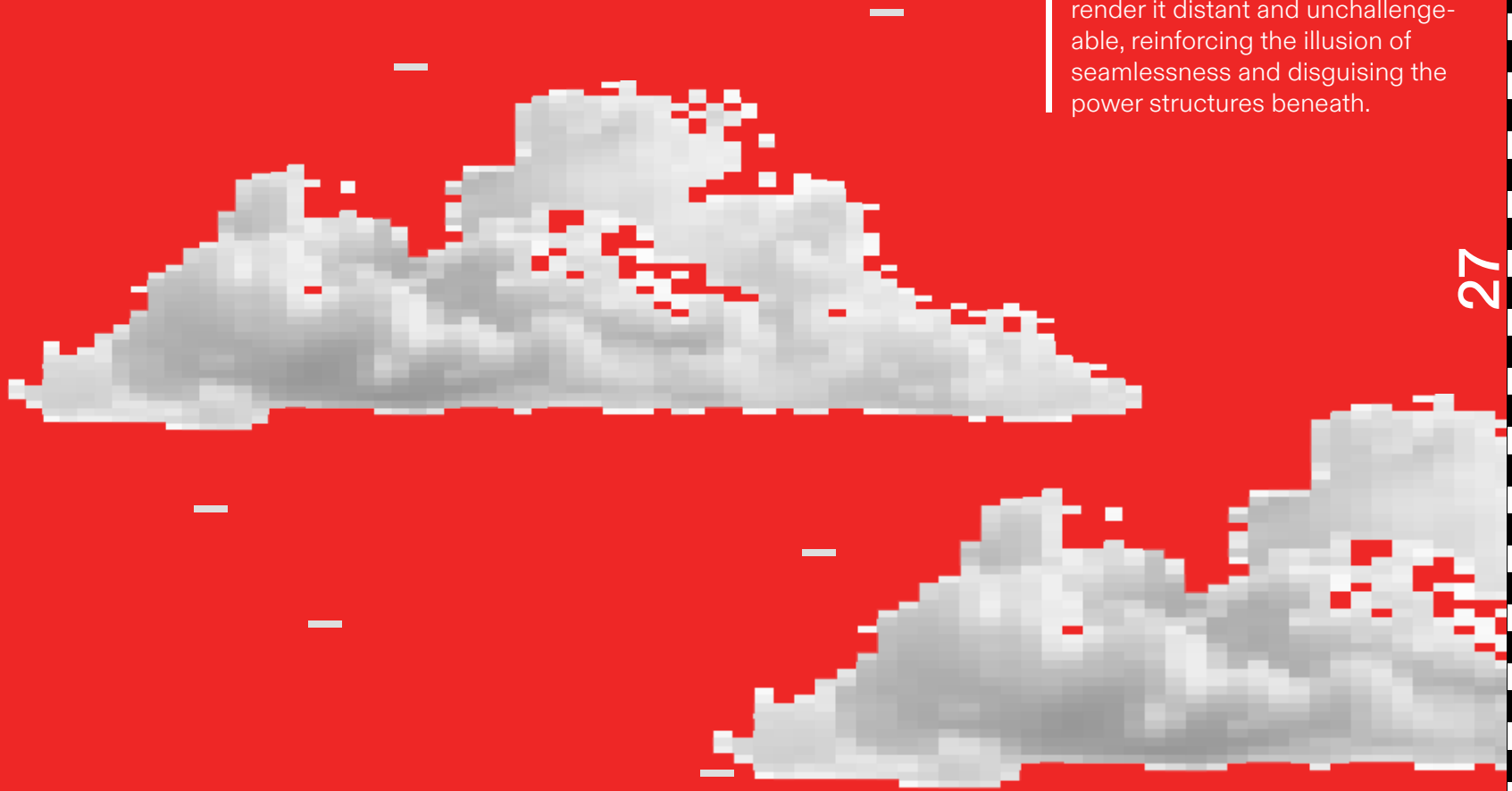
HOW METAPHORIZATION OF THE WEB DISTANCES US FROM TECHNOLOGY

One of the most persistent forces alienating users from technology is the human tendency to cloak the digital world in layers of metaphor and abstraction. Rather than revealing, these metaphors obscure, turning technology into something mystical at once familiar and fundamentally unknowable. This process distances us, the so-called "users," from the technical realities underpinning our digital environments.

