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Electronic Wastelands?

Information Management, Cultural Memory, and the Challenges of Digitality

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Content

Introduction:

Electronic Wastelands? Information Management, Cultural Memory, and the Challenges of Digitality[1]

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> Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
> Falling towers
> Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
> Vienna London
> Unreal
>
> T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922, 68)

The apocalyptic scenario of a world lying in shambles conceived by British American writer T.S. Eliot more than one hundred years ago looks eerily familiar today, albeit under different auspices. If Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922) portrays whole tracts of land in debris and vast regions ravaged, we can equally imagine our digital landscapes—the world of digital information and communication via social media (from Facebook and Twitter to Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok)—as marked by "cracks" and "bursts," looking "unreal" to many observers. The exponential growth of new electronic devices and the subsequent digital lifestyle of billions of consumers worldwide has generated an unsustainable growth of waste of electronic equipment. As a matter of fact, e-waste is the fastest-growing solid-waste stream. According to the Global E-Waste Monitor, we can expect to reach 74.7 million tons annually by 2030.[2] In addition to the production of physical waste, we are confronted with two additional problems:

> 1. the production of digital waste which is defined as "the data we choose to neglect or discard, equivalent to layers of sediment hidden in devices and storage facilities much of it never to be used or recycled again, alongside the infrastructures and devices that are integral for their operation" (Cameron 251);

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> 2. a dangerous tendency towards disinformation in the digital age, with challenges for democracy, state, and society including the spread of false information, from fake news to propaganda wars, proliferation of hate speech, and violent content on digital media platforms (see Penninckx).[3]

Are we currently witnessing the failure of the revolutionary digital era? Are we experiencing an "electronic wasteland" one hundred years after the publication of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922 which has often been read as a poem of failure—a "painful nostalgia for a wholeness that is no longer possible" as Harold Bloom argued (132)?[4]

Likewise, our present age seems to face the loss of *wholeness* and the fragmentation of reality into bits and pieces. The boundaries between real and unreal, past and present, material and immaterial, are getting more and more blurred—to the extent that we can no longer distinguish between the material world and the 'brave new world' of digitality. What's more, the digital world gradually *replaces* the real world, becoming an integral part of our perceived reality, if not its indistinguishable replica. Jean Baudrillard, a pioneer of postmodernist theory, envisaged this development as early as 1981:

> By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs, a material more malleable than meaning [...]. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all vicissitudes. (2)

With new technical possibilities such as *deep fake*, the age of simulation has transformed into the age of "post-truth" and "fake news" (see Bruin & Roitman 1; Smith & Mansted 5). Users find it harder than ever before to recognize false information on the internet and distinguish between *human actors* (of flesh and blood) and *artificial actors* (induced by AI); this trend is demonstrated by the rising number of "terrorist-style" cyberattacks via bot accounts and the increasing tendency of social media to engage in what one author calls "information warfare" (Prier 65, 73). This transformation of the hegemonic imagination is tied to what Brian Thill terms "digital wastelands," namely, the emergence of vast and incoherent digitized spaces in our homes and minds that have replaced fact-based information by a colorful spectacle of emotionally charged parallel universes:

> These are wastelands that are simultaneously sites of forgetting and remembrance, of desire and abandonment, available to us in ways that are fundamentally different from the object-worlds of our homes, where we gather what is supposed to be important to us, and the trash that we put

> out every single week. By their very nature, these digital wastelands trouble the old distinctions between desire and abjection, past and present, and, therefore, most importantly, between old selves and the new self that is constantly forming, not just in the streaming, proliferating present, but with the ongoing influences of the digital pasts that we drag along with us, wanted and unwanted all at once. (Thill 9)

Such "digital wastelands" may be the result of particular global developments in the postmodern age. Yet, the tendency to create a reservoir of alternative truths is intimately linked to the history of American thought. What the American literary master Herman Melville once stated about a characteristic feature of the so-called American genius also resonates with our digital age. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville blamed the literary market for the relative lack of popularity of his masterful literary colleague. He argued that the market valued literary trash more than works of quality. Melville insisted: "[F]ailure is the true test of greatness" (1164). We live in an age in which the digital transformation has affected all our lives from the social to the political, economic, and education sphere. Digital Humanities scholars such as Stanley Fish speak of a quasi-theological vision according to which the digital world

> promises to liberate us from the confines of the linear, temporal medium in the context of which knowledge is discrete, partial and situated—knowledge at this time and this place experienced by this limited being—and deliver us into a spatial universe where knowledge is everywhere available in a full and immediate presence to which everyone has access as a node or relay in the meaning-producing system. ("The Digital Humanities and the Transcending of Mortality")

Many others, however, feel that in the process of developing Digital Studies, the results are still comparatively meagre despite large amounts of funding and a general emphasis on the productive potential of the digital revolution. Critics such as Timothy Brennan attack new digital scholarship, arguing that "digital humanities is a wedge separating the humanities from its reason to exist" (online). Others warn about the limitations of "over-hasty announcements of an intellectual revolution" (Dunst & Mischke 139) or point to the potential of moving from text-based data mining to semi-automatic computer-assisted reading (Mehring 234). As John Bryant, director of the Melville Electronic Library, puts it, it is vital for digital scholarship to "sufficiently and coherently embody a critical vision" (158).

With our reference to "electronic wastelands" in this special issue of *AmLit*, we want to address the question of problems, challenges, and failures of the ongoing digital revolution and find ways to critically assess theoretical and methodological approaches to literary texts and archives. At the same time,

this thematic issue addresses the challenges that digitalization as a process of information (mis)management poses for the production of cultural memory, including the creation of *empty discourses* in the realms of political and cultural practice. To what extent is the digital world—and are we—equipped to cope with the pitfalls of an unhinged distribution of half-truths and barely reflected knowledges? How do these, oftentimes denunciatory, practices generate and influence communication in everyday lives and lead to a dynamics of 'failure'? As Bryant reminds us with an eye to Melville's assessment of the importance of failure:

> [F]ailure has no practical value unless it either promotes a deeper understanding of theory or engenders a consideration of whether one's theory is the one to pursue. Technicians will tell you that anything can be done digitally—with "Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience" (as Melville also once put it)—but once achieved, a technical solution (elegant or not) is worthless unless it sufficiently and coherently embodies a critical vision. (158)

With the emphasis this citation places on failure from a technical point of view, it brings to the fore how fragile and susceptible to error technology can be when it is kept in isolation and away from human critical thinking and wellbeing.

In our current time and age, the speed with which digitality envelops every aspect of human action—physical, intellectual, and cognitive—brings us face to face not simply with the omnipresence and omnipotence of technology but with the realization of how expendable everything is. With electronic vulnerability and ephemerality being an unquestionable fact if one considers how quickly gadgets and online software become outdated, one can realize that a total wipe out and erasure of all that has been created or preserved with the use of digital technologies is inevitable. In such an ambivalent reality, humans are being caught up in a race of ongoing updates and online platform migrations in an attempt to resist technological redundancy. Kamilla Pietrzyk, in her exploration of the speed at which information is disseminated as well as lost in our digital age, locates this problem in "capitalism's systemic imperative toward social, economic, and technological acceleration, and the associated cultural lack of interest in the problems of duration" (127). This observation very much brings to the center of attention Manuel Castells who identifies postindustrial economy with the dominance of information technologies or, what he calls, *informationalism* which is "oriented towards technological development, that is toward the accumulation of knowledge and towards higher levels of complexity in information processing" (17). This realization marks a transition to an accelerated production of data that cannot be analyzed by the human mind but only by intelligent machines, which heralds an uneven distribution of power and intelligence.

In such an ominous environment of impending digital doom, fear should not overwhelm us. The current appearance of the ChatGPT AI tool that completely effaces the distinction between ubiquitous technologies and human cognition makes imperative, as N. Katherine Hayles had written a few years ago, to "recognize the mutuality of our interactions with [intelligent machines], the complex dynamics through which they create us even as we create them" (243). It is interesting that both Castells and Hayles, though they approach digital technologies from different standpoints, comment on its "complexity" or "complex dynamics." This complexity, even though it sounds abstract and vague as a notion, should not deter us from engaging in depth with it in an attempt to comprehend what it stands for and how it explains the human-machine symbiosis and synergistic interaction. Hayles already attempted to raise awareness when she stated that

> [a]s digital media [...] become more pervasive, they push us in the direction of faster communication, more intense and varied information streams, more integration of humans and intelligent machines, and more interactions of language with code. These environmental changes have significant neurological consequences, many of which are now becoming evident in young people and to a lesser degree in almost everyone who interacts with digital media on a regular basis. (11)

The changes that this observation highlights, as regards the impact digital technologies have on our thinking and communication capacities and hence on our identity, may seem inevitable and irreversible, gradually leading to the 'electronic wastelands' this volume sheds light on. This thought is reminiscent of Baudrillard's realization which he summarized by claiming that we are entering an abstraction of the real "whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself" (1). The "desert" he is referring to is what he also terms as "simulation" or the "hyperreal" in the citation that follows: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). Such a proclamation has somehow paved the ground for the technological ubiquity we are nowadays experiencing that makes any differentiation between human action and digitality indistinguishable on an international scale. However, we are still walking on solid ground and the way digitality is experienced around the world is not the same for everyone if we consider internet availability and access worldwide. So it is essential at this stage of our existence to consider the extent to which we still have time to gain insight into what makes our engagement and interaction with digital technologies complex: Is it the multiple combinations of data? The forward and backward movements or loops that the users consciously or unconsciously perform? The random

activation of information when users tap on their keyboards and electronic screens or surf on the net? The algorithmic processes that are set into motion? These are all functions that may appear to be overpowering and overwhelming but, simultaneously, they widen our perspective with regard to the capabilities of the networked computer.

With our everyday digital experience being shaped by the sensorial pleasures and the data that the digital interfaces generate, it becomes necessary to acknowledge uncertainties and transitions as well as the opportunities and risks that define our present moment. Despite the ubiquity of digitality, there are still differences in the ways each one of us tackles it. This lack of uniformity in how digitality is perceived combined with the constant rise of its usage certainly does not leave any domain of human action unaffected, but it also offers us the opportunity to articulate our questions and elaborate on our findings. What everyone understands is that the vastness and expansiveness of the present-day digital media move beyond the mere manifestation of plurality but into an unbound and polymorphic terrain within which multiple and varied processes can be executed. Such an observation corresponds to Lionel Ruffel's remarks when he comments on our contemporary moment, saying that "[it] feels more like a concordance of temporalities than a single time, a concordance that is also more subjective than collective: it's not postulating that a single unique, unified present is shared by the community but rather that what the community shares is a subjectivized polychronicity" (178). Possibly within the existence of multiple temporalities, subjectivities, singularities, and communities, a glimpse of opportunity may still be visible for an exchange of experiences, viewpoints, and practical skills between users as well as between different disciplines before the electronic wastelands overtake us. Humanity has proven that at major challenges—with COVID-19 being the most recent one—only meaningful synergies matter.

Moving away from celebrating digital transformations, this thematic issue of *Electronic Wastelands* attempts to critically map, analyze, and evaluate certain problematic developments of the digital era we live in. As for the acknowledgement of the limitations, failures, and sometimes dangerous developments of digitality, this constitutes the first step towards a more democratic, productive, and participatory consideration and questioning of the impact and effects digitality can have in academia, art, culture, and society.

The contributors to *Electronic Wastelands*, coming from different geographical territories, critically engage with topics such as electronic information (mis)management, digital strategies of memory-making as well as conspiracy theories concocted in social media.

John Rodzvilla opens our volume with his article on "The Hollowed-Out Bookstore: Amazon's Promotion of Empty Discourses in Their Online

Bookstore." He takes an initiative by representatives Adam Schiff (D-CA) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) as the springboard for his article. In September 2021, they sent letters to Amazon about promoting books that provide misinformation on the COVID pandemic. This was not the first time Amazon had been involved in some kind of algorithmic manipulation of the way books appear on their site. Previously, the "world's largest bookstore" removed the sales rankings from over 57,000 titles, most of which were LGBTQ+ titles and blamed the removal on a coding error. Outside of their well-documented manipulation of titles from traditional publishing, Amazon's self-publishing marketplace, Kindle Direct Publishing, still allows authors to publish all manners of print and digital "books," including: conspiracy theories, blank books, scans from mass digitization, and even selections of entries from Wikipedia. Rodzvilla looks at the different ways Amazon has hollowed out their bookstore and made it a source of misinformation in both print and digital formats.

In their essay, Paschalia Mitskidou and Vasileios N. Delioglanis turn to the *Internet Archive* to engage with questions of how to best preserve American cultural memory in times of sheer unlimited digital storage opportunities. Websites, blogs, videos, images, and software, they argue, run the risk of becoming ephemeral and obsolete, as they are constantly disabled by no longer being available for use. The essay concentrates on the *Internet Archive*'s Wayback Machine, a digital tool serving as an online library that enables the discovery and archiving of obsolete webpages as well as the restoration, preservation, management, and classification of these "electronic wastelands," while also adding to their historicity. Exploring the challenges posed by digitalization as a process of culture making, the authors investigate the ways in which the *Internet Archive* contributes to the preservation of cultural memory of the United States. The authors propose that this web archive offers a solution to the problem of disinformation by turning electronic wastelands, under certain circumstances, into a repository of cultural knowledge that handles and systematically organizes the various online materials, thereby contributing to the formation of a 'healthier' information ecosystem.

In "Bodies, Brains, and Burnt-out Systems in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*," Despoina N. Feleki investigates literary representations of electronic wastelands in twenty-first-century American fiction (markedly, waste as 'wasted mind power'). Highlighting images of cultural and moral decadence in a digitized world where the omnipresence of the internet is criticized, Feleki addresses the ills of an uncritical use of and exposure to new media. The novella *The Silence* (2020) by Don DeLillo, one of the most influential living American writers and declared critic of American culture, is explored to shed light on the health and the ills of the American nation in the digital era.

As DeLillo's obsessions with the obscenities of the real world currently shift, he expresses his anxieties over the terrifying effects of our digitized world, interrogating excessive exposure to the screen. By scrutinizing instances of existential crisis in DeLillo's narrative (the denial of one's sense of self, the disruption of one's presence in space and time as well as the loss of cultural memory), Feleki draws attention to the agonizing questions concerning these challenges caused by electronic systems that manipulate human bodies and minds. Analyzing *The Silence* as a metaphor for the end of discourse *per se*, the author pinpoints how we have all become immersed in a new media order that is deeply pervasive and exploitative.

In his article "The Barcode Monster: Supermarkets, Supermarket Data, and Surveillance in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," Andrew Warnes explores the rise of the American supermarket system, tracing its evolution from small self-service grocery stores in the early twentieth century to the giant conglomerates of today. Over the course of the 'American' century, after all, food—by definition sensual and material—has become *information*, too, as it arrives on supermarket shelves and then online, representing itself and holding its actual contents beneath a coded system. Both supermarket items and online life address the individual as an individual even as they constantly harvest data on this individuality to group it into types. Observing these similarities, Warnes turns to an American novel published in the digital age, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), showing how it valorizes *food* beyond the supermarket's textualizing network.

Throughout this special issue, each of the contributing essays attempts to highlight a different aspect of contemporary digital reality that is still developing in an unrestrained manner. The observations and conclusions the authors draw underline the multifacetedness of digitality but also the need to articulate different points of view in an analytical, critical, and discursive manner. The essays also prove that culture still remains the hub and incubator of ideas and perspectives. The more we learn the more we battle ignorance about the digital world around us, but the more digitality expands the more urgent the need to take action becomes. What this issue of *Electronic Wastelands* hopes to offer to its readers are additional elaborations, speculations, and considerations on an ever- and currently-changing terrain of digital intensification.

Notes

[1] This special issue of *AmLit* emerged from a series of papers delivered during a shoptalk organized by the EAAS Digital Studies Network at the EAAS Conference in Madrid (2022). See https://www.eaas.eu/eaas-networks/643-eaas-digital-studies-network. Accessed 9 Jan. 2023.

[2] Global E-Waste Monitor, https://ewastemonitor.info/gem-2020/. Accessed 5 Jan. 2023.

[3] Patrick Penninckx gave his speech in his function as the Head of Information Society Department at the Council of Europe on 7 Apr. 2022.

[4] The dawn of the "roaring twenties" seemed unreal to Eliot. In times of the electronic wasteland and at times of global crises, a desire for wholeness has become quite real (or rather 'hyperreal,' in the Baudrillardian sense) among our generation.

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Biography

Stefan L. Brandt is Professor of American Studies at the University of Graz and former President of the Austrian Association for American Studies. After receiving his PhD and Venia Legendi at Freie Universität Berlin, he was awarded lecturer positions at University of Chemnitz and University of Bochum as well as professorial positions at Freie Universität Berlin, University of Siegen, and University of Vienna. He was affiliated—on the research and teaching level—with numerous other universities, among them Università Ca' Foscari, Radboud Universiteit, University of Toronto, and Harvard University. Brandt has talked and written on a wide range of topics in American Cultural Studies, having published four monographs—among them *The Culture of Corporeality: Aesthetic Experience and the Embodiment of America, 1945–1960* (Winter, 2007), and *Moveable Designs, Liminal Aesthetics, and Cultural Production in America since 1772* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)—and (co-)edited eight anthologies, most recently *In-Between: Liminal Spaces in Canadian Literature and Culture* (2017) (Lang Canadiana Series), *Space Oddities: Difference and Identity in the American City* (2018) (LIT Verlag, with Michael Fuchs), and *Ecomasculinities: Negotiating New Forms of Male Gender Identity in U.S. Fiction* (2019) (Lexington Books, with Rubén Cenamor). Brandt is currently working on a book project dealing with the transatlantic origins of U.S. formation literature (*Burgeoning Selves: Transatlantic Dialogue and Early American Bildungsliteratur, 1776–1860*). He is also one of the founding members of the European research network 'Digital Studies' (https://www.eaas.eu/eaas-networks/643-eaas-digital-studies-network) (together with Frank Mehring and Tatiani G. Rapatzikou).

Biography

Frank Mehring is Professor of American Studies at Radboud University, Nijmegen. His research focuses on cultural transfer, migration, intermediality, and the function of music in transnational cultural contexts. In 2012, he received the Rob Kroes Award for his monograph *The Democratic Gap* (2014). His publications include *Sphere Melodies* (2003) on the intersection of literature and music in the work of Charles Ives and John Cage, *The Soundtrack of Liberation* (2015) on WWII sonic diplomacy, *Sound and Vision: Intermediality and American Music* (2018, with Erik Redling), *The Politics and Cultures of Liberation* (2018, with Hans Bak and Mathilde Roza), or *Islamophobia and Inter/Multimedial Dissensus* (2020, with Elena Furlanetto). Mehring unearthed a new visual archive of transatlantic modernism with articles, lectures, exhibitions, editions, and catalogues such as *The Mexico Diary: Winold Reiss between Vogue Mexico and Harlem Renaissance* (2016) and *The Multicultural Modernism of Winold Reiss* (2022). With Tatiani G. Rapazikou and Stefan L. Brandt, he is the co-founder of the European Digital Studies Network and the online journal *AmLit—American Literatures*. He organized the first performance of the Marshall Plan opera *La Sterlina Dollarosa* and co-curated exhibitions on Winold Reiss, Joseph Beuys, the Marshall Plan, and Liberation Songs in Kleve, New York, Nijmegen, and The Hague.

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou is Associate Professor at the Department of American Literature and Culture, School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTh), Greece. She holds a B.A. from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, while for her graduate studies she holds an M.A. from Lancaster University and a Ph.D. from the University of East Anglia, Norwich, U.K. (funded by the Board of Greek State Scholarships Foundation, I.K.Y). She was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the M.I.T. Comparative Media Studies program (2009). She has received various fellowships: the Arthur Miller Centre Award (2000), the BAAS Short Term Travel Award (2000), the British Library Eccles Centre for American Studies Visiting Fellowship (2020). She was a Visiting Research Scholar at the Program in Literature at Duke University, U.S. (2012), the Department of English at York University, Toronto, Canada (2016, 2022), and the Department of Fine Arts & Humanities, Augustana Campus, University of Alberta, Canada (2022). She has written the monograph titled *Gothic Motifs in the Fiction of William Gibson* (Rodopi 2004), while she recently co-edited: *Ethnicity and Gender Debates: Cross-Readings of the United States of America in the New Millennium* (Peter Lang 2020); *Visualizing America* (Hellenic Association for American Studies Digital Publications, National Documentation Center 2021); and the special journal issue *The Cultural Politics of Space* (2020: *Gramma, Journal of Theory and Criticism*). She is one of the founding members of two online peer/blind review journals (*Ex-centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media* and *AmLit: American Literatures*) and of the EAAS Digital Studies Network (together with Stefan Brandt and Frank Mehring). Between 2019 and 2022, she served as the Director of the Digital Humanities Lab "Psifis" (AUTh). Her teaching and research deal with: contemporary American literature, postmodern writing practice, cyberpunk/cyberculture/cybergothic (William Gibson), electronic literature, print and digital materialities.

