

THE PLEASURE OF THE BLOG: THE EARLY NOVEL, THE SERIAL, AND THE NARRATIVE ARCHIVE

Kathleen Fitzpatrick

Pomona College, Claremont, CA, USA

kfitzpatrick@pomona.edu

<http://www.plannedobsolescence.net>

„Pleasure results from the production of meanings of the world and of self that are felt to serve the interests of the reader rather than those of the dominant.” — John Fiske (1987: 19)

As this paper, which is a preliminary gesture toward a much larger work-in-progress, centers around the relationship between writing and the self as constructed through blogging, it seems almost necessary for me to begin with the personal, with my own self. This self is of course a multiply constructed subjectivity: there is the me that teaches, the me that attends endless meetings, the me that you might meet at a conference, the me that you could run into on the street. And then there is the me that you can find on my blog, which I’ve maintained for almost four and a half years now. If you google me, this is the me that you find first, the search engine’s best estimate of who I am.¹

I bring this up because this paper began for me with a series of conversations I had around the question of blogging — one in which a woman I’ve never met IRL, but whom I know from a series of online interactions, told me via IM that I was „a well-rounded character”; the other, in which a woman I do know IRL told me that she felt like she knew me better from my blog than from our direct interactions. These two moments raised questions for me about the relationship between blogging and subjectivity, how much the self becomes inscribed as a character in the act of

blogging, and what the relationship between that character, its multiple narratives, and the pleasures both of writing and of reading the personal blog might be.

Moreover, such questions about the relationship between the blogger and the character produced by blogging, as well as the narrative techniques that are used to create that character, began to suggest to me that blogs might fruitfully be approached as an emergent literary form. This is hardly a revolutionary thought: as Julian Dibbell suggested a million years ago (or in May 2000, to be more precise, but this is ages ago in blog years), „there is at least a little something to the claim that weblogs belong to literature. Deriving full-bodied, believable personalities from the quotidian flow of consciousness is, after all, one of literature’s specialties” (Dibbell, 2002: 76). The „quotidian flow” to which Dibbell referred was, in this case, the link-and-comment postings of Jorn Barger’s *Robot Wisdom*, but with the rise of a more personal, narrative style of blogging, such an observation seems to become even more appropriate. But there is a tension set up in Dibbell’s statement between the „deriving” of character in traditionally structured literary forms, and the „quotidian flow” of the blogger’s actual production; the literary quality of blogs arises from a complex negotiation among discrete, and often random, daily entries and the often invisible arc that they together sketch. Character may emerge from plot, in most literary writing, but in the blog, plot must itself emerge from the quotidian, produced not by a singular, overarching narrative, or even by a multiplicity of such narratives, but instead by the accretion of numerous fractal narratives structured by the form of the database.²

As many scholars have argued, different literary forms are in significant measure defined less by their specific content than by the ways that readers engage with them, the shared conventions through which readers orient themselves with respect to the text. In this sense, Steve Himmer argues in his essay, „The Labyrinth Unbound,” what defines a blog as a blog is less the specific technologies that produce it — though those are of course important, too — than the mode of interaction that blogs require of their readers, a way of reading that is intimately tied to the blog’s primary existence as a database:

writing on a weblog can only ever be read through the filter of the reader's prior knowledge of the author. As one day's posts build on points raised or refuted in a previous day's, readers must actively engage the process of „discovering” the author, and of parsing from fragment after fragment who is speaking to them, and why, and from where whether geographically, mentally, politically, or otherwise. (Himmer, 2004)

It is, according to Himmer, the shared codes among bloggers and blog readers that result in this process of narrative completion that produces the primary experience of reading blogs, an experience that he understands as „a distinctive literary and creative mode, something richer and more nuanced than viewing it as simply the outcome of a specific toolset or formal structure allows for” (Himmer). And, as he goes on to note, such an understanding of the „literariness” of blogs makes clear that this quality is not one „achieved by some weblogs and lacking in others.... This literary nature of the weblog is instead the loose set of shared criteria that allows us to speak of a plurality of ‘weblogs’ in the first place” (Himmer). All blogs, for Himmer, are in some sense literary, because of the nature of their readers’ interactions with them.

