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The *Word* Hoard

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Paradoxy: Interpretive Environments, Time Travel, and the Unrereadable

by Andy Verboom

I am standing in the garage of a hoarder. The ceiling is low and raftery, the lighting unlucky, the books heaped on weak wooden tables and in cave-damp cardboard. As if they have reached that intermediate age between requiring deodorant and discovering it, the books have lifted into the air as a musk. My nine-year-old self is a buoy in it, floating from view behind a shelf-less mass of drugstore novels. The hoarder, a family friend, pronounces his lending policy: “You can borrow as many books as you want for as long as you want.” “Could I have one?” “You can borrow one for the rest of your life, but I expect it back after that.” I settle into a long lease of *The Last Starfighter*—its cover torn off, its spine a tacky band of glue, its pages smelling a month or two from mushrooming irretrievably. Alex, a kid in a trailer park, masters an arcade game only to discover it’s a recruitment tool for a galactic defense force. It falls to leaves after the second read. A few years later, among the beach wrack of a yard sale, sunbaked, I find *The Last Starfighter* on VHS. And (the first symptom of a future of graduate English work) I hate it. They’ve turned that charmed, mouldered book into this unrottable cassette.

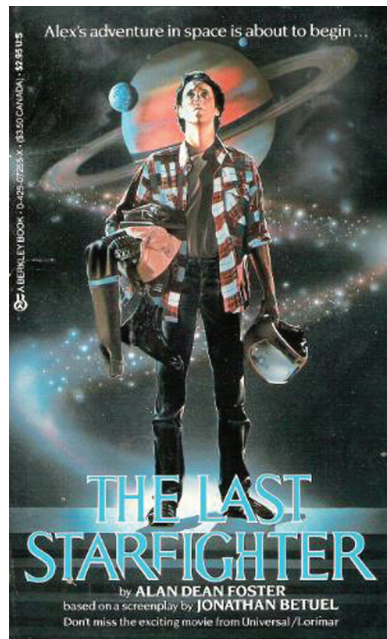


Fig. 1. Front cover of *The Last Starfighter* by Alan Dean Foster.

I had it all backwards, of course: when Alan Dean Foster wrote *The Last Starfighter* in 1984, he was novelizing Nick Castle’s film,

released earlier that year. Yet my experience of the two texts is reducible neither to the order of production nor the order of encounter; it is shaped by a particular *narrative* of production and encounter, the paratext comprised of the novel's and film's comparative renown, reputation, and referentiality. Bluntly, my consideration of the novel as precedent was determined by my initial unfamiliarity with the film and by the novel's lost cover, where (I later learned) the attribution to Jonathan Betuel's screenplay was printed. That crucial plot point missing, I encountered the novel as authoritative and the film as derivative, and these impressions persist even now, so that in recalling the novel, I cannot re-experience it only as a novelization of the film: no, the vector of adaptation will always seem to run in the other direction as well. Much as in M. C. Escher's perpetual motion aqueduct, *Waterfall*, a 'rational' descent of influence from film to novel is matched by an illusory ascent from novel to film.

In *Waterfall*, a flaw of two-point perspective, a visual rhyming of distance with height, propels the water impossibly up the aqueduct; in my encounters with *The Last Starfighter*, a limited perspective, an incomplete narrative of production, fashions my irrational allegiance to Foster's novel. But in Andrew Wenaus's "Patterns that Oscillate Forever," his readings of *2001: A Space Odyssey* are shaped by a perspective disguising itself as total—an elaborate narrative of the collaborative and concurrent composition of Arthur C. Clarke's novel and Stanley Kubrick's film, the two texts sharing that title.



Fig. 2. *Waterfall* by M. C. Escher. 1961. Lithograph. M. C. Escher: The Official Website. Web. 27 May 2013.

