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Research Paper 3

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Alchemy of Image

(*The Space-Time, A Team Supercluster*)

We live in an age of information—a socio-cultural climate that straddles the material and immaterial, our daily interactions taking place across physical and theoretical environments. The phrase "Information Age" itself endeavors to define an entire sphere of existence, production, interface and influence. Technology frames it. It proliferates across the arts and sciences, through economies and empires—and an ethereal, pervasive component, *information itself*, occupies the core, in place of steam and iron. Information is the philosophical spark of all matter and non-matter, all theory and concept, all communication and commodification.[1] The Information Age is the heart of Postmodernism, the platform of Post Postmodernism,[2] hinging technology, digital visual culture and interdisciplinary thinking. Within it, we have unprecedented access to data—all artistic styles, all points in history and geographic locations in a single click.[3] Space and time collapse in the face of this new, digitally-driven landscape, redefined by delivery and access,

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[1] Theoretical physicist John Archibald Wheeler manifestoed, "Information gives rise to 'every it—every particle, every field of force, event he spacetime continuum itself'…" (Wheeler qtd. in Gleick 10). Theorist James Gleick himself claims "information is what our world runs on: the blood and the fuel, the vital principle," where atoms are the basic units of matter, bits are the basic units of information, themselves describing the nature of the atom's existence (9-10). Biophysicist Werner Lowenstein even articulated the transformation of the term "information" itself: " The information circle becomes the unit of life… it connotes a cosmic principle of organization…" (Lowenstein qtd. in Gleick 9).
[2] Also dubbed "Pseudo-Modernism" and "Digimodernism" (Kirby).
[3] Theorist Alan Kirby identifies this kind of access as a fundamental paradigm shift, a rupture of existing cultural relationships: "Digimodernism identifies as the critical event in contemporary culture the profound and shattering encounter between computerization and the text. Its most recognizable form is a new kind of digitized textuality— onward, haphazard and evanescent—that disrupts traditional ideas about authorship and reading, and is found on Web 2.0, a range of applications..." I would argue that it explodes the broader concept of "text" itself, with things like the re-orientation of the idea of the original (Jarvis) and the strange collapse of all eras of information and all geographic locations into a binary-based, digitized space-time environment (or, deep digital space).

shaped and re-oriented by the "Information Age" itself. As we encounter the data cascade, "each

of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted

from the media flow… transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday

lives" (Jenkins 3). This pronounced hypertextuality[4] of information allows we contemporary

artists to mix style, medium and influence on multiple levels, developing the privatized, remixed

language Frederic Jameson feared[5] out of a kind of celestial jukebox, itself interconnected to the

mythology of others. Making use of this connectivity, information and new media have become

vital to my visual art production. Several recent projects, like *The Cascade,* investigate this

hypertextuality of time, space and matter, informed by information flow, across various

mediums. The result is an alchemy of image that addresses the time collapse, integrating micro

and macro[6] layers that echo multifarious networks and the constructed personal mythology[7] we

generate in our daily lives.

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[4] "Hypertext" refers to the plastic referentiality of text (and information) made possible by electronic devices. There is a sense of immediacy and interconnectivity within non-linear space. Branching structures resemble trees, galaxy filaments or network superstructures. "Hypertextuality" allows one to "transcend the linearity of the written text by building an endless series of imagined connections" (Riffaterre qtd. on "The Torque"). "Hypertext" is also used to describe not only "imagined connections," but *literal*, web-like relationships that can be accessed from any point.

[5] According to Jameson, pastiche is used in Postmodernism due to the erosion of the idea of a linguistic or cultural norm as a result of increased language privatization (130). Jameson was concerned about growing linguistic bubbles that would generate parallel, but separate, paths of interaction. With pluralism, the Modernist idea of a linguistic, cultural pinnacle goes right out the window. The "celestial jukebox" refers to a global bank of information and material that can be used and remixed cross-culturally and cross-technologically (Wasow). Contemporary artists can work across mediums, across the limitations of style, choosing the right components and context for projects in "remix" fashion. Style becomes a tool, not an end-game in itself, and importance is placed on context, arrangement and association (Jarvis) (Binkley 237-238). As such, no style, no medium is off-limits.