The Hollowed-Out Bookstore:

Amazon's Promotion of Empty Discourses in Their Online Bookstore

John Rodzvilla
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Abstract

Amazon is considered the world's largest bookstore but what kind of books hide on the 'darkest' digital shelves? By looking beyond the new titles and best-sellers, this paper finds evidence of a wasteland of titles composed of content-free titles, corrupted reprints, and dangerous misinformation. Changes to publishing in the twenty-first century and the pressure of the market on Amazon can help to explain how this wasteland formed, but this paper also explores how this wasteland provides for specific audiences who live in their own cultural bubbles.

Keywords

Amazon; Book Publishing; Booksellers and Bookselling; Disinformation; Mass Media; Misinformation.

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In August of 1835, the New York newspaper *The Sun* published a series of reports on the discovery of life on the moon. The articles claimed to base their descriptions on a report about a new type of telescope by the eminent British astronomer Sir John Herschel that appeared in the Edinburgh *Journal of Science*. The excerpts described bat-like humanoids who herded bison, goats, and unicorns and lived in sapphire temples with roofs of gold. Later articles even introduced bipedal tail-less beavers and a humanoid species living nearby in the 'Vale of Triads' that was larger than the furry man-bats and "less dark in color, and in every respect an improved variety of the race."[1] The series came to an abrupt end a month later due to an unfortunate accident when the telescope's giant lens was used during daylight and set the observatory on fire.

The articles caused an immediate boost in circulation of *The Sun*, one of New York's first penny papers. The paper sold 15,000 copies on the day the first article appeared and circulation peaked close to 20,000 copies a day by the time the man-bats appeared. This jump in sales gave it one of the largest circulations of any paper in the world and it caused other penny papers to reprint the stories as well. Most of these penny presses would also see an increase in daily circulation, which allowed the papers to charge higher ad rates that would generate more revenue. This in turn made these new inexpensive newspapers viable enough to compete alongside the more established and more expensive newspapers that were known to readers.

The Sun would confess to their hoax after a group of scientists contacted the paper looking to reprint the original journal articles. As Kevin Young has noted in his *New Yorker* article on this incident, *The Sun* misjudged the reception of the articles, which may have originally been intended as satire but were received as factual reporting. The paper was forced to admit to the obvious hoax within a month of publication (Young). Their confession in turn forced the other penny papers to admit that they had borrowed wholesale from *The Sun*.

In this current age of misinformation, one would hope to find a coda to this incident that showed how this hoax made newspaper readers more critical readers and pushed for journalists to adhere to an ethical framework in their reporting. While journalists did attempt to codify practices in the newsroom as the power of the daily newspaper grew, these fictions-as-fact would also continue to find their way into print as news for the next century and a half, in some cases generating a mascot for the paper as happened with the Bat Boy and the *Weekly World News* (Creighton). The moon hoax articles helped *The Sun* become one of the largest papers in New York and the paper maintained its increased circulation numbers even after they admitted the hoax. As a result of this success, the paper promoted Richard Adams Locke, the original

author of the moon articles, to an editorial position that allowed him to publish more hoaxes including one on a transatlantic balloon flight by Edgar Allan Poe in 1844.

This propensity to mask entertaining stories as news would come to be a staple for local papers looking to attract new readers in the newly settled territories of the United States. One can see the reliance on hoax articles in a local newspaper in Virginia City, Nevada around the time of the exploitation of Comstock Lode in the 1860s. At that paper, William Wright and Samuel Clemens, two failed miners turned newspaper men, engaged in a series of editorial one-upmanship of confabulation. Not only would these hoaxes launch Clemens's literary career, but they also provided him with the opportunity to try out the pen name Mark Twain. It turns out that misinformation has been a solid business model for American media for a very long time.

The story of this moon hoax has been well chronicled in Matthew Goodman's 2008 book *The Sun and the Moon* and Kevin Young's *Bunk*, both of which are available alongside millions of other books on Amazon.com, the world's largest bookstore.

Amazon has always promoted the sense that their customers could purchase any book ever published. This would eventually come to include those exclusive titles published only through their Kindle Publishing program. The company currently offers millions of titles including heavily discounted bestsellers, college textbook rentals, and, as we will explore in this paper, titles that cater to specific audiences looking for filtered realities and troubling ideologies. Amazon's large selection of books provides readers with hundreds of thousands of titles outside the best-seller list, which creates what Barry Schwartz has identified as the "paradox of choice" where too many options only push consumers to be more conservative in their choice of products (Schwartz). In terms of bookselling this means readers of thrillers stick to titles by authors like James Patterson as they know they have enjoyed his work in the past. It also means that customers who have purchased books on alternative medicine or climate denial in the past will continue to search for other titles in that category. Amazon's growth in the twenty-first century has relied on tracking their customers' purchases and using that data to suggest similar products, creating suggestion bubbles, something that has been well documented since the company's founding in 2004 (see Galloway, Rub, Smith, Stone, West). Amazon has become its own business ecosystem (Isckia) where customer tracking influences the marketing of third-party products. Amazon has used this ecosystem to usher in a new era of media consumption that does not simply promote popular printed content over 'culture,' but evaluates every customer's reading and viewing habits in order to appeal to consumers on both ends of Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production.

In the field of bookselling, Amazon is often portrayed as the juggernaut that influences the titles on best-seller lists and the price for print and e-books (West, 85–90), but behind their lists of top-selling titles is a very different world. It's a wasteland of titles that promote empty and dangerous arguments, but it's still a wasteland that Amazon regulates through their tracking of customers on the site. This paper will look past Amazon's front pages to explore three categories of books that exist in this wasteland: shoddy reprints, books of dangerous misinformation, and books of literal emptiness.

Before turning a telescope on Amazon's 'Vale of Triads' of reprints, emptiness, and misinformation, it is important to frame the company's rise in context to the changes that have happened within the larger publishing industry over the last quarter century. Much like the penny presses mentioned above, Amazon's rapid rise into retail dominance in North America came about because the company was able to rethink marketplaces. In terms of bookselling, they understood the influence of price on the consumers, but more importantly they also saw the value in automated personalized suggestions (Murray 59). Amazon was the first large bookseller to understand that readers aren't always looking for the best or most important information, but, as Laurence Lessig noted in a Ted Talk from 2007, were content with information that was "second best," provided it was accessible and reflected their view of the world (Lessig). While corporate publishers negotiated with Amazon to create discounts equivalent to print for the Kindle digital format, entrepreneurial authors and independent/small publishers rushed to publish inexpensive e-books and print-on-demand (POD) paperbacks that provided alternative worldviews that could compete for attention in a bookstore for the first time.

Changes in the Book Publishing Ecosystem

The growth of self-published titles targeted towards specific ideologies that sell on Amazon came at a time when traditional book publishing was undergoing rapid change. Before Amazon began in 1994, the book-selling ecosystem consisted of two large chain bookstores, Barnes and Noble and Borders, that carried about 175,000 unique titles per store (Thompson 42) and roughly 1,000 independent bookstores that carried between 2,000 and 10,000 unique titles (Danzinger, Fitting). Barnes and Noble and Borders offered publishers promotion within the store through a co-op program where publishers could pay for placement of titles on endcaps, the displays found at the end of aisles, and on the front-of-the-store tables. This program ensured that the large book publishers who could afford to pay for promotion would control the limited visual space within the store. In comparison, independent bookstores had suggested titles and table displays that were often dictated

by the interests of the staff who selected what they liked instead of what the publishers wanted to push (Miller 96). Amazon's endless virtual space would eliminate the competition for space and allow every book to have the potential to be seen by any consumer (Rub 378). It offered the idea of equitable visibility within its online store. While Amazon would engage in co-op for their newsletters, they would court independent publishers in a way Barnes and Noble did not and create marketing space for those smaller titles. This is not necessarily due to the fact that Amazon had a better relationship with small publishers, but that their sales data pointed to an increased interest in titles from those publishers. Amazon's tracking of customer activity would be based on the interests of the reader and not on the financial influence of the publisher. This understanding of the customer would prove so successful that it would become a foundational part of Amazon subsidiaries including retailers Woot, Zappos, and Whole Foods as well as book-adjacent companies like Goodreads, Audible, Comixology, The Book Depository, and AbeBooks.

Amazon's focus on data has reshaped not only the face of retail but the methods of warehousing and distribution of consumer goods. Amazon now offers instantaneous delivery of digital movies, music, and books through their various digital storefronts and rapid delivery of physical goods. The company has developed a warehousing system that mixes automation and human workers together to create an efficient but exploitative fulfillment model (Delfanti, MacGillis) to achieve these rapid deliveries. While this paper will talk about the ideological wastelands found in Amazon's bookstore thanks to the promotion of fringe titles by search recommendations, it is also worth noting that their rapid growth of warehouses is changing the physical landscape outside major urban areas in America. This includes physical wastelands like the one immortalized in Jessica Bruder's *Nomadland* where workers live in RV camps near the Amazon warehouses in the American West.

Amazon's obsession with understanding their customer and the reliance on automated suggestions created a major accelerant for the growth of the virtual wasteland within Amazon's bookstore, but it would not have had books for that space if Amazon's rise hadn't coincided with a global publishing industry that was seeing an explosion in the number of titles produced. In a blog post from 2010, Leonid Taycher outlines how the staff at the Google Book Project derived an estimate of the total number of books ever published. Google Book's estimate, which is based on their work with the library catalogs to which they had access, is around 130 million unique book titles published before 2010 (Taycher).[2]

The first two decades of the twenty-first century would see the number of new titles added to that 130 million quickly rise from about 100,000 new titles in the US in 2000 to about 300,000 in 2010 (see figure 1). Over the next

decade traditional publishing's new title output would hover around 300,000 new titles annually (Bowker). While no other single country produces as many new titles as the United States, China's book industry has reported a similar annual output and the publishers within the European Union are releasing around 600,000 new titles annually (Federation of European Publishers). That means that the three largest publishing markets in the world produce roughly 12 million titles—roughly 10% of all titles previously published in the whole of human history—just in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

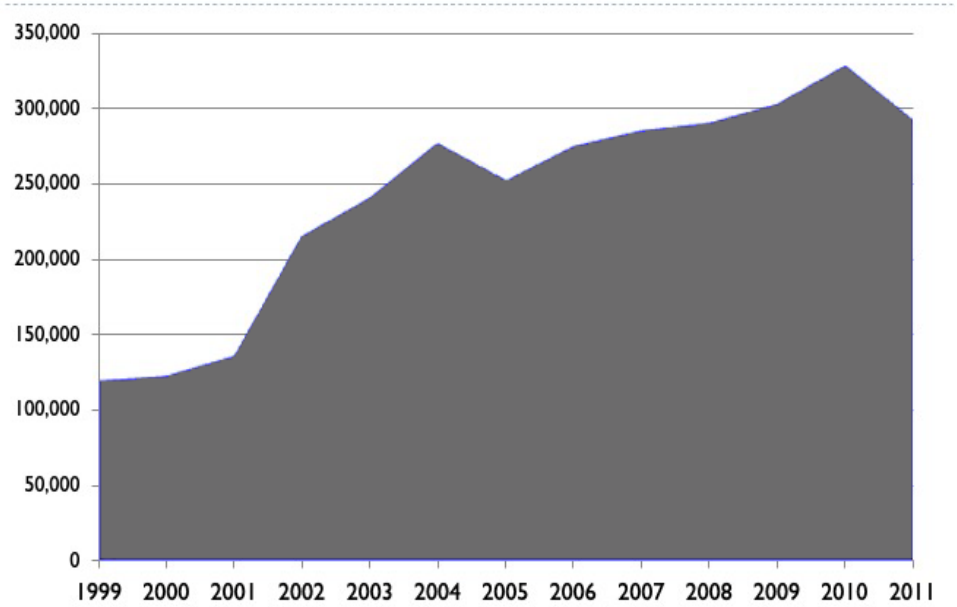

Figure 1: Between 1999 and 2010 the number of ISBNs used for titles by traditional publishers released grew from around 120,000 to over 300,000 titles (Bowker, "Self-Publishing in the United States, 2010-2015"). The traditional publishing industry would continue to publish between 250,000 to 300,000 annually over the next decade.

But the traditional publishing space is miniscule compared to what has happened in self-publishing spaces supported by Amazon. Bowker's report on ISBN usage also includes self-publishing services like CreateSpace, which would be acquired by Amazon and eventually become part of their Kindle program. CreateSpace went from 35,000 ISBNs in 2010 to 423,718 in 2015 to 1.4 million in 2018. Add to that the output of companies like Smashword and Lulu who reported around 100,000 titles per year and the hundreds of smaller publishing service providers and the service providers outside the traditional publishing industry have conservatively used an additional 10 to 12 million ISBNs in the last decade (see figure 2). And these estimates are only for titles released with ISBNs, something Amazon no longer requires for publications on their site.

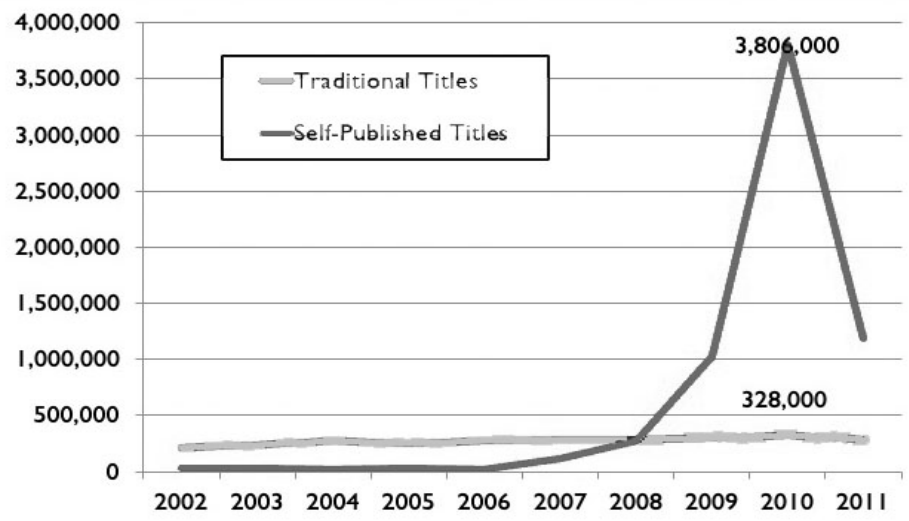

Figure 2: Traditional publishing's use of ISBNs remained consistent in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but self-publishing's use of ISBN went from a few hundred per year to close to 4 million in 2010. The number dropped in 2011 when Amazon changed their requirements for unique identifiers (Bowker, "Self-Publishing in the United States, 2010-2015").

For self-publishing authors in the United States, Amazon offers an alternative to the ISBN with their ASIN (Amazon Standard Identification Number) that the company uses to manage all products for sale on their platform. An ASIN can offer self-publishing authors significant savings as it allows them to forego the cost of an ISBN which can be anywhere between $29 and $129. (Bowker) The ASIN also locks the book into Amazon's ecosystem as most other book retailers in the United States still require an ISBN. Unfortunately, Amazon does not publish any data on the number of books without ISBNs in its Kindle service. The only insight we have on this information comes from research done by companies like the defunct authroearnings.com website which estimated that at least one million titles annually were published without ISBNs on the Kindle format (Thompson, *Book Wars* 262).

Amazon's Shelf: Low-Content Books

Within the millions and millions of titles produced over the last decade, only Amazon has been in the position to offer all of them for sale in its infinite bookstore, and thanks to an obsession with data collection on customer behavior since 1998, the company has a very strong suggestion engine to help guide customers to relevant titles (Smith and Linden). Unlike the independent bookstores in America where booksellers offer suggestions based on their knowledge of the title, Amazon's suggestion engine is an automated function on the site that relies on customer searches, purchases, and reviews to shape suggestions specifically to sell more books (Steiner). This reliance on customer

profiles for suggestions should cause valuable books to rise in the rankings and questionable titles to sink in Amazon's bookstore ratings to a point where customers would need to actively search for them. For the casual reader who purchased best-sellers and popular books, they will only see titles that fit these categories, but once a customer moves past the results of popular titles, they may find themselves in that wasteland of titles and encounter the first type of empty discourse book: the low-content book.

Low-content books are not new. Books that have either blank pages or pages designed for input from the user have been part of book publishing since the widespread adoption of the printing press (Gitelman 21). This category includes planners, and journals focused on everything from daily gratitude (*Good Days Start with Gratitude: A 52 Week Guide to Cultivate an Attitude of Gratitude*) to creativity (*Destroy this Journal*). While these books are printed with empty pages, the author provides some content within the book to guide the reader on how to use the book. But there is a more recent variant where the empty pages are not there for self-improvement, but to use the book cover and spine to project a political or cultural viewpoint.

An example of this would be Michael J. Knowles's self-published *Reasons to Vote for Democrats: A Comprehensive Guide* (2017). The book's pages are blank except for running heads and page numbers. It became an Amazon bestseller and sold 70,000 copies in its first week of sales (Deahl). The book's popularity soon brought other politically motivated blank books to Amazon including *Reasons to Vote for Republicans: An Incomprehensible Guide* (2017) by Rosco Coltrane, *Why Trump Deserves Trust, Respect and Admiration* (2016) by David King, and *Everything Great About President Trump: Literally Everything* (2017). While this sub-category saw several titles centered around American politics after Knowles's book became a bestseller, this genre also includes titles like *Highway to Hell: The Dangers of Marijuana* (2017) and *Perks of Marriage* (2017) as well as books that trade upon pop culture jokes like *The Comprehensive Collection of Things that Jon Snow Knows* (2016) by S. Tarly.

This category is the truest form of empty discourse available at Amazon. These titles exist only to offer a title meant to reflect the reader's ideological position without providing any sustained argument or support for that position. This concept of book as agitprop has been the focus of a series of videos by comedian and talk show host Scott Rogowsky that show him riding the New York mass transit system while holding up books with provocative fake covers including *If I Did it, How I would have Done 9/11*, by George W. Bush, *Definitely not Porn: So What Are you Looking At? Mind Your Own Business*, and *Human Taxidermy: A Beginner's Guide*. Some of these fake titles have, in fact, become real titles of blank books available for sale at Amazon.[3]

A similar but much smaller category available on Amazon are books that aren't quite blank but use a limited vocabulary. These are often found in the joke or satire categories and include the 119-page memoir, *My Journey North, The Autobiography of Hodor* (see figure 3) or the 100-page *Moist: A Book Full of Moist* by JG. The goal of these titles, like those used by Rogowsky above, are designed to reference Internet memes and appeal to customers at Amazon who are savvy enough to be in on the joke.

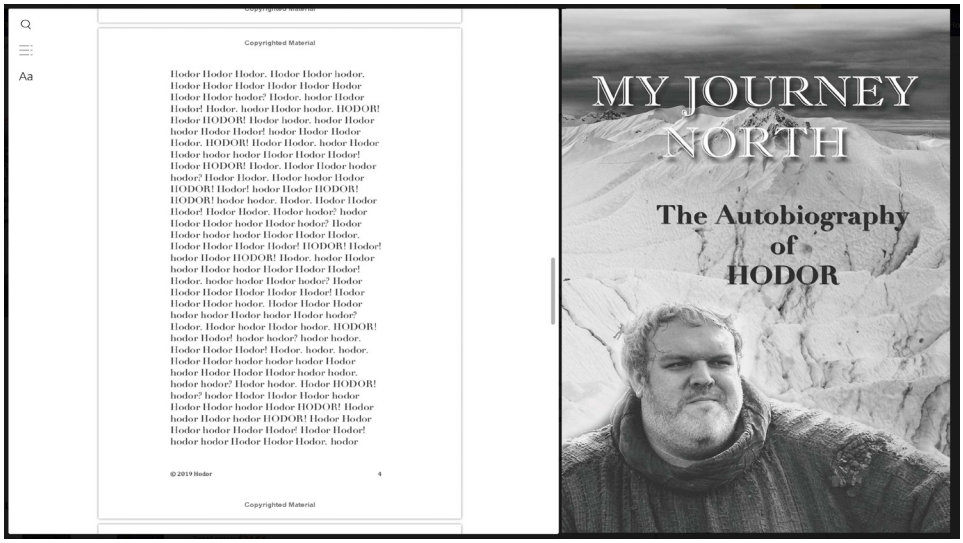

Figure 3: An interior page design and cover for My Journey North: The Autobiography of Hodor (Hodor 4).

