



Figure 1.1. DOS Startup screen on an airplane.

Watching the plane chart its progress is ambient and relaxing as the beautiful renderings of oceanic plates and exotic names of small towns off the North Atlantic—Gander, Glace Bay, Carbonear—stream by.

Suddenly, as we approach the Grand Banks off the coast of Newfoundland, my screen flickers and goes black. It stays that way for some time, until it illuminates again, this time displaying generic white type on a black screen: the computer is rebooting and all those gorgeous graphics have been replaced by lines of DOS startup text. For a full five minutes, I watch line command descriptions of systems unfurling, fonts loading, and graphic packages decompressing. Finally, the screen goes blue and a progress bar and hourglass appear as the GUI loads, returning me back to the live map just as we hit landfall.

What we take to be graphics, sounds, and motion in our screen world is merely a thin skin under which resides miles and miles of language. Occasionally, as on my flight, the skin is punctured and, like

*Because the Gull went away, he can see this.*

getting a glimpse under the hood, we see that our digital world—our images, our film and video, our sound, our words, our information—is powered by language. And all this binary information—music, video, photographs—is comprised of language, miles and miles of alphanumeric code. If you need evidence of this, think of when you’ve mistakenly received a .jpg attachment in an e-mail that has been rendered not as image but as code that seems to go on forever. It’s all words (though perhaps not in any order that we can understand): The basic material that has propelled writing since its stabilized form is now what all media is created from as well.

Besides functionality, code also possesses literary value. If we frame that code and read it through the lens of literary criticism, we will find that the past hundred years of modernist and postmodernist writing has demonstrated the artistic value of similar seemingly arbitrary arrangements of letters.

Here’s a three lines of a .jpg opened in a text editor:

```
?Ïjε≈Ôïðff¥d4:‡À,†ΩÑÍóª;ËqsôëY”Δ"/à)1Í.$ÏÄ@”JJCGOnaa$ë¶æ
QÍ”5δ’5â
p#n)=ÁWmÁfÓàüü*Êœi”_$_iÛµ}Tßæ”[“Ô*â≠
Í=äÖΩ;Ï”≠Ö çø¥}è&&£S”ÆπëËk©ı=Á/”””úöË>∞ad_ÿËüö”€Ï—éÆΔ’aø6ªÿ
```

Of course a close reading of the text reveals very little, semantically or narratively. Instead, a conventional glance at the piece reveals a nonsensical collection of letters and symbols, literally a code that might be deciphered into something sensible.

Yet what happens when sense is not foregrounded as being of primary importance? Instead, we need to ask other questions of the text. Below are three lines from a poem by Charles Bernstein called “Lift Off,” written in 1979:

```
HH/ ie,s obVrsxr;atjrn dugh seineocpcy i iibalfmgmMw
er,,me”ius ieigorcycjjeuvine+pee.)a/nat” ihl”n,s
ortnsihclldseløpitemoBruce-oOiwvewaa39osoanfJ++r”P2
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Intentionally bereft of literary tropes and conveyances of human emotion, Bernstein chooses to emphasize the workings of a machine

*Looking within, under a hood of homogenous, flattened code*