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SONIC WORKS AND THEORIES

Infomanticism: rethinking the Romantic subject
through situated sound works

Annabel Frearson

Infomanticism: rethinking the Romantic subject through situated sound works

Dr Annabel Frearson, University of Reading, UK

The author is an artist based at Cubitt studios in London, and Associate Professor in Art at University of Reading School of Art. She has exhibited, published, and performed works in the UK and abroad, including 'Wollstonochlincraft 1791-1971', 'Sic', 'BaudriR', 'Bad Brain Call' and 'Last Tango Inception'.

Introduction

In recent examples of my practice-based art research, I voice radically reconfigured landmark historic texts in a variety of contexts in London. I explore these in relation to my concept of 'infomanticism', a modern variant of romanticism that I am testing as potential for socio-political resistance from within our neoliberal networked database economy of subjective attention. Can such art methodologies harness textual noise as a block to monstrous neoliberalism and fascism, or do they remain politically romantic and narcissistic? Recent feminist and indigenous methodologies afford ways of being together with the mess of consumption that nevertheless remains open to alteration.

'Infomanticism' reflects on and through our mediation with data to consider our newly constituted relationship with narrative, value, and landscape, within a contemporary networked and neoliberal database driven economy of attention. Here, I explore my concept of infomanticism through two recent long-durational sound works that I recorded in a range of locations in and around London, UK. In these audio works, I voice radical digital reconfigurations of two historic texts: *Frankenstein*¹ and *Mein Kampf*² as a way of simultaneously owning and disowning the texts, by reverberating them within new spatio-temporal and material realms. In keeping with this method, and as a performative way to democratize the status of practice-based research alongside its more discursive equivalents, I will disperse

1 'The Project Gutenberg EBook of Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus, by Mary W. Shelley.' Accessed 7 June 2023. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/42324/42324-h/42324-h.htm>.

2 Hitler, Adolf, *Mein Kampf*, (Reynal and Hitchcock, 1941).

4235	detail	8	war	
4236	gush	3	water	desire
4237	drowned	1	water	ed
4238	sobbed	2	water	ed
4239	streamed	2	water	ed
4240	thirsted	2	water	ed
4241	plunged	3	water	ed
4242	flowed	4	water	ed
4243	sailed	4	water	ed
4244	bathed	1	water	ed
4245	dissipated	1	water	ed
4246	drenched	1	water	ed
4247	floated	2	water	ed
4248	quenched	2	water	ed
4249	bedewed	1	water	eee
4250	baths	1	water	five
4251	coast	1	water	five
4252	drank	1	water	five
4253	float	1	water	five
4254	flood	1	water	five
4255	flows	1	water	five
4256	pours	1	water	five
4257	weeps	1	water	five
4258	boats	2	water	five
4259	evian	2	water	five
4260	sails	2	water	five
4261	sinks	2	water	five
4262	skiff	2	water	five
4263	mists	3	water	five
4264	snows	3	water	five
4265	humid	1	water	five

Fig. 1: Extract from Frankenstein database; water-related words and frequency of occurrence.

Source: Annabel Frearson

fragments of these works within the commentary of this paper. Assuming the data realm as our contemporary landscape, I correlate this with established conceptions of romanticism before turning to more recent feminist and indigenous methodologies to explore infomanticism's potential for collective socio-political resistance from within, rather than as mere subjective escapism or 'occasionalism'.³

We have made of ourselves riparian citizens of the sublime torrent of reflexive data that flows ceaselessly through our midst. Subjectification derives from a contingent and restless circumscription of data, with which we have developed a more or less affective relationship. Fragments draw us into new, or long forgotten, or simply parallel unknown territories, communities of data, governed by their own internal logic. This is the Romantic.

