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The Readies (from Bob Brown to dj readies)

An imaginary book, writing and reading technique

Bertrand Gervais

Bertrand Gervais holds a Canada Research Chair in Digital Arts and Literature and is the Director of NT2, the Hypermedia Works Research Laboratory, founded in 2004. Founder and Director (1999-2015) of Figura, the Textile and Imaginary Research Center, he is a professor at the Department of Literary Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He has published numerous essays on reading, American literature, fantasy and digital, as well as novels, stories and short stories. His last test, *A manufacturing defect. Elegy for the Left Hand*, published by Editions du Boréal (2014) was a finalist at the Governor General’s Awards of Canada. He has published in 2018 a co-authored essay with five other researchers, called *Thirst for Reality. Diving in the contemporary imagination* (Nota Bene). His most recent novel, *The Last War*, was published in 2017 by Éditions XYZ.

Translated by Tresie Murphy

Abstract

I focused in this article on a precise example of a reading machine, a machine that probably never truly existed, but received however quite a lot of feedback, to the point that it became the center piece of a protest rhetoric. Those are Robert Carlton Brown’s *Readies* (1930). The desire to find new ways of capturing, preserving and transmitting texts has been a recurring feature throughout the 20th century. And the process intensified in the 21st century with the latest computer developments that have multiplied the reading surfaces, the touch pad and e-readers to more and more accurate screens of our computers. These new devices bring us into a culture of the screen that seems to sound the death knell of the book and its culture. However, this search for a technical device capable of competing with the codex was not done at once, it did not lead spontaneously to a functional model. The desire to renew the very instruments of reading has left many traces, projects of reading machines dead on the soap opera. These projects all concern a wish, that of renovating the techniques of conservation and dissemination of texts, as well as the very mechanisms of reading, which never evolves quickly enough. The careful examination of Brown’s project, notably in it’s controversial resumption by Craig Saper, under the pseudonym dj readies, will make it possible to understand how reading machines, beyond their technical dimension, have important semiotic and symbolic implications.

Keywords

book, Craig Saper, dj readies, e-reader, interpretation, manuscript, media, media archeology, modernism, postmodernism, reading, remix, technical device, *Readies*, Robert Carlton Brown, writing,

Full text (PDF file)

I request the reader to fix his mental eye for a moment on the ever-present future and contemplate a reading machine which will revitalize his interest in the Optical Art of Writing. Robert Carlton Brown¹

Throughout the 20th century, the will to find new ways of writing, preserving and passing on written texts was a constant feature. This was taken to a new level in the 21st century with technological advances and the advent of various reading devices, from tactile tablets to eBook readers to the increasingly precise screens of our computers. These new devices have led to a screen era that would appear to be ringing the death knell of the book and its culture. The current notion that the book is dead is fuelled by technological change, with the massive digitization of the world's literary heritage, the perfect example of which is Google Books, as well as the popularity of social media and sharing platforms.

While it is true that the screen now competes with the book as a means to read, keep and share writing, the advent of the screen does not necessarily mean that the book is destined to disappear. They will most likely survive side by side for a long time, given that screen versions of texts emulate or outright copy the format of books and pages which have managed to remain the reference. Pages are reproduced using electronic ink, texts respect the layout of printed books and pages and pages on eBooks are turned as if made from paper.

These functioning devices did not appear spontaneously as the search for a technical device that can rival the codex happened over a long period of time. The wish to create new reading instruments has a long history filled with many “reading machines” that have today been written out of the narrative. These projects were all aimed at renewing the means by which texts were kept and shared, and the actual mechanisms of reading, that didn't evolve quickly enough. Together they constitute a remarkable archive of dead media, imaginary machines that did not survive their own birth and that, not unlike zombie Franksteins, fill the warehouses of good ideas before their time.

