The Labyrinth Unbound: Weblogs as Literature

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On Sunday, April 13, 2003, Erika-Renee Lanier writes a short essay about coming to grips with her mother's mortality and her own unexpected adulthood. She shares these words on her personal website, *Snazzykat*. The same day, Mark Woods offers a birthday tribute to the late Eudora Welty and a collection of links to resources regarding her work. Meanwhile, elsewhere on the web, Joseph Duemer reflects on the visual imagery of the American war in Vietnam. These instances of online writing, weblogs all, cover a range of topics as vast and varied as their authors. Lanier works at an urban teen center in Massachusetts, and frequently addresses the intimate details of her life and her work. Duemer is a poet and professor of English in upstate New York, and his weblog focuses on political and cultural fascinations. Woods offers an encyclopedic daily compendium of literary and cultural artifacts, and reveals no more about his offline life than that he writes from Ontario, Canada. Other weblogs are devoted to everything from evolutionary biology and genetics, to a fictionalized diary of Julius Caesar, to dealing with the death of an online acquaintance. All of them share the classification "weblogs," yet each is remarkably different from its peers.

Understanding what allows these authors and so many others to claim a unified category while offering such diverse content requires first an examination of how the nebulous notion of "weblog" has been defined, largely by its own practitioners. While the weblog tends toward esoterically personal content (as evidence in the examples above) and often delivers some contextual account of the author's life and activities, the obvious exceptions to this rule preclude understanding the form simply as an online diary. Likewise, the structural and technical definitions many in the weblogging community focus on fall equally short of describing what is a complex, earnest, and distinct literary form. In other words, it is insufficient to explore the weblog exclusively at the level of content, and equally insufficient to focus wholly on the technical delivery of that content. Accounting for the diversity of weblogs and webloggers—yet still maintaining some larger sense of what they have in common—requires instead a careful look both at what weblogs do, and how they do it for both writers and readers.

Calling a weblog "literary" does not require content that is about literature or even content that aims to be literature. It is not an attempt at categorizing one weblog and its author as more worthwhile in a canonical sense than any other. To the contrary, I propose that every weblog can be considered literary in the sense that it calls attention not only to what we read, but also to the unique way we read it. The weblog is (to paraphrase Colin MacCabe) the performed result of a code of particular techniques, and this paper is an attempt to highlight the primary features of that code. The weblog collapses many of the common assumptions made about texts, as it complicates the distinction between author and audience through the multivocality of both direct commenting, and the reader's ability to reorder the narrative in myriad ways. Owing to its ongoing creation over an undefined period of time, the weblog becomes a text that constantly expands through the input of both readers and writers. This absence of a discrete, "completed" product makes the weblog as a form resistant to the commoditization either of itself, or of any one particular interpretation.

These features, I argue, characterize the weblog as a distinctive literary and creative mode, something richer and more nuanced than viewing it as simply the outcome of a specific toolset or formal structure allows for. The form's literariness, then, is not a quality achieved by some weblogs and lacking in others. Nor is it a closely demarcated category "that one must not cross," serving to include some authors and projects while excluding others in the interest of a cleanly

defined genre (Derrida, 1981). This literary nature of the weblog is instead the loose set of shared criteria that allows us to speak of a plurality of "weblogs" in the first place, and equally allows the form to continue expanding.

Defining the Literary Weblog

In a June 2002 column that echoes both earlier and later arguments (see Blood, Mead, Pyra), weblog pioneer Hourihan (2001) writes, "If we look beneath the content of weblogs, we can observe the common ground all bloggers share—the format" and adds that "Blog posts are short, informal, sometimes controversial, and sometimes deeply personal" and "can be characterized by their conversational tone." Webloggers, she continues, write about "the content that matters to us… But because it's a weblog … a reader can expect it will be updated regularly." Hourihan concludes that "we're united by tools … These tools spit out our varied content in the same format—archives, permalinks, time stamps, and date headers." This definition is representative and typical in its focus on the stylistic and structural aspects of delivering content rather than the content itself (though it does acknowledge the diversity of that content). However, as she continues toward her largely technical definition, Hourihan also highlights many of the aspects of blogging that are essential to a literary understanding of the form. The difficulty of distinguishing the weblog from other writing, the importance of finding something other than specifics of content to unify such a variable form, the possibility for multiple authors and reader participation in the production of a text, and frequent updates with posts building on previous posts and counting on later ones rather than making entire arguments within their confines: these are all, she and I agree, crucial components of what makes a weblog a weblog.