The first two-fifths of Wenaus's essay promises a compound theoretical framework, a (frankly exciting) constellation of media ecology, natural ecology, virtual ecology, rhythm science, and strange loops, out of which he projects 2001's "imaginary third text" (60)—a text of "posterity" rather than "priority" in that it "may only exist after experiencing the novel and the film" (61), but a text "paradoxical" in that it nonetheless seems to 'loop back' and "inform" those texts (62). The fit of these models with each other and with his "third text" is rather more associative than schematic, but Wenaus foregoes the provisional hermeneutics of the stargazer and instead consigns these discrete

models to tight semantic equivalence. They are, he implies, not merely related but identical to the processes of his “third text.” The resulting framework is less constellation than singularity, proliferating synonymous phrases by collapsing terminological distinctions—between ‘text’ and ‘environment’; between ‘still life’ and ‘oscillation’; between ‘mirror’ and ‘loop’; and finally between ‘paradox’ and ambivalent ‘priority’—that is, ambivalent authority. What these theoretical collapses obscure is the foundational narrative of *2001*’s production, the paratext that indeed comes prior to an experience of the texts and that may afterward recuperate a reader’s experiences back into itself as “posterity.” This paratext is not imaginary but quite material, even as it encompasses the more atmospheric and affective (socio-historical contexts of encounter, genre, mode, and cultural, group, and personal associations) along with the more immediately legible (advertisements, interviews, textual packaging, and venues of encounter), including what we usually consider the metatextual (reviews, word-of-mouth evaluations, authorial reputations) and intertextual (citations, references, re-releases, and remakes). At the risk of sounding like the P.I. in a whodunit, I must insist that this paratext—this is the actual “third text” of *2001*.

text ≠ environment

In interpreting Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec’s playful phenomenological ruminations on “natural ecologies” (59), Wenaus converts their

notion that “[a]n organism mirrors its environment [and] an environment mirrors its organisms” (Flusser and Bec 31) into a notion “that the reader mirrors its texts and the texts its reader” (59). Structurally, this implies an equivalence of reader with organism and “texts” with environment, yet it is unclear how “texts” are environmental: how does a text envelope and sustain “the reader”? How could a text, even at its most enthralling, match the total phenomenological immersion of an environment? How does the plurality of “texts”—a word that must be plural to allow for readerly nomadism—reconcile with what Flusser and Bec identify as a singular suitability of organism and environment? A reader may pick up and discard texts half-experienced; an organism, however agential, cannot enter and exit environments with impunity. Rather than constituting “two levels” (59), two different orders of hermeneutic agency, it seems more accurate to consider readers and texts as constituting two types of “entities” (Flusser and Bec 31) within the same level—organisms and elements, that is, within what Wenaus names “interpretive environments” (59). Indeed, Wenaus’s initial terminology soon slips in this direction such that “Clarke’s novel [and] Kubrick’s film . . . operate as entities in an environment” (60) rather than as environments themselves.

This revision, to which Wenaus seems at least partially inclined, allows for variations in degree of entanglement between a given reader and any particular text (more of us will have closely viewed Kubrick’s *2001* than closely read

Foster's *The Last Starfighter*), much as a given organism is uniquely entangled with an environment's resources. The revision also allows for readers' differing *basic awareness* of a text and of its intertextual relations (more of us will have heard of Kubrick's *2001* per se than heard of it specifically as a co-text to Clarke's *2001*). And crucially so, for as a reader, my interpretive environment includes not only my history of textual entanglements, but also the reputations that precede un-encountered texts, the paratexts that anticipate and fashion how I will tangle with texts once I do encounter them. As a consequence of this revision, however, we must locate the mirroring relationship Flusser and Bec identify not between readers and texts, among texts, or even among readers, but rather between each such entity and the overall interpretive environment they co-inhabit. If readers and texts "transform and mutate one another," as Wenaus insists (59), they do so indirectly through the Flusserian environment's mediation: as the whole adapts to one particular entity, each other entity adapts to that new whole.

