

## DIALOGUES WITH DECAY: TRACING NARRATIVES OF DATA SPACE IN PAT O'NEILL'S "THE DECAY OF FICTION"

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This paper outlines the formative dialogues that emerged during production of the experimental film *The Decay of Fiction* and its interactive counterpart *Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounters with a Film by Pat O'Neill*. The project was a collaboration between filmmaker Pat O'Neill and The Labyrinth Project—a research initiative on database documentary directed by media theorist Marsha Kinder at the University of Southern California.



*Installation view of "Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounters with a Film by Pat O'Neill" by Pat O'Neill, Rosemary Comella, Kristy H.A. Kang and The Labyrinth Project, DVD-ROM, (Copyright 2002, photo by Kristy H.A. Kang).*

In 1993 experimental filmmaker Pat O'Neill was introduced to the Hotel Ambassador. Built in 1921 in the center of Los Angeles' Wilshire corridor, the formerly grand hotel was a famous nightspot that hosted the Oscar award ceremonies and became a magnet for dignitaries and Hollywood luminaries in its heyday. Later made infamous as the site of Robert F. Kennedy's assassination in 1968, the Ambassador closed in 1989 and was left vacant, its abandoned spaces periodically leased as a location for movie shoots. Today the site is home to the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools. O'Neill was given a tour of its spaces long after its doors were closed to the public and inspired by this urban ruin, he began filming, capturing the way light would move through its surfaces. This collection of shots (captured using a combination of computerized motion control and time-lapse photography) was edited with a temporary soundtrack from noir films and became the basis for O'Neill's 2002 film *The Decay of Fiction*. While working on the film in 1997, O'Neill was invited to collaborate with The Labyrinth Project (a research initiative on interactive narrative at The University of Southern California directed by media theorist Marsha Kinder) on a digital media project that would be based on his film. This collaboration resulted in an interactive DVD-ROM published in 2002 called *Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounters*

*with a Film by Pat O'Neill.* [1] This paper will outline the history of how the digital iteration emerged from O'Neill's film and explore the dialogues that developed while these two forms of *The Decay of Fiction* were being produced.

Since 1963 Pat O'Neill has been creating a body of experimental films that cannot be easily categorized as belonging to any singular strand of cinematic style. His work exhibits an intimate mastery of image processing techniques conventionally used to produce special effects in cinema, but the layered landscape of sound and moving images he composes extends beyond the limited language of traditional effects. [2] Rather than creating seamless optical illusions, O'Neill foregrounds the gaps between his densely layered imagery to orchestrate a different kind of illusion – one of unlimited associations in the mind. A poetics of associative meaning is awakened when watching O'Neill's films and it is this matrix of imagined trajectories that corresponds to one of the characteristics shared in film and digital media discourse – non-linear narrative.

During a workshop hosted by The Labyrinth Project at USC's Annenberg Center for Communication in 1998, media scholars and artists were invited to discuss the possibilities and challenges in creating an interactive non-linear narrative based on *The Decay of Fiction*. O'Neill (who had no prior experience working in digital media) was invited by Marsha Kinder to collaborate on this project because their close friendship created a foundation of mutual respect and trust from which one of the first Labyrinth Projects emerged. Moreover, Kinder had written about O'Neill's work in the 1970s and wanted to collaborate with someone whom she admired and whose work had great potential for interactive database narrative. The goal of the collaboration was to make an interactive work that would be emotionally engaging while both experimenting with and retaining the pleasures of cinematic narrative. Kinder defines narrative "not just as the idea of the well-made story with a three-act structure but...as a cognitive way for contextualizing the meaning of perceptions. It's a combination of data that's selected from a bunch of different databases and put together in interesting ways. And I think Pat's film have that kind of structure." [3] In the computer world this modular architecture of non-linear narrative typically takes shape in the form of a database.

In his book *The Language of New Media*, media theorist Lev Manovich traces the origins of the database to computer science and defines it as "a structured collection of data. The data stored in a database is organized for fast search and retrieval by a computer and therefore, it is anything but a simple collection of items." [4] This idea of data as a "collection of items" corresponds to the way in which O'Neill collects material for his films, identifying himself as "a kind of scavenger that looks through a lot of existing material and finds items that spatially or in terms of feeling have connections to the basic piece." [5] The modes of selection made by the computer or by O'Neill, can be considered non-linear in that items are chosen randomly from a constellation of possibilities. The difference, however, is that computer data exhibits no intrinsic value or associative meaning. The machine does not choose, judge or make cognitive connections between items but reduces them all to identical, sterile bits of information. Although the database evokes a very contemporary notion of computerized consciousness, it connotes a lack of corporeal presence and an absence of the kinds of sensual pleasures found in O'Neill's narratives. Rather than a database that fetishizes computer consciousness, I would like to imagine an embodied *data space* – one that is grounded in human consciousness mapped onto spatial trajectories.

