

# LANGUAGE MACHINES

The background of the cover is a detailed, dark-toned illustration of a mechanical device, likely a cipher machine or an early computer. It features several large, circular components with internal mechanisms, possibly rotors or drums, and a complex network of wires and gears. A hand, depicted in a sketchy, artistic style, is shown holding a pen and writing on a surface that appears to be a keyboard or a set of controls. The overall aesthetic is technical and historical, with a focus on the intersection of language and technology.

TECHNOLOGIES OF  
LITERARY AND CULTURAL  
PRODUCTION

EDITED WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION BY  
JEFFREY MASTEN  
PETER STALLYBRASS  
AND NANCY J. VICKERS

THE ENGLISH INSTITUTE

## SCREEN WARS

TRANSMEDIA

APPROPRIATIONS

FROM EISENSTEIN

TO A TV DANTE AND

CARMEN SANDIEGO

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Only by a critical comparison with the more basic early forms of the spectacle is it possible to master critically the specific methodology of the cinema.

—Eisenstein, "A Course in Treatment," 1932

A good old text always is a blank for new things.

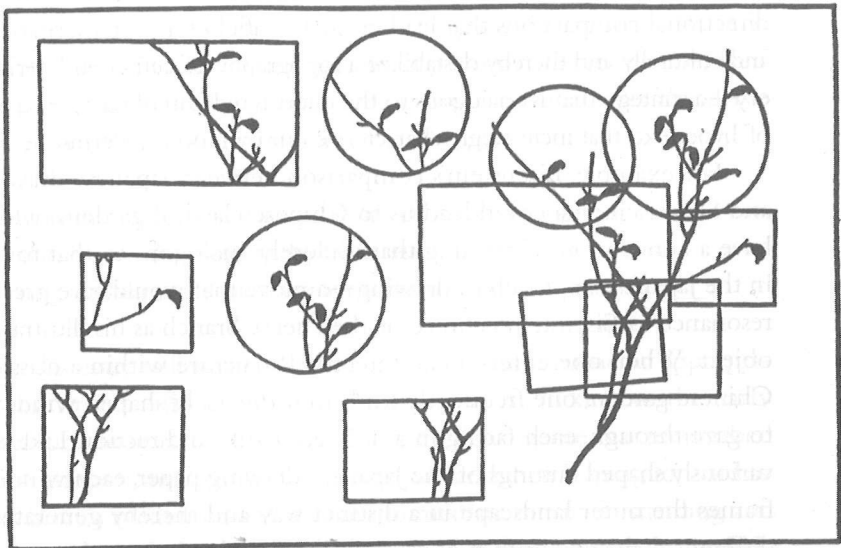
—Phillips, *A TV Dante*, 1988.

## I. REFRAMING EISENSTEIN'S ANALOGIES

IN HIS 1929 ESSAY, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," Sergei Eisenstein contrasts the Japanese method of teaching drawing with that used in the west, claiming that the former provides a wonderful model in cinema for "the most fascinating of optical conflicts: the conflict between the frame of the shot and the object."<sup>1</sup> He observes that whereas in the western approach students are given a four-cornered piece of white paper and then asked to "cram onto it" some object artificially placed in the center, in Japan they are shown the branch of a cherry-tree and then asked to cut out "compositional units" from this whole object, with a square, circle, or rectangle, as if "hewing out a piece of actuality with the ax of the lens" (see Figure 1). By appropriating this analogue from Japanese culture, Eisenstein not only helped defamiliarize his own approach

to cinematographic montage (making it appear a more radical departure from other Soviet and American alternatives) but he simultaneously made it seem universal (since it had analogues in other cultures and art forms). It was not just the conflict between the object and its framing

that provided a new resource for dialectic montage but also the way he framed this conflict through a *comparison* across contextualizing media, cultures, and periods, a process that generated a productive analogy between framing and adaptation. Having demonstrated that frame and object are positions which can be occupied by a wide range of signifiers, he remained open to new analogies, for (like new technologies



第十二圖 位置の取方

Fig. 6.1 An illustration of the Japanese method of teaching drawing from Eisenstein's "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram."

such as sound and color) they provided raw material for expanding dialectic montage.

This strategic mode of analogic argumentation frequently comes under attack in the discourse on Eisenstein's theory, most recently in David Bordwell's *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (1993). Accusing him of being "intellectually promiscuous" and attacking his "often diverse and obscure formulations" in which "digressions abound, and argument by analogy is much in evidence,"<sup>22</sup> Bordwell (like J. Dudley Andrew two decades ear-



lier) tries to prune him down to a neo-Aristotelian purity.<sup>3</sup> In the process Eisenstein is stripped of his dialectics and transformed into a Bordwellian whose main contribution is “an empirical poetics of cinema” (114).

In contrast, this essay will build on Eisenstein’s “promiscuous” use of analogies by reframing it as an ongoing process of transmedia adaptation, in which earlier works are appropriated as a “screen” through which artists and audiences perceive and thereby shape a new medium. While the designated “pair” in the analogy is a temporary point of collision with historical and cultural specificity, it provides access to other multidirectional comparisons that lead us farther afield temporally, spatially, and culturally and thereby destabilize a topography of center and periphery—a strategy that is analogous to the decentered, multilinear structures of hypertexts that increasingly characterize our own postmodernist period.