Thanks to the advances in POD and distribution made by Amazon, these low-content books are easy to produce in limited quantities and do not require a large upfront capital investment that was once necessary for warehousing and distributing printed material. They are also able to use Amazon's search engine to appeal to customers who may be searching for similar ideological or cultural content on Amazon and may find these books amusing and inexpensive enough to add to their cart. That signals to Amazon that these books and whatever other products were purchased are somehow associated together by customers who fit a certain profile, making it so the books will appear as suggestions for other customers. The results of this awareness have given these books a strong sales record including the Knowles title mentioned above and Hodor's memoir which has sold about 3,000 copies.

Amazon's Shelf: Public Domain Titles

I would now like to move from books with no content in them to those titles available at Amazon that are straightforward reprints of public domain material. Amazon's rules for self-publishing prohibits direct reproduction of public domain material, but it does allow for publishers to sell obscure public

domain content or what they call differentiated work that includes annotations, new translations and illustrations (Publishing Public Domain Content). If, as noted in the previous section, content creators have found a way to sell books without any content, they have also found a way to repackage previously published content that is out-of-date or disproven in a way that will appeal to the right audience. In the case studies below, it is clear that the publication of the work is not about the restoration or reintroduction of forgotten texts with scholarly introductions and contextual notes. It's about using freely available digitized public domain content to create large collections to sell on Amazon and to organizations.

In the previously mentioned 2009 report on ISBN usage, Bowker identified publishers who focused specifically on public domain publishing. This list included BiblioBazaar (273,000 ISBNs), Books LCC (224,460 ISBNs) and Kissinger Publishing (190,175 ISBNs). In total, Bowker recorded 764,448 new ISBNs from nontraditional publishers in 2009 and, as noted in a post on the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association's *Writer Beware* website, of those ISBNs, 687,500 were for reprints of public domain content (Strauss).

BiblioLabs, which was responsible for over a third of those reprints in 2009, would partner with the British Library to launch the British Library's 19th Century Historical Collection App on the iPad that would offer users access to 45,000 of their digitized titles. Two years later, the company signed agreements with EBSCO Information Services to offer EBSCO customers the use of the BiblioBoard Library and BiblioBoard Creator, which contain the content tied to those registered ISBNs from 2009.

While we can trace how BiblioBazaar converted their 273,000 registered ISBNs into large collections licensed out to libraries around the world, there are other public domain reprinters like Forgotten Books who register ISBNs specifically to sell directly to consumers on Amazon. A current search of this publisher on Amazon returns over 70,000 books, almost all of which are straightforward POD copies of scanned material. It is clear from the search results on Amazon that the company uses an automated process to scan and create their content. It also becomes apparent that the company uses that automated process to fill in the descriptions and metadata for Amazon from their scanned content. Take for example Edward L. Wheeler's play *Deadwood Dick, a Road Agent*. When searching for Wheeler on Amazon, a customer may encounter the Forgotten Book version of the book, titled *Ps Z We Ih Rijfflod A Road-A(Ient!)*, the uncorrected text for the title generated by an OCR scan of a library book (see figure 4). On the title page of the library book is a call number covering the first three letters of the title. The call number for the book is **PS** 635. **Z**9 **W**562, which provides the first few characters for the title listed on Amazon. The poor quality of the title page is representative

of the rest of the interior of the print book which has very lightly printed text that is hard to parse, something that would be readily apparent to the reader through Amazon's "look inside" feature, if the title offered that option. This then becomes an inferior reprint of a public domain work that represents the rare case of a publisher making it harder to find a book on Amazon as academics and researchers who are searching for an inexpensive reprint of Wheeler's play may not be able to discover it through the search function. This book, which is the only version currently available in print on Amazon, can be found only through an author search or if Amazon suggests it as a similar title to another book. This kind of title becomes part of Amazon's wasteland as it adds to Amazon's list of potential titles but becomes very difficult to not only find on Amazon due to bad metadata and is of a very low quality in terms of production value.

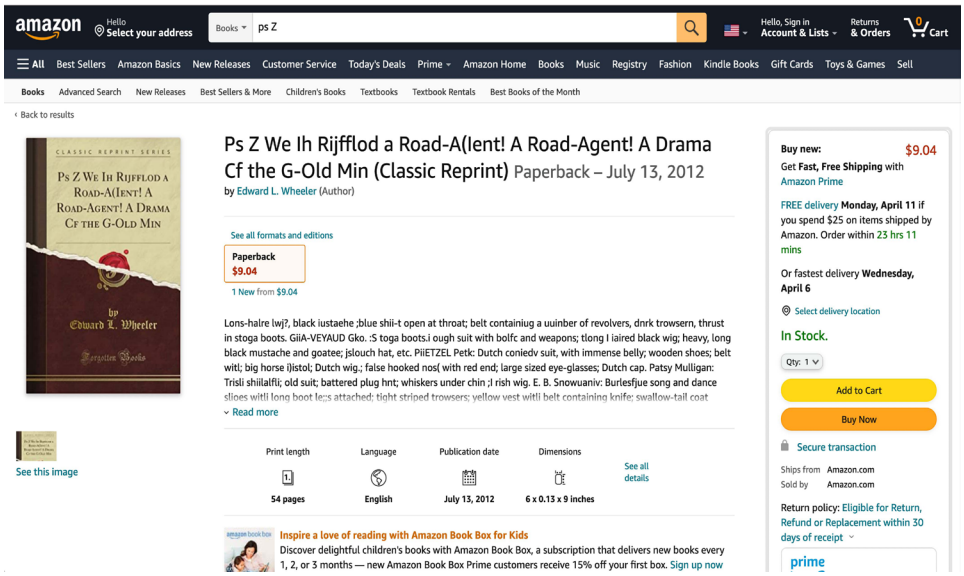

Figure 4: Forgotten Book's Amazon page for Edward L. Wheeler's Deadwood Dick: A Road Agent. The information on the book is the result of a corrupt OCR scanning process (https://www.amazon.com/Rijfflod-Road-Road-Agent-Classic-Reprint/dp/B008VIBWGE).

An additional group of publishers that are worth considering when talking about public domain reprinters who add a bulk of titles to Amazon's catalog with very little valuable content are those publishers who focus on the large corpus of non-copyrighted content from Wikipedia. For example, Focus On Publishing currently offers over 3,000 Kindle e-books all of which are generated directly from Wikipedia. The titles cost $.99 and are released under the same Creative Commons license as the original content. The titles indicate that the company performs some editorial work as they collect similar subject matter into collections that run several hundred pages and have unwieldy titles that indicate the content within. One such example from Focus On's English grammar collection is the 330-page *Focus On: 50 Most*

Popular Rhetorical Techniques: Metonymy, Irony, Rhetorical Question, Modes of Persuasion, Parable, Allusion, Slippery Slope, Description, ... Rose is a rose is a rose is a Rose, etc. The interior of the book imitates Wikipedia entries in an e-book format where each "chapter" begins with a boxed list of contents, just like on Wikipedia, and ends with notes (see figure 5). While the books bear a striking resemblance to the original Wikipedia entries in design, the actual content has not been updated since 2018, capturing a snapshot of a Wikipedia entry and presenting it as publishable information. Much like the bulky reference material that often became outdated upon publication, these collections of entries from Wikipedia create a pool of hundreds of titles within Amazon's catalog that offer dated and potentially dangerous information right next to vetted material from traditional publishers that was created with the intention of being a book and not a living encyclopedia.

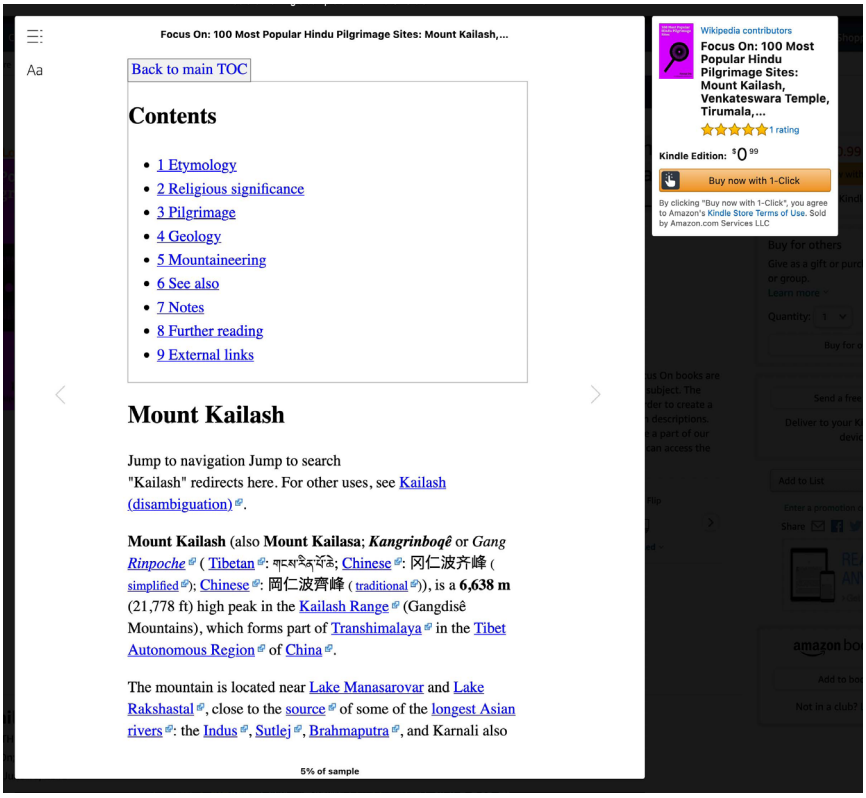

Figure 5: An example of the interior design of Focus On titles. The design reflects the source material from Wikipedia (https://www.amazon.com/Focus-Pilgrimage-Venkateswara-Padmanabhaswamy-Manasarovar-ebook/dp/B07DNGD4TH?asin=B07DNGD4TH&revisionId=f9d611df&format=2&depth=1).

Another facet of Focus On's publishing program that is worth mentioning is that the company also provides several dozen collections on alternative and homeopathic medicine including the massive *Focus On: 100 Most Popular Alternative Medicines: Kombucha, Acupuncture, Apple Cider Vinegar, Chiropractic, Isolation Tank, Alkaline Diet, Bloodletting, ... Diet, Craniosacral*

Therapy, etc., which comes in at 1,061 pages. These titles not only gather potentially dangerous misinformation, but they also separate that information from the Wikipedia framework which will also offer alternative entries and counterpoints to the information presented. In fact, by adding these titles into the Amazon ecosystem, Focus On has created an opportunity for more titles on questionable medical practices to become more discoverable through Amazon's similar title list. Expand this model past alternative medicine to the titles on firearms, conspiracy theories, and military strategies and one can quickly see how Amazon begins to promote thousands of books that promote misinformation and inflammatory content.

Amazon's Shelf: Misinformation and Dangerous Content

The last and most problematic category in Amazon's wasteland of questionable content is one that links books that cover alternative histories, alternative medical advice, instructions on how to build bombs and even plans on running paramilitary organizations as similar titles on Amazon result pages. In the exploration of low-content and public domain work available at Amazon, it is important to reiterate that these titles are often, but not always, published outside the mainstream publishing industry by small presses or self-published authors and are often confined to specific categories that only appear to those customers doing a purposeful search for the material on Amazon (Rub 380). These titles rarely appear on the front pages of Amazon or on the top of search results, but they are the type of books that fill out the scrolling bar of suggested and similar titles that Amazon has created to promote content identified as relevant through their algorithm.

One of the most recent examples of this kind of content that did hit the front pages of Amazon and caused something of a public outcry is Joseph Mercola's *The Truth About COVID-19*. Mercola's book, which is traditionally published through a small publisher and discusses conspiracy theories about the origin and severity of COVID, prompted US Senator Elizabeth Warren to send a letter to Amazon about her concern that the company was promoting misinformation on the COVID pandemic after it became the top result for books on the pandemic at Amazon (Paz). Mercola's book offers us an example of how this type of misinformation offers a false sense of value to customers about the content of the book and then guides them to other titles of questionable, if not dangerous, content. As of the writing of this essay, the book is still available on Amazon where it has 5,984 reviews with 90% of them giving it a 5-star rating. On Amazon's list of related titles to Mercola's book is Peter Duesberg's *Inventing the AIDS Virus*, which was first published in 1996 as an argument that HIV does not cause AIDS. Outside the "related titles" result, Duesberg's book would be very hard to find on Amazon as it is out of print and is limited

to used book sales on Amazon, two things that lower a book's ranking on Amazon's result page. It also currently has a small number of reviews (121). This is not the type of book that should have a lot of visibility, but we find Amazon's algorithm has identified this as a title that would appeal to the thousands of customers that are reviewing and purchasing the Mercola book (see figure 6).

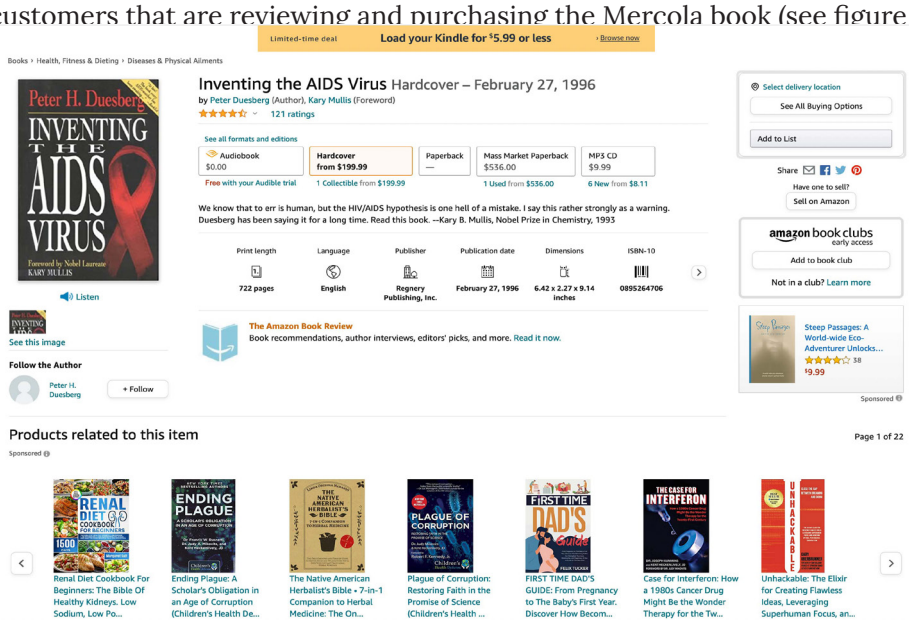

Figure 6: Duesberg's Inventing the AIDS Virus (1996) has limited buying options, but still has an 88% rating on the site (https://www.amazon.com/Inventing-AIDS-Virus-Peter-Duesberg/dp/0895264706).

It is worth noting that Amazon does remove problematic titles from their site, but it often feels like it does so only as a response to bad press. One such example is their response to a 2013 article by Jeremy Wilson at *The Kernel*. Wilson's article focused on the availability of "hundreds of e-books that celebrate graphic rape, incest, and 'forced sex' with young girls" in Amazon's Kindle service (Wilson). Amazon quickly purged those titles from their bookstore when the story gained traction with other media outlets. Amazon did another purge of controversial content in 2021 when it removed any product it associated with QAnon after the January 6, 2021 siege of the U.S. Capitol, noting that sellers on the site agree not to sell products that "promote, incite, or glorify hate or violence toward any person or group," (Weise). Amazon's announcement was made following similar statements from other social media companies. One of the books removed in the QAnon purge was William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* (1978). *The Turner Diaries* had been available through Amazon's bookstore despite the fact that it has been identified as "the most influential work of white nationalist propaganda since the fall of Nazi Germany" and connected to over 200 murders and 40 terrorist attacks including the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh and the 1998 murder of James Byrd Jr. where the murderers stated they were

Other titles that are influential with white nationalists can still be purchased through Amazon. In a 2004 article for the Southern Poverty Law Center, Camille Jackson lists additional books in the white nationalist's library including Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (1905) (the source for D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*), Jean Raspail's anti-immigration novel, *The Camp of the Saints* (1975), John Ross's *Unintended Consequences* (1996), Ellen Williams's *Bedford: A World Version* (2000), Gerald James McManus's *Dark Millennium* (2001), Lloyd Lenard's *The Last Confederate Flag* (2001), and Ward Kendall's *Hold Back This Day* (2016). The US Amazon bookstore still lists these titles for sale and allows sellers to sell copies of these titles in both new and used editions.[4] Amazon in fact lists at least 10 editions of *The Clansman* for sale as well as copies of *The Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion*, dozens of editions and study guides of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Ted Kaczynski's *Unabomber Manifesto*, and 43 versions of the *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas, the woman who shot Andy Warhol. Once on the page for any of these titles, Amazon's search algorithm will also offer links to purchase the other titles, making it easy to build a white nationalist library in a few clicks, even if that library will no longer include a copy of *The Turner Diaries* from Amazon.

Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this paper, Amazon's focus on understanding customer wants and delivering titles that fulfill those wants is part of the history of American bookselling. Their sales of almost any title including those on the American Library Association annual list of banned and challenged books could be viewed as an attempt to combat book censorship in America like that on display at the 2022 book burning led by pastor Greg Locke (Anglesey). But it should be clear from the case of *The Turner Diaries* that Amazon is more open to removing titles if they might disrupt the company's stock price. Their ban on QAnon-related titles happened only after consumers started to call for boycotts of companies who offered QAnon a voice. The availability of questionable content on the site is tied to Amazon's understanding that their customers are the audience for this content. We have seen how Pierce's book, which is clearly marketed as a work of fiction, has been banned while Mercola and other authors who offer potentially harmful medical advice sold as non-fiction continue to appear in suggest lists and search results. In fact, Mercola's book, which was published by the well-established Chelsea Green Publishing company, is highly reviewed on Amazon, making it more visible on the site.

By relying on Amazon for printing and distribution, the small publishers who produce books of questionable content are able to utilize Amazon's ecosystem to sell to their audience without the need to create and support distribution. Amazon, in turn, is able to profit from the readers

of these books not just through the sale of some bound pages but through tracking their search behaviors and seeing what they buy. Amazon is not just a storefront, it is an influencer of social discourse and has helped to push "the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor [to] pervade the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate," which Habermas notes replaces public debate with consumption, causing "the web of public communication to unravel into acts of individuated receptions, however uniform in mode" (Habermas 161). By privatizing the cultural arbitration that has been part of public discourse (Striphas 406) and masking it with an air of scientific objectivity associated with the mathematics behind programs like algorithms (Murray 57), Amazon has created a space where they get to choose the public discourse that their customers see at the company's bookstore. Like American newspapers of the early nineteenth century, the value of the content for Amazon is not in the content itself but in the ability to grow users. It was a dangerous precedent set by the singular newspaper companies of the nineteenth century, but it is even more dangerous when used by a company that uses the consumption of that written content to track purchases and reinforce their customers' ideological worldview. When that tracking is then connected to a whole host of services including movies (Prime), television programs (Prime), virtual assistantship (Alexa), audio content (Audible), and even home security (ring), we can see the company's potential to limit their customers' access to information in a way that creates a virtual filter hiding the American wasteland that surrounds them.

Notes

[1] While most of the articles on this hoax fixate on the man-bats, Kevin Young explores the idea of this as an abolitionist signal from the paper but shows how the language used to describe those living in the 'Vale of Triads' complicates that premise.

[2] Like almost anything else that revolves around the history of the printed word, the reliance on libraries is complicated. Google's estimate does not include books from non-digitized archives, or those titles lost to time and human conflict. Historians do not have an estimate for how many codices were burned by Catholic priests during the colonization of the indigenous people of North and South America. There is also a lack of information on the publications from small and pulp publishers who sold cheap books outside the established book trade in the two decades after World War II or the companies who never submitted copies of their books to the Library of Congress for copyright registration.

[3] As of the writing of this paper, there are 11 different version of blank notebooks that have the words "Human Taxidermy" as the main title on the cover of the book similar in style to the one used by Rogowsky.

[4] These titles do not often appear in the top search results for either author name or title. Like other books in Amazon's bookstore, they exist for the reader willing to search them out either by scrolling through pages of results or doing an advanced search on author and title.

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Preserving American Cultural Memory through Web Archives:

The Case of the *Internet Archive*

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges posed by digitalization as a process of culture-making by examining the *Internet Archive* digital library and more specifically its components, the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It*. These are digital tools that enable the discovery and archiving of obsolete webpages as well as the restoration, preservation, management, and classification of these "electronic wastelands," while also adding to their historicity. The article emphasizes the ways in which the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It* contribute to the preservation of cultural memory of the United States, looking at specific examples drawn from the diverse material to which the archives offer access. Using the *Internet Archive* and, more specifically, its components as case studies, the article investigates the value of web archives as cultural repositories, where cultural memory is not only preserved but also created and expanded through their participatory aspects and the engagement of the general public with the continuously proliferating born-digital content.

Keywords

American Culture; Cultural Memory; *Internet Archive*; Partcipatory Culture; Web Archiving.