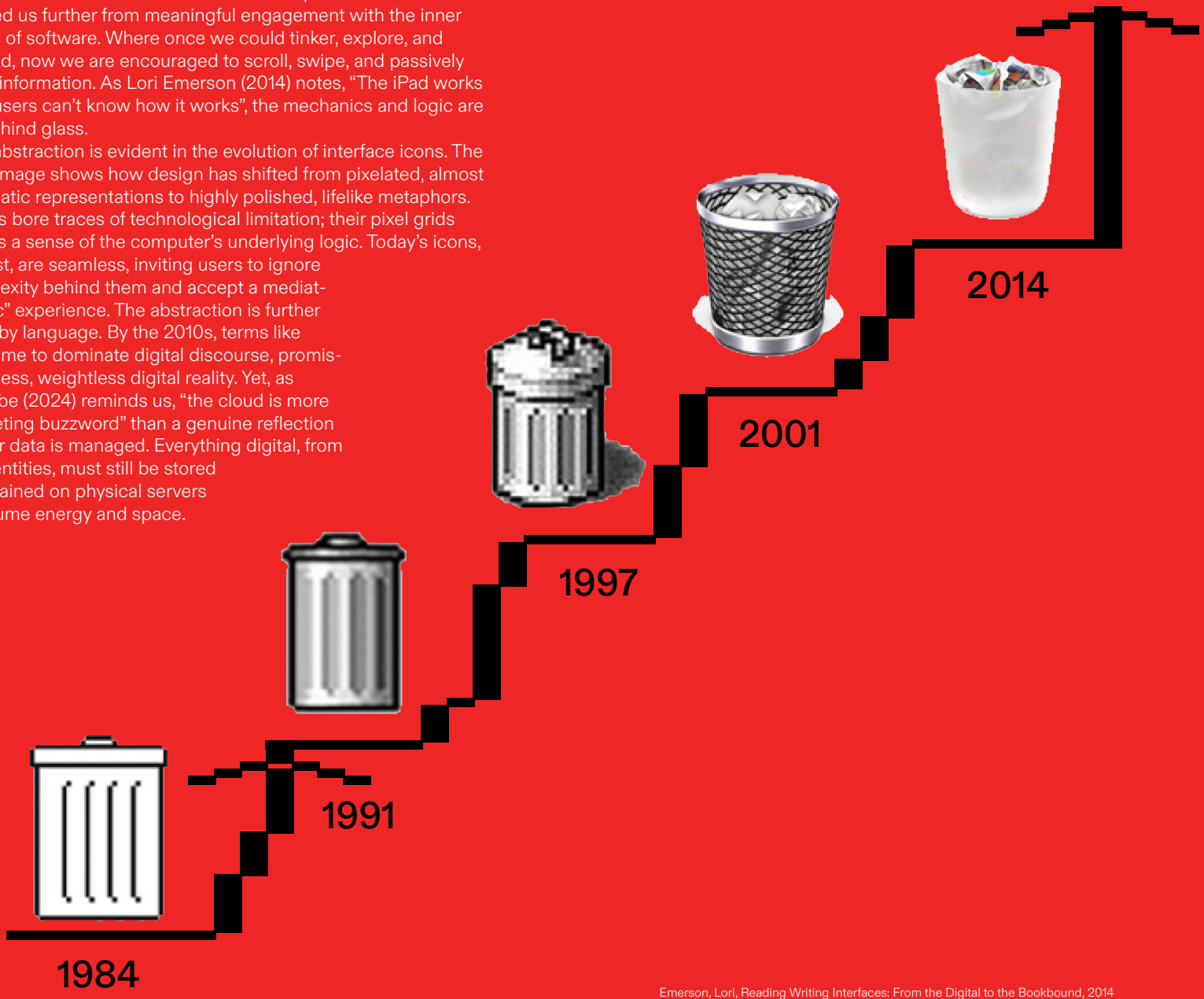
Graphical user interfaces (GUIs) themselves have become "an abstracted representation of a person's relationship to a machine"—and it is precisely this abstraction that prevents users from seeing or questioning the technical and political realities at play (Ecologies, 2024). These metaphors, once meant to make technology approachable, now render it distant and unchallengeable, reinforcing the illusion of seamlessness and disguising the power structures beneath.



