

Archimedes' Mindscrew

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Until we reach the statistically likely planet and begin to converse with whatever green-faced teleporting denizens thereof – considering only this shrunk and communication-ravaged world – can we any more postulate a separate culture? Viewing the metastasis of Western Culture it seems progressively less likely. Sarah Boyle imagines a whole world which has become like California, all topographical imperfections sanded away with the sweet-smelling burr of the plastic surgeon's cosmetic polisher, a world populace dieting, leisured, similar in pink and mauve hair and rhinestone shades. A land Cunt Pink and Avocado Green, brassiered and girdled by monstrous complexities of Super Highways, a California endless and unceasing, embracing and transforming the entire globe, California, California!¹

In her seminal 1967 New Wave science fiction story *The Heat Death of the Universe*, Pamela Zoline portrays the daily world of a typical housewife expanded to the size of Western Culture and then to the entire universe, all running down entropically. The tale overlays two rationally incommensurable spheres: the quotidian and the global. This overlay, into which we have slipped so easily in the last few decades, is the nexus of Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead's art, a confrontation with the tantalising impossibility of seeing the entire world at once clearly and distinctly.

¹ Pamela Zoline, 'The Heat Death of the Universe,' in *The Heat Death of the Universe and Other Stories*, McPherson and Company, Kingston, NY, 1988.

Time Collapses

Since you are tongue-tied and so loath to speak,
In dumb significant proclaim your thoughts.

1 Henry VI, II, iv.25-26

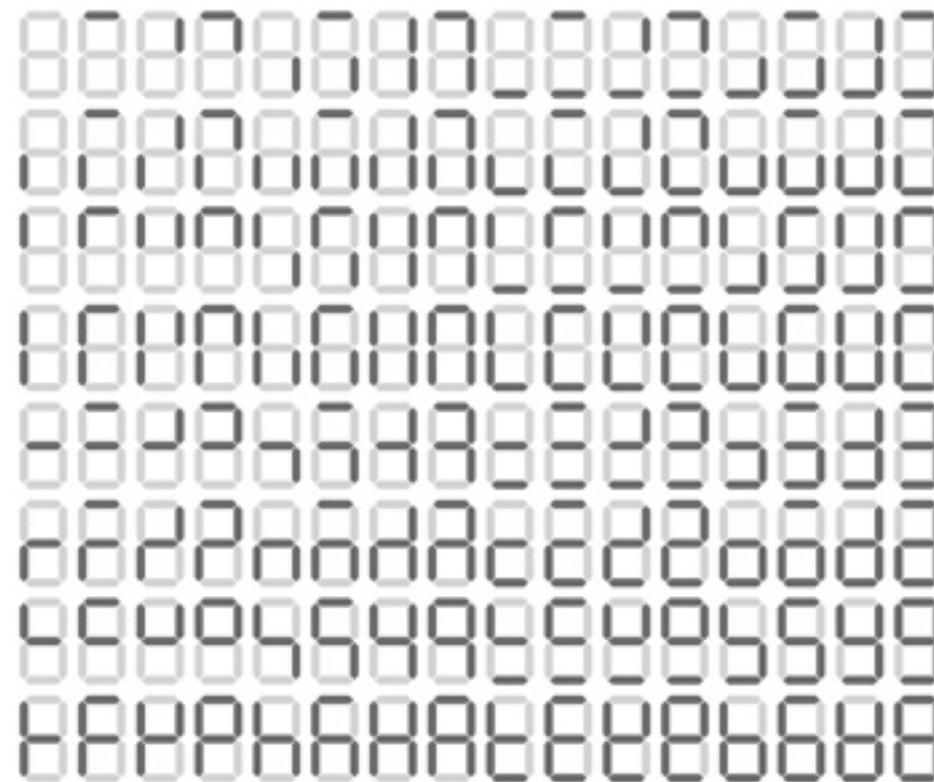
At the end of *Flat Earth* (2007), a proper English gentleman describes the Archimedean Point, the ideal vantage point from which the world can be perceived rightly, objectively, and totally.² The text becomes absurd as we see a pull-back from an animated representation of the Earth, since we observe the dilemma that were we to be far enough away in space to observe the entirety of the Earth at a distance, we would be unable to see anything on it smaller than a mountain range. Such an unmovable point would only be one of ignorance.