For example, Eisenstein’s comparison between Japanese drawing and Soviet cinema could lead us to Chinese classical gardens, which have a conception of framing that is closely analogous to that found in the Japanese approach to drawing—a move that would give greater resonance to Eisenstein’s choice of the cherry branch as his illustrative object. When one enters an architectural structure within a classical Chinese garden, one frequently finds four diversely shaped windows to gaze through, each facing in a different cardinal direction. Like the variously shaped cuttings of the Japanese drawing paper, each window frames the outer landscape in a distinct way and thereby generates a different dialectic conflict. Moreover, the four landscapes themselves are also deliberately cultivated to maximize the differences. Thus, when the spectator turns from one window to another, she experiences a complex montage effect that is analogous to cinema—particularly if that perception has been filtered through a reading of Eisenstein.

One can also extend Eisenstein’s analogy by exploring its morphological connections with the structure of the essay in which it appears. This passage occurs within a long (six-page) digression on the shot, which is positioned slightly off-center in the middle of a seventeen-page essay and begins, “Let us be allowed the luxury of a digression—on the matter of the shot, to settle the debated question of its nature, once and for all” (36). Paradoxically this luxurious digression becomes the heart of the essay (its main object like the cherry branch), transforming the so-called main body into a frame. In his later



essay, "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today" (1944), Eisenstein marvels at Dickens's use of the same formal strategy in *Cricket on the Hearth*, where he "wedges . . . a whole digression . . . in the *very center*" of his story to express his "own 'treatise' on the principles of this montage construction . . . which he carries out so fascinatingly."<sup>4</sup> Aware of the power dynamics implicit in adaptation, Eisenstein notes that this formal strategy "passed into the style of Griffith" but without mentioning that he had appropriated it himself in "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram." By revealing Griffith's indebtedness to Dickens, Eisenstein strategically naturalizes his own indebtedness to Griffith while positioning himself higher on the chain of appropriation, which gives him greater mastery over the drive toward the future. As he puts it,

I understand quotations as outrunners to the right and left of the galloping shaft horse. Sometimes they diverge, but they help to speed the imagination by their broadening, reinforcing parallel run. As long as one does not let go of the reins!<sup>5</sup>

This essay will pursue Eisenstein's galloping transmedia appropriations, first briefly moving backward beyond Dickens to the early development of the English novel, a hybridized genre that reinscribed conventions borrowed from earlier forms, and then leaping forward to television, a medium that has come to mediate our understanding and consumption of virtually all other forms of cultural production, including those newly emerging multimedia hypertexts.

The explicit comparison between Eisenstein and Dickens evokes a virtual analogy with Henry Fielding, primarily for two reasons. First, his novels provide the structural link between digression and montage that Eisenstein attributed to Dickens. As in the example of the Chinese garden, they are latent intertexts that lie hidden behind the direct allusion. Not only did *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* directly influence Dickens, but their authorial narrators acknowledge that they in turn learned the structural principle of digression and the "art of contrast" from Cervantes and Homer. Moreover, Fielding uses these structural devices to achieve two of the same epistemological goals that Eisenstein pursued through his montage—a broader comprehensiveness in scope and a greater mastery in reinscribing quotations and perceptions.

Second, there is an uncanny parallel in the way Eisenstein and Fielding used their early experimentation in the theater to conceptualize the cinema and novel respectively. In his 1934 essay, "Through Theater to Cinema," Eisenstein describes how experiments designed to overcome the technical limits of the stage in plays like *The Mexican* and *Gas Masks* ultimately led to a theory of montage, which he could develop more fully once he turned to cinema. Paradoxically, this movement from theater to cinema did not make his films more theatrical; on the contrary, it made them more cinematic, for they emphasize the differences between the two media.

Precisely the same dynamic occurs in the case of Fielding. Before helping to launch the English novel, he wrote twenty-six plays, including four experimental works: *The Author's Farce* (1730), his first burlesque; *The Tragedy of Tragedies* (1731), his best-known play; *Pasquin* (1736), his biggest contemporary success; and *The Historical Register* (1737), the satire which motivated the 1737 Licensing Act that forced Fielding out of the theater. In these four plays he experimented with five main devices: a hybridization of forms, a play within a play, an on-stage author who commented on the action, an on-stage spectator whose reactions could be mocked, and a comparative structure that promoted digressions and verbal irony.<sup>6</sup> These devices achieved a more comprehensive scope and a tighter control over audience response, qualities difficult to attain through ordinary dramatic conventions. Once Fielding left the stage, these experimental devices were easily transferred to the novel where they could be pushed much further. As in the case of Eisenstein, this movement from theater to fiction did not make his novels more theatrical; on the contrary, it made them emphasize precisely those qualities that were ordinarily lacking in theater.

Despite the distance between Fielding and Eisenstein in period, culture, and media, their careers both support Walter Benjamin's observation that

One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later. The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form.<sup>7</sup>

This process of accommodation carries a threat of obsolescence for the older art form functioning as screen—a threat that was largely disavowed in the discourse of authorial mastery performed by Fielding and Eisenstein.

## II. A TV DANTE AS HYPERTEXT

This threat reemerged with a vengeance in the decentered hypertexts of postmodernism, particularly as theorized by George Landow:

One *should* feel threatened by hypertext, just as writers of romances and epics should have felt threatened by the novel and Venetian writers of Latin tragedy should have felt threatened by the *Divine Comedy* and its Italian text. Descendants, after all, offer continuity with the past, but only at the cost of replacing it.<sup>8</sup>

Or as Michael Heim puts it: “Over the ten years of the 1980s . . . an estimated 80 percent of written language began existing in digital form. Computers swallowed the cultural heritage of English-speaking countries.”<sup>9</sup> Although theorists like Landow and Heim focus on the displacement of the page by the screen (what Sven Birkerts calls “the reading wars”) and the threat that it poses for literature, all three ignore the relationship between hypertext and television, a medium that uses its position in the home to mediate all other forms of cultural production.

