Writing in Real-Time, Fictions of Digitization: The Novels of Don DeLillo and Dave Eggers

Figure 1: Holland House library after air raid

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B.A./B.S.—MA/MLitt (Hons.)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Critical Studies

College of Arts

University of Glasgow

September 2016

Abstract

By tracking the intersection of contemporary fiction and the information technologies of the digital age, this thesis argues that the narratives being produced over the past ten years have evolved into a distinct genre of literature, one where the aesthetics of fragmentation and postmodern uncertainty must confront the new realities of a digitally saturated culture and society. In order to demonstrate this alteration in contemporary fiction, this thesis considers novels written within the past ten years that reflect on this new form of textuality, namely Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) and David Eggers' *The Circle* (2013). These texts demonstrate a paradigm shift in contemporary literature, a new kind of fiction in which American society, culture, economics and politics, are all directly affected by various forms of digital mediatisation. These authors reflect an altered cultural zeitgeist within their fiction—writings which can be differentiated from the postmodern literary aesthetic—prompted by neoteric digital technologies coupled with the ubiquitous nature of the Internet. Although this topic is broad and covers multiple fields of scholarly interests, my thesis nonetheless concerns itself with a very specific line of questioning: will our authors have the imaginative wherewithal and social sensitivity to keep pace with changes brought forth by the explosion of information technologies? If so, what type of fiction is likely to emerge from this new digital environment? By taking a focused approach and using contemporary literature as representative of these massive social, economic, and political transformations, my research recalls Kurt Vonnegut's "Canary in the Coal Mine" dictum: the writer has always been the first to notice the dramatic effects of technology on the individual and the culture at large.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my deepest gratitude goes to my supervisors, Vassiliki Kolocotroni, John Coyle, and Stephen Burn, for their continuing support and encouragement. Without their invaluable personal and academic guidance and patience, this thesis would not have come to fruition.

The School of Critical Studies and the Department of English Literature at the University of Glasgow have given me a strong foundation for pursuing my academic goals. As an international student from America, I feel deeply indebted for the support I received from the administrative staff and the academic faculty. Furthermore, with funding from the school, I was able to conduct research at different institutions. Thanks to the *Principal's Early Career Mobility Fund*, I was able to meet excellent scholars and conduct research in New York City, at Columbia University and NYU. I feel obligated to thank Dr Dennis Tenen at Columbia University and the Department of English and Comparative Literature, for allowing me access to research and write at their institutions.

Also, I thank my colleagues in the field English/Comparative Literature, particularly the group at the PhD office space on 73 Great George Street—for all their encouragement, kindness, and conversation over the years. Other academic and scholarly opportunities, such as giving papers at various conferences, delivering talks and leading reading groups (special thanks to the Theory at Random crew and the XPMgla team), teaching workshops, working as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, and volunteering at other universities in the greater Glasgow area, have all greatly contributed to my thesis in this final form.

Additionally, and most importantly, my friends. A special thanks goes to Anna and Yilei, my office-mates for the past three years: without your unconditional support and unfailing patience, I would have had a much more difficult road to navigate. I will never forget, and, as you both know, I will always have your back. Also, special thanks to Victoria for her unparalleled writing guidance, and Jamie for the seemingly endless supply of high quality coffee. As any PhD Candidate will attest, caffeine is the unspoken necessary ingredient for any extended period of academic writing.

Lastly, my deepest gratitude goes to my parents and siblings, Frank and Adrienne Muscolino, big brother, Joe, and little sister, Elizabeth. Your way of thinking, your work ethic, your personal and financial support, and your unshakable optimism gave me the courage and endurance that was needed to complete this thesis. We lost our mother much too early, but her love remains, beautifully and faithfully exemplified in your strength of character and in your actions. She was a teacher, and she always encouraged us to read, allowing for a sense of imagination and love of books that, over time, inspired me to pursue this goal, this dream, really. For always believing in who I am—and reminding me when I fell into despair—this thesis is dedicated to my family.

Author's Declaration

The thesis represents the original work of Stephen J. Muscolino, unless otherwise stated in the text. The research upon which it is based was carried out in the English Literature Department at the University of Glasgow under the supervision of Dr Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Dr John Coyle, and Dr Stephen Burn during the period of October 2012 to September 2016.

Introduction

"It's a Necessity": How Digital Advancements Are Transforming the American Narrative

> It would be uncharacteristic if our literary production *didn't* seek out new ways to embody the novelties of twenty-first-century life: the commingling of online with actual experience; the disappearance of a certain kind of solitude; the illusion of safety that goes along with being in touch; surveillance as a fact of everyday life; the gulf between those who are technologically connected and those still isolated. To name just a few.
>
> -Jennifer Egan, 2014[1]

In the summer months of 2016, the U.N.'s HRC (Human Rights Council) officially declared that denying or "disconnecting" people from the Internet is a human rights violation and against international law, which is essentially indistinguishable to proclaiming Internet access as a basic human right.[2] Such a globally recognized sociotechnical transition was anticipated a year earlier by President Barack Obama, who stated in January of 2015: "Today high-speed broadband is not a luxury, it's a *necessity*."[3] This shift—one that makes the Internet not merely a medium for entertainment, consumerism, and communication, but a utilitarian and all-inclusive human right—marks a change not only within geopolitical coteries, but within the realm of historically distinguishable moments in relation to world-altering technological innovations. These advancements ultimately serve to remould the human experience and are generally historicized as "age-defining" technological inventions: fire, language, the written word, metallurgy, gunpowder, railroads, electricity, the automobile, the airplane, the telephone, the radio, the atomic bomb, the television, the Internet. In fact, it is my contention within this thesis that the very ubiquity of such technocultural transformations is precisely what makes them *historically* significant.

In proposing a literary investigation as a method by which to evaluate such societal evolutions, it should be clear that I do not extricate the author from the cultural environment or historical setting in which s/he is situated. In offering a critical analysis to the twenty-first century novels of Don DeLillo and Dave Eggers, this thesis suggests that contemporary American fiction is engaged in a profound conversation concerning the impacts of cultural digitization on our commonplace surroundings. In doing so, it

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[1] *The Best American Short Stories, 2014*, editors Jennifer Egan and Heidi Pitlor, (Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt: New York, 2014), p. xix.

[2] United Nations General Assembly, Oral Revisions of June 30th, 2016. Available online at: https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf
See Also: *Article 19*, a British organization that works to promote freedom of expression and information. Available online at: https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38429/en/unhrc:-significant-resolution-reaffirming-human-rights-online-adopted

[3] Council of Economic Advisers Issue Brief, July, 2015. "Mapping the Digital Divide," Available online at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/wh_digital_divide_issue_brief.pdf

suggests that the novel is one of the most powerful and inventive diagnostic tools we have with which to address the emerging conditions of our new kind of Heideggerian Being-in-the-world. The novels of DeLillo and Eggers offer us a means of comprehending the present, our Real-Time, when it seems especially resistant to various paradigms available for reading and understanding it. This necessitates a scholarly reorientation, one dexterous enough to be part of a much larger critical project, one that is not solely the remit of the contemporary American novel. As such, the methodology of this thesis is a hybrid of narrative analysis and grounded sociological theory. It investigates and explores the impact of digital saturation in both cultural and literary domains. This synthesis of research techniques assists in developing the underlying critical approach, and through the consideration of the narratives written by Don DeLillo and Dave Eggers, allows for the revitalization of old questions within modern parameters: how has the novel, and the reading of novels, changed in the last three decades as the engagement between literature and reality itself has been transformed? How have current authors, as both readers and producers of these stories, imagined and engendered this nascent form of literary engagement?

More than fifteen years into the twenty-first century, this thesis argues that we are currently at a stage in literary history when reflection on what is happening in fiction published in America in the new century is now possible. One can now engage with the above inquiries, offering scholars unique theoretical opportunities. This critical occasion is a contemporary cultural moment in some obvious ways. Nonetheless, over the past ten years I have questioned the validity of these "historical" transformations more frequently, and each time experience a strange kind of digital apophenia. It is of course always the case that the contemporary appears to those of us living through it to be a transformative moment; it is hard to imagine a time that does not feel transitional to its contemporaries. As Julian Barnes puts it, in a sardonic phrase that runs throughout his novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), the one thing that we can say about any historical period is that it is almost certainly a time of 'great unrest.'[4] This is no doubt due to the fact that theorists, historians, artists, and cultural philosophers in the West have been claiming to see moments of unprecedented technological and social transformations virtually every year since the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945, beginning with those through the Eisenhower administration—an era that is often seen as one of

[4] Julian Barnes. *The Sense of an Ending*, (Jonathan Cape: London, 2011), p. 5, p. 150.

the most stable and steady economic and political periods available to American history (an assumption that will be challenged in chapter one).

This thesis asserts that literary narratives *have* genuinely changed over the course of the past decade, not just because of the latest nightmares of history—9/11, environmental devastation, peak oil crisis, the financial collapse of 2008, the neoliberal dismembering of the social democratic settlement—but because of the persistent excavation of human cultures and economies by the processes of globalization, mediatisation, and digitization. The cumulative layering of existential meaning traditionally fashioned in the West by family, community, class, politics, religion, nation, and even nature itself have been ruptured, if not entirely redefined, by the acceleration of information technologies, networked communications, and economic strategies based on globalized free market fiscal systems.

Such comprehensive reformulations suggest the breakdown of the autonomous, yet ideologically integrated American individual. If we consider the fact that basic notions central to liberal humanism have been steadily diminished in the opening years of the twenty-first century (Giroux, 2009), we might also contemplate whether such a generalized reduction creates an individual that is nothing more than a taciturn subject produced by endless reiterations of social media, online consumerism, and the panoptic employment of digital surveillance.[5] This paradoxical summary can be accounted for by a number of social, economic, political, and cultural factors, and to understand the state of American fiction in the twenty-first century, we need to examine how novelists—both canonized literary voices and the new guard—articulate, respond to, and position themselves among these dynamic influences. Are there, as Vija Kinski attests in *Cosmopolis* (2003), categorically no personal or cultural domains which exist "outside the market," or the worldwide hegemony of "cybercapital?"[6] This thesis, through critical evaluation and close readings of the novels of Don DeLillo and Dave Eggers, with a particular emphasis on *Cosmopolis* and *The Circle*, explores such questions.

In reflecting on literary generations over the past thirty years, one promptly engages with much larger (perhaps even prematurely instigated) questions of periodization. As Brian McHale (2007) underscores in his perspicacious discussion in the *electronic review*, postmodernism differs from its predecessors in that it was always-already self-delineating: "Periods in literary history are typically constituted

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[5] Henry Giroux. *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2009), p. 12: '[y]oung people have become a generation of suspects in a society destroyed by the merging of market fundamentalism, consumerism, and militarism.'

[6] Don DeLillo. *Cosmopolis*, (Picador: New York, 2003).

retrospectively," McHale remarks. He continues, "Modernism can 'appear' as a period with a canon of its own only forty years after the fact, around 1960," but, "from the very outset, postmodernism was self-conscious about its identity as a period, conscious of its own historicity, because it conceived of itself as historical, coming after something, namely modernism—a historicity encoded in the very term 'postmodernism.'"[7] This thesis questions McHale's assertions that present-day readers, critics, and authors should expect a certain speeding up of literary history *itself*, even as they are simultaneously conditioned to accept the acceleration of other historical processes, such as the rapid advancements of informational and digital technologies.

Are these dynamic processes of technological evolution and digital mediatisation, in McHale's words, "encoded" in contemporary American literature? And if so, is this emergent form of fiction *historicized* as being distinct from postmodern narratives? Are these stories, as critics have been proclaiming for over two decades,[8] a representation of *post*-postmodern literary aesthetic?[9] Can we identify a set of stylistic or thematic characteristics that marks a new phase in the development of the novel, one that could potentially allow us to speak meaningfully of the twentieth-first-century novel, as we do of the romantic novel, or the modernist novel, or the postmodernist novel? Has this century come into clear enough focus that we can attribute to its cultural practices a general disposition, a character, an underlying outlook? These are among the questions addressed in this thesis, as they are central to my discussion of cultural digitization and its influence on contemporary American authorship.

"Our Cultural Brain": Historicizing Digitization

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[7] Brian McHale. "What was Postmodernism," *electronic book review*, December 20th, 2007.

[8] Alan Sokal. 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,' reprinted with permission in, Sokal and Bricmont's, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*, (Profile Books: London, 1998), as Appendix A, pp. 199-240. The article purported to show that physical reality was merely a 'social and linguistic construct,' (p. 200) yet, Sokal was really attempting to expose just how gullible an academic readership could be when presented with scientific jargon—targeting the foremost postmodern philosophers of his time (e.g., Lyotard, Kristeva, Virilio, Baudrillard).

Linda Hutcheon. *Politics of Postmodernism*, (Routledge: London, 1989), p. 166, p. 181. Hutcheon bluntly states: 'It's over…the postmodern moment has passed.'

See Also:

Charles Altieri. *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts*, (Pennsylvania UP: Philadelphia, 1998), p. 1.

Steven Conner. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, (Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 2004), p. 1.

A. Gasiorek and P. Boxall. 'Modernism and Postmodernism,' as found in *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, 14:1, 2006, pp. 64-88.

[9] Jeffrey T. Nealon. *Post-Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, (Stanford UP: Stanford, 2012).

Historical periods are increasingly associated with technological developments, because history itself concomitantly accelerates to match the digital advancements which continually drive political, social, and economic experiences (DeGusta, 2012).[10] If we take a step back and evaluate such technological expansions from the chronological wingspan of almost twenty years of digital evolution, a clearer picture emerges. When the general visibility of social networks became discernible in the early 2000s—by way of nascent media interfaces such as Web 2.0 and ever-expanding Internet availability—they quickly caught the attention of corporate investors and start-up industries (e.g. Amazon and Expedia). Web locales whose main purpose is professional and social networking, micro-blogging, and online connection (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google) have appeared at the forefront of "new capitalism's" (Doogan, 2009)[11] attempt to recreate social life as a commercialized space, and social interaction as the "new media" (Manovich, 2002)[12] which (as with all prior media) can and must be made into a carrier of commercial signifiers.

Additionally, the impact of the ubiquitous integration of digital and social media into civic discourses inevitably contributes to networks becoming highly politicized social formations. Social media now plays a dominant role in the communication between the citizenry, formative news outlets, and the candidates, it has become a quintessential feature of all political campaigning (Ember, 2015).[13] This leads theorists, such as Darin Barney (2004), to assert that networks—as the dominant form of cultural order—can no longer be viewed as a sociological isomorphism, but must be reconsidered as a form of embedded ideology. This image of the social network, for Barney:

> In purporting simply to describe a set of contemporary social dynamics, provides a script that sets out roles, norms, expectations and terms of dialogue. Thinking through the model of the network—nodes, ties, flows—certainly helps us to understand a great deal about, for example, the restructuring of capitalist enterprise and work, the disaggregation of state sovereignty, the rise and operation of new social movements, and emerging practices of community formation…But when an idea such as this is

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[10] Michael DeGusta. "Are Smart Phones Spreading Faster than Any Technology in Human History?" *MIT Technology Review*, May 9th, 2012.

[11] Kevin Doogan. *New Capitalism? The Transformation of Work*, (Polity Press: 2009), pp. 2-3. See: 'The term "new capitalism" may have come into use because the "new economy" is a neologism whose currency rose and fell with the dot.com boom-and-bust cycle of the 1990's. The "knowledge economy" is widely used but is confined to particular sectors of the economy most associated with technological innovation, whereas new capitalism captures a broader sense of evolution within, and of, society.'

[12] Lev Manovich. *The Language of New Media*, (MIT Press: London, 2002), p. 228. Manovich describes "new media" as being resultant of the exponential accumulation of digital information—or large-scale database sets—whose functionality is dependent upon computational processes. See: 'databases occupy a significant, if not the largest, territory of the new media landscape.'

[13] Sydney Ember. "Digital Ad Spending Expected to Soon Surpass TV," *The New York Times*, December 7th, 2015. See also: "How social media is changing political campaigns," from *Global Risk Insights: Know Your World*, March 11th, 2016. Available online at: http://globalriskinsights.com/2016/03/how-social-media-is-changing-political-campaigns/

> elevated from heuristic device to the status of an all-encompassing social and historical fact, its function shifts significantly.[14]

This shift is closely aligned to a kind of cultural and free market modification that the theorist Tiziana Terranova (2000) has described as the "free labor" characteristic of the relationship between the online economy and what—following the Italian autonomists—she labels "the social factory." She utilizes this term to explain the socioeconomic phenomena, 'whereby work processes have shifted from the *factory to society*, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine.'[15]

For many modern entrepreneurs and digital economists, such as Google's Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, this is a genuine historical adaptation. In their 2013 book titled *The New Digital Age*, Schmidt and Cohen propose that, as the Internet itself exponentially grows larger, our common understanding of nearly every aspect of life will change, from the minutia of daily lives, to more fundamental questions concerning identity, relationships, and international security:

> Through the power of technology, age-old obstacles to human interaction, like geography, language and limited information, are falling and a new wave of human creativity and potential is rising. *Mass adaptation of the Internet* is driving one of the most exciting social, cultural and political transformations *in history*, and unlike earlier periods of change, *this time the effects are global*. Never before in history have so many people, from so many places, had so much power at their fingertips. And while this is hardly the first technology revolution in our history, it is the first that will make it possible for almost everybody to own, develop and disseminate real-time content...[16]

The above quotation articulates two main arguments. First, that—although technological revolutions are an inherent feature of human history—this is the first instance of these technological advancements combining with the forces of globalization. Second, this emergent globalization is facilitated by information and digital technologies, with their attendant capacity to maintain an online connection, that is, the Internet is the main element acting as a catalyst for this exceptional moment in human history. For much of the developed and industrialized world, the quotidian use of digital technologies and the Internet have the capacity to redefine what it means to be human, and by association, society,

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[14] Darin Barney. *The Network Society*, (Cambridge: 2004), pp. 179-180.
[15] Tiziana Terranova. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text*, 63, no. 18, 2000, pp. 33-57, my italics.
[16] Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen. *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business*, (John Murray Publishers: London, 2013), pp. 3-4, my italics.

and culture. As Ursula Heise suggested in 2008, we are now a planetary people, for whom a 'sense of place' is entwined and conditioned by our 'sense of planet.'[17]

This historical transition, one which is foundationally initiated by digital and Internet-enabled technologies, leads directly to the materialization of what Justin Peters (2016) terms the "cultural brain":

> The cultural brain is the zeitgeist, the ether, the intangible repository of communal interests. The cultural brain is *the conversation*. Its changing makeup is a function of technological progress. The oral tradition, the printing press, the railroad, the telephone, the radio, the television, the Internet—all of these innovations opened channels for what otherwise might have remained stray ideas, and gave those ideas velocity and direction. They are the mechanisms by which an entire society can come to consider and discuss the same ideas and events.[18]

This form of online engagement, in that its mass or "global" scale immersion makes it possible for "almost everybody" to "disseminate real-time content" and become part of the "cultural brain/conversation," creates a society in which knowledge formulations can no longer be actualized or authorized subjectively. A digital epistemology, i.e., one based on the premise of perpetual social media connectivity, has surfaced in this emergent technosphere. As my analysis of Eggers' *The Circle* (2013) will show, when "an entire society can come to consider and discuss the same ideas and events," idiosyncrasy is eroded to the point where any personal or private thoughts or actions become branded as unconventional—and possibly damaging—social behaviour.[19]

Such technological anxieties arise in the wake of complete digital and online engagement. For Eggers, such an immersion runs the risk of jeopardizing a vital part of what it means to be a unique individual. In the millennial character of *The Circle's* Mae Holland, we see a reflection of what Palfrey and Gasser introduce in their 2008 book, *Born Digital*:

> There is one thing you know for sure: These kids are different. They study, work, write, and interact with each other in ways that are very different from the ways that you did growing up. They read blogs rather than newspapers. They often meet each other online before they meet in person. They probably don't even know what a library card looks like, much less have one; and if they do, they've probably never used it…They're more likely to send an instant message (IM) than to pick up the telephone to arrange a date later in the afternoon…And they're connected to one another by a *common culture*. Major aspects of their lives—social interactions, friendships, civic

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[17] Ursula K. Heise. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, (Oxford UP: New York, 2008).
[18] Justin Peters. *The Idealist: Aaron Swartz and the Rise of Free Culture on the Internet*, (Scribner: New York, 2016), p. 11, italics in original.
[19] Dave Eggers. *The Circle*, (Penguin Books: 2013).

> activities—are mediated by digital technologies. And they've never known any other way of life.[20]

It is the millennial generation's rapid transition, its digitally facilitated flight from long-established communicative and interpersonal, cultural, and economic practices, which critics, theorists, and contemporary philosophers deem its most salient feature. *Born Digital* argues that millennials are not ignorant due to their lack of library cards, newspapers, and face-to-face communications, but rather, they have—and have always had—the wealth of the world's libraries in a portable device that fits in a pocket, which can also access real-time news and information, as well as their customized social networks, with unprecedented speed and casualness. The question then becomes: how are these online interpersonal experiences changing the millennial generation at the subjective level, and, are there possible downsides to the processes of cultural digitization?

"Lost in the Infostream": Our Cognitive Reconditioning

Following Palfrey and Gasser, Douglas Rushkoff (2010) identifies an increasing permutation in our cognitive makeup, one that is a direct result of the prevalence of digital technologies in our mundane communications and interactions. As Rushkoff argues, the effects are far more psychologically ingrained than formerly acknowledged, and could be considerably more difficult to properly detect or comprehend:

> The big, unrecognized news here is about a whole lot more than multitasking, pirated MP3's, or superfast computers at the investment houses shortcutting our stock trades. It is that *thinking itself* is no longer—at least no longer exclusively—*a personal activity*. It's something happening in a new, networked fashion. But the cybernetic organism, so far, is more like a cybernetic mob than new collective human brain.[21]

This cultural transformation is indicative of a reversal of the dualisms that have dominated the critiques of the Internet-society nexus. In chapters three and four, I more thoroughly explore these ongoing appraisals through a close reading of the manner in which Mae Holland's individual psychology and ideological principles are transformed by her employment at the Circle. Now that Prensky's (2001) generation of "digital natives" have grown up, scholarly and popular debates around which should be more valued—the online or offline realms—will be given yet another revision in the face of everyday social realities.[22]

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[20] John Palfrey & Urs Gasser. *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*, (Basic Books: New York, 2008), p. 2, my italics.
[21] Douglas Rushkoff. *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commandments for a Digital Age*, (OR Books: New York, 2010), p. 17, my italics.
[22] Mark Prensky. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, October, 2001, pp. 1-6.

Nathan Jurgenson (2012) highlights a popular false dichotomy by observing normative online tendencies and interactions:

> Hanging out with friends and family increasingly means also hanging out with their technology. While eating, defecating, or resting in our beds, we are rubbing our glowing rectangles, seemingly lost within the infostream…Never has being disconnected—even if for just a moment—felt so profound. The current obsession with the analog, the vintage, and the retro has everything to do with this fetishization of the offline.[23]

Here, Jurgenson observes a paradoxical "disconnect" between the tenor of debates concerning online communication problems and new media, and how people go about their daily lives. Those who argue for going offline in web-saturated societies assume that unplugging is simply a technical matter, when evidence shows that there is a little understood psychological and neurological component to being and staying in touch via online communications (Carr, 2010).[24] Jurgenson views the modern ubiquity of the Internet as a communicative opportunity, rather than as a loss of something quintessentially human. Although it may be an actuality that we, "may never fully log off…This in no way implies the loss of the face-to-face, the slow, the analog, the deep introspection, the long walks, or the subtle appreciation of life sans screen. We enjoy all of this more than ever before."[25]

Jurgenson's argument here responds to the U.S. millennial generation's disposition concerning how conventional sensory and sentient experiences present a new allure for those growing up perpetually immersed in digital technologies and social media. His "analog" reasoning transposes the dualisms of the pre-digital generation, exemplified in Donna Haraway's (1990) cyborg manifesto, in which she warns about nurturing a false nostalgia for the "paradise lost" of the gendered and ethnic-class power hierarchies, an influence of authority and domination that—at the time of her writing—permeated everyday life in the physical realm, the tangible "real world."[26] Jurgenson insists on this analog-to-digital distinction, stating that the "notion of the offline as real and authentic is a recent invention, corresponding with the rise of the online. If we can fix this false

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[23] Nathan Jurgenson. "The IRL Fetish," *The New Inquiry*, June 28, 2012. Available online at: http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-irl-fetish/

[24] Nicholas Carr. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, (W.W. Norton: New York, 2010). For additional studies, see: Jacqueline Howard. "This is how the Internet is rewiring your brain," *The Huffington Post*, February 22nd, 2016.

[25] Jurgenson, "IRL Fetish"

[26] Donna Haraway. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," as found in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, (Routledge: New York, 1990), pp. 190-233.

separation and view the digital and physical as enmeshed, we will understand that what we do while connected is inseparable from what we do when disconnected."[27]

Jurgenson's conception of a 'false separation,' his argument for enmeshment, resonates with Bruno Latour's (2002) notion of the "nonhuman," whereby Latour argues that the modern world is so pervasively fabricated, that tools and technologies are so ubiquitous, that we cannot meaningfully separate the human from the non-human. This is to the extent that, 'the human [...] cannot be grasped and saved unless that other part of itself, the share of things, is restored to it' (Latour, 1993).[28] As McMaster and Wastell (2005) contend, the human and the nonhuman are, for Latour, symbiotically related: neither can exist without the other.[29] This is the gist of Latour's principle of symmetry, which he uses to critically reject the ontological dualism which opposes the human to the nonhuman, in its several forms. This designation explains technology and technological developments as naturally co-existing and co-evolving occurrences that are integral parts of the human experience.[30]

To Latour (1992), human beings are—and always have been—significantly dependent on the capabilities of various "nonhumans" in our everyday existence:

> To balance our accounts of society, we simply have to turn our exclusive attention away from humans and look also at nonhumans…What our ancestors, the founders of sociology, did a century ago to the house of the human masses in the fabric of social theory, we should do now to find a place in a new social theory for the nonhuman masses that beg us for understanding.[31]

Latour (1993) maintains that human agents cannot simply be contrasted to passive nonhumans *a priori*: 'The human is not a constitutional pole to be opposed to that of the nonhuman. The two expressions "humans" and "nonhumans" are belated results that no longer suffice to designate the other dimension.'[32] Technical objects—far from being objective tools—are continually being defined and redefined by human actors, the spaces in which they move, and the ways in which they interact.

A supplementary method for understanding Latour's enmeshment is N. Katherine Hayles' (2012) concept of technogenesis, 'the idea that humans and technics have

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[27] Jurgenson, "IRL Fetish"
[28] Bruno Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1993), p. 136.
[29] Tom McMaster and David Wastell. 'The Agency of Hybrids: Overcoming the Symmetrophobic Block,' *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, 17[1], Article 5, pp. 175-182.
[30] Bruno Latour. "Morality and Technology: The end of the means," as found in, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19 (5/6), 2002, pp. 247-260.
[31] Bruno Latour. "Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts," as found in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1992), edited by Wiedee E. Bijker and John Law, p. 227.
[32] *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 137.

coevolved together.' [33] Hayles, mirroring Rushkoff, argues that technogenetic intervention inherently implies a change in human cognition, or *thinking*. As she details in her 2007 essay "Hyper and Deep Attention," the effects of such co-evolution cause a cognitive reconditioning, 'networked and programmable media are a part of a rapidly developing mediascape transforming how citizens of developed countries do business, conduct their social lives, communicate with one another, and—perhaps most significant—*think*.' [34] These cultural theorists represent more than thirty years of research regarding sociotechnical advancements, transformations, and permutations, and all three (Jurgenson, Latour, and Hayles) arrive at the same conclusion: that humanity and non-humanity are inextricably linked. Such observations of our modern experience of networked media technologies, coupled with the ubiquitous statistics of people engaging, interacting, and creating sustained communities through the Internet and digital appliances, indicate that fact has already followed science fiction (Lenhart, et al., 2015).[35]

New Horizons of Narrative Possibility: Theorizing the Contemporary American Novel

This thesis provides evidence for the above claim by evaluating the way in which contemporary American novelists have had to readjust the focus of literary attention in order to contend with such monumental technological alterations. It is a concerted attempt to produce new methods with which to understand the relationship between the material conditions of contemporary American culture and the narrative forms within which such conditions have come to expression. The themes of DeLillo's and Eggers' stories—of characters caught in limbo between analog and digital materialization—provide insights into contemporary debates by addressing the complex relations between self and others, history and technology, corporeal and virtual, private and public lives, and personal and collective memory. This thesis aims to investigate (or theorize) such narratives by turning them into a prism—a conceptual tool through which we can understand larger transformations currently at work in our culture. The novels under

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[33] N. Katherine Hayles. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, (The University of Chicago Press: 2012), p. 10, my italics.
[34] N. Katherine Hayles. "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes," *Profession*, 2007, p. 187.
[35] Amanda Lenhart, et al., "Teens, Social Media & Technology: Overview 2015," Pew Research Center's Internet, Science, and Technology Project, April 9, 2015. Available online at: http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/

consideration are set almost entirely in the U.S., have American-born protagonists, and are predominantly concerned with the American context, even if the specific issues they explore resonate beyond national borders.

Since the late 1990s and the early 2000s—outside of genre fiction—only a fraction of published American novels that one might consider worthy of canonical inclusion resonate explicitly with cultural digitization, which is the primary focus of this thesis. To include genre fiction would be to curate an annotated inventory of authors, themes, trends, and titles, so numerous that it would impede the progress and exceed the limitations of this project. Alternatively, my methodology tethers a peer to each chosen literary author in order to synthesize and analyze the critical discussion: to DeLillo; Thomas Pynchon and his 2013 novel *Bleeding Edge*,[36] to Eggers; David Foster Wallace and his essay "E Unibus Pluram."[37] My rationale for the selection of these writers is straightforward: they are born of the same generation, thus lending historical perspective, and they are concurrently granted the highest scholarly accolades in both academic and popular readings, thus allowing for a comparing and contrasting of the different authors' views on the subject under examination. Furthermore, Pynchon and Wallace are often associated as the literary watershed of a "postmodern period," and their novels and writings often reflect on—and wrestle with—what such a scholarly categorization means, not only for the state of contemporary fiction, but also for the greater surrounding culture.

As we move beyond the horizons and the reach of postmodernism, the true extent of the schism in literary representation that we are facing—the extent of the gap between narrative forms and our new digital environments—is becoming clear. As Paul Virilio stated in 2008, there has been a 'havoc wreaked' upon 'the orientation of human activities,' by the very technological devices and forms of global communication that have been designed to function as our informational compass.[38] Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* takes place over the course of a year, from the fall of 2000 to the fall of 2001, situating the novel within the very midst of 9/11 and the beginning of the rise of social media networks and emergent online economies. This novel is written retrospectively, at the chronological distance of over a decade, allowing for Pynchon to fictionally engage with Virilio's informational and communicative rupturing: topics of terrorism, cultural digitization, and the waning of the postmodern attitude. Through a comparative literary analysis of these two archetypes in American Letters, chapters one and two concentrate

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[36] Thomas Pynchon. *Bleeding Edge*, (Jonathan Cape: London, 2013).
[37] David Foster Wallace. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2, 1993, Summer Issue, pp. 151-194.
[38] Paul Virilio. *Open Sky*, translation by Julie Rose, (Verso: London, 2008), p. 4.

on the manner in which DeLillo and Pynchon help underscore how cultural digitization—specifically through the establishment of Web 2.0 and the attendant availability of a steady Internet connection—have propelled contemporary fiction into new narrative domains.

In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace (1993) suggests that 'American fiction remains deeply informed by television.'[39] It is an extraordinary essay on what a specific form of mediatisation—when taken to a level of ubiquitous experience—does to an American society and culture, and consequently, to the individual psychology of the working American author. In the same vein, my writing on Eggers' *The Circle* can be read as an attempt to explain or map the contemporary moment, as social media and information technologies replace television as the main source of media consumption (Goldhaber, 1997).[40] Chapters three and four address the ongoing challenge to formulate a critical language that can respond to current cultural experiences in the aftermath of cultural digitization.

In addition to this, the modern author has to contend with notions of millennial and post-millennial discourses, including those around 9/11 and the subsequent "War on Terror," the 2008 financial crash and its aftermath, the ongoing debates about immigration and refugee relief, concerns regarding the threat of nuclear and biological weapons development, the Syrian Civil War, the ascension of Google (Alphabet) as the most successful information technology company and the most valuable publicly traded corporation on the planet, and the terrifyingly bipolarizing political campaign of the republican nominee for the President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump. These events have reverberated in the consciousness of contemporary authors and have created a nascent political context that is already producing a wealth of creative and critical writing. In and among these human conflicts looms the gathering response of digital and technological objects (one facet of Latour's enmeshed environment of human/nonhuman), in a world that is being increasingly impacted by the actions—and inactions—of our species. This thesis claims that these technocultural, political, and historical events may be moving both contemporary fiction and academic criticism beyond the postmodern atmosphere associated with the last thirty years and influencing a concomitant search for innovative forms of literary and theoretical strategies to

[39] Ibid., p. 155.

[40] Michael H Goldhaber. "Attention Shoppers!", *Wired Magazine*, December 1st, 1997. Goldhaber focuses on globalization and 'the information economy.' He argues that, ultimately, we no longer live in an information economy, as it is not a scare resource, but, that we now live in an 'attention economy.' In cyberspace (world wide web), information captures our attention, thus making *attention itself* as the scarce resource in our emerging—online—economy.

envisage new horizons of narrative possibility. The theoretical developments that attend my reading of the narratives in the chapters that follow tend to emerge, to some degree, from this lapsing of postmodernism as a cultural dominant.

This pursuit of a new language for the field of literary theory indicates the need for an updated literary history, more specifically, a historiography that engages with the topics of cultural digitization and the ubiquity of the presence of social media networks in everyday life. Such a body of methods and theories of literary research and presentation is needed to comprehend current tensions of an online landscape in which an ever-increasing number of users operate on a routine basis. By exploring the technical, economic, and political perspectives of the culture of digitization, this thesis clarifies how recent changes in our global-media environment have profoundly affected—if not entirely driven—our experience of sociality and connectedness. This, in turn, has significantly altered the kind of stories being produced in the early twenty-first century.

Thesis Design and Chapter Composition

The four main chapters reflect the vitality of artistic responses found in current American writing and fiction, specifically illuminating the modern themes of social media networks, the forces of globalization, and the emergence of a form of narrative that is moving into post-postmodern literary territories. The criteria for selection of DeLillo and Eggers as the focus of this thesis includes their authorial fixation with technocultural and digital advancements, their shared passion for a type of human rights storytelling, and the power of prose to work against the potentially damaging nature of the topics and themes which are most prevalent within their novels.

Chapter one centres on the author Don DeLillo and his novels *White Noise* (1985)[41] and *Underworld* (1997).[42] These novels were chosen based on the fact that they are often used by scholars and critics as beacons of postmodern fiction in the 1980s and 1990s. More precisely, this opening chapter explores DeLillo's categorization within the "postmodern" genre; a label that this thesis argues is too loosely associated with the author in both popular and academic readings of his work. In maintaining that DeLillo is not today (and never truly was in the past) a distinctively "postmodern" author, chapter one considers the role that technoscientific advancements have played in keeping DeLillo in a field of his own making.

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[41] Don DeLillo. *White Noise*, (Viking Penguin, Inc.: New York, 1985).
[42] Don DeLillo. *Underworld*, (Picador: New York, 1997).

Chapter two transitions to more contemporary writings produced by the author, expanding the focus from the relationship of DeLillo and postmodernism, to the influence of the Internet and digital technologies on his recent works of fiction. *Cosmopolis* (2003) will function as the sounding board from which this thesis attempts to scale years of DeLillo's "twenty-first century period" work down to a multifaceted theory concerning the ever-changing relationship between technology and literature. The novel also serves as an example of what this thesis maintains is a paradigm shift in the world of fiction today, a move away from postmodernism into a new form of literary production. In chapter two, I relate a wide-range of DeLillian readings to claims concerning his main thematic preoccupation of digital and cyberspatial (Internet) evolutions, and the subsequent effects of these technological developments on the beauty, mystery, and humanity of everyday life. In doing so, chapter two promotes a renewed ideology concerning the state of "serious" fiction today, which will in turn serve as a thematic bridge to the discussion and analysis of Dave Eggers' latest novels.

Chapter three explores the recent novels of Dave Eggers and argues that—over the past five years—his writings have consistently worked in the contemporary "real-world" by diagnosing and responding to the effects of the comprehensive integration of digital technologies into the lives of everyday Americans. Eggers' 2012 release, *A Hologram for the King*, in tandem with *The Circle* (2013), demonstrates two sides of the state of the modern economy, envisioned through individual characters who work in the field of information technologies and social media integrations. *The Circle* best exhibits this technological alteration of the mundane American experience, as the novel can be read as a cautionary tale regarding the erosion of personal privacy in the digital age. *The Circle* will be the primary text from which chapters three and four consider the manner in which the central thematic preoccupation of Eggers' novels has evolved to meet these unprecedented technocultural changes. Following McLaughlin (2004), chapter three presents Eggers as a "post-postmodern" embodiment of an artist and author who is intimately aware—and invested in—the dramatic social and cultural consequences of digital technologies infiltration into the quotidian American experience.[43] Chapter three further explicates, describes, and analyses Eggers' writing with the shared leitmotif of technoscientific and digital idealism, with a particular emphasis on current socioeconomic and sociopolitical hegemonies of online networks and community formation, Internet data-mining and techno-corporate surveillance.

[43] Robert McLaughlin. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World," *Symploke* vol. 12, nos. 1-2, 2004, pp. 53-68.

Chapter four concentrates on the broad impacts of cultural digitization on the current generation, as symbolized by the young protagonist of *The Circle*, Mae Holland, and her personal and professional acclimatization to the corporation. While chapter three focuses on a summary of the Circle's sociotechnical philosophies through the introduction of "SeeChange" technologies, chapter four considers the resultant psychological and social consequences on an individual character, and the manner in which digital hyperconnectivity breeds a new brand of hyperreflexivity. The Circle is adamant that their participatory culture—enacted through the global implementation of their social networking and information gathering digital technologies—will be capable of positively altering the very political, economic, and moral constitution of the human race. Chapter four considers the manner in which Eggers questions whether or not such panoptic social engineering yields results that can be considered beneficial to the overall wellbeing of the global village, as the novel's idealistic protagonist begins to encounter the downside of the Circle's self-proclaimed utopic demands for radical transparency and total informational control.

Canaries in a Coal Mine

Cultural digitization serves as a kind of thematic substratum for these four chapters, above which various refrains are announced and developed: the function of self-referential irony in turn-of-the-millennium literature, the challenge presented to aspiring artists who create in the midst of the "end of history," the role of the novelist attempting to produce a serious work of art that has cultural significance within the postmodern milieu of instilled scepticism and incredulity, and the difficulty of developing an original literary voice in the era of ubiquitous social media and unremitting digital surveillance. What the passing of postmodernism has revealed to us is an extraordinary failure of the paradigms with which we have articulated contemporary cultural life. As a result, a new kind of inarticulacy has emerged—a strange sense of disconnection—in a world that is more closely connected, more digitally saturated and mediatized, than anything our immediate predecessors could have dreamt of. Still, there remains a potent desire to escape from the continual deconstruction of postmodern philosophy—a desire to return to the real—to make sincere and meaningful connections to other human beings, to use language non-ideologically, in a manner that suggests the genuine communication of our thoughts, feelings, and longings.

As Vermeulen and van der Akker (2010) suggest, 'If, simplistically put, the modern outlook vis-à-vis [*sic*] idealism and ideals could be characterized as fanatic and/or naive, and the postmodern mind-set as apathetic and/or skeptic, the current generation's attitude—for it is, and very much so, an attitude tied to a generation—can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism.'[44] Or, to borrow a phrase from David Shields (2010), there is a 'reality hunger' in the contemporary arts, a yearning, he says, shared among a 'burgeoning group of interrelated (but unconnected) artists in a multitude of forms and media,' to 'break larger and larger chunks of "reality" into their work.'[45] Contemporary fiction has to navigate in and amongst these "chunks of reality"—the established economic, political, and technological environments in order to expose and explain the American public's underlying complicity in the very systems they purport to have a controlling will to power. The cultural sensitivity demonstrated in the writings of Don DeLillo and Dave Eggers uncover new veins of ore in the mine, but with such deep excavations also comes unforeseen dangers. Best for us to take heed of their surveys.

[44] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker. "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, pp. 1-14, 2010, p. 5.
[45] David Shields. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, (Hamish Hamilton: London, 2010), p. 3.

Chapter 1

Introduction

"Seven Shades of Blue": A Writer's Desire to Restructure Reality

> Language and the power of imagination are the same thing...Behind every word a whole world is hidden that must be imagined. Actually, every word has a great burden of memories, not only just of one person but of all mankind. Take a word such as bread, or war; take a word such as chair, or bed or Heaven. Behind every word is a whole world. I'm afraid that most people use words as something to throw away without sensing the burden that lies in a word.
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> -Interview with Heinrich Böll, 1983[1]

DeLillo writes in real-time, pointing his ultra-sensitive pair of binoculars at a range of distinctly American landscapes and institutions. His writing occurs contemporaneously (sometimes even giving the surreal impression of clairvoyance), with conceits and motifs that invariably bring him back to the power of language itself, what David Cowart (2003)[2] terms in his analysis of DeLillo's work as "the physics of language"—i.e., the relationship between fiction and what Paul Virilio (2000) and Arjun Appadurai (1990) have coined the "technoscape" that exists in modern western society.[3] By placing many of his characters in the environment of this technoscape, DeLillo is often associated with the postmodern period, and the philosophies and theories surrounding the genre seem to leak into every work of writing and criticism concerning the author. Seen retrospectively, the time frame in which DeLillo begins his career as an author is situated precisely in the midst of American universities first exposure to postmodern philosophies—which had already gained scholarly consideration in humanities departments across western Europe—with the publication of his first novel titled *Americana* in 1971.[4]

By writing in "real-time," this 1971 publication date make DeLillo a contemporary of other major authors working and gaining acclaim around the same period, such as Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. This is the hay-day of U.S. postmodern

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[1] A. Leslie Wilson. 'The Art of Fiction, No. 74, an Interview with Heinrich Böll,' *The Paris Review*, Issue 87, Spring 1983.

[2] David Cowart. *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*, (The University of Georgia Press: 2003).
This phrase is additionally the borrowed title of Cowart's book on DeLillo, and it is a direct quote from *Underworld*, in which Father Paulus is talking with a young Nick Shay. See: '"We're doing the *physics of language*, Shay."' […] '"Everyday things represent the most overlooked knowledge. These names are vital to your progress. Quotidian things. If they weren't important, we wouldn't use such a gorgeous Latinate word. 'Quotidian'…An extraordinary word that suggests the depth and reach of the commonplace"' (p. 542).

[3] Paul Virilio. *The Information Bomb*, translation by Chris Turner (Verso: London-New York, 2000), p. 13. For Virilio, 'Two complimentary aspects of globalization [have] to be taken into account today: on the one hand, the extreme reduction of distances which ensues from the temporal compression of transport and transmissions; on the other, the current general spread of tele-surveillance. A new vision of a world that is constantly 'tele-present' twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, thanks to the artifice of this 'trans-optics' which puts what was previously out of sight on display.'
Arjun Appadurai. *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Economy*, (John Wiley and Son: 1990), p. 98.
For Appadurai, a technoscape is one of five dimensions of global cultural flows (ethno-scapes, media-scapes, finance-scapes, and ideo-scapes being the four others). In a more specific sense, a technoscape is the movement of technology (mechanical, digital, and informational) and the ability to move such technologies at ever-increasingly rapid speeds.

[4] Don DeLillo. *Americana*, (Houghton Mifflin: New York, 1971).

fiction, and DeLillo is customarily linked to the genre not only because of the content of his novels, but also the period in which he is writing. The opening chapter of this thesis argues for the idea that DeLillo's relationship to fiction has always been about much more than simply echoing the thoughts and sentiments of poststructuralist theory, or an artistic reinterpretation the Baudrillardian notions of simulacra and simulation, although such postmodern associations are, at times, very much warranted.

DeLillo would argue with critics who use this scholarly categorization—one which renders language as only a tenuous connective tissue linking world and consciousness—in that it fails to comprehend what the author attests to be the true power of language, of fiction. To quote Cowart (2003):

> To call his conception of language "romantic" or "sublime"—indeed, even to speak of something as formal "theory"—seems patently inadequate. Unencumbered by the heavy baggage of such terms, DeLillo's thinking about language is resolutely eclectic and creative. Language, for DeLillo, is the ground of all making, and no conceit is too extravagant to be essayed.[5]

This is the very nature of DeLillo's writing; it is what various critics have described as problematized language, a passionate investigation of the power of language itself. For DeLillo, words (both spoken and written) are a potent influence that surges not only through the individual at the subjective level—i.e., acting as a radical stimulant in the formation of personal identity—but also through the whole of culture, society, and nation. DeLillo underscores this sentiment during an interview with David Remnick in 1997, "For me, the crux of the whole matter is language."[6] Or, as the protagonist Bill Gray suggests in *Mao II* (1991), '"I've always seen myself in sentences."' He continues, '"I begin to recognize myself, word by word, as I work through a sentence. The language of my books has shaped me as a man. There's a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right."'[7] For DeLillo, this "moral force"—which is exerted through the dual process of reading and writing—works to form one's existential attitude, as he believes language is a literal conduit for all human activity, and therefore presupposes its epistemological sway in transforming knowledge systems and its ontological potency in shaping human history.

A young Nick Shay expresses a similar sentiment in *Underworld* (1997), after a discussion with a Jesuit Priest concerning the "physics of language": 'I wanted to look up words. I wanted to look up velleity and quotidian and memorize the fuckers for all time, spell them, learn them, pronounce them syllable by syllable—vocalize, phonate, utter sounds, say the words for all they're worth. This is the only way in the world you can escape the things that

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[5] *Physics of Language*, p. 226.
[6] David Remnick. "Exile on Main Street: Don DeLillo's Undisclosed Underworld." *The New Yorker*, September 15th, 1997, p. 42-48.
[7] Don DeLillo. *Mao II*, (Vintage Random House: 1991), p. 48.

made you.'[8] Beyond the literary strategies of metafictional writing, DeLillo's novels seek to conceptualize what it means to exist in a world where our only outlet, or only hope of understanding and perception, arrives through the medium of language, metaphor, and story. His writings also prompt an inverse line of enquiry: if words shape one's identity, can they also work to deteriorate it? Even more, what if one is unable to learn the *right* words, or find *accurate* definitions? Is such language impotent, unable to exhibit the "moral force" alluded to by the author/character of Bill Gray?

In *Underworld*, the scene between the student Nick Shay and the teacher Father Andrew Paulus, S.J., begins with Nick being asked to name the specific parts of Father Paulus' shoe. Nick makes little progress, only being able to name the sole, tongue, heel, and lace. Father Paulus then—with the pedagogical rigor and meticulousness often associated with the mystique of the Jesuit order—names and obliges Nick to repeat the names of the *cuff*, the *counter*, the *quarter*, the *welt*, the *aglet*, the *vamp*, the *last*, and the *grommet*. After, Father Paulus explains to a bewildered Nick (and, one assumes, reader) why it is that they are conducting these semantic isometrics: '"Everyday things represent the most overlooked knowledge. These names are vital to your progress. Quotidian things."'[9] Paulus' lesson alerts Nick that a world of knowledge exists that can *only* be revealed through an understanding of its language, through these seemingly unimportant verbal exercises and exchanges. Nick's initial ignorance prompts the quote above, and, as he exists Paulus' office, walking out into the snowy winter of Minnesota, he experiences a new kind of epiphanic awareness, a realization that a form of transcendence can only emerge through the processes of linguistic comprehension. The scene also suggests that Nick has been guided to a deeper understanding of the world and of himself, that the performative force of language can allow him to break away—or re-write—his personal history, the storyline of his life up until that point. He maintains this epistemological insight throughout the novel, often meditating thoughtfully on the deeper meanings of his day job in waste-management.

In the first full-length interview recorded with the author (published and transcribed in 1982, recorded in Greece in 1979, where he was at work on *The Names*), DeLillo gives the critic and literary theorist Thomas LeClair a unique glimpse into his writing process, revealing his interest in discerning "the word beyond speech," a quote from the early modernist author Hermann Broch that DeLillo often utilizes.[10] Broch's idea is that fiction draws its power from a move towards mystery, a writing style that is both elusive and alluring in its commitment to

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[8] Don DeLillo. *Underworld*, (Picador: New York, 1997), p. 543.
[9] Ibid., pp. 540-42.
[10] Hermann Broch. *Der Tod des Virgil/The Death of Virgil*, (Pantheon Books, 1945), p. 454. See: 'The word hovered over the universe, over nothing, floating beyond the expressible as well as the inexpressible, and he, caught under and amidst of the roaring, he floated with the word […] it was a word beyond speech.'

the exploration and understanding of language as a numinous instrument for self-discovery. As DeLillo explains to LeClair (1982):

> When you try to unravel something you've written, you belittle it in a way. It was created as a mystery, in part. Here is a map of the world; it is seven shades of blue. If you're able to be straightforward and penetrating about this invention of yours, it's almost as though you're saying it wasn't altogether necessary. The sources weren't deep enough. I think [this] helps explain why some writers are unable or unwilling to discuss their work. There's an element of tampering. And there's a crossover that can be difficult to make. What you write, what you say about it. The vocabularies don't match. It's hard to correspond to reality, to talk sensibly about an idea or a theme that originates in a writer's desire to restructure reality.[11]

DeLillo here is responding to LeClair's comment that he appears "elusive" to his readers and critics, a sentiment that is only bolstered by the lack of biographical information available on the jacket-covers of his novels, along with his relative unease in mixing with the literati or engaging in public dialogue.[12] The result is that despite forty years of writing, DeLillo has yet to acquire a definitive style that yields itself to facile literary analysis. If critics respond either positively or negatively, it nonetheless ends up being for very different reasons, with a consensus difficult to locate amongst various reviewers. DeLillo, however, conducts himself in such a way not for the sole sake of privacy, but rather, because he feels that it is the responsibility of the author to stay on the outskirts of society for the precise reason of having the widest perspective. This sensibility also leaks into DeLillo as an artist, as he believes that discussing his novels would do nothing to further interpretation, as a simple clarification of the characters and plotlines—or to offer philosophical contextualization—is the kind of narrative elucidation which he is trying to avoid. For DeLillo, authors write and readers read. Any further explanation of the original text would push it beyond our revelatory grasp, as the "vocabularies" would be rendered incomprehensible—rupturing the fundamental exchange of the storytelling apparatus.

There are two prominent impulses at work here, antagonistic "desires" that DeLillo clearly articulates in the quotation above. On the one hand, the very act of writing fiction intended for publication articulates a conviction in the linguistic structuration of literature, i.e., its constructive laws, rules, and principles (there are a finite set of elements and functions in which language can operate and enact communication and transfer knowledge). On the other hand, it involves a desire to transcend this structure, or as Raymond Federman's (1975)

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[11] Thomas LeClair. "An Interview with Don DeLillo," from *Contemporary Literature*, 1982, p. 19-31.

[12] LeClair, "An Interview," p. 19: 'Of American novelists that began publishing in the seventies, Don DeLillo is one of the most prolific and original. He is also one of the most *elusive*. While his novels are located in America's fascinations—entertainment, big-time sport, intrigue—they are written with a *detachment* that causes reviewers to praise him for very different, sometimes contradictory intentions. His books are elusive […] Because DeLillo has *not joined* the literary auxiliary: he does not sit on panels, appear on television, judge contests, review books, or teach creative writing. He travels and writes.'

surfictional interpretation would have it, DeLillo seeks to 'escape from the confines of language' and express 'that which no dictionary contains.'[13] In other words, if we again deploy Broch's "word beyond speed" exegesis, what DeLillo is seeking in his novels, the formative principles of his life and art might turn out to be, once found, nothing he could just say. Of course, it could be argued that all creative art is an attempt to express oneself in a new way, to communicate at level *beyond* the conventional. Where DeLillo separates himself as an author distinct from his literary peers is in the fact that he gives his *characters themselves* this awareness. Bill Gray, Murray Jay Siskind, Eric Packer, David Bell, Bucky Wunderlick, Nick Shay, J.A.K Gladney—all of these men demonstrate a masculinist desire to exert command over language, in a very real sense to wrestle with it, hoping that such psychological engagement might open up a new text, a new way of being in the world, a reinvigoration of the complex possibilities found in ordinary life.

As DeLillo himself explains, "There's an element of contempt for meanings. You want to write outside the usual framework. You want to dare the readers to make a commitment you know they can't make…The writer is driven by his conviction that some truths aren't arrived at so easily, that life is still full of mystery" (LeClair, 1982).[14] Or, as the character of Elster reiterates in *Point Omega* (2010): 'The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever.'[15] DeLillo's approach to understanding language has produced some of the most insightful moments of self-realization in contemporary American literature. These moments occur when his fictional characters inspire the reader to ask questions about the nature of our non-fictional relationship to our numerous mediums of communication, including how differentiating languages can help to "restructure reality" and change the course of history.

Further challenging the genre categorizing impulse, DeLillo seamlessly drops in and out of various modes, often consciously Pynchonian in style, sometimes writing with the inflection of Hemingway or Emerson, and other times morosely Kafkaesque. This characteristic DeLillian style makes it difficult to use straightforward analogies in relation to any one literary tradition. The dialectic of the scholarly homily often takes for granted the concept of one universal truth claim (even if this truth claim is, paradoxically, that there is no singular truth claim), but DeLillo remains fairly ambiguous with his novels, never resorting to polemical interpretations of the deeply complex world about which he writes. As Randy Laist

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[13] Raymond Federman. *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*, (Swallow Press: Chicago, 1975), p. 76-77.
[14] "An Interview," p. 29.
[15] Don DeLillo. *Point Omega*, excerpt first published in *The New York Times*, Feb.1st, 2010, available online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/02/books/02book_excerpt.html?_r=0

(2010) expounds, '[t]o think of DeLillo is to imagine a writer alone, stranded in a kind of world and possessed of a kind of awareness for which there is virtually no precedent.'[16]

Nonetheless, many critics have attempted to align DeLillo within a succinct and transparent literary mode. Harold Bloom (2009) introduces his book of essays on contemporary American fiction by stating that, 'Despite [DeLillo's] supposed Post-Modernism, he is a High Romantic Transcendentalist.'[17] Critics who interpret DeLillo as a "Romantic" writer find instances throughout his novels of resolved obscurities, of miracles and spiritual revivals, and of subjective awakenings that occur with quasi-epiphanic results. A series of dualisms can be reduced and reconciled: nature vs. technology, culture vs. individual identity, capitalism vs. terrorism. Joseph Dewey (2006) emblematically claims (in the more romantic tradition) that DeLillo's work 'has zealously guarded the notion of the self and the persistence of dignity.'[18] While Mark Osteen (2000) argues for a more postmodern reading of DeLillo by observing of his characters, 'their elaborate strategies to evade or subvert various authorities usually lead only to exploitation by other, equally implacable forces, ideologies, or discourses.'[19] Much of the writing and criticism that surrounds DeLillo's oeuvre concerns itself with a negotiation of the territories between romantic, modern, and postmodern readings.

Generally speaking, if one wants to be critical of DeLillo, an easy starting point is his insistence on literary ambiguity, his lack of direct answers to the epistemological and ontological queries he inspires through his fiction. These are often seen as all-encompassing social forces that overwhelm human subjectivity, agency, and responsibility. By contrast, if one wants to praise DeLillo, the argument is that his characters ultimately prevail over their cultural, political, and technological entrapment. The ground breaking study *In the Loop* by Tom LeClair (1988), proposes readings of DeLillo that focus on themes of regeneration and re-synthesis, which ultimately prevail over the forces of disorder, disintegration, and entropy:

> While revealing the danger of various conventions, ideologies, and closed systems, DeLillo also reconstructs, by the end of each novel, mystery, even possibility. His looping method does not substitute one closed system for another…DeLillo's double-binding or looping strategy is not only consistent in his books but also congruent with their subjects—the multiple communications loops of contemporary life in all its manifestations from the person to the social, the physical body to the body politic, the ecological to the technological. DeLillo's constant concern is postindustrial America in a multinational world: how different aspects of our postmodern condition unite in great knowledge and great danger.[20]

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[16] Randy Laist. *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels*, (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.: New York, 2010), p. 2.
[17] Harold Bloom. *American Dream*, (Chelsea House Publishers: 2009), p. 2.
[18] Joseph Dewey. *Beyond Greif and Nothing*, (University of South Carolina Press: Columbia, 2006), p. 13.
[19] Mark Osteen. *American Magic and Dread*, (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2000), p. 2.
[20] Thomas LeClair. *In the Loop*, (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1988), p. 233.

This "looping method" often leads critics to lament that DeLillo winds his readers up, puts them in motion, and allows the narrative to spin around in a fictional Large Hadron Collider, but without a massive collision—no ontological break, no distinct lessons learned or answers given, only more questions, more confusion, making the reader feel as if there is no escape from the loop. Through this critical lens DeLillo's recursive style leads to heightened feelings of existential uncertainty and endless paranoia.

The brilliance of LeClair's study is how he tracks DeLillo's work and articulates what he (and DeLillo himself) believes is the true function of fiction. The double-vision—Cowart's (2003) infused "obliquity"[21]—described in so much of DeLillo's writing tenders not entrapment, but instead presents a way into the essential phenomenon at the very heart of our mental culture, what Laist (2010) qualifies as, 'the manner in which contemporary technologies reconfigure the relationship between ego and environment, between nature and nurture, and between the soul and the world.'[22] Each novel accomplishes both the "mystery" and "possibility" of entering into the complex systems that make up our everyday lives. DeLillo distinguishes himself from his literary peers through his obsessive examination of how the contemporary American consciousness has been transformed—and in some instances transmogrified—by the historically unique infiltration into circadian life of information, consumerist, and militaristic technologies.

The role of technology in DeLillo's fiction is recognized in nearly every critical interpretation of his work. Laist (2010) speaks of DeLillo as, 'a phenomenologist of the contemporary technoscape and ecologist of our new kind of natural habitat.'[23] LeClair (1988) emphasizes the 'multiple communications loops' that new technologies allow, giving contemporary society and culture a sense of an epistemological breakdown, forcing us to ask,

> Do our thinking and behaviour and fictions correspond to all that we do know, and can know, about living systems and how they survive? If we match our actions with our knowledge, as DeLillo does in his novels, contemporary and post-contemporary humankind could survive, head off personal and global self-destruction, prevent a final closing in the...[24]

Similarly, Joseph Tabbi (1996) speaks of DeLillo's fictional method, 'Since *Ratner's Star*…his approach has been to rework, from the inside, technological forms and political narratives that the culture has already constructed.'[25] For the majority of the population living in the Western world, technoscience is a nearly inescapable facet of their existence, whether in a professional

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[21] Cowart, *Physics of Language*, the word is used throughout the book.
[22] *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity*, p. 3.
[23] Ibid.
[24] *In the Loop*, p. 235.
[25] Joseph Tabbi. *The Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*, (Cornell University Press: New York, 1996), p. 174.

capacity, for entertainment options, in commercial transactions, or medical treatments. DeLillo is interested in how technology can infiltrate even the most mundane aspects of our experiences, and how this infiltration alters not only our surroundings, but our ontological bearing within the world.

1.1 *Technical Language: The Paradox of Transcribability*

> How comprehensive is the horizon within which we have to rethink our conceptions of literary forms or genres, in view of the technical factors affecting our present situation, if we are to identify the forms of expression that channel the literary energies of the present.
>
> -Walter Benjamin[26]

Literary examples of technologically driven cultures and societies are typically found in the genres of cyberpunk and science fiction. These established narrative genres use metaphors and experiment with methods of world-building that exist only within the author's mind. These genres conceive new world-models—in a complex process of writing a universe that exists outside of our immediate reality—creating a fictional environment that is non-mimetic and which (tends) to exist outside of the proximate chronology. Novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), Neal Stephenson's *Anathem* (2008), and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), are a few examples that follow this narrative pattern.[27] However, as the reality of science is catching up to the imaginative worlds of science fiction, the distinction between the two is becoming increasingly blurred. Donna Haraway's (1991) recognition in *A Cyborg Manifesto* that, 'the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion,' reminds us that identifying technologies transformative effect is often merely a matter of perspective.[28] DeLillo is intimately aware of this "optical illusion." He uncovers the cyborgism of everyday life, as we use technology to enhance ourselves and to amplify our efficacy, distorting the line between fact and fiction, body and machine, cognition and mediatisation.

DeLillo's style is one of literary reconceptualization. He transposes science-fictional tropes into a mimetic representation of our technologically saturated contemporary

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[26] *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Harvard University Press: 2008), p. 82.

[27] Aldus Huxley. *Brave New World*, (Vintage: 2007 [1932])
William Gibson. *Neuromancer*, (Ace: 1984)
Neal Stephenson. *Anathem*, (William and Marrow Company: 2009)
Paolo Bacigalupi. *The Windup Girl*, (Night Shade Book: 2009)
Although terms such as "speculative fiction," "historiographic metafiction," "dystopic fiction," "alternative history," and "magic realism" have also been associated with the umbrella label of "science fiction,"—my thesis deploys the term as a catch-all categorization for the sake of clarity.

[28] Donna Haraway. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," p. 149, as found in, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge: New York, 1991), pp.149-181.

environment. Marshall McLuhan (1964) saw this incursion of technology as a sort of prostheses; that is, technology as the solution to many of mankind's sociocultural tribulations, an extension of humankind's ambitions and abilities.[29] If McLuhan and Haraway were correct in their assumptions; if information and media technologies have, in fact, become a part of who we are—both in our physical bodies and our ontological posture—then the frequently rehearsed argument that science fiction or technologically suffused narratives operate beyond (or even counter to) mimesis must be reconsidered. Such a re-examination is needed to critically engage with DeLillo's writings. His literature, to borrow a phrase from *Structural Fabulation*, has 'faith in the transcribability of things.'[30]

The extended version of Scholes' (1975) argument reads as follows: 'what we can no longer accept is precisely this Joycean faith in the transcribability of things. It is because reality cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poesis.'[31] This proposition will once again come to the forefront when postmodern uncertainty is discussed in relation to DeLillo's writing. Postmodern rhetoric dismisses totalizing truth claims, and critics of literary mimesis, such as Scholes, adopt a similar stance when discussing fiction in a more general sense. For Scholes, all fiction has two functions: *sublimation*, which is 'a way of turning our concerns into satisfying shape,' and *cognition*, which 'helps us to know ourselves and our existential situation.' The best stories adequately serve both purposes. However, literary fiction suffers from two fallacies: paired and opposite. They are the *realistic fallacy*, which is the belief that fiction 'will offer us a record of experience,' and what one might call the *fantastic fallacy*, which is the concept of a fiction existing outside of realism. According to Scholes, the failure of fantasy is due to the fact that it is impossible to imagine a world free of connections to our experiential world, for if we cannot coincide with reality, nor can we avoid it. Thus all fiction is cognitive in that it offers a distorted picture of reality.

The final argument, condensed here for the sake of brevity, is that the world cannot be truly (or "faithfully") represented in art. Instead, Scholes (1979) proposes a new fictive sensibility, which he names as 'fabulation'—a genre of fiction obsessed with its own unreality, that openly proclaims its artifice.[32] In a collection of essays published in 1975, Scholes, acting as the sole editor, combines the high-literati of the time, all with explicit intention of delivering the *coup de grâce* to traditional narrative realism.[33] Using Barth's 'Literature of Exhaustion,'

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[29] Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media*, (Routledge & Paul Kegan: UK, 1964), p. 12.
[30] Robert Scholes & Eric S. Rabkin. *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1975), pp. 6-7.
[31] Ibid., p. 7.
[32] Robert Scholes. *Fabulation and MetaFiction*, (University of Illinois Press: 1979).
[33] Robert Scholes. *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*, ed. Robert Scholes, (Swallow Press: 1975).

Scholes doubles-down on this assertion, emphasizing how literature had 'used up' the conventions of fictional realism.[34] In his essay, Barth analyses the fiction of Nabokov, Beckett, and Borges, arguing that the dominant characteristic of their novels is the pretence that it is impossible to write an original work, and their paradoxical theme is writing about the 'end' of writing. Out of this longing for silence emerges a fiction neurotically concerned with its own status as fiction. Consequently, art—rather than nature—became the object of imitation, materialising in a self-conscious reflexivity.