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> [T]he idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity.
>
> Foucault and Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces"

The Digital Era has delivered new tools and platforms to manage, analyze, and share information and knowledge; however, constant technological upgrades and developments often render digital media essentially vulnerable. Websites, blogs, videos, images, and software run the risk of becoming ephemeral and obsolete, as they are often discontinued and thus no longer available to the public. This article explores the challenges posed by digitalization as a process of culture-making by examining the *Internet Archive* digital library and more specifically its components, the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It*, which are digital tools that enable the discovery and archiving of obsolete webpages as well as the restoration, preservation, management, and classification of these "electronic wastelands," while also adding to their historicity. In fact, the article places emphasis on the ways in which the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It* contribute to the preservation of cultural memory of the United States, looking at specific examples drawn from the diverse material to which the archives offer access, such as the 9/11 attacks, the Black Lives Matter Movement, the impact of Route 66 on American culture, recent grass roots political resistance activities in the United States, as well as American locative gaming practices. In this regard, it is argued that the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It* constitute a valuable contribution to the field of American Studies by opening up opportunities for an enhanced understanding of American history and culture. Using the *Internet Archive* and its components as case studies, the article investigates the value of web archives as cultural repositories, where cultural memory is not only preserved but also created and expanded at the same time, through their participatory aspects and the engagement of the general public with the continuously proliferating born-digital content.

Digital technologies and media have a significant impact on archives and archival practices, particularly in relation to issues associated with access, preservation, and reproducibility of digital content. The constantly shifting nature of the digital landscape, as well as the new digital tools, formats and technical (software and hardware) dependencies, shape the collection and preservation policies of institutions and organizations. Digitalization has

transformed our understanding of what the archive is, enabling new archival forms to emerge. In addition, digital technologies determine the way the archived material is presented as well as how this material may be relevant in the future, which complicates the issue of preserving electronic materials in web archives. These vast data repositories have unprecedented influence on the cultural practices of memory, and the humanities can play a significant role in reflecting, theorizing, and criticizing the digital transformation that is underway and is rife with challenges and ambiguities. In light of this transformation, the way cultural memory is formed is reconceptualized.

Web archiving, namely the process of collecting websites and the information that they contain from the World Wide Web typically through the use of automated processes, and preserving these in an archive, is a practice that started around the mid-1990s. Since then, the Web's cultural significance and its value as a hub of information have increased, making web archiving a valuable process that can ensure the retrieval of and long-term access to this information.

Conventional memory institutions such as national libraries/archives and university environments, cultural organizations, and community-centered archiving initiatives are all involved in archiving culturally important web content. Web content can be archived for various purposes—business, heritage, legal, historical and cultural—and web archives have been regarded as valuable resources for digital humanities, social sciences, and web history/Internet studies research. There has been considerable scholarly interrogation of the changes in the nature and function of archiving practices in the context of the transformation from analogue to digital and the related implications for scholars using web archives both as sources and as objects of study in their own right (Brügger; Milligan; Weber).

Upon its inception back in 1996, the *Internet Archive* aimed at "archiving the Internet itself, a medium that was just beginning to grow in use" ("About the Internet Archive"), and the nature of its content was ephemeral. Its founder, Brewster Kahle, envisioned a digital "Library of Everything," "containing all the published works of humankind, free to the public, built to last the ages" ("Celebrate the Internet Archive's 25th Anniversary!"). In its early days, the *Internet Archive* was able to capture the entire Web, yet the constant growth of the Internet has since made this impossible. In addition, websites are often regularly updated and constantly evolving, and although this is definitely an advantage, it also means that the information they contain can be lost forever before being captured as evidence. However, as Surya Bowyer notes, "even if the reality of absolute accumulation remains untenable, the idea appears to be the Machine's guiding principle … It is a 'general archive' in the sense that there appears no overriding theme guiding its acquisitions, and indeed any

user can choose to add a webpage, at a particular time, to its holdings" (44). As per the *Internet Archive*'s website, by now they have made more than twenty-five years of web history accessible, and in collaboration with various partners they continue to do so through *Archive-It*, their web archiving subscription service for collecting and accessing records of born-digital cultural material in different formats ("About the Internet Archive").

There are different methods of collecting online material from the Web, each one with its own strengths and limitations (Brown 46–68). Remote harvesting is the most widely employed method and the one used by the *Internet Archive*. The *Internet Archive* collects web content that is publicly available through the use of specially designed software, an automated program known as "crawler," which surfs the Internet harvesting websites from their locations on the live Web and allows for the browsing of webpages over multiple time periods. The hundreds of web crawls performed daily provide the snapshots or copies of websites (as they looked at the time of capture) that can be accessed via the *Wayback Machine*. The archived websites are made available online, providing a record of web content as it was available at particular points in time. The *Internet Archive*'s *Wayback Machine* allows users to visit archived versions of websites by typing a URL and selecting a date range. With over 778 billion stored webpages, the *Wayback Machine* is now the world's most extensive web archive. It is a useful tool to track how a website evolved over time and find pages that are no longer live on the Web; therefore it essentially enables a look at the World Wide Web's past. Still, certain problems remain, as, for example, the fact that the platform offers a limited range of search possibilities; the URL of the site in question must be known, as there is no way of searching by title, which prevents a more targeted navigation. Taking a computational approach, some researchers have focused on the opportunities and technical challenges the database presents (Sampath Kumar and Prithviraj; AlNoamany et al.), while others have emphasized the impact of the *Wayback Machine* on historical research methodologies and the use and value of the *Machine*'s diverse materials as historical resources (Rogers; Belovari; Milligan; Kaur).

The *Internet Archive*'s mission is to provide "Universal Access to All Knowledge" by preserving cultural artifacts in digital form that would be valuable to journalists, researchers, historians, and scholars, but also to the general public. As stated on their website, "[w]ithout such artifacts, civilization has no memory and no mechanism to learn from its successes and failures" ("Wayback Machine General Information"). Thus, both the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It* are directly linked to cultural memory, which, according to the *Internet Archive*'s founder and archivists, is the driving force behind their archiving efforts. The importance of the medium through which cultural

memory is communicated cannot be overlooked. Astrid Erll emphasizes that each medium "has its specific way of remembering and will leave its trace on the memory it creates" (389). This applies to the *Internet Archive*'s *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It*, as well as to their archival practices and the interfaces that allow access to the archived content, which can have a profound impact on our understanding of the material that has been preserved. Today, cultural memory seems to be dependent primarily on digital media, and specifically American history and culture are increasingly mediated, therefore it is worth examining the current "memory boom" that is evident, in conjunction with the technologies and media that facilitate it. As Andreas Huyssen asserts in his work *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, "we cannot discuss personal, generational, or public memory separately from the enormous influence of the new media as carrier of all forms of memory" (18). Digital materials are mutable digital entities, prone to revision much like memory itself, as people use and reuse them, alter them, manipulate them and reassign meaning to them, in an ongoing process of memory renegotiation, revision, and reconstruction. This process is intertwined with the devices, tools, and practices that enable it; media and technology inform memory and shape the way we remember things past. The transition from analogue to digital comes along with a redefinition of the notion of memory itself and one question that arises is: what are the implications of this transition for the ways in which memory is inscribed, stored, and recalled? In this media-saturated environment, where the pace of change—be it technological, social, or otherwise—is hard to keep up with, there is a sense that various aspects of cultural heritage are at risk. The proliferation of information in the digital domain results in the accumulation of "heterogeneous and conflicting pasts in the present" (583), to use Rodney Harrison's expression. Harrison notes that "in the contemporary world, we risk being overwhelmed by memory" (580). He refers to this process as "a 'crisis' of accumulation of the past" (580), foregrounding the importance of collective forgetting, which involves an active revaluation of the past and, in his view, constitutes an indispensable part of collective memory (588). Such reflections are especially relevant to the archiving and preservation of digital content. The limits of what can be archived today are being significantly extended, as we are witnessing an explosion of born-digital material, and yet it seems that the volume of all that is being created and recorded is beyond human capacity to manage, process, and review. Ina Blom posits the question: "[H]ow can a world of networked mobilities,—relays, updates, negotiations, associations, and speculations—even be archived? How to decide where connectivity starts and where it ends?" (13). Any attempt to archive the Internet is a highly challenging (if not unattainable) task, due to the overwhelming and practically impossible-to-

handle bulk of material but also due to the often ephemeral nature of web content. In order to effectively deal with this "'crisis' of accumulation of the past," deciding what to keep and what to discard becomes critical.

In addition, it is worth noting that in our digital age a tension can be detected between computation and memory. The digital is often regarded as a threat to the archive, which can potentially lead to a loss of cultural memory, as Wendy Chun aptly puts it in her study *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*. Software, in her view, "enables a logic of 'permanence' that conflates memory with storage, the ephemeral with the enduring. Through a process of constant regeneration, of constant 'reading', it creates an enduring ephemeral that promises to last forever, even as it marches toward obsolescence or stasis" (137). This applies to the *Wayback Machine*, with regard to the way information is compiled and stored and to the selection criteria of what is preserved. Wendy Chun observes that "the IWM has solved the extremely time-consuming task of selecting the enduring from the ephemeral by saving everything" (138). The archive's aim is to create a "library of the Internet" (170). The result, in her view, is an odd library and "[t]he IWM's greatest oddity … stems from its recursive nature: the IWM diligently archives itself, including its archives, within its archive" (170).[1] She concludes, therefore, that despite its creators' original intentions to collect and preserve material that was deemed valuable to the public, the *Wayback Machine* eventually became "an automatic archive of everything" (138). In this regard, the *Internet Archive* only *superficially* appears to be offering a solution to the problem of disinformation by turning "electronic wastelands" of information into a repository of cultural knowledge that handles and organizes the various online materials, thereby contributing to the formation of a "healthier" information ecosystem, given that information is stored only on the basis of the algorithm, which can result in an accumulation of heterogeneous material. The *Wayback Machine*'s archiving practices are not uncontroversial or unambiguous, and various scholars have expressed their concerns. Kalev Leetaru, for instance, notes that the archival landscape the *Wayback Machine* offers is "incredibly uneven," highlighting that "far greater understanding of the … *Wayback Machine* is required before it can be used for robust reliable scholarly research on the evolution of the web" ("How Much of the Internet"). This would involve documentation on its algorithms and crawlers, and the decisions informed by them, as well as more detailed logging data and statistics about the digital artifacts in storage. Given that archives are not neutral or impartial repositories of records, such a documentation could increase the visibility of the archival system and shed light on the collections' possible inner biases and the system's embedded logics. According to Leetaru, these logics could be, for instance, the selection criteria and whether these are inclusive and open to debate and discussion,

or the prioritization of the webpages' archiving and the factors by which it is determined ("How Much of the Internet"). An important consideration pertaining to issues of social and cultural significance of the archived material is which dominant groups influence the decisions as to what should be preserved and the sites of control the archive may be subject to. The power dynamics associated with processes of remembering and forgetting as well as the cultural, political, and economic contexts within which the archive functions, have an impact on its construction and the material that may or may not be included and subsequently on how the past is recorded, archived, and accessed.

The above remarks bring to the fore the *imperfect* nature of the *Wayback Machine* and help us to further illuminate the relationship between the formation of memory and web archiving practices. At the same time, what is also highlighted is the intermediary state of the archived materials that are waiting to be "regenerated" (Chun 172), that is to be framed within a new context, interpreted, and inevitably changed in the process. By examining the creation and construction of digital archives, we gain insight into the ways in which archiving practices shape access to the past and can even transform the historical events themselves and how these are remembered by the public. In David M. Berry's words, "The archivization produces as much as it records the event" (103). Thus, the archive emerges as a fluid and constantly evolving entity, and in this sense it has affinities with memory itself, which is dynamic and under constant negotiation. Against this backdrop, the notion of web archives as neutral, static repositories of cultural memory is contested, giving way to their understanding as dynamic digital spaces of cultural production and exchange that are constantly updated and transformed. Hence, the nature of cultural memory itself is also transformed, which certainly affects the ways in which scholars study and utilize online resources.

Although there is a variety of other organizations offering similar services and tools, such as *archive.today* (https://archive.ph/), *UK Web Archive* (https://www.webarchive.org.uk/ukwa/), and *Archive Team* (https://wiki.archiveteam.org/),[2] the *Internet Archive*'s *Wayback Machine*, despite its flaws, is considered one of the most consistent and reliable sources in the industry. The users are given free access (without paywalls, password protection or other mechanisms of restriction) to a variety of content. Brewster Kahle, the *Archive*'s founder, has emphasized the importance of free access to knowledge and the role of the *Wayback Machine* as "a crucial resource in the fight against disinformation," stating that they are "preserving history as it unfolds, keeping track of who's saying what and when—all without charging for access, selling user data, or running ads" ("Internet Archive"). At this point,

it is worth considering the role of human input in the archival practices as this is demonstrated in the *Internet Archive*'s *Archive-It* service.

Archive-It is a paid service that allows institutions to create and share their own collections, while also providing tools, training, and technical support. According to the *Internet Archive*'s website, since 2006 "over 800 organizations … including libraries, cultural memory and research institutions, social impact and community groups, and educational and open knowledge initiatives" have used their web archiving services and "40 billion born-digital, web-published records" have been preserved ("About Archive-It"). The collections include different types of material and are searchable and publicly accessible; users can download the archived material "for additional preservation and sharing" ("About Archive-It"). The fact that the archived material is freely accessible to the public is particularly important, especially given that we are witnessing, as Kalev Leetaru notes, "the rise of the parallel web" ("A Vision of the Role and Future of Web Archives"), namely the creation of multiple versions of the web that exist in parallel with the rest of the web's content, primarily due to the proliferation of social media. Corporations such as Metaplatforms, Inc. (formerly known as Facebook), for example, store and control the users' material, thus creating commercially-owned digital archives that are not publicly available and preventing their users or the web archiving community from accessing the content and archiving parts of it that may be valuable for future generations. The *Internet Archive* collaborates with the *Archive-It* users to further "the shared ethos of ensuring perpetual access to diverse, cultural, and historically-relevant digital collections from around the world" ("About Archive-It"). Meanwhile, web archiving is considered a collective effort, which involves a broader community of scholars, researchers from a variety of fields as well as other interested parties and stakeholder groups, and promotes the values of diversity, inclusivity, and free access to information.

Through the *Wayback Machine* and the *Archive-It* services, the *Internet Archive* allows a look back to the Web's past and through this to the American past, as many of the archived materials relate to American politics, history, and culture. Below we take a closer look at two thematic collections from *Archive-It* entitled "Black Lives Matter Movement" and "Resistance." We then continue with two additional examples from the *Wayback Machine* that concern Route 66 and American locative gaming practices. These specific topics highlight the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It* as valuable tools that enable one to explore and analyze historic moments in American history. Race, politics, and media constitute important factors which when talking about the United States, and when discussed in conjunction with American Studies, demonstrate its interdisciplinarity due to the combination and synthesis of many disciplines—history, literature, games, art, popular culture—that capture the complexity

and diversity of American culture. This wealth of materials could serve as a valuable resource for American Studies scholars, historians, and other researchers in the future and possibly provoke inquiry, trigger discussions and bring forth new perspectives and interpretations.

By juxtaposing *Archive-It*'s collections and the ones provided by the *Wayback Machine*, we call attention to the differences between these two components of the *Internet Archive*, although both are intended for the archiving of webpages. While the *Wayback Machine* allows the general public to easily add web content to its collection, *Archive-It* is "a full-featured end-to-end suite of services for institutions collecting, managing, preserving, downloading, and providing public access to web and born-digital archival collections" ("About Archive-It: FAQs"). *Archive-It* also offers a variety of tools for managing the stored collections, as well as a series of other services, such as "integrations, APIs, and connections with cataloging, preservation, and access services used by libraries, archives, and others" ("About Archive-It: FAQs"), essentially enhancing the collection's visibility and enabling its connectedness with various archiving institutions. Therefore, we could argue that the *Archive-It* service, with its customizable features, allows the creation of "curated" collections that can be systematically and effectively handled by the *Archive-It* partners, and more importantly, these partners remain in control of their archives, being able to access them even when their use of the service ceases. Yet, as mentioned above, the common denominator in both the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It* is that the preserved material can be freely and publicly accessed.

"BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT" (ARCHIVE-IT)

The "Black Lives Matter Movement" is a small collection, which includes only seven listed items, mainly online newspaper articles and a YouTube video. It was created by the New Brunswick Free Public Library and concerns activities related to the Black Lives Matter Movement in New Brunswick, NJ, covering events that took place in the area. Archiving started in June 2020 and covers a short period of time, as is evident by the items' dates. For example, one of the stored webpages links to an article by Molly O'Brien entitled "Peaceful Protests Take Shape in Streets of New Brunswick." The article was featured on the *New Brunswick Today* website on 20 June 2020 and reports the peaceful protests that took place in the city, in memory of George Floyd, a black man from Minnesota who was a victim of police violence. Although this collection only covers events on a local scale and in a specific timeframe, it sheds light on certain aspects of the Movement that may prove valuable for historians researching this topic in the future.

"RESISTANCE" (ARCHIVE-IT)

The thematic collection titled "Resistance" is a collection of websites dedicated to "documenting and embodying grass roots political resistance activities in the United States in the wake of the election and inauguration of Donald Trump" ("Resistance"). It was created by the Columbia University Libraries and there are 197 items listed. Archiving began in April 2017 and, as per the collection's description, there were "periodic re-crawls of those websites that continued to be updated, and new websites were added to the collection as they were identified" ("Resistance"). The updating of the collection ceased in February 2021, shortly after the conclusion of Donald Trump's administration. The collection includes websites that focus on:

> protest/demonstration planning; calls to action and guidelines for political participation by citizens; official statements in response to controversial executive orders; campaigns to contain and mitigate the effects of specific dramatic policy shifts; published whistleblower or other reports of dissent by government officials; official congressional investigation reports; and newspaper board editorials addressing impeachment. ("Resistance")

One characteristic example is the website entitled "La Resistencia." According to *Archive-It*'s description, "La Resistencia is a grassroots organization based in Washington State working to end the detention of immigrants and stop deportations" ("Resistance"). The organization was founded in 2014 and today its mission is to "support and engage with people detained at the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington" ("La Resistencia"). Its members protest against the detention and deportation system and take action, with the aim that the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC), where asylum-seekers crossing the US-Mexico border often end up, is shut down. Self-defined as a "volunteer community group" ("La Resistencia"), this is one of the grass roots political resistance groups whose activities were intensified during Trump's administration as a response to policies that targeted and marginalized immigrants and refugees.

The archived content in both collections is searchable and offers multiple search and discovery capabilities; for instance, users can narrow down their results by choosing the creator, publisher, date or type of entry. One can also enter a search query to find a specific site or search the text of the archived webpages. In recent years American society has been grappling with issues of systemic racism and inequality. Given the current social and political climate in the United States, with issues of police violence, racial discrimination, and suppression of ethnic minorities, and the US refugee/immigration crisis occupying center stage, it is understandable why collections such as the ones briefly presented above are of utmost importance. The diverse sources to which the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It* offer access

illuminate how American society has been—and is to this day—forged through conflicts and negotiations within its multiethnic societies and how different versions of history may have been constructed, contested, and revised over the years.

ROUTE 66 (WAYBACK MACHINE)

Upon typing "Route 66" as keyword, the *Wayback Machine* returns results about fifty websites that link to various web objects. Each one of the results provides information about the number of distinct webpages copied from a specific host-website and of the images, audio files, and moving image files that have been archived (which can also be accessed through separate webpages, depending on the type of file one may be searching for). The results also contain the number of captures per website, the date range within which these captures were made, as well as statistics and data visualization about each website.

Route 66 holds a special place in American history and culture. Many of the websites relating to this iconic US highway, otherwise known as the Will Rogers Highway, the Main Street of America or the Mother Road, focus on its impact on American culture. The "Historic 66" website (www.historic66.com), for instance, offers a "turn-by-turn road description" that takes the visitors on a journey through the eight US states that Route 66 traversed (as it officially no longer exists), highlighting roadside attractions and providing information and pictures of landmarks along Route 66, some of which have disappeared by now. Thus, users become acquainted with important—albeit forgotten—aspects of American history, and this contributes to the preservation of cultural memory as regards the highway's significance ("Historic 66"). The website is still live on the Web, although via the *Wayback Machine* one can access snapshots of the website that date back to 2001, when the website's layout and content were considerably different. In this sense, the *Wayback Machine* allows users to take a trip to the World Wide Web's past and revisit older versions of websites, a trip which also involves their exposure to historical knowledge.