[6] Edward Tufte describes macro and micro readings in *Envisioning Information*. He uses a street view map of New York to illustrate the viewer-activated phenomena of generating "individual stories about the data" when viewing visual information (Tufte 37). Someone who lives in the city would have extended micro readings of the street view map, shops visited, favorite lunch spots, perhaps even identifying life-event locations like the place where they celebrated graduation, or suffered a break-up. The map contains layers of theoretical information applied by the viewer, which varies dramatically between individuals. A tourist who visited the same locations might also have micro readings of a macro map, as would someone familiar with the setting via movies or television. Someone who had never been there and knew nothing of the setting would have a broader macro understanding of the map as a piece of data, providing insight into a distant series of structures. This kind of extended context allows for what Tufte calls "storied detail," and layered reactions connected to the "relationship between the measurements of its space and the events of its past" (38).

The 20th century saw tremendous interdisciplinary evolution (Gleick 9, 242-243).[8] Theorist James Gleick (and physicist Fritjof Capra) argue that our awareness of information itself led to many 20th and 21st century breakthroughs, changing our understanding of everything from telephony to the network relationships traceable from star systems to DNA (Gleick 8-9) (Capra 35). Information was paradoxically understood as a pulse freed from semantics, as in Information Theory, and as heavily-laden language. Both physical and ethereal, it describes the transmission, replication and even biological order of all things. The study of information even made digital technology possible. In my course of research, I discovered that analyzing the information cascade, in all its manifest forms,[9] is another way of accessing the interconnectivity (and generative nature) found in Eastern philosophy and physics that I worked with in the past.[10] It also relates to the network of matter, social systems and data flow found in Fritjof Capra's writings, equally important to my visual considerations.

While researching source material for previous work, I became fascinated by the process of digital research itself. I would sketch the Vazquez Rocks[11] from memory, then Google additional photos. What resulted was not a static spill, but a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure style

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[7] Eli Pariser also refers to the "unique universe of information for each of us" (9), as we navigate and extrapolate information and experience from the filtered digital experience.

[8] Notably diverse fields like physics, mathematics, biology, electronics, telephony, code-breaking, linguistics and even psychology expanded and overlapped, corresponding to the rise of a new age—the rapid increase of movable data and technology (Capra 5).

[9] My research included information theory, networking, digital culture, astrophysics, the internet, convergence culture, video games, spectacle and new media, which builds naturally on my previous research, allowing me to investigate 21st century concerns more directly than previous work.

[10] The body of work I completed in 2012 investigated the nature of emergence—matter and non-matter, the point at which being emerges from non-being. I explored the relationship between physics and Taoism, finding that the seemingly different language of philosophy and mathematics were intertwined, often describing identical conditions. Layering elements mimicked strata unearthed in archaeological digs and its resulting reveal of relative truth. Pieces were two-dimensional, on paper, and combined printmaking with mixed media, emphasizing the interdisciplinary. Newer work is pushing the mixed media even farther and incorporating some of what Eli Pariser called "transmedia," expanding my field into web-based, time-based and digital overlap.

[11] The Vazquez Rocks are a rock formation located in Agua Dulce, California (Mojave Desert), north of Los Angeles. They are part of a 745 acre county park, minutes away from Santa Clarita and Palmdale. Though the formations are millions of years old, they're best known today for guest appearances in countless films, television and commercial productions (Digital-Desert).

hypertext journey. It led from vacation shots at "Gorn Rock" to maps, street views, paintings,

postcards, weather reports, TV stills and film caps, all from various eras, with varied intent, some

of which referred to the pre-existence of other images in an endless feedback loop.[12] The search

results are a hypertext "cloud" of concepts related, sometimes indirectly or tenuously, to the

Vazquez Rocks. In this instance, snapshots taken in the 1950s occupy the same digital space as

recent cell phone caps or Vine videos. The cascade of images effectively reduces the Vazquez

Rocks to a series of suggestive, webbed data streams that a viewer can explore in a non-linear,

metanarrative fashion.[13] It forms a virtual relationship between time, spatial location, regional

influence and an alchemy of virtual geography. Add the storied detail of our own micro readings

to the mix and this new kind of relativity allows time to lose linearity in deep digital space.[14] If

you were to draw a map of the related links and remixes, the web-like clusters would uncannily

resemble the very nature of our universe's biggest galaxy networks: superclusters (Figure 1), as

well as models of internet connectivity (Figure 2) in data flow and hardware.

