Plotting the Pixel in Remediated Word and Image

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Abstract: In her article "Plotting the Pixel in Remediated Word and Image" Sarah Wyman argues that art's historic negotiation of culture continues into the new digital media age as it both asserts the materiality of the medium and acknowledges the impact of embodied perception. She demonstrates that however revolutionary, the new digital media still relate to many traditional paradigms of aesthetic expression. Problems of representation and simulation continue to catch on questions of time, space and human perception. The contingent relationships between categories and entities once kept separate — word/image, observer/observed — determine and define the process of globalization. The new digital media’s ostensible goals of immediacy and transparency clash with its irresistible fascination with the electronic medium itself. A look at the pixelated image in various pre-electronic incarnations – geometric painting, concrete poetry, mosaic art — demonstrates a counterpart to our own experiential existence, now transformed by the impact of contemporary technologies. By examining such cultural artifacts, Wyman elaborates on the way aspects of remediation, intermediality, and hypermediality have always factored in the way people read, create, and use images in the West.
Plotting the Pixel in Remediated Word and Image

Culture comes to us by way of images and the ideologies they convey. Art in its verbal and visual manifestations both reflects our culture back to us, and impacts that culture as it develops. However revolutionary, the new digital media still relate to many traditional paradigms of aesthetic expression. Its images flirt with mimesis while exploiting the fact that artificial constructs can never perfectly reproduce the material world. Problems of representation and simulation continue to catch on questions of time, space and human perception. Artful modes in the electronic form both assert the materiality of the medium and acknowledge the physical reality of the human consumer. The medium of the electronic pixel functions as does a word in a poem, a thick brush stroke, a musical note, a smear of clay: each unit finds its meaning within the context of the whole work. Consequently, each work's significance depends on the reader/viewer/listener's perceptual process, and thus unfolds through time (see Mukařovský). Computer-generated messages operate as remediated products as well as persuasive images on the cyber screen. The speed, the sense of proximity, and the illusory intimacy they appear to manifest suggest convincing counterparts to our own perceptual experience as embodied beings in the world.

The new digital media's ostensible representational goals of immediacy and transparency (see, e.g., Bolter and Grusin) clash with its irresistible fascination with the electronic medium itself. Despite the astonishing success of innovations in virtual reality technology, verbal and visual signs cannot hide the stuff of their substance: verbal language, form, color, and the relative values of the graphic image. The pixelated grid haunts a surface that only seems seamless (see Krauss). In our metatextual age, the self-conscious display of display itself predominates. In a related way, twentieth- and twenty-first-century aesthetic experiments in the West tend to foreground the medium in modes corresponding to electronic hypermediation: they claim multiple positions in time and space simultaneously. These contemporary art objects often call attention to their own substance — words, paint, wood, metal, even sound — rather than transmit easily readable messages. This self-reflexive tendency bespeaks a reaction against the long tradition of illusionism, or naturalistic painting. A look at the pixelated image in various pre-electronic incarnations demonstrates a counterpart to our own experiential existence, now transformed by the impact of internet technologies. By extension, the contingent relationships between categories and entities once kept separate — word/image, observer/observed — determine and define the process of globalization.

Aspects of remediation, intermediality, and hypermediality have factored in the way we read, create, and use images in the West. A look at the pixelated image in several examples of contemporary art — geometric painting, concrete poetry, and the mosaic — provides a counterpart to our own experience of reading the broader reality around us. The two dynamics of fragmenting form and of building parts (or pixels) into aesthetic wholes both correspond to the act of visual perception itself. Humans see the world in limited units of sense data that integrate as patterns of meaning. To analyze and interpret their environments, people perform acts of closure to compensate for what lies beyond the reach of immediate sense perception. Due to the fragmentary nature of human visual perception, they continually take in the world in pieces of relative focus, assembling them into wholes, interpreting meaning, layering remembered content through time. These acts of closure grant a sense of reality: inferring that the chair back one cannot see is actually there, that the assembled guests floating from room to room form a coherent company.