Rather than focus on the early days of television when the primary rivalry was with prior media like radio and cinema, I will select a few examples from the 1980s and 90s when the main threat is coming from the digitized future—from multimedia computers. With the massive restructuring of communication and information technologies and the increasing fetishization of convergence and connectivity, no medium can afford to stand alone; like a lego piece it acquires new meanings and functions in each new corporate merger and network that is built, deconstructed, and made over. The driving question is which medium will absorb or “swallow” the other, even if both are transformed in the process. Although television (like cinema and the novel before it) still frequently adapts texts from prior media (as if mobilizing the past to forestall the threat of obsolescence), it also increasingly simulates futuristic rivals by masquerading as a multimedia hypertext.

In his groundbreaking book, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Landow defines hypertext as



An information medium that links verbal and nonverbal information. Electronic links connect lexias "external" to a work—say, commentary on it by another author or parallel or contrasting texts—as well as within it and thereby create text that is experienced as nonlinear, or, more properly, as multilinear or multisequential. (4)

The television work that this definition immediately brings to mind is *A TV Dante*, an ambitious miniseries based on *Dante's Inferno* which was commissioned by Michael Kustow in the 1980s for Channel 4 (London). Though originally conceived as encompassing the whole poem and involving the participation of many artists, the work that was actually broadcast in Britain in July 1990 consisted of eight ten-minute episodes created in collaboration by Tom Phillips, the visual poet/composer/critic who translated an illustrated version of the *Inferno* in 1983 and who is best-known for his "treated" book, *A Humument*, and filmmaker Peter Greenaway, who is best known for movies like *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), which enabled him to cross over from avant garde video and filmmaking to mainstream production, and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), whose notoriety achieved a surprising commercial success.<sup>10</sup>

Having variously been described as "a thinking person's pop video" (AFI Video Festival catalogue), a "translation" from the language of the book to the language of video (Tracy Biga), and "a video palimpsest" that marks the cultural transition from "the dominance of the word to . . . the dominance of the sound-word-image" (Nancy Vickers), *A TV Dante* reveals a chain of complex relations between a series of art forms and media which extend backward to cinema, photography, and poetry as well as forward to computer animation, high-definition television, and multimedia technology.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, this extraordinary hyper-text material is all easily absorbed within the ordinary repetitive segmentation of commercial television along with its usual dialogic combinations of literary adaptations, nature documentaries, erotic spectacle, talking heads, banal chatter, and commercial breaks.

The cantos are mediated not only through a series of narrators (including Dante and Virgil from within the poem, as well as "naturalist" David Attenborough, "classicist" David Rudkin, and coauthor Tom Phillips, who gloss the text with various degrees of omniscience) but also through the inset screens or "windows" in which their author-

itative "talking heads" appear. Besides appearing as an ingenious way of visualizing footnotes and of transforming a potentially linear narrative into a hypertext, these "windows" evoke the Microsoft programs that enabled PC computers first to rival and then threaten Macintosh with extinction, thereby making Bill Gates one of the richest, most powerful men in the world. Thus the series is structured around serial appropriation—Greenaway's and Phillips's appropriation of Dante, Dante of Virgil, Attenborough of nature, and Bill Gates of the information superhighway—all involving rapid movement across spatial, temporal, cultural, generic borders.

Just as Eisenstein naturalized his own borrowings from Griffith by exposing the latter's borrowings from Dickens, Greenaway and Phillips make their own appropriation of Dante part of a series, but the effect is very different. For in this postmodernist context where such appropriations are commonplace, it is our perception of Dante's practice (rather than that of Greenaway and Phillips) that undergoes the most dramatic transformation. As Phillips proclaims at the opening of canto one in direct address (a convention derived from poetry that is pervasive in television yet traditionally avoided in cinema), "A good old text always is a blank for new things." Dante suddenly becomes postmodernist and televisual—a metamorphosis that is accomplished through television's seemingly unlimited power to appropriate anything that appears on its screen. And this perception of cooptive power helps forestall television's own appropriation by multimedia computers.

