

## Affordance and Emergence: Magazine as New Media

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The media theorist Friedrich Kittler, to whom many of my own ideas about magazines are indebted, argues in his study of film, typewriters, phonographs, and the other new media of the early twentieth century that the period matters because “it ushered in” the “technologizing of information.” The writers and artists we now call modernists responded to this in aesthetically innovative ways ranging from the invention of the unconscious to experiments with stream-of-consciousness writing. Kittler, however, does not include magazines among these new media forms, in part, I suspect, because they masquerade so successfully as books. Following Ann Ardis, however, I want to defamiliarize modern magazines by thinking about them as new media technologies. To do so, I will draw briefly on two key terms from information theory and software design: affordance and emergence.

The first concept, “affordance,” describes simply the “action possibilities” in an object: the physical, material, and conceptual properties that both make possible and limit what an agent can do with it. In the software world, such a concept is easy to understand. I can click on the File menu inside a word processing program, for example, and be afforded several actions like saving or printing a document. My choices, however, are fairly limited since I cannot use the options here say to translate my document into French or to transcribe directly my thoughts onto the page. The affordances of magazines, however, are more difficult to determine, particularly since they vary across time and even between periodicals.<sup>1</sup> We can, nevertheless, image some very basic “action possibilities” unique to these objects that might include, but are not limited to options like these:

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<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true is we narrow this list of possibilities to what Donald Norman in *The Design of Everyday Things* calls “those most readily perceived by an actor.”

- Reading the periodical from beginning to end, one page after another.
- Skimming the magazine by reading selective passages and looking at occasional images. This process can proceed in a number of ways: from front to back, from back to front, or more randomly.
- Using the table to contents to identify articles of interest then reading them in an unconstrained order, in the process even attributing connections and patterns to the work of the editor or merely to chance.
- Within individual articles, headers, sub-heads, and photo-captions allow a user to navigate to sections of interest, reading them in detail while skimming or ignoring others.
- One might also recognize, construct, or imagine links to other texts that lie outside the object itself: an affordance similar to a hyperlink that invites the reader to construct connections between this and other issues of the magazine.

When we compare these options to those made available by a codex book, it becomes obvious that the magazine has a much greater degree of affordance. Books, after all, afford agents very few possibilities for action beyond reading the text in a linear, serial order. Some kinds of skimming are also made available, by the addition of an index, for example, or the use of chapter titles. In general, however, the codex book is a highly constrained media form while the magazine affords a great many more possibilities for agents.

This difference, I want to argue, is not just one of degree but of kind and it is precisely this considerably expanded affordance that makes the magazine itself a fundamentally new media form. In just the same way that say the phonograph, the film, or early hypertext afforded new kinds of agentive possibilities, so too did the modern magazines. Indeed, we might best understand magazines not as derivatives of the book at all but as a distinctive array of radically new software designs that operate on the hardware of paper and ink. And this new software initiated key elements of the intermedial aesthetic experiments in form, genre, and character we somewhat haplessly call “modernism.”

The second concept I’d like to develop from new media studies for this hastily sketched theory of the magazine is “emergence,” a term drawn from systems theory that

has lately been pressed into the service of literary criticism. N. Katherine Hayles concisely defines this idea in *My Mother Was a Computer*, writing that it “is any behavior or property that cannot be found in either a system’s individual components or their additive properties, but that arises, often unpredictably, from the *interaction* of a system’s components.”<sup>2</sup> I hope this sounds as tantalizing to you as it does to me since it offers a very useful way to conceptualize magazines as something more than the mere additive sum of their parts. Understanding them as complex systems capable of producing meaning through the unplanned and even unexpected interaction of their components helps us free them from the dominant metaphors of the book. Put another way, the wide affordances of the magazine produce the conditions for emergence—for the creation of interconnected networks of meaning that are not only difficult to map or anticipate, but that elude stabilizing concepts like author, intention, and even textuality.

Treating a magazine as a system, of course, raises some immediate challenges since it is not entirely clear what constitutes the components of the system and thus how they might interact. Should we treat the article as the basic unit of analysis? If so, then what about advertisements, illustrations, editorial commentaries, and tables of contents? These questions are further complicated by the fact that the article depends for its coherence on a particular conception of authorship and intention that underwrites its status as a self-consistent component. Magazines, however, are frequently populated by items that are anonymous, initialed, written under a pseudonym, unsigned, sometimes pirated, or sometimes just dropped onto a page. The affordance for authorship too, in other words, is considerably wider than in books and expanded even further by direct editorial intervention (such as Pound cutting out parts of *Ulysses* he found objectionable) as well as indirect editorial actions that range from the design and placement of illustrations to the introduction of meta-commentary in the letterpress.<sup>3</sup> Even the page itself is not a stable unit of meaning or analysis since it might contain multiple kind of highly disparate objects and texts ranging from the a stately pair of twinned columns running down the page to a rather more chaotic mixture of advertisements, images, texts, headers, captions, maps, and photographs.

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<sup>2</sup> Hayles, 198.

<sup>3</sup> Brake, “Time’s Turbulence”

Here again, however, digital media can offer us some fruitful guidance since this lack of linearity and the consequent transfer of increased levels of control to the reader are the distinguishing features of hypertext. Digital textuality ranging from interactive fiction to web pages and blogs offer users similarly wide affordances and thus make possible the same features of emergence that I argue are essential to understanding the magazine. In his early study *Cybertext*, Espen Arseth argued that we should make a distinction between “textons” and “scriptons.” The first of these are simply “strings of signs” that appear either on a page or in a browser, while the second describes the ways in which these strings can be idiosyncratically assembled by individual readers. The codex book long suppressed the difference between these two textual units, but in magazines—just as in electronic texts—textons and scriptons can diverge widely from one another. Thus, although a magazine can appear to be a stable object consisting of the same words and images laid out the same way across multiple copies, its wide affordances actually generate a diversity of scriptons—multiple different paths that individual readers can then take through a text. These paths themselves then produce the phenomenon of emergence: the creation of meanings and behaviors generated by the multiple ways in which textons can interact with one another.

The modern magazine, in short, is a distinct media form with its own history and trajectory that helped shape not only the aesthetics of literary modernism but the intellectual foundations of hypertext and other distinctive media practices we perhaps mistakenly call “new.” It presented not just new contents, but new forms for organizing, navigating, linking, and reading what Arseth calls “nonlinear textualities” for which “fundamental structural terms like story, plot, fiction, and narrative are not always suitable.”<sup>4</sup> In some important sense, it was not just the software engineers of the 1960s and 70s, but editors like Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap who helped create the kind of flattened, linked, emergent textuality that now distinguishes modern culture. Hypertext, video games, and other kinds of contemporary media may seem fundamentally new, but they actually remain part of a more generally conceived modernism that derives much of its originality, power, and innovation from material possibilities and creative affordances of the modern magazines.

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<sup>4</sup> Nonlinearity and Literary Theory, *New Media Reader*, 779.