Such a claim begins to suggest that the reasons we read blogs may be slightly different than we have often imagined; through this understanding, blogs offer not simply a voyeuristic peek into someone else's life — though, obviously, that numbers among their pleasures, too — but they also offer a form of writing that engages the reader by requiring her not simply to consume the content presented but also, in some sense, to produce that content, to complete what is present through a knowledge of what is past, an exploration of the ways that that present is situated, and a commitment to return in the future. The character of the blogger, and the narrative of the blog, thus emerges in a distinctively time-based fashion. In most literary forms, of course, the text remains relatively static; even in forms such as hypertext, which require interaction on the part of a reader in order for the text, and its reading, to be produced, the text's nodes and pathways are all in place prior to the reader's first engagement. By contrast, any ongoing blog changes significantly

over time, as a reader encounters and re-encounters it: new posts are added, completing or complicating older posts; new links are created, changing the relationships among existing textual elements.³ For this reason, more than is true of most textual forms, in the encounter with blogs, reading is always re-reading; there is always something new, and thus the reader must return to the scene of reading again and again, gradually producing through accretion and reinterpretation the meaning of the blog as a whole.

The necessity of such an iterative reading process begins to suggest that while theories of narrative will be important to understanding how blogs are structured, and while theories of the database will be important to understanding how blogs function, theories of seriality will be crucial to understanding the pleasure of the blog. Why is it, after all, that we as readers are driven to return? The blog doesn't, generally, employ cliffhangers, doesn't demand that the reader tune in next week in order to find out how any particular mystery is solved. It does, however, always hold out the promise of more, and that sense of more — or, rather, the sense of incompleteness that requires more to fulfill the reader's desire — is at the heart of the pleasure to be obtained from reading blogs. What I hope to do in this project is explore the sources of that pleasure as a means of understanding the specific literary quality of blogs.

In what follows, I focus primarily on personal blogs, though I believe that some aspects of this argument can be extended to a wide variety of blog forms. As Jill Walker and numerous other sources remind us, a blog, in its most stripped-down form, is nothing more than „a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order” (Walker). Within this generality, however, there is infinite variation. Blog entries range from a simple record of links to interesting websites, to more extensive essays. Blogs can be personal or, most famously, political, and they can take up a wide variety of stances and a wide range of purposes inbetween.

Recent popular thought about blogs in the US acknowledges this range of styles and purposes, but often betrays a clear hierarchy of forms. The *Wikipedia* entry on

blogging is particularly informative here: blogs, it claims (or at least it claimed, as of 5 December 2006), „often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news,” before going on to acknowledge that „some function as more personal online diaries.” This clear dichotomy not only highlights the distinction most pundits draw between blogs that are public and blogs that are, in some sense, at least, private, but also makes clear that the latter category is relegated to the ghetto of the „online diary.” Of course these forms hardly exhaust the possibilities of blogging; the blog is, when separated from its more literary codes, little more than an engine, and one that colors but does not determine the kind of content that it delivers. I want to argue, however, that the „online diary” mode of blogging is far too quickly dismissed, and is in fact deserving of a closer look.

These popular notions of what blogs are or ought to be are grounded in the misguided sense, put forward in no small part by a cluster of elite bloggers themselves, but exacerbated by the treatment they’ve received in the mainstream media, that „serious” blogs become serious, taking on a kind of documentary quality, by virtue of their focus on archiving the materials of the public sphere. This phenomenon has of course been most pronounced with regard to the so-called „political” bloggers in the US, the obvious importance of whose subject over the last several years and the symbiotic nature of whose relationship with the news media has resulted in a kind of visibility that has defined blogging for the general public. But many other sorts of blogs reach for this same kind of public documentary presence without necessarily focusing on the political realm; in this category I might include any number of the more research- or debate-focused academic blogs (such as *Crooked Timber* in political philosophy or *The Valve* in literature, to name only two particularly visible examples) or the scads of technical blogs in the software community. These are the blogs that are frequently pointed to as evidence of what „good” blogs can be, and do.

