Dear readers,

This is an early draft of the proposal for my dissertation, “Poetry of the Post-Medium Condition, 1994–2014.” The goal of the dissertation is to think about poetry’s place in a contemporary media ecology, and to consider how poetry responds, overtly and implicitly, to forms of visual culture.

In undertaking that investigation, my hope is not only to say something about contemporary poetry, but about contemporary media culture, and about the changing nature of literary form within that culture. While my background is primarily in poetics, I would like to write something that would be interesting to scholars of contemporary literature more broadly (say, the post-45 set)—which is why I’m circulating my proposal in this workshop.

Unfortunately, I’m circulating this draft at a bad moment in its evolution. I’ve decided to jettison the first chapter summary, and I’m told the first half of the proposal needs to be rewritten in its entirety. If you find it rough going, you may want to skip ahead to the chapter summaries (p. 13); and even then, you probably won’t need to read the whole document to have some ideas as to how it might be improved.

I’ll open the discussion with some examples from my archive, which I hope will clarify both the coherence of the project and some of the claims I make below.

Many thanks for reading.

Steven

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Dissertation Proposal Draft

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Poetry of the Post-Medium Condition, 1994–2014

During a 2011 poetry reading at the Center for Book Arts, held to celebrate the last 61 years of American poetry, the poet, theorist, and Princeton professor Susan Stewart prefaced one of her poems with a call for “a national movement of poets to write poems that are the size of mandatory television screens”: “When you get into a New York City taxi cab you can just paste your poem right up. Or when you go to the airport you can paste your poem up there.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Stewart’s media activism provides an allegory for contemporary poetry’s relationship to visual culture, the subject of my proposed dissertation. First, it stages the relationship between poetry and the media as a conflict in which different technologies of attention, the screen and the page, are embedded in forms of social life that they may also overflow. Poetry is appealed to as a kind of veil that might, here in its opacity, mediate between the viewer and “mandatory” forms of reception. Yet in its very resistance to these media, poetry is forced to imitate their forms. What was a conflict becomes a conflicted symbiosis, and the oral culture of poetry is confronted with its own opticality, its own participation in an economy and ecology of visual forms.

My dissertation attempts to locate poetry within the broader media ecology of the present by examining the way poets both draw on and resist the influence of contemporary media genres. Like Stewart, I believe that poetry’s place in a contemporary media ecology is secured by the modes of attention it requires—modes of attention that draw on, and ask us to connect with, the deep time of literary history and a parallel history of social forms. But my goal in examining these tensions is less to suggest that contemporary poetry recalls a competing set of perceptual techniques than to see poetry as a site of remediation, in which the practices of attention occasioned by other media forms can be interrogated and revised. Against the assumption that media configure social life in particular or necessary ways, poetry reminds us of the plasticity of our relationships to all forms of mediation, even as it may advocate for particular forms of attention (including those it demands for itself).

The poets I consider below focalize aspects of the media culture of the present through specific media genres, and my chapters use those genres as base-sites for mapping this larger media ecology. Claudia Rankine and Tan Lin each write long prose poems about television in the historical present, yet undergird their prose with practices of illustration and annotation that recall Wikipedia pages. Anne Carson writes poems about the art films of Michelangelo Antonioni that turn his painterly visual compositions into simple declarative statements, echoing the pan-and-scan process that reformats widescreen films for televisual broadcast; yet Carson’s poems use this reduction of the image to expand the imaginative possibilities of Antonioni’s films beyond the limits of the frame. Anna Deavere Smith detours the talking head by way of the outmoded genre of soliloquy in order to rethink the political efficacy of video footage in racial politics. And Lisa Robertson places video art, billboards, commercial breaks, oratory, skywriting, and song in a single, unified flow that subsumes these genres not as images, but as forms of rhetoric—all while making good on Benjamin’s imperative to find a future for poetry in the world of the neon sign. My point is not just that these works require various forms of media literacy, or that they foreground cross-citation among media forms, but that they activate these sites of mediation to suggest new routes between them, new modes remediation and perception that individual media technologies seem to foreclose.

To claim poetry as an agent of remediation is naturally to pose questions about its efficacy, questions that may equally be posed as problems of audience and scale. By foregrounding the forms and genres of mass media, the poets I consider below also pose a question about the relative scope of literary publics with respect to those media, while entertaining the possibility of a future for poetry beyond the coterie. And it may be because both the future of poetry and the forms of technologically-mediated culture are in question that an urgent and animate set of speculations emerges at the site where poetry and the media intersect.