In this article, I will focus on one particular example of a reading machine. This machine may never really have existed as such, but it gave rise to a critical reception of some consequence, to the point where it became the central idea at the core of a rhetoric of protest. I refer to the Readies by Robert Carlton Brown.² As Siegfried Zielinski points out, this singular invention is not so much a dead machine as an imaginary device or medium, that haunted engineers and inventors throughout the 20th century.³

I will begin by describing Brown's Readies, and compare it to Bradley Fiske's reading machine that was developed at the same time. This comparison will serve to highlight the interest in devices to speed up reading at a time when industrialization was booming, and the real reach of Brown's project, that was not just about inventing a machine, but about creating a new medium, based on an in-depth reworking of the way culture and texts were spread and shared. I will then examine the revival of the Readies thanks to the work the American academic Craig Saper. Not only did Saper publish Brown's books, he also wrote an important biography of the author, produced an emulator of the device which is available online, and, in a consequential act of appropriation, created an avatar for himself called “dj readies,” a representation of an author who brings Brown's protest-thinking up to date. His reading machine also became a writing machine, a machine that produces text.

I would like to point out that I have already written about this reading machine. I described

1. Robert Carlton Brown, *The Readies*, Bad Ems, Roving Eye Press, 1930, p. 33.

2. Robert Carlton Brown, *The Readies*, Bad Ems, Roving Eye Press, 1930. The text was republished in 2009, thanks to Craig Saper (Houston, Rice University Press). I will come back to Saper's work in the last part of this article.

3. Siegfried Zielinski distinguishes three categories of imaginary media. The first category is untimely media, devices or machines that were before or after their time, but that nevertheless eventually came to be. The *Readies* belong to this category. Secondly are the so-called conceptual media, devices and machines that only ever existed on paper and were never actually built. Finally, we have the impossible media, the truest form of imaginary media. These are machines that could never actually be built but nevertheless have an impact on the way we think about of media. Cf. Siegfried Zielinski, “Modelling Media for Ignatius Loyola: A Case Study on Athanasius Kircher's World of Apparatus between the Imaginary and the Real,” in Eric Kluitenberg (dir.), *Book of Imaginary Media. Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers, 2006, p. 30 *passim*.

it in 1992 at a seminar on reading practices.⁴ I was interested in this machine at the time because reading and writing were so closely bound together in it and that the speeding up of the reading process, a much sought-after objective since the start of the 20th century, did not just involve the transformation of the medium but also the adjustment of the content, meaning the transformation of the way texts were written and the way words relate to one another. It was a global project, with a modernist, radical reach, as it involved renewing the very definition of literature. In this article, I will not approach reading from a semiotic angle, I will examine the media archeologically, reflecting on the devices used in writing and reading practices.⁵ As such, Bob Brown's Readies constitute the precursors to electronic eBooks and the digital ecosystem that has allowed for their commercialisation, not unlike *Memex* by Vannevar Bush, as he forecast the advent of the World Wide Web. They are an integral part of the techno-imaginary world of books, writing and reading.

The Readies

In 1930, the modernist poet and sometime industrialist, Robert Carlton Brown invented a revolutionary writing machine, that he called The Readies. The machine was based on the miniaturization of reading devices.

Brown had come to the conclusion that all of the arts, except for reading, had made huge advances during the first two decades of the 20th century. Painting and sculpture had cubism, writing had modernism, music, architecture, theatre, dance and cinema had all progressed, undergoing revolutions that sped up their development. Reading was the only art that lagged behind, stuck to the book, to paper and to lines that had to be read in an archaic manner, from top to bottom, from left to right, using a needlessly complicated movement. Brown decided to rethink the practice and to tackle the book. He wanted to replace the cut-up lines of a printed text on a page with a continuous line on a roll of film.

As Jeremy Norman points out, "Written before anyone imagined electronic computers, and even longer before anyone imagined a hand-held electronic computer, one goal of Brown's vision of new media for reading was saving space, paper and ink through media more compact than traditional printed books.⁶ His reading machine was intended to allow someone read a ten-thousand-word text in ten minutes, thanks to a new type of printing. The text was to be printed, using the newest of photographic procedures, (for 1930), on rolls of miniature, transparent film that could be transported in pill boxes. These "microfilms" were intended to run along a magnifying glass that measured 30 centimetres. This freed the reader from the book, the need to hold it, turn pages and keep them clean, and from the need to move their eyes from side to side. The writing itself moved, it came to the reader rather than the other way around, which was intended to speed up the reading process.

