PABLO GONÇALO ⓘD

Speculative Writing
Unfilmed Scripts and Premediation Events

ABSTRACT: This article investigates and proposes the concept of specu-
lative writing, which is a disruptive sort of dramaturgy mediated by
artificial intelligence. What are the kinds of events created by specula-
tive writing? What might its history and genealogy be? What might
the duration of an alphanumeric reenactment be? Guided by these
questions, the article details its search for speculative writing in un-
filmed script history as well as in premediation events. According to
these concepts, this essay concludes that speculative writing will enact
potential, abstract, and premediated events, which have never become
material media.

KEYWORDS: Writing; Speculative Realism; Screenwriting Studies;
Media Archaeology; Archive

Speculative Writing
Unfilmed Scripts and Premediation Events

PABLO GONÇALO

WRITING AS A MEDIUM OF TIME: ARCHIVES BETWEEN FOSSILS AND PROBABILISTIC EVENTS

This essay will investigate some key issues concerning writing: not the act of writing in its traditional meaning, but writing as a technological process in constant change following new standards of tools for expression. Since typewriters and old editing practices have lost their central role, writing has been undergoing fundamental transformations. Less mimetic than before, it has been interacting with alphanumeric codes and has also been dealing directly with potential open futures, rather than with representations of past facts.

From the work of Plato to that of Jacques Derrida, writing has been conceived (or deconstructed) as an act aimed at the representation of past facts and events. It could be constructed as an ideal event based on 'reality', or a gesture that involves metaphysical doubles, voices, and concepts; every future event, in this particular concept and tradition of writing, is related to something created, experienced, or represented in a past time. Even in performing arts such as music and theatre, someone (an 'author') creates an aesthetic environment and lays out plans that will become reality on stages, pages, or screens, realities that generate the outlines of further events. If reenactments

produce differences and repetitions, it bears investigating what kind of temporality (as well as subjectivity) an alphanumeric writing paradigm has been conceiving up to this point. If writing is indeed a medium of time, what might be the duration of an alphanumeric reenactment? Is it possible to claim that some of these alphanumeric reenactment events might conceive durations that are beyond the capacity of human subjects experiences?

By proposing the concept of 'speculative writing', a notion that I am still developing, I am dealing directly with a new kind of dramaturgy. It consists of a writing practice that looks at artificial intelligence, chaos, and new relations between subjects and objects as alternative means of creating events and potential infinities in a new and not so clear aesthetic context. These potentialities raise several questions: first, how is writing altered when dealing with ontologically oriented objects, and second, what kind of discontinuity has digital writing been creating?

ALAN TURING AND THE ARCHIVE

Turing's ideal machine has not only altered our relationship with writing but also inaugurated another historical period. Alan Turing believed that a computer could mimic anything that humans have already created, experienced, and even conceived. Therefore, some objects may be able to imitate everything that — and even produce something beyond what — a human has programmed it to imitate. If this claim is correct, it leads us to another issue: can technical objects write? In fact, an alphanumeric representation does duplicate mimesis: humans have become spectators of some mimetic representations that have been performed or even written by computers and softwares. Thus, what would be the difference between human-automatic writing and machine-automatic writing?

Let us look at, for example, Derrida's conception of an 'archive fever' that emphasizes the *arché* as a place and institution that conceives truth, authority, and classical metaphysical processes for the receiving subject.[1] If one looks carefully at the ontology of alpha-

---

1   Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

numeric writing, this archival problem does not match it or fit so precisely. Digital archivals are more like a metaphor for empty and virtual places, for imaginary architectures, than for physical spaces. Even the production processes of mechanical and digital machines are completely different from one another, and such a distinction can illuminate the writing shift that this essay seeks to highlight.[2]

It is through these distinctions pertaining to archivals that we may come closer to a speculative writing historical period. Consider, for example, the concept of *arche-fossil*, proposed by the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, which indicates 'the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is prior to terrestrial life'.[3] For Meillassoux, the 'arche-fossil' perspective may reveal some event archivals (or archived events) that happen before (and beyond) the human and the subject. They do conceive of a metaphysical event, but it is a strange one, because it reveals a metaphysics without subject. This kind of speculative and material realism is of particular interest to my problem and question, as it is a speculative method in which corelationism is not a key aspect and might even gradually disappear.