LOCATIVE GAMES (WAYBACK MACHINE)

Another example of revisiting older versions of websites is American locative gaming practices. Preserving digital games has been problematic, with Megan A. Winget also arguing that "it will be impossible to preserve videogames without the existence of structured documentation that describes the game's technical components as well as the context in which it was played" (1876). The *Wayback Machine* could be viewed as such an attempt to document and organize digital game elements, thus preventing them from becoming "electronic wastelands." Locative games are mobile apps that involve the

virtual augmentation of real-world locations, with which mobile phone users are required to interact in order to play the game. *Ingress* (2012-) and *Harry Potter: Wizards Unite* (2019-2022) are two of the most popular American locative games both produced by Niantic, Inc. The games feature a transmedia narrative that can be experienced through various platforms. Some of the elements of *Ingress* are now accessible only through the *Wayback Machine*, as is the case with the *Ingress Investigate* website. In a similar manner, although *Harry Potter: Wizards Unite* was shut down in January 2022, *The Taskforce Times* is one of the websites where the game's narrative was featured and can now be found only in the databases of the *Wayback Machine*. The web archive then contributes to the historicization of the evolution of *Ingress*, but also to the archival preservation of *Harry Potter: Wizards Unite*.

Through an exploration of the *Archive*'s materials, one can gain access to personal narratives of diverse social groups, examine the role of certain political figures, and better understand the impact of important historical events, phenomena or institutions. However, in order for the interested individual or researcher to engage with the collections more effectively and productively, organizing diverse materials around specific topics and themes, as well as supporting collections with contextual information and descriptive material would be necessary. This would provide context to the collected items and subsequently result in a more meaningful user experience. This way, the materials could serve as valuable resources for historical research, being gradually integrated into the procedures and methods of American Studies, but also this large data repository could serve as research object itself for the study of American culture. According to Johanna Hartelius, the *Wayback Machine*'s combination of "a weak structure and a massive archival scope" (383) results in an experience of displacement for the user, "an anxious placelessness" (385), where one is "lost among an abundance of items without a way to engage with them meaningfully" (385). The solution she proposes is building "meaning through structure," "an ordering of stored artifacts" through which "access becomes more than copious delivery" (389). Returning to the "electronic wastelands" evocation, this way the user experience would not be one of wandering in a wilderness of information but rather one that is framed as targeted and meaningful. Besides the sheer amount of data, which is impressive, there is also the issue of making the digital content truly accessible, in the sense of facilitating a better understanding of the materials preserved. To this end, purely computational approaches might be problematic. Instead, a humanities-oriented approach could enable one to deal more effectively with the technologies and tools at one's disposal.

Digital media offer new means to preserve, retrieve, and represent the past and hence influence the shaping of social memory, by allowing

historical material to be easily accessed and widely distributed. Andrew Hoskins argues that "[t]he new media of memory render a past that is not only potentially more visible, accessible and fluid than that which preceded it, but that also seems at one level more easily revocable and subject to a different kind of 'collective' influence and shaping" (29). The Internet and the extensive connectivity it affords has transformed the ways in which history is perceived and engaged with; a significant shift is that users are no longer mere consumers but also creators and contributors of content. Thus, archiving and preservation practices have been popularized and this, in turn, seemingly promotes, "at least in theory," as Ina Blom remarks, "a radical democratization of memory" (13), although, as she notes, the reality is very different and consists of "[a] proliferation of digital paywalls and passwords" (13) that threaten information equality and free access to knowledge. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult for users to navigate this landscape where a plethora of information is readily accessible but what originates from a reliable source is compromised and misinformation is widespread. Discussing the "mediatization" of memory, Andrew Hoskins again highlights an important consequence concerning the historicity of digital materials and the preservation of cultural memory; he states that "the digital era opens up conflicting and simultaneous horizons (or even 'fronts' on the past) that are rapidly being assembled, torn up and reassembled … by all those who have ready access to the increasingly affordable tools of digital recording and production, editing and dissemination" (28). Therefore, in this newly emergent, complex landscape characterized by the fluidity and accessibility of the past due to its interplay with the media and technologies available today, the shaping of cultural memory acquires a more public and participatory dimension, as we explain below.

In line with these observations, it could be argued that the *Wayback Machine* not only preserves cultural memory, but also expands it through its participatory aspects. Jussi Parikka observes that "[t]raditionally, the archive was a place for storage, preservation, classification and access" (113). Parikka considers digital archives like the *Wayback Machine* subject to ephemerality, vulnerable to limited duration and decay, and in need of constant maintenance. Although the *Wayback Machine*, in being a digital archive, runs the risk of becoming obsolete, it could be argued that it does not merely preserve cultural memory, but it potentially expands this memory. This is achieved through its participatory aspect, as it allows users to actively engage in the process of culture making by themselves adding material to it. Moreover, the *Wayback Machine* does not only remediate events that are part of our cultural memory, but it also modifies them. Gabriella Giannachi points to the shifted role and status of the digital archive, which "[n]o longer purely centers for

storage and preservation," but has "become [one of] the main repositories for the capture, preservation, reinterpretation, [and] sharing … of the act of remembering" (76). We argue then that the *Wayback Machine* exemplifies this observation, since it is not only that "[a]nyone with a free account can upload media to the Internet Archive" ("About the Internet Archive"), but the users may also continue commenting on specific documents and texts even after their obsolescence, as is revealed in the website itself. This is because users are granted the opportunity "to inform the understanding of an event not only at the time when an event may have originally occurred, but also in the aftermath of it" (75), as Giannachi would argue. In fact, archival practices of researching, collecting, and exhibiting information have been appropriated by amateurs/non-specialists who may use the *Wayback Machine* to publish obsolete webpages to their social media profiles in order to start a conversation about these pages. If this is the case, to use Giannachi's words, "The document must therefore be read as an inter-document, not so much a proof of a past event, but … [it] may lead to the generation of new types of interpretation and so produce further documents" (75) that could also be added to the archive.

In a similar manner, in 2021, the *Internet Archive* hosted an online webinar, entitled "Reflecting on 9/11: Twenty Years of Archived TV News" where "[s]cholars, journalists, archivists, and data scientists [would] discuss the importance of archived television to understand unfolding history" ("Understanding 9/11"). Thus, the information about 9/11 was not only archived but also expanded by the creators of the *Internet Archive* and the participants themselves. The recall of a memory does not only regenerate an event but in the course of doing so, it modifies it. What all this calls attention to is "the general trend toward participatory and interactive forms of user engagement," as well as a "growing interest in repeating, replaying, and re-performing documents as part of our everyday lives" (Giannachi 76). Through the act of distributing, re-distributing, and sharing, we "may produce further documents for others to replay within the archive" (76), which again demonstrates that the archive is a dynamic rather than a static digital entity. In this respect, the *Wayback Machine* could be said to exemplify Henry Jenkins's definition of participatory culture as "one which embraces the values of diversity and democracy through every aspect of our interactions with each other," rendering us "capable of making decisions, collectively and individually," as well as "express[ing] ourselves through a broad range of different forms and practices" (2). Indeed, the *Wayback Machine* is an open-bordered, democratic, and participatory archival system that permits the inclusion of documents by users themselves.

The exploration of the *Internet Archive* and its components, the *Wayback Machine* and *Archive-It*, reinforces the value of web archives to new audiences and disciplines. Archives become a growing source for scholarly

research, while at the same time, researching, collecting, and exhibiting information is no longer the task of the professional archivist. This being the case, web archiving emerges as a collective effort that takes place on a global scale and is further enhanced by participatory structures, instant connectivity, and virtual interactivity. How the websites and digital collections made available via the *Internet Archive* will be used in the future and in precisely what ways they will preserve and shape American cultural memory remains an open question. However, the examination of the intersection between memory and digital media shows us that in the Digital Era cultural memory is constantly re-constructed, revised, and updated. Naturally, the possibilities that digitalization affords in the process of culture-making come with a set of challenges, among other things regarding our perception and understanding of history. Ultimately, the users' active engagement with the *Wayback Machine*'s and *Archive-It*'s archived material can possibly enable them to make sense of the American past and how they relate to it, but also help them realize and appreciate the meaning that the past assumes in the current context; this participation in the production of meaning, which is closely linked to the processes of identity construction and culture-making, informs the present and possibly opens up new paths for the future.

Notes

[1] This also relates to what Joanne Garde-Hansen suggests about the *Internet Archive* being "a self-archiving phenomenon," a prime example of media forms and practices "that use themselves to remember themselves" (72).

[2] *Archive Team* is a long-running site of web archiving, a "loose collective" of volunteers dedicated to saving websites in danger of going offline. For more information, see Ogden.

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Biography

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Bodies, Brains and Burnt-out Systems in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*

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Abstract

This essay offers an examination of instances of uncritical exposure to new media through the lens of twenty-first century American Postmodern fiction. Through a close reading of Don DeLillo's latest novella *The Silence* (2020), which works as both an observation and harsh criticism of western consumer society and American culture in particular, the present study aims to shed some light on the ways contemporary postmodernist literary writing—informed by post-postmodernist tendencies and features—criticizes American political choices that define the (un)health of a nation as it succumbs to digital (mis)information processes.

For its theoretical background the essay relies on late twentieth and early twenty-first-century thinking on media and the use of technology as a means of transcending human limitations. In more specificity, it explores Andrew Hoskin's take on media, memory and the connective turn, N. Katherine Hayles's theories on man's posthuman nature, while it also takes into account latest beliefs in transhumanism and critical posthumanism as philosophies that rethink human form and nature in relation to contemporary bio-technological conditions.

DeLillo's updated preoccupation with the western world turns into intensified anxiety about the terrifying effects of digitization and uncritical exposure to the screen. He focuses on the disintegration of the self and the disruption of its presence in space and time in tandem with the failure of language and the loss of (cultural) memory, ultimately questioning the future of all existence and writing.

Keywords

Digitization; Don DeLillo; Language; Memory; Posthumanism; Postmodern Writing; Transhumanism.

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Introduction

In the light of the Wastelands EAAS[1] Conference that sought for reflections on notions of waste and wastelands in American culture, history and politics, this article attempts an analysis of human corporeal and moral decay as represented in contemporary American postmodern fiction and discusses the challenges that have come into surface in terms of digital superfluity. These literary representations of bodies, brains and burnt-out systems constitute manifestations of fictional—yet still menacing—electronic wastelands in Don DeLillo's novella *The Silence* (2020). Through a close reading of DeLillo's latest publication, which comes as both an observation and harsh criticism of western consumer society and American culture in particular, the present study aims to shed some light on the ways contemporary postmodernist literary writing—informed by post-postmodernist tendencies and features—stigmatizes American political choices that define the (un)health of the nation as it succumbs to digital (mis)information processes. The selected examples are reviewed in the light of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century thinking on media and the use of technology as a means of transcending human limitations. In more specificity, I rely on Andrew Hoskin's take on media, memory and the connective turn, N. Katherine Hayles's theories on man's posthuman nature, while I also look into latest beliefs in transhumanism as a philosophy that seeks the evolution of the human form with the help of science and technology (Sorgner 2009; 2010).[2] In addition, for the purposes of this study discussions in the newly formed field of critical posthumanism[3] have been taken into account. These prioritize the redefinition of the post-human as a form of post-anthropocentric and pluralistic existence due to emergent scientific and bio-technological conditions (Ferrando). All in all, this theoretical background will help one reflect upon the extensions of electronic wastelands and electronic waste in present societies with regard to the representations in the novella in question.

In particular, this examination does not only deal with the technological aspect but also investigates its extensions in corporeal, moral and cultural dimensions of contemporary western societies through the study of literary representations of digital, mental and physical exhaustion. The discussion extends to socio-cultural contexts and constitutes proof of the uncritical use of and exposure to digital technology at a social level (both individual and institutional) that raises a lot of ethical problems. The article launches this investigation by closely looking at DeLillo's concerned ruminations regarding human limitations in a digitized and technologized world. It hopes to be pushing forward the conversation about the future of immersing our lives in the institutionalized new media order. It traces the main consequence of technological influences on memory and language—with fragmentation and loss as the immediate side effects. More specifically, the examination focuses on the themes and

narrative structures that DeLillo employs in a postmodernist—or even post-postmodernist—appreciation of the limitations of exhausted humans (turned into useless apparatuses and extensions to screens) and the writer's concerns about the practice of enhancing human beings as we know them today.

This "post" in post-postmodernism, may denote a development in time as simply the period that comes after postmodernism. Still, it may imply dismay about what follows postmodernism as philosophical criticism or better as an organized system of structures, beliefs and practices. If according to Linda Hutcheon, in her groundbreaking work *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), postmodernism "takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" (1) in literature and all fields of cultural development, DeLillo's writing poses as self-deriding and aims to deconstruct its own purpose and essence, exhausted by the demands of the technologized world in the twenty-first century. In his parodic writing that reaches the point of ridicule, the world in *The Silence* comes to a standstill just before its complete demise at the moment when the media that once ruled stop functioning. It is hereby regarded as an investigation of the non-essence of life, language and cultural memory in post-apocalyptic scenes of a crashed airplane and disfunctioning characters with uncontrollable bodies and brains at a time when discourses about the transhuman possibility of human nature flourish.

Don De Lillo's Take on Posthuman and Transhuman Theories

According to Hayles, in her milestone work *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), humans are seen as cybernetic systems that extend in virtuality. In this early but rigorous account on the boundaries between human and machine, she presents the historical development of the technology that is so closely connected with subjectivity, cognition and embodiment in tracing the movement from human to cyborg and then to posthuman in cybernetic discourse. For Hayles, bodies exist as prosthesis for the mind and embrace the posthuman. In her prologue to the book, she argues:

> The important intervention comes not when you try to determine which is the man, the woman, or the machine. Rather, the important intervention comes much earlier, when the test puts you into a cybernetic circuit that splices your will, desire, and perception into a distributed cognitive system in which represented bodies are joined with enacted bodies through mutating and flexible machine interfaces. As you gaze at the flickering signifiers scrolling down the computer screens, no matter what identifications you assign to the embodied entities that you cannot see, you have already become posthuman. (xiv)

In the post-technologized settings DeLillo places his characters, his writing can be said to take the form of a reaction to what we may have regarded so far

as postmodern. It expresses greater than ever skepticism regarding writing forms, the act of writing itself and the human condition, that is the humans' capacity to remember, forget and communicate. The themes of the fear of death and forced mortality have been a common thread in most of his fiction. When asked about this inescapable death drive apparent in his novels in an interview for *The Paris Review* by Adam Begley, he argues: "Who knows? If writing is a concentrated form of thinking, then the most concentrated form of writing probably ends in some kind of reflection on dying." In this respect, if DeLillo's novella is regarded as critically assessing the posthuman conception of the world, according to which the human being is enmeshed and embedded in an extended technological world with immense potentialities, one may assume that, in a retrospective manner, DeLillo questions the purpose and norms of writing and interrogates those institutions and structures that are to blame for the state his microcosm has come to. Thus it is suggested that the conception of the microcosm he creates clashes altogether with the main transhumanist beliefs which originated in the 1990s by Max More.[4] More saw full potential in the improvement of the human intellectual, physical and psychological capacities with the synergy of science and technology. Today, American computer scientist, futurist and transhumanist Ray Kurzweil, who has long professed the inevitable merger of humans with the machine (1990; 1999; 2005), sees the cyborg as an entity superior to any human being that is surely going to self-destruct.[5] Along with Professor Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, and writer of *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (2017), they enumerate the benefits of human societies from technological progress.

On the contrary, DeLillo is immensely preoccupied with the ills of the western capitalist and technologized world. He has repeatedly challenged it in his postmodernist writing by pushing boundaries and testing the limitations of both literary norms and cultural institutions for more than half a century. He has wondered about the limitations of science and technology in other novels, such as *White Noise* (1986), *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Zero K* (2016). In *The Silence*, he expresses his anxieties over the terrifying effects of extremist futurist beliefs and the uncritical use of technology. More alert to present pressing concerns than ever, DeLillo is exploring the nature of the relationship between human conduct and the media, detecting the vibrations caused by the connectivity enabled by new media technologies and excessive exposure to the screen. His extremely laconic expression forewarns us of the imminent death of the characters and the end of all communication among them. His succinct representations are only an understatement to the disruptive role of technology.

In the novella, the plot takes place in 2022. Part I deals with the fragmented and fragmentary interactions in which Tessa and her husband Jim are engaged while aboard a transatlantic flight, on their way to meet their friends

Max, Diane and Martin and enjoy Super Bowl on TV. Part I takes up the greater part of the narrative and ends abruptly leaving Max staring into a blank screen. Part II immediately begins to describe an ongoing digital war characterized by "[c]yberattacks, digital intrusions, [and] biological aggression" (77). This war involves the collapse not only of all digital and broadcast technologies but of whatever involves mechanical support. Our world as a remotely and digitally managed system suddenly fails or is hacked and DeLillo very succinctly (in just 116 pages) creates the opportunity to criticize the uncontrollable side effects of our exposure to digitized information and services. At the end of it all nothing really changes and Max is still left seated and staring at the blank screen.

As the plot in the novella takes place in U.S. territory, the writer maps the ills of a nation and its institutions as well as the effects of such technological, institutional and cultural waste on human citizens. The concerns he brings to the fore are extremely serious. He undertakes to expose moral and physical decadence, the gradual disintegration of human organized societies, the dysfunction of the family unit and the malfunction of the ruling institutions. By scrutinizing instances of the characters' existential crises in the narrative (the denial of one's sense of self, the disruption of one's presence in space and time as well as the loss of cultural memory), the writer's agonizing questions concern the crises caused to human bodies and minds by burnt-out electronic systems. In opposition to the transhumanist movement that hails the possibility of developing an enhanced human species with increased mental and physical capabilities by changing human nature and mainly the way the human brain works, the characters in *The Silence* fail to evolve or develop enhanced capabilities. They are portrayed in their struggle to come out alive and functioning though crippled by the menacing potential of science and the misuse of media technology. In tandem with the questions fired by the writer, this paper quietly asks: What would happen if technology stopped working and media stopped transmitting? How would human nature continue to evolve? What would happen to human agency if stuck in digital wastelands?

Memory, Language and Communication Failure

In *The Silence*, spelt out in DeLillo's most compact writing patterns (following the overwhelming representation of the 9/11 events in his 2007 novel *Falling Man*), his dark vision of a world disintegrating, where people are detached from one another as they get more addicted to their mobile screens, becomes more alarming. The erasure of the world as we have known it is represented through the erasure of the language that could potentially be used to speak about it. To DeLillo, "a word has a life and a history" of its own (Begley). As the words in the novella fail to relate, point to or mean, a waning need, hope or potential for life may also be implied. One reads this story and begins to appreciate "the implied

limitation built into his stories" as noted by Xan Brooks in "Don DeLillo: I Think of Myself as the Kid from the Bronx."[6] The human characters fail to communicate meaningfully through their language which fails to signify when technology stops supporting all existence. Yet, we enjoy a bleaker DeLillo expressing not actually more urgent but rather more all-encompassing concerns about the dire threats of our technological reality. Notions of teleology, temporality, history, memory and the function of language are under investigation, yet this time they somehow ring out in a more intensified way. There is a new more acute sense of an incoherent self abandoned in a post-digitized world only to experience the breakdown of communication that challenges cultural efficacy and physical contact.

A disease of the digital turn transforms the technologized universe in the story and, ultimately, its physical space into a wasteland where nothing functions any more. It turns its characters, who appear bare with no historical past, into useless transmitters of speech acts devoid of any intelligible meaning; a disease that could easily and at any moment have the world stop going round.[7] While one of the main characters, Martin Dekker, confidently and eloquently nibbles upon Albert Einstein's famous physics theories published in *Manuscript on the Special Theory of Relativity* (1912), the writer also chooses Einstein's words as an epigraph for the novella. Even before Part I begins and the narration unfolds, the reader receives a nihilistic sense of nothingness and cancellation that characterizes the book: "I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones" are Einstein's words that precede the narrative. They encapsulate the novel's main idea; they set a bleak tone and foreshadow the writer's pessimistic outlook on the future of the world as one knows it even before beginning one's read.

