



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

1997

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Suggested citation:

McIntosh, David (1997) Driving mauve desert: Borrowing, translation and navigation in hypertext. Fuse Magazine, 20 (5). pp. 24-38. ISSN 0838-603X Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1265/>

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BORROWING, TRANSLATION AND NAVIGATION IN HYPERTEXT

by David McIntosh

The Library is total. It contains all that is given to express in all languages: the minute detailed history of the future, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books. Every copy is unique, irreplaceable, but there are always several hundred imperfect facsimiles: works which differ only in a letter or a comma.

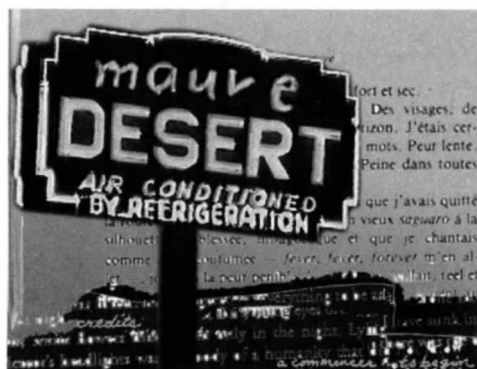
—Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*



Borges' prescient metaphysical fictions predate the computer era, having been written in the 1940s, but works such as *The Library of Babel* feel strangely familiar and resonant in an era of Internet information overload. Given that the Net is often conceived of as an endless book with a mutable page order, the metaphor of "The Library" shifts into and substitutes for the infinite utopia of "The Net" with startling ease. Borrowing from the mathematical fields of algebra and geometry to conjure his magical and impossible worlds of

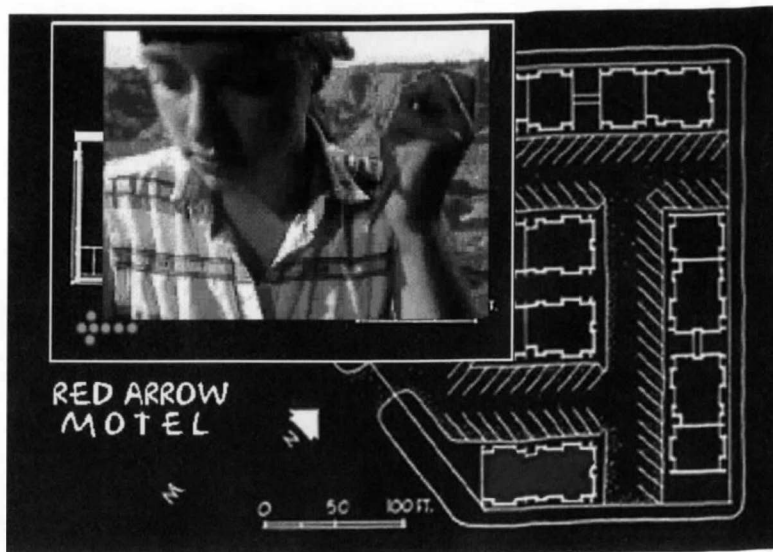
"combinative analysis illustrated with examples of variation and repetition," Borges has in turn become the target of more prosaic borrowing by a range of contemporary technology and hypertext theorists. Borges' fictions have been activated as underlying myths for the purpose of legitimating certain culturally based pseudo-science investigations. Literary theorists like Katherine Hayles have engaged in extensive transdisciplinary borrowing from Borges' story "The Garden of the Forking Path" as well as from science-based notions of physics to legitimate their rhetoric of non-linearity, disruption of traditional narrative logic and individual empowerment.

Despite extensive and compelling deconstructions of the fictiveness of science by scientists like Evelyn Fox Keller, Sandra Harding and Bruno Latour, some cultural theorists continue to borrow from fashionable science disciplines, especially physics and genetics, in order to bask in the reflected glow of a dominant discourse of authority and power. Some parasitic hypertext theorists have institutionalized and professionalized leading-edge physics theory for purposes of personal gain and prestige. Repositioning their overdone postmodern literary theories within a self-serving and derivative framework of the radical democratic potential of random access inherent in digital technologies, most of these hypertext theorists borrow extensively and incorrectly from notions of non-linearity in physics to support their jacked-up liberationist claims for intertextuality and the divergence of writing and reading trajectories in hypertext.