Are DeLillo's novels a reflection of these fabulist—or surfictionist—narrative qualities? One must remember the author's insistence on the power of language here. DeLillo *does* have faith in the transcribability of things. However, it has become progressively difficult to articulate the right metaphor to describe these "things" in our technologically saturated modern world. Ultimately, Scholes' effort runs counter to what DeLillo's fiction itself teaches us: that we live in an increasingly complex environment where language and the amendments of language, identity and its discontents, speech and the written word, sign and the signified, object and affect, are only comprehensible within the specific contexts they inhabit. Scholes should be reminded that the best work of the literary imagination attends first to the subjective, persuading the reader to enlarge her *worldly* perspective as the consequence of a *local* reading. Great contemporary fiction distils the experience of living and captures the human condition in all its variety. By the same token, DeLillo's stories reorient us to the very business of living with and in the sprawling culture of America, the condition—or *nature*—of our national moment.

Yet, Scholes is not alone in such literary announcements. In composing this thesis and analysing DeLillo's work, my research has revealed a strong tendency from theorists to use either Technological Determinism or Humanism as critical lenses. The Technological Determinist argues that the forces of technology will inevitably invade our lives so thoroughly that the very essence of what it means to be human will be lost, or at the very least an integration of these forces into our bodies and consciousness will redefine what it means to be "human." For Humanists, the primary focus is the subject. Humans are centre-stage, and technology is the product, not the cause. Society constructs every feature of technology. Humanists also oppose the deterministic notion that technology exists as it does because it is rational and inevitable that it does so. For them, the political elements of society are already imprinted into technology, and thus, technologies have embedded social relations that are continually coalescing.

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[34] *Surfiction*, pp. 19-33.

David Porush (1985) has illustrated that this divergence in technological interpretation can best be described by unpacking meaning in the "machine." Porush states:

> The machine represents the paradoxes of our very existence as thinking, rational, civilized beings capable of expression. One the one hand, it is a sign of determinism, of the sheer predictability of mechanism, including the mechanism of the models we employ to describe our world and selves that we have grown from empirical evidence. On the other hand it is an expression of our inventiveness and freedom.[35]

Porush emphasises the inescapable conflation between the organic and inorganic. But how do we determine the way in which "the machine" effects human subjectivity? Will technology reduce, rather than extend and enhance, human capacities? Does technological gadgetry diminish the human mind, or, foster a genuinely new territory for the dissemination of knowledge into society? Is technological abundance a measure of quality of life and cultural progress? Can it not equally enhance *and* destroy humankind?

In 1893, Emile Durkheim announced that, 'Things in fact are a part of society, just as persons are, and play a specific part in it…Thus their relationship to the body-social needs to be determined.'[36] The "body-social" in modern terminology would be the study of sociology. In basic terms, sociology is preoccupied with a fundamental change that has to do with *community* (Bauman & May, 2001):

> All of us live in the company of other people and interact with each other. In the process we display an extraordinary amount of *tacit knowledge* that enables us to get on with the business of everyday life. Each of us is a skilled actor. Yet what we get and what we are depend on what other people do. After all, most of us have lived through the agonizing experience of a communication breakdown with friends and strangers. From this point of view, the subject matter (of sociology) is already embedded in our everyday lives and without this fact we would be unable to conduct our lives in the company of others.[37]

In sociology, the change in question very often develops in one particular way: community is moving from the small scale to the large, from the rural to the urban, from being socially cohesive to processes of cultural individuation.[38] People are spending less time in face-to-face situations with extended family and friends and more time interacting digitally with strangers across large distances (Wellman, 2002).[39] The extended family is slowly reducing to the nuclear, these bonds of kinship often becoming replaced by new ties of emergent media. Ultimately, community is changing from local to global.

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[35] David Porush. *The Soft Machine*, (Methuen & Co. Ltd: Great Britain, 1985), p. 13.
[36] Emile Durkheim. *The Division of Labor in Society*, Original Publication 1893, translation by W.D. Halls, (Free Press: New York, 1997), p. 72.
[37] Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May. *Thinking Sociologically*, (Blackwell Publishing: 2001 [1990]), pp. 6-7.
[38] According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, more than 54 per cent of the world's population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 66 per cent by 2050. Available online at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/world-urbanization-prospects.html
[39] Barry Wellman. *The Internet of Everyday Life*, (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2002), eds. Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, forward by Howard Rheingold, preface by Manuel Castells.

Various phrases are used to identify this dynamic, including the shift from *organic* to *mechanical* (Durkheim), the shift from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* (Tonnies, 1957),[40] and perhaps most famously, the Marxian shift from *feudal* to *capitalist*.[41] Although each of these philosophers worked during different historical periods and from separate geographical locations (their principal scholarly explorations were idiosyncratic), each viewed change as something regrettable. They saw people becoming more isolated, and their respective communities unravelling. The lament of society's collapse is seen today by the title of a 2000 book by the American sociologist Robert Putnam, which opens with the plaintive idiom, *Bowling Alone*,[42] and in Dave Eggers' 2014 novel *Your Fathers, Where are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*.[43]

While DeLillo does pay attention to shifting sociological phases, especially in relation to capitalism, globalization, and the Durkheimian shift from the organic to the mechanical, the focus of academia makes direct correlations between DeLillo and more contemporary philosophers and theorists, in particular the French School of the 1970s and 80s. This is due to questions that arise in DeLillo's fiction about the nature of the relationship between person and object, language and material "things," human consciousness and the complex process of defining (naming) one's subjective reality. Such narrative refrains often lead critics to read DeLillo alongside French postmodern philosophers and poststructuralist semioticians. For example, Jean Baudrillard (2002) asserts that we are all "Sunday Drivers," entirely mystified by our technologies. Jacques Derrida similarly asserts that we lack the ability to comprehend the very technologies that constitute our environment. Human behaviour—in both the subjective and collective sense—becomes increasingly superseded by modern technologies. For Derrida (2002), this a root cause of modern existential struggles.[44]

Baudrillard (2002) further bemoans the heavy toll we pay for ubiquitous personalized computer devices, 'Gadgets do nothing more than channel our desires and petrify our

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[40] Ferdinand Tonnies. *Community and Society*, translation by Charles P. Loomis, from the original German publication of *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*, (Michigan State University Press: 1957).
[41] Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*, translation by Samuel Moore, (Penguin Books: 1967 [1888]).
[42] Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (Simon and Shuster Paperbacks: New York, 2000).
[43] Dave Eggers. *Your Fathers, Where are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?* (Knopf: 2014), pp. 23-26—the novel's title is from the Bible, the book of Zechariah, 1:5. Beyond the scriptural allusion (failure of fathers, loss of prophetic visionaries) the title is also gestures towards a more comprehensive national exposé, what Eggers perceives to be the waning in American direction, purpose, backbone; essentially, the loss of the American dream. As the protagonist Thomas rhetorically asks, speaking for his generation: '"Don't we deserve grand human projects that give us some meaning? […] If you don't have something grand for men like us to be part of, we will take apart all the little things. Neighborhood by neighborhood. Building by building. Family by family."'
[44] Jacques Derrida & Brian Stiegler. *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, translation by J. Bajorek (Polity: Malden, MA, 2002).

abilities.'[45] His argument is that we effectively trade our freedom for gadgets, causing the deterioration of cultural values and interpersonal relationships. Baudrillard predicts a future public-space populated by "zombies" plugged into various mobile devices, leading to greater and greater isolation and estrangement. These new urban forms will not relate to their immediate environment nor will they connect with others in close proximity, leading to the gradual corrosion of face-to-face interaction or sustained interactive communications. Baudrillard (2003) maintains that the consequence of this will be that, 'Everyone will be simultaneously elsewhere.'[46] At the time of Baudrillard's philosophizing, it would be another five years until the first iteration of the iPhone would be released for sale to the general public.[47] Although his astute observations concerning cultural mediatisation through personalized computer devices was far ahead of his time, like much of Baudrillard's writing, it failed to take into account the positives. The emergence of the smartphone, arguably, did not inherently cause widespread estrangement but instead offered a new form of connection; human beings do not necessarily abandon past interpersonal methods of communication, but learned *additional* ways in which to interact through technology.

The critics of information technology are legion, and they all seem to be singing the same song: the smarter we make our machines, the more disenfranchised and uninterested the users become. This is not a new argument, as these ideas chime with both Georg Simmel[48] and Paul Virilio (2008),[49] who—although separated by nearly 70 years—both voiced concerns that industrial society was producing increasingly complex machines while human culture struggled, failing to keep the pace of technological expansion.

Virilio, a cultural theorist frequently utilized in criticism of DeLillo, had a revealing conversation with David Dufresne in 1999, shortly after the release of his work, *Cybermonde, la Politique du Pire*, an interview-format book about the frightening and profound risks inherent in new technologies. During the discussion, Virilio named the Internet and the digital mediums in which the Internet is accessed—referencing everything from the operating system of Windows 95 to military industrial complex of the pentagon and Arpanet—as a Cold War emanations of a "New Occupation." He continues with this line of thought:

> If the media are the Occupation, the multimedia are likely to be far worse. Just as they entail promise: the world citizen will be shaped by worldwide information. It's obvious. But we are not there yet. First we must fight against the negativity of the new

[45] Jean Baudrillard. *Screened Out*, translation by C. Turner, (Verso: London, 2002), p. 4.
[46] Jean Baudrillard. *Cool Memories IV: 1995-2000*, (Verso: London, 2003), p. 24.
[47] Lev Grossman. "The Apple of Your Ear," *Time Magazine*, January 12th, 2007.
[48] Georg Simmel. *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, (University Press of Chicago: Chicago, 1971), as referenced in "Subjective Culture" in D.N. Levine (ed.), p. 234.
[49] Paul Virilio. *Open Sky*, translation by Julie Rose, (Verso: London, 2008), p. 50.

> technologies. I am worried about the…sudden nature of the new technologies. When machines begin to be idolized, social catastrophe is never far behind.[50]

Virilio attitude reminds one of an axiom from Murray Jay Siskind in DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), '"the greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear,"' as his paranoia is heightened by the negative intrusion of the Internet into everyday life.[51] When asked about his actual *use* of the very media devices and World Wide Web he had criticised, Virilio responds, "I prefer to keep my distance and participate laterally. Frontal encounters are encounters where you never fail to be 'had.'"[52] What Virilio fails to acknowledge is that a lateral participation with technology is in and of itself an oxymoronically charged position; it is by its very nature something that cannot be accomplished outside the realms of pure conjecture. Many users engaged in an *active participation* with such technologies would offer a completely different understanding of the gadgets and the Internet that they use on a routine basis. This point is crucial as meanings are '*always made in usage*' (du Gay, et al., 1997).[53] Is the average user "had" the moment she accesses the Internet, or makes a purchase online, monitors her personal finances, interacts on social media, plays a video game? Virilio's overgeneralizations often come at the cost of sacrificing concrete examples, the average individual's *real world* experience of the Internet and information technologies.

Still, Virilio is not immune to positivism, as he recognizes the cohesive effects of the Internet and information technologies on a global scale. Responding to the question, do you find some merit in the information society? Virilio retorts:

> Yes. It finally poses the question of a common language. It cannot be otherwise if there is to be world citizenship. It is Babel, moreover. What we are witnessing is not the Tower of Babel but the return of Babel! Can the world have a single language? Is this unicity of communication good or evil? Another positive point: Information will make us Earthlings. In the sense that there is a natural identification of man and the Earth and that the question of world citizenship prompts that of Earth being where ecology would no longer simply be an ecology of nature, but a social, planetary ecology, where the human species would be united around the globe. But all this is also fearsome: these questions somehow accomplish what totalitarianism never even dared to hope.[54]

Alas, Babel fell, the people scattered, and the individuation of languages and common speech followed, as God's retribution for the hubris of man. Virilio's philosophy always operates along such dualities, "the invention of the ship was also the invention of the shipwreck," no profit without loss, no invention without accident. His scholarly contribution is evident in the

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[50] David Dufresne. "Cyberesistance Fighter: An Interview with Paul Virilio," self-published and available online at: http://www.apres-coup.org/mt/title/Cyberesistance%20Fighter%20-%20An%20Interview%20with%20Paul%20Virilio.pdf

[51] Don DeLillo. *White Noise*, (Penguin: 1985), p. 161.

[52] "Cyberesistance"

[53] Paul Du Gay, S. Hall, L. Janes, H. Mackay and K. Negus. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, (Sage: London, 1997), p. 85, italics in original.

[54] "Cyberesistance"

fact that he is able to recognize underlying motivations that others might fail to notice, especially in relation to the evolution of information technology corporations, the Internet, and the World Wide Web.

This techno-global attentiveness is exactly why so many critics utilize Virilio's theories in analysing DeLillo's fiction. DeLillo writes with a clear understanding of Virilio's notion of duality, as his narratives reflect the semantic doubleness of information technologies. His stories signal an evolution in literary aesthetic, one that is tied to the very technologies that help us understand ourselves and the world in which we live. As we struggle to fathom the epistemological consequences of this new environment, this technoscape, it is important that the writer of fiction—as well as the literary critic—maintains a basic comprehension of the various information technologies which they are attempting to describe through artistic allegory and academic theory. In the absence of this intellectual capacity, to use an analogy ripe with McLuhanian inferences, both will find that they are driving down a dark road with no headlights.

For DeLillo the techno-prophetic squabbles between the Humanist and the Determinist are moot. If one writes in real-time—as my thesis asserts both DeLillo and Eggers do—then the narrative will inherently follow the contemporary cultural moment, engaging with the effects of technological developments, searching to define and explain social transformations that are *already* taking place. David Foster Wallace (1993) describes the fundamental responsibility and intrinsic characteristic of the novelist: 'fiction writers are born watchers.'[55] DeLillo is a "watcher," which is to say, he does not take a side in this debate; he aims to discover the new territories and environments that technology creates, and the manner in which this emergent technoscape affects the people living within it.

When critics attempt to align DeLillo's fiction as a literary analog of Baudrillard's (1970) technological dystopia—in which the media corrupt the essence of things as they are—they often do so retrospectively, in many instances years after original publication of the source material.[56] In doing so, they forsake DeLillo's "seven shades of blue" literary strategy, colouring characters, scenes, and plotlines with a postmodern philosophical palette which obscures rather than clarifies. DeLillo's fiction does not suggest that our new communications-rich landscape should lead us to reconsider or redefine what we understand as the thing doing the communicating: the human. The famous "barn scene" from *White Noise* (1985) is the quintessential example of this, often taught to undergraduate English literature students as a fictional reiteration of Baudrillard's (1994) "Disneyfication" theory concerning the hyper-

[55] David Foster Wallace. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2, 1993, Summer Issue, pp. 151-194.
[56] Jean Baudrillard. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, translation C. Turner, (Sage: London, 1970).

reality of the American situation.[57] In the scene, Murray Jay Siskind is conversing with Jack Gladney while observing tourists take pictures. Here, Murray introduces the cryptic (and now illustriously postmodern) phrase: "No one sees the barn." Murray's claim is that the tourists are not photographing the barn because it is especially beautiful, antique, or exceptional in any way, but because it assists in creating a "collective perception." They are photographing it for the sole reason that others have photographed it. He states that the tourism is a "religious experience" and a "kind of spiritual surrender," every photograph of the barn taken "reinforces the aura," and, that once inside, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between a mediated reality and a disintermediated reality.[58]

It is important to make the distinction that this is *not the same* as Baudrillard's overriding thesis, which is that *reality itself* is simulacral: '...The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.' [59] Through a logical extrapolation of Baudrillard's theory, people themselves are simulacral, their very existence is predicated in the hyper-real. Baudrillard argued that modern society is made up of mostly simulacra, because many of the symbols we encounter *appear* to be symbols of real things, but are categorically symbols of something that do not exist (or have never existed). If 'hyper-reality bypasses the distinction between life and death' and if 'the subject no longer provides a vantage point on reality' it is impossible to reconcile DeLillo's authorial motivations with Baudrillard's philosophy.[60]

In the 1980s, Baudrillard turned his attention to the media, advocating a paradoxical response to the saturation of information media in a liberal, consumer-based society: '[t]he media present an excess of information and they do so in a manner that precludes response by the recipient. This simulated reality has no referent, no ground, no source. It operates outside the logic of representation. But the masses have found a way of subverting it: the strategy of silence or passivity.'[61] Consider the literary conceit of *White Noise*: the relationship between cultural mediatisation and human mortality. Does such a thematic preoccupation resonate with Baudrillardian indifference? We can respond to such a question with one of DeLillo's own characters, the reclusive author of *Mao II* (1991), Bill Gray:

> Do you know why I believe in the novel? It's a democratic shout. Anybody can write a great novel, one great novel, almost any amateur off the street. I believe this…Some nameless drudge, some desperado with barely a nurtured dream can sit down and find his voice and luck out and do it. Something so angelic it makes your jaw hang open. The

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[57] Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Glaser, (University of Michigan Press: 1994 [1981]), pp. 262-4: 'Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyper-real and of simulation.'
[58] *White Noise*, pp. 12-13.
[59] Jean Baudrillard. *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, (Polity: Cambridge, UK, 1988).
[60] *Selected Writings*, p. 6.
[61] Ibid., p. 7.

> spray of talent, the spray of ideas. One thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints. And this is what you want to destroy.[62]

In writing novels that respond to the materiality of history and the reality of our increasingly mediated daily lives, DeLillo demonstrates a strategy or "logic of representation" that is, quite literally, the opposite of the passivity or silence that Baudrillard prescribes.[63]

Associating Baudrillardian hyper-reality to the specific "barn scene" in *White Noise* is not an inappropriate use of philosophy-to-text analysis. Rather, the problem arises when critics make the move beyond this initial suggested overtone and align the *novel itself* as a fictional imagining of Baudrillardian postmodern philosophy. Such an inversion discourages close-reading by making the text itself nothing more than a simulation of a novel, diminishing its ability to work—as DeLillo has proclaimed on numerous occasions—as a means of "resistance" or as a "counternarrative" to historical occurrences.[64] DeLillo's fiction encourages a space of confrontation, one that may only come to fruition through a greater understanding of our sense of "community" as being transformed into dynamic arrangements that exist only in terms of the connections between isolated individuals.

Coming of age as a member of the Baby Boomer generation, DeLillo witnessed the ties of time, distance, and geography that linked individuals and community loosened by car traffic systems, mass air travel, television broadcasting, mutually assured destruction, the Internet, and the ever-expanding market of personal (and easily transportable) computer gadgetry. Today, people can create and sustain communities any place and any time, and, with this sociotechnical alteration, change what communities (and individual's roles within them) might be. But it is also now the case that a group of isolated individuals can choose to rupture our technologically facilitated sense of community, society, nation—even one's sense of identity is vulnerable.

Like DeLillo himself, this thesis marks the genesis of cultural digitization as occurring in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers.[65] In the wake of such monumental transformations, it is not only the American individual whose role has been changed, but also that of the American writer. In this new fiction, one can see the reflection of a new way of thinking about global relations, a new and ethically challenging way of mapping the tensions between political radicalism, violent insurrection, literary innovation, and the power and force of the emerging global market place.

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[62] Don DeLillo. *Mao II*, (Scriber: New York, 1991), p. 159.
[63] Jean Baudrillard. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majority* (Semiotext(e): New York, 1983 [1978]).
[64] Don DeLillo. "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," *Harper's*, December, 2001.
[65] Peter Henning. 'Interview with Don DeLillo,' *Frankfurter Rundschau*, No. 271, November 20th, 2003, pp. 28-29. In the interview, DeLillo comments that 9/11, "marks the actual beginning of the twenty-first century." See Julia Apitzch's translation of the original—German—interview here: http://perival.com/delillo/interview_henning_2003.html

As an author—a New Yorker born and raised—DeLillo responds to September 11th by explaining what the attacks did to language and story:

> The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is. But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us. Is it too soon? We seem pressed for time, all of us. Time is scarcer now. There is a sense of compression, plans made hurriedly, time forced and distorted. But language is inseparable from the world that provokes it. The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counternarrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel…In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space.[66]

DeLillo's commitment to observing and understanding the society in which he lives and writes is directly related to his insistence on creating a counternarrative. As early as 1964, McLuhan argued that, 'The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and *without any resistance*.'[67] DeLillo's believes that our contemporary authors have a responsibility through the writing of fiction to alter the course of history, to offer a method a resistance to the "effects of technology" through literary engagement.

During an interview with Adam Bagley in 1993, DeLillo again speaks to this "restructuring of reality" through language and narrative:

> Writing is a concentrated form of thinking…a young writer sees that with words he can place himself more clearly into the world. Words on a page, that's all it takes to help him separate himself from the forces around him, streets and people and pressures and feelings. He learns to think about these things, to ride his own sentences into new perceptions.[68]

There is an important dualism at work here. DeLillo wants to "place himself more clearly into the world," even though he views the act of writing as a separation from the "forces around him." A writer, in a sense, must both engage and disengage the real world in order to manifest both an authentic sense of objective reality and a sincere sense of subjective identity. If this is done successfully the author reaches a location of artistic independence, what DeLillo sees as both a personal and cultural liberation: "Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals."[69]

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[66] "In the Ruins"
[67] *Understanding Media*, p. 33, my italics.
[68] Adam Bagley. *The Art of Fiction CXXXV: Don DeLillo*, from *The Paris Review* # 128, Fall 1993, pp. 274-306.
[69] Jonathan Franzen. "Perchance to Dream: In the age of images, a reason to write novels," *Harper's Magazine*, April 1996. As seen in a letter from Don DeLillo to Jonathan Franzen.

Many of DeLillo's contemporaries display a scepticism about accomplishing anything in the "real world" through fiction. The counternarrative in this instance viewed as merely a form of literary egocentrism. William Gass' (1970) assertion that, 'There are no *descriptions* in fiction, there are only *constructions*,' alludes to writing that rejects mimetic fictions which views literary realism as an impossible endeavour.[70] Gass claims that the contemporary novelist must 'cease to pretend that his business is to render the world; he knows, more often now, that his business is to *make* one.'[71] When is this not the inherent task of any literary artist, as *making* unconditionally exhibits itself in the *creation* of art? It is important to illustrate that DeLillo—as an author and an individual—takes umbrage at such restrictive definitions. He deviates from these theorists in his categorical insistence that American authors write a counter-history or counternarrative, as this literary impulse places him at odds with such postmodern ideologies.

1.2 *Beyond Postmodernism: Mimesis in a Time of Rupture*

> What has our culture lost in 1980 that the *avant-garde* had in 1890? Ebullience, idealism, confidence, the belief that there was plenty of territory to explore, and above all the sense that art, in the most disinterested and noble way, could find the necessary metaphors by which a radically changing culture could be explained to its inhabitants.
>
> -Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*[72]

For the purposes of critical coherency in relation to how cultural digitization is altering contemporary American fiction, this section must diagram at least a partial definition of the terms being used so frequently within my analysis of the author's writing. The term "postmodern" needs to be clarified in order to address whether or not DeLillo's fiction is a symptom, a diagnosis, or an endorsement of a postmodern literary aesthetic.

The adjective (or adjectival) noun *postmodern* is used in a number of ways by the French School of theorists. Jean-François Lyotard's work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) is arguably responsible for giving the terms postmodern and postmodernism widespread currency in the English-speaking world. He uses "postmodern" in a sociocultural sense as a transition towards a "knowledge society," with knowledge becoming the most precious resource and commodity, which results in what he calls a "legitimation crisis" for traditional "metanarratives" (narratives that underpin a modern worldview based on the philosophy of the Enlightenment—i.e., liberalism, empiricism, universalism, etc.).[73] While this state of affairs is worrying in itself, anxiety levels are further increased by the growing recourse to science and

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[70] William Gass. *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, (David Godine: Boston, MA, 1970), p. 17, my italics.
[71] Ibid., p. 24, italics in original.
[72] Robert Hughes. *The Shock of the New*, (McGraw-Hill & Random House: 1991), p. 9.
[73] Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translation by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Manchester University Press: 1984 [1979]).

technology as the solution to seemingly any problem, since information technologies act as our main conduit for the dissemination of knowledge into society.

Lyotard contends that the emergence of technoscience has cracked the very foundations of previously held certainties regarding our metaphysical, religious, economic, and political ideologies. As a result, we must recognize the fragmentation of reality, and understand this new environment as a set of competing or collaborating "language games." With this Lyotardian understanding of the postmodern milieu literature, science, and technology are to be considered alternative constructions or "discourse systems," none of which should be privileged as a way of knowing. For the legitimation of knowledge to occur, for a "truth" to be recognized and categorized, it must remain continually aware of its own limitations and *suspicious* of the global knowledge sought by traditional sciences. The grandness and universal quality of the word "knowledge" is knocked off of its elevated perch, sculpted to fit a localized and circumscribed space. This "incredulity" toward metanarratives will insulate us from the illusory effects of technology and science as producers of knowledge, that reality cannot be "seized" by any one medium of interpretation. The incredulous attitude will, in Lyotard's own words, 'let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name' (Lyotard, 1992).[74]

How does the philosophy of postmodernism challenge traditional literary theory and destabilize established fictional genres? How does it affect the contemporary author and the stories s/he writes, and, how does it (re)define the American cultural condition? One of the most prominent voices in this discussion is Linda Hutcheon (1989), who described postmodernism as 'historiographic metafiction,' that is, fiction as a mode which consciously problematizes the making of fiction and history. Postmodern fiction reveals the past as ideologically and discursively constructed. It is a fiction which is directed both inward and outward, concerned both with its status as fiction, narrative or language, and also grounded in some verifiable historical reality.[75] Hutcheon is well aware of a political ambiguity in her account of the way, 'Postmodern texts paradoxically point to the opaque nature of their representational strategies *and at the same time* to their complicity with the notion of the transparency of representation.'[76] In place of a totalizing vision of historical representation, Hutcheon finds postmodern fiction—often through parody and irony— subverts but also inscribes the conventions of realism. The literary text is both critical of and complicit with mimetic representation and the idea of the human at its centre. Hutcheon is quite clear that

[74] Jean-François Lyotard. "Answering the question: what is the postmodern?" as found in *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, (Power Publications: Sydney, 1992), p. 82.
[75] Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (Routledge: London, 1989).
[76] *Ibid*, p. 18, my italics

postmodern fiction is intricately tied to representations of history: the real issue for her is *how* and for *whom* those representations work.

In another formulation, Brian McHale focuses on how postmodern literature engages with questions concerning subjective psychological stabilization and cultural knowledge formation, rather than Hutcheon's notion of historical and political representation (realism/mimesis, fiction/metafiction). McHale's underlying thesis is that postmodernist fiction represents a conceptual shift in emphasis from the 'epistemological' dominant of modernism to the 'ontological' dominant of postmodernism. Writing in 1987, McHale produces a taxonomy of postmodern themes and techniques in *Postmodernist Fiction*, in which he describes postmodernism as 'the shift of dominant from problems of knowing to problems of modes of being—from an *epistemological* dominant to an *ontological* one.'[77] He restates this as a series of interrogatories, or 'strategies which engage and foreground questions like: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?"'[78] McHale extends this claim five years later, in his second book, *Constructing Postmodernism*, in which he states that: '"Post-modernism" foregrounds and lays bare the process of world-making (and –unmaking) and the ontological structure of the fictional world.'[79] However, the cracks begin to show in McHale's model because it requires a formalist approach to cataloguing the features and themes by which the postmodern literary aesthetic can be recognized, and it becomes increasingly unclear whether postmodernism is linked to a *specific* economic, political, or historical formation (e.g., Jameson's notion of 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,' or Fukuyama's 'The End of History and the Last Man').[80]

DeLillo's fiction is best considered a fusion of Hutcheon's and McHale's contentions that historical narratives and knowledge systems that endorse complete ways of knowing have been debunked, creating a postmodern attitude of self-imposed *disillusionment* and *scepticism*. Keeping this postmodern literary aesthetic firmly in place, a conversation between Nick Shay and Klara Sax in *Underworld* (1997) takes on more serious undertones, veering away from a simple discussion between two old friends and former lovers:

> Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction…Many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck.

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[77] Brian McHale. *Postmodernist Fiction*, (Methuen: New York & London, 1987), p. 10, italics in original.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Brian McHale. *Constructing Postmodernism*, (Routledge: London, 1992), p. 36.
[80] One cannot help but notice an oxymoronically constructed form of literary theory and criticism emerging after half a century of postmodern thought. That is, any attempt to define postmodernism runs the risk of becoming a *modernist* survey of *postmodernist* culture, as such a positivist cataloguing approach is inimical to the postmodern desire for fluidity of boundaries, a free play of information systems, and a suspicion of any form of reductionist tabulation.

> Things have no limits now. Money has no limits. I don't understand money anymore. Money is undone. Violence is undone, violence is easier now, it's uprooted, out of control, it has no measure anymore, it has no level of values.[81]

Klara was born into a world that had boundaries and systems of measurements that could be easily understood. As a member of the Baby Boomer generation, the Cold War was a way for Klara to understand herself in relation to some larger cultural and historical context. The clear-cut taking of sides—America vs. the Soviet Union—generated in Klara feelings of ontological stability. The end of this silent war causes Klara to experience the same feelings described by Lyotard's concept of the postmodern "unpresentable": she no longer senses that the world functions according to a plan, as *any* definitive version forever absconds. There is no longer a sociological compass or roadmap, "things have no limits now." Knowledge, money, and violence, have become "undone" causing subjective wisdom and social relations in general to break down. What happens to history in this postmodern equation, when global knowledge is no longer an option? This Lyotardian elimination of metanarratives rips open a vacuum about time and space. Our trusted and reified economies of memory, how we determine our epistemological bearing within the world, become incomprehensible. When one cannot test against memory the veracity of an experience through true-or-false statements, McHale's subversion of the epistemological for the ontological is expressed, as Klara is not questioning *how she knows things,* she is questioning *what things are*.

Klara's nostalgic response to the Cold War manifests itself as a delusory antidote, one based on a period of American history when "the bomb" and nuclear catastrophe was an imminent threat. This idea that the apocalypse was always placed in the future tense created in Klara a false sense of living in the present. When Klara looks back on the timeline of her life, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)—the knowledge that the world could actually end at any moment—gives her life context. DeLillo reproduces in Klara the American desire to falsely historicize an idealized past when the dystopia was safely located in the *future* as a possibility.

In a similar fashion, Baudrillard (1981) comments on this nostalgia for the Cold War condition by stating:

> An explosion is always a promise, it *is* our hope: note how much…the world waits for something to blow up, for destruction to announce itself and remove us from this unnameable panic, from this panic of deterrence that it exercises in the invisible form of the nuclear…But this is precisely what will never happen. What will happen will never again be the explosion, but the implosion. No more energy in the spectacular and pathetic form—all the romanticism of the explosion, which has so much charm, being at the same time that of revolution—but the cold energy of the simulacrum and of its distillation in homeopathic doses in the cold systems of information.[82]

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[81] Ibid., p. 76.

[82] Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Glaser, (University of Michigan Press: 1994 [1981]), p. 55.

When reading this passage one cannot help but think of Murray Siskind's formulation in *White Noise*, that powerful nostalgia always seems to bring us closer to violence. DeLillo evokes his reader's nostalgic response to this American postmodern epoch for the narrative purpose of illustrating the impossibility of such nostalgia in contemporary society, a society and that is dominated by emerging information technologies that, to use Baudrillard's analogy, freeze time and space and change the very nature of violence from an explosion to an implosion, a type of power that is unseen and unheard (like much of the Cold War itself).

The nuclear bomb found its power in the fact that it contained the *potential* for apocalypse, giving Klara the sense that her life was always one step away from a newsreel, that history was something they lived in and created. As the narrator of *Underworld* informs us, 'They made history by the minute in those days. Every sentence there's another war or tremendous downfall. Memorize the dates. The downfall of the empire and the emergence of detergents.'[83] The dormant possibility of nuclear annihilation becomes the ultimate realization of humanity being supplanted by mass technology. Klara's sense of self, her personal identity and experiences, are linked to external and largely non-human agencies. The overarching prospect of a nuclear event places Klara within the framework of a working history, the memories that she generates, the moments that she experiences, will be directly associated with the potential to be forever remembered in the annals of the great American chronicle.

Klara's sense of self-awareness is informed by the Marvin Lundy school of thought, in which Cold War Americans rely on a condition of polarized hostility on the brink of global annihilation in order to form a genuine sense of personal identity and individual agency. As Marvin informs Brian Glassic (this scene happening in the sealed-off, timeless space of Marvin's basement in his home in New Jersey), '"When the tension and the rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and the intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream."'[84] DeLillo uses the character of Klara Sax to echo the postmodern sentiments prevailing over society in America during the 1960s and 1970s, with one of the most conspicuous ideologies being effectively summed-up in Tony Tanner's *The City of Words* (1971). Tanner describes much of postmodern American literature as the exploration of two conflicting views of the universe: that it is absolutely patterned or absolutely random, either of which in its pure form appears threatening.[85] DeLillo is well aware of this postmodern equation, and presents both sides of the coin, as it were, in *Underworld*. This is demonstrated by Nick's reaction to Klara's notions of the "unpresentable" and the "unreal" existing within postmodern society. Nick himself proudly insists on his commitment to a type

[83] Ibid., p. 141.
[84] Ibid., p. 170.
[85] Tony Tanner. *City of Words,* (Harper: New York, 1971).

of pragmatism and empiricism, one devoid of the Lyotardian concepts of a static history and purely circumscribed knowledge:

> I lived responsibly in the real. I didn't accept this business of life as a fiction, or whatever Klara Sax had said when she said that things had become unreal. History was not a matter of missing minutes on the tape. I did not stand helpless before it. I hewed to the texture of collected knowledge, took faith from the solid and availing stuff of experience…We were not excluded from our own lives.[86]

Nick Shay believes in personal agency, that he cannot be externalized from his own experience or made into a "thing" or "object" that simply engages in third-person moments and inconsequential occurrences and encounters. There is a "real world" that Nick sees around him, one that can be measured, understood, and "lived" in.

However, the setting in which DeLillo places Nick Shay during this moment of self-realization is ripe with counterintuitive implications. Nick's stream of consciousness, in which he insists that he is grounded in the real, occurs while sitting in a hotel room, in the middle of a nondescript desert, watching TV. DeLillo often uses the hotel room as a hyperreal space of postmodern dislocation, a room that would mirror all other hotel rooms in any other setting. This particular hotel room is located in the Texan desert, an abstract ecosystem that evokes in the reader a sense of apocalypse, an energy draining, hard-sun, environment that seems void of life (thus making it the perfect space for the testing of America's most powerful nuclear weapons). Nick does not "accept this business of life as a fiction," but it is difficult to miss the implication. He is described as watching television, the screen projecting, 'a man…in a contour chair in a living-room set with a coffee table in front of him and books or the covers of books arrayed on the wall behind.'[87] Here, it is clear that the character Nick is watching is meant to be a double, a televisual representation of Nick himself. *Underworld*, like all of DeLillo's fiction, works at uncovering the significance of obscure connections.

Even as Nick makes declarations about his freedom from self-distortion, the hotel room scene obviously sets up a predicament where Nick is looking at an image on TV that is meant to be symbolic of his own self-externalization. The medium is of the utmost importance here. It is the television, this new electronic forum that provides the viewer with both entertainment and information, which gives us a glimpse into the purpose of setting up these complex dichotomies. These new technological structures completely rearrange Nick's subjective understanding of the world and his place in it. He speaks of the corporate structure, of his life in Phoenix with his family, of how '"things tend to drift dimly inward,"' expanding on these thoughts by contemplating:

> You feel the contact points around you, the caress of linked grids that give you a sense of order and command. It's there in the warbling banks of phones, in the fax machines

[86] Ibid., p. 82.
[87] Ibid.

> and photocopiers and all the oceanic logic stored in your computer. Bemoan technology all you want. It expands your self-esteem and connects you in your well-pressed suit to the things that slip through the world *otherwise unperceived*.[88]

What constitutes Nick's selfhood throughout the novel is intimately connected to the information technologies that have played important roles in each moment of self-realization in his life. From the earliest scenes of the novel, when Nick uses the portable radio to sit on the roof and listen to the play-by-play of the 1951 Thompson homerun, to the novel's conclusion, when atomic bombs are used to dispose of hazardous waste. These scenes cannot be disintermediated from the technologies that help produce them. One also notices the reoccurring warmth and familiarity of the language DeLillo deploys, "the contact points," and "the caress of linked grids," such metaphors serve to further emphasize the almost quixotic manner in which Nick interacts with the various technologies that make up his everyday environment.

If we evaluate Nick Shay and Klara Sax and measure them against Tanner's (1971) postmodern dichotomy of absolute patternicity, or absolute randomness, which character more aptly represents what we might name the postmodern culture? In what one might consider an unconscious response to Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction as illustrative of a postmodern literary aesthetic, DeLillo tells us from the opening page of *Underworld* that, 'Longing on a large scale makes history'. For DeLillo, history in its perceptible form is an indicator of human desire (McKeon, 1987).[89] What does Nick desire? What does Klara desire? In this way, DeLillo considers Cold War America as a historical period intimately connected to the Lacan's notions of desire. Lacanian psychology replaces the Enlightenment's faith in *reason* as the motor for historical change, arguing that the self is split between conscious and unconscious minds (the gap between knowing and being) that the desire for the other is a constituting part of the subject, which in turn drives history.[90] According to John Duvall, DeLillo is 'one of the most important American novelists since 1970' because of 'his fiction's

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[88] Ibid., p. 89, my italics.

[89] Michael McKeon. *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740*, (Johns Hopkins U.P.: Baltimore, 1987), p. 20. DeLillo's recognition of this reciprocity is most likely what lead him to become an author, as, from its very inception, the novel has always both imitated and parodied the writing of history. We must remember Michael McKeon's suggestion, that—as a genre—the novel is a historical form that comes about due to its, 'unrivalled power both to formulate, and to explain, a set of problems that are central to early modern experience. These may be understood as problems of categorical instability, which the novel, originating to resolve, also inevitably reflects.' Such "instabilities," McKeon articulates, are both social and generic, and certainly one of the instabilities the novel has perennially negotiated is its own status as imaginative flight or historical representation.

[90] Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I & Book II* (W.W. Norton & Company: 1991 [1975]), translation by John Forrester, editor Jacques-Alain Miller. See: 'it is only once it is formulated, named in the presence of the other, that desire appears in the full sense of the term...That the subject should come to recognize and to name his/her desire, that is the efficacious action of analysis. But it is not a question of recognizing something which would be entirely given. In naming it, the subject creates, brings forth, a new presence in the world.'

repeated invitation to think historically.'[91] Duvall's assessment is a viable way in which to understand the author, as DeLillo's novels remind us constantly to think beyond the confines of the ordinary and to look at those figures that often evade the frameworks of historiography proper. DeLillo's novels reflect an almost obsessive interest in the history of the post-war decades, they appropriate Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, but add another factor when distinguishing how desire and subjectivity, the conscious and unconscious mind, change history: revolutionary technology.

The nuclear bomb exists in *Underworld* as the definitive technological reference point. Beyond this shared ontological orientation, it also represents a closed techno-psychic continuum in which the Cold War subject is invariably caught, but which is in its very essence external to the subject herself. That is, the characters are not aware of the full extent of the effects of these technologies on their medial consciousness and therefore the ideological changes taking place collectively may go individually unnoticed. DeLillo's characters seem, once again, to be caught in a loop. It is in this way that "the bomb" of *Underworld* is not just a piece of ordinance in a silo somewhere; it is the information technology that imports nuclear geopolitics into our everyday lives.

The emergence of the Cold War touched everything, from the economic and ideological systems—which created or appeased the conditions of international hostility—to the system of concealment and denial which negotiated our relationship with the waste products of the bomb itself (from nuclear power plants, to the actual fallout concerning the human populations in Japan), to the militaristically financed creation of computational systems and the Internet through ARPANET. Thomas Pynchon describes the genesis of this American socioeconomic and technocultural alteration in his novel, *Bleeding Edge* (2013), through a character that lived through the 1950s and 1960s, the father of the protagonist, Ernie Tarnow:

> Everybody thinks now the Eisenhower years were so quaint and cute and boring, but all that had a price, just underneath was the pure terror. Midnight forever. If you stopped even for a minute to think, there it was and you could fall into it so easily. Some fell. Some went nuts, some even took their own lives…Your Internet was their invention, this magical convenience that creeps now like a smell through the smallest details of our lives, the shopping, the housework, the homework, the taxes, absorbing our energy, eating up our precious time. And there's no innocence. Anywhere. Never was. It was conceived in sin, the worst possible. As it kept growing, it never stopped carrying in its heart a bitter-cold death wish for the planet, and don't think anything has changed, kid.[92]

In a similar way, Klara's static Cold War history can be read as a type of metanarrative, one that enforces her sense of identity and establishes sociopolitical boundaries, systems of

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[91] John N. Duvall. "Introduction: The Power of History and the Persistence of Mystery," in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, ed. John N. Duvall (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2008), p. 2.
[92] Thomas Pynchon. *Bleeding Edge*, (Jonathan Cape: London, 2013), pp. 419-420.

measurements from which her subjectivity—as well as that of the nation's—can be defined and understood. Yet, with this existential stabilization came the concomitant technological revolution of the Internet, "this magical convenience" itself was "conceived in sin," materialized from the fallout of instilled militaristic hostilities.

Even more, Mutually Assured Destruction scenarios that American children would perform, a quick hide-under-your-desk routine practiced after the recital of the Pledge of Allegiance would predictably affect the manner in which children viewed the work of scientists and technologists. The evolution of weaponry, the survival of the fittest, now (techno) science shifts from a way to understand the world, and instead becomes a way to control it. Lenny Bruce waxes on this idea during a passage in *Underworld*, parroting Ernie Tarnow's Cold War psychological conditioning of "pure terror" and "midnight forever," the subterranean feeling of apocalyptic dread. Lenny informs his late-night crowd about the true nature of the political negotiations between Soviet Russia and the USA: '"This event is infinitely deeper and more electrifying than anything you might elect to do with you own life. You know that this is? This is twenty-six guys from Harvard deciding our fate."'[93] Lenny Bruce appears in *Underworld* as historically verifiable figure, and DeLillo focuses on the performances that border on rumour, as Bruce's act begins to permeate through the underground tableau of the 1960s New York City club scene (Bruce also catches the attention of the FBI under director J. Edgar Hoover because of his provocative political comedy, revealing yet another thread that DeLillo weaves between the characters and the generational chronology of the narrative). This scene occurs in 'Part 5—Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry (Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s),' a timeframe in which John F. Kennedy (a Harvard alum, along with many in his cabinet) is president, and, a historical moment when the failed military invasion of the Bay of Pigs causes the Cold War hostilities between the USA and Cuba to induce a nationwide paranoia concerning the potential for worldwide nuclear conflict.

Such geopolitical military posturing leads J. Edgar Hoover to contemplate near the midway-point of *Underworld* that with the advancement of nuclear weaponry it is the nation-state—rather than any divine power—that 'control[s] the means of the apocalypse,' the state manifested into the 'godhead of Annihilation and Ruin.'[94] Religion is replaced by a spirituality of doom and American power is directly correlated with its ability to completely destabilize an entire nation with the dropping of a few precisely targeted bombs. When DeLillo's character Chess explains in *Great Jones Street* (1973): '"Whenever there's too much technology, people return to primitive feats,"' he is referring to a strange existential transference of power.[95]

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[93] Ibid., p. 505.
[94] Ibid., p. 563.
[95] Don DeLillo. *Great Jones Street*, (Picador: 1973), p. 252.

Reality has become man-made; technology has replaced God, giving man the ability to wipe Himself and his entire race off of the face of the earth. Technology makes violence easy and gives humanity the ability to generate its own dystopia. When two great opposing powers have the capacity to annihilate one another, we regress to a back to the Old Stories, to Cain and Abel, to our more basic and primal selves. This is Lenny Bruce's greatest lamentation, his trusted exclamation that he uses repeatedly in *Underworld* as a way to express his fear and confusion: '…"*we're all gonna die!*" Lenny loves the post-existential bent of this line. In his giddy shriek the audience can hear the obliteration of the idea of uniqueness and free choice. They can hear the replacement of human isolation by massive and unvaried ruin.'[96]

When Matt Shay attempts to the describe the weapons facility that he and other "bombheads" work at to his girlfriend, Janet, the reader gets a glimpse of how powerful and psychologically transformational these technologies are at the subjective level. Janet's response alludes to the mysterious attraction which influences these scientists to do research on advanced weapons systems:

> People went willingly to these places, scientists' eager to meet some elemental need. Or was it just a patriotic duty or the standard challenge of doing serious work in physics or mathematics? [Matt] thought they went in search, on impulse, almost recklessly, to locate some higher condition.
> "You make it sound like God," she said.[97]

During the Cold War years, America's best and brightest would usually find themselves working at some think-tank or government sponsored laboratory, perhaps even being directly recruited by a branch of the military complex (like Billy Terwilliger in *Ratner's Star*). DeLillo seems to struggle with the realization that humanity's rapid technological advances during the 20th century were invariably linked to the greatest periods of violence, war, and bloodshed. DeLillo is focused on writing a novel that adequately represents this dramatic shift in American consciousness, hoping that an expression of these sociocultural changes fictionally, one might effect change in the real world.

Yet, *Underworld* is less about a pure departure from one stage of American History to the next. Rather than seeing the trajectory as a straight-line, the narrative chronology of the novel goes back-and-fourth between 1951 and 1997, with the Thompson home-run baseball and its 'long arching journey' serving as the object that ties all the separate story-lines together.[98] The emphasis on an underlying connection between these seemingly disparate events, characters, and locales succeeds by mapping two generations of American citizens through this single dynamic movement in American History. The crack of the bat, the testing

[96] Ibid., p. 506, italics in original.
[97] Ibid., p. 457.
[98] Ibid., p. 314.

of the nuke, these are distinct moments which Marvin Lundy cannot help but associate: '…"Which the whole thing is interesting because when they make an atomic bomb, listen to this, they make the radioactive core the exact same size as a baseball."'[99] The suggestion here is the making of history perpetually and recursively happens on both the large and small scales. DeLillo writes this massive novel in ever widening and spiralling circles, going over familiar cultural territory (New York City, J. Edgar Hoover, Lenny Bruce, Sister Edgar, Ismael Muñoz/aka "Moonman 157," etc.) but always reaching deeper and deeper into the essential phenomenon that attracts the gaze of history.

When the Cold War ended, America emerged as the world's leading economic power, and this ascension was directly linked to its ability to create and manufacture the most cutting-edge technological innovations, such as home PCs, portable messaging communicators, aerodynamic audio equipment, VCR and DVD and videogame systems, cheaper and cheaper television sets, and easily transportable photo and recording devices. The geopolitical landscape went from two great powers on the verge of nuclear apocalypse to a globalized marketplace driven by free-market capitalism. DeLillo attempts to articulate the development of an American national identity, that is, how technology both issues the ability to invent our own annihilation while simultaneously bringing about an ostensibly sustainable cultural, political, and economic system. In the specific character examples of Klara Sax and Marvin Lundy, DeLillo uncovers and explains the counterintuitive nature of their nostalgia for the Cold War, their strange longing for the possibility of a nuclear dystopia.

Such a historical, economic, and sociopolitical milieu engenders a clear-cut boundary between two nation states. Klara Sax and Marvin Lundy can be nostalgic for fear and annihilation because these two elements are both products of a moralistic sensibility that encourages a "right" and "wrong" way of living. Having an adversary makes life less complicated, it simplifies matters that are, in fact, far more politically and psychologically intricate. Marvin Lundy explains, '"You need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It's the one constant thing. It's honest, it's dependable."'[100] This dependability vindicates and automates the national public disposition, meaning there is the American way of doing things (the right way), and the Soviet way of doing things (the wrong way). 'War and treaties, eat your Wheaties.'[101] Epistemological and ontological coordinates are set. The underlying assumption is that in such an environment, it is easy to locate one's subjective ideological leanings.

[99] Ibid., p. 172.
[100] Ibid., p. 170.
[101] Ibid., p. 141.

This is the subconscious feeling that Brian Glassic experiences when he goes to a classic-car show. As he describes to Marvin Lundy:

> I went to a car show and it did something to me.
> What did it do?
> Cars from the nineteen-fifties. I don't know.
> You feel sorry for yourself. You think you're missing something and you don't know what it is. You're lonely inside your life. You have a job and a family and a fully executed will, already, at your age, because the whole point is to die prepared, die legal, with all the papers signed. Die liquid, so they can convert to cash. You used to have the same dimensions as the observable universe. Now you're a lost speck. You look at old cars and recall a purpose, a destination.
> It's ridiculous, isn't it? But probably harmless too.
> Nothing is harmless…You're worried and scared. You see the cold war winding down. This makes it hard for you to breath.[102]

Brian reflects Klara's longing for the past, a desire for a steady and secure metanarrative from which one can establish individual purpose and meaning. From the other voice in the conversation, Marvin Lundy attempts to explain the epistemological situation, *why* Brian is experiencing this longing for the past, and *how* historicizing makes his life seem more real, more connected to people, places, and the things that surround him. Brian feels that the existential reorientation caused by the car show is "ridiculous" because he was only a child during the 1950s, and therefore, what could he have personally known about this period of American history? October 3rd, 1951, the "Shot Heard 'Round the World," the testing of a nuclear bomb in Russia that sets off forty years of military animosity. Brian is nostalgic for a piece of American history that he believes had "dimensions," an observable shape, a momentum that carried the nation along, and gave it "purpose." He is searching for a feeling of historical intensity, one that Marvin, and perhaps DeLillo himself, are describing as being more and more difficult to locate in a postmodern, technologically saturated environment. Still, this is a narrative that cannot be tested against history itself, because what is being considered carries an inherent duality: it is in one sense metaphysical, a "longing," and yet in another sense a clearly psychological occurrence, as the scenes that occur in Marvin Lundy's baseball memorabilia basement take on the tone and dialogue of a talk-therapy session between doctor and patient. What Brian ultimately longs for is an America that was innocent and comprehensible, an America that, as Ernie Tarnow rationalizes in *Bleeding Edge*, never truly existed.

DeLillo writes these characters into real history and plays with their ability to properly understand their own longings and desires. When Nick Shay has a stream of consciousness moment about his childhood in the Bronx, he expresses his current feelings of incompleteness, a yearning to go back to his adolescence. He thinks, '"I'll tell you what I long for, the days of

[102] Ibid., p. 170.

disarray, when I didn't give a damn or a fuck or a farthing.'"[103] The reader had been under the impression—via Marvin Lundy and his Cold War historicizing—that the 1950s and 1960s felt more stabilized, that there was a feeling of everyday citizens being parts of extraordinary historical occurrences. Now, we see Nick express a desire for "disarray," for violence and chaos, the neighbourhood confrontations of his youth, in which he used to beat up kids for wandering into his part of Bronx.

Throughout *Underworld*, Nick continues in this decade-to-decade evaluation of his past, looking back through the years of his life, considering how he has changed and how the world has changed. The specific instance quoted above is perhaps the most revealing in regard to Nick's general psychological and existential condition, as he sits in the motionless outpost in the Arizona desert at the end of the twentieth-century, he considers himself as a young man in the seventies. Here, towards the end of the novel, there is once again a longing for his younger self, for the, 'days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real,' the 'days of disarray, when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself.'[104] In *Americana* (1971), where a young David Bell looks *forward*—searching to disclose through film and art his youthful, oedipally conflicted aesthetic radicalism against the possibility of his own resigned maturity—Nick Shay looks *backward* from just such a reconciled position, homesick for his own expired unruliness. *Underworld* generates a keen sense of the beauty of such reconciliation, despite its nostalgia for the repudiations of youth. The prose (or language) of the novel itself, as the narrator phrases it, is, 'alight with a kind of brave ageing,' a sense of the almost spiritual completeness that comes with maturity.[105]

As Nick sees it, the end of the Cold War produces a kind of historical closure, an easing of the restless and questioning spirit. Witnessing the wreckage of the Soviet nuclear programme (DeLillo was presumably inspired by the infamous Semipalatinsk test site) on the outskirts of Kazakhstan at the close of the novel, Nick thinks, 'I begin to feel something drain out of me. Some old opposition, a capacity to resist.'[106] The intensity of the oppositional spirit, that transgressive force which drove David Bell's films in *Americana*—and which fuelled, in a sense, the decades of the Cold War—is here laid to rest in the post-historical calm of the fall of the Berlin wall. But alongside this tranquillity, the novel also keeps alive a longing for narrative disobedience, a will to resist both the pleasures and the anxieties of a mature Western neoliberal democracy.

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[103] Ibid., p. 806.
[104] Ibid., p. 810.
[105] Ibid., p. 809.
[106] Ibid., p. 801.

How can the characters of this novel long for both a stable and erratic history? During an interview in 1998 with Diane Osen, DeLillo says that this scene with Nick is a "telling" admission, as he, "ultimately expresses his regret and longing for the days when he felt physically connected to the earth. The days when he had the freedom to commit transgressive acts. And it's not a nostalgia for innocence, it's a nostalgia for guilt."[107] It is as if Nick's life—as well as Brian Glassic's—had become entirely preordained, destined to be lived inside the safe technological and occupational structures that orient their existential attitudes', so much so that they long for a time of guilt-riddled immaturity, when breaking free from constraints and acting unpredictably becomes ingrained with romanticism. It is not simply that Nick wants to return to his past; it is that he misses the ability to be able to shape his future.

The word "nostalgia" itself—similar to the word "passion" in that it is often misinterpreted—is rooted in pain, in longing, a wish to return home.[108] With time, everyone will experience nostalgia. In this way it is both a deeply personal and intimate feeling, and yet, an emotional condition that we are all destined to encounter. As the garbage guerrilla Jesse Detwiler explains: '"Don't underestimate our capacity for complex longings. Nostalgia for the banned materials of civilization, for the brute force of old industries and old conflicts."'[109] DeLillo is interested in uncovering the moments of nostalgia that can occur when we encounter products, objects, and technologies, that have been purchased with the intention of building a steady narrative that helps define our ontological bearings in a globalized world.

When Nick returns home to Phoenix from a trip to New York City, he experiences a strange sense of nostalgia: 'Home alone, surrounded by all the things and textures that make you familiar, once again, to yourself.'[110] Later, during the epilogue of the novel, Nick again goes through a deep sense of nostalgia that is elicited by products and "things." This time the scene occurs while doing a fly-over of old nuclear test grounds near the Kazakhstan/Mongolian boarder, where model American homes were built to be tested as witnesses to the consequences of nuclear fallout:

> And how strange it is, strange again, more strangeness, to feel a kind of homesickness for the things on the shelves in the houses that still stand, Old Dutch cleanser and Rinso White, all those half-lost icons of the old life, Ipana and Oxydol and Chase and Sanborn,

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[107] Diane Osen. "Window on a Writing Life: A Conversation with National Book Award Winner Don DeLillo," Book of the Month Club, BOMC Reading Room, 1998.

[108] **nostalgia** (n.)—Origin 1770, defined as "severe homesickness considered as a disease," Modern Latin, coined 1668 in a dissertation on the topic at the University of Basel by scholar Johannes Hofer (1669-1752), as a rendering of German *heimweh* "homesickness" (for which see home + woe). From Greek *algos* "pain, grief, distress" (see *-algia* + *nostos*) "homecoming," from *neomai* – "to reach some place, escape, return, get home," from PIE **nes-* "to return safely home" (cognate with Old Norse nest "food for a journey," German *genesen* "to recover," Gothic *ganisan* "to heal," Old English *genesen* "to recover").

[109] Ibid., p. 286.

[110] Ibid., p. 482.

> still intact out here in this nowhere near Mongolia, and does anyone remember why we're doing all this?[111]

The feeling of "strangeness" that Nick is momentarily overwhelmed by is elicited by the simple household products of his youth. His feeling of nostalgia is redolent of Linda Hutcheon's (1998) definition, as it is 'not something you "perceive" *in* an object; it is what you "feel" when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight.'[112] DeLillo contrasts the feelings of homesickness that Nick is experiencing with the overarching potentiality of nuclear war for the purposes of making us confront our yearning for the past in an altered, technologically mediated light—the blinding white-light of a nuclear explosion that is coextensively distant and yet occurring in the present.

When Nick asks, "does anyone remember why we're doing all this?" the strangeness of the experience is impressed on the reader, as we share the same momentary incomprehension. The author's entreaty to participate in this process of nostalgia simultaneously induces a disruption of our own linear perception of the space-time continuum. DeLillo uses this 1950s milieu, the stereotypically maintained idea of innocence and the cliché "simpler-times" ideology of post-WWII America, precisely to illustrate how this historical purity has become infected and compromised in order to demonstrate how such (false) historical remembrances inspire such intense feelings of nostalgia. America emerged from the void of the Cold War as the world's leading economic and military nation-state, and with this ascendance it appears that the material conditions of Klara Sax's, Marvin Lundy's, Brain Glassic's, and Nick Shay's cultural history were lost. For DeLillo, this is not simply coincidental, as it is this same time period when information technologies were shifting to meet the nascent economies being generated by the World Wide Web and the personal computer.

When Marvin Lundy traced the lineage of the Thompson home-run ball, one of the epiphanic moments that occurred during his search was, 'The shock, the power of an ordinary life. It is a thing you could not invent with banks of computers in a dust-free room.'[113] Throughout *Underworld*, indeed, throughout DeLillo's entire oeuvre, the reader recursively encounters these paradoxical metaphors, i.e., the shock of the ordinary, the mystery found in the quotidian, the "seven shades of blue" narrative strategy. Such an authorial approach at first appears unnecessarily inscrutable, but in reality, DeLillo's artistic exploration concerning the importance of language and story for existential equilibrium and his attendant search for neoteric modes of being—coupled with his examination of human subjectivity and its integral connection to technological evolution—demand such a nuanced literary methodology. DeLillo

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[111] Ibid., p. 793.
[112] Linda Hutcheon. "Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern," January 19th, 1998. Available online at: http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html
[113] Ibid., p. 308.

is searching for a way to express the complexity of the commonplace, while maintaining full awareness of the fact that such an expression forever absconds. Yet, each of his novels sets a new rung in the ladder, a new way in which we can climb to a greater understanding the American cultural moment, and a greater understanding of ourselves as individuals.

The question posed earlier, about whether it was Nick or Klara who best exemplified postmodern sentimentality at first seems obvious. Nick Shay has experienced a life devoid of history, barren of a transcendental signifier, reminding us of Fredric Jameson's (1991) characterization of postmodernism as, 'the aesthetic situation engendered by the disappearance of the historical referent,' which, 'finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.' The culture-wide fallout being a, 'waning of…historicity.'[114] With the loss of his father at an early age—and the implicit mystery of this disappearance—Nick loses the steady plotline of the traditional family unit and is left with only scattered, incomplete texts, second and third-hand stories on which he becomes entirely dependent for a sense of existential stabilization. For nearly all of the characters in *Underworld*, the void left in the wake of the abandoned American metanarrative was filled by The Bomb and its omnipotent presence in the Western consciousness during the Cold War period. This piece of early twentieth century military technology helped ossify a national identity, enabling ordinary people to be involved in extraordinary cultural singularities (or, at the very least, to make them *think* that they had participated in something historically exceptional).

Lenny Bruce's "we're all gonna die!" exclamation articulates these enigmatic longings, and, through a stereotypically DeLillian technique, the author rapidly shifts the narrative voice from third-person to second-person, stimulating feelings of immediacy and emotional empathy from the reader: 'Hearing Lenny say it,'

> was wondrously refreshing, it purified his fear and made it public at the same time—it was weak and sick and cowardly and powerless and pathetic and noble somehow, a long, loud, and feelingly high-pitched cry of grief and pain that had an element of sweet defiance…an id-like wail from their own souls, the desperate buried place where you demand recognition of primitive rights and needs.[115]

DeLillo recognizes the semiotic implications of these new militaristic and information technologies, and works to distinguish an art form, a fiction, that can properly represent the dramatic transformation that they are inspiring in day to day life, the moments that have the potential to go "otherwise unperceived." These new technologies are taking American culture and American literature beyond postmodernism, in the same manner that emergent technologies of the post WWII period initiated a move away from the philosophies, political

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[114] Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 1991), p. 25, 18, 21.
[115] Ibid., p. 547.

ideologies, and narratives of modernism. The question becomes: will our artists and authors have the imaginative wherewithal and social sensitivity to keep up with changes brought forth by these rapidly evolving information technologies?

1.3 *Postmodern Narratives: Exploring the Impossibility of Truth*

"It is not [postmodern]. I'm the last guy to ask. If I had to classify myself, it would be in the long line of modernists, from James Joyce through William Faulkner and so on. That has always been my model."

-Don DeLillo, 2010[116]

DeLillo maintains the importance of the novel, the importance of fiction, even in our rapidly changing technocultural environment. By working in real-time, DeLillo writes narratives that endeavour to keep pace with changes happening in contemporary American culture. DeLillo may seem at first to be incapable of realistically interpreting our technologically driven state of affairs, as one would assume that in an evaluation of culture and society of the magnitude and scale of the writers and philosophers already mentioned, the novel would inevitably neglect some of our most serious concerns with simple metaphors, plotlines, and characters (its main function being that of entertainment).[117] One of the most important features concerning the nature of our current technoscape is the manner in which it transforms our long held notions about what it means to be human, in particular, how human beings reach epistemological formulations and how knowledge is fostered and circulated in this new environment.

Power, capital, and the ability to politically persuade are ongoing factors, and they are pivotal to technological triumph. It is commonplace to contend that our technologies are more open, more dynamic, and more complex than ever before. In consequence, we struggle to fully understand them. There is a breakdown of previously maintained existential attitudes occurring in the digital age, an extensive, culture-wide readjustment brought to the forefront by the incursion of information technologies into our everyday lives. This gives the artist a new sociocultural climate from which to operate, as well as a new kind of responsibility. In order to endure literary fiction must adapt, it must find a way to stay relevant in the rapidly adjusting environment.

DeLillo engages postmodern culture by struggling to preserve the value of art in a technologically driven world. Mark Osteen (2000) suggests that DeLillo's work is in constant dialogue with the new Western technoscape, creating narratives that simultaneously provide moments of epistemic epiphany, while sustaining the fundamental mystery of existence through

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[116] Dale Singer. "Take Five: Don't call Don DeLillo's fiction 'postmodern,'" available online at: https://www.stlbeacon.org/#!/content/18046/take_five_dont_call_don_delillos_fiction_postmodern

[117] To paraphrase the famous line from W.H. Auden, the novel makes nothing happen.

an always-lurking scepticism about what is "real" and what is "truthful" concerning the nature of the world and its inhabitants. Osteen names this as a unique kind of "American dread," the prevalent cultural atmosphere of the United States. He argues DeLillo attempts to transform this neoteric national condition through fiction, giving DeLillo's novels a redemptive quality. Language and the act of storytelling can still function as a force against postmodern ennui, irony, and hopelessness. That art—even in a technologically driven age—can still act as a moral and ethical compass, a guide through new cultural territories. DeLillo, for Osteen, 'presents art as the soundest magic against dread, the truest source of radiance and community.'[118]

Throughout his career, DeLillo has maintained that the true power of language—of story—is contained within its unique ability to "remake" both the author and the world:

> What writing means to me is trying to make interesting, clear, beautiful language. Working at sentences and rhythms is probably the most satisfying thing I do as a writer. I think after a while a writer can begin to know himself through his language. He sees someone or something reflected back at him from these constructions. Over the years it's possible for a writer to shape himself as a human being through the language he uses. I think written language, fiction, goes that deep. He not only sees himself but begins to make himself or remake himself. Of course, this is mysterious and subjective territory…Writing also means trying to advance art. Fiction hasn't quite been filled in or done in or worked out. *We make our small leaps.*[119]

Here art, specifically the writing of fiction, has the means to transcend the postmodern, in that it allows the writer to find an original voice, or, perhaps better stated, it continuously helps to regenerate and reshape a sense of identity and purpose through the act of writing stories. For theorists such as Fredric Jameson (1991), the deterioration in regard to a sense of individual identity and agency is inherently connected to a concomitant *cultural* deterioration. To remedy such limitations, borrowing DeLillo's phrase, Jameson *makes his small leaps* through the notion of 'an aesthetic of cognitive mapping' in an effort to resist the obliteration of differences caused by the 'cultural dominant' of postmodern thought.[120]

For Jameson, 'cognitive mapping' is a reorientation of our experience of time and space in an era where the opportunity to place ourselves into a definable time-space location (i.e., a place with a unique, individual identity) has become systematically challenged by the culture of global capitalism, which, for example, replicates the same chain stores, fast-food outlets, theme pubs and shopping malls in every Main Street across America. This is Jameson's 'cure' for the fragmentation and alienation of subjects in a postmodern culture. DeLillo's 'cure' traces

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[118] *American Magic and Dread*, p. 7.
[119] Thomas LeClair. "An Interview with Don DeLillo," *Contemporary Literature*, 1982, p. 19-31, my italics.
[120] *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pp. 88-90. For the concept of the cognitive map, Jameson argues that it is concerned with the issue of individuals' abilities to articulate and represent cultural and social relations in a progressive yet flexible manner, which he contends is 'unpresentable' under the prevailing force of what he prefers to call as 'multinational or late capitalism.'

a similar diagram, with the symptoms of the contemporary economy and technoscape diagnosed and treated with language and fiction. DeLillo's response suggests that there is a powerful sense of literature exerting its redemptive potential through the very practice of narrative creation, which once more gestures towards a literary exegetics, that is, manifesting (or *interpreting*) a sense of identity and self through the very process of storytelling.