Where we diverge is on what unifies weblogs and their authors around a form—whether it is technology or technique. Focusing exclusively on the material production of a weblog is akin to arguing that what allows individual novels to fit into a class of novels—or, indeed, for a class "novels" to exist at all—is that they all consist of printed pages of prose fiction bound into a volume. There is a truth to it, and further differentiation could be made between novels as bound volumes containing one long story as opposed to collections of several stories, but it still obscures essential commonalities held across the sphere of novels or, in this case, weblogs. The novel, as Watt, Gallagher, and others have argued, is defined as much in how readers are trained to enter its shared codes as it is by the specific delivery of those codes. Likewise, the weblog relies on particular codes enacted by both author and readers—readers who become, in this case, secondary authors.

The novel is, as Doody (1996) reminds us after Henry James, "'a loose baggy monster.' And it is so chiefly because it does not acknowledge the distinction between… Form and Matter" (p.304). The weblog likewise collapses form and matter such that they can only ever be understood in tandem. It is the intersection of these multiple collapses, the particular set of opportunities and problems presented by the weblog as a written outlet, that best defines this new literary mode. It is not, as Gallagher (1995) reminds us regarding the novel, simply a question of fact versus fiction, or true versus false (xvi-xviii, pp. 162-165). Instead, the weblog is an engaged performance of these collapsed distinctions in which the personalized content, unique technical delivery system, and specific set of codes through which authors and audience meet all interact to form an original project.

One element of that project is a less defined distinction between fact and fiction, or between stories and those who tell them. Despite frequent and lingering questions about whether online voices are "honest" or "real," and concerns about webloggers presenting themselves truthfully, the particular features of the weblog make these questions all but irrelevant in many cases. Readers of fiction are typically asked to identify specifically with a narrator or at least a narrative presence, experiencing vicariously the imagined events of the characters' imagined lives. Reading the newspaper or an academic journal, on the other hand, we are asked not to identify

with a narrative or authorial voice, but rather to read with no attention to voice at all—to read facts and opinions within a vacuum of "pure" information. A typical weblog offers both factual and interpretive information at once, making the distinction between truth and fiction irrelevant in favor of differentiation between trustworthy and untrustworthy. In one especially rich illustration of this, Delacour (2003) writes,

> "When I was in middle-school," Ikuko told me, "I hated my name." We were lying in her bed, drinking champagne, fooling around. I traced her name in the glossy film of perspiration on her stomach. (On our second date, I'd asked her to write the characters for me. Since then I'd written them dozens of times in my notebook and on scraps of paper.) I could already guess what she wanted to say.

As Delacour continues with a discussion of Japanese written and oral languages in connection with his relationship with a woman named Ikuko, the reader is not focused on whether Ikuko (or Delacour, for that matter) is a "real" person or not, but only with whether, as Tim O'Brien says of a true story, it "makes the stomach believe" (p. 84). Unlike a novel in which the author's interpretations are viewed through the lens of a character, or traditional journalism in which the author is purposely made invisible, writing on a weblog can only ever be read through the filter of the reader's prior knowledge of the author. As one day's posts build on points raised or refuted in a previous day's, readers must actively engage the process of "discovering" the author, and of parsing from fragment after fragment who is speaking to them, and why, and from where whether geographically, mentally, politically, or otherwise. When we read the above post of Delacour's following or followed by a quoted passage from Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (posted a day earlier) or the role of the immoral individual in political or cultural leadership (a day later), multiple facets of the author's personality arise, and all reading must be done through our sense, as readers, of the "true" author built on those facets.

