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Manga: The Signal of Noise

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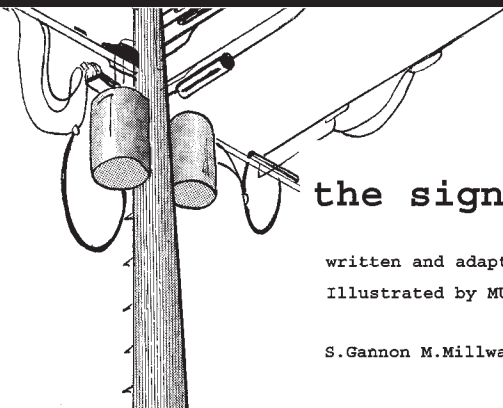


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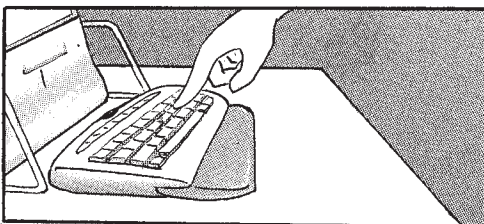
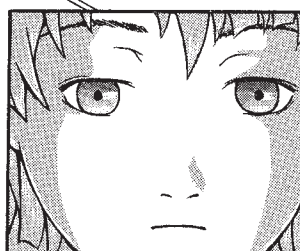
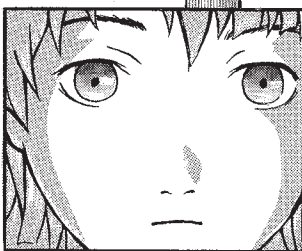


the signal of noise

written and adapted by Adèle-Elise Prévost

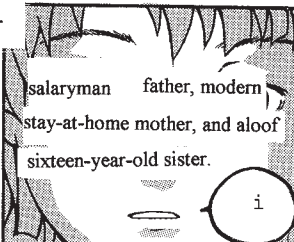
Illustrated by MUSEbasement

S.Gannon M.Millward Y.-T.Liu R.Tseng M.Ouahes

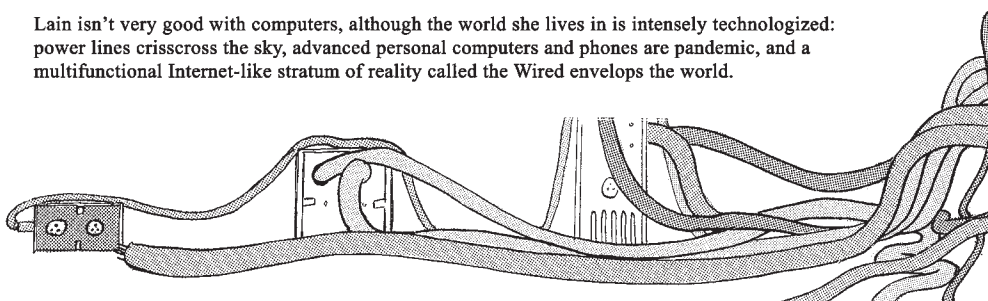


Iwakura Lain is 13.

She goes to school and lives with her family -



Lain isn't very good with computers, although the world she lives in is intensely technologized: power lines crisscross the sky, advanced personal computers and phones are pandemic, and a multifunctional Internet-like stratum of reality called the Wired envelops the world.



When Lain acquires a new top-of-the-line computer and proceeds to connect to the Wired, she begins to fall into an existence where reality is undetermined, memory is malleable, and identity is a diffuse quality.

Serial Experiments Lain, the concise 1998 series by director Nakamura Ryutaro and writer Chiyaki J. Konaka with concept art by Yoshitoshi Abe, thus addresses issues immediate to the rise of cyberspace and of digital media: the potential multiplicity of delocalized identity and the unreliability and unindexicality of memory. But although Lain embodies certain anxieties typical of the digital world, these anxieties are not novel but rather reflect timeless concerns.

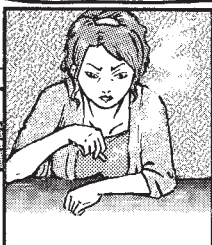


The problem of identity is crucial in *Lain*.



Unwillingly and usually unwittingly, our eponymous heroine appears to live a dual life: 'real world' Lain, a childish introvert with family and school,

and Lain of the Wired, a legend among hackers.



However, the identity Lain thinks of as "real" will turn out to have been wholly constructed – and she will come to accept with difficulty that she is, in essence, an executable computer program with a body.

Coalesced and embodied from an omnipresent existence in the Wired, Lain was put together by a scientist named Eiri Masami, who now exists only in the Wired as its self-proclaimed God; her body is only a "hologram"¹ of her Wired existence. As her creator will tell her:

"Lain, you're software."²

Hubert Dreyfus would argue that for even the most mundane of us, identity in cyberspace also becomes 'software'.

"we are encouraged to think of ourselves as fluid,

emergent,

decentralized,

multiplicious,

flexible,

and ever in process"³.