Time and language are central thematic strands in *The Silence*. Although DeLillo's narrator and his characters tirelessly pose questions about the future of the world, these are never answered. Language fails to mean while at the same time the speakers do not show any interest in making intelligible meanings or drawing any serious conclusions. Insurance agent Jim Kripps and his wife poet Tessa Berens are flying to New York to meet up in their friends' apartment and watch Super Bowl on TV. There, await Max Stenner, a building inspector, Diane Lucas, a retired physics professor, and Diane's former student and Physics college teacher Martin. In the opening scene, in the middle of a flight, Jim seated next to Tessa is reciting words he sees on the screen in front of him; words and numbers that make no difference are coming out of his mouth. The couple have no seeming past and as it will become apparent no future either. They are stuck in non-presence in a moment that seems most vulnerable. The narrator sets the scene from the opening lines and sketches their alienated relationship:

> The man touched the button and his seat moved from its upright position. He found himself staring up at the nearest of the small screens located just below the overhead bin, words and numbers changing with the progress of the flight. Altitude, air temperature, speed, time of arrival. He wanted to sleep but kept on looking. (3)

The image of a sleepless man suffering from exhaustion is the result of the long flight from Paris to New York. Silence and sleep are what both passengers need as a way of surviving the destructive urge that runs through the narrative. Instead constant noise and automated responses come out of the couple's mouths as they stare at the screens without displaying any intimate contact. Jim is affected by the continuous noise while nonsensically counting distance to his destination: "He began to recite the words and numbers aloud because it made no sense, it had no effect, if he simply noted the changing details only to lose each one instantly in the twin drones of mind and aircraft" (4). His brain functions are reduced and compared to the mechanical parts of an aircraft, while the soothing effect of sleep continues to pose as the only possible salvation throughout Part I: "Sleep was the point. He needed to sleep. But the words and numbers kept coming" (4). All the numbers and unimportant bits of information about altitude, temperature, speed and arrival times that come out of their puppet-like mouths remain out of any conversational context. They are exaggerated to such an extent that they ironically pass off as necessary to the couple's existence. Yet, as if occupying non-space, Jim gets very little attention from his wife Tessa and his name is soon equated to a seat number: "His name was Jim Kipps. But for all the hours of the flight, his name was his seat number" (6).

Tessa's almost comic precision in verbal exchanges that are the result of her habitual engagement in linguistic games as a poet and an editor, on the other hand, may sound hilarious at times:

> "I'm thinking back to the main course," she said. "I'm also thinking about the champagne with cranberry juice."
>
> "But you didn't order it."
>
> "Seemed pretentious. But I'm looking forward to the scones later in the flight."
>
> She was talking and writing simultaneously.
>
> "I like to pronounce the word properly," she said. "An abbreviated letter o. As in scot or trot. Or is it scone as in moan?"
>
> He was watching her write. Was she writing what she was saying, what they were both saying?
>
> She said, "Celcius. Cap C. It was someone's name. Can't recall his first name."
>
> (4-5)

DeLillo is deeply concerned about the purpose of language as a historical, cultural and political act. During the flight we learn nothing of importance about Tessa or Jim. In a similar fashion to the non-linear organization of the digital information that flashes on and off the screens, affecting people's thoughts and actions, there appears no continuity in their speech. The superfluous nonsensical linguistic exchanges almost necessitate the silence Jim asks for and people usually enjoy when seemingly self-content in themselves, lost in their mobile phones and hooked onto their screens:

> Here, in the air, much of what the couple said to each other seemed to be a function of some automated process, remarks generated by the nature of airline travel itself. None of the ramblings of people in rooms, in restaurants, where major motion is stilled by gravity, talk free-floating. All these hours over oceans or vast landmasses, sentences trimmed, sort of self-encased, passengers, pilots, cabin attendants, every word forgotten the moment the plane sets down on the tarmac and begins to taxi endlessly towards an unoccupied jetway. (7)

In the air, free from the force of gravity words are stripped of their historical and cultural context. They fail to contribute to the development of the story or enhance the plot. Rather language deconstructs any sense of organized structure in the novella. The difficulty of the experience of flying overseas exacerbates the situation while Jim and Tessa's fragmented conversations reaffirm a state of blurry confusion and floating parallel existence. While flying, it is as if time, energy, human contact and interaction not "stilled by gravity" (7) are a total waste. The readers have a forewarning of a horrific incident, the kind that is common in DeLillo's scenes of terror and total destruction (as in *Falling Man*). The narrator notes with a sense of suffocation as if gasping for air:

> He alone would remember some of it, he thought, middle of the night, in bed, images of people bundled into airline blankets, looking dead, the tall attendant asking if she could refill his wineglass, flight ending, seatbelt sign going off, the sense of release, passengers standing in the aisles, waiting attendants at the exit, all their thank-yous and nodding heads, the million-mile smiles. (8)

In this rather long sentence, elliptical phrases in paradigmatic structure highlight the agonizing thoughts in the last moments before the end. The narrator makes an ironic commentary on the couple's possible lapses and lack of concentration as an early indication of eminent death and finitude that the narrative implies.

At other times, numbers are just coming out of Jim's and Tessa's mouths as if automata: "Heure a Paris nineteen o eight," he said. "Heure a London eighteen o eight. Speed four hundred sixty-three m.p.h. We just missed two miles per hour" (9). Tessa keeps checking arrival time in London and Paris, altitude, speed and outside air temperature. She nonsensically persists in speaking out robotic responses and urges Jim to keep calm and watch a movie. Such unimportant

information is only for uncritical consumption, not forwarding communication in any way. And then she needs to write down everything, words, memories as if they have to be recorded in order to matter and be remembered. Memory needs to be mediated as language gradually fails to mean and cognition is further compromised: "Did you sneak a look at your phone?" Jim asks about the factual information coming out of Tessa's mouth. She abruptly responds, "Go back to your sky-high screen" and then "Activate your tablet. Watch a movie" (6). "I feel like talking. No headphone. We both like talking" Jim states. "No earbuds," she said. "Talk and write" (7).

In the novella, the use of earbuds, earphones, screens and even paper is highlighted. These different technologies are media that pose as prosthetic parts to human agents of nonsensical conversations and conduct. These extensions to their bodies help them carry out their exchanges and are reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan's defining work on media. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), McLuhan forms his groundbreaking theory of the medium as an extension to man used to mediate communication and our perception of the world around us. Earlier, in *Letters of Marshall McLuhan* (1960), he was the first to note that "[a]ll media are necessarily extensions in technological form of one or more of our senses. The electronic media together add up to an externalization of our sensorium" (256). In his 2011 article "Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn," Andrew Hoskins, scholar in digital war, media and memory studies expands on the role of digital media in contemporary mediated memory. Hoskins emphasizes the importance of media on historical and cultural memory not only as a metaphor but also as a practice and brings to the fore philosophers and scholars who have claimed that so indispensable are digital media to our existence that lives cannot be lived outside of them. Social and cultural life cannot exist outside media anymore.[8] Not only in theory but in actuality, investments in laboratory research are proof of the transhumanist belief in the creation of a brain-computer linked back to humans in order to allow them full control of the inexhaustible abilities and functions of their brain.[9]

In the same vein in *The Silence*, the characters' appreciation of the world is not only informed by the media they use; it is actually defined by the media extensions that act as their sensors. DeLillo purposefully takes the chance to criticize Tessa's and Jim's alienation due to the excessive use of technology and all the noise that surrounds them is the metaphor for all the cancellations they experience. The media create an illusion of a holistic sense of the self; they fill the gaps and help avoid long silences. But as soon as the characters experience a massive technological breakdown, all digital extensions to man also fail to work. Immediately, we feel Jim's and Tessa's disorientation as they can hardly go by without electronic mediation and away from their screen. As the narrator notes, "[Jim] wasn't listening to what he was saying because he knew it was stale air" (13).

As Tessa stubbornly asks to take everything down in her notebook as a way of exercising her memory, Jim calls out to her, "You can't help yourself" (13):

> "I don't want to help myself," she said. "All I want to do is get home and look at a blank wall."
>
> "Time to destination one hour twenty-six. I'll tell you what I can't remember. The name of this airline. Two weeks ago, starting out, different airline, no bilingual screen."
>
> "But you're happy about the screen. You like your screen."
>
> "It helps me hide from the noise."
>
> Everything predetermined, a long flight, what we think and say, our immersion in a single sustained overtone, the engine roar, how we accept the need to accommodate it, keep it tolerable even if it isn't. (13-14)

Every conduct and every detail sadly imply an unbearable sense of boredom, along with the lightness of being while floating. These exchanges could express the characters' possible ultimate need to disconnect from technology and then reconnect with the human, seeking thus a return to their former human state and nature. The consecutive cancellations they experience are metaphors for the ultimate end, just before the nightmare of death turns into reality.

Memory as the central mental capacity is also in a flux when the couple is not connected to the screen or to the internet. As Tessa says, "[memories] come swimming out of deep memory" (6) as she tries to remember Dr. Celsius's first name. As language fails to advance meaning and to produce cultural memory, missing facts and information come out of nowhere:

> "Speaking of remember. I remember now," she said.
>
> "What?"
>
> "Came out of nowhere. Anders."
>
> "Anders."
>
> "The first name of Mr. Celsius." (14)

Without memory Tessa and Jim are minimized to the shape of caricatures that share bizarre verbal exchanges. In "Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn," Hoskins asks where individual memory can be found. He reminds us that this is connected to one's cognition now reconfigured in media space: "That is, cognition—the mental process of awareness, perception, remembering—has been seen as extended, scattered and distributed outside of the head and across social and cultural worlds (23)[10]. In his "view of memory as a kind of 'circuit' that extends from individual cognition out into the world and back again" (23) Hoskins interestingly notes about remembering and forgetting when in a state of networked existence:

> The now much more visible "long tail" of the past is increasingly networked through a convergence of communication and the archive. Smart phones and other highly portable digital devices act as prosthetic nodes that extend the self across an array of communication and consumption networks, personal and public [...]. Hence, there is a kind of digital dormant memory, awaiting potential rediscovery and reactivation—lurking in the underlayer of media life. (26)

Somewhere between the human and the digital "[f]orgetting—or perhaps a new careless memory—becomes the default condition when there is no need to remember" (19). Our digital networks eventually constitute this "prosthetic memory" according to Alison Landsberg.[11] In *The Silence*, when technology fails, this "prosthetic memory" fails to inform the human. Tessa reclines into her notebook and Jim hides into his screen, experiencing the mental and physical distress caused by the long flight and their alienation. A bouncing starts, passengers staggering in the aisle, "voices on the intercom . . . in French and then . . . in English" (16) and an eminent crash comes closer: "'Are we afraid?' she said. He let this question hover, thinking tea and sweets, tea and sweets" (17).

The Breakdown of Civilization

Immediately afterwards, in the second chapter we find Martin, Diane and Max, seated in front of a TV, waiting for Tessa and Jim to arrive from the airport and enjoy the 2022 Super Bowl that is about to begin. The narrator explains, "The man had a history of big bets on sporting events and this was the final game of the football season [. . .]" (19). As if life, subjectivity, thinking and memory have been taken away from Max, the reader enjoys the parodic image DeLillo creates of him:

> Max was accustomed to being sedentary, attached to a surface, his armchair, sitting, watching, cursing silently when the field goal fails or the fumble occurs. The curse was visible in his slit eyes, right eye nearly shut, but depending on the game situation and the size of the wager, it might become a full-face profanity, a life regret, lips tight, chin quivering slightly, the wrinkle near the nose tending to lengthen. Not a single word, just this tension, and the right hand moving to the left forearm to scratch anthropoidally, primate style, fingers digging into flesh. (19-20)

In these two long sentences, one appreciates the first consequences of the end of life and civilization as we have known it so far. Max has been stripped of his main human capacities. The slight facial expressions, eye and lip movements and the hand coordination are only able to remind one of his humanoid nature in the beginnings of civilization. As Diane confesses, the "years of our something-or-other partnership" (21) has led to unbearable boredom and routine lives that only western consumerism has promised to ease. She confesses, "Max doesn't stop watching. He becomes a consumer who had no intention of buying something. One hundred commercials in the next three or four hours" (21). Consumption to the point of exhaustion fills the room.

Suddenly, there is a visual distortion on the screen and then we hear something unearthly happening to the world: mobiles are off and all screens go blank. According to Martin, a compulsive supporter of Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity, yet one who misquotes his formulas and theories of black holes and gravitational waves, they have been falling into what Einstein calls black holes. Or, alternatively, he imagines conspiracies organized by the Chinese: "'Hidden networks,' Martin said. 'Changing by the minute, the microsecond, in ways beyond our imagining. Look at the blank screen. What is it hiding from us?'" (28). They even hear otherworldly verbal exchanges: "'It is not earthly speech,' Diane said. 'It is extraterrestrial'" (27). Diane apparently more perceptive than anyone else in the room tries to picture the extent of the confusion taking over the once digitized world now that technology does not work and media fail to transmit information and mediate communication: "I am foolishly trying to imagine all the rooms in all the cities where the game is being broadcast. All the people watching intently or sitting as we are, puzzled, abandoned by science, technology, common sense" (29). She ironically asks, "Is this the casual embrace that marks the fall of world civilization?" (35). Neither she nor the readers get an answer and the chapter ends abruptly.

The scene changes to Tessa and Jim again, who have just experienced a turbulent flight landing causing "a wobbling mass of metal, glass and human life, down out of the sky" (37), unavoidably bringing to mind the disturbing images that DeLillo had painted in his seminal novel *Falling Man* to describe the terror that overwhelms people as soon as death seems inescapable and fear rules. Passengers are described floating with lacerated bodies, broken arms, and legs twisted, teeth missing, experiencing loss of memory. Passersby, drivers, flight attendants are not coordinating with their surroundings. Emotionally absent from their own lives, they could well be characters in a movie and Jim marks self-consciously: "All we need is rain… and we'd know we were characters in a movie" (*The Silence* 39). A slight error that may have occurred in the digital communication systems seems to be resulting to a complete chaos because of their highly deterministic and sensitive to technology nature.[12]

Back to the flat, more incoherent talk fills the pages: "Half sentences, bare words, repetitions" (46). Max makes rambling sentences about the game, using repetitive words, and then interrupts them for some weird and unconnected commercial jargon (46-48) as if in a different space and time, "a transrational warp that belongs to [his] time frame, not ours" (48). He continues watching his own game, in his blank screen, lost in his own loop. This complication has characters get confused between actual and virtual experience of the game and of their lives which they get to watch as if it were a movie. More observant Diane makes penetrating thoughts about the new state of affairs among her guests and Max, in particular:

> Is it the bourbon that's giving him this lilt, this flourish of football dialect and commercial jargon. Never happened before, not with bourbon, scotch, beer, marijuana. She was enjoying this, at least she thought she was, based on how much longer he kept broadcasting.
>
> Or is it the blank screen, is it a negative impulse that provoked his imagination, the sense that the game is happening somewhere in Deep Space outside the fragile reach of our current awareness. (47-48)

In the novella, the two married couples seem to be accepting the ruins of a married life with their partner unquestionably. What is more, Diane is really enjoying the de-humanization process through the ridiculed portrait of her husband. Regarding the blurring of the spatiotemporal relations, one can again rely on Hoskins to refer to the complications of a new experience of space and time that new media have helped formulate. According to Hoskins, "[o]ne can say then that digital media have complicated the temporal dimensions against which we measure our sense of presence in-the-world, and increasingly blurred this with our sense of presence in the-media, and also presence-in-memory" (25-26). It is precisely this blurry sense of being in and out of the world while also in and out of media connection that DeLillo hopes to satirize through his puppet-like characters in *The Silence*. Martin soon starts talking as if hallucinating, as if his medication is having peculiar effects on him:

> "I've been taking a medication."
>
> "Yes"
>
> "The oral route."
>
> "Yes. We all do this. A little white pill."
>
> "There are side effects."
>
> "A small pellet or tablet. White, pink, whatever."
>
> "Could be constipation. Could be diarrhea."
>
> "Yes," she whispered.
>
> "Could be the feeling that others can hear your thoughts or control your behavior."
>
> "I don't think I know about this."
>
> "Irrational fear. Distrust of others. I can show you the insert," he said. "I carry it with me." (48-49)

As the situation gradually deteriorates, the characters free themselves from any authorial intent or control. They lose their subjectivity or any control of their own agency. Their body parts and their consciousness fail to respond to a central nervous system or a peripheral circuit that determines humanoid existence. Diane overhears Martin voicing out ontological questions without expecting or getting any answers:

> I look in this mirror and I don't know who I'm looking at, he said. The face looking back at me doesn't seem to be mine. But then again why should it? Is the mirror a reflective surface? And is this the face that other people see? . . . Do other people experience this, ever? Our faces. And what do people see when they walk along the street and look at each other? Is it the same thing that I see? All our lives, all this looking. People looking. But seeing what? (50-51)

Martin's voice is heard contemplating on the distorted and disintegrated image of himself, his consciousness keeping a distance from his body. He fires away ontological questions about the essence and purpose of his existence while he still relies on episteme for his answers. The basic functions of looking and really seeing are questioned as if the characters have been robbed of their human nature, their bodily and cognitive abilities. In turn, Max's condition deteriorates and his movement is seriously affected as if lost in the shoes of a sports presenter: "He raised his hand now, phantom microphone in hand, and he spoke to a camera well above field level, his voice pitched to a higher tonal range" (67). As soon as technology stops functioning, people in existential crisis manically search for a new order. "He seemed lost in the pose but returned eventually to a natural stance. Max was back to his blank screen. The pauses were turning into silences and beginning to feel like the wrong kind of normal" (67). We continue reading about the remnants of the seemingly agonizing thoughts of people living detached from one another. What will happen now that all the screens are disabled? The answer comes from elsewhere. Back to the clinic close to where the plane crashed and out of nowhere a woman ruminates:

> I can tell you this. Whatever is going on, it has crushed our technology. The word itself seems outdated to me, lost in space. Where is the leap of authority to our secure devices, our encryption capacities, our tweets, trolls and bots. Is everything in the datasphere subject to distortion and theft? And do we simply have to sit here and mourn our fate? (59)

Through her mouth and words, DeLillo criticizes our false sense of digital security, the conditioned truths we are made to believe and the institutionalization of this mediated sense of being. We get pictures of darkness in the streets, in the stadiums, the whole system and organization of life seems out of order. It is as if the world has been hacked and the characters are experiencing some kind of "natural breakdown, or foreign intrusion" (65). According to Sonia Livingstone, social analysis increasingly recognizes that "all influential institutions in society have themselves been transformed, reconstituted, by contemporary processes of mediation" (qtd. in Hoskins 20). Yet, past this complacent state of relying on technological mediation that extends to all aspects of social and cultural life, in *The Silence*, it feels as if we are gradually moving from the decadence of the surrounding electronic wasteland to a former state of natural (dis-) order.

In the second part of *The Silence*, disintegration has developed further; writing also dissolves: as numbers disappear, chapters are separated only by long lines, designating thus another instance of rapture with literary norms. Each new entry is an expression of present-day fears that seem more up-to-date than ever before. The narrator mentions the virus of war, the fear of agencies being in control of nuclear weapons, bombs and missiles from supersonic aircraft, mass surveillance, satellite tracking data, bioweapons, drone wars, climate change, world crisis, asteroids, meteorites approaching Earth that is in danger, data breaches and cryptocurrencies, all expected in a world conspiracy (77). These are not thoroughly discussed but brought up as Wikipedia entries. They come up as the side effects of a new kind of war or, even worse, of a new world order. The narrator ironically wonders about the cognitive power of people to still remember after this violent intrusion (77-78). Do memories of previous terrorist attacks haunt contemporary people or do they vanish with the informational overflow or worse with the click of a button?

As if experiencing a faulty version of their expired self, the characters end up completely fragmented and disillusioned. Max calls out to the others in the room, "'We're being zombified,' Max says. 'We're being bird-brained.'" Seconds later he cries out, "I'm done with all this. Sunday or is it Monday? February whatever. It's my expiration date" (84). The characters seem out of order, and their utterances out of context once again and making little sense. Their mental power is down as if a central controlling computer has been shut down. They are separated from their physical aspect as if the human and the mechanical are now two separate entities. Communication breaks down as their brain uploads are now disconnected.

And still the narrator has the characters continue their labored conversations in the novel to the point of exhaustion. Diane is trying to identify some patterns in her guests' conduct. Yet, towards the end she also ends up entrapped in her own limitations. As if everyone has been stuck and lost into that aspect of reality, that space and time they were inhabiting just before being unplugged and entering the black hole. "The world is everything, the individual nothing. Do we understand that?" (115) are Martin's and DeLillo's ultimate words before the world ends up in complete silence. The reader hopes for a word, a blink, a touch that will reverse the situation. One turns the last page of the novel and reads about Max pictured in complete inertia and deafening silence:

> Max is not listening. He understands nothing. He sits in front of the TV set with his hands folded behind his neck, elbows jutting.
>
> Then he stares into the blank screen. (116)

One is disappointed to realize that the text ends with a "blank screen" (116). In this prophetic novella that seems so relevant to the present, DeLillo writes about

people's inability to keep control of their bodies, minds, language and silences. He updates his lexicon to describe our present day, not some dystopian future and this is what makes it more disturbing.

Conclusion

This article has dealt with the latest narrative endeavor of DeLillo, a widely credited fiction writer and dire critic of social and political world matters. His novelistic representations have been reviewed in the context of twenty-first century media theory on memory and against transhumamist theories that support human enhancement by means of science and technology. Despite the immense optimism about the technological development of the Fourth Industrial revolution and the professed belief in the enhanced nature of humanoids after their merger with technology, DeLillo and his characters remain silent in disbelief (if thinking at all) of what is to follow at the end of the novel. Humanity has arrived at the key moment when it needs to test its powers against technology that poses as its worst enemy. Posthumanist and transhumanist beliefs, on the other hand, are questioned in the dystopian reality where no technology works any more.

DeLillo examines the fragmentation of our cultural realms with an updated and intensified interest in challenging technological developments and the electronic wastelands they create. He continues to seek and develop new imaginative ways of establishing intelligent communication with the concerns people face today. Without looking for any kind of compromise he seems unable or unwilling to surpass the dead-end western civilization has brought about. With his tense dialogues and rigid lines, he is updating his conceptual map to respond to current affairs and concerns through intensification and mutation of tendencies already present in postmodernism. Through language human communication is not even a possibility. DeLillo's characters miss out on human contact from the start and by the end of the narrative all their mental and physical capacities are eliminated.

What happens to memory then? Is it truly only mediated by our technological extensions? And if language and words miss out on meaning and then they lose their connection with history, is there any point in writing at all? DeLillo's agonizing thoughts are all-pervading and seem to be pertaining to the function of writing after postmodernism and after the terror of the terrorist attack against western civilization on 9/11. Is there any sense in writing fiction at all? An incomparable anxiety over the role of the writer and writing to save history from vanishing overwhelms DeLillo. Ultimate death is approaching. Is fear the sole winner after all? Under this light, *The Silence* becomes a wonderful metaphor for the end of discourse, the end of civilization and, by extension, the end of all writing.

Notes

[1] The 34th European Association for American Studies Conference, organized by the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia with the collaboration of the Universidad Complutense, expanded on the idea of waste present in T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922) to all notions, themes and directions related to the study of the United States. "Bodies, Brains and Burnt-out Systems" was presented in the "Electronic Wasteland" panels with special interest in examples of waste in human resources, moral and emotional waste in twenty-first-century digital era as represented in contemporary American fictions.

[2] In the *Journal of Evolution and Technology* (2010), a dialogue commences regarding the linkages of transhumanism with Darwinian evolution theory and the similarities between the concept of the posthuman and Nietzsche's idea of the "ubermensch."

[3] In her article "Posthuman Critical Theory," which appears in the first issues of the first volume of *Journal of Posthuman Studies* (2017), Rosi Braidotti attempts a mapping of critical posthuman theories in the field and calls for "the need to rethink subjectivity as a collective assemblage that encompasses human and nonhuman actors, technological mediation, animals, plants, and the planet as a whole (9)."

[4] A list of the theoretical premises upon which the movement of Transhumanism is based is available at whatistranshumanism.org. Accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

[5] Among Ray Kurzweil's most notorious theories on immortality, singularity and superintelligence, the "Transhuman Singularity" is that singular event when death is outwitted by immortality. He explains, "This day that Death dies will join together with the day that Life took its first breath as the two most important dates in the history of life on our planet" www.kurzweilai.net/the-transhuman-singularity. Accessed 1 Jan. 2023.

[6] One can read an interesting account of Don DeLillo's concerns and preoccupations as expressed in his novels in Xan Brooks' article for the *Guardian* at www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/06/don-delillo-kid-from-the-bronx-interview-xan-brooks. Accessed 1 June 2022.

[7] Although this book arrived in this reader's hands and screens during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, while still in strict lockdown and though it was not about the pandemic, it felt so relevant at that moment to the concerns of the disillusioned people, being about another disease that was taking its toll on the human race.

[8] Marc Deleuze "recognize[s] how the uses and appropriations of media penetrate all aspects of contemporary life (qtd. in Hoskins 20)." According to Roger Silverstone, "media [...] define[s] a space that is increasingly mutually referential and reinforcive, and increasingly integrated into the fabric of everyday life" (qtd. in Hoskins 20).

[9] Mediated thinking and understanding may soon be a reality: with only a thought, not even the touch of a button, humanoids will assumedly be able to control any device built inside or outside their bodies. Elon Mask's announcement of his grand future project Neuralink is the perfect example of such transhumanist belief in linking humans up to a brain-computer in order to unleash their full potential so as to fight disease and overcome the limitations of human nature. For more information of the project visit neuralink.com. Accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

Notes

[10] Read about John Sutton's "extended mind thesis" as "mental states and processes … spread[ing] across the physical, social, and cultural environments as well as bodies and brains" (Hoskins 23).

[11] Check out Alison Landsberg's *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. Columbia UP, 2004.

[12] According to chaos theory analyzed in Britannica.com, "In recent decades, … a diversity of systems have been studied that behave unpredictably despite their seeming simplicity and the fact that the forces involved are governed by well-understood physical laws. The common element in these systems is a very high degree of sensitivity to initial conditions and to the way in which they are set in motion. www.britannica.com/science/chaos-theory. Accessed 1 Jan. 2023.

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Biography

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The Barcode Monster:

Supermarkets, Supermarket Data, and Surveillance in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the dream that begins Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, an opening sequence which previous readings have tended to overlook. I argue that the monster in this dream is an odd assemblage: a cave-dwelling predator somehow compiled from elements redolent of the blasted commercial landscape which the father and son will later scour for food. In particular, I contend that the tolling brain and unseeing mode of observation that mark this creature resonate unexpectedly with the barcodes that first entered American life in the 1970s and which became increasingly difficult to avoid during the 1990s. Detailing the increasingly sophisticated use that major supermarkets made of this technology following the initial rise of personal computers, I argue that their barcode systems were a crucial forerunner of the digital surveillance forms that prevail today—and I also argue that an antipathy toward these systems becomes apparent as *The Road*'s father, while always feeling followed, discards all branding and packaging in order to revalorise food on the basis of its material worth. At the end of the essay I relate McCarthy's ambivalent response to the encroaching commercial logic of the American road to other dystopic fantasies, including Ever Dundas's *Hell Sans*, in which external repositories of personal information seem similarly to limit bodily freedom and desire.

Keywords

Apocalypse; Barcode; Commodity; Supermarket; Surveillance.

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A novel about apocalypse and a desperate journey on a ruined highway system, the cultural significance of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* was obvious to critics immediately upon its publication in 2006. Understanding the novel as a pinnacle in McCarthy's career, many searched it for echoes of his existing work, from the Southern Gothic vision of *Suttree* (1979) to the violent odyssey of *Blood Meridian* (1985), even as they recognised that it was written in a mode of prophetic warning quite unlike anything he had tried before. This emphasis on the importance of the novel also led critics to pour their energies into ascertaining the true cause of the disaster that triggers its main narrative. As Adeline Johns-Putra suggested, while some "have convincingly countered that it really does not matter" why this catastrophe occurs, and even that "it is this not mattering that is the novel's point," many if not most have continued to look for a key to unlock its final meaning (Johns-Putra 520). Certain aspects of *The Road*—and not least the fact that it calls the early explosions "concussions," a word choice straight from the pages of John Hersey's "Hiroshima" (1946)—have persuaded some that McCarthy shares Hersey's concern with a nuclear fallout (McCarthy 54). Others, noting that McCarthy's father's memories often suggest nature was in decline long before these detonations, have seen the novel as an ecological jeremiad.[1] During these and other acts of critical decipherment, however, the dream sequence that opens *The Road* has received surprisingly little attention. Perhaps because it disrupts the focus on human agency that is central to these dominant readings, or perhaps because it brings together such a discordant range of allusions, the father's opening vision of a cave creature with "alabaster bones," a "head" that "swung... from side to side," and a "brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell," somehow remains buried beneath the many pages that follow it (McCarthy 1). Critical discussions so far have not reflected the prominence that McCarthy gave to this dream sequence by placing it at the very start of his novel.

This essay, mindful of how often readers have raced past *The Road*'s opening page, lingers over it, taking a closer look at its dream sequence and the cave creature to which this leads. Heeding Johns-Putra's reminder that *The Road* is neither an allegory nor a parable but a thought experiment, open to varied responses, it argues that this monster reverberates with the eponymous road that is its principal setting. Associations that McCarthy conjures between the cave and the road suggest that what survives of the highway system also remains the terrain of this predator, the domain it scans for edible life. This, as we will see, becomes particularly evident through a motif of dripping water that intensifies just before the father dies. For these ominous drips, which also sometimes follow him into supermarkets and gas stations among other ruins of globalised capitalism, suggest that this creature remains at his shoulder, shadowing him, his appetites, and the actions these appetites inspire. Reflecting on the motif as it treats *The Road* as a thought experiment, this essay suggests that the creature on

the novel's opening page can be considered a barcode monster, spawned before the apocalypse, and that its weirdly mechanical "brain," seen pulsing inside "a dull glass bell," can be likened to a primitive computer that continues to harvest data from the road it scans. The creature that commences *The Road*, stalking its journey south, belongs to the wider response the novel makes to the immanent power over human desires that consumer capitalism has accumulated during McCarthy's lifetime.

Necessarily, then, the essay's argument moves from a close analysis of *The Road* to an account of the historical development of the commercial landscapes whose wreckage is navigated in the novel. Quoting extensively from the text itself, the opening section deepens the interpretation rehearsed above. It argues that in his description of this strange cave creature, with its mechanised brain, its black and white hue, its perpetual scanning of the world, McCarthy uncannily reassembles components from the barcode systems that first became a feature of everyday American life in the late 1960s. The second section of the article then turns to the history reassembled in this uncanny creature, exploring the development of the product scanning technology that helped to lubricate further the US consumer flows that accelerated so rapidly over the twentieth century. It shows how, not least in McCarthy's own home state of Tennessee, the introduction of self-service shopping systems soon inspired an anxious desire to understand and control the unknown consumer—a desire that, by the 1960s, helped persuade major US businesses to pool resources and commission new research into what became known as barcode technology. Understanding this in-person system of data gathering as an essential precursor for the online forms of surveillance capitalism that now dominate critical debate, the final pages of the essay then return to *The Road*. Close analysis of the text shows that the novel displays a gathering interest in bare tins and homemade stencils, in painted signs and handwritten labels, and in other objects that *The Road*'s father, when scavenging, retrieves from the frozen circuits of commodity flow. In a context of unremitting horror, a world of hunger and predation, the novel here connects these unsurveillable foods to an unexpected and often fleeting return of slow talk, caloric satiety, and other experiences that can become endangered amid the consumer routines of today. Released from the distractions and negotiations evoked in the famous postwar US phrase "pester power," dialogue between *The Road*'s father and son slows down. Bonds between them deepen, and their talk becomes philosophical and more illuminating for both. Of course, the price of this gain—catastrophe—is far too high, and absurdly so. But life after *The Road*'s apocalypse does transpire, however inappropriately, as a context in which affective experiences long lost to consumerism return.

The Monster on the Road

And yet the cave creature is also exceptional: homo sapiens are responsible for all the acts of violence that take place in the book. Although many crimes are kept offstage, being identified by abandoned corpse stores among other grim aftermaths, they are always perpetrated by human actors. Hearsay about the "men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" among other unspeakable acts confirm that McCarthy, interested in reclaiming good and evil as moral absolutes, is also defining the latter in terms of rape and cannibalism, crimes in which some subordinate the bodies of others to their desires (McCarthy 193). Given this, when *The Road*'s mother likens all survivors to the "walking dead" early in the novel, the allusion looks ahead to those later threats that she will not live to see (McCarthy 57).[2] All but one of the monsters in the book resemble such Hollywood zombies. Lifeforms that lack "the organic articulation and teleological focus that we are prone to attribute to ourselves," in Steven Shaviro's words, they project a vision in which human consciousness is defined by the needs and desires of the body (Shaviro 85).

On the opening page of *The Road*, however, we meet an unequivocal "It." Juxtaposed in this uncanny creature are divergent components, from bells to spiders' eyes, but very little in the way of an anthropomorphic element. Its dwelling-place, too, seems to belong to a European fairytale. It exists in stark contrast to the human habitats—the abandoned malls, warehouses and other roadside ruins—haunted by other predatory forces in the novel. From the beginning of the father's dream these fairytale elements are clear. As night falls like "the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world," a "child" who may or may not be his son takes hold of the father's hand and leads him into a cave. Inside, as the "light" plays "over the wet flowstone walls," *The Road* likens the duo to "pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast." Their brief and mysterious quest then leads them to "a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake." "On the far shore," we become aware of

> a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark. (McCarthy 1)

A few isolated elements in this description do come close to suggesting that, like the zombie threat later on, *The Road*'s cave creature may mirror human behaviour of some sort. Just as its shadow joins that of the father on the wall of the cave, so the creature's oxymoronically "sightless" scanning of its environment might

seem to mimic the latter's nervous habit of using his binoculars to monitor the horizon for threats. Yet these similarities soon prove minor. Taken as a whole, *The Road*'s opening description disrupts such direct comparisons, maintaining an air of confusion and mystery around its opening vision. Even any allusions to *Beowulf* that arguably become apparent in the sequence already arrive in a scrambled and unknowable form. That is to say, *The Road* in general can be said to invert this Old English poem's epic movement from Grendel to the dragon: it introduces its cannibals only after its introductory dream sequence has led us to its "crouching" cave dweller. Yet the opening page, while initiating the novel's broader interest in counterpointing *Beowulf*, also inaugurates its tendency to interweave such allusions with all sorts of unexpected and jarring elements. The slow and pendulous movement of the creature's head, like its subterranean dwelling-place and its apparent hunting of humans, may evoke the monsters of the long medieval poem. But as McCarthy zooms further in, providing a description of its physiognomy that seems both forensic and freighted with meaning, a range of different associations become apparent.

These unexpected features are made visible by the light that floods the cave and throws the shadows on the wall. For this light, which remains unspecified but which clearly prefigures the "fire" that the father will tell his son he carries inside him, reveals that the cave creature is far from robust. As it illuminates the creature's "bowels" and "beating heart," it exposes an organism that is in fact "pale and naked and translucent." The monster bears the hallmarks, in other words, of a troglobite, a species unaccustomed to the light in which it now finds itself. Uncannily, though, some moments pass before the creature recoils. Looking straight into the invading beams, it waits long enough to display all the internal organs that press against its see-through skin. As if viewed in an X-ray, its brain, pulsing "in a dull glass bell," seems especially robotic, far more mechanical than its medieval surrounds. The overwhelming impression thus proves to be one of paradox. This is a creature that cannot see but looks at us before it slouches away. It is a troglobite identified with the light that is cast upon it. Primordial, untouched by human development, its body remains nonetheless mechanical in form.

In *Monster Culture* (1996), the influential essay cycle that Cody Jones has called the "ur-text of teratological cultural analysis" (Jones 357), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that such paradoxes lie at the heart of notions and manifestations of monstrosity in human cultures. Monsters, Cohen suggests, must by necessity remain "uncertain," "a breaker of category" knowable "only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis" (ix–x). Nonetheless, Cohen continues, as they "stand… at the threshold of… becoming," they are also liable to cast these paradoxes as riddles, continuing to "ask us why we have created them" (Cohen 20). Bordering on outrage, they

demand answers even as they continue to present us with contradictions we cannot possibly solve.

The Road's cave creature exemplifies this difficult combination. Occupying a liminal position, the paradoxes that it incarnates all demand explanation. Its menace and fragility, its blind scanning of its surrounds, and its ancient and mechanical body parts all invite Cohen's question, suggesting a need to find out why our culture could have created such a form. Yet both here and later, when the father and son trudge through the ruins of the road, the novel ensures that its initial dream of the cave and the waiting creature remains mysterious. It never connects either to any single incident or memory.

Even as it protects this mystery, however, some suggestive affinities still surface. A simile likening the stone walls to "the inward parts of some granitic beast" proves particularly intriguing, implying as it does that the creature and the cave are part of a single organism. This possibility—the possibility that when they see the monster's eyes the father and son are already standing inside its body—is strengthened by the references to dripping water that follow. In these "deep stone flues," we learn, "the water dripped and sang," a musical rhythm that we might imagine smooths "the wet flowstone walls." As if to add to this curious impression of vocal erosion, the novel then traces the water to the creature's "dripping mouth." The "dripping" thus comes to seem more monstrous than natural, an uncanny paralanguage by which the creature at once speaks and shapes the dark pathways that serve its predatory lair. The impression is of a creature that holds a power or physiological control over a network of pathways beyond the cramped unlit corner where we first see it.

It thus seems significant that this dripping sound should return as the novel nears its tragic denouement. Throughout the narrative *The Road*'s father has been acutely aware that the road is a place of danger as well as a route to safety, and that he and his son must always remain mindful of the risk of capture to which their journey exposes them. Just before his death this balance becomes impossible to maintain. As *The Road*'s father seems increasingly defenceless, the motif that began inside the cave reoccurs. "Drip of water. A fading light. Old dreams encroached upon the waking world. The dripping was in the cave." (McCarthy 299) If the motif's return at this point seems fitting or unsurprising, however, this may be because other allusions in the novel have also identified the cave creature, and its strange power of oversight, with the road beside which the father dies. At one point described as a "black shape… running from dark to dark," the road can even look like the troglobite, or its shadow at least, and it provides the setting from which we hear the howl of "something imponderable," inhuman and "without cognate," shifting "out there in the dark" (McCarthy 279). And yet this external resemblance between the modern road and ancient creature only echoes the fact that, as we have seen,

the latter's physiology is far more mechanical than its medieval surrounds might lead us to expect. Departing sharply from the fairytale dwelling-place where it is found, uncanny elements in the original description of this monster have, in other words, already indicated that it harbours a surprising affinity with the world outside the cave, with the real world of the desolate road and the desolate commercial spaces in which McCarthy's father and son spend their waking hours.

As such—and without giving a final answer to Cohen's question of why this monster was made—it can seem as if the creature's medieval aspects have here become interwoven with an unexpected ability to perform a kind of mechanical observation of the wider American world. Indeed, just as *The Road*'s account of its paradoxically blind vision suggests a system of unverifiable surveillance, so the eyes themselves, vividly described as "dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders," evoke lines of DNA, a vast harvest of information from the world it does and does not see. The "human head in a cakebell" that the father and son stumble across in an abandoned drugstore—a strange duplicate of the troglobite's brain—would seem to confirm its links with the commercial sites that lead off from the road (McCarthy 195). The question thus becomes what this creature is scanning for—what exactly these scans, like its pulsing brain in a box, might bring to mind. One answer—barcode technology—might jar and seem surreal. Yet much of *The Road* is deliberately incongruous. The actions of this creature—its association with the road, its mechanical and monitoring consciousness, its unseeing eyes—do suggest the new technological modes of monitoring customers that we will turn to in the essay's following section.

At this stage it seems important to emphasise that consumer sites such as this present *The Road*'s starving protagonists with constant reminders of a lost American world of impulse and plenty. Ruins of the "car country" that was the "nation's signature landscape," in Christopher W. Wells' phrase, they recall a world in which hunger characteristically manifested itself not as need or want but overstimulated desire (Wells 289). And of course, over very long shifts, McCarthy's father holds another remnant of this lost world in his hands. The grocery cart whose bar handle he pushes along offers a persistent reminder of what the road once was. It constantly rekindles memories of weekly odysseys through aisles upon aisles of pre-packaged food. And because it resembles a primitive car of sorts, it also constantly recalls the constant stimulation of caloric desire that took place on the highway network itself. Unspoken throughout the father and son's pilgrimage South is their knowledge that the road had once presented them (or those from an older generation) with a cornucopia of neon or backlit ads for food. Because it constantly draws the cart away from the road, even the "wonky" wheel might appear an unwelcome

echo of a world in which motorists frequently acted on such appetising signs, turning their steering wheels to the right to grab some suboptimal snack.

But this was also, of course, a world that the novel wishes to burn to the ground. In writing *The Road*, by his own account, McCarthy acted out a vision that—as he told Oprah Winfrey in a rare TV appearance in 2008—came to him while he was staying in a hotel in El Paso with his son. One night,

> it was probably about two in the morning, and I went over and just stood and looked out the window at this town. There was nothing moving but I could hear the trains going through, a very lonesome sound. I just had this image of what this town might look like in 50 or 100 years… fires up on the hill and everything being laid to waste, and I thought a lot about my little boy. So I wrote two pages. And then about four years later I realised that it wasn't two pages of a book, it was a book, and it was about that man, and that boy. (qtd. in Adams)

The parallels between this memory of *The Road*'s original inspiration and its opening page are illuminating. In both scenes, one remembered and one novelistic, the father is restless, and his son's deep sleep allows him to ease his imagination slightly and contemplate future scenarios he knows he must later keep to himself. Even within this context of relative imaginative freedom, however, McCarthy remains as reluctant to name the cause of the apocalypse as he is in *The Road* itself. As in the novel, too, this reluctance fuels speculation. Just as we might wonder whether, as he gazed on El Paso at night and imagined it on fire, McCarthy saw any homeless people, or any grocery carts next to their sleeping bodies, so we might also ponder the likelihood that the "lonesome" sound of the trains took the form of the warning bells so redolent of the American railroad.