In complementary fashion, *A Short Film About War* (2009) displays the URLs of various photos obtained from Flickr, most with timestamps and some with GPS coordinates, making quite clear that any individual point of data is buried in such an immense coordinate plane of so many dimensions that it is hopeless for one person ever to ingest the total aggregate.

These complex arrangements of data satirise the sheer problem of magnitude facing us today. But such information overload can make it difficult to sift signal from noise and determine how Thomson & Craighead's treatments are affecting their source material and the

² For an *au courant* application of the concept of the Archimedean Point to cosmology and temporality, see Huw Price, *Time's Arrow and Archimedes' Point: New Directions for the Physics of Time*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997. Particularly relevant is Price's emphasis on the pervasive anthropomorphic bias inflecting our very ideas of time. The anthropomorphic projection of our epistemological temporal asymmetry onto the cosmos to produce a fallacious *metaphysical* asymmetry shows that our anthropomorphic biases run far deeper than our interactions with other forms of life, down to the most basic ontological levels. Price's argument easily sweeps away the inflated claims of recent speculative realists to be entertaining such a decentered perspective, proving that they lack the knowledge to be able to occupy such a perspective.

consumption of it. Consider instead one of their simplest alterations: *Flipped Clock* (2009), which is indeed an inverted digital clock, creates an uncanny awareness of the basis behind that simple digital display of numbers, the seven-segment display (SSD). We normally see only ten arrangements out of the 128 possible:



The 128 possible states of a seven-segment display (SSD)

Through inversion, *Flipped Clock* sometimes displays some of the configurations one never sees (except in the case of a partially broken SSD). The interpenetration of what seem to be two independent abstraction layers (segment display and numerals) produces the requisite dishabituating effect, as it does in Electric Six's pop song 'Countdown to the Countdown':

35 seconds til the countdown starts
25 seconds til the countdown starts
94 seconds til the countdown starts
It's the countdown to the countdown

Time elapses
Love collapses
Over and over
Come over
Red rover
Our ship sails from Dover
Its cargo is time³

The same method of defamiliarisation and decontextualisation is at work, breaking the gestalt unity of what we take to be the common representation of time and making clear its linkages to diverse other stimuli. *Flipped Clock* achieves what Barbara Maria Stafford has called a primary duty of today's imagist: 'to induce merged information to behave as if it were linked.'⁴

For example, one of the new configurations is the upside-down '7', which appears as an 'L' in the SSD. Interpreted with regard to *time* and *number*, several salient associations present themselves. For one, the 'L' evokes the British pound symbol, periodically turning the



³ Electric Six, 'Countdown to the Countdown,' in Zodiac, Metropolis Records, Philadelphia, PA, 2010. Note that the lyric creates disorientation in precisely the way that Martin Creed's lyrics for Owada's *Nothing* do not. Creed concertedly reifies the existing order rather than disturb it.

⁴ Barbara Maria Stafford, 'The New Imagist,' in *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtues of Images*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996, p. 77.

Flipped Clock, 2009
Modified digital clock

clock into a price readout. But ‘L’ is also the Roman numeral for 50. This archaic evocation insists on being read as a willful anachronism, an obsolete system of numerical representation dragged into the digital age. Yet ‘L’ has its own archaic significance. 50 BCE was the last gasp of the Roman Republic. The Senate attempted to rein in Julius Caesar legislatively for the last time, failing and spurring him to cross the Rubicon with his army in January of 49 and instigate the civil war that would lead to the end of the Republic and the beginning of dictatorship and empire. In 50 BCE the Senate and the Republic were proven to be obsolete anachronisms. Once in power, Caesar *changed time* by establishing the Julian calendar.

50 BCE was not *their* year, of course – the very use of such dates prior to the ascent of Christianity is a ubiquitous anachronism. The fact that we count down BCE years has something in common with *Flipped Clock*’s inversion: can we even imagine following a time system that counts down to a fixed zero-point?