Picture an interpretive environment as T. S. Eliot's "existing order" of art—but delineated by readers' possibilities of encountering texts rather than limited to an evaluative canon, and in which not only "the introduction of the new . . . work of art" but the merest reading of an extant work may add to and so alter "the *whole* existing order . . . if ever so slightly . . . so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted" (Eliot 1). Paratext acts as both the substance and the space of

this process: it is the accumulated narratives of production and consumption surrounding a text and thus the catalyst (or set of guidelines) for a reader's future encounters with that text. In the case of *2001*, then, the third text is not "an invisible *Übertext*" born from the "collaborative urtexts" of Kubrick's film and Clarke's novel, as Wenaus argues (69). Neither is the third text "the lived experience of reading, the experience of the *in-between* of primordial texts in relation to one another" (59). Rather, I would counter, the third text is the narrative of those texts' collaborative and concurrent conceptions, the "primordial" paratext that prepares one to read the text or texts—especially to read *2001* as "unique" (60) among typical novel-to-film or film-to-novel adaptations.

still life ≠ oscillation

In considering John Conway's *Life*—a solitaire game in which pixel-like "organisms" in a checkerboard grid survive, die, or give birth over successive "generations" based on the over- or under-population of neighbouring cells (Gardner n.p.)—Wenaus defines the term "still life" as "a mutation that 'cannot change or patterns that oscillate forever'" (60). This oxymoronic 'static oscillation' suggests a convenient parallel for what Wenaus sees in Flusser and Bec as an "infinite spiral" of adaptation contained within a "finite" space (60), and so "still life" becomes a term central to his argument, a basic rhetorical building block. In Martin Gardner's original article on *Life*, however, the full

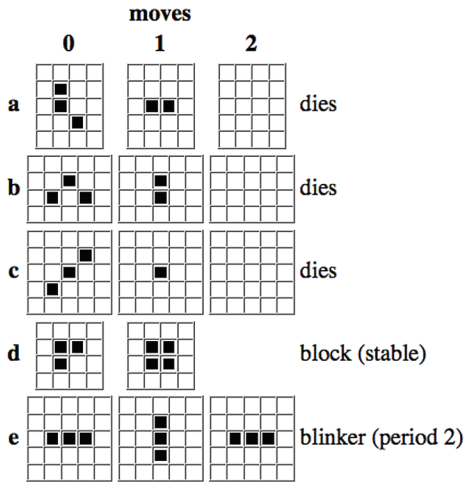


Fig. 3. From “Mathematical Games: The Fantastical Combinations of John Conway’s New Solitaire Game ‘Life’” by Martin Gardner.

Various starting patterns (a, b, c, d, and e) in Conway’s *Life* are tracked over two generations, or “moves” (1 and 2). Patterns a, b, and c die out on the second move due to under-population. Pattern d reaches a two-by-two block and persists in that shape over successive generations, forming a “still life.” Pattern e oscillates indefinitely between a horizontal line and a vertical line, forming the simplest instance of an oscillator.

context of the term reads as follows: “Most starting patterns [of *Life*’s organisms] either reach stable figures—Conway calls them ‘still lifes’—that cannot change or patterns that oscillate forever” (n.p.). Vitally, the either/or construction of this sentence sets “stable figures . . . that cannot change” in *opposition* rather than synonymic relation to “patterns

that oscillate forever.” The emphatic insertion of “still lifes” refers only to the former category.

Wenaus’s particular citation of Conway’s “still life,” by superimposing stasis and oscillation, contributes to his conclusion that “the knotted relations” of Clarke’s *2001* and Kubrick’s *2001* “manifest themselves as a kind of conceptual paradox” (61); while Wenaus refers to at least three distinct ‘paradoxes’ in this essay, the first being that of “posterity” and “priority” summarized above, in this case he describes his third text’s paradoxical “increase in richness and complexity” with “no effect on [the] materiality” of its base texts (62). For Wenaus, that is, the capacity for an intertextual reading of *2001* to self-complexify on subsequent re-reading, even as the core film and novel remain unchanged, requires that such an intertext and its oscillations be wholly “imaginary” (62) and “abstract” (60). But a more precise application of Conway’s *Life* allows for the static (ostensibly the film and the novel) and the oscillating (the third text) to occupy distinct materialities. It is within this “interpretive clearing” (61)—if I may appropriate a phrase from Wenaus—that appears the open-ended revisions and referential oscillations of the material paratext I have been describing.