Such possibilities are necessarily speculative, attempts to deal with the gaps that McCarthy left unfilled. Nonetheless, conclusions of a more definite nature can be drawn. We can certainly infer that, not only in *The Road* itself but also when recounting its moment of creation, McCarthy remains focused far less on the why than the how of disaster. Although it is in fact impossible to separate the two, as a novelist he is at liberty to gloss over the cause of the apocalypse in favour of watching it unfold slowly over the consumerist world that surrounds him. And in the context of this artistic interest in watching "everything being laid to waste," of course, "everything" refers to the built urban space of El Paso, the backlit arrows and other stimuli of a consumerist world that beckons outside his hotel window. Given this stated preoccupation, it seems imperative that we now turn to the transformations and intensifications that took place in this commercial world in the years when McCarthy was writing *The Road*, relating these, in turn, to its longer history over the course of his own long American life.

2-D Surveillance: Barcodes and Personal Data

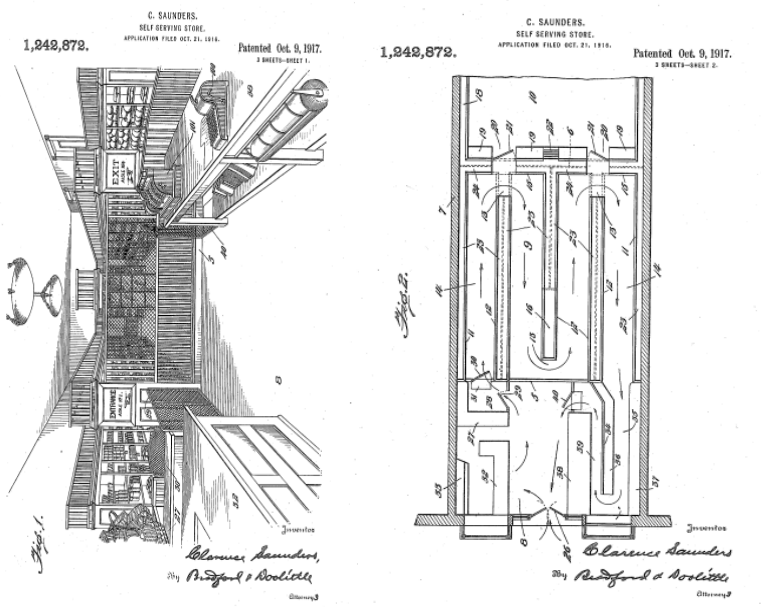
In the 1960s a consortium of major US supermarkets, inspired by an initial patent that the inventor Joe Woodland had filed in 1949, invited bids from other firms to produce a more efficient and reliable version of what they called Universal Product Code (UPC) technology. Developers at IBM were at this time quick to see that the new laser capacities meanwhile being identified in California, though often spoken of as some kind of "science fiction death ray," could actually help their new optical scanners deliver such more prosaic improvements (qtd. in Weightman). The ceremonial zapping of a pack of Wrigley's chewing gum at a store in 1974 in Troy, Ohio, duly became what Gavin Weightman calls a "historic occasion," a significant leap forward for the ever-globalising US economy.

Such fanfare, of course, did not last long. The small stamps of irregular columns and automatic numbers that came to be known as barcodes quickly faded into the background. Soon they would become a familiar feature of US everyday shopping, often overlooked. As they became more ubiquitous, the innumerable zaps that had followed the scanning of the first pack of gum attracted little notice. Indeed, it soon transpired that, light years away from the futuristic reputation of its internal laser, the UPC's true superpower lay in its ability to disappear. Unnoticed by customers, tucked away in some discreet corner of the packages they handled, barcodes quietly eased the flow of consumer goods around the United States and, increasingly, the world.

Under a decade after their launch, then, barcodes had become a familiar feature of everyday US life, well on course to attaining their present ubiquity. Major US firms with no involvement in the original commission were quick to see how the new technology could expedite stock monitoring and checkout speeds. As a result, like the invention of the shopping carts or shipping containers that preceded them, barcodes quickly became one of the essential components of globalisation, a slightly hidden lubricant that smoothed the passage of goods from warehouse to private home via the self-serve store.[3] But these major firms were also quick to grasp that, at the same time as it lubricated stock flow, UPC technology could generate vast datasets logging the everyday likes and dislikes of their customers. In time, indeed, this capacity to profile individuals could seem to eclipse the improved commodity flow for which barcodes had first been commissioned.

Commercial firms in the US became increasingly anxious about who their customers were, and how to monitor their movements, following their adoption of self-service approaches during the interwar years. In his influential patent of 1917, the Tennessee entrepreneur Clarence Saunders, founder of the Piggly Wiggly supermarket chain, already betrayed these anxieties (see Figures 1 and 2). At first his patent takes pains to boost the turn away from counter-based service, suggesting it will leave the customer free to move as she pleases among a "variety

of lines of goods." Only a few sentences later, however, we find him introducing a one-way walking system as well as a "screened opening" that deters early exits. Among these attempts to reintroduce control, however, perhaps the most noteworthy is a network of hidden "passage-ways" that, indicated by number 23, his design places behind each line of public shelves. Not that Saunders is open about the purpose of these recesses. While he claims that they allow a "store walker" to "supervise the sales and inspect the amount of stock on hand without interfering with those who are making purchases," the explanation seems far-fetched; it would be much cheaper to have this employee carry out such work from the shop floor, as supermarkets often still do. Saunders' explanation was like that of an ad, appearing in the New York Times, in which another early self-service adopter assured readers that the only purpose of the turnstile at the entrance of the store was to "register the number of persons who enter each day" ("A Self-Service Grocery" 40). Both commercial statements, championing self-service, also volunteered explanations that stretched credulity, revealing their fear that the loss of the counter meant they would no longer know their customers.



Figures 1 and 2 (https://patents.google.com/patent/US1242872A/en?oq=US1242872)

This anxiety is confirmed in the numerous ads for Piggly Wiggly that Saunders placed in regional newspapers between the wars. On the face of it these simply picture the genteel white housewife who was his ideal customer, erasing all other identities as he emphasises her purity and selflessness as a provider for her family. Like his customers, however, he knew that, even after the move toward self-service, food shopping in the South would remain a mixed affair, an activity in which, as Lisa Tolbert has shown, "white and black, rich and poor, men and women interacted on a daily basis," and usually under the yoke of

segregation protocols designed to humiliate black clientele (Tolbert 183). It was against this background that Saunders would define his new self-service stores: as a space relatively free of Jim Crow's toxic signage, yet which somehow also remained a *de facto* white space, a store that his newspaper ads always filled with genteel white female shoppers and no one else. The fact that the most in the commercial world at the time continued to regard the self-service approach as a dangerous innovation, and an approach somewhat likelier to increase thefts than sales, add to the suspicion that the "store walker" described in Saunders' patent was always going to do a great deal more than simply monitor stock control. The recesses included in his patent take a big step toward the introduction of the store surveillance system that would in time become commonplace in US supermarkets. What they really offer is a way of following customers without seeming to disturb their new freedom of movement and choice.

If some new suspicions of the customer were thus apparent from the start of self-service history, becoming visible in its earliest patents and ads, then the wider applications of barcode data that emerged over the 1990s handed supermarkets some much better methods for addressing these old fears. As checkouts harvested ever more detailed data on what was selling where and what might thus be sold there again (Kumar 194), the growing use of loyalty schemes also allowed supermarkets to bring "names, addresses, purchasing behaviour, and lifestyles all together onto one record," building "a picture of someone's life," as Martin Evans suggested at the time (Evans 2). The process of "data matching," linking electronic point of sale information (POS) to individual loyalty scheme profiles, subsequently put stores on the path toward a computerised method of surveilling customers that would prove far less cumbersome or difficult to explain than the recesses Saunders squeezed into his blueprint. Coupons among other targeted discounts were often greeted in the 1990s as simple sales pitches, crude promotions that sought nothing but an immediate boost in sales. But as they chased receipts out of checkout printers or arrived through letterboxes in loyalty scheme updates, they actually helped add to the datasets that supermarkets were increasingly matching to the individual identities of their customers.

Advances in these behind-the-scenes applications of barcode technology meant that, by the 1990s, the cart itself was beginning to acquire a new and additional function. Hitherto such carts had been chiefly associated with the increased scale and volume of postwar US consumerism. Indeed, for Frank Cochoy and Catherine Grandclément-Chaffy, the cart was above all "a vast cavity which... asks only to be filled," inviting shoppers "to continue putting objects into it until it is full, or 'satiated'" (Cochoy and Grandclément-Chaffy 652–3). Overconsumption thus became the crucial addition Cochoy and Grandclément-Chaffy made to the understanding of the supermarket network that they developed from Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social* (2005). Where *Reassembling the Social* presents

the supermarket as a space that wants to "preformat . . . you to be a consumer, only a generic one… with an ability *to calculate* and *to choose*," and which places before you various "plug-ins" you can "download on the spot to *become* locally and provisionally competent," Cochoy and Grandclément-Chaffy focus on the particular "plug-in" of the cart whose inviting size they emphasise (Latour 209–10). A "vast cavity which… asks only to be filled," the cart thus becomes for them a crucial catalyst of individual overconsumption, at once drawing shoppers toward their own choices and placing these on a scale of excess. Following advances in POS barcode technology in the 1990s, however, it becomes apparent that the "extremely generous volumetric" scale of the cart is more than a spur to overconsumption. Via barcodes it also provides the raw data for the supermarket to build a detailed portrait of the shopper. As "the cart invites" them "to continue putting objects into it until it is full," UPC technology begins to feed lines of data into loyalty systems that generate a refined profile of who these shoppers are.

In consequence, some years before the algorithms of Google, Amazon and Facebook became notorious for personal intrusion, supermarkets could already seem a step ahead of their customers. Indeed, as they calibrated online discounts to anticipate the preferences of their clientele, they could appear a clear forerunner of the system of surveillance capitalism that, in the words of Shoshana Zuboff, "claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data" (Zuboff 8). Ever since the "data matching" of the 1990s paired purchase histories to individual profiles, barcodes have clearly helped usher in a new digital approach that anticipates the current system that, for Zuboff, "transforms the things that we have into things that have us in order that it might render the range and richness of our world, our homes, and our bodies as behaving objects for its calculations and fabrications on the path to profit." And yet whereas "surveillance capitalists," for Zuboff, by necessity "impose their will backstage," both the commercial uses and the practicalities of barcode technology have recently become a far more familiar part of everyday life (Zuboff 253). The UPC commission had stipulated in the 1960s that the winning design should remain under ten centimetres squared. While it had a practical benefit, enabling manufacturers to fit barcodes onto items as small as a packet of chewing gum, such minimal sizing was also motivated by a determination to ensure that this addition to the skin of the packaged product did not interfere with the aesthetic pitch this product made to passing supermarket customers.[4] But as home computing technology improved, and as other kinds of organisations woke up to the potential uses of the POS data that the supermarkets had pioneered, barcodes began to step out of the shadows, no longer away facing away from customers. Prior to this point barcodes were "just there," engineered to be ignored by most. Most Americans only hunted around for them if they were cutting saving coupons out of a newspaper or working at the checkout. But now, as the twenty-first century got underway, these UPCs became central to a series of examples

of what the sociologist George Ritzer terms "prosumption," a sphere of activity in which "new technologies," such as "the computer, Internet, ATMs, self-scanners," and "sensors," have enabled consumers to perform tasks "that they rarely, if ever, did before" (Ritzer 6).

Supermarkets, founded on the principle of self-service, stood at the vanguard of these advances. The prosumerist expectation of self-scanning your own barcodes, although increasingly ubiquitous across a range of other consumerist or social information points, demands the most rapid work rate of us in the depopulated checkout spaces of the old big box stores. Here, as customers move from the supermarket's aisles into its self-scan area, finding a cubicle and pressing Start on the touchscreen, they are required to carry out a kind of quickfire deconstruction of a succession of commodity forms, approaching each one no longer in the capacity of its consumerist addressees but as its prosumerist processor. In other words, at the heart of a commercial context whose key components predate the internet systems on which Zuboff focuses, barcodes now enlist consumers in their own surveillance activity, requiring them to upload a detailed inventory of their purchases before they leave the store.

Yet as they upend their choices, inspect the base of cans, seek information about the content of these successive commodity forms, these customers also mirror the actions of *The Road*'s father. In the novel he is seen repeatedly looking as if behind the skin of the supermarket commodity. His focus frequently falls on the need to ascertain whether the food he has found is edible. Certain mainstays of the supermarket shelves, canned foods such as corned beef and ham, frankfurters and fruit salad, can seem almost miraculous in this work, happenstance placing them before him and allowing him to keep his son from starving for another day or so. Before he can receive this blessing, however, he must first deconstruct such goods. On pain of survival, he must look behind the skin of the packaged item, accessing the food itself to assess its safety. Desperation thus requires him to grapple with and understand the material character of foods he would once have thrown into an empty shopping cart.

A similar restoration occurs when, deep into their journey, the father comes across a "tiny paradise" in the form of an abandoned private bunker. Within, "walled with concrete block," he finds "crate upon crate of canned goods." The bounty before him come to seem more beneficent as the father realises that its original owner had a hand in labelling its contents:

> He ducked under a lantern with a green metal shade hanging from a hook. He held the boy by the hand and they went along the stencilled cartons. Chile, corn, stew, soup, spaghetti sauce. The richness of a vanished world. Why is this here? the boy said. Is it real?
>
> Oh yes. It's real

> He pulled one of the boxes down and clawed it open and held up a can of peaches. It's here because someone thought it might be needed. (McCarthy 147)

As he sees the work of the human hand, the evidence of a human agent providing for others, the father becomes less fearful, happier to accept the unexpected bounty. The effect is akin to that of the billboards, seen nearby, which have been "whited out" with paint so that people can scrawl "warnings" upon them. They, too, are "palimpsests," overwriting the messages or descriptions of "goods which no longer existed" (McCarthy 135) with acts of human communication that revive a commitment to communal rather than singular survival.

When we encounter the supermarket "on the outskirts of the city," McCarthy's father seems almost optimistic about his new salvaging mission. Leaving the cart outside, he and his son "walk the littered aisles," but in the "produce section in the bottom of the bins" they find only "a few ancient runner beans and what looked to have been apricots, long dried to wrinkled effigies of themselves." Outside are only "a few shopping carts, all badly rusted." The two return to the store without much hope of finding anything to sustain them:

> By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. He sat and ran his hand around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola.
>
> What is it, Papa?
>
> It's a treat. For you.
>
> What is it?
>
> Here. Sit down.
>
> He slipped the boy's knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said.
>
> The boy took the can. It's bubbly, he said.
>
> Go ahead. He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It's really good, he said.
>
> Yes. It is. (McCarthy 22)

The drink, cocooned in the busted vending machine, is neither so "charred" nor "anonymous" as other canned goods in the book, and calling it "Coke" feels unavoidable. But the novel continues to withhold this name from the dialogue, and even its iconic skin can seem to melt away as it becomes just another "cold metal cylinder": McCarthy's father never mentions it by name and his narrative never refers to its famous colour. As with the tinned foods they eat elsewhere, however, the rise in the Coke's nutritional value would seem to become curiously contingent on the deconstruction of its outside skin. With the rejection of its

packaging, indeed, new identities, no longer forged on consumerist patterns, become available to them. The drink leaves the son in raptures, and the father has time to take in and savour his delight. The barcode system of consumerist routine thus vanishes as the novel suggests the two are sharing a fundamental experience that is antithetical not just to the apocalypse but, before it, to the ordinary functioning of the supermarket in which they are lingering. Bypassing the packaging as well as the systems such packaging served, McCarthy imagines new and unusual kinds of family conversations about food.

In consequence, Coca-Cola, a foodstuff once taken as a byword for casual excess and a cause of the obesity epidemic, is grasped in the exchange not as a brand, ideology or problem but a material entity: liquid sugar that delays the boy's starvation. At this juncture, indeed, McCarthy's father believes he has discovered the last remaining Coke can in the world and, although they find more later, its singularity provides the basis for a sacrifice on his part. Parental love and religious devotion interweave as he passes it to the malnourished son in whom, he says elsewhere, the "word of God" lives on.

The Road's supermarket scene is not a simple exercise in nostalgia. On one level urging thanksgiving, inviting readers to appreciate the fragile plenty of western life, on another it laments the ease with which these comforts are today overused. The father makes his sacrifice amid the wreckage of a checkout and a vending machine—in the shadow, in other words, of an old American scene, planned around pester power, in which the parent's main task had been to placate the child or find a way of saying no. McCarthy clearly yearns not to recover this lost world of plenty but to use it as a stage for new experiences—experiences which that world once thwarted. A test and an act of devotion, a direct line between pleasure and satisfaction, and a more generous mode of fatherhood, all impose themselves on a setting where they would once have seemed wildly out of place. Disaster, seen elsewhere in lurid detail, peels away the supermarket's old skin of icon and image, allowing McCarthy's father and son to recover a new and more pastoral way of being. Thanks to the supermarket's destruction, strange as it might sound, they can linger over the Coke. He can smell it like fine wine, and his son can savour a taste those before apocalypse overused or overlooked.

Conclusion

In the years before and after *The Road* appeared in 2007, several science fiction novels imagined worlds in which excess information leads to the demise of individual difference. As early as 2000, in Ken MacLeod's *Cosmonaut Keep*, the massive overproduction of generic digital data already defines life on earth, and we hear that other interplanetary cultures have come to regard homo sapiens as "great lumbering spambots, corrupted servers," little more than "slightly

varied replicas of ourselves" (qtd. in Shaviro 2014). Written in the Internet 1.0 era of static webpages and dial-up connections, *Cosmonaut Keep*, as Shaviro has suggested, suggests not only that email and other spam constitute a "virus" but also that this virus has become what "we are," reconstituting human identity into predictable genres of response (Shaviro 2014). More recently, in *Hell Sans* (2022), a second Scottish novelist, Ever Dundas, pictures an authoritarian future in which democratic acquiescence is secured via billboards and other signs written in a magical font. The command "Be Your Best Self," repurposed from Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-8), is paraded everywhere in capitalised HellSans, but while the eponymous typeface reduces some who read it to thoughtless bliss, it triggers terminal allergies in others, labelling them deviants. Resistance thus takes two forms. The novel's heroes often carry out surgery on their personal robots, disrupting the collection of the data that will tell them what their "best self" is. Meanwhile, however, unknown vandals scour the city, "tearing down the retro hoardings, spray-painting serifs on the HellSans emblazoned across all cars, shops, warehouses" (Dundas 449). Their vandalism is protective: it shields deviants from the toxic font. But for those immune to such negative effects, and for whom such signs inspire only formulaic bliss, it also restores a capacity for individual feeling. Defacing the authoritative signs of HellSans also attacks the concept of the "better" self, predicated on your personal data, on which such propaganda insists.

This essay has argued that a similar territory is charted in *The Road*. At moments it, too, draws satisfaction from the destruction of a world organised around anticipatable consumerist desire. Admittedly, in keeping with its status as a thought experiment, this vision remains far more conflicted throughout McCarthy's novel. Pleasures he takes in the return of fatherly bonds, nutritional satisfaction and slow talk always exist in a delicate and frightening tension with the horrors he depicts, and indeed with his failure to imagine an enduring female presence. Conflicted as it is, however, his novel never succumbs to sensationalism. Although it may reflect the assumptions of a writer whose life has coincided with a period of unprecedented material progress, *The Road* is never ethically reckless. Its view of suffering and the pain of unmet need is clear. Nonetheless McCarthy also finds room in his novel to explore how, when we freeze the rapid circuits of commodity flow, certain feelings, including the feeling of hunger, may be positively reclaimed. He finds ways for his story to become something more than a cautionary tale, something as well as a meditation on loss and pain. He allows it to express a nostalgia deeper than the nostalgia you might expect, a yearning for the world before the world just destroyed. He imagines the old kinds of talk and feelings apocalypse might restore. When this happens in *The Road*, moreover, it is as if the novel stepped outside the range of the barcode monster that it conjures on its first page. It is as though the encounter with homemade and homegrown

objects in the novel—the father's resourceful eye for foods with no barcode and no prospect of feeding a personal dataset—were McCarthy's equivalent to the disruptive robot surgery and guerrilla defacements of *Hell Sans*. They, too, thwart a system of data retrieval and predicted desire, in the process restoring a notion of heroic, transformational individuality to the novel.

Notes

[1] For critical readings focused on nuclear holocaust, see Hantke (2013) and Sheikh (2019). Approaches that read the novel as a comment on the Anthropocene include Monbiot (2007) and Stark (2013).

[2] For a fuller exploration of this cinematic allusion, see Cooper, 548.

[3] For more on the history of the shipping container, see Levinson (2016).

[4] For more on the consumer appeal central to commodity packaging in this period, see Logermann (2019).

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Biography

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