Hypertext critic and producer Martin Rosenberg makes an important scientific distinction between two fields of physics: time-reversible dynamic forces (determined, geometric and symmetrically linear forces) and time-irreversible thermodynamic processes (contingent, spontaneous, non-linear processes). The literary theory of political difference between linear reading of printed text and "non-linear" reading of digital hypertext simply does not follow from these differences in fields of the study of physics. Working from the premise that "the technological environment of hypertext remains functionally indifferent to the chosen trajectory of the reader," Rosenberg argues that cultural misreadings of the physics of non-linearity render the theoretical desire for perfect freedom and control over experience in hypertext just another seduction into the calculus of leaping backward and forward in time, into the physics of symmetry, reversibility and determinism. In other words, the science of the physics of non-linearity as misappropriated by some hypertext theorists implies serves to disguise the true limits on hypertext readers to make contingent or liberated meaning within determined and delimited technology. Given that linearity is inevitable in both literature and hypertext, the rhetorical "non-linearity" of hypertext theory might be more usefully and accurately described as multi-linearity—multiple choice within a range of linearly constitutive units/options. "Hypertext rhetoric must take into account more than just the ordering of language. It must also address a more complicated meta-management in which the user modifies ordering processes themselves."¹

The difference between non-linear and multi-linear may strike some as baroque techno-minutiae, but, as fictive as it may be, science maintains real power and it must be borrowed from accurately and cautiously. Theoretical missteps through imprecise borrowing can have clear and dangerous effects on lived reality, as witnessed in the current nefarious borrowing of the notion of "nomad" by technological corporatists from elegant theoretical works. Techno-skeptic Sean Cubitt fears that with the increasing spread of "nomad" inspired Internet culture and its accompanying "unstable form of regressive hyperindividuation [and] contradictory formation of a narcissistic culture found in the affirmation of selfhood, we are witnessing the emergence of a subject position modelled on the nomadic transnational corporation." Cubitt describes the nomadic tactic as one "which had appeared as an appropriate use of weakness to defeat the designs of power, [but] has become the strategy of



All images from the CD-ROM *Mauve Desert* by Adriene Jenik. Courtesy of the artist.

power itself, now rendered free of place by speed of communication."² In this context of self-legitimizing borrowing from both science and fiction, and of technology-driven theories of empowerment going bad, Borges' algorithmic fictions continue to shine through with poetry, clarity and imaginative power, and to point to completely other processes of creative resistance in a digital era.

In the case of Nicole Brossard's 1987 novel *Mauve Desert* and Adriene Jenik's recently published hypertext CD-ROM *Mauve Desert*, the process that is integral to the poetic power of each piece as well as to the relationship between the pieces is that of translation, not

borrowing. One of Quebec's most accomplished poets and novelists, Brossard is perhaps best known for the lush, seductive beauty of her language and for her experimental disruptions of traditional narrative forms; she has pioneered an artistic approach to intertextuality, multi-linearity and multi-media in print that is exemplary for digital projects. *Mauve Desert* (the novel) is structured around a series of translation processes. The book is comprised of three separate novellas: the first, titled *Mauve Desert*, is by fictitious author Laure Angstelle and tells the story of fifteen-year-old Melanie, a wild child who lives with her mother and her mother's girlfriend at their Arizona desert motel; the second, titled *A Book to Translate*, is written by Maude Laure, a Montreal school teacher who discovers the first novella and writes about her obsession with translating it into French; and the third is titled *Mauve, the Horizon*; it is Maude Laure's eventual translation of the first novella.



In conversation with the author of *Mauve Desert*, Maude the translator claims "Reading gives me every right" to which Laure Angstelle the author replies:

But as a translator you have none. You've chosen the difficult task of reading backwards in your language what in mine flows from source.

Brossard conjures the complex process of translation in exacting and evocative detail:

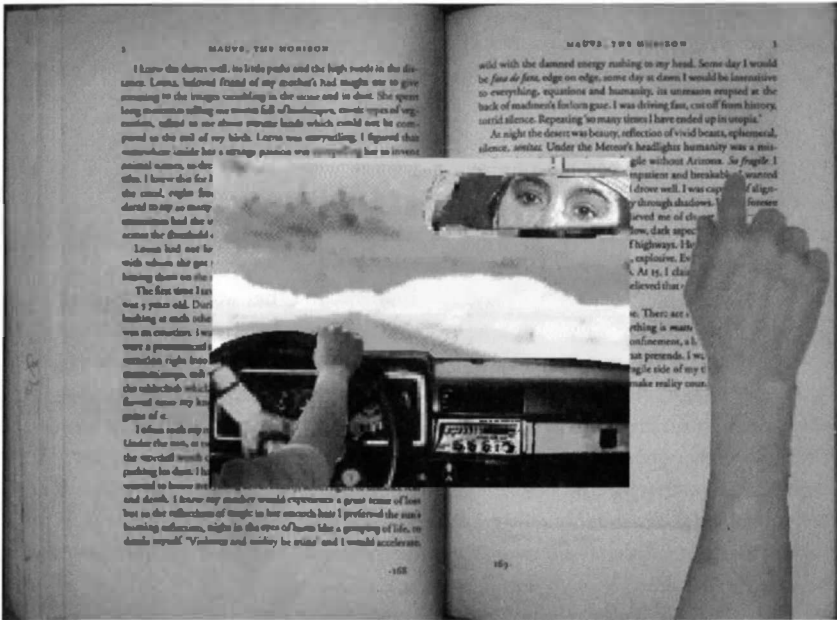
[Maude] suddenly had the feeling that she was going to be nothing but a resonance instrument. . . . She progressively got accustomed to the idea of becoming a voice of both other and alike in the world derived from Laure Angstelle. She would be alone in her language. Then would come substitution.

Maude contemplates her translator's voice as one which would "activate the hypotheses, adapt the adornment, adjust the folds, the ornament, the anecdote ensuing from it like a work, regulate the alternating movement of fiction and truth."³

In many ways, former Paper Tiger TV video producer and now CD-ROM artist Adriene Jenik has taken over and extended Maude Laure's role as translator. Jenik began work on adapting Brossard's novel as a film script some years ago, but soon realized that the irreversible time and space constraints inherent in the film medium prohibited her from adequately translating the subtleties of the intricate structure and process of *Mauve Desert*. The combination of random access and multi-media potential (simultaneous moving image, graphics, sound and text) of the CD-ROM medium allowed Jenik to develop what amounts to another language to translate into. Paralleling the CD-ROM's unique capacity for user-directed navigation, Jenik has established a central motif of a map of a corner of the Arizona desert where "the heat, the inexorable light transforms lives of flesh into the bare bones of narrative" and where we enter the next layer of the piece by driving into the desert horizon with Melanie in a white Meteor, escaping her mother and the Motel, contemplating the beauty and horror of her young life:

Here in the desert, fear is precise. Never an obstacle. Fear is real, it is nothing like anguish. It is localized, familiar and inspires no fantasies. At the Motel though, fear is diffuse, televised like a rape, a murder, a fit of insanity.

Jenik speaks to us from behind the map, warning us as we drive *Mauve Desert* to 'keep in mind where you sit and what drives you to understand.' The sensually coloured central map is the access point to any number of Melanie's drives into the desert, to places like Desolation Canyon, Two Guns Highways, Jackrabbit Pass and Petrified Forest. Once we are in the car with Melanie, the screen takes on multiple



layers. The background is a double page spread from a copy of the actual book *Mauve Desert*, marked up with Jenik's handwritten comments like "guns & pornography." Layered over this book background is an image from inside Melanie's car looking out the front window; we see her hand on the wheel, her eyes in the rear view mirror, the road and the desert horizon in front of us. We can tune the radio in the dashboard as we move down the highway. The AM band gets us local right-wing talk radio, the FM band gets us music. Three additional tuning buttons allow us to play Melanie's voice-over in English, French or Spanish, giving the notion of translation an immediate reality. "Fear, it doesn't matter when you accelerate; fear vanishes like a dark spot in the rear-view mirror."

Entering the rear-view mirror through Melanie's eyes brings yet another layer up on the screen, inside the book pages, inside the image of Melanie driving: live action encounters of a confrontational nature between Melanie and her mother, and of a seductive nature between Melanie and Angela Parkins, geometrist and head of the oversight committee at the Yucca Mountain Radioactive Waste Depository (a





factual site, also visitable from the central map). Sometimes the image inside the rear-view mirror is not live action, but sections of dialogue in text form from a shooting script. As we accompany Melanie on these drives into the desert, fragments of her life begin to accumulate into a tentative and mutable narrative in an order we have determined. There is a fixed end point, however, in which Angela Perkins is shot dead on the dance floor of the Red Arrow Motel bar, as Melanie watches in horror.

