

<https://artnodes.uoc.edu>

ARTICLE

NODE “MATERIOLOGY AND VARIANTOLOGY: INVITATION TO DIALOGUE”

Art, as risky device

Aaron Jaffe

Florida State University

Date of submission: January 2024

Accepted in: June 2024

Published in: July 2024

Recommended citation

Jaffe, Aaron. 2024. «Art, as risky device». In: Siegfried Zielinski and Daniel Irrgang (coords.). Node «Materiology and Variantology: invitation to dialogue». *Artnodes*, no. 34. UOC. [Accessed: dd/mm/yy]. <https://doi.org/10.7238/artnodes.v0i34.424664>



The texts published in this journal are – unless otherwise indicated – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 4.0 International licence. The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract

My title alludes to “Art, as Device,” Victor Shklovsky’s foundational statement of Russian Formalism. The cornerstone of its contribution to modernist studies is the idea of defamiliarization (*ostranenie* or estrangement), a program in which form subtends risk and administration. My essay traces signals and homologues of modern art, as risky device, risk signal and homologues that cut across media modernity in an expanded, media theoretical sense. Giving special consideration to a Vorticist moment that stands “for the Reality of the Present – not or the sentimental Future”, it examines, *inter alia*, the gyroscopes, *vortoscopes* and *whorosscopes* devised by modernist tinker-hobbyists, who diagram past and future risks on the present metamedium. The essay’s payoff reconceives two nearly ubiquitous concepts in new literary and cultural studies: modernism and medium. On the one hand, the modernism concept, with its Anglo-American genealogies and receipts and cosmopolitical ambitions, describes a reflex to modernity in literature, art, culture and media; on the other, a better media-theoretical account of medium. The medium concept pulls modernism/modernity in several other directions: from the Greenbergian notion of modernist medium specificity and transparencies towards the opacities of a technical-medial a priori; from cybernetic environments towards mediation as interface effect with inhuman scalar possibilities. There is an acute sense that everything modern – every risky attempt to arrange our bodies and our lives – is about medium orientation. The task of literary-media-cultural criticism – critically reflexive human intelligence – in modernity’s second media mass-age, according to Vilém Flusser, is to uncover the apparatuses behind the apparatuses that program apparatuses. And, more than ever, to adapt Friedrich Kittler’s media theoretic claim that our literary tools are working our thoughts: our media-machines are administering our modern unconsciousness.

Keywords

modernist studies; modernism; media theory; Vorticism

Arte, como dispositivo de riesgo

Resumen

Mi título alude a «Art, as Device», la declaración fundacional del formalismo ruso de Victor Shklovsky. La piedra angular de su contribución a los estudios modernistas es la idea de la desfamiliarización (ostranenia o distanciamiento), un programa en el que la forma se opone al riesgo y a la administración. Mi ensayo rastrea señales y homologías del arte moderno, como dispositivo de riesgo, señal de riesgo y homologías que atraviesan la modernidad de los medios en un sentido teórico ampliado de los medios. Considerando especialmente un momento vorticista que representa «la realidad del presente, no o el futuro sentimental», examina, entre otros, los giroscopios, los vortoscopios y el whoroscope ideados por cacharreadores aficionados modernistas, que diagraman los riesgos pasados y futuros en el metamedio actual. El resultado del ensayo reconice dos conceptos casi omnipresentes en nuevos estudios literarios y culturales: modernismo y medio. Por un lado, el concepto de modernismo, con sus genealogías angloamericanas y ambiciones cosmopolíticas recibidas, describe un reflejo de la modernidad en la literatura, el arte, la cultura y los medios de comunicación; por otro lado, un mejor relato teórico de los medios de comunicación. El concepto de medio atrae el modernismo/la modernidad en varias otras direcciones: desde la noción de modernismo de especificidad y transparencias medias de Greenberg hacia las opacidades de un a priori técnico-medial; desde entornos cibernéticos hacia la mediación como efecto de interfaz con posibilidades escalares inhumanas. Existe una sensación aguda de que todo lo moderno, cada intento arriesgado de organizar nuestro cuerpo y nuestras vidas, se trata de una orientación media. La tarea de la crítica literaria-media-cultural, la inteligencia humana críticamente reflexiva, en la segunda era moderna de los medios de masas, según Vilém Flusser, es descubrir los aparatos detrás de los aparatos que programan los aparatos. Y, más que nunca, adaptar la afirmación teórica de los medios de Friedrich Kittler de que nuestras herramientas literarias están haciendo funcionar nuestros pensamientos: nuestras máquinas de medios están administrando nuestra inconsciencia moderna.

Palabras clave

estudios modernistas; modernismo; teoría de los medios; vorticismo

“I made an iron float on which was soldered a split-tube in which the given metal could be fixed, a similar piece of metal being adjusted above the float, so that by working the plunger or the pressure bulb the two metals could be brought into contact with graduated pressure. The other arrangements adopted were the contact of spirals compressed by micrometer screw, and filings similarly compressed between two electrodes.” –Jagadish Chandra Bose (1900)



–various artists/makers. Infographic from *BLAST*, no. 1 (1914)

1. Peak risk

Dancer/sculptor Lizica Codreanu, photographed in Constantin Brancusi's studio in 1923, models a strange modernist headdress with a cone sectioning another cone. Wavering between sound and vision, her hand seems to fluctuate between visor and salute, gesturing towards a horizon of invisible flares and blasts. Lizica's sister, Irina, observed that

the pose and costume indicated “respect [to] the shape which nature or accident gave matter.”