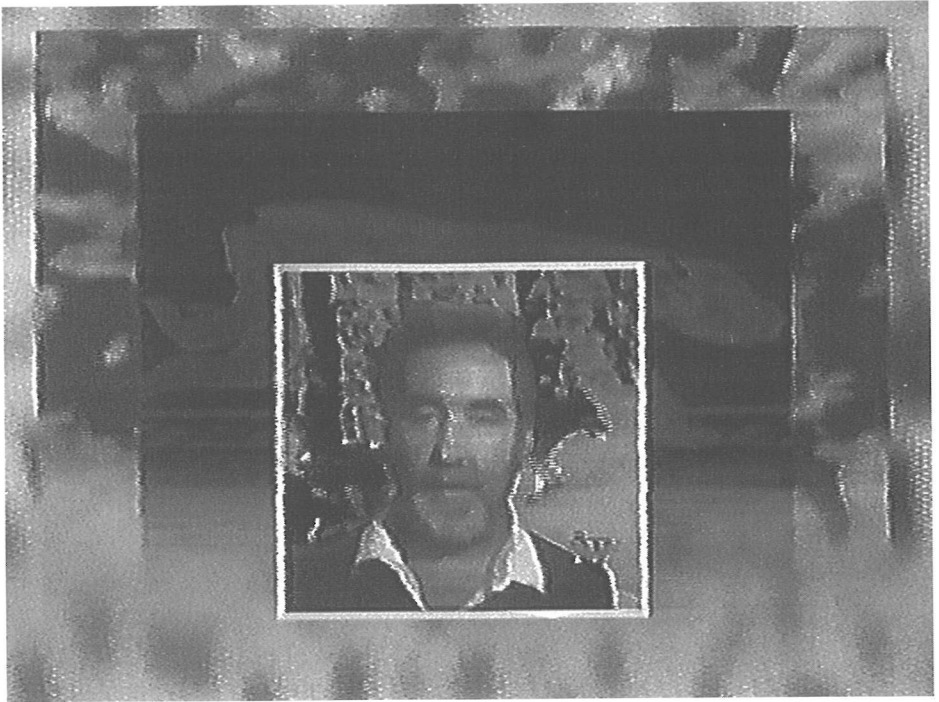
In canto one this power is extended to Greenaway's own original medium, independent video, as the privileged screen that mediates between past, present, and future, between poetry and cinema, and between broadcast television and computers. Nancy Vickers has brilliantly detailed how the series reinscribes the corpus of Eadweard Muybridge and its technological passage from photography to cinema, particularly through the depiction of humans (that mass of writhing naked flesh) and animals in motion. As she puts it, "Muybridge, like Dante, takes on 'new life' through video 'translation.'"<sup>12</sup> Yet there is a further irony in the way the television medium surpasses Muybridge by blatantly harnessing the cutting-edge powers of computer animation to manipulate and layer the image, so that it can rival the density of the classic arts of poetry and painting.

As we hear the opening lines of the first canto in voice-over, we see a stone tablet containing the graphic representation of the words. A window appears containing a group of naked sinners, as if in a crowded elevator, descending through numbered circles of hell, punctuating the poetry with their screams of torment. The images of the naked crowds are varied stylistically, through their diverse colors, actions, and movements, a constructed set of functional differences that *neutralize* the naked flesh (in the Eisensteinian sense), transforming it into an element of montage that is eventually contrasted with Beatrice's fiery circle of the soul.

This opening immediately introduces the dominant technique of layering both on the visual and audio registers, with images emerging through dissolves like stacks of hypercards, numerically cataloging levels and cantos and hybridizing past and present, word and image. Out of the orchestrated background of urban cacophony, a woman's musical laughter periodically rings out followed by percussive noises of reflexive mechanisms that register the passage of time and image. As Dante describes "the dark wood" that appears "half way through the journey of our life," we see a cityscape and hear urban sounds as background to the poetry, juxtapositions that provide an implicit gloss on the verse and that redefine his "wild, harsh forbidding world" as our own urban dystopia.

The most startling rupture comes from broadcast television rather than the poetics of video—that moment when the first numbered "window" pops up on screen with David Attenborough commenting on Dante's leopard. This moment usually evokes laughter, perhaps as much from the pleasure of recognizing the familiar generic conventions of the TV nature documentary as from the incongruity of the surrealistic jolt. In telling us the leopard was thought to be "the offspring of the union of a lion and a panther . . . sprung from two different parents," Attenborough calls attention to the hybridization that was already present in Dante's poem and that is central to this postmodernist adaptation. He also demonstrates the serial interpretation that is pervasive in both writerly texts, evoking the kind of layered, pluralistic readings that Barthes performed in *S/Z*. When Dante says, "I turned and turned," we see boxed images of the leopard against the background of a spotted field, images flopped not only to echo that act of repetitive turning but also to violate the cinematic conventions of con-





**Fig. 6.2** In *ATV Dante* the poet's "trinity of beasts" is presented as a hypertextual form of triptych.

tinuity editing. At this point the layering becomes so extreme that it is difficult to distinguish between the various layers of the spotted leopard or between background and foreground.

When Dante mentions the "lion" we are reminded that the visual representations are chosen from a paradigm of cultural images of that beast—for we see a realistic lion from a documentary charging at the camera, which is juxtaposed with images of domesticated circus lions leaping through burning hoops in the background within the window that boxes (and thereby domesticates) Attenborough, an image that prefigures the fiery circle of the soul in which the beatific face of Beatrice will later appear.