David Cowart takes a more direct approach in associating DeLillo with the poststructuralist theory embedded in postmodern philosophy. 'To be sure,' Cowart (2003) writes, 'DeLillo invites his readers to recognize, with poststructuralist theory, the inadequacy of the old model of things and their word labels.'[121] Cowart reemphasizes how readers could easily make the mistake of associating DeLillo's writing as a simple extension of such poststructuralist theory. One must, he continues,

> …test DeLillo's fictions against elements of the postmodern aesthetic defined by such theorists as Lacan, Derrida, and Baudrillard: the foreshortened view of history, the unmooring of subjectivity, radical discontinuity, replication and parody, awareness of the constructedness of all knowledge and myths, resistance to closure, indifference to what Lyotard calls "the solace of good forms," and that "new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" that Fredric Jameson characterizes as "the supreme formal feature of all postmodernisms."[122]

However, for Cowart this is an artificial compatibility. His correlation between DeLillo and postmodern and poststructuralist theory is meant to act as a conduit for further hermeneutic interpretation. Earlier, Cowart was quoted for the purposes of warning the reader against critics who place DeLillo into the same poststructuralist camp. There is an important reason for this, as DeLillo cannot be labelled in such terms. DeLillo's fiction uncovers the depths of language which is disavowed by poststructuralist ideology, neatly summarized as Jameson's (1991) often cited 'postmodern depthlessness.'[123] Cowart (2003) goes on to assert unequivocally that DeLillo should be disentangled from the postmodern literary aesthetic by stating that the author, 'charts new territory for literary art in fictions that constantly probe language for an epistemological *depth* largely *denied by poststructuralist theory*.'[124]

It is important to stress some of the most salient features of poststructuralist theory in order to establish the distinctions between DeLillo and the French School in general. Like Cowart, I am utilizing poststructuralism itself as a product of postmodern thought. Specifically, philosophies related to structuralism's arguments for binary opposition(s)—and the fact that poststructuralism *rejects* the notion of the essential quality of the dominant-relation in such hierarchies—particularly in regard to studies which emphasize the logical and *scientific* nature

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[121] *Physics of Language*, p. 209.
[122] Ibid., p. 11.
[123] *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic*, p. 9.
[124] *Ibid*, p. 12, my italics

of the results (underlying structures in cultural products, such as texts/historical accounts, and analytical concepts that range in academic disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, neurology, and anthropology). Postmodern literature, then, is responding to a theoretical argument which describes postmodernism as the cultural practice emerging from an allegiance to the poststructuralist philosophical assault on notions of stable linguistic meaning and the existence of an unmediated objective reality (Rorty, 1995).[125]

Like Hutcheon, Jameson (1991) argues that postmodern fiction merely reproduces the past as nostalgia, which it links with the eclectic strategies of 'consumerist' popular culture and mass media.[126] Postmodern fiction's implicit belief in a lack of linguistic referentiality, and the difficulty in believing in a history that has any ontological foundation other than that which is linguistically constructed, has led him to be wary of the ideological implications of texts which proclaim no obligation to the realm of reference. Such critics have argued that the linguistic self-referentiality of postmodernism severs the work from objective historical reality, thereby turning the art object into a formalist exercise unrelated to its social conditions of production. Here this thesis must restate that DeLillo's fiction is *intimately* connected to the American cultural reality (his stories reflect that there is a "reality" which objectively exists), and, although his novels might not offer a precise rumination *vis-à-vis* a "state of the nation address" they nonetheless have a distinct realm of reference in the American social, economic, political, and technological moment.

Is this philosophical exegesis necessary to my thesis? And, perhaps the more salient question, what does it have to do with the status of contemporary American fiction? The answers can be found when one considers how postmodern fiction incessantly interrogates epistemological, ideological, and political authority. What emerges is an individual that is constantly questioning her existence (McHale's lack of ontological formulations), her interpersonal relationships, her economic exchanges, and her political stance. Such incredulity fashions a person that must be permanently sceptical through self-referential irony (or PoMo parody and pastiche) in order to avoid being viewed as cliché or unsophisticated.

Many American authors categorized as "post-postmodern" such as David Foster Wallace, Charles Yu, Ruth L. Ozeki, Dave Eggers, Karen Russell, and Junot Díaz find a type of postmodern conditioning associated with the technological appliances of the 1960s, most

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[125] Richard Rorty. "Deconstructionist Theory," from *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Volume 8, *From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, (Cambridge University Press: 1995), p. 173. As Rorty contends, 'That is, words have meaning only because of contrast-effects with other words. "Red" means what it does only by contrast with "blue", "green", etc. "Being" also means nothing except by contrast, not only with "beings" but with "Nature", "God", "Humanity" and indeed every other word in the language. No word can acquire meaning in the way in which philosophers from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell have hoped it might—by being the unmediated expression of something non-linguistic (e.g., an emotion, a sense-datum, a physical object, an idea, a Platonic Form).'

[126] *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic*

notably the television. Wallace (1993) places his generation of authors (the literary generation *proceeding* from postmodernism) in the context of the 1960s intersection of television as a ubiquitous technological appliance and the pervasive influence of postmodern fiction.[127]

Robert McLaughlin (2004) speaks of the transformative, irony-inducing effects of television:

> It cut to the hypocritical heart of post-World War II America's myths—about the American dream, American exceptionalism, the family, justice, equality—that were promulgated through television. As postmodern techniques and attitudes—especially irony—trickled down to popular media, authority-questioning became the dominant mood on television.[128]

For many postmodern authors, the television programs of the 1960s and 70s portrayed a fundamental and distinctively American ideology that was simply incompatible with the "real" world in which they lived. Eventually (beginning in earnest in the mid-1980s), television programs became aware of the American myths they were participating in, and shows such as *Married with Children*, *The Simpsons*, *Twin Peaks*, and *Seinfeld* began to take hold as the ratings leaders in their respective demographics. It did not begin and end with sitcoms and hour-long dramas. Late night programs had also become more cynical and dismissive, two qualities integrated into the very fabric of David Letterman's on-air personality. It became hip to be ironic about nearly everything. Television taught us to see the world in a new way, its incessant presence in the lives of most Americans helped hard-wire viewers to be ironic about the status quo. To espouse postmodern irony was to make the real impossible, but it also afforded a personal defence mechanism against being viewed as unsophisticated or ignorant of the way things "really are."

In the absence of metanarratives, self-referential irony takes hold and demands continual scepticism, and this all-encompassing cynicism leads the "hip" American individual to fear being "caught" taking *anything* seriously. As Wallace (1993) explains, 'the most frightening prospect, for the well-conditioned viewer, becomes leaving oneself open to other's ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability. Other people become judges; the crime is naïveté.'[129] The author moves from essay to fiction, expressing similar sentiments through the youngest of the three Incandenza children in *Infinite Jest* (1996):

> Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic: One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he

[127] "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction"
[128] Robert McLaughlin. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World," *Symploke* vol. 12, nos. 1-2, 2004, pp. 53-68.
[129] "E Unibus," pp. 180-181.

> despises what he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pulses and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia.[130]

The postmodern self-referential irony seen here undermines the capacity for genuine human connection. It jeopardizes individuation and depletes one's ability for imagination, empathy, and pleasure. In postmodern thought, there is no scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything, for everyone. Postmodernism, with its deconstruction of every feature of human existence and its emphasis on individual interpretation can lead us down a road of narcissism, cynicism, and detachment. Post-postmodern authors make an *authentic* and *sincere* attempt to bridge these gaps, with the knowledge that such an artistic endeavour may well be a potentially difficult and endless process. This does not entail that the novel return to the potentially dangerous metanarratives (grand-narratives) of modernism. Instead, the contemporary novel strives to make *real* connections to other individuals, to alleviate (or to help explain) the loneliness felt by characters like Hal Incandenza.

Post-postmodern stories reflect a non-ideological pursuit in which the characters simply find a way to communicate and get along, of striving to have strong communal integrity, valuing others and their human dignity, unabashedly and un-ironically enjoying what they find enjoyable. As Wallace articulates (using nearly identical terms from the fiction of *Infinite Jest*) during an interview with Charlie Rose in 1997: "Since to be really human…Is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic."[131] What Wallace is wishing to convey is that this is an unavoidable feature of what it means to be "a fucking human being."[132] Such a recognition can lead to a greater sense of meaning and optimism in our lives, to live, in a sense, with a kind of uplifting cynicism rather than perpetual self-referential irony. In the end, Wallace's interviews and essays ossify in unambiguous terms the kind of American cultural lamentation that *Infinite Jest* ultimately represents. By identifying and commemorating what it means to be "really human" in a country transformed by televisual mediatisation and techno-corporate advancements, Wallace clearly distinguishes himself from his more detrimentally pessimistic and compulsively ironic postmodern predecessors.

Contemporary American authors find themselves in a difficult position. Certainly there was a time when postmodern fiction was revolutionary; the early writings of Pynchon and Vonnegut are proof that literature can act as an agent of change and spur a culture-wide questioning of the political and economic status quo. But over time, the persistent exploitation of self-referential irony drained it of any potency it once averred to possess. The revolutionary

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[130] David Foster Wallace. *Infinite Jest*, (Little, Brown and Company: 1996), p. 694.
"Anhedonia" is the sociopsychological descriptor for the inability to experience pleasure from social and interpersonal activities generally found to be enjoyable.
[131] Full interview available on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm94gUBCih8
[132] Interview with Charlies Rose, 1997.

spirit of postmodern fiction has instead, in the words of McLaughlin (2004), 'become reactionary as it makes impossible a sincere assertion about the world: sincerity is always subject to the Letterman-esque smirk and eye-rolling.'[133] Or, in the words of Wallace himself, "a hip cynicism, a hatred that winds and nudges you and pretends it's just kidding" (McCaffery, 1993).[134]

The sheer amount of information being received by the author has undoubtedly been exponentially increased by the mediatisation of the postmodern period, making the contemporary writer more vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy. In *Infinite Jest* and "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace was considering how to transcend the ironic, to return to an objective reality which could yield the possibility of authentic human connection, a possibility that postmodernism had eroded through twenty-five years of entertainment television and literature. How can a writer surpass these new boundaries? There remains a power in the re-naming suggested by DeLillo earlier in this chapter.

In 1997, the very same year of both the novel and the interview from Wallace cited above, DeLillo wrote "The Power of History" in the *New York Times Magazine*. Within the essay, DeLillo describes writing fiction as, '…a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe. Such qualities will sooner or later state their adversarial relationship with history, revealing the novelist's perennial effort to detect the hidden nature of things.'[135] DeLillo's insistence that the novelist, "detect the hidden nature of things" shows a continued conviction that language (re)defines and reveals the very world that we live in. He continues, "Let it break the faith of conventional re-creation," let it, "work in opposition to the enormous technology of war that dominated the era and shaped the book's [*Underworld*] themes."[136] This "opposition" disconnects conventional Cold War polarities, unpacks the bipolar strategy of "us versus them," and wilfully dismembers tidy causal structures of thought and vision, an assault on polarities at all levels that most reviewers of *Underworld* could sense but never fully explain. DeLillo tackles the superficially seamless dualisms of nuclear strategies, and as this occurs, according to the author, 'the lost history […] becomes the detailed weave of novels. Fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance.'[137] Postmodernism drains fiction of its ability to "reveal" the "hidden nature of things" in its continued scepticism about knowledge formation and knowledge dissemination. How can one

[133] "Post-Postmodern Discontent," p. 64.
[134] Larry McCaffery. "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," as found in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 1993, 13(2), p. 127-50, p. 147.
[135] Don DeLillo. "The Power of History," *New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 1997, p. 62.
[136] Ibid., p. 63.
[137] Ibid.

re-write history, or have an "adversarial" stance against history, when postmodernism maintains that history is—by its very nature—relativistic?

I think that it is now possible to see, across a range of cultures, and in a number of different forms of artistic expression, something like the waning of postmodern historicism, and something along the lines of an emergence of a new historical attitude, a new and different structure of historical feeling. However, it should be clear at this point that the faculty to mark critically this historical transition—the transition from a postmodern to a twenty-first century awareness—has been weakened by the very historical condition that the critical language of contemporary historicity attempted to define. Which is to say, the methods of inheritance suggested earlier in this chapter, i.e., the chronological and historical procedures which govern notions of consecutive progress (technology and science), have been arrested by nearly a century of critical thought which has steadily eroded the materiality or significance (ontological reality) of the linear historical development. To locate oneself as surfacing *after* postmodernism is to orient oneself in relation to a phenomenon whose cultural power has depended on its erasure of the temporal distinction between before and after, history and story, life and fiction. It is as if DeLillo is asking: how does the artist or author position themselves in the wake (or the aftermath) of a cultural event (or period) which is defined by its *cancellation of historical progression*, its collapsing of the past, present, and future into the same narrative moment?

During an interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993, David Foster Wallace responds to this line of questioning through a kind of post-postmodern reintroduction of the historical referent, focusing on the negative effects of irony and pessimism on the state of contemporary American fiction:

> Irony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for. That's what made the early postmodernists great artists. The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets us up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicities…The problem is that once the rules for art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, then what do we do? […] Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naïve to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving.[138]

It is important to note that Wallace is not calling for a return to some utopic pre-postmodern (dare I say, Modern) period where innocence and "non-self-aware" language was still a possibility. He is not suggesting a return to realism be depicted in literature, or an outright rejection of the French School's contribution to assessing and explaining postmodern philosophy as a whole. Rather, he suggests that the contemporary author should work *through*

[138] "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," p. 147.

self-referential irony in order to imagine a new language—a new narrative—which can foster empathetic connections among people and assist in understanding ourselves and the society in which we exist.

There must be a line drawn in the sand for the author writing in this new post-postmodern domain. A retreat to the safe literary modes and tropes of the previous generation renders a novel which is merely reiterative and, therefore, culturally ineffectual. Don DeLillo is a unique artist who maintains an imaginative ability to evaluate and write about American culture and society without accommodating postmodern self-referential irony. DeLillo succeeds in absorbing this postmodern sensibility without letting it fully mature into "hip cynicism/literary savvy." Indeed, DeLillo (please forgive the obvious allusion to *Underworld*) never takes his eye off the ball. The struggle for today's writers of fiction occurs when the discourse-saturated world in which they exist makes the idea of human connection unreachable, when any concrete notions of ontological and subjective understanding and historical union are severed by the rhetorical dance of postmodern complexity.

Throughout this his forty-year career as an author of fiction, DeLillo has maintained a burgeoning desire for reconstructing what was once deconstructed, fragmented, or overlooked. His novels work to uncover the fundamental and essential message of literature and of art itself: that both deconstruction and reconstruction hold equal importance on a continuum of cultural, historical, and technological transformations. As Adam Begley (1997) observes, "If everything in the culture argues against the novel, that's what DeLillo's going to make. If celebrity is the expected path, he'll find a detour. He chooses to set up shop on the far periphery, in the shadows—out of sight, but with a clear view of the center."[139] The cultural margins, then, rather paradoxically afford the best vantage point from which to observe, and this authorial hawks-nest is precisely the location Wallace was alluding to when he commented that writers of fiction are "born watchers." In DeLillo's latest novel *Zero K* (2016), the protagonist Jeffery Lockhart speaks vicariously for the author: 'Music and books, simply there, the walls, the floor, the furniture, the slight misalignment of two pictures that hang on the living room wall. I leave objects as they are. I look and let them be. I study every physical minute.'[140] DeLillo's fiction continuously leads the reader to a sense of inexplicable mystery (how does one *study* time, how is a minute *physical*?) to ever-evolving subjective reconciliations that recognize the infinite complexities of an ordinary existence.

Nearly fifteen years after the author's interview with Larry McCaffery, Jonathan Lethem (2007) appropriates some of Wallace's words and demonstrates the challenge of writing out of a world entirely devoid of truth claims:

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[139] Adam Begley. "Don DeLillo: *Americana, Mao II, and Underworld*," *Southwest Review*, 82.4, 1997, p. 490.
[140] Don DeLillo. *Zero K*, (Scriber: New York, 2016), p. 218.

> In reimaging what human life might truly be like over there across the chasms of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, imago, and appearance, artists are paradoxically trying to restore what's taken for "real" to three whole dimensions, to reconstruct a univocally round world out of disparate streams of flat sights.[141]

This new appraisal of the "real" that Lethem challenges the contemporary writer to uncover has become increasingly complicated with the intrusion of information technologies into the quotidian aspects of culture and society. Postmodernism's founding fathers reacted against the modernist conception of epistemological systems as totalizing structures that claimed to explain all phenomena and contain them in one absolute truth and that sought to disseminate that truth though a *controlling* will to power. Postmodernism managed to critique and "deconstruct" these controlling systems and their claims to an unmediated reality. Thus postmodernism, as Wallace clarified earlier, successfully explored the limits of knowledge, the systems that exist behind systems, and the potential for multiple, alternate realities.

However, the negative emphasis that postmodern critical theorists, such as Virilio, Lyotard, and Baudrillard, have placed on technology—known by its many synonyms as the "material," or the "object," or the "artefact," or the "gadget"—has positioned all of information technology as the manufacturer of alienation and inauthentic experience. Such a pessimistic disposition towards technological intermediality views any mechanically abetted activity as a non-social endeavour, as human beings are supposed to relate to (and directly communicate with) other humans, without the assistance of lifeless technological objects. But can one simply assert that technological progress inevitably comes at the cost of reducing face-to-face interaction—which in turn weakens the social and cultural framework—without providing sufficient evidence? This chapter argues that DeLillo, in both his essays and fiction, has never subscribed to such a rigid techno-social dichotomization. I will return now to an examination of DeLillo's most reputable "postmodern" fiction in order to reinforce this observation.

1.4 *Phenomenological Magic: Knowing Your Code*

Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

-T.S. Eliot, *The Rock*[142]

The protagonist of *White Noise* is the angst-ridden professor of Hitler studies, Jack Gladney, and it is through this character that DeLillo explores the many themes and philosophies of the postmodern period. Jack's most poignant moments of self-realization occur when technology

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[141] Jonathan Lethem. "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," as found in *Harper's*, February, 2007, p. 59-71.
[142] *The Rock: A Pageant Play*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: 2014 [1934]).

confronts or modifies his sense of individuality, providing an overload of new information, while simultaneously creating a vacuum of knowledge. As early as 1985, with the release of *White Noise*, DeLillo was pragmatically confronting media technology's influence on subjectivity and identify formation. All of DeLillo's fiction, from *Americana* (1971) to *Zero K* (2016), includes encounters of technological systems and routine human experience. *White Noise* separates itself from DeLillo's earlier works because it insists on engaging postmodern uncertainty and the transformation of knowledge in a society driven by information technologies.

The complex vortex that emerges when technology intermingles with one's everyday existence is an incredibly difficult phenomenon to translate into fiction. Deep psychological changes take place almost without perception, at a level ripe with paradoxical significance. This sensibility is dramatized in *White Noise* frequently, but perhaps one of the most eerie moments occurs when Jack sees his wife's posture class broadcast on local television station.

> Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glade through the wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say goodbye to us from the fluorescent screen? [...] Her appearance on the screen made me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead. If she was not dead, was I? […] The face in black and white, animated but also flat, distanced, sealed off, timeless. It was but wasn't her…Waves and radiation. Something leaked through the mesh. She was shining a light on us, she was coming into being, endlessly being formed and reformed as the muscles in her face worked at smiling and speaking, as the electronic dots swarmed.[143]

As we read Jack's stream of consciousness in the scene above, DeLillo's brilliance and power as a writer become apparent. Through his obsessive attention of a seemingly innocent encounter with television we see that it can reformat one's entire phenomenological understanding of the world. Here, the amalgamation of the intimate with the ordinary occurs, imbuing the moment with almost transcendental intonations, as if watching television is a metaphysical experience, rather than harmless entertainment. Jack's impression of seeing his wife on television prompts philosophical queries concerning the very nature of being. Babette, in being projected through the television, is both an embodied and disembodied presence; she is released from space and time, reinscribed into a lifeless and deathless presence by the televisual aura.

Television is not seen as acting as an engine of understanding, or functioning as a sort of prosthesis, a McLuhanian extension of our senses into a new realm of knowledge through electronic mediatisation. Instead, it paradoxically eliminates Jack's ability to apprehend truth. This scene acts as a fictional depiction of the Heisenberg principle.[144] Jack's ability to observe

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[143] Ibid., p. 104.

[144] Alok Jha. "What is Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle? How the sun shines and why the vacuum of space is not actually empty," *The Guardian*, November 10th, 2013.

Babette on the television rearranges his physical position in the world, and he wonders—"If she was not dead, was I?"—as if his consciousness is altered by his perception of his wife in the two-dimensional space. Television serves a dual purpose in this strange scene. Babette is briefly made immortal, no longer transfixed by the physical limitations of time and space. But within the same moment, she is stolen from Jack, made into a distant figure who no longer has the designation of "wife," "mother," or "lover." She is a character on Jack's television, and yet, a sense of physical proximity is lost. The manner in which Jack perceives Babette on the television offers both alienation and intimacy simultaneously, "it was and wasn't her." Jack's confused impression of televisual Babette provokes thoughts of Murray's discourses on the relationship between widespread cultural anxiety and the evolution of media.

In a world where television cameras have invaded every feature of our existence, from the church basement where Babette is teaching her class, to the isles of the grocery store where the Gladneys do their weekly shopping, DeLillo seeks out the effects of these new "waves and radiations," he wishes to find a thread of meaning, an understanding of how we are being transformed by these seemingly omnipresent media technologies. Jack describes Babette "coming into being," as if the television literally gives birth to an electronic Babette, an entirely separate and yet entirely familiar entity. This is the magic of the televisual encounter, of seeing familiar individuals' projected in mundane media spaces, or even more to the point, of seeing *ourselves* projected electronically. In *White Noise*, television is no longer the sole environment of movie stars, historical figures, and famous athletes—of Hitler and Elvis—it now mediates much of the ordinary human experience.

Shaken by witnessing the electronic Babette, Jack attempts to calm himself with practical reassurances, 'I tried to tell myself it was only television—whatever that was, however it worked—and not some journey out of life and death, not some mysterious separation.'[145] The mundane aspect of television, its ordinariness, is meant to serve as an antidote to Jack's alienation. Still, even as he attempts to readjust himself existentially through recognizing the routine nature of the televisual experience, he must admit to the fact that he essentially has no idea how a television actually functions. It is a machine—a distinct unit of technology—which goes far beyond his knowledge.

In fact, the basic physical principles that make television possible are unknown to the vast majority of people who watch it. Jack *knows* this; it is inherent even in his stream of consciousness. David Weinberger (2011) identifies Jack's televisual confusion as a precursor

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The most basic definition of the Heisenberg principle: the scientific principle stating that it is impossible to determine with perfect accuracy both the position and momentum of a particle at any given point in time.

[145] Ibid., p. 105.

to what he calls a "crisis of knowledge" happening in the early-to-mid aughts, which he contends is a result of information technologies cultural omnipresence:

> When we talk about information overload these days we're usually not thinking of it as a psychological syndrome but as a *cultural condition*. And the fear that keeps us awake at night is not that all this information will cause us to have a mental breakdown but that we are not getting enough of the information we need […] There was always too much to know, but now that fact is thrown in our faces at every turn. Now we know that there's too much for us to know. And that has consequences.[146]

Weinberger's recognition that information overload is a cultural condition rather than a subjective psychological issue is echoed in *White Noise*, as the majority of main characters struggle with the consequences of media technology's infiltration of their everyday lives. Again, the reader is confronted with the riddle of postmodern uncertainty. Jack's technoscape, seen here through the medium of television, only seems to heighten his feelings of disorientation and confusion in relation to this newly mediated environment. But unlike other authors working through the prism of postmodern scepticism, DeLillo gives Jack the ability to recognize the effects of a technoscape entrenched with paradoxes, and in doing so, allows for the possibility of existential understanding.

What does this existential equilibrium entail, exactly? When Jack's son Heinrich challenges him to "explain a radio," we see DeLillo working among the postmodern philosophies of his time through the literary vehicle of a stereotypical father-son interaction. Except that in this instance, Heinrich is the one giving the important life-lessons, inverting our traditional ideals of the father instructing the morals and ethics of his son. Jack (as he always does when dealing with his creepy progeny) responds with an old-fashioned voice, one embedded with rationality and matter-of-factness:

> There's no mystery. Powerful transmitters send signals. They travel through the air, to be picked up by receivers.
> They travel through the air. What, like birds? Why not tell them magic? They travel through the air in magic waves.[147]

Heinrich challenges complete ways of knowing, which echoes the postmodern attitude of circumscribed knowledge and the eradication of the transcendental signifier. The radio, much like the television, seems to be a commonplace, measurable, and dependable piece of technology. But again, Jack does not entirely comprehend the physical properties, the mechanisms that make a radio signal broadcast through his speakers and into his consciousness. It might as well be, to use Heinrich's words, "magic waves."

The subjective experience of recognizing that one cannot completely comprehend anything in its totality generates a cultural outlook in the general public that concedes to

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[146] David Weinberger. *Too Big to Know*, (Basic Books Group: New York, 2011), p. 9, my italics.
[147] Ibid., p. 148.

ontological ambiguity. The influences of postmodernism expand, rather than contract, when exposed with the information technologies of the time: the television, the radio, the personal computer, psychotropic prescriptions designed by advanced medical science, the personal firearm; all of these technologies are introduced within the pages of *White Noise*, and they all collide with Jack's tenuous state of existence. Yet, there is also a sense within the novel that Jack is constantly challenging the postmodern sentiments of the 1980s. By proclaiming the 'end of skepticism,' DeLillo opens the door to a very important question.[148] If fiction and reality have traded places, and everything is true because nothing is true, what happens to our abilities to observe, describe, and understand the world in which we exist? DeLillo offers a way into the technical mysteriousness and postmodern uncertainty of his time and commissions his readers to maintain their capacity for critical thought even in spite of the apparent impossibility of objective knowledge.

Heinrich plays a dual role within *White Noise*, acting both adversarial and cooperative to the notion postmodern ambiguity. His self-proclaimed "critical observer position" sets up a dichotomy in which postmodern uncertainty bangs heads and locks horns with empirical knowledge.[149] When asked if he would like to visit his mother in Montana next summer, Heinrich responds, '"Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? How can you be sure about something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex?"'[150] When asked if his snake-loving friend Orest Mercator is happy, '"He thinks he's happy but it's just a nerve cell in his brain that's getting too much stimulation."'[151] In this specific scene, Heinrich's neurological relativism exhibits a positivist interpretation to his subjective emotional state, in that he completely disassociates his physical body from a wider understanding of human consciousness. DeLillo asks the reader to contemplate this anti-dualism, to question whether or not Heinrich is, in the end, wrong. Is there a distinction between the mind and the brain and the body? The kind of wisdom or knowledge in which Heinrich engages with is a distinctly 1980s kind of knowledge, one that deconstructs the very possibility of knowledge itself. By giving voice to an oppositional line of thinking through the character of Heinrich Gladney, DeLillo sets up a discourse in which the reader is challenged to explore both sides of the philosophical argument.

White Noise brilliantly introduced us to a postmodern generation with its elements of half-truths, simulations, spectacles, and falsities. With the use of the word "generation," one assumes that there will be a subsequent movement away from postmodernism into something

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[148] Ibid., p. 27.
[149] Ibid., p. 103.
[150] Ibid., p. 45.
[151] Ibid., p. 182.

new. During the 1980s, postmodernism was embedded in the social, political, and historical context in which thinkers, writers, academics and intellectuals interacted with the philosophy of deconstruction and poststructuralism. In doing so, postmodern uncertainty was passed on to younger minds (whether intentionally or not). This assertion—that postmodernism is in a sense a lived trajectory and not merely a philosophy of rhetorical intervention—is an important distinction to make. It changes postmodernism from a succinct genre of architecture, art and literature, and expands its meaning to be understood as a historical and sociological phenomenon (postmodernism / Postmodernity). To describe postmodernism thusly is to argue that any "solution" to the problems of ontological vacuity and knowledge formation is much more complicated than a simple return to the logic of structuralism. In other words: postmodernism has happened, and its occurrence was so powerful and transformational that the results are nearly impossible to take back, repress, or ignore. Contemporary critics find themselves in the strange position of having to distinguish the postmodern literary aesthetic from the socio-historical phase of Postmodernity.

Is such a differentiation possible, however? That is, can the critic or theorist to extricate the influences of postmodern culture from the postmodern literary aesthetic? As the philosopher Richard Kearney contemplated nearly twenty years ago:

> Where do we go from here? How may we hope to ever escape the endless self-parodying of postmodernism which announces the "end" of everything but itself? And if postmodernism subverts the very opposition between the imaginary and the real, to the point where each dissolves into an empty imitation of the other, can we speak of imagination at all? Does imagination itself not threaten to disappear with the disappearance of man? Is there life, for the human imagination, after deconstructionism?[152]

The strategy that Kearney suggests, the answer to his many questions above, is to accept an uncertain subjectivity. Kearney recognizes that even with the deferral of traditional Western philosophy and the annihilation of conventional assumptions about space, time, and language, we still live and interact in the real world. Additionally, this postmodern interruption does not obstruct the necessity of making daily social and ethical decisions. As Ted Hiebert (2012) suggests, 'In other words, [it] is not simply to resist or counter postmodernism, but to actually use deconstruction to undermine deconstruction—and in so doing, to re-open the question of uncertainty to the possibility of that which is lived out despite the indeterminacy of meaning.'[153] If we consider DeLillo's foundational authorial motivation, his incentive to rehabilitate the cultural imagination, to inspire others (and one's self) to think and act and live in new ways, to write a counter-history or counter-narrative, such methods allow for a kind of cross-

[152] Richard Kearney. *The Wake of the Imagination*, (Routledge: London, 1998), p. 386.
[153] Ted Hiebert. *In Praise of Nonsense: Aesthetics, Uncertainty, and Postmodern Identity*, (McGill-Queen's University Press: Quebec, 2012), p. 15.

examination—or philosophical challenge—to postmodern uncertainty. Identifying objective truths might have become incredibly difficult (or according to Derrida, an outright impossibility), but that does not mean the search for human knowledge and human flourishing stops with our recognition of postmodern scepticism.[154]

An environment that continuously deconstructs reality creates an individual who constantly questions the world, which DeLillo gives us in the character of Heinrich. Utilizing *White Noise* once again as an example of postmodern ambiguity, DeLillo asks the reader to consider a simple question: What is rain? More precisely, this is the question presented by Heinrich to his father. Jack must locate and isolate the physical properties of rain, the reality of rain. Jack, adopting the cliché "if-it-looks-like-a-duck" logic responds, '"It's the stuff that falls from the sky and gets you what you called wet.'"[155] However, Heinrich, like a boxer who has pulled the classic rope-a-dope move on his opponent, has Jack cornered here: '"I'm not wet,'" he gloats, '"Are you wet?"' Jack is not wet, nor is Heinrich. This causes Jack to retreat from his initial stance, and he is forced to admit that his argumentation has logical holes. Heinrich's reasoning works in this scene because they are sitting in Jack's car. The weather report heard over the radio predicted rain, they were driving in the rain, and yet Jack cannot convince his son of the reality of rain. According to Jack's own embodied definition, it is actually not raining as far as they are concerned because of their technologically mediated situation. The car interferes with the reality of nature and protects them from getting wet. This, in a very curious way, vindicates Heinrich's radical scepticism.

But this whole episode is a bit ridiculous, is it not? As Jack laments, '"another victory for the sophists"' demonstrating a particular indictment of the absurdity of Heinrich's arguments.[156] Rain is rain, being wet is being wet (*Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*). If one adopts the epistemological chaos of Heinrich's postmodern ideology, knowledge formation and the development of any kind of objective meaning are jeopardised, only to be replaced by ontological obscurity and the fragmentation of personal identity. What are the psychological results? Fear, paranoia, anxiety, and dread seem to be the obvious answers. However, DeLillo is careful to recognize that uncertainty, while being an uncomfortable result of postmodern thought, might also be the only manner in which to confront the fragmentation of knowledge brought forth by deconstruction in the first instance. DeLillo is asking: in a technologically mediated postmodern world, where uncertainty seems

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[154] Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore University Press: 1976 [1967]), p. 10. See: 'The "rationality" which governs a writing thus enlarged and radicalized, no longer issues from a logos. Further, it inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of *truth*.'
[155] Ibid., p. 24.
[156] Ibid., p. 25.

to be so thoroughly entrenched that it infects the very air that we breathe, how do we reach a sense of subjective understanding, let alone objective truth? One must consider that the author is writing *White Noise* at the same time of Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Derrida's introduction to the American reading public and academia at large. The fact that DeLillo's observational abilities pre-empt the popular understanding of the French School's ideas concerning poststructuralism and postmodernism validates his unique ability to perceive cultural movements as they occur in real-time.

In *White Noise*, when Murray Jay Siskind says, '"Everything is connected. Everything and nothing, to be precise"'[157] or similarly when Matt Shay in *Underworld* struggles with the notion that, '"everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does"' it demonstrates DeLillo's understanding of the paradoxical life lived in an environment of postmodern ambiguity.[158] It also intimates the potential discovery of some new vision or perspective, that will evolve out of the ruins of the Cold War, postmodern indeterminacy, and cultural mediatisation. Throughout his forty-year career as an author, DeLillo has consistently written into his novels a portal—an entranceway for his characters into the possibility of an authentic and sincere lived experience—one which distinctly maintains human value in the climate of postmodern uncertainty. His stories exhibit at once a tendency towards complete ways of seeing, towards an expanded form in which readers might see the world whole, but also an opposite tendency towards fragmentation, a kind of broken failure of collective sight. In the conclusive section to this chapter, I explore how DeLillo's fiction balances these two approaches to reach a unique artistic position.

1.5 *"Tell Us How the World Works": A Process of World Modeling*

> The history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and them same.
>
> -Nancy Armstrong,[159]

By describing the way in which cultural meanings have become increasingly complex—principally with the intrusion of media technologies into the poststructuralist binary context of the endless deferring of signs for other signs[160]—*White Noise* evokes what DeLillo refers to as

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[157] Ibid., p. 217.
[158] Ibid., p. 465.
[159] Nancy Armstrong. *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900*, (Columbia University Press: New York, 2005), p. 3.
[160] Jacques Derrida. *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1982), p. 26. See: 'At the point at which the concept of différance, and the chain attached to it, intervenes, all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics (signifier/signified; sensible/intelligible; writing/speech; passivity/activity; etc.)—to the extent that they ultimately refer to the presence of something present (for example, in the form of the identity of the subject who is present for all his operations, present beneath every accident or event, self-present in its "living speech," in its enunciations, in the present objects and acts of its

"a kind of radiance in dailiness" (DeCurtis, 1988).[161] Or, in Jack's own words: "'In the commonplace I find unexpected themes and intensities.'"[162] Everywhere Jack turns, he is confronted by emergent technology. From the supermarket, with its automatic doors and price-tag scanners, to the ATM, the television, and the radio, Jack's technoscape is unavoidable. Even Jack's immediate ecosystem has been transformed by technology, in that the catalyst for the major plotline of the novel—known as "The Airborne Toxic Event"—was caused by a chemical spill at a nearby home-cleaning supplies manufacturing plant. He is surrounded by Baudrillardian "gadgets," manmade pieces of electronic technologies that brim with awe-inspiring implications. How do these technologies affect the climate of uncertainty in which Jack exists? Certainly, they prompt feelings of unfamiliarity in Jack's subjective experience, but they also feel as if they belong, as if the very air of scepticism is taken for granted. For Jack, the question of uncertainty is a consequence of the social intensification of technological living—and perhaps more to the point—an inevitable conclusion of the psychic dissonance brought on by postmodernism in a more general sense.

When Jack encounters an ATM (a piece of technology that this thesis will consider in *Cosmopolis* as well) he is prompted to enter his "secret code," which causes him to ponder the continual transformation of the banking system into some global cybernetic organism:

> The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now.[163]

The code acts as an existential passport into a networked world of digital information. Here, the reader comes across elements reminiscent of the elimination of time and space that resonate with Jack's encounter of televisual Babette. Similarly, the scene also offers a way in; it grants a unique technological access. Heinrich's epistemological ambiguity—his dismissal of any totalitarian knowledge system—is replaced with a transcendent sort of technological ubiquity via the ATM.

There is a safety provided by these commercial technologies that goes far beyond straightforward financial reassurance, as the use of the words, "blessed," "support," and

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language, etc.)—become non pertinent. They all amount, at one moment or another, to a subordination of the movement of différance in favor of the presence of a value or a meaning supposedly antecedent to différance, more original than it, exceeding and governing it in the last analysis. This is still the presence of what we called above the "transcendental signified."'

[161] Anthony DeCurtis. "Q&A: Don DeLillo…Exploring 'Libra' and the Assassination of John F, Kennedy," *Rolling Stone*, November 17th, 1988. Available online: http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/matters-of-fact-and-fiction-19881117

[162] Ibid., p. 184.

[163] Ibid., p. 46.

"approval" inscribe a simple ATM transaction with a spiritualized affectation. The combination of Jack and his secret code reformulate an existential environment that is fundamental to the configuration of his personal identity. Yet, there remains the brief moment involving the violent escorting of the deranged person, an occurrence that is abruptly alluded to, but never fully explained. Why does DeLillo insert this into the ATM scene? Is there a correlation between this new automated banking system and insanity? The observation comes out of nowhere, interrupting Jack's description of his underlying connection to his PIN and to the ATM. He does not ask why this person is being escorted out, nor does he give the impression that he cares. His sense of empathy rests more with the financial institution of the bank than it does with another human being. The deranged person also hints at a sense of exclusion from the system. Not every individual is allowed to participate in this "pleasing interaction," which evokes a recognition of the potential danger of being caught outside of the system.

The letter that Jack receives from his bank later in the novel exhorts him to, 'Know your code. Reveal your code to no one. Only your code allows you to enter the system.'[164] The economic technologies that exist in Jack's world can serve as a resistance to postmodern uncertainty, but they are also closely coupled to Virilio's notions of an integrally multifaceted technoscape. If the authentication of Jack's true consciousness and the confirmation of his personal identity can only be accomplished by navigating his way into the numerous systems of commercial and electronic technologies, how can the reader be certain that he is not simply an echo, a human being without human consciousness? Does this render Jack as a piece of gadgetry himself, or, as he contemplates in the novel, has he become so dependent on technology that he has become a kind of cyborg, 'technology with a human face' a walking, talking, embodiment of various forms of economic and communications media that inform his every thought and action?[165]

The most salient piece of technology next to the television in *White Noise* is the psycho-pharmaceutical pill known as "Dylar," a product that deconstructs conventional representations of external influence and internal agency, of mechanism and subjectivity. The drug itself also reflects Heinrich's notions of neurological relativism, evoking Jack's postmodern connectedness to his technological environment. Jack thinks, 'Dylar is almost as ingenious as the microorganisms that ate the billowing cloud,' alluding to the "Airborne Toxic Event" from earlier in the novel, which inspired Jack's initial fears regarding his mortality and supposed illness.[166] Science and technology caused the Airborne Toxic Event, and yet it will be *through*

[164] Ibid., p. 295.
[165] Ibid., p. 211.
[166] Ibid., p. 190.

science and technology that Jack attempts to repress his own inscrutable fears caused by his exposure. His moral dilemma concerning his potentially lethal inhalation of the chemical compounds will be cured by similar chemical agents which sickened him in the first place. Thus, commercial technology acts as both the cause and the cure of Jack's possible infection (as well as exacerbating and remedying his and Babette's fear of death).

The ambiguous meanings that DeLillo presents in *White Noise* are embodied in images which suggest the subjective resonance of the technologically mediated external world, as well as the otherness of subjectivity itself. Dylar does not work for Babette's fear of death, nor is it something that Jack eventually decides to imbibe as a cure-all for his own illness and anxieties. This cannot go overlooked. In *Americana* (1971), when it is predicted that 'drugs are scheduled to supplant the media,' one can see how DeLillo struggles to comprehend just how far technology has progressed in the two decades since his first attempt at the novel.[167] What occurred was a strange reciprocity between technology and subjectivity. Drugs did not eventually supplant the media; rather, a transposition between drugs and the media came into effect—they became *interchangeable*. What is the cause and what is the cure?

During the final sunset scene of the novel, the existential breakdown of knowledge and subjective experience is illustrated by Jack's stream of consciousness as he watches the sun wane in the sky:

> All of this uncertainty is implicit in the awe of the sunset-gazers. Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means, we don't know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness, soon to pass.[168]

The sunset for DeLillian characters has become what it was for Emerson and the American Transcendentalists, a spectacle that provides a problem, a riddle, and an indecipherable revelation. Over a hundred and fifty years ago, Emerson wrote in *Self-Reliance*, 'The progress of the intellect is to the clearer vision of causes, which neglects surface differences. To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine.'[169] Yet, the postmodern generation no longer can look at Man, Nature, and History in the manner which Emerson could, in which there was a common thread that linked language and storytelling as being a shared and inherent human condition.[170]

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[167] Ibid., p. 367.
[168] Ibid., p. 325.
[169] Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, (Dover Publications, Inc.: New York, 1993 [1841]), p. 5.
[170] Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1957). This selection is from *Nature*, Chapter 3, "Beauty," pp. 27-8. See: 'The charm, last evening, of a January sunset […] What was it that nature would say? Was there no meaning in the live repose of the valley behind the mill, and which Homer and Shakespeare could not reform for me in words?'

At the end of *White Noise*, the beauty of the sunset is a result of the "Airborne Toxic Event," the pollution causes aesthetic pleasure in the same way that the pollution of Los Angeles creates picturesque sunsets and sunrises. This is an America that has been fundamentally altered by global warming, mutually assured destruction, genetic and psychotropic modification, and rapid post-industrial technological advancements; which is to say, our planet is becoming increasingly and exponentially shaped by human activity. If Emerson was "charmed" by a sense of continuity that bound such geographically and historically diverse figures as himself, Shakespeare, and Homer into a common language of natural images and human values, *White Noise* suggests that this connection has been shattered, only to be reformed in the modern era through technological, political, and linguistic processes of which we have an equivocal understanding.[171] The loop, the circle between subjective and objective experience, has been redrawn, in a way that is much more technologically mediated than the quasi-religious poetics of Emerson, galvanizing the reader of *White Noise* to ask: what has the combination of postmodern uncertainty and contemporary technologies done to our traditional ideals concerning narrativity and storytelling, the very foundation of our collective knowledge formation, our ethics and our morals, the cultural-compass known as "serious literature?"

As Zadie Smith explains in an interview, it is no longer the writer's job to, "tell us how somebody felt about something, it is to tell us how the world works."[172] Like many other contemporary authors, such as David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Lethem, and Jonathan Franzen, Smith is less concerned with character arcs than with what she calls "problem solving." Contemporary media theorists, such as Douglas Rushkoff (2013), saw this alteration of narrative structures as a reflection of a sociocultural paradigm shift being caused by the medium of information technologies:

> Just like the worlds of television's *Lost* or *Heroes*, the worlds of DeLillo's *White Noise* and Lethem's *Chronic City* are like giant operating systems whose codes and intentions are unknown to the people living inside them. Characters must learn how their universes work. Narrativity is replaced by something more like putting together a puzzle by making connections and recognizing patterns.[173]

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[171] From *The Online Etymology Dictionary*, the word "charm" as a noun: c. 1300, "incantation, magic charm," from Old French *charme* (12c.) "magic charm, magic, spell; incantation, song, lamentation," from Latin *carmen* "song, verse, enchantment, religious formula," from *canere* "to sing" (see ***chant*** (v.)) […] The notion is of chanting or reciting verses of magical power. See Jakob Grimm, "Teutonic Mythology," translation by Stallybrass, from 1883: 'A yet stronger power than that of herb or stone lies in the spoken word, and all nations use it both for blessing and cursing. But these, to be effective, must be choice, well knit, rhythmic words (verba concepta), must have lilt and tune; hence all that is strong in the speech wielded by priest, physician, magician, is allied to the forms of poetry.'

[172] James Wood in a review of *White Teeth*, "Human, All Too Inhuman: The Smallness of the 'Big' Novel," *New Republic Online*, July 24, 2000. Available online at: www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/human-all-too-inhuman

[173] Douglas Rushkoff. *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, (Penguin Group: New York, 2013), p. 34.

The challenge for the contemporary author lies in finding a new way to generate a sense of captivity and enthrallment, as well as the sensations and insights of the traditional narrative, but to do so without the assistance of a traditional storyline. According to Rushkoff, these emergent narratological conditions lead authors like Don DeLillo to spawn characters that wake up in an unfamiliar plotline and must to figure out who they are or what is going on around them. In *White Noise*, this happens in the very narrative structure of the novel itself, as the sections seem to happen with no transparent chronological order, like channel-surfing with fiction.

In Jack's final depiction of the baffled supermarket shoppers, this epistemic confusion is dramatized in a definitive technologically mediated image. The context of the scene is incredibly important. The Gladney clan is doing its weekly shopping at the local grocery store, with both Babette and the younger children accompanying Jack on the venture. The supermarket's shelves have been rearranged with the intention of creating a more free-flowing environment in which people can shop, but instead of allowing for easy access, this reorganization renders the shoppers senseless (particularly the elderly), 'They walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go, clusters of well-dressed figures frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the pattern.'[174] Is DeLillo suggesting that postmodern indeterminacy has been exponentially increased by information technologies leakage into our quotidian experiences? Or is there a space for reconciliation here? Is not the fact that DeLillo writes into his characters an incessant need for epistemological symmetry—a continual urge to "figure out the pattern"—in some sense reassuring, if not hopeful?

During the postmodern age, religion, science, technology, ideology, and even common cultural values did not always provide a meaning for our existence, and this led many to feel isolated and divorced from community. DeLillo does not suggest that our search for existential meaning will not continue. Instead, his novels ultimately suggest, or ask, if it is a search is worth pursuing when a meaningful life can be found in friends, family, and new experiences. Indeed, as both Jack and Babette Gladney discover at the conclusion of *White Noise*—as do Nick and Marian Shay at the conclusion of *Underworld*—the only thing more terrifying than not existing, or not knowing why one exists, is existing and having no one to share it with.

In the next chapter, this thesis more thoroughly explores the relationship between DeLillo's writing and the information technologies invariably embedded in his novels, particularly concentrating on the profound effects of cultural digitization on his twenty-first century fictional period, and the manner in which these novels reveal an emergent literary aesthetic distinct from the postmodern genre.

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[174] Ibid., p. 325.

Chapter 2

Introduction

Renaming the World

In the twenty-first century, the debates are likely to center not so much on the tension between the liberal humanist tradition and the posthuman but on the different versions of the posthuman as they continue to evolve in conjunction with intelligent machines.

-Katherine Hayles, 2005[1]

In chapter one, this thesis analysed DeLillo's twentieth-century fiction with the intention of arguing against readings of his work as merely a literary reiteration of the philosophies of postmodernism. This chapter focuses on the interaction between cultural digitization and literature, and the manner in which the economic, social, and political climate has been irrevocably transformed by emergent online—or Internet-enabled—networks and information technologies. Chapter two brings this shift in contemporary fiction to the forefront by highlighting Don DeLillo's 2003 novel, *Cosmopolis*.[2] In his earlier writing, DeLillo maintained the power of language as a levelling force against the all-consuming nature of technology. However, in *Cosmopolis* the reader witnesses a dramatic and rapid renovation of the American sociotechnical milieu. The digital technologies that took hold of the US economy after the events of September 11th—and the advent of the ever-present nature of the Internet and Web 2.0—were so transformational that many authors are still, to this day, attempting to comprehend how to properly integrate their existence into the traditional literary framework.

Why exactly is this emergent literary era so difficult to define or artistically represent? Speaking plainly, there are banal reasons for overlooking the immense sociopolitical, cultural, and economic effects of digital and information technologies: we fail to notice the obvious. Ubiquity creates invisibility (Miller & Woodward, 2011).[3] Still, this does not change the fact that information technologies always intrude, even in supposedly unmediated face-to-face conversation. Human beings are inevitably tied to various modes of organization that include artificial "things" and mechanical objects. It is true that an individual can simply talk to another individual, but, as Latour (1996) reminds us:

> The clothing that we are wearing comes from elsewhere and was manufactured a long time ago; the words we use were not formed for this occasion; the walls we have been

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[1] *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2005), p. 2.
[2] Don DeLillo. *Cosmopolis*, (Picador, Scribner: New York, 2003).
[3] D. Miller and S. Woodward. "Manifesto for a Study of Denim, as found in *Social Anthropology*, 2007, 15(3), pp. 335-51.

> leaning on were designed by an architect for a client, and constructed by workers—people who are absent today, though their action continues to make itself felt.[4]

Latour underscores this line of thought, 'the very person we are addressing is a product of history that goes far beyond the framework of our relationship.'[5] Latour's historicizing bonds interpersonal communication to a host of various technologies, and further, claims that it has always has been this way. Following this logic, mediation will only continue to evolve as the digital technologies that inundate even our most routine interactions become increasingly employed in everyday communications, social interactions, and commercial exchanges.

With this always-inter-mediated reasoning, one might ask: does this not generate the same layered and historically circumscribed reality that postmodernism has argued for? In a broad sense, there are philosophical corollaries (cast this net too wide, however, and one finds literary theorists claiming *Don Quixote* as postmodern).[6] We must remember that postmodernism was a reaction to modernism, just as contemporary fiction is a reaction against its forbearer. The differences become apparent when we think about the manner in which technologies intrude in *every* facet of modern society. Today, the trend is for digital technologies to intervene between people, or in some cases to even replace them entirely. One only has to think about the modes of communication that are most prominent in our mundane existence: email, voicemail, text messages, mobile devices, professional and social networking sites, smartphone applications, ATMs, automated telephone technologies, and an entire economy based around online services. Digital and information technologies have simultaneously changed interpersonal communications, commercial interactions, and cultural contacts, all at a pace that some eminent futurists believe will eventually exceed Moore's Law (Kurzweil, 2001).[7] Or, in the words of Neil Badmington (2010):

> When computers can beat humans at chess, when life is understood as a readable code, when death can be deferred or redefined by radical medical intervention, when the Genome Project has revealed that humans share 98 percent of their genetic composition with chimpanzees, when artificial limbs outperform and blend seamlessly with their organic counterparts, and when some experts in the field of artificial intelligence believe that it will soon be possible for humans to achieve

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[4] Bruno Latour. "On Interobjectivity," as found in, *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 1996, 3(4), p. 228-45.
[5] Ibid., p. 231.
[6] E. C. Graf. "Cervantes and Modernity: Four essays on don Quijote," (Bucknell University Press: Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, 2007).
[7] Ray Kurzweil's *Law of Accelerating Returns* (2001) which states: 'An analysis of the history of technology shows that technological change is exponential, contrary to the common-sense "intuitive linear" view. So we won't experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century—it will be more like 20,000 years of progress (at today's rate). The "returns," such as chip speed and cost-effectiveness, also increase exponentially. There's even exponential growth in the rate of exponential growth…The implications include the merger of biological and non-biological intelligence, immortal software-based humans, and ultra-high levels of intelligence that expand outward in the universe at the speed of light.' Available online at: www.kurzweilai.net/the-law-of-accelerating-returns

> immortality by transferring themselves into a computer, the old humanist model seems desperately incapable of speaking to the present order of things.[8]

The black-box of digital technology has been opened. If contemporary writers neglect said technology, they lose an incredible artistic opportunity to explain what makes us human, how our actions come about, how power is exercised, and how society is constructed, maintained, and renovated.

In any literary interpretation of our contemporary society (realism), digital and information technologies need to be centre stage as they are 'that which makes us be' (Latour & Stark, 1999).[9] As Brian Rotman (2008) explains, 'From the first "human singularity" to our present incarnation, human being has been shaped through a complicated co-evolutionary entanglement with language technics, and communicational media.'[10] Donna Haraway (2006) views this as a co-evolutionary entanglement with other creatures and animals, and further stresses the need to pay attention, 'to the temporalities, scales, materials, relationalities between people and our constitutive partners, which always include other people and other critters, animal and not, in doing worlds, in worlding.'[11] Steve Matthewman (2011) reemphasizes Haraway's point by stating:

> We have been co-evolving with our technologies for millions of years. We should not be separated from them by theory when we are not in practice. They are part and parcel of what it is to be human, perhaps our most human element. To say that we have always been posthuman is to say nothing more than this. We are never prior or independent of the very technologies, companion species, and environments that help constitute us. Our spotlights need to illuminate these areas.[12]

There have been few authors over the past forty years who have shined this "spotlight" as strongly and as consistently as Don DeLillo.

Rather than seeing scientific and technological advancements as a medium of existential estrangement, DeLillo recognizes the potential of art, of literature, to balance the seemingly one-sided incursion of technoscientific mediation in the everyday American experience. As DeLillo explains during an interview with to LeClair in 1982:

> Mathematics and astronomy are full of beautiful nomenclature. Science in general has given us a new language to draw from. Some writers shrink from this. Science is guilty; the language of science is tainted by horror and destruction. To me, science

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[8] Neil Badmington. "Posthumanism," as found in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*, (Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2010), p. 377.
[9] Bruno Latour and M. Stark. "Factures/Fractures: From the Concept of the Network to the Concept of Attachment," as found in, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1999, 36, pp. 20-31.
[10] Brain Rotman. *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being*, (Duke University Press: Durham, 2008), p. xiii.
[11] Nicholas Gane. "When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done? Interview with Donna Haraway," as found in, *Theory, Culture, & Society*, 2006, 23(7-8), pp. 135-58.
[12] Steve Matthewman. *Technology and Social Theory*, (Palgrave & Macmillan: 2011), p. 176.

> is a source of new names, new connections between people and the world. Rilke said we had to *rename the world*. Renaming suggests an innocence and a rebirth.[13]

An important lesson is to be drawn: technologies cannot be abstracted from the environments which they help create. DeLillo recognizes this, and instead of backing away from science and technology, he confronts them with art, rendering the possibility that fiction can be an agent for maintaining human uniqueness in the face of technical intervention.

DeLillo has been searching for a method of exegetics to describe the complex relationship between language and techné since his earliest works of fiction. In *Great Jones Street* (1973), the protagonist Bucky Wunderlick considers the telephone in his vacated Manhattan apartment:

> A telephone that's disconnected, deprived of its sources, becomes in time an intriguing piece of sculpture. The business normally transacted is more than numbed within the phone's limp ganglia; it is made eternally irrelevant. Beyond the reach of shrill necessities the dead phone disinters another source of power. The fact that it will not speak (although made to speak, made for no other reason) enables us to see it in a new way, as an object rather than an instrument, an object possessing a kind of historical mystery. The phone has made a descent to total dumbness, and so becomes beautiful.[14]

DeLillo recognizes that information technology and human subjectivity are now and forever linked, and that this neoteric breakdown of the aesthetic and the digital, the object and the objectified, will have far reaching consequences concerning the kinds of narratives being created in this emergent technocultural atmosphere.

What is the "historical mystery" evoked in the passage above? What can we learn from a disconnected telephone in an abandoned apartment in New York City? DeLillo asks questions and searches for these "sources of power" in the most obvious of technological spaces, territories so ordinary that other writers neglect to focus on their power in transforming our ontological bearing within the world. Again, one must remember DeLillo's (Rilke's) insistence on renaming or remapping the world through words. All of technology must be understood as a metaphor, as the physical materialization of language. For DeLillo, Man expresses himself through his inventions, so that the culture as a whole exemplifies the kind of artist that the character of David Bell strives to become, '"a maker of objects that imitate [our] predilection."'[15] Through the character of Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo narrows his focus and, paradoxically, this imaginative impetus serves to widen his literary outlook, enabling the discovery of a "new way" to describe our

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[13] Thomas LeClair. "An Interview with Don DeLillo," *Contemporary Literature*, 1982, p. 19-31, my italics.
[14] Don DeLillo. *Great Jones Street*, (Picador: New York, 1973), p. 31.
[15] Don DeLillo. *Americana*, (Penguin Book, Ltd: New York, 1971), p. 347.

contemporary "predilection," the strange reciprocities between subjectivity and technical evolutions, history and free market capitalism, terrorism and cybercapital.

In more general terms, and certainly in its critical reception during the early months of 2003, *Cosmopolis* can be considered the pariah of DeLillo's recent novels. Prevailing critics were receptive to DeLillo's new style in their reviews of *The Body Artist* (2001)[16] perhaps suspecting that this was just a writer's one-off literary experiment. However, by the time *Falling Man* (2007)[17] was released, critics were both accustomed enough to the style of DeLillo's "twenty first century period"—and sufficiently hushed into reverence by the apparently elegiac project of a novel that was dealing with the melancholic subject matter of September 11th—that they, in due time, found approving things to say about the book. This was not the case with *Cosmopolis*. DeLillo has said that the idea for the story had been percolating in his mind since the 1990s, and if this is indeed the case, perhaps this novel is a reflection of old subject matter coming into collision with a new artistic temperament, one generated and influenced by the traumatic events of 9/11 and the contemporaneous emergence of digital technologies.

Some reviewers, such as Blake Morrison (2003) from *The Guardian* saw the novel as, "a prose-poem about New York…DeLillo has always been good at telling us where we're heading…We ignore him at our peril."[18] In his review of *Cosmopolis*, John Updike (2003) maintains that, "DeLillo's fervent intelligence and his fastidious, edgy prose, buzzing with expressions like 'wave arrays of information,' weave halos of import around every event."[19] DeLillo is often praised for his dexterous ability to write sharp sentences and shape witty, realistic, dialogue. Yet it is not simply DeLillo's ability as a crafter of sentences, his "edgy prose" and apothegmatic observations that drive the narrative force of *Cosmopolis* along. There is a spectatorial feeling in this novel, a ghostly looming presence. Even though the events of *Cosmopolis* take place a year and a half before the actual terrorist attacks of 9/11, the reader knows what is to come, and with this prescient knowledge comes an expectant state of mind, giving Updike's "halos of import" a sinister connotation.

These positive responses to *Cosmopolis*, however, are anomalies. What the majority of the reviewers were expecting was a story that seemed—at first glance—like it should read with a breakneck sense of urgency. After all, this is a novel that was advertised as featuring as its main character a twenty-eight-year-old, sex-crazed, multi-billionaire asset manager who loses both his mind and personal fortune as he makes his way across

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[16] Don DeLillo. *The Body Artist*, (Scribner: New York, 2001).
[17] Don DeLillo. *Falling Man*, (Scriber: New York, 2007).
[18] Blake Morrison. "Future Tense." *The Guardian*, May, 2003.
[19] John Updike. "Layers of Ambiguity," review of *Cosmopolis*, *New Yorker*, March, 2003, p. 103.

Manhattan in a white stretch limousine. What reviewers received instead was a meditation on the minute details and interactions between digital technology and subjectivity, capitalism and globalization, violence and suicide.

Complaints were not difficult to find, and many reviewers who had steadfastly praised DeLillo's novels began to form rather negative sentiments in regard to the author's newer works. For example, Michiko Kakutani (2003) laments that "[Eric's] crosstown trip to the barber, for all its melodrama and violence, turns out to be a long day's journey into tedium."[20] Graham Caveney (2003) from *The Independent* grouses that, "The po-faced grandeur of [DeLillo's] conceit has squeezed out the warmth, the mischief, the oblique pathos that lent his earlier novels the passionate intelligence that this Intelligent Novel so passionately lacks."[21] The criticism garnered by these early reviews perhaps led to the novel's subsequent falling in between the cracks, as *Cosmopolis* received far less critical attention than his earlier novels.

It is this chapter's contention, in contrast to the above reviewers, that DeLillo's thirteenth novel is arguably his most thematically focused, as it hones in on the effects of cultural digitization, the Internet, and notions of the emergence of the posthuman. It is this precise preoccupation with digital technology that injects the novel with an even more eerie feeling than that of *The Names* (1982),[22] or even *White Noise* (1985).[23] At the end of *Underworld*, the narrator asks, 'Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?'[24] This questioning leaves the reader unsure about the directionality of the cyberspatial metaphor. In *Cosmopolis*, Eric Packer comes into existence within and among these paranoid systems of digital selfhood. He will seek to understand and surpass the mysterious psychological effects—what Cowart (2003) names as "the anxieties of obsolescence"—that digital technologies are having on him at the existential level.[25]

The time-frame of the novel, the year 2000, a day in April, is of crucial importance. The cryptic transcendence that Sister Edgar experiences at the end of *Underworld*, her dissolution into the Internet and cyberspace—into the glorious light that the video-recording of the explosion of a Soviet atomic bomb fills her monitor with, the technologically mediated synthesis between her soul and the world—is explored in even greater detail in

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[20] Michiko Kakutani. "BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Headed Toward a Crash, Of Sorts, in a Stretch Limo," *New York Times*, March, 2003.
[21] Graham Caveney. "Review of '*Cosmopolis*,'" *The Independent*, May, 2003.
[22] Don DeLillo. *The Names*, (Picador: New York, 1982).
[23] Don DeLillo. *White Noise*, (Penguin: 1985).
[24] Don DeLillo. *Underworld*, (Picador: New York, 1997), p. 826.
[25] David Cowart. *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*, (The University of Georgia Press: 2003).

Cosmopolis. This three-year period between 1997 and 2000 births the current iteration of the Internet, Web 2.0, and more advanced digital technologies. This does not escape DeLillo's attention. During an interview with Mark Feeney in 1999, DeLillo considers this rapid technological acceleration:

> The drive in technology is always toward something that's faster, better, more complete. In this play [*Valparaiso*], there's a sense of complete revelation, complete exposure, and the complete absorption, finally, of the main character. I wonder if there is a secret drive in technology that tends toward a kind of totalitarian perception, something we don't glimpse necessarily. Or whether there's something in us that's brought to realization by technology itself.[26]

In *Cosmopolis* this technologized selfhood is explored in a similar manner to that of *Valparaiso* in that the actuality of "complete revelation/exposure" had materialized into a tangible possibility rather than a purely science-fictional character trope. Which is to say, the ubiquitous nature of digitization, with its ever-accelerating, ever-evolving qualities has caused an axiomatic change in culture and society, an alteration that Frank Schirrmacher (2009) attempts to articulate:

> We are now in a situation where modern technology is changing the way people behave, people talk, people react, people think, and people remember. And you encounter this not only in a theoretical way, but when you meet people, when suddenly people start forgetting things, when suddenly people depend on their gadgets…to remember certain things. This is the beginning, it's just an experience. But if you think about it and you think about your own behavior, you suddenly realize that something fundamental is going on.[27]

The "realization" that both DeLillo and Schirrmacher refer to—one that is technologically mediated but that may escape our immediate understanding—represents the very essence of Eric Packer's fascination. Although such fictional stratagems may appear similar at first glance, *Cosmopolis* differs from its predecessors in that the motivational drive of the novel (quite literally) seeks to uncover what "complete absorption" into *digital* and Internet-facilitated technology would look like. What is this "secret drive" behind Packer's motivations, and how do these constant technological innovations change the very nature of his ontological bearing in the world?

At the very same time that this second wave of Internet innovation and application was taking hold, America experienced the worst terrorist attack in the nation's history. *Cosmopolis* is the first novel that DeLillo published after the events of September 11th, 2001, and with its publication, many of DeLillo's loyal readers expected that he would immediately respond to the attacks, or, at the very least adhere to his traditional literary

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[26] Mark Feeney. "Unmistakably DeLillo," *The Boston Globe*, January, 1999.
[27] Frank Schirrmacher. From a 2009 interview, Available online at *Edge* here: http://edge.org/conversation/frank-schirrmacher-1959-2014

formula of writing about the contemporary American cultural moment. That is, turn his imaginative gaze to the attacks and its perpetrators and create a fictionally mimetic version of the events. American readers wanted one of their great authors (a New Yorker born and raised) to give them a sense of how to react, how to feel, and how to think. What they received instead is a much more complex narrative, one that dives deep into the nature of the American economy and the dramatic effects of nascent digital technologies on the neoliberal capitalist system. In doing so, *Cosmopolis* does not provide a way out of the existential void created in the American psyche after 9/11. Instead, the novel turns our attention towards the nature of our current economic models, the "totalitarian perceptions" that our progressively technologically mediated environments generate.

DeLillo had already tackled similar themes of the artist's agency versus that of the terrorist's in *Mao II* (1991), but with *Cosmopolis* the intensity is more myopic.[28] Here, the author intently considers the technological obsolescence generated by the ever-accelerating computerization and digitization of the world markets and personal devices. In this regard, *Cosmopolis* resonates with the language of his essay "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," which DeLillo wrote for *Harper's* in December of 2001.[29] In *Cosmopolis*, we will see the character of Vija Kinski more or less echo phrases and language used in this essay verbatim, particularly in the manner in which American culture is reacting to the forces of globalization and notions of neoliberal "cyber-capital."