When examining Meillassoux's reflections, it is worth considering and developing his distinction between potentialities, virtualities, and actualizations, a process which identifies the core issue with speculation as resting upon the provisional aspect of scientific laws and philosophy's need to deal with probabilistic aberrations. In each of those biases — of chance, potentialities, and virtualities — there is a notable preoccupation with restoring a very specific metaphysics that must refute any totalizing, fixed aspect that is blind to inevitable transformation and mutation processes.

> Potentialities are the non-actualized cases of an indexed set of possibilities under the condition of a given law (whether aleatory or not). Chance is every actualization of a potentiality for which there is no univocal instance of determination on the basis of the initial given conditions […] and virtuality (is) the property of every set of cases of emerging within a becoming

---

2   Mario Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p. 5.

3   Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude. Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 26.

which is not dominated by any pre-constituted totality of possibles.[4]

Therefore, a speculative writing may flirt with those aberrations, by which chance, chaos, virtuality, and potentiality would occur in between subject and object durations. In other words, it points to a temporality of writing as a medium that 'breaks with the fixity of potentialities' and inaugurates other aesthetic durations by which objects might be subjects (and vice-versa), and by which aesthetic (and reenactment) experiences generate events beyond past archival procedures.[5] In the following pages, I investigate some of this temporality's aspects through examination of unfilmed scripts as well as some specific 'premediated events'.

UNFILMED SCRIPTS

Taking into consideration that screenwriting is an ever-changing practice, I want to highlight some aspects of it that make up an alternative approach to film theory, film history, and what has been called 'media archaeology'. The first aspect concerns *unfilmed scripts*. In the course of my doctoral research, I came across several unfilmed scripts that aroused my curiosity. At that time, my genealogical bias favoured writers transitioning from literary writing into properly imagistic writing, and the discovery of these unfilmed scripts sparked a number of questions. For example, was it possible to talk about a negative history of film, a history that did happen but failed to become fully realized? Would not those unfinished strokes by writers and screenwriters from the twentieth century serve as an invitation to conceive of an imaginary history of films that never actually reached the screens? Lastly, what kinds of archivals are unfilmed scripts?

During my research, the most interesting and wide-ranging example of this kind of bias was the French publication *Anthologie du cinéma invisible. 100 scénarios pour 100 ans de cinéma* (*Anthology of Invisible Cinema: 100 Scripts for 100 Years of Cinema*), compiled by

---

4   Quentin Meillassoux, 'Potentiality and Virtuality', trans. by Robin Mackay, in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), pp. 224–36 (pp. 231–32).

5   Ibid., p. 233.

Christian Janicot.[6] Released in 1995, the book is the product of an almost archaeological type of research. Its authors introduce a hundred projects, ideas, and scripts by famous authors, intellectuals, and artists, such as Georges Bataille, Italo Calvino, William Burroughs, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Max Frisch, Federico García Lorca, André Gide, Allen Ginsberg, Graham Greene, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Antonin Artaud, Georges Pérec, Stefan Zweig, René Magritte, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and E. E. Cummings, among dozens of other key twentieth-century figures.

Standing as possible movies, the unproduced scripts, more than just hidden archivals, show us how twentieth-century writers and artists imagined and flirted with film. These writers were writing texts that would no longer be restricted to books or the stage; they were intended for a forthcoming screen. Pier Paolo Pasolini defined scripts as texts that do not want to remain texts[7]. I would like to add that scripts might also be paper archivals that would like, someday, to turn into audiovisual archivals. They are situated on a boundary. Unfilmed scripts, however, are very special cases, because they demand time (an interval) before the metamorphosis of the script into film. Unfilmed scripts are archivals that present an incomplete and open ontology, pointing to a sort of speculative archaeology. They are potential films, and they refer to imaginative events that one may never comprehend but only speculate about.

More than claiming a waiting period, unfilmed scripts can really be slotted into a dynamics of undefined and pendulum-like oscillation between potentialities and virtualities. Would the drafted films be, if taken as a whole, possible, virtual, and speculative narratives that failed to transform into the most applicable form of archival (that of film) in the history of cinema? Are they multiple stories, denying the totality of predetermined *possibles*?

If we focus on the archival as open and incomplete, unfilmed scripts reveal an archival that oscillates between a reader and a film

---

6   *Anthologie du cinéma invisible. 100 scénarios pour 100 ans de cinéma*, ed. by Christian Janicot (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1995).

7   Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'The Screenplay As a "Structure That Wants to Be Another Structure"', in Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. by Louise K. Barnett, trans. by Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett, 2nd edn (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005), pp. 187–96 (p.187).

audience, the latter being, of course, absent. In some ways, unfilmed scripts are archivals that approach what Graham Harman calls as an 'ontologically-oriented object', which is something between a real and a sensory object. For Harman, they 'are autonomous forces in the world, existing even if all observers sleep or die', while sensory objects 'exist only insofar as a perceiver is occupied with them. These perceivers need not be human.'[8] Unfilmed or speculative scripts could, one day, be perceived by cameras, screens, or even readers and spectators. As they are incomplete and multi-natural, unfilmed scripts are part image and sensory objects and part potential real objects, so they remain almost fugitive events. Through aesthetic speculation alone, they truly become possible and upcoming events. Consequently, unfilmed scripts reveal certain aspects of writing that have left the mimetic paradigm, that flirt with media technologies and new events by pointing to new archivals. Their incompleteness translates as an open archive that may be the basis of an interaction between human perceivers and machines, the latter of which might in turn, under some circumstances, write.

WHAT MIGHT A SPECULATIVE WRITING BE?

Beyond the challenges that unfilmed scripts face, a speculative writing aims at approaching more precisely the interfaces between literature, narrative, and the dramaturgies of the 1970s onward. On the other hand, its historical, laboratorial, and experimental combinations are now interacting with the extended area of artificial intelligence. It is important to remember here the literary experiments of the Oulipo group, in which Raymond Queneau and Georges Pérec participated, along with a number of other French writers. Additionally, one should also include in this genealogy the first experiments with fictional dialogues between human beings and computers, of meta-novels — in the wake of *Tale-Spin* and the creation of Alternative Reality Games — examined within the scope of transmedia narratives.[9] There are many

---

8   Graham Harman, 'Seventy-Six Theses on Object-Oriented Philosophy', in Harman, *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013), pp. 60–70 (p. 60).

9   Noah Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing: Digital Fiction, Computer Games, and Software Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), p. 6.

writers and computer scientists (or artificial intelligence engineers) already treading this path.

In addition, upon carefully looking into an ontological object history, one may include Gilbert Simondon's seminal concepts of the mode of existence of technical objects. For Simondon, a technical object leads directly with three different aspects, such as the element, the individual, and the ensemble.[10] Looking over the relations between writing and artificial intelligence, one may consider how objects interact with human subjects and how this ensemble conceives of a new writing and reading-gaming experience. Therefore, genuine speculative writing opens up an experimental phenomenon that triggers an inversion, where objects offer experience to humans in a random (programmed, but also not controlled) manner.

It is also important to consider Claude Shannon's entropy information theory, which was a pioneering perspective. Shannon argued that compression and coding programs might be aware of the constant probability of information loss and noise. Applying this inversion ensemble to the context of writing, one may also realize that noise and entropy would play a key role between a writing object and a human receiver, gamer, or reader. What escapes in these potential entropies triggers unthinkable events, which are essential to a speculative sublime experience. Therefore, every reenactment of an instance of speculative writing should appear as an entropic aberration: that is, something that was thought of as predetermined but will, however, be revealed to be occurring again, even if it originally seemed that it was happening for the first time.

It is interesting, at this point, to recapture the ontological characteristics of new media as favoured by Lev Manovich in his pioneering book on the subject, which synthetically introduces the concepts of 'numerical representation', 'modularity', 'variability', 'automation', and 'codification'.[11] At first, what stands out is a mode of writing that has more than just the algorithm and the numeric digital fusion as its (im)material basis, as it is also changeable, modular, and extensive.

---

10   Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, 3rd edn (Paris: Aubier, 1989), p. 15.

11   Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 27.