Figure 1. Lizica Codreanu, 1924¹

Source: Public Domain

1. See Miller, pp. 111-113.

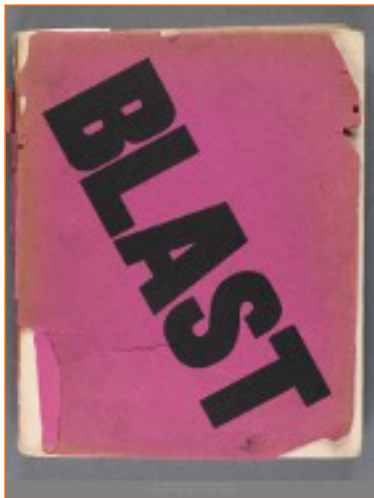


Figure 2. Cover of the "Puce Monster". Source: Trinity College, Dublin²

Consider the **Vorticist** BLAST-cone [↑]. The point ("The Vorticist is at his [sic] maximum point of energy when stillest") might mean several things (Lewis 2024). Part of its "**crude energy**" comes from how it lies at the crux of decisions about its very status as a symbol or as a signal (Lewis 2024).



Figure 3. Blast Cone. Source: *BLAST*³

A symbol stands for something, but a **signal** is performative communicative, a means of transmitting information or instructions from one place to another. In other words, as a symbol, the BLAST-cone has a conventional meaning, recognized and agreed upon within a specific

context, whereas as a signal, it initiates a program of behaviour or message that carries meaning or information (Heidegger 1962).⁴

**FORGET WORLD PEACE...
VISUALIZE TURN SIGNALS**

Figure 4. Visualize Turn Signals.⁵ Source: LPF USA, Amazon.com

Complicating this, of course, is that the BLAST-cone itself has become a potent symbol in retrospect, a symbol of the future, a brand for a configuration of artists, and, eventually, in a way, a trademark.



Figure 5. William Roberts, *The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel: Spring, 1915 (1961-1962)*⁶. Source: Tate. © The estate of William Roberts

A symbol is a sequence in a past-present-future (PPF) algorithm in which the signifier arrives first, but the referent – a thing that was presumably there first – arrives second. **Kurtz**, forming himself in the pose of a meditating Buddha (Conrad 1902).⁷

David Trotter traces the device, seven cones in *BLAST*, no. 1, to the Vorticist signatory Edward Wadsworth's interest in the symbology of ports (Trotter 2016). A letter from Ezra Pound compliments Wadsworth on the motif in one of his paintings: "a thing like a signal arm or some

2. The specimen of the "puce monster" from the library at Trinity College, Dublin, is less sun-faded than other surviving copies.
 3. The BLAST cone appears several times in *BLAST*, starting on page 9.
 4. The turn signal example comes from Heidegger's *Being and Time*: "Motor cars are sometimes fitted up with an adjustable red arrow".
 5. Figure 4 shows a popular meme, frequently affixed to **automobile bumpers**.
 6. See Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, pp. 179-182.
 7. Kurtz's signal is already the medium in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Mind', [Kurtz] began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower." In the beginning/end, Marlow forms himself into Kurtz's pose.

other graceful unexplained bit of machinery, reaching out, and alone, across the picture, like a Mozart theme skipping an octave, or leaving the base for the treble” (Trotter 2016). Strung with fishing tackle, drying fish, traps and wet clothes – the signal arm is a mast, some kind of scaffold for hanging semaphores on ships, coastal promontories or lighthouses to convey information or instructions. Pound’s imagist bona fides show through, projecting the devices’ musical notion onto the apparatus, the quasi-thing as medium. A signal station might be classed with other newly encountered inscription machines, stepped-on combs, birds flocking calligraphically, the ocean as an expansive canvas, a vast, planetary abstraction. Like faces on the Metro or green, arsenic paint smears, the device → a risky, new medium for markings. A comb piercing a heel → a pointy stylus inscribing a callused, mystical writing pad, → is not simply defamiliarized, → is an informing apparatus for risky aesthetic communications (Pound 1990).⁸

Others explain the BLAST-cone shape as merely a serendipity from the print shop. *Objet trouvé*, stumbled upon by Wyndham Lewis, the mislaid printing block from the weather report, lying about the shop at *Leveridge and Co. (T.U.), St. Thomas’ Road, Harlesden* (Hanna 2015). Leveridge printed weather charts. On these charts, ▲ signals turbulent weather from the North, the forecast of bracing air from the North Sea. *The Oxford English Dictionary* includes a citation for *storm-cone* from Fitzroy, *Rep. Meteorologic Office*, 1864: “This morning the storm cone was hoisted” (Oxford English Dictionary [OED] 2024). In effect, the vortex of modernity turns around this motif. The signal station – to which Wadsworth’s oeuvre obsessively returns – foregrounds a material techno-media relation between seaborne transport networks and forecasting risks. The link is well pronounced, for example, in his late 1944 painting, *Signals*:



Figure 6. Edward Wadsworth, *Signals*, 1942. Source: Tate. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 DEED

Not incidentally, the Fitzroy cited by the *OED* is Robert FitzRoy, the captain for the second voyage of HMS Beagle made famous by Charles Darwin, is the first seafarer to make use of telegraphic weather reports and a signaling system based on “a combination of cones and drums hoisted on a staff to warn ships both in harbour and along the coast of an approaching gale” (Royal Charter 2024).⁹ FitzRoy invents forecasting.

