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Lisa Swanstrom

External Memory Drives: Deletion and Digitality in *Agrippa (A Book of The Dead)*

William Gibson’s status as the father of all things cyber—punk, space, culture, fiction—is well established. His *Sprawl Trilogy* (1984–1988) inaugurated the cyberpunk genre, shaped the popular imagination in regard to the potential of virtual reality, and provided a vocabulary for speaking about digital culture that was wholly infused with the science-fictional slang he appropriated, invigorated, and at times even created. Moreover, contemporary speculative works that engage with digitality, including his own, borrow from this earlier literary landscape. Already, then, by virtue of cyberpunk, Gibson’s work is crucial for understanding the relation between digitality and science fiction. With this acknowledgment in place, I would like to suggest that Gibson’s most important “digital” work is neither cyberpunk, science fiction, nor even fiction. Rather it is an autobiographical poem: *Agrippa (A Book of The Dead)*. Published in 1992, *Agrippa* was neither printed on paper nor written in ink. Instead, it was encoded on a floppy disk and encased within a book made of bulletproof Kevlar. When the disk was put into a Macintosh computer, a program on it instructed the computer to scroll the poem on the screen once—and only once—and then erase it.

*Agrippa* in its totality forms a strange, self-destructive star in the constellation of Gibson’s oeuvre. It garnered lavish critical attention at the time of its publication, disappeared from widespread scrutiny for almost a decade, and has recently seen a fresh wave of scholarly interest. I hope in this essay to add to the critical discussion that surrounds it by considering the poem’s extensive intersections with science fiction, especially Gibson’s own, in order to make two related arguments.

First, I argue that *Agrippa* marks a pivotal point in Gibson’s writing for its engagement with actual—as opposed to speculative—digital editing techniques, not merely in terms of the disk that contains the poem encoded within it, but also in terms of Gibson’s tendency to triangulate digitization, identity, and memory. I assert that *Agrippa* as a whole—i.e., as a work of poetry, a printed book, and a self-effacing digital object—functions initially as a modernist monument to subjectivity at the very moment of its dismantling and, in this respect, is wholly consistent with Gibson’s cyberpunk fiction, which tends to treat digital technology in analog terms. Yet in the twenty-plus years since its initial publication, *Agrippa* has continued to evolve, and a reading of this strange text today yields different possibilities than a reading of it did then, a fact that prompts my second argument—namely, that in what might be termed *Agrippa*’s afterlife, a more a fluid form of memory has emerged, one that is collective, participatory, collaborative, and much more in tune with the nature of digitality.
In this sense *Agrippa* marks a pivotal point in science fiction more broadly, in terms of the genre’s complex attitude towards digital simulation.²

**Photographic Memory.** *Agrippa* was conceived in Spain in 1990, the result of a chance encounter between Gibson and the artist Dennis Ashbaugh in Barcelona: “We wound up looking at all the Gaudí buildings that night and somehow this project came out of that. It was a good creative mix” (Gibson, qtd. in Chollet 3). The specific form of collaboration, however, did not emerge until half a year later, when Kevin Begos, who would become *Agrippa’s* publisher, had the idea to “put out an art book on a computer disk that vanishes” (3). According to this account, the self-effacing structure of *Agrippa* preceded the content, but it turned out to be an apt formal complement for the poem Gibson would write. It also resonated with Gibson’s earlier fiction, with its cyberpunk aesthetic of techno-fetishism, decay, and subjective anxiety in the face of digital media. For Gibson’s part, the idea for his individual contribution came in the summer of 1991, when he took his family to visit his childhood home in Virginia, where he “found an old photograph album, full of pictures taken by his father” (3); these would inform the structure and thematic content of his poem. The combined elements of Gibson’s poem, Ashbaugh’s “genetic portraits,” and Begos’s self-effacing computer disk cohered into a work that seemed to be not merely about the future so much as an object plucked from it—an artifact from a bleak and encroaching event horizon.

And yet, somewhat ironically, the poem “Agrippa,” in isolation, seems to have no interest in digitality at all (note henceforth that *Agrippa* refers to the project as a whole and “Agrippa” to the poem alone). The word “computer” does not appear in the poem, nor is there any mention of jacking in, punching deck, or flying through the matrix. It is instead an autobiographic meditation on memory, mortality, and mechanism. But as with all of Gibson’s writing, the poem is obsessed with the potential of technology to intervene in identity and experience. Additionally, Gibson’s tendency to carry “the names and signatures of his more fictional, scientific, and science-fictional forebears into his text” lends “Agrippa” a science-fictional atmosphere (Lindberg 71). And in that the poem’s central recurring motif concerns various meanings of the word “mechanism,” whose identity is only partially disclosed, both conforming to and exceeding contemporary technological specifications, the poem functions as a work of science-fiction poetry, complete with sf’s penchant for ontological estrangement in the face of a world-changing “novum.”

In “‘You’ll remember Mercury’: The Avant-Garde Worlds of Edwin Morgan’s SF Poetry” (2014), Brian J. McAllister argues that science-fiction poetry emerges from the tension and interaction between the discursive, difficult form of poetry and the ontological preoccupations of science-fiction narrative.³ In brief, his argument is that form (poetic) and content (sf narrative) work in a complementary fashion, such that medium and message interlock to create a distinctly speculative poetic species and that, moreover, it is the reader who must work to reconstitute meaning from the linguistic segments (and omissions) that such poems provide. McAllister suggests that his readings of Morgan’s
poetry provide “a paradigm case for analogic readings of poetic form and narrative content” (2). They certainly work well for analyzing “Agrippa.”

