

# Immaterial Interruption: Paul Chan's *New New Testament*

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"The media...is where democracies conduct their civil wars."

Cloud Atlas, David Mitchell<sup>1</sup>

The first technology to capture light was photography, and through the imposition of a frame the mass-production of images birthed the crisis of aura and authorship. Currently, the screen mediates the enframed image, and in *Feedback: Televisions Against Democracy*, David Joselit elaborates upon the detention of light with the first form of media that combines both the frame and the screen. Joselit states, "Television tames the comet by turning light into private property. Art stands against television as figure stands against ground, and television, in its privatization of public speech and its strict control over access to broadcasting, stands against democracy"<sup>1</sup>. Belying the fundamentalist principles from which government sponsored projects proclaim equal representation, e-books and the publishing network have modeled their economy to mimic television's systematization and integration into society in order to build a new visual regime. The trajectory of the e-book and e-reader mirror the history of consumer television, and Wendy Chun illuminates how this is the result of an ideological conflation between television and new media. With the lens of Chun, the 2014 publication *New New Testament* by the artist Paul Chan can be perceived as a time-based, digital-born book. The economic model and social interest of the mass consumption of technology is established with Joselit's history of consumer television, and Chun illustrates the contradictions and misunderstandings of new media that are rooted within reproducing the conditions of television's ideology.

*New New Testament* inaugurates an image-event by utilizing the book in both the material and digital form as a space for the exploration of the aesthetic and as the generation of artistic experience. Through the juxtaposition of a past work, *Volumes* (2012, in which Chan appropriated books covers and utilized them as a ready-made canvas, painting abstract squares of landscapes), with visual poetry, Chan incorporates symbols, signs, and word signifiers that manifest a formal language through the manipulation of the book's structure. The subsumption of the traditional support of paper does not qualify the act of reading and writing with images as a disembodied project, but rather, demonstrates the full integration of hyper-real images within knowledge and communication. The tension of translation and reading words with images manifests an event in real time, and as the images and words are read, an interruption occurs within the act of cognitive reproduction, generating an association. Chun asserts this consistent displacement, formerly applicable only to language, is beholden not to the speed of light associated with the appearance of an image, but rather, due to the images' ephemeral character. The conventions established by the history of television need to be recast with digital media, and *New New Testament's* practice makes visible the productive processes of new media while questioning the democratic means of knowledge and dissemination.

The first relationship that Joselit identifies within the history of television is, "The network is a function of the commodity. Television existed as a technology before it was clear how it might be marketed as a product"<sup>2</sup>. The large manufacturers that arose out of the economy of World War II found a place in society after the war by mass-producing televisions. However, before television became a mass marketed product, the economy had to reflect a shift and focus in the consumer's demands. The history of electronic publications, like all forms of media, has its roots in government-sponsored projects, and the rise in the consumption of e-pubs parallels the changing ways in which information is consumed.

In 1971, Michael S. Hart published the first electronic text, *The Declaration of Independence*, by emailing users of Arpanet, the government funded network that resembled a pre-Internet.<sup>3</sup> The obituary for Hart published by *The New York Times* is laden with patriotic references such as the Fourth of July and subsequent publications put online by Hart: The Bill of Rights, the U.S. Constitution, and the King James Bible. Even if Hart was promoting values of equal access to literature with his continued project of making books accessible online within the public domain, Hart's utilization of Arpanet makes it impossible to divorce technological progress from the interests and benefaction of the State.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the ideological impulse of Hart's project imitates assumptions established by Vannevar Bush decades earlier.

Chun outlines the argument of, "As We May Think", an article published by Bush in 1945, and discusses how the memex created new media in an effort to preserve media. Chun states, "Thus the [scientific] archive, rather than pointing us to the future, is trapping us in the past, making us repeat the present over and over again"<sup>5</sup>. Chun's words are poignant in the context of Hart's choice in publications; even the name of the Hart's endeavor, "Project Gutenberg", harkens a forgotten past. Nonetheless, publishing books online began a modern conflict within the free, eminent domain of the Internet by making private property accessible to the public. File sharing and copyright laws attempt to control access to information, and at the foundation of these complex efforts of privatization is a presumed subject. Chun, critical of the ambiguity of Bush's title, reveals an uncertainty principle between man and machine. Techno-progressivists like Bush defend the limitations of technology through development and advancement in complex modes of cognition. In Bush's model of knowledge, the subject is premeditated due to the equation of software to hardware. Chun states, "In Bush's writing...there is no difference between access to and understanding the record, between what would be called...machine reading and human reading and comprehension, between information and argument"<sup>6</sup>. Thus, publishing the Bible and *The Declaration of Independence* online does not guarantee the promotion of the American, Christian legacy, but may be representative of such ideologies by serving as the content. The conjecture that the content of human consciousness was suffice for media was established by Bush and the memex, and the failure of the subject coincides with Bush's assertion because it indicates larger epistemological problems.

Chun states, "Bush's argument assumes that human records make possible the construction of an overarching archive of human knowledge in which there is no gap, no absence—a summation of human knowledge...This conversion of medium into storage—grounds Bush's progressivist and idealist ideology"<sup>7</sup>. Hart's project is fundamental to the historical tension between publishers, authors, and giant content managers such as Sony, Amazon, and Barnes and Noble; however, the function of storage marginalizes the production of new forms by the memex and e-book. Hart manifested a network for digital publications and the creation of content managers is another result of the technically prolific stifling creative production.

In 2011, in the case of Bertelsmann versus Random House, "the agency model" was solidified as proper business conduct for the publishing world. Publishers were allowed to set the price for titles while e-booksellers acted as the selling agents.<sup>8</sup> At this point, content managers were producing their own versions of the e-reader, and the agency model permitted content managers to store and solicit titles. Purchasing e-books from a publisher became an extra step for the content managers and did not allow them to offer customers a break when buying e-readers. Amazon resolved this conflict by becoming a publisher. By increasing privatization within the publishing network, Amazon adopted a closed circuit modus operandi that mimics the history of television by converting the *medium* into storage.

The second principle in the history of television is, "The commodity is a function of the network"<sup>9</sup>. The commodity has a subjective function within the network by identifying individuals based upon their socio-economic status, determined by the possession of private property and wealth. As television became the signifier of the middle-class in America, it also served as a platform for the advertisement of any other commodity. In a more intimate manner, these qualities are reproduced by the economic functions of the e-book. What are for purchase on the e-publishing market are two different commodities. The e-reader is a status symbol and

affiliation; for example, do you own an iPad, Kindle, or Nook? The DRM (Digital Rights Management) copyright protection system utilizes metadata such as the ISBN number or an implanted code to catalog every purchase. As Alessandro Ludovico states, "... (in case anyone still needs convincing that customer profiling is here to stay), every single e-book or e-magazine purchase is tracked and registered, *just like anything else on any network*".<sup>10</sup>

By vertically integrating production processes, Amazon fixes the consumer in a relationship between the device and the e-books that are available through the content manager. E-books are not transferrable to other devices, and as multiple brands of e-readers and tablets are created, the world of programming platforms is accordingly disparate. The consequences of privatizing light suppress the capabilities of digital media's functions and network, and the wide dissemination of devices for a "close-up"<sup>11</sup> individual use is shrinking market share amongst publishers and booksellers. While this further destabilizes categories of authorship and the fight for creative representation on either side of the publishing spectrum, the foundational presumptions of digital media's subjective purpose were made on behalf of Bush and the memex.

While many companies were developing the e-reader to be capable of hosting other services such as web browsing, Amazon and founder Jeff Bezos were the primary proponents of the e-reader imitating the look and feel of a book. This shift in the way in which information is received modifies the perspective from the frame to the screen, and Bezos' interest in the e-book by association or supplementation to the tangible object complicates the principles first purported by Bush by begetting the creation of a new form while also omitting any precedent. Bezos' conflation of the two forms of publishing belies its' very ideology. Chun states:

Networked new media does not follow the same logic of seriality as television; flow and segmentation do not quite encompass digital media's ephemerality...To program a television show is to schedule or broadcast it; to program a computer is to produce a series of stored instructions that [supposedly] guarantee—and often stand in for—a certain action. One is descriptive, the other prescriptive... Digital media with its memory was supposed to be the opposite of or the solution to television. *That is, new media scholars' blindness to the similarities between new media and TV is ideological*; it stems from an overriding belief in digital media as memory—and thus possibly memorable—and TV as liveness...Digital media through the memory at its core, was supposed to solve, if not dissolve, archival problems...not create archival problems of its own.<sup>12</sup>

Mass consumption is the sole interest television and the e-reader have in common, and this similarity spawns the miscomprehension of memory, storage, and forms of narrative. Joselit discusses how the television heightened the alienation between the producer and consumer by presenting digital images in which to align one's identity, and how programming can influence an ideological narrative. Increasingly, as the e-book becomes more prominent in the use of education, the relationship between alienation and the production of subjects is located beyond the structure of the commodity and the network. While the e-book advertises the consumer to third parties not (always) visible or permissible to the user, Bush's institution of media as storage is substantiated in the digital form. Severing the capacities of the medium transforms the e-book into a capitalist function by exploiting the immaterial results of capture. These logistical functions were first ingrained with the foundation of the television network, and digital media reproduce the conditions of television's ideological production.

Another e-publication by Chan that is exemplary of Chun's claim of conflation between digital media and television is *AD Book* by the artist group, BFA3AE. *AD Book* comprises of ads for galleries, artists, art-related publications, and businesses. The network of the art market becomes the narrative when flipping or swiping through this e-book, and *AD Book* permits advertisements to occupy a space of media storytelling. Chun discusses the qualities of digital media that are overlooked by stating, "The major characteristic of digital media is memory. Its ontology is defined by memory from content to purpose...the move from calculator to computer depended upon 'regenerative memory'...Vacuum tubes, unlike mechanical switches, can hold value precisely because their signals can degenerate—and thus regenerate".<sup>13</sup> The value of digital media's productivity is extinguished when knowledge is equated to information, and the possibility for cognitive (re)generation is lost with the appropriation of shallow, recycled content.

The third relationship that Joselit identifies is, "The network is [itself] a commodity...like the highway system of the 1950s...the development of a televisual infrastructure was viewed as both a national identity and a corporate boom. Access to the public was itself fashioned as a kind of commodity".<sup>14</sup> A harmonious agreement between private corporations and public interest endowed by the State ignores the material basis that the advancement of technological progress stands upon: the labor of marginalized groups and individual consumers. Chun affirms the rhetoric surrounding the dynamic of new media "is based on a conflation of storage with access, of memory with storage, of word with action. This belief depends on our machines as more stable and permanent and, thus, better record holders than human memory; it depends on an analogy between digital and analog media".<sup>15</sup> The primary mode of public interaction and consumption of images assumes the live omnipresence of television's narrative, and the functions that characterize the human condition, such as the ephemerality of memory, have been erased due to the alienation experienced between the image, the commodity, and the consumer. The availability of new media belies public access to nationalist monitoring and corporate restrictions; forms of infringement that are defended with a focus upon the future of digitality that is symptomatic to the past. A discussion regarding the future becomes problematic with the conceptual substitution of memory for storage, and Chun asserts acts of cognition, such as reading and writing, are more suited to explain the functionality of computers and digital media. With the creation of new media, the support of cognition, traditionally understood as the book, pen, and paper, becomes part of the "nonsimultaneous dissemination"<sup>16</sup> of the image and media object, and the focus is toward the appearance and repetition of an image throughout time. Additionally, the presence of memory as a logistical function of new media allows for a space of regeneration that permanently threatens the apparition and disappearance of an image.

Access to the public via the network was not lost on publishing companies, and aside from tracking purchases made by consumers, Smith identifies sponsorship as a revenue source for publishing companies. Subscribers to a publication pay prior to the printing; this method is most obviously enacted with magazine subscriptions and is increasingly popular in the e-book world with the release of multiple chapters or volumes for a single e-book.<sup>17</sup> Inadvertently, this was my experience when purchasing *New New Testament* through iBooks. *New New Testament* was divided into eight different volumes. Each volume of *New New Testament* has the same introductory essay by Chan and art historian, Sven Lütticken, however the amount of content differs for each volume and none of this is apparent to the consumer until after purchase. *New New Testament* is also published in book form, and while the amount of content in each e-volume is reflective of chapter length, comparative questions of value and worth surface with the necessary purchase of multiple digital volumes.

Smith identifies the "P.E.S.T" factors in publishing: politics, the economy, social relations, and technological advancements.<sup>18</sup> While these are obvious elements that impact businesses, the nature of publishing is fragmented, therefore, each element is considered within a specific faction of publishing. To the consumer, publishing companies are selling one product, but a nuanced process of book publishing precedes the complexity of the e-book. Traditionally, the life of a book is formatted and sold as a hardcover before it enters the "B" format of the more user-friendly paperback. If the title accomplishes success on the market, the publishing company will mass-produce paperbacks, and perhaps a more aggressive marketing endeavor will be deployed in order to broaden the audience.<sup>19</sup> The book title is exploited on a variety of levels; certain stages indicate a commodity that circulates within specific sectors of the economy. The current mode of publishing releases hard copies simultaneously with e-books, and the continued contestation of the digital by the world of art book publishing compels the production of *New New Testament*.

Art book publishing companies struggle to innovate their product and market outreach due to resisting attitudes towards the digital form. *New New Testament* and Chan's publishing company, Badlands Unlimited, nominally falls into the category of art book publishing, however, the divergent nature of Chan's publishing company became clear this past February at an event hosted by the

New York Public Library called, "Trends in Art Book Publishing".<sup>20</sup> Representatives from Phaidon, Yale University Press, David Zwirner gallery, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Sigilio Press delivered short presentations about the method and history of each publisher while addressing the problems that art book publishers face with a dwindling audience and the rise of the digital format. Unsurprisingly, these companies and institutions are not receptive to e-publications. Yale University Press was perhaps the most lamentable when describing the unenthusiastic attitude of art book publishing companies formatting publications for the digital and/or making their content available online. Yale University Press is a commercial publisher that accepted a grant focused on establishing an e-portal over the next two years. Although this seems like good news, the stipulation that some of the content is to be open source concerned the Yale University representative. The e-portal is a method used by other companies wishing to present their product in a space that is not affiliated with third parties like Amazon. All of these publishers spoke of an online presence which showcases their titles, although, the motivation is particular in each case. Yale University Press is attempting to find a new revenue source through the e-portal by offering services such as print-on-demand or purchasing backlisted titles. The Metropolitan Museum offers these function on the Met publications website, but due to institutional affiliation and funding, the Met's e-portal is an open access source.

The majority of the participants, including the moderator, skirted around the question of the digital, but Mark Polizzotti, director of the Publications Program at the Met was candid about the problems faced by art book publishers. Firstly, Polizzotti established a hierarchical binary amongst e-books and art books by proclaiming that e-books are successful for certain genres such as instructional, fiction, or romance. Then, Polizzotti asserted the art book as an *object of desire*. According to Polizzotti, the art book will never be fully transferable to the digital because the digital is unable to mimic the complex content and design of the art book. Polizzotti's argument supports traditional forms of commodity fetishism and consumption only because Polizzotti and the other publishers present are unable to imagine the infinite possibility of the digital form—i.e. these publishers were focusing on the digital as *storage*. The lack of creativity and market adaption consequentially resulted from the perseverance of the memex's ideology, and *New New Testament* coerces new media by turning the e-book into a medium with the capacity for epistemological investigation.

Deborah Aaronson, from Phaidon, revealed the key behind best-sellers, such as Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, or Robert Frank's *The Americans*: these books are the objects that became the primary representation and source for the work of art. The perpetual circulation of best-selling art books is caused by their status as a commodity *and* art object. It is also not a coincidence that the best-selling art books named are books of photography. Joselit's testament to the power of the image is recalled through the apprehension of light and the subsequent influence of advertising, and the economic model of contemporary art seeks to mask the social processes that are embedding these objects into the canon. If one needs further proof of the sycophantic nature of the art world, David Zwirner's Todd Bradway, bragged about the inclusion of twenty artists, whom are represented by the gallery, in a new Phaidon publication on 21<sup>st</sup> century art.

Another project emerging from Phaidon is the complete catalogue raisonné of Andy Warhol, but the title that represents Phaidon's success most aptly is *The Story of Art* by E.H. Gombrich. The history of this title is subject to multiple versions and re-printings, and the goals and achievements of *The Story of Art* highlight the e-book's contribution and deviation from traditional forms of knowledge production. Gombrich conceived the work with an interest in speaking to the non-specialized reader. Thus, the impact of *The Story of Art* affected a consensus of understanding (or *consciousness*) of art surrounding the last 30,000 years.

Through form and content, Chan's *New New Testament* generates cognitive associations linked to knowledge and representation by utilizing normative notions of language and the visual. The presence of a "non-specialized" reader fades as a concern for Chan's project because of the lack of narrative or subject within the work. Instead of a linear history of time though the accounting of objects, Chan approaches the ephemeral qualities of art and language through processes of (re)generation, asking us as Chun did, to reconsider the relationships in between the moments of conscious production.

The final relationship that Joselit identifies within the history of television is, "The audience is a commodity...[advertisers] began to regard their audiences less as undifferentiated masses and more as a spectrum of distinct sectors defined by their consumption patterns".<sup>21</sup> The archaic version of the DRM system is a mapping of visual consumerism that completes the subject. Through the television, the process of subjecthood occurs through network affiliations and brand representation. With the aid of technologies, consumption and circulation are increasingly monitored, and the democratic choice of purchase is turned into information and working knowledge. Statistics are used to plot audience expansion and outreach to other types of consumers. Polizzotti conveyed the obstacles confronted by art book publishers in reaching a broader audience willing to identify with a particular publication or institutional mission. His response to dwindling sales and strategies for widening the market is simple: exploit the product and the network. Polizzotti maintained success to conceit by proclaiming the necessity of superficial judgments. Utilizing the old axiom, "Judge a book by its' cover", Polizzotti desired more pathways of exploitation that reach consumers at the "trade" level, rather than only within the confines of the museum bookstore. It is surprising that Polizzotti has yet to apply these ideas to the digital realm, but there are more nuanced ways that other companies are approaching the integration of the digital. David Zwirner uses social media: Twitter and Instagram, in order to promote book events at the gallery and elsewhere. Phaidon's strategies resemble a multi-level marketing scheme with various sectors of their publishing force focused on different aspects of the art community and the general public. For example, Phaidon's contemporary art series produces art books according to the artists' medium, reflecting a user-friendly price-point, design, and editorial content meant to reach a wider audience. Phaidon's sister platform, Artspace, showcases Phaidon's books as well as acting as a channel of communication by harvesting information about the Phaidon customer. The average price of a book sold on Artspace begins at \$1,300, thereby reflecting the users of this platform to be of a higher consumer class.

The challenges of publishing today ensue the history of modern production by demonstrating a fundamental shift in the way in which capital moves through space. Economic production takes place through technologically enhanced forms of cognition, crafting a result that is both immaterial and embodied. The framework of capitalism is congruent with television and the e-book, and the technology that compels the extraction of the subjects it exploits and produces flattens qualities of new media. The production and exchange of signs and signifiers ascribes a subject through the labor and disappearance of another, and *New New Testament* makes the subject conscious of the processes of production through a generation of cognitive associations. The abstract nature of *New New Testament* lends the work to continually displace normative signifiers while simultaneously constructing new links between words and images. The e-book is authorized as a new moment in the history of cultural and social production by opening the space of cognition, completed by the subsumption of the e-reader as a support. What occurs when the *hypokeimenon* is utilized as a readymade, or is made an active agent through discourse? Chun quotes Frances A. Yates' *The Art of Memory*, in order to emphasize the difference in cultural production: "For the places are very much like wax tablets or papyrus, the images like the letters, the arrangement and disposition of the images like the script, and the delivery is like the reading".<sup>22</sup>

While the television network has directed publishing in an economic sense, the rhetoric surrounding the speed of light limits the development of a discourse focusing on the non-simultaneous production and substitution of the image. Paper, acting as a medium, was a space for writing, but inherently lacks the dimensionality of software and hardware. If Yates' words can be truly considered, a compression of historical time is not experienced with this type of narrative, but rather, a layered evocation of images that accounts for a synchronous exchange of one another is to read and write with images. *New New Testament* attempts to slow down the speed of images by utilizing images as a language, producing a hyper-real content not subjugated to the form, but comprised within and by it. A new act of reading and writing does not substitute knowledge for content; on the contrary, if the perception of the image moves beyond light, cognition operates on a continuum that is constantly generative. What is of interest for storage and memory is

why certain images or language keep reappearing, and what processes of production make them disappear.

## Endnotes

- [1](#) David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas: A Novel* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004), 124.
- [2](#) David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), xi.
- [3](#) Ibid, 15.
- [4](#) William Grimes. "Michael Hart, a Pioneer of E-Books, Dies at 64" *The New York Times*, 8 September 2011. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/09/business/michael-hart-a-pioneer-of-e-books-dies-at-64.html>.
- [5](#) ARPA definition: "An agency of the United States Department of Defense, ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Agency) underwrote development for the precursor of the Internet, known as ARPANET". Margaret Rouse. *Tech Target*, WhatIs.com, Web. <http://searchnetworking.techtarget.com/definition/ARPA>
- [6](#) Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "The Enduring Ephemeral, or the Future Is a Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (April 24, 2008): 148–71, 158.
- [7](#) Ibid, 159.
- [8](#) Ibid.
- [9](#) Kelvin John Smith, *The Publishing Business from P-Books to E-Books* (Lausanne ; Worthing: AVA Academia, 2012).
- [10](#) Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy*, 17.
- [11](#) Alessandro Ludovico, *Post-Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing since 1894, Onomatopée ; 77; Variation:* (Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2012), 88. *Emphasis mine*.
- [12](#) "Unlike film...the small screen tends toward the kind of dramatic intimacy epitomized by the close-up...Television programming privileges individual modes of identification [and consumption] over collective or group identities". Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy*, 19.
- [13](#) Chun, 153-154. *Emphasis mine*.
- [14](#) Ibid, 154.
- [15](#) Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy*, 20.
- [16](#) Chun, 160.
- [17](#) Chun states, "Also, the lag between a digital object's creation and its popular or scholarly uptake—its nonsimultaneous dissemination— does not belie new media, but rather...grounds it as new". 153
- [18](#) (Smith).
- [19](#) Ibid.
- [20](#) Ibid.
- [21](#) Deborah Aaronson, Todd Bradway, Patricia Fidler, Arezoo Moseni, Lisa Pearson)
- [22](#) Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy*, 21.
- [23](#) Chun, 165.

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Sara received her M.A. degree in Media Studies from Pratt Institute, where she focused on the language games that surround narrative and the labor of subjects in history, while being critical of the conditions that make present alternative subject positions invisible through production and exchange. In 2015, she assisted in the organization of a conference held at Pratt Institute entitled "Hostile Intelligences and The General Antagonism," and has presented her work on the film "The Act of Killing" that extends her interest in the circulation of knowledge to the problem of fetishistic circulation of traumatic images. Sara is an independent scholar who investigates the value-form in the context of modern art and the historical relations between photography and film. Aside from the accompanying article on the artist Paul Chan, Sara looks forward to a forthcoming journal issue on Samuel Beckett published by Ibidem Press in which an interview with Chan will be published.

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