



Fig. 1. Screen frames from Art Jones' CDROM *Culture Versus the Martians* (1998).

Riddles of the Interface: Hieroglyphic Consciousness and New Experimental Multimedia

by Joe Milutis

In Reginald Woolery's CDROM *World Wide Web/Million Man March* (1997), one clicks on a link labeled "spirit" and enters into a mystery. The elusive message—one might call it a video cartouche—is a hieroglyphic representation of the controversial Nation of Islam leader, Louis Farrakhan. Shot through with Dada inspiration, this mediagenic name is broken down into its "elemental" mediagenic components: "farrah + khan=!?!". Here, Woolery regales us with clips of "Charlie's Angels" and *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* and everybody's in "let's kick some ass" mode. Calls for "full impulse power" given by Captain Kirk are interlaced with calls to "full power" in the speeches of Farrakhan. There are some more dreamy segments of the loop ("We are now entering the Motara nebula") that remind one of the cosmic nature of the hieroglyph and the forms of thought it encourages.

On the one hand, this hieroglyph-loop, in the spirit of hypertextual thought, creates complex linkages: "Star Trek" (the cultural equivalent of utopia for technocracy), "Charlie's Angels" (the cultural equivalent of blaxploitation for feminism), Khan (the outsider to the utopia), and black men (arguably the Khan of certain feminisms, but most certainly the "real" of Woolery's piece) compose

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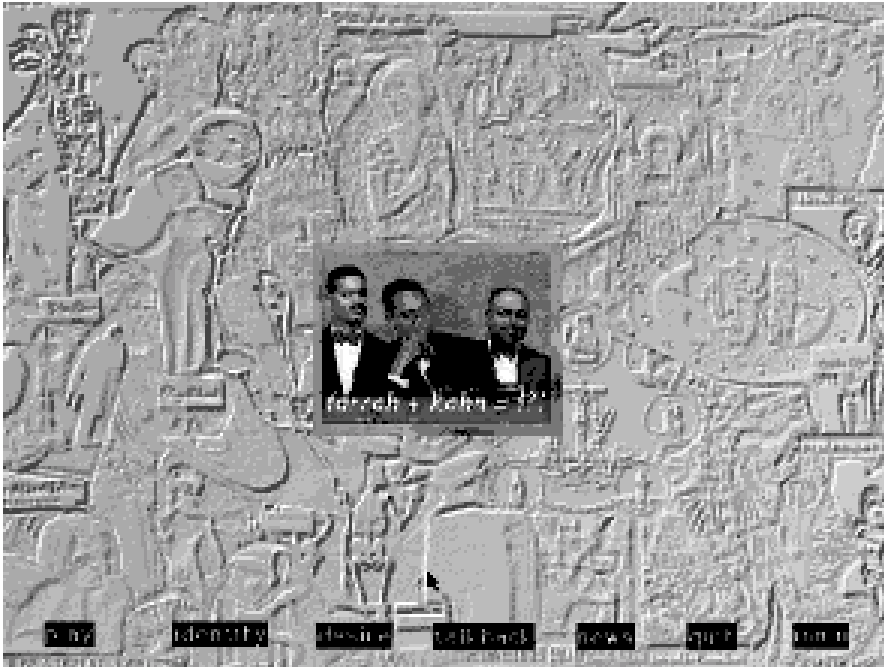


Fig. 2. “farrah + kahn = !?!” fragments into...

the Ubu-like limbs of a cybernetic Farrakhan body. The perception engendered by hieroglyphic consciousness, moreover, brings the viewer to some place not immediately identifiable, beyond the merely parodic; it is as if the viewer is carried along a hidden impulse, past what is at one moment the Farrakhan sensorium and another the Farrakhan galaxy towards an idea that has not yet evolved. As thought-objects in a force field of uncertain allegiances between knowledge, sense, and time, the montage elements and related system of links within *World Wide Web/Million Man March* become place-holders for a future configuration that the unified idea of Farrakhan cannot contain. Farrakhan fragments into “farrah + kahn” which in turn fragments into a million men which in turn fragments into everybody behind a screen, the “communications fabric of the country,” the fabric of the universe. For Woolery, the question seems to be “who’s universe?” because even in that ultimate unificatory substance of all things, there is a potential conflict between the technognostic legacy of Silicon Valley and a black noosphere.