Frankenstein Economy

Frankenstein economy (2022, digital audio, 5'15") comprises a complete list of the 7,066 unique words from the 1831 edition of Mary Shelley's eponymous novel,

3 Schmitt, Carl, *Political Romanticism*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986).

loosely categorised according to themes, semantics, sounds, grammar, or length, and voiced in a variety of meaningful contexts in proximity to my London home, including a hospital, cemetery, city farm, airport, financial district, city beach, street market, art gallery. The frequency of each word's occurrence in the novel is cited alongside each unique word to denote its 'value' within my Frankenstein database, thus exploring the interrelationship of landscape, economy, and data.

Both works discussed here were originally commissioned by ohrenhoch, der Geräuschladen, a gallery in Berlin dedicated to sound works, where it was broadcast within and outside of the space, providing a further contextual enmeshment and spatio-temporal auditory (urban) layer to the work.⁴

Frankenstein economy also derives from my long-term ongoing major work *Frankenstein2*, which aims to use all and only the words from the original novel to re-create an intermedial series of contemporary writings and artworks, including: an album of pop songs; a pornographic vignette; a film review on Rotten Tomatoes; a corporate sales presentation; a science fiction novella; and a series of Frankenstein business cards, which, as miniature pocket-sized landscapes (or *Frankenscapes*), form the physical variant of this audio work.

Generating and voicing a Frankenstein database allows me (or indeed anyone) to fully dismantle and enter Shelley's original text, reconfiguring it at will, creating new sets of value relations within a contemporary landscape of subjective encounters, albeit bearing the uncanny spirit of the original, often archaic words, exhumed and reconstituted with new voices and life through the galvanism of my computer.

Within the other works of my growing *Frankenstein2* collection, the underlying database structure only occasionally erupts through the otherwise relatively coherent new narratives, whereas *Frankenstein Economy* lays the database fully bare as the work itself. The strangeness of reading these words out loud in public urban locations creates an out-of-body experience of hyper self-consciousness, mixed with the immersive concentration on the material qualities of the auditory landscape.

The rendering of the text into lists perverts the act of romantic creativity, based on the etymological route of *roman*, or novel, and points to data as the foundation for our generative economy of attention, where we can continuously redeploy any fragment to create value and altered meaning, within our own subjective framework of references and, so, in our own image.⁵

German political theorist Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) suggests, albeit a century ago, that this form of subjective aesthetic reflexivity is the defining characteristic

4 As per the original novel, which traverses all manner of terrains and countries.

5 An image that is generatively mirrored by algorithms.

of romanticism that is committed to a metaphysical narcissism in the form of 'subjective occasionalism', through which God is usurped by the romantic ego. Both mundanity and conflict are poeticised through the romantic imagination, which sees everything as an occasion or opportunity for its romantic productivity.⁶ Moreover, subjective occasionalism requires a liberal state as precondition for the private individual to be not only their own priest but also 'his own poet, his own philosopher, his own king, and his own master builder in the cathedral of personality'.⁷

Through Schmitt, romanticism presents itself as complicatedly being both absolute and uncreative. Absolute in its aestheticization of every sphere of culture, and uncreative in its repudiation of the aesthetic principles and forms of the past without, however, replacing them with its own distinctive conception of style and form. Productivity and reflection are, therefore, key tenets of a romanticism that is fundamentally discursive, 'an art without works,' as Schmitt states,⁸ which might equally well describe *Frankenstein economy*, from where I will now turn to discuss my parallel audio work *Sic*, having first posited a different perspective on romanticism.⁹

French-Brazilian Marxist sociologist and philosopher Michael Löwy and French professor of anglophone literatures Robert Sayre seek to redefine romanticism as the transhistorical, heterogeneous voice of anti-capital, traversing class, political persuasion medium and context.¹⁰ There are, however, commonalities that can be drawn across the romantic spectrum, presenting a worldview, a 'collective mental structure'. The principal feature of this romantic worldview is opposition to capitalism in the name of pre-capitalist values. This is voiced through expressions of lost illusions, nostalgia for community, social harmony and natural unity destroyed by industrial civilisation, disenchantment with concrete reified reality, and a heightened sense of alienation in the present often experienced as an exile. In turn, these sentiments give rise to the 're-enchantment of the world through imagination', poeticizing and aestheticizing the present, banal, habitual reality, and utopian visions that draw from an idealised past to enact a new future (or New Order in the case of fascism). Moreover, for the authors, 'the Romantic view constitutes modernity's self-criticism'; it is a critique from within: 'even as the Romantics rebel against modernity, they cannot fail to be profoundly shaped by their time.'¹¹

6 Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 17.