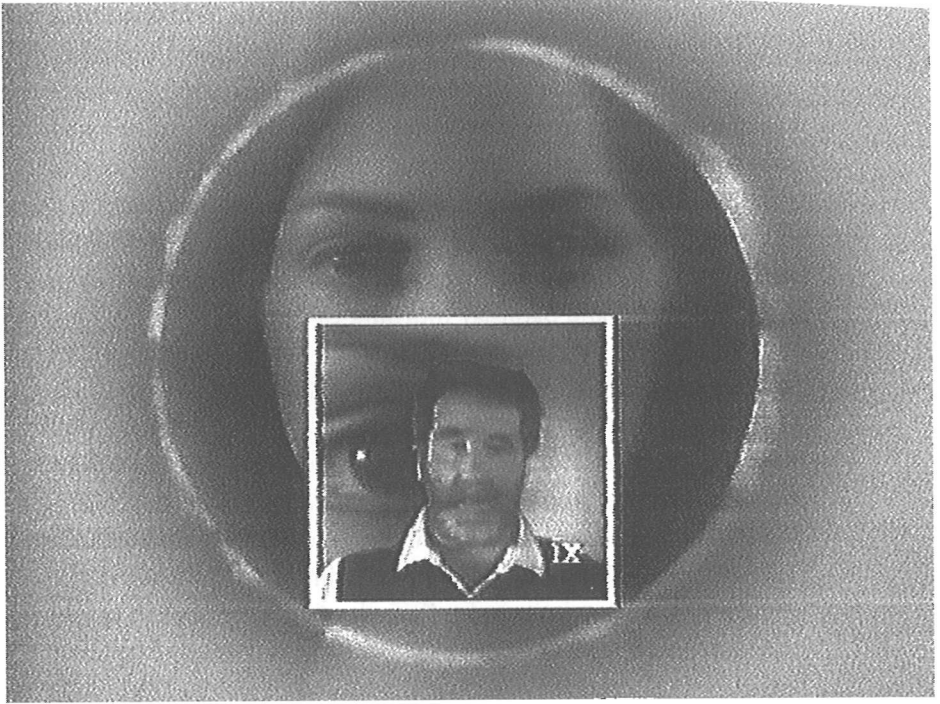
When Phillips glosses Dante's "trinity of beasts" (leopard, lion, and hound), we see an illustrative triple-layered stack of animal images that evokes a hypertextual form of triptych. (See Figure 2.) Not only does this establish a morphological analogy between form and content, it also

demonstrates how the meaning of each poetic phrase is altered or extended by the visual imagery with which it is juxtaposed; images are selected not to illustrate the words but rather to destabilize their meanings.

Another example of this dynamic occurs when processed, colored images of the hound appear over aerial footage of bombed cities, evoking World War II. This association is amplified by Phillips as he lists the historic figures ("Napoleon, Mussolini, Gramsci, and Garibaldi") who have used various names for the hounds—a catalog that extends the list of referenced battles further backward to include the Napoleonic wars, the Risorgimento, and (with the next gloss to Virgil) the Trojan War. What is evoked is a Gramscian hegemonic struggle for the position of historic referent as well as for the foreground of the screen, an instability of signification that is rendered in concrete formalist terms while retaining its full ideological resonance.

It is difficult to tell which medium is appropriating the other, for not only is Dante's *Inferno* being "screened" through television and computers, but television is also being filtered through Dante's vision. Just as Dante is praised for "wielding" his own language into "a poetic instrument," we watch Greenaway and Phillips wielding video into a "poetic language." Specifically, we see how to use televisual verticality productively, how to make footnotes work on screen, and how to transform TV's endless flow of chatter into a "generous stream of poetic speech"—strategies that seem more compatible with independent video than with broadcast television. As Vickers astutely observes, "the series certainly resists any familiar notion of television as an ephemeral flow of programming; its dense intertextual field virtually demands a VCR" (267).

By coupling Dante's poetry with the banality of television, the series infuses both of them with new life. This effect is made literal when we see the actor playing Dante "materialize" out of the death mask of the poet through a dissolve, and we watch the familiar face of Sir John Gielgud literally become animated from a still image to live action. Rather than being boxed like the noted scholars and naked sinners, these famous faces (the primary source of that "generous stream of poetic speech") float freely in televisual space. Moreover, the contemporary star power of Gielgud is balanced against the cultural resonance of Beatrice, both transformed into oracular talking heads who (like PeeWee Herman's Genie, the Power Rangers' Zordon, and



**Fig. 6.3** In *A TV Dante* the boxed head of Tom Phillips is superimposed over the encircled face of Beatrice who substitutes for the free-floating head of Virgil.

CBS's Dan Rather) occupy full screen, balancing that writhing mass of victims who are doomed to naked anonymity. When Phillips introduces Beatrice as the one who "substitutes" for Virgil, his own talking head is temporarily superimposed over hers, thereby extending the chain of serial substitutions—from the free-floating head of Virgil, to the encircled face of Beatrice, to the boxed insert of Phillips—a virtual trinity of graphically modulated guides. (See Figure 3.) These talking heads make us see TV's "guiding stars" in a new light—the news anchors who nightly narrate the trials and tribulations of those in limbo and those certified experts who (like Fielding's narrators) authoritatively gloss images from poetry and nature. They help us realize that serial television is the hypertext medium most appropriate for adapting poetry, not cinema, which, according to Greenaway, is a "dying" medium, rapidly becoming as retro as literature.



While Landow argues that hypertext is as central to critical theorists like Derrida, Barthes, and Bakhtin as to computer scientists like Theodor H. Nelson (who coined the term in the 1960s), Greenaway and Phillips demonstrate that it is also constituent to broadcast television. This characterization applies not only to music videos and radical experimental works like their own *A TV Dante* (with its traces of high modernism and residual "high art" status) but also to the medium's ordinary operations through its so-called "lowest" forms such as news, soaps, talk shows and Saturday morning cartoons.<sup>13</sup>

### III. WHERE ON EARTH IS CARMEN SANDIEGO AS REVISIONIST HISTORY

Nowhere is this convergence between television and hypertext more apparent than on Saturday morning television, which transforms post-structuralist conceptions of textuality into child's play as it reproduces postmodernist subjectivity. As Landow points out, "the convergence of textuality and electronic embodiments of it" sometimes has embarrassing consequences.