Living Up to Potentiality

In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Aarseth (1997) defines cybertext as neither exclusively organic or inorganic, electronic or paper-based, but rather any organization of information that includes a feedback loop, a way for the reader to influence and even orchestrate the production of a text through the process of reading. Aarseth adds that,

> The concept of cybertext focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange. However, it also centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim… During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of 'reading' do not account for. (p.1)

Ergodic literature, then, a term derived by Aarseth from the Greek words for "work" and "path" (*ergon* and *hodos*, respectively), requires significant, engaged effort on the part of a reader in the construction of the text—effort beyond the flow of eyes across words or the turning of pages. The author of ergodic literature—whether it is the Chinese *I Ching*, Oulipian works by Raymond Queneau, or Michael Joyce's seminal pre-internet cybertext fiction *Afternoon*—provides the parameters of a story, and the reader, within those constraints, draws his or her own path through it. A crucial distinction, evidenced by the diverse examples presented, is that cybertextuality and/or ergodicism is not in itself a genre or style, but rather a communicative strategy and a means of production—ergodicism relies on technique, not technology, and process rather than product (Aarseth, 1997).

Drawing on a long metaphorical tradition, Aarseth (1997) explores ergodic literature through its comparison to the labyrinth, highlighting distinct differences in the ways that model can be applied to ergodic and non-ergodic texts (pp. 5-6). While the reader of a traditional text, even an experimental one like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, can be said to work his or her way through the narrative along a gradually unfolding path, there is a gross inaccuracy underlying the comparison. Even the rambling, non-linearity of *Ulysses* is, in fact, linear. There is only one direction in which to read the novel, from front to back, and the text is complete when the reader passes from one cover to the other. There is ultimately only one story being told however many times it is reinterpreted—the events and *order of events* in Leopold Bloom's day are never able to change, no matter how many times they are enacted. There are only two possible results for the reader of *Ulysses*: closing the book after the finishing the novel, or closing the book somewhere before the conclusion—neither changes the finality and stasis of the narrative as it has been written. The second time I open the novel, I will not find an additional chapter, character, or plotline added by Joyce since my previous reading. The topology of the text has been defined remains consistent.

An ergodic work, on the other hand, offers is multicursal, offering multiple paths for traversing the text. There is not single defined narrative route, as in *Ulysses*, but instead a variety of possible movements from each point in the work to any number of other points in the work. The text is reassembled—thus rewritten—through the interaction of author and reader with each performance. Emily Short's classic of interactive fiction, *Galatea*, for example, offers no particularly discernible "plot," yet allows for a vast array of possible conversations between the player/reader and the non-player character (NPC) at the root of the game—in the case of *Galatea*, the NPC is a female being on display in a museum-like space. It is possible to play the game—or engage the text—for only a few minutes before reaching one of the possible conclusions, yet it is also possible to interact with it for an hour or more, eliciting various responses and dialogues as a result of questions asked by the reader, without ever reaching the "end." In comparison to the rigidly constrained, forward-moving non-linearity of *Ulysses*, *Galatea* offers a narrative with fewer restrictions and wider parameters. Rather than focusing on the necessity of moving through the textual labyrinth, *Galatea* and other cybertexts highlight the possibility of exploring the maze for an unspecified time without a novel's physical or narrative emphasis on conclusion.

Cybertext is in many ways a literature of potentiality. It "insist[s] on the distinction between 'created creations'… and 'creations that create'… to the benefit of the latter: it has been concerned not with literary works but with procedures and structures capable of producing them" (Brotchie & Matthews, 1998). In other words, cybertext and interactive fictions offer the possibility to create a number of various textual experiences through the particular narrative structure and devices provided. The question of whether or not the reader actually creates or performs all or any of these possible texts or not is immaterial—the potential for their creation remains. Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes*, for example, is a collection of ten sonnets with each line of each poem printed on an individually manipulable strip of paper. Because each line of each sonnet poetically "fits" with every line of every other sonnet, there is a potential for producing and reading 1014 (100,000,000,000,000) individual poems. According to Queneau's own calculations, a reader reading "one sonnet per minute, eight hours a day, two hundred days per year… would take more than a million centuries to finish the text" (Motte, 1998). All of the possible poems are available, whether or not they are ever read.