While the new visual media is too recent a phenomenon for precise definitions, it can be genealogically investigated and described in terms of 1) The materiality of the medium (see Hayles; Mukařovský), 2) The dynamics of visual perception (see Arnheim; Crary; Morris), and 3) The function of art as an arbiter of culture (see Dikovitskaya; Mitchell; Shklovsky). By routing questions of intermediality through specific works of verbal/visual art, one sees the prevalence of pixelization as an aspect of composition, signification, and perception. In addition, one understands how new technologies continue art's ties to culture, as both agent and object. Art impacts the social realm, interprets it via representation, and provides a means for navigating the relatively unknown world of the new me-
dia. Indeed, the heterogeneous image as a site of ideological production and reflection (Mitchell, *Iconology*), now occupies a radically new public sphere (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 363-64) or commons (Hardin). The rise of the twenty-first-century image, in its hybrid, language-laden state, signals an upset of disciplinary boundaries as well as a shift in the way we think about representation itself. Craig Owens documented this aesthetic revolution as "an eruption of language into the visual arts" before the 1970s had even come to a close (127), indicating a collapse of genre limits that has become the norm in contemporary culture. Citing a parallel dynamic, theorists stress remediation or the movement of media through each other (Bolter and Grusin). As Asunción López-Varela and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek argue, any such instance of intermediality refers to "the blurring of generic and formal boundaries among different forms of new media practices" (65). Any internet-housed poem, narrative, or image has been remediated, re-represented through electronic means as a time-bound unit for our consumption during moments between booting up and shutting down. Yet, the arts have always worked through and in reference to each other, pushing limits, nudging boundaries. Likewise, under the cosmopolitan world order disciplinary and genre boundaries dissolve alongside national borders (Cheah 1-3). Even the relationship between subject and object comes under careful scrutiny according to several well-established theories claiming, "pictures look at us" (see, e.g., Crary; Mitchell; Virilio and Crary).

A new category of image-charged world literature thus evolves, even as we observe. W.J.T. Mitchell's notion of the "pictorial turn" of our new visual culture (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 9), describes a contemporary scene preoccupied with *words*, rather than the *things* that fascinated ancient and medieval philosophers or the *ideas* that obsessed seventeenth through nineteenth century thinkers (Rorty, *Philosophy* 263). We now inhabit a new visual culture in which the *picture* (Mitchell's intermedial verbal/visual signifying complex) dominates the public sphere. Further, Mitchell suggests that "all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no 'purely' visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism" (*Picture Theory* 5). Each artful example offered below is not only seeable, but readable as a Saussurean language-like system in which individual parts — words, visual details, pixels — partake of integrated systems of differential semantics.

The advent of a new, disciplinary field of visual studies concerned with the cultural construction of the visual in everyday life, in the arts, and in media demonstrates a need to know more about the way images generate meaning (see Dikovitskaya). As Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore wrote in 1967, "Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the nature of the communication" (8). Today, critical theory itself becomes both a conceptual tool and a symptomatic form of the visual age if not the new digital media itself (Foster xiv). Word and image again collide when López-Varela Azcaráte and Tötösy de Zepetnek define culture as "socially constructed meaning," that which takes place through the process of negotiating stories, images and meanings (68). Stories are made of images (verbal, visual, aural, gestural) and images tell the story of their own creation. Meanings are continually negotiated in terms of power relations, authorization, and context, all elements of intermedial dynamics leading to social change (see, e.g., López-Varela's and Tötösy de Zepetnek 77). At the crux still stands the human. Various theorists have announced the end of the human body itself, a casualty of the new media, mainly by citing the powers of virtual reality. Tim Lenoir plays up this departure from the anthropocentric orientation, describing the digital image as, "a matrix of numbers, a table composed of integers, a grid of cells capable of being stored in a computer memory, transmitted electronically and interpreted into an image by a display device" (xiii). The temptation to leave the body behind in light of automated expression and coded sensation, authorless productivity, and stunning extremes of simulation, proves enticing but misleading. Unlike Jonathan Crary and W.J.T. Mitchell, I insist on the fundamental embodiment of the observer. The medium, as defined here, operates via sensate bodies, themselves the source of meaning. For new media theorist Mark Hansen (and his forerunner Henri Bergson), the observer constitutes a human agent that uses its body to frame sensory perception in a mode of interpretation and valuation extending beyond the purview of neurological processes.
The physical disposition of expressive material in spatial relation to human bodies affects perceptual processes beyond the brain itself. For example, Leo Steinberg describes the paradigm shift in the West in 1950 when the orientation of paintings changed from vertical fields (a painting on a wall, for example), to what he calls "flatbed horizontals" in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Dubuffet. Steinberg explains that "the works no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than the newspaper does" (84). Robert Morris would emphasize this connection between the work and the body by developing his theory of the phenomenological formalism of 1960s minimalist sculpture in which "the body measured the work as much as the eye" (Morris, Words and Images 343). Steinberg broadens the ramifications of the individual / art work interaction to encompass the social realm. He claims, "the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal [is] expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture" (84).