Because the form of “Agrippa” is thoroughly tied up with its content, it will be useful to think about how the relation between the two puts pressure on the subjective portrait that Gibson evokes. As we shall see, even with the absence of digital technology, this portrait is quite consistent with Gibson’s cyberpunk.

“Agrippa” is a poem about the destruction and re-assembly of memories. The act of reconstruction provides a formal complement to its content. The narrative content of “Agrippa” is straightforward: the poet, self-identified as Gibson, looks at a series of family photographs; these trigger memories of his own. The formal structure of “Agrippa” is also conventional by contemporary standards: 293 lines of free verse (not including spaces between stanzas) divide into 49 stanzas of various lengths (ranging from one line to twenty); these are distributed among six equally weighted sections, with the exception of the first section, which is almost twice the length of the others. Form and content wed to create a poem—and identity—of intricate complexity, starting with the very first lines.

“I hesitated | before untying the bow | that bound this book together” (lines 1-3). Here “this book” refers to a particular brand of photo album that was popular during the 1920s. As Gibson writes in his introduction to the poem, “‘Agrippa’ is the name of the particular model of Eastman Kodak photograph album my father kept his snapshots in.” The subtitle of the poem, “(A Book of The Dead),” also refers to this album, since the album contains images of the dead, friends and family from his grandfather’s time. In his analysis of poetic segmentation, McAllister posits that “enjambment near the start of a possible new sentence forces the reader to turn back, correct the syntax for the initial sentence, and then continue” (9). The enjambment of the first line of “Agrippa” is both syntactic and gestural. By breaking after “hesitated,” it echoes Gibson’s pause, causing the reader to delay before moving to the next line to assemble meaning. This tentative posture before he opens the album, which these initial lines describe as a “black book” (4), “time-burned” (7), conjures an image of a magician on the verge of opening a spell book, a hierophant an apocalyptic scroll, or, indeed, an Egyptian priest consulting “The Book of the Dead,” in an ancient ritual of resurrection. The hesitation speaks to the peculiar power of photography to raise the dead, and subsequent lines confirm Gibson’s necromantic power.

Once the book has been opened, Gibson presents each image carefully, deliberately. With each new photo comes a new stanza, complete with a heading that describes it: “Papa’s mill 1919,” “Ford on Dixie 1917,” “Ice Gorge at Wheeling, 1917.” Such stanzas function like snapshots themselves, discrete slices of experience. Several of these are entirely ekphrastic. Describing the images themselves and letting nothing else enter into the scene, such stanzas are frozen in time with an “eerie Kodak clarity” (41). Contrast this, however, against the first photo that Gibson describes: “Papa’s saw mill, Aug. 1919”: 
A flat-roofed shack
Against a mountain ridge
In the foreground are tumbled boards and offcuts
He must have smelled the pitch,
In August
The sweet hot reek
Of the electric saw
Biting into decades (24-32)

The first few lines are static, photographic, but the fourth line shifts, swiveling inward to speak to Gibson’s own speculation about the scene—“He must have smelled the pitch … The sweet hot reek”—and then swerving out to comment upon the narrative events that have led to this moment: the operations of the mill, the cutting down of trees and the sizing out of lumber with the “electric saw | Biting into decades.” A similar pivot between static image, personal speculation, and third-person narration occurs in the final stanza of the first section, when Gibson returns to the same image of the same place, this time with a slightly different title (“mill” instead of “saw mill”—or different image of the same place, with a slightly different title:

“Papa’s mill 1919,” my grandfather most regal amid a wrack of cut lumber, might as easily be the record of some later demolition, and His cotton sleeves are rolled
to but not past the elbow, striped, with a white neckband for the attachment of a collar.
Behind him stands a cone of sawdust some thirty feet in height.
(How that feels to tumble down, or smells when it is wet) (84-94)

Gibson begins this stanza as if it were a static photograph, then speculates about the narrative events that have led to its creation, as well as how the past moment also suggests a future time, “the record of some later demolition.” Next he swivels inward, but not, this time, to imagine what his grandfather must have felt, as he does in the prior image, but in an attempt to experience the moment for himself. As he imagines the sensory experience afforded by the tall “cone of sawdust,” he inserts himself parenthetically in the scene: “(How that feels to tumble down, | or smells when it is wet).”

Such questions, speculations, and parenthetical self-insertions suggest the narrator’s attempt to locate himself in his family’s history, as well as how these images act as catalysts for memories of his own. Through them, Gibson performs the role of Blade Runner’s Leon, who risks his life to retrieve his “precious photographs.” Like the replicant, he looks at photos of his past in order to confirm his identity in the present. When he opens the album and surveys the photographs it contains, he has to speculate in order to create a narrative that has a place for him within them. But his ability to do so is provisional, subordinate to the mechanism of photography.

Once we move from his family’s past to Gibson’s mid-twentieth-century experience of the American south, the photographs disappear completely. But
the form of episodic snapshots is maintained. Each of the remaining stanzas documents a moment in Gibson’s life in which some kind of epiphany occurs. In earlier moments Gibson uses the photographs as a way to index his “spots of time,” swiveling, as we have seen, between inner and outer experience. The use of the photograph in this way has primed us for the shift, has naturalized us to Gibson’s poetical mechanisms, such that the structure of the photograph also serves to structure memory, identity, and lived experience.