Users of the Wired

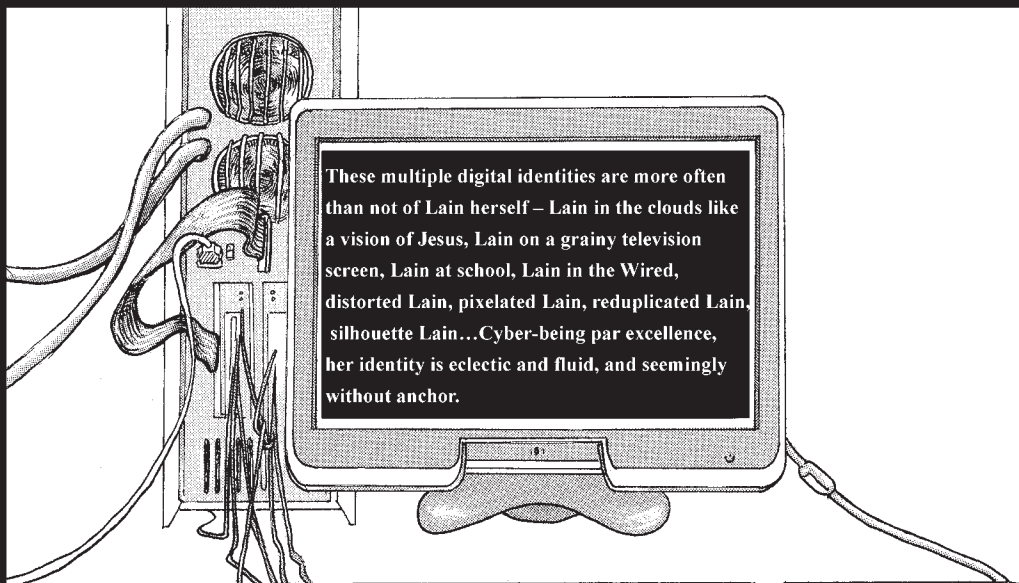
cannot easily identify Lain, or God, or the mysterious Knights – as with the Laughing Man in Oshii Mamoru's *Ghost in the Shell*, anonymity is ensured by the delocalization of identity. If cyberspace throws our own identities into question, digital technology questions the identity of media: since digital imaging functions by manipulating numbers (rather than physical indexes of real-world events), there is no decisively real-world origin for anything digital, and anything can be modified to suit shifting identities.

Serial Experiments Lain luxuriates in the modifiability of its images: one count gave me over 15 different types of image, cel and digital and live-action-based, photography and text.

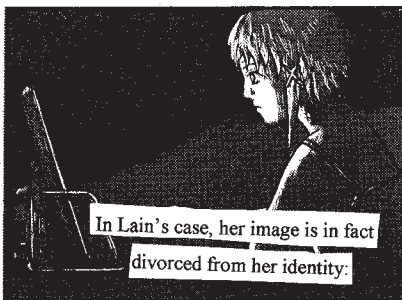
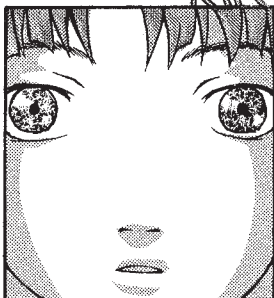
¹ Here 'hologram' must be meant to imply 'an etching accurately capturing both the wavelength and the wave phase (i.e. the depth) of information', rather than a literal photographic image.

² All unreferenceed quotations taken directly from DVD subtitles. *Shiritaru ekusuperimentsu rein*, dir. Nakamura Ryutaro (1998); translated as *Serial Experiments Lain*, subtitled DVD (Geneon/Pioneer, 2001).

³ Hubert Dreyfus, "Nihilism on the Information Highway," in *On the Internet* (Routledge, 2001), 82.



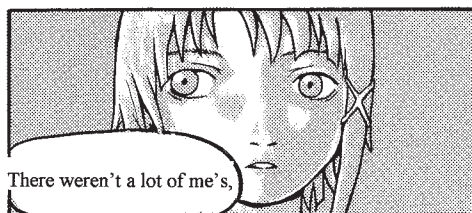
These multiple digital identities are more often than not of Lain herself – Lain in the clouds like a vision of Jesus, Lain on a grainy television screen, Lain at school, Lain in the Wired, distorted Lain, pixelated Lain, reduplicated Lain, silhouette Lain...Cyber-being par excellence, her identity is eclectic and fluid, and seemingly without anchor.



In Lain's case, her image is in fact divorced from her identity:



"That's why there were all kinds of me's."



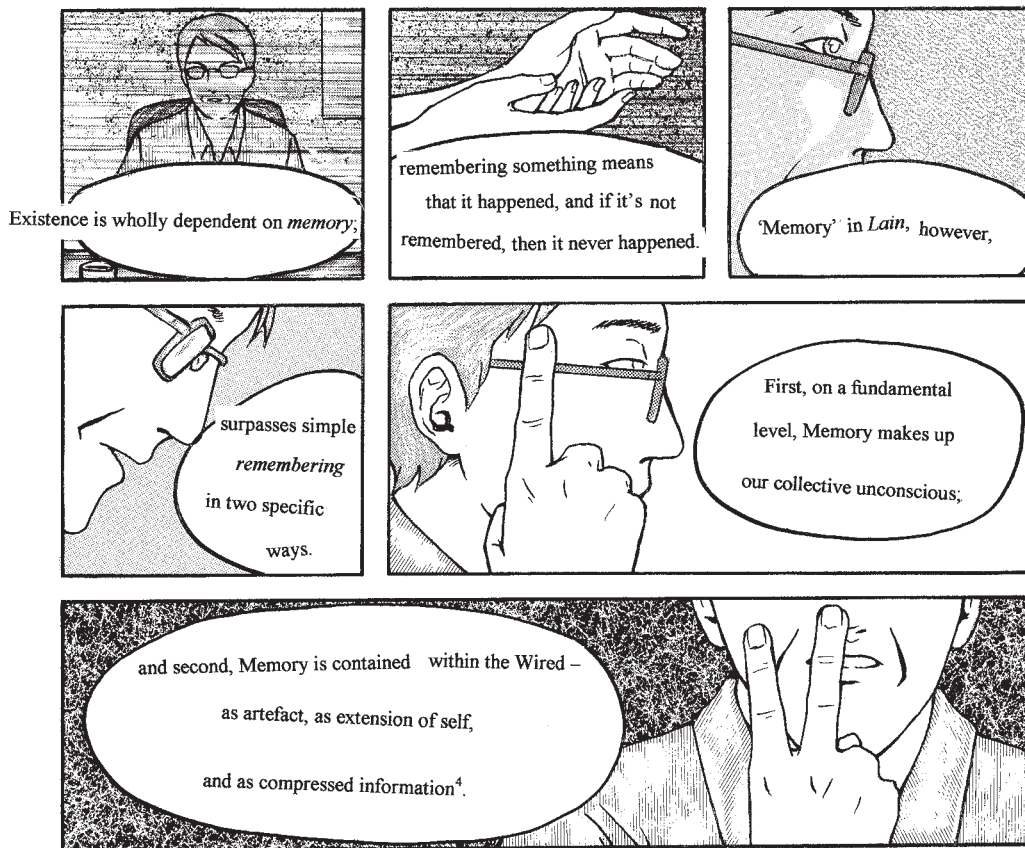
There weren't a lot of me's.



