Programming is the New Ground of Writing
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David M Rieder, NC State University

Figure 1. Mark Tansey's "Picasso and Braque"

The image on the screen is by the painter Mark Tansey (see Fig. 1 above). It is titled "Picasso and Braque." And there are three reasons why I'm leading with it. First, it is reminiscent of Orville and Wilbur Wright's test flights outside the town of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, which is just a few hours drive from here. Second, at a conference on writing, many of Tansey's paintings, including this one, valorize text in one way or another—especially the printed word. In this painting, we can see Picasso trying to fly one of his collages while Braque surveys his progress from the ground, and the point worth noting is that the flying surfaces of Picasso's collage are made from swaths of newsprint. It's a multimodal writing machine. Well, really…

Figure 2. Wikipedia image of Hargrave (left) and Swain
< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hargrave-demo.jpg >

It's a curious combination of kite and plane—a machine made from what look like Hargrave cells wrapped in words. Judging from the second image on the screen (see Fig. 2 above), perhaps Tansey's painting is a bit of a mash-up of histories of flying, Hargrave's kites and the Wrights's plane.

But, getting back on track, in addition to these two points is the third, which includes my main point.

In the painting (see Fig. 1 above), the words printed on the swaths of newsprint—the writing has broken free of its logocentric grounding. It's a relative break—not an absolute deterritorialization—because we still recognize the writing on those swaths of newsprint as writing, but the words have taken on a value relative to the flying machine that it serves. The words are still readable, but the point here is why read them? Or (I don't really mean to throw the baby out with the bathwater) why limit their value to their readability? The flying machine, the dynamic medium they now serve, invites us to step away from our conventional stance toward writing, which is writing at a standstill, and unground ourselves. In computational media, writing wants to take a walk, not sit on a couch to be analyzed. Writing doesn't need to be limited to the faithful representation of glottic thought and expression—it never did, in fact. In computational media, our alphabet is motivated and dynamic. As Richard Lanham explains in *The Economics of Attention*, it is capable of thinking. In today's digital age, the definition of writing is expanding well beyond the logocentric tradition, but many of us continue to reinforce the static, logocentric tradition. When it comes to computational media and the topic of this town hall, if writing can think (i.e., if it is mobile and transformable) then we should turn our focus away from content, which has diminishing value, to algorithmic forms and functions.

So, my third point about Tansey's painting, the thing that I like about it, is that we're all Picasso in flight, whether we know it or not. How many of you are multi-tasking with tablets or laptops during this conference, partly here, partly some where else. We're in flight right now. But here's the problem, the challenge: while we're all comfortable in flight, far fewer of us are willing or able to recognize how writing has taken flight, too.

The new ground, the new basis of writing is algorithmic. Today, the power and profit in writing has less to do with representing speech than serving a generative process of creation.

So, if you are teaching and practicing writing as a grounded, representational technology, you are missing the proverbial forest for the trees, the machine for the pages of newsprint. If you can't write code, if you can't think with code, if you can't write algorithmically, you may eventually find yourself stuck in the logocentric sands of the past.

David M Rieder … dmrieder@ncsu.edu