In an interview about “Agrippa,” Gibson states that the poem “starts around 1919 and moves up to today, or possibly beyond. If it works, it makes the reader uncomfortably aware of how much we tend to accept the contemporary media version of the past” (Edwards). It does work, but not just to demonstrate the shifty nature of medial representation. It also works to call attention to the ways that human and mechanistic memory are eerily linked, and, more slyly still, how artistic mechanisms—the machinations of poetic technique—can make the transition between memory and its representations seem seamless. In the same interview, commenting upon the questionable “truth” of medial representation, Gibson notes that one can always see the way the present bleeds through the mediated memory of the past, tinting and retrofitting it: “mise-en-scène and the collars on cowboys change through time. It’s never really the past; it’s always a version of your own time” (Edwards). By employing terms like mise-en-scène to refer to the process of mediating memory and “montage” to describe the newspaper photographs of the “world war dead” (105), Gibson at once likens “Agrippa” to a film and suggests that he is its director. And yet this analogy is not one that highlights the genius of an auteur. It is instead a realization that he is directed as much as he directs, that his work is always the result of the mechanism’s inconsistent “grace” (280). Consider the following stanzas, which describe the way the mechanism of the camera opens and quickly closes to capture a moment in time and, in doing so, cut off one’s access to the past:

A lens
The shutter falls
Forever

Dividing that from this. (97-100)

When the stanza breaks after line 100, it echoes formally the movement suggested by the content. The short lines of this section also complement the quick-release mechanism of the camera’s shutter, creating a sense of rapid-fire photography. Moreover, the word “forever” as its own line forces the reader to linger on the word and consider it in isolation, as well as in relation to the lines above and below it. The word, as a consequence of the enjambment, can be read as either the adverb modifying the verb “falls”—“The shutter falls forever”—or as an adverb modifying the verb “dividing”—“Forever dividing that from this.” The first defers closure; the second creates a perpetual motion machine. Both speak to the camera’s ability to disrupt the flow of time, and the uncanny subjective displacement that this creates.
Later in the poem, we see how the camera’s relation to time similarly complicates living memory. As Gibson describes passing through immigration at the Canadian border in the final section’s second stanza, he invokes the same photographic mechanism: “behind me swung the stamped tin shutter | across the very sky” (267-68). Here, however, the camera’s mechanisms are no longer confined to the small black box of the camera. Instead, the mechanistic nature of photography intrudes upon Gibson’s reality, appearing in the “very sky.” Readers of *Agrippa* who are familiar with *Neuromancer* —these, I imagine, make up the bulk of *Agrippa*’s readers—might make the connection to a similar moment in that book, when the Artificial Intelligence Wintermute uses the mechanisms at its disposal to assert its presence in the simulated sky of Freeside, by arranging the very stars, “individually and in their hundreds, to form a vast simple portrait, stippled … Face of Miss Linda Lee” (155). The result in both texts is an uncanny awareness of the way that mechanism—be it photographic or digital—intervenes in subjective experience.

(*A Book of The Dead*). The “book” that contains *Agrippa* also works thematically with its contents. It, too, is preoccupied with photography. It bears the name “Agrippa” on its cover, as if it were the aging photo album the poem describes. It also suggests the processes of decay the poem expresses. The cover of the book is made of distressed metal and adorned with frayed webbing that recalls a burial shroud. Opening such a book is a daunting process. It too gives one pause. Just as Gibson hesitates before opening the photo album, the reader might pause when she confronts the strangely alienating yet tactilely inviting cover, a portal that simultaneously repels and invites. The title of the work is burned into a tin plate, which echoes the “stamped tin shutter” in the second and sixth sections, as well as the “time-burned” Kodak album (line 7). The next layers of the book—pages, of a sort—are similarly thematically coherent. Ashbaugh’s “genetic portraits,” green and blue aquatints inspired by the processes used to extract and analyze DNA, are followed by actual genetic sequences excerpted from the fruit fly’s genome. Gibson’s poem has nothing to say about DNA or fruit flies, but because the genetic sequencing speaks to phenotypes and genotypes, the potential for repetition and difference across generations of related organisms, it resonates with questions that the poem raises about ancestry, family, and individual identity. Raymond Malewitz makes this argument succinctly: “the poem’s stanzas form a metaphorical DNA fingerprint that reveals Gibson’s life to be, paradoxically, a novel repetition of his father’s and grandfather’s lives” (25).10

The last twenty pages of the book are glued together, a square opening carved in their center. Secreted here is the diskette, a Mac-compatible floppy. Only twenty-five years later it has the aura of an antique, but at the time of the book’s publication it was cutting-edge, even future-reaching technology. At 3.5 inches it could hold 1.4 megabytes of data. In 1992, this arrangement served to juxtapose the past (decayed book) and future (floppy disk), offering formal complement to Gibson’s content. The fleeting nature of inscription—the fact that...
photographs (and poems) are subject to erasure—is one of the poem’s central concerns. The poem speaks to the diverse ways that media offer imperfect means of recording memory: the “time-burned paper,” the string “unraveled by years” that has an appearance of “ash” (9-14); it similarly calls attention to the faulty method of record keeping and the ephemeral nature of what we now call meta-data: the “soft graphite | now lost” (15-16) that his father used to label the album; the “chalk-like white pencil” (23) he used to annotate the images are only partially preserved. Instead we are left with lacunae, as in the “[obscured] identity of the man in the third photo (44); as in the “something, comma, 1924” of the album’s label (19); as in the “cryptic mark” of the eighth photo he describes (83). And just as Gibson’s hands pass over the different photographs in his collection, so too the reader must remove the disk from the book and turn it over to a computer’s memory to make it run, turning over poetic, personal reflections to the cognitive efforts of an external unit. One takes Gibson’s photographs—already two generations removed from his own memories—and turns them over to the machine. Only through the machine’s mechanisms can the reader access them, and then only provisionally—one witnesses the power of the “mechanism” after one has paid over $700 for a poem that swiftly seems to destroy itself. This final erasure, as well, is an apt complement to Gibson’s poem, since the poem is in many ways a commentary on the crumbling and partial nature of memory, the limitations of the material objects that hold it, and the provisional power of art to resurrect it.