The media ecology of the present might be tentatively characterized by two widely noted features. First, by the possibilities it affords for citation, circulation, and re-representation across various media platforms that have their own medium-specific properties—a set of practices collectively known as *remediation*. And second, by a sense of the temporal rhythms of interaction that are proper to this or that representation—something I will call its *actuality*, its purchase on action and attention in the present.[[2]](#endnote-2) These features were already apparent in broadcast television, but they have arguably intensified with the online dissemination of news, information, and entertainment. And while multiple media devices now vie for our attention, the perceptual flow that connects and alters these media forms, and a temporal acuity that organizes or constrains that flow, are the persistent substructures that this splintering of reception only partially occludes. Television, the medium that has taught us the most about flow and unremittent presentism, is the place where remediation and actuality take on their most rigid and structured forms—including the talking head, breaking news, and the larger ideology of “live” broadcasting. Yet the ubiquity of actuality and flow is perhaps most apparent when in their negative image: the potential for endless contemplation sometimes ascribed to art objects—a form of contemplation that might continue indefinitely, and which takes place with no particular end in mind. Elsewhere, Stewart writes of aesthetics as a means of “preserving persons from totalitarian systems of social control, including systems of nonconsensual time and technological development,” and the organizational effects of television remind us how mundane such systems of coercion can be.[[3]](#endnote-3) Yet rather than valorize art against visual culture, or slow time against liveness, or concentration against flow, I see contemporary poetry as taking up flow and remediation as conditions of new aesthetic possibility—so that the transition between media genres and temporal contexts becomes itself the subject of aesthetic contemplation; and conversely, so that the durational and aesthetic possibilities of artworks might enliven or expand a set of representational genres caught up in the total flow of the contemporary.

What about contemporary poetry suggests its efficacy in these negotiations? I have already emphasized poetry’s long temporality—the long history of poetic form, rooted in its material availability across time and across cultures, something reinforced by poetry’s self-conception as a kind of mnemonic art. But there are two other reasons to consider visual culture through the discourse of contemporary poetry. First, poetry, even at its most straightforward, conjures what it represents not just in full or diminished presence, but in the form of other representations in other media, borrowing or troping their medium-specific qualities. Poetry is, after all, the literary genre most associated with (verbal) imagery, and its medium-specific claims to sound and song are equally the anchor that allows a slippery relationship to visuality to be exploited and explored. Second, as Andrew Epstein has argued, American poetry in the post-war era conjures a form of attention at its most intense.[[4]](#endnote-4) This is not because reading a poem requires such attention, but because poems enshrine moments of attention, taking experiences of attention as their very occasion. Contemporary poetry is thus a site where attention and representation meet across different sensory modalities, encountering one another virtually, and in all their utopian possibility.

The paradox of this virtual possibility is that it must be anchored in material forms—that material sites of attention must be conjured in both their specificity and their ubiquity for such a negotiation to be articulate. For Epstein, what poets attend to is the stuff of everyday life, the stuff that passes unnoticed until a poem brings it into view. Yet in the mediated present, which requires so many kinds of attention anchored to different social situations, technologies, and media genres, a form of attention may not be reducible to the set of things it brings into view and must be thought alongside the objects and configurations that occasion it. Forms of attention also suggest and make possible particular forms of action and cognition, which regulate that attention in turn, and provide a kind of experiential or affective correlate for attention itself. Attention is not simply manifest in what is or is not seen but has its own perceptible qualities, whose salience is reinforced by its concomitant cultural forms.

I say “forms of attention” because I want to stress that attention is internally differentiated, that a kind of attention may recognizably repeat, and that new forms of attention may also be improvised. Reading a poem, watching a television show, or examining a painting each involve some form of attention, although the form of attention they require may shift across different genres, across different cultures, and at different historical moments. Moreover, the form of attention one brings to an object is volitional: one can read for style or read for the plot, watch a television series for the mise-en-scène or for parceled-out moments of closure. In thinking about poetry’s relationship to visual media, part of my assumption is that the forms of attention we give one object (say Michaelangelo Antonioni’s *Red Desert*) might be called upon by another (say Anne Carson’s “Ode to the Sublime by Monica Vitti”) where it becomes the basis for a new, improvised form of attention—and that this new form of attention might have uses beyond its inauguration.

