

McGrail

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The Signs of the Times

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The Signs of the Times

It is interesting that our theme, *The Signs of the Times*, is for our Spring 2016 issue. In the *actual* spring of this year, on April 21st, the artist behind the much-lauded album, *Sign 'o the Times*, Prince Rogers Nelson (1987), usually known by his first name and sometimes merely by the symbol, ♀, sadly perished, leaving behind a rich legacy of funk, pop, R&B and rock. For Prince, writing in 1987, some of these signs were: “In France a skinny man/Died of a big disease with a little name/By chance his girlfriend came across a needle/And soon she did the same/At home there are seventeen-year-old boys/And their idea of fun/Is being in a gang called The Disciples/High on crack, totin’ a machine gun...” (Prince, 1987, track 1).

Today, almost 30 years later, crack has waned but heroin has resurged, huge strides have been made in the fight against AIDS, though it is still a killer, and some people still cling to their high-powered weapons, which in many states are sanctioned by law.

On the arts scene, the past 30 years have seen our world transformed by digitality. Nicholas Negroponte’s (1995) concept of “being digital” has never been more “ubiquitous.” Using the tools of digitality, today’s young creators can create music on a laptop with almost all of the sonic integrity of Prince’s best work, though perhaps not with its soulfulness. However, as we move with our art further and further into the digital world, people of my generation—who straddle the analog/digital line of demarcation with one leg on either side—note that increasingly, knowing how digital works is not as important as being able to work with it. Just as most of us don’t really know how a car works but we can drive it, today’s young artists, because they are digital natives, began as children with computers, perhaps with the Mac OS or with Windows, and soon gravitated to iPods, then iPads, then finally iPhones (or Android devices). Today, they swipe left or swipe right, and a business partner or love partner is “liked” or

dispatched forever. They can fire up a synthesizer studio or a Word program on their phone, plug in a preexisting beat, and voilà! They have made a song. It has never been easier to create than with fully digital, fully mobile, and (partially) virtual tools.

This very journal simply wouldn't have been possible in the analog world. How would we have presented musical pieces, as we do in this and other issues, in the analog world? How would we have presented short films? We would have had to have been content with sheet music and screenplays. Now, more and more popular songs lack sheet music entirely. Instead, songs are programmed into highly specialized digital tools and combined on digital mixers by beat masters and other specialists. Films, while sometimes more traditionally made, now can be made by almost everyone with a camera costing a few hundred dollars and software costing about the same. Indeed, many just use the video camera built into their iPhone, iPads, or Android device. A few such films have won prizes at prestigious festivals.

So is digital washing analog away? Not yet. Right now, there seems to be a kind of uneasy détente between the two forms. Traditional media like film and television use digital tools, but are still often disseminated in traditional ways. They seem also to have their own personalities. Indeed, what has happened in the very recent past is that there are now internet stars and traditional media stars, and there is something of a rift between them. Older, more traditional consumers of media probably don't know who PewDiePie is. In 2015, he earned \$12 million from his various videogame video blogs on YouTube. In the same year, YouTube violinist/dancer Lindsey Stirling made \$6 million and received recording offers from the major studios, but turned them down, saying that she doesn't need them anymore financially (Forbes, 2015).

The dust from all of this is still settling. Television may migrate to the internet, and films may cease being displayed theatrically, but we just don't know. Journals and magazines still exist both in print and online, and ours is purely the latter. There are still traditional poets, and we like to think we've got some good ones in this journal. We have great traditional music, too; please check out our musical offerings in this strand. Finally, we have some great digital photography and fiction.

In our Semiotic Composition section, we have Russell Shitabata's "Coney Island Red Box," which is a beautiful meditation on Coney Island and what hangs on in our reality, if not always in our functionality. It is a very "analog" subject—an old emergency fire telephone from days gone by, in front of a ceaselessly tidal sea.

For our musical piece, we have "Lake Kentucky," by George Boggs, a folksy, folkie, and decidedly traditional musical offering that should impress with its quietly accomplished musicianship and profound lyrical content.

In our Literary Compositions, we have two treats. The first is "The Envelope," which is purportedly about something real that happened to the author Ted Kesler (though of course, we can't know, literary license being what it is). What could be in that envelope? You're just going to have to read this compelling short story and find out.

The other is "Sucker Punch," which is a memory piece by author, playwright, and professional actor David Harscheid. If even half of the things that have happened to this man in this story are real, he has lived a very rich life indeed.

Read on! On whatever digital device you wish.

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Author Bio: J. Patrick McGrail is an Associate Professor of Communication at Jacksonville State University. He teaches media literacy, broadcast news and video production. He is the recipient (with Ewa McGrail) of the *Georgia Association of Teacher Educators* Distinguished Research in Teacher Education Award. Prior to his career in academia, McGrail worked in television and radio as an actor and director. He also has a keen interest in poetry and music production, and holds a number of musical copyrights himself.