DeLillo has explicitly written about the relationship between the author and the terrorist in various essays, the most salient of which is "American Blood,"[30] which was published in *Rolling Stone* magazine and would later be read as a precursor to the release of *Libra* (1988).[31] DeLillo's writing evolves to match the ideologies and sociotechnical movements of the times. With *Cosmopolis* and "In the Ruins of the Future," DeLillo shifts his attention from that of the terrorist and the author, to more poignant observations about Wall Street, digital and cultural obsolescence, and the ability of language to humanize and endure technological advancements. I will return to the relationship between *Cosmopolis* and "In the Ruins of the Future" shortly. For now, this chapter turns its attention to the novel's young protagonist, Eric Packer.

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[28] Don DeLillo. *Mao II*, (Vintage Random House: 1991).
[29] Don DeLillo. "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," *Harper's*, December, 2001, pp. 33-40.
[30] Don DeLillo. "American Blood," *Rolling Stone*, December, 1983.
[31] Don DeLillo. *Libra*, (Penguin Books: New York, 1988).

2.1 *Time and Tide: DeLillo's Shift to Digitization*

> Bewildered by the scale and scope of historical change, culture and thinking in our time often embrace a new millenarianism. Prophets of technology preach the new age, extrapolating to social trends and organization the barely understood logic of computers and DNA.
>
> -Manuel Castells, 1996[32]

Cosmopolis introduces Eric Packer as a 28-year-old mogul with a 'personal fortune in the tens of billions.'[33] For each of his novels, DeLillo ranges over the institutions that define contemporary life in America, often going over similar fictional environments by evaluating consonant themes, motifs, and images. This recursive style was referred to earlier in this thesis by both Cowart and LeClair, and fictionally brought to the forefront by DeLillo himself in the 1997 novel, *Underworld*. There is a decisive break here from the "patternicity" (Shermer, 2011)[34] or "everything is connected" recursion of DeLillo's earlier novels (Gediman, 1997).[35] If it is true that much of DeLillo's style and thematic interests have remained fairly consistent from *Americana* to *Falling Man*, following *Underworld* the tone of DeLillo's writing has shifted in a manner even more acute than the shift others have perceived between *Running Dog* and *The Names* (LeClair, 1988).[36] With *Cosmopolis*, and in DeLillo's new millennium writing in general, we see the author turn his attention away from the broader ideas of connectivity, social cohesion, and "holy mystery" found in *Underworld*, to the precise aspects of the individual psyche, an inward movement towards the consequences of continual Internet connectivity, technoscience, and a digitally mediated sense of identity.

In his earlier novels, DeLillo would use a central character whose everyday sensibilities and ideologies are changed by developing media, information technologies, and consumerist modes of production. DeLillo uses these intrusions as a way into the complex

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[32] *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed., (Wiley-Blackwell: 2011 [1996]), p. 4.
[33] Ibid., p. 121.
[34] Michael Shermer. *The Believing Brain: From Spiritual Faiths to Political Convictions – How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths*, (Dutton/Penguin Group: 2011). Shermer argues that the human brain is a belief engine: an evolved pattern-recognition machine that connects the dots and creates meaning out of the patterns that we think we see in nature.
[35] Paul Gediman. "Visions of the American Berserk," *Boston Review*, October/November 1997, pp. 46-48, my italics. Gediman's review of *Underworld* reveals a profound, almost mystical connection between the individual characters in the novel, expressing a distinctly human hunger for connection and the discovery of some underlying sociological pattern. See: '*Underworld* is not held together by relationships of cause and effect but rather by the vaguer stuff of association, echo, and mirroring. […] Some of the book's many connections are ineffable quantum leaps…a vision of a world governed not by mere randomness but by something—with its proliferation of patterns and subpatterns and counterpatterns—very much *like a holy mystery*.'
[36] Tom LeClair. *In The Loop*, (University of Illinois Press: 1988), p. 176. LeClair argues that this as the first aesthetic shift or transition in literary style to be found in DeLillo's career as a novelist.

and dynamic interactions between the individual and the greater political and economic arrangements of the time. For example, although separated by twelve years, both *Underworld* (1997) and *White Noise* (1985) engage with religion (nuns and priests), waste, weaponry, deserts, sports, hotel rooms, academia, and medical/recreational drugs use. Cowart (2003) names these as, 'the mythemes of [DeLillo's] expression.'[37] Eric Packer can be differentiated from DeLillo's earlier protagonists in that his vast wealth, Wall Street acumen, intelligence, and business savvy have brought him virtually unparalleled success. He is above the quotidian by virtue of the fact that he exists in this world of elites. Whereas the earlier characters of DeLillo's novels have things happening to them—Bucky Wunderlick, Jack Gladney, Nick Shay—Packer initiates the momentum of America's overarching financial institutions. He exists in a world of his own making. There is, of course, Eric Packer's supposed assassin, who one could argue is outside of Eric's immediate influence. Though even in this instance, Eric is just as engrossed in finding his stalker as Benno Levin/Richard Sheets is interested in finding his prey.

From *Americana* to *Cosmopolis* (1979 to 2003), DeLillo's protagonists often find themselves pursuing some indefinable object or shadowy character. Jack Gladney was looking for the prescription fear-reliever known as Dylar and its peddler Willy Mink in *White Noise*; Nick Shay purchases the Thompson homerun ball in *Underworld*; James Axton tracks down a mysterious language cult in *The Names*. For Eric Packer, whiz-kid currency analyst, the Holy Grail being pursued is the Japanese yen, 'He wanted all the yen there was.'[38] Yet, even before Eric's intuition concerning the deceleration of the precipitously rising yen leads him on a path to both personal and monetary destruction, there is something troubling the young protagonist. What many critics of *Cosmopolis* have missed in their readings of the novel is that Eric Packer begins the story sleep-deprived and depressive. Here is a man that 'mastered the steepest matters in half an afternoon,' but for whom a restful night's sleep was unattainable, 'Sleep failed him more often now, not once or twice a week but four times, five.'[39] It is during these sleepless evenings, 'the pale nights when his identity flattens' that we are first exposed to a subtle shift in Eric's character, an erosion of his cunning instincts and mighty ego has been taking place with each restless night.[40]

In the hours that Eric finds himself sleepless, the reader learns that he is not a stereotypical Wall Street trader. Eric studies science and poetry, Special Theory in English

[37] *Physics of Language*, p. 213.
[38] Ibid., p. 97.
[39] Ibid., p. 7, p. 1.
[40] Ibid., p. 207.

and German. An art aficionado, a music enthusiast, Eric is a polymath who can master any subject that catches his attention. DeLillo stresses these details from the onset of the novel to set up a dichotomy between Eric Packer and the cliché about what a prodigious currency analyst is expected to be. Eric Packer is not Howard Hughes or Donald Trump or Michael Bloomberg, those New York barons who immediately trigger an association of the mythos of the great wealth that the city's financial and real-estate establishments can yield. Nor is Eric Packer akin to other literary or cinematic figures of NYC: Jay Gatsby, Gordon Gekko, Pynchon's Pierce Inverarity, or Wolfe's Sherman McCoy. The most apropos figures that one can place Eric Packer in company with would be the generation of inventors, computer programmers, and entrepreneurs that arose in the wake of the market collapse that occurred after the events of September 11th, 2001. These are the Web 2.0 designers, the visionaries such as Mark Zuckerberg (creator of Facebook), Kevin Systrom (co-creator of Instagram), and Peter Andreas Thiel (co-founder of PayPal), young men who would eventually change the very economic landscape and culture of the Internet by dramatically transforming our traditional understandings of digital technologies and the function of social media. Eric more closely resembles these men, even though he exists well before the emergence of the new iterations of the Internet and the re-emergence of the immensely profitable confluence between the worlds of finance and digital technology.

Eric exists during an in-between period, right after the Internet-bubble came crashing down in the late 1990s, but before the financial beacon of the twin towers violently collapsed in 2001. Douglas Rushkoff (2013) sees this period as producing a sweeping temporal disorientation, one akin to the transformation that occurred in the 1970s with the emergence of electronic technologies. During the late 1990s in America:

> We were all futurists, energized by new technologies, new theories, new business models, and new approaches that promised not just more of the same, but something different: a shift of an uncertain nature, but certainly of unprecedented magnitude. With each passing year, we seemed to be closer to some sort of chaos attractor that was beckoning us toward itself. And the closer we got, the more time itself seemed to be speeding up. Remember, these were the last years of the last decade of the last century of the millennium. The roaring, net-amplified, long boom of the 1990s seemed defined by the leaning forward, this ache toward conclusion, this push toward 2000 and the ultimate calendar slip into the next millennium.[41]

Eric Packer is the definitive realization of this uncertain "chaos attractor" that Rushkoff alludes to, as his cross-town journey for a haircut seems to arise from a desire to make a purgatorial voyage to Hell's Kitchen, no matter what the cost. Packer also "ache[s] towards

[41] Douglas Rushkoff. *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, (Current/Penguin Publishing: New York, 2013), p. 10.

conclusion" and is "leaning forward" in his seemingly rash decision to leverage massive sums on the Japanese yen. When Michael Chin, Packer's currency analyst, attempts to express his concern that Eric's borrowing, "doesn't chart," and that "[we] are speculating into the void," Eric responds: '"It charts. You have to search a little harder. Don't trust standard models. Think outside the limits. The yen is making a statement. Read it. Then leap."'[42] Throughout *Cosmopolis*, one gets the sense that DeLillo is attempting to come to terms with the emergent millennium, to develop a new way for language and story to adapt to the advancement of a digitally mediated hegemony. Eric Packer is DeLillo's way into understanding our budding digital consciousness. Of course, the reader is aware that Eric's "leap" concerning the yen leads not to a personal or monetary epiphany, but rather to his financial ruin and subsequent death at the hands of Benno Levin/Richard Sheets. DeLillo's intention is to focus our attention on *why* Eric is motivated to make these decisions in the first place, and if personal agency cannot be established, what are the outside forces driving Packer along?

From the onset of the novel, Eric Packer expresses himself as part of a totalized commercial system, and the language he uses when interacting with various characters often reflects a merger between his personal identity and his corporate persona, gesturing towards a kind of globalized subjectivity. DeLillo emphasizes this merger not only through Packer's subjective stream of consciousness, but also in his professional dialogue. For example, when speaking to his head of personal security, Torval, concerning his plans for the day, Eric says,

> I want a haircut.
> The president's in town.
> *We* don't care. We need a haircut. We need to go crosstown.[43]

Why the sudden shift from "I" to "we"? When Eric is talking about matters related to money and finance, he frequently switches back to the personal (pluralized) pronoun. If one considers just what a corporation is, the fact that one only owns shares, stock options, pieces of the company, the significance of Eric's continual use of "we" instead of "I" connotes a shared infrastructure. He is part of a lager organism, part of a collective investment. However, Eric is not unaware if his singular position in the world, the power that his firm has established, and the enormous amount of money they have generated. Eric's immediate dismissal of the president being in the city as nothing more than an inconsequential annoyance hints to the fact that Wall Street has supplanted Washington as the most

[42] Ibid., p. 21.
[43] Ibid., p. 11, my italics.

important part of the American economic and political system. A few pages later, the reader learns that the president's presence in the city has flagged a security threat, to which Eric dryly responds, '"Do people still shoot at presidents? I thought there were more stimulating targets."'[44] One must ask: who would be a more stimulating target then the leader of the free world? Eric's answer: the leader of the free market.

Eric's use of the pronoun "we" also points towards a cybernetic transformation in his sense of identity. The Internet and technology have connected Packer's consciousness to the globalized economic modalities that operate in and through the decisions formulated in Eric's mind. The binary directionality expressed in Eric's relationship to the global economy prompts the use of "we" in place of "I" because there is no way to disentangle the human investor from the global commercial body, certainly not for an individual as wealthy as Eric Packer (or for the average citizen who has her retirement plans, or mortgage, or student loans, or credit card debt, tied and/or invested in various stock options, which are controlled and traded continually by impersonal financial institutions). The president of the United States may very well yield tremendous power and influence, but on a global scale, Packer's actions have a real and immediate effect on the international markets, and it is these markets that influence the financial wellbeing of both the individual investor and the world's economy.

DeLillo demonstrates the globalized relationship between economic and political systems during a scene in which Jane Melman, his chief of finance, explains a "rumor" concerning the "finance minister":

> He's supposed to resign any time now…Some kind of scandal about the economy that may have been misconstrued. The whole country is analysing the grammar and syntax of this comment. Or it wasn't even what he said. It was when he paused. They are trying to construe the meaning of the pause. It could be deeper, even, than grammar. It could be breathing. So the whole economy convulses…because the man took a breath.[45]

This scene concerns the finance minister of Japan, but is meant to show the interconnectedness of the global economy. One cannot help but make historical associations, eminent politicians and economists who convey similar geopolitical and fiscal power, individuals such Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the Federal Reserve from 1987 to 2006. Greenspan was a man who could genuinely affect the "whole economy" with the lone utterance (or non-utterance) of a single word. Free market capitalism, loosed from its localized economies and spread worldwide by the utilization of the Internet and digital

[44] Ibid., p. 20.
[45] Ibid., p. 48.

technologies, now extends globally, and with ever growing speed and efficiency. The manner in which Packer pursues the yen is an allegory for our new world financial configurations. In order to understand just what this world economy looks like, we can draw comparisons to modern globalized commercial arrangements.

Such contrasts become evident if we consider the word "globalization" itself. The economist and journalist Thomas Friedman uses the term "globalization" frequently in his often referenced and well-known books, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999)[46] and *The World is Flat* (2005).[47] The basic understanding of globalization is that the world's financial markets and economies are linked due to rapid advances in transportation technologies and the ubiquitous nature of the Internet. In rapidly developing nations, such as India, South Korea, or China, economic autonomy will continually lose traction to globalized institutions, the most prevalent of which are multinational corporations. The most straightforward example that Friedman offers is that of the USA's dependence on foreign sources for energy. In a more contemporaneous sense, globalization is understood as the myriad interactions occurring between America and the foreign countries that manufacture the most profitable digital appliances, such as our smartphones, televisions, and tablets/personal computers. From the raw materials that help build our cities—gasoline, steel, concrete—to the electronic devices that are a part of day-to-day life, globalization appears to be the only way in which to facilitate a strong and sustainable economic model. With the success of this new form of globalization, the financial markets that guide and control the ebb and flow of money become omnipresent and inescapable, as the average consumer and worker in a localized economy is immediately implicated in a much larger financial process that they have little control over.

Vija Kinski illustrates the processes of globalization succinctly when she explains to Eric that the group of protesters gathered around 6th Avenue are,

> …A fantasy generated by the market. They don't exist outside the market. There is no outside…The market culture is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system.[48]

In a world in which a neoliberal free market ideology reigns supreme, human beings are reduced to commodities, just another piece of information to be "traded on the markets of the world". In Kinski's theory-based understanding of the globalized economic modality, there is no distinction between human actions and the actions of the global marketplace;

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[46] Thomas Friedman. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 1999).
[47] Thomas Friedman. *The World is Flat*, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: 2005).
[48] Ibid., p. 90.

there is only the glow that emanates continually from the NYSE ticker in Times Square. Even as the protesters grow more violent, even as their aggression comes to rock the very limo that Vija and Eric are sitting in, Packer concedes:

> He thought Kinski was right when she said this was a market fantasy. There was a shadow transaction between the demonstrators and the state. The protest was a form of systemic hygiene, purging and lubricating. It attested again, for the ten thousandth time, to the market culture's innovative brilliance, its ability to shape itself to its own flexible ends, absorbing everything around it.[49]

Provoked by Kinski's theorizing, Packer's stream of consciousness begins to match a biological or cybernetic allegory to the global marketplace, as it becomes a self-regulating, self-sustaining, and self-evolving organism. But in the stereotypical DeLillian fashion, there are certain elements that manage to escape the continuum of the world's financial markets, things 'outside its reach'.[50] It is the violent encounter that will shift the momentum of history and transform Eric's preconceived notions in regard to the all-encompassing nature of digital technologies and the global markets in which they so efficiently operate.

It is within this environment—one that hinges on the praxes of global currency exchanges—that Eric Packer exists. Unlike the stock market used by the previous generation, the majority of the world's trading occurs digitally, via Internet processes. Michael Chin and Eric discuss what financial moves they would like to make, and Chin enters them, 'resentfully in his hand organizer and then synched with the system.'[51] Later in the novel, Eric conducts an analogous type of instantaneous trading with Elise's money on his Internet-connected wristwatch.[52] These scenes are being illuminated because of the fact that they trace a contemporary setting in which the virtual domain and the economic paradigms of our financial systems concomitantly interact in a manner that effects change in the real world. Eric's massive borrowing pertaining to the yen has a ripple-effect on the global economy. This is all to stress what Eric points out to Michael Chin early on in *Cosmopolis*, that, '"there's only one thing in the world worth pursuing professionally and intellectually…The interaction between technology and capital. The inseparability."'[53] Now, the invisible hand of the market no longer operates solely from the work of man, or the self-interest of man, but from the complex processes of man and digital technologies.[54]

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[49] Ibid., p. 99.
[50] Ibid., p. 100.
[51] Ibid., p. 22.
[52] Ibid., p. 123.
[53] Ibid., p. 23.
[54] Adam Smith. *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1976), edited by W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce, vol. 2a, pp. 26-27. From this volume, we find what many call "Smith's dictum": 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.'

Indeed, for Eric Packer, technological evolution and the advancement of financial markets are one in the same. Unlike the industrial revolution, which depended on mechanical technology *serving* the needs of mass scale production through skilled physical labour, digital technology works independently, and, at certain levels, entirely free of human intervention.

It is with this notion of globalization, digital technology, and world markets that DeLillo focuses our awareness on yet another paradoxically charged ideology. That is, an international online marketplace is as much a trans-local space as it is a local one. Wall Street is a physical location in New York City. It has an actual address and is a fixed locality. The New York Stock Exchange (NYSE, sometimes known as the "Big Board") is a stock exchange located at 11 Wall Street, Lower Manhattan, New York City, New York. Every morning someone physically rings a bell that signals the beginning of the day's fiscal trading. One can use the word "paradox" because it is a *local* whole made up of *global* components. The paradox holds because the relationship of local to global is not (as one might initially assume) a simple opposition between part and whole, but a merger of the two distinct notions of the local and the global.

Consider the oxymoronically charged language that thinkers so often invoke in characterizing globalization. According to Roland Robertson (1992), for example, globalization is 'the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular.'[55] John Rennie Short (2001) asserts that globalization renders disparate local realities 'closer apart' and 'further together.'[56] Similar vernacular is applied by Fredric Jameson (2000), when he declares that the globalized world is an, 'untotalizable totality.'[57] The pretext of why the globalized world defies the logic of part-and-whole is that its literal dimensions function independently of its figurative elements. If one were speaking literary—factually—with a geological understanding of the globalized world as a concrete object, the definition would be relatively straightforward: the earth has definite physical features (e.g., an oblate spheroid shape) and objectively measurable dimensions (e.g., a radius of approximately 6,378 kilometres).[58] If one were speaking figuratively, however, and through a digitally mediated awareness, the globalized world would *not* be a spherical object. It would be an ever-evolving and ever-mutating web wherein localities separated

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[55] Roland Robertson. *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, (Sage: London, 1992), pp. 177-178.
[56] John Rennie Short. *Global Dimensions: Space, Place and the Contemporary World*, (Reaktion: London, 2001), p. 9.
[57] Fredric Jameson. "Preface" to *The Cultures of Globalization*, (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2000), p. xii.
[58] See NASA's "Earth Fact Sheet"—available online at: https://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/planetary/factsheet/earthfact.html

by geographic distance can be rendered instantaneously contiguous with the installation of a simple cable modem.

Digital technologies and the Internet generate a rupture between the literal and figurative dimensions of the globalized world. This rupture is recognized by Benno Levin/Richard Sheets in his Confessions:

> *World is supposed to mean something that is self-contained*. But nothing is self-contained. Everything enters into something else. My small days spill into light-years. This is why I can only pretend to be someone. And this is why I felt derived at first, working on these pages. I didn't know if it was me that was writing so much as someone I want to sound like.[59]

The sense of estrangement Benno experiences occurs when presupposed definitions can no longer be extrapolated from simple ideas. Later, he quotes St. Augustine, '"I have become an enigma to myself…And herein lies my sickness."'[60] In quoting St. Augustine, perhaps DeLillo is hinting that the crisis of identity that Benno is suffering is a manifestation of the ongoing human condition. However, this quotation is referred to by Benno during his conversation with Eric Packer: '"I'm not talking about myself. I'm talking about you."'[61] The world may never have been truly self-contained, but the process of globalization only heightens the sense that we are all always, in some way, shape, or form, inexorably connected to one another. Does this globalized and digitized connection facilitate greater means of communication and understanding, or does it lead to a steady erosion of the individual? If psychological interiority is sacrificed to perpetual connection, do we jeopardize the ability for originality, and therefore end up in a suspended state where every action and means of communication is an echo of some earlier iteration?

A multifaceted understanding is required in order to assess this digitally mediated existential condition. Marshall McLuhan (1967) recognized this very early on when he famously said, 'One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in.'[62] Yet, Eric Packer is not oblivious to his globalized and digitized environment. Towards the conclusion of the novel, before his final violent encounter with Benno Levin/Richard Sheets, Eric is alone on an empty street in Hell's Kitchen. He thinks:

> There was nothing to do. He hadn't realized this could happen to him. The moment was empty of urgency and purpose. He hadn't planned on this. Where was the life

[59] Ibid., p. 60, my italics.
[60] Ibid., p. 189.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Marshall McLuhan. *War and Peace in the Global Village*, (Gingko Publishing: New York, 2001 [1967]).

> he'd always led? There was nowhere he wanted to go, nothing to think about, no one waiting. How could he take a step in any direction if all directions were the same?[63]

If Eric's "anti-environment" is without the influences of the world market and digital technologies, then why has he aggressively pursued his own financial ruin and disconnected himself from the totalizing cyberspatial system? Eric's un-digitized existence leads him to the *very same* epistemological breakdown that Benno underwent working while within the unmitigated digital environment of speculative currency trading. "[N]othing is self-contained" and "all directions [are] the same" suggest that DeLillo is less interested in the general socioeconomic effects of digital technology than he is in the strange correlations that occur when two seemingly opposing forces share a common interest. This is precisely why both Benno and Eric have the condition of an asymmetrical prostate; where in every other physical, professional, and psychological way these two men are nearly the complete inversion of the other, they share this strange ailment. DeLillo uses this bodily resemblance to encourage readers to focus on the underlying motivations of the two characters. What gives them a sense of "urgency and purpose" and what role have globalization and cultural digitization played in the creation of their sense of subjectivity and self-worth? If both Eric Packer and Benno Levin/Richard Sheets attempt to alter their individual, digitized, existence, and yet end up in the very same place—to apply McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message" mantra—perhaps we should be focusing less on the fish and more on the water.

Literary theorist Seo-Young Chu (2010) views Eric's aforementioned "inseparability" from technology and the globalized world as creating:

> a rift that we perceive through its hallucinatory epiphenomena: jet lag, rootlessness, culture shock, the illusion of sitting next to the person on the other end of a long distance phone call, the nebulous sense of being implicated in a vast network of life-stories the intricacies of which defy straightforward apprehension. Common to all of these experiences is a certain phantasmagorical texture that realism cannot adequately represent.[64]

By placing Eric Packer in this digitally mediated and globalized economic structure, DeLillo paints himself into a difficult narratological corner. As Chu describes it, straightforward fictional realism may have been rendered impotent by the intrusion of technology that dramatically reorients the individual's ontological posture. Is Chu implying that our contemporary world is insusceptible to a realist literary representation? *Cosmopolis* is uniquely conducive to thinking and writing about the "phantasmagorical texture" of globalization and digital technology, specifically in relation to its categorization as a work

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[63] Ibid., p. 180.
[64] Seo-Young Chu. *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?: A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2010), p. 86.

of mimetic fiction. To accomplish this sense of realism, DeLillo uses science-fictional tropes and motifs in the same manner in which he stylized his earlier fictions, such as *Great Jones Street* and *Ratner's Star*. The cognitively estranging nature of the globalized world, the "hallucinatory epiphenomena" which Chu names as challenging "straightforward apprehension" is produced by a gulf between its literal and figurative components. *Cosmopolis* transcends this gap through Eric Packer, a man who embodies the yin-and-yang nature of globalization and technological obsolescence. DeLillo's more recent fiction has integrated the literal and figurative dimensions of a more globalized understanding of the world by literalizing language and figures of speech closely associated with concepts of technological progress.

This literalization is established in the beginning of the novel, and continues to run thematically throughout the narrative. Within *Cosmopolis*, Eric interacts socially, conducts business, consults with various advisors—he even has a licensed medical doctor give him a full physical and prostate examination—all within the confines of his white stretch limo. The first description of the interior of the vehicle gives the reader a glimpse into the science-fictionalized and digitally mediated environment in which Eric exists:

> He sat in the club chair at the rear of the cabin looking into the array of visual display units. There were medleys of data on every screen, all the flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing. He absorbed this material in a couple of long still seconds, ignoring the speech sounds that issued from lacquered heads. There was a microwave and a heart monitor. He looked at the spycam on a swivel and it looked back at him. He used to sit here in hand-held space but that was finished now. The context was nearly touchless. He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank.[65]

Eric's preferred mode of transportation contains all the stereotypical amenities that one associates with the luxury of a stretch limousine. It is the technology that the limo contains—the heart monitor, the spycam, the Internet connectivity that links him to the world's financial markets and media outlets—these digital systems signal a conflation of the literal and the figurative dimensions that globalization produces, in that they are representing forms that are recognisably derived from life, while simultaneously corresponding to a non-literal environment. The "medleys of data" are simply a digital metaphor for the rising and falling of currency values, while Eric's physical presence and cognitive interpretation of the data has a direct correlation to things happening in the real world.

In being able to "talk most systems into operation," there is a sense that the interface is dematerializing, in that it ceases to represent a border between the individual and the

[65] Ibid., p. 13.

technology itself. The sense of "using" technology happens through these interfaces, it is this process of having to manipulate and "work" with gadgetry that one encounters the existential "otherness" of the thing. What happens when these interfaces are eliminated and one can simply *speak* material things into existence? The ineffable experience of subjectivity and the materiality of the objective experience intersect, creating a form of human and machine interaction that carries with it notions of an emergent cybernetic organism.[66] The most up-to-date and cutting-edge technologies have eradicated the interface itself, so that Eric's connection to the global informatics displayed on his screen can continue incessantly. 'He went back up to the living quarters, walking slowly now, and paused in every room, absorbing what was there, deeply seeing, retaining every fleck of energy in rays and waves.'[67] Eric has the seemingly inhuman ability to continually absorb information. An eidetic memory, it is as if data simply flows into Eric's nervous system without him being a conscious participant to the process. His awareness of the data is envisioned as simply another point in the transmission of the data—"rays and waves"—implying that his subjective consciousness is itself not different in kind from the "consciousness" of global networks of thinking machines. Furthermore, when Eric looks into the ever-present screens that portray stock market fluctuations and currency oscillations, this data itself is a reflection of his own image. Eric has leveraged so much capital on the yen that the global markets react to his every decision, to the degree that the data Packer is analysing begins to correlate to his own disposition. This kind of digitally mediated solipsism is demonstrated in the bi-directionality of Eric's relationship to data and information. Eric perceives his own reflection in the mirror of global information technology, even as he himself is a product of that very technology.

DeLillo activates the power of such figures of speech by literalizing and substantiating them into narrative situations. Within the limo, one feels both a sense of the local and trans-local, of displacement mixed with a static physicality. Shiner's curiosity about being in the limo exemplifies this amalgamation of the distant and the proximate. He asks Eric:

Any special reason we're in the car instead of the office?

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[66] Manfred E. Clynes, and Nathan S. Kline. "Cyborgs and space," from *Astronautics*, September, 1960, pp. 26-27 and 74-75; reprinted in Gray, Mentor, and Figueroa-Sarriera, eds., *The Cyborg Handbook*, (Routledge: New York, 1995), pp. 29-34. See: '…for the exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system unconsciously, we propose the term "Cyborg."'

[67] Ibid., p. 8.

DeLillo has used similar language to describe digital information in other novels. In *Underworld*, Nick Shay's son, Jeff is described as an Internet obsessed homebody, '…A lurker. He visits sites but does not post. He gathers the *waves and rays*. He adds components and functions and sits before a spreading mass of compatible hardware. The real miracle is the web, the net, where everybody is everywhere at once, and he is there among them, unseen' (p. 808, my italics).

> How do you know we're in the car instead of the office?
> If I answer that question.
> Based on what premise?
> I know I'll say something that's halfway clever but mostly shallow and probably inaccurate on some level. Then you'll pity me for having been born.
> We're in the car because I need a haircut.[68]

Through such literalizations, by placing these situations and characters physically within the interior of a vehicle that feels motionless, but is in fact moving across town, the previously mentioned figures of speech pertaining to globalization, the "closer apart," "further together," and other global paradoxes acquire proportions that the reader recognizes kinesthetically. The sensory experience of a corporeal environment—that is, imagining the simple familiarity of sitting in a moving vehicle—evokes a sense of acknowledgement about the mysterious nature of the interaction of digital technology and one's subjective sense of spatiality.

There should be an easily distinguishable contrast between the physical location of the office and that of the limo, but such a distinction cannot be easily identified in an atmosphere that is totally saturated by technological intervention. Eric's limousine is unique in that, although the limo removes Eric from the physical world, it systematically joins him with the world through the digital and electronic technologies which permeate the limousines interior. When Eric adjusts in his seat the spycam or "surveillance camera" adjusts to match his position. The narrator informs us that 'a nurse and two armed guards were on constant watch at three monitors in a windowless room at the office.'[69] Again, it is as if Eric exists in more than a single place, that he occupies various positions in the space-time continuum. The ever-gazing eye of the spycam instils a sense of eeriness in the reader, but not in Eric. He is completely comfortable within the confines of the limo, having the power to be continually connected to his business and the market, while at the same time being able to cross town to get a haircut.

2.2 *Accelerated Obsolescence: "Devices Already Vestigial"*

> In an age of multiple and massive innovations, obsolescence becomes the major obsession.
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> -Marshall McLuhan[70]
>
> Whoever must be a creator always annihilates.
>
> -Nietzsche[71]

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[68] Ibid., p. 15.
[69] Ibid.
[70] "Innovation is obsolete," *Evergreen Review*, Volume 15, Issues 86-94, Grove Press, 1971, p. 64.
[71] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (Penguin Classics: 1969 [1895]), p. 59.

Cosmopolis is organized around the principle of technological obsolescence; as we witness Eric methodically dismiss different terms and phrases throughout the novel, from the architectural "skyscraper," to the electronic gadgetry of the "telephone handset." Eric views language as failing to keep up with the speed of technological advancements. The admixture of frustration and impatience that Eric experiences concerning the terminology of technologically mediated objects could be read as a precursor to the perpetual anxiety that has come to be associated with the digital age. Through his vast wealth and intelligence and unyielding obsession with owning the most up-to-date gadgetry, Eric Packer gives DeLillo an avenue in which to explore an American culture and economy that is continually being reinvented by nascent digital and information technology innovations.

It is within the early scenes in the limo that we are introduced to a frequent motif in *Cosmopolis*. When Eric considers of the "windowless room at the office" where the surveillance camera sends its incessant feed of his location, he ruminates on the specific noun, 'The word office was out-dated now. It had zero saturation.'[72] The reader encounters such linguistic impatience in nearly every scene of the novel, as situations regularly occur that evoke in Eric a sense of outmodedness or conceptual obsolescence, that from the moment something attains material form it is already of the past, already antiquated, '"anti-futuristic."'[73] These 'devices…already vestigial' include 'scan retrieval, a technology that seemed already oppressively sluggish' (p. 34); the 'ear buds' (p. 19) worn by his security team; ATMs (p. 60) and cash registers (p. 71); a man playing a saxophone on a busy street as 'from a century past' (p. 148); the Siberian tiger (p. 81); walkie-talkies (p. 102); various weaponry, both Benno's gun, and Eric's old revolver (p. 203); the personal computers that are '"in their present form…Just about dead as distinct units"' (p. 104); diamonds as a form of jewellery or expression of personal wealth (p. 64); Eric's daily visit with his doctor, makes him think that stethoscopes are akin to old medical treatments, 'lost tools of antiquity, quaint as blood-sucking worms' (p. 43); Freud is "finished" (p. 6); even the white stretch limo is part of this inventory of obsolesce, '"The global era officially ends,"' Kinski remarks, '"when stretch limousines begin to disappear from the streets of Manhattan."'[74]

Eric is just as obsessed with the technology of language as he is with the cutting-edge digital gadgetry that he surrounds himself with. The frustration that Eric experiences when he encounters antiquated technologies is mirrored in his annoyance at not knowing the biological/Latinate name of a plant that he comes across walking through the courtyard

[72] Ibid., p. 15.
[73] Ibid., p. 54.
[74] Ibid., p. 91.

of an apartment complex, 'He could not quite summon the Latin name of the tree but knew it would come to him within the hour or somewhere deep in the running lull of the next sleepless night.'[75] Why would this lack of a name, this lack of incredibly specific knowledge, trouble a 28-year-old billionaire currency trader? Like cloud-computation and the Internet itself, Eric believes that he can acquire near endless amounts of information, that nothing is outside of his reach. When he is told by his lover Didi Fancher that the '"Rothko Chapel belongs to the world,"' Eric responds bluntly, '"It's mine if I buy it."'[76]

Eric's attitude is a continuation of Nick Shay's anti-postmodern mantra from *Underworld*, of living "responsibly in the real." Eric is blatantly challenging the notion that some things are outside of monetary influence, that there exists something like a "priceless work of art." Didi, on the other hand, represents a continuation of the type of belief system that Klara Sax maintains in *Underworld*. Didi's admission, '"I don't know what money is anymore"'[77] reflects the postmodern desensitization that Klara describes in *Underworld* when she remarks '"I don't understand money anymore…Money is undone."'[78] Klara Sax is a painter, Didi Fancher an art historian and personal assistant to a wealthy clientele of art collectors. Both of these women are baffled by the manner in which money and technology are changing the purpose of art. How does one possess a work of art, own a work of art? How can Eric's terse, almost childlike assertion that, "It's mine if I buy it" transform the relationship between artist and patron, between the public and the private? In recounting her massive landscape art project, known as "Long Tall Sally," Klara alludes to the possibility of reclaiming militaristic technology by way of a creative reinvention: '"We're painting, hand-painting in some cases, putting our puny hands to great weapons systems that came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible, millions of components stamped out, repeated endlessly, and we're trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life."'[79]

Eric views the world as either/or, on/off, like the binary coding of computer functionality. Yet, what is being discussed between Eric and Didi is a work of art, something that belongs to the public by its very nature. Didi and Klara believe in a more romantic intentionality, that there is an "element of felt life" that is elicited from great works of art, one that escapes immediate understanding and that is only accomplished via creative, "hands-on" involvement. Didi tries to convince Eric to purchase the Rothko piece because,

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[75] Ibid., p. 25.
[76] Ibid., p. 28.
[77] Ibid., p. 29.
[78] Ibid., p. 76.
[79] Ibid., p. 77.

'"It will remind you that you're alive. You have something in you that's receptive to mysteries."'[80] Eric Packer, as a technologist, futurist, and as a Wall Street guru, cannot fathom this kind of artistic mystery, for something to be obscure is almost as offensive as it being antiquated. The writer and computer scientist, Jaron Lanier (2010), expresses concern about the insulated nature of the modern technologist:

> The mere possibility of there being something ineffable about personhood is what drives many technologists to reject the notion of quality. They want to live in an airtight reality that resembles an idealized computer program, in which everything is understood and there are no fundamental mysteries. They recoil from even the hint of a potential zone of mystery or an unresolved seam in one's worldview.[81]

Eric's worldview resonates with these same sentiments, 'He [Eric] liked knowing what was coming. It confirmed the presence of some hereditary script available to those who could decode it.'[82] Sustained mystery implies a lack of ability, a lack of intellectual adeptness, 'He liked to track answers to hard questions. This was his method, to attain mastery over ideas and people.'[83] For Lanier, the cost of complete technological immersion is nothing more than individuality itself. As *Cosmopolis* progresses, the reader witnesses that this is a cost which Eric Packer is more than willing to pay.

Klara wishes to "unrepeat" the static past, to transform the decommissioned planes meant for large-scale bombing operations back into something that has human origins and, in doing so, to reverse the robotic and violent ancestry of these great machines. By contrast, Eric's understanding of a "felt life" occurs in the very opposite manner. He wishes to find a way into the very core of digitally mediated environments, to disappear into a world of totalized technologies. Eric's transcendence happens *through* digital technologies, all of which are available to him because of his great wealth. DeLillo reemphasizes the all-encompassing nature of globalization and cyber-capital during the scene in which Packer explains to Vija Kinski that he owns the modern equivalent of the B-52 long range bombers used in Klara's "Long Tall Sally" art project:

> And you bought an airplane. I'd nearly forgotten this. Soviet or ex-soviet. A strategic bomber. Capable of knocking out a small city. Is this right?
> It's an old Tu-160. NATO calls it a Blackjack A. It was deployed around 1988. Carried nuclear bombs and cruise missiles…These were not included in the deal.[84]

The B-52s that Klara and her group of volunteer artists are painting were used extensively during World War II, Vietnam, and the Cold War conflict. Klara remembers the bombers

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[80] Ibid., p. 30.
[81] Jaron Lanier. *You Are Not a Gadget*, (Penguin Books: 2010), p. 50.
[82] Ibid., p. 29.
[83] Ibid., p. 52.
[84] Ibid., p. 103.

as having a clear correlation to the Cold War, to the USA's ability to send long-range bombers to the USSR in the case of a nuclear war. In *Cosmopolis*, Vija Kinski assumes that the Blackjack A that Eric owns was purchased from the Russians. Packer responds, '"What Russians? I bought it black-market and dirt cheap from a Belgian arms dealer in Kazakhstan. That's where I took the controls, for half an hour, over the desert. U.S. dollars, thirty-one million."'[85] The Cold War, Mutually Assured Destruction, dialectic is no longer a part of a contemporary globalized ideology. There is no outside the market. Klara's attempt to transform the B-52s back into an '"ordinary thing"' through artistic intervention has—by the time of Eric Packer—ultimately failed.[86]

When Vija asks where the Blackjack A is located, Eric responds,

> Parked in a storage facility in Arizona. Waiting for replacement parts that nobody can find. Sitting in the wind. I go out there now and then.
> To do what?
> To look at it. It's mine.[87]

Whereas Klara Sax attempts to alter and ultimately transcend the violent, mechanistically determined ideologies created by the Cold War military complex, Eric's material environment is the fundamental element of his character. Eric's vision of psychology bluntly states, '"Freud is finished, Einstein's next."'[88] The previous generation may have found beneficial results from the utilization of the Freudian psychoanalytic theory of personality, i.e., identifying through talk-therapy the three component parts of the mind: the id, ego, and superego (and the manner which these cognitive components effect pathological behaviour).[89] But Packer anticipates a psychology that is generated by our technoscientific achievements, and, is therefore incompatible with Freudian psychoanalytic theory. This conflict arises from the lack of scientific evidence surrounding Freud's theories, in that they cannot be supported by any empirical (experimental) *data*. In fact, as researchers began to take a more scientific look at Freud's ideas, they found that several were unable to be supported by any objective measurement: for a theory to be *scientifically valid*, it must be possible to disprove (falsify) it with experimental evidence, and many of Freud's notions are not falsifiable. Packer identifies Einstein's revolutionary understanding of the physical

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[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., p. 77.
[87] Ibid., p. 104.
[88] Ibid., p. 6.
[89] Sigmund Freud. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, introduction by Peter Gay, (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.: New York, 1965 [1933]). Freud argued that each individual is presented with a conflict between biological drives and social expectations; successful navigation of these internal conflicts will lead to mastery of each developmental stage, and ultimately to a fully mature personality.

universe—the physics of relativity—as bonding the individual in the fabric of space and time in a way that is unrelated to Freudian psychology.

With this move from psychoanalysis to physics, from Freud to Einstein, Packer embeds himself in a space-time that follows the rules of special and general relativity, the most up-to-date understanding concerning the nature of the physical universe.[90] Through Eric's curt reference to Einstein, a whole set of natural phenomena are introduced, but two become necessary for interpreting Eric's behavior within the narrative: *time dilation* (moving clocks are measured to tick more slowly than an observer's "stationary" clock) and the *equivalence principle* (free fall is inertial motion, i.e., an object in free fall is falling because that is how objects move when there is *no force* being exerted on them, instead of this being due to the force of gravity as is the case in classical mechanics). These two principles are offer a way to grasp both Packer's personal psychology as well as the real world effects that his actions have on the world's financial markets.

How does Eric Packer's understanding of relativity relate to his obsession with owning the most advanced technology? Consider the aphorism from Ralph Waldo Emerson, written over a century ago, "Everything intercepts us from ourselves."[91] Yet, digital technologies have so infused themselves into the phenomenology of Eric's everyday existence that it is the disintermediated experiences that manifest themselves as distractions from genuine reality. Such a digital disposition is exemplified when Packer uses derivative language to describe moments when he is disconnected from the global informatics of the world market and his currency trading firm, expressions such as "meat space" and "real time"[92]—repeated nearly verbatim later in the novel, "meat space" and "original space"[93]—such phraseology is meant to confer an inferior, atrophic element. Eric's "real" life takes place in the universe of digitally facilitated information and data. His entire existence is predicated upon keeping up with the pace of technological advancements. His staff, the physical environment of New York City, the lingua franca of the people, the financial success of his firm, it all must keep up with the technoscientific evolutions constantly occurring. If anything falls outside of this wild acceleration, Packer simply leaves it behind, or worse, forcibly removes it from his life. In an astonishing mix of hubris and selflessness, he does not excuse himself from this techno-entropic equation.

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[90] Albert Einstein. *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, translation from German to English in 1920, first published in 1916, (H. Holt and Company: New York). Available in the public domain in the USA and the UK.

[91] Possibly a reiteration of a phrase Emerson encountered in Montaigne, "Of Vanity," *Essays*, 1693, II, p. 359: "Look into your self, discover your self, keep close to your self…Men steal you from your self."

[92] Ibid., p. 64, p. 52.

[93] Ibid., p. 209.

Returning to specific instances of linguistic and cultural outmodedness, there are palpable moments of condescension in which Eric becomes particularly offended by certain uses of out-of-date technology. So much so that Eric, through the narrator, feels the need to express his distaste in great detail. For example, with regard to the term "walkie-talkie" Packer, 'wanted to ask the man why he was still using such a contraption, still calling it what he called it, carrying the nitwit rhyme out of the age of industrial glut into smart spaces built on beams of light.'[94] Yet another piece of antiquated technology that catches Eric's eye—and one that he is notably contemptuous of—is the ATM, otherwise known as,

> …Automated teller machines. The term was aged and burdened by its own historical memory. It worked at cross-purposes, unable to escape the inference of fuddled human personnel and jerky moving parts. The term was part of the process that the device was meant to replace. It was anti-futuristic, so cumbrous and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated.[95]

This ceaseless cataloguing of passé communicative, economic, and cultural frameworks, of material gadgetry, and even of people themselves, again prompts the reader to wonder: can language keep up with the speed of technological advancements? Or do our words lose their essence, become archaic and untranslatable, by the technologies which replace them?

If we take a step back and look at what DeLillo's earlier novels had to say about the ATM, a studied reader of the author perceives a virtual about-face on the topic. In *White Noise*, the character of Jack Gladney expresses: 'the system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed.'[96] The same piece of technology is being considered, and although separated by only eighteen years, these two novels reveal drastically different interpretations. Whereas Jack feels "support and approval," Packer is literally offended by the ATMs prolonged existence, and even more perturbed by the fact that our language had not evolved to match a metaphor to the antiquated operations of this "contraption." What exactly has changed? Why do these two protagonists maintain such contradictory opinions?

Within "In the Ruins of the Future" DeLillo (2001) declares:

> Technology is our fate, our truth. We may find that the ruin of the towers is implicit in other things. The new PalmPilot at fingertip's reach, the stretch limousine parked outside the hotel, the midtown skyscraper under construction, carrying the name of a

[94] Ibid., p. 102.
[95] Ibid., p. 54.
[96] Ibid., p. 46.

> major investment bank—all haunted in a way by what has happened, less assured in their authority, in the prerogatives they offer.[97]

All of these examples persist in *Cosmopolis,* and all gather the attention and consideration of Eric Packer at various times throughout the novel. Using his "hand organizer," Eric transcribes, 'a note to himself about the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper.' Here, in the later published novel, DeLillo has moved away from the nomenclature of the "PalmPilot." Eric expresses the very same sentiments that the reader experiences when reading the word "PalmPilot." As a technological term for this gadgetry—which was the first widely purchased iteration of a digital platform that could be used as both a phone and an email reader—"PalmPilot" was at one time as ubiquitous as the "Blackberry," a device which itself is already being replaced by "iPhone," which is itself being challenged by a myriad of tablets and mobile devices being manufactured by Android and Google. Even the terms cellular or "smart" phone, sound out-dated.

Eric Packer, a precursor to our digital age, knows that 'the hand device itself was an object whose original culture had just about disappeared. He knew he'd have to junk it.'[98] In both "Ruins" and in *Cosmopolis,* DeLillo recognizes that established modes of cultural and economic evolution are being constantly assaulted by the rapid development of digital technologies. America imagined the twin towers to be permanent, representations of its financial strength and solidarity: they were not. America believed that its technology would develop at a fixed rate, and that it could contend with the societal and cultural changes that it brought about in the same manner that it had with other massive historical or epochal shifts: it cannot. Technological revolution itself accelerates exponentially, which at first appeared to be a heaven-sent imperative for a neoliberal form of capitalism, as it pushes the consumer at ever greater speeds to spend and purchase, to buy and sell. However, the enormous transformation that our digital age brings about inspires a sense of perpetual obsolescence, not only of the things being used, but of the people using them.

2.3 *Information Made Sacred*

Nurs'd by warm sun-beams in primeval caves
Organic life began beneath the wave…
Hence without parent by spontaneous birth
Rise the first specks of animated earth;
From Nature's womb the plant or insect swims,
And buds or breaths with microscopic limbs…
From embryon births her changeful forms improve
Grow, as they live, and strengthen as they move

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[97] "In the Ruins," p. 39.
[98] Ibid., p. 9.

-Dr Erasmus Darwin, *The Temple of Nature, or the Origin of Society*, 1802

In theorizing what it means to live in a globalized, digitally mediated world, many writers (with varying degrees of self-consciousness) have often found themselves using science-fiction images, metaphors, and allusions. As has already been referenced, within his limo, his home, and his office, Eric 'could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank.'[99] In the year 2000 this type of digital technology would be something that the general American public would not have been familiar with outside of science-fictional narratives, and any real world implementations of such technologies would have been enormously expensive, precluding it from infiltrating and disseminating into the base of common cultural knowledge or usage. In this way, the world in which Eric exists in is non-mimetic. DeLillo has to imagine a technologically mediated environment in which Eric has devices that would have been the most pioneering of his time, and in doing so, he creates scenarios in which Eric interacts with digital technologies that have yet to be invented. In having to re-imagine the immediate future because of the exponential growth of information technologies, many contemporary writers have had to turn to science-fiction tropes, and they have done so with a consistency suggesting that anyone who attempts to write about our globalized world will almost inevitably turn to the language of science fiction. *Cosmopolis* echoes this language in order to describe the transition from "industrial glut" to "smart spaces built on beams of light."

Science-fiction language is simultaneously being absorbed into the cultural vernacular, outside of the confines of literature and fiction. Indeed, it has now come to saturate academia—as new fields of scholarly research and departmental subjects, such as the now abundant "Digital Humanities," "Digital Sociology," "Social Media Studies," "Digital Anthropology," "Video Game Studies," "Internet Studies" etc., reveal a nascent generalized academic-level interest that, quite simply, did not exist twenty years ago. This science-fictionally infused dialect has come to saturate politics, education, journalism, economics, and popular culture so thoroughly that it would be a challenge for someone to find a medium in which our vocabulary has been unaffected by the development of digital technologies.

One scholarly example can be found—perhaps the most frequently used in order to demonstrate this shift into science-fiction language—in Fredric Jameson. Jameson (1991) has characterized our postmodern globalized world as a 'hyperspace' a 'mutation in space'

[99] Ibid., p. 13.

comprising a 'multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities.'[100] Transitioning to science-fictional language on capitalism and the free-market, Kenneth Boulding (1966)—among many others in his field of economics—has famously characterized the globalized world as a "Spaceship Earth."[101] Paul Virilio (2000) has (in a similar fashion to Eric Packer himself) compared the globalized world to a flash of brilliant energy: 'Globalisation,' he declares, 'is the speed of light….And it is nothing else!'[102] Finally, John Gulick (2007) has observed that globalization is often imagined as a paranormal phenomenon, as 'a supernatural force beyond human control.'[103]

Of all the characters this thesis has examined thus far, none is as involved with their surrounding technoscape as Eric Packer, whose fictional composition is nearly impossible to consider without reference to the entirely digitized environment with which he surrounds himself. Packer embodies the nebulous definitions given above, from Virilio's hyperbolic "speed of light" metaphor, to Gulick's almost religious sentimentality, to Jameson's comic book laden language of "mutations in space" and the multiverse. This is demonstrated in a brief moment of conversation, when Shiner, Chief of Technology, confides in Eric:

> All this optimism, all this booming and soaring. Things happen like bang. This and that simultaneous. I put out my hand and what do I feel? I know there's a thousand things you analyze every ten minutes. Patterns, ratios, indexes, whole maps of information. I love information. This is our sweetness and light. It's a fuckall wonder. And we have meaning in the world. People eat and sleep in the shadow of what we do. But at the same time, what?[104]

Perhaps the most central and persistent rhetoric driving the digitally mediated society is oriented towards placing an emphasis on the belief that information technologies "empower" individuals. The founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates, has expressed his conviction that computers are "the most empowering tool we've ever created" (Grossman, 2004).[105] How true is this statement? Shiner's series of questions begins with his examining the very epistemological structure of his life and business, '"Do you get the feeling sometimes that you don't know what's going on?"'[106] Shiner is first introduced as being hunched over in a 'masturbatory crouch' as a 'curling embryonic ingrowth.' His absorption in the narcissistic

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[100] Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 1991), p. 44, 413.
[101] Kenneth Boulding. "The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth," 1966. Available online at: http://www.eoearth.org/view/article/51cbed1f7896bb431f68fe60/
[102] Paul Virilio. "The Kosovo War Took Place in Orbital Space: Paul Virilio in Conversation with John Armitage," translated by Patrice Riemens, 2000. Available online at: http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=132
[103] John Gulick. *Sociology 450: Sociology of Globalization*, (Akita International University Press: Akita, Japan, 2007).
[104] Ibid., p. 14.
[105] Lev Grossman. "Ten Questions for Bill Gates," *Time Magazine Online*, March 8th, 2004.
[106] Ibid., p. 14.

womb of digital technology is unable to totally expel the persistent, although unidentifiable, feeling or intuition that there is a "real" world in comparison with the online-world, that for all its global magnificence, cyberspace is illusory and deficient of an authentic, human element. Even for Packer, a man who has the money and power and intelligence to be at the very apex of technological, economic, and political enterprises, at moments feels as if 'Nothing existed around him.'[107] What is causing this existential deterioration in these two young men? Is it a natural occurrence, a reiterative case of postmodern ennui? Or is it something being brought on by the technology that Eric and Shiner are continually immersed in?

J.C.R. Licklider, recognized as one of the intellectual "fathers" of the Internet, wrote an influential essay published in 1960, titled "Man-Computer Symbiosis."[108] In this essay, Licklider remarked on the ostensibly "symbiotic partnership" between men and computers, with the emphasis being that humans will set the parameters within which computers will do the work. Licklider saw this man-computer relationship as an avenue to, 'prepare the way for insights and decisions in technical and scientific thinking…and that preliminary analyses indicate that the symbiotic partnership will perform intellectual operations much more effectively than man alone can perform them.' The interaction between the man and the computer will be a one-way street. Computers will simply serve to help humans perform "intellectual operations" more efficiently. Humanity will *use* computers to serve their own purposes. This is the ideological root of the man-computer relationship. But if one fast-forwards to the year 2000, the symbiotic partnership that Licklider envisioned has become far more complex.

Consider Eric's interior monologue as he looks into the plasma screen display of the world markets:

> He looked past Chin toward streams of numbers running in opposite directions. He understood how much it meant to him, the roll and flip of data on a screen. He studied the figural diagrams that brought organic patterns into play, birdwing and chambered shell. It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact, data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole.[109]

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[107] Ibid., p. 6.
[108] J.C.R. Licklider. "Man-Computer Symbioses," as found in *IRE Transactions on Human Factors in Electronics*, vol. HFE-I, March issue, pp. 4-11.
[109] Ibid., p. 24.

Eric discerns the transformation of information and data into organic matter, "birdwing and chambered shell," the geometric patterns of life itself are understood as "zero-oneness," as binary code. DeLillo goes even a step further. The financial markets that Eric scrutinizes are not in and of themselves initiated by human beings. Licklider's man-computer, one-way directionality is shed by the rapid evolution of digital technologies. Data itself is now seen as a form of life, "soulful and glowing." This data-as-life scenario is not simply the inner monologue of a fictional character, or the reverberation of DeLillo's own digitally situated ideology. As Richard Dawkins wrote in 1986, 'what lies at the heart of every living thing is not a fire, not warm breath, not a "spark of life," it is *information*, words, instructions.'[110] Evolution itself is to be viewed as an exchange of information between organism and environment. It is all DNA, deoxyribonucleic acid. The definition: "A self-replicating material which is present in nearly all living organisms as the main constituent of chromosomes. It is the carrier of genetic *information*." When Eric looks at the monitor and thinks, "here is the heave of the biosphere" there is not a hint of hyperbole. Nor is there exaggeration when James Gleick (2011) chronicles the universe itself as merely information reaching toward greater states of complexity.[111] Atoms, matter, life, and technology are all just media for this information to continually evolve.

When DeLillo writes in "Ruins" that: "Technology is our fate, our truth…We don't have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment," technology replaces religion, substitutes for faith, and most importantly, supplants the allegorical narrative of the "spark of life" with the chemical transfigurations of metamorphic biology.[112] This line of thought is continued through Eric's chief of theory, Vija Kinski, when she says, '"Technology is crucial to civilization why? Because it helps us make our fate. We don't need God or miracles or the flight of the bumblebee."'[113] Here, Kinski seems to speak vicariously for the Don DeLillo who wrote "In the Ruins of the Future." Vija's reference to the "flight of the bumblebee" is meant to evoke both the biological mystery of the insects' ability for flight, and the virtuosity needed to perform the piece of music on the violin. It also presumes that the world of high culture and our biological environments have been overtaken by some third power that is outside of our traditional understanding, a sentiment reflected thirteen years later in DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016), by the protagonist-named character of Nadya: '"Technology has become a force of nature. We

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[110] Richard Dawkins. *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design*, (W.W. Norton: New York, 1986), p. 112, my italics.
[111] James Gleick. *The Information*, (Harper-Collins: 2011).
[112] "In the Ruins," p. 36.
[113] Ibid., p. 95.

can't control it. It comes blowing over the planet and there's nowhere for us to hide.'"[114] Digitization has caused a chromosomal anomaly, an evolutionary mutation that eerily incorporates both the artificial and the organic.

These are not just the fictional and non-fictional musings of an aging author. Many see the development of digital technologies and the Web 2.0 as the continuation of natural processes. For instance, Kevin Kelly convincingly portrays technology as a partner in human evolution. In his book *What Technology Wants* (2010), Kelly argues that technology is emerging as the "seventh kingdom of life on earth."[115] Although he expresses himself with greater humility and more self-doubt than previously mentioned technologists, futurists, and scientists—such as Ray Kurzweil and his theory of "The Law of Accelerating Returns"—Kelly nonetheless holds that technology's growth and development is not only inevitable, it is even desirable. While Kelly appreciates that certain technologies can create sociocultural complications, he also contends that such difficulties simply generate an opportunity for yet another technology to be produced to mitigate the detrimental effects. Is this not just an endless loop of negative and positive outcomes, in which humanity is eventually frayed beyond repair? Kelly (2007) disagrees:

> I don't think technology is neutral or a wash of good and bad effects. To be sure it does produce both problems and solutions, but the chief effect of technology is that it produces more possibilities. More options. More freedom, essentially. That's really good. That is the reason why people move to cities—for more choices.[116]

With this understanding, anyone who wishes to hold off what DeLillo calls "the white-hot future," to slow down a seemingly unstoppable technological onslaught, becomes complicit in trying to withhold "choices" from the general public.[117]

This "freedom of choice" paradigm is reaffirmed in the epilogue of *Underworld*, where the reader observes Nick Shay's stream of consciousness concerning global markets and technological advancements:

> Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transitional media, the attenuating influence of money that's electronic and sex that's cyberspaced, untouched money and computersafe sex, the convergence of consumer desire—not that people want the same things, necessarily, *but that they want the same range of choices*.[118]

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[114] Don DeLillo. *Zero K*, (Scriber: New York, 2016), p. 245.
[115] Kevin Kelly. *What Technology Wants*, (Viking: New York, 2010).
[116] John Brockman. "The Technium and the 7th Kingdom of Life: A Talk with Kevin Kelly," *Edge*, July 19, 2007. Available online at: www.edge.org./3rd_culture/kelly07/kelly07_index.html
[117] "In the Ruins," p. 33.
[118] Ibid., p. 785, my italics.

By the time of *Cosmopolis* and Eric Packer, digital technology is embedded within culture, and in some instances undifferentiated from it, and any avoidance of technology is rendered as being "anti-futuristic" as well as anti-capitalist. Or, in the words of Vija Kinski, such a disposition would be an affront to the imminent progress of globalization, '"This is a protest against the future. They want to hold off the future. They want to normalize it, keep it from overwhelming the present."'[119] In *What Technology Wants,* Kelly uses the Unabomber and the Amish as examples of societies that produce individuals at opposite ends of the technological spectrum, with his thesis remaining intact in describing the actions of both. That is, resistance to the growth and expansion of technology is futile, or even illusory. In the end, both parties depend on technology. The Unabomber depended on bombs and the US mail system to attack technology and the Amish depend on hand-tools that are, in fact, produced and manufactured in high-tech factories great distances away from their townships.

Kelly's ideas are, at this point, well within reason. Where they become discomforting, however, is when he insists on technology's all-consuming nature:

> It is an ever-elaborate tool that we wield and continually update to improve our world; and it is an ever-ripening superorganism, of which we are but a part, that is following a direction beyond our own making. Humans are both master and slave to the *technium,*[120] and our fate is to remain in this uncomfortable dual role.[121]

There is no way to reverse our trajectory, we can only move through. Kelly cautions us to, 'align ourselves with the imperative of the technium,' because any other reaction would be to 'resist our second self.'[122] Humanity and technology are ultimately indistinguishable: 'The conflict that the technium triggers in our hearts is due to our refusal to accept our nature—the truth is that we are continuous with the machines we create…When we reject technology as a whole, it is a brand of self-hatred.'[123] For Kelly, humanity is simply a component, a link in the great causal chain of technological evolution. But is this type of reasoning not itself a form of self-hatred?

Kelly's argument depends on a single strand of self-generation. This new form of genetic reproduction, a new DNA, would tie together the cosmos, the bios, and the technos into one act of universal creation: 'Humans are not the culmination of this trajectory but an intermediary, smack in the middle between the born and the made.'[124] Technology must be accepted as our inevitable offspring *and* successor, any hesitation would be to "reject

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[119] Ibid., p. 91.
[120] "Technium" is Kelly's designation for the technological universe.
[121] *What Technology Wants,* p. 187.
[122] Ibid., p. 188.
[123] Ibid., p. 189.
[124] Ibid., p. 356.

technology as a whole." In Kelly's schema, there is no middle-ground. If this is the case, then the emergence of an all-encompassing technium would also be our apocalypse, the end of a distinct form or understanding of what it means to be human. Still, this is a dystopia that falls outside the realms of our immediate understanding. As one of the Stenmark twins rhetorically questions in *Zero K* (2016): '"Apocalypse is inherent in the structure of time and long-range climate and cosmic upheaval. But are we seeing the signs of a self-willed inferno?"'[125] This is not a cinema-inspired scenario, where some new disease spreads across the globe and decimates human populations. This is not World War Three, when monomaniacal leaders decide it is time for yet another great conflict. This is not some outside, alien force ascending from the heavens to wipe out the world's population and claim the earth as their own. We, ourselves, through our own actions and technical inventions, have written this tale, coded this eschatological narrative in binary arrangements of zeros and ones.

DeLillo has contemplated this ideology of self-imposed obsolescence since the first iterations of the personal computer and networked information. In *White Noise*, "J.A.K" or Jack Gladney (and, potentially, the entire town of Blacksmith) is exposed to the chemical agent known as Nyodene D. The Gladney family has to evacuate and moves into a makeshift camp on the outskirts of town. On the way to the temporary shelter, Jack and his family witness the 'remarkable and startling sight' of the 'black billowing cloud,' the 'airborne toxic event' from inside their moving car. Jack and his family are stunned, 'We weren't sure how to react.' Jack continues with this mystified internal dialogue by contemplating:

> Our fear was accompanied by a *sense of awe* that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and wilful rhythms. This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measureable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or a tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event.[126]

This dramatic imagery of artificial death, of "death made in a laboratory," the Airborne Toxic Event being "man-made" prompts Jack to interpret the events with a televisual metaphor, 'The cloud resembled a national promotion for death, a multi-million dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation.'[127] The Airborne Toxic Event is so startling and awe-inspiring that the only method that Jack can use to

[125] Ibid., p. 243.
[126] Ibid., p. 128, my italics.
[127] Ibid., p. 158.

understand its actual existence is to filter what he is seeing through similar imagery that he has viewed on television. As the cloud becomes an ad-campaign for the apocalypse, Jack manifests a subjective understanding of the experience by turning himself into a character in a commercial, '"All this as a result of a byproduct of insecticide. There's something artificial about my death. It's shallow, unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky. They ought to carve an aerosol can on my tombstone."'[128] In a strange way, Jack's sardonic mediatisation of his (potential) illness serves to heighten the profound fear which he is experiencing. Medical technologies have assisted Jack in that they provide a greater understanding of his exposure to the chemical agent of Nyodene D, yet, as he is explaining to Murray Jay Siskind in the above conversation, with this knowledge comes not comfort, but a paralyzing hopelessness.

It is within the early scenes in *White Noise* that the reader is introduced to DeLillo's first foray into the mundane existence of digital and information technologies, as Jack's medium into a basic comprehension of his illness comes in the form of an Internet-connected personal computer. Jack learns of his unique circumstances not from any immediate effects on his physical health and well-being (other than his anxiety, he shows no symptoms of illness), but from the bracketed, pulsating stars from the computer screen of a SIMUVAC worker, '"It just means you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that."'[129] In this way, the computer, the airborne toxic event, the fear-relieving psychotropic known as Dylar—even Jack and Babette's perception of the very nature of death itself as a hyperreal enigma—become part of a field of associations and meanings that have been divorced from the traditional epistemological framework.

The introduction of digital technology changes Jack's subjective experiences so radically, that even death itself seems to exist independently of any symbol that he has yet encountered:

> Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all. It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying.[130]

The SIMUVAC technician's monitor reveals a kind of esoteric riddle, one that Jack is both completely baffled by due to his lack of practical computational knowledge (not only what

[128] Ibid., p. 283.
[129] Ibid., p. 141.
[130] Ibid., p. 142.

the stars and pulsating data sets imply for his health, but also, what is a computer and how does it work?) and completely implicated in by the paradoxical "alien logic" of this new "network of symbols." The computer screen gives Jack access to a reality where he can simultaneously be made aware of his overall health, but is robbed of any comfort this knowledge may impart due to very same technology revealing the myriad of possibilities—graphs and data sets—that displace death by making it just another form of information. Digital technology puzzlingly makes Jack's illness a virtual, and therefore, a presumably innocuous threat. Yet, at the very same time, his ailment is nonetheless an inescapably *real* condition, one which "no man can escape."

When DeLillo refers to the World Trade Center Towers as, "not only an emblem of advanced technology but a justification, in a sense, for technology's irresistible will to realize in solid form whatever becomes theoretically allowable," we see similar fatalistic language to that of Kelly being utilized.[131] It also mirrors Victor's language in the epilogue of *Underworld*, when he comments on the strange relationship between the imagination and the atomic bomb, '"Once they imagine the bomb, write down equations, they see it's possible to build, they build, they test in the American desert, they drop on the Japanese, but once they imagine in the beginning, it makes everything true…Nothing you can believe is not coming true."'[132] Such a DeLillian understanding of sociotechnical evolutions can be condensed through a conditional (or material) statement: if the essence of technology is the compulsion to distil thoughts and ideas into material reality, then it would appear that the only limitations would be that of our collective imagination.