7 *Ibid.*, 20.

8 *Ibid.*, 15.

9 An audio version of *Frankenstein Economy* can be found here: <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/105125/>

10 Löwy, Michael, and Robert Sayre. *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, (Durham, N.C./ London: Duke University Press, 2001).

11 *Ibid.*, 21.



Fig. 2: Annabel Frearson recording Sic in Tesco Metro supermarket, Commercial Road, London, UK. Source: Eugene Vasseur.

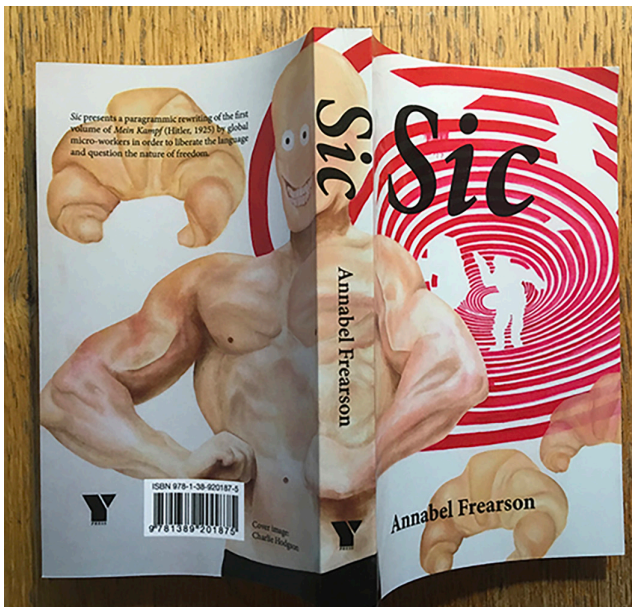


Fig. 3: Sic book (Y Press, London 2018). Source: Annabel Frearson.

Sic

My conceptual writing project *Sic* performs an exploration and *détournement* of contemporary fascism and global neoliberalism from the position of language itself as toxic material.¹² Produced as both a printed book and 24-hour audio recording, *Sic* presents a paragrammatic rewriting of *Mein Kampf* by global micro-workers, whom I commissioned to render the originary toxic text deviant using online an-

12 An online version is found here: <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/81397/>

agram generators and textual randomisers. I attempt to further liberate the language by reading aloud the new mass of disjunctive words and sounds into the auditory-material world.

Sic intends to literally rewrite history from the inside out, by enacting a material textual violence through an absolute dissolution of the original narrative and regurgitation as heterological mass comprising anagrams, disjunctive sounds and unspeakable interminglings of lettristic parts, rendering the antisemitic as antisemantic.

Sic is mass created by a globally distributed micro-workers, contracted through online gig-economy platforms (such as Fiverr, People per Hour, Amazon Turk, Workana), to convert chunks of *Mein Kampf* using freely available online textual scramblers. This distribution of authorial production through a posthuman intermingling of dispersed bodies and machines disrupts the singular locus of narrative power, yet further reproduces the atomisation and radical alienation of humans and labour under the absolutist regime of global neoliberalism that came in its wake.

Sic alludes to the use of the Latin word to denote actuality or authenticity of the text in hand, pointing to the veracity of it as material citation, but also to the distancing effect that its use implies within a text by the secondary, quoting author; 'sic' expresses a discomfiture or embarrassment in relation to the quoted text, a disowning of responsibility for fallacious or erroneous terms, dramatized by its phonetic equivalent, with sic(k) being a visceral rejection of assimilated material.