Fig. 3. ...“farran + kahn = !?!” Screen frames from *World Wide Web/Million Man March*, Reginald Woolery (1997).

Ultimately, one might understand experimental CDROMs and the future of multimedia art by returning to basic modernist insights on the nature of hieroglyphic or ideogrammatic representation—forms of representation that have always been tied to “higher” cosmic communiqués. From Eisenstein to Sun Ra, the hieroglyph has a strange twentieth-century history. It is a history that, by the way, has been categorized as Orientalist, even as it is an inspiration for re-orienting the excesses or banalities of metropole language practices. Eisenstein saw some Japanese films, Artaud went to the World’s Fair, Sun Ra reconnoitered the heavens while American satellites exploded on launch pads. What they all came back with were ancient insights into the problem of representation. Artaud, upon seeing the “animated hieroglyphs” of the Balinese theater, raved, “these spiritual signs have a precise meaning which strikes us only intuitively but with enough violence to make useless any translation into logical discursive language. ... It is certain that this aspect of pure theater... transforms the mind’s conceptions into events perceptible through the labyrinths and fibrous interlacings of matter.”¹ The hieroglyph, as a language which still

maintains a visual, intuitive association with the matter for which it stands, brings one back to the body as spiritual sign and away from the chaos of signs in the vacuum of simulation. Art Jones in his CDROM *Culture Versus the Martians* (1998) gives a hip-hop spin on this hieroglyphic desire:

Whut I doo with words is make them xplode sodat the nunverball ape-ears in the verbell. That is to say that I make the words funktion in such away that at a certain moment they know longer blong to discourse, to what regulates thiscourse —hence the homonahomonyms, the fragdented words, the propa names that do not esscienceially belong to language... N if I luv words it is all so bcuz of there a billy-tee to xcape theer proper for, weather they interest me as visible tings, lettuce representing the spaceial visibility of the word, or as sum thing muse-sickal or ordibell.

What Derrida calls the “purloined body” materializes in the discourse,² “the nunverbal ape-ears in the verbell,” echoing the sudden, brief and uncapturable glimpses of Jones that flash behind volume 2’s interface map. It is not necessarily any old-time body that is sought after. After all, Artaud’s “animated hieroglyphs” conjure up the heady combinations of cyborg and primitive imagery that are the domain of Afrofuturism: “these angular and abruptly abandoned attitudes, these syncopated modulations formed at the back of the throat, these musical phrases that break off short, these flights of elytra, these rustlings of branches, these sounds of hollow drums, these robot squeakings, these dances of animated manikins...”³ The animated hieroglyph “xplodes” the world of signs and promises “xcapes” to other planes of data. X marks the spot where vision, intuition, sound, and cosmic consciousness converge.

The ultimate paradox is that the hieroglyph, in its originary, non-cyborgian form, is radically analogue (because it is a language based in visual similarity not code) and here it is popping up in the digital avant-garde. But it has already manifested itself in the digital mainstream. For example, it would seem a very far cry from Art Jones’s *Culture Versus the Martians* to Brenda Laurel’s *Computers and Theater*, with its by-now canonical call for more direct forms of human-computer activity. Yet the hieroglyph—a pictorial representation of the thing itself—has always been about bringing back language to the body, sound, and speech and thus could become a model for virtuality (with Bill Gates as Akenaton?). The hieroglyph, half-way between the materiality of things and the disembodied rationality of ideas, is

the location of a modulation between the two. To conceive of the computer as a medium, both for art and for desktop applications of the most everyday variety, has entailed this embrace of hieroglyphic forms of communication—from Ivan Sutherland’s *Sketchpad* (1963)⁴ to today’s profusion of multimedia devices—at the expense of the cryptographic challenges of the command line interface.