The orchestration of space is central to the narrative trajectory presented in *The Decay of Fiction*. Space takes precedence over action, as opposed to action forming the underlying architecture in most traditional storytelling. The 73-minute film traces a pathway through the decrepit hotel, dripping with the

kind of nostalgic traces that abandoned spaces evoke, a pathway that O'Neill describes as a "choreography for the camera." [6] This feeling of nostalgia is heightened by the superimposition of noir film soundtracks onto the contemporary ruins of the hotel spaces evoking what O'Neill calls "the decay of storytelling or how storytelling merges with the environment or with a space that's foreign to it but somehow attracts it". [7] It is as though these stories are written onto the body of the hotel and watching O'Neill's scenes of sped-up-time, we are witnesses to this decay of fiction.

Conceiving the network of noir inspired action that would take place in the environment occurred after the empty spaces had already been captured on film. Having recorded the camera moves using a customized motion control system, O'Neill was able to later shoot his actors while repeating the same camera movement. Then through the process of optical printing, the foreground action and background spaces would be combined to form a composite image in which black and white figures inhabit a contemporary landscape shot in color. By compositing the present with the collective memories of a vintage era of Hollywood's past the Ambassador's remains become a repository of cultural history and imagined interactions represented in the film by a layer of ghostly fictional characters playing out noir inspired narratives. These narratives are periodically interrupted by animated interludes that seem to emerge from a parallel dimension formed from a repository of surrealistic moments. These parallel spaces converge as the film culminates in a carnival parade of performers whose dance of overlapping bodies blurs the boundaries between past and present. On one level, the film is an imprint of the hotel as artifact – a fossil of the past housing not only the imagined fictions invented by O'Neill but the public and private histories of Los Angeles' memory.

In the DVD-ROM, the hotel's history is an additional dimension that is only hinted upon in the film. In the film, as the camera pans across the hotel's ballroom we are reminded of the Robert Kennedy assassination as we hear excerpts from the speech he gave shortly before his death. Though this is one of the few moments in the film where historical memory materializes, it maintains a peripheral distance to documentary that haunts the edges of the screen. In the DVD-ROM, as the viewer navigates through the ballroom, additional material about the assassination is made accessible through a click of the mouse. This documentary material includes news clippings, archival footage surrounding the shooting, radio broadcasts of conspiracy theories and contemporary interviews with historians and witnesses offering their insights on this historical trauma. These documents are embedded within the surfaces of the navigable space where they remain hidden unless activated. The film de-emphasizes the "artifactual" dimension of the Ambassador hotel as a repository of history and although O'Neill initially struggled to incorporate his historical research of the space into the film script he abandoned his efforts, realizing that he "wasn't doing a documentary but a choreographed camera move with action." [8] Collaborating on the interactive iteration of *The Decay of Fiction* opened up the possibility to include not only historical material O'Neill had intended to include in his film, but additional material researched by Kinder, myself and others during the four year period in which the DVD-ROM and film were being produced. These included moving image archives of social events and publicity stunts hosted at the Ambassador, photographs of the hotel and its surrounding neighborhood from 1920 to 2002 and contemporary audio interviews providing different and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the history of the area. All these alternate layers of narrative possibility exist on the fringes of O'Neill's fictional spaces and can be accessed at any time. While exploring the hotel in the DVD-ROM, one encounters a diversity of data spaces and it is up to the viewer to choose which allegorical vector to follow.

*Tracing the Decay of Fiction* expands upon the uncanny qualities of place and memory that are present in the linear film by transforming the film's linear spatial trajectory to non-linear spatial navigation or "navigable space" – what Manovich identifies (along with database) as "another key form of new

media.” Although Manovich refers to 3-D computer generated virtual space as a model to illustrate the exploration of navigable space, the same description could be applied to illustrate spatial exploration in *Tracing the Decay of Fiction*. In the hotel, the viewer can activate any of its static interior spaces by placing the cursor over the edges of the screen, animating the still image into motion and following the camera moves that give the illusion of spatial navigation. Near the end of production on the DVD-ROM, Rosemary Comella invited Manovich to view the navigation system she had designed and programmed for the interface allowing the viewer to move within and between the hotel spaces. Manovich discussed his conception of “navigable space” but admitted he had never seen it realized in this particular way.

Another attribute that differentiates the DVD-ROM from the film is its use of “the image as interface.” Manovich states that “The new role of an image as image-interface competes with its older role as representation....a computer image is situated between two opposing poles – an illusionistic window into a fictional universe and a tool for computer control.” [9] The role of the image as both “window” and “tool” is illustrated in the DVD-ROM when the viewer pauses on a still while following a camera move through the hotel. Doorways, walls and windows become links to historical and fictional interludes. However, I hesitate to assert that the use of image as representation and interface are in opposition here. Rather, the immersive beauty of O’Neill’s cinematography is foregrounded and the navigational devices are intentionally integrated to minimally distract the viewer. Furthermore, in the work of experimental filmmakers like O’Neill the image does not always function as “illusionistic window.” Rather, the illusory quality of the image is frequently challenged using the very techniques used to maximize illusion in the special effects industry. While discussing the industrial apparatus that O’Neill re-uses to develop his own aesthetic, he states, “the by-products of the processes of special-effects work....that which undermines the illusion. That seems to be a very powerful thing – the illusion and the denial of the illusion, both present at the same time.” [10] Similarly, the binary poles of image as illusion and instrument are not in competition with each other in *Tracing the Decay of Fiction*, but are “present at the same time”.