Hypertext creates an almost embarrassingly literal embodiment of a principle that had seemed particularly abstract and difficult when read from the vantage point of print . . . this more literal presentation promises to disturb theoreticians, in part, of course, because it greatly disturbs status and power relations within their field of expertise. (43)

While one might be willing to tolerate such an embodiment in a complex writerly hypertext like *A TV Dante*, it may seem downright humiliating when they are found in Saturday morning kiddie shows like *Muppet Babies* and *Power Rangers*. Another consequence of this shift to a "simpler" context is that it is easier to perceive the ideological implications of these textual strategies, which might even make Landow's utopian fervor an embarrassment. As Carolyn Marvin observes, it is "in the uncertainty of emerging and contested practices of communication that the struggle of groups to define and locate themselves is most easily observed."<sup>14</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that Saturday morning television teaches kids a complex form of media literacy—one that may be as sophisticated a method of reading as is found in Barthes's *S/Z*.<sup>15</sup> It teaches them

how to use television to read all forms of popular culture intertextually. Partly because of television's position in the home and its ability to provide young children with their first entry into narrative, television mediates sensory perceptions and proposes a set of cognitive categories for organizing memories. In this way, it maps the world and the viewer's position within it. Calling attention to intertextuality and direct allusions, it teaches kids how to master the broader historical/cultural field against which all texts are decoded and to feel empowered in the process. Yet at the same time it commodifies that cognitive process by linking it to consumerism, establishing brand names (like Nike and Gap), commercial networks (like Nintendo and Sega), and licensed figures (like the Power Rangers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles) as generic categories. In the process, it teaches kids how to buy into the system. Like *A TV Dante*, children's television frequently comments on other media both from the past and the future, as if to ensure that television will not be replaced by the new interactive multimedia which are also increasingly available to youngsters in the home and at school. One way to do this is to simulate interactivity and assimilate the computer screen.

Although these dynamics function systemically rather than being limited to a specific network, genre, or series (a position I have demonstrated in my previous work on CBS, the Fox network, and Nickelodeon), I will focus here on a single example, *Where on Earth Is Carmen Sandiego*, a television adaptation of Broderbund's successful educational computer software which was introduced in 1985 and by 1992 had sold over 2.5 million copies, with six variations of the game that have been widely adopted in schools nationwide. The original *Carmen Sandiego* software generated many spinoffs, but none so successful as the animated series on Fox.<sup>16</sup>

First aired on the Fox Children's Network in February 1994, *Where on Earth Is Carmen Sandiego* quickly became the first educational show in TV history to succeed on a commercial network (ranking number one in its Saturday morning time slot). Although its ratings have subsequently declined and some have attributed its initial success to its privileged position within the Fox lineup, its achievement is still historic. The original computer game was designed to teach geography and history by having players track the mysterious Carmen Sandiego, a former spy-turned-thief, across space and time in order to restore

stolen treasures. Usually sandwiched between two male-oriented action series (such as *X-Men* and *Mega Man*), the Fox series features a pair of young brother-sister detectives, Ivy and Zack, chasing Carmen. The show is attentive to gender issues, encouraging both boys and girls to use computers, but it teaches a lot more besides.

In the 1994 season premiere (broadcast on September 17), Ivy and Zack track Carmen back to the American colonies in the eighteenth century, where she threatens Paul Revere's warning of American rebels that the British are coming, Ben Franklin's harnessing of electricity with his kite, and the Liberty Bell's survival. Despite the show's emphasis on cutting-edge technology, the narrative strives to preserve the traditional version of American history, defending it against any revisionist override.

The episode restores a colonizing discourse within a postcolonial sphere—celebrating the postcolonial independence of the United States (which Revere helped to win), its superior technology particularly in the field of electronic communications (which Franklin's harnessing of electricity helped to launch), and its democratic ideology (which is represented by the visual icon of the Liberty Bell). Thus, along with history and geography, the episode teaches kids a national discourse on American supremacy—which Europeans (like Carmen Sandiego) were trying to reverse. In 1994 that supremacy was centered on the trade status of America's second leading export, its movies and television shows, particularly in the G.A.T.T. talks where European nations were trying to curtail our domination of the global market. Although Carmen (like the EC) claims that "Time is on her side," Ivy and Zack as American patriots are determined to "get history back on track" in order to protect our nation's cultural hegemony. This reading supports Marvin's contention that "old habits of transacting between groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or seem to alter, critical social distances" (5).

Although this globe-trotting narrative makes youngsters feel comfortable in an international setting, they are constantly being reminded of their national identity—especially in the weekly lead-in to the show where they are posed against the Statue of Liberty as they hold a miniaturized globe in the palm of their hand, exercising their privileged position of freedom and mobility. Ivy and Zack are empowered to travel freely through space and time like nomadic tourists, colonizing figures from the past, who (like people of underdeveloped nations) are





**Fig. 6.4** In *Where on Earth is Carmen Sandiego* commercials are framed by this image of a unisex player in front of a computer screen.

stuck in a single zone. Whenever their technology breaks down (in this episode their time machine temporarily malfunctions), these American heroes are threatened with the prospect of getting stuck in one place—back in history or sitting passively in front of their screen, which is precisely where we television viewers are positioned, even though we are directly addressed as active players within the fiction.

As if to counter that predicament, the series frames all of its commercial breaks with a recurring image of a unisex player seated in front of a computer screen with back to camera, as if to facilitate identification for a wider range of viewers of both genders. (See Figure 4.) In the upper left corner of the room we see a sports pennant with the word “Go,” a familiar mantra chanted not only by fans in sports arenas but also by action heroes in westerns and other popular American movie genres from *The Wild Bunch* to *Pulp Fiction*. The pennant points like an arrow to a large facial close-up of the Statue of Liberty in the upper

right corner. These icons connote mobility and freedom respectively, a combination that evokes the kind of interactivity that is promised not only by computer games but also by the American system of corporate democracy that is increasingly endorsed both by the Left and the Right.