My intent is not to dispute the „goodness” of such blogs, but rather to take a closer look at what gets left out of such assessments of bloggerly „quality,” and why. After

all, the political/personal divide doesn't really hold up in the blogosphere; the personal in blogs often becomes political by virtue of being made public and, as Steve Himmer points out, „webloggers engage politics not from the distant remove of traditional pundits, but rather from positions with high personal stakes” (Himmer). And thus while blogs that focus on the private sphere — the so-called „online diaries” — are much too often dismissed as being the work of teenage girls and other hysterics, prone to a kind of neurotic oversharing, that personal work is very often, on some level, political. Witness, for instance, the rash of dismissive articles in 2005 about the „mommy bloggers,” who were denigrated for making the private materials of their lives public, without any apparent recognition of the ways that such a making-public is precisely part of a political project.⁴ Thus, we can extend beyond Himmer's important assessment —

The weblog, as its detractors criticize, is often characterized by mundane, banal, sometimes embarrassing personal content ranging from what the author ate for lunch to specific health problems and sexual issues. This personal content, moreover, is frequently intermingled with commentary on politics or culture, making the personal, the public, and the political inseparable in precisely the ways the avant-garde demanded. (Himmer)

— to indicate that the desire to make the private public indicates the ways that the personal, in the blog, is not just „intermingled with” but very much of a piece with the political.

Witness, too, the characterization of such a private-sphere blogger by Ivan Tribble, a pseudonymous columnist in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, who set off a blogstorm in 2005 with an extremely dismissive rant about the dangers that blogs pose to academic job seekers. In the course of this rant, in which Tribble repeatedly displayed his bewilderment with the form and with the notion that anyone might have a desire to publish in such a fashion, he suggested in particular that the author of one such private-sphere blog, a job candidate he referred to as „Professor Shrii,” whose blog he discovered in the course of a search, might be well advised to seek counseling (Tribble, 2005).

The particular nickname that Tribble here selects highlights the fact that there is of course a relationship to be posited between the dismissal of such private-sphere blogs and the historical dismissal of feminine modes of writing; such personal bloggers are certainly not exclusively female, but they bear much in common with the „damn'd mob of scribbling women" lamented by Nathaniel Hawthorne. By dismissing private-sphere blogs as no more than online diaries or domestic ranting, we are effectively casting aside untheorized an entire mode of blogging that has, I believe, significant literary potential.

Today we of course understand the novel as one of the great Western art forms of the modern era, thanks in no small part to authors such as Hawthorne who demanded that it be taken seriously. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the novel inspired anxieties in the general public that seem a bit familiar today. Some portion of these anxieties about the novel was driven, famously, by concerns about what the novel was doing to its female readers. As Cathy Davidson has described the reception of the novel in the early United States:

The novel was the subject of heated popular debate in the late eighteenth century and, in many ways, was to the early national period what television was to the 1950s or MTV and video games to the 1980s. It was condemned as escapist, anti-intellectual, violent, pornographic; since it was a 'fiction' it was a lie and therefore evil.... The novel ostensibly contributed to the demise of community values, the rise in licentiousness and illegitimacy, the failure of education, the disintegration of the family; in short, the ubiquity of the novel . . . most assuredly meant the decline of Western civilization as it had previously been known (Davidson, 1991: 3).

But another aspect of this anxiety had to do with the very femaleness of the novel itself, which, as another critic has argued, resembled nothing more than „a coquette who lured readers into a claustrophobic world of desire and self-indulgence, the antithesis of the public domain of rationality and men" (Gilmore, 1994: 621).

The early novel was thus castigated both for the dangers it posed to delicate female sensibilities and for the ways that it made female forms of desire central to its

concerns (much in the same way that personal blogs are accused of being both neurotic and banal). Nancy Armstrong, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, has famously explored the intimate relationship between the early history of the novel and the coming into being of the domestic woman, arguing that writing by, for, and about women was formative in the production of modern subjectivity, arguing in part that „domestic fiction helped to produce a subject who understood herself in the psychological terms that had shaped fiction. I regard fiction, in other words, both as the document and as the agency of cultural history” (Armstrong, N., 1987: 23). Armstrong focuses on the relationship between the novel and its prehistory in women’s domestic writing such as conduct manuals, indicating the ways that these forms of writing, both the early nonfiction forms and the fiction to which they helped give rise produced a vast transformation in the modern self, changing that self from one understood primarily in its socially-situated nature to one understood primarily as an individual. Armstrong is mostly interested in what she sees as the disciplinary power of narrative, and the ways that it brought into being a modern, gendered subject. What is important here for my argument about the literary quality of blogs is the ways that such disciplinary power — the fact of the early novel’s having produced a form of subjectivity so pervasive and so apparently „natural” — is what transformed a species of writing seen as potentially dangerous, of dubious value, etcetera, into „literature.”