I was just inside all sorts of people.



that's all."



The Wired and the 'real world' at first appear to be as distinct as our world and the Internet, if it weren't for some tokens of abnormal interconnectivity which gradually increase in number and in strength until the two worlds are difficult to tease apart.

In the Wired, Lain quickly develops abilities beyond those of any hacker: she is able to translate her real-world image spectacularly well into digital form, and even enter into other people's virtual realities. Soon, however, it becomes clear that not only can she navigate the Wired with the ease of real-world action, but she can also apply things typically 'virtual' to the world of her physical body.

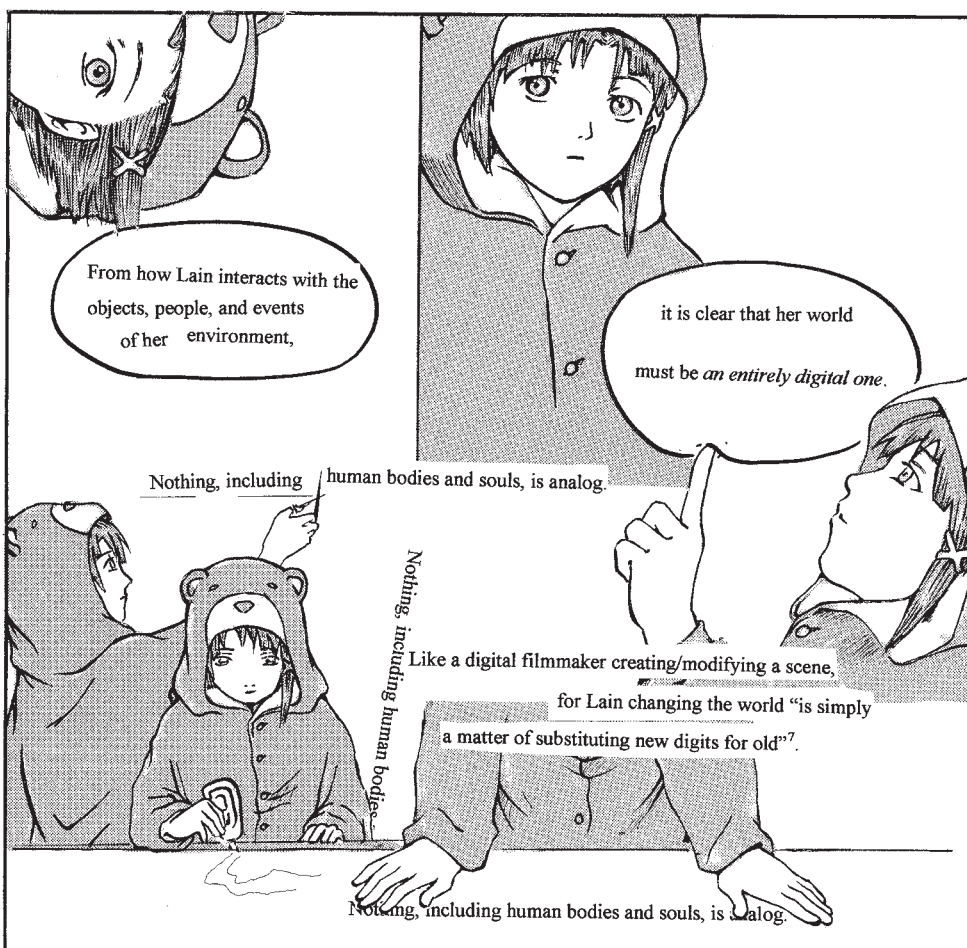
⁴ In this way, we could see Lain as *quite literally* a new archetype, generated by the collective unconscious and given form in the Wired.

⁵ Philip Rosen, "Old and New: Image, Indexicality, and Historicity in the Digital Utopia," in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 302.

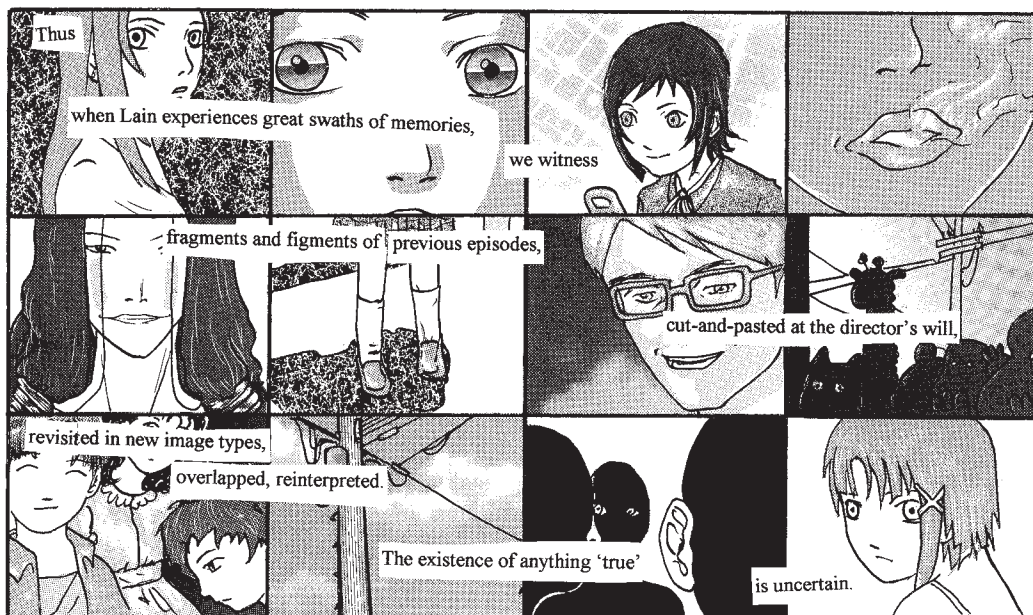
⁶ *Ibid.*, 328.