Although the series is frequently praised for its gender and ethnic diversity, it still casts the empowered adult female as the villain and doubly codes her ethnicity as Hispanic, not only through both her names (Carmen Sandiego) but also through her jet black hair (which contrasts sharply with the strawberry blond tresses of the heroic Anglo siblings, Ivy and Zack) and her bright red trench coat and fedora. The color coding in this series is no more elaborate than that in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles myth or the Power Rangers cult that replaced it, for they all empower young players through the cognitive pleasures of mastery and decoding. Carmen's red color coding also links her to danger and the stop sign, associations which emphasize her narrative function (in the Proppian sense) as the character who has to be stopped and the one who is set in symbolic opposition to that jolly green giantess, the Statue of Liberty who (with her Go pennant) rallies our spirits like a cheerleader, urging American players to go beat Carmen and her team of treacherous international thieves. The red coding also evokes Carmen's past as a former spy who (we soon discover) speaks flawless Russian and who got her hardware from the Soviet Union—a backstory that helps recuperate the Cold War paradigm. Perhaps this explains why this particular episode on American colonial history opens in Arctic Russia, with Carmen stealing a "Top Secret" time-travel machine from our old Cold War rivals, which enables her to attempt to reverse the outcome of the American Revolution. Thus the story follows a route that parallels the trajectory of this essay—first poaching a time-travel mechanism in Russia and then going back to the eighteenth century to change our vision of television in the postmodernist present.

In the scene where Ivy and Zack finally recover the time machine, we see how the viewer is mobilized as an active player who supposedly pushes the buttons and supplies definitions (like the experts in *A TV Dante*) and who can supposedly communicate directly both with the young heroes and the villain. Not only does the plot increasingly poach on *Back to the Future*, but Ivy and Zack appropriate an ordinary

commercial billboard as a screen for displaying the talking head of their authoritative chief, who (despite his temporary British accent that results from Carmen's reversal of history) is visually linked with Albert Einstein in this advertisement for American know-how. When Zack picks up the time-travel gadget, he holds it in his hand and tries to think of a more familiar object to compare it with, pausing just long enough for us to come up with our own analogue—a TV remote-control. Although Zack finally compares it to a garage door opener, the trope of the TV joystick proves more resonant, particularly when we realize how proficient television is as a time machine that can represent any period through the appropriation of other media both from the past and future: the low-tech classroom medium of the slide show, which segues our heroes back to the eighteenth century, and the simulated cutting-edge computer screen, which provides an illusory sense of interactivity and control. The episode shows us that the battle over screens is really a struggle between rival media and their competing versions of history.

Not surprisingly, the tone in this series is very different from that found in *A TV Dante*, a difference analogous to the one Landow perceives between poststructuralist theory and its embodiment in electronic hypertexts (as well as between Birkerts's dystopic perspective and Landow's own utopian vision):

Whereas terms like *death, vanish, loss*, and expressions of depletion and impoverishment color critical theory, the vocabulary of freedom, energy, and empowerment marks writings on hypertextuality . . . Critical theorists . . . continually confront . . . the exhaustion of the culture of print . . . Writers on hypertext, in contrast, glory in possibility, excited by the future of textuality, knowledge, and writing. (87)

While Greenaway and Phillips quietly appropriate computer software to demonstrate television's superior abilities in recuperating an exhausted poetic classic about death, *Carmen Sandiego* brazenly appropriates cutting-edge educational software and its illusory promises of freedom and empowerment. Yet the TV series, like the software, also focuses on the past, using its plot to preserve a version of history in which American television still reigns supreme, safe from the revisionist challenges posed by other nations, technologies, and media.

Yet, in these "reading wars" television's hegemony is not going unchallenged. Media both from the past and the future frequently resist its domination. You can find such resistance in the opening paragraph of a brilliant hypertextual novel like *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, where television is used as a synecdoche for the intrusive outside world.

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Raise your voice—they won't hear you otherwise—"I'm reading!"<sup>17</sup>

It can also be found in *Club Kidsoft*, a kids software catalog masquerading as a magazine, which contains a consumer guide article titled "Mighty Morphin' Power Computers" promoting the latest multimedia hardware from Apple and Compaq.

Have you ever thought about using your computer as . . . a TV set? With these machines you can do some pretty cool stuff, like watch TV on the computer screen at the same time as you finish your homework! You see your homework appearing in one window on screen, and the TV show running in another. Or if someone else takes over your TV set on Saturday mornings, just turn on your computer to watch your favorite cartoons.<sup>18</sup>

Besides literalizing the clichéd trope of "edutainment," this provocative passage accentuates the difference between the reception modes of two generations—the cutting-edge kids being directly addressed who will think these dual windows (like those in *A TV Dante*) are "cool stuff" and the horrified retro parents who may be paying for both the hardware and the subscription but who are reminded in the ad on the back cover of *Club Kidsoft* of their disempowered position:

You bought the computer. You even sprung for the printer. The kids are jazzed. But you don't know beans about software . . . Join the Club!