To continue reading at today's speed, I must have a machine. A simple reading machine which I can carry or move around, attach to any old electric light plug and read hundred thousand word novels in ten minutes if I want to, and I want to.⁷

Brown intended to sell the rolls of film in chemist shops or in telephone stores (precursors to video clubs). Above all, he believed that the reading machine would lead to the transformation of writing. In order to develop, this new, fast, effective and cheap reading

4. The text was published in 1994 (republished in paperback in 1998), in the *L'Acte de lecture*, collection edited by Denis St-Jacques, at Éditions Nota bene in Québec. The description of the reading machine in this article is for the most part in line with this initial analysis from fifteen years ago.

5. Media archaeology is not an entire discipline, it is more a field of research that takes an interest in the economic, technological social and cultural developments and even constraints of media. An excellent book on the subject is the one by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011.

6. Jeremy Norman, "Bob Brown: Visionary of New Reading Machines and Changes in the Process of Reading (1930-1931)," [historyofinformation.com](http://www.historyofinformation.com/expanded.php?id=2999). [Online] <http://www.historyofinformation.com/expanded.php?id=2999> [accessed 13 February 2018].

7. Robert Carlton Brown, *The Readies*, Bad Ems, Roving Eye Press, 1930, p. 28; Robert Carlton Brown, *The Readies* [1930], ed. Craig Saper, Houston, Rice University Press, 2009, p. 34.

method required writers to invent new words, to throw out old used-up words. For example, the definite article was to be phased out, along with all conjunctions and words that were not considered to be essential, and replaced by dashes or spaces. As Brown like to say, “Let’s see words machinewise, let useless ones drop out and fresh spring pansy winking ones pop up.”⁸

Brown did not limit himself to designing the machine, he also built a prototype version. The first version was developed by Ross Sanders in Cagnes-sur-Mer. An American industrialist, Albert Stoll from the *National Machine Products Company* in Detroit, even made an attempt to perfect the instrument. Brown maintained a correspondence with Bradley Fiske, who had also invented a reading machine using the same technology for the most part. However, Brown was critical of Fiske’s invention, as it maintained the hegemony of the page as the basic unit for printing text, and the book as the only reference.

But book me no books! In the Fiske Machine we still have with us the preposterous page and the fixity of columns. It is stationary, static, antiquated already before it’s acceptance, merely a condensed unbound book.⁹

The Fiske Reading Machine

As early as the twenties, a decade marked by economic prosperity, Admiral Fiske, a well-known inventor, working, for the most part in the military sphere, had come up with the idea of a portable reader, The Fiske Reading Machine.

This was a device with a magnifying lens that provided the reader with access to text that was printed in miniature on small cards. The cards were slid into the slit on the device and the text was readable through a visor. The benefits of such a device were legion: lower distribution, production and storage costs, savings on paper, easier access to information. In a 1922 edition of *Scientific American*, available online, it said, “The diffusion of knowledge will be greatly facilitated because even the poorest people will be able to buy the most instructive and entertaining works.”¹⁰

One of the issues with this invention was the lens, that required the reader to use only one eye, like on a long-range rifle, which could lead to eye fatigue, headaches, and even squinting. “Admiral Fiske, in answering the suggestions of the possibility of the Instrument causing jaded eyes, throws out the reminder that engravers toil incessantly at their occupations which is of striking similarity to reading by this machine.”¹¹ Despite the Admiral’s denials, the lens of his reading machine did nothing to make reading easier and his invention was not a success.

One of the advantages of this machine, which formed the basis of many of these enterprises, was the speeding up of the reading process. At a time when everything seemed to be getting faster (a refrain that has existed for a long time), reading lagged behind, which encouraged the more daring to look for solutions. Fiske’s reading machine promised speedier and simpler access to larger quantities of text. One look through the lens of the machine revealed one hundred and twenty words at once. During a demonstration, Admiral Fiske managed to read 239 words per minute out loud, while the writer from the *Scientific American* was able to read 287 words silently. Each card could contain ten thousand words on each side. The economies of scale are immediately obvious. It must be said that in the decades that followed, microfilms often appeared as the ideal answer to the storage challenges faced by libraries. Nicholson Baker’s essay *Double Fold* gives a good account of the damage done to collections

8. Robert Carlton Brown, *The Readies*, Bad Ems, Roving Eye Press, 1930, p. 37; Robert Carlton Brown, *The Readies* [1930], ed. Craig Saper, Houston, Rice University Press, 2009, p. 43.