To speak of attention in terms of such material sites requires a more complicated account of the historical duration of perceptual techniques. Epstein suggests that the form of attention found in American poetry after 1950 is reciprocally constructed with an awareness of the “everyday” things that are its ubiquitous and inevitable objects—things that are, in the colloquial sense, “contemporary.”[[5]](#endnote-5) This periodization of the poetry of attention corresponds neatly with the resurgence of attention as an object in developmental psychology and the concurrent expansion of media technologies into the human terrain of the person and the home.[[6]](#endnote-6) Yet the utility of poetry to attention is that it recalls a moment when attention was otherwise, even a moment when attention did not have that name. As others have noted, the notion of attention requires internal differentiation to be intelligible at all: there would be no attention without distraction, or without the possibility of attending otherwise.[[7]](#endnote-7) While other recent studies have attempted to antedate the invention of attention to the late 19th century, or to the early 19th century, or to the 18th century, it seems fair to say that the self-differing of attention cuts against such stories of historical particularity and rupture, so that the notion of attention inevitably opens onto a longer history of the dialectical interplay between perception and thought.[[8]](#endnote-8) The irony of these genealogies is that they tend to foreclose the plasticity of attention in each of its historical moments, downplaying at once the heterogeneity of its forms and their improvisatory possibilities. Indeed, in contemporary media theory, this kind of history has been overthrown by a so-called media archaeology, where the phenomenological temporality of attention can be seen to be shot through with the deep time of human technologies and technics.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The flattening of attention as a concept seems to come to a head in the two decades between 1994 and 2014, the period around which I focus my dissertation. By the mid-1990s, the computer had attained sufficient ubiquity, at home and at work, to facilitate the erosion of the barrier between labor and leisure, a barrier that had previously designated to labor a particular time and space. To be sure, this erosion was set in motion by a larger set of neoliberal promises and designs, but the computer has become an unmistakable site for translating the temporal order of the workday into smaller quotas of self-disciplined production.[[10]](#endnote-10) This organization of labor values a very particular kind of attention. First, for Epstein and others, the notion of attention carries with it the sense of an internalized discipline, one newly manifest in all technologies that function as conduits to both work and leisure. And second, in the culture of the present, attention becomes something you can measure in time—so that the great measure of attention is how long someone can refrain from checking their smartphone.[[11]](#endnote-11) So while the computer is a technological support for many different activities, and occasions just as many forms of thought and perception, it has been overwhelmingly cast as deleterious for attention since attention has been assumed to be unchanging and durational.[[12]](#endnote-12)

As Alan Liu has shown, the teleology that attempts to homogenize this diversity of experience is the reduction of culture to information, and much contemporary poetry has attempted, in one way or another, to beat its readers to that punch.[[13]](#endnote-13) Yet the culture of remediation may also provide the banal grounds against which a new set of aesthetic forms can appear in relief. To take seriously poetry’s claim to the aesthetic is to hold open its potential to produce new cultural forms whose very architecture resists their assimilation as information, without denying the processes of circulation and re-representation that undergird those forms. As Carson writes in the voice of Monica Vitti: “Everything might spill.”

Post-Medium Conditions—Format and Flow

The recent unmooring of aesthetic forms from the materials and technologies that occasioned them is what the art critic Rosalind Krauss has called “the post-medium condition,” and she roots this aesthetic revolution in the culture of television, where heterogeneous genres of representation are both subsumed in the larger structure of televisual flow and transmuted into the generic category of the image. The very dominance and blandness of the image as an experiential category then becomes the field against which alternative forms of perception can be recovered in their novelty and plasticity, making a space for artworks that deviate from the regime of medium-specificity.[[14]](#endnote-14) Krause thinks of these artworks as “inventing a medium” since they draw on the affordances of non-aesthetic materials or technologies (that is, on a knowledge of the practices those materials or technologies occasion), even as those materials or technologies may not be physically present in the work itself. What the term “post-medium” denotes is not that the artwork has no medium, nor that it exists outside of techno-culture, nor that it is properly conceptual, but rather that it refuses to be assimilated into existing traditions of aesthetic production, like painting, sculpture, or land art.

While I will ultimately want to temper this account of contemporary art, I want to stay for a moment with its technological backdrop, in order to specify how the media ecology Krauss describes has shifted since the 1970s. While digital, text-friendly technologies have augmented the image-culture of television with user-generated content, the rule of flow and remediation has only intensified.[[15]](#endnote-15) Yet the pervasiveness of the personal computer and other process-oriented technologies means that remediation itself has become intelligible as a heterogeneous collection of processes. As Alexander Galloway contends, these technologies demand that media theory wrest itself from a notion of the medium as a vehicle for communication, and attempt instead to think of media as enabling certain *actions*. [[16]](#endnote-16) In this view, communicating becomes one prototypical action among others, including computing, visualizing, mobilizing, and provoking. Finally, this shift in the conception of the medium seems to have as its aesthetic correlate a shift towards art practices that are participatory and site-specific, many of which belong to what Krauss would later describe as “the spectacle of meretricious art called installation.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

This shift to action presents a kind of crux for the strain of aesthetic thought in which I have framed my project, one premised on the long temporality of the artwork (or poem) and its resistance to encapsulation under a concept. While specific art practices have laid claim to action as an aesthetic medium (or as a mode of being an artist—say through “action painting,” or performance art, or happenings), the idea that art in general should be perceived as action would seem to complicate any claim dependent on the non-teleological character of artworks, including claims about the enduring social function of art and its autonomy from matters of political life. Most pointedly: if an artwork is seen to have a predetermined end, and if that end is to effect action in the world, then art would become a genre of rhetoric, propaganda, or advertising. Yet even in contemporary art, the privileged actions occasioned by artworks remain perception and contemplation. What has changed about aesthetic experience is that perception and contemplation have taken on their own material forms, manifest in what Fredric Jameson calls the “total flow” of postmodern culture.[[18]](#endnote-18) While our screens literalize and thereby augment the modernist stream of consciousness, our ways of interfacing with those screens foreground the at once scripted and volitional navigation of cultural forms. What has changed for aesthetic *theory* is that one can no longer avoid inscribing these materialized forms of perception and contemplation within a longer chain of action, one that may exceed the mind of the beholder and take on other observable forms in social life.[[19]](#endnote-19)

This materialization of perception, and its new legibility as a kind of action, finds its art historical formulation in David Joselit’s *After Art*, which I would like to posit as a dialectical complement to Krauss’s position as outlined above. Joselit urges us to rethink the banality of images, focusing on the image’s capacity for circulation and transformation. Indeed, the scale of image production and circulation in the present can make the critical ideal of attending to individual artworks seem quaint and our inattention to the art world’s modes of production (including its modes of producing reception) seem irresponsible. Against the singular art object, Joselit suggests scholars of contemporary art should attend to “formats”—that is, to the way forms writ large carry within themselves certain protocols for access, reproduction, and transformation. For Joselit, the artworks he considers “establish a rich texture of rights to action or rights to representation”; they are “heterogeneous and often provisional structures that channel content.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Since the role of these formats is to reorient those who interact with them, to shift their position within a network of accessibility, Joselit thinks of these formats as a part of a broader “epistemology of search,” in which the availability of cultural forms has transformed from an infrastructural dilemma to an epistemological one (metaphorically: less a matter of hardware than one of software). And this, in effect, gives us a strong formulation of total flow: that the condition of televisual flow is now the default setting of the sensorium, which is based less on the possibility of connection than on a practice of suspension. The task of the art historian would then be to recover the pattern of links that flow itself would repress or render arbitrary, and to realize that flow itself has enduring forms, be they technological, cultural, or institutional.

 What links these two versions of contemporary aesthetics—that of Joselit and that of Krauss—is that both are grounded in the fact of flow and the ubiquity of the image. The difference is that, where Joselit wants to study flow, Krauss wants to arrest it. Yet what Krauss calls “inventing a medium” might be equally thought of as a kind of reformatting: a redirection of perceptual flow along a certain line of art historical inquiry, one orthogonal to a set of normative expectations for artworks in the present. To call this change in direction “orthogonal” is to suggest the extent of the revision, yet this may elide the way that history itself is part of the fabric of the present, that the currency of a historical narrative or event or form is hardly proportional to the temporal proximity of its advent. While Krauss sees the artworks she admires as salvaging older or unvalued forms, the other side of the post-medium condition is that those forms are necessarily immersed in the larger structure of total flow. While the idea of form is what makes such revision palpable, it is flow, not form, that is both the condition for such salvage and the thing that is being revised.

 The literary works I consider below similarly root the problem of flow in specific media genres, a practice that makes the revisions of attention for which they advocate more readily legible. But the prerequisite for their thinking about flow is a shared fixation on the facts of distribution in time. The wiki, the pan-and-scanned film, the talking head, and the neon sign—the media that undergird these tropes are obviously eclectic, yet they all carry the logic of the public sphere in their projection of a normative spectator, a certain scale of reception, and particular rhythms of address. Whatever the failings of public sphere theory as a political project or as a sociological analysis, it has provided a framework for thinking about the role of affect, imagination, and projection in the reception of circulating forms. Chief among these innovations is an emphasis on the rhythms of reception and response that attend those forms, which differ from both the aesthetic ideal of the timeless and the technological ideal of immediacy. Media theory has tended to ground discussions of temporality in stories of technological innovation, and literary study has often followed suit, rooting the time of modernity, and that of postmodernity, in the technical capacities of various technologies. But as theorists of television have long known, this sense of modernity’s temporality is really a social (and industrial) ideology. Public sphere theory is helpful here because it cuts across these assumptions, triangulating the deep time of art and technology with the claims or demands of the present, and highlighting the social negotiations that media theorists are often at pains to address.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 — Modernity’s Flow: What the Neon Sign Says (Lisa Robertson)

[This should be a chapter showing how an experience of flow is constructed within a given literary work. The argument of this chapter has been a problem. In general, I want the chapter to culminate in a reading of Lisa Robertson’s *Debbie: An Epic* that focuses on its “screens”: entire pages occupied by texts whose color, size, and geometrical configuration set them apart from the pages (occupied by left-justified, numbered lines) in which Robertson sets out her feminist retelling of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. These screens are coded variously within the text by way of analogous media genres—the oration, skywriting, epitaphs, a frieze, video art, etc.—but they are also labelled “spurious” in the poem’s table of contents. The “all-over-ness” of the earliest screens (where the outermost parts of the text block are cut off by the edges of the page) suggests the kind of opticality that Greenberg found in the paintings of Jackson Pollack. But it also reminded me of Rosalind Krauss’s détournements of Greenberg and Fried’s terminology, in which she ultimately associates opticality with advertising, Pop art, and Op art.

Initially, I wanted to read these screens alongside the neon works of Bruce Nauman and Jenny Holzer, and to frame those readings with Benjamin’s adage from *One Way Street*: “What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says­—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.”[[21]](#endnote-21) This still strikes me as an important and suggestive gloss of the opticality in which these poems participate, both for its rejection of detail and its embrace of the ambient quality of the visual field. Moreover, the ambience of the street, and the implicit profusion of neon signs, seemed liked a necessary component for a genealogy of flow. I was here reminded of Pound’s review of Jean Cocteau’s *Poesies, 1917–1920*: “The life of a village is narrative; you have not been there three weeks before you know that in the revolution et cetera, and when M le Comte et cetera, and so forth. In a city the visual impressions succeed each other, overlap, over-cross, they are ‘cinematographic,’ but they are not a simple linear sequence. They are often a flood of nouns without verbal relations.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

There’s a lot to take on here—the poetic legacy of montage, for example, in so-called disjunctive poetics, and its difference from a potential (or merely suppressed) poetics of flow. So I could use this chapter to demonstrate how “flow” gives a model for poetic composition that is different from “montage,” possibly leading to a comparative reading of Pound and Robertson. The difficulty with invoking Pound and Benjamin here is that the neon sign and the urban street seem too rich with associations to be satisfactorily confined to one chapter.]

Chapter 2 — Pan-and-Scan Poetics (Anne Carson)

My second chapter considers how the logic of flow operates to erode the boundaries between cultural forms, focusing on the example of Anne Carson’s poems about the films of Michelangelo Antonioni. Carson, a contemporary poet and classicist, is notorious for poems that mix art, literature, and media forms from Thucydides to Godard, from Lao Tzu to Edward Hopper, from Clytemnestra to Venus Xtravaganza. In the moment of postmodernity, this recombination of source materials is typically read as a form of pastiche, yet I want to suggest that these poems are more productively and more accurately understood through Joselit’s notion of a format. In effect, the work of this chapter is to trace the types of action and re-representation occasioned by Carson’s poems, and to reframe the contemporary epistemology of search by way of their classical examples.

Carson’s linguistic remediation of Antonioni’s painterly cinema presents an extreme version of the way a film is panned-and-scanned for televisual broadcast, erasing the formal qualities of the frame but preserving (or creating) its “information.” At least part of Carson’s education in art films was obtained by means of a TV and VCR, and her methods of poetic adaptation suggest some features of the pan-and-scan process: the translation (and dubbing) of dialogue, the compression of running time, the foregrounding of narrative over atmosphere, and that of character over landscape. (Carson’s decision to “frame” this series of poems around the figure of Monica Vitti suggests not only such shifts in focus, but also that these films are properly texts, opened to each other in forms of mutual reference and malleable relation.[[23]](#endnote-23)) The first law of panning-and-scanning is to keep the person in the frame, something a poem does through its procedures of address and its system of recurrent pronouns. But the pan-and-scan’s condition of possibility is that the lost content—the environment that surrounds the characters—can be adequately inferred or implied: even in the original, the totality of space is only metonymically present in a rectangular image. Carson’s “Ode to the Sublime by Monica Vitti” gives these tactics for representing person and environment a nearly symmetrical form, since each of the sentences that Vitti utters in her poem contains the pronoun *everything*, which itself opens metonymically onto the world. But where other recurrent pronouns promise the stability of their referents, the deictic pronoun “everything” takes on different referents in each sentence; the juxtaposition of its many uses here exemplifies just how difficult actually envisioning “everything” would be. The serial deployment of “everything” in this poem, linked as it is to varying spaces and scales, leaves the reader with a lexical equivalent of Kant’s mathematical sublime—that we can name totality even as we feel its contents overwhelm us. The very truncation that gives definition to the photographic image is revealed as a mechanism of repression, and the plenitude of Antonioni’s visual compositions may be seen as compensation for a representational lack.

 In Carson’s companion essay “Foam,” the negotiation of totality by way of framing is extended to contemporary literary historicism in all its archival extension. Antonioni is placed in a genealogy with Longinus and his sources, especially Homer, Demosthenes, and Sappho. The context for this genealogy is Carson’s radical reinterpretation of Longinus’s *On the Sublime*: based on its author’s propensity for quotation, Carson recasts the sublime as a “documentary technique” in which the writer “loot[s] someone else’s life or sentences and make[s] off with a point of view, which is called ‘objective’ because you make anything into an object by treating it this way.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Part of the originality of this idea is that it makes the person who apprehends the sublime a participant in danger and not its potential victim—and this complication allows an experience of aesthetic pleasure to be superimposed on literature’s ideological functions in an unusually literal way. But this reversal also provides a suggestive figure for the truncating and sharing of experiences through social media and other interfaces within the contemporary epistemology of search. Quotation and abridgement here function as imperatives toward further circulation, while giving flow the kind of local structure that Joselit calls a format. And just as the Kantian sublime conjoins perceptual spillage and conceptual containment, so Carson’s sublime asks what conceptual configurations might usefully manage the flows that alight upon them. By aligning Antonioni’s abuse of the actress Lucia Bosé with Domosthenes’s indictment of “the man who hits” (itself a justification for murder), Carson poses a reader’s relationship to the organization of culture as both ethical and aesthetic, one that demands forms that are larger than any individual work.

Chapter 3 — Public, Access, Television (Anna Deavere Smith)

My third chapter continues to consider the ethical and formal problem of flow as it is posed by Carson’s essay, but it poses that problem in a more quotidian context: the sequence of talking heads in the larger flow of television news. Aligning the image and the voice, the talking head conjures a kind of alternative to political representation, where human bodies become the ambassadors of opinion, information, and expertise. The talking head is the organ of a phantom public sphere promised by television; but the dream of democracy it animates is less a political form than an aesthetic one. Anna Deavere Smith’s 1994 performance piece *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* offers a particularly powerful materialization of this aesthetic form, since it pits this ideal of the public sphere against an actual moment of civil unrest: the L.A. race riots that followed the 1992 acquittal of the police officers charged with the beating of Rodney King.

Composed through interviews with various people who were in some way connected to the trials, the riots, and the longer history of racial tensions in L.A., Smith’s performance attempts to represent the complexity of contemporary race-relations in the language of the *demos* itself, in all its conflict and contradiction, replicating not only the words of actual people but their particular manner of speaking. Smith roots her practice in her experience reciting a Shakespearean soliloquy as an acting student, and she thus confronts the logic of the talking head, and its aspirations toward political representation, with a comparable logic of poetic voice, in which the “marked” qualities of a person’s speech are read as politically representational. In rooting her practice in the genre of soliloquy, she sees her role as a performer as facilitating an interpersonal communication between the speaker and the spectator. But in order to scale up this communication to a properly political form, Smith also trades on the reworking of soliloquy in the Romantic lyric and its modern inheritors. In the printed lyric, from Wordsworth to Kamau Brathwaite, there is no such thing as idiolect, only dialect, since the printed lyric suggests an utterance shared between bodies. Yet by refusing to limit her discourse to a particular identity category or subject position, by recording and reproducing the specificity of a heterogeneous group of speakers, Smith can exemplify the limits of a politics of the voice, which contemporary poetry otherwise occludes. And by insisting on the utter specificity of the speakers she embodies, Smith likewise holds open a space for other categories, other modes of allegiance than the ones we presently have.

Of course, the form that grants these voices the authority of a Renaissance soliloquy is now the flow of television, and Smith suggests that performances of *Twilight* include video footage to contextualize the interviews—footage of the beating of Rodney King, of the murder of Latasha Harlins by a Korean shop owner, and of the beating of Reginald Denny, a white truck driver, by four black men.[[25]](#endnote-25) Indeed, the juridical aftermath of King’s beating was equally a trial of video’s legal and political power. Yet this is less an endorsement of the veracity of video footage than an account of its inevitability, an attempt to understand both the powers and the failures of the video form. In the preface to the Anchor Books edition of *Twilight*, Smith notes that, during the civil-rights trial that followed the original King verdict, the jurors could not initially agree whether King was in pain as he was being beaten: the attorney for the officers accused of violating King’s civil rights claimed that King was high on PCP during the altercation, and that the use of force was elevated to compensate for this anesthetic. “But when, during deliberations, they focused on the audio rather than the video image, their perspective changed. The physical image of Rodney King had to be taken away for them to agree that he was pain and responding to the beating.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

Chapter 4 – The Image Bank: Savings and Loan (Claudia Rankine, Tan Lin)

My final chapter turns to the personal negotiation of televisual flow, of publically disseminated images and their perceived actuality, in the work of Tan Lin and Claudia Rankine. Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and Lin’s *Insomnia and the Aunt* each include in the body of their text images that are framed, literally and narratively, by the television sets that disseminate them. The at times debilitating negotiation of identity through such images is a common theme of both works, yet their protagonists also find in American mass culture the schemes by which they can (tentatively) make sense of or continue with their own lives. This ambivalence toward the content of television is inevitably extended to the medium itself, and at times the relation of these narrators to their television sets seems to exemplify an observation by Raymond Williams: that television may be less the cause of social alienation than its symptom—a kind of would-be therapy to compensate for the disintegration of traditional communities in the wake of various waves of urbanization and global migration. Not only does television’s relationship to insomnia and other social disorders figure heavily in both books, but each book seems to replicate something of the unstoppable and indeterminate temporal extension characteristic of televisual flow, where who exactly is talking, thinking, and feeling becomes difficult to ascertain.

In these and other ways, each of these books recalls Lauren Berlant’s characterization of mass-cultural narratives as “autobiographies of collective experience.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Both texts weave together narratives taken from multiple sources to create representative forms of personal pathos, and yet the occasion for that pathos is at least partly mass culture itself. As if to pry these positive and negative relationships to mass culture apart, both books also literalize the genre of collective autobiography through another technological correlate: undergirding the narrative structure of each work is a citational apparatus that recalls, in form and content, the Wikipedia page—a genre that aspires to wed the technology of collective authorship to a properly voiceless prose style. The “Notes” that follow *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* anchor the narrative’s prose fragments not only with documentary sources, but also with assorted “trivia” related to the cultural forms it cites: that Tom Cruise won a Golden Globe award for his performance in *Magnolia*; that the poet Joseph Brodsky died of a heart attack in his Brooklyn apartment in 1996; or that *Stage Door* was nominated for three Academy Awards. In effect, these “Notes” mediate between the potentially idiosyncratic connections of the main narrative and the larger web of American culture, triangulating Rankine’s speakers and her readers against the properly public. (Lin’s *Insomnia* accomplishes this even more literally by ornamenting his narrative with footnotes to “Google reverse searches,” which match select sentences to their nearest neighbor in the searchable Web.) Yet the content of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* suggests that our movements through this web are directed by different metadata: the ubiquity of aging, illness, depression, and ultimately death. Lin’s book, too, ends by chronicling a series of personal losses and medical diagnoses, in which insomnia and autism are foregrounded as disorders of relation to both people and time. What both works present is a need to reconfigure a mode of televisual identification through a fantasy of Web-collectivity, using the latter to reclaim a plasticity of identification once promised by literary form.

