (Chevallier) and "Mutating Languages in *Vas: an Opera in Flatland* by Steve Tomasula and Stephen Farrell" (Tissut). Like Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, *VAS* can be understood as a transitional work, in that it is both a product of and comment on media change in the late age of print. Also like Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, *VAS* utilizes or at least invokes a problematics of the book even while working within the space of the printed codex. In *VAS* this problematics is also bound to an allusion to another text. The subtitle of *VAS*, "*An Opera in Flatland*," refers to Edwin Abbott Abbott's Victorian satire, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. Following Abbott's work, Tomasula sets his novel in "Flatland," a two dimensional universe. Where Abbott is satirizing the social order of Victorian society, Tomasula sends up the hegemony of print culture itself, especially its overdetermination of what the space of the novel—its graphic surface—can and should look like.

At the center of *VAS* is a seemingly linear novel housed and made sequential by the codex. The central strand narrates the domestic drama of a couple struggling over their reproductive decisions and histories (miscarriage, c-section, abortion, and the vasectomy of the title), but this central text is under siege by supplementary information in the form of marginal commentary, collaged information including text-images from such diverse sources as medieval manuscripts, racist documents of 19<sup>th</sup> century pseudoscience, and early aughts websites about body modification and genetic engineering. *VAS*, like *Patchwork Girl*, can be described as a book about how technology in collusion with information transforms the body and, similarly, the literary object—the book. The images and language of the book make the reader consider how technology has affected the body, while the design and experience of navigating the physical book force the reader to consider the various dimensions of literary engagement. In Abbott's novel the leadership of Flatland makes it criminal to acknowledge the existence of three-dimensional "Spaceland." In *VAS*, Tomasula and Farrell force the reader to reconsider the two-dimensional space of the printed novel, and the potential for exploiting its graphic surface as something more than simply a platform for displaying black text on the white page in the usual, codified ways.

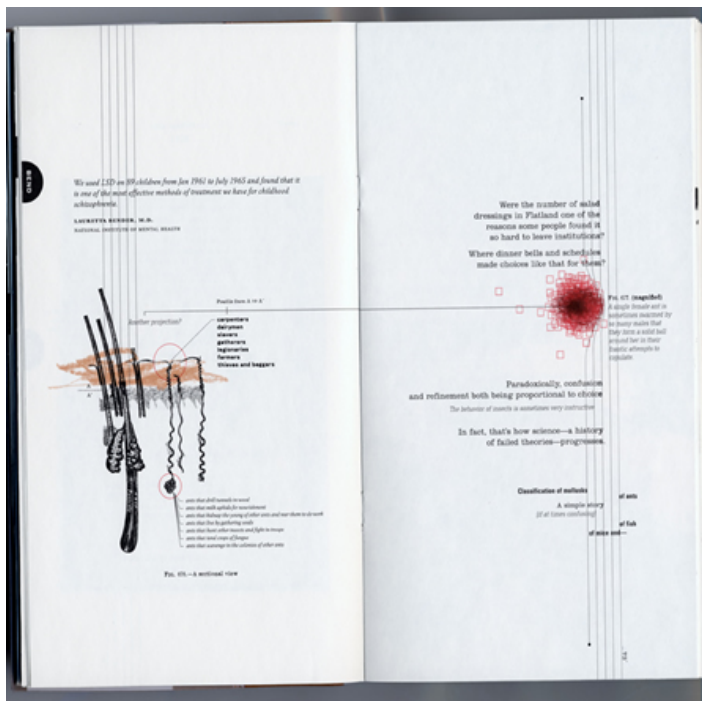


Fig. 5. *VAS*. Courtesy of Steve Tomasula.