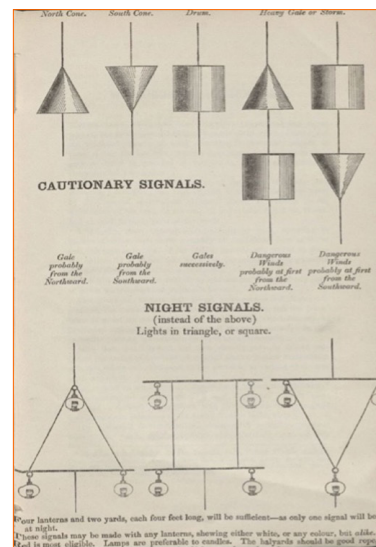


Figure 7. Excerpt from Factsheet 21 of the National Meteorological Library and Archive. Source: National Meteorological Library and Archive

Second modernism obsessively turns on risk signals, for which the convention of three-dimensional cones and drums, flattened into two-dimensional weather symbology of triangles and half-circles, provide a paradigmatic form for indicating difficult information (in the multiple sense of disturbing and difficult to access and process). In other words, the by-line of second modernism, modernism’s modernism, involves signaling turbulence ahead.

2. Disturbances

A bird ... disturbed, the line that begins Henry Green’s experimental novel *Party Going* (1939) provides a case in point: “Fog was so dense, bird that had been disturbed went flat into a balustrade and slowly fell, dead, at her feet” (Green 1993). Later in Green’s strange novel, there’s a dead pigeon in a cardboard box, the animal-corpse-as-pointer, anticipated by Baudelaire’s *Carrion* poem, echoing Camus’ trainmaster toting around a decaying rat or a dead body on a terminal beach. These shapes are not literary symbols in the old sense but entropic “shuttle-

8. I am referring to the following poems by Pound, “In the Station of the Metro” and “L’Art,” as well as Taniguchi Buson’s classic haiku, “The piercing chill I feel/my dead wife’s comb, in our bedroom, under my heel”.
 9. Royal Charter for the world’s first National Forecasting Service begins in the aftermath of a severe storm on the 25th and 26th of October 1859.

cocks,” to borrow the alarming utterance from Ford Madox Ford’s novel *The Good Soldier* (1915) (Ford 2007). Another cone-like, bird-like form, Ford uses this signal to describe outbursts from precarious lives, batted one way and another, like badminton equipment:

“And she repeated the word “shuttlecocks” three times. I know what was passing in her mind, if she can be said to have a mind, for Leonora has told me that, once, the poor girl said she felt like a shuttlecock being tossed backwards and forwards between the violent personalities of Edward and his wife.... Once, or perhaps twice, during the meal her knife and fork will be suspended in mid-air as if she were trying to think of something that she had forgotten. Then she will say that she believes in an Omnipotent Deity or she will utter the one word “shuttle-cocks”, perhaps. It is very extraordinary to see the perfect flush of health on her cheeks, to see the lustre of her coiled black hair, the poise of the head upon the neck, the grace of the white hands--and to think that it all means nothing--that it is a picture without a meaning.” (Ford 2007)

The nerves of the Vorticists are similarly bad tonight. As their manifesto says, they move one way, then another. Where is the vorticist mind? *Try this trick and spin it, but there is nothing in it.* Now, invigorated; later, enervated; the wooden narrator of Ford’s novel is called Dowell, after all. *Human Cyllinders* (1917), Mina Loy’s futurist poem, renders it (Loy 2024). Maybe the Vorticist mind is disturbed by northern winds, maybe by southern winds. Now Edinburgh, later Bristol. The forecast calls for cold modernism, as Jessica Burstein puts it (Burstein 2012). Its signal forms are less mimesis than thermodynamic mimicry. The inverted top inherits the indexical symbology of the hanging sail-cloth scrap, a *windsock*, indicating a cold front.

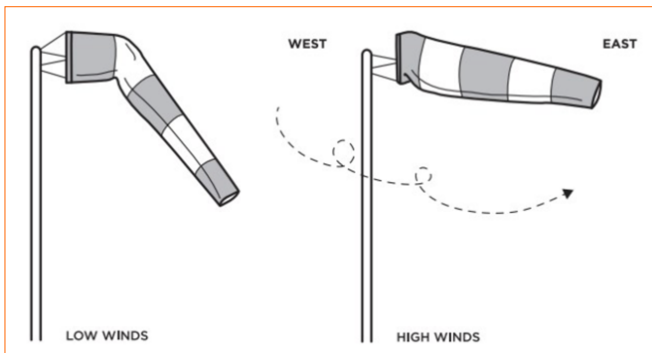


Figure 8. Windsock illustration

Source: Science World, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Early nautical maps sought to find a form for risk forecasting for winds. Map or diagram, it indicates along an invisible interface, a front, dynamic information where pressure zones meet. Edmond Halley’s and Alexander von Humboldt’s early efforts to map currents and winds are second modernist research projects, that precisely, pace Siegfried Zielinski, model “fundamental cultural techniques”, “poetics of relations (Édouard Glissant), [...] reading and understanding the winds, as well as clever navigation” (Zielinski 2023).

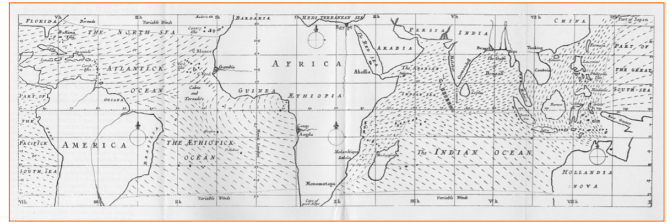


Figure 9. Edmond Halley’s map

Source: John Delaney’s, *Historic Maps Collection*, Princeton University Library

Halley’s *map* collates, condenses and organizes *a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi*, visualizing an enormous amount of data and measurements about wind directions (Delaney 2012). Whether or not this data is good or bad is constitutively ambivalent; its value depends on subsequent processing.