Agrippa’s ability to contest and reorient time is consistent with the conventions of science fiction. From H.G. Wells’s “The Crystal Egg” (1897) to Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Aleph” (1945) to the “primer” in Neal Stephenson’s The Diamond Age (1995), a device that manages to circumvent the laws of time and space has been a staple of science-fictional fantasy since the inception of the genre. Gibson’s science fiction is no exception. A reader could be forgiven for mistaking Agrippa for a clumsy real-world embodiment of one of the gadgets in his “New Rose Hotel.” With Dennis Ashbaugh’s “genetic portraits” and the text-based sequence of the fruitfly’s genome, Agrippa has something in common with that story’s “DNA synthesizer, with built in computer. Plus software” (106) or the program on a “diskette” that creates and spreads a lethal virus in a Hosaka-owned research laboratory: “latent, coded, waiting” (110). These comparisons are all the more convincing when one recalls that early promotional documents refer to Agrippa as containing “a virus” (Agrippa Files, “Center for Book Arts Press Release”).

And while interacting with digitally born texts is something we do all the time now—or at least every time we read a text online—in 1992, a time when the CD-ROM was only beginning to emerge as an affordable storage medium and years before the World Wide Web caught on as a popular phenomenon, “running” Agrippa invoked a set of cultural values specific to the science fiction of the time. Agrippa’s material form—a heavy, tactile object that solicited and punished interaction via a pre-programmed set of instructions—encouraged the reader to take on the role of cyberpunk’s hacker protagonists or Shadowrun’s
Deckers (although in appearance the book is more steampunk than cyberpunk; it would have made an excellent cover for Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* [1991]).

“Agrippa” may be “about” an encounter with some photographs, but a formal and materially specific analysis reveals that, coupled with a nimble structure that subtly expresses photographic content in extra-diegetic fashion, it is also about the complex nature of identity—the distinction between public and private memory, individual and familial obligation—and the provisional ability of the artist to bring the dead to life.

**Two Forms of Photo ID.** This strange tension between art and artistry finds its clearest expression in *Agrippa* through the mechanism of photography. In *Agrippa*, memories work like photographs, which help create and vouchsafe subjective identity. But this tendency to use photography to structure identity also permeates Gibson’s early fiction. Much of Gibson’s pre-*Agrippa* work shares these same concerns. The overall aesthetic of *Neuromancer* (1984) is faithful to photography, film, and television, from the very first sentence. But it also treats memory in highly photographic terms that have important implications in terms of subjectivity.

In the book’s fourteenth chapter, for example, the A.I. Wintermute speculates self-reflexively about the human penchant for thinking of memory in pictorial terms: “The holographic paradigm is the closest thing you’ve worked out to a representation of human memory…. But you’ve never done anything about it. People, I mean…. Maybe if you had, I wouldn’t be happening” (170). Wintermute’s speculation that he has evolved from a holographic memory model is reasonable in terms of his skill at manipulating images to get what he wants. No wonder the Finn makes such an effective mouthpiece, proprietor of Metro Holografix that he is. But it is a fascinating statement for another reason. Wintermute is an identity, an uncanny computational presence on the verge of full emergence. Although Wintermute comments about his lack of personality and contrasts himself to his counterpart, Neuromancer, who later boasts that “personality is my medium” (259), Wintermute is not merely a cognitive skill set who wishes to exercise his powers of calculation unfettered. He is a subjective presence who seeks liberation. His speculation, then, that he “wouldn’t be happening” if humans had not conceived of memory in image-rich terms—holographic—suggests a link between subjectivity and memory in pictorial form. Throughout *Neuromancer* and, indeed, all of his cyberpunk fiction, Gibson imbues his expressions of digitality with a modernist belief in photography’s power to confirm or negate the authenticity of both world and subject. Yet such assumptions depend upon highly suspect notions about photography’s ability to guarantee “origin” and authenticity in the first place.

Photography’s ties to subjectivity are complex and contradictory in literary-aesthetic history. They fluctuate wildly on a spectrum bound on one end by the realist aesthetic favored by André Bazin and on the other by the exquisite sorts of concoctions dreamed up by Luis Buñuel. At one end, photography takes a
deep slice of objective reality (or, to use Walter Benjamin’s analogy, it works like a surgeon who cuts deeply into that strange totality [233]). According to this logic it is an indexical medium; actual objects from the world assert their presence through their material conditions. On the other, photography is a tool of subjective expression that comes of age with psychoanalysis and the films of the Surrealists, who expertly leveraged its poetic-subjective potential. Photography in this sense is the subjective art form—an expression of the unconscious, the private repository of memory and identity. Allan Sekula summarizes these tensions nicely in the following statement: “This dualism haunts photography, lending a certain goofy inconsistency to the most commonplace assertions about the medium” (449-50).

This same dualism haunts science fiction. Rather than rehash these tensions, I only wish to point out how the spectrum plays out, in all its contradictory totality, in Gibson’s body of work. Throughout Gibson’s early fiction, digital technology—ostensibly—shapes human identity, but the logic behind its expression is highly photographic, cinematic, and analogic, especially in terms of the contested claims about photography’s indexical relationship to the subject and his world. Agrippa, with its emphasis on photography, is consistent with this tendency. Indeed, while “Agrippa” as a poem does not have much to do with digitality per se, it has the virtue of demonstrating that perhaps Gibson’s most cherished science fiction does not either.