⁷ Lev Manovich, "What Is Digital Cinema?" in *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media* (MIT Press, 1999), 181.

Most remarkably, Lain is able to delete information from people – to rewrite their memories. This is the problem of virtual memory, part of the tensions of the digital age. Digital information, by its very nature as "a seemingly arbitrary code of discrete, relational elements (numbers)"⁵, is almost infinitely malleable. Nothing serves as an unambiguous index of a real-life event; any pre-existing medium can be digitized and turned into raw material, and in this grand levelling "universal coding procedure"⁶ anything can be transmuted, redistributed, and recast in new ways.



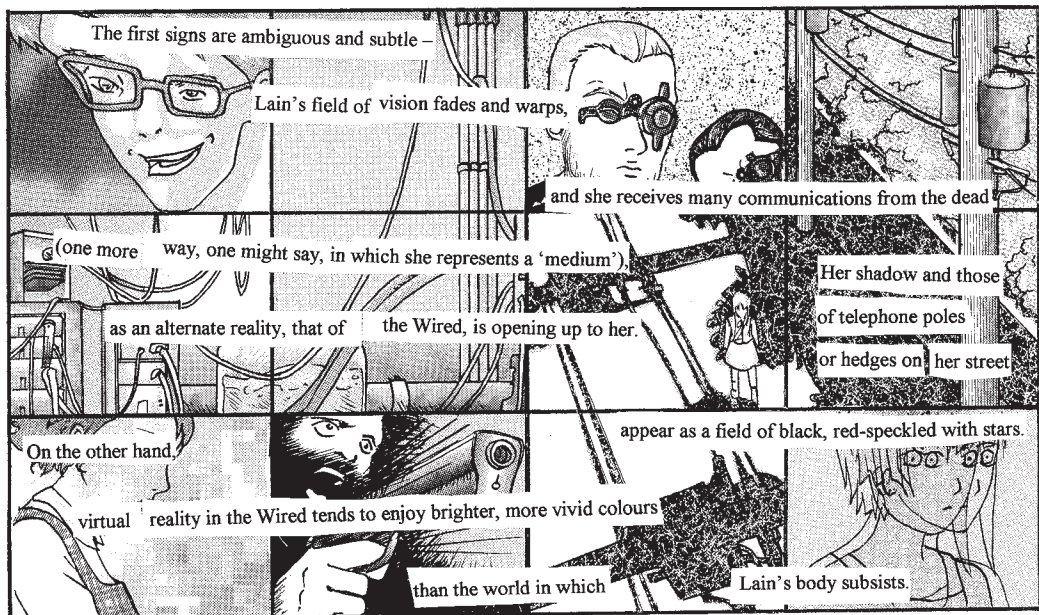
In a world of such “inherent mutability”⁸, the fact that memory causes existence by reinventing the world at each moment is tremendously dangerous. Again this is a fear which isn’t new to humanity; much like the problem of the self, the uncertain reliability of our memories is a worry that has haunted mankind for much longer than there have been computers. From a media perspective, this fear is that our records may be synthetic, cut out of whole cloth, if so desired. In a digital world, this is entirely conceivable.



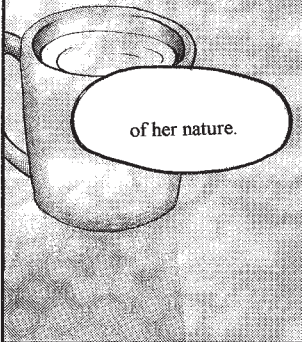
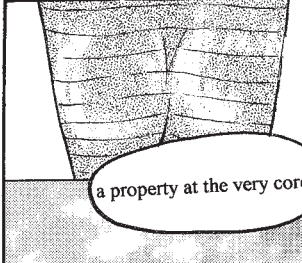
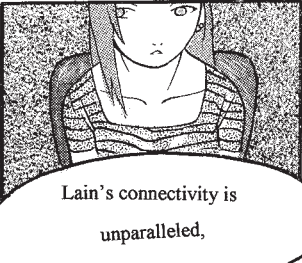
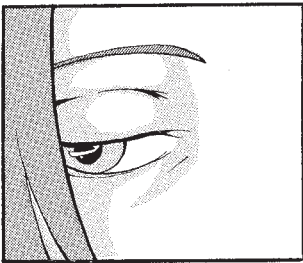
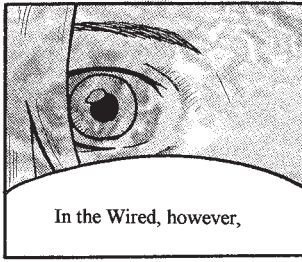
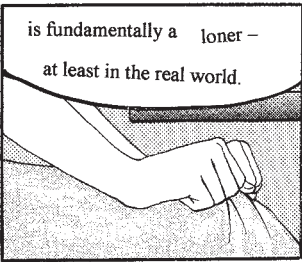
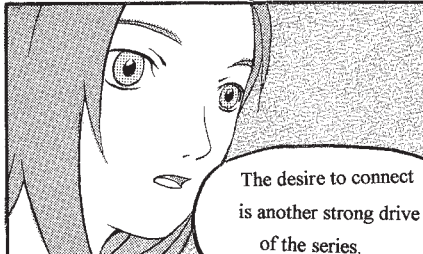
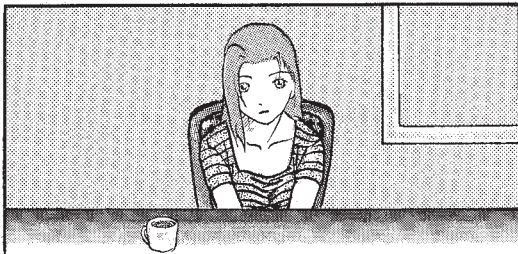
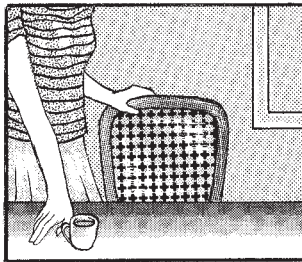
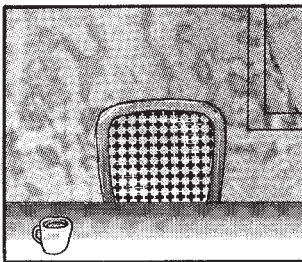
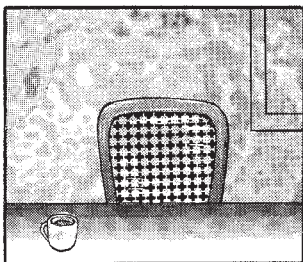
This throws into complete darkness what one should consider to be ‘reality’. “The Wired and the real world are one and the same”, says one *Lain* character. Another claims that “the real world and the Wired are attached end-to-end”, and Lain herself ends up remarking that “the real world isn’t real at all...”