The question, then, is whether the personal blog might be in an analogous situation to the early novel. Structurally, of course, blogs bear a relationship to early forms of the novel, such as the picaresque and the epistolary novel, in their episodic format. But the relationship extends beyond such formal similarities to more epistemological concerns. Like the early novel, the personal blog on the one hand seemingly presents certain dangers to its readers, while on the other, it may be gradually transforming a degraded species of domestic scribbling into as a new form of literature through the production of a new form of subjectivity, a new understanding of the self as it exists not as individual, but instead as part of a network. As in the case of the early novel, part of the danger that blogs pose to the

reading public stems from the tension that they create around their truth value; are blogs genuinely a reflection of life, and thus non-fictional, or are they unverifiable, uncertain, and perhaps even untrue, or fictional?

Several blogs have tested the limits of such anxieties about truth status, including *She's a Flight Risk*. Begun in March 2003, *She's a Flight Risk* presents itself as the blog of an heiress on the run, was described by *Wired* magazine as a „hoax” (Kahney, 2003) and was greeted with fascination and suspicion by readers. Interestingly, it remains unclear whether the site is „true,” or fiction, or some combination of the two. A reporter from *Esquire*, in October 2003, published an extensive feature on his search for the mysterious Isabella V., concluding, finally, „Isabella is real. I think” (Richardson, 2003). And if, in fact, *She's a Flight Risk* was fictional, it was a most extraordinarily multi-media fictional production, employing, for the *Esquire* article alone, dozens of actors and coordinators, and even lawyers who stood ready to threaten bloggers with legal action.⁵ On the other hand, the story always seemed a little over-the-top to be real, prompting many readers to think of it as what Mark Bernstein described as „a new media thriller unfolding in real time” (Bernstein, 2003). Isabella kept posting, somewhat sporadically, for nearly three years, but interestingly she lost most of her audience and the media attention she'd gotten once it became clear that the question of her ontological status couldn't be settled. The interest, it turns out, was focused on that question: was she real, or wasn't she? Such fictional blogging experiments bear in common with the early novel a pervasive cultural anxiety about their truth status, an anxiety heightened by the sense of anonymity produced by the internet. Since the early days of BBSs or bulletin board systems, which evolved into usenet newsgroups, in fact, the internet has been the locus of a series of scandals about writers pretending to be someone else. The most famous example of such scandal in the blogosphere is the case of Kaycee Nicole. Kaycee Nicole was a nineteen year old blogger with cancer, who befriended many readers both through her blog and other modes of internet communication, before dying of a brain aneurysm in early 2001. Kaycee was, however, entirely an invention. Readers were infuriated by the „lie,” feeling that they'd somehow been

taken in; the FBI went so far as to investigate Kaycee's author, before finding that as she hadn't profited from the hoax, she hadn't committed a crime.⁶

One more example, which turned out differently: During the spring and summer of 2003, at the same time as the investigations into the truth status of „She's a Flight Risk,” a wide range of readers were also caught up in such questions about the status of Salam Pax, author of the blog „Where is Raed?”, a blog published from a Baghdad under siege at the onset of the war in Iraq. Debate raged around both the blogosphere and the mainstream media about whether the blog was „real” or whether it was a politically motivated hoax. (It finally did become clear that, in this case, the site was „real.”⁷)

In the case of Salam Pax, what's at stake in ascertaining the ontological status of the author is clear: if the author of the blog „really” exists, and is in fact who and where he says he is, the blog maintains some authority with respect to the matters of the public sphere that it's attempting to document. But examples like *She's a Flight Risk*, or the more recent scandal surrounding the truth status of the fictional YouTube poster „lonelygirl15,” raise the question of why we need personal blogs to be „true.” The situation is somewhat archaic: think of Hawthorne's move in the „Custom House” foreword to *The Scarlet Letter*, for instance, in which a kind of moral rectitude requires the author to demonstrate that his text is not an invention, but rather portrays a documentary reality.⁸ In the case of blogs, the fear seems to be that readers might be led to a dangerous form of identification with a person that doesn't exist, thus creating a vulnerability in the reader by exposing the constructed nature of her own subjectivity.