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Both *VAS* and *Patchwork Girl* invite the productive confusion between body and book, while also dramatizing our shifting textual landscape and its implications for our literatures past and future. *VAS* is styled like a body. Its cover (in the Chicago edition) depicts semi-transparent skin revealing blue veins underneath, reminding the reader of the book's rich history, when medieval codices were written on animal skins, while also perhaps drawing a link to the circulatory systems of narrative and literary meaning contained within. The page is a skin in *VAS* (as shown through the design). The (counter)narrative is stitched together from different sources, as the page itself is visually depicted as being stitched together like a wound, just as the patchwork monster in *Patchwork Girl* parallels the patchwork text. And thus both works initiate an enfolding between book and body within the metaphorical / material space of the book. The physical book and the literary text are enmeshed and intertwined in disrupting ways, and we, as readers, get our wires crossed. We are both inside and outside we are sewing together the narrative and making meaning, yet the work is also forcing our hand, pushing us into foreign spaces, ejecting us back into our bodies but left with a lingering strangeness.

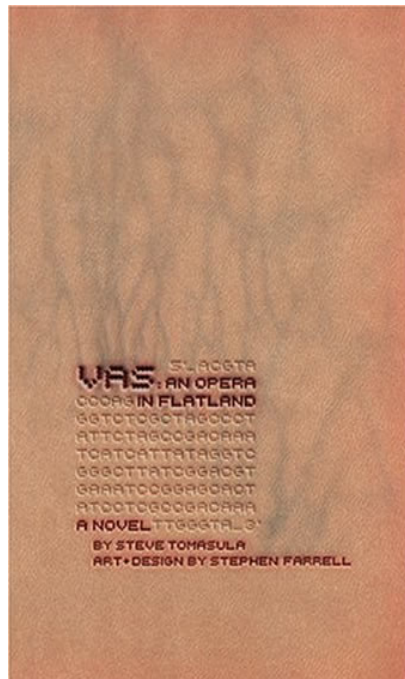


Fig. 6. *VAS* (paper cover); University of Chicago Press edition.  
Courtesy of Steve Tomasula.

VAS and *Patchwork Girl*, draw our attention to the practice of reading itself, and the dual dualism of the circuit embodied by the interaction between reader and the literary object.<sup>2</sup> Of the history of reading the scholar and book historian Robert Darnton writes, “The history of reading will have to take account of the ways that texts constrain readers as well as the ways that readers take liberties with texts.” He concludes, “The tension between those tendencies has existed wherever [readers] confronted books” (79). This confrontation is both a physical and an intellectual one, and it has existed at least since the invention of writing (and was perhaps made more complex as the practice of silent reading gained prominence, thus closing the circuit—one reader, one book—as I have described it here). In his essay on Ronald Sukenick, “Taking the Line for a Walk: *In Form to Narralogues, A History in Medias Res*,” Tomasula addresses the shifting relationship between readers and novels, while hinting at the dual dualism of the reading experience, which I have sought to characterize here. He writes:

A novel was a thing the reader actually holds in his or her hands. It should also be a part of the reader’s actual experience, and not a facsimile of some exterior reality, negating its status as print by inviting readers to enter a dream state as does the traditional novel in which the story is conceived of as a kind of virtual reality that lulls readers into forgetting that the words they are reading are a construction on a page. (27)

VAS and *Patchwork Girl* disrupt this soporific mode of the novel. Both works jolt readers from their dream state, and force them to consider the physicality of the technology of literature and to become aware of their own embodied being. By addressing this aspect of reading, both works problematize the reader’s relationship to the physical text. They circumscribe a problematics of the book in the late age of print, when print is increasingly supplanted by new means of storing and displaying textual and graphic information. This can be characterized as a problematics of the *extimacy* of the book—the book as external, yet intimate Other: the book as an uncanny reflection of our mind in the mirror.<sup>3</sup> Within the productive confusion of this circuit we sense a path from *noumenon*—the thought of only—to the *phenomenon*—the physically manifest thing—bound in a recursive loop extending out through the author-figure and feeding back from/to an ill-defined and unseen reading public of which we as reader are either an indistinct and unnecessary, or originary part.