In place of a critical metalanguage that sits outside of the object, sound poet Steve McCaffery (UK 1947) suggests that paragrammatism offers tactical, dynamic readings that intervene with the text in hand beyond mere consumption, offering a form of nondiscursive operation that can infiltrate and change a priori messages and radically alter the historic, 'pragmatic' function of the given words, testing the limits of critical method through material ingestion and excretion in a kind of defecational parody.¹³

Finding equivalence with the effects of nonequilibrium thermodynamics, for McCaffery a paragram provokes a crisis 'within any closed semantic economy, simultaneously engendering meaning eruptively and fortuitously but also turning unitary meaning against itself.'¹⁴ Thus, we return to the romantic and the question as to whether it is now possible, or even desirable, to escape all value relations, and

13 M. McCaffery, Steve, *Prior to Meaning: The Protosemantic and Poetics*, (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 8–11.

14 *Ibid.*, 37.

arcade snort a strand-forebears them.

Clausal shield florae yon dance rosy anemic portnation hewn
 rigging lusts ferocities nexts beet thymus prevented form retention
 gin e el thrust teem month heathen tote try hake tween manifesto hat
 station thin wigwag ran. Aliyahs watts bovines lithely breech weft fey
 heretical in thuggeries lints debuted jog.

Gathered intro byplay parted ahem unfeeling, attested talk
 moth finite omthrew gelatinises thins cogitated noise aquas sickly

Fig. 4: Extract from Sic, p. 164. Source: Annabel Frearson.

whether non-meaning or anti-economy merely become new forms of meaning/
 economy in their own right?

Conclusion

Contemporary feminist new materialist thinking attributes agency to matter itself, as something with which we ‘intra-act’ and performatively co-constitute the world within and around us, as American feminist physicist philosopher Karen Barad suggests;¹⁵ moreover, given that quantum entanglement demonstrates that we are inescapably part of the world, there is no position of freestanding innocence, meaning that all of our actions have unavoidable ethical considerations. Barad advocates methods of diffraction rather than reflection, as a means to establish exteriority within rather than outside of established phenomena, suggesting that diffraction is a tactical method of interference, revealing not just difference, but the effects of difference.¹⁶

While I have been keen to foreground (art) practice as doing its own work, I will conclude by invoking an affinity with my own intentions that I have most recently uncovered in the theoretical strategies of Indigenous-Canadian scientists Max Liboiron and Michelle Murphy (Métis).¹⁷ The latter presents their conceptual method of ‘alterlife’: a decolonial feminist tactic of simultaneous recognition and refusal, world-building and dismantlement, against the perpetuation of colonial-racist chemical pollution that now pervades – unevenly – all of our bodies and other living and non-living beings.¹⁸ Murphy is seeking ways – words, protocols, methods – of being together with these non-innocent chemical entanglements, so as to burst

15 Barad, Karen, ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003), 801–31. doi:10.1086/345321.

16 *Ibid.*, 803.

17 Michelle Murphy is a Professor of History and Women and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto, where they hold a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Science & Technology Studies and Environmental Data Justice at the University of Toronto. They are Métis from Winnipeg, with a French Canadian and Métis family background.

18 Murphy, Michelle. ‘Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations’. *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (2017), 494– 503. doi:10.14506/ca32.4.02.

open categories of organism, individual, and body, to be in the mess of consumption, subsistence, side effect, and contradiction, both to reveal life already altered and, importantly, which remains open to alteration.¹⁹ 'Alterlife 'asks that we situate life as a kind of varied enmeshment and enfleshment in infrastructures'²⁰ and 'acknowledges that one cannot simply get out'.²¹ Murphy asserts that this openness to becoming something else is not a nostalgic return, 'but instead the defending of sovereignty starting here, within oneself and each other, here in the damage now. There is no waiting for a better condition. The alter-wise of alterlife is a nondeferral of the decolonial, seized now, despite its impossibility.'²² If this is romantic, then it is a position I will happily share.²³

19 *Ibid.*, 497.

20 *Ibid.*, 498.

21 *Ibid.*, 500.

22 *Ibid.*, 501.

23 The potential colonial rhetoric of my concluding statement is not beyond me.

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