This vulnerability exists because such concerns about the truth status of bloggers raise the question of whether any self constructed through narrative can be said to accurately reflect a actually-existing human being in the world. As Steve Himmer points out, the ability of bloggers to play with the relationship between fictionality and the self, to understand the self's construction through its million little narratives, is precisely one of the pleasures of the blog:

The latitude allowed a weblogger, over time, to unfold the many aspects of his or her life and personality, and to do so in the same space in which they offer commentary on politics and culture, is a luxury not afforded to journalists or even novelists: discrete, commodifiable work requires a purpose, a point, or at the very least a marketable focus. This is not to say, however, that the self presented on a weblog is a ‘complete’ or even an accurate one: just as in journalism, memoir, or fiction, decisions are made about what to include and what to exclude. The weblogger, in that sense, can be read as fictional, as a character... furthering the collapse between factual and fictional, public and private, and distinct genres in general. (Himmer, 2004)

This collapse is largely responsible for the anxieties about the truth status of blogs, as such anxieties seem to revolve around one question: who are you? This suggests that one key difference between the novel and the blog is that, while the narrative of a novel as we generally understand it is in some admittedly reductive sense „about” plot, about a story, the narrative of a blog is in that same sense „about” character. Because of this, fictionality and anonymity produce similar kinds of concerns among blog readers, as we can see in the cases of Isabella V. and Salam Pax. Anonymity becomes threatening in no small part because it operates as a subset of the larger threat of de-individualization that blogs ostensibly present. Because of the intense reliance on linking, whether within the blog, to earlier bits of narrative, or outside of the blog, to other blogs with whom the blogger is in conversation, blogs always, in some senses at least, have a collective and intersubjective authorship. The blogger’s voice, while self-created and self-creating, is never complete in itself, never the discrete, unique, coherent individual to which Nancy Armstrong argues the novel gave birth. Instead, the blogself embodies many of the traits long attributed to the postmodern: radically decentered and fragmented, fully inhabiting a networked subjectivity.

Of course, as Fredric Jameson (1991) reminds us, there are two modes of understanding the changes in subjectivity that have ostensibly been wrought by the postmodern: the historicist argument, in which it is suggested that we once were in fact unique, discrete, coherent individuals, but that at some point since 1950,

something changed; and the poststructuralist argument, in which it is maintained that we never were those unique, discrete, coherent individuals, and that all that has changed is the epistemology that drives our self-understanding. The underlying presuppositions of this paper — that such self-understanding is tied to the dominant literary form of the period — rely on this poststructuralist argument. If the sense of the self as an individual was created and promoted through writing and reading about that self as an individual — if that sense of the individual is, not just in its origins but also in some deeper epistemological sense, fictional — then we might begin to understand the deep significance that the rise in blogging presents for our understandings of contemporary subjectivity. A self constructed through the form of the blog is not discrete but distributed, not coherent but fragmented, not unique but profoundly socially situated. And if the blog is, as I earlier suggested, an emergent literary form, it is a form that bears the possibility of transforming the relationship between the literary text and subjectivity.

And, in fact, the quality that has caused many personal blogs to gain such a substantive, devoted following amongst their readers is precisely the self-conscious work that they do in documenting the self, a project that paradoxically treats the self as „true” and as a chronologically developing, and thus inconsistent, character. Such personal blogs are extremely aware that the self that they construct is in some important sense fictional, and as such they consciously work to open up a grey area between documentary and fiction. Any number of bloggers (most of whom are avid blog readers) have gestured toward this grey area, including the New Kid on the Hallway, an anonymous academic personal blogger, who suggests a relationship between the serial form of the blog and the serial form of the soap opera, both of which focus on the ongoing adventures, over time, of their characters:

I feel caught up in bloggers’ lives in the way that people get caught up in soap lives. People talk about soaps as „my stories,” and that fits the way I think about blogs. If I miss reading for a while, I have to make sure to catch up on what’s happened. And I worry about my „characters,” and wait for the next installments when dramas are happening. (New Kid on the Hallway, 2005)

It's interesting to note, however, that she immediately pulls back from that assessment of the bloggers she reads, saying „This may sound a little creepy — I know that you bloggers out there are not ‘characters,’ but real people; I know that you're living real lives, not stories designed for my entertainment” (New Kid on the Hallway, 2005). What I want to suggest is that, in fact, in the most interesting blogs, this is not an either/or proposition; these blogs intentionally interrogate the literary nature of the self as a character.