To understand “still lifes” as distinct from “patterns that oscillate forever” is also to glimpse the possible limitations of Conway’s *Life* to a consideration of *2001*’s collaboration. A return from metaphoricity to the plainest denotation of “still life”—the mimetic art of *stilleven* perfected by the Dutch masters of

canvas in the 17th century—belies Wenaus’s notion of “a diegetic still life” (60) as a basic contradiction. That which is in the main diegetic, which narrates or ‘tells,’ such as Clarke’s novel and (arguably) Kubrick’s film, cannot also be primarily mimetic, imitative, or ‘showing.’ While for Conway “still life” means, simply, a static organism, the term has drastically different denotative freightings in arts, textual, and media studies. In a discipline-attentive sense, 2001’s paratext is indeed both “a third diegetic space” (59)—an accumulated narrative oscillating between each readerly or textual entity and the whole interpretive environment—and “an inter-diegetic entity” (59)—a material bridge between two texts with their own oscillatory beginnings and end points. But these “shimmering oscillations of still life” (69), compelling though their image be, are taken for granted as accurate descriptors of an inherently oxymoronic paratext when they are instead an artefact of Wenaus’s argumentation.

mirror ≠ loop

By tossing Paul D. Miller’s “rhythm science” into the theoretical mix, Wenaus expands on his brief comparison of ‘static oscillation’ to an “infinite spiral” in a “finite” space, specifically a spiral that “manifests as a mirror reflects itself in another mirror” (60). As Wenaus reports it, “rhythm science” is “a mirror held up to a culture . . . that has released itself from the constraints of the ground to drift through dataspace, continuously morphing its form in response

to diverse streams of information” (Miller 5). Wenaus takes this to signify a “mirror [come] to reflect itself so as to spiral, mutate, and drift away from the constraints of materiality” into “an abstract nowhere,” which in the case of 2001 is “the imagination of a reader” (60). And so, of Wenaus’s theoretical components, Miller’s seems the most apt, especially given Miller’s classification of contemporary cultural production as a movement “from version to version” based on “the logic [of] extension rather than . . . negation,” a mutative “changing same” (Miller 3-4) that might resonate with Wenaus’s “oscillations of still life” (69).

Indeed, on the level of metaphor, Wenaus’s reading of Miller reinforces Flusser and Bec’s notion of mutual mirroring between organism and environment—or, as I have argued, between text and interpretive environment. In equating rhythm science’s “mirror held up to culture” with a mirror held up to a mirror, however, Wenaus assumes the cultural processes of “drift” and “morphing” that Miller depicts are synonyms for ‘reflection.’ In Miller’s figuration, however, “[r]hythm science is a forensic investigation of sound as a vector . . . that goes from the physical to the informational and back again” (5). In other words, while rhythm science reflects culture to itself, making legible its self-production in progress, that cultural production is an autonomous loop between “the informational,” which might *in extremis* be considered immaterial, and “the physical,” which certainly cannot be. Neither Miller’s rhythm science nor its conception of culture, then, bear out the

radical, spiralling, purely abstract information or hermeneutics so foundational to Wenaus's "imaginary" third text.

