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Experimenting with the Future: Born Magazine, Multimedia, and the French Avant-Garde

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Citation Details

Trimble, A. and Grotz, J. "Experimenting with the Future: Born Magazine, Multimedia, and the French Avant-Garde," *The Work of New Composing*. Debra Journet, Cheryl Ball, Ryan Trauman, eds. Computers and Composition Digital Press (Utah State UP), 2012.

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“Every mechanism has as a material its own particular effect upon our impulses. Thus our feelings toward clay and iron, towards the organ and piano, towards colloquial and ceremonial speech, are entirely different” –I.A. Richards, C.K. Ogden and J. Wood “The Medium” *Foundations of Aesthetics*, 1925 (qtd. Drucker 68)

“Lofty reflections on the cultural significance of information technology are commonplace now.” –Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* (53)

No Theory but for Practice: Born, Multimedia, & the Avant-Garde

[Born](#) is an experimental online magazine that brings together writers and “new media” designers and artists, who have collaborated to create multimedia interpretations of poetry (and more rarely, short prose). As editors of one of the earliest, enduring literary publications on the Web, we often receive invitations to share our “vision” of Web poetics, literary multimedia, et cetera. This presents a problem—Born evolved without consciously intending to even focus on poetry (only our current incarnation), but rather with an intent to be a creative, collaborative community. As such our work and vision are shaped as much by the interests of our contributors as our volunteer editors and curators.

Furthermore, most of our published works were crafted in print and then interpreted into multimedia, thus we are not creating multimedia poetry in the tradition of

those such as Loss Pequeno Glazier, who have considered the impact of multimedia technology on the composition and craft of poetry itself, and the resulting poetics. However, we do continually find our work raises questions directly relevant to the rising field of “multimedia poetics” (for lack of a better term). How does the medium affect the experience of poetry? In the case of Born, does the transference or interpretation into this medium change the poem—structurally, its language, or otherwise? What does the process of collaboration do to a poem’s reading? Actually, while we do on occasion get some of those questions, the most persistent can be distilled to one: “Isn’t this just all a bunch of prettified bells and whistles tacked on to the poem?”

We regard this as a question of composing, but not the traditional sense of authorial composing, but rather the affect of blending old and new media resulting in new kinds of compositions. In thinking about Born and the “new work of composing,” we find the above bells-and-whistles question reveals a tension between old and new, and that such uses of technology suggests an anxiety that poetry is insufficient in itself – that media are being employed to create palatable packaging for less serious readers. It is our belief that this is not the case, and that it is illustrative to look at how Born is engaged in a historical praxis of composing and cross-pollinating between media.

To begin, we operate under the assumption that a poem, just like a book, is a perfectly self-sufficient “technology” or creation. As multimedia also becomes a self-sufficient literary technology, Born-style interpretation makes us consider how publishing technology has always shaped conceptions of poetry, especially its conception as something specifically “literary.”

And as with any conversation, however, some introductions are in order, beginning with a brief history of *Born*, and how *Born*'s continually evolving blend of technology and collaboration resonates within larger debates of “non-literariness” in poetry, specifically the literary avant-garde. In brief, what we are suggesting is that *Born*'s contribution to this discussion of the New Work of Composing is to wonder how conceptions of what constitutes poetry (or even “literary”) are challenged by the addition of multimedia technology into poetry, which in turn echoes earlier work of the specifically French literary avant-garde. *Born* is thus a case study of such theories into practice.

“Literary”? Magazine”?

Born was founded as a magazine in 1996 in Seattle as a venue for local writers to self-publish and for graphic designers to create outside the corporate confines of their field. It was—and remains—an all-volunteer endeavor, and the Web was chosen as publication medium because it was inexpensive, easy to disseminate, and fast to produce. *Born Magazine* was a classic example of the zines cropping up all over the Web and print worlds, and at the time featured essays, stories, music reviews—even an advice column—in rather conventional magazine design format.

However, due to the nature of publishing using a rapidly changing technology, the magazine quickly evolved. *Born* expanded its geographic focus (the Web made us international), but also rapid change in technology allowed design possibilities that were impossible on the printed page. Artists began to incorporate motion, audio, and interactivity, and following suit, *Born* began dropping those written forms that didn't

offer as much artistic license in the way of interpretation, focusing more increasingly on poetry and short prose.

Around 2001 or soon thereafter, our core of volunteers began to realize we saw ourselves less as a publication than the creativity borne of collaboration, as each project might bring together artists, writers, programmers, photographers, musicians, and others. These collaborations resulted in fusions of different art forms (which in 2005 eventually spread from the Web to the [gallery](#)). Very early on in these collaborations, words became [cinematic](#), metaphor became [interactive](#), audio could be a human [voice](#) or composed [soundtrack](#). In other words, shortly after finding ourselves a literary magazine, we found we were no longer even that, but rather hosts and matchmakers to interpretations of literary works. (One can trace much of this evolution in our [online archive](#).)

This process has brought the magazine to its final form, which has focused primarily on editors choosing from submitted written works and then our curators pairing the writer with an artist or designer to create an interpretation. We have had other forms of matchmaking, where collaborative teams created an original concept and work from scratch, but for the purpose of this conversation, we will focus on the interpretive pieces, as this kind of collaboration has been the most popular among our contributors.

It is fitting we focus on contributors' interests. Each piece is the result of a one-time collaboration, making each work unique. We have never attempted to represent any specific movements or poetics within the literary or arts communities, but rather sought to create a venue where artists and writers have free reign to experiment.

A Surfeit of Meaning?

One reason for examining how Born relates to a historical literary tradition of the avant-garde is that it helps us understand what might be the broader audience appeal of Born's work. The majority of Born's audience, which typically averaged 20,000 to 30,000 readers a month, are those who would not typically pick up a literary magazine. We know this from a decade of interest shown at diverse conferences and feedback from readers. Born is in many ways mainstream, so when one thinks "avant-garde," likely Born isn't the first venue that comes to mind (if ever).

Somewhat to our surprise, the most resistance to Born's work usually comes from circles that otherwise embrace (at least academically) the avant-garde, as they raise core questions about the role of image and sound in Born's literary art works. In presentations of our contributors' work in literary and writing-focused venues, we often hear concerns that the pieces "[privilege or make literal the image](#)" or the use of sound "[manipulates](#)" the viewer's experience/reading of the poem—in other words, a key establishment of poetry (and often writers themselves), while enthusiastic about the potential of multimedia, also expresses profound unease with this melding (muddling?) of genres. We are not here to argue whether or not such concerns are true or good (isn't poetry a manipulation of sounds in the form of language, for emotional effect?), but we do posit that these blended works are in part an expression of the designer's experience of the works in discourse with the writer. If one thinks, for example, of the exquisite corpse game, there is an inherent belief that disparate things naturally connect and produce something revelatory that is beyond our intention. To some extent, this is a way to justify Born's collaborations—that they produce a surfeit of meaning that is pleasurable and provocative, and as with the French literary avant-garde, points to a (Romantic) belief

that the irrational and subconscious suggest underground connections between the rational or the obvious and things related. This experience is brought to its greatest expression in the Born project “[You and We](#),” with the readers being both composers and readers of intentionality.

Another aspect to examine when considering the literary audience’s unease toward Born’s work may be found in our notions of the word “literary” itself, which is rooted in printed text, and in turn causes us to wonder how or if multimedia will define literary arts to the degree the invention of writing changed poetry in ways distinct from its oral origins.

For example, Born’s struggle with its business card tagline—“art and literature. together.”—maintains the traditional view of separateness between the two art forms, with “together” evoking a kind of cohabitation. We sometimes use “literary/arts” to describe our collaborations, to allow for both blending and an appreciation for the distinct qualities of literary arts. However, “literary” essentially means “writings” (from the Latin *littera*: letter of the alphabet), so then how to regard Born’s conception of “[And the Ship Sails On](#)”? While the original written poem can be accessed via an html link, in the interpreted Born version, there is no “writing” at all, that is, not in the visible sense of literature. Thus when it comes to Born’s work, “text” may be a more *accurate* term, as Walter J. Ong notes that text “is from a root meaning ‘to weave’” (13). Our works weave together the visual and literary arts. But, unlike text, the word “literary” evokes a quality, an art form, while “text” lacks a sense of something to be *experienced*.

There is something about considering the relation to multimedia and the written word that reveals the excitement and resistances that congregate about multimedia

compositions in the literary world. Ong notes, “without writing, words have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds” (31).

Multimedia is both reintroducing sound to poems and stories: now we can hear the author’s spoken, not just written, voice in a publication (and in the case of “[Tisha B’Av](#),” the poet’s revision between the written and spoken, creating a new composition from the written). To apply Ong’s point that writing cannot truly capture sound, multimedia can actually capture the spoken word within its text.

Further, multimedia can also create a different sense of presence by incorporating new ways of visualizing which, to some current literary audiences, feels distracting or foreign. In the face of protest or confusion about what we do at Born, Ong and others remind us that structure, narrative, and other architectures of storytelling were changed by the technology of writing, moving from a sole reliance upon sound/mnemonic devices to incorporate visual cues. That multimedia creates new possibilities (and confines) in its incorporation of new forms helps explain resistance to the visual that we experience when we present our work (“it privileges the image”) while at the same time we don’t receive complaints that the visual word “dominates” the sound or vice versa. (An aside—these expressions of discomfort are perhaps inevitable when we consider the ancient complaints that the invention of writing was charged with ruining everything from the arts to memory.)

Again returning to Ong, he discusses the relationship of oral forms and written forms to memory, stating “in an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression, but also thought processes” (33). There are a number of studies showing how forms of new media are shaping the minds of our youth, so it is

logical to presume it will shape the way we think of literary arts, and in turn what we think of, think *is*, poetry. Multimedia challenges our written literary culture to restructure words into other kinds of “texts”—what does the word and the poem become when they *move*? When we put a visual image in motion, we call it film or animation. When we make a word cinematic, we are left with a cliché of “poetry in motion.” And it is still recognized as a written poem. Stretching Ong’s point that early print still preserved sound dominance (versus our current sight dominance) can help explain: our era of early multimedia literary arts is still very much sight/word dominated. (The aptly named project [poemsthatgo](#) wonderfully underscored how multimedia is exposing the difficulties of applying current literary language to multimedia.)

In its final years, Born considered publishing works that we deemed literary yet did not incorporate any visual text; this shift was a direct response to our discussions with audiences about our blended works and on the distinctions between a poem, a short story, and film. Previous to multimedia publications, the difference between a film and a poem needed little scholarly intervention to the mainstream viewer: You watched films, and you read a poem. Earlier cinematic pieces in Born, such as “[My Neighbor’s Wife](#),” maintain the presence of written language and thus maintain this easy distinction. However, as we are offered more filmic interpretations, such as “[And the Ship Sailed On](#),” it became increasingly difficult for us to determine the applied distinctions between genres.

In *The Visible Word*, Johanna Drucker meticulously explicates the historical traditions(s) that left a legacy of the visual being defined in exclusion of the linguistic or literary (4), and the responses to Born’s work and the definitional struggles we face as

editors seem in part rooted in this historical separateness. Drucker's examination is helpful in that it also suggests we lack a grammar for understanding the bringing together of these forms. Drucker writes, "unlike language, in which words, letters, phonemes, and morphemes have clearly defined identities and where rules of grammar and syntax are at least identifiable, the visual domain has no set rules defining what elements within an image are 'signs' and which are not and what the grammar of their relations might be" (45). When we present Born's work, the main discussion rarely turns to the process of collaboration (our mission) and composition (except for queries on how to submit one's work), but rather focuses on how to *read* these pieces. These are writers and teachers struggling with this, and thus we find it helpful to turn to historical examples to argue and illuminate, perhaps to legitimize, Born's use of "non-literary" forms in multimedia literary arts.

Born and the Literary Avant-Garde

To begin, a quote from Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant, *De la mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes*:

"Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfills its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is. . . ." (qtd. in Renato Poggioli 9).

Laverdant's quote is ambitious, and perhaps naïve: We don't know how likely it is that a single individual could accurately predict the direction of Humanity, but what is

useful about his quote is the way it presents a now-familiar distinction to us between “the old art” and “the new art” that is central to an understanding of an avant-garde. As you may guess, the avant-garde is an artistic position that declares itself to be new in contrast to what’s come before it, which becomes the old. In the theory of the avant-garde, the old art is traditional, academic, and classical. The new art tends to be, in contrast, the unconventional, the political, and the new or experimental.

The avant-garde is, according to Massimo Bontempelli, “an exclusively modern discovery, born only when art began to contemplate itself from a historical viewpoint.” (qtd. in Poggioli 14). In *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Renato Poggioli maintains that “[i]t is still true that both sides, paradoxically, continue the discussion with the tacit presupposition that always . . . there has been the same hostile relation, the same conflict, between new art and old art” (13).

To continue examining the avant-garde as it relates to Born and literary art forms on the Web, Poggioli suggests that avant-garde movements begin with two possible attitudes: that of activism or that of antagonism (26). One key element, “activism,” is “the spirit of adventure,” the active looking forward into the future, an attempt to greet the future head-on and help bring it to the contemporary time; “antagonism” is the “the spirit of sacrifice,” that is, the active looking to the immediate past and reacting against it, a sort of reactionary rejection of the past as inadequate to express the contemporary or the future (131). Of these two poses, we believe that Born most closely resembles that of *activism* in its looking forward into new ways to explore the territory of new media to incorporate them into the literary realm.

This endeavor truly resembles one of the key features of the avant-garde, that is, the incorporation of something originally “non-literary” into literature – and in Born’s case, as in many other historical avant-gardes, the “non-literary” aspect of society being used is that of new technology. Poggioli notes, “The experimental aspect of avant-garde art is manifested not only in depth, within the limits of a given art form, but also in breadth, in the attempts to enlarge the frontiers of that form or to invade other territories, to the advantage of one or both of the arts” (133).

This “enlarging frontiers” extends to the specific techniques of the avant-garde playing out in Born’s multimedia works. For example, Mallarme, the French symbolist poet, was the first to outline the “theory of typographical emphasis,” in which the manipulation of fonts became a necessary feature of the work and caught the reader by surprise by evading usual print-medium expectations (133). Apollinaire added to this what he called “visual lyricism: a graphic-figurative correspondence between the manuscript or printed poem and the sense or imagery of that poem” (134). Another hallmark of the avant-garde is the incorporation of synesthesia—the marriage of two senses or two sensory experiences in a literary work, as in Baudelaire’s “Correspondence” or Rimbaud’s “Voyelles” (133).

These three qualities are seen everywhere in Born’s work. One of our early favorite examples, “[Story Problem](#),” points most strongly to a new interactive poetics. The typographical emphasis becomes synesthetic as the reader must interact with the screen to call up the poem as sound—however, as musical notes rather than language. The typographic presentation of the poem plays with its orality without interfering or needing to create an actual voice.

Another early example, "[Blue Madonna](#)," reveals synesthetic correspondence in play as the poem's lines become a visual segmentation of the central image, creating a complex relationship with the visual lyricism and the poem's theme of cross-cultural separation and fusion.

More recently, the visual lyricism and typographical emphasis incorporated in the interpretation of "[Outrances](#)" recalls Drucker's examination of typography and the avant-garde's "blurring of the line between forms and sites of so-called high art and the forms and situations of mass media; a muddying of distinctions between image and language" (91-92). In Born's collaboration of "Outrances," the "high art" of poetry melds with the graphic correspondence and typographic emphasis of the poem's musical subject(s).

When we present these ideas to audiences uneasy with bells-and-whistles, we do so out of a desire to contextualize the "new" within literary history, but also because we are excited that multimedia technology allows the realization of so many of these "old" ideas. These concepts are not historical artifact but perhaps key questions that literary arts have never fully resolved.

Finally, the 20th century avant-garde displays aspects of what is called "technicism," that is, the imprint of the creative and spiritual realm onto technology so as to react against the dehumanization of the purely mechanical or technological (Poggioli 138). We think this is worth pondering, because in general, our culture is humanizing technology at an accelerating pace: Think of the way cell phones, email, laptops, social networking sites, blogs, and other forms of communication technology are marketed to and incorporated by our culture. We are living in a post-Romantic time, where we can no longer simply rebel against the dehumanization of technology, because it's clearly not

going away. That being the case, it is an interesting study to look at the ways our culture tries to incorporate technology in productive (and we would emphasize artistic) rather than in ominous ways.

Born is not a reactionary or antagonistic venue; rather it is conceived from what we would call the “activist” or adventurous side of the theory of the avant-garde: That is, this new technology exists and is rapidly manifesting itself into every aspect of our daily lives, inviting artistic exploration, and clearly providing means of collaboration and genre melding that previously were infeasible (if not unimaginable). To our detriment or success, Born has been a motley combination of the two kinds of art: the old and the new. Born’s role in the composition of multimedia poetry is the practice of carrying the old into the new. Born doesn’t strike us as part of the debate around the possible end of the printed page, any more than the wheel makes irrelevant the shoe, but it does seem relevant to consider what forms of literary arts may arise from these new technologies. So while we regard Born’s work as an endeavor separate from the page, we are as curious as anyone how new media will shape our future conceptions of literary arts.

Author notes: Anmarie Trimble, Born’s editor, and Jennifer Grotz, contributing editor, are part the [volunteer community](#) that created Born.

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