Furthermore, the combination of Rome and clock conjures up one of the most notorious anachronisms of all time: the clock in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Stressing that Shakespeare was surely not so stupid as to commit such an anachronism unknowingly, Sigurd Burckhardt linked political power and time across both eras, in Caesar’s institution of the Julian calendar and Pope Gregory’s reform of the Julian calendar in 1582.

Thus at the turn of the century – Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* in 1599 – a situation existed in Europe exactly analogous to that of Rome in 44 B.C. It was a time of confusion and uncertainty, when the most basic category by which men order their experience seemed to have become unstable and untrustworthy, subject to arbitrary political manipulation.⁵

5 Sigurd Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meanings*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1968, p. 6.

Europe concurrently witnessed the rise of the mechanistic model of the universe, with God as master watchmaker, and began a booming global export industry of timepieces to East Asia.⁶

The most recent evolution in the mechanisation of the clock, the digital clock of our current age, bears out the famous words of historian and philosopher Lewis Mumford:

The clock, not the steam-engine, is the key-machine of the modern industrial age... The clock, moreover, is a piece of power-machinery whose ‘product’ is seconds and minutes: by its essential nature it dissociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences: the special world of science... Time took on the character of an enclosed space: it could be divided, it could be filled up, it could even be expanded by the invention of labour-saving instruments.⁷

Yet this ‘independent world’ exists only by our collective agreement to believe in it. In the 20th century we have seen the shift from analog to digital clocks, from solar time (Universal Time) to atomic time (International Atomic Time). Yet these objective measures are legislated and can contain their own limitations. POSIX (or Unix) time, an Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers standard commonly used by computers for timestamping, is represented by the number of seconds that have passed since midnight Universal Time of 1 January 1970, termed the Unix epoch. Dates prior to the epoch cannot be represented, and 32-bit machines using POSIX time will be unable to handle dates after 3:14:07 of 19 January, 2038. In POSIX time, 1 January, 1970 arbitrarily replaces 1 January, 1, as t-zero. Time is not a solved problem, nor a soluble one, and this link from the classical

6 See Carlo M. Cipolla’s fascinating *Clocks and Culture*, W.W. Norton, New York, NY, 1967/1978 for details of the early globalisation of the time industry. Also worth noting is the concurrent shift from antiquity’s joyful anthropomorphisms of time to a melancholic, saturnine figure of Time associated with death and destruction. See Erwin Panofsky, ‘Father Time,’ in *Studies in Iconology*.

7 Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, NY, 1934, pp. 14, 17.

era to the Renaissance to our own time emphasises the fundamental continuity of Thomson & Craighead's strategies.

Thomson & Craighead's art repeatedly stresses the idea of *synchrony*, whether from simultaneous videos of global action from across the web (*October*, 2012), the joining of disparate time-slices into linear narrative (*Flat Earth*), or weather data from hundreds of different locations around the globe (*Weather Gauge*, 2003). The seeming promise of such spectacles is to have us reach such an Archimedean Point, a View from Nowhere.⁸ Yet the works consistently undercut their own claims to this point by showcasing anomalies and the loss of grain that comes with an expanded perspective. The metaphysical frame provided by a discrete moment in time is absolute only to the extent that the representation of time is universal and synchronised. I hope to have shown, via Thomson & Craighead's works, that this is an illusion and that the synchronisation is imposed by a finite hegemonic factor, be it Caesar, the Pope, or the IEEE. This sort of corruption of space and time, functionally (though not sensually) akin to Shakespeare's anachronism, opens up a world of new experiential possibilities *without* promising the impartial omniscience of an Archimedean Point.

The greater aesthetic and social importance of such a project requires a bit of background to explain.

8 For a representative explanation, see Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986.

The Uses of Disenchantment

Mind moving slow is sane
Mind moving fast is mad
Mind left stopped he's got⁹

The overlaying of digital information onto our analog landscapes is commonly called 'augmented reality'. Before we look at what 'augmented reality' is or can be or may be, we might want to ask ourselves what it is we're augmenting. What is this reality? There is this myth that some overarching single 'reality' exists as a basis for all of our ways and means in life (really, do we share the same reality even with our closest friends and lovers, to say nothing of those of foreign cultures?). On top of it we pile whatever nonsense we deem to be unreal: thoughts, feelings, ideas, dreams – anything that we deem sufficiently non-physical to lack that supposed degree of reality.