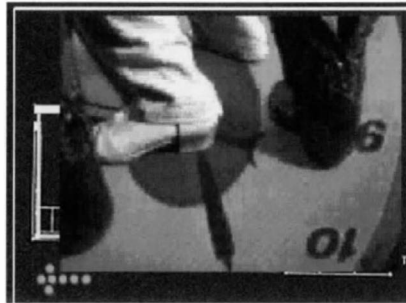
The last access point inside Melanie's car, the glove box, opens to take us into many other realms. There is a revolver that is always loaded. We can flip through a notebook filled with petulant thoughts and poems written by the young actor who plays Melanie in the live action sequences to find scribbled entries like "I hate computers" and "Who's scared, who stared, who cried, who lies, who cracked, who slacked, who's behind those eyes." A map in the glove box takes us into a completely other world, that of translator Maude Laure in Montreal as she struggles with her

obsession with language and with Melanie's story. The books in Maude's library can be pulled off the shelf and paged through. A book titled "The American Southwest" contains brilliantly coloured illustrations of Arizona flora and fauna. Another book involves detailed scientific examination of the true, nightmarish story of the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste burial site, located near the fictional Mauve Motel and built on an unpredictable fault line. This book provides a website address for further connection to the ongoing saga of Yucca Mountain. Other books on the shelf are more theoretical works on technology, even hypertext theory, by authors like Paul Virilio and Rosanne Stone. One of the most intriguing places inside Maude's office is a set of two simultaneous moving images of women's lips, both speaking the same phrases like "humanity—nothing but deserted skin," but one set of lips speaks English, the other speaks French, rendering the space between languages visible, audible and finally, sensual.

The glove box map also takes us to self-reflexive sites, where Nicole Brossard and Adriene Jenik examine their own creative processes. Brossard appears seated in a green summer garden, surrounded by floating heads of herself. Each head



offers Brossard speaking on a specific topic: narrative, desire, the symbolic. On language and imagination, Brossard suggests that "I have no imagination, it is language which has imagination." Jenik offers a self-portrait of her face in close-up surrounded by a snake pit of twisting road and highway signs. Her large glasses become screen for revisiting her process of making this work. She offers us fragments like: "Death Valley Survival Hints" an evocative notebook of her personal



experience with the project; a "making of Mauve Desert" series of video imagery; and an extensive archive of correspondence between herself and Brossard, comprised of letters, faxes, postcard and e-mails. The most startling image in Jenik's self-portrait is a single frame map or flow chart of the structure underlying the entire CD; this is a complex image that can be pored over endlessly without ever fully comprehending it, an abstraction that only partially demystifies the elaborate structure and fluid processes built on it.

Intermittent references to science, technology and theory throughout both Brossard's novel and Jenik's translation take on an ominous coherence in a particular component of the CD-ROM that has been designed to slash through every other layer and trajectory outside of the will or choice of the user. The only male figure in the piece, Longman is an armed, insane scientist experiencing a melt-

down in a grimly impersonal room at the Red Arrow Motel. Attached to the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste project in an unstated but extreme way, he represents "the civilization of men who came to the desert to watch their equations explode like a humanity." Jenik has fashioned Longman as the ghost in her machine; he cannot be summoned, but simply appears randomly at point of his own choosing to interrupt whatever signifiatory trajectory the user/driver may be on. A shadowy, desperate figure in hard edge black and white stills, "Longman knows the magic value of formula. He thinks about the explosion. The slightest error could have disastrous consequences. I/am/become/Death. . . . Longman rests his head on the equation."

Mauve Desert is unique and original work in the CD-ROM format. It is neither a game nor a mathematical puzzle, but rather an invitation to navigation and discovery. Jenik's digital media work does not operate on the false premise of a borrowed scientific superego, as the parasitic work of some hypertext theorist does; instead, Jenik has set up a dynamic inside her work, as well as between her work and that of Nicole Brossard, that opens a dialogue between languages and media through the processes of negotiation, translation and imagination. Mauve Desert, the CD-ROM and the novel, constitute two related and overlapping but distinct art objects which resonate with the poetics and sensuality of translation, expanding the potential for collaborative creative resistance in an age of digital dislocation. Mauve Desert invites us into "a sumptuous dialogue, an unbearable expense of word and expressions, a suite, built around an idea which would drift. . . . Mauve Desert decomposed, recomposed."

Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms, it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.⁴

Notes

1. Martin E. Rosenberg, in *Hyper/Text/Theory*, ed. George P. Landow (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
2. Sean Cubitt in *Future Natural: nature/science/culture*, ed. George Robertson et al. (New York: Routledge, 1996).
3. All quotes unless otherwise indicated are from *Mauve Desert*, Jenik's CD-ROM distributed by Video In, or from *Mauve Desert*, the novel by Nicole Brossard published by Coach House Press in 1990.
4. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Random House, 1988).

David McIntosh is a Toronto writer and curator. He is currently writing a book on recent Canadian cinema.