This kind of strategic transgenerational address (that is, reaching two distinct generations of consumers by exaggerating the differences

between them) has already proved central to the success of children's television programming on several stations (especially the Nickelodeon Children's Cable network). It is also essential to this article's real thematics—the replacement of television by the next generation of multimedia computers. Not only do the promoters of these computers appropriate for the title of their article and featured products the name of the most popular kids show on television, *The Power Rangers* (an American adaptation of a Japanese TV series which has already generated movie and video game spinoffs as well as thousands of licensed products), but they demonstrate the superior morphing power of the computer by showing how it can subordinate its older arch rival television to an inset window (the way *A TV Dante* boxed Attenborough) and to the bottom of a list of ancillary functions (just as parents are relegated to the back cover of *Kidsoft*).

#### IV. A REFLEXIVE EDUCATIONAL EPILOGUE

In light of the screen wars I have been describing, I began to wonder whether it might be possible to become more actively involved in using multimedia hypertexts to recuperate or at least demarginalize media threatened with obsolescence or extinction in the global marketplace—a project that is in some ways analogous to the one pursued in *A TV Dante* and in opposition to the nationalist goals in *Carmen Sandiego*. This project seemed particularly appropriate for the world of higher education where (despite the creeping conservatism of university presses) web sites, CD-ROMs, and computer screens are increasingly challenging books, journals, videotapes, and laserdiscs as a medium of critical commentary and a mode of publication. Having written a book on the marginalized cinema of Spain, *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (1993) which dealt with issues of transcultural and transmedia reinscription, I decided to extend that process by producing a companion CD-ROM that would present brief excerpts from fifteen films (most of which were otherwise difficult to obtain in the United States) with written and audio commentaries in English and Spanish. I was able to obtain permission to use these excerpts because I was *not* competing with the films themselves (since video compression cannot rival the visual quality of a 35 mm print). Rather, my hypertext was designed to help promote these foreign films in the

United States where they are usually perceived as peripheral. In this way, I was reopening closed texts (my own book as well as the films being excerpted), converting them into hypertexts that could be read interactively in diverse ways. The design of the interface encourages users to pursue their own interests by watching the excerpts in any order they please (with or without hearing or reading the commentaries or consulting the various overviews and glosses) and by recording their own comments on a notepad that can be saved and shared with others. Like Eisenstein's Japanese drawing students, users are encouraged to control the temporary collisions of frames and objects that appear on the computer screen. But unlike Eisenstein and Fielding, I had to relinquish the reins, for my own authorial role diminished—in the collaboration both with users and with Charles Tashiro (who designed the screens) and Barry Schneider (who designed the interface). Like Landow, I found that “hypertext as a writing medium metamorphoses the author into an editor or developer” (100).

By now it may be apparent (especially from the endnotes) that this essay reflexively traces the trajectory of my own career, which began thirty years ago with a dissertation on Fielding's experimentation in the theater in relation to his novels, and then turned in succession through an ongoing process of “promiscuous” analogic thinking to movies, television, video games, CD-ROMs, and other forms of popular culture. While each new project was screened or reframed through my previous objects of study, they all remain deeply engaged with the ongoing process of transmedia appropriation and transcultural reinscription.

## NOTES

1. Sergei Eisenstein, “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram” (1929), in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), p. 41.
2. David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 137, 114.
3. J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
4. Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today” (1944) in *Film Form*, p. 223.
5. Sergei Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories*, trans. Herbert Marshall (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1983), pp. 185–86.



6. For a detailed argument see Marsha Kinder, *Henry Fielding's Dramatic Experimentation: A Preface to His Fiction*, Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 1963; or my essay "The Improved Author's Farce: An Analysis of the 1734 Revisions" in *Costerus* (November 1972), pp. 35-43.
7. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 237.
8. George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 103.
9. Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. xiv. Also see Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1994).
10. For more information about the conceptualization and production of the series, see Michael Kustow, "How *A TV Dante* Came About" in *A TV Dante*, ed. Derek Jones (London: Channel 4 Television, 1990).
11. *A TV Dante* had its American premiere at the American Film Institute's National Video Festival in October 1990. For two of the most perceptive readings of the series, see Tracy Biga, "Cinema Bulimia: Peter Greenaway's Corpus of Excess" (dissertation, University of Southern California, 1994), pp. 167-171, and Nancy J. Vickers, "Dante in the Video Decade" in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, ed. Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).
12. Vickers, p. 272.
13. This view is compatible with Nick Browne's formulation of the "television (super) text," Mimi White's concept of the "referential imaginary" of American broadcast television, and my own theorization of MTV. See Nick Browne, "The Political Economy of the Television (Super) Text" in *American Television: New Directions in History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Langhorne, Pa.: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), pp. 69-79; Mimi White, "Crossing Wavelengths: The Diegetic and Referential Imaginary of American Commercial Television" in *Cinema Journal* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1986), pp. 51-64; and Marsha Kinder, "Music Video and the Spectator: Television, Ideology and Dream" in *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1984), pp. 2-15.
14. Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 5.
15. See Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991); "Home Alone in the 90s: Generational War and Transgenerational Address in American Movies, Television and Presidential Politics" in *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, eds. Cary Bazalgette and David

Buckingham (London: British Film Institute, 1995), pp. 75–91; and “Ranging with Power on the Fox Children’s Network” in *Kids’ Culture*, ed. Marsha Kinder (forthcoming from Duke University Press).

16. These other spinoffs include adventure books, jigsaw puzzles, CD-ROM games, and a PBS weekday quiz show called *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego* that is not as “faithful” to the original software as the Fox series.
17. Italo Calvino, *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1979), trans. William Weaver (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 1.
18. Kearney Rietmann and Frank Higgins, “Mighty Morphin’ Power Computers” in *Club Kidsoft* 2, no. 4 (1995), p. 35.