2.4 *"We Wished for It": Our March towards Self-Negation*

> We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*; Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and, to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.
>
> -Robert Oppenheimer, on witnessing the first test of the atomic bomb[133]

Such unlimited technological potentialities are made available by a digitized faith, and constitute the very essence of Eric Packer's personality. Or, as his wife Elise elaborates when she tells Eric, '"I think you acquire information and turn it into something stupendous and awful."'[134] Packer is the explicit manifestation of this new idea of a globalized human

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[131] "In the Ruins," p. 7.
[132] Ibid., p. 801.
[133] Available via YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LmxIptS3cw
[134] Ibid., p. 19.

species previously alluded to by Kelly and Jameson. As Benno Levin posits: 'He [Eric] is always ahead, thinking past what is new, and I'm tempted to admire this, always arguing with things that you and I consider great and trusty additions to our lives. Things wear out impatiently in his hands. I know him in my mind. He wants to be one civilization ahead of this one.'[135] Eric Packer is striving to live by a McLuhanian (1960) "global village" mantra, a world in which, 'everything happens to everyone at the same time: everyone knows about, and therefore participates in, everything that is happening the minute it happens.'[136] Eric's obsession with living authentically in his technologically mediated environment arrives from a desire to fulfil the imperative presented to him by the widespread digitization occurring in the globalized world. This imperative, as expressed by Jameson (1991), urges us to evolve our physical bodies, to 'grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions,' with the intention of keeping pace with the hyperconnectivity of contemporary global reality.[137] In his rush towards such technological futures, Eric Packer manifests an emergent, digitized psychology.

DeLillo wrestles with our technological destiny in both his non-fiction writing and in his novels. His characterization of technological determinism differs noticeably from the essay of "Ruins," to the fiction of *Cosmopolis*. "Ruins" describes September 11th as a kind of anomaly or a temporary deviation that does not critically disrupt the onward march of digital culture, "the future has yielded, for now, to medieval experience, to the old slow furies of cut-throat religion."[138] DeLillo's essay was written in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, when the effects of the violent trauma reverberated throughout the world. Yet, like throwing a stone in a pond, the ripples eventually fade as they move further from the epicentre. "Ruins" focuses much more on the conventional dialectic, the conflict generated between the forces of technological advancement and the forces of anti-modernization, between terrorism and the Western world. *Cosmopolis* sustains ambiguity in the midst of these two seemingly opposing forces by shedding light on the paradoxical kernel at the heart of anti-capitalism and capitalism: both are based on the premise of perpetual destruction. When Vija Kinski quotes Mikhail Bakunin's anarchist refrain that "The urge to destroy is a creative urge," we see that the globalizing nature of digital advancements and the forces of anti-globalization are in a mysterious kind of complicity. Vija continues, '"This is also the

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[135] Ibid., p. 152
[136] Marshall McLuhan and Edmund Snow Carpenter. "Introduction" to *Explorations in Communications: An Anthology*, (Beacon: Boston, 1960), pp. ix-xii.
[137] *Postmodernism…The Cultural Logic*, p. 39.
[138] "In the Ruins," p. 6.

hallmark of capitalist thought. Enforced destruction. Old industries have to be harshly eliminated. New markets have to be forcibly claimed. Old markets have to be re-exploited. Destroy the past, make the future."'[139]

Vija's theorizing that the neoliberal capitalist ideology *and* the destructive urge of anarchism are both implicit in the digitized global marketplace implies a philosophy similar to Baudrillard and Virilio. Both state that the events of September 11th, 2001, were created by a contradictory feature present in the American consciousness. In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard (2002-a) articulates:

> When the two towers collapsed, you had the impression that they were responding to the suicide of the suicide planes with their own suicides. It has been said that "Even God cannot declare war on Himself." Well, He can. The West, in the position of God (divine omnipotence and absolute moral legitimacy) has become suicidal, and declared war on itself.[140]

With a Baudrillardian understanding of 9/11, the World Trade Center attacks did not occur from without, but from within, a sentiment reaffirmed by one character in DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007): '"Weren't the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down. The provocation is obvious."'[141] The terrorists themselves have no legitimatized agency in this paradigm. The hijackers become nothing more than avatars in a vast philosophical conversation that the West is having with itself about its own monolithic position in the age of cybercapital. It is Baudrillard's (non-fictional) evoking the second person pronoun "you" that is perhaps the most offensive part of his internecinal conjecture. Is his implication that all Westerners, and in this particular instance, all Americans, shared this "impression?"

After the dust had settled—literally—many Americans may have wandered into such a theoretical maze in a vain attempt to understand how this kind of catastrophic moment could occur without warning. Indeed, only days after the attack, blogs were being posted at tremendous rate, news organizations were searching for answers, connections, stories that could lead us back to steady narrative. Numerous conspiracy theories were born the moment the first plane hit (and are perpetuated to this very day): was this an inside job? Did the Bush administration set this up to help push us into a war in Afghanistan and Iraq? And—if this was simply an act of terrorism—who was responsible and why did they target

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[139] Ibid., pp. 92-93.
[140] Jean Baudrillard. *The Spirit of Terrorism*, translation by Chris Turner, (Verso: London, 2002), p. 7.
[141] Ibid., p. 116. Here, we must remember DeLillo's uncompromising insistence of the "seven shades of blue" paradigm, i.e., if the narrative strategy is "obvious"—as attested to in the above quotation—then the "sources weren't deep enough." DeLillo mimics Baudrillard here, not for the sake of philosophical corroboration, but to give voice to a cultural consciousness that permeated the USA during the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a widespread feeling in which the indeterminacy of reality became manifest as a normative psychology.

the World Trade Center? Do we react militarily, if so, where and against what nation? Baudrillard (2002-a) sees this line of questioning as the wrong way to approach the event. He continues, 'At a pinch, we can say that *they* did it, but *we* wished for it,' a staggeringly difficult proposition that Baudrillard has to concede is 'unacceptable to the Western moral conscience,' but that is clearly demonstrated by the profitable cinematic sub-genre of urban dystopianism.[142]

Baudrillard concentrates his attention on the mediated dystopias of apocalyptic cinema and television because he is invested in the dissolved (or imploded) dichotomy of the sacred and profane, which he links with the real and the virtual, the symbolic and the semiotic, correspondingly. The result of such an implosion is a dialogic exchange wherein meaning and the control over meaning is continually negotiated, asserted, and problematized. Much of Baudrillard's writing reads like an elegy for the real, sounding the death-knell of genuine representation. Even when he aims to strategically generalize his overall argument, the urge to overturn the simulacrum actually serves to contribute to its own implosion, initiating a recursive fatalism which leads to an overstated and ultimately impulsive investment in the loss of any opportunity for the transcendental or the sublime. What is forsaken in Baudrillard's (2002-b) philosophy? The answer: the potential for any *real* catastrophe, any *real* loss, 'Because we live under the sign of virtual catastrophe.'[143]

Of Baudrillard's (2002-b) myriad examples of "extreme phenomena," the prefix of *Trans* ("across," "beyond," "through," "changing thoroughly," or "transverse") serves to thematically highlight his primary cultural concern. In the section of "Transeconomics," Baudrillard argues that the Wall Street crash of 1987 was just one in a line of non-events, of '"bombs" that do not go off.'[144] The historical occurrence matters not to Baudrillard, whether the issue is a 'financial crash,' a 'nuclear showdown,' or a 'population time bomb,' the fact remains that, 'we experience no such explosions,' these are bombs that are never actualized, never serve their inborn function of detonation.[145] Although he concedes a real economic crisis did take place in 1929, and 'Hiroshima really happened,' war and money are now "hyper-realized"; that is, they exist in 'a space that is inaccessible.' What actually takes place is inconsequential to Baudrillard's philosophizing, as this hyperreality and inaccessibility leave 'the world just as it is.'[146] We might, with the hindsight of a nearly fifteen years, easily recognize Baudrillard's 'imaginary economy' in which debt has 'gone

[142] *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 5, italics in original.
[143] Jean Baudrillard. *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, (Verso: London, 2002), p. 26.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid., p. 27.
[146] Ibid.

into orbital whirl…circulating from one bank to another, or from one country to another, as it is bought and sold,' in the post-financial crisis of 2008, post-credit crunch milieu of the early twenty-first century.[147] With this recognition, however, we might *also* acknowledge that this imaginary economy was—and is—translatable into "real economic terms," and that the world is in no sense subsequently left intact, having experienced what, for many, is a "true catastrophe," a very real and tangible financial crisis that destabilized both the US and world economy, and the very real decade-plus war(s) in which America spent trillions of dollars and lost thousands of soldiers in the conflicts that took place in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012) respond to Baudrillard's entrenched simulacra and simulation by stating:

> [His] work is valuable insofar as it questions the relation between media and events, refusing to accept what representationalism presumes—namely, their a priori separation. However, it is also epistemologically flawed because, in exchanging separation for implosion or collapse, it still posits an outside, a real world out there that is effectively lost, substituted by simulations that absorb events like black holes absorb light.[148]

In *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo considers an analogous loss of the transcendental signifier through the suicidal ideology of Eric Packer. During his day long journey that eventually brings him to Hell's Kitchen, Packer is fascinated by the "event" of the death-threat that he has received even before the initiation of the main plotline. This threat serves as his guiding light, his ideological compass, one that he believes can lead him to unaffected world and sense of self, one not bounded by endless replications and reverberations of a long deceased authentic reality. As the narrative progresses via Eric's crosstown expedition, the reader is only made aware of these reports sporadically and ex post facto. This produces in the reader a feeling of anticipation and unease. Eric's repeated dismissal of Torval's warnings concerning the heightened security threats and his insistence that they continue across town at a snail's pace (all to get a haircut) suggests that Packer has some sort of attraction to his pursuer, a gravitational pull caused by the "black hole" of Benno Levin/Richard Sheets that he voluntarily allows to ensnare him.

Eric Packer, in a similar fashion to Marvin Lundy's Cold War nostalgia in *Underworld*, seems to find the idea of being an assassin's target as giving his life enhanced meaning and texture:

> He was afraid the night was over. The threat should have taken material form soon after Torval went down but it hadn't, from that point to this, and he began to think it never would. *This was the coldest possible prospect, that no one was out there*. It

[147] Ibid., p. 28.
[148] Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska. *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, (MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012), p. 40.

> left him in a suspended state, all that was worldly and consequential in blurry ruin behind him but no culminating moment ahead.[149]

By the conclusion of *Cosmopolis*, when Eric finally confronts Benno Levin/Richard Sheets, it has become increasingly clear that Packer has materialized an otherwise avoidable security threat out of his own desire to be in an assassin's crosshairs. Is Eric Packer meant to be interchangeable with Baudrillard's ideas concerning the hegemonic West? Is Eric's desire for self-destruction meant to be read as an allegory of Baudrillard's (2002-a) insistence that, 'no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree?'[150]

Although critics such as Laist, Boxall, and Cowart make connections between Baudrillard's hyperreality and DeLillo's narratological structures and plotlines, it is difficult to reconcile with the two writers as being a continuation of the same social, cultural, and economic history. During the course of an influential and controversial discussion of the changing status of signs in industrial and post-industrial culture, Baudrillard (1976) remarks—almost in passing—"art is dead."[151] This remark, although said casually by Baudrillard, is a despotic comment that refers in the first instance to the diluting of ideals of inspired solo craftsmanship or "lone genius" in an age driven by mechanical mass production. The inimitability of cultural artefacts ceases to exist in an economic environment prone to endless replication through the technologies of advanced capitalism. The "priceless" nature of a work of art ("It's mine if I buy it"), the unique signature of a given artist's singular creative style can now be instantaneously forged by something as commonplace as a machine. Baudrillard recognizes that the assertion of such ideas is far from original, and he duly acknowledges Walter Benjamin's (1939) well known and celebrated essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," as the ground-breaking intervention in this area of critical debate.

For Benjamin, the consequences of mechanical reproduction and technological advancements need to be understood not only in aesthetic terms but also in *political* practises. He goes on to argue that if the work of art has lost its "aura" of uniqueness and sacredness, then this is entirely a good thing, because it agreeably dispels the atmosphere of privilege and mystique in which members of the high-culture exist (mainly as a way of avoiding participation in a liberal democracy).[152] To Baudrillard, the ramifications of

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[149] Ibid., p. 169, my italics.
[150] *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 5.
[151] Jean Baudrillard. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, (Sage: London, 1993 [1976]), translation by Iain Hamilton, p. 75.
[152] Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," found in *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935-1938*, 2nd version, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 101-33.

technological and mechanical revolution are to be associated with a more general and all-encompassing *ontological* alteration, rather than a shift in political consciousness. The "death of art" to Baudrillard is only one symptom of a much wider sociological phenomenon: the death of reality itself. Or, to phrase it with similar language to the ideas quoted earlier on concerning the Cold War, Baudrillard does not see technological advancements causing an "explosion," but rather, an "implosion" into the endless reiterations of simulation and hyperreality. As was previously made clear in chapter one, DeLillo's insistence on the power of language and the novel acting as a counter-narrative to this ontological reorientation is *antithetical* to Baudrillard's proclamation that art has lost its sociopolitical and sociocultural potency. In the next, conclusive section to this chapter, this thesis methodically examines this claim by scrutinizing Eric Packer's strange fascination with digital transcendence.

2.5 *Digital Metempsychosis: Eric Packer's Techno-Scientific Unconsciousness*

> We live in a moment of history where change is so speeded up that we begin to see the present only when it is already disappearing.
>
> - R.D. Laing, 1967[153]

Although *Cosmopolis* does not directly engage with the events of September 11th, DeLillo uses the novel to direct our attention to the effects of the attacks on our globalized economic systems and the digital technologies that are so rapidly propelling them forward. Eric Packer expresses sentiments comparable to Paul Virilio's earlier explored ideas concerning self-initiated obsolescence. In his essay *Ground Zero,* Virilio (2002) characterizes 9/11 as the continued expression of our technologically facilitated condition, 'The tragic events in New York in September 2001 showed us the alarming situation of an overpowerful state suddenly brought up short against its own consciousness—or, rather, against *its techno-scientific unconsciousness*: in other words, against the Gnosticist faith on which it is founded.'[154] The collapse of the WTC Towers signifies the emergence of a technoscientific ideology which conjures up the perpetual ebb and flow of scientific dogmas which continually consume one another in a race towards complete ways of knowing.

Virilio (2002) interprets this technoscientific worldview as the nodal point in a one-way march towards "a purified dystopia":

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[153] *The Politics of Experience,* (Penguin Books: 1967), p. 1.
[154] Paul Virilio. *Ground Zero*, translation by Chris Turner (Verso: London, 2002), as found in "The Paul Virilio Reader," (Columbia University Press: New York, 2004), p. 249, italics in original.

> Let us not forget that, since the inopportune pursuit of the Manhattan Project by American physicists, the scientific "sorcerer's spirit" had found itself virtually released from the authority of its former patrons and, particularly, of their axiomatics—the ideological, social, economic and cultural criteria—on which the authority of the State was founded. And that had led to Hiroshima…A purified dystopia, a watertight system in which, after the collapse of the old epistemological ambitions, *would work only for the scientist, each discovery grafting itself on the previous one and science finding the sources and ends of its existence on its own ground*.[155]

If DeLillo's fiction provides a singular example of this kind of Virilian notion of concurrent self-reinforcement and self-negation, it is certainly Eric Packer, as he follows the technoscientific concept of obsolescence to the brink of self-destruction, and perhaps into new physiological dimension where the posthuman emerges out of the continual evolution of a digitized existence. As an American self-made billionaire, Eric exemplifies the loosed scientific "sorcerer's spirit" described by Virilio. Eric is his own authority, no politics guide his reasoning, no ideology or ethically constructed guidelines effect his motivations, and his vast wealth makes it a matter of course that he is always the first to own the most innovative technology. His obsession with cybercapital and discovering patterns within the world's financial markets put him continually a step ahead of the competition. Here is a man with one foot in the future, and one foot bolted-down to the present. As *Cosmopolis* progresses, we discover that Eric's insistence on finding new territories to exploit, new computational technologies to employ, new languages to interpret, map, and decipher, all lead to a final violent encounter, one that will force him to escape the very time-frame in which he exists, that is, to leave the present tense in a resolute leap towards the digitized future.

Within *Cosmopolis* the most explicit manifestation of the incongruous effects of digital technology on our understanding of space and time (space-time continuum) can be seen during the moments when Eric experiences events that happen seconds before they actually occur in "real-time." The initial episode at first appears meaningless, almost incidental. 'Eric watched himself on the oval screen below the spycam, running his thumb along his chinline. The car stopped and moved and he realized queerly that he'd just placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after he'd seen it on-screen.'[156] The second precognitive moment happens during the touch-less sex that Eric and Jane Melman, his Chief of Finance, have in the confines of his limo—during a prostate exam.

> He saw his face on the screen, eyes closed, mouth framed in a soundless little simian howl…He knew the spycam operated in real time, or was supposed to. How could he

[155] Ibid., italics in original.
[156] Ibid., p. 22.

> see himself if his eyes were closed? There wasn't time to analyze. He felt his body catching up to the independent image.[157]

By placing this moment during such a medically invasive and incredibly intimate scene, it is nearly impossible to miss. Now we are curious: why does Eric keep seeing things before they happen? The touch-less sex that happens between Packer and Melman stresses the importance of physicality, how the body and the mind are in constant communication, implying that the brain is not a distinct entity from that of the body.

This feature is made evident during a physical check-up, one that Eric has on a daily basis. Eric's insistence on knowing his overall health, medically speaking, suggests that he is overly concerned about his wellbeing. "'We die every day"' after all, an obvious truth that does not explain or exonerate Packer's distrustful obsession with his own body.[158] Dr Ingram's replacement of Dr Nevius implies that something has changed. Eric no longer takes comfort in knowing his body completely. This becomes even more apparent during the echocardiogram:

> Eric was on his back, with a skewed view of the monitor, and wasn't sure whether he was watching a computerized mapping of his heart or a picture of the thing itself. It throbbed forcefully on-screen. The image was only a foot away but the heart assumed another context, one of distance and immensity, beating in the blood plum raptures of a galaxy in formation. What mystery he glimpsed in this functional muscle. He felt the passion of the body, its adaptive drive over geologic time, the poetry and chemistry of its origins in the dust of old exploding stars. How dwarfed he felt by his own heart. There it was and it awed him, to see his life beneath his breastbone in image-forming units, hammering on outside him.[159]

Surely, this is not the first time that Eric has been exposed to the video-imaging of an echocardiogram. Yet, Eric's psychology concerning the procedure has taken on a completely different context. This is no longer a pragmatic medical exercise. Now there is "mystery" and "awe" and "poetry" being displayed in the monitor. Packer's digitally rendered inner workings become a micro-representation of the universe itself.

Similar to Jack Gladney's reaction to his computerized diagnosis, Eric is simultaneously alienated and made intimately aware of his physical nature through a digitally mediated transference of information. The echocardiogram forces Eric to consider something whose existence is both virtual and literal, as his heart portrayed digitally is both cyberspatial and physically localized, "How dwarfed he felt by his own heart." Eric's digitally imaged cardiovascular system overwhelms him, inspires him to think of the vastness of a "galaxy in formation." Packer's physical experiences take on an inferior status

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[157] Ibid., p. 52.
[158] Ibid., p. 45.
[159] Ibid., p. 44.

compared to the magnificence of such a stunning image, a technologically enabled image that elevates Eric's physiology into the complexity and grandeur of a celestial body. In this image, Eric's "functional muscle" is cleansed of flesh and blood and bone, now transformed to the physics of light and space, into binary datum.

According to the OED, cyberspace is "space perceived as such by an observer but generated by a computer system and having no real existence." Cyberspace (by its very definition) is the illusion of space that we experience when we interact with a computer monitor, or sign-in to a network of computers, or interact with the ever-changing collection of data that these Internet-connected machines share. In this way, cyberspace can only be understood as a figure of speech. During this medical exam, Eric is literally plugged into the cyberspace environment. He is the embodiment of the "sex that's cyberspaced" alluded to in *Underworld*. So much so that he only needs to use language in order to bring about a sexual connection with Jane Melman: 'He only has to speak it. Because they're beyond every model of established behaviour. He only has to say the words.'[160] An online, cyberspatial environment is also freed from the space-time continuum in that it does not have to adhere to any pre-established physical laws. This is the exact environment in which Eric wishes to exist—a kind of digital relativity—one freed from the 'scalding fact of his biology.'[161] Eric takes the sexual desire that he has for Jane and channels it into the virtual and cyberspatial, as opposed to a physical activity. Eric, in being able to talk Jane into orgasm without the direct involvement of the body, suggests that the future of erotic interaction is unrestricted by the limitations of medial bodies in direct physical contact.

Eric's next sexual liaison occurs with his one female bodyguard, Kendra Hays. This encounter ends with Eric requesting that Kendra shoot him with her stun-gun. His plea—'"shock me to my DNA"'—refers to the technoscientific discovery of a digital code as the chemical building-blocks of all molecular biology.[162] The inference is that Eric will seize upon the physical experience of pain as a way of overriding the structure of his corporeal morphology. The one-hundred-thousand-volt burst will propel him toward the essential binary code of universal biology, the binary code of genetic informatics, a language that is naturally compatible with computational functionality. Eric is testing the limits of his own physicality, plumbing further and further down into his own bodily experiences of pain and sexual pleasure, all with the intention of discovering the strange cybernetics of everyday life. As DeLillo explains during an interview with Michael Krasny in 2003:

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[160] Ibid., p. 51.
[161] Ibid., p. 50.
[162] Ibid., p. 115.

> There's a kind of sub-theme in [*Cosmopolis*] of bodilessness…a force and counter-force exist at the same time. That is, Eric is himself a bodybuilder; he is in good shape physically and takes good care of himself and is quite a powerful man. But, he has a sense that this accelerated time in which he lives is moving us towards not only bodilessness but almost a sense of immortality.[163]

DeLillo's comments remind the reader of Kinski's prediction, '"People will not die. Isn't this the creed of the new culture? People will be absorbed in streams of information…Computers will die. They're dying in their present form. They're just about dead as distinct units. A box, a screen, a keyboard. They're melting into the texture of everyday life."'[164] Eric considers the potentiality of the digitized mind, one that lives on forever, unimpeded by death or disease, while concomitantly being chained to the reality of his physical body. This is the "force" of accelerated technological evolution coming up against the "counter-force" of Eric's physiology.

Eric's penultimate precognitive moment occurs near the heart of Times Square, during the aforementioned riot:

> His own image caught his eye, live on the oval screen beneath the spycam. Some seconds passed. He saw himself recoil in shock. More time passed. He felt suspended, waiting. Then there was a detonation, loud and deep, near enough to consume all the information around him. He recoiled in shock. Everyone did. The phrase was part of the gesture, the familiar expression, embodied in the motion of the head and limbs. He recoiled in shock. The phrase reverberated in the body.[165]

Eric is only able to see into the future through digital mediums. The screen, the spycam, the limo, the Internet, these electronic and digital mechanisms work in conjunction with Eric's atypical virtuosity to provide glimpses of events yet to occur. Sitting in the interior of the limo with Eric during the blast, Kinski views Packer recoil seconds before the actual detonation. This leads her to theorize: '"This is the thing about genius [it] alters the terms of its habitat…Think of it this way. There are rare minds operating, a few, here and there, the polymath, the true futurist. A consciousness such as yours, hypermaniacal, may have contact points beyond general perception."'[166]

Kinski is, in essence, analysing Packer's intellectual abilities as a polymath as the physical embodiment—or psychic materialization of—Laplace's Demon:

> We may regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its past and the cause of its future. An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the

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[163] Full interview available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzkuhFBRNi4
[164] Ibid., p. 104.
[165] Ibid., pp. 93-94.
[166] Ibid., p. 95.

> tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes.[167]

Eric's singular intelligence, coupled with cutting-edge digital technologies, enables an "intellect vast enough" to analyze, quantify, and interpret "all forces that set nature in motion," to the degree of being able to foresee future events. Again, it must be stressed that it is only *with and through* digital technologies that Eric is able to ascertain and decipher such enormous amounts of information. Laplace's Demon could, in consideration of Eric Packer, be renamed as Laplace's Cyborg: the transcendent marriage of mind and technics that hints towards the posthuman.

In the final scene of *Cosmopolis*, when Eric is allowed a fore glimpse of his dead body in the digital display of his watch, it is only the logical result of the book-long fixation with what DeLillo referred to as "bodilessness," with surpassing himself through complete fusion with technology. His repeated visions of the immediate future which digital technology brings into being—the office towers barren of human inhabitants, the posthuman techno-ravers, the cinematically-facilitated apocalypse—all point towards the erasure of human presence as their most prominent indicator. The watch in which Eric sees this image is the most science-fictionally inspired example of technology in the novel, and, although Eric has presumably been wearing it all day, it is only mentioned once previously, when Eric intentionally sabotages the accounts of his ex-wife, Elise Shifrin, after her offer of financial assistance.[168] In the final scene, the watch once again comes to the forefront, this time with the camera and image-screen being the locus of attention: 'The camera was a device so microscopically refined it was almost pure information. It was almost metaphysics. It operated inside the watch body, collecting images in the immediate vicinity and displaying them on the crystal.'[169] The watch itself can be described as a science-fictional piece of technology because it is beyond anything else in Eric's world—or our own—in its capacity to photograph and record images from any perspective. By its very existence within the novel, the watch signifies something in relation to which Eric himself is finally made derivative, finally made obsolete. The future-projected picture of Eric's dead body on the watch's screen is the definitive image of the technologist being absorbed by technology, not only in the corporeal sense, but also existentially. Eric's life and death become actively transposed into digital space, a rearrangement which Eric welcomes as the kind of technological metempsychosis which Vija Kinski had earlier predicted: 'He'd

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[167] Pierre Simon Laplace. "A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities," translated by F.W. Truscott and F.L. Emory, 6th ed., (Dover Publications: New York, 1951), p. 4.
[168] Ibid., pp. 122-23.
[169] Ibid., pp. 204-05.

always wanted to become quantum dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat. The idea was to live outside of the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from the void.'[170]

In Eric's final moments, he seems optimistic about the likelihood of his achieving this posthuman condition: 'The technology was imminent or not. It was semi-mythical. It was the natural next step. It would never happen. It is happening now, an evolutionary advance that needed only the practical mapping of the nervous system onto digital memory.'[171] Notwithstanding the fact that Eric has taken no practical steps to arrange for this hybridization of his cognitive makeup and digital memory, the sheer notion of the inevitability of this near-future is enough to satisfy Eric's cyber-eucharistic faith in the possibility of technology to absorb and merge with his physical body (the sacramental bread consumed in this instance being the bullet shot from Benno Levin's handgun). Indeed, the adjourned ending of *Cosmopolis* does confer on Eric an intimation of immortality. The final sentence of the book—'He is dead inside the crystal of his watch, but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound'—leaves Eric the human-being and Eric the posthuman digital-program locked into one another.[172] The suspended conclusion signifies a definitive representation of the interconnectedness of Eric and his technoscape, and perhaps, of that yet to come in our own world. In the following two chapters, this thesis transitions to an exploration of the novels of Dave Eggers and the manner in which they reflect upon the "semi-mythical" implications of such cultural digitization, and the way in which these technological "evolutionary advancements" delineate the characterological makeup, thematic agendas, and fictional settings of the types of narratives being produced in America at the beginning of the 21st century.

[170] Ibid., p. 206.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid., p. 209.

Figure 2: The Dystopian Lineage

Chapter 3

Introduction

The New Infernal Machine: A Registry of Modern Longings

> With technoconsumerism, a humanist rhetoric of "empowerment" and "creativity" and "freedom" and "connection" and "democracy" abets the frank monopolism of the techno-titans; the new infernal machine seems increasingly to obey nothing but its own developmental logic, and it's far more enslavingly addictive, and far more pandering to people's worst impulses, than newspapers ever were.
>
> -Jonathan Franzen[1]

In its opening chapters, this thesis discusses the lengths to which technology has been infused into American society, generating a techno-cultural transformation which became the main themes of DeLillo's novels and essays: first by TV and radio (*White Noise*), then the personal or home computer (*Underworld*), and finally the Internet and digital technologies (*Cosmopolis*). I shall now explore the author Dave Eggers, whose novels diagnose and respond to the effects of cultural digitization in the modern world. Eggers' 2013 novel, *The Circle*,[2] best exhibits this digital alteration of the mundane American experience; the novel garnered the author an analogous popular response to that of his landmark 2000 autobiographical release, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.[3] In *The Circle*, Eggers' writing focuses on the average American citizen—whom David Foster Wallace (1993) has christened "Joe Briefcase"—a symbol of how the comprehensive integration of digital technologies are transforming the lives of everyday Americans.[4] The novel has also gained subsequent critical attention by way of research conducted by Jockers and Archer (2016), in which Eggers' *The Circle* was algorithmically deduced as the 'paradigmatic novel of the twenty-first century.'[5]

Beyond my immediate consideration of *The Circle*, an abridged list of Eggers' accomplishments over the past fifteen years easily serves to illustrate his preeminent position in contemporary American fiction. Firstly, and most apropos, he is the founder of McSweeney's, which was launched during the first dot-com boom in the late 1990s as an independent publishing company based in San Francisco. McSweeney's produces novels, a quarterly journal of new writing (*McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*), a monthly magazine

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[1] "Jonathan Franzen: While We Are Busy Tweeting, Texting, and Spending, the World is Drifting Towards Disaster, the problems of our modern world," *The Guardian*, September 13th, 2013.
[2] Dave Eggers. *The Circle*, (Penguin Books: 2013).
[3] Dave Eggers. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2000).
[4] David Foster Wallace. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2, 1993, Summer Issue, pp. 151-194.
[5] Jodie Archer and Matthew L. Jockers. *The Bestseller Code: Anatomy of the Blockbuster Novel*, (St. Martin's Press: 2016). See also: Philip Jones. "*The Circle* is the Ultimate Bestseller, Computer Says," *The Bookseller*, June 27th, 2016.

(*The Believer*), and an "almost" daily humor blog (*Internet Tendency*).[6] McSweeney's also publishes "Voice of Witness," a non-profit book series that uses oral history to illuminate human rights crises around the world. During a period in which more and more novels are being digitally produced for tablets, smartphones, and personal computers, Eggers keeps one foot in the analog past as a producer of beautiful print books as both reissues and original publications.[7] As an author, Eggers is also well known for partially self-funding the literacy non-profit organisation, 826, by using some of the proceeds from *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.

Eggers' multi-disciplinary talents are evident in his ability to simultaneously write in different disciplines, as he has journalistically reported stories while at the same time writing fiction. After winning the Dayton Literary Peace Prize with his nonfiction chronicle *Zeitoun*,[8] he penned the novel *A Hologram for the King*,[9] a 2012 National Book Award finalist. The latter, in tandem with *The Circle*, demonstrates two sides of the state of the modern economy, envisioned through individual characters who work in the field of information technologies and social media integrations. These two publications have also struck a cultural chord with Hollywood and the American entertainment industry, as both novels have been acquired by major studios for cinematic adaptation, with *The Circle* arriving in theatres in 2017, and *A Hologram for the King* already in post-production, with a scheduled release in the spring of 2016.

Such versatile endeavours lead many—from an informal (popular) readership to the academic intellectuals—to label Eggers as a literary polymath. However, for the purposes of this thesis, my methodology concentrates on the manner in which cultural digitization is changing the narrative structure (plot and characters, style and tone, settings and themes) of the novels that Eggers has been producing over the last half decade. Following McLaughlin (2004), I view Eggers as a "post-postmodernist" artist who is intimately aware of—and invested in—the social and cultural consequences of digital technology's infiltration into the quotidian American experience.[10] Beyond his educational and humanitarian agendas, this awareness is apparent in Eggers as an artist and an author, one who recognizes that he and his writings are being exponentially shaped and fashioned by the digital environment in which he is situated.

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[6] Available online at: http://www.mcsweeneys.net/
[7] See: https://store.mcsweeneys.net/products/a-hologram-for-the-king
[8] Dave Eggers. *Zeitoun*, (McSweeney's Books: 2009).
[9] Dave Eggers. *A Hologram for the King*, (Penguin Books/Random House: UK, 2013 [2012]).
[10] Robert McLaughlin. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World," *Symploke* vol. 12, nos. 1-2, 2004, pp. 53-68.

Chapter two of this thesis discussed the possibility of technology to absorb Eric Packer into itself, a digital exegesis for the rather abrupt—and violent—end of both the novel and of Packer's life. It also suggested that Packer's digitally inundated experience was DeLillo's cautionary tale concerning the generalized political and cultural absorption of these emergent technologies into the American psyche. Eggers revitalises this fictional concentration by writing a story which shares thematic similarities. *The Circle* arrives in the year 2013, ten years after DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* was first published.[11] If Eric Packer was DeLillo's clairvoyant manifestation of the first iteration of Web 2.0—the physical embodiment of the socioeconomic effects that the Internet and digital technologies would have at the level of multinational corporations and the dynamic processes of globalization—then Mae Holland is Eggers' more myopic fictional representation, an existential character investigation which focuses on a personalized, "always-on" psychology brought about by the culture of digitization and the omnipresence of social media networks, providing a narrative milieu that directly engages with near-future technologies (boyd, 2012).[12] The not-too-distant future—as it is presented in *The Circle*—proposes that sociocultural and communicative interactions can no longer be separated from network driven, Internet facilitated technological arrangements. This chapter examines the distinctions between characters in DeLillo's novels written during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and characters found in Eggers' *The Circle*, with an emphasis on the dramatic changes in literary treatments that have appeared in the wake of the ubiquity of Internet-enabled networks, social media, and the rise of the culture of digitization in contemporary America.

Chapter three further explicates, describes, and analyses Eggers' writing with the shared leitmotif of technoscientific and digital idealism, with a particular emphasis on modern socioeconomic hegemonies of online networks and communities, Internet privacy and surveillance, and the manner in which hyperconnectivity breeds hyperreflexivity.[13] I am fully aware that by focusing on cultural digitization, some of the stylistic and formal aspects of Eggers' work will remain underexposed; but as this novel portrays the insatiable

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[11] Don DeLillo. *Cosmopolis*, (Picador: Scribner, New York, 2003).

[12] danah boyd. "Participating in the Always-On Lifestyle," as found in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg, (NYU Press: New York, 2012). Internet researcher danah boyd's argument is that the most important skill is now knowing how to look things up (search/query) rather than knowing things. Her position implies that the contemporary individual needs his/her phone at all times as an "information prosthetic" in order to operate efficiently and effectively in the current digital atmosphere.

[13] Louis A. Sass and Josef Parnas. "Schizophrenia, Consciousness, and the Self," *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 29, no. 3, 2003, pp. 427-444. Originally cited in Allard den Dulk's *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*, (Bloomsbury: New York & London, 2015), p. 27. Phenomenological-psychologists Sass and Parnas define "hyperreflexivity" as 'forms of exaggerated self-consciousness in which aspects of oneself are experienced as akin to external objects.'

monopolistic tendencies of an unfettered, hyper-capitalistic social media and information technology corporation, my thesis concentrates less on literary technique and more on contextualizing Eggers' latest work as a parable of subversive power in a digital age.

The Circle, like its established techno-dystopic predecessors, such as Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*, and more recently, Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) and Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013), surveys the complex effects of technological revolutions on ordinary aspects of society and culture.[14] It is a response to the massive transformation that social media and the culture of digitization have had on current communicative structures, and the unprecedented expansion in both speed and scale that these Internet and cloud-dependent technologies have wrought on the everyday functions of political, economic, and cultural institutions. As J.D. Peters (1999) has observed, communication is the central avenue through which modernity comes to confront its own nature. As he reasons in *Speaking into the Air*, communication,

> …is one of the characteristic concepts of the twentieth century. It has become central to reflections on democracy, love, and our changing times. Some of the chief dilemmas of our age, both public and personal, turn on communication or communication gone sour […] "Communication" is a registry of modern longings. Only moderns could be faced with each other and be worried about "communicating" as if they were thousands of miles apart. "Communication" is a rich tangle of intellectual and cultural strands that encodes our time's confrontation with itself.[15]

This notion—that communication plays a central role in historical labelling and cultural temperament—is particularly true in the case of the Internet, for if it is considered as the prevalent communicative medium, the "registry of modern longings," it must be regarded not only as a metaphor for modern life, but also as the most essential constituent of it.

This may have been, at the time of Peters' theorizing in 1999, considered a bold claim, but in contemporary society it is routinely accepted on a variety of levels. Most notably, there is the well-established and well-documented prevalence of the Internet in conventional discourse. The bulk of this literature, as it were, spans two generations, and is simply too vast to allow or require elaboration here, but for my purposes it is sufficient to note that the Internet maintains a uniquely high status in both popular and scholarly debates, having come to be a virtual synonym for all things digitally fashionable and "high-tech." Charles Leadbeater (2008) labels this as:

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[14] George Orwell. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (Penguin Classics: 2000 [1949]).
Aldus Huxley. *Brave New World*, (Vintage: 2007 [1932]).
Gary Shteyngart. *Super Sad True Love Story*, (Granta Books: New York, 2010).
Thomas Pynchon. *Bleeding Edge*, (Jonathan Cape: London, 2013).

[15] J.D. Peters. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, (University Press of Chicago: 1999), pp. 1-2.

> The web-inflected culture we inhabit…A peculiar mixture of the academic, the hippie, the peasant and the geek. What binds them is a belief in the power of communities to share knowledge and other resources. Or to put it another way, the culture being created by the web is a potent mixture of post-industrial networks, the anti-industrial ideology of the counter-culture and the revival of pre-industrial ideas of organisation that were marginalised in the 20th century. Our expanding opportunities to be creative together come from this cocktail of ingredients.[16]

This semi-illusory notion of the "[opportunity] for everyone to be creative together" underwrites the current marketing models of the digital-tech industry. This is due to the fact that, in part, the Internet and information technologies are emblematic of a wider shift in the socioeconomic climate. For the previous generation, television epitomized and promulgated the cultural values and consumer practices of a common population (*White Noise*). In keeping with this techno-economic rationality, the Internet in modern society can well be understood as what George Gilder (2002) terms the, 'central nervous system of modern capitalism.'[17]

Fourteen years after Gilder's proclamation, the Internet has evolved far beyond the traditional "anti-industrial ideology of the counter-cultural" institutions from which it was born to become the foremost communicative, social, and commercial synecdoche from which the general populace catalogue their "modern longings," and therefore it is crucial to recognize the epistemological and ontological implications of such recent digital representations. Recalling the refrain from *Underworld*, that, 'longing on a large scale is what makes history,'[18] such populist yearnings should not be taken as fleeting or faddish cultural echoes, but as the originary signals of a genuine societal and narratological shift. Eggers' stories embody this truth, that literary fiction has been, and continues to be, a valuable way of critiquing our social world, of finding ways to be human in it and of truly connecting with others. *The Circle* is an example of the various ways in which living in a digital culture has an impact on the fiction about living in said culture, as the novel's characters provoke the reader to consider their own place (and digital products) by living in a similar, technologically infused, society.

The Circle's protagonist is the twenty-four year old Mae Holland, who, from the moment she arrives for her first day of work, quickly realizes that the corporation is an amalgamation of Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, and Google. It is ostensibly a social media company, but its main goal is "completing the circle," which is to have every transaction

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[16] Charles Leadbeater. *We-Think: Mass Innovation, Not Mass Production*, (Profile Books: London, 2008), p. 27.
[17] George Gilder. *Telecosm: The World After Bandwidth Abundance*, (Free Press: New York, 2002).
[18] Don DeLillo. *Underworld*, (Picador: New York, 1997), p. 35.

that happens online occur through their technology, and—quite literally—all transferences of personalized user data relating to communicative, economic, or political operations to happen through the Circle and their concomitant information technologies. The Circle wants to keep all digital information running through its singular gateway, including both local and global governmental organizations, leaving nothing outside the company's "digital enclosure" (Andrejevic, 2007).[19]

Thus, the Circle—as an information technology and social media corporation that is entirely dependent on the Internet—stands in an allegorical relationship to late capitalism, with its inherent logics of flexible production, the circulation of symbolic goods, and the expansion or incorporation of cultural and societal dissimilarities. As Tiziana Terranova (2004) has claimed:

> The Internet is not simply a specific medium but a kind of active implementation of a design technique able to deal with the openness of systems. The design of the Internet (and its technical protocols) prefigured the constitution of a neo-imperial electronic space, whose main feature is an openness which is also a constitutive tendency to *expansion*.[20]

Concisely stated by Douglas Rushkoff (2016): '*growth* is the single, uncontested, core command of the digital economy.'[21] It is this "core command" which is most explicitly actualized in this novel. Ultimately, by the conclusion of *The Circle*, there is not a single political, economic, or cultural entity that exists outside of the company's authority.

As the story progresses, Mae eventually becomes the focal point of the Circle, indispensably assisting the corporation in accomplishing its goals by the end of the narrative. She has been co-opted, assimilated into the collective machinery of the Circle's digital hegemony. Yet, her passionate contribution to the Circle's taking over every telecommunication and information technology industry does not arrive from the stereotypical corporate desire for financial success. What Eggers explores so minutely is Mae's techno-ideological belief that she is made a better person in the process, and that her subjective transformation is beneficial to the Circle—and to the world—at large. Because the Circle promotes itself as a place of total transparency, clarity, and understanding, both with its employees and its clients, Mae views the intersection of digital technologies and her private life as heightening and extending her social and cultural experiences. As she

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[19] Mark Andrejevic. *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era*, (University Press of Kansas: 2007), p. 132. Andrejevic developed this term to describe digital or machine-to-machine relations which retain a primary functionality of either surveillance or marketing goals (in many instances, the kind of surveillance being conducted can be precisely *for* marketing objectives).

[20] Tiziana Terranova. *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, (Pluto Press: London, 2004), p. 3, italics in original.

[21] Douglas Rushkoff. *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus: How Growth Became the Enemy of Prosperity*, (Portfolio Penguin: 2016), p. 5, my italics.

becomes more involved with the company, her connectivity and usage of the Circle's products and services expands exponentially, and Mae undergoes a personal renovation that effects all relationships in her life.

Eggers, in unambiguously mirroring the social media and digital technology companies that currently exist in our world, clearly incites the reader to consider how much the American public—particularly the up-and-coming generation entering the globalized workforce—might be following in Mae's footsteps. In this regard, many critical interpretations of *The Circle* perceive Mae as a digital archetype, a poster-child for the Millennials, an entire generation of youths being swept in by the gravitational pull of cultural digitization. The novel, however, tells a different tale depending upon one's predisposition concerning the specific consequences of information technology and networked media on culture, society, and the capitalistic political systems of the free market economy.

It is the company's seemingly boundless economic and political influence that has led many critics to classify *The Circle* as an eschatological science fiction novel, as it takes place in the near future when the myriad digital technologies referenced in the book have become available for both corporate and commonplace usage. Ellen Ullman (2013) writes:

> The company demands transparency in all things; two of its many slogans are SECRETS ARE LIES and PRIVACY IS THEFT. Anonymity is banished; everyone's past is revealed; everyone's present may be broadcast live in video and sound. Nothing recorded will ever be erased. The Circle's goal is to have all aspects of human existence —from voting to love affairs—flow through its portal, the sole such portal in the world.[22]

The monopolistic, all-encompassing nature of the company is revealed as its most threatening attribute, hence the majority of critics' immediate response in associating this novel with the all too familiar science-fictional dystopic interpretation. Lev Grossman (2013) identifies a similar refrain to that of Ullman's, his main concern being the loss of anonymity. He proclaims a familiar modern woe—one frequently expressed in the realms of education, psychology, and cultural anthropology—that the constant connections which social media offers coincide with the loss of one's subjective sense of self-worth and self-meaning:

> Mae starts wearing a bracelet that tracks and broadcasts her vital signs and a headset through which she ceaselessly responds to marketing queries for the benefit of the Circle's clients. The more informationally transparent she gets, the more insubstantial she becomes as a person […] The truth isn't setting Mae free; if anything, too much truth is turning her life into a public performance, fully monetizable and totally

[22] Ellen Ullman. "Ring of Power," *The New York Times*, November 1st, 2013.

> meaningless. There's a saying online: If you're not paying for it, you're not the customer; you're the product being sold.[23]

Both of these critics elucidate the negative effects that the combination the Internet and advanced digital technologies can have on the individual at both the physiological and psychological level (and this is, undeniably, one of Eggers' primary thematic concerns). Grossman essentially interprets Mae's actions as an employee of the Circle as being detrimental to her existential wellbeing, as the Circle itself becomes manifested as the sole ontological certainty from which she can extract meaning in her own life. Such critical readings establish an inverse correlation: the greater an individual's online presence, the more the individual diminishes in the real world. Ullman also reveals the insidious nature of the complete loss of privacy, noting the transparency demanded by the Circle in *all* aspects of human communication and interaction.

For both Grossman and Ullman, Mae has been enticed into the Circle by false promises: by money and a sense of safety and security, a sense of community and family, by love and exciting romantic entanglements. Grossman and Ullman view these attributes as ultimately being revealed as a façade, a digital intoxication which is so mesmerizing that Mae is willing to abandon every single societal, familial, and romantic connection that exists *outside* the Circle in order maintain it—to stay an employee at the world's most cutting-edge and ever-pioneering information technology company.

While I agree with these critics' observations, I believe they fail to properly detect and emphasize Mae's *willingness*—indeed of most characters in this novel—to openly subscribe to what the Circle is offering. This willingness lends itself directly to a piercing brand of satire, as there are scenes in this novel that straddle the line between ludicrous and realistic, and are certainly more comedic in tenor than dystopic. The primary example of this can be located in Mae's disciplinary meeting with upper-management due to her failure to respond on social media or appear in person at a co-worker's internationally themed "Portugal Brunch" (*TC*, pp. 104-109). During an interview with Mimi Lok in 2015, Eggers discusses how this scene spurred the overall thematic agenda of the novel:

> "The first scene I wrote for *The Circle* was the one about the Portugal lunch. I thought I'd write this scene, and then the rest of the book would build out from that…The scene scared me because it was something that has happened in my life, too. You get thousands of email notices, and you cannot respond to all of them. You get this constant feeling that people around you are offended by your silence or your indifference to their invitations or their asking you to like or dislike something. There is an overwhelming deluge of stimuli that we are supposed to respond to."[24]

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[23] Lev Grossman. "The Circle: Dave Eggers' Scathing Attack on Social Media," *Time*, October 2nd, 2013.
[24] Sean Bex and Stef Craps and Mimi Lok. "An Interview with Dave Eggers and Mimi Lok," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 56, Number 4, Winter 2015, pp. 544-567.

Within the novel the scene itself reads as a contemporary example of digitized-schadenfreude, with the offended party unable to recognize the ridiculousness of his anger by way of a snubbed social media invitation. It is precisely this dichotomy of genuine fear and paranoia—for both Mae and Eggers—placed in contrast with the sheer absurdity of the situation which makes the scene humorous; a sardonic twist on an everyday occurrence functions as the premise of many successful acts of comedy. Eggers' sense of humour and cultural acuity are (rather surprisingly) overlooked by the majority of the critical readings of this novel.[25]

An additional way in which *The Circle* departs from the dystopic observations cited by Grossman and Ullman above is in the transparency from which the corporation operates. No one is being tricked, or hoodwinked; no dissimulation or concealment arrives from the "Three Wise Men" or from the company's mission statement. The majority of users not only want what the Circle offers, some even *demand* access. The millennial generation—the group that Eggers is presumably writing this novel for—is candidly unconcerned about "The Man," or a single overarching governmental organization or Illuminati-like corporate assemblage that wishes to steal personal information and data in order to transform the user into a perpetual consumer (Madden, et al., 2013).[26] Present research actually reveals a contrary digital disposition: the millennial generation is not only *aware* of the fact that their online tendencies are being monitored and tracked by companies in the vein of Google and Amazon, Facebook and Twitter, they *encourage* such detailed corporate scrutinization (Lenhart, et al., 2015).[27] This is not an issue of naiveté; rather, it is indicative of a

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[25] A short list—sans Grossman and Ullman—of the titles of the reviews/critical evaluations of *The Circle* should serve as indicative of the dystopic atmosphere that many believe Eggers intends to convey. See:
1.) Dennis K. Berkman. "Dave Eggers's 'The Circle' Takes Vengeance on Google, Facebook," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 17th, 2013.
2.) Claire Gutierrez. "Behind the Cover Story: Dave Eggers on Imagining the Future World of Over-Sharing," *The New York Times*, September 28th, 2013.
3.) Carolyn Kellogg. "Trapped in the web with Dave Eggers' 'The Circle' follows a young woman as she gives her life over to an Internet company, *Los Angeles Times*, October 3rd, 2013.
4.) Lauren Christensen. "*The Circle*, Dave Eggers's Chilling, New Allegory of Silicon Valley," *Vanity Fair: Culture*, October 8th, 2013.
5.) Margret Atwood. "When Privacy is Theft," *The New York Review of Books*, November 21st, 2013.
6.) Robert Collins. "Future Shock: Dave Eggers is alarmed at how the internet and big data are warping our lives," *The Telegraph*, April 25th, 2015.

[26] Mary Madden, Amanda Lenhart, Sandra Cortesi, Urs Gasser, Maeve Duggan, Aron Smith, and Meredith Beaton. "Teens, Social Media, and Privacy," *Pew Internet*, May, 2013. Available online at: www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Teens-Social-Media-And-Privacy.aspx
Pew researchers discovered that while 81 percent of parents had concerns about online privacy, *less than 10 percent of their teenage children shared that concern*, although a significant number of youth had taken at least some action to remove or alter certain kinds of information they wished to keep private.

[27] Amanda Lenhart, et al., "Teens, Social Media & Technology: Overview 2015," Pew Research Center's Internet, Science, and Technology Project, April 9, 2015. Available online at: http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/

generalized apathy towards data-mining. As the narrative progresses, Mae reflects both this widespread indifference to digital surveillance, coupled with an ever-intensifying desire for perpetual immersion within the Circle's social media networks.

As the Circle succeeds in its global goals, the more users request to be integrated, the more products they buy through the Circle and for the Circle, the more they "zing," the more customer surveys they complete, the more they "smile" and "frown," in short, the more they petition for total and continual involvement. This online immersion and constant connectivity is—as mentioned by Franzen in the scathing quotation that opens this chapter—*addictive*; it inspires compulsive behaviour towards a 'propensity for self-disclosure' (Mitchell & Tamir, 2012).[28] What the Circle advances as a multinational information technology company does respond, at some level, to Franzen's notions of digital "enslavement" to "our worst impulses." Therefore, we must consider the driving psychological and sociocultural factors behind such digital inclinations.

At the heart of the dystopic readings (by the majority of critics and reviewers) is a primitive fear that relates to the Circle's seemingly unstoppable progression, its "techno-titan" ability to consume any and all information as it is made available—not only in an online environment—but also in the disconnected, offline interactions that take place in our casual technological experiences. This critical interpretation is certainly a sobering vision of how social media corporations operate in contemporary society, however, it is important to bear in mind that the Circle only succeeds if the general public *openly* and *voluntarily* participates. To borrow from Franzen's rather tenuous comparison between two disparate media modalities: we are not forced to buy the newspaper, and even if the purchase is made, the entirety of the information contained within its pages is not inherently damaging to the individual or one's respective community. *The Circle* is about what happens when a single corporation's control of data and information mixes with an individual's banal desire for specific channels of online media consumption.

Mae Holland's ex-boyfriend, Mercer, describes this digital cooperation as a fissure in the traditional power dichotomy between totalitarianism and a democratically oriented sociopolitical system:

> Here…there are no oppressors. No one's forcing you to do this. *You willingly tie yourself to these leashes.* And you willingly become utterly socially autistic. You no longer pick up on basic human communication clues. You're at a table with three

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By 2015, 88 percent of teens had access to cell phones or smartphones and 90 percent of those teens texted daily, *while 92 percent of teens report going online daily*, with 24 percent claiming to be online "almost constantly," facilitated by the widespread availability of smartphones and alternative digital devices.

[28] Jason Mitchell & Diana Tamir. "Disclosing information about the self is intrinsically rewarding," as found in the *National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, May 22, 2012, pp. 109-21.

> humans, all of whom are looking at you and trying to talk to you, and you're staring at your screen, searching for strangers in Dubai.[29]

The following two chapters explore the impetus behind Mae Holland's actions, as well as the greater complexities of her social and cultural interactions in a world dominated by the Circle. Why is she willing to be employed by a company whose actions and corporate ideologies are so brazenly monopolistic? Put plainly, it is not the Circle itself which is the genesis of the "completion of the circle," but rather the everyday users who propel the company forward, exponentially and irreversibly generating momentum that leads to the final omnipotent and omnipresent iteration of the company. The following chapters also consider the way in which this novel offers a potential version of a self-fulfilling prophecy, a digitized sociocultural and socioeconomic psychology driven by ever-evolving information technologies. This line of reasoning begs the question: can a story be labelled as dystopic fiction when the majority of the characters in the narrative get *exactly* what they ask for? If so, why are there such dramatically varied understandings of this emergent digitized ideology?

3.1 *TruYou: One Button for the Rest of Your Life Online*

Given enough data, intelligence and power, corporations and governments can connect dots in ways that only previously existed in science fiction.

-Alexander Howard, 2012[30]

The Internet as it operates in *The Circle* serves several roles at once: as a contentious object of sociocultural analysis, a digital socioeconomic arena, and as a means for communicative action involving all characters in the narrative. It is important to mark the differences between this digital landscape and the utilization of the Internet as it is presented in Eggers' fiction compared to that of DeLillo's work. *The Circle* does not suggest an analogous—DeLillian—technological obsolescence or digital determinism as discussed in the previous chapters. If one considers the plotlines and contextualizations in which DeLillo situates and develops his characters, a recursive thematic atmosphere can be distinguished, one which is particularly evident in the narratives which focus most intently on science and technology. DeLillo often depends on prodigious individuals who exist outside the norm both intellectually and financially in these novels. In *Cosmopolis* (2003), it is the multi-

[29] Ibid., p. 260, my italics.
[30] Aleks Krotoski. "Big Data age puts privacy in question as information becomes currency," *The Guardian*, April 22nd, 2012.

billionaire currency trader and polymath, Eric Packer. In *Ratner's Star* (1976), it is the child prodigy mathematician, Billy Twillig. In *Great Jones Street* (1973), it is the enigmatic frontman and eccentric celebrity rock-star, Bucky Wunderlick. Finally, in DeLillo's most recent release, *Zero K* (2016), the main character Jeffery Lockhart is the son of a billionaire economic consultant, Ross Lockhart. As this thesis explored in chapter two, such characters are—quite intentionally—not representative of an average citizen, but exist as elevated fictional models from which DeLillo can consider some of humanity's most unanswerable questions: questions concerning the legacies we leave behind, terrorism, historical periodization, technological evolutions, and the beauty and mystery of everyday life.

In contrast, *The Circle* employs the very ordinary character of Mae Holland in order to examine similar thematic issues; through her experiences the reader encounters the manner in which the company's digital and information technologies are transforming the lives of typical Americans. Mae is not a genius, not a billionaire, not a rock-star. She begins the story working a lacklustre job which offers no occupational opportunities or chances for future promotion, she is riddled with over two-hundred thousand dollars of student debt for a liberal arts university education, and she is living in a shared apartment with two roommates in order to afford the cost of rent.[31] Although the authors utilize divergent approaches in character construction, both Eggers and DeLillo seek to reveal the answers to the same questions, with Eggers concentrating on the ever-increasing but diminutive intrusions of social media networks into Mae's professional and leisure existence. As Mae immediately discovers on her first day, the technological, commercial, and social elements of the Internet are all intertwined in her quotidian workday routine at the Circle.

This assimilation of professional, leisure, and online activity is evidenced in the very landscape aesthetic of the Circle itself:

> My God, Mae thought. It's heaven.
> The campus was vast and rambling, wild with Pacific color, and yet the smallest detail had been carefully considered, shaped by the most eloquent hands. On land that had once been a shipyard, then a drive-in movie theater, then a flea market, then blight, there were now soft green hills and a Calatrava fountain. And a picnic area, with tables arranged in concentric circles. And tennis courts, clay and grass. And a volleyball court, where tiny children from the company's day-care center were running, squealing, weaving like water. Amid all this was a workplace, too, four hundred acres of brushed steel and glass on the headquarters of the most influential company in the world. The sky above was spotless and blue.[32]

This description of the Circle opens the novel, and as Mae's tour of the main campus continues, the reader learns that the Circle offers not only recreational sporting and day-care

[31] Ibid., pp. 4-12.
[32] Ibid., p. 1.

options for its employees; it also houses a health center, a kennel, abundant gardens, a mini-golf area, a movie theater, numerous restaurants, a 3,500-seat theater called the "Great Hall," a local grocery store, an aquarium, a library, a 1990s-style arcade, and a dormitory with over 200 hundred rooms (with a planned expansion to hold a "few thousand" employees within a two year period). All of these entertainment options and services, all of these extraordinary workplace affordances, are offered at no charge for the 10,000-plus employees at the Circle's main campus, and are a direct result of the tremendous financial success of the company.[33]

The Circle is "in the business" of social media and information technology, but what that entails exactly is more difficult to explain with modern technological parlance (hence the novel existing in the near future). At the most fundamental level, the Circle provides as its main feature the Unified Operating System known as TruYou, which was invented by Tyler Alexander Gospodinov—better known as "Ty"—the Circle's founder and one of the "Three Wise Men" who run the corporation.[34] In the most basic sense, TruYou is the unification of all one's online activities merged into a centralized online identity. As the narrator explains, TruYou:

> …combine[s] everything online that had heretofore been separate and sloppy—users' social media profiles, their payment systems, their various passwords, their email accounts, user names, preferences, every last tool and manifestation of their interests… [Ty] put all of it, all of every user's needs and tools, into one pot and invented TruYou—one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person. There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were, and your one identity—the *TruYou*, unbendable and unmaskable—was the person paying, signing up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen. You had to use your real name, and this was tied to your credit cards, your bank, and thus paying for anything was simple. One button for the rest of your life online.[35]

There are currently information technology companies which provide similar monetary experiences through digital avenues such as Apple Pay, Samsung Pay, Android Pay, Amazon Coin, and Google Wallet via NFC (near field communication) technology—in conjunction with biometric identification and security measures (iris scanners and

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[33] Here, Eggers is fictionally recreating the workplaces of successful digital technology and Internet-related social media corporations—primarily working from three main-campuses as his chief influences: Google, Microsoft, and Facebook.

* Eggers has stressed in multiple interviews that he has "never stepped foot" in any of the above listed campuses. Instead, Eggers reads about them online and uses other corporations in the information technology field that he has physically visited as his imaginative basis. As the author attests, "I have seen non-tech campuses that are not in California that have some of the same goals, to provide all the best stuff to their staff. In the case of The Circle I took it to a logical extreme…They ultimately have 10,000 people in a controlled environment, where all of their actions, preferences, behaviours can be observed, monitored, monetised." From previously cited interview with Robert Collins (2015).

[34] Ibid., p. 19.

[35] Ibid., pp. 20-21, italics in original.

fingerprint scanners) on personalized devices. The key difference that emerges in *The Circle* is that TruYou subsumes the many online customer constellations into a *single* point of process: 'Anytime you wanted to see anything, use anything, comment on anything or buy anything, it was one button, one account everything tied together and trackable and simple, all of it operable via mobile or laptop, tablet or retinal.'[36]

The Circle replaces all intermediary companies, financial institutions, and social media applications and websites, so that it not only provides the tools—'and they were the best tools, the most dominant and ubiquitous and free'—to do everything a user wants to do, but also the near entirety of the various online entities needed for day-to-day commerce and communications.[37] This creates an online system of identification perpetuated by its own information technologies, so that the Circle begins to have a wider sociotechnical effect corresponding to what Marshall McLuhan wrote over fifty years ago: 'We shape our tools, and afterwards our tools shape us' (1994 [1964]).[38] That is, the Circle's success was so rapid, and its online corporate presence so prominent, that, 'TruYou changed the internet, in toto, within a year.'[39]

This digital assimilation can be seen at the global scale, as we encounter the Circle's ability to shape and reorganize structures, organizations, and even entire sectors of online commerce and communication. As the Circle becomes the most frequently and consistently accessed social media site in the world, the information technologies provided by the corporation begin to emerge as a regulatory force capable of simultaneously shaping and monitoring economic and cultural behaviour:

> Those whose wanted or needed to track the movements of consumers online had found their Valhalla: the actual buying habits of actual people were now eminently mappable and measurable, and the marketing to those actual people could be done with surgical precision…No longer did they have to memorize twelve identities and passwords; no longer did they have to tolerate the madness and rage of the anonymous hordes; no longer did they have to put up with buckshot marketing that guessed, at best, within a mile of their desires. Now the messages they did get were focused and accurate and, most of the time, even welcome.[40]

The collection and consolidation of both social and consumerist online activity allows the Circle to absorb the necessary information pertaining to an individual user's buying habits. This is already a common socioeconomic reality with corporations such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon, companies that regularly monitor users' online commercial dealings

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[36] Ibid., p. 21.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media*, (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1964), p. xxi.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p. 22.

and communications. In *The Circle* this process is taken a step further by generating an online history that is directly related to a specific user, which is never deleted, always updated, and constantly improving in its ability to track and measure the possible desires and needs of the TruYou client.

In this way, TruYou informs a process of social organisation and technocultural adaptation that are mutual and co-evolving, a digital iteration that many Internet theorists, including Daniel Nations, are terming "Web 3.0." Nations (2014) describes this progression as:

> Not so much a prediction of what the Web 3.0 future holds so much as the catalyst that will bring it about; the ever-present Web 3.0 has to do with the increasing popularity of mobile Internet devices and the merger of entertainment systems and the Web. The merger of computers as a source for music, movies, and more puts the Internet at the center of both our work and our play. Within a decade, Internet access on our mobile devices (cell phones, smartphones, and pocket pc's) will be as popular as text messaging. This will make the Internet always present in our lives: at work, at home, on the road, out to dinner, wherever we go, *the Internet will be there*.[41]

In fictional world of *The Circle*, Nations "ever-present Web 3.0" has become a social and professional reality. In the novel, this evolution is evidenced in the language used to describe the Internet *before* the creation of the Circle and TruYou, and once analysed reveals a shifting—digitized—lingua franca. Before the Circle, the Internet was "sloppy and separate," it was infected by the "madness and rage of anonymous hordes," it lacked the capability and proficiency, the "surgical precision" to recognize the users "one identity…unbendable and unmaskable." After the advent of the Circle, online life would change. Comparable to the manner in which Mae thought the very aesthetic of the landscape and architectural design of the Circle's main campus was like "heaven," so will the Circle transform or "merge" the exchanges and interactions of an individual's life online into an experience that is personalized, utilitarian, and streamlined to match both the professional and entertainment desires of the client. The pre-TruYou Internet platforms, with their often unruly, frustrating, and anxiety-ridden user-interfaces will be replaced by a comprehensive and versatile online implementation of the TruYou system. The Circle promises to restructure and simplify the Internet to satisfy both the recreational wishes and the practical needs of the general public, but the only way in which to accomplish such lofty goals is through data-mining an incredible amount of personal—what many might consider *private*—information.

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[41] Daniel Nations. "What is Web 3.0? What Will Web 3.0 Be Like?" *about tech*, December 15th, 2014, my italics.

At the start of the book, such digital invasiveness for Mae is considered a necessary component of the Circle's neoliberal goal of an open-source, free-market regulated, Web, which is to say she does not view the data-mining or surveillance capabilities of the company as something driven by monopolistic or capitalistic propensities, but rather by egalitarian aspirations to make the Internet "better" for the average user. This is reflected in Mae's stream of consciousness at the end of her first workday. She is, for all intents and purposes, absolutely ecstatic at the opportunity afforded her to be employed at the Circle and as her opening day on the job comes to a conclusion at the companywide solstice party, she thinks to herself that the 'appeal' of the Circle 'was visceral.' Her internal monologue continues:

> A few thousand Circles began to gather in the twilight, and standing among them, Mae knew that she never wanted to work—never wanted to be—anywhere else. Her hometown, and the rest of California, the rest of America, seemed like some chaotic mess in the developing world. Outside the walls of the Circle, all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been perfected. The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible this, the best place to work. And it was natural that it was so, Mae thought. Who else but utopians could make utopia?[42]

The language here begins to emulate Mae's almost mythical impression of the main campus, its divine, "heavenly" qualities. The event being occasioned as "solstice party," the marking of a seasonal apex, beginning and endings, combined with the simultaneity of both epiphanic and apocalyptic vernacular, are suggestive of a transcendental invocation. The language Eggers utilizes: "it was natural that it was so," never wanting to be "outside the walls," entangled with the iniquitous, the "noise and struggle," the "failure and filth," the "chaotic mess" which surround the Circle's cordoned off space—gestures towards a kind of cultish, hermetically stationed community and corporate culture (isolation by way of heavenly preference being the very cornerstone of the fanatical ideology). Here the Exodus story is re-appropriated for the contemporary sociotechnical condition; the divine visitation of Moses at Mount Sinai replaced by the Circle's ten-thousand employees in Silicon Valley, their digitized manifest destiny as the Internet's "chosen people," the visionaries from which this utopia will be brought to fruition.