Experimental multimedia’s “labyrinths and... interlacings of matter” invite a decoding of hidden histories of the hieroglyph (the paradoxical cryptograph of the hieroglyph), and a critique of the emerging international language of “user friendly.” If the objects of this avant-garde are not all immediately what we expected, it is because they document something important about the artist and his/her uncertain relation to the new medium. As a quixotic antidote to the non-referentiality of language, the connections arranged before us bring us back to the mind and body of the person who programmed the connections, not to any “freedom” of the user. In the posthumous CDROMs of Christine Tumblyn, the intellectual identity of the creator is what we perceive through the network of links; decades of her writing, including journals she wrote from childhood on, are archived. Woolery’s use of the love poetry of Essex Hemphill within a web of associations among black nationalism, paranoia, and cybercultural dreams destabilizes disembodied forms of community and identity in favor of a reflection on sexual identity and community (for Woolery, this link to Hemphill’s work encourages the perception of Farrakhan as a black queen):

Our inhibitions
force us to be equal.
We swallow hard
black love potions
from a golden glass.
New language beckons us.
Its dialect present
Intimate.⁵

This more erotic form of black separatism replaces a stable understanding of Farrakhan’s Islam; Woolery archives the possibilities of self within the conflicting promises of self-transformation through love of and/or identification with other black men. As an archive of the self, these CDROMs display

force fields of conflicting, ambiguous, and sometimes inadequate roles, and explore the forgotten powers of those elements of identity that are edited out of traditional modes of self-representation.

Jones's linkages, like Woolery's, are a form of Dadaistic montage that somehow, elusively, bring us back to the body of the creator within a net of intellectuality that is neither reducible to the user's clear understanding nor to the artist's linear presentation. In *Culture Versus The Martians*, for example, the mythos of Basquiat is fused with the iconography of Sesame Street, giving us a Samo-Elmo assemblage ("with Julian Schnable as 'The Count'"—a further extension of the pun into media-referential orbit, referring not only to the Count in Sesame Street but also to Garry Oldman's roles as Schnable in Schnable's *Basquiat* and as Count Dracula in Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*). Like his splicing of smurfs with techno-anarchism, and his transformation of Barney into a malt-liquor drinking "Larry the Cop-Killing Dinosaur," the combinations are funny and critical. More importantly, though, the use of iconography from childhood also sets up a series of intellectual, unvisualizable relations between the myth of the artist as a young man, and the reality of inadequate models available for the "outsider artist."

Furthermore, by utilizing pop culture as a hieroglyphic iconography for a profounder reality, Jones redirects the medium's power as a learning device to that which cannot be learned. Whether that unlearnable substance is street knowledge, life, or some more rarefied unthinkable thing is uncertain, but the first image one sees in *Culture Versus The Martians* is one of a Buddha, Band-Aids, and some cash. His syncretisms—displacing the registers of hierophanic and secular, hip-hop and mainstream iconography and encouraging monstrous combinations of incommensurable cultural objects—create a form of heresy. Mainstream interface design's icon is much more palatable, seemingly devoid of ideology, even as it covertly announces a specious global understanding through a return to virtuality. Shawn James Rosenheim, in *The Cryptographic Imagination* explains the anxieties that engender this need for the hieroglyphic:

...the overwhelming amount of information constitutes an assault on human identity. This spread of digital communications has produced a corresponding desire to "reexperientialize" information—which means, among other things, to render it visible, bounded, hieroglyphic. For Lanier and Gibson, one response is to reconvert complex forms of information back into perceptual entities...⁶



Fig. 4. Screen frame from Art Jones's CDROM *Culture Versus the Martians*, (1998).

The international language of user-friendly creates, in a sort of media-induced Y2K panic, bounded language and identity “for the next century.” The purpose, however, of these more experimental forms of hieroglyphic communication is to continue the assault on human identity.

In place of clear transmission and understanding, these artists engage in heresies—a term that writer Peter Lamborn Wilson defines as “the means for transfer of ideas and art-forms from one culture to another.”⁷ It is only through these forms of misappropriation that a kind of hallucinatory drift powered by love and knowledge can be experienced. One of these “heresies” according to Wilson, is the Afrocentric appropriation of the hieroglyph—a nodal point of sacred, poetic, and intellectual drift between ancient Egypt and American culture. Unfortunately, in Wilson’s account, the spiritual purity of totalitarian forms of Islamic community blocks off the creative drift that inaugurated black nationalism—the productive inauthenticity and culture jamming at its roots. But for the Afro-

futurist avant-garde, the drift continues; not halting on any one identity, coursing through the data of different media and styles, all the while pointing to some source of African-American experience that might very well be cosmic (or perhaps forever deconstructed), they continue the projects of artists and writers like Sun Ra, Samuel Delany, and Octavia Butler. The cosmogenetic connectivity of the Internet and the potentially totalitarian configurations of white technoculture come up against the Mothership Connection—the science-fictional “Internet of black culture” that John Akomfra, in his film *The Last Angel of History* depicts as emerging from the music of Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Lee “Scratch” Perry—artists who understood the blues as a “black secret technology.” In this “Internet of black culture,” the hieroglyph may be a form of Afrocentric kitsch, or it may be the origin and future of this black secret technology, an interplanetary symbol of communications between an advanced but alienated race and their superintelligent, extraterrestrial foreparents.

What is certain is that the hieroglyph is a transitional (or even a liminal) form of communication, much like the (now ostensibly obsolete) CDROM is a transitional medium. And as transitional forms, they both have a lot to tell us about where we are coming from and where we are going, even though we are quick to consign even the most recent artifact of data manipulation immediately to the dustbin of history. What, I may ask in conclusion, is a “dustbin”? Think, if you will, of the hieroglyphic trash can of the Macintosh interface. How is it that we identify with this trash can, when our experience of the “trash can” can range from the wheeled-Tupperware that serve as receptacles for the minor-excreta of catalog culture to hermetically-sealed drums suitable for nuclear waste, biohazard material, or dead bodies? To extend Jones’s “Street” imagery, Oscar the Grouch is so charmingly bitter because his galvanized and fluted can is a veritable Victorian mansion in comparison to the inner-city dumpster. From dustbin to dumpster there is a range of forms that the “trash” icon can take, as there are also a variety of histories that can be salvaged from the detritus of “the storm we call progress.”⁸ We have all by now had the inevitable experience of culture schlock in the face of well-touted multimedia art. The goal, for experimental electronic artists, should be not to elegantly repurpose that which already has cultural currency (even though that may well be a fine means to a loftier end) but to create what Artaud calls “spiritualized gold”⁹ out of the lost or broken, the forgotten and devalued,—the forms that are somehow always on the outside of time.

Films and CDROMS Cited:

Akomfra, John. *The Last Angle of History*. 1996. Distributed by First Run/Icarus.
Jones, Art. *Culture Versus the Martians*. CDROM. 1998. Distributed by Video Data Bank.
Christine Tamblyn. *Mistaken Identities*. CDROM. 1995. Distributed by Video Data Bank.
Reginald Woolery. *World Wide Web/Million Man March*. CDROM. 1997. Distributed by Video Data Bank.

Notes

1. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 54 & 62.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 240.
3. Artaud, 54.
4. Ivan Sutherland's *Sketchpad*—a graphical interface program—pioneered the direct, physical encounter with the computer screen that would eventually transform lines of code into Brenda Laurel's vision of virtual Brechtian theater. See Laurel, *Computers as Theater* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 9.
5. Essex Hemphill, "Between Pathos and Seduction" in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (Plume Penguin Books, 1992), 164. Quoted in Reginald Woolery, *World Wide Web/Million-Man March*. CDROM. 1997.
6. Shawn James Rosenheim, *The Cryptographic Imagination: Secret Writing from Edgar Poe to the Internet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), 108.
7. Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy* (New York: Autonomedia, 1988), 13. See also Wilson, *Sacred Drift: Essays on the Margins of Islam* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1993), 14-50 for his discussion of Prophet Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple and the postmodern roots of the Nation of Islam.
8. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 258. For a multimedia salvage of trashed technologies see Zoe Beloff's Philosophical Toy World (www.turbulence.org/Works/illusions/index.html), where lost or impossible cinemas are revived with Quick Time VR and Shockwave. In the text of this project, Beloff writes: "I'd like to recall that holding something up for dead is a philosophical artifice. Paul Valery felt it indispensable in order to rethink a phenomenon without entering the sequential labyrinth of 'that most dangerous of poisons secreted by our mental alchemy: history.'"
9. Artaud, 52.