By 1932, Rudyard Kipling dedicates a poem to an actual storm cone signal:

“Stand by! The lull ’twixt blast and blast
Signals the storm is near, not past;
And worse than present jeopardy
May our forlorn to-morrow be.” (Kipling 1941)

It is hard to imagine that Kipling was remembering the “*great MARGENTA cover’d opusculus*,” as Pound called the magazine (Stephens n.d.). When the dust settled, *BLAST* left such a tiny impact point, even if the cone of scattered debris can still be traced somehow. In a letter, Kipling dutifully connects his own storm cone warning to troubles abroad, the winds of European fascism in particular. The cone indicates a siren for risk, a coalmine canary, an antenna detecting signals way over the horizon. The imagery comes not because Kipling directly learned anything from the avant-garde exertions of Lewis, Pound, Wadsworth and the Vorticist crew but because weather forecasting by 1932 was a ubiquitous component of daily life, a vital vernacular modernist medium for giving technical visibility to invisible risks.

Unlike Thomas Hardy’s 1914 poem *Channel Firing* in which the “great guns” blast practice ordinance haphazardly towards France (clay pigeons raising the dead, who think they are experiencing Judgment Day), the workings of the alarm system seem much more diffusive for Kipling. The premonitions are felt more assuredly in a robust communication system – the modernist communicology – and are consequently at the same time more and less developed. There is more signal fidelity and less symbolic amplitude in the weather reports. Visually, as a shape, depending on orientation or point of view, the 1914 *BLAST*-cone is either implosive and explosive. It resembles a sergeant’s bugle, an unmuted post-horn, a director’s megaphone. More signal fidelity, less symbolic amplitude: depending on orientation or point of view, either implosive and explosive. ◀ resembles a sergeant’s bugle, a pre-Pynchonian unmuted post-horn, a silent film director’s megaphone, communicating complex instructions for an enormous *mise-en-scène*.



Figure 10. Allan Dwan directing *Robin Hood*, “making himself heard by twelve hundred extras through the medium of the world’s largest megaphone”

Source: *Photoplay*, 1922

A kindred form is famously mobilized by Alexander Rodchenko’s 1924 constructivist photomontage poster.



Figure 11. Rodchenko’s original design for Lenziz

Source: *Elephant*. See Goff (2020)

Revolutionary typography projects outward: \leftarrow , Lilya Brik’s open mouth, resembling - indeed enacting - a cone of amplification, but also comprising a funnel pleading for concentration, attention and reception: *Books (Please) in all branches of knowledge*. Feed me: garbage in, garbage out, in revolutionary times when the refuse of garbage and fruits of knowledge seem less confusing. Which is to say more containerized.

A blast cone insofar as it traces ballistic reverberations, provides a \Rightarrow , \Leftarrow , and \Leftrightarrow of destructions. So too, Rodchenko and Brik, just as

Lewis and Pound, the valve between images (anticipatory, *a priori*) and resonant future history (associated, *a posteriori*) are connected but constitutively tendentious. The semiotic war machine is total and felt however hushed in an individual aesthetic event. For Marlow, Kurtz is less a name than an *ambivalent* risk signal for decisions \Rightarrow a “dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt” (Conrad 1902). Aggressive warnings provide anticipatory wish-fulfillments, warning symbology so deeply embedded in risk epistemology that alarm only makes sense retroactively from the vantage of actual harms felt. Behind the projectile, as it flies, shockwave propagate backwards at the speed of sound, a phenomenon not yet well understood in the times of the “Men of 1914,” but nevertheless beautifully illustrated fifty years later by Harold Edgerton’s famous photograph of a bullet passing through an apple.

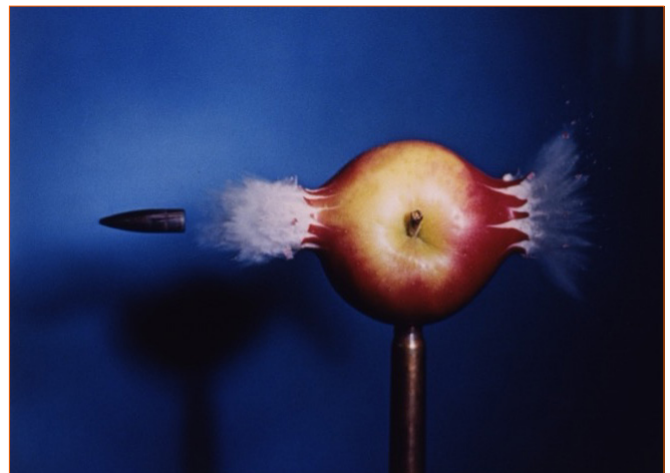


Figure 12. Harold E. Edgerton’s *Bullet through Apple*, 1964

Source: © Harold E. Edgerton

Nonetheless, already back in in 1873, the explosive shape of a projection was observed in a related connection – an airburst in thermodynamic field theory – by chemists: “If we approach the jet of the pyrogene so as to touch the side of the spirit-lamp pyrocone, and blow with greater violence, the inner or blast cone becomes invisible from the accelerated movement of the air” (Ross 1873). The shape of movement is a hidden projection in the air. The prehistory of cinematic apparatus is well known. Communicative administration – the partition of the sensible, as Jacques Rancière puts it – is being made sensible at scale by technical means. Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* mimicking the dynamics of... time measured by shutter speed, the galloping horse of Eadweard Muybridge, is the case in point. For *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors...* the chocolate grinder becomes the zoetrope. In bullet-time, just connect the dots and you will get to the point. See the projection, Duchamp seems to say.



