At some point in the first two decades of the twentieth century, best-selling pulp-fiction writer, publisher, advertising sloganeer, stock trader, cookbook writer, and impresario Bob Brown (1886-1959) invented a reading machine. This machine became the stage on which he emerged as an avant-garde visual poet. In light of his popular works and varied careers, the machine also provides a glimpse into the intersection of the avant-garde and “lowbrow” popular culture in modernism. Recent scholarship, such as the work of David Earle, has looked to Brown as one of the many links between modernist and popular sensibilities. Earle argues that the close connection between pulp fiction and modernist writing exposes the old prejudice against lowbrow fiction’s facile and formulaic plots. For Earle, “the speed of writing […] caused innate reductivism in the pulps”; furthermore, as he notes, “this fast and formulaic aspect of the pulps” as well as “its very speedy formulism” created a style that “delegated pulp literature to the cultural trash pile.” Yet as Earle points out, “high modernism
was just as enthralled, just as much enmeshed with speed and heightened technology as the pulps were. If one had to choose a single concept or sensation to describe modernity in the first few decades of the twentieth century, one could hardly do any better than speed. The concept of speed is an integral part of modernism” (2009: 177). This essay takes up speed’s crossing of the high/low boundary, and examines Bob Brown as an example of one author who played an important part in making exchanges happen between lowbrow popular culture and avant-garde art on the one hand, and publishing and writing on the other.

Brown called the prepared transcript of texts for his machine “readies.” He announced the machine to the world with a series of publications in the early 1930s: “Without any whirr or splutter writing is readable at the speed of the day – 1931 – not 1450, without being broken by conventional columns confined to pages and pickled in books, a READIE runs on before the eye continuously – on forever in-a-single-line-I-see-1450-invention-movable-type-Gutenberg–” (Brown 1931: 184). In his manifesto-like proclamations about his machine, he includes plans for an electric reading apparatus and strategies for preparing the eye. There are instructions for making texts as “readies” and detailed quantitative explanations about the inventions and mechanisms involved in this peculiar machine (i.e., a machine that adds speed to the old fashioned ways of reading). Brown writes about the machine’s potential to change how we read by adding literal speed (not the representation of speed) to the process. In 1930, the beaming out of printed text over radio waves or in televised images had a science fiction quality or, for the avant-garde, a fanciful art-stunt feel, although Brown thought of his machine as eventually serving a popular audience in mass culture.

Brown’s description of his machine explains how it will add speed and miniaturize the technology:

Extracting the dainty reading roll from its pill box container the reader slips it smoothly into its slot in the machine, sets the speed regulator, turns on the electric current and the whole 100,000, 200,000, 300,000 or million words spill out before his eyes [. . .] in one continuous line of type [. . .] My machine is equipped with controls so the reading record can be turned back or shot ahead [. . .] [Using a] magnifying glass [the reader can move the text] nearer or farther from the type, so the reader may browse in 6 point, 8, 10, 12, 16 or any size that suits him. (Brown and Saper 2009a: 29; see also Brown and Saper 2009b)