I pursued the levels of micro and macro information present in this "celestial jukebox" of

data and media, and the fascinating, philosophically endless spiral of connections between each

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[12] Of interest to the feedback loop of referentiality were shots of people reenacting fictional narratives, which occupied the same digital space as the "real" screen caps of the original Hollywood narratives. The intertextual reference of characters imitating characters at the site was especially prolific for Hollywood backlot sites like the Vazquez Rocks. For example, the cast of *The Big Bang Theory* dressed like *Star Trek The Next Generation* characters, stranded at the Vazquez Rocks—where the *Next Generation* episode they refer to via costume was itself originally a reference to the infamous Kirk vs. Gorn battle in the *Star Trek* episode, "Arena," itself a pastiche of older science fiction shorts recorded at the Vazquez Rocks. Choosing any side topic, such as the Kirk vs. Gorn fight itself, yields another spiral of fractured, referential (yet networked) results—everything from fan art and fan-reenactment to screen caps and contemporary parody.

[13] The de-centering of the traditional narrative is a primary component of Postmodernism, Post Postmodernism and digital visual culture (Darley 56). The "meta" progression intensifies in digital culture, where web pages, image searches and even web sites can be viewed in any order, accessed from varied sources and dispersed across unrelated platforms (Flickr photos curated on Pinterest, then shared on Twitter via Pinterest). The "proper" viewing order gets turned on its head and new, macro and micro, contextualization occurs. The feedback aspect of the image loop is also vital, as it indicates a recursive, almost organismic system.

[14] A Google search (or Picasa database) might span all times, eras, moments and progressions, allowing us to hop hypertextually (or intertextually) between moments, condensing them into the same instance of experience.

source. An abundance of information lead to the possibilities of hypertext, new ways of finding

nd expressing patterns, and new methods of art production. Enter Mr. T and *The Cascade*.

If you've ever caught *The A-Team, Knight Rider, MASH, MacGyver, The Dukes of*

Hazzard or *Star Trek*, you've seen it: the color palette, the geographical relationships, the

creosote bushes, Joshua trees, tilting rocks. You've seen the Mojave Desert of the 1960s –

1980s.[15] The arid outlay of folded rock may even be familiar—from personal visits or the

whirling, hypertext pool of Hollywood reference. Offset by urban density, the dry turn-outs and

canyon highways are the geographic language of the region. Areas like the Vazquez Rocks have

become a rhythmic, cultural motif, acting as referents to television, fictional narratives and life

events, while also suggesting an unreal, imagined geographic space, a cultural recognition of

their use. The rocks (and the Mojave) inhabit the very real, the imagined and the transient,

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[15] My formative years were spent in the Antelope Valley (Mojave Desert, CA), which Frank Zappa referred to as a land with its own lore. Just north of Los Angeles, the "AV" and its related environs (Santa Clarita, Soledad Canyon, Agua Dulce, etc.) saw explosive growth from the mid-70s, through the early 90s. The expansion was partly related to aerospace, but largely a result of increasing costs of living in the LA basin. Hundreds of thousands of people moved to the area over the course of 25 years, treating the rocky expanse as a "suburb" of the valley, entering the quirky land of abandoned gas stations and burned out cars with urban interests. Its close proximity to Hollywood invited the production of movies and TV even before the boom. It was cheap to film there, easy to get to and had pockets of vast open space peppered with cities. The broader Mojave Desert became Hollywood's backlot. As production moved out of the sound stage, sequences were often shot on-site in areas whose very geological, sociological and ecological makeup had affected my perceptions, guided my aesthetics. In some ways, the backgrounds of popular TV froze a contextual moment for me, capturing the essence of environment within an actual time-sensitive narrative rooted in geography and the progression of time.

As a child completely immersed in popular television culture (the TV was rarely off), the tales I internalized were filmed in areas I frequented. The adventures were built of familiar flora and fauna, recognizable roads, understandable weather. It was a visual vocabulary I inherently understood, composed of a unique kind of relational linguistics. I intuitively understood that these stories involved my own personal geography, my own generation of space and place–filtered through the lens of popular culture as a kind of remix. This is the micro reading. The trick is to make work that can use the micro, while offering the newly inverted author/viewer relationship to allow the viewer to bring their own micros to the macro in an endless experience.

iconographic of a collapsing space between personal history, geologic reality and cultural

production. Storied details can overlay the real and the enacted as a kind of remix—and our

entire experience is formed, like matter itself, from the possibilities of the void and the special

combination (and recombination) of generative elements.

Form itself is malleable, shifting. Artist Cai Guo Qiang says of his work (which

addresses an imagined Mexico, constructed of myth and memory): matter and consciousness are

always in a state of flux (11)—just as information. This relationship speaks to the integration of

public and private, digital and analog, cultural and personal.[16] Someone watching *Star Trek*, for

example, might have visual familiarity with the fictional "Arena" episode, may have also been

on picnics at the Vazquez Rocks and may have a blended understanding of the popular and

personal, the social and representational aspects, its original cast and crew, its place in American

history, its reception and impact on the digital and physical world. These fractured overlays

behave like artifacts, or layers, in visual art, stemming from the cascade of information that

inhabits multiple levels of construction. Physical space and linear time become collapsed and

reframed as they rush through data streams, allowing "digital media [to] transform physical form

into conceptual structure" (Binkley 109).

The Cascade freezes a trace of this physicality in an instant. Landscape[17] is once removed

from its location (and time) by the original filming and again removed by the act of capturing a

temporary instance. The project makes use of three 1980s TV shows I had multi-level responses

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[16] I do not use the term "universal," here as the unique personal mythology of each individual prevents a cohesive, "universal" response to stimuli. There may be broad tendencies, especially when the viewers of a work are culturally tied, but I prefer to think of macro readings as the broad, camera-pulled-back encounters, rather than universality. Edward Tufte believes "the space-time grid has a natural universality with nearly boundless subtleties and extensions" (110), but this is a descriptor of the nature of physics, which is not usually a victim of subjectivity.

[17] I would venture to use the term "landscape" beyond the restriction of sheer physical geography. The landscape, as in the digital landscape, can contain many levels and associations, internal and external relationships, tied to a loaded set of media—exposed in the instant of consideration.

to: *The A Team, Knight Rider,* and *MacGyver.*[18] The transitory landscape found in these rapid

videos elude focus, as action tends to preclude wide, sweeping vistas. Yet, landscape is integral

to these television adventures.

Moments are snapped in real time with a cell phone, during viewing. Characters and

commerciality are de-emphasized in favor of transitional spaces (time depicted in the narrative)

and regional collisions (shifting camera views). I then use traditional media to investigate each of

the screen captures—exploring surface and the representation of space and time on a 2D plane.

The next phase remixes the two, digitally layering the original screen caps with new caps and

drawings. Compositions are then posted in a virtual gallery, allowing the viewer to sift through

images in a linear or non-linear fashion, with the gallery format allowing connective links to

behave as a hypertext supercluster.[19]

Pieces completed in response to recent research tie into networks like galaxy

superclusters and their uncanny echo of internet clusters, as well as the transient, collapsed space

of digital data made possible by hypertextuality (and information theory). Identifying

relationships between information, new media, philosophy, and physics opened new ways to

manipulate pattern,[20] time, and surface across mediums and encouraged me to take a transmedia

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[18] Though potentially nostalgic, my intent is not an investigation of sentimentality, but of time and context (Figure 3). Since the project is ongoing, it will eventually expand to include 1960s and 1970s and other 1980s programs, of relation to the first group.

[19] Likewise, another recent series, *Superclusters,* builds on my cornerstone interest in the development of matter from non-matter. Some of my familiar archaeologically-infused rock shapes tumble in a state of ambiguous gravity. Working through these spinning, connective ingredients, I've blended glyphs and language, the linear strings of maps and filaments and even pictographic suggestions. I'm interested in the convergence of raw material and the information that defines their construction--an attempt to reach an alchemy of image through mixed media and surface play, applying some digital techniques to the mix. While still working in two dimensions, I attempted to employ Tufte's methods of "escaping Flatland" by emphasizing layers (13-14). By researching digital visual culture, info theory, convergence culture, remix and appropriation, systems thinking and networking, I have taken the "snow globe" of visual elements from previous work and shaken them vigorously, allowing them to expand and shift with digital hypertext in mind (and applied to works on paper).

[20] There are no parts, only patterns. Fritjof Capra addresses a shift in our understanding of the whole-parts relationship by asserting, "ultimately—as quantum physics showed so dramatically—there are no parts at all. What

approach, as in T*he Cascade*, freeing the work from reliance upon traditional materials and

allowing it to engage divergent sources. This alchemy of image, a reorientation of time and space

and an expression of the connective tissue between philosophy, physics and digital DNA

positions my new work in the 21st century. Time is re-oriented in deep digital space and the

intersection of time, space, matter, and information opens the door for future evolutions.

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we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships" (36-37). Interdisciplinary breakthroughs showed that the basest form of matter is not a tiny object (a quark or atom) at all—but wave-like patterns.
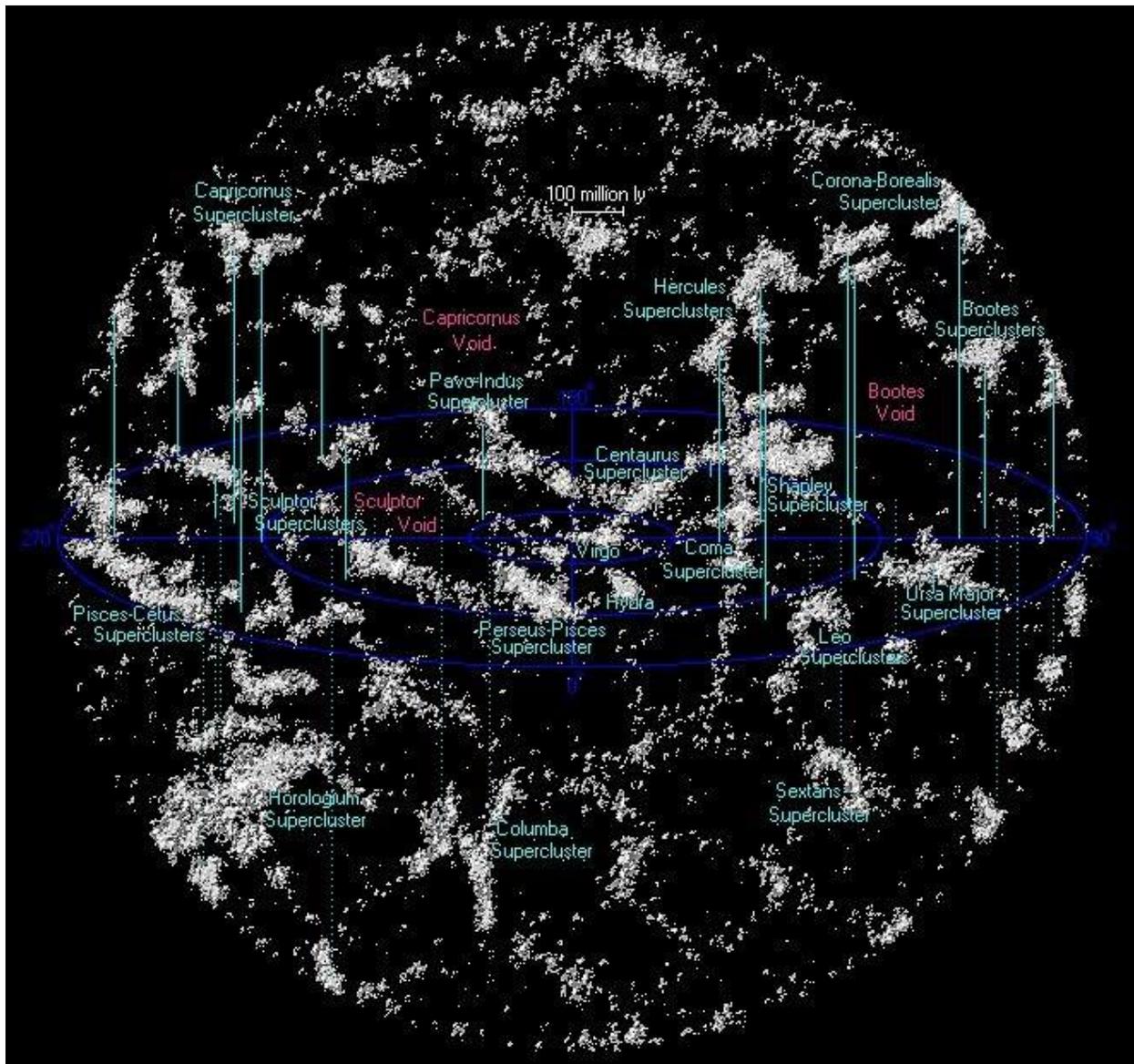
Figure 1. The universe within a billion light years of Earth, showing local superclusters of galaxies - approximately 63 million galaxies shown. The superclusters are clusters of thousands of networked, clustered galaxies, themselves forming clusters that form a larger networked system. Image Source: Richard Powell via *Gizmag*.

Figure 2. Partial map of the Internet based on the January 15, 2005 data, from a series of relay

tests. The map of internet connectivity and data flow would change from instant to instant, but

always resembles the micro and macro clusters of networks found in the universe. Image Source:

Opte.org via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3. A single, phase III entry from *The Cascade,* blending technique and transparent layers in an effort to capture the passage of time, various physical locations and the transformation of energy into movement.

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