What the Circle accomplishes with the production and implementation of TruYou results in an inevitable tension between the 'informatics of domination' and the 'fruitful couplings' that emanate from the numerous ways in which humans and information technologies intersect and interact in everyday economic, political, and social life (Haraway,

[42] Ibid., pp. 29-30.

1990).[43] Eggers deliberately paces the narrative to follow an ever-accelerating velocity which is intended to match the precipitous digital saturation and rapid technological progressions of the Circle in real-time, as it is not until later in the novel—in Book II—that Haraway's presentiment concerning such tensions is demonstrably materialized. With the emergence of these digital concerns, the satirical elements prevalent during Mae's introduction to the company start to give way to the dystopic ambiance found in numerous critical responses on the novel. In the beginning, Mae is grateful for the opportunity to be employed at the Circle, as the competition for even an entry-level position at the company is quite nearly one-in-a-million. However, as the narrative advances, she will learn first-hand that working at the world's most successful information technology company involves total immersion in a digital culture that has the potential to rapidly consume her; this new, incredibly sought-after and appealing job might quickly cost losing her core identity, her very individuality.

This vacillation between digital anxiety and fulfilment is precisely the psychological territory that Dave Eggers has been focused on so intently over the past five years. As this unease continues to problematize the commercial, cultural, and critical discussion concerning the Internet-identity-economy nexus, an author keenly aware and acutely conscious of such massive technocultural alterations, such as Eggers, cannot help but take notice and write about the overarching societal and communal reverberations. During an interview with Claire Gutierrez in 2013, Eggers was asked what kind of cultural conversation he would ideally like to see *The Circle* inspire. His response is quite telling: "I think we're already engaged in a constant and meaningful examination of how the available technology is affecting us—but maybe fiction can shine a different kind of light on it."[44] *The Circle* thematically responds to these digitized communities, not what they *might* look like in the future, but the effect that such technologies have on currently established modes of human interaction and communication in real-time, as the narrative illuminates a near-futuristic sociotechnical environment that directly addresses these new online spaces of interpersonal exchanges.

3.2 *"I Need Give-And-Take": The App Generation's Digital Dialectics*

Right now there are three people in Chat. But there's no way of knowing exactly who until you are in there, and the chat room she finds not so comforting. It's strange even with friends, like sitting in a pitch-dark cellar

[43] Donna Haraway. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's," as found in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, (Routledge: New York, 1990), pp. 190-233.
[44] Claire Gutierrez. "Behind the Cover Story: Dave Eggers on Imagining the Future World of Over-Sharing," *The New York Times*, September 28th, 2013.

conversing with people at a distance of about fifteen feet. The hectic speed, and the brevity of the lines in the thread, plus the feeling that everyone is talking at once, at counter-purposes, deter her.

-William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*[45]

Mae Holland's personal transformation is, in the beginning, a subtle accumulation of moments that are directly associated with technological alterations in online activity as it relates to TruYou and the Circle's information technologies. She starts her burgeoning career at the Circle in "CE" or Customer Experience, a departmental occupation within the company that is continually growing in order to match the rapid expansion of TruYou in the social media marketplace. To be an effective member of the CE, Mae must be properly connected. Mae receives her first piece of tech, a tablet that '"hasn't even been released yet"' upon her first workday.[46] The tablet runs '"four times as fast as its predecessor,"' and is inscribed, in capitalized block lettering, with her full name: 'MAEBELLINE RENNER HOLLAND.' She also receives a new phone, similarly inscribed with her full name, which wirelessly connects to her (now outmoded) device and transfers all digital information.

Eggers recognizes an important digital evolution in this scene, in that, over the past five years, the Internet-enabled and application-supported smartphone has moved from being merely an aesthetic object in fiction—one that arises in the subjective phenomenological and communicative experience of an individual character—to an absolute necessity for establishing a sense of realism within the overall narrative composition. Both the subjective identity formation of a single character, as well as the cultural framework of an entire society are, within most narratives in contemporary fiction, mediated and coordinated by smartphone technologies. The psychologists Howard Gardner and Katie Davis (2013) use the term "app generation" to describe the current age group that grew up (and are growing up) with smartphones in-hand and apps at the ready. They developed the phrase as a sociopsychological descriptor, one which they employ to explain people who bring an engineering sensibility to educational, romantic, professional, and everyday life experience. Their research assists in illustrating an important point concerning the themes and social topography of contemporary American fiction: if an author wishes to situate a narrative in the "real world," s/he will—in most instances—have to confront the digital gadgetry of smartphone technology.[47]

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[45] *Pattern Recognition*, (Penguin: 2003), p. 4.
[46] Ibid., p. 42.
[47] Howard Gardner & Katie Davis. *The App Generation: How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2013). Chronologically, the smartphone has been represented in contemporary fiction: for the near past, see Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* or Jess Walter's *The Financial Lives of the Poets* or William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*; for the present tense, see Zadie Smith's *NW* or Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*; for near future literary imaginings

The tablet replaces Mae's old laptop, and the phone replaces her one remaining method of communication that is disconnected from the Circle's cloud-technology. As her tech-liaison explains:

> Now everything you had on your other phone and on your hard drive is accessible here on the tablet and your new phone, but it's also backed up in the cloud and on our servers. Your music, your photos, your messages, your data. It can never be lost. You lose this tablet or phone, it takes exactly six minutes to retrieve all your stuff and dump it on the next one. It'll be here next year and next century.[48]

From the beginning of her job at the Circle, Mae's identity is directly sewn in to the digital and information technologies that are the very fabric of the company. Mae's orientation into CE is the very first intimation of the power that the Circle truly yields. It is not merely the advanced gadgetry (hardware/software capabilities) which provides the Circle with its immense sway in the online economy; it is the ability to maintain all digital information indefinitely. Mae is not unique in this sense, as all TruYou clients have to use their genuine identity, which is connected to all other online interactions and communications. The Circle conserves—without substantial regulatory interference—the entirety of a user's digital information the moment that they create an account. Eggers here was no doubt inspired by Facebook, Google, Apple, and Amazon, all companies that reserve the right to maintain an individual's online activity and data once the legally fashioned "end-user licence agreement" (EULA's) box is (so often nonchalantly) clicked by the client (Hern, 2015).[49]

These digitally transitive strategies continually occur without the user being fully cognizant of the Circle's tracking and storing such data, which becomes the Holy Grail for advertisers and numerous systems of online commerce as it forms, holistically, the user's identity, and therefore, consumer preferences. The average user is not focused on such a personalized corporate examination because the gadgetry—with its new and improved interfaces, chip sets and processors, mobile games, haptic touch-screen engagement, camera capabilities, and sharp, stylish social media applications—are designed, at their very root, to distract, to make the user feel as if they are in control of their personal and private data, when, in reality they have (legally) agreed to give it all over to the Circle.

This continual fluctuation between concrete notions of technological empowerment and technological *dis*empowerment is reminiscent of the debate between Technological

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see Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* or Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. For additional evidence of smartphone saturation in the "real world" see:
Ingrid Lunden. "6.1B Smartphone Users Globally by 2020, Overtaking Basic Fixed Phone Subscriptions," *Tech Crunch*, June 2nd, 2015.

[48] Ibid., p. 43.

[49] Alex Hern. "I read all the small print on the internet and it made me want to die," *The Guardian*, June 15, 2015.

Determinism and the Humanist criteria from the previous chapters, a predominantly dualistic formulation within critical scholarship that continues to regard the technologies on one side, and human actors on the other. There is, however, an often under-elucidated middle ground in this technological debate, what Geert Lovink (2012) terms the "interpenetration" between the two seemingly opposing sides.[50] Furthermore, as Rudi Volti (2006) makes evident, the ideological divergence between the parties is inherently problematic due to the fact that it ignores the synthesis of technology and the social: 'New technologies brings [*sic*] changes to many aspects of society, while at the same time social forces do much to stimulate and shape these technologies.'[51]

Many in the technological determinist camp argue that new digital media are liable for robbing us of an essential humanity that can only be conveyed by face-to-face interactions. If we consider that all forms of media are increasingly being contextualized in an online communication ecology where creative production and expression is indistinguishable from social communication (Ito, et al., 2008), the technological determinist fear concerning the loss—or complete transformation—of established modes of interpersonal communication appears to be reinforced:

> While some see "digital kids" as our best hope for the future, others worry that new media are part of a generational rift and a dangerous turn away from existing standards for knowledge, literacy, and civic engagement. Careful, socially engaged, and accessible scholarship is crucial to informing this public debate and related policy decisions. Our need to understand the relation between digital media and learning is *urgent because of the scale and the speed of the changes that are afoot*.[52]

Such claims, while pertinent to the conversation involving the real-time consequences of digital technologies on the millennial generation, do not consider the fact that no individual (irrespective of age) spends the entirety of their time in virtual/cyberspaces, and greatly exaggerates the "digital dualism" of online/offline (Jurgenson, 2012).[53] I will return to the notion of Jurgenson's digital dualism shortly. For now, it is important to unpack Ito's concept of the "urgency" and "speed" of such technological proliferation, particularly within the demographic of the millennial generation.

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[50] Geert Lovink. *Networks without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media*, (Polity Press: Oxford, 2012), pp. 3-4.

[51] Rudi Volti. *Society and Technological Change*, 5th ed., (Worth: New York, 2006), p. 272.

[52] Mizuko Ito, et al. *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, "Foreword," edited by David Buckingham, from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2008), pp. vii–ix, my italics. See also: 'As with earlier shifts in media environments, this current turn toward digital media and networks has been accompanied by fear and panic as well as elevated hopes. This is particularly true of adult perception of children and youth who are at the forefront of experimentation with new media forms, and who mobilize digital media to push back at existing structures of power and authority.'

[53] Nathan Jurgenson. "The IRL Fetish," *The New Inquiry*, June 28, 2012. Available online at: http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-irl-fetish/

In reality, the processes of media integration have a strong discursive element (Berker, 2006): 'When the domestication has been "successful," the technologies are not regarded as cold, lifeless, problematic and challenging consumer goods at the root of family arguments and/or work-related stress, but as comfortable, useful tools—functional and/or symbolic—that are reliable and trustworthy.'[54] What this research reveals is that there is fundamentally no completely neutral medium, no medium that does not always-already ideologically frame or privilege certain kinds of interaction, and limit other communicative possibilities. Therefore, one might reason—with Berker, et al.—that digital mediation, these "useful tools" are the latest variation of an overarching system of continually evolving communicative processes. However, we must at the same time recognise the radical difference in the social, political, and economic potential of each newly introduced tool. The novelty of a technological instrument does not guarantee its sustained success—or presence—in the everyday lives of a general public and its citizenry.

It could be argued that Eggers has been focused on the potential for such modes of authentic communication since his pseudo-memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000).[55] From the very beginning of his career as a writer, Eggers recognized that the human experience cannot be accessed directly, without some form of mediation. However, as Wolfgang Funk (2015) maintains, it is through the persistent 'refraction and reflection' of this very process of mediation that experiences can be aesthetically elevated.[56] Or, as the book's narrator phrases it:

> So instead of lamenting the end of unmediated experience, I will *celebrate* it, revel in the simultaneous living of an experience and its dozen or so echoes in art and media, the echoes making the experience not cheaper but *richer*, aha! being that much more layered, the depth luxurious, not soul-sucking or numbing but edifying, ramifying.[57]

Earlier in the narrative, Eggers explicitly describes this desire for meaning and authentic social interaction: 'I need community, I need feedback, I need love, connection, give-and-take.'[58] This leads Nicole Timmer (2008) to comment: 'Dave partly wants to be the unique spokesman of this community of peers and partly, rather desperately, needs feedback from someone else to be able to authorize his own life story.' She adds: 'Dave turns himself

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[54] Thomas Berker, Maren Hartmann, Yves Punie and Katie Ward. 'Introduction' from *Domestication of Media and Technology*, (McGraw-Hill: Maidenhead, 2006), p. 3.
[55] Eggers notes in the preface to *AHWSG*: 'For all the author's bluster elsewhere, this is not, actually, a work of pure nonfiction' (p. xi).
[56] Wolfgang Funk. *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium*, (Bloomsbury Publishing: 2015), pp. 123-139.
[57] Ibid., p. 270, italics in original.
[58] Ibid., p. 237.

inside out in an attempt to get a better grasp of what he feels and who he is,'[59] which speaks to a rejection of the aforementioned (chapter one) postmodern self-referential irony so vehemently derided by Eggers' literary peer, David Foster Wallace (1993).[60] Yet, the above passage does reflect a meta-fictive move which is a familiar literary trope among postmodern writers: it reminds readers that all language is recursive, i.e., all speaking and writing is a product of a conscious self.

What is crucial to understanding the passage above—and the author's writing in a more general sense—is to appreciate that Eggers *does not* want his books to be read as ironic. He makes this explicit in a self-edited abstract from *Mistakes We Knew We Were Making* in 2001:

> Here we go: You can't know how much it pains me to even have that word, the one beginning with i and ending in y, in this book. It is not a word I like to see, anywhere, much less type on to my own pages. It is beyond a doubt the most overused and under-understood word we currently have. I have that i-word here only to make clear what was clear to, by my estimations, about 99.9% of original hardcover readers of this book: that there is almost no irony, whatsoever, within its covers.[61]

Although the quotation above ('lamenting the end of unmediated experience') does reveal a striking brand of self-awareness, what Eggers takes exception with is the immediate association of such self-awareness as being ironic. Why would he take umbrage with such a distinction? Because it makes his life story seem disingenuous, which is why he writes—verbatim—the definition of the word *irony* (the use of words to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning) to begin his writing in the section titled "Irony and its malcontents". Eggers views reading this use of exaggerated language as satirical or ironic as a mistake:

> When someone kids around, it does not necessarily mean he or she is being ironic. That is, when one tells a joke, in any context, it can mean, simply, that a joke is being told. Further, satire is not inherently ironic. Nor is parody. Or any kind of comedy. Irony is a very specific and not all that interesting thing, and to use the word/concept to blanket half of all contemporary cultural production—which some aged arbiters seem to be doing (particularly with regard to work made by those under a certain age)—is akin to the too-common citing of "the Midwest" as the regional impediment to all national social progress (when we all know the "Midwest" is 10 miles outside of any city). In other words, to refer to everything odd, coincidental, eerie, absurd or

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[59] Nicoline Timmer. *'Do You Feel It Too?' The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, (Rodopi, B.V.: New York, 2010), pp. 188-9, 342.

[60] *Ibid*, p. 191 (italics in original): In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace describes the aftereffects of a postmodern televisual rhetoric in which there are 'no sources of insight on comparative worth, no guides to *why* and *how* to choose among experiences, fantasies, beliefs, and predilections…When all experience can be deconstructed and reconfigured, there become simply too many choices. And in the absence of any credible, noncommerical guides for living, the freedom to choose is about as "liberating" as a bad acid trip.'

[61] Dave Eggers. "On second thoughts—part two," *The Guardian*, January 20th, 2001. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2001/jan/20/weekend7.weekend6

> strangely funny as ironic is, frankly, an abomination upon the Lord. (Re that last clause: not irony, but a simple, wholesome, American-born exaggeration.)

At the heart of Eggers' writing is a wish to be taken sincerely, even with the self-recognition that he will be unable to relate his experience truthfully—without mediation—through the process of writing of his autobiography. *A Heartbreaking Work*, in this way, oscillates between a conviction that an authentic story of one's life can be told, while at the same time informing the reader that such a tale will inevitably contain gaps, holes, and discontinuities. Such a paradox reiterates what George Saunders stated in an interview published in 2005, that the task of, "all good fiction is moral, in that it is imbued with the world, and powered by our real concerns: love, death, how-should-I-live."[62] He went on to reason that the pinnacle for which art can reach is, "to show that nothing is true and everything is true."[63] It is the cultural and literary critics' inability to hold these two contradictory ideas in mind together that leads to an ironic—and therefore insincere—reading of Eggers' writing.

But, interestingly, Eggers uses this consciously revealed/un-ironic self, the author himself, to issue a kind of moral rebuke for his (self-perceived) lack of sincerity. In *A Heartbreaking Work*, he applies the simile of a snake shedding its skin to explain:

> What am I giving you? I am giving you nothing…I tell you how many people I have slept with (thirty-two), or how my parents left this world, and what have I really given you? Nothing…We feel that to reveal embarrassing or private things, like, say, masturbatory habits (for me, about once a day, usually in the shower), we have given someone something…But it's just the opposite, more is more is more—more bleeding, more giving. These things, details, stories, whatever, are like the skin shed by snakes, who leave theirs for anyone to see…Hours, days or months later, we come across a snake's long-shed skin and we know something of the snake, we know that it's of this approximate girth and that approximate length, but we know very little else. Do we know where the snake is now? What the snake is thinking now? No.[64]

Eggers does not view this solipsistic and hyperreflexive cathexis, such as a self-evaluation by form of memoir, as entirely ameliorating the influence of self-referential mediation. Still, in recognizing the unavoidable mediation of interpersonal experiences and communications, while nevertheless participating in a genuine search for what we might call a literary aesthetic of authenticity, Eggers circumvents the postmodern interpretation of his writing as self-aware (tongue-in-cheek, or "Letterman-esque") which would potentially diminish the truthfulness of the narrative and, therefore, of his "real life" experiences. While Eggers grants that a postmodern symptomology is essential for understanding the proclivities and

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[62] George Saunders. *The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers*, editor Vendela Vida, interviewer Ben Marcus, (Believer: San Francisco, 2005), pp. 313-32.
[63] Let us not forget that a similar statement was made twenty years earlier, in DeLillo's *White Noise* through the character of Murray Jay Siskind: "Everything is connected. Everything and nothing, to be precise."
[64] Ibid., pp. 214-216.

proscriptions of past conventional social interactions—and for recognizing the ethological tendencies of these communal engagements—such an analysis has little to say about the complex spectrum of obdurate and sentimental reactions that such exchanges bring about at the personal level. No matter how thorough the postmodern or deconstructive interrogation; the outcome simply does not assist in Eggers' communication of his idiosyncratic beliefs, feelings, or emotions—who he *really* is, the *irreducibility* of his individual experience. Such self-mediation by way of autobiography becomes merely an exercise in approximation.

David Foster Wallace, in his short story "Good Old Neon" also struggles with solipsism, thinking of it as a problem that could be confronted and overcome by producing (at best) haunting moments of sincerity. It is perhaps the authors most concentrated effort to tackle the problem of solipsism, as we find in it a clear expression of an essential skepticism about our capacity to connect with one another:

> You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes.[65]

Here, Eggers' snake skin is replaced by Wallace's keyhole, but the underlying motivation remains the same: true—unmediated—connection to other people through unaffected language. However, as early as 1993, Wallace had already lamented the inadequacy of language for any genuine compassionate exchange and had declared the consequences: "We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy is impossible."[66] In the same well-known and often quoted interview, Wallace offered an account of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as a kind of surrender to the truth of solipsism: "…Which divides us, metaphysically and forever, from the external world."[67] Wallace goes on to say in the interview that in later writing the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein provided us with, "the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made."[68] But Wallace continued to protest that a sort of communal egoism persists, citing that Wittgenstein argues that for:

> …language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons (that's why he spends so much time arguing against the possibility of a "private language"). So he makes language dependent on human community, but unfortunately we're still stuck with the idea that there is this world of referents out

[65] David Foster Wallace. "Good Old Neon," in *Oblivion*, (Little, Brown & Co.: New York, 2004), p. 178.
[66] Larry McCaffrey. "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2012), p. 22.
[67] "Expanded Interview," p. 44.
[68] Ibid.

> there that we can never really join or know because we're stuck in here, in language, even if we're at least all in here together.[69]

As Wallace/Wittgenstein suggests, we may not have the external world, but at least we have each other. What still remains is language, which allows us to influence and associate, express and communicate, with one another. But these communications are merely spectres, outlines of an authentic reality. We can never experience what another is experiencing, we can only imagine true empathy, a recursive presence of referents which we attempt to express within the confines of language. The best we can hope for in art and literature is thus to share through what Wallace calls, "…a sort of generalization of suffering," a communal connection with that suffering, which might allow for that DeLillian "small leap" to interpersonal empathy and communication.[70]

For Eggers, and for Wallace, what is important is the *effort* to communicate—to surpass the solipsism and self-referentiality of postmodernist literary and cultural irony by making sincere attempts for connection to others through the processes of writing—even with the knowledge that language will ultimately fail in enabling one individual's personal feelings to be felt and experienced by another. In *A Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers articulates the value of such an effort to connect:

> Because secrets do not increase in value if kept in a Gore-ian lockbox, because one's past is either made useful or else mutates and becomes cancerous. We share things for the obvious reasons: it makes us feel un-alone, it spreads the weight over a larger area, it holds the possibility of making our share lighter. And it can work either way—not simply as a pain-relief device, but, in the case of not bad news but good, as a share-the-happy-things-I've-seen/lessons-I've-learned vehicle. Or as a tool for simple connectivity for its own sake, a testing of waters, a stab at engagement with a mass of strangers.[71]

Eggers un-ironically expresses that "sharing" with others through the process of storytelling (in this instance, autobiography) becomes a way to create a community, i.e., using language to communicate memories and personal experiences becomes a way to connect with other people. There is a kind of self-imposed naivety at work here, a way of thinking about life and art and literature that David Foster Wallace attempts to convey in "E Unibus Pluram":

> The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue…The

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[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., p. 22.
[71] Ibid., p. 215.

> new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how *banal*."[72]

The result of this "childish gall" is that the entire project of endless and clever self-referential irony is overturned. Stories are produced in which irony becomes the object of irony. But the most profound feature of this ironizing of irony is that it rests—in both Wallace's and Eggers' narratives—not on cleverness or mental ferocity, but on the enduring and sentimental ordinary self. This is especially true in *A Heartbreaking Work*, which reads like a sort of experiment in empathy, "a stab at engagement with a mass of strangers" to see if the loneliness of solipsism can be lessened.

The issue becomes whether or not the acceleration of one's communicative abilities through the usage of digital and information technologies exacerbates or alleviates the solipsism of Eggers' "more is more is more" paradigm. What happens when Wallace's keyhole, that small, limited perspective of the other, is expanded? What happens when the linguistic exchange is made just one of many possible methods of communication, as the screen—through the 'visual/aesthetic turn of the 1990s' (Manovich, 2008)[73]—becomes a ubiquitous feature of modern life via social media networks, the Internet, and the ever-expanding World Wide Web? What happens when we have the ability to kick the old door right off of its hinges? To begin answering these questions, we have to return to Lovink's idea concerning digitally negotiated communications, the "interpenetration" of the offline and the online, and his claim that all human interaction is—in some way, shape, or form—technologically mediated. It is only logical to take a hard look at identity formations and cultural transformations beyond language, that is, from an interdisciplinary perspective.

With this conception firmly established, in writing *The Circle*, Eggers is clearly arguing that it would be a serious error to assume that there are no differences between digitally mediated life, and other mundane technological experiences. Eggers "celebration" of mediated communications as offering an "edifying" and "ramifying" existential experience is re-examined in the wake of the modernized world's cultural digitization. *The Circle* overtly considers the theme of socialization and community formation, as this ultramodern fictionalization addresses the hazards of a simulacral-community, one generated entirely from the digital technologies of social media. For Eggers, such a community ultimately reveals a hollow center, a reality in which so called "connections" to

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[72] David Foster Wallace. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in *Supposedly Fun Things I'll Never Do Again*, (Little, Brown & Co.: New York, 1997), p. 81

[73] Lev Manovich. *Software Takes Command: Extending the Language of New Media*, (Bloomsbury: London, 2013 [2008]).

others are premised and understood in purely quantitative and reductive terms, the online (inter)actions of, "zing" and "tweet," "like" or "dislike," "smile" or "frown."

The Circle offers a far more precise rumination on the supplementary personal ramifications of prolonged digital interactivity. This is reflected in the penultimate conversation between Mae Holland and her soon to be off-the-grid ex-boyfriend, Mercer:

> You know what I think, Mae? I think you think that sitting at your desk, frowning and smiling somehow makes you think you're actually living some fascinating life. You comment on things, and that substitutes for doing them. You look at pictures of Nepal, push a smile button, and you think that's the same as going there. I mean, what would happen if you actually went? Your CircleJerk ratings or whatever-the-fuck would drop below an acceptable level! Mae, do you realize how incredibly boring you've become?[74]

Throughout the above discussion, Mercer has to ask Mae repeatedly to stop checking her phone while he is attempting to talk to her (a request that is, in the end, futile). The kind of interactions that the Internet offers through social media—such as ticking the "like" button on Facebook, or posting a Tweet at the hundred-and-forty-character limit, or using an emoticon or Vine or Snapchat to express wildly complex emotions while reducing the amount of thoughts or feelings communicated in *actual* written or spoken language, etc.—is demonstrative of a breakdown of genuine attention that, for Mercer, must be a collaborative process. The interactive/interpersonal element therefore necessitates the very form and function of all valid communicative projects and, consequently, all authentic human relationships.

More than fifteen years into Eggers' career as a working author and educator, the same concerns persist: solipsism vs empathy, irony vs sincerity, language and the external world. So why make the effort, why write the book? Eggers asked these questions less than a year after *A Heartbreaking Work* was released. His response:

> Because if you do it right and go straight toward them, you, like me, will write to them and will look straight into their eyes when writing, will look straight into their fucking eyes, like a person sometimes can do with another person, and tell them something, even though you might not know them well, or at all, and even if you wrote in their books or hugged them or put your hand on their arm, you still would scarcely know them, but even so wrote a book that was really a letter to them, a messy fucking letter that you could barely keep a grip on, but a letter you meant, and a letter you sometimes wish you had not mailed, but a letter you are happy that made it from you to them.[75]

This *give-and-take*, conversationally driven methodology leads to some profound questions pertaining to Eggers' contemporary literary disposition, with the most germane being: what—in the thirteen years from the publication of *A Heartbreaking Work* to *The Circle*—

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[74] Ibid., p. 261.
[75] https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2001/jan/20/weekend7.weekend6

has altered Eggers' understanding of mediated communications so abruptly, engendering such a reproachful point of view? Should all digitized or mediated online communications be considered inauthentic discourse? Is the term "online community" itself an oxymoron? Does being immersed in information technology render the individual, in Mercer's words, "socially autistic?"

3.3 *Extending Consciousness: Connection in an Age of Digital Communications*

> Tim Berners-Lee created a new mode of human communication. He created a new way of allowing communication to work in extraordinarily connected ways. It seemed like a great new world. It seemed like a new democracy. It seemed like a new way of people coming together and spreading news, of educating, of giving ourselves information and access to people and cultures and history. It seemed the most fantastic, radical and extraordinary development since Gutenberg produced his Bible.
>
> -Stephen Fry, *The Virtual Revolution*

One of the first scholars to engage with these questions is the pioneering digital culture theorist, Sherry Turkle, who, as a Professor of Social Studies in Science and Technology at MIT, has been exploring the impact of these technologies on culture and society for over thirty years. In monitoring the explosion of information and digital technologies in the everyday lives of the millennial generation, Turkle's more recent writings have become far less sanguine on the subject than her initial work in the mid-to-late 1990s. She believes the ubiquity of computing, incessant connection via mobile devices, combined with the ever-evolving robotics industry and ever-evolving artificial intelligence via algorithm formulations (from "smart" phones to Apple's "Siri" query engine) have rendered many modern individuals more adept at relating to digital devices than to actual people.

Perhaps in paying homage to Robert Putnam's work in social studies, *Bowling Alone* (2000),[76] Turkle's 2012 book, *Alone Together*, proposes a straightforward, yet acutely urgent thesis: The more we expect from technology, the less we expect from each other.[77] Our capacity to be alone, or temporarily disconnected from the Internet and technologically facilitated (online) social interactions, has become increasingly difficult for the contemporary individual. *Alone Together* cogently outlines the consequences of a society addicted to digitally enhanced experiences. One proposed outcome is that there will be a point of existential singularity in which, 'performances of identity feel like identity itself.'[78] This reiterates the logical paradox voiced previously in *The Circle* by Mercer, the

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[76] Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (Simon and Schuster: 2000).
[77] Sherry Turkle. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books: 2012).
[78] *Ibid*, p. 12

simultaneity of connection/disconnection that occurs in these cyberspatial environments. For Turkle, the kind of virtual intimacy that digital technologies and electronic devices provide cannot act as a substitute for complex human interactions. While she sees technologies becoming progressively adept at mimicking human speech and oral communication, mimicry is—by its very definition—only an imitation of something that maintains an essential uniqueness.

Turkle's digital fears are in the same vein as those of the critics who respond to *The Circle* by labelling it a dystopic science fiction novel, in that it points towards the millennial generation as "digital natives" who have been totally immersed in this kind of digitized intimacy even before they have had an opportunity to develop deeper forms of communicative skills with their fellow human beings (Prensky, 2001).[79] Again, the fear that *The Circle* inspires in its critical responses has just as much to do with an ideological shift in human communication and intimacy as it does with the monopolistic intentions of this imagined corporation.

Turkle responds to the millennial generations digitized "way of life" in her most recent offering titled, *Reclaiming the Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (2015) which continues her decade-long thesis in its investigation of the loss of face-to-face conversation, and how this communicative transformation undermines our very relationships, creativity, and productivity.[80] Perhaps most importantly, Turkle believes that constant online connection via our mobile devices is detrimental to our most vital emotional and interpersonal capability—empathy. Recalling Mercer's criticism of "social autism," she argues:

> What phones do to in-person conversation *is* a problem. Studies show that the mere presence of a phone on the table (even a phone turned off) changes what people talk about. If we think we might be interrupted, we keep conversations light, on topics of little controversy or consequence. And conversations with phones on the landscape block empathic connection. If two people are speaking and there is a phone on a nearby desk, each feels less connected to the other than when there is no phone present. *Even a silent phone disconnects us*.[81]

The word "digital" can be found in the titles of hundreds of books published over the course of the past twenty years. All of this literature seems to be wrestling with the notions brought forth by writers such as Turkle and Prensky, that is, we are sacrificing our humanity by

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[79] Mark Prensky. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, October, 2001, pp. 1-6.
[80] Sherry Turkle. *Reclaiming the Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, (Penguin: New York, 2015).
[81] Ibid., p. 21, italics in original.

hastily integrating digital technologies into our mundane communicative, professional, and commercial experiences.[82]

These are the very social, cultural and personal transformations that Eggers so thoroughly explores in *The Circle*. After Mae's technological liaison has set up her tablet, computer, and workspace (and after her biometrics), she begins the process of learning the daily work routine of a CE employee. Before this occurs, however, Mae is reintroduced to Dan, the team leader of her pod in Customer Experience, and the individual that was present for all three of her job interview sessions.[83] Mae is excited to start her training, but Dan is insistent that they meet beforehand in order to articulate the Circle's "core beliefs,"

> …chief among them is that just as important as the work we do here—and that work is very important—we want to make sure that you can be a human being here, too. We want this to be a workplace, sure, but it should also be a *human*place. And that means the fostering of community. In fact, it *must* be a community. That's one of our slogans, as you probably know: *Community First*. And you've seen the signs that say *Humans Work Here*—I insist on those. That's my pet issue. We're not automatons. This isn't a sweatshop. We're a group of the best minds of our generation. Genera*tions*. And making sure this is a place where our humanity is respected, where our opinions are dignified, where our voices are heard—this is as important as any revenue, any stock price, any endeavor undertaken here.[84]

Whereas the generational divide brought about by the emergence of information and digital technologies often leads theorists and critics to lament a loss of *community*, a loss of *personhood*, a loss of *empathy*, Dan here is proposing the very opposite to Mae. The Circle—as the largest and most ubiquitous purveyor of cultural digitization—maintains a corporate philosophy which values community and sociability above all else, and these values argue against what theorists such as Turkle have been proclaiming concerning the effects of these technologies on our communicative and social experiences.

Dan is endorsing the sense of existential fulfilment and community that the Circle hopes to achieve, not only with its employees but also with the billions of clients that use the company's online resources. As he sees it, the Circle, rather than being interpreted as a hegemonic multinational conglomerate that causes the loss of individuality ("We're not automatons"), the corporation should instead be viewed with McLuhan's (1962) sense of

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[82] Turkle was working from two specific studies in arriving at the empathy-conversation-phone connection: Shalini Mirsa, Lulu Cheng, and Jamie Genevie. "The iPhone Effect: The Quality of In-Person Social Interactions in the Presence of Mobile Devices," *Environment and Behavior*, 2014, p. 124.
Andrew Przybyliski & Netta Weinstein. "Can You Connect with Me Now? How the Presence of Mobile Communication Technology Influences Face-to-Face Conversation Quality," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 2012, pp. 1-10.
[83] Ibid., p. 47.
[84] Ibid., italics in original.

facilitating the growth of the "global village"[85] and the general population's "extension" of consciousness: 'Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extension of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to *the whole of human society*, much as we have already extended our senses and nerves by the various media' (McLuhan, 1994 [1964]).[86] While previous industrial age economic processes simply removed human beings from the equation by way of mechanical automation, the Circle's digital processes seek to assimilate humanity through their artificial social media. Dan elaborates, '"With the technology available, communication should never be in doubt. Understanding should never be out of reach or anything but clear. It's what we do here. You might say it's the mission of the company—Communication. Understanding. Clarity."' [87] For Dan, the Circle's technologies act as an extension of man, but in his digital optimism, he fails to recognize that such extensions can also bring about new forms of ignorance concerning past communicative and socializing frameworks.

If we consider the foundational conceptualizations of the postmodern rhetoric through the lens of Derrida's notion of "deconstruction," i.e., a process of reception which privileges the performativity, indeterminacy, and aporia intrinsic in any form of representation, its ultimate and irrevocable *différance* from experience and reality (Altieri, 1981),[88] Dan's techno-corporate resolve concerning the potential of the Circle—through the advancements of cultural digitization—speaks in direct opposition to such postmodern axioms of an essential inexpressibility of consciousness and aporetic insignificance (Miller, 1985).[89] Such a deconstructive analysis severs the communicative process by revealing and parodying its unspoken hierarchal and relational structures, leading Gergen (2000) to

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[85] Marshall McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, (University of Toronto Press: 1962).

[86] *Understanding Media*, pp. 3-4, my italics: even in 1964, McLuhan was wary of ethically or morally diagnosing the outcome of such an electronic expansion: 'Whether the extension of consciousness, so long sought by advertisers for specific products, will be "a good thing," is a question that admits of a wide solution.'

[87] Ibid., p. 47.

[88] Charles Altieri. *Act & Quality: A Theory of Literary Meaning and Humanistic Understanding*, (Harvester Press: Brighton, 1981), p. 35. Altieri offers a veritable and concise definition of the term *différance* (I am fully aware of the paradox generated by using the word "definition" in connection with Derrida). For Altieri: 'Derrida's concept of writing, with is associated metaphors of trace, hymen, supplement, restance, parergon, and dissemination, can be seen as a precise rendering of this problematic relation between representation and its other… [because language] does not picture what it purports to refer to, meanings depend on structures of signs or other meanings, none of which is securely anchored in a reality outside language.' Passage originally cited in den Dulk's (2015) *Existentialist Engagement*.

[89] Joseph Hillis Miller. *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens*, (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 1985), p. 264. Miller, writing on the poetry of Hopkins, remarks: '[he] recognizes that there is no word for the Word, that all words are metaphors. Each word leads to another word of which it is the displacement, in a movement without origin or end.'

comment that metaphorical significance itself can be said to be lost in an endless game of deferral between the sign and the signified. He describes the ensuing postmodern condition as,

> …marked by a plurality of voices vying for the right to reality—to be accepted as legitimate expressions of the true and the good…Under postmodern conditions persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold.[90]

What Dan is proposing is a digital transcendental signifier, one that attempts to close these very gaps, to re-establish the connections between the constituents of the act of communication by technologically renegotiating the relations and hierarchies between the individuals and their conversational elements of interaction and exchange.

The Circle's technologically amplified communicative proficiencies therefore enact Hassan's (2003) appeal for agency, 'to discover new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and wholes—indeed, new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centers and centers,' in order to uncover a 'new, pragmatic and planetary civility.' [91] In this regard, Dan views the Circle's saturation in the online, (cyber)spatial social media environment as an attempt to locate new depths and possibilities in personal communication in a reaction against the 'kind of flatness or depthlessness, [the] new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense,' which Fredric Jameson (1991) sees as emblematic of postmodernism.[92] While Derridian deconstruction is driven primarily by epistemological scepticism and incredulity, the Circle's model of cultural digitization is founded on an attitude of confidence in the power of social media networks to cure this psychological malaise, to genuinely covey experience rather than reflect the inner workings of the sign systems themselves.

The information technologies of the Circle attempt to find continuities in the inherent discontinuities of figurative transfers via digitized symbolic interactions (Charon, 1985):

> Instead of focusing on the individual and his or her personality, or on how the society or social situation causes human behavior, symbolic interactionism focuses on the activities that take place *between actors*. Interaction is the basic unit of study. Individuals are created through interaction; society too is created through social interaction. What we do depends on interaction with others earlier in our lifetimes,

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[90] Kenneth J. Gergen. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, (Basic Books: New York, 2000 [1991]), p. 7.
[91] Ihab Hassan. "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 8 (1), pp. 3-11.
[92] Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 1991), p. 9.

> and it depends on our interaction *right now*. Social interaction is central to what we do.[93]

The Circle's brand of symbolic interactionism directly assists in the development of interactive parasocial relationships via their social network (Baek, et al., 2013)[94] and, in doing so, contest the previous generations' postmodern philosophies and literary predispositions relating to the public imaginary, which, according to Baudrillard (1993), had become stagnated by endless mediation, simulation, and reiteration ('nothing remains for us to base anything on').[95]

The technological capabilities of the Circle and its access to vast amounts of information pertaining to every individual client, would seem to interfere with rather than facilitate face-to-face communications, as each digitized interaction is mediated by virtual environments and online encounters (Sigman, 2009).[96] Dan—parroting the Circle's mission statement—maintains an antithetical stance, asserting that digitized communications provide the opportunity for an *even more* authentic human discourse, in that the technology available can keep the TruYou user incessantly connected, leading to complete transparency in lines of communication:

> …as you know, we're in charge of customer experience, CE, and some people might think that's the least sexy part of this whole enterprise. But as I see it, and the Wise Men see it, it's the foundation of everything that happens here. If we don't give the customers a satisfying, human and *humane* experience, then we have no customers. It's pretty elemental. We're the proof this company is human.[97]

In this way, at the commencement of the novel, the Circle, in a more general sense, ostensibly provides what Mark Warschauer has coined, "technology for social inclusion," which, instead of bemoaning the digital divides in our communicative experiences brought on by the age of the Internet and networked media, suggests a proactive method of social and political integration. Warschauer (2003) summarizes his perspective:

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[93] Joel M. Charon. *Symbolic Interactionism: an Introduction, an Interpretation, an Integration*, (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 2004 [1985]), p. 31, my italics.

[94] Young Min Baek, PhD, Young Bae, PhD, and Hyunmi Jang, MS. "Social and Parasocial Relationships on Social Network Sites and Their Differential Relationships with Users' Psychological Well-Being," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Volume 16, Number 7th, 2013, p. 512.
See: 'With the advent of social network sites (SNSs), people can efficiently maintain pre-existing social relationships and make online friendships without offline encounters […] We classify SNS relationships into two types: (a) *social* relationships based on reciprocity between a user and his/her friends, and (b) *parasocial* relationships in which an ordinary user is aware of activities of a celebrity (e.g., famous actors, athletes, and others) but not vice versa.'

[95] Jean Baudrillard. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, (Sage: London, 1993 [1976]), p. 5.

[96] Aric Sigman. "The Impact of Screen Media on Children: A Eurovision for Parliament," Health and Education Lecturer, Fellow of the Society of Biology, Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, published in 2009. In this paper, Sigman notes that the hours per day of face-to-face social interaction *declines* as use of electronic media increase. The trends are predicated to increase (data abstracted from a series of time-use and demographic studies).

[97] Ibid., pp. 47-48, italics in original.

> Whether in developed or in developing countries, urban areas or rural, for economic purposes or sociopolitical ones, access to ICT is a necessary and key condition for overcoming social exclusion in the information society. It is certainly not the only condition that matters; good schools, decent government, and adequate health care are other critical factors for social inclusion. But ICT, if developed well, can contribute toward improved education, government, and health care, too, and thus can be a multiplying factor for social inclusion.[98]

Yet again one encounters contradictory interpretations of how the Internet and online communications have an effect, both at the individual and overarching political and cultural level. The true impact of these pervasive digital technologies is dichotomized, made into a hemisphere in which one side views such technological intrusions as being fundamentally detrimental to the human experience (Turkle), and, conversely, the other side maintaining the positivist position of ICT's as the driving force in overcoming "social exclusion" from the information society (Dan & Warschauer). In the next section, this chapter discusses the manner in which the digitally deterministic and polemical nature of this debate needs to be reconsidered. For the characters of *The Circle*—and certainly within our own contemporary sociotechnical ecosystem—the answers to such questions have become far more byzantine.

3.4 *"The Core is the Core is the Core": A Dangerous Stasis*

> Technological fixes, because they attack symptoms but don't root out the causes, have unforeseen and deleterious side effects that may be worse than the social problems they were intended to solve.
>
> -Lisa Rosner, 2004[99]

The visibility and relative accessibility of commonplace interactions in virtual/cyberspace has been a feature of social media from the Internet's early days (Franklin, 2004).[100] However, the commercialized platforms that characterize the current generation's use of social media and online applications have shifted this visibility from limited usage to a ubiquitous cultural experience. This occurred (near simultaneously) not only in terms of economic ubiquity and corporate earning power, but also in digital indexing and personal archiving dynamics. The Internet's rapid embedding in all areas of human endeavour still leaves many scholars ardently defensive if not entirely bifurcated between true believers and determined sceptics. One of the most obvious reasons for this, I contend, is the

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[98] Mark Warschauer. *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*, (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2003).
"ICT" is an acronym for: **I**nformation and **C**ommunication **T**echnologies.
[99] *The Technological Fix: How People Use Technology to Create and Solve Problems*, (Routledge: New York, 2004), p. 2.
[100] M.I. Franklin. *Postcolonial Politics, the Internet, and Everyday Life: Pacific Traversals*, (Routledge: New York, 2004).

normative ontology previously expressed by Mercer, in that he privileges "real life" (i.e., physically proximate and territorially bound social relations) over and above those manifesting themselves differently (online, in and through virtual and cyberspatial environments). This anthropologically centred notion of proximity underwrites many polarized debates on the real and imagined impacts of the Internet—a synecdoche for sociocultural, political, and economic changes over the last two decades.

On which side of this digital/materialist argument one eventually lands seems a direct consequence of how one formulates an understanding of what an authentic human self actually is, marking a contemporary re-emergence of the Romantic belief that the self is the inviolable and ultimately un-representable core of human consciousness. Over sixty years ago, Theodor Adorno (1951) spoke to the innate nature of this psychological paradox: 'the mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail.'[101] Correspondingly—and more directly related to Eggers' writing—Sass (1992) describes the disaffecting processes of consciousness and self-consciousness as a coinciding self-duplication and self-distancing:

> There is a potential for estrangement in every act of consciousness. To become aware of something, to know it as an object, is necessarily to become aware of its separateness, its nonidentity with the knowing self that one feels oneself to be at that very instant. […] And since this an *essential* fact about consciousness, it must surely apply to self-awareness as well: to know my own self is, inevitably, to multiply or fractionate myself; it is to create a division between my knowing consciousness and my existence as perceivable individual who interacts with others or subsists as a body of flesh and blood.[102]

If we compare these insights of self-consciousness eliciting self-fractionation to Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work*, a similar faith is placed in the belief of a fundamental incapacity to fully and truthfully exist by the Delphic maxim, to "know" oneself, or live in "the real":

> I could be aware of the dangers of the self-consciousness, but at the same time, I'll be plowing through the fog of all these echoes, plowing through mixed metaphors, noise, and will try to show the core, which is still there, as a core, and is valid despite the fog. *The core is the core is the core*. There is always the core, that can't be articulated.[103]

Adapting this awareness to *The Circle*, one could conclude that Eggers himself is genuinely concerned about the digital saturation of social media and constant online interactivity occurring within our everyday communicative experiences, and the consequences that such

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[101] Theodor Adorno. "The Actuality of Philosophy," as found in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor, (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000), p. 38.
[102] Louis Sass. *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, (Basic Books: New York, 1992), p. 75, italics in original.
[103] Ibid., p. 270, my italics.

uninterrupted interactions have on our sense of an authentic, fully-formed and expressible personal identity.

Eggers fictional unease is a result of the way social media technologies promise to establish an authentic account of an individual and that individual's real world experience. Networked media applications promise identity formation through social connection and friendship, seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard, viewing and being viewed; these technologies offer a cyberspatial avenue into the very essence of a person, a comprehensive articulation by way of digital individuation, a techno-mimetic fabrication that is advocated as accurate, honest, and constantly being refreshed and refined in real-time. Heidegger, in an argument which parallels Eggers' insistence on "the core is the core is the core" asserts that it is the very universality of "being" which renders it impenetrable and fundamentally incomprehensible: 'If one says accordingly that "being" is the most universal concept, that cannot mean that it is the clearest and that it needs no further discussion. The concept of "being" is rather the most obscure of all.'[104] Eggers' fiction reflects the phenomenological philosophies of Sass, Adorno and Heidegger, in that there is only the smallest chance of penetrating the detail, and that such an opportunity—to even feel a hint of the totality of an authenticated experience, or to submit a complete picture of one's life—could never be communicated or shared or represented by spoken or written language, let alone by digital means. There always remains a part of us hidden.[105] In the best scenario, one never ceases the search for those veiled moments of legitimacy, those moments that are "valid despite the fog." Following DeLillo, one could call this the Author's Oath, to "make our small leaps" towards uncovering what Marvin Lundy in *Underworld* cherishes as, '…The shock, the power of an ordinary life. It is a thing you could not invent with banks of computers in a dust-free room.'[106]

Mae reflects upon a similar personal opacity during the Circle's introduction of the LuvLuv app. After she has unexpectedly been requisitioned as a participant in the presentation, she mulls over the residual anger and embarrassment concerning her sudden call to the stage:

> So what had so mortified her during [the] presentation? She couldn't put her finger on it. Was it only the surprise of it? Was it the pinpoint accuracy of the algorithms? Maybe. But then again, it wasn't entirely accurate, so was *that* the problem? Having

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[104] Martin Heidegger. *Being in Time*, edited by Dennis J. Schmidt, translated by Joan Stambaugh, (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2010), p. 2.
[105] In a *Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers laments this inability to describe the kind of life that he and his little brother, Toph, are leading, as his writing fails to be the equivalent to their lived-in reality, one he strives so vehemently to describe: 'To adequately relate even five minutes of internal thought-making would take forever—it's maddening' (pp. 114-115).
[106] Ibid., p. 308.

> a matrix of preferences presented as your essence, as the whole you? Maybe that was it. It was some kind of *mirror*, but it was incomplete, distorted. And if Francis wanted any or all of that information, why couldn't he just ask *her*?[107]

What makes Mae uncomfortable and causes her to undergo a strange sense of psychic dissonance, is networked social media and digital technologies advancing an inauthentic version of an individual and promoting it as the *authentic person*. The virtual online experience of TruYou is offered as *real*, one that has a coexistent and tangible historicity. This history, or techno-actuality, proposes to reveal the genuine narrative of one's life, a narrative that is written not from a lived history of face-to-face interactions or physically proximate communications, but through the information and datum extrapolated from one's various online social media profiles.

Eggers' beliefs that Internet-enabled technologies are conceivably detrimental to one's existential welfare are mirrored in the digital disposition of the protagonist Alan Clay in the novel *A Hologram for the King* (published only a year before *The Circle*):

> He was already in the photo program, the vast grid of his life in thumbnails, so he scanned backward. Everything was there, and it terrified him. For Alan's last birthday, Kit had taken a few dozen photo albums from his garage and sent them away to a service that scanned all the pictures within and put them on a disc. He'd dumped them all onto his laptop and now they were all there, photos from his own childhood, from his life with Ruby, from the birth and growth of Kit. Someone, Kit or the digitizers, had arranged them all more or less chronologically, and now he could, and often did, scan through the thousand pictures, a record of his life, in minutes. All he had to do was keep his finger on the leftward arrow. It was too easy. It was not good. It kept him in a dangerous stasis of nostalgia and regret and horror.[108]

This photographically bracketed narrative of Alan's life through an accurate, if abridged, temporality also echoes Adorno's (1951) sociotechnical fears: 'Technology is making gestures precise and brutal, and with them men. It subjects them to the implacable, as it were ahistorical demands of objects…The new human type cannot be properly understood without awareness of what he is continuously exposed to from the world of things about him, even in his most secret innervations.'[109] Adorno (like Clay) is not offering a sober dialectical account of the thing-world that was emerging, but rather his philosophical undertaking is to speak from the perspective of a "damaged life," submitting a wilfully negative critique of ordinary subjective life caught in the midst of things choreographed by the facticity of mechanical reason.[110] His questions ask what things/objects want, and how

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[107] Ibid., p. 125, italics in original.
[108] Ibid., p. 99.
[109] Theodor Adorno. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, (Verso: London, 1989 [1951]), trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott, p. 40.
[110] Ibid. * The technologies from which Adorno qualifies his instrumental assessment, his pedagogy of "things," range from the door, cars, refrigerators, window frames and "encasements," latches, handles, and

they might produce us as subjects. So too might we question Alan's experience with his digital photo album. His drunkenness in the scene aside, one must contemplate: where does this sense of nostalgia, regret, and horror come from? What is the source of this dangerous stasis? Again, Eggers depends on the sustained interaction with the other in a physically contiguous space—about which Timmer (2008) writes, 'could possibly counter the feeling of entrapment in an empty self,'[111]—as the source of authentic self-knowledge and self-understanding.[112]

Alan is terrified by the brevity and ease of his digital objectification, a process in which he can view a chronologically faithful record of his lifetime—a life now seen as a snapshot from the perspective of an online eternity. Such onscreen evanescence reduces Alan to an algorithmic slideshow, and a human being (as Marvin Lundy has taught us), regardless of how technologically advanced these mediated renderings become or how penetrating the atmosphere of digital inundation, will always be more complex than a binary series of zeros and ones. The line of questioning, then, must move to match such an anthropomorphic rationalization: are these intermediated, digitized versions of the individual intrinsically damaging to his/her epistemological and ontological constitution? What is the role of social media technologies and material objects in capturing both individual and collective memory? Can Alan, instead of being immersed in a panicked and melancholic residue upon the encounter of his digitized self, alternatively discover that such a technologically facilitated exploration of his life to offer a sense of astonishment and gratitude, or, at the very least, a sense of contentment? How has the transference of the physical object known as a photo-album to a virtual, online ecosystem changed Alan's aesthetic *experience* of the photographs themselves? In a more optimistic turn, he might also have recognized the casualness of such a digital transformation as potentially containing the seeds of a sociality and interactivity yet to come, one not restricted by antiquated and analog communication rationales or technologies.

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doorsteps. Such a scrutinization prompts him to ask, in an exaggerated, hyperbolic fashion (one hopes): 'What does it mean for the subject that there are no more casement windows to open, but only sliding frames to shove, no gentle latches but turntable handles, no forecourt, no doorstep before the street, no wall around the garden? And which driver is not tempted, merely by the power of his engine, to wipe out the vermin of the street, the pedestrians, children and cyclists?'

[111] *The Post-Postmodern Syndrome*, p. 313.

[112] Kevin Mattson. "Is Dave Eggers a Genius? Rebelling and Writing in an Age of Postmodern Mass Culture," from *Radical Society*, 29, no. 3, 2002, pp. 75-83. To this I would add Mattson's description of *AHWSG* as a process of dual narration—a kind that co-opts the reader into the artistic practice as an act of community formation. See: 'Crack open a copy of *AHWSG* and early on you get a sense of how this young writer is struggling to bring readers into a two-way, communicative relationship…Some might think these examples nothing more than gimmicks. Nonetheless, they represent Eggers's hope to draw the reader into the act of communication.'

3.5 *The Circle's Digital Panopticon: "Imagine the Implications!"*

Technology is the answer, but what was the question?

-Cedric Price, 1966[113]

As Mae's first workweek comes to a close, it has become exceptionally clear that Eggers has attempted to set up a dichotomy in which the Circle's sociotechnical capabilities can be viewed as either a technocultural panacea—in that they redistribute abilities and improve lives through enhanced communicational competencies—or, conversely, as a direct threat to established economic, social, and political institutions and practices:

> By her first Friday Mae had served 436 customers and had memorized the boilerplates. Nothing surprised her anymore, though the variation in customers and their businesses was dizzying. The Circle was everywhere, and though she'd known this for years, intuitively, hearing from these people, the businesses counting on the Circle to get the word out about their products, to track their digital impact, to know who was buying their wares and when—it became real on a very different level. She now had customer contacts in Clinton, Louisiana, and Putney, Vermont; in Marmaris, Turkey and Melbourne and Glasgow and Kyoto.[114]

The Circle's mantra of an all-inclusive globalized community at first appears to be fostering a comprehensive system of sociocultural and socioeconomic developments through its forward-thinking and constantly progressing digital products and services. The variation in the types of businesses and customers is "dizzying"; the disorientation that Mae experiences arises not from being "surprised" by the Circle's ubiquity, rather, in recognizing that she is dealing with actual people and actual businesses which have a genuine effect on the thousands of clients that she impacts from her single 100-square foot pod in CE. The phenomenological detachment that Mae would customarily feel when navigating cyberspatial environments, such as social media, have been instantaneously altered to a more significant axiological dimension, one that she feels is "real on a very different level."

This notion of social, political, and cultural improvement through technological means, being administered by the up-and-coming generation, is reiterated when Mae thinks back to her first job out of college, at a utility company in her hometown of Longfield, California. Mae now associates the occupation as being patently antediluvian, 'from another time, a rightfully forgotten time.'[115] The application of such confident language, a "*rightfully* forgotten time," reveals the author's pre-emptive suggestion that there are elements of Mae's idiosyncratic past that should have been held on to. As the idealistic

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[113] 1966 lecture "Technology is the answer—but what was the question?" Available online at: https://issuu.com/adhocracyath/docs/adh_adhocracyprice_stack
[114] Ibid., pp. 54-55.
[115] Ibid., p. 11.

protagonist begins her second week of employment in CE, the reader begins to sense Eggers threading into the underlying narrative an atmosphere of suspicion and cynicism regarding the Circle's corporate culture.

The most noticeable of these suspicions is uncovered in the Circle's digital dogmatism, and is abruptly brought to bear when we are introduced to the second of the "Three Wise Men," Eamon Bailey, as he gives a keynote address at the Great Hall: '"Newbies…You're in for something special. This is called Dream Friday, where we present something we're working on. Often it's one of our engineers or designers or visionaries, and sometimes it's just me. And today, for better or worse, it's just me."'[116] Bailey's keynote lecture, which in Circle-speak is called an "unveiling," evokes in the reader a sense of familiarity, as it mimics the style of presentation of the annual conferences held by companies such as Microsoft, Apple, and Google. Due to the Circle's virtual monopolization of the social media marketplace and its attendant digital technologies, these unveilings are a synthesis of both CES (Consumer Electronics Show) and TED (Technology, Entertainment, and Design) conferences, as they serve to function simultaneously as a platform from which to announce future corporate plans and developing commercial ideologies, as well as to reveal brand new digital appliances soon to be available for purchase to the general public.

Eggers even goes so far as to borrow a Steve Jobs-esque physicality, age, and casual attire for Bailey. He is described as, 'a tall man of about forty-five, round in the gut but not unhealthy, wearing jeans and a blue V-neck sweater.'[117] Even the most periodic observer of digital technologies and trends easily arrives at associations with such stereotypical Silicon Valley inspired corporate personalities. Bailey's charisma and eccentricity are also reminiscent of Jobs, in that Bailey has an allure that solicits the attention, respect, and devotion of his followers (Isaacson, 2011).[118] One audience member interrupts the presentation by yelling out, '"We love you Eamon!"' To which the Wise Man responds: '"Well thank you. I love you back. I love you as the grass loves the dew, as the birds love a bough."'[119] Although ripe with platitudes, within this brief exchange Eggers establishes not only that there is a reciprocated affection between the boss and his employees, but, more

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[116] Ibid., p. 60.
[117] Ibid., p. 59.
[118] Walter Isaacson. *Steve Jobs: The Exclusive Biography*, (Simon & Schuster: 2011). A direct quote from Jobs: "Your time is limited, don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma, which is living the result of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other opinions drown your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition, they somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary." *The critical irony of these words will be echoed by Bailey in the Circle's corporate philosophy vis-à-vis the implementation of SeeChange.
[119] Ibid., p. 60.

importantly, the scene demonstrates that Eamon is incredibly sharp-witted and practiced in responding moment-to-moment, with seeming effortlessness and complete sincerity.

His appeal is not lost on Mae: 'He paused briefly, allowing Mae to catch her breath. She'd seen these talks online, but being here, in person, seeing Bailey's mind at work, hearing his off-the-cuff eloquence—it was better than she thought possible.'[120] Eamon is depicted as a new brand of corporate celebrity—a digital iteration of the terminology—a labelling that has resulted not purely from his enormous wealth or mercantile success, but from the nascent technologies that he helps the Circle bring into existence. This first unveiling scene helps to advance an image of the Circle as a kind and caring corporate entity, one that wants only the very best for its clients, using the astute and presumably well-intentioned person(a) of Eamon Bailey as the "company face" of the brand. In a moment of direct foreshadowing concerning Mae's own appearance on the unveiling stage of the Great Hall, she thinks: 'What would it be like, to be someone like that, eloquent and inspirational, so at ease in front of thousands?'[121]

Eggers writes Bailey's unveiling presentation with the use of repeated words and phrases, or *anadiplosis*: "Imagine if something happened?"—"Would not be hard to imagine," etc. Also, heavy use of *interrogatio*: "Almost useless, right?"—"That's what we're here for, right?" As well as recurring use of *subiectio*, or mock dialogue (thus a monologue), with the question and answer both included in the speech to enhance the line of thought: "Looks pretty good, right? Maybe I should be out there, as opposed to standing here with you!"—"Wait. Did I say it runs on a lithium battery that lasts two years? No. Well it does."[122] This manner of speaking is a well-known, and often imitated, semantic technique developed by Steve Jobs, often employed not only by businessmen, but politicians as well (President Barak Obama's beginning each response or sentence with the inclusive entreaty "*Look*, here's what we need to do").[123]

Bailey continues by recounting an anecdote about surfing, and finding the conditions of the waves and breaks happening at his regional spot, Stinson Beach, located in the San Francisco Bay Area. The fact that Bailey is a surfer helps to endorse the notion that he is a "common man" even though the world is well aware that he is a CEO of one of the most powerful corporations in the world. It also assists in underscoring the illusion of Eamon's connection to nature, his familiarity and personal awareness of a disconnected, organic,

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[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., pp. 65-67.
[123] This manner of conversational engagement, or public speaking, and can be seen in full effect at Steve Jobs' (now famous) 2005 commencement speech at Stanford. Available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF8uR6Z6KLc

Internet-free, kind of existential experience. Bailey lists the technologies used to ascertain this kind of information in chronological order: First there was the telephone (calling the local surf shop), then the cell phone (calling one's friends), and, finally, a webcam focused on the beach itself (website via digital video). Bailey notes the '"impracticality"' of these various technologies, priming the audience for the introduction of something new, an improvement upon such past technological inadequacies.[124]

This arrives in the form of a 'new video delivery system,' capable of replacing the 'tiny, pixilated, and comically slow' images being provided by the current video-streaming technology: 'Now the page was refreshed, and the coastline was full screen, and the resolution was perfect. There were sounds of awe throughout the room.'[125] A recurrent celestial vocabulary is exhibited here, as the words "awe" and "perfect" once again float through Mae's subjective stream of consciousness, a phraseological cue that Eggers employs to indicate that the Circle—as it does with all things—will be working to improve and refine a current communicative apparatus by inventing and implementing its own digital revolution.

Bailey is aware that the video-streaming technology itself, even with its incredible quality, is not necessarily an extraordinary or unique technological feat for the times, noting that, '"many machines can deliver high-res streaming video, and many of your tablets and phones can already support them."'[126] The key differences emerge when Bailey begins to explain the size, cost, and portability of this new gadgetry: '"We can now get high-def-quality resolution in a camera the size of a thumb. Well, a very big thumb. The second great thing is that, as you can see, this camera needs no wires. It's transmitting this image via satellite."'[127] This device, which 'is the shape and size of a lollipop,' can rotate and orient the camera 360-degrees, in any horizontal or vertical positioning. It has a microphone, which can both detect and transmit sound. Finally, within a year, a solar-powered model that never requires an alternative energy source will be available. Bailey continues his demonstration with a pitter-patter in the vein of a television salesman: '"And it's waterproof, sand-proof, windproof, animal-proof, insect-proof, everything-proof."'[128] Whereas this type of closed-circuit streaming technology was, in the past, '"prohibitively expensive"' for the average person, the Circle is able to retail each individual camera for only fifty-nine dollars each. The affordability of this price-point—one that only the Circle has the ability

[124] Ibid., p. 61.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid., p. 62.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

to offer—is not the sole factor providing Bailey confidence in the widespread appeal and eventual diffusion of this video-streaming technology.

At this stage, an eerie sentiment begins to leak into the presentation, as Eamon describes the flippancy in which one of these cameras can be arranged and operated with almost complete anonymity: '"Okay, so I set up that camera this morning. I taped it to a stake, stuck that stake in the sand, in the dunes, with no permit, nothing. In fact, no one knows it's there."'[129] Bailey goes on to explain how he spent his morning setting up multiple cameras for the Dream Friday address, placing them at not only Stinson, but Rodeo, Ocean, Montara, and Fort Point Beaches: 'With each beach Bailey mentioned, another live image appeared. There were now six beaches in a grid, each of them live, visible with perfect clarity and brilliant color.'[130] These cameras also have a dual functionality in that they do not have to be stationary and can act as a kind of futuristic GoPro, recording in real-time and instantaneously streaming live video. Or, they can imperceptibly be set up in one location—in "five minutes tops"—to constantly monitor and broadcast the video and audio of a singular location. Gaining access to view a livestream is also kept within the purview of the Circle's extant social media capabilities. As Bailey explains:

> It's just like friending someone, but now with access to all their live feeds. Forget cable. Forget five hundred channels. If you have one thousand friends, and they have ten cameras each, you now have ten thousand options for live footage. If you have five thousand friends, you have fifty thousand options. And soon you'll be able to connect to millions of cameras around the world. Again, imagine the implications![131]

Such imaginings are not difficult to come by, as the capacity for live-streaming technology has emerged as a fiercely competitive market in our own contemporary information and telecommunication economies. In fact, the practical implementation of video-streaming resources has developed as the principal topic in more generalized discussions revolving around digital culture and—in an incredibly hastened fashion—within the entertainment industries of film and television.[132]

The Circle's live-streaming capabilities through this new technology, which Bailey cleverly brands as "SeeChange," moves beyond the simple video-facilitated correspondence between an individual user and his or her immediate group of "friends" or subscribers in the social media arena.[133] For digital communication applications such as Skype, Apple's FaceTime and Google's Hangouts, or Twitter's most recent progression in the form of

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[129] Ibid., p. 63.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid., p. 64.
[132] The HBO hit comedy, *Silicon Valley* (2014), is premised on this very notion of providing high quality live video-streaming technology.
[133] Ibid., p. 66.

Periscope, the livestream being broadcast by the user is intentional, and the individuals watching the video-stream are deliberately interacting, knowing that they can both see and be seen within the app.[134] That is, identifying who is watching—in either the quantitative sense by the numbers in live viewership, or in the amount of subscribers to the channel who can "live-comment" on the video-stream—coupled with the recognition of the specific personality live-streaming, is the overall objective and communicative rationale of these digital applications (Afshan, 2015).[135] The Circle, however, via SeeChange, repositions the live-streaming paradigm by altering the foundational concept from digital vicariousness and personal broadcasting with the hope of popular viewership, to that of inescapable surveillance through widespread video monitoring. Bailey proposes such flagrant invasiveness under the auspices of worldwide peace and harmony, quickly shifting the tone of the unveiling from that of entertainment by way of the potential for "fifty thousand [viewing] options," to that of shadowy reconnaissance through clandestinely arranged SeeChange cameras.

