

## Why Qs Are Worth Ten: Digressions on Language, Moving-Image Mediums, and Technicity

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To cite this article:

Espelie, Erin and Cary Wolfe. 2021. "Why Qs Are Worth Ten: Digressions on Language, Moving-Image Mediums, and Technicity." *Techniques Journal* 1 (Spring).

To link to this article:

<https://techniquesjournal.com/why-qs-are-worth-ten-digressions-on-language-moving-image-mediums-and-technicity/>

Journal homepage: [techniquesjournal.com](https://techniquesjournal.com)

# Why Qs Are Worth Ten: Digressions on Language, Moving-Image Mediums, and Technicity

...featuring *Tenebrio Molitor*, 视网膜 (*A Net to Catch the Light*), and 内共生 (*Inside the Shared Life*)

Erin Espelie, University of Colorado Boulder  
Cary Wolfe, Rice University

- Cary Wolfe:** A prominent theme, as I read your work, is a constant conjugation of the relationship between the biological or the organic and the technical or the mechanical, the technological. I wondered if you could talk about that a little bit and about how your framing of that relationship is related to the question of the body and of embodiment, generally—I mean the human body, obviously, but also embodiment of life, different life-forms, human and nonhuman. This is very prominent in [A Net to Catch the Light](#). It's very prominent in some of the opening moves in *Heart (Radical 61)*.
- Erin Espelie:** *A Net to Catch the Light* most overtly addresses the body and embodiment. In that film, it's very literally an act of looking at looking, by way of digital technologies and medical instrumentation. I begin with retinal surgeries of the human eye, followed by a more abstracted consideration of how light emitted from devices effects and affects us. Is that opening section with the abstracted eye the one you were thinking about in particular?
- Cary Wolfe:** That's one of the places, and also in some of the opening moves in *Heart (Radical 61)*. But really, it seems to me it's just such a pervasive problematic that anchors a lot of your work: this constant posing of the question of the living and the technological. We talked about this a long time ago in Santa Fe. When you look at, for example, the images of the spider's body in *A Net to Catch the Light*, it's almost a kind of an emblem for a certain line of deconstructive thought (Bernard Stiegler, David Wills) that really thinks about the body as a kind of originary technicity—not something that's natural and given. This seems to me a very broad theme in your work that comes up in almost every piece.
- Erin Espelie:** Absolutely, that's true. Because my work does not arise from theory, nor does it grow out of philosophical literature, I feel reluctant to lock it into some of that terminology.
- Cary Wolfe:** Sure.
- Erin Espelie:** However, that said, I am interested in the ways in which Stiegler, Rosi Braidotti, and a variety of folks have attempted to break down that binary. I'm situating our ways of seeing the world through the digital. Because I am a biologist by training, I gravitate toward basic cellular activity and highlighting the ways that even that has become so enmeshed as to be inseparable from, say, the blue light of our computers. In dissecting aspects of the organism, I'm also recapitulating the limited actions of science, sometimes an act of deception in its narrow focus. I want to test and find out where it fails, where we cannot look any further, or when attempts at separation of the so-called natural and digital breaks down. Perhaps that connects to what you're saying?



**Cary Wolfe:**

Yeah, it does. Another place we could go is to think about *A Net to Catch the Light* and *Inside the Shared Life* side by side. I mean, those are obviously sister films in a way, and not just because of the sound work at the beginning and the use of Mandarin in the titles, and not just because of the paired visual tropes of the negative space at the opening of the former and the shot of the round belly in the latter—or that they were only made a year apart. They're interestingly similar sister films, but also different films in a way. So, one way to pose the question—to put it in shorthand—is to say, “What’s the relationship between Steve Jobs and Lynn Margulis when we look at those films side by side?” Because they do seem to raise this question of computer technology on the one hand and theoretical biology on the other: the eye as a clock, to go back to the organic technicity question, versus thinking about the eye very differently as something that’s wet, something that’s a product of symbiosis. So, those two films are another place where it seems to me that you’re working with this problem in a very interesting way.