Figure 13. Reynaud's Projection Praxinoscope
Source: La Nature, Revue des Sciences, 1882

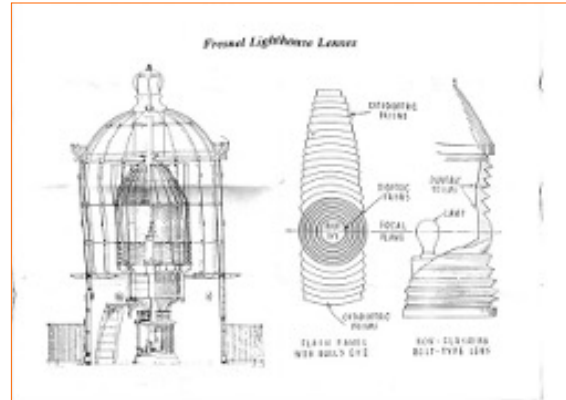


Figure 14. Fresnel Lighthouse Lenses handout
Source: St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, St. Marks, Florida

3. A projector... a horizon. An airburst.. an apparatus¹⁰

The storm cone is the cousin of the semaphore and the mechanical telegraph; the second cousin of fishing tackle, flotsam and jetsam drying by the port. The turn signal implies direction and decision. The \Rightarrow mathematical notation implies implication: $A \Rightarrow B \Rightarrow C \Rightarrow$ Smoke Signals \Rightarrow Archimedes' Lens \Rightarrow a telematic burning glass, at evening rising to meet you. Thinking of the Oresteia, which opens with a signal across the horizon, the implication \Rightarrow the destruction of Troy, Tom McCarthy underscores the riskiness of telematic transmission, ambivalence about signals experienced by their recipients:

“Greek beacons were sophisticated objects, elaborate contraptions with movable parts, attendant encryption systems and so on. For Aeschylus, information—and, by extension perhaps, language itself—is no abstract, natural phenomenon: it’s a manufactured, mediated, and material regime in which we find ourselves, the precursor and precondition to our agency and actions. When listened to attentively, Clytemnestra’s speech starts whispering a truth I hope to amplify and echo in this essay: that we are always not just (to use a dramatic term) in medias res, i.e., in the middle of events, but also simply in media. In the beginning is the signal.” (McCarthy 2012)

In second modernism, from Virginia Woolf to the Eggers Brothers, if you actually get to the beacon \Rightarrow a Fresnel lens up top

and a shameful Promethean shit-show beneath (Woolf 2023; *The Lighthouse* 2019).



Figure 15. Rudolph Karl Alexander Schneider's *Hypnosis*, 1904
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Modernist technical emblem par excellence – Heideggerian turn signals, the up-and-down elevator buttons – gives form for a transmission signal for flow, movement, turbulence: a storm signal, a greater than/less than sign, an amplification cypher (louder, softer; expansion, reduction), a simple electronics component (i.e., a diode or anode), a megaphone, an ear-horn, a mic or speaker, signal detection from noise. The point is cohering incoherence.¹¹

10. The punctuation pattern follows Beckett's critical genealogy, “Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce. On the media-genesis of the magic lantern, see especially the fifth chapter of Zielinski's *Deep Time of the Media*.

11. I am grateful for conversations with Seth Morton on this topic and mediamodernism at transmediale 10.

As a diode, it signals a flow from + charge (blast) to - charge (bless):



From William Butler Yeats' *gyroscope* ("Turning and turning in the widening gyre/The falcon cannot hear the falconer") to Pound's *vortoscope* to Beckett's *whoroscope*, the modernist is a tinker-hobbyist, diagramming past and future risks on the present metamedium. "We stand for the Reality of the Present—not or the sentimental Future, or the sacripant past", proclaims the Vorticist (Lewis). Byung-Chul Han reminds us that the vortex is a kind of interface valve for this risk-taking/-making event: a whirlwind, a whoroscope, a shit-storm. According to Han, the shit-storm "lacks a voice" and is "perceived as noise" (Han 2013).

"Whirl up, sea—
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir." (H.D., 1914)



Figure 16. Apple iPhone acoustic amplifier stand by DecorianDesign
Source: DecorianDesign

About the dissociation of voices and noises in this vortex, in "Oread," at least, published in *BLAST*, H.D. isn't so sure. Han is thinking about storms in the noisome, on-line waste land of social media, where the wind under the door seems to say nothing. The operative distinction is cybernetic \Rightarrow signal/noise, form/medium, system/environment. Writ-

ing over a century ago, H.D.'s vortex signals an overwhelming weather event. Her imagist poem gives us a suitably crispy cinematic image, a transmission inscribed on a rocky coast by wasted conifers. Who is this "us," observing the shape of the movement, being disturbed into being by liquid media, H.D. asks? The question being begged here points to McCarthy's reading of transmission in *Kraftwerk*: "who transmits and who receives"? (McCarthy 2012).



Figure 17: Kraftwerk's *Antenna* (1975)
Source: YouTube

What is the read/write function of mediamodernism, in effect, when the modernist milieu begins and ends in the medium, so to speak, that is, the middle?

The Mountain Nymph stands as mythopoetic placeholder for paleo-signal jamming, gigantomachia about nature and culture, for which inscription systems on both sides of the ledger don't really add up but nevertheless disturb deep time.