Even complex works like Short's and Queneau's, however, remains constrained in ways unproblematic to the weblog. *Galatea*, for all of its possibility and variation, has already been written. Though a new text is, in the sense offered above, produced with each successive reading, all of the internal elements of the narrative are always already present. If I play the game twice, entering identical actions, I will elicit the same NPC responses from the game each time. I may interpret them differently based on changing circumstances and conditions within my own life and experience as a reader, but the output itself—the narrative—doesn't ever change,

only my response. Whereas the elements of time and *change* over time are relevant to my position as a reader, the physical text (notably distinct from the interpretive text) is impervious to the passage of time. The character Galatea answers my questions the same way today as she will in fifty years. The interactive fiction, as a piece of cybertext or ergodic literature, remains restricted by its condition of completeness. Every possible interaction, every possible connection from one point in the text to another, must be programmed into the text/game prior to its release to readers. Once released the author is unable to add or adjust those interactions short of somehow recalling each and every extant copy of the text and replacing them with a newer version—a newer version itself restricted by the specific moment of *its* production and completion. I may be able, as a reader/player, to traverse the labyrinth in multiple ways without overwhelming concern for either a center or an exit, but I can never make the labyrinth any larger or add paths not specifically allowed for by the author prior to my engagement with the text.

In the weblog, by contrast, these constraints are addressed differently or made irrelevant. The weblog shares its potentiality with cybertexts like Joyce's *Afternoon*, Short's *Galatea*, or even Queneau's poems, but it also explodes that potentiality to its farthest extremes. Points of entry to a blog, whether via a link on another weblog, search engine results, a newspaper article, or an email, are for all intents and purposes infinite. In other words, the reader can open and begin reading the text—with which I refer to the weblog entire rather than specific, individual entries— at any point along the process of its production from the oldest, earliest post to the most current.

Those entrance points are determined not by the author, but rather by the engagement of others with the text(s) the author has produced. It is only possible for a reader to arrive at a posting of mine via another site if that other site (or its author) has chosen to offer a link to my work. The multiple entry points, then, are not only dynamic, but entirely beyond the constraint or control of the original author and the original text. Likewise, following the initial interaction with the point-of-entry post, the responsibility for further development of the narrative chain lies squarely with the reader: whether to proceed chronologically to a newer post, if there is one, or backtrack through older ones. A reader can use an internal search mechanism (common on many weblogs) to seek particular topics or terms, browse by category, month, or day, all offering a myriad of paths through the narrative "space" of the weblog or to other weblogs, articles, or general websites. Along with infinite points-of-entry, then, there are also multiple points of departure, each leading to *another* set of possible paths and exits, and those possible departures are still multiplying long after the initial post is written and shared.

These features of the weblog are so common that their performance and possibility are apparent in virtually any post on any blog. For instance, on April 28, 2003 weblogging theologian AKMA writes some brief comments in response to some thoughts blogged by Eric Norlin at *Digital ID World*. In his remarks, AKMA links not only to these specific comments, but also to Norlin's personal weblog, *Uncharted Shores, LLC*. A reader now has a number of options. She might continue reading *AKMA's Random Thoughts*, whether in chronological order or not. He could read either Norlin's *Digital ID World* column, or his weblog. In addition, the reader could choose to exit AKMA's site via a link in his comments, which in this case all lead to pornography sites because of increasing "Comment Spam"—a frustrating but illuminating example of the ways in which weblog posts quickly escape the control of their initial authors. Finally, depending on whether a reader discovers AKMA's post on January 11, 2004 or January 12, 2004, there is a variable number of comment links to choose from, just as links may have come or gone in his blogroll during that time. As this same process occurs no only around this individual post, but all posts and links connected to it as well, the narrative potentiality of AKMA's post increases exponentially.