Compiling Edge Effects: Notes on Publishing Ecologies, 2023

The invention of the computer mouse, for instance, brought us closer to virtual space by introducing a new form of embodied navigation, demanding at least some physical effort from the user. However, the subsequent rise of handheld devices like smartphones and tablets has pushed us further from meaningful engagement with the inner structures of software. Where once we could tinker, explore, and understand, now we are encouraged to scroll, swipe, and passively consume information. As Lori Emerson (2014) notes, “The iPad works because users can’t know how it works”, the mechanics and logic are hidden behind glass.

A similar abstraction is evident in the evolution of interface icons. The attached image shows how design has shifted from pixelated, almost diagrammatic representations to highly polished, lifelike metaphors. Early icons bore traces of technological limitation; their pixel grids gave users a sense of the computer’s underlying logic. Today’s icons, by contrast, are seamless, inviting users to ignore the complexity behind them and accept a mediated, “magic” experience. The abstraction is further amplified by language. By the 2010s, terms like “cloud” came to dominate digital discourse, promising a limitless, weightless digital reality. Yet, as Becca Abbe (2024) reminds us, “the cloud is more of a marketing buzzword” than a genuine reflection of how our data is managed. Everything digital, from files to identities, must still be stored and maintained on physical servers that consume energy and space.



Emerson, Lori, Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound, 2014
Becca Abbe, The Internet’s Back-to-the-Land Movement, 2019

This culture of abstraction and detachment finds its most potent expression in the world of design software. As Rob Giampietro has argued, "The computer has changed design, but it has also changed our process of thinking and making" (Giampietro, 2014). Tools like Adobe Creative Suite, with their intricate ecosystems of defaults, templates, and automated features, shape not only how we work but how we think about what design is and could be.

design SOFTWARE AND DEFAULTISM

This phenomenon extends beyond mere hardware. The introduction of the Macintosh computer, for instance, coincided with the decline of the Swiss International Style and the rise of a more automatic, industrialized approach to graphic design. “Default systems are machines for design creation,” Giampietro writes, describing a shift toward design practices that align with capitalist values—speed, replication, and efficiency over craft, nuance, and critical engagement (Giampietro, 2014).

The first Apple Macintosh was introduced on January 24, 1984, by Steve Jobs.

Default settings, far from being neutral, actively sculpt creative outcomes. They make design more accessible to the masses, but also risk flattening difference and dehumanizing the creative process. The designer is gradually replaced by the software; what once required intentional choice and authorship is now accomplished through the path of least resistance, the click of a button. Even the notion of “ugly design,” as Giampietro discusses, is bound up with these same systems—driven by a mix of democratic impulse and algorithmic convenience.

For me, this resonates with Olia Lialina’s critique of Adobe’s marketing: campaigns that claim, “I have more time to do what I like most—being creative,” while actually encouraging designers to distance themselves from code, links, and the deeper workings of the web. The message is clear: the less you understand about the technology, the more creative you supposedly are (Lialina, 2015).
Adobe, in particular, monopolizes the “creativity” market, setting the standards for what is considered “good design” and influencing aesthetic norms across the field (Giampietro, 2014). The deeper issue is that default systems are designed to be invisible. Their norms, once established, become silent truths—rarely questioned, yet powerfully shaping the direction of an entire industry. As Bridle (2019) observes, “To live a life within human society