Figure 18. Blasted trees from the Tunguska Event
Source: Wikic

The extraterrestrial air blast from the Tunguska Event in Siberia in 1908 provides a real-life example. *A screaming comes across the sky*, whether comet or meteor, the trace left behind, marked by innumerable felled trees, inscribed into countless tree rings, indicates a planetary scar covering an enormous swath of inhospitable terrain, impossible to witness or measure (Sack 2019). Because of its max scale and relative rarity, these kinds of cosmological happenings do not align with the familiar registers of human memory keeping. A solitary farmer, interviewed later, knows nothing about witnessing cosmological black swans, remembering only that

“the sky split in two. Fire appeared high and wide over the forest... Then the sky shut closed, and a strong thump sounded, and I was thrown a few yards... After that such noise came, as if . . . cannons were firing, the earth shook.” (Gasperini 2008)

Even though shock waves were felt in London and Berlin – where newspapers were being read at night in the afterglow of the blast – it was not until 1927, when a scientist from Moscow treks into the 2,000 square kilometers blast zone and found “a radial pattern” spreading out from a nucleus of “partially burned tree stumps” that resembled ruined “telegraph poles” (Gasperini 2008). From here, the message for our human situation can finally be disclosed: its total precarity. “**London missed obliteration by four hours**”¹² (Arthur 1999). Transmission received.

The classic example of Niklas Luhmann’s form/medium distinction, a distinction which Luhmann borrows from Fritz Heider, features a human footprint in wet sand:

“a footprint in the sand establishes a tight coupling between the grains of sand, which cannot be resisted because the grains are not connected to one another strongly enough. The weaker the stable couplings between its elements, the better the medium is at accepting forms: for instance, stones or larger grains of sand already have their own form, thus conditioning the form of the footprint and making for a less suitable medium. In this example, the totality of grains of sand is treated as a medium in which the footprint is established.” (Corsi, Baraldi & Esposito 2021)

“Take only memories, leave only footprints” is the bumper sticker version of this insight, wisdom tightly coupled into an attenuated humanism. Taking form by leaving media is risky. Modernist medium remains fully inscribed in the blast cone. On the one hand, the modernism concept, with its literary-aesthetic genealogies and receipts and cosmopolitical blast cone, describes a reflex to modernity in literature, art, culture and media. It is less a packet of years than an epistemocritical condition that, as Luhmann puts it, “knows no positions from which society could be adequately described for others within society” (1998). In effect, modernity is a world in which everything is never the case, in which society “barely understands itself [. . .] so it marks its newness by

relegating the old, thereby covering up its own embarrassment at not really knowing what is going on”.

On the other, the reorientation or resequencing of the past-present-future algorithm is key. The past no longer appearing as a guarantor of future results leaves an acute sense that everything modern – every micro-technique arranging bodies and lives – is medium-oriented. The past no longer appears as a guarantor of future results. The medium concept pulls mediamodernism in several other directions: from the Greenbergian notion of modernist medium specificity and transparencies towards the opacities of a technical-medial *a priori*; from cybernetic environments towards mediation as an interface effect with inhuman scalar possibilities. There is an acute sense that everything modern – every micro-technique arranging bodies and lives – is medium-oriented. The future is reflexivity programming the medium that is the present in complex ways. The concept is slippery, if nothing else, fluid not least because of a kind of constitutive transparency.

“What’s water”, asks the fish, in David Foster Wallace’s *joke*? (Wallace 1995). We exist, in a non-trivial sense, with apologies to Zielinski, not only after the media but inside the blast cone: “The present becomes merely an extremely short effect for the future; a miniscule, no longer quantifiable amount of time; simply a moment of updating. The extreme shortening of storage times coupled with simultaneous expansion to near-infinite storage capacity have not led to the past being forgotten; rather, the facility of enjoying the present is the victim. There’s no time for that anymore. Future and past are joined together directly and effectively” (Zielinski 2013). Accordingly, as Vilém Flusser suggests, the task of literary-media-cultural criticism – critically reflexive human intelligence – in modernity’s second media mass-age is to ply/play the risky medium by uncovering misplaced middles and vanishing mediators: the AI apparatuses behind the apparatuses that program apparatuses (Flusser 2002). And, more than ever, to adapt Friedrich Nietzsche’s/Kittler’s media theoretic claim that our literary tools are working our thoughts: our media-machines are administering (funneling) risk into our modern unconsciousness:



4. Unto this (B)Last

The BLAST-cone is a form to funnel risk – concentrating it like Jacob Epstein’s *Rock Drill*.

12. “If you were in London on 30 June 1908, you are astronomically lucky to be alive.”



Figure 19. Jacob Epstein's study for *Rock Drill* (c.1913). © The Estate of Sir Jacob Epstein
Source: image courtesy of the New Art Gallery Walsall, Garman Ryan Collection

It is also an impossible stylus for inscribing information overload along the zombie horizons of mediamodernism. “A Zombie being a corpse that won’t give in and admit it”, reads the communiqué from Zombieville in *Pacific Islands Monthly* from the outermost rim after V-J Day. The uplink reports that “the sea is flat, an opaque disc of green-blue . . . without as much as a ripple to mar its mirrored surface”. Nietzsche’s Madman provides a useful commentary on relation of the needle on this record. Aphorisms are themselves risk horizons, an association indicated by etymology. The set list follows the “madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace, and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!” means that special need for a transcendent, perspectival rule ⇒ lost, hidden, on a voyage, emigrated (Nietzsche 1968). The implication of the notorious deicide passage in this particular connection applies as a kind of sender-receiver policy cancelation. For the Diogenes-like Madman – the kind of technician who tries to make an apparatus like Rainer Maria Rilke’s **primal sound machine**: the metaphysical guarantee of interpretive authority is past its expiration date (Rilke 1999). The rule’s obsolescence is not just a matter of distrust for the sovereign authority of the State – or Governmentality or the Author or the Text – is not just phony because a cynic dares to declare it so. Rather, it registers that total connectivity now depends on the ubiquitous background medium of risks: “Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?” (Nietzsche 1968).