In order to keep things relatively contained in this paper, I'm going to focus on one such blog: *Dooce*. *Dooce* is very much a personal weblog, authored by Heather Armstrong. Heather is mostly famous now for having gotten fired because of her blog several years back — in fact, „dooiced” has entered the vernacular of the blogosphere as an adjective used to describe those who have lost jobs because of controversies surrounding their blogs. My own feeling, though, that the most notable work *Dooce* has done has been blogging her breakdown, hospitalization, and subsequent recovery from crippling postpartum depression. What's important here are the complexities we see in the character of Heather: on the one hand, she's beautiful, she's funny, she's sophisticated, she's successful; on the other hand, we see these extraordinarily honest moments in which she explores the pain that she's mired in. Her voice is quite distinct: funny and honest and a little bit raucous. That voice is in fact key to the creation of her character: we know about her the things that she tells us, but mostly we know how she tells them, and that style is what elevates this blog, I'd argue, from the whiny online diary that many might dismiss it as, to something more literary in nature.

But *Dooce* is also filled with contradictions, ellipses, retractions, and revisions. For instance, on October 5, 2006, in the midst of her monthly letter to her daughter, Leta, Heather announced that the depression against which she had fought had returned. In the intervening period between her hospitalization two years before and her October revelation, Heather wrote of herself as recovered, as having survived and overcome. Does her admission of the depression's return invalidate the writing that has gone before? Or does it merely complicate it, revealing the self to be

constructed and reconstructed from moment to moment, never stable, but always instead an approximation? Moreover, it was another week before Heather began to reveal, at least in part, the causes of her depression, a lawsuit that had been filed against her, requiring an out-of-court settlement to avoid what appeared to be the imminent destruction of her family. Heather, of course, had been enjoined from writing about the situation by her lawyers, but such silence came to feel oppressive rather than protective:

I haven't said anything about this before now because that was the counsel of our lawyers, and I'm sure that if they read this they will recoil, shake their heads, and then charge me \$350 for having expended energy thinking another second about my case (I can hear one of them calling the other to say, „Dammit! She wrote about her feelings!”). I understand why they haven't wanted me to talk about this, but I have felt completely dishonest in remaining silent, in putting on a brave face when inside I was feeling as black and dramatic as every lyric written by The Cure. (Armstrong, H. 2006. *Here Goes Nothing. Doocè*)

There's much in this post that's instructive. Heather holds back the details of the lawsuit itself — though she hints that „anyone who wanted to do a little research could read every sordid detail”⁹ — focusing instead on the effects of the suit, on her „feelings,” as she suspects the lawyers would sneeringly say. These feelings and the hints about their causes are, from the perspective of the blog's regular readers, more important than are the details; this relatively brief revelation about the previous few months of Heather's life not only sends readers outside of the text for information that will complete it, but also allows readers to revisit writing from those previous few months, understanding a bit more about what was happening behind the scenes. The honesty that Heather seeks in her blog is not, then, a simple fidelity to the facts or an unmediated revelation of everything about her life, but rather a consistency of relationship between the blogger's affect and the persona she creates. As affect is mobile, so is that persona. The blog may thus be not simply the form best able to represent a genuinely fluid subjectivity, but rather the form that allows us to understand the fluidity of subjectivity in the first place.

The pleasure of the blog thus lies, I would suggest, not simply in its creation of character in any straightforwardly literary way, but also in its radical revisionings of both character and plot, and particularly, to return to the statement by Julian Dibbell cited earlier, in its reimagining of the ways that character emerges not out of a coherent narrative through-line, but out of the myriad interconnections of the quotidian. In the larger project of which this article forms a small part, I will turn my attention to theories of narrative, and the ways that they intersect with blogs around the questions suggested by Peter Brooks — „How do we find significant plots for our lives? How do we make life narratable?“ (Brooks, 1992: 114). Through these readings, I finally argue that blogs’ requirement of operating, in the phrase usefully presented by Frank Kermode, „in the midstest“ (Kermode, 1967: 17), suggests that blogs cannot simply be read as a form of online memoir, as they offer profound disruptions to the form. There’s an obvious structural difference: the memoir, even in its most complex forms, bears a kind of pressure toward coherence, toward rationality, toward teleology, that the blog evades — that the blog, being released over time, and being bound to the fluidity of its subject, must reject. While the memoir thus presents, even when it strives for open-endedness, a sense of conclusion, of past-tenseness, the blog requires a focus on the present tense and a refusal of closure in order to go on.

And in the specific mode of this refusal of closure is perhaps the most significant departure of the blog from earlier forms of electronic literature such as hypertext. Traditional hypertext theory has focused in on the lexeme and the rhizome as figures for the construction of the networked literary text, which becomes a system of nodes and pathways that the reader must explore.¹⁰ And clearly these figures are in some sense operational in the blog; each entry links both to other entries in the same blog, entries in other blogs, and the vast store of other resources on the internet, creating a rhizomatically distributed mode of meaning production.