The internet has become the locus for everything that is not reality. Calling it 'virtual' is not quite right, because to be virtual is to be an imitation of something without possessing its physical form. The internet is something else entirely.

So when we speak of augmenting reality, there are at least three doubts that should nag at us:

1. We don't have unmediated access to reality in the first place; something, be it our senses or our words or our thoughts, always gets in the way.
2. Reality is not unaugmented; we already augment it with culture, concepts, and consciousness.
3. Technological augmentation is not a discrete realm, merely another wing/level grafted on to the ever-enlarging edifice that is our nature-culture hybrid.

9 The Fall, 'Craigness,' in *The Wonderful and Frightening World of the Fall*, Beggars Banquet, London, 1984.

This ideal of unmediated reality, based on the false possibility of a 'pure' engagement with the world, can be linked to two of the more nefarious theoretical mainstays of the 20th century, Max Weber's disenchantment and Walter Benjamin's pure language.¹⁰ These two concepts are mere variations on the ideal of Archimedes' Point, made normative and compulsive by the myth that the ideal was reached but has now been lost. Both posit an ideal from which we have fallen, and are essentially secular postlapsarians.

Benjamin's pure language is the more insidious of the two: drawing from religious fundamentalist and political reactionary Johann Georg Hamann, Benjamin famously posited the ideal of a gnostic language of power that would match up with reality in a way that ours did not. 'In this pure language – which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages – all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished.'¹¹

Such a language does not and cannot exist. Language is that which defines us and by which we define ourselves, and at the moment it conforms perfectly to some hypostatized 'reality', we would cease to exist, as there would no longer be a gap into which humanity and culture could fit. But this mirage of heavenly harmony is tempting.¹²

The case is less egregious with Max Weber. In proclaiming that science's triumph has disenchanted aspects of nature that previously were enchanted by animism, folk belief, and superstition, Weber is not exactly wrong, but he is misleading. Certainly we may not feel the terror that accompanies the arrival of a hurricane and wonder what supernatural forces are bringing it onto us and how they may

10 Weber's most famous expression of disenchantment is contained in his 'Science as a Vocation' lecture, elaborated on in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

11 Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator,' in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, NY, 1968, p. 80.

12 For exactly *how* tempting, see David Auerbach, 'The Pythagorean Comma and the Howl of the Wolf,' in *Music & Literature 2: Laszlo Krasznahorkai*, 2013, pp. 145-161.

be appeased, but instead we are confronted every day with invisible forces and principles that we take for granted *in the same way* that the ancients did the gods, except that these forces are sometimes more predictable and are permitted to be questioned.

In the early 17th century, Galileo dismissed Kepler's idea that the moon influenced the tides. It was absurd, Galileo said, that the moon could somehow move the ocean from such a far distance. Kepler practiced astrology, and for Galileo, the moon's influence on the tides was as ridiculous as the planets' influence on people's lives. How, then, is the theory of gravity any less enchanted than astrology or witchcraft? Certainly the theory of gravity *works* better, but it's a funny measure of enchantment that declares only inefficacious nonsense to be enchanted.

Hans Blumenberg has most clearly articulated the links between disenchantment and postlapsarian theology:

While the response of historians to [Weber's] thesis was predominantly negative, that of theologians was predominantly positive, for the latter perceived the thesis through the medium of a self-denying affirmation of responsibility for Christianity's eschatological complicity, which did not hesitate to verge on a magical negation of the world. ... Discontent is given retrospective self-evidence.¹³

The problem of postulating such a past (and potentially future) state of unfallen-ness is not necessarily the regulative ideal itself, but the authority of claiming full knowledge of it and impeccably diagnosing its current absence. Call it *Archimedes' Mindscrew*: the process by which a lowly subjective point of view is wrenched and elevated to appear objective to the ingenuous and the gullible. As Blumenberg shows, religion hardly has a monopoly on such tactics. Such claims are now the stock in trade of much philosophy: Heidegger, Levinas,

13 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, tr. Robert Wallace, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1966/1976/1983, p. 118.