Let us not get distracted by innuendos of sacrilege in the Madman schtick, and refocus on the details. Lighting the lantern – powering on – highlights the inevitability of the night, information overload, disorienting ubiquity and the ubiquity of hidden phenomenology. Disorientation means arrow signs, compass coordinates that do not work right anymore. The past and the future are malfunctioning. The real possibility is, as Glissant

realizes, as well as Kurtz, that Europe is but a forlorn part of western Asia, Spain, a soldered-on piece of Africa, the Mediterranean Sea, a weird inland lake (Glissant 1990). Sender and receiver functions are jammed, transmitting the ultimate claustrophobic codependency, the zombie relationship between the reader and the writer is no good. Readers no longer want to know what dead writers say. They want to sponge away this horizon, too, by proffering hollow writing routine advice and soliciting publishing and literary PR tips. Let me Google that for you: *Hypocrite lecteur! Mon semblable, -mon frère!* The implied reader is now bundled inside the AI. The key takeaway from DJ Madman is the awareness that the massive disorientation-qua-complexification – the *sine qua non* of a primal sound machine: modernity, traceable to Giordano Bruno, is not over yet. In 1882, it was only just beginning:

“At last [the Madman] threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I have come too early,” he said then; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars – and yet they have done it themselves.” (Nietzsche 1968)

Tellingly, modernity’s inexorable complexification, detected by Nietzsche’s Madman, is self-inflicted, a destruction of authority caused by modern self-reflexivity. Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? ⇒ not parricidal uprooting but the individual branches that clutch are the complex branching of decision trees. In a word: *hermeneutics*.

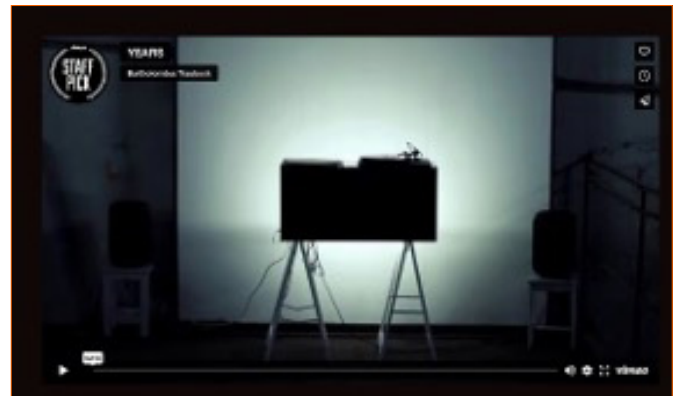


Figure 18. Blasted trees from the Tunguska Event
Source: Wikic

For his project *Years* (2011), Bartholomäus Traubeck built an instrument very similar to the one proposed by Rilke (Traubeck 2012). Instead of a skull, he made a record player play a tree: “a modified turntable that uses a camera as a pickup and that samples a microscopically small image of the year rings . . . then translated into sound

by programming”.¹³ Using slices of different kinds of species – alder, ash, oak, beech, maple, spruce, and walnut – Traubeck’s instrument acquires input from patterns encoded in the rings then realizes that data as sound output:

“A tree’s year rings are analysed for their strength, thickness and rate of growth. This data serves as basis for a generative process that outputs piano music. It is mapped to a scale which is again defined by the overall appearance of the wood (ranging from dark to light and from strong texture to light texture). The foundation for the music is certainly found in the defined ruleset of programming and hardware setup, but the data acquired from every tree interprets this ruleset very differently.” (Traubeck 2011)

When receivers listen to the markings on different slices of wood, what are they listening to? Traubeck intimates that they are listening to an archive of data, deep time encoded in tree rings via rhythms of disease, insect damage, the seasons, the weather, branching off events, climate change. If that sound is aesthetically sensible – sensible as music; pleasurable, even – this conclusion speaks to resonances between the capacity of our organism to receive the data of tree-life and tree-time – in effect, listening for markings of risk in trees is less about a human reading the tree as an author than in sharing a common risk program through a complex transmission apparatus. For similar reasons, white noise – pink noise, brown noise, and so on – as a possible music of the patterns where the skull knits together, pace Kittler, stochastic form communicates communication and something profoundly inhuman about the comfort-level with uncertainty and chance, the corporal inscription, on the skull, hidden beneath the skin.

