

# Introduction

Darren Tofts & Lisa Gye

Focus for now on the concrete experience of this story, as a simulation of a more abstract practice to be tested at another time' (Ulmer, 1990: 96)

Gregory Ulmer has been at the forefront of thinking about new cultural formations as the paradigm of literacy converges with digital culture. His work has, and continues to be, central to contemporary thinking about the future of writing, of schooling and paradigms of learning, the dynamics of creativity and the poetics of invention. A barometer and force of cultural change, Ulmer has taken the very notion of creativity into the 21st century.

As an educator, theorist and practitioner of experimental approaches to writing, Ulmer's work has influenced a generation of students, academics and artists, whose work traverses the vectors of writing as it has merged with video, the computer apparatus and the Internet. His work incorporates cultural studies, informatics, cybernetics, post-structuralist theory and the avant-garde arts. Ulmer's project demonstrates how all forms of knowledge and inscription (painting, dance, installation, literature, film) relate to writing and the convergent apparatus of alphabetic and electronic literacy.

Ulmer's theoretical exposition of a transition from literacy to "electracy," to use one of his many neologisms, enables us to glimpse and understand technological convergence as a scene of writing. For Ulmer, electracy is not the end of the literate paradigm, but rather an extension and re-definition of it. His theoretically informed coinages have given us a lexicon of convergence for the possibilities of

writing beyond the book. Moreover, they gesture to what he has called 'anticipatory consciousness,' the intuition that the apparatus of writing entails a different kind of sense, an illogic of sense apposite to the age of hypermedia.

Terms such as applied grammatology, mystory, heuristics, post(e)-pedagogy, textshop, chora-graphy, are offered as generative concepts for the making of new and experimental work, or what Ulmer has called 'electronic rhetoric.' Ulmer demonstrates examples of potential compositional practices that are unique to the composer and to the place or space of their invention. He always shows rather than tells, performing choral writing or making mystories, rather than explaining them. The concept of the finished work is always, in advance, unknowable, since the logic of invention, the illogic of sense, takes the performer and the performance in unexpected directions. Chance presides over choice, abduction over deduction, metaphor and metonymy fuse into the flow of syncopation and collage. Association and the audacious conduction of its threads guide the creative act as an ongoing process of discovery and assemblage. Whatever the finished work might be, it is ostensibly an archive of the creative act itself. Ulmer has never advocated the prescription of a method to be mimicked or simply emulated. Rather, his ideas are offered as a means for enabling others to make creative work of their own, to use his work as raw material for invention. It is this solicitation of invention that inspired this book. The eight authors assembled in this collection have each, in their own way, responded to the call of Ulmer, to treat his work as a relay rather than a model. They have

been encouraged by his example to 'turn to their own archives' and discover their own inventio.

For the purposes of an Introduction to this book, the editors have interpreted Ulmer's work as a contemporary re-make of the Rosetta Stone. Ulmer's interest in the Rosetta Stone is multi-faceted and references to it recur throughout his writings, particularly to its 'intertranslatability' of different types of writing. Principally, he is interested in it as a kind of literary machine, or more appropriately a vehicle of literacy that unlocked previously lost knowledge of hieroglyphic texts. The key to the Stone of el-Rashid was its transliteration of the same Ptolemaic decree in different scripts (hieroglyphic, demotic and Greek). It was this understanding of the triscript that enabled Jean-François Champollion to crack the code in 1822 and revive the lost art of reading hieroglyphics, thereby opening up the ancient world to the modern age. In a similar application of method, we can situate Ulmer's 'popcyle' (the interrelations between popular, explanatory and expert knowledge) as a triscript.

The triscript structure will be used as a method for introducing *Illogic of Sense*. All scholarly texts are palimpsests, archives of their authors' engagement with and intertranslations of the discourses of academic inquiry and everyday life. They are also provisional, written out of the context of a specific time and place in the author's life; or what Ulmer describes as their 'personal periodic table of cognitive elements, representing one individual's intensive reserve.' (Ulmer, 1989: vii) This relation between living and artificial memory is rhetorically woven within a space, or chora, of significance to the composer (hence choragraphy). The provisionality of chora and its emphasis on unforeseeable processes of discovery and association, echoes the contingent nature of the Rosetta Stone itself, which is a product of chance operations, in this case accidental breakages and damage over time (a big hunk of quartz, it is, in the Duchampian sense, definitively unfinished). Residing in the British Museum, The Rosetta Stone is a remainder, an irregular fragment of a larger, monolithic stela that

once featured a rounded lunette at its peak. It is both the memory of a whole and an archive of its fragmentation. As with the compiled elements of any choragraphic inscription, the Rosetta Stone is a found artifact, a discovery that yielded various processes of invention, the most famous being the *techne* that enabled scholars to read Ancient Egyptian culture as a code. Perhaps less well known, until now, is its intimation of the present volume in the title of the actual text featured on the Rosetta Stone itself, known historically as the Memphis Decree.

This first section of the Introduction is written in the explanatory register, describing the context of the project and discursive framework of Ulmer as subject. The second section (popular) draws on the editors' encounters with Ulmer and is anecdotal in tone. The third section of the triscript deals with expert knowledge and presents brief descriptions of the assembled essays. These are not so much summaries as overdubs, the layering of multiple tracks, as in a process of audio-visual editing. They add a further stratum of disciplinary writing to the authors' inscriptions, extending as well as enframing them in *Illogic of Sense*. And perhaps, in the context of this place, this scene of writing, they too are best considered as fragments, chips off the old block.