Derrida, Badiou, and others have all claimed to speak from outside whatever system is trapping us, through what Herman Philipse has termed the *Strategem of the Elect*.¹⁴

What we are dealing with in confronting the *Archimedean Mindscrew* is a revival of Gnosticism. In brief, the modern Gnostic takes the form of a thinker or visionary who finds this world irredeemably flawed and only fixable through radical, revelatory change, a superior perspective bequeathed to this thinker through his or her extraordinary and total vision. Once again, Blumenberg best summarises the process by which postlapsarian thinking infiltrates a philosophical perspective such as Benjamin's or Weber's:

Philosophy originates with the discovery of the hiatus between appearance and existence, perception and thought, and already in Heraclitus and Parmenides it divides men into those who unreflectingly submit to appearance and perception and those who penetrate to the authentic truth behind these, who do not even gain access to the truth by their own powers but rather require initiation, as though into a mystery.¹⁵

The mystery of which Blumenberg speaks is the Archimedean Point, from which all is truthfully revealed. While such claims of privilege are quite common in contemporary philosophy, more relevant for our purposes are the utopian visions of Karl Marx.¹⁶ Though the Enlightenment is often tarred with the stigma of absolutist thinking, this is the result of a huge anachronistic misunderstanding, as one finds in Diderot, Buffon, Condillac, and Herder the greatest questioning

of the sciences' earlier claims to completeness, as well as a shift from abstract Cartesian theorising to biological empiricism.¹⁷

In truth, the 19th century holds better claims to such universalism, Rousseau and the Romantics having placed the subject back at the center of the cosmos and prepared the ground for such totalising worldviews as those of Vilfredo Pareto and Karl Marx. Their views are secularised theology in both their quantitative absolutism and, in particular, their eschatology (though, not, however, in their naturalism, which marks them as modern). Pareto proposes an eternal cycle, while Marx envisions a predetermined end of history far more specific than that laid out by Hegel.¹⁸ It is *this* connexion that yields Benjamin's Gnostic presumptions of the possibility of a 'hidden' pure language, a language in which false consciousness would not be possible. This is the much-obscured passage from dialectical materialism to critical theory, as well as a severe fallacy in both: a religious claim of access to liberating Gnostic knowledge.

Indeed, this claim is precisely what we see in Raymond Geuss' description of critical theory: 'A critical theory, then, is a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation.'¹⁹ Critical theory posits itself as a Benjaminian pure language of liberation, a new Gnosticism to lead us away from our false consciousness of our false world.

The jarring, conspicuous disjunctions in Thomson & Craighead's work disenchant this Gnosticism. *Belief* (2012) juxtaposes a number of absolutist, transcendental worldviews, yet removes them from their absolute standpoint by locating them in a 'virtual' 'physical' reality:

17 On the contrast between Diderot and Rousseau in particular, see David Auerbach, 'Moi and Lui and a Beehive,' in *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 May 2011, pp. 12-13.

18 The quantitative, totalising tendency extends from Marx and Pareto (see *The Mind and Society* (1935)) into the 20th century through Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse on the one hand and Friedrich von Hayek on the other, yielding totalising American exponents as diverse as Milton Friedman and Talcott Parsons.

19 Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 2.

14 See Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1998.

15 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, pp. 244-245.

16 Karl Löwith explicitly connects Weber's 'disenchantment' with Marx's 'alienation' in his 1932 study *Max Weber and Karl Marx*.

a visual electronic representation of a globe showing the origin of the telling of such a belief. It is less significant that the beliefs are incompatible with one another than that they are de-absolutised, each fixed to a single point on the globe, with the viewer being reminded too that she occupies just one such point. The speaking of such beliefs thus becomes *anecdotal* and *quotidian* while remaining utterly decentered. There is no center from which absolutism can emerge.

This is a very different sort of realisation than the sort of emancipations promised by theory. One may trace a line from Marx to Benjamin to Jacques Rancière, who envisions an egalitarian emancipation that exactly presupposes the *Archimedean Mindscrew*. When Rancière approvingly states that ‘The master’s secret is to know how to recognise the distance between the taught material and the person being instructed, the distance also between learning and understanding,’ what position does ‘the master’ occupy but that of the Archimedean Point?²⁰ What language is he speaking but the ‘pure language’ of Gnosis?