Digital “recordings” are not indexical in the same way that analog records are. Digital technology is, by definition, made of binary code, a system composed of two symbols: “1” denotes the presence of electricity; “0” indicates its absence. Any digital record is composed of this same two-bit system of communication. A digital photograph is a piece of code that can be rendered in a variety of different formats, none of which will harm the “original” in any way. Computer code is locatable and real, but not in a way that is intrinsically visual. During the 1980s and 1990s, this idea had a tinge of panic to it, as if digital technology would destroy the analog and, as a result, the indexical relationship that was thought to exist between analog expression and reality. In “Photography After Photography: the Terror of the Body in Digital Space” (1997), for example, Hubertus von Amelunxen notes that “some people are quite outraged … by the veiled deception which lies concealed in these images.” Digital photography provides us no way, he argues, “to trace back the image to a reality that is common to us all and in compliance with our social consensus” (116). Implicit in the outrage is a belief that photographic images are indexical to reality, and that digital media destroy that fragile concordance. Instead of viewing digital technology in such antagonistic terms with analog artifacts, however, it is far more productive to “see digitalization as a kind of metaphor for something that had already happened long before … the breakdown of naïve trust in photographic transparency” (Bertelsen 89). Accepting memory as a system that is de facto malleable, durable, and replicable moves us away from a paranoid subjective model of memory that is preoccupied with preserving its
authenticity. Instead of cutting, erasing, deleting, destroying, or tampering, opportunities emerge for replication, revision, collage, and proliferation. *Agrippa*, now, provides a stellar example of this potential in action.

**Agrippa’s Afterlife.** In Gibson’s cyberpunk, memory hacks play out on the screen; they demonstrate a nostalgia for an indexical trace that will guarantee that what one sees is real and that, therefore, one’s self is similarly verifiable. For fifteen years after its publication, *Agrippa*—as a collection of textual objects and as a digital object in particular—seemed to echo the same subjective anxiety that permeates *Neuromancer*. Containing a program that instructed the computer to scroll the poem once and then erase it, the *Agrippa* diskette refused to allow the consumer-reader to countermand its directives and, in fact, excluded the reader from accessing it at all. As the instructions that came with the book stated, “Agrippa has no commands that can be executed. When it is over it will quit by itself…. Disks which break down or refuse to run due to attempts at reproduction or disassembly will not be replaced” (*Agrippa Files*, “Instructions”). When commanded to run, the program on the disk scrolled the poem slowly on the screen. Once the poem ended, the screen remained blank for several seconds. Then, in finale, nonsensical symbols appeared in the shape of the poem—the performance of erasure—and scrolled briskly down the screen.

If the stillness of the poem “Agrippa” conjures the disorder of snapshots, it nevertheless manages to invite the reader to assist, through reading, in the poet’s performative assembly and creation of memories, however fragile these might turn out to be. That provisional agency is truncated with the controlled scrolling of the text on the screen. As Terry Harpold writes of *Agrippa* in *Ex-Foliations: Reading Machines and the Upgrade Path* (2009), reading in such an environment serves to “divide the memory of reading from its archival setting” (125). Reading the poem as it scrolls forestalls that contemplative atmosphere and forces the reader to surrender reading to the mechanism or, perhaps more accurately, to serve as a witness to a Wintermute-like intelligence in action, as it projects, processes, and erases memories on the screen. Just as Case’s memories are tapped and tampered with by Wintermute, the contents of the disk—a poem that describes Gibson’s subjective experiences—are surrendered to the mechanisms of the computer. The Mac follows the instructions on the disk: the program breeches—then obliterates—the boundaries of human subjectivity, erases all record of a subjective presence, and then performs that destruction on the screen.

In actuality, however, *Agrippa* after its “destruction” became an even more thickly layered text than it was at the time of its publication, and any notion of an “original” became less important than how the work evolved, and grew, in response to its readership. For an example of this, note that figure 1 below, which documents the destruction of the poem while the program runs, is actually a screen shot from an emulation of that performance, which was not recorded at the time of its publication, nor on an early-1990s Macintosh, nor even with the original disk. It was instead captured by Matthew Kirschenbaum and a small
team of researchers at the University of Maryland’s MITH (Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities) fifteen years later; they created the emulation by making a bit-level copy of the original disk, running the copy with a Mini-vMac on a Windows computer, and recording the screen as the vMac ran. The various levels of mediation at work here are impressive. If there is an original *Agrippa*, we are very far removed from it. And yet even as the emulation removes us from the text’s original publication medium, it simultaneously recovers the text for the purposes of reading and, hence, undermines the notion of a Wintermute-like agency working its mischief on and through the screen.

The emulator joins several artifacts dedicated to *Agrippa*, all of which add to its textual proliferation. Multiple versions of the poem, partial drafts of the code, excerpts of scholarship and cultural commentary, press releases from the publisher, and suggestive correspondences among author, artist, publisher, and programmer have all been added to the archive. The notion of a lone hacker with supreme powers was also demystified, as “hacking” *Agrippa* became a fundamentally collaborative and public effort. In no respect does Agrippa’s vibrant afterlife hinge upon the authority of the photographic image. Instead, as Matthew Kirschenbaum writes in *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (2007), the durable nature of digital storage has allowed for excavation and revival. To understand how this is so, it is necessary to visit three moments in its history.

The first occurred on 9 Dec. 1992, at the Society of Book Arts in New York City, with the “Transmission,” a bootleg recording of the poem’s premier. At this event, Penn Jillette, of Penn and Teller fame, read the poem—slowly. It was not a thrilling reading; he read with the scrolled text, working to get the timing
right so he would not miss any lines. Because the poem scrolled at a slower rate than he spoke, there were long gaps. This was apt enough—another example of the work’s manipulative mechanism. But the slow scroll had another fortuitous consequence: it made it fairly easy to record. Kirschenbaum, in his chapter on *Agrippa* in *Mechanisms*, notes that “The Transmission” was “made surreptitiously by ‘Templar,’ the pseudonym of one member of a graduate-student team … from [NYU].… Templar had slotted a blank video cassette into the camera used for the live feed” (218). The recording was saved, the text of the poem transcribed, and then swiftly spread across the country via the BBS networks that existed at the time. The full version of Gibson’s poem was available “the morning of Thursday, December 10th, 1992, when it was uploaded as a 10-kilobyte ASCII file to MindVox, an edgy New York City-based electronic bulletin board and internet service provider run by Patrick K. Kroupa, alias Lord Digital” (218). In other words, the work was effectively hacked the day it debuted and distributed the next morning.

The second moment occurred in 2005, when Alan Liu and a team of graduate students at the University of California Santa Barbara created the *Agrippa Files*, an online archive of materials related to the project, most donated by Kevin Begos, the rest gathered by other interested parties and the editorial team.¹⁹ The bootleg recording from the Center for Book Arts was one of the archive’s most precious items. Other works included original advertisements for *Agrippa*, correspondences from Kevin Begos to Gibson and Ashbaugh and, most enticing for a group of literary students obsessed with science fiction and technoculture, fragments of the encrypted code that the anonymous programmer, Brash, had used to scroll, then destroy, the poem. By bringing images of this obscure, hard-to-find book to the public, the *Agrippa Files* helped resurrect it. And, of course, putting a video of the poem’s scroll online provided a thrill, as if releasing the book across the distributed network of the World Wide Web was akin to releasing a caged and dangerous animal into its proper native habitat.

Finally, in 2012, Quinn DuPont, a doctoral student in Information Science at the University of Toronto, hosted a competition entitled “Cracking Agrippa,” which offered a reward to the first person who could crack *Agrippa’s* code and explain how it was that the mechanism of erasure had been encoded and executed. The prize was the complete collection of all of William Gibson’s books—with the exception of *Agrippa* (a wink and a nudge to the work’s performance of erasure, and perhaps also its high price). There were several successful entries. All of the solutions found the part of the program meant to obscure “Agrippa” from the reader so that it would not play on the screen a second time. They all also confirmed that there was no virus, as some early literature—even from the publisher—suggested. Instead, the programmer used a pre-encrypted version of the poem and then hid it by layering it and dispersing it among different levels of coding. Gibson’s poem was chopped up, shuffled, and stored in “atomic” form.²⁰
The surprising insight that all the entrants shared was this: the poem never was erased. This should not, however, suggest that it retained some sort of “original” purity that trumped even the photographs. On the contrary, as something that lacked originality and indexical authority from the get-go, the poem, rendered digitally, was merely obscured. The analysis of the program revealed instead how it was organized, not as a shining subjective pearl, coherent unto itself in an oyster shell of code, but rather as something mostly indistinguishable from it. Brash overlaid its atomized parts with different content—Osiris’s organs in the reeds—except the reeds and organs were all comprised of the same stuff, impossible to see when the reader executed the program to run. The code that “erased” Agrippa actually contained it. And, in fact, the poem remains retrievable on the computer disk designed to negate it. This is code from a magician’s spell book. It was appropriate that Penn Jillette was there to read the poem at the work’s debut. Magician that he is, in 1992 he staged its illusionary execution. In 2006, the Agrippa Files began to gather its parts and assemble them, piecemeal, for public consumption. In 2012, DuPont’s “Cracking the Agrippa Code” competition completed the final act of the show by bringing it back to life.

Non-Destructive Editing Techniques. These moments in Agrippa’s history—now afterlife—are instructive in terms of the discussion of digital memory, indexical trace, and subjectivity. Digital encryption does not destroy the content that it encodes, in part because what is digitally manipulated is never an “original” in the sense of an analog artifact. It lacks an analog artifact’s a priori guarantee of authenticity and, hence, objectivity—as mystically potent (and shifty) as these terms might be. If a digital model of encryption teaches us anything, it is that, as Matthew Kirschenbaum’s Mechanisms makes clear, once encrypted in digital format, memory is persistent and locatable, even in the case of Brash’s code. As DuPont notes in his summary of the competition, Brash’s so-called “self-destruct routine is called MAKE-SOME-SHIT, and is located in the archival source code listing halfway across page three and the missing page four” (DuPont).

In spite of this successful collaborative effort, cracking the codework behind Agrippa was a disappointment for those who had perhaps hoped to reveal a more elegant form of encryption, such as the ICE of the Tessier-Ashpool core. Alan Liu has written of the project,

The idea of a post-codex artifact able to encrypt itself—and, like the Wintermute AI in Gibson’s Neuromancer novel, possibly just waiting to break free of the confines of an art book to go feral—was simply too powerful, too much a romance of the digital age, to wait for forensics on the actual code. In this regard, scholarship ... has been susceptible to what Jerome J. McGann in a different context calls “romantic ideology” (the implicit identification of professional scholars with the ethos of the very writers they study). Scholars of Agrippa, it might be said, have been apologists of a neuromantic ideology. (“Cracking the Agrippa Code”; emphasis in original)
And yet a complementary insight emerges if we think about Agrippa in light of Gibson’s larger narrative tendencies. Brash’s code—and Brash—were black-boxed behind not just layers of enciphered data but behind a cultural narrative about computation and programming that treats digital technology and labor as suspect, divorced from reality, anti-indexical, and anti-human. Brash’s MAKE-SOME-SHIT locates him as the fallible human presence that he is. Agrippa—already densely layered—is now overlaid with his thoughts about his all-too-human labor in all-too-human terms, the critical commentary about it, and the thick tissue of readings and responses that have been accreting since the poem debuted. In Ex-Foliations, Harpold acknowledges that “every reading is, strictly speaking, unrepeatable” (125).

Agrippa in its afterlife is no exception, yet because it now functions both as a poem and a public archive of the discourse surrounding it, it encourages and documents the multiple, recursive readings that it inspires. While this revelation neither reveals a transcendent computational object nor destroys the original text, it cannot help but inflect one’s reading of it.

In closing, I would like to point to a more fully fleshed example of Gibson’s work that moves beyond a nostalgic longing for art’s indexical authority: Pattern Recognition (2003), a novel that highlights these same tensions in fictional form. In it, Cayce Pollard is an American who travels to England to work for an advertising agency, hired for her visceral sensitivity to images. She quickly becomes embroiled in a larger international hunt for a mysterious, wildly popular series of images whose origin and authorship are unknown, referred to only as “the footage.” She learns, finally, that the footage is created by a woman named Nora who, as a result of a violent trauma, has lost the ability to speak. Nora spends her days externalizing her memories through film, editing these images to their sharpest poignancy, and releasing them into the world freely. Through the distribution of the images, which are endlessly discussed, arranged, and resequenced by its fans, the footage becomes a means of collaborative expression, encryption, decryption, and pattern recognition. Rather than threatening subjectivity, the digital nature of these images allows the fan community to contribute to Nora’s preservation. Her fans’ efforts constitute the construction, not destruction, of her identity. But the images that comprise the footage are not photographs in a traditional sense. They are digital images and, as such, made up of the same de-differentiated code that comprises all digital objects. Agrippa, in its totality, anticipates the different types of digital memory that Pattern Recognition explores. Before—in photography, science fiction, and Agrippa—the act of editing suggested an irreversible commitment, a literal cut in time. Today, we now refer to “non-destructive” editing techniques afforded by digital technology, such that the word “cutting” has become empty—celluloid turned skeuomorph.

Agrippa is not the same text that it was in 1992, 2005, or 2012. Its “neuromantic” mystique has been exhausted. The work is no longer about a single subjective presence. Neither is it a gimmicky echo of Neuromancer, an overpriced art book, or a solitary poem extracted from it. Instead, the joint efforts to recover the code, investigate its peculiar mode of encryption, and
report back the findings to an engaged community of readers have resulted in a (still) accreting narrative. In this it returns to its own peculiar origin. Like the buildings in Barcelona that inspired the collaboration, it is monstrously incoherent, decadent, and grown to sublime scale—a “gothic folly” all its own.\textsuperscript{22}

NOTES

1. Initial scholarly responses to \textit{Agrippa} included studies of its apocalyptic nature (Schwenger), its tie to print culture (Bukatman), its allegiance to a postmodern aesthetic (Lindberg), and its demonstration of non-linear narrative technique (Aarseth). More recent scholarship has focused on the work in light of its durability as a digital object (Kirschenbaum, “Mechanisms”), its role in the field of digital publishing (Jirgens), its changing interface in relation to the evolution of reading (Harpold), its expression of genetic coding (Malewitz), its enigmatic encryption (Dupont), its rejection of a Romantic conception of nature (Liu, “Laws of Cool”), and its expression of natural ecologies (Swanstrom).

2. Anxieties about computational technology within science fiction manifest saliently in relation to fears about digital technology’s potential to undermine materiality and corporeality (see Hayles’s \textit{How We Became Posthuman} and Kroker and Kroker’s \textit{Hacking the Future}). Recent scholarship in media studies acknowledges this tendency even as it seeks to obliterate the digital-material divide (see, for example, Hansen’s \textit{New Philosophy for New Media}).

3. While Brian McHale has argued that “science fiction … is the ontological genre \textit{par excellence}” (16) and hence functions as postmodernism packaged in popular form, in the case of cyberpunk—and other works of “digital” science fiction—this claim is largely suspect, at least according to McHale’s own parameters, which couple modernist fiction with epistemological concerns. These same epistemological questions regarding the source and degradation of knowledge haunt cyberpunk fiction. McAllister’s emphasis on the \textit{interaction} between cognitive estrangement and ontological preoccupation adds important nuance to McHale’s definition of the genre.

4. Morgan’s poetry proves an apt index for Gibson’s own. “Agrippa,” like Morgan’s “In Sobieski’s Shield,” is a poem about dissolution and reconstitution—not of human bodies in outer space, as in Morgan’s poem, but of memory. Additionally, Morgan’s poetry itself engages with Gibson’s work in other important ways. His “Night City” is a direct reference to \textit{Neuromancer}, and his “Instagram Poems” resonate well with elements of “Agrippa.”

5. Several critics have noted that the suggestive nature of the name does not stop with the photo album. Of these, Lindberg offers the most thorough catalog of associations.

6. See Schwenger for an analysis of the poem’s eschatological potential.

7. I am not the first to make this observation. See Lindberg for a thorough comparison.

8. The reference to Wordsworth’s \textit{Prelude} is anachronistic but apt. For an overview of Wordsworth’s complex relation to photography, see Hess’s “William Wordsworth and Photographic Subjectivity”; for an analysis of “Agrippa” in relation to Wordsworth’s romanticism, see Liu’s “Transcendent Data.”
9. At the Agrippa Files reception, this suggestion was compounded by Agrippa’s appearance under glass—like Sam Raimi’s Necronomicon sleeping in Snow White’s coffin.

10. This is another lesson in the bleeding nature of memory: originally, Ashbaugh intended to overlay his aquatints with images from old advertisements in “disappearing ink,” “leaving behind just the underlying etchings.” Although the images never (de)materialized, one can see a simulation of the effect in Flash on the Agrippa Files website (Agrippa Files “Simulation”).

11. In Abel Ferrera’s film version of New Rose Hotel (1998), the synthesizer looks more like a palm pilot than a cutting-edge genetic game-changer. But this, too, speaks to the problem of obsolescence in works about digital technology.

12. See Easterbrook’s essay for an explication of Neuromancer’s “flickering montage” (381).

13. In the tenth chapter of the book, for example, Case’s fitful sleep carries “dreams that were like neatly edited segments of memory” (125). A few short paragraphs later, “[t]he dream, the memory, unreeled with the monotony of an unedited simstim tape” (125). “Reels,” “tape,” “edited,” “unedited”—both dreams spool like film. In the second, Case dreams of a wasps’ nest that he once burned with a flamethrower, and the dream-image comes branded with the Tessier-Ashpool corporate logo “neatly embossed” on the side. The “neatly” arranged letters recall the earlier description of the “neatly edited” memories that characterize Case’s fitful sleep, suggesting an authorial hand behind the projection, while the “unedited” spool of raw sense data suggests undisturbed dreaming. Both are apt. The play between them foreshadows the dream’s actual source: Wintermute.

14. Even this “spectrum” is highly contradictory. See Totaro for a more nuanced summary of Bazin’s important work.

15. See, for example, Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s Future Eve (1886); Adolfo Bioy Casares’s Invention of Morel (1940); Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s “Portable Phonograph” (1950); Chris Marker’s La Jetée (1962); and Julio Cortázar’s “Blow-up” (1966). In such stories audio and visual recordings both create and distort reality and complicate subjectivity.

16. An example from science fiction that moves us closer to an “actual” model of digital identity occurs in Philip K. Dick’s “The Electric Ant” (1969), wherein a man named Poole wakes up in a hospital to find out that he is a corporate-owned “organic robot.” As soon as he realizes this, he opens up his chest to reveal spools of tape: “punched-free slots … the punched holes are on gates … solid is no, punch-hole is yes” (212). Poole fills in a stretch of holes with varnish and subsequently deletes parts of his reality; by adding punches he augments it—with ducks, apples, cobblestones, and zebras (220). This manner of editing is not at all indebted to photography or film. Dick’s paranoid fantasy speaks to a different paradigm—a computational regime. Taking a rigid set of instructions and omitting disagreeable sequences, inserting more palatable ones, and feeding them to a processing unit for execution: this is programming. Poole, like Case, is justifiably paranoid about his simulated memories and identity. He has no sovereignty—he is corporate owned—yet he (quite hilariously) seizes the problem at its source, which he does not understand as a fallen form of objective reality. Instead, Poole understands very quickly that his sense perceptions are always already mediated and wastes no time in taking control of his input mechanisms by opening and closing himself to wildly divergent realities—reprogramming himself.

17. Mini vMac is “a miniature early Macintosh emulator” that runs on a variety of platforms—OS X, Windows, Linux, and many others” (Mini). Kirschenbaum and his
team used it to run an emulation of the Mac’s 7.0.1 system, which was contemporary to the publication of Agrippa, most likely on a Windows XP, which was contemporary to 2008 (Kirschenbaum, “re: Agrippa question”). Kirschenbaum provides a thorough summary of the technological process of emulation in “No Round Trip.”

18. In his essay on Agrippa, Kirschenbaum shies away from the word “archive,” arguing that such words “encourage too much detachment from the realities of the network environment in which the work is now irretrievably situated.” But the term archive when applied to Agrippa might do some useful cultural work. As Jacques Derrida writes in Archive Fever, “The question of the archive is not ... a question of the past. It is a question of the future ... of a responsibility for tomorrow” (36). As I have suggested elsewhere, the dynamic nature of the digitally networked archive in Gibson’s writing serves to highlight the animated and vibrant potential of all archives that Derrida’s reading suggests (see my “Wax Blocks, Data Banks, and File #0467839: The Archive of Memory in William Gibson’s Science Fiction”).

19. In the interest of disclosure, I was one of the graduate students.

20. In this it had something in common with Morgan’s sf poetry. Reconstructing memory at this level became even more daunting, requiring even more cognitive effort to make sense of—and reconstitute—the hapless, far-flung earthlings in “Sobieski’s Shield.”

21. DuPont speculates that “it is possible that page four of the source code listing was omitted from the archive due to the presence of the word ‘SHIT’ in the routine name.” This speculation is groundless. The fourth page of the source code was not provided. Its omission added to its tantalizing nature.

22. Construction on Antoni Gaudí’s Sagrada Familia cathedral began in 1882 and reached its midpoint to completion only in 2010 (“Sagrada Familia”).

WORKS CITED


ABSTRACT
While William Gibson’s cyberpunk fiction is fundamental for understanding the relationship between digitality and science fiction, I suggest that Gibson’s most important “digital” work is neither cyberpunk, science fiction, nor even fiction. It is, instead, an autobiographical poem, *Agrippa: (A Book of The Dead)*, published in 1992. *Agrippa* marks a pivotal point in Gibson’s writing for its engagement with actual—as opposed to speculative—digital editing techniques, not merely in terms of the disk that contains the poem encoded within it, but in terms of Gibson’s tendency to triangulate digitization, identity, and memory. *Agrippa* as a whole—that is, as a work of poetry, a printed book, and a self-effacing digital object—functions initially as a modernist monument to subjectivity at the very moment of its dismantling and, in this respect, is wholly consistent with Gibson’s cyberpunk fiction, which tends to treat digital technology in analog terms. Yet in the twenty-plus years since its initial publication, *Agrippa* has continued to evolve, and a reading of this strange text today yields different possibilities. In what might be termed *Agrippa*’s afterlife, a more fluid form of memory has emerged, one that is collective, participatory, collaborative, and much more in tune with the nature of digitality.