Bailey implores the audience, "imagine the human rights implications," and at the exact moment he speaks the words, a livestream of the city of Cairo appears on the screen behind him. He continues, '"Protesters on the streets of Egypt no longer have to hold up a camera, hoping to catch a human rights violation or a murder and then somehow get the footage out of the streets and online. Now it's as easy as gluing a camera to a wall."'[136] At this juncture, Eggers transitions from the fictional world of *The Circle* to that of genuine historical occurrences, using the cradle of the Egyptian Revolution, Tahrir Square, to lucidly describe the power of such Internet-enabled technologies. Now, Bailey entirely abandons the cadence of a financially driven salesman for that of an ideologically motivated politician:

> The square is quiet now, but can you imagine if something happened? There would be instant accountability. Any soldier committing an act of violence would instantly be recorded for posterity. He could be tried for war crimes, you name it. And even if they clear the square of journalists, the cameras are still there. And no matter how many times they try to eliminate the cameras, because they're so small, they'll never know for sure where they are, who's placed them where and when. And the not-knowing will prevent abuses of power.[137]

This is one of the most significant scenes of the novel, as it fundamentally demonstrates the kind of digital and informational control that the Circle has the potential (and direct intention)

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[134] Live usage of the Periscope app during an interview with co-founder, Keyvon Beykpour: "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert", December 19th, 2015. Available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHe1LJ4dFKw

[135] Ahmed Afshan. "Experience life vicariously through the Periscope app," *The National*, September 12th, 2015.

[136] Ibid., p. 65.

[137] Ibid., p. 66.

to exercise over not only its informed clients and customers, but the majority of public and private geographical locations and individual Internet users that are not already subscribed to the Circle's social media network.

Whereas Bailey initially introduces SeeChange through the established online notion of "friending someone" in order to provide peer-to-peer livestream options, he smoothly transitions to anonymous surveillance with the expectation of preventing future crimes or "human rights violations" and, in doing so, transmutes the bidirectional and interchangeable flow of the cyberspatial connection. No longer is it necessary for a client of TruYou to accept a friend request for the purposes of viewing an individual user's SeeChange cameras. Instead, as Bailey expertly slides into his presentation, one only has to search for the geographical location, and the Circle will (most likely—and certainly in due time) be able to provide a live-feed of the setting. The insidiousness of this kind of surveillance is only heightened when Bailey explains that the Circle will be the lone corporate entity with the technological resources and faculties to maintain the recorded data, "for posterity."

Yet, the audience members remain unperturbed by the impending repercussions of such digital proliferation. In fact, they grow more excited with each subsequent announcement, applauding Bailey continuously as he explains the potential of SeeChange to alter the very manner in which people interact, communicate, and articulate knowledge, the very foundation of epistemological standardization: '[Bailey] went on, revealing their coverage of a dozen authoritarian regimes, from Khartoum to Pyongyang, where the authorities had no idea they were being watched by three thousand Circlers in California—had no notion that they *could* be watched, that this technology was or would ever be possible.'[138] Why would the Circlers not applaud and respond with such enthusiasm? This kind of video-surveillance could only improve the situation for a general populace living under the oppression of an authoritarian regime. As Noah Webster wrote in 1788, "Information is fatal to despotism," and, for the Circle, an ever-informed, ever-informationally transparent public is an unchained public.[139]

On the surface, Bailey suggests that using SeeChange to eliminate injustice and human rights violations on a global scale is an issue of simple common sense: who would be against improving the lives of individuals living in such conditions, under such political persecution? Bailey is promoting SeeChange to enhance monitoring practices that are

[138] Ibid., p. 67, italics in original.
[139] Noah Webster. "On the Education of Youth in America," in *Collection of Essays and Fugitiv Writings: on moral, historical, political and literary subjects*, p. 24.

already accepted as social norms, as such lateral or peer-to-peer monitoring has always been a part of any banal social interaction, what Steve Mann (2003) terms as "co-veillance":

> In contemporary networked societies, individuals switch among multiple, partial communities and work teams rather than being embedded in single communities or workgroups…In networked societies, people are more likely to want sousveillance and coveillance, for they lack the protection of the village/community or hierarchical organization. Newly developed technology allows them to surveil the surveillers. In affording all people to be simultaneously master and subject of the gaze, *wearable computing devices offer a new voice in the usually one-sided dialogue of surveillance*. They suggest a way towards a self-empowering sousveillance for people as they traverse their multiple and complex networks.[140]

Bailey takes a similar line of argumentation, maintaining that the interactive digital technologies of SeeChange can create shifting strategies for virtual viewership, self-representation, and anonymity. Moreover, they foster increasingly emancipatory social movements with the goal of social engagement and dialogue which work *against* surveillance paradigms based on corporate monitoring and political exploitation.

If this were the end of the Dream Friday unveiling, and Bailey had presented only the two options—viewing live-streams for a sense of social engagement and for entertainment purposes, or for the dismantling of totalitarian governments by way of global exposure—the average TruYou client would find it difficult to recognize the detrimental potential of SeeChange. But what if the cameras were turned around and placed in public areas where the common citizenry could be discreetly monitored? Surely the audience would take issue with the abrupt loss of privacy, the invasiveness of the Circle by way of such anonymous digital surveillance. This is not the case, however, as Bailey, once again, dexterously weaves a narrative that only highlights the positive possibilities of SeeChange: '"now this doesn't just apply to areas of upheaval. Imagine any city with this kind of coverage. Who would commit a crime knowing they might be watched anytime, anywhere? My friends in the FBI feel this would cut crime rates down by 70, 80 percent in any city where we have real and meaningful saturation."'[141] Such statistics casually bypass the very idea of personal privacy under the mantle of instantaneous national and local security improvements, as Bailey fails to describe exactly what kind of data is taken (who has access and control of the archives) and in what form and for what duration.[142]

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[140] Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman. "Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments," as found in *Surveillance and Society*, no. 3, 2003, pp. 331-55, my italics.

[141] Ibid.

[142] In the event of an actual terrorist attack, as in the San Bernardino shootings on December 2nd, 2015, a recent Pew Poll from February 22nd, 2016, shows the majority of American's siding with the FBI. That is, *51 percent* responded that the terror suspect's iPhone should be unlocked. This is indicative of the overall trend in the American public's opinions and perceptions concerning personal privacy, in that the majority is

The Circle—through the consequent worldwide presence of SeeChange—administers a digital panopticon. This notion of interminable observation was modelled over two hundred years ago by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1798).[143] His original idea was architectural in nature, as a manner in which to construct a building where every occupant/prisoner was under the *impression* that they were being watched at all times. The design is magnificent in its simplicity. A guard is placed at the hub of a spoked wheel. Since those who are living in the spokes do not know when the guard is looking at them, they act as if he always is, due to the fact that he always has the potential to be (Evans, 1982).[144] The occupants of such buildings correspondingly put themselves on good behaviour, conforming to what they think of as the societal and regulatory norm.

The panoptic framework successfully transforms the interactions and communications of individuals in prisons and in asylums, a behavioural alteration that Michel Foucault (1975) took notice of, 'Panopticism is the general principle of a new "political anatomy" whose object and end are not the relations of sovereignty but the relations of discipline.'[145] Foucault made Bentham's notion of panopticon surveillance relevant to thinking about being a citizen of the modern state. For Foucault, the task of the local government is to reduce its need for surveillance by creating a citizenry that is ceaselessly watching and monitoring itself: 'He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject of communication.'[146] Foucault describes this new form of dominant sovereignty as no longer being necessitated by the use of force to segregate and control, but rather through the use of panoptic surveillance. Within this paradigm, 'visibility is a trap,' one set up and maintained by the state (or various prevailing social, political, and cultural dynamisms).[147] The principal effect of the panopticon was to, 'induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.'[148] In order to be successful, power had to be visible, yet unverifiable. That is, the *threat* of surveillance has as much power as *tangible* surveillance in influencing, and thus, controlling, human behaviour.

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now in favour of open data records via digital surveillance. See: "More Support for Justice Department Than for Apple in Dispute Over Unlocking Phone," Pew Research Center U.S. Politics and Policy. Online at: http://www.people-press.org/2016/02/22/more-support-for-justice-department-than-for-apple-in-dispute-over-unlocking-iphone/

[143] Jeremy Bentham. *Proposal for a New and Less Expensive mode of Employing and Reforming Convicts*, (1798), quoted in Evans (1982), p. 195.

[144] Robin Evans. *The Fabrication of Virtue: English prison architecture, 1750–1840*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1982), pp. 193–235.

[145] Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (Vantage Books: New York, 1978), trans. by Alan Sharing, p. 327.

[146] Ibid., p. 320.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid., p. 201.

Bailey uses evidence from "his friends in the FBI" to promote an analogous sociopolitical conceptualization. With SeeChange cameras in most public spaces—and many secluded corners—an individual will not misbehave (let alone act criminally) because of the assumption that s/he is being watched, even in the absence of the concrete knowledge that there is a SeeChange camera on any particular corner. Bailey believes that this chronic indeterminacy produces a citizenry that will always be on its best behaviour. This kind of self-monitoring invokes what Reginald Whitaker (1999) characterizes as the "participatory panopticon."[149] Within such a model, a duality is established: it represents a form of consensual submission to surveillance in part because the watched are also doing the watching—a "group effort" mentality is generated in which the public abides by the illusory notion of peer-to-peer monitoring as normative social conduct. Bailey truly believes that the Circle is improving society, making the world a better place. With SeeChange technologies installed around the earth, Bailey is adamant that the Circle will be capable of positively altering the very political, economic, and cultural nature of the human race. In the next, conclusive, chapter, this thesis considers the manner in which Eggers questions whether or not such panoptic social engineering yields results that can be considered beneficial to the overall wellbeing of the digital global village.

[149] Reginald Whitaker. *The End of Privacy: How Total Surveillance Is Becoming a Reality*, (New Press: New York, 1999).

Chapter 4

Introduction

"Mimesis and enactment, all in parallel": Double-Thinking Mediation

Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.

-George Orwell, *1984*

At the conclusion of the previous chapter, this thesis explored the manner in which Whitaker's "participatory panopticon" systems of reciprocated monitoring rely not only on a climate of generalized skepticism and wariness, but on conceptions of risk that influence social behaviour that is shaped by the perception of a fully functioning digital panopticon. Bailey's aspiration is that the worldwide implementation of SeeChange will not only assist in improving issues relating to local criminal justice and global human rights violations, but that the resulting digital-neoliberalism will encourage more generalized imperatives of a productive work force, personal efficiency, and public wellbeing. Such imperatives, as media scholar Laurie Ouellette (2004) argues, quoting Nikolas Rose, 'transform "the goals of authorities" into the "choices and commitments" of individuals.'[1] For Bailey, this is the exact effect he was anticipating, that the saturation of SeeChange into the private sphere would be accepted as a "choice" made by the majority of the general public, and not the inevitable outcome of the world's most profitable social media corporation exercising its data-mining capabilities.

To some degree, both accounts are accurate. The Circle is simply giving the people what they have requested (what they believe they deserve) by offering SeeChange viewership to the conventional TruYou client, to the extent that entertainment by way of "fifty-thousand viewing options" becomes conflated with the very surveillance tactics Bailey originally described as being necessitated by totalitarian governments quelling political protests in Egypt. The panoptic outcome is twofold: the Circle can easily assist the user in checking the waves and breaks at her local beach, but it can also determine what brand of surfboard the client prefers, what kind of car she owns, and what kind of swimsuit she prefers. In the Circle's social media ecosystem, editorial opinions are equal to objective journalism, advertisements and news broadcasts become interchangeable, theory and empiricism cannot be distinguished, and the crucial differences between quantitative and qualitative methods of knowledge formation and data interpretation become blurred in the

[1] Laurie Ouellette. "'Take Responsibility for Yourself': Judge Judy and the Neoliberal Citizen," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, (NYU Press: New York, 2004), eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, p. 246.

viewer's inherent incapacity to absorb the tremendous amount of information now streamed continuously through SeeChange.

In a similar fashion to the Airborne Toxic Event and its subsequent media coverage and SIMUVAC re-enactments in DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985),[2] the Circle's networked media proficiencies can actually serve to destabilize one's existential bearings rather than reinforce a sense of personal agency. When the actual airborne toxic event happens in the town of Blacksmith, the local government still calls in a SIMUVAC ("simulated evacuation") team. Jack, confused by their presence on the scene, attempts to explain that, '"the evacuation isn't simulated. It's real."'[3] To which one of the SIMUVAC workers responds, '"[they] thought could use it as a model."'[4] The difference between reality and a simulation has collapsed, and it is never truly possible for the reader (or the characters) to know whether they are experiencing one or the other. In the end, for Jack it is inconsequential; if the SIMUVAC team can get his family (and himself) out of harm's way, what is the difference between a simulated evacuation and a real one? For the characters in *White Noise* there is no difference, because in their technologically mediated world, the only way they truly know if something is happening is if they see it on TV or hear about it on the radio. In *The Circle*, an analogous—but now digitally facilitated—existential breakdown occurs by obscuring the lines of causality, instigating a course of epistemological questioning regarding the application of SeeChange viewership: is what I am seeing really happening, and if so, does having real-time witnesses actually *change* anything? Are my personal actions and behaviour also the object of public attention? And if so, who is watching me and why?

The kind of self that emerges is that self of self-surveillance, which responds precisely to Turkle's (2011) premonition concerning the dramaturgical or "performative self" being viewed as the authentic person, rather than an act suitable to one's specific cultural, social, or cyberspatial environment.[5] It also echoes Wallace's (1993) conception of the televisual or "spectatorial self" from "E Unibus Pluram," in which he argues that increasing amounts of mediated—or televisual—experiences have a converse effect on the amount of time an individual spends developing interpersonal relationships.[6] The consequence is a

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[2] Don DeLillo. *White Noise*, (Penguin: 1985).
[3] Ibid., p. 139.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Sherry Turkle. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books: 2012), p. 12.
[6] David Foster Wallace. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2, 1993, Summer Issue, pp. 163-164: Wallace makes connections between TV viewing its sociopsychological impacts on interpersonal communications (an Audience's "teleholic" tendencies). For Joe Briefcase: '…the more time spent watching TV, the less time spent in the real human world, and the less

psychosomatic inversion in which the watcher develops a kind of televisual empathy; s/he *thinks* and *feels* as if s/he is having the very same experience as the individual s/he is watching.

For Wallace, the saturation of the televisual medium throughout the general American populace was ineluctably causing a mass experiential metamorphosis:

> But once television introduces the element of watching, and once it informs an economy and culture like radio never did, the referential stakes go way up. Six hours a day is more time than most people (consciously) do any one thing. How people who absorb such doses understand themselves changes, becomes spectatorial, self-conscious. Because the practice of watching is expansive. Exponential. We spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. We start to "feel" ourselves feeling, yearn to "experience" experiences.[7]

Here, Wallace is marking the distinctions in mediation from the radio entertainment programs of pre-1950s America to the rise of the television as the cultural and economic nexus of an entire Baby Boomer generation (he names this six hours a day viewing as developing a psychology of "metawatching"). We can just as easily extend the "spectatorial self" to contemporary online mediations, such PewDiePie,[8] or the more generalized online trend of "Let's Play" (LP), in which one "experiences" a videogame by watching another individual play through it via YouTube or Twitch. Or, perhaps even more apropos, the "Reaction Video" sensation that has led to recent litigation by Fine Brothers Entertainment.[9] These are only a few examples of Internet-enabled media; today, the fact is that Wallace's six hours a day paradigm has been replaced by a technocultural climate in which the average American individual spends *eleven hours per day*[10] with digital media, with nearly *five hours a day* of such mediation occurring through smartphone usage.[11]

Whereas Wallace was able to cite sources such as *The New York Times* as being indicative of a turgid literary ("lit") cultural response to the potentially damaging nature of the televisual experience, as well as having the critical wingspan to reference television programs that were on air or in syndication for nearly forty years, the modern technocultural

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time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel alienated from real humans, solipsistic, lonely. It's also true that to the extent one begins to view pseudo-relationships with Bud Bundy or Jane Pauley as acceptable alternatives to relationships with real humans, one has commensurately less conscious incentive even to try to connect with real 3D persons, connections that are pretty important to mental health.'

[7] Ibid., p. 160.

[8] PewDiePie's YouTube channel has the most subscribers of all time, hovering around 45 million. His channel also holds the top position for most hits, at close to 10 billion video views.

[9] Alex Hern. "YouTube network's plan to trademark 'react' sparks backlash," *The Guardian*, February 1st, 2016.

[10] Matt Petronzio. "U.S. Adults Spend 11 Hours per Day with Digital Media," *MashableUK*, March 6th, 2014.

[11] Lulu Chang. "Americans Spend an Alarming Amount of Time Checking Social Media on Their Phones," *Digital Trends*, June 13th, 2015.

implementation of digital gadgetry and social media consumption—through the medium of the Internet—has taken less than ten years to develop as the most dominant and profitable corporate entertainment industry on the planet.[12] In this milieu of axiomatic and ubiquitous computation, the web-based environment renders everything through digital mediation, everything is experienced vicariously or via second-hand information, and the ideological result is that the term "meta" loses cultural and artistic currency as the prevalence of the self-referential experience expands and evolves exponentially.

In Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*, the genesis of such technologically magnified self-referentiality is explained by the amateur documentary filmmaker, Reg:

> Ain't like I was ever Alfred Hitchcock or somethin. You can watch my stuff till you're cross-eyed and there'll never be any deeper meaning. I see something interesting, I shoot it is all. Future of film if you want to know—someday, more bandwidth, more video files up on the Internet, everybody'll be shootin everything, way too much to look at, nothing will mean shit. Think of me as the prophet of that.[13]

Pynchon's novel takes place in New York City, in 2001, in the lull between the collapse of the dotcom boom and the terrible events of September 11th. Nearly a decade before the time period of *Bleeding Edge*, Wallace was already intuiting this heightened sense of self-referentiality, Reg's notion of "everybody shootin everything," as generating a suffocating hyper-ironic cultural temperament in which "nothing will mean shit." As early as 1993—long before the advent of social media or the widespread use of the Internet—Wallace was attempting to explain the literary and cultural symptoms of this erasure of meta, as "E Unibus Pluram" scrutinizes the sort of "tech-bred" psychology brought on by television and the introduction of the personal computer.

Wallace hyperbolically replies to the technologically enabled self-referential experience by commenting on George Gilder's (1992)[14] presumption concerning the socioculturally liberating outcomes of the generalized employment of "telecomputation":

> Let's let Joe B., the little guy, be his *own* manipulator of video-bits! Once all experience is finally reduced to marketable image, once the receiving user of user-friendly receivers can choose freely, Americanly, from an Americanly infinite variety of moving images *hardly distinguishable from real-life images*, and can then choose further just how he wishes to store, enhance, edit, recombine, and present those images to himself, in the privacy of his very own home and skull, TV's ironic, totalitarian grip on the American psychic cajones will be broken![15]

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[12] Ari Levy. "Google parent Alphabet passes Apple market cap at the open," *CNBC Technology*, February 2nd, 2016.
[13] Thomas Pynchon. *Bleeding Edge*, (Jonathan Cape: London, 2013), p. 143.
[14] George Gilder. *Life After Television: The Coming Transformation of Media and American Life*, (Norton: New York, 1992).
[15] "E Unibus Pluram," p. 187, my italics.

It is remarkable to discover the similarities between such ideas, even if being presented sardonically, alongside the current usage of YouTube, Facebook, Periscope, and Twitter. The high-definition "video-bits" Wallace is describing, however, are meant for an internal, and therefore personal, viewership, "the privacy of his very own home and skull." His Joe Briefcase is merely allowed more technologically advanced images at a wider variety and scale. This differentiates such interactivity from the sociotechnical climate of the modern era, in which the Audience is defined *not* solely by consuming vis-à-vis a wide array of televisual entertainments, but by a *projection* of one's own self-made "video-bits" into the ether of the Internet and social media networks. The distancing, or layering, the inexorable sense of estrangement of the technologically (inter)mediated experience that one would customarily feel is severed, and in its place a new digital reality materializes in which seeing with one's-own-eyes and seeing on one's-own-screen becomes an interchangeable phenomenon, an experiential tautology: the medium is the medium.

In a possible homage to Murray Jay Siskind from *White Noise*, Pynchon develops the character of Heidi Czornak in *Bleeding Edge*, a professor of pop culture at NYU and adamant blogger. Heidi testifies to the elimination of meta as producing a latent American cultural attitude in which, '"everything has to be literal now,"' a society that interprets simulacrum as normative, where artificiality is taken as unaffected, and satire is no longer revelatory in its ironic exaggeration of topical issues:

> After her Hallowe'en anthro expedition, Heidi has come back a changed person. "Children of all ages enacting the comprehensive pop-cultural moment. Everything collapsed into the single present tense, all in parallel. Mimesis and enactment." Nowhere did she see a perfect copy of anything. Not even people who said, "Oh, I'm just going as myself" were authentic replicas of themselves.
> "It's depressing. I thought Comic-Con was peculiar, but this was Truth. Everything out there just a mouseclick away. Imitation is no longer possible. Hallowe'en is over. I never thought people could get too wised up. What'll happen to us all?"
> "And because you tend to be a blamer…"
> "Oh I blame the fuckin Internet. No Question."[16]

Heidi exclaims that the Internet is responsible for a return to a form of communal and subjective literalness—the very root of realism—yet still insists on the precariousness of individuation and of *reality* itself. As a mass psychology, both cultural and literary, this is consistent with Wallace's contention that postmodern metafiction arose not from a scholarly vacuum, but from the processes of mediation and through metawatching:

> Metafiction, for its time, was nothing more than a poignant hybrid of its theoretical foe, realism: if realism called it like it saw it, metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it. This high-cultural postmodern genre, in other words, was

[16] Ibid., p. 335, p. 374.

> deeply informed by the emergence of television. And American fiction remains informed by TV…especially those strains of fiction with roots in postmodernism, which even at its rebellious zenith was less a "response to" televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV.[17]

Robert McLaughlin (2004) adheres to Wallace's logic by describing a corresponding 'aesthetic sea change,' in which, 'postmodernism's main qualities, irony and self-referentiality, percolated into the culture at large,' only to be, 'claimed by television [as] its dominant mode of operation.'[18] We can name the panoptic development and infiltration of social media and digital technologies in the current epoch as revealing, or "percolating" into, a culture which is *abiding-in-the-Internet*. McLaughlin prefaced that assertion by summarizing—with a striking resemblance in descriptive technique to Wallace's metafictional explanation—the influence of postmodern culture on literature and narrativity: 'Perhaps the best way to think about postmodern self-referentiality is not as a denial of language and literature's connection to the world but as their self-consciously pointing to themselves trying to point to the world.'[19]

Just as television informed the postmodern and metafictional narratives of its time, so does the present diffusion of digital and information technologies inform American culture, and therefore American fiction, today. With this emerging cultural sensibility, postmodern irony loses ground to digital mediation, while self-referentiality evolves as the cardinal existential attitude regarding subjective experience and social relationalities. Hence, a key element of Wallace's argument that does not hold in the current online atmosphere is the "yearning" for real experience, as the majority of the populace is "wised up," aware that "imitation is no longer possible," that "everything is only a mouseclick away." Instead, many sense that the digital encounter is as valid and authentic as having had the experience for oneself.

This concept, condensed down to its very ideological foundation is, for Eggers, truly alarming—even when considering the motivation behind such digital interactions to be humanitarian in nature. For example, Bailey's son, Gunner, was born with cerebral palsy, which leaves him confined to a wheelchair. Eamon views this as yet another opportunity for SeeChange to intervene between the experiencer and the experiencee:

> So what does he do if he wants to experience something…Well, he watches video. He looks at pictures. Much of his experiences of the world come through the experiences of others…When he experiences the SeeChange view of a Circler climbing Mount Kenya, he *feels* like he's climbed Mount Kenya. When he sees firsthand video from an American Cup crew member, Gunner *feels*, in some way, that

[17] "E Unibus Pluram," p. 161.
[18] "Post-Postmodern Discontent," p. 55, p. 63.
[19] Ibid., p. 57.

> he's sailed the America's Cup, too. These experiences were facilitated by generous humans who have shared what they saw with the world, my son included.[20]

This is perhaps Eggers' paramount concern regarding digital and networked media technologies: that one's *real-life* experiences and one's *online* experiences become subjectively and culturally legitimatized as epistemological equivalents. Leading to the straightforward question: why does this ontic transferal of on-screen-to-real-life interest Eggers to the point of writing a nearly five-hundred page novel (the longest of his career) regarding the aftereffects of digital and networked media technologies? The answer can be found when one considers the logical outcomes of a society that amalgamates online and real world experience.

When pressed by Bailey during an onstage unveiling conversation to explain the '"impulse to keep things to [herself],"' Mae responds:

> It was just selfish, Eamon. It was selfish and nothing more…I understand that secrecy is part of, well, an aberrant behavior system. It comes from a bad place, not a place of light and generosity. And when you deprive your friends, or someone like your son Gunner, of experiences like I had, you're basically stealing from them. You're depriving them of something they have a right to. Knowledge is a basic human right. Equal access to all possible human experience is a basic human right…I understand that we're obligated, as humans, to share what we see and know. And that all knowledge must be democratically accessible…We all have a right to know everything we can. We all collectively own the accumulated knowledge of the world.[21]

Mae rearticulates the pragmatism of a society organized around a critical episteme in which informational transparency is understood and enacted as a paradigmatic (and therefore ethically justifiable) cultural process. This philosophy reveals the elemental nature of Eggers' digital forebodings. Because the Circle views knowledge (information) as a "basic human right," and that it alone is offering the tools and technology for worldwide saturation and connection, the succeeding formulae or Digital Social Contract can be deduced: any paucity of information, or any lack of total online translucence is akin to withholding or "stealing" knowledge (experience) from other human beings. This leads to the Circle's most Orwellian motto: PRIVACY IS THEFT.[22]

As Foucault analysed the panoptic world in *Discipline and Punish*, when the state puts cameras on street corners, it is with the intention of people noticing them and

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[20] Ibid., pp. 299-300, my italics.
[21] Ibid., pp. 301-302: Mae's sublime metaphoricity, '"a place of *light* and generosity,"' resonates with Eric Packer's instance that digital technologies are 'smart spaces built on beams of *light*,' (*C*, p. 102), and with JAK Gladney's impression of televisual Babette, 'Once again I began to think Murray might be on to something. Waves and radiation. Something leaked through the mesh. She was shining a *light* on us, she was coming into being…' (*WN*, p. 104).
[22] Ibid., p. 303.

subsequently constructing a self that takes surveillance as an ontological antecedent—simply knowing that the cameras are in existence influences individuals to act properly. However, in the Circle's data regime, the goal is for the general populace to be unaware, or at least to forget in the moment, that such surveillance exists. The corporation is most successful when people are free to "be themselves," and in this way they can provide "natural" data to the system. Zeynep Tufecki (2014) observes that such "natural" digital data is far more accurate than traditional polling and advertising practices:

> Crucially, this type of modeling allows access to psychological characteristics that were beyond the reach of traditional databases, as invasive as those might have been considered…Kosinski, et al. (2013) demonstrated that models based on Facebook likes were as good as scientific scales. In other words, *without asking a single question*, researchers were able to model psychological traits as accurately as a psychologist administering a standardized, validated instrument.[23]

Such notions of identity formation and performativity are easily appropriated and perpetuated within the digital landscape; in our modern, post-Snowden, sociotechnical atmosphere, we are acutely aware that our general online habits—texts and emails, social interactions, commercial purchases (and live-streaming applications)—are conclusively *not* private or confidential (Gellman, et al., 2014).[24] Consequently, we self-mediate our online actions; we psychologically internalize a form of digital censorship without being fully conscious of our own self-editing. In this way, the "freedom" to navigate endless experiential mediations can serve to, following the paradox of Orwell's "doublethink," automate an individual's online behaviour.

At the most basic level of configurational analysis, for the Internet to work as a mass medium, computers are continually sending digital packages and involuntary representations over which a user has little (or no) control; hence, to use the Internet also means to be used. This intrinsic vulnerability leads some Internet scholars, such as Wendy Chun (2006), to observe, 'Online, everybody automatically produces *traces*; every search produces a return address.'[25] In this nearly invisible online feedback loop, Internet users constitute themselves as digital doppelgangers inhabiting an ever-widening and

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[23] Zeynep Tufecki. "Engineering the Public: Big Data, Surveillance, and Computational Politics," *First Monday*, 19, no. 7, 2014, my italics.

[24] Barton Gellman, Julie Tate, and Ashkan Soltani, "In NSA-Intercepted Data, Those Not Targeted Far Outnumbered the Foreigners Who Are," *Washington Post*, July 5th, 2014.
See: a write-up of a cache of intercepted conversations given to the *Washington Post* by Edward Snowden revealed that, '*nine out of ten* account holders…were not the intended targets but were caught in a net the agency had cast for somebody else.'

[25] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*, (MIT Press, Ltd.: 2006), p. 61. It is important to note that this kind of digital vulnerability was recognized by writers and theorists, such as Chun, even before Google's ascension to the top as the most profitable and the most predominant information technology corporation.

progressively intrusive enclosure. Participation in the unremittingly data-gathering web has given Foucault's notion of "self-surveillance" a new modification. Just as Mae Holland ceaselessly responds to marketing queries through the Circle's extant social media technologies, the modern individual willingly and voluntarily provides personal information by reporting his or her preferences online, simply by playing mobile games such as Pokémon Go, by using search engines such as Google, "liking" a post on Facebook, reviewing a hotel on Yelp, or commenting on a YouTube thread.

Our actions online generate a database, and this feed of communicational and transactional information is continually fabricating a digitized version of who we are by keeping track of where we go, what we wear, where we shop, look for a romance, get our news, and much more. One's digital self is constructed through the tracking of our physical fitness, how we keep in touch with friends and family on social media, the movies and television shows that we watch, the artists, authors, and music that we enjoy (Rushkoff, 2016).[26] Rendered digitally legible, such "traces" of personal activities—captured as one's wandering through a city's streets or one's GPS-divined navigation through the arteries and boulevards of suburbia—become manifest as hieroglyphs of consumer desire that, when deciphered correctly, provide information technology companies a comprehensive set of instructions for incentivising consumers at their most impressionable moments.

Therefore, reading such acts of digital surveillance through the lens of Foucault's panopticon—while beneficial to understanding a general hypothesis in regard to systems of power and discipline—must be extended to match our contemporary technocultural experience, as it is not only the "state" which is monitoring, analysing, and quantifying our online actions and activities. To quote Vija Kinski in *Cosmopolis*: '"People in free societies don't have to fear the pathology of the state. We create our own frenzy, our own mass convulsions, driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over. The frenzy is barely noticeable most of the time. It's simply how we live."'[27] In an era of digital surveillance, the expansion of panoptic monitoring relies on the internalized discipline not just of the watched, but also of the watchers, as Kinski's "frenzy" speaks to a self-induced

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[26] Douglas Rushkoff. *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus: How Growth Became the Enemy of Prosperity*, (Portfolio Penguin: 2016), pp. 41-42. See: 'Facebook can derive data from how long your cursor hovers over a particular part of a Web page…*The same sorts of data can be used to predict the probability of almost anything*—from whether or voter is more likely to change political parties to whether an adolescent is likely to change sexual orientation. It has nothing to do with what they say in their emails about politics or sex and everything to do with the seemingly innocuous data. Big data has been shown capable of predicting when a person is about to get the flu based on their changes in messaging frequency, spelling autocorrections, and movement as tracked by GPS' (my italics). Source: Brian Womack. "Google Updates Flu Trends to Improve Accuracy," *Bloomberg Business*, November 1st, 2014.

[27] Ibid., p. 85.

cultural symptomology propagated by the common assumption that such technological constructs are always operating. The general populace must become habituated to a technosphere in which each individual is expected to monitor one another—to deploy surveillance tactics easily and efficiently facilitated by interactive social media technologies—in order to protect themselves and the ones they love and to maximize chances for economic and social success ("it's simply how we live").

As we willingly contribute to this cornucopia of digital material, Turkle (2015) observes that such online behaviour, 'make surveillance and social participation seem like the same thing.'[28] Indeed, to Eamon Bailey and for the majority of Circle employees (and billions of Circle clients) *they are the same thing*:

> "I agree with the Hague, with human rights activists the world over. There needs to be accountability. Tyrants can no longer hide. There needs to be, and will be, documentation and accountability, and we need to bear witness. And to this end, I insist that all that happens should be known."
> The words dropped onto the screen:
> ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN[29]

Bailey prefaces the dissemination of SeeChange on the global scale by insisting on its ability to eliminate crime and injustice. Surely, the move from abolishing human rights violations to the Circle's unceasing data mining—that significant shift in word choice, from "should" to "must"—cannot be viewed with such a blasé attitude, a digitized exegesis indifferent to the consequences of this enormous sociotechnical transformation? For Bailey, however, the Circle's "Internet of Things" (IoT) is a straightforward, interstitial progression from one informational avenue to another (Curran, 2014).[30] Nothing will be forgotten, nothing will be deleted, and everything will be known, all through SeeChange:

> We're at the dawn of the Second Enlightenment…I'm talking about an era where we don't allow the majority of human thought and action and achievement and learning to escape as if from a leaky bucket. We did that once before. It was called the Middle Ages, the Dark Ages. If not for the monks, everything the world had ever learned would have been lost. Well, we live in a similar time, when we're losing the vast majority of what we do and see and learn. But it doesn't have to be that way. Not with these cameras, and not with the mission of the Circle.[31]

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[28] Sherry Turkle. *Reclaiming the Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, (Penguin: New York, 2015), p. 306.
[29] Ibid., p. 67.
[30] Chris Curran. "A Guide to the Internet of Things," *PWC*, July 31st, 2014.
Although the term is never used within the novel, what Bailey and the Circle are proposing in relation to the integration and usage of their information and digital technologies is nearly indistinguishable in ideological design to IoT, that is, a hyper-capitalistic reality in which everyone and everything is connect online, at all times, and for all informational, political, transactional, communicational, and commercial purposes.
[31] Ibid., pp. 67-68.

Bailey's egalitarian aspirations appear to be in the right place. Absent is the concern for the tremendous amount of power that accompanies complete access and knowledge, as Eamon insists that the data would not only be maintained in the solitary proprietorship of the corporation, it will be available to the entirety of the Circle's clientele at no additional monetary expense. This online informational diversification is also emphasized by Eggers in Bailey's participatory language, his continuous use of the inclusive pronoun "we" in place of the possessive "ours" (an often imitated public speaking technique made popular by the late Steve Jobs).

The Circle's archival objective and open-access platform are reminiscent of Google's plan from 2009, in which it argued for the scanning and documenting of all the books publicly available at the world's major libraries (Skidelsky, 2009).[32] The reasoning against such digitization came by way of copyright infringement, fair use, and other related issues as to the legal feasibility of making such documents open-source (Band, 2006).[33] In the end, Google succeeded in not only establishing Google Books, but also in developing Google Scholar, an online resource that is one of the most widely utilized scholarly search engines and databases in all of academia, worldwide (Orduna-Malea, et al., 2014),[34] as well as Google Earth, which employs the same global positioning system technologies and satellites as Google Maps. Nothing seems to be able to stop Google's infiltration into every nook and cranny of the Internet. Their corporate slogan could easily be a variation of the Circle's: all that happens, Google will know.

As the opening Dream Friday unveiling presentation comes to a close, Bailey reveals the speed and scale relating to the implementation of SeeChange into the world markets: '"Now, we're making a million of this model, and my prediction is that within a year we'll have a million accessible live streams. Within five years, fifty million. Within ten years, two billion cameras. There will be very few populated areas that we won't be able to access from the screens in our hands."'[35] Such a rapid saturation of SeeChange is simply not fast enough for the employees of the Circle, as one of the members from the audience yells out, "We want it now!" This technological impatience is partially generated from the hurried tempo in which the Circle has been releasing digital products and services, as the corporation itself is *less than six years old* at this point in the novel. From viewing the

[32] William Skidelsky. "Google's plan for the world's biggest online library: philanthropy or an act of piracy?" *The Guardian*, August 30th, 2009.
[33] Jonathan Band. *The Google Project: Both Sides of the Story*, (University of Michigan Publishing: Ann Arbor, 2006).
[34] Orduña-Malea, E.; Ayllón, J.M.; Martín-Martín, A.; Delgado López-Cózar, E. "About the size of Google Scholar: playing the numbers," Granada: EC3 Working Papers, 18: July 23rd, 2014.
[35] Ibid., pp. 68-69.

pristine beaches of Fiji, to checking the specific location of one's child, Bailey promotes SeeChange as a universal tool to be used in the demystification of the external world, as a "visual surrogate[s]," with the possibility of ushering in an era of, '"ultimate transparency. No filter. See everything. Always."'[36]

In Stewart Brand's *The Media Lab* (1987), the entrepreneur and futurist memorably declared that 'information wants to be free.'[37] Is the Circle simply endorsing this digital imperative for informational sovereignty? Brand's famous motto has an underpinning complexity; as he anticipated, 'information also wants to be *expensive*.' It is effectively impossible to restrict the flow of—and artificially maintain high prices for—data in a world rife with disseminative tools, which, during his time, included tape decks, photocopiers, instant cameras, and the emergence of digital networks.[38] During the 1960s and 1970s, Brand was the founder and editor of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, a counterculture magazine and product directory (most well-known for its reviews) that brought long-haired shoppers a message of conscientious consumption. In the 1980s, Brand became interested in digital networks. He reasoned that, like the products and tools he featured in the *Catalog*, these networks had the potential to empower their users, bridge cultural divides, and transform society.

In the paragraph that immediately succeeds Brand's catchy slogan, the shift from starry-eyed optimism to pragmatic scepticism is palpable:

> Information wants to be free because it has become so cheap to distribute, copy, and recombine—too cheap to meter. It wants to be expensive because it can be immeasurably valuable to the recipient. That tension will not go away. It leads to endless wrenching debate about price, copyright, "intellectual property," and the moral rightness of casual distribution, *because each round of new devices makes the tension worse, not better*.[39]

Brand's informational paradox describes the state in which Mae Holland finds herself as an employee at the Circle (and neatly summarizes the ideologies the last half century's worth of data activism, as my University's current rector, Edward Snowden, can attest).[40] Bailey reflects the anti-establishment, grassroots-driven beginnings of the Internet. Since the earliest days of digital computing, technological idealists have envisioned such machines as the cornerstone of an infinite library that would offer unregulated access to the fruits of human knowledge and creative production. The "library of the future" would be democratic

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[36] Ibid., p. 69.
[37] Stewart Brand. *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT*, (Viking Penguin: New York, 1987), p. 202.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., my italics.
[40] Ewan MacAskill. "Edward Snowden 'humbled' by his Election as University Rector," *The Guardian*, February 18th, 2014.

and free, not financially motivated; it would be intuitively organized and universally accessible; it would be responsive, personalized, and intelligent; it would belong to everyone and benefit everyone.

In Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*, the veteran political activist and editor of the weblog, "Tabloid of the Damned," March Kelleher, speaks to this supposed digital egalitarianism:

> "You know what Susan Sontag always sez."
> "'I like the streak, I'm keeping it'?"
> "If there's a sensibility you really want to talk about, and not just exhibit yourself, you need 'a deep sympathy modified by contempt.'"
> "I get the contempt part, but remind me about the sympathy?"
> "Their idealism," maybe a little reluctantly, "their youth…Maxi, I haven't seen anything like it since the sixties. These kids are out to change the world. 'Information has to be free'—they really mean it. At the same time, here's all these greedy fuckin dotcommers make real-estate developers look like Bambi and Thumper."[41]

Is Bailey's SeeChange making this dream of an Internet-enabled, autodidactic utopia a reality? Is the Circle, as March would confirm, a replication of the political and economic romanticism of the sixties in America, a digitized Baby Boomer generation? Or, is there a hidden agenda in the Circle's munificent, "no filter" informational strategy? In the following chapter, I will more thoroughly explore these questions through Mae's personal acclimatization—and ascension—in the Circle's corporate culture.

4.1 *From POMO to FOMO: An Aggregation of Responses*

True freedom comes from being unknown**.**

-Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*[42]

Two billion cameras rendering every populated locality of the planet in video and sound, recorded for perpetuity: the Circle promises to encompass the very world itself within its digital palisade. Bailey does not mention that it would be fundamentally impossible for a single human being to view this data. Due to restrictions in attention span and recreational time—and the human brains inherent incapacity to process such tremendous amounts of information—one would have to choose, of course, which live-streams to watch, offering an endless array of interruptions, entertainments, and diversions. From its very origin, broadcast media has been an inherently collective phenomenon, even if that collectivity has been transposed to a variety of channels, such as the Internet and virtual/cyberspatial environments. Walter Benjamin (1939) associates a similar ideology of technologically

[41] Ibid., p. 116.
[42] *A Tale for the Time Being*, (Canongate Books, Ltd: Edinburgh, 2013).

enabled distraction to the origin of the mass audience, one which becomes converted into a body of social critics, and this theory guides him to one of his most famous assertions: 'the audience is an examiner, but a distracted one.'[43] As Ben Highmore (2011) contends: 'For Benjamin the age of technological entertainments has brought about a *sea-change in perception*: in a previous age, cultish and auratic art demanded concentrated and sacral attention; in the modern age a much more agile and less reverential reception is appropriate.'[44] One does not have to scroll far in the comment section of a YouTube video or Periscope livestream to discover just how little reverence the vox populi maintains in contemporary online ecologies.

Ultimately, the kind of attention necessitated is dependent upon on the direction and locus of enthrallment. As Benjamin (1939) explains, 'Distraction and concentration form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it…By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide.'[45] If the traditional artwork required total immersion by the onlooker, then the objects in Benjamin's culture of distraction are—more typically—absorbed into the concerns of the mass audience. One can see examples of this in modern society with the numerous online platforms for consumer and fan reviews: From Amazon's five-star rating system to Rotten Tomatoes in-theater audience score "Tomatometer," from Goodreads' book criticisms to Metacritic's ten-point aggregate scaling format on music, television, film, and video games. Ordinary consumers are no longer wholly swayed by an established hierarchy of predilection, but evaluate culture according to the concerns, needs, and tastes of other non-experts. As discussed in chapter two, Benjamin's (1939) larger aspiration was that distraction (or *Zerstreuug*) by way of apperception would transform the receptive lexicon of culture, and thus would inaugurate an audience more critically active.[46] Once the paradigm of a culture of distraction has been established, however, does mass evaluation by way of digitized individuation become the equivalent of a more dialectically stimulated social criticism?

Benjamin's contemporary and philosophical sparring partner, Theodor Adorno (1999 [1936]), addresses this (and more). His response to "The Work of Art" essay was disparaging —bordering on contemptuous—accusing Benjamin of an 'anarchistic

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[43] Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," found in *Selected Writings: Volume 3, 1935-1938*, 2nd version, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 101-33.
[44] Ben Highmore. *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, (Routledge: London & New York, 2011), p. 122, my italics.
[45] "The Work of Art," pp. 119-120.
[46] Ibid., my italics.: 'For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—*through habit*.'

romanticism,' a political outlook far too Brechtian, which lacked the indispensable quintessence of persistent dialectical investigation:

> I am very doubtful of the expertise of the newspaper boy in discussing sport, and in spite of its startling seductiveness, I cannot find your theory of "distraction" at all convincing—if only for the simple reason that in a communist society, work would be organized in such a way that human beings would no longer be so exhausted or so stupefied as to require such distraction.[47]

I would argue that Adorno severely underestimates the degree of exhaustion and stupefaction of which humanity is capable. His communist utopia, one in which boredom itself would be eliminated, is an ever elusive dream, a fantasyland made impossible by human nature. Once an individual cultivates habits, becomes *habituated*, or acclimated to an experience, s/he almost immediately craves nascent phenomenological and psychosomatic stimuli.[48]

Yet, Adorno's dismissive account of the culture of distraction as founding a more critically active populace was not necessarily wrong. Today, the kind of onslaught of "distractions" that the culture of digitization presents is far more embedded in the general social fabric than the variety of "distractions" mentioned in Benjamin's writings in the late 1930s. The assumption that cultural digitization has led to enhanced social critique is a dubious postulation, one that some social theorists, such as Andrew Keen (2007), view as harmful rather than beneficial to a society's existential configuration. Keen establishes his position by asking a logically inferential question: if anyone and everyone can contribute to the cultural output without being continually authenticated or edited, how is it then possible to assess the validity and relevance of the individual statement? In his book *The Cult of the Amateur*, Keen condemns both the loss of dependable expertise and a kind of 'digital narcissism,' which he sees abetted by an alleged 'democratization [of] media, information, knowledge, content, audience, author,' through the participatory epistemology of the Web 2.0.[49] Keen uncovers 'the noble abstraction behind the digital revolution [as] that of the *noble amateur*,' in a technoculture where 'the crowd has become the authority on what is true and what is not.'[50]

In chapter two, this thesis explored the technological determinism of the digital media theorist Kevin Kelly. Here, Keen's "noble amateur" appears to speak in direct

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[47] Henri Lonitz. *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1999), March 1936, p. 130.
[48] As Camus once observed, 'The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits.' Or, as Palahniuk questions in his novel *Survivor* (1999): 'Did perpetual happiness in the Garden of Eden maybe get so boring that eating the apple was justified?'
[49] Andrew Keen. *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy*, (Nicholas Brealey Publishing: 2007), p. ix, p. 14.
[50] Ibid., p. 35, p. 92, italics in original.

opposition to that of Kelly (2006)—his celebration of the supposed impartiality and ready availability of knowledge within the technium, which he initially describes as a 'single liquid fabric of interconnected words and ideas' that he argues as embedded in the very framework of the Web 2.0.[51] In discussing Google's plan to assemble and scan a universal library from all print books, Kelly adopts an optimistic outlook as to the economic consequences of this digitized system of reproduced (and endlessly reproducible) cultural content: 'in a regime of superabundant free copies, copies lose value.'[52] Information, data, and knowledge itself can thus no longer be regarded as commodities or as the currency of Bourdieu's famous *capital culturel* (Nash, 1990).[53] In its place, Kelly foresees a cultural environment which is fundamentally based on contribution and consumption, in that 'relationships, links, connections and sharing' act as 'the basis of wealth' and whereby the 'deep structuring of knowledge comes a new culture of interaction and participation.'[54]

For theorists such as Keen, this is quixotic digital thinking. He views the reality of Web 2.0's social media enabled interaction as characterized predominantly by the triumph of superficiality over essence and an ever increasing egocentricity. Keen's derogatory terminology is reminiscent of Jaron Lanier's (2010) lament over the loss of a genuine self in the realm of the Web 2.0:

> This ideology promotes radical freedom on the surface of the web, but that freedom, ironically, is more for machines than people. Nevertheless, it is sometimes referred to as "open culture." Anonymous blog comments, vapid video pranks, and lightweight mashups may seem trivial and harmless, but as a whole, this widespread practice of fragmentary, impersonal communication has demeaned interpersonal interaction. Communication is now often experienced as a superhuman phenomenon that towers above individuals. A new generation has come of age with a reduced expectation of what a person can be, and of who each person might become.[55]

Keen (2007) proclaims that 'one chilling reality in this brave new digital epoch is the blurring, obfuscation, and even disappearance of truth,' as 'our knowledge—about everything from politics, to current affairs, to literature, to science—is being shaped by nothing but the *aggregation of responses*.'[56] As both Lanier and Keen testify, by some

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[51] Kevin Kelly. "Scan this Book!" *New York Times*, May 14th, 2006.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Roy Nash. "Bourdieu on Education and Social and Cultural Reproduction," as found in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 1990, pp. 431-447. See p. 432: 'The concept of capital applied to such resources enables Bourdieu to explore a potent property of capital, its property of conversion and reconversion…Bourdieu suggests, only semi-metaphorically, all forms of capital are subject to conversion, real capital to cultural capital, cultural capital to social capital, and so on.'
[54] "Scan this Book!"
[55] Jaron Lanier. *You are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (Knopf: New York, 2010), from "Fragments Are Not People." See: 'Something started to go wrong with the digital revolution around the turn of the twenty-first century. The World Wide Web was flooded by a torrent of petty designs sometimes called Web 2.0.'
[56] *The Cult of the Amateur*, p. 16, p. 93, my italics.

extraordinary mass delusion, Web 2.0 enthusiasts have collectively confused the inessential with the elemental, or (as DeLillo would phrase it) the noise with the signal.

Lanier's and Keen's disputations are affirmed by Eggers during a conversation between Mae and Mercer on the effects of digital media as the main conduit for social interaction and cultural exchange:

> [All] this stuff you're involved in, it's all gossip. It's people talking to each other behind their backs. That's the vast majority of this social media, all these reviews, all these comments. Your tools have elevated gossip, hearsay, and conjecture to the level of valid, mainstream communication. And besides that, it's fucking dorky. But now…it's everyone, and it seems to me sometimes that I've entered some inverted zone, some *mirror* world where the dorkiest shit in the world is completely dominant. The world has dorkified itself.[57]

Keen does not interpret the situation so lightly, as only a surface level "gossiping" or "dorkification" of one's subjective digital experience. He condemns the very dialogical nature of the "open culture" participatory endeavour as a mere chimera, and asserts that the possibility for everyone to express themselves about anything—ceaselessly and continuously—will only lead to a digitally enhanced form of self-centredness. This amplified self-reflexivity prevents any real dialectically fuelled interaction with dissenting voices and opinions because of a demarcation in one's communicative horizon, a disposition in which, 'the only conversations we want to hear are those with ourselves and those like us.'[58] For Keen (2012), then, the illusory nature of participation that social networks and digitized interactivity generates is nothing more than a process of solipsistic ossification, rather than an avenue to an endless supply of epistemological evolutions and reorientations.[59]

The Circle, like Kelly, is confident in the plasticity of the digital mind, certain that the subsequent "culture of interaction and participation" will adapt and flourish exponentially as more and more people gain access to the "single liquid fabric of interconnected words and ideas" that (they promote) as the Internet. For Bailey, the result of the implementation of SeeChange, instead of automating and cropping one's tastes and

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[57] Ibid., pp. 132-33.: I have italicized the word "mirror" as it can be located repeatedly in *The Circle*, and is used by several characters as a metaphor to describe the coinciding accuracy and inaccuracy of one's digital reflection/representation.

[58] *The Cult of the Amateur*, p. 55.

[59] Andrew Keen. *Digital Vertigo: How Today's Online Social Revolution is Dividing, Diminishing, and Disorienting Us*, (Constable: London, 2012). Keen's opinions on the "digital age" have not softened over time. During an interview with Nick Bilton in 2012, in which he was discussing the recent release *Digital Vertigo*, Keen was asked to summarize his current line of thought on the topic: "we are being seduced by a new cult in Silicon Valley: the cult of social media. We are told we should reveal ourselves more and more on the network. While we do this, as we sign up for more services…we share more and are entering a painful solitude." From: Nick Bilton. "One on One: Andrew Keen, Author of 'Digital Vertigo,'" *The New York Times*, May 22nd, 2012.

desires, one's intellectual temperament and intercultural exchanges, will foster a society of informational "clarity" and "understanding." Eamon uncovers in the ever-accelerating rhythms of scientific and technological discovery a new and improved vocabulary for understanding what is happening to subjectivity, perception, and memory, as they are rapidly processed through the Circle's digital matrix.

At the conclusion of this opening Dream Friday unveiling, the final words spoken by Eamon Bailey are a testament to the radical apotheosizing of the commonplace technological experience that the Circle wishes to shepherd into existence, and are issued to "thunderous" standing applause from the audience: '"We will become all-seeing, all-knowing."'[60] Omnipresence, a transcendental characteristic normally attributed to the deities, has been exchanged with the collection of routine happenings of the cyberspatial experience. Previously held postmodern ideologies regarding knowledge formation—including the doubt, skepticism, and disjointedness, the very dissolution of the metanarrative and the corresponding death of referentiality—lose phenomenological relevance in a world absent of uncertainties. Therefore, the communicative paradigm that has ensued in a *post*-postmodern society can be described thusly: to know, or to be known, one has to simply go online.

This thesis has explored how postmodern achievements can lead to ethical bankruptcy (irony, solipsism, the impotency of language, and the lack of metanarratives). The societal inclusion offered by the Internet reenergizes a postmodern ideological ecology viewed as dying from its own lack of meaning, and, simultaneously, encourages the user to maintain an uninterrupted online presence. This shift from a culture of anonymity is pervasive wherever interactive digital technologies are present. Eric Schmidt (2014), the executive chairman of Google, when asked to comment on the kind of data mining that the corporation is capable of, said, "The way to deal is to just be good."[61] But what does it mean, exactly, to "be good?" This Google-inspired ethicality can potentially develop an individual who feels perpetually guilty—which is a direct consequence of unbroken surveillance—resulting in a sense of constant self-incrimination, a distinct impression of paranoia coupled with an ever deepening digital eschatology. As Sigmund Freud (1963) observed, 'the paranoiac builds [the world] again, not more splendid, it is true, but at least

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[60] Ibid., p. 70.

[61] The Fletcher School, "Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen on 'The New Digital Age,'" available via YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYGzB7uveh0.
The earliest and perhaps most cited example of this sentiment was voiced by Scott McNealy, onetime CEO of Sun Microsystems, when he reportedly said at a press event for a launch of its Jini technology in 1999, "*You have zero privacy anyway*. Get over it." See: "On the Record: Scott McNealy," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 14th, 2003.

so that he can once more live in it,' the inmate/citizen/worker is called to rebuild their own interior world. If the paranoiac 'builds [their world] up by the work of [their] delusion,' the inmate/citizen/worker rebuilds their world by the work of the delusion of constant surveillance. As with the paranoiac, 'the delusion-formation, which we take to be a pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction.'[62] In this way, the very process of psychological rehabilitation becomes an inherently *paranoid* reconstruction.

Such technological anxiety is represented fictionally as a premonitory cultural symptom as early as 1978, by the character Earl Mudger in DeLillo's *Running Dog*:

> When technology reaches a certain level, people begin to feel like criminals. Someone is after you, the computers maybe, the machine-police. You can't escape investigation. The facts about you and your whole existence have been collected or are being collected. Banks, insurance companies, credit organizations, tax examiners, passport offices, reporting services, police agencies, intelligence gatherers…Devices make us pliant. If *they* issue a print-out saying we're guilty, then we're guilty. But it goes even deeper, doesn't it? It's the presence alone, the very fact, the superabundance of technology, that makes us feel we're committing crimes. Just the fact that these things exist at this widespread level, [it's] enough to make us feel like criminals. What enormous weight. What complex programs. And there's no one to explain it to us.[63]

DeLillo may have, at the time of the novel's publication, been accused of a kind of technophobia, one closely aligned with the sort Jack Gladney experiences in *White Noise* (1985). The "enormous weight," the feeling of epistemological confusion and vagueness that arrives in having "no one to explain it to us" has given way in the modern social and political situation to strange kind of acceptance of perpetual telecommunication surveillance, a digital alteration resulting in a technocultural pliancy that even Earl Mudger could not have anticipated.[64]

Today, if one desires an explanation of the kind that arrives from the same informational content that the "machine-police" and the "intelligence gatherers" have access to, one simply has to ask Siri or speak the words "Ok, Google" and voilà, the answers will be provided by a virtual/personal assistant. As Casserly (2014) explains:

> Google Now monitors your internet search history, location, and general usage habits to collate a profile that allows it to suggest things that might be helpful. It can be incredibly useful, but some people find it a little unnerving that their devices are paying such close attention to their activity. There is the option to disable access to

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[62] Sigmund Freud. "Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia [Dementia Paranoides])" as found in *Three Case Histories*, (Collier Books: New York, 1963), p. 147.
[63] Don DeLillo. *Running Dog*, (Knopf: 1978), p. 93, italics in original.
[64] One Amdocs survey reports that *only 35 percent* of eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds say they are concerned or interested in privacy issues in regards to their mobile communications, with those in the over-forty demographic only showing slightly greater interest. See: "Can Data Become a New Currency?" *Amdocs Survey*, 2013. Available online at: http://www.amdocs.com/vision/documents/survey-highlights.pdf

> much of this data if you want more privacy, *but this substantially reduces the capabilities of the service*.[65]

This is also referred to as the "Google It" tendency of knowledge formation, a rupturing of the paradigmatic existentialist philosophy in that Google has replaced religion as the source of not only information, but of unequivocal veracity, offering a digital reunification of a cultural and ideological divergences (Bonnell, 2012).[66]

As Turkle (2015) has maintained, users would rather participate than be excluded, a plausible rationalization that renders online engagement as a higher personal, social, and economic priority than online privacy or security concerns. The mainstream clientele would rather abandon seemingly Luddite notions of personal privacy in order to preserve relevancy and a sense of identity in a world seemingly driven by digitized communications:

> One reason we avoid conversations about online privacy is that we feel on shaky moral ground. If you complain that Google is keeping your data forever and this doesn't seem right, you are told that when you opened your Google account, you agreed to terms that gave Google the right to do just this. And to read the content of your mail. And to build a digital double. And to sell its contents. Since you didn't actually read the terms of agreement, you begin the conversation disempowered. It seems that by agreeing to be a consumer you gave away rights that you might want to claim as a citizen.[67]

When pressed further on the specifics regarding Google's unique data access, Schmidt's (2014) position was simply, "if you don't like it, don't use it."[68] The ostensible problem is that the average individual in social, consumerist, and professional online ecologies will find it difficult to locate the option to defer. Usage of applications and digital services from corporations such as Google, Microsoft, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Apple have made it almost impossible for the average individual to engage in any sort of online interaction without the assistance of their informational and communicative arrangements. Therefore, the manifestation of a "digital double" appears to be the inevitable result of one's usage of any Internet-enabled digital gadgetry, from smartphones and laptops to gaming consoles and wearables.

It is arguable that Turkle's notion of digital vulnerability and disempowerment is overstated, or, more accurately, the spotlight of her scholarly attention needs to be broadened in order to avoid confirmation bias. The kind of paranoia engendered by our contemporary technocultural condition can no longer be associated with the analog

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[65] Matt Casserly. "How Siri, Cortana, and Google Now are replacing our brains," *PC Advisor*, July 11th, 2014, my italics.
[66] See Billy Bonnell (2012), minutes 1:28-3:05 (one of a myriad American stand-up routines on the subject): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoVxOLew_cU
[67] *Reclaiming the Conversation*, p. 327.
[68] "The New Digital Age"

diagnosis, i.e., a psychology of scrutinization, of being "under investigation," of our online actions being continually watched, monitored, and monetized by the ever-present phantasmic figure that lingers in the imagination of postmodern scepticism. The current brand of paranoia arrives not from a fear of disempowerment or invasive corporate surveillance, rather, it is a fear that one might be missing out, that any instant, even a moment of uncoupling or being offline, can result in losing one's existential bearings (Konnikova, 2013).[69] This disconnection anxiety is mirrored in the stream of consciousness of Alan Clay in *A Hologram for the King*: 'this is the peculiar problem of constant connectivity: any silence of more than a few hours provokes apocalyptic thoughts.'[70]

Mae Holland suffers from these "apocalyptic thoughts" repeatedly (and at an ever-quickening rate) throughout *The Circle*; she describes it as a psychosomatic sensation, a 'wave of despair gathering in her chest,' a 'black rip,' 'this loud tear.'[71] These anxieties are illustrated in an epiphanic interior soliloquy, as Mae begins to comprehend the provoking cognitive mechanisms behind her nascent digitized epistemology:

> It occurred to her, in a moment of sudden clarity, that what had always caused her anxiety, or stress, or worry, was not any one force, nothing independent and external—it wasn't danger to herself or the constant calamity of other people and their problems. It was internal: it was subjective: it was *not knowing*. It wasn't that she had an argument with a friend or was called on the carpet by Josiah and Denise: it was not knowing what it meant, not knowing their plans, not knowing the consequences, the future. If she knew these, there would be calm.[72]

In this prenominate moment, we witness Mae's subjective internalization of the Circle's mantra: ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN. It is also symptomatic of a greater psychic transformation, one indicative of an underlying computational shift in the past-present-future temporal paradigm discussed by Vija Kinski in *Cosmopolis*: '"Computer power eliminates doubt. All doubt rises from past experience. But the past is disappearing. We used to know the past but not the future. This is changing."'[73] Of course, for Mae to eliminate the "not known" elements of her life, she has to stay constantly connected within the confines of the Circle's digital arena, which essentially means she has to crop her social exposure and interpersonal communications.

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[69] Maria Konnikova. "Why Facebook Makes Us Unhappy," *The New Yorker*, September 10th, 2013. See also: Kross, et al., "Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-Being in Young Adults," *PlosOne*, August 14th, 2013. From journal abstract: "On the surface, Facebook provides an invaluable resource for fulfilling the basic human need for social connection. Rather than enhancing well-being, however, [our] findings suggest that Facebook may *undermine* it."
[70] Ibid., p. 217.
[71] Ibid., pp. 195-96.
[72] Ibid., p. 194, italics in original.
[73] Ibid., p. 86.

The irony of living a digitally abridged social experience is not recognized by Mae, who believes that the Circle, as the most technologically advanced and widely resourced social media corporation on the planet, not only connects her to friends, family, and co-workers, but to the very world itself. In this way, people and culture become concentrated forms of bits and datum from which Mae hopes to establish real "connections," thus proving her involvement in the "community." This is psychologically suggestive of Kinski's theorizing concerning the power of digital and computational technologies to cause a temporal dislocation: if Mae can stay informationally present—if she can ascertain the history, movement, direction, and velocity of every single individual in the Circle's social media network—then she can effectively foresee future events, and thus, purge the "unknown" elements of her life.[74]

4.2 *"We Don't Delete Here": The Circle's Networked Ethics*

> And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual.
>
> -John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

Importantly, the first instance of Mae's psychological reconditioning arrives immediately following a quasi-disciplinary meeting with Josiah and Denise, two staff members in Human Resources who act as quality control for the Circle's employees and their peer-to-peer social media involvement. They have judged that Mae is not '"meshing with the community"' to the expected Circle standards, learning that Mae went kayaking over the weekend without employing any digital documentation or social media tools. Josiah's reprimand has an acute effect on Mae's understanding of her disconnected behaviour.[75] Upon learning that Mae had used a *paper* pamphlet to learn about the wildlife and birds she might see while kayaking, Josiah responds:

> …my problem with paper is that all communication dies with it. It holds no possibility of continuity. You look at your paper brochure, and that's where it ends. It ends with *you*. Like you're the only one who matters. But think if you'd been *doc*umenting. If you'd been using a tool that would help confirm the identity of whatever birds you saw, then anyone can benefit—naturalists, students, historians, the Coast Guard. Everyone can know, then, what birds were on the bay on that day. It's just maddening, thinking of how much knowledge is lost every day through this kind of shortsightedness. And I don't want to call it selfish but—[76]

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[74] Mae is following Eric Packer's desire for the fusing of digital technologies with one's intellectual abilities, allowing for complete knowledge of not only the past and present, but also of the future.
[75] Ibid., pp. 180-82.
[76] Ibid., pp. 186-87, italics in original.

Mae acquiesces to Josiah's accusation of selfishness, '"No. It was. I know it was."' This realization prompts Mae to hurriedly correct her lack of community involvement by pulling an all-nighter in order to increase the figures and stats of her various profile pages and social media feeds.[77]

Her recently acquired ambitions, to "know everything" and climb the corporate ladder by improving her PartiRank numbers (discussed in section 4.3), incites her to exploit every single available socially-networked opportunity, but such action inevitably diminishes her ability to categorize and articulate the communal *value* of such online participation. In her fevered rush to rectify her "selfishness" (lack of engagement on the Circle's social network), Mae blindly manifests the very anxiety of uncertainty which kayaking alone was initially used to alleviate. This immersion alienates her from established relationships *outside* of the Circle's digital systems. Furthermore, studies have shown that when social media users passively follow the photos and postings of other people—as opposed to actively writing and posting their own—they tend to experience heightened emotions of envy, dissociation, and feelings of loneliness (Tandoc, et al, 2015).[78] Meaning, the more Mae engages with social media, the more continuous involvement becomes a necessity to stave off such feelings of estrangement and isolation.

There are two additional kayaking scenes in the novel, each thoughtfully written by Eggers to match Mae's ascendance in the corporation, each reflecting Mae's shifting digital psychology. Mae's existential grievance, "it was internal: it was subjective: it was *not knowing*," finds its correlate in Mae's opening kayaking trip, the very first time she leaves the Circle's main campus. Here, the language used by Eggers to describe Mae's future sensations of *not knowing* is reversed, and as she paddles along the vast San Francisco Bay; the natural world and all its complexities are no longer seen as an emotional or epistemological affront, but as a self-therapeutic avenue to peace, to a sense of tranquillity:

> There were leopard sharks in this part of the bay, and bat rays, and jellyfish, and the occasional harbour porpoise, but she could see none of them. They were hidden in the dark water, in their black parallel world, and knowing they were there, but not knowing where, or really anything else, felt, at that moment, strangely right…She thought about moving, but saw no point. There seemed no reason to go anywhere. Being here, in the middle of the bay, nothing to do or see, was plenty…Occasionally she would smell that dog-and-tuna smell again, and turn to find another curious seal, and they would watch each other, and she would wonder if the seal knew, as she did, how good this was, how lucky they were to have all this to themselves.[79]

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[77] Ibid., pp. 190-96.
[78] Edson C. Tandoc Jr., Patrick Ferrucci, Margaret Duffy. "Facebook use, envy, and depression among college students: Is facebooking depressing?" *Computers and Human Behavior*, Vol. 43, February 2015, pp. 139-146.
[79] Ibid., p. 83.