A central question remains as to technology. If the mediation of reality is a continuum and not a binary, and if the Archimedean Point was already a mirage – if, as Jon Thomson says, ‘that’s the way we experience everything anyway’ – what then does technology and specifically the internet bring to the scene that is new and different? How is the internet uniquely affecting the already quasi-real structures in which we already exist?

This is, I believe, the question that art such as Thomson & Craighead’s addresses. Since we cannot view our nature-culture hybrid to see it from a wholly detached perspective, we are stuck looking at facets of the whole that in turn reflect aspects of ourselves. It is as though we are standing in a hall of mirrors attempting to determine the layout,

20 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, tr. Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1991, p. 5. See also pp. 71-73 for more of Rancière’s gnosis, which here takes a particularly Campanellan form.



Pippin Barr, *The Artist is Present*, 2011

except there is no ‘original’ body, only the reflected images themselves. Technology provides a far greater magnitude of opportunities to skew the images and reflections.

It is this exact principle that is illustrated in *Obituary* (1997), presenting ‘front’ and ‘back’ views of an event on two sides of a screen. Though we are one step closer toward completion, we are still infinitely far from it, *as were the original participants in the event*, who only had one view. The ‘original’ experience, as perceived by any individual, was no more complete than the replica.

Such a critique can be turned on the art world itself. Consider Pippin Barr’s *The Artist is Present* (2011), which isolates concept from performance and reproduces it in the style of 1980s Sierra graphic adventure games such as *King’s Quest*, *Space Quest*, and *Leisure Suit Larry*.²¹ Here, the quest, rather than becoming king, defeating the

21 Pippin Barr, *The Artist is Present*, 2011, <http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/theartistispresent/TheArtistIsPresent.html>

Sariens, or losing your middle-aged virginity, is to reach the front of the line and sit opposite Marina Abramovic.

So-called 'virtualisation' results in a *loss of grain*, yet the result is to point out the inadequacy of the 'original' performance, the inauthenticity and self-spectacle which was already present, smoothed over by the systematic, technologically-inflected packaging of visual and verbal rhetoric.

The technological methods can be subtler. Some of Thomson & Craighead's work is possible only through the increased accessibility and control that digitisation provides. Cut up into more finely-grained pieces with ease, data can be rearranged absurdly quickly with the assistance of technology, making possible experiments like *The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order* (2010). The antecedents for such a project lie in Anne McGuire's *Strain Andromeda The* (1992), which reverses the scene order of Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (2008) while still playing each individual scene forwards, and Martijn Hendricks' *Give Us Today Our Daily Terror* (2008), which digitally removed every appearance of a bird from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963).

In all three projects, the process is to take a single semantic level of an existing artwork, be it the *words*, the *shots*, or the *objects*, and privilege it above all others through some sort of alteration by which the semantic level now stands out as strange, wrong, and/or artificial. The digital 'rips' created by the imperfections in Hendricks' removals of the birds function as a metonym of the process, as do the suddenly jarring cuts in the other two works.

The sort of artificial spectacles that Thomson & Craighead provide serve to highlight the enchantment surrounding us today. If they are able to produce uncanny moments that jolt us out of the tacit acceptance of our own folk-technological beliefs, then they have succeeded. Perhaps I am more inured to the oddities of technology having spent so many years as a software engineer, such that the

particular abstractions and ontologies it provides have become as familiar to me as the far more bizarre and inconsistent caprices of English become familiar to its speakers. If so, then it is crucial to look at Thomson & Craighead's work without searching for any of the theoretical strangeness of the base substrate of the work. That is to say, we must accept the source material of the work as *normal* in order to understand what Thomson & Craighead have done with it. Thomson & Craighead are not illuminating a strangeness already subliminally present in the source material. They are not evoking an existing uneasiness in the viewer, for it is precisely the ubiquitous and digestible nature of the source material that makes it commonplace to us, absorbed without reflection. Rather, their manipulations create a new critical perception in the viewer. In a reversal of the Oulipo's processes, they do not apply constraints to their work but attempt to expose constraints built into their source material that would otherwise go undetected.

Their jarring anomalies, by violating any illusion we may be given of an ideal Archimedean Point of view, allow us to relocate our dislocated selves in a new geometry – through disenchantment.