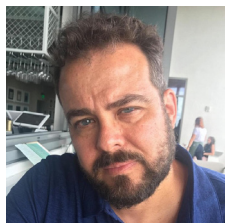
References

- Arthur, Charles. “Missed Obliteration by Four Hours”. *The Independent*, London (1999, 16 September): 23:02. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/london-missed-obliteration-by-four-hours-1119600.html>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Beckett, Samuel. “Dante [...] Bruno, Vico [...] Joyce”. In: Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman & Olga Taxidou (eds.). *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), 449-451.
- Burstein, Jessica. *Cold Modernism*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.
- Bose, J.C. “On a Self-Recovering Coherer and the Study of the Cohering Action of Different Metals”. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*, vol. 65, no. 413-422 (1900, December): 166-172. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspl.1899.0020>
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Blackwood, 1902.
- Corsi, Giancarlo, Claudio Baraldi and Elena Esposito. *Unlocking Luhmann*. Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2021.
- Dead Media Archive. “Magic Lantern”, (2010). http://cultureandcommunication.org/deadmedia/index.php/Magic_Lantern. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Delaney, John. “First X, Then Y, Now Z: Landmark Thematic Maps”. *Historic Maps Collection, Princeton University Library*. Princeton University Library, 2012. https://library.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/thematic-maps/contents.html. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Eggers, Robert (dir.). *The Lighthouse*. Film (2019). A24.
- Flusser, Vilém. “Criteria—Crisis—Criticism” [1985]. In: Andreas Ströhl (ed.). *Writings*. Translated by Erik Eisel. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 42-50.
- Ford, Ford Madox. *The Good Soldier* [1915]. New York: Penguin, 2007.
- Gasperini, Luca, Enrico Bonatti and Giuseppe Longo. “The Tunguska Mystery--100 Years Later”. *Scientific American* (2008, June 30). <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-tunguska-mystery-100-years-later/>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translation by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1990.
- Goff, Samuel. “The Memeification of The Memeification of Rodchenko’s Iconic Soviet Portrait”. *Elephant* (2020, 14 October). <https://elephant.art/the-memeification-of-rodchenkos-iconic-soviet-portrait-lilya-brik-14102020>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024]
- Green, Henry. *Loving; Living; Party Going* [1939]. London: Penguin, 1993.
- Han, Byung-Chul. *In the Swarm*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013.
- Hanna, Julian. “Vorticism and Avant-Gardism”. In: Andrzej Gašiorek and Nathan Waddell (eds.). *Wyndham Lewis: A Critical Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748685691-005>
- Hardy, Thomas. “Channel Firing”, (2024) [1914]. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46544/channel-firing>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time* [1927]. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.
- H.D. “Oread”. In Ezra Pound, “Vortex”. *BLAST*, no. 1, (1914, 20 June): 153-154.
- Jaffe, Aaron. *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Kipling, Rudyard. “The Storm Cone” [1932]. *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse Made by T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber and Faber, 1941.
- Lewis, Wyndham. *Blast*, no.1 [1914]. Santa Rosa, California: Black Sparrow, 1992.
- Lewis, Wyndham. “Long Live the Vortex!” and “Our Vortex” [1914]. *Poetry Foundation*, (2024). <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69478/long-live-the-vortex-and-our-vortex>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Loy, Mina. “Human Cylinders” [1914]. *Poetry Foundation*, (2024). <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51872/human-cylinders>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].

13. <https://www.datagarden.org/post/2018/9/18/interview-bartholomus-traubeck-on-years>

- Luhmann, Niklas. *Observations on Modernity*. Translated by William Who-brey. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- McCarthy, Tom. *Transmission and the Individual Remix*. London: Penguin, 2012.
- McGivering, John and John Radcliffe. "Notes on The Storm Cone". *Kipling Society*, (2015). https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/readers-guide/rg_stormcone1.htm. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Miller, Sanda. *Constantin Brancusi*. London: Reaktion, 2010.
- Morrison, Mark. "BLAST: An Introduction". *Modernist Journals Project*, (2005). <https://modjourn.org/blast-an-introduction/>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- National Meteorological Library and Archive. *Factsheet 21 — Met Office History and Timeline*. The Met Office, (2024a). https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/binaries/content/assets/metofficegovuk/pdf/research/library-and-archive/library/publications/factsheets/factsheet_21-met-office-history-and-timeline_2024.pdf. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- National Meteorological Library and Archive. "The Royal Charter Gale". *The Met Office*, (2024b). <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/library-and-archive/archive-hidden-treasures/royal-charter>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science* [1882]. In: Walter Kaufmann (ed.) (trans.). *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1968.
- The Oxford English Dictionary. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2021. <https://www.oed.com>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Pacific Islands Monthly. *Pacific Islands Monthly*, no. 16, (1945, 4 October).
- Pound, Ezra. *Personae*. New York: New Directions, 1990.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated and introduced by Gabriel Rockhill. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. "Primal Sound". *Friedrich A. Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Reynaud, Emile. "The Projection Praxinoscope". *Philosophical Magazine*, (1882).
- Ross, Captain W.A. "Pyrology, or Fire-Analysis". *Chemical News*, (1873, 7 February).
- Sack, Harald. "The Mysterious Tunguska Event – June 30, 1908". *SciHi Blog* (2019, 30 June). <https://scihi.org/tunguska-event>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Device". *Poetics Today*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2015): 151-174. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-3160709>
- Stephens, Chris. "BLAST! The radical Vorticist Manifesto". *Tate Museum*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/v/vorticism/blast-radical-vorticist-manifesto>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Traubeck, Bartholomäus. Interviewed by Joe Patitucci. "Interview: Bartholomäus Traubeck on 'Years'". *Data Garden* (2012, 14 February). <https://www.datagarden.org/post/2018/9/18/interview-bartholomus-traubeck-on-years>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Traubeck, Bartholomäus. "Years". Modified record player, wood, sleeves. Traubeck [2011]. <http://traubeck.com/works/years>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Trotter, David. "Modernism's Media Theory". *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3, (2016): 5-26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/crq.12284>
- Wallace, David Foster. "This is Water". Kenyon College commencement speech, (2005). <https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Wolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse* [1927]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.
- Zielinski, Siegfried. "...After the Media": News from the Slow-Fading Twentieth Century. Translated by Gloria Custance. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Zielinski, Siegfried. "Call for Papers, Materiology and Variantology". *Artnodes*, (2023). <https://raco.cat/index.php/Artnodes/about/call-for-papers/materiology>. [Accessed: 31 January 2024].
- Zielinski, Siegfried. *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*. Translated by Gloria Custance. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006.

CV

**Aaron Jaffe**

Florida State University
ajaffe@fsu.edu

Aaron Jaffe is the Frances Cushing Ervin Professor of English at Florida State University. He has published *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*; *The Way Things Go: An Essay on the Matter of Second Modernism*; and *Spoiler Alert: A Critical Guide*. He has edited and co-edited several books and special issues, including *Thinking Further* by Vilém Flusser (forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press, 2025).