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In Chevallier’s essay delivered at &Now she analyzed in part how readers received VAS, addressing in particular the sentiment that any extra-textual elements served only as a distraction rather than an integral part of the literary work itself. She remarks, “What frustrates or satisfies readers is that our reading process does not rely only on the deciphering of a message, but also on an immersion in the material of the text.” Similarly, Tissut commented on the significance of the “plasticity of

language" in *VAS*. This tension between material and message is critical for understanding both of the works under consideration here. And it links precisely to the problematics of the book these works both address and exploit—this problematics that is a sort of mind/body dualism encompassing both the reader and what is read.

These works force us to ask questions of the literary artifact. Does the literary work exist as an abstract immaterial concept? Is it just a text, in the sense of an alphanumeric code, requiring only an arbitrary display mechanism, be it the pages of a paperback book or the display on an Amazon Kindle? Or is the literary work most fully realized as the embodied thing? Mallarmé has called the book a spiritual instrument, and, in fact, the rise to prominence of the codex over the scroll emerges contemporaneously with the early development of the cult of Christianity. To take Mallarmé's characterization further, are we to understand the literary work as the soul of the book? (Perhaps the answer to this question depends on the book under consideration.) Both *Patchwork Girl* and *VAS* provide complex examples, indicative of a potential literary art where the medium and means of embodiment matter. While one can argue that the means of embodiment for literature always matters, the power of print culture is that the means of how our literature is produced, manufactured, and presented becomes virtually invisible to the reader.<sup>4</sup> We expect our books to be organized in familiar and established ways. In fact the Kindle is a technology based on this generalized understanding of books as essentially their alphanumeric codes displayed in strictly codified ways.

So too do literary theorists and critics largely construct the space of the novel as an imaginative space where the text serves as the instructions that transport the reader into the space conjured by the author. The book is discounted in this formulation as a mere means to an end. It must simply deliver its code. While most will recognize this as a gross oversimplification, it should also be recognized that literary critics almost universally discount the material manifestation of literature. (Following from the soporific model of literature, which Tomasula warns against but acknowledges as the rule, we can perhaps conclude that the majority of our critics and scholars would rather remain asleep, unshaken from their dream-state.) Bibliographers and textual critics have long argued for the importance and significance of the book's materiality, and it is not surprising that electronic-literature scholars like Matthew Kirschenbaum and N. Katherine Hayles have turned to these fields to address our emerging digital textual landscape.<sup>5</sup> Works like *VAS* and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* undermine the implicit assumption of most of our literary criticism that embodiment does not matter. These works force us to wrestle with literature as both a linguistic and material/technological mode of art.

In his essay on Sukenick, Tomasula comments on the significance of evolving technology and its effect on literary production. And perhaps in his views on

Sukenick we can gain some insight into his intentions with *VAS* and in his more recent electronic work. He writes:

While some critics mourned the corpse the novel had become, others had given up on its relevance in an age of film and television. Marshall McLuhan among others proclaimed an end to not just the novel, but the whole Gutenberg galaxy. Yet Sukenick characterizes this time as a moment of exciting possibility, noting that 'genre is traditional,' i.e., a matter of how literary conventions were conceived, while 'medium is technological'. If the novel were to reinvent itself, as ... every novel that aspires to art must, it would have to do so by revisiting these two defining characteristics—the tradition that allowed some works, but not others, to be thought of as 'novels,' and the possibility of both being expanded, not narrowed, by technology. In fact, he writes, "this is typically what happens when a new medium is introduced. The new medium...creates more options, and the older ones become more essentialized because they no longer need to be concerned with what the new mediums do better." (24)

In other words, it is a connection to the traditions of genre that prevent the "book" or the "novel" from becoming something else entirely as literary forms migrates to new media and evolve through new technologies. And perhaps we should be reminded at this moment of relatively rapid media change that the history of the book and the novel are not as simple nor as technologically homogenous as they at first may appear. When we consider the presence of volvelles (spinning disks) in an early printed book or the Technicolor, wholly unique marbled page in a first edition of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, we may reconsider limiting the future of literature to what can be displayed in a mass market paperback or on an Amazon Kindle.<sup>6</sup>

If the literary-work-as-code model is the dominant model, as I have argued, I would suggest that both *VAS* and *Patchwork Girl* point towards the tactile and not just visual potential of literature, and they do so in a sense that plays with this liminal space between thinking-of and physically interacting-with. It is fitting that early critics of electronic literature, notably N. Katherine Hayles and Mark Hansen, use the model of proprioception, or the sensing of the physical limits of the body, when examining the reading experience in media-rich environments. Chevalier, citing Laura Marks' phrase, refers to this reading of the material as "haptic visuality" a sort of touching with the eyes. (Mark Hansen has also written notably about the link between the haptic and visual in the realm of new media.)<sup>7</sup> And "touch computing" may be the most distinguishing feature of the (yet to be seen) "iPad revolution."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that much of our electronic literature requires more interaction with the material technology (this interaction may call for physically navigating a virtual space by touching a screen or directing and clicking a mouse, or by inputting our own texts, as in "interactive fiction").<sup>9</sup>

How can we separate the book and its work from the thinking self during the act of reading? Where do the physical limits of this circuit begin and end? Perhaps our most persuasive new literature—or at least a radical strain of it—will encourage and further this productive confusion wherein the line between reader and that which is read becomes confused. But perhaps literature has always walked this line, and it is only as technology is rapidly changing that we revisit this question anew.

If these two works ask: How does technology determine our bodies? They also raise the question: How does technology determine our literature? And in this liminal space between these two questions, between the space of literary questioning and the space of understanding our own embodiment, perhaps we can contemplate our existence in new ways. This is the dual dualism I am concerned with, this is the territorialization these works elicit.

In this approach, I see a potential literature, a possibility for an electronic literature that is self-aware of its transgressions, that utilizes new tools to achieve new effects, while remaining conscientious of the expectations of the reader and the traditions of genre (even as it seeks to disrupt or subvert them), aware of the very process of reading as it plays out from author to work to reader, aware of how this transaction occurs and where it can be transformed and reimagined. As the book is transformed, its ghost-book, a past essence lingers, a potential powerfully resonant metaphor.

Both *Patchwork Girl* and *VAS* look back to literatures past as they point towards literatures future. These works require critics and scholars to establish deeper histories that acknowledge the rich history of the book both as a vehicle for literature and as an evolving technology put to use in a variety of manners and contexts. Yet, if critics are to assert that the form of the book cannot be understood as language alone, then what of our criticism? If we are to take these questions seriously, do we not also require new forms of criticism?

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## Notes

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1. See *TOC: A New Media Novel* (FC2 2009) for an example of Tomasula's born-digital work, also created in collaboration with Stephen Farrell, published on DVD.
2. See Darnton 68, for his famous "communications circuit" for a contrasting, more sociological, model of the relationship between readers and books in the early modern period. Darnton's model served as the inspiration for the "circuit" framework and description.
3. Extimacy is a term borrowed from Jacques Lacan, and I am indebted to James Pate for introducing me to the term via his essay in *Action, Yes*.
4. See the introduction to Johns, 1-57, for a discussion of the assumptions of modern readers about the nature of books in the late age of print, situated within the greater context of the history of the book.
5. See Hayles' *My Mother Was a Computer* 103-104, and Kirschenbaum for more on bibliography and electronic literature.
6. See Trettien for more on volvelles as precursors to multi-media and digital literature. "Technicolor," used here anachronistically, recalls the moment in the film *Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy steps out from a world of black and white into a world of color—another moment when a new technology is utilized to metaphorical effect.
7. See Hansen for an insightful analysis of the "haptic" in the context of new media art and literature.
8. See Halpern for one of many sources addressing the so-called "iPad revolution."
9. See Montfort for more on the history of interactive fiction as genre.