More than mere imitators and simulators of human behaviour like by-products of Turing's machine, new computational media would engender new products, new grammars with codes and languages that would also generate other interface syntaxes.

Following Manovich, Mario Carpo has claimed that variability has turned into the key element of writing and expressivity of digital tools. This variability conceives of a distinct paradigm, whereby the copying reality ceases to be the main goal of writing and representation. For screenwriting history and practice, for example, digital (and speculative) writing may appear too distant from the blueprint metaphor, which claimed that the film should be a copy of what was written on the script. More recently, scripts have been interacting intimately with edition software, collaborative workers, and animation characters, so they are closer to animation aesthetics and videogame languages than they are to the work of a classic screenwriter, who would be struggling alone with the blank page, his typewriter, and his textbook writers' block:

> Digital technologies inevitably break the indexical chain that, in the mechanical age, linked the matrix to its imprint. Digital photographs are no longer the indexical imprint of light onto a surface; digitally manufactured objects are no longer the indexical imprint of a mold pressed into a metal plate; and digital variability may equally cut loose the indexical link that, under the old authorial paradigm, tied design notations to their material result in an object.[12]

Thus, one could claim that speculative (and aesthetic) writing produces events that appear to happen again, although they have never actually happened. By means of archivals, they point to the return of something that is potential but has never been experienced or even conceived. It is a sort of probabilistic aberration by which human beings remain fragile spectators of creatures that have emerged beyond their dreams, imagination, and even nightmares. So far, speculative writing points to writing and reading practices that are far removed from a mimetic tradition as well as all the anti-mimetic aesthetic experimentations that have taken place over the past century.

---

12   Carpo, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm*, p. 43.

AN ABSTRACT REENACTMENT: SPECULATIVE WRITING AND PREMEDIATED EVENTS

What kind of *scene* could a speculative writing procedure conceive? Though unanswered and still in need of development, this will certainly be a key question for all premediated events, pointing also to what I propose to call an 'abstract reenactment'. Let us look at an example: designed by Daedalic Entertainment, the game *Long Journey Home* conceived of its algorithm based on NASA's map of the universe, which is always expanding and tends to infinity. Because the tale-spinning possibilities are not randomized, every gamer will have a unique and unrepeatable experience, as they do in life. Aligned with other contemporary game designers, a method called procedural generation, which is based on the geometric patterns of fractals, was used to build *Long Journey Home*.[13] These patterns open up new logics and experiences between storytelling, repetition, and differentiation of events. If it faces infinite possibilities, can we still conceive of it as form of reenactment?

An answer to such a complex question may be directly related to premediated events. According to Richard Grusin, premediation leads with a set of possible events. It is connected to the idea of the ubiquity of media and claims that the future is also produced by a previous remediated event. With a focus on political events such as the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, Grusin perceived that this event had already been 'premediated' by films, books, and other fictional narratives.[14]

---

13   Richard Cobbett for Daedalic Entertainment, *Long Journey Home* (2017), Microsoft Windows.

14   Richard Grusin, 'Premediation', *Criticism*, 46.1 (Winter 2004), pp. 17–39 (p. 29).

REFERENCES

Carpo, Mario, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011)

Cobbett, Richard, for Daedalic Entertainment, *Long Journey Home* (2017), Microsoft Windows

Derrida, Jacques, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>

Grusin, Richard, 'Premediation', *Criticism*, 46.1 (Winter 2004), pp. 17–39 <https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2004.0030>

Harman, Graham, 'Seventy-Six Theses on Object-Oriented Philosophy', in Harman, *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013), pp. 60–70

Janicot, Christian, ed., *Anthologie du cinéma invisible. 100 scénarios pour 100 ans de cinéma* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1995)

Manovich, Lev, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002)

Meillassoux, Quentin, *Après la finitude. Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris: Seuil, 2006)

—— 'Potentiality and Virtuality', trans. by Robin Mackay, in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), pp. 224–36

Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 'The Screenplay As a "Structure That Wants to Be Another Structure"', in Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. by Louise K. Barnett, trans. by Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett, 2nd edn (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005), pp. 187–96

Simondon, Gilbert, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, 3rd edn (Paris: Aubier, 1989)

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, *Expressive Processing: Digital Fiction, Computer Games, and Software Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011)