But what I want to suggest is that this is utterly insufficient to understanding the ways that narrative is constructed in a blog, because, as a fundamentally spatial metaphor, it fails to contend with the blog’s most significant feature, its absolute

dependence upon temporality. Notions of the rhizomatic are useful for thinking about the nonlinear aspects of the blog, but they can't contend with the diachronic, the steady release of new text, new pathways, new information over time, and the ways that the iterative aspect of blog reading results in an ongoing sense of the development of character and even of plot. In the larger project, again, I will much more thoroughly explore this question of time, of the blog's simultaneous construction of a perpetual present and a ever growing past, as posts almost immediately become obsolete, disappearing into the archive, replaced by a more present present. I also explore the significance for blog-reading of the distinctions that Frank Kermode draws between two forms of literary temporality, *chronos*, or mere successiveness, what Kermode calls the time that is merely „one damn thing after another,” and *kairos*, or seasonal time, „a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end” (Kermode, 1967: 47). Why, I hope to ask, is the apparent retreat from *kairos* into *chronos*, from a structured sense of beginning, middle and end into the chaos of „one damn thing after another” so appealing to its readers? Why the desire for an eternal present, a narrative world without any apparent sense of an ending?

In the end, I argue, theories of seriality are crucial for understanding blogs, not simply in the ways that the character of the blogger is constructed through an ongoing, complex interaction of episodic narratives, but also for understanding the pleasure of the blog-reading experience, the ways that interruption, deferral, and waiting produce the desire that gets readers to return. These notions of the serial allow for an understanding of blogs that connects them to earlier narrative forms, including of course the picaresque and the epistolary novel, but also, as the New Kid on the Hallway suggested in her blog post, the soap opera.

And that last form, and the feminine modes of discourse that construct it, return me to the beginning of all this, in the ways that the so-called „online diary” is cast aside as another mode of discourse produced by that „damn'd mob of scribbling women.” As Beverle Houston has argued, seriality puts all television spectators „into the situation provided for the feminine in theories of subjectivity as well as in

her actual development and practice in patriarchy” (Houston, 1984: 189). The quotidianness, the deferral, the refusal of closure that is the signature of serial television forms such as the soap opera is also key to the structure of the blog — and is a significant aspect of the personal blog’s construction as feminine.

For these reasons, then, the blog requires some interweaving of theories of narrative, theories of hypertextuality, and theories of time-based media, such as television, in order to be fully explored as a narrative form. Through such an exploration, and particularly through an understanding of the ways that narrative forms construct both the writing and the reading self, we might begin to understand how blogs work discursively to produce a new kind of networked subjectivity.

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¹ See Fitzpatrick, 2002-present.

² Due to spatial and temporal limitations, I am unable in this paper to fully explore the significance of the database as an element of the literary nature of the blog; for more information on the relationship between database and narrative, however, see Manovich, 2001: 218-43, and Kinder, 2003.

³ And, not incidentally, old posts and links — and sometimes entire blogs — are deleted. Despite the existence of various Internet archives and caches, it remains possible for entire texts to disappear, as any number of Internet researchers have discovered, much to their chagrin.

- ⁴ See, for instance, the *New York Times* article “Mommy (and Me),” which focused on Dooce and other such bloggers: “For the generation that begat reality television it seems that there is not a tale from the crib (no matter how mundane or scatological) that is unworthy of narration” (Hochman, 2005).
- ⁵ See, for instance, *The Agonist’s* collection of documents related to Isabella.
- ⁶ See the *Museum of Hoaxes* website for one account of the Kaycee Nicole scandal.
- ⁷ See Maass, 2003.
- ⁸ “It will be seen, likewise, that this Custom-House sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognized in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained. This, in fact,—a desire to put myself in my true position as editor, or very little more, of the most prolix among the tales that make up my volume,—this, and no other, is my true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public” (Hawthorne, 2000: 4).
- ⁹ Needless to say, any number of bloggers immediately did precisely this. A Google search for “heather armstrong lawsuit” produces an overflow of hits pointing to the information that Heather was sued by Kensington Publishers for breach of contract after deciding not to sign a lengthily negotiated agreement to publish two books with them. See, for instance, Rost, 2006.
- ¹⁰ See, for instance, Landow, 1997.