As with the cybertextual works discussed above, the issue of whether or not a majority of readers stray from more straightforward chronological paths across a particular weblog (*AKMA's*

Random Thoughts, for example) is irrelevant. What matters isn't that readers actually take advantage of all or any of the possible interactions offered to them, only that the *potential* to produce that infinite number of texts is available in ways impossible to other forms.

The Value of Indiscretion

The above criteria offer enough of a distinction between weblogs and both traditional narrative forms and other forms of cybertext to demonstrate the unique nature of the form. However, there is an additional element of difference between the weblog and other modes, one that shatters the remaining boundaries of most narratives: time. As I mentioned, both the novel and the interactive fiction are constrained at the final moment of their production by the author's decision that the work is "finished." The piece is complete, and launched into the world of readers, to be interacted with and interpreted and reinterpreted. While the meaning(s) of the text change and adapt with time and usage, once the work is released it is out of the hands of the author: there is no significant communication, if there is *any* communication, between writer and reader. Readers may, in the Foucauldian sense, engage the specter of the author—the set of associations and meanings attached by culture and commoditization to James Joyce or Emily Short as a publicly-traded persona and figure—but that author is not generally able to actively reconstruct the work or engage the reader.

If we consider the weblog entire as a project rather than evaluate each post as a discrete unit, the difference between forms comes clear. There is no completion of a weblog—there is always the possibility, and usually the implied promise mentioned by Hourihan, of an additional post to come. The author, then, actively crafts later writing in response not only to reconsideration of his or her earlier words, but also in reaction to the responses of readers, whether received through onsite comment mechanisms, offsite email, or responses posted on other weblogs. This is a luxury—or curse—unavailable to Joyce or Short. While it can perhaps be assumed that the later works of these authors, whether novels or interactive fictions, bear the impact of responses to earlier work, this is not quite equivalent. *Ulysses* and *Galatea* remain discrete, self-contained, completed works—any impacts or responses will be reacted to and visible only in later works, not in the work actually being responded to. The weblog offers the possibility of real-time conversation between authors, such as in February and March, 2004 when Shelley Powers, Loren Webster, Joseph Duemer, and others carried on a discussion of Emily Dickinson across their blogs over several weeks. A conversation of that complexity could not occur between the authors of books, first because the necessities of publication would make it temporally impossible, but also because works would be incapable of referring to later responses as weblog posts can do.

That the weblog is always in process, never completed, can be read as both its greatest strength and, in another way, its weakness as a form. Burger (1995) argues that the project of the avant-garde is to collapse the distinction between the art object and the process of its creation, that art (and the creation of art) should be integrated into the practice of everyday life. "What is negated," Burger writes,

> is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effects that works have as does the particular content. (p. 49)

When Adorno enigmatically insists that, "Today the only works which really count are those which are no longer works at all," it is easy to assume that the "works" he refers to are discrete, contained, and containable objectified outcomes of the artistic process—in other words,

commodifiable and commodified *objets d'art* (qtd. in Burger 55). The art that is truly art, Adorno tells us, is that which cannot be separated from its context, packaged, and owned—art that depends fully on the moment and mode of its production/performance and cannot be asked, as DuChamp's *Fountain by R. Mutt* has been asked, to become a cipher for its historical moment of creation and the life of its creator, yet simultaneously be torn from the specific context of production.

The weblog, though not universally or always intentionally, resists commoditization in a number of ways. The play of time, and change over time, make impossible the capture and containment of the weblog as a "complete" work—there is always more to come, so whatever particular fragment is torn from its context for commoditization or display necessarily and insistently refers to its own incompletion, via links to earlier pieces and other sites, or references to information about the topic or author contained in an earlier post or promised to appear in a later one (other posts written by Delacour further explicating his relationship with Ikuko, for instance). The weblog as a work, and therefore each individual post contained within it and, too, each link to any *other* weblog, is unavoidably altered by the addition of a new post and the creation of new possibilities for traversing and interpreting the labyrinth of the work. That potential for and insistence on alteration and recreation cannot be contained in a single, discrete fragment divorced from the whole—as would rapidly become clear to anyone reading a single typical post without access to the larger weblog.

In Burger's (1985) discussion of the avant-garde he draws distinctions between various modes of artistic production: the sacral, the courtly, and the bourgeois (p.48). The avant-garde, he suggests, seeks to mimic the methods of sacral art, that which is both collectively produced and consumed, but without the process being a referent to a deity or larger power—the avant-garde process refers only to itself (pp.48-49). Such art, through its open access and possibility, is difficult if not impossible to reduce to a discrete commodity unit. The weblog, like the street performances of Dadaism, offers potential for collective production. Just as, in those earlier performances, particular artists established the moment and parameters of an event and encouraged passersby to join in its production, the weblogger typically offers a commenting mechanism included as part of the site, or encourages feedback via email. These comments allow readers not only to connect their own thoughts and responses to the narrative offered by the author, but to also deposit hyperlinks and directions of their own into the original post (or an easily accessible addendum), creating yet again additional possibilities and paths through the labyrinth of the weblog.

The content of the typical weblog also serves to resist commoditization, though this is not to say that many writers haven't attempted (and will attempt) to turn their processes and productions into commodities and commodifiers by seeking advertisers and sponsors for their websites. Or, as is increasingly the case, writers working for traditional media outlets including CNN and MSNBC will adopt the weblog format for their online content, though it remains to be seen quite what the impact of this phenomena will be on the weblog form as a whole. In general, nonetheless, the content of weblogs actively collapses many of the distinctions that traditional commodity journalism (or, for that matter, fiction and memoir) relies on, mixing the deeply personal with the factual and the interpretive. While this collapse serves, over time, to allow authors to develop and deepen the public persona presented through their work, incorporating more and more of the personality traits and quirks which would not, typically, emerge in public writing—the equivalent of Andy Rooney, say, opening one of his Sunday night rambles through nostalgia and curmudgeonry by mentioning how much he drank the night before and how much he's been enjoying the newest album by the White Stripes.

The latitude allowed a weblogger, over time, to unfold the many aspects of his or her life and personality, and to do so in the same space in which they offer commentary on politics and culture, is a luxury not afforded to journalists or even novelists: discrete, commodifiable work requires a purpose, a point, or at the very least a markable focus. This is not to say, however,

that the self presented on a weblog is a "complete" or even an accurate one: just as in journalism, memoir, or fiction, decisions are made about what to include and what to exclude. The weblogger, in that sense, can be read as fictional, as a character, in precisely the same ways that Andy Rooney or James Joyce can be—furthering the collapse between factual and fictional, public and private, and distinct genres in general. The play of time in the weblog allows for the presence of what Walter Benjamin calls an "aura," the work's "presence in time and space, its unique existence in the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" (p. 222). The weblog—rather, the weblog as it was in the moment *before* the most recent addition or change—cannot be reproduced: it is inextricably bound with its moment of production, and that moment is lost when a new moment occurs in its place.[1]

Elevating the Ordinary

Though I have argued that the literary nature of weblogs is inherent not so much in their content as in the context within which we read them, there is one particular aspect of content that contributes significantly to the form's resistance to commoditization, and thereby its overall uniqueness (or, at least, unusualness). The weblog, as its detractors criticize, is often characterized by mundane, banal, sometimes embarrassing personal content ranging from what the author ate for lunch to specific health problems and sexual issues. This personal content, moreover, is frequently intermingled with commentary on politics or culture, making the personal, the public, and the political inseparable in precisely the ways the avant-garde demanded. In addition, the linking of various strains of content resists fragmentation and separation and, therefore, commoditization. Just as the author and work are discovered by the reader over time, moving from post to post in whatever direction they choose, so too is the content revealed in multiple trajectories, the personal and the political co-existing and complementing each other as webloggers engage politics not from the distant remove of traditional pundits, but rather from positions with high personal stakes. When Lanier (2002) of *Snazzykat* writes of state budget cuts affecting social services, she does so not only as an expert in the field, but also as an individual for whom often abstract financial discussions bear concrete impacts on her job and the welfare of the teens she serves. She also does so in the same space that features her more personal offerings, as mentioned at the top of this essay.

Often this personal content runs to the undeniably sentimental—photographs of kittens, for instance—and could be dismissed as Kitsch without worry, were it not for a decidedly *un*-Kitsch integration into the productive process. Eco writes that, "Whereas the avant-garde stresses the importance of the processes that lead to the work and turns them into the very object of its discourse, Kitsch focuses on the reactions that the work should provoke in its audience and sees those as its very *raison d'etre*" (186). In reading a weblog, the pseudo-Kitsch content, the kitten picture, say, can only be read at all via an engagement with the process of production—the focus is not the reaction such content garners from its reader, but rather on the *reader* understanding the reaction of the *writer*. There is hope, then, for Kitsch to be redeemed: what could earlier be reduced to generic, lowest common denominator content instead becomes imbued with deeply personal intentions. Whether through the collapse and conflation of private/public contents or its often decidedly non-commercial visual design elements, the weblog displays the individual hand of the maker constantly and unavoidably.[2] As a form it engages Ruskin's (1981) directive to

Always look for invention first, and after that, for such execution as will help the invention, and as the inventor is capable of without painful effort, and *no more*. Above all, demand no refinement of execution where there is no thought, for that is slaves' work, unredeemed. (p.593)

Unlike Ruskin's idealized gothic architecture, however, the weblog neither inherently supports abstract national mythologies or the overarching power of an almighty: the hand of the maker is always visible, but, unless the author/maker intends otherwise, glorifies only itself.

It seems appropriate to end with that mention of authorial intentions, because as much diversity as there is among weblogs, at root they are all guided by those particular, individual intentions: without the hurdle of editors, publishers, and corporations between writers and "publication" in some form or another, weblog authors are able to write exactly what they want to, in exactly the way they prefer. In offering these observations toward classification, I hope not to constrain or limit the possibilities of the weblog as a mode or form. To the contrary, by developing definitions somewhat divorced from tools and structures, the weblog may be allowed to develop in ways otherwise impossible while maintaining some element of cohesion and unity—just as there is wide variation in what qualifies as a "novel," there should be equal latitude allowed the weblog; authors should not have to concern themselves with the hurdle of whether they are or aren't truly blogging.

There are other hurdles, naturally, more worthy of attention—obstacles of finance and access to technology, obviously bound up with race, class, gender, and geography—which make it inappropriate to call the weblog some kind of panacea for would-be public writers. Nonetheless, while the caveats I've mentioned, along with so many others, deserve (and hopefully will receive) careful treatments of their own, there is still much promise in the weblog. That promise will be more easily tapped by authors willing to treat the form as more than the mere sum of its parts and explore what readers and writers alike are doing when they blog, not just what facilitating devices are doing on their behalf.

Notes

[1] There is an apparent exception to this in the capabilities of Google and other search engines to create caches of websites "as they were," allowing access to a reproduction of a moment that has passed. These reproductions, however, still lead viewers to the site as it currently it is. In addition, reproductions of earlier states of a site are viewed through the lens of Google's own software, including graphical headers and advertising content, rather than as it actually appeared at the time being represented. For those reasons, archives don't truly capture a discrete moment, or at least not a discrete moment manufactured outside the archive itself.

[2] There is much that can and should be said about the visual elements of the weblog as it relates to conventional "professional" design sense, or the stereotypical photographs of kittens, to offer but two examples. Enough can be said, in fact, that the topic warrants its own unique treatment and falls beyond the scope of this paper.

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