9. Robert Carlton Brown, *The Readies*, Bad Ems, Roving Eye Press, 1930, p. 34; Robert Carlton Brown, *The Readies* [1930], ed. Craig Saper, Houston, Rice University Press, 2009, p. 40.

10. S.R. Winters, “An Invention That May Reduce the Size of Our Books to a Fraction of Their Present Bulk” [1922], *Scientific American*, reproduced on the MobileRead Forum. [Online] http://wiki.mobileread.com/wiki/Fiske_Reading_Machine [accessed 24 May 2018].

11. S.R. Winters, “An Invention That May Reduce the Size of Our Books to a Fraction of Their Present Bulk” [1922], *Scientific American*, reproduced on the MobileRead Forum. [Online] http://wiki.mobileread.com/wiki/Fiske_Reading_Machine [accessed 24 May 2018].

of newspapers and books in big libraries in the name of space and conservation in the eighties and nineties.¹² Microfilm was sold as the universal panacea, as a technology that could finally replace the book, before it became clear that it was extremely fragile and inflammable. In other words, when it comes to books and their survival, Ray Bradbury is always hovering.

Admiral Fiske was also the inventor of various military technical devices such as the “gun director system,” the “Naval Telescope Sight,” the “stadimeter,” the “turret range finder,” the “torpedoplane” and the “horizometer,” as well as being the author of essays such as *The Art of Fighting*, *The Navy as a Fighting Machine*, and *Invention. The Master-Key to Progress*, which was published in 1921. In this book, the Admiral champions human inventiveness and, above all, a technical and machine-based conception of the world. In the second-last chapter entitled, “The Machine of Civilisation,” he argues this point by affirming straight off that: “The originating work of inventors of all kind [...] have built up a Machine of Civilisation that is surpassingly wonderful and fine.”¹³ But it is clear that in order to protect and preserve this wonderful machine of civilisation that could go off the rails at any time, you need good, loyal soldiers who will ensure that progress continues by working to develop it while protecting its rear (against Bolsheviks and pacifists, the latter seen as much more dangerous than the former!). The reading machine is yet another link in the development of this machine of civilisation, a stage that is all the more crucial as it touches the human mind, which is generally averse to any approximation of its operating methods.

Emulation

Despite their initial promise, Bob Brown’s Readies never made it to the market. They are now consigned to the category of amusing, even original inventions, that have ultimately been abandoned, even though their spirit lives on. They are even listed in the Dead Media Project database where members of the website’s mailing list compile all obsolete or forgotten communication technologies. The Readies feature in the database, as does the *Milton Bradley Vectrex*, the *Polyrhetor* and the *Wilcox-Gay Recordio*.¹⁴ But we would easily argue that the Readies do not constitute a dead media, but that Brown’s imaginary machine merely appeared prematurely. Indeed, Brown’s objective to revamp how we read and learn, by making reading devices more effective, faster and more compact, was legitimate and extensive research has continued in the area. After being forgotten for almost sixty years, his invention is once again beginning to garner interest, with the development of a range of digital reading devices.

It must be said that it is not only modernist historians who take an interest in the Readies, but a much broader audience that takes an interest in the impact media technologies have on reading, a process we have taken for granted for so long. As such, Brown’s project can be seen as a real precursor to current digital practices. The instant messaging apps that we all have on our phones and the brevity of style they require, eBooks that use electronic ink having freed themselves from the codex, if we forget this surprising nostalgia for the page, memory keys, databases, the Internet, the ecosystem that we now call digital culture, all started off in Brown’s work as some form of approximation. He did not restrict his work to a reading machine, he wanted to create a complete cultural practice. His machine was not intended to merely transmit a text that didn’t budge, as if this technical revolution was not going to change anything about the way it was written, his machine was to force an entire reworking of the process, and, in doing so, of writing itself.¹⁵

Marshall McLuhan accustomed us to thinking in terms of complex links between medium and message. Bob Brown had anticipated this, having understood that not only were new sentences and syntactic structures needed, but new discursive approaches had to be worked

12. Nicholson Baker, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, New York, Random House, 2001.

13. Bradley Allen Fiske, *Invention. The Master-Key to Progress* [1921], Charleston, BiblioLife Publisher, 2013, p. 333.

14. Dead Media Project. [Online] <http://www.deadmedia.org/notes/index-numeric.html> [accessed 18 February 2018].

15. For Ulrich K uchler also, the originality of Brown’s approach comes from this holistic approach. The way Brown did not just invent a device, but attempted to redefine the culture so that the device would work: “Brown addresses some of the most pressing issues of his time, most importantly the redefinition and re-appreciation of written language at a time when the new medium of the phonograph had changed and fundamentally influenced established concepts of artistic production and reception” (Ulrich K uchler, “Reading Machines: On the Surface of Meaning – Beyond the Surface of Discourse,” *Arcadia*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2014, p. 52).

out as text would now only appear on one line. Brown was keen for input when developing his invention and he contacted over forty writers including Gertrude Stein, Paul Bowles, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, to create content for the Readies. He even published a book that gave a glimpse of this new textuality and, as a result, this new reading method.¹⁶

The academic Craig Saper, who specialises in the links between textuality and technology, republished Brown's book in 2009; his interest comes from a media archaeology approach rather than a reading and textual theoretical one, in as much as Brown's machine is a precursor to eBooks and tactile tablets. Saper is fascinated with machines that provide an alternative to the codex and to traditional forms of representation, and he associated the Readies with the retro steampunk aesthetic. He tells us, "The steampunk aesthetic [...] would today embrace Brown's clunky futuristic machines, perhaps with the slightly modified name MachinePunk, revelling in cogs, gears, magnifiers, and spools running on a whirring electric motor."¹⁷ Saper takes the fantasy further and even goes as far to imagine possible commercial success for the Readies, having passed the prototype stage to become the latest gadget. The interest for this modernist machine, where Jules Verne meets the Futurists, according to Jennifer Schuessler,¹⁸ who actually considers Brown to be the Godfather of the modern E-Reader, is not waning. Kamaria Penn, a graphic artist from Cruz Bay in the Virgin Islands, brought out an elegantly designed brochure in 2013 that contains what is intended to be a visual interpretation of Brown's Readies. The project, which is made up of twelve pages folded like a fan, exploits the futuristically dated nature of the invention, complete with collages and cogs.¹⁹ This is not merely a recreational project, it is a supplement, a complementary object that doesn't teach us anything new about the machine, except its new-found relevance in a digital context. It is a nostalgic version of the Readies, that accentuates the manifesto dimension of the text.

It must be said that it would have been interesting to recreate the Readies in the same way that Daniel Libeskind recreated Agostino Ramelli's reading wheel that was originally designed in the 16th century. At the Venice Biennale in 1985, Libeskind presented "Three Lessons in Architecture: The Machines" made up of *The Reading Machine*, *The Memory Machine* and *The Writing Machine*.²⁰ These monumental machines provide an unexpected perspective on the human functions that have shaped our civilisation, memory, writing and reading. In fact, Craig Saper attempted to do with Brown's invention what Libeskind did with Ramelli's, in proposing a digital version of the Readies, re-mediatising the reading machine using emulator software. On readies.org, the project website, there is a device that lets us try out the Readies²¹ for ourselves. There is no sign of microfilms and lenses, rolls of film or projection mechanisms, they have been replaced with a convivial interface that scrolls the text onscreen on a white background. 46 texts have been uploaded to the site, all extracts from the 1931 edition of *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine*. When the user chooses a text—*We Came: A History* by Gertrude Stein for example—, the text scrolls from left to right like a roll of film. The user can stop, restart, speed up or slow down the text using a roller that is numbered from 1 to 60—the final figure represents the fastest speed—, and can go back from left to right, against the flow of the text. The sequences are endless. Obviously, the faster the text scrolls, the harder it is to read, as the movement of the words prevents the eyes from focusing. The Readies add movement to something that is usually immobile, and the emulator renders this feeling well. Words are not meant to move around a page, except in the case of kinetic poetry. They stay still and it is up to the reader's eye to find them. With the emulator of Brown's machine, words scroll in both directions. They are in movement and become gradually illegible, the very act eludes the reader. The text is no longer to be read, it is

16. Robert Carlton Brown (dir.), *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine*, Cagnes-sur-Mer, Roving Eye Press, 1931.

17. Robert Carlton Brown, *The Readies* (1930), ed. Craig Saper, Houston, Rice University Press, 2009, p. 68.

18. Jennifer Schuessler, "The Godfather of the E-Reader," *The New York Times*, 8 April 2010. [Online] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/11/books/review/Schuessler-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 [accessed 24 May 2018].

19. The project is presented on Behance. [Online] <https://www.behance.net/gallery/8243643/the-readies> [accessed 18 February 2018].

20. There is a presentation of the project on the artist's website, Studio Libeskind. [Online] <https://libeskind.com/work/cranbrook-machines/> [accessed 18 February 2018].

21. [Online] <http://readies.org/> [accessed 18 February 2018]. In fact, the emulator that is currently available online is the second one uploaded by Saper, the first stopped working as the software upgraded.

to be looked at. It is just a representation of a text, a representation that reveals its presence—we see it scroll on the screen—and its absence—we can no longer read it.²²

dj readies: appropriation

Saper is well aware of the contemporary reach of this emulation of the Readies, that he identifies with scratching, used by some rap artists. The Readies emulator allows the reader to change the speed of the text manually and the direction it scrolls in, miming the movement of a vinyl record. Like a DJ that moves the record back and forth, shifting the place of the needle to create the scratch effect that produces unexpected sounds and special effects, the reader of the Readies can do the same with texts, making them undergo all kinds of jerky twists and interpretations. This is no longer a dialectic of the readable and the visible, but a triad completed by the audible, a register that manages to free the device from its initial straightjacket. The text is no longer denied or neutralised, it is reinvested with new modalities. This twist allows Saper to imagine other uses for the machine.

What if someone had built a scratch machine that changed reading into something besides the foundation of alphabetic-print culture literacy? What if someone today built an online e-version of the machine to allow for the simulation of the interaction and engagement with the material conditions of reading-as-a-technology, with more in common with scratch remix than sounding out words?²³

The emulation of the Readies shifts Brown's enterprise, making it relevant; it doesn't just take on a modernist project and give it an update thanks to the Internet, it adjusts it to contemporary practices, notably those associated with rap and scratching, that turn text from a linguistic form into an artistic material. Saper quotes William Burroughs' *The Invisible Generation*, and Burroughs himself used to play vinyl albums back to front to listen to the hidden words, and closely associates the scratching techniques of rappers and djs with the "un-reading" and craziness that the Readies allow. As he says in the article we quote, "scratch is not an ornamental value distorting the text, but rather a crucial way of reading, uncovering the ghosts of meanings lurking in plain sight."²⁴ You need to scratch the text to take away its varnish, and, in a way, strip it clean.

What does it mean to apply a term usually thought of in terms of composition (music, media, writing) to a cognitive process of a subjectivity? [...] By shifting the terms of the debate, the frame of how one defines reading, the process now resembles composition rather than reception. Reading as something more akin to scratching and the turntablist's DJ-ing suggests a subject formation as a bricoleur-in-motion.²⁵

The digital emulation of the Readies makes them the emblem of a practice of re-appropriation and deflection, of the subversion of established order, in cultural terms but also in economic and political terms. For Saper, the Readies are to society what scratch is to music. The role of emblem is one that the academic knows well, as he has chosen the pseudonym dj readies for some of his projects, where the initials dj indicate explicitly that the Readies do not so much refer to Bob Brown's machine, but to its re-mediatiation by Saper.

22. Bertrand Gervais, "Imaginaire de la fin du livre. Figures du livre et pratiques illittéraires," *Littérature, histoire, théorie, Fabula*, no. 16, 2016. [Online] <http://www.fabula.org/lht/16/gervais.html> [accessed 3 October 2016].

23. Craig Saper, "FCJ-105 Materiality of a Simulation: Scratch 'Reading' Machine, 1931," *The Fiberculture Journal*, no. 15, 2009. [Online] <http://fifteen.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-105-materiality-of-a-simulation-scratch-reading-machine-1931/> [accessed 24 May 2018].

24. Craig Saper, "FCJ-105 Materiality of a Simulation: Scratch 'Reading' Machine, 1931," *The Fiberculture Journal*, no. 15, 2009. [Online] <http://fifteen.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-105-materiality-of-a-simulation-scratch-reading-machine-1931/> [accessed 24 May 2018].

25. Craig Saper, "FCJ-105 Materiality of a Simulation: Scratch 'Reading' Machine, 1931," *The Fiberculture Journal*, no. 15, 2009. [Online] <http://fifteen.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-105-materiality-of-a-simulation-scratch-reading-machine-1931/> [accessed 3 October 2017].