Eggers utilizes these adjacent kayaking scenes to play against the Circle's notion of transparency via their social media networks. Privacy, solitude, inactivity, keeping experiences to oneself, hidden from public awareness—the very actions Josiah previously qualified as "being selfish"—are presented here as beneficial to one's psychological and spiritual wellbeing. Mae's feelings of anxiety, stress, and dread are aestheticized, replaced by a sense of the sublime, of awe, of equanimity, of an appreciation of the beauty to be found in the eternal mysteries of the natural world.

In *The Circle*, much of Eggers' most powerful and moving writing occurs within these three kayaking scenes. Most vitally, they afford Eggers the opportunity to present his counter-thesis to Bailey's notion of SeeChange and TruYou, of social media and networked digital technologies in general, that *mystery* is the natural order of the universe. Eggers implies that it is the responsibility of the author to (paradoxically) attempt to describe the eternal mystery. Which is to say that narratives invite the unknown, taking us to the very edge of rationality and logic in order to discover new epistemological and ontological territories, new forms of knowledge concerning the natural world, of other people, and, most significantly, of ourselves. DeLillo's Airborne Toxic Event, the Circle's ubiquitous digital technologies, Melville's white whale, Saul Bellow's Augie March, McCarthy's Judge Holden, Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim: all of these stories and characterizations are distinguished by a strange mixture of the revelatory and the inexplicable. As DeLillo (1982) claims, "The writer is driven by his conviction that some truths aren't arrived at so easily, that life is still full of mystery,"[80] and as the narrator of *Moby Dick* cryptically declares, 'It is not down on any map. True places never are.'[81] The literary theorist, Alan Liu (2008), in examining the epiphanic possibilities located within this kind of existential incomprehensibility in a postindustrial (information-intensive) age defines such narratives as articulating 'the ethos of the unknown' which he finds expressed in selected novels and works of art as a 'data pour,' a teeming and irrepressible excess that he links with notions of transcendence.[82]

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[80] Thomas LeClair. "An Interview with Don DeLillo," from *Contemporary Literature,* 1982, p. 29.
[81] Herman Melville. *Moby Dick,* (Wordsworth Classics: 1993 [1851]), p. 79.
[82] Alan Liu. *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database,* (University of Chicago Press: 2008), p. 81. See, pp. 220-221: 'Behold, then: there is now a great blind spot on the page that authors, artists, and designers of the interface no longer directly control but can only parameterize…In an earlier time, this blind spot through which data floods from transcendental sources might have been called *the sublime.*'

In the final paragraph of Cormac McCarthy's 2007 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road*, the narrator reiterates this sentiment, recalling a milieu of the sylvan habitat and wildlife comparable to the kayaking scenes in *The Circle*:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.[83]

Much of McCarthy's writing focuses on the enigmatic, the inscrutability of people and of the natural world, the ever-humming reverberations of its immemorial signs and edifices. Such humming is unacceptable to Bailey and contrary to the Circle's very existence. This is demonstrated when Annie, as a member of the Circle's famed "Gang of 40"—perhaps Eggers' fictional appropriation of the Chinese Communist Party's "Gang of Four"—reminds Mae that, '"We don't delete here,"' that Bailey would "weep" if, '"anyone even considers the deleting of any information."'[84] As the novel progresses, the penetrating yet fulfilling sense of mystery, sublimity, and transcendence that Mae undergoes during her kayaking expeditions loses ground to the Circle's mission, which does not allow mystery to exist.

Mae's kayaking trips are momentary aberrations, as she always returns to the Circle and her new normal—digitally nonstop—work routine. For the majority of characters in *The Circle* (even the individuals who deliberately attempt to live in isolation)—the very notion of disconnection is unrealistic due to the company's monopolization of not only the social media marketplace but effectively all global telecommunication and digital economies. In many respects, fact has already preceded this fiction, as the personal liberties of a life free of digital surveillance in contemporary culture has been sacrificed to globalization and Web 3.0 advancements. And as interconnectedness and surveillance become conflated, it appears that many are unconcerned with this potentially asymmetrical loss of privacy (Dimock, 2013).[85]

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[83] Cormac McCarthy. *The Road*, (Knopf: 2006), pp. 286-287.

[84] Ibid., p. 204.

[85] "Majority Views NSA Phone Tracking as Acceptable Anti-Terror Tactic," *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, June 10th, 2013.
There are *specific* kinds of digital surveillance that the majority of Internet users still find to be upsetting. If it is third-party online vendors buying information via web browsing history or detailed email/text messaging from corporations such as Facebook, Twitter, or Google, the average user is unperturbed by such surveillance. However, when the issue of online privacy is brought up in relation to the *government*, the responses fluctuate from apathetic to a sense of intrusiveness. The particular question that triggered the change in attitude is: "Do you think the government should be able to monitor everyone's email and other

One explanation for such apathy is that companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter do an incredible job of fostering the impression that their digital devices and services are interactive, participatory, and altruistic, and come with no hidden costs in regards to either the social capital or one's respective financial or existential condition. A norm of perceived reciprocity is established in which users are able to access, control, and manage not only their personal data and online presence, but they are able to view *others* as well, at any time and from any location. Andrejevic (2007) expands upon this surveillance-based rationalism:

> The participatory injunction of the interactive revolution extends monitoring techniques from the cloistered offices of the Pentagon to the everyday spaces of our homes and offices, from law enforcement and espionage to dating, parenting, and social life. In an era in which everyone is to be considered potentially suspect, we are invited to become spies—for our own good.[86]

Bailey is correspondingly successful in his initial Dream Friday unveiling in that he compels Mae (and his viewing audience) to believe SeeChange will give not only the Circle omnipresence, but *everyone*; he promises that the power and control of such an expansive, all-inclusive archive will be broadcasted and distributed equally among the masses of the corporation's clientele (which is to say, the majority of the world's population). The Circle's panoptic justification is distilled into a single rhetorical question posed by Eamon at the end of Book I: *when is a secret a good thing*?[87] With this understanding, the majority of the characters in this novel deliberately participate in the spectacle of their own technological manipulation in the name of personal and collective empowerment.

This sense of prospective digital emancipation is reflected in the epigraph of the novel, as *The Circle* opens with a passage from Steinbeck's *East of Eden*: 'There wasn't any limit, no boundary at all, to the future. And it would be so a man wouldn't have room to store his happiness.'[88] This quotation, although used as an ironic setup for the overall thematic agenda of the novel, can be better understood if one looks to its preceding paragraph.

> "I want it built strong," [Adam Trask] directed over and over, "nothing to rust and rot." […] He was not alone in his preoccupation with the future. The whole valley, the whole West was that way. It was a time when the past had lost its sweetness and its sap. You'd go a good long road before you'd find a man, and he very old, who wished to bring back a golden past. Men were notched and comfortable in the present, hard and unfruitful as it was, but only as a doorstep into a fantastic future. Rarely did two men meet…that the valley's future, paralyzing in its grandeur, did not come up,

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online activities if officials say this might prevent future terrorist attacks?" With 52 percent of respondents saying they were against the practice.

[86] *iSpy: Surveillance and Power*, p. 240.

[87] Ibid., p. 281.

[88] Ibid., p. 49.

> not as conjecture but as a certainty. "It'll be—who knows? maybe in our lifetime," they said. […] And people found happiness in the future according to their present lack.[89]

In *The Circle*, Steinbeck's Salinas Valley is replaced by Eggers' Silicon Valley. Whereas a hundred years ago the hope for the region was agricultural and industrial in nature, today it is the geographical location for the world's foremost social media and information technology corporations. Eggers reproduces Adam Trask's optimism, "a doorstep to the fantastic future," with the digital aspirations of Eamon Bailey and the Circle ("Imagine the implications!").

Eggers questions this hopefulness, one so heavily embedded in the belief in the American West as a place for the utopic future. The digital determinists, with their removal of temporal and informational boundaries—"nothing to rust and rot" / "we don't delete here"—the unlimited possibilities that they believe the future promises, are simply the most recent iteration of an American ideological characterisation which regards the West as offering infinite technocultural and capitalistic expansion. Kinki's observation in *Cosmopolis* that, "the past is disappearing," is also paralleled in *East of Eden*: "It was a time when the past had lost its sweetness and its sap." These new Futurists look ahead towards the limitless bounty of the next technological innovation, with the past being deemed as inconsequential to the "paralyzing grandeur" of what is yet to come. Eggers asks, is it possible that in doing so, they forego the very elements of their lives that have the capacity to make them happy in the present, as "hard and unfruitful" as it might seem? The next section takes a closer look at this underlying assumption, and considers whether or not Mae Holland is ultimately liberated or imprisoned by the Circle's processes of cultural, economic, and political digitization.

4.3 *"Extracurricular Stuff": The Circle's Participatory Culture*

The degree to which anyone values the Internet is proportional to how valuable the Internet makes that person.

-Chuck Klosterman, 2009[90]

[89] Ibid., p. 48.
[90] *Eating the Dinosaur*, (Scribner: New York, 2009), p. 224.

In the 2007 White Paper titled "Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture,"[91] Henry Jenkins places a strong emphasis on the pedagogical potentials of a participatory educational approach to teaching and learning:

> A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).[92]

The Circle's participatory culture takes Jenkins' methodology to its most extreme measure, eliminating all barriers between experiencer and experiencee, novice and veteran, creator and consumer. In the process of doing so, hyperconnectivity becomes the new norm, as all personal and professional information is made not only readily available via TruYou and SeeChange, but permanently and openly accessible to the "members" of the Circle's ever-expanding clientele. In a world where ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN, and PRIVACY IS THEFT, participation is not voluntary, it is a prerequisite. As Mae begins her second workweek at the Circle, she learns that to be a productive contributor in both social and occupational territories, she has to erase the boundaries between the two. Being a *social* and being *professional* are disintermediated, and her surrounding cultural and commercial environments adapt to meet these shifting technological and economic conditions.

Eggers methodically blends the Circle's participatory culture into Mae's everyday social and professional interactions, as each liaison that she is introduced to over the course of her first month working in CE belabours the necessity of staying continuously active on the company's social media platforms (both inside and outside of normal work hours). After Dan's preliminary foray relating to the Circle's corporate philosophy, his emphasis on *community*, *understanding*, and *clarity*, Mae is immediately introduced to Gina, a specialist in CircleSocial. Gina acquaints Mae with a third screen on her desk, one in which she will set up her "company social account."[93] At this point, Mae has her first (main) screen, dedicated to assisting TruYou customers and vendors, and a second screen, reserved for her individual pod's managerial and peer-to-peer communications. This third screen will be

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[91] A "White Paper" is a government proposal in the United Kingdom giving an authoritative report or guide that informs readers concisely about a complex issue and presents the issuing body's philosophy on the matter.

[92] Henry Jenkins, Katherine Clinton, Ravi Purushotma, Alice J. Robinson, and Margaret Weigel. *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, (MacArthur Foundation: Chicago, 2007).

[93] Ibid., pp. 94-95.

used for CircleSocial and Mae's zing-feed, which is any micro-commentary she shares in real-time.

When Gina questions why Mae has failed to import her old profile to CircleSocial, Mae claims that she had been too busy '"to do extracurricular stuff."' Gina's rejoinder establishes just how deeply the Circle's employees believe in—and adhere to—the company's mission statement:

> Gina tilted her head and cleared her throat theatrically. "That's so interesting you put it that way," she said, smiling, though she didn't seem happy. "We actually see your profile, and the activity on it, as integral to your participation here. This is how your coworkers, even those on the other side of campus, know who you are. *Communication* is certainly not extracurricular, right? […] If you visit a coworker's page and write something on the wall, that's a *positive* thing. That's an act of *community*. An act of *reaching out*. And of course I don't have to tell you that this company exists because of the social media you consider '*extracurricular*.'"[94]

Upon first glance, the reader might assume that the phrase: "know *who* you are" to be a typographical error for "know *where* you are." It is not, and this is made abundantly clear as Gina continues her nuanced diatribe on the importance of keeping involved in CircleSocial: '"…But just know, from now on, that being social, and being a presence on your profile and all related accounts—this is part of why you're here. We consider your online presence to be integral to your work here. It's all connected."'[95] The Circle's participatory culture enacts hyperconnectivity, which creates individuals who feel that any obstruction to the lines of communication via the company's social networks is not only unprofessional, a simple digital faux pas, as Mae claims, it is, as Gina's melodramatic reaction makes evident, glaringly antisocial. With the introduction of CircleSocial, Eggers is taking Bailey's aspirations for informational openness, his hopes for universal knowledge formation through SeeChange and TruYou, and superimposing the same notions of transparency onto the individual human subject.

Gina goes on to explain the "commentary" and "Zing user" expectations to Mae, '"you know, like what you thought of lunch, a new feature at the gym, anything. Just basic ratings and likes and comments. Nothing out of the ordinary, and of course all input helps us do a better job at serving the Circle community."'[96] These comments go out to the ten-thousand plus employees at the main campus, and are also connected to Mae's individual zing-feed. Gina continues, '"In terms of your own zinging, we'd expect about ten or so a

[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid., p. 97.

day, but that's sort of a minimum. I'm sure you'll have more to say than that."'[97] Next, Gina describes the concept of "InnerCircle" and "OuterCircle" communications:

> Now, next to the Zing feed, you'll see the window for your primary social feed. You'll also see that we split it into two parts, the InnerCircle social feed, and your external social, that's your OuterCircle. Isn't that cute? You can merge them, but we find it helpful to see the two distinct feeds. But of course the OuterCircle is still in the Circle, right? Everything is.[98]

When Mae learns what a single week's absence from the Circle's InnerCircle feed truly means, Gina's rhetorical question, "isn't that cute?" becomes a humourless, almost malevolent observation: 'Mae followed the counter on the bottom of the screen, calculating all the messages sent to her from everyone else at the Circle. The counter paused at 1,200. Then 4,400. The numbers scrambled higher, stopping periodically but finally settling at 8,276.'[99] Gina calls this inbox deluge, '"A feast! Have fun,"' and assures Mae, '"You can catch up…Maybe even tonight."'[100] All Mae would have to sacrifice in order to accomplish this would be sleep, an activity that many of the Circle's restless employees view to be an overrated pastime.

In addition to her actual job duties, Mae is expected to maintain a steady online presence on her OuterCircle feed (her personal social media accounts), which are now integrated into the Circle's digital systems. In terms of the Circle's social media "hierarchy," the Inner/OuterCircle screen ranks as "third and fourth priority," following the first screen/priority (Customer Experience) and second screen/priority (direct messages from supervisors). However, as Gina advises Mae, her third screen and its communications, '"aren't, like, superfluous"':

> …They're just as important as any other messages, but are prioritized third. And sometimes they're urgent. Keep an eye on the InnerCircle feed in particular, because that's where you'll hear about staff meetings, mandatory gatherings, and any breaking news. If there's a Circle notice that's really pressing, that'll be marked in orange. Something extremely urgent will prompt a message on your phone, too. [So] keep that in view.[101]

Gina stresses that the Circle '"values [the] work life balance…the calibration between your online life here at the company and outside it. I hope that's clear."'[102] It is anything but clear, as Eggers briskly writes this scene to intentionally illustrate the fact that Mae's online life now has no "inside" or "outside"; it is all a part of the Circle's digital enclosure. Jenkins'

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[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., p. 98.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid, pp. 98-99
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., p. 99-100.

definition, 'A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another,' is transmogrified by the Circle's social media networks, as the absence of a constant online presence becomes tantamount to *purposefully* dismissing another person's request for "social connection." Mae equates the company's participatory culture to promulgating an atmosphere in which 'total non-communication in a place like the Circle was so difficult, it felt like violence.'[103]

In this digital immersion, Mae's job in CE demands a reallocation of her sustained moments of concentration. Skimming, scanning, and scrolling are required simply to keep pace with her Circle/Zing feeds. Maryanne Wolf (2010), a cognitive neuroscientist at Tufts University, observes that such fractured attention spans inversely affect our ability to read or properly examine the written word, what she names as the capacity for "deep reading."[104] Her thesis is that a life lived online makes intense attention more difficult to summon. This is a result of the plasticity of the human brain—it is constantly in flux over one's lifetime—so it "rewrites" itself depending on how attention is distributed:

> The act of going beyond the text to analyze, infer and think new thoughts is the product of years of formation. It takes time, both in milliseconds and years, and effort to learn to read with deep, expanding comprehension and to execute all these processes as an adult expert reader…The reading circuit's very plasticity is also its Achilles' heel. It can be fully fashioned over time and fully implemented when we read, or it can be short-circuited—either early on in its formation period or later, after its formation, in the execution of only part of its potentially available cognitive resources.[105]

As an employee at the Circle, Mae has no choice but to operate as an individual that is constantly connected to a myriad of social media networks. In Wolf's terms, all of her textual analysis—her interpersonal/interoffice communications and customer interactions—occur online. The question becomes whether or not Mae's brain is being rewired or "short-circuited" in an irreparable fashion. Could she go back to a cognitive state in which deep attention/reading is an option? And, if so, will Mae ever again have the choice to disconnect from the Circle's networked media systems?

Gina's final bullet point in Mae's primer for CircleSocial comes by way of PartiRank:

> She crouched next to Mae, typed for a few seconds, and a number appeared on the third screen, looking much like her aggregate CE score. It said: MAE HOLLAND: 10, 328 […] "This is your Participation Rank, PartiRank for short. Some people here

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[103] Ibid., p. 103.
[104] Maryanne Wolf. "Our 'Deep Reading' Brain: Its Digital Evolution Poses Questions," *Nieman Reports*, Summer, 2010.
[105] Ibid.: 'Because we literally and physiologically can read in multiple ways, how we read—and what we absorb from our reading—will be influenced by both the content of our reading and the medium we use.'

> call it the Popularity Rank, but it's not really that. It's just an algorithm-generated number that takes into account all your activity in the InnerCircle."[106]

Mae now has two numerical markers from which her standing at the Circle is derived: her aggregate CE score, which is expected to be nearly a hundred-percent customer satisfaction, and her PartiRank, where she is positioned nearly dead-last. Gina breaks down the intricacy of the PartiRank system, exposing the fine-tuned nature of social media content to which the Circle has access:

> It takes into account zings, exterior followers of your intra-company zings, comments on your zings, your comments on others' zings, your comments on other Circlers' profiles, your photos posted, attendance at Circle events, comments and photos posted about those events—basically it collects and celebrates all you do here. The most active Circlers are ranked highest of course…But every time you post or comment or attend anything, that gets factored in, and you'll see your rank change accordingly. That's where the fun comes in. You post, you rise in the rankings. A bunch of people like your post, and you really shoot up. It moves all day.[107]

The Circle's tentacular machinations spread out to every corner of Mae's personal and professional life, constantly gaining strength by incentivising online comments and contributions as a socializing and occupationally advantageous enterprise.

Being an "active user" means climbing the ranks, but such activity can only be measured digitally, as it is dependent upon the social media network to record and quantify each online action. Ian Bogost (2010), in his perspicaciously titled essay "Ian Became a Fan of Marshall McLuhan on Facebook," explains an analogous interactive social media process in the following terms: 'Facebook amplifies the newness of what has happened recently by displaying this information first and by allowing older items to flow off the page. Nowness is encouraged on Facebook, so much so that individual moments transform into overall flow—a *feel* of now now now.'[108] In this way, hyperconnectivity permits the hyperreflexivity described by phenomenological-psychologists Sass and Parnas (2003), as PartiRank encourages, 'forms of exaggerated self-consciousness in which aspects of oneself are experienced as akin to external objects.'[109] That is, if Mae does not digitally objectify and project her subjective experiences into the online domains of CircleSocial, TruYou, and SeeChange, it will be as if they never actually occurred, lowering her PartiRank number and diminishing her sense of identity. The participatory culture of the Circle establishes a social

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[106] Ibid., p. 100.
[107] Ibid., pp. 100-101.
[108] Ian Bogost. "Ian Became a Fan of Marshall McLuhan on Facebook and Suggested You Become a Fan Too," from *Facebook and Philosophy*, ed. D.E. Whittkower, (Open Court: Chicago, 2010), p. 28, italics in original.
[109] Louis A. Sass and Josef Parnas. "Schizophrenia, Consciousness, and the Self," *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 29, no. 3, 2003, p. 27.

pattern in which the user's personal existential stabilization is dependent upon participation itself, a digital re-appropriation of the Descartesian principle: I post, therefore I am.

The Circle's *cri de coeur* of unmitigated informational clarity goes far beyond basic social media interactivity; in her third week, Mae's initiates the healthcare plan, the "full program," as her new MD, Dr Villalobos, terms it. Dr Villalobos explains that the Circle's on-campus hospital is a '"prevention-emphasis clinic…In the interest of keeping our Circlers healthy of mind and body, we provide wraparound wellness services."'[110] All employees have a biweekly checkup, and are expected to relay all health-related issues immediately and precisely to the medical staff: '"the biweekly checkups involve diet consultations, and we monitor any variances in your overall health […] Every two weeks we'll do blood work, cognitive tests, reflexes, a quick eye exam, and a rotating retinue of more exotic tests, like MRIs and such."'[111] Dr Villalobos clarifies that all of these services are available free of charge and are intended as pre-emptive measures for early detection of any illnesses or potential health risks, leading Mae, in her stream of consciousness, to consider how the Circle regularly makes the extraordinary seem mundane: 'Mae had the feeling, which she was used to by now at the Circle, that they alone were able to think about—or were simply alone in being able to *enact*—reforms that seemed beyond debate in their necessity and urgency.'[112] The reader may interpret this scene by mirroring Mae's positivity, as the physical health and wellbeing of employees appears to be of genuine concern to the company. However, is this type of medical care truly "beyond debate"? Might there be potential downsides in allowing for complete biological/bodily exposure to the Circle's emergent medical treatments and technologies?

As Mae is retrofitted with the latest personal health monitoring gadgetry, the tone shifts subtly from reassuring to invasive: 'The doctor held out a silver bracelet, about three inches wide. Mae had seen health monitors on Jared and Dan, but theirs were made of rubber, and fit loosely. This one was thinner and lighter.'[113] The Circle's smartwatch iteration is far more digitally invasive than its FitBit predecessor, monitoring not only the employee's heart rate, but a host of other physical characteristics, as the bracelet works in conjunction with an orally ingested sensor. Once the sensor is tethered to the bracelet, the Circle will be able to, as Dr Villalobos explicates:

> Collect data on your heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol, heat flux, caloric intake, sleep duration, sleep quality, digestive efficiency, on and on…it measures galvanic skin response, which allows you to know when you're amped or anxious. When we

[110] Ibid., pp. 150-51.
[111] Ibid., pp. 152-53.
[112] Ibid., italics in original.
[113] Ibid., p. 153.

> see non-normative rates of stress in a Circler or a department, we can make adjustments to workload, for example. It measures the pH level of your sweat, so you can tell when you need to hydrate with alkaline water. It detects your posture, so you know when you need to reposition yourself. Blood and tissue oxygen, your red blood cell count, and things like step count.[114]

Just as PartiRank is used to monitor an employee's sociopsychological state through incessant digital posting (via CircleSocial), the Circle's medical technology (via the bracelet) digitally objectifies Mae's very physiology: 'The bracelet was beautiful, a pulsing marquee of lights and charts and numbers. Mae's pulse was represented by a delicately rendered rose, opening and closing. There was an EKG, shooting right like blue and then starting over. Her temperature was rendered large, in green, 98.6, reminding her of the day's [CE] aggregate, 97, which she needed to improve.'[115]

This piece of digital technology would impress even Eric Packer; indeed, the descriptive language utilized by Eggers here is reminiscent of Packer's own techno-ideology. When Eric, riding comfortably in his stretch limousine, looks into his Internet-enabled screen, he contemplates, 'This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole.'[116] Mae, fascinated by the bracelet, thinks, 'It was one of the more elegant objects she'd ever seen. There were dozens of layers of information, every data point allowing her to ask more, to go deeper.'[117] However, unlike the previous generation, personified by Alan Clay in *A Hologram for the King*, Mae is unperturbed by the awe-inspiring capability of digital technology to render her life and experiences—her physical body itself—as nothing more than a binary arrangement of information. But how comprehensive must "the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems" be in order for her to develop a sense of self-understanding and self-acceptance?

CircleSocial, TruYou, and SeeChange, all save data to be readily available on the cloud and accessed at any time, from any location. Dr Villalobos uses almost identical reasoning to that of Eamon Bailey in her description of the necessity of maintaining such detailed records: '"The idea is that with complete information, we can give better care. Incomplete information creates gaps in our knowledge, and medically speaking, gaps in our knowledge creates mistakes and omissions."'[118] The cabinets and lab interior of the medical

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[114] Ibid., p. 155.
[115] Ibid., p. 156.
[116] *Cosmopolis*, p. 24.
[117] Ibid., p. 157.
[118] Ibid., p. 155.

clinic are lined with steel strips that reemphasize Dr Villalobos' digitized Hippocratic Oath, as Mae observes that they are engraved with the words, 'TO HEAL WE MUST KNOW. TO KNOW WE MUST SHARE.'[119]

As Mae's initial exam comes to a close, she is asked about her family's medical history. At this point in the narrative, the reader is aware of Mae's father having recently been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and the subsequent feelings of guilt and powerlessness which Mae initially experienced. Mae struggled with, 'What a good child, an only child, would do':

> A good only child would spend the next three to five years, which might be his last years of mobility, of full capability, with him, helping her mother, being part of the family machinery. But she knew her parents wouldn't let her do all that. They wouldn't allow it. And so she would be caught between the job she needed and loved, and her parents, whom she couldn't help.[120]

Upon Dr Villalobos' inquiring about her family history, Mae breaks down in tears, thinking about her father's condition, his insurance running out, failing to cover the costs of his prescriptions, how she is incapable of being "part of the family machinery," and how she feels unable to assist either emotionally or physically. To which Dr Villalobos calmly responds, '"have you asked HR about adding your parents to the company plan?"' Mae claims that she is unaware that extended family members could be retroactively added to an employee's healthcare plan, as 'there was no company in the country that covered an employee's parents or siblings.'[121] Dr Villalobos reiterates her suggestion, adding: '"You could ask HR…Or actually, maybe you should just ask Annie."'[122]

As a member of the renowned "Gang of 40," Annie's influence at the Circle is palpable. In fact, throughout the course of Book I, other Circle employees consistently refer to Annie when interacting with Mae; many are demonstrably jealous of their strong friendship. When Dr Villalobos suggests that Mae ask for Annie's assistance, it is a testament to how much power she possesses. After being informed, Annie responds: '"I can't understand why you wouldn't tell me,"' and immediately starts typing on her phone. Annie leaves to attend (as always) an urgent meeting, but moments later, 'Mae's phone buzzed. It was Annie. "And don't worry. You know I'm a ninja with stuff like this. It'll be done." And she hung up.'[123] The pacing of this dialogue, weighed against the severity of the events being discussed, is a narrative style that Eggers exercises in order to develop

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[119] Ibid., p. 150.
[120] Ibid., p. 82.
[121] Ibid., p. 160.
[122] Ibid., p. 159.
[123] Ibid., p. 161.

in the reader a genuine sense of how quickly things occur at the Circle, and the manner of hyperconnectivity that such pioneering digital technologies afford:

> Mae's phone went off again and again it was Annie.
> "Okay, good news sooner than expected. I checked and it's not a big deal. We have about a dozen other parents on the plan, and even some siblings. I twisted a few arms and they say they can get your dad on."
> Mae looked at her phone. It had been *four minutes* since she'd first mentioned all this to Annie.
> "Oh shit. You're serious?"
> "You want your mom on the plan, too? Of course you do. She's healthier, so that's easy. We'll put both of them on."
> "When?"
> "I guess immediately."[124]

McLuhan (1966) spoke of the "all-at-onceness" of the "world of electronic information," but what distinguishes Mae's digital ecology from the conventional media environment is the hybridity and multiplicity of its personal, cultural, professional, social, political, and technical functionalities.[125] The intimacy of her father's diagnosis and her related guilt, anxiety, and distress are intertwined with the sociopolitical and socioeconomic hegemonies of the American healthcare system—and the complexities of circumnavigating disparate organizations—with the hope of finding adequate medical treatment and support for her family. The Circle, through Annie's assistance and its overwhelming fiscal success, incorporates what was, in the pre-digital world, multiple governmental and commercial assemblages into a single point of process, a dynamic process that occurs at ever-increasing speeds and into ever-expanding spaces.

This is a distinctive moment in *The Circle* in which Eggers considers the pros and cons of the intrusion of digitized information into every facet of Mae's life. Like Bailey's introduction of SeeChange, the scene involving Mae's father follows a consonant narrative pattern of the social, cultural, and political benefits. This time, though, the potentially negative aspects are obscured by the fact that Mae's father's life has been, in her mother's words, "saved": '"Mae, you've saved not just your father's life but my life, too, I swear to god you have, my sweet Maebelline."'[126] It is challenging to locate deleterious qualities here, but taking a step backwards helps to reveal why Eggers includes this incredibly profound moment. Mae's concerns over how a "good daughter" would react should be revaluated in light of the fact that her father has been placed on the Circle's healthcare plan.

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[124] Ibid., my italics.
[125] "McLuhan on McLuhanism," from the WNDT Educational Broadcasting Network, 1966. See: "Today, the instantaneous world of electric information media involves all of us, all at once. Ours is a brand new world of all-at-onceness. Time, in a sense, has ceased and space has vanished."
[126] Ibid., p. 162.

Instead of a measured consideration regarding how to best support her father as his only child and as a member of the family, Mae has essentially passed that responsibility to the Circle. In place of attempting to psychologically and emotionally acknowledge her father's mortality, she assumes that the medical technologies of the Circle will manage the condition and all of his health related issues.

The technology theorist and writer, Nicholas Carr (2010), who introduced the notion of "the shallows" to encourage serious consideration of how our brains are adapting to a life in which Internet-enabled information technologies are nearly omnipresent, affirms: 'We become, neurologically, what we think.'[127] Building on Wolf's research regarding "deep reading" and the brain's plasticity, if the individual does not use particular parts of the brain, those specific areas will fail to develop, or be less cognitively connected. In allowing Mae to disconnect her medial representations and interactions from her corporeal form, the Circle's technologies appear to be making digital spectres of their clients and employees, as Mae's physical presence is supplanted by a hyper-natural simulation of identity presented in the universal yet ephemeral realm of the Internet. By extension of Carr's argument, if Mae does not use the part of her brain activated by personal involvement with her parents and her father's diagnosis, she will fail to expand the appropriate emotional and mental circuitry necessary to best care for her family. Much like Mercer's harangue on the damage social media and digital technologies inflict on the communicative mannerisms and interactions of people in face-to-face situations (what he calls "social autism"), Mae's actions actually serve to desensitize her, as she can turn off the empathetic part of her character, the kindness and care and attention and love that she—in the absence of the Circle's intervention—would possibly have provided her parents.

Of course, the alternative option offers no definitive assurances, and would most likely lead to Mae's father enduring a more arduous road without exceptional medical care to help him live with MS. Eggers is suggesting that having the "family machinery" in place, spending personal time—going *through* the illness with the other—is conceivably more important than the kind of healthcare or insurance that is being afforded. Eggers' implication might, at first, appear naïve. Who would risk the very wellbeing of one's family by rejecting the Circle's assistance? However, the reader soon learns that Mae's father's healthcare coverage comes at a hefty price, one that all clients and employees of the Circle openly embrace: informational clarity. The most prominent stipulation is that SeeChange cameras *must* be installed in every room of Mae's parents' home, so that constant

[127] Nicholas Carr. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, (W.W. Norton: New York, 2010), p. 33.

"monitoring" of the patient can occur. If these cameras are disabled or tampered with, the Circle (delicately) implies that the insurance and care could also be jeopardized. Privacy, as Dr Villalobos explained, is antagonistic to the application and evolution of the Circle's medical services. Even in the midst of illness and near-death experience, what many consider to be a human's most guarded and precious moments, the Circle will be present.

4.4 *"My Work Exists in One Room": The Circle's Digital Transparency*

Everybody sounds stoned, because they're e-mailing people the whole time they're talking to you.

-Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*[128]

A better understanding of what the corporate phrase "completing the circle" actually means arrives when the reader is introduced to the third member of the Circle's "Three Wise Men," Tom Stenton. While Tyler Alexander Gospodinov is the whiz-kid programmer and genius computer engineer, and Eamon Bailey the corporate-face and techno-ideological compass for the Circle, Stenton serves the role of domineering CEO, an individual driven purely by the free market, the capitalistic potentialities of the company. Stenton rarely takes the stage at unveilings, but is present at all government-related businesses dealings involving the Circle or, as Annie phrases it, '"the [government] is his niche."' As this specific unveiling is an incorporation of both the political and the digital, Stenton takes the helm:

> Stenton took the stage without introduction. The audience applauded, but in a way that was markedly different from the way they had for Bailey. Bailey was their talented uncle who had saved every one of their lives personally. Stenton was their boss, for whom they had to act professionally and clap professionally. In a flawless black suit, no tie, he walked to the center of the stage, and without introducing himself or saying hello, he began.[129]

Stenton initiates his presentation by stating the importance of procedural clarity in an openly democratic government, citing that, '"Congressional approval is actually at 11 percent! And as you know, a certain senator was just revealed to be involved in some very unsavoury business."'[130] Earlier in the novel, Senator Williamson is briefly alluded to as pushing for governmental action involving the Circle for its breach of competition laws and threating market buoyancy as a prospective monopoly. As Annie explains to Mae, '"You didn't hear? She [Williamson] got busted for all kinds of weird stuff. She's under investigation for half-dozen things, all kinds of ethical violations. They found everything on her computer, a

[128] *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, (Knopf: New York, 2010), p. 141.
[129] Ibid., p. 205.
[130] Ibid., p. 206.

hundred weird searches, downloads—some creepy stuff."'[131] Through this hushed dialogue, Eggers is suggesting that Stenton and the Circle actively sabotaged Williamson's computer and search history to halt her pursuit of governmental regulations. This is the first direct insinuation in the novel that the Circle manipulates information, rather than "setting it free" as publically accessible.

Stenton's reference to Williamson's indictment assists in the unveiling's main focus, '"a move toward the ultimate transparency that we've all sought from our elected leaders since the birth of representative democracy."'[132] To this end, he introduces Congresswoman Olivia Santos from District 14, the district of San Francisco in which the Circle's main campus resides. Santos begins by responding to the poor approval rating and the necessity for informational candidness in legislature, stating: '"I'm as concerned as you are about the need for citizens to know what their elected leaders are doing. I mean, it is your right, is it not? It's your right to know how they spend their days. Who they're meeting with. Who they're talking to. What they're doing on the taxpayer's dime."' [133] Prior to Congresswoman Santos' appearance on stage, Stenton prefaced the unveiling event by paying respect to a Circler known simply as "Stewart." As Stenton articulates, the Circle views Stewart as an "inspiration." He continues by expressing his admiration for, '"a man who's willing to open up his life to further our collective knowledge. He's been filming, recording, every moment of his life now for five years, and it's been an invaluable asset to the Circle, and soon, I bet, to all of humankind."'[134] The basis for fictional "Stewart" could be none other than the wearable tech pioneer and Google Glass mastermind, Thad Starner, a computer engineer and technologist that has been personally involved in the utilitarian capacities of somatic gadgetry since 1993.[135]

Just like the digital prosthesis of Mae's bracelet, this unveiling is meant to implement a new iteration of an existing technology. Congresswomen Santos will answer the Circle's call for complete informational clarity. As she rationalizes: '"We all wanted and expected transparency from our elected leaders, but the technology wasn't there to make it fully possible. But now it is. As Stewart has demonstrated, it's very easy to provide the world at large full access to your day, to see what you see, hear what you hear and what you say."'[136] The SeeChange cameras first introduced by Eamon Bailey are stationary, and

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid., p. 207.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid., p. 205.
[135] Clive Thompson. "Meet Thad Starner, the Man Who's Spent 20 Years Wearing a Computer on His Face," *Huffington Post*, September 24th, 2013.
[136] Ibid., p. 208.

although they can be repositioned and relocated, they are a static broadcast of a singular location. The digital tool being described by Olivia Santos (its origin being the wearable-tech donned by Stewart) serves another function:

> I intend to follow Stewart on his path of illumination. And along the way, I intend to show how democracy can and should be: entirely open, entirely transparent. Starting today, I will be wearing the same device that Stewart wears. My every meeting, movement, my every word, will be available to all my constituents and to the world.[137]

This technology is a camera the size of a quarter, attached to a necklace, providing a first-person perspective in which the viewer "sees what [the wearer] sees." The Circle uses ideologically infused language for this new tech; when someone wears the necklace, they have "gone transparent." All of the data and recordings can be viewed in a livestream on the client's Circle page, which is permanently maintained in the Circle's cloud. As Bailey did for SeeChange, Stenton harps on the positive political and governmental changes that will occur in the wake of implementing the Circle's new technologies. Eggers employs dramatic irony here, as the reader is well aware that Congresswomen Santos is simply the starting point for the Circle to offer transparency as an option to the general public. As the Circlers' applause floods the Great Hall, Eggers once again gestures towards a religious atmosphere, as Santos is described as, 'bowing, putting her palms together in a posture of prayer.'[138]

The day after Stenton's introduction of transparency, Mae is asked to take on yet another social media responsibility. At the behest of her supervisors, Mae will be outfitted with the gear to answer CircleSurveys, an occupational task that is considered 'a reward, an honor,' to the up-and-coming employees of the Circle.[139] CircleSurvey digitally calculates and quantifies Mae's 'tastes, her preferences, her buying habits and plans, for use by the Circle's clients.'[140] Her liaison for CircleSurveys is a man in his lower-thirties named Pete Ramirez, the first Circler that Mae has met that is 'fully retinal.'[141] He has no tablet, no phone, no screens, and his office is a circular, with no desk or chairs. Pete begins the setup by telling Mae why she has been selected, '"You're here because your opinions are valued. They're so valued that the world needs to know them—your opinions on just about everything. Isn't that flattering?"' Pete's explanation by way of compliments, coupled with his rhetorical question, establish in Mae both a sense of personal worth, while at the same time helping to develop her sycophantic occupational attitude.

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[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid., p. 209.
[139] Ibid., p. 226.
[140] Ibid., p. 227.
[141] Ibid., p. 228.

CircleSurvey operates by, 'a hair-thin arm, a microphone at its end,' which is tethered to an earpiece. The tech is gesture oriented, Pete clarifies, '"So every time you hear the bell, you'll nod, and the headset will register your nod, and the question will be heard through your headphone."'[142] CircleSurvey uses the same measurement system as Mae's zing-feed, in that she can answer with either a *smile* or a *frown*. Pete continues, '"The idea is to take the pulse of a chosen sampling of Circle members. This job is important. You've been chosen because your opinions are crucial to us, and to our clients. The answers you provide will help us in tailoring our services to their needs."'[143] Pete—congruent to introductions of both Gina (CircleSocial) and Dr Villalobos ("full program" healthcare coverage)—speaks only to the socioeconomic advantages of CircleSurvey. These various liaisons unanimously bolster Mae's self-esteem by declaring the urgency of her responses and emphasizing how important her *individual* involvement is to the overarching development of these new technological systems, demonstrating a nascent brand of digitized neoliberalism.

"Neoliberalism" can be defined as an economic ideology that stresses personal freedoms and market solutions to address all of society's problems (Harvey, 2004).[144] Or, utilizing the succinct outlining of the philosopher Henry Giroux (2009), the tenants of neoliberalism are first: 'consumerism is the most important obligation of citizenship'; second: 'freedom is an utterly privatized affair that legitimates the primacy of property rights over public priorities'; third: 'the social state is bad, all public difficulties are individually determined; and all social problems, now individualized, can be redressed by private solutions.'[145] Neoliberalism has the clear goal of making *everything* susceptible to the forces of the free market. In this regard, the Circle is the manifestation of a purified neoliberal political ideology, as it propagates a spectacle of digital inclusion that co-opts capitalistic individuation and advertises a participatory fantasy of interpersonal collaboration.

Mae's being "chosen" for CircleSurvey means that she has accrued an additional occupational responsibility that carries the underlying understanding that she *must* contribute in order for the application to work properly. Pete cautiously informs Mae of these expectations:

> …you have a certain, well, I don't want to say *quota*, but there's a number of questions that would be ideal and expected for you to answer in a given workday. Let's call it

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[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] David Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford University Press: 2005), pp. 1-4.
[145] Henry Giroux. *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2009), p. 153.

> five hundred, but it might be more, might be less. You can either get through them on your own pace, by powering through, or by spreading them throughout the workday. Most people can do five hundred in an hour, so it's not too stressful. Or you can wait for the prompts, which will occur if the program thinks you should pick up the pace.[146]

At this point in the novel, Mae is starting her third month at the Circle. Her desk now has five screens, and she is responsible for maintaining a professional and social presence on CircleSocial, CircleSurvey, TruYou, and her zing-feed in order to keep her PartiRank numbers rising—all while simultaneously keeping her aggregate CE score at a one-hundred percent approval rating.

Her every thought and action is being scrutinized and monetized, but in this digital dissection, Mae testifies to feeling more satiated, more fulfilled, and most importantly, more entrenched at the Circle: 'It was all easy enough to assimilate. The first day, she'd gotten through 652 of the survey questions, and congratulatory messages came from Pete Ramirez, Dan and Jared. Feeling strong and wanting to impress them even more, she answered 820 the next day, and 991 the day after that. It was not difficult, and *the validation felt good*.'[147] This feeling of personal and professional substantiation arrives through participating in the Circle's social network via their information technologies, and as Mae's existential composure becomes increasingly dependent upon such digital interactivity, a strange kind of addiction evolves in which she can only experience moments of psychological and emotional equilibrium when she is maintaining a continually active online presence (Hafner, 2009).[148] Yet, Mae would not recognize her actions as "addictive" as she believes that her work and her nearly incessant zinging, smiling, frowning, and commenting all contribute to improving both her subjective life and the world at large. For Mae, such an accusation would be akin to deriding an individual for *helping* other people, a nonsensical indictment in which she is said to be addicted to being socially and philanthropically productive.

Throughout *The Circle*, Mae preserves this optimistic disposition. Mercer is the first to challenge Mae on her new job and the Circle's corporate philosophy. When Mae informs Mercer that his '"social needs are so minimal,"' he responds: '"It's not that I'm not social. I'm social enough. But the tools you guys create actually *manufacture* unnaturally extreme social needs. No one needs the level of contact you're purveying. It improves nothing. It's

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[146] Ibid., pp. 229-230, italics in original.
[147] Ibid., p. 233, my italics.
[148] Katie Hafner. "To Deal with Obsession, Some Defriend Facebook," *New York Times*, December 21st, 2009. As early as 2009, psychologists were beginning to notice—and report—on their findings concerning social media sites as being potentially addictive. In this article, the psychologist Kimberly Young, a director of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery, discusses the dozens of teenagers she has encountered who have attempted to quit Facebook: "It's like any other addiction…It is hard to wean yourself."

not nourishing.'"[149] Mercer compares the Circle's networked media services to junk food, in that the content is devoid of any genuine nutrients or socially beneficial substance, '"You know how you finish a bag of chips and you hate yourself? You know you've done nothing good for yourself. That's the same feeling, and you know it is, after some digital binge. You feel wasted and hallow and diminished."'[150] Mae has an opposite interpretation of such a "digital binge" and the "extreme social needs" that Mercer disparages the Circle for engineering, rebutting: '"I never feel diminished."' Internally, 'Mae thought of the petition she'd signed that day, to demand more job opportunities for immigrants living in the suburbs of Paris. It was energizing and would have impact. But Mercer didn't know about this, or anything Mae did, anything the Circle did, and she was too sick of him to explain it all.'[151] As Mae understands it the "level of contact" that the Circle affords—which Mercer views as disruptive, addictive, and "extreme"—is, for her, not experienced as an interruption but as an opportunity for social and professional connection. Her view of her own mediated interconnectivity aligns squarely with the mission statement of the Circle: continual digital-interconnectedness is the only way in which to improve oneself and society as a whole.

Mercer tells Mae that the Circle's social media technologies—coupled with their digital gadgetry of wearables and smartphones and tablets—have made her socially and communicatively exasperated, rendering her incapable of engaging in face-to-face conversations. Mae disagrees:

> But you talk so *slow*.
> I talk normally. You've just gotten impatient.
> Okay. Go.
> But now you're hyperventilating.
> I guess I'm just so easily bored by this.
> By talking.
> By talking in slow motion.[152]

Here, Mae is reflecting Bogost's (2010) contention that social media applications cause a subjective temporal collapse, in that the illusion of "nowness" generated by the digitally mediated experience is recursively creating a psychological dependency that is more concerned with the *speed* of informational communications than it is with the actual *content*.

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[149] Ibid., pp. 133-34.: Mae's complacent attitude is a haunting representation of Andrew Keen's digital anxieties, which he expressed in 2012 (a year before *The Circle's* publication). When asked if he is "genuinely worried" about the consequences of sustained social media usage, Keen responds: "I am concerned that whatever it means to be human is being undermined. This endless temptation to broadcast ourselves, intimately, globally, to the world is ruining us. The majority of us don't want to be sold and right now, with all of this data, we are being followed around the Web." From previously cited interview, "One on One."

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid., p. 134.

[152] Ibid., p. 130.

More precisely, Mae's hyperconnectivity manifests in her a growing desire for the constant flow of digital communications—"now, now, now"—regardless of the significance or necessity of the information. As the velocity and volume of Mae's online connections increase, she demands immediate answers and has to "dumb-down" all manner of conversations and interactions in which she is involved, even those revolving around important matters. As Mae continues in her new job at the Circle, she becomes not only accustomed to a life of constant interruption; she begins to view it as the norm for all interpersonal communication.

Geert Lovink (2010) terms such a longing for unremitting digital communiqués as 'the pacemaker of the real-time Internet.' He continues in the vein of a politico-economic critique, 'Web 2.0 applications respond to this [social media] trend and attempt to extract value out of every situation we find ourselves in. The Machine constantly wants to know what we think, the choices we make, where we go, who we talk to.'[153] Hayles (2012) identifies a less cyber-fascistically motivated explanation, turning her consideration instead to a more personalized and cognitively situated account, one focused on digital activity as a phenomenological, and therefore psychosomatic, process which causes a deterioration of one's ability to focus for extended periods of time on a singular object of interest. Adopting Greenfield's (2009)[154] study—which reveals that some features of web-reading serve to actually rewire the brain—Hayles pinpoints specific online actions as facilitators of this neuronal modification:

> Among these are hyperlinks that draw attention away from the linear flow of an article, very short forms such as tweets that encourage distracted forms of reading, small habitual actions such as clicking and navigating that increase the cognitive load, and most pervasively, the enormous amount of material to be read, leading to the desire to skim everything because there is far too much material to pay close attention to anything for very long.[155]

The formatting of social media is created in such a way that adjacent or tangential information (tweets and hyperlinks) are no longer considered as distractions, but merely indicators that there is so much information in a given stream/text, that the only way for a human to process it is to skim it. For Mae Holland and her co-workers, hyperactivity—their "desire to skim everything"—is the communicative, commercial, and social standard, the interactive paradigm from which one and all are expected to operate. Rather than being

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[153] Geert Lovink. "MyBrain.net: The colonization of real−time and other trends in Web 2.0," *Eurozine*, March 18th, 2010.
[154] Patricia Greenfield. "Technology and Informal Education: What is Taught, What is Learned," *Science* 323.5910, January, 2009, pp. 69-71.
[155] N. Katherine Hayles. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, (The University of Chicago Press: 2012), p. 63.

professionally disadvantageous or psychologically harmful, it is viewed as the collective exhibition of the ability to multitask at previously unprecedented levels. Mercer's inability to comprehend Mae's attraction to such information technologies and social media applications only serves to strengthen her belief that he is a kind of vestigial remnant from her past, a hindrance to the utopian vision of the Circle: 'He was in her past, in *the* past, he was an antique, a dull, inanimate object she could leave in the attic.'[156]

In the weeks after Congresswoman Santos becomes transparent, an ever-increasing number of elected officials begin to follow in her footsteps: 'It was, to most minds, an inexorable progression.'[157] Additionally, politicians who have chosen not to go transparent begin to feel mounting pressure, prompting Mae to contemplate, 'If you weren't operating in the light of day, what were you doing in the shadows?'[158] This line of questioning is reiterated by the general public, as they become suspicious of corruption in the offices of those politicians who wish to remain off the Circle's grid. Furthermore, analogously to Senator Williamson's being "caught" with disturbing search histories and "weird stuff" on her personal computer, the politicians who defer the option of the Circle's offer of transparency are appearing in the news more and more frequently for conspicuous, or outright criminal, activities and are subsequently being removed from their offices and replaced by elected officials willing to perform under transparency. At the same time, the Circle begins to implement its own form of transparency, installing SeeChange cameras in nearly every nook and cranny of the main campus, including eight cameras in Mae's own pod.[159]

None of this is surprising, or, indeed, disturbing to Mae and her peers at the Circle. They work comfortably with the knowledge that they are being watched in real-time and recorded for perpetuity in the Circle's archives. As Mae's popularity with viewers' increases and the Circle becomes aware of the amount of people watching and interacting with her, they add yet another layer to her CircleSocial profile: Conversion Rate and Retail Raw. Conversion Rate is described by Gina as a way to "provoke" and "stimulate" purchases with the Circle's partners and vendors, '"You can zing, you could comment on and rate and highlight any product, but can you translate all this into action? Leveraging your credibility to spur action…"'[160] The more purchases that are initiated by Mae's recommendations, the higher her Conversion Rate becomes. Retail Raw is the amount an

[156] Ibid., p. 263.
[157] Ibid., p. 238.
[158] Ibid., p. 239.
[159] Ibid., p. 241.
[160] Ibid., p. 248.

item costs, making a definitive assessment possible for the amount of money spent on Mae's personal recommendations via her various social networking feeds. Gina concludes: '"the *minimum expectation* for high-functioning Circlers is a conversion rate of x250, and a weekly Retail Raw of $45,000, both of which are modest goals that most Circlers far exceed."'[161] By participating in Conversion Rate and Retail Raw, Mae literally transforms her online communications and interactions into real-time advertisements.

Mae's introduction to Conversion Rate and Retail Raw is followed by her penultimate trip home, away from the dormitory and the professional responsibilities of the main campus. Her father's condition has been steadily improving since being put on the Circle's healthcare plan, and Mae is looking forward to a peaceful dinner with her parents. This is not what occurs, as Mercer has been unexpectedly encouraged to join them, and he brings a gift for Mae's parents, a celebratory act in response to Mae's father's improving health. The gift is a chandelier, one that Mercer handcrafted, with 'silver arms [that] were actually painted antlers.' Both Mae and her parents concede that it is a beautiful piece, Mercer's "best work to date."[162]

Mae compliments the chandelier effusively and takes a picture to surreptitiously post—along with Mercer's contact information—on all of her feeds. When she reveals this to Mercer he is visibly perturbed, and wants to know exactly where/how she has publicized his work, to which Mae responds, '"Everywhere relevant.'" This answer only serves to heighten Mercer's anger, and he insists that she cease posting his information or any photographs of his work: '"Mae. Stop. Please stop. Mercer was staring at her, his eyes small and round. "I don't want to get loud here, in your parents' home, but either you stop or I have to walk out.'"[163] Mae is deaf to his pleas due to her obsessive thoughts concerning PartiRank, Conversion Rate/Retail Raw, and CircleSocial, as the chandelier is already gaining hundreds of positive responses, comments, and ratings from various retailers and the general Circle clientele.

Infuriated, Mercer leaves the house and Mae follows him to his truck where he berates her, telling her that she does not realize that the Circle's technology and the people who produce it are not acting benevolently. With his stereotypical élan, what Mae labels as his "professorial smugness," Mercer grouses that the digital capabilities of the Circle are causing Mae to undergo a personal transformation, one that is detrimental to the very allure and charisma that make Mae who she is:

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[161] Ibid., p. 251.
[162] Ibid., p. 252.
[163] Ibid., p. 257.

> And worse, you're not *doing* anything interesting anymore. You're not seeing anything, saying anything. The weird paradox is that you think you're at the center of things, and that makes your opinions more valuable, but you yourself are becoming less vibrant. I bet you haven't done anything offscreen in months. Have you?[164]

Mercer believes that Mae's inability to disconnect herself from the Circle's social media applications has caused a steady erosion of eccentricity, a flattening of her most distinctive features, the very essentials of her identity.

Mercer's accusations are preposterous to Mae, as, in her mind, she has been evolving continuously through her digital connectivity. When Mercer informs Mae that she has become—"Snide…mean…and callous"—Mae responds:

> What? I'm the opposite of *callous*…I'm trying to help you because I believe in what you do.
>
> No you don't. Mae, you're just unable to allow anything to live inside a room. My work exists in one room. It doesn't exist anywhere else. And that's how I intend it.[165]

Mercer sends Mae into an inconsolable rage and Mae hurriedly leaves her parents' home with a frenzied urgency to return to the main campus of the Circle where she can, once again, nurture her sense of identity by quantitatively moulding her diverse social media profiles.

This argument is the final face-to-face conversation between Mercer and Mae, and is the beginning of the end for Mae's disconnected identity. Both characters serve their narrative function for Eggers' foundational investigation concerning the psychological and cultural effects of information technology, as the tête-à-tête ends with neither Mae nor Mercer being "right" or "wrong" about the underlying consequences. What is clear, however, is the accumulative disintegration of Mae's capacity for a pre-digital style of communication, as well as Mercer's attendant inability to recognize any potentially positive aspects of the Circle's social networks.

In the chapter's conclusion, this thesis closely examines Mercer's closing epistolary accusation, that the Circle's social media technologies are 'far more insidious than any human invention that's come before it.' Mercer pre-empts this remark in his missive to Mae, 'Surveillance shouldn't be the tradeoff for any goddamn service we get.'[166] In his techno-dystopic reasoning, he prophesizes that in the future there will be two societies, 'the one you're [Mae] helping to create, and an alternative to it. You and your ilk will live, willingly, joyfully, under constant surveillance, watching each other always, commenting on each other, voting and liking and disliking each other, smiling and frowning, and otherwise doing

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[164] Ibid., p. 261.
[165] Ibid., p. 258, italics in original.
[166] Ibid., p. 367-68.

nothing much else.'[167] Mercer's apperception that Mae and her cohorts will live "willingly" and "joyfully" within the Circle's surveillance-state reiterates the line of questioning with which I opened chapter three, the essential paradox at the heart of the dystopic readings of the novel. The Circle's information technologies fundamentally alter Mae Holland's identity, as she becomes progressively incapable of recognizing the detrimental possibilities inherent in the company's social media structures.

4.5 *If the Mirror is Whole, We See Everything*

> In exchange for "freedom," in exchange for "free things," we allow ourselves to be spied on. As such, I think the rise of the Internet has turned out radically different from how the idealists originally thought it would; they imagined a much more egalitarian, democratic system, where the power was equally spread. No one predicted that it would end in an unprecedented concentration of power and wealth.
>
> -Dave Eggers, 2015[168]

As Mae drives back to the Circle in a state of existential turmoil, she considers a line of defence for each of Mercer's complaints. She sees a sign for a kayak rental, and, though Mae knows it has been closed for hours, when she discovers a kayak outside of the locked area, she drags it to the water and sets out to Blue Island, a jagged and rarely visited island far out in the Bay. As before, a curious seal tracks her kayak as she paddles along the inlet. Once there, she attempts to climb to the peak of the landmass, taking great satisfaction knowing that few other people had visited that specific location, 'She stood, breathing heavily, feeling strong, feeling enormous.'[169] Looking out at the water, she is able to take comfort in *not knowing*, in not being required to constantly quantify and measure her own experiences, 'She guessed at it all, what might live, moving purposefully or drifting aimlessly, under the deep water around her, but she didn't think too much about any of it. It was enough to be aware of the million permutations possible around her, and take comfort in knowing she would not, and really could not, know much at all.'[170]

In this last kayaking scene, Eggers allows the reader a final glimpse of a disconnected, yet happy, Mae Holland. The descriptive language used to explain Mae's state of mind, her "feeling enormous," and the "comfort" that she takes in her inability to "know much at all," reveal of an inverted psychological correlation in relation to the Circle's information technologies and Mae's subjective stabilization. She feels at ease, relaxed, and

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[167] Ibid.
[168] Sean Bex and Stef Craps and Mimi Lok. "An Interview with Dave Eggers and Mimi Lok," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 56, Number 4, Winter 2015, pp. 544-567.
[169] Ibid., p. 267.
[170] Ibid., p. 270.

significantly, most herself when she is alone on Blue Island. The sense of an ontological breakdown, the "loud tear" which accosts Mae in her hyperconnectedness at the Circle is alleviated only when she is allowed a space for private contemplation, or during moments of genuine personal connection with others in physically contiguous environments. The recurrent sensation of the "the tear" demonstrates the extent to which Mae has been pushed into a distinct kind of mental dysfunction by working at the Circle, even for such a short period of time. While overcome by the tear, Mae hears the constant screaming voices of others, signifying that—even within the confines of her own mental interiority—there is no escape from the masses that she (through the Circle) ceaselessly imposes on herself. Mae ultimately concludes that the tear represents the lack of *total knowledge*.

Book I of *The Circle* establishes that the corporation works to manipulate Mae's sense of identity, her sense of communal, social, and professional worth, by hijacking and monetizing her every communication. The term "manipulate" would not be interpreted pejoratively by the majority of the Circle's clients and employees as, again, they view such technological proficiencies as an avenue to creating stronger societies and healthier individuals. Eggers establishes this sanguine techno-ideological mood in Book I as an ironic setup for the dystopic tenor of Book II and III.

When Mae arrives back at the shore in her kayak she is confronted by the police, who have been tipped by an anonymous caller and from a SeeChange camera posted on the beach. The Maiden's Voyages owner, Marion, clears Mae of all charges, and explains to the police that she is a regular patron. This does not assuage Mae's concerns; she sleeps fitfully and returns to the Circle the next morning determined to work relentlessly to re-establish a sense of personal identity as well as occupational security. Dan calls her in for a morning meeting and reveals that the Circle knows she was questioned by the police, and furthermore, that he finds it especially troubling that she was caught by a Circle technology. Dan—with patois that is nearly indistinguishable to that used by Josiah and Denise in Mae's second disciplinary meeting—accuses Mae of not only acting in a criminal manner, but also, at a fundamental level, he views her disconnected conduct as "selfish." Mae, once again, accepts this charge of egocentrism: '"I know," Mae said, feeling the sting of truth. She had been selfish. She hadn't thought of anything but her own desire.'[171] Dan also informs Mae that Eamon Bailey himself has taken notice of the event and wishes to speak to her personally.

[171] Ibid., p. 276.

That evening, in Bailey's office (which also doubles as his private library), he asks Mae how she feels about the "incident" and whether she would have acted in the same manner if she had known SeeChange cameras were present. She replies negatively to both inquires. Additionally, Bailey questions her on whether secrets between people can ever be a "good thing," foreshadowing the rehearsed dialogue he is planning for the next Dream Friday presentation. During their discussion, Bailey says he believes all governments—globally—should disclose the entirety of their plans to the people they govern and to the world at large, and that such informational clarity would reduce international conflicts based on speculation and geopolitical inference (there is even a direct reference to Julian Assange and WikiLeaks). Eamon Bailey believes that in a world where everyone "has the tools to know anything" and everyone is therefore "held accountable," unethical or immoral choices will no longer be an option, thus the incremental perfection of human beings through the Circle's information technologies.[172] The permanence of the historical record, captured in full video and sound, Bailey believes that such a sociotechnical transition will alter the way that people think and interact with one another, in a manner that is incontrovertibly beneficial to each and every citizen of the digital global village.

But Bailey wants to take the Circle's data-mining abilities far beyond the simplicity of a stationary SeeChange camera. Eamon asks Mae why she was vexed at being called to the stage unexpectedly for the unveiling of the LuvLuv app:

> It just caught me by surprise. He hadn't told me about it beforehand.
> Is that all?
> Well, it presented a distorted impression of me.
> Was the information he presented incorrect? There were factual mistakes?
> Well, it wasn't that. It was just…piecemeal. And maybe that made it *seem* incorrect.
> It was taking a few slivers of me and presenting that as the whole me—
> It seemed incomplete.
> Right.[173]

Speaking about to the Circle's logo, Eamon rearticulates both his individual goals for the corporation, and his personal philosophical disposition concerning a conceivable world devoid of secrets, or "distorted" information: "'A circle is the strongest shape in the universe. Nothing can beat it, nothing can improve upon it, nothing can be more perfect. And that's what we want to be: perfect. So any information that eludes us, anything that's not accessible, prevents us from being perfect.'"[174] Bailey is priming Mae for what he, and the

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[172] Ibid., p. 280-286.
[173] Ibid., italics in original.
[174] Ibid., p. 287.: Notice the word "perfect" is spoken three times, a numerical trinity, the Godhead made up in this instance of the three CEO's of the Circle. We can also discern the paradox generated by Bailey, as only in the abstract or transcendental world of pure mathematics can we find a perfect circle—a world of

Circle, believes to be the only logical method of achieving this form of "perfection," as he once more leans into the simile of self-reflection, claiming that any absence of shared information is, '"like a broken mirror."'

He continues with this Socratic technique, asking Mae:

> "If we look into a broken mirror, a mirror that's cracked or missing parts, what do we get?"
> Now it made sense to Mae. Any assessment, judgement, or picture utilizing incomplete information would always be wrong. "We get a distorted and broken reflection," she said.
> "Right," Bailey said. "And if the mirror is whole?"
> "We see everything."

Through this exchange, Bailey shapes Mae's feelings—and even her memory—into notions of self-centeredness and narcissism, reorienting her reflections of the kayaking trip as being the very actions that demand constant surveillance and absolute informational clarity. Gone are the recollections of self-possession and serenity that Mae experienced while on Blue Island, her peace with the inherent mystery of subjectiveness and the natural world. Mae now believes that it is her *disconnected behaviour* which triggers the metaphysical sensation of the loud tear, that it is her private moments themselves which cause the collapse of her epistemic composure. Eamon convinces Mae to take part in a joint presentation at the following week's Dream Friday event, where the Circle plans to use her as the first individual from the general public to "go transparent." During this unveiling, the corporation's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*-style central refrains are introduced: SECRETS ARE LIES, SHARING IS CARING, and PRIVACY IS THEFT, all seemingly arriving from the epiphanic on-stage realizations of Mae herself, rather than the premeditated result of the presentations studied discourse.[175]

It is within the closing unveiling/"Dream Friday" scenes that the literary correlations between Orwell's late novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Eggers' *The Circle* are made explicit.[176] Both can be read as examples of a desperate rejection of an emerging historical culture—of a new way of being in time—which both authors nevertheless acknowledge as being powerless to prevent. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is perhaps the best-known dystopia of the twentieth century. The future world has been divided into three super-states (Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia), all of which are embroiled in a perpetual war. In Orwell's world, the governments use a manipulative form of language called 'Newspeak', which

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points and infinitely-thin lines with no room for particle inconsistencies or spherical oblateness. In other words, what Bailey is proposing is, at any material or humanistic level, simply impossible.

[175] Ibid., p. 303.

[176] George Orwell. *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* (Penguin Classics: 2000 [1949]).

states ‘War is Peace’ / ‘Freedom is Slavery’ / ‘Ignorance is Strength’ and is able to convince anyone and everyone that ‘2 + 2 = 5’. Britain has been designated ‘Airstrip One’ and monitors its citizens for the Stalin-esque leader, Big Brother.

The protagonist of the narrative, Winston Smith, is, above all else, an activist against historical and cultural relativism. As in so many dystopian or science fiction scenarios, Winston is portrayed as the last sane man in a society that has lost its collective sense of reason. The rise of global superpowers in the wake of World War II—combined with the development of information technologies that allow for the manipulation of recorded reality—has produced in the novel a situation in which the past has become completely malleable. Reflective of postmodern thinking, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* history is retrospective, merely a story fashioned by a violently repressive government to justify its claims to authority. As history is written (‘Newspeak’), invented by the government (‘the Party’), so it is continually rewritten to reflect the changing needs of the present. As Winton sees it, ‘All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as was necessary.’[177] Or, as the Party’s slogan has it, *Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past*.[178] Such a malaise is the cultural and political condition of a populace that has accepted and enacted “doublethink,” but Winston’s own sense of time, his personal awareness of the linearