THE ECHO OF NARCISSISM IN INTERACTIVE ARTS

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from *Literatures in the Digital Era: Theory and Praxis*, eds. Amelia Sanz and Dolores Romero (2009)

Cultural theorists have long likened and linked artistic disciplines with Ovid's account of Narcissus. They establish such links directly, or through a mediating semiotic or psychoanalytic discourse, thereby retelling Ovid's myth, retooling accounts of the formation of the psyche, and reassessing the nature of artistic processes simultaneously. Examples of such trine claims are so numerous they can be grabbed in fistfuls: Gray Kochhar-Lindgren conflates Narcissus with the novelist, citing Linda Hutchins' claim that "the novel from its beginnings has always nurtured a self-love, a tendency towards self-obsession" and, nodding to Freud and Lacan, he sees Narcissus, novelists, and entities in general as sharing a subjectification by the "symbolic order of language and culture" (4). Film theorist Charles Altman claims that, like Narcissus-centered readings of Ovid, much of film theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis valorize masculine-visual experience over feminine-aural experience (270). Steven Levine notes that the process of painting turns an artist's canvas into Narcissus's mirror. He imagines Monet "bent over," with his "self-reflective presence" "implicitly mirrored" in his lily pond paintings.

> There we come face to face with the writing body of the aged artist. Bending over the scrumbled surface of his art, we watch as he entrusts his inevitably vain efforts at self-posession to the allegories of Narcissus, or at least to their real counterparts in the weeping willows and passing reflections in a pond. (191)

Indeed, considering his own book on such artistic narcissism, and bending over the pages of his preface, Levine imagines himself exhibiting the same narcissistic tendency as Monet: "Suspended over an image in these pages I am Narcissus," he says. But he goes on to say that "separated from the sources of these words I am Echo as well" (xvii). Thus Levine, and many who have used the myth as metaphor, imagine a paradigm in which Narcissus represents the process of artistic production of the quintessential male subject reaching toward the symbolic, the unattainable phallus. On the other hand, Ovid's wood-nymph Echo, Narcissus' spurned lover, represents the environmental receptacle, the world's reception of and response to that art. In her review of Levine's book, Jennifer Shaw describes this Lacanian use of the Ovidian metaphor as "proceed[ing] according to a paradigm in which "feminine" nature becomes a screen for male self-actualization" (1). Echo here is the world that stands in attentive awe at the Narcissistic artist's creation, and lacks voice to impinge upon and critique that creation, save with recontextualised, second-hand words and images provided by and originating in the original art or artist.

Springboarding from Kristeva and Salomé's interest in the creative instinct inherit in narcissism, and indeed Lacanian theories of the mirror-stage, cultural theorists attempting to explain artistic and semiotic/psychoanalytic processes tend to thus leave Echo in a subordinate, secondary or subaltern position, rather than depict her as a helpful conterposition to Narcissus. Yet there is a growing wealth of critical work that resituates or celebrates Echo somewhat in this artist-audience paradigm. Music theorist David Schwartz claims that Steve Reich' reflects what "happens to Echo in Ovid's Metamorphosis," saying the figure of Echo resembles a solo performer's relation to a

taped performance, and mimics a Lacanian acoustic mirror, a pre-symbolic relation between a not-yet-perceived-as-such self and the mother's voice: "pieces presents the listener with a fantasy of sonorous oneness; as the soloist and tape diverge, we hear a clear acoustic mirror as one voice literally echoes another" (46). Feminist theorists especially, and perhaps understandably, have taken up Echo's neglected voice as their own. Amy Lawrence notes the Echo-like repression of women's voices under the dominant paradigm of the masculine, narcissistic image in 20th century film. And, in that it answers western, narcissistic views of the body, as Ovid's Echo "answers" Narcissus, Ava Gerber's "body art" is taken by feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak to exemplify an echoistic trope that advances beyond a "rotarian epistemology of *advancing* from the Imaginary to the Symbolic[.]" (35-38)

Altman, Lawrence and others have pointed out the mutual inclusiveness of the audio and visual image, that "Even the Greeks […] knew that the story of Narcissus is incomplete without that of Echo: the audio mirror completes the video mirror" (Altman, 270). Hollander notes that when Ovid's Narcissus says "Keep your arms from me! / Be off! I'll die before I yield to you," what is echoed back to him is determined by environmental factors. He shows that the ricochet of sound waves in an echo cannot come back to the ear of the speaker until the speech terminates, or else the primary and secondary sounds would collide in mid-air. Also, if Narcissus' original elocution ricochets off, say, distant mountainsides, the post-terminal echo will seem of longer duration to the speaker than if it bounced off a nearby cliff (19-20). That Echo cannot respond to Narcissus with "I'll die before I yield to you," but rather just "I yield to you," thus serves to embody and position her and him in space and time. Seeing the newness of

an echo is not a new seeing on the part of Hollander. He is only echoing Thoreau's

"Sounds" chapter from Walden, where, describing distant echoing bells, Thoreau writes:

> *The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood; the same trivial words and notes sung by a wood-nymph.* (Hollander, 20)

Similarly for Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, Echo, by figuring this "alteration which insinuates itself in all repetition, thus call[s] into question, by the acoustic return of the utterance onto itself, its originary intention and identity" (629). Hollander notes that sound is made possible only in the bounce-back of forces off objects of resistance or tension: the larynx, the nasal cavity, molecules in the air, the diaphragm in a telephone receiver. That this law of acoustics and physics has semiological repercussions and parallels, informs poststructuralists who maintain that "it is impossible for us to say exactly what we mean, for if we say anything at all we say more than one thing" (Humphries, 33). If Echo is thus vital in the formation of Narcissus's identity, her echo-locutions no longer seem post-lapsarian, corrupted, inferior, or even secondary. The two would-be lovers' relationship becomes non-hierarchical, though they remain inter-dependent, non-identical entities.

Such an Echo, no longer secondary and subaltern to an original Narcissus, seems ideal for this so-called postmodern age in which ploy-vocality is valorized and authors and artists are relentlessly toppled from their pedestals of narcissistic subjectivity. Echo's rise is the rise of the DJ's who feels as much of an artist as the musicians he or she samples and loops. It is the rise of the collage artist appropriating and recontextualizing

the work of the photographer. And it is the rise of their opinion that their artistic echoings represent no falling away from a primal, perfect originality.

Echo's rise seems especially well suited for interactive hypermedia in the digital realm. Online on Myspace or Youtube, art, video and music endlessly multiply and permeate a non-hierarchical democratic framework of hyperlinks. Digital realms manifest an uncorrupt Echo, for copied ones and zeros of binary code do not deteriorate; there are no "originals." Accordingly, during the last few decades, "first-generation" hypermedia enthusiasts, J. David Bolter, George Landow, and Richard Lanham and others, have generally touted new interactive hypertext technologies, claiming they subvert tyrannies of linearity in old-school left-to-right print, fixed meanings, one-way flows of signs from subject-author to object-reader.

> The characteristic flexibility of this reader-centered information technology means, quite simply, that students have a much greater presence in the system, both as potential contributors and collaborative participants abut also readers who choose their own paths through the materials. (Delaney, Landow, 14)

Early hypertext enthusiasts have rallied behind them postmodernist theorists, arguing that "hypertext embodies many of the ideas and attitudes proposed by Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and others" (Landow, qtd. in Shakelford, 283). Stuart Moulthrop quotes Barthes to complain that Borges' stories "for all their allusiveness and formal instability," are "definitive, material productions restricted both by the immutability of their medium (the printed page) and by social practices (authoritative texts, the law of copyright) to a single set of discursive possibilities" (Delaney, Landow, 123). While authorial subjectivity and the printed word have been thus pooh-poohed, Echo has been hailed as "a patron deity of interactive art"(Rokeby, 8).

But in the midst of all this celebration of the echo, what happens to Narcissus? Has he drowned in his own image? Or has a happier ending to Ovid's tale been ushered in by interactive hypermedia? Are the two lovers now somehow closer or more compatible? To attempt an answer, to find what new scenario this new heightened interactivity gives us, let us consider some specific examples of interactive art—non-digital and digital, text and hypertext—while keeping in mind Echo and Narcissus as a possible paradigm for the relationship between text and reader, art and audience.

Obliquely placed in one of the British Library's many odd corners sits a bronze sculpture of a ball and chain tied to a half-opened book nearly the size and shape of a park bench. This is Bill Woodrow's *Sitting on History* (1990), the meeting point for many who take the library's guided tour. If you take the tour, the guide will probably end up telling you a little bit about the piece, adding that the work is not yet finished, and will only be finished when someone "comes and sits on it." According to this guide, the sculptor and the sculpture were inviting me to give up being a mere passive observer, and integrate myself into their master plan, thereby, recontextualizing it.

The artist and this tour guide were taking literally, and physically realizing, Marcel Duchamp's famous, now almost cliché, declaration that "the spectator makes the picture." I didn't sit on the bench, but stood at a mid-distance, observing, considering, re-interpreting it. To force this book into a bench shape, Woodrow had had its covers ostensibly thoroughly abused, bent, pulled back nearly to their binding. There was this rupturing spine, the humiliation of this ball and chain. I considered what must have been the artist's point: It was that books are, like a ball and chain, *incarcerating* objects, especially for British Library readers who have chosen a life of dusty cloistered study. To

help us get our revenge on this effigy book, I figured, Woodward has here violently ripped back its covers so any passersby could viscerally express disdain for the world of books by having a sit, a pantomimed shit, a symbolic defecation on the pages of all books everywhere. One could, I thought, so easily rewrite the title (not *Sitting on History*, but) *S(h)itting on History*.

The guide put an end to this rather quickly. She said she knew the ball and chain looked like a negative critique of books, but she made sure to "assure" us it referred to a bygone era when books were chained to desks to discourage thieves. Immediately my echoing inner voice, reconfiguring and reinterpreting as an spectator of art, was shut down.

Of course, Duchamp's point need not be taken literally, or necessarily involve physically sitting on a work of art. It needn't have any more to do with interactive art than art in general. He was likely trying to make a point that all art is interactive, just as the repetitious echoings of interpretation occur in the mind of any viewer of art, and it is that same mind that makes the perception and conception of art possible by its ability to reproduce a concept of that art within itself. The separation of mind and art then can be understood to be:

> *ungraspable in linguistic, poetic or phenomenological terms. Neither in the form nor the content of a statement could we assign an intrinsic difference between the statement I am pronouncing here, now, in my so-called speaking voice[…] and the same sentence retained in an inner instance, mine or yours.* (Derrida, 288)

This sense of the interdependence of art and audience is the interdependence of Narcissus and Echo. Every identity can thus be seen as locked in a continuous process of self-formulation by echolocation at the moment that its "sonorous source attempts to rejoin itself, dividing, differing, deferring without end" (Derrida, 288)

In this way, Woodward's "Sitting on History" is not, in my view and relatively speaking, interactive art, other than in the sense that you can sit on it, because interactive art makes *physical as well as conceptually manifest* this proposed symbiosis between Narcissus and Echo. The physical manifestation of a bench on which I as an audience could physically integrate myself was apparently not backed up by an equivalent interpretive flexibility that every other piece of art in existence has (according to Duchamp). But if we do accept, as in our reading of Duchamp, that *all* art is in a way interpretively flexible (except Woodward's), and therefore interactive, then we must come up with other qualifiers for what makes proper "interactive" art. Should we agree with David Rokeby, an interactive artist, who claims that some art serves "to discourage subjective readings and others work to encourage them? (1)." To *measure* the extent to which subjective readings are encouraged or discouraged, if such measurings are even possible, we must consider more art.

Laurence Sterne's novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, is an early, 18th century example of an art piece that is physically modified by the reader. The reader is asked to call for pen and ink in order to "paint" a picture of a hypothetical mistress, to better illustrate the tempestuous charms of a "widow Wadman," Sterne then leaves a page blank in the middle of the tome, upon which one might ostensibly follow these instructions. Imagining the instructions to have been followed, Sterne then cries:

> *Was ever any thing in Nature so sweet!-so exquisite! […] Thrice happy book! thou wilt have one page, at least, within thy covers, which Malice will not blacken and which Ignorance cannot misrepresent.* (from Rokeby, 2)

This becomes a physical representation of a conceptual structure of interplay, troped by Narcissus and Echo, between art and audience. For here Sterne is made "literal and

visible the implicit inscription of the reader's subjectivity into the body of the book"

(Rokeby, 2). Such re-configurable literature emerged again in 1979, over two centuries

after Sterne's book was written, when Random House published the first book in its

Choose Your Own Adventure series. This short novel, *The Cave of Time*, was novel for

me in that it used the second person "you" to address me, asked me to choose from a

series of storyline options, and then directed me to the page that would show how my

choice panned out.

Fine. But in a strict sense, there really isn't much interactivity going on in these

examples; there is no encouragement or discouragement of subjectivity that I can see. For

Sterne's interactivity is simply spawned by an authorial injunction for the reader to

"paint" *X*, and after a blank page, the authorial text picks back up again under the

assumption that the reader, like a good automaton, had done precisely as he or she was

told. Similarly, *The Cave of Time* offers hardly anything more than the *illusion* of

physical interactivity. Its choices are prescribed binaries, and the same author or authors

who wrote the choices also wrote their consequences for the reader or the art's audience.

Interactive artist Steven Rokeby imagines the possibility of a far more malleable

interactivity in art, a far greater creative role for its audience. He imagines systems that

are so interactive they become, as McLuhan terms them, "extensions of man," where

> *the flow of information goes both ways; the apparati become more like*
> *permeable membranes. If there is a balance of flow back and forth across*
> *this membrane, then the interactive technology is an intermingling of self*
> *and environment. If there is an imbalance, then the technology extends*
> *either outwards from the organic boundary of the interactor or inwards*
> *into the interactor.* (from Rokeby, 13)

For Rokeby, this notion of the permeable membrane becomes a guiding principle in his

interactive pieces. A computer in his interactive art piece *Very Nervous System*, through a

video camera, sees and tracks the movements of an interactive spectator who physically and entirely permeates the art's membrane. The computer instantly reconfigures impressions made by the interactor's motions into sounds. These sounds, then, simultaneously reflect and accompany the person's gesticulations, "thereby transforming the interactor's awareness of his or her body" (9). This transformation, this on-going metamorphosis, is *Very Nervous System's* raison d'être. Interactive to the highest degree, without the movements of its audience, the art physically ceases to exist. Unlike "Sitting on History," *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, or *The Cave of Time*, "Very Nervous System" is thus no longer a closed, predetermined, authorially inscribed system. As its voice is in flux and configured by its audience who are able to physically permeate it and act upon it, its inner structure becomes the echo-chamber. "Like Echo," Rokeby says, "the interactive artist transforms what is given by the interactor into an expression of something other" (8). Indeed, structurally speaking, interactive art *becomes* Echo.

But it cannot be Echo all alone. As we have seen, Echo and Narcissus are independently non-existent. Thus an art of which Echo is the trope must have an audience or interactor that is troped by Narcissus and inscribed by narcissism. Such a role reversal, which increasingly becomes the case as interactive art becomes increasingly interactive, fulfills the general paradigmatic dynamic in Spivak's "Narcissus-Echo *pair*," which she rightly describes as ever *spinning* in *flux*, in a "contentless, enclitic, monsterative vector" (35). Thus, the audience in "Very Nervous System" become a multiple of Narcissus, creating extensions of themselves into the device that has become nothing more than the echoing servomechanism of their whims. All interactive art, then, all hypermedia, seem to do nothing to "free" their audience, as has been claimed by the proponents of such art

and media. In fact, interactivity secretly privileges the eternal phallo-centrism of Narcissus, as it turns its audience into him. As much as it gives us, it taketh away. It tends to ignore our desires to be acted upon, as much as it fulfills our desires to be the narcissistic actor.

This inherit narcissim of the interactor in interactive systems has been underscored by George Felton, who claims "interactivity's key premise is that, at long last, I get to direct the action… I'll soon be able to sit in my living room and press a button routing the movie/book/CD/experience-mechanism in the direction I want it to go" (1). But Felton soon sees the limits in hyper systems over which he has complete complete control: "When I'm finally free to direct where everything goes, I'll never go anywhere I don't intend. In fact, I'll never learn anything new, just keep recycling a few of my favorite things"(1). Turning into Narcissus, Felton soon becomes nostalgic for the non-interactive paradigm, in which he would be acted *upon* by art, and imagines the benefits of a non-hypertext version of *Walden:*

> *Nor do I need to have a "conversation" with Thoreau in which I determine what's interesting and get appropriate text bytes in response. If it took him two years to live the book, nine years to write it, and six drafts to get it right, I can at least shut up and let him determine what's interesting. (1)*

"First-generation" hypermedia enthusiasts seem to miss the clandestine phallo-centric desire inherit in interactive media whenever they tout hypertext as an escape from the linear tyrannies print. The internet, like pamphleteering did during the English Civil War, as has been recognized by Amanda Griscom and others, puts words and information into the hands of "ordinary people." Yet there has been a wealth of theory in recent decades that seems to suggest that interactive media is structurally less tyrannical than print.

Griscom cites Robert Coover's claim that the "novel's alleged power is embedded in the line, that compulsory author-directed movement from the beginning of a sentence to its period, from the top of a page to its bottom" (4). But, other than shifting the roles, and making the audience Narcissus and the art Echo, interactive art does not seem to allow for any less tyranny nor any more conceptual freedom than does standard, non-interactive media, since art only ever exists in the conceptions of it we hold in our heads.

Griscom seems to mildly taunt the so-called "Luddite" Sven Birkerts, when she asks him if "hypertext [is] capricious in that it supplies "gaps" into which the reader fills his or her imagination?"(26). Is she implying that Birkirts shies from interactive hypermedia because he has questionable imaginative skills? If so, I must raise a flag in his defense, suggested by the last 40 years of post-structuralist semiotics. For I would maintain that that language in general, every word of it, is riddled with such "gaps," the very ones "into which the reader fills his or her imagination." We cannot have it both ways. We can either read language as having a phenomenological power over us, or as absolutely indeterminate, arbitrary and shifty. Some words cannot have relatively greater gaps, even though they might come couched in a hypertext link. Such links, and all interactive art, can physically trope that gap, for that is what interactive art does and is, but the gap it makes allows no greater room for interpretive maneuvering.

Interpretations of art are neither accurate nor inaccurate. For representation of mental activity becomes altered the moment Sterne's reader translates it to ink and paper. And if his reader were to accidentally drip ink upon the page, and close Sterne's book, the resultant Rorschach inkblot would forever be a sign for him to interpret or mis-interpret as arbitrarily as they would had it been there from Sterne's hand. Reading

Thoreau's Walden from cover to cover, the old-fashioned way, with a playful mind will elicit, facilitate, or host just as many newnesses and revelatory inter-mental echoings than if they were to put him in front of an online interactive network, because just as a non-active mind is told what to think and when to think it by linear tyranny, similarly he or she is told what to click, and where that click will take him or her, in an interactive network. The tyranny of the link only incarcerates those who cannot (not click, but) think beyond its confines.

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