They are his own Readies, his own practice of scratching as an interpretative strategy, a little like when Mark Amerika's remix becomes a textual analysis.²⁶

Like a real “ghost in the machine,” dj readies immersed himself in the spirit of Brown's machine and turned into a revolutionary figure, a visionary who is ready to rework the very foundations of our societies. Saper even wrote a socio-poetic manifesto using the pseudonym of dj readies, that is not unlike Brown's call for the renewal of artistic practices. The oxymoronically titled *Intimate Bureaucracies*,²⁷ provides an historic view of the present time, envisaged retrospectively as a turning point, in the same vein as Walter Benjamin's angel of history, turned toward a past that is, in fact, our own present.

The Readies machine is no longer a physical entity, a series of cogs and microfilms, it becomes an abstract machine, an imaginary machine that has its own way of approaching and rebuilding the world. If Donna Haraway can define the cyborg in order to analyse the world from an original perspective, Saper can place the Readies at the heart of an enterprise to rework the world based on the Internet's participative and decentralising possibilities. It has become a reading machine of a semiotic nature, an interpretative hypothesis that exposes the very materiality of the text, as well as its zones of resistance or dissolution. Textual scratching makes new words appear (mostly coded), that can deconstruct hegemonic discourse and spread a new mythology that is, this time, anchored in the virtual.

Conclusion

Craig Saper's slow process of appropriation transformed a modernist project into a practice connected to digital aesthetics, marked by scratching, remixing and subversive practices.²⁸ His promotion of Bob Brown's project was not just confined to making an emulator available online, or to highlighting the poet-inventor's life and work,²⁹ it also saw him take up the baton, looking to renew culture itself, just as Brown intended. dj readies, in fact, appears as a new avatar for the modernist project. But this update occurs through shifting and transformation. There was a gradual shift from the faithfulness to the original project, as evidenced by the publication of the original book from 1930, to variational mode, as the book title (*The Readies*) became the name of a figure who illustrated its very spirit (dj readies), and the machine itself became a principle for the production of signs. The movement Brown initiated and hoped for thus reaches its maximum amplitude and becomes an actual flux.

The astonishing fate of the Readies allows us to understand what is simplistic about the opposition between book culture and screen culture. Books and screens are complementary, and have been for a long time. So, since the start of the 20th century, in the middle of the book's heyday, people have been imagining texts not linked to pages and books, and trying to come up with forms of reading that are not bogged down by the ancient constraints of the codex. In the same way, in current screen culture, devices and methods have finally been developed that separate text from pages and have considerably renewed the way they are preserved, shared and experienced. The ultimate irony is the academic who uses digital technology to bring a project back to life that was abandoned due to lack of technology. Using an emulator, he has managed to create a working version of the Readies that Brown himself could never have imagined

This perspective was made possible by media archaeology. It makes it possible to reveal links between premature or impossible media and current digital platforms that have the

26. Mark Amerika, *Remixthebook*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

27. dj readies, *Intimate Bureaucracies*, Santa Barbara, Punctum Books, 2012.

28. dj readies' reading-writing and variational mimicry position takes an “illittéraire” approach. This involves a range of writing strategies used in screen culture that present themselves as illegitimate, illegal, illegible, at times illustrative, even illogical (Bertrand Gervais, “Penser les pratiques illittéraires en culture de l'écran,” in Emmanuel Bouju [dir.], *Fragments d'un discours théorique. Nouveaux éléments de lexique littéraire*, Nantes, Cécile Defaut, 2015, p. 193-223). These practices connect to forms of “uncreative writing” as per Kenneth Goldsmith (*Uncreative Writing. Managing Language in Digital Art*, New York, Columbia University Press, (2011), that no longer respect the usual principles of creative writing and, in doing so, renew our way of thinking about literature and culture.

29. Saper's fascination for Brown's modernist project led him to write a biography of Bob Brown (*Amazing Adventures of Robert Carlton Brown. Real-Life Zelig of the Twentieth Century*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2016), in which he compares the modernist poet to the character of Zelig from the Woody Allen film, the ultimate human chameleon.

potential to bring to life an idea that was first imagined three quarters of a century earlier. Media archaeology manages to build bridges where nay-sayers see only chasms.

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