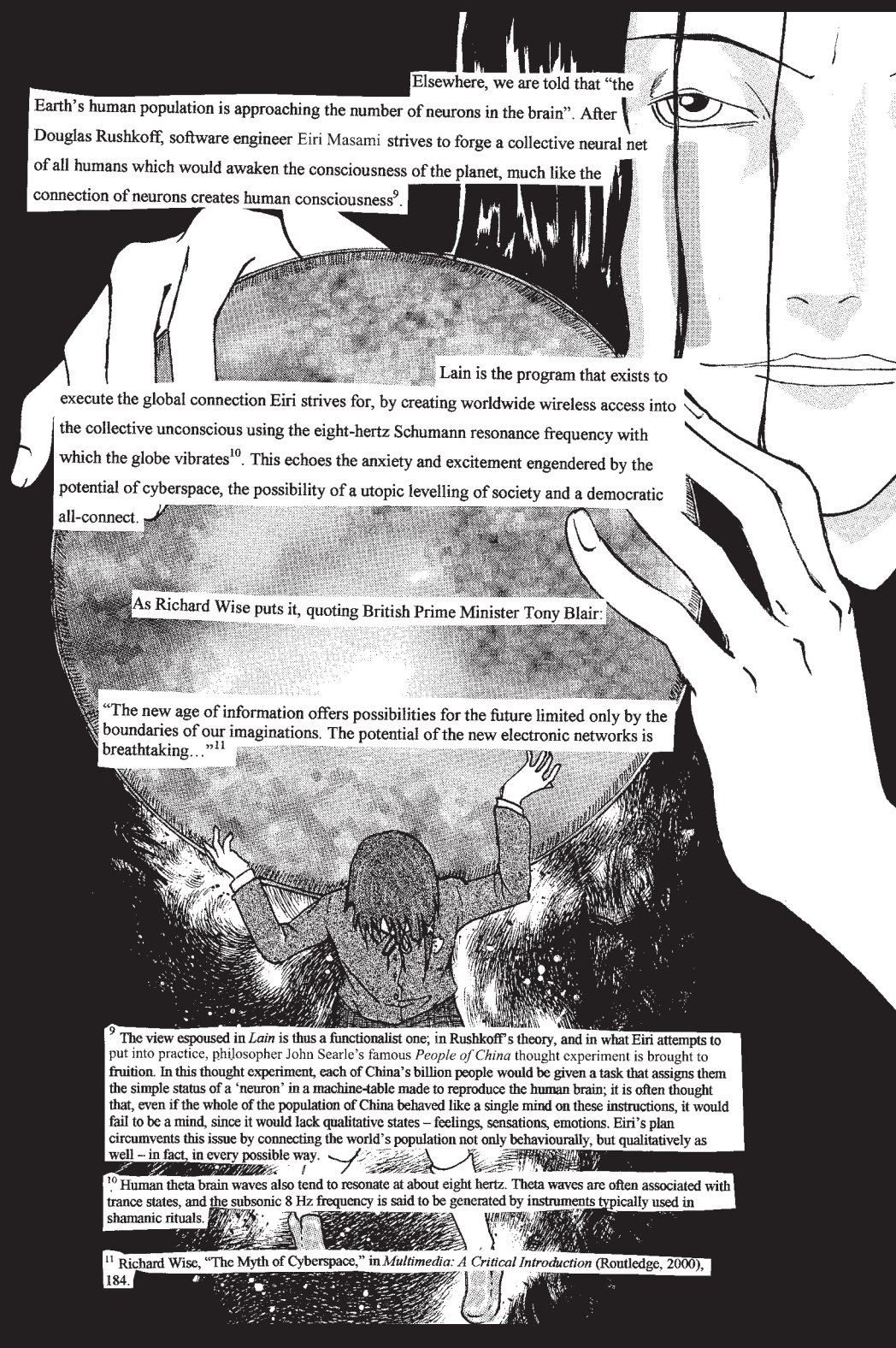
⁸ Ibid.

In order to visually throw the reality of the “real world” into question, *Serial Experiments Lain* uses a play of interference and distortion, of signal and noise.



Signs become more overt: a man walking down the sidewalk in VR goggles mutters, “I’m breaking the barrier between the real world and the Wired...”, and what he sees through his enhanced eyes is (apparently) digitized live-action film – breaking the barrier, as it were, between fleshy, moving humans and patterns of information, in his series-internal world as well as for the viewer.





Elsewhere, we are told that “the Earth’s human population is approaching the number of neurons in the brain”. After Douglas Rushkoff, software engineer Eiri Masami strives to forge a collective neural net of all humans which would awaken the consciousness of the planet, much like the connection of neurons creates human consciousness⁹.

Lain is the program that exists to execute the global connection Eiri strives for, by creating worldwide wireless access into the collective unconscious using the eight-hertz Schumann resonance frequency with which the globe vibrates¹⁰. This echoes the anxiety and excitement engendered by the potential of cyberspace, the possibility of a utopic levelling of society and a democratic all-connect.