**Erin Espelie:**

For me, it’s very much about their positionality and their authority in both the sciences and the world of technology. Steve Jobs obviously is a tech icon. I take a particular speech of his from the early 1980s, delivered in Aspen, Colorado, where he’s talking with great certainty about the future of the computer. And then, I break that soundtrack down and rerecord it using software that Jobs himself helped design; I create an elision of that sound in real time rather than in postproduction, manipulating his voice by cycling it through the computer. He’s such an authority in that technical world that by appropriating his words for my voiceover, I’m wresting a bit of control from him. Also, I’m reflecting upon how much power he has had on our bodies, on our selves, on our larger culture and society as a whole. The reverse is true for Lynn Margulis. Even though she resurrected and confirmed endosymbiotic theory, she consistently credited Ivan Wallin and his work in the early part of the twentieth century as being the real generator of endosymbiotic theory. She’s a marginalized figure, compared to Jobs.

**Cary Wolfe:**

Right.

**Erin Espelie:**

By giving Margulis the power of the voiceover in *Inside the Shared Life*, I’m showcasing her strength as an orator as well as her sensitivity, her generosity, and her expertise as a scientist. Much of my filmmaking explores the power of speech, from the history of voice-of-God narrators such as Winston Hibler and David Attenborough to the dearth of female narrators. Giving vocal and sonic control to nontraditional speakers—and sadly that still means women—changes the entire dynamic relationship of spectators to the screen. So there obviously were many, many layers hinging on power, recognition, and authority.

**Cary Wolfe:**

Yeah. I hadn’t really thought about this until you were just talking right now, but one of the interesting similarities in those two films is that they’re really voicing two very different visions of community, you know? That’s obvious with Margulis and her work on symbiosis, but Jobs is, in his own way, imagining and projecting a future community, as well. As he says, it won’t be constituted by television, it won’t be constituted by the book. It will be constituted by computer technology. So, it seems to me that in a lot of your work—and I think this is clearer in the film on Margulis—there’s a real kind of . . . I don’t know if I’d call it a political edge, but there is a kind of an institutional critique that you’re interested in . . . and I think I told you that Donna Haraway and I talked about this with Margulis in our “Manifestly Haraway” conversations—Donna being very interested in recovering and bringing back front and center how important her role in the history of biology has been, what Donna called “the politics of citationality.” There seems to be a very strong awareness on your part in making the film of the limitations of science as an institution that maps, maybe in surprising ways, onto similar kinds of limitations you might find in the overconfidence of somebody like Steve Jobs, right? Is that a fair characterization of the kind of ethical or political stakes of some of this work for you?

**Erin Espelie:** Different definitions of community and personal identity infuse several of my films, thank you for pointing that out! Our sense of selves within the global sense of humanity is one of the reasons I came to focus my lens on Jobs and Apple, Inc. Coming out of my work in *The Lanthanide Series* and thinking about specifically Apple's role in glass technology, like Willow Glass and Gorilla Glass, which coat our personal devices, our screens, instigated my investigation into the proprietary nature of Apple and the litigious nature of the whole company. For example, *A Net to Catch the Light* derives its title from the fact that the word "retina" was something that Apple stamped its trademark on very early.

**Cary Wolfe:** Right.

**Erin Espelie:** Capitalist ownership of language, notably biological terms, has become increasingly common with Apple, Inc. At a linguistic level, single words, and ideally very visual words, were ones that the public immediately could grasp. But to own them? That monetization incentive was one of the core principles in *A Net to Catch the Light*, along with commodification and homogenization of our vision. I'm complicit. I am someone who uses these products daily and therefore must face what that means for the way in which my world is controlled by them.

**Cary Wolfe:** Right. So, in a way, we're back to the question we started with, about the relationship between the organic or the biological and the technical or the technological. But it seems to me that one of the things you're doing in your work, for example—and you talked about this some in the recent essay that you did in the special issue of *Angelaki*, based on the work of the Ontogenetics Process Group—is to say, "Look, here's how light and certain kinds of light, blue light, LED light, et cetera don't really obey the kind of seamless fantasies that we have about the folding together of the technological and the biological." There are biological histories here, there are things like circadian rhythms here that these technologies don't fold into so seamlessly. And so, there's a question of really different temporalities and different time scales being operative in the very fast technologies of the contemporary moment, of which Apple would be emblematic, and these much longer and slower temporalities that are a product of millions of years of evolution of life on the planet. So, it seems to me that's another place where there's a kind of an edge to your work, whether you want to call it political or institutional or ethical . . .

**Erin Espelie:** Well, you put it better than I could. The ethical, the institutional, and the political.

**Cary Wolfe:** You were talking a moment ago about the power of voice and sound and voiceover in this kind of work. I wanted to just ask you—and maybe this is impossible to generalize about—I was thinking about the sound in *Tenebrio Molitor*, specifically. What are you trying to achieve with the sound field? I'm thinking also about the sound field at the opening of *A Net to Catch the Light*. And I've noticed that you collaborate with other people on some of the sonic elements and sound design in your films. But then you have other films, like *Gathering Moss*, that have no sound. How do you make those decisions? Is there a generalizable way to characterize your relationship to sound in your work, or maybe not? I know a lot of artists who work in this medium complain about how hard it is to get the sound right. So . . .

**Erin Espelie:** Sound changes the image utterly. Michel Chion writes about it beautifully. It's surprising how malleable the image can be. For this series, what I'm calling the *RGB+K* series with *Tenebrio Molitor* being the K or the black component, I wanted a point of contrast. In the other three films, RGB, all of the sound emanates from what I would still call the natural world, from nonhuman creatures. In the case of *A Net to Catch the Light*, it's the spider. In *Inside the Shared Life*, it's all underwater creatures. And in *Heart (Radical 61)*, it's all geologic sounds, shifting rocks and vibrations in the earth. In *Tenebrio Molitor*, the obvious choice would have been to record the species of mealworm I'm featuring. Instead I wanted

to foreground the material these creatures are uniquely capable of consuming: Styrofoam. I took a contact microphone and dragged it across various Styrofoam packaging for a squeaking and rustling, which connected so perfectly to the look and the feel of those mealworms writhing en masse together. The overall experience of an audience can shift dramatically by the slightest shift in sound or even the ratcheting up of color expression or light exposure. All of that modulation has nearly infinite play. I still design my own sound, but in the last couple of years, I've really appreciated working with a sound mixer, someone who has, one, the equipment and two, the expertise to be able to do that kind of in-depth modulation.

**Cary Wolfe:** Right. So, it sounds like, if anything, you've gotten pickier and you're paying more and more attention as time goes on to the sound elements in your work.

**Erin Espelie:** I'd say that's true and that's exactly why in *Gathering Moss*, I didn't want any sound at all.

**Cary Wolfe:** Right.

**Erin Espelie:** Anytime you listen to a film, even a silent film, you hear what's around you; that's heightened in a silent film. If you're watching that in a theater, you feel the presence of the people around you more. If you're watching that by yourself, you feel that isolation more.

**Cary Wolfe:** Right. So, just to stay with this piece a little bit longer, *Tenebrio Molitor* and the lines from A.R. Ammons that end that piece. As you know, Ammons is one of my favorite poets. Actually, the first thing I ever published, the first article I ever published, was on A.R. Ammons, when I was a graduate student. He's also a fellow North Carolinian, which is a funny coincidence. But it just made me think about something we've talked about a little bit in the past, which is the importance of literature and language in your work. We could think about your use of Joyce, for example, in *The Sea Seeks Its Own Level*. But we could also think about the ending of *Inside the Shared Life* and pretty much all of *Heart (Radical 61)*. . . And I remember you saying in an earlier conversation we had that you felt a lot of avant-garde, image-based art over the years had really tried to flee language or pretend that language could be left behind. So, could you just say more about the role of literature and language, either in your work or as something that maybe isn't explicitly in the work but has really shaped your sensibility as an artist? And maybe talk a little bit as well about the relationship between image-based art and text-based art?

**Erin Espelie:** Sure. Well, as a start, I also have a special place in my heart for A.R. Ammons. We overlapped at Cornell, and he was one of the people that I could always count on seeing if I walked down a particular hall at the university. He'd always have his door open and he'd be working in there. That was a time in my life when I was taking classes in science but feeling a pull towards the poetic, towards literature, and specifically towards poetic playwriting. I took one poetry class there, with the poet Reginald Shepherd, who was a great inspiration to me as well. At the root of every single one of my films, I could cite for you a specific scientific paper that helped inspire the film and a particular poem or a line of poetry.

**Cary Wolfe:** Oh, wow. That's interesting.

**Erin Espelie:** It's true. In every film, I regard both the arts and the sciences, holding them in a single container. Sometimes I explore that through text, which, to return to your question, has an aesthetic entrenched within it. I see text as not just text but also image, dependent upon whether I've shot it on film or if it's been digitally composed. In my making, I often turn to text as my link to scientific grounding, offering more information, sometimes an overload of information, or even just a reminder of the dominance of our language world.

**Cary Wolfe:**

Right. That's really interesting, what you were saying about seeing words and seeing language visually, because it opens onto another question I wanted to ask you, actually, about the relationship between Western and non-Western languages. That's really foregrounded in *Heart (Radical 61)*, *A Net to Catch the Light*, and *Inside the Shared Life*. I mean, when you frame it that way, your use of Mandarin in those films and just, in general, that kind of attention to the visuality of language in those pieces makes a lot more sense.

**Erin Espelie:**

That's another linkage within the *RGB+K* series, my attention to character-based languages. I originally conceived of it as a direct engagement with the pictographic and the way in which that affects us neurologically. If we're sounding words out and working with a 26-letter Latin alphabet, that takes us into a variant sphere of thinking from image-based words and ideas. Even beyond that, language for me really defines the heart of the sciences and classical conceptions of knowledge. When I first started studying science, language was the key to unlocking the biological world. Scientific nomenclature going back to Linnaeus classified and categorized the world in a way meant to be universal, with genus and species names. The more I learned about that naming process, the more intrigued I became with the personal and the poetic embedded in all of these. At least nine species have been named after Barack Obama. None for Steve Jobs, that I know of. Stars and galaxies are named after people, species of mosses, there's poetry to that and deep subjectivity and identity. And so, thinking about *Tenebrio Molitor* as the title of a film, I gravitated to the elegant etymology of *tenebrio*, meaning "dark spirits," "death spirits," and *molitor*, meaning "miller" or "one that breaks down and can break down to something particulate." Beyond the poetics of the naming, I was curious about our absorption of it. I was struck by a study looking at dyslexia in character-based languages versus non-character-based languages, Mandarin versus English. It showed that, in fact, a dyslexic in English would not be dyslexic in Mandarin and vice versa.

**Cary Wolfe:**

Yeah.

**Erin Espelie:**

What I find most beautiful about Mandarin is that it really is more akin to watching a movie, if you can read fluently, than what I think of when phonetically sounding out words and reading a text. There's no true parallel in my experience in reading and writing in English. There's a huge history there that we need not go into, Ezra Pound and others, drawing upon the pictographic. I'm not trying to reduce the language to pictures but to think of gathering information in one sighting rather than progressing in a linear fashion.

**Cary Wolfe:**

No, that's really interesting. And it leads me to another question I wanted to ask you about the way in which you can think of the difference between pictographic languages and, let's say, English. There is a way in which that difference loosely maps onto the difference between analog and digital textual technologies. And of course, a lot of people have written a lot about this. Gregory Bateson talks about this very interestingly in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, that you can actually mathematize information theory in terms of the discrete probability of letters in English and where they appear. Anybody who's played Scrabble knows why Q's are worth ten and E's are worth one or whatever. Or if you've ever watched *Wheel of Fortune*, you know why vowels are cheap, right? The reason I'm bringing it up is less as a theory, per se, of the difference between different kinds of languages and more as something that is related to another question I wanted to ask you, which is the digital/analog question of medium. I know that you have a strong commitment to film as a medium, wet film. But you've also worked in digital media as well. This comes up in something like *Heart (Radical 61)* but also in lots of other places in your work. So, could you just talk about the difference between working in digital media versus working in film—the different things that are possible in those media and why you continue to have a special attachment to film, whether it's 8 millimeter, 16 millimeter, or whatever.

**Erin Espelie:** Analog and digital do have very different embodiments and, of course, modes of capture, as well as distinct materialities. From the starting point of filming, analog forces a greater care, economy, and even scope, vantage. Then the way in which that material is processed. I'm increasingly interested in the way in which analog film and digital speak to one another within a single film, fully enmeshed. Some film purists would say, "Well, unless everything is done in analog, down to the cutting and the processing and the film output, it's not analog." I disagree. Digital technology can, in certain instances, enhance and preserve. To me these are all tools, which can be used affectively to influence the viewer's relationship to what they're seeing.

**Cary Wolfe:** Yeah, yeah, that's really interesting. I was just kind of thinking back over your pieces that I've been looking at over the past few days and I do think some of your work has what I would call a very kind of filmic sensibility, and what I mean by that is kind of how it's shot and how color is handled and so on. And then in other places in your work, you clearly go out of your way, I would say, to sort of perform a kind of digital sensibility. And the sound is part of this, too, as we were talking about earlier, this foregrounding of a sensibility that people associate with digital technology. . . so, that's another place where I feel like you are working back and forth between the biological or the organic and the technological or the technical, only here it's not thematic, it's in the protocols of the work itself as it moves back and forth across what I would call a filmic sensibility and a more digital one that foregrounds the technological. Against that background, could you describe what you see as the general trajectory or direction of your work over the last ten or fifteen years? Is there a clear path that gives your overall body of work not just a coherence, but a kind of a trajectory and a direction? I know some artists think this is an important question and some don't . . .

**Erin Espelie:** Yes. I always feel like one film begets the next.

**Cary Wolfe:** Right.

**Erin Espelie:** And that I kind of can't make the next film until I've figured out what was working or what wasn't working or what questions were unanswered in the last film. So, in that way, the link to the experiment feels apt for my work; each film is an experiment and it allows me to step to the next place.

**Cary Wolfe:** You mean an "experiment" in the sense of a working scientist?

**Erin Espelie:** In the sciences, yes.

**Cary Wolfe:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Erin Espelie:** Cinema is an ideal place to explore unanswered questions. All of my films are linked by an attention to the nonhuman natural world and the ways in which species, especially nonhuman species, operate. Less and less do I feel the need to point my lens directly at environmental issues, because more filmmakers are doing that now compared to when I started making films in 2008. I'm always trying to find the margins, where people forget to look. One purpose I have in filmmaking is to reorient viewpoints, showcasing something I think it's worth taking the time to observe.

**Cary Wolfe:** That's interesting. So, that actually opens onto one last question I want to ask you, both about the general trajectory of your work and also about what people see and don't see or observe and don't observe. I was really struck watching *Heart (Radical 61)* and *Sacred Mountain*—both of which are from 2020—by the prevailing sensibility in those pieces. It made me want to ask: Is there a drift toward a more Eastern sensibility in your more recent

work? Because part of what *Sacred Mountain*, for example, is very much about is the things that are seen and not seen in the world and how many of the things that we think we do see and that we think are solid and that we think are real actually are not. That's part of what "enlightenment" means in that piece, according to those in the ashram. Is there an increasing interest in the East and in Eastern philosophy and Eastern practice in your more recent work, or is it just a coincidence that those two pieces were done in 2020? Is that part of this larger trajectory that we're talking about?

**Erin Espelie:**

It's a bit of a coincidence, honestly, because *Sacred Mountain* started in 2010. I made it as a gift for a group of women living up in the mountains at eight thousand feet in the Rocky Mountains in relative isolation and . . .

**Cary Wolfe:**

Right. At the ashram.

**Erin Espelie:**

At an ashram, yes. It feels like an outlier from my other work; it's more traditional in its documentary form. That said, I found ways to make it my own through selective editing. The person whom I'm interviewing in *Heart (Radical 61)* is from China, and she's grappling with the East and West divide as she tries to find a personal and national identity. It comes down to how we each situate ourselves in a very global environment. To harken back to Margulis and her idea of Gaia theory, thinking about the communality of the planet and the homogenization for humans as well as so many other species, I think that could be a direction I want to explore more going forward. *Tenebrio Molitor* touches on that a little bit, with the darkling beetle larvae, the mealworms, as stand-ins, bodily stand-ins, for us. That film is about overpopulation and the fact that we have almost eight billion people on this planet, and we are in increasing contact, as COVID-19 is making quite apparent. It comes back to the ecological and the biological more so than a cultural divide, a binary between East and West.

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