While rhythm science does not describe cultural production in the fashion of Wenaus's third text, it does describe it in the fashion of Hofstadter's "Strange Loop"—or as Miller puts it, the process of "[digging] beneath what lies on the surface only to arrive where you started" (4). And it is in turning to the strange loop that Wenaus explicitly collapses all four theoretical models in his framework into the image of the infinitely fertile, immaterial third text:

Indeed, like Miller's mimesis representing mimesis . . . and Flusser's mirrors reflecting mirrors, strange loops shimmer in complex symmetries, oscillating and mutating, contributing to mathematics of chaos where the sum of collaboration seems vastly to exceed its constitutive parts. That is, strange loops are indeed the shimmering symmetries of Conway's 'still life.' (62)

Specifically, strange loops constitute the first of Wenaus's paradoxes, that temporal "aberration" in which his "imaginary" third text can exist only 'after' the two core texts but appears to inform them 'before' they are encountered: "this third work is at once deviant and loyal, autonomous and dependant . . . and is as much the mutating offspring of the original works as it is an instigating force causing mutations to occur to the memory of the reader of Clarke and the spectator of Kubrick" (61).

Here Wenaus comes to the cusp of identifying his third text as a variation on time travel's 'grandfather paradox,' a thought experiment in which a time traveller murders his virgin grandfather, thus preventing his own birth, time travel, and grand-patricide: Wenaus's time travelling third text (in what we might call the McFly variation) instead steps in as its own hermeneutic grandparent. Yet what makes a strange loop 'strange,' even as Miller describes it, is that the segmented arcs of its cycle are gradual, ordinary, and rational, featuring no such miraculous or material violation as time travel. As with Escher's *Waterfall* or, say, a Möbius strip, it is only as a whole that the loop appears uncanny to us; the trick manifests not because of the loop's radical "aberration" but *because of its seamlessness*. In his insistence on the experiential inversion of cause and effect—its reversal as if in a mirror image—Wenaus fails to distinguish between an experience of the whole loop *in parte* (as when a single reader re-encounters the same texts in a modified way) and experiences of the arc *in totum* (as when multiple readers' encounters with a text modify the interpretive environment). Both Wenaus's experience of *2001* and my experience of *The Last Starfighter*, I believe, demonstrate how a private instance of the former experience, through circulation as material paratext into the interpretive environment (read: through publication in *Word Hoard*), can become a public instance of the latter experience.

paradox ≠ ambivalence

I have so far discussed two of the three distinct paradoxes to which Wenaus refers: infinite mutation within finite space, and ‘posterior’ interpretation’s appearance as ‘prior’ interpretive grounds. It is Wenaus’s third paradox, though, that seems most fundamental to his particular reading of *2001*. In his view, the common “critical misunderstanding” that Clarke’s more expositional novel serves only to gloss Kubrick’s affective film “is rooted in the unwillingness of critics to treat the relationship between the works as a paradox. The two works are successful inasmuch as they are considered as two autonomous parts of the same work of art” (63). In his conclusion, he elaborates:

As one rereads the novel, one finds himself unexpectedly infusing the images and sounds of the film into the written text; and as one re-watches Kubrick’s film, one inevitably hears Clarke’s explanation. Paradoxically, the novel and the film somehow become a whirling singular work. Yet, the novel always unexpectedly loops back upon itself and we are reminded that it is itself a unique work—the same paradoxical process applies to the film. (69)

The paradox Wenaus delineates here, one ostensibly unique to *2001*, is that of a novel and a film that are both separate and conjoined in their meaning, both integral and fragmentary, both textual and intertextual. Yet considered in

the broadest sense, this perilous extra-textual dependency—differing from that of *2001*’s texts perhaps in degree but certainly not in kind—is the condition of *any* text within an interpretive environment. Without participating in the most basic forms of conjoinedness, fragmentariness, and intertextuality constitutive of cultures, media traditions, and languages, a text is not only uninterpretable but, in fact, unreadable. The only intelligible material is that which is largely recycled.