1. Stewart’s call was one of the few acknowledgements in that two-day event that poetry might exist alongside contemporary visual culture and its technologies of transmission—something that, of course, would hold across the entire 61 years of the National Book Awards. Stephen Burt, Tony Hoagland, James Longenbach, Maureen McLane, and Susan Stewart. "Lineage: Poets Reflect on American Poetry Since 1950.” Center for Book Arts, New York City. February 25, 2011. <https://youtu.be/hmfstjjuwUk> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I take this understanding of “actuality” from Miriam Hansen’s *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 75–76. See also Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s –abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 50–52. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Susan Stewart, “On the Art of the Future,” in *The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Epstein, *Attention Equals Life*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Epstein, *Attention Equals Life*, 41–45, 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For exemplary versions of these ideas see Johnathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) and Paul North’s *The Problem of Distraction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Johnathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Lily Gurton-Wachter, *Watchwords: Romanticism and the Poetics of Attention* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Margaret Koehler, *Poetry of Attention in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. An early, exemplary version of this re-articulation of historical time through technology is found in Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 74–76. The application of the notion of “deep time” to man-made cultural forms was first ventured in Siegfried Zielinski’s *Deep Time of the Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006 [German ed., 2002]) and Wai Chee Dimock’s *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Unviersity Press, 2006), although the desire for literature and art to be a “timeless” or trans-historical medium is clearly much older. Susan Stewart gives a philosophically nuanced treatment of these concerns in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), especially “The Problem of Poetic History,” 242–253, which anticipates in many respects Dimock’s approach. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Gilles Deleuze all but prophesized this world order in his late “Postscript on The Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992), 3–7. More recently these features have been independently and retroactively catalogued by, among others, Rebecca Solnit in her “Diary: In the Day of the Postman,” *London Review of Books*, 29 August 2013. These short essays effectively bookend the period I address in my dissertation, during which a theoretical inkling becomes a rhetorical commonplace. Epstein’s *Attention Equals Life* begins its inaugural chapter with a long quotation from Solnit. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. From *The Boston Globe*, May 27, 2013: “Another study found that students, when left to their own devices, are unable to focus on homework for more than two minutes without turning to web surfing or email. Adults in the workforce can make it to about 11 minutes.” Quoted in Solnit, “Diary,” *LRB* 35.16. I here make gentle reference to E.B. Thompson, who make a similar set of claims about clocks and the workday. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The commitment to a conception of attention as enduring and unwavering is particularly puzzling in the realm of aesthetics, since the social utility of art—for everyone from Viktor Shklovsky to Walter Benjamin, to Jacques Rancière, to Epstein himself—has been linked to its ability to alter the way we attend to the world around us. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For work on contemporary poetry from the perspective of the culture of information, see: Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Brian M. Reed, *Nobody’s Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Paul Stephens, *The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Rosalind Krauss, *“A Voyage on the North Sea”: The Work of Art in the Age of Its Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998?). Krauss’s remarks on image-culture more broadly are indebted to Fredric Jameson’s essay “Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity,” collected in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 2009 [1998]). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Tara McPherson, “Reload: Liveness, Mobility, and the Web” from *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, eds. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas W. Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2006). As Tom Mitchell and Mark Hansen have noted, Grusin and Bolter’s *Remediation*, one of the foundational texts for the study of new media, is in many respects a long gloss on McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, the foundational text for television studies. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The most compelling arguments for a process-oriented conception of contemporary media may be the ones offered by Galloway in his essay “Gamic Action: Four Moments,” in *Gaming: Essays in Algorithmic Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006?) and in the introduction to *The Interface Effect* (London: Polity, 2012?)*.* But we can find a version of this insight in the writings of numerous contemporary media theorists, including: [Mark Hansen’s *New Philosophy for New Media* in here?] Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: New Media and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); and David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). The work of French sociologist Bruno Latour, and the Actor–Network–Theory with which he is associated, by turns motivates and parallels these developments insofar as he envisions a reciprocal shaping of action by human and non-human agents. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalsim*, 76–78. See also “Culture and Finance Capital” in *The Cultural Turn*, 155–161*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jacques Rancière’s contribution to this debate has been to shift the scene of the aesthetic away from the mind of the beholder and onto the properly social reactions an artwork may provoke, which Rancière would call a *dissensus*. In effect, the inability of the mind to grasp an aesthetic form under a concept (as in Kant’s formulation of the beautiful) is manifest, not in the temporal experience of the form by an individual, but in an inability to come to agreement about the nature of that form in social life, or through the indeterminate multiplicity of actions that form might provoke. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Joselit, *After Art*, 52. Joselit’s notion of a format, framed as it is with Pierre Huyghe’s *The Third Memory* and Sidney Lumet’s *Dog Day Afternoon*, recapitulates in other terms the theory of cinema as a public sphere advanced by Alexander Kluge and Miriam Hansen. Joselit’s principle innovation here is perhaps to acknowledge at once the multiple seriality of all cultural forms alongside the multiplicity of the actions they occasion. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), vol. 1, 476. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Erza Pound, “Briefer Mention,” *The Dial* 70.1 (January 1921), 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. I’m thinking here of “Ode to the Sublime by Monica Vitti,” discussed below, as well as “Kant’s Question About Monica Vitti,” “Mia Moglie (Longinus’ *Red Desert*),” “Longinus’ Dream of Antonioni,” and “L’.” See the “Sublimes” section of Carson’s *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 59–71. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Carson, *Decreation*, 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Anna Deavere Smith, “General Production Note” for *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2003), 4.  [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (New York: Random House, 1994), xx. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)