What transpires, then, when today’s artists take a painting from the museum wall or floor, remediate it through electronic means, and place it in our laptop laps? As Walter Benjamin and his follower John Berger would stress, the infinitely reproducible image loses its uniqueness, its distance, its consequent aura, as well as its integration into a communal (if exclusive) setting: the museum. The remediated, intermedial art work becomes more than ever an element of the public square for those with access, and the sheer scope of its dissemination signals another sort of aura-mystique.

The new media generates meaning just as the old media does, evoking the familiar world via shades of similarity and mimesis, yet never escaping its own unique characteristics as a signifying substance. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin explain the important features and goals of the digital medium from a foucauldian perspective: "A medium is that which mediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real. A medium in our culture can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with other media" (65). The following three images demonstrate the way a painting can act like a story or a sculpture and how a poem can act like a picture or a three dimensional form. Bolter and Grusin insist on a correspondence between the mediated representation and the real, one that calls on equivalencies between the realm of reality and the realm of art. Their approach already dates itself, hinging so carefully on goals of convincing reproduction in a new mode lauded for its powers of autonomous generation and freedom from naturalistic representation. Three classic twentieth-century examples of pre-electronic, hypermediated imagery call attention to their own being as artificial constructions, pushing traditional limits of time and space: One is a painting with rhythm and rhyme; two are poems that could be called paintings. Here, the visual does not necessarily exist in a single moment, as the first modern aesthetician Gotthold Ephraim Lessing would argue (Laokoön 77), nor does the verbal exactly unfold through time in customary, linear fashion (see Mukařovský). Each non-naturalistic work insists that the viewer notice the media that forms it rather than take it as a transparent view to a recognizable world. First, consider the irregular grid of a 1922 watercolor. I exemplify my argumentation with art by Paul Klee and Eugen Gomringer, both of which express their content verbally and visually at once (see Klee Figure 1 and Gomringer: <http://www.ubu.com/historical/gomringer/gomringer01.html>):

Figure 1: Paul Klee, Der Bote des Herbstes/Messenger of Autumn (1922). Yale Art Gallery. Copyright release by Yale Art Gallery to the author.
Paul Klee's early pixelization, *Messenger of Autumn* calls attention to its own surface rather than functioning as a window on reality. Nevertheless, both its underlying grid structure and its framed view on an unmistakable tree recall windows. The linguistic handle of a title suggests the autumnal season in a temperate zone. Through color and form resemblance, the orange oval is iconic for leaf or tree at this time of year. Robert Morris would point out that, "textualizing is always in place at the site of the aesthetic icon" ("Words" 340) or that any degree of naturalistic representation seems to demand wordy accompaniment. In fact, one can hardly hold back from stating, "that is a tree." The surroundings, in contrast, are extremely abstracted, yet no less *representational*. For example, the panels on the lower right drop to signify anisotropic space or the fact that the tree inhabits a world with gravity in play. Signaling the paradox of presence, these oblongs slide to reveal the paper below. The dynamism of this effect destabilizes Lessing's claim that paintings exist in space, not time, as they can express only a single moment (*Laokoön* 19). Instead of convincing the viewer via mimesis as Lessing would expect, this painting calls attention to its own constructedness as art, to its own artificiality. No transparency or immediacy here. Rather than realism's easy correspondence between leaf – and – *image of leaf*, here one finds a formal composite suggesting but not directly denoting, gravity, movement, change through time, disintegration, etc. The overlapping panels also suggest physical touch, another important theme for media theorists concerned with the "paradox of connectivity" (López-Varela and Tötoós de Zépetnek 71) present in the new media in which simulated social connection can be both seductive and devoid of actual contact. Likewise, with concrete poetry, words in their graphic state take on the physicality of assembled objects.

Similar to a pixelated screen, this painting recalls Rosalind Krauss's notion of the grid. Thus, Klee's 1922 work on paper participates in a contemporary systematic declaration of the "modernity of modern art" (Krauss 9). The underlying grid structure, ubiquitous and "emblematic" (Krauss) of twentieth-century modern art in the West, insists on the materiality of the medium, on the work's being as paint, as clay, as language. Through its very abstraction, it demolishes older goals of transparency or naturalistic representation. Krauss offers the grid as, "the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface" (9). As Krauss explains, "the physical qualities of the surface ... are mapped onto the aesthetic dimensions of the same surface ... The bottom line of the grid is naked and determined materialism" (10). This would correspond to the "flatness" Clement Greenberg declared the essence of Modernist painting. By calling attention to the flat surface of the canvas, the work bares all devices, dispenses with illusion (including Albertian perspective or narrative realism) and reveals in the stuff of its own creation. This does not lead to the end of meaning, but rather to new meanings.

Krauss's concept applies to various concrete poems as well, including two by Swiss artists Eugen Gomringer and Claus Bremer that present as types of grids, laid out in precise rows and columns of words. Each text deepens intermedial analysis because of the way it breaks down expected limits between the visual and the verbal. Both pertain to intermediality debates because they constitute fine examples of the permeability of limits between word and image or the "blurring of generic and formal boundaries among different forms of new media" (Tötoósy and Azcaráte 65). As Christopher Balme explains, "The taking up or imitation of the methods of representation of one medium by another medium can also function as a specific, medium-crossing form of intertextuality, which implies that one medium refers to another medium" (148). The fact that the full expression of both of these concrete poems depends on their visual aspect as much as it does on the medium of language indicates that many of our accepted categorical definitions, even those distinguishing poetry and painting, prove inadequate.

Figure 2: Eugen Gomringer, "Silencio" (1954) (Williams 12). Copyright release to the author.
Gomringer’s "Silencio" (1954) reworks several of the issues introduced by Klee’s painting and Krauss’s theory of the grid, including its anti-literary "will to silence" (9). Both the visual image and the poem signify absence and silence differentially, by means of the unspoken, the unrepresented. In "Silencio," a neat block of language, built up in word bricks like pixels, spells out the abstract concept "silence." Yet, that which most clearly represents this theme is the central void in which no language speaks at all. Thus, the positive signifier, the black ink on white paper, signifies differentially via gaps and discontinuities; the unsaid, in fact, delivers the message, within the context of the whole. Like most concrete poems and hypermediated computer screens, this composite image upsets the culture-bound expectation to read left to right and top to bottom. Poetry's oral tradition bears no connection to this poem that defies reading aloud. Instead, language operates in space, depending on its visual impact to make meaning, rather than unfolding through time (Lessing 77; see Mukařovský; Riffaterre on "unfolding contexture"). Words accumulate in another sort of overlay in Bremer's poem to follow (see Figure 3). Qualities of density and difference, as elaborated by Gilles Deleuze, express themselves in Bremer's self-obscuring work as well in which discrete words, such as illegible can be arguably same and different at once (see Foster 66-68).

In Bremer’s poem, "Rendering the legible illegible" ("Lesbares in Unlesbares übersetzen," 1963) the inky type builds itself up to the point of chaotic overload. The piling up of letters signals a heavy obliteration, a collusion of word and image in a project of self-erasure and differential communion. Neither verbal nor visual signifying aspect could function alone. One cannot read this poem aloud; one cannot experience it fully without seeing it, or at least visualizing it in the mind. Thus, concrete poems help dissolve traditional distinctions and reformulate categories of media. As temporally anchored artifacts, they manifest society’s concerns. For example, one could comment on the way Gomringer’s 1950s work seems logic-based and controlled in contrast to the sense of disarray and self-critique of Bremer’s 1960s work, composed during a time of overt social unrest in the West. Most important, both poems speak for their century as they celebrate the primary playful nature of utterance, before its function as address, discourse, or representation (see Antin 13).

With spirited instability, art works in the modernist era often pivot on dichotomies of speech vs. silence and presence vs. absence. These first three examples (in contrast to those that follow), seem particularly quiet, especially concerned with their own erasure. The self-reflexivity characteristic of postmodernism has always been detectable in art, as representational works have rubbed up against the limits of illusionary mimesis, evoking truth vs. untruth. Such dualities hearken back to our most basic binomial thinking. As artist Janet Kozachek and other critics have pointed out, the earliest computer 0/1 language called ADA (a pallindrome, read backwards and forwards alike) is built on primitive programs based on yes/no choices (personal conversation 2009). The seeming simplicity of these binary options and absolute origins foils the complexities generated from such simple dialectics. These three examples defy Bolter and Grusin’s representational goals for the new media: immediacy and transparency. They slow down the process of perception because they are deceptively difficult, depending on logic as much as mimesis to convey their metatextual messages. Effects of hypermediation
also trump this desire for immediacy and transparency. With the new media, one can be in two places at once, using Windows or hypertext or a simple collaging of choice zones on a screen. All three of the above examples can be considered hypermediated as well, in that they call attention to themselves as art, insisting on their own materiality rather than attempting to render the medium itself invisible. Their parts are the same and different at once, their gestalt effects unified yet fragmentary and grid-based. Thus, their windows obscure as much as they reveal.

However heartily Lessing may have argued that a painting exists in space rather than time, artists have often experimented with hypermedial effects of depicting multiple spaces at once. In Lucas Cranach's *Melancholia* (1532) a pixeled world displays windows revealing at least three discrete events transpiring simultaneously: a battle in the clouds, a quartet of cherubs at play, and Melancholy herself, sharpening her arrows. Layered content co-exists within the frame, each bit calling for its own narrative as in a graphic novel. This painting returns us to the sixteenth-century historical moment when traditional modes of representation met with questions serious enough to precipitate the paradigm shift known as Modernism (Antin 29). This metatextual painting presents itself self-reflexively, aware of its own artful construction. Denoting at least three points in space, if not time as well, it evokes the "multistability" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 45) of an optical illusion that can be read in multiple ways such as the Necker cube or Joseph Jastrow's dialectical "Duck-Rabbit" (46).

Mosaics, with a similar multiplicity of detail, constitute hypermediated events as well, as they hardly disguise the stuff of their own creation. Revealing in the fragment, they build up forms from parts, discrete only at limited distances. They define the idea of meaning in context: a shard on the table is only a shard. Yet, within the mosaic, each particle takes on an identity as eye, nose, a piece of a shadow, depending on its relationship to other tessellated fragments. According to this formulation, a single chip functions like a word in a Saussurean system of linguistic signification or like a discrete shape on an analytic cubist canvas (1909-11), achieving meaning only in relation to the integrated whole. More than most art forms, mosaics seem to insist on the very idea of construction. When is a seam between stones a conjunction and when is it a rupture or separation? Mosaics prove especially flexible, working between the denotation of definable objects through resemblance and also fully present as parts standing simply for themselves. As mosaic artist Janet Kozachek has commented, "sometimes a wall of stones is just that: a wall of stones" (personal conversation 2008).


Still in the spirit of the pixeled square, consider two mosaics as examples of "layering" representation in the manner of hypermediation. With *Binomial Sikkinus* (see Figure 3), Kozachek builds up a palimp-
sext of semiotic systems: an anti-élitist dance satirizing a political situation, depicted in ceramic tile, enclosed in bits of computer motherboard. *Sikinnus* translates as, "both a dance and a form of satirical mimodrama. It burlesqued the politics, philosophy, and drama of the day and was said to cater to the taste of the common people for vulgarity and sensationalism" ([Ancient Greek Dance](http://www.carnaval.com/greece/dance/)). The central glazed tile of *Binomial Sikkinus* pictures a maenad dancer affiliated with Dionysus. Kozachek explains that "using computer parts in this mosaic, I am satirizing the excesses of the information highway. The materials in the mosaic are, like the internet itself, jewels in juxtaposition with, and sometimes embedded in common substances: pearls fill the holes in the plastic circuits, 24K gold embellishes ordinary glass" (personal conversation 2009).

Thus, this mosaic image tells a story, has a story of its own origin to tell, and also signifies in ways that do not translate into language. The motherboard, for example, frames the dancer, evokes technology, and functions decoratively to emphasize the flat surface and abstract, geometric patterning. Thus, the motherboard signifies both itself and what some would call pure formal or decorative qualities. In the overall context, the "made in Japan" and "made in Taiwan" imprints deconstruct meaning, as the mosaic was actually made in South Carolina, U.S. The artist appropriates found objects in a way that creates a meeting of East and West with hegemonic overtones due to the English language deployment. Edward Said would likely celebrate this piece as an example of the "reopening of art" to "worldly concerns," to kitsch, mass culture, the mixture of media, political propaganda, and theater, the resurgence of artistic impurity, hybridity, and heterogeneity" ([Mitchell, Picture Theory](239)). With the exception of the mimetic dancer and the linguistic statements, the tesserae remain abstracted geometrical shapes.

Figure 5: Janet Kozachek, *Conquistador* (2001). Susan Lenz Collection. Copyright release to the author.
She comments, "I used mother-of-pearl in the eyes of the Conquistador because it refracts light in such a way as to give the appearance of someone gazing into a fire" (personal conversation, 2010). Kozachek thus motivates the eye signifiers—the bits of pearl and gem—decreasing the degree of arbitrariness between the hard objects and the imagined eyes she represents by using them.

This piece introduces important issues of framing via remediation, as a fragment of a fragment, cropped and staged, one could say, for marketing purposes by Mosaic Mercantile, a California art dealer. The mosaic mask, now remediated through the unique angle of a photographer's lens, begins to signify in new ways. Owing to the framing of our gaze, we are no longer looking at a mosaic mask; we are looking at a photograph of a mask from a determined viewpoint. In effect, the viewer's body (not just eyes) has been placed in a certain relationship to the object. From this angle, the Conquistador's eyes perform an averted gaze, and the sense of the work alters from what it would have been standing before it. Now, the figure contemplates the viewer reluctantly, even guiltily. Adding a title Conquistador remediates the piece through language, inviting postcolonial interpretations. Thus, the impact of the piece depends (like the concrete poems) on a combinatory process of verbal-visual expression. Such a remediated example as this allows the viewer to stay focused on the materiality of the art object, even as she remains meta-discursively interested in the act of looking or the experience of visual perception. With increasing frequency, electronic voices and faces have come to address internet users directly. An emphasis on gesture and performance as central aspects of communication has come to replace more conventional practices of reading and deciphering art and media messages. Contemporary image theory, then, places less emphasis on the icon or art object itself, and more on the act of looking. Strides in neuroscience have rendered the analysis of perception increasingly intricate and accurate. A look at several basic mechanical and affective aspects of human visual perception completes this exploration of the new media.

Clarifying characteristics of human visual perception demonstrates the way the new digital media affects users, and how they can effectively use it to impact the world. By rendering digital media participants more aware of the materiality of the internet media and of their own processes of mechanical and affective consumption of this information, educators can increase a sense of embodied user agency. López-Varela's and Tötösy de Zepetnek's program charges instructors with the task of taking the classroom to a new level of interactivity that will train students to be more aware of their discursive positioning and thus more responsible and involved members of society (77). As the greatest challenge to this ideal, the authors suggest that excessive use of internet technology may disconnect individuals from the active political sphere and from embodied interactions. This, they claim, diminishes their sense of social and personal responsibility (71). Examining key features of human visual perception clarifies the way digital media affects human beings and how they themselves can use digitized images most persuasively.

Figure 6: Famine in the Sudan (1993). Copyright release to the author.
With richer content, the photo-realistic depiction of a vulture and a starving girl from Ayod during the Sudanese civil war (see Figure 5), the image's impact changes drastically. Whether or not the media is the message and form is content, emotionally charged subject matter elicits particular affective responses. One can still struggle to maintain a safe formalist distance and comment upon camera angle, the subject's inability or refusal to return the gaze, the way body positions or gestures carry meaning, or the relationships of power structured between bird and girl or between the photographer and subject, as Marguerite Helmers suggests (108). In this case, however, it is awfully hard to carry out such objective analysis without being distracted by the fact that this child appears about to die and the bird ready to feast on her corpse. The story of this quintessential icon of African famine as a material object expands to include public scandal with additionally lethal results (including the photographer's suicide). As a Pulitzer-prize-winning documentary photograph, mechanically reproduced on the grand scale of the New York Times and now disseminated in the internet, this work demonstrates again that art has been re-injected into the social praxis (see Bürger). Elizabeth Bronfen insists that artful documents of popular culture that could be read as an objective news story such as Carter's, tell us about our own preoccupations and anxieties as a society (20-21). Such appalling images move us: "precisely because they force us to get affectively involved by eliciting a disturbing fascination, they call upon us to decipher them and in so doing, contain them" (33). The use of logic and language to interpret atrocities of human rights can either motivate internet consumers to action or numb them to the emotional consequences of confronting these issues (for further discussion on the impact of images in the discourse about African famine, see, e.g., theworld.org <http://www.theworld.org/2011/08/images-of-famine-in-the-media/>; Seib).

Figure 7: Tom Feelings, *The Middle Passage: White Ships Black Cargo* (1995). Copyright release to the author.

As access to art changes via the new media's growing public sphere, so does its use and value. This depiction of the unvoiced subaltern in an arguably pixeled image from Tom Feelings' children's book, *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo* (see Figure 6) dissolves distinctions between high- and folk art. Here, Feelings, a leader in the U.S. Black Arts Movement, depicts the descent through a slave ship's orlop deck into the lower hold where Africans were stored as cargo during transport. Layers of bodies, poised like the Sudanese girl, are organized horizontally in a *mise-en-*
abîme configuration, suggesting an infinite regression downward. A two-dimensional imposed grid controls the lower two thirds of the image, echoing the struts and beams of the ship itself. The sectioning of the picture plane recalls the squared sequence of a movie film, a sort of freeze-frame moment in time as whips thrash over stillled bodies. The overlaid structure relates (like Cranach’s Melancholia) to the boxed segments of the graphic novel genre. Art Spiegelman describes the comic book as “a gutter medium; that is, it’s what takes place in the gutters between the panels that activates the medium” (100). In other words, one could read the activity within the frames as generated by that which inhabits the negative space surrounding it. For example, one might place therein the ideology that sanctions slavery or, more broadly, that promotes institutionalized brutality, as I have discussed elsewhere (see Wyman). Homi Bhabha might consider these white gaps a “supplementary space” or a “productive political site” where new critiques and definitions can be brought forward. Such arenas, he has argued, are effective in “reconjugating, recontextualizing, translating the event into the politics of communities and public institutions” (Bhabha qtd. in Mitchell, “Translator” 82). The physical suffering, underscored by the materiality of a haunting grid, and the radically reduced and polarized black/white tonal scale, seems to demand an intellectual, if not metaphysical explanation. In this image, one finds trapped the ghostly, nightmarish lackeys of an nefarious policy along with its primary victims, the Africans themselves, all far removed from those who ultimately engineer and profit from the slave trade.

Others scholars (see, e.g., Bolter and Grusin; Hayles; Manovich; Hansen; Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort) have considered new medial modes for art in which a pixeled art can be generated, evaluated, and preserved. Thus López-Varela and Tötösy de Zepetnek propose an arguably false choice between intermediality as a site for innovative artistic creation or a means of attack on aesthetic purity and academic rigor (66). Extraordinary innovations in combinatorial word and image art have been created and disseminated via new media technologies alongside scholars’ and critics’ hurried efforts to define and describe them. Grass-roots artists and thinkers have participated in this revolution in artistic expression and analysis. From YouTube to Facebook to virtual reality to BioMorphic Typography (see Seaman 230) and beyond, our modes of expression increase and thus the democratization of information (for users with access) dissolves distinctions between categories of high/low art and illegitimate/legitimate scholarship. Furthermore, obsessions with artistic purity (see Greenberg) have thankfully died out, due in part to innovations in genre-bending abstract expressionist, pop, and conceptual art (see, e.g., Foster; Krauss; Morris). Nevertheless, the commodification of culture with the rise of imperialist (and consumer) capitalism has contributed to a re-valuation of art objects and institutions. Engaged thinkers (electronic and not) will further theorize the scope and impact of the new media phenomenon, both within the academy and outside.

In conclusion, humans have forever lived in a "pixeled" world, a space of fragmented sensory experience in which they continually strive for a sense of wholeness or completion and in which they imagine the parts of objects and bodies they cannot see. They attempt to contain and comprehend the pasts and futures they cannot know by fashioning representations for themselves. The new media expand this search to know and to impact culture in ways we are just beginning to understand.

Works Cited

Ancient Greek Dance <http://www.carnaval.com/greece/dance/>
Sarah Wyman, "Plotting the Pixel in Remediated Word and Image"