What the case of *2001* brings into particular focus, by shifting it into an unusual orientation, is the influence of *authority* within such recyclical interpretive environments: *2001*’s novel and film, “each, simultaneously, operating as source text and as adaptation” (Wenaus 61), flatten the usual vertical hierarchy of source text and derived texts. The story of *2001*’s production differs from the story of any other novel-to-film adaptation (or the now-endangered film-to-novel adaptation) only in terms of which text is assigned greater authority—which text, to borrow from graphic novel and sci-fi parlance, is “canon.” While the typical narrative is the film adaptation’s inferiority to the source novel, here we have a paratextual story that splits authority between film and novel. They are, quite simply, co-authored. It is this authorial ambivalence, not an ostensibly unprecedented intertextuality, that makes *2001* different from the typical “beginnings and ends, directionality, cycling and recycling, and linearity of adaptation” (62): neither novel nor film can be seen as a degraded facsimile, clumsily wrought knock-off,

or misguided translation, because the narrative of Clarke and Kubrick's simultaneous collaboration cross-pollinates each text with the other's authorial clout. Clarke's disavowal of any such narrative, his insistence that no "record" can capture the "the complicated truth" of the collaborative process (Wenaus 60), forms as a crucial part of the very "canon" it disavows. To similar effect, I might describe the view from Mount Ngauruhoe's volcanic peak as "indescribable," or myself as "speechless."

But if we should "[accept] that there are actually three works involved in this discussion" (Wenaus 61), we should also attend to the authority of all three: Wenaus's conviction in a certain narrative of *2001*'s production—his conviction, that is, in the *paratextual authority* of its assignments of mutual *textual authority*—sanctions his transposition of "Clarke's explanation" into Kubrick's film and Kubrick's "exhilaration" into Clarke's novel (68). A similar set of convictions might affect a reader encountering any two (or more) perspectives on a common narrative: two victims of the same violent act, two characters in the same novel, two camera angles in the same scene, two translations of the same poem, two adverbs in the same phrase. In each case, the flotsam and jetsam of paratext tell us a story about the relative authority of each text. And as I have implied through my conviction that Foster's *The Last Starfighter* is more "canon" than Castle's, we may be unaware of that story, in whole or in part, or we may refuse its authority. Perhaps, then, the most important contribution of Wenaus's essay to literary studies—even

as he would surely insist on *2001*'s radical exceptionality—is its suggestion that *any* intertextual relationship is far more complicated than a simple conception of adaptation, than mere linearity, recycling, textual effect.

readable ≠ rereadable

To rather facilely paraphrase Isaac Brock, I have argued that paratext "is the liquid that we're all dissolved in." I have proposed an understanding of interpretive environments as the grounds of interaction between readers and texts, comprised of cycled and recycled paratext. And I have suggested that Wenaus's particular experiences of *2001*, Clarke's novel and Kubrick's film, act as epilogue to the story of their collaborative and concurrent production—just as Wenaus's essay acts as a prologue to its readers' subsequent experiences of *2001*. What emerges as unrecyclable in Wenaus's essay and mine (and here I must speculate, presumptively, that my own reading experiences are definitive of readerly life in general) is the impression authority makes on readers. Traces of textual authority may be what marks the distinction between the rerun and the reboot, those familiar grooves in our grey matter that make it impossible for us to experience a familiar text anew even as we need it to define the freshness of its adaptation.

A reader is a palimpsest of its texts; this may be a rather unfashionable conclusion to draw, an émigré from the old country of reader-response criticism. But it offers an elegant alternative to Wenaus's Rube Goldberg machine, his

paradox-riddled explanation for the “otherwise simple reason why, once one has [both read] Clarke’s novel and watched Kubrick’s film, one cannot help but visualize Kubrick’s imagery when rereading Clarke’s version and, alternatively, one cannot help but fill in the explanatory absences with Clarke’s clarifications when re-watching Kubrick’s version” (63). Were I to read Foster’s *The Last Starfighter* again, it is not difficult to anticipate how that third reading

would differ; my experience of the film would act as the centre of my experience of the novel, even as my earliest reading of the novel would continue to nest inside my viewing of the film. To Wenaus I say, Forget the levers and treadmills and ghosts in the machine: if you want to crack an egg, here’s the edge of the pan.

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