Another nodal point of dialogue between the film and DVD-ROM is the differing role that montage plays in each. In the film, the viewer is introduced to O’Neill’s choreographed sequence of narrative spaces – the viewer sees an authored mix and a pathway arranged by its author. In *Tracing*, the viewer *participates* in the mix and editing is replaced by navigation and choice. In the film, a sequence of moving images is arranged over *time* while in the DVD-ROM the moving images are spread out into *space*. The viewer’s choices in that space are arranged into a spatial montage. Spatial montage is made explicit on the DVD-ROM by allowing the viewer/performer to control the “choreography of camera movement” from a selection of rooms in the hotel. By moving the computer mouse over indicators on the edges of the screen the viewer can control specific camera moves or slide into adjacent spaces. Alternately, one can choose a different space by using the original blueprints of the Ambassador’s architect Myron Hunt as a map to locate the spaces to explore on the DVD-ROM. While navigating the camera moves, the ghost-like characters that inhabit these spaces can be activated over the moving image with a click of the mouse. During the production of the DVD-ROM, there was a debate about whether to include the noir characters or to leave the navigable spaces uninhabited in order to retain the uncanny quality of the hotel and invite the viewer’s consciousness to inhabit its spaces. [11] It was a question of how closely the DVD-ROM sequences should mirror the film. While describing the period when he was first filming the Ambassador, O’Neill said, “as you walk around an empty building – especially when you know about who inhabited it and what happened there – you always expect you’re going to run into these people as you go around a corner. I mean its haunted in your own mind...so it was this quality that I was trying to figure out how to synthesize.” [12] While this haunted quality is made explicit in the film’s layering of ghost-like characters, in the DVD-ROM the viewer *can select either option* – either she can explore the empty space or inhabit it with characters from O’Neill’s fiction. Periodically, however, the

choice of combining foreground action and background space is automatically generated whenever an “earthquake” occurs. At these moments, the viewer loses control of the interface and a random collage is generated from the database of foreground and background elements. By alternating the layer of characters off and on or by viewing a randomly generated mix of multiple layers, the emptiness of the hotel takes on a heightened quality of mystery as you realize in your mind, that there is another hidden narrative frequency that haunts these spaces.

In summary, I have outlined the formative dialogues that emerged during the production of *The Decay of Fiction* and its digital hybrid *Tracing the Decay of Fiction*. First I explore the role of non-linear narrative in both projects and show how the complex network of associations created in O’Neill’s films correspond conceptually to the way non-linear narrative is structured in new media. This structuring takes the form of a database, a collection of items, or an index. The indexical nature of O’Neill’s process is reflected in his view that his films are like a journal, a synthesis of disparate units, “a collection of entries all by the same person but at different times and places.” [13] I propose extending the notion of the database to a data space in order to address the role of spatial navigation and spatial montage. Spatial navigation as a mode of organizing narrative footprints resonates in O’Neill’s observation that his films serve as “a record of an individual who wanders the land and from time to time stops to comment on it.” [14] I also explore the dual nature of image both as interface and mode of representation both in the film and DVD-ROM. All of these dialogues converge in the ruins of the Ambassador and in the end the hotel becomes a metaphor for the exploration of data, narrative, memory and history. Finally, it is a tracing of decay that is embodied in the haunted orchestration of spaces written on celluloid and encoded in digital space.

#### **References and Notes:**

1. *My role in the DVD-ROM was as co-director along with Pat O’Neill and Rosemary Comella. This involved working on the conceptual development, research and production including the digital compositing, interface and graphic design of the collaborative project.*
2. *It should be noted that longtime collaborator George Lockwood contributed his expertise as sound designer to many of Pat O’Neill’s films.*
3. *Labyrinth Project workshop, USC Annenberg Center for Communication, February 28, 1998.*
4. *Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2001), 218.*
5. *Labyrinth Project workshop, 1998.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Labyrinth Project workshop, 1998. The addition of noir dialogue came through the kinds of signature chance encounters O’Neill welcomes in his work. During early editing, O’Neill was listening to the television when he heard a passage from the noir film “The Big Sleep” and realized that the dialogue fragments had an evocative affinity with the spaces he had shot.*
8. *Labyrinth Project workshop, 1998.*
9. *Manovich, 290.*
10. *David E. James, “An Interview with Pat O’Neill,” Millennium Film Journal, nos. 30/31 (Fall 1997).*
11. *From a conversation with Rosemary Comella in 2006.*
12. *Labyrinth Project workshop, 1998.*
13. *James, “An Interview with Pat O’Neill.”*
14. *Ibid.*