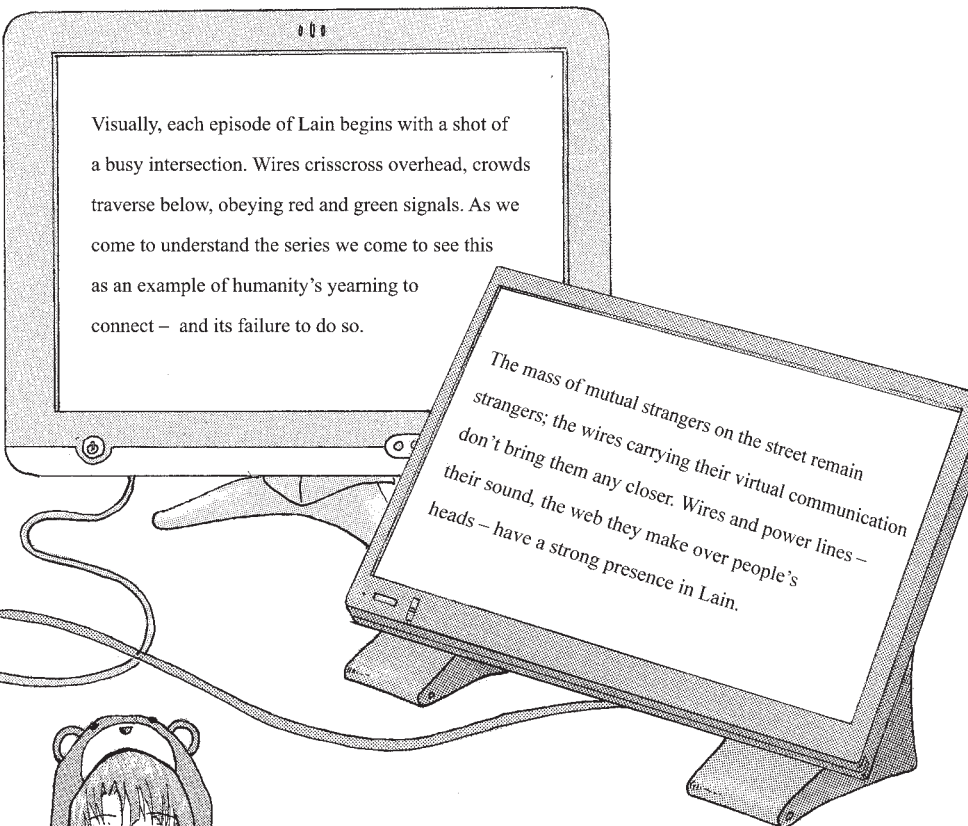
As Richard Wise puts it, quoting British Prime Minister Tony Blair:

“The new age of information offers possibilities for the future limited only by the boundaries of our imaginations. The potential of the new electronic networks is breathtaking...”¹¹

⁹ The view espoused in *Lain* is thus a functionalist one; in Rushkoff’s theory, and in what Eiri attempts to put into practice, philosopher John Searle’s famous *People of China* thought experiment is brought to fruition. In this thought experiment, each of China’s billion people would be given a task that assigns them the simple status of a ‘neuron’ in a machine-table made to reproduce the human brain; it is often thought that, even if the whole of the population of China behaved like a single mind on these instructions, it would fail to be a mind, since it would lack qualitative states – feelings, sensations, emotions. Eiri’s plan circumvents this issue by connecting the world’s population not only behaviourally, but qualitatively as well – in fact, in every possible way.

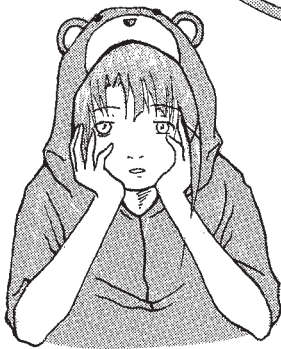
¹⁰ Human theta brain waves also tend to resonate at about eight hertz. Theta waves are often associated with trance states, and the subsonic 8 Hz frequency is said to be generated by instruments typically used in shamanic rituals.

¹¹ Richard Wise, “The Myth of Cyberspace,” in *Multimedia: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2000), 184.



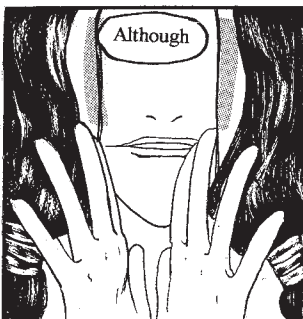
Visually, each episode of *Lain* begins with a shot of a busy intersection. Wires crisscross overhead, crowds traverse below, obeying red and green signals. As we come to understand the series we come to see this as an example of humanity's yearning to connect – and its failure to do so.

The mass of mutual strangers on the street remain strangers; the wires carrying their virtual communication don't bring them any closer. Wires and power lines – their sound, the web they make over people's heads – have a strong presence in *Lain*.



The possibility of melding with others is not new to the digital age. But the image coming through is that, although we want connection and seek each other out, because of the matter – the *medium* – of our bodies, we're doomed to fail.

This concern is nothing new, either – human beings are both individual and social, and the tension between solitude and connection is one that we each carry within. Hence the focus on religion in *Lain*: much spiritual activity seeks to unite the self with some greater truth – God, the World, Nothingness or otherwise – and, if practiced in groups, to unite each partaker with the others, levelling selves in the sway of religion.



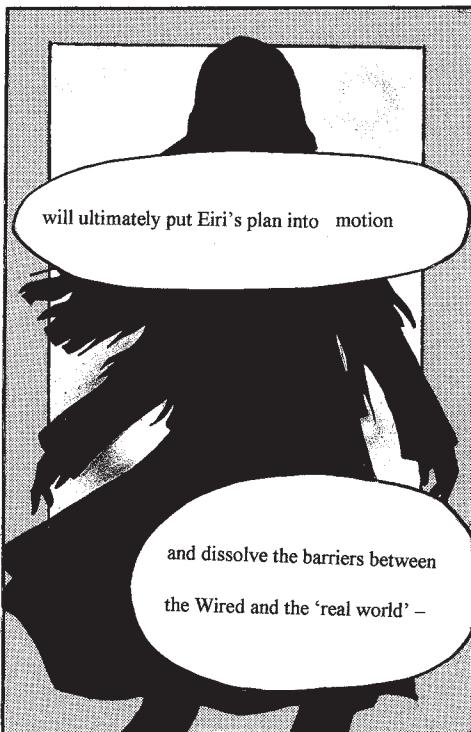
Although



she resists for some time,

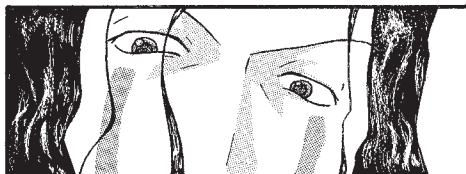


Lain



will ultimately put Eiri's plan into motion

and dissolve the barriers between
the Wired and the 'real world' –



but the process

turns out to be flawed and painful.

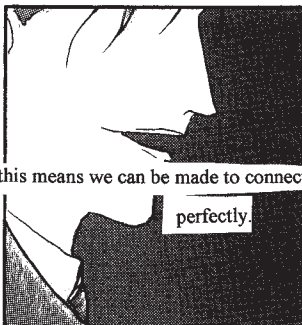


Eiri's mistake

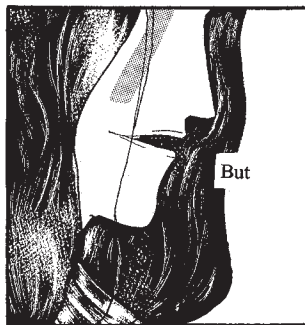
is in believing that, because in some
dreamtime past we were all connected,



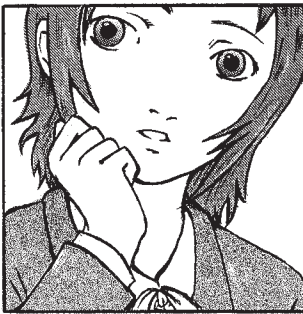
and because we now share a collective
unconscious and an 8 Hz resonant frequency,



this means we can be made to connect
perfectly.



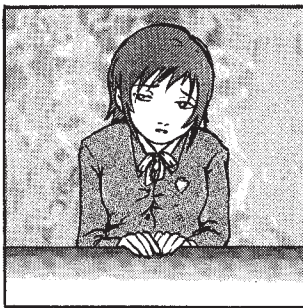
But



since humanity is not at a place in its evolution
where this connection is natural,
people are broken instead of being enlightened.



Like Tima in Rintaro's 2001
movie *Metropolis* (*Metoroporisu*), Lain will ultimately repair the wrongs of her
programmer, destroying him and sacrificing herself in the process.

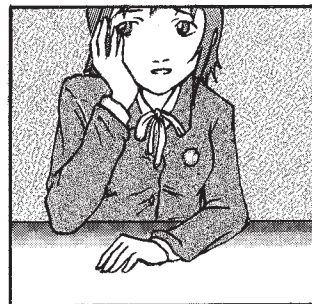


Lain brings about Eiri Masami's pure and utter
Information Age, but with a twist:

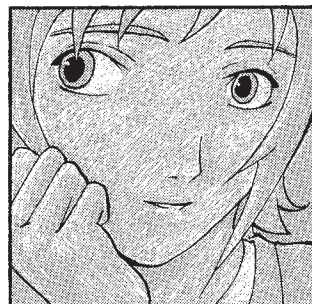


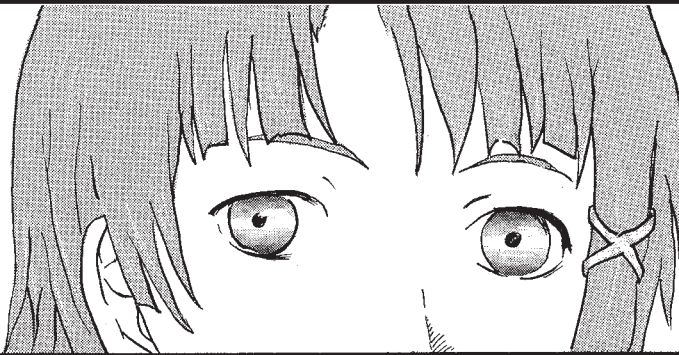
she effects an 'All- Reset',

and proceeds to write him
and herself out of reality.



The consequent world, one in which Lain never existed,
is indeed a utopic one. This is expressed by the happy balance
in which characters now live; even the dead have returned to life.
Moreover, in the animation itself, the power lines whose din accompanied
Lain's earlier travails now hum in harmony, and the 'real world'
is now as vivid in colour as Lain's Wired once was.





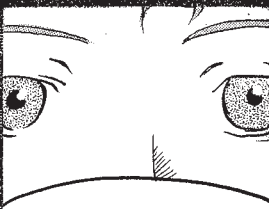
Digital media makes us ask the question asked by Lain, finally alone after having reset the world:



"If I'm nowhere, who am I? Where am I?"

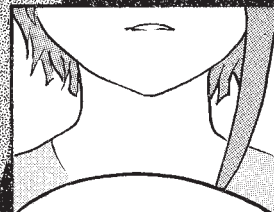
Delocalized, divorced from indexes of physical memory, identity becomes something mutable, in both good and bad ways. In one view, identity is just an overlap of the memories of others. But if the

medium for that memory is volatile, as in *Lain* or in digital materials, then we lose the very proof of identity. So what is left? When Lain rewrites the world without herself in it, when all indexes of our existence vanish, when we are connected with no one, is there anything that remains, and remains 'us'?

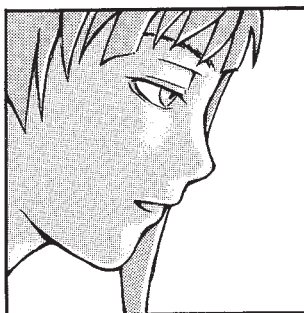
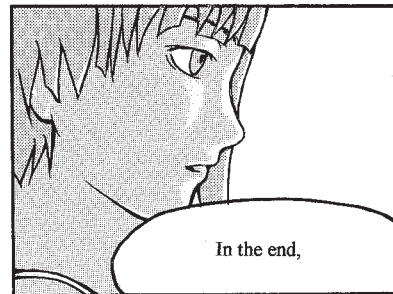
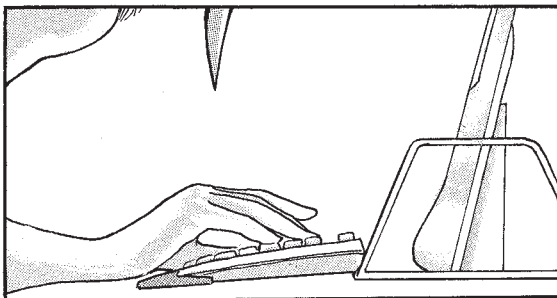
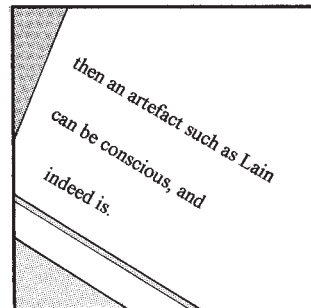
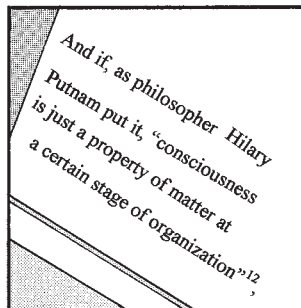
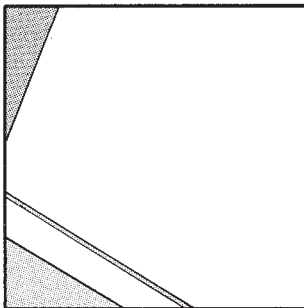
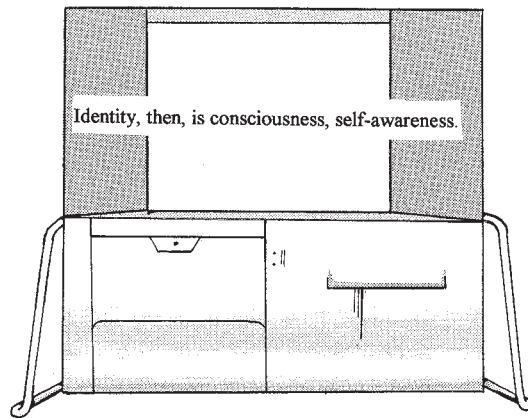


"As long as I'm aware of myself",

Lain concludes,



"my true self is inside of me".



Lain's message is that although we are accustomed to basing our identity on physical tokens and the memories of those who know us, we will be able to exist just fine without these things –

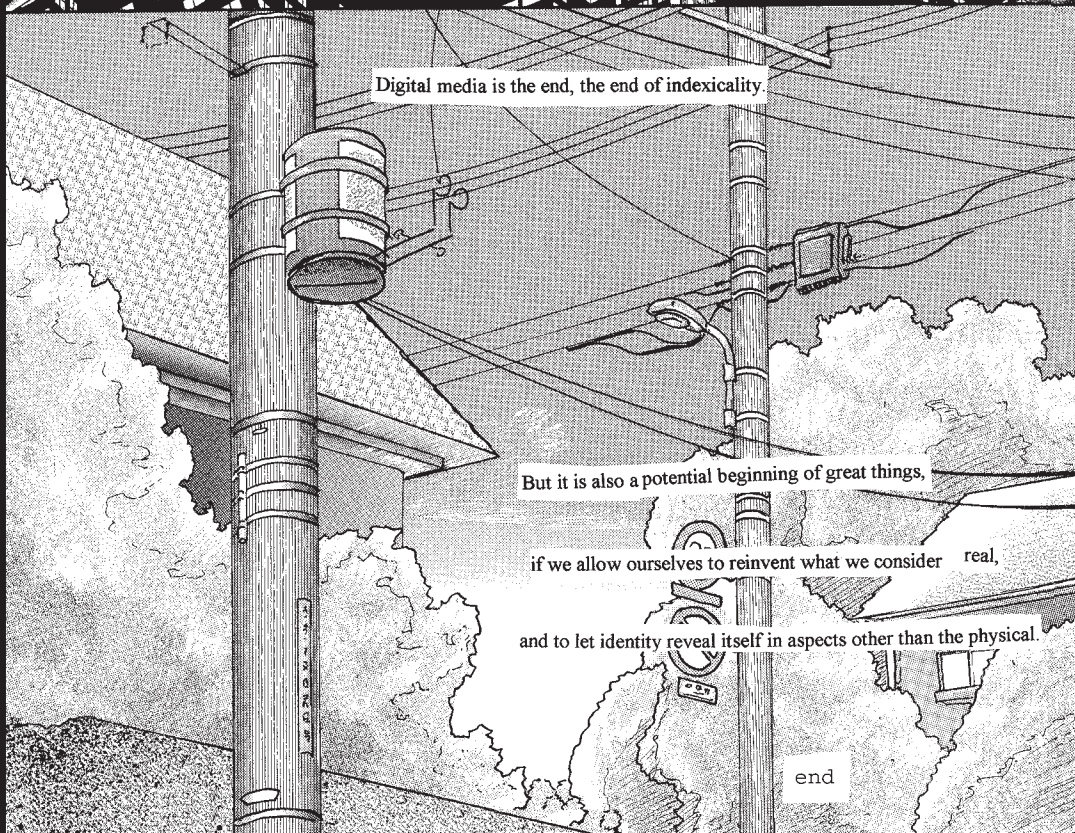
¹² Hilary Putnam, "Robots: Machines or Artificially Created Life?" in *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 397.



to exist,

to remain 'ourselves',

and even to find balance in a happy world.



Digital media is the end, the end of indexicality

But it is also a potential beginning of great things,

if we allow ourselves to reinvent what we consider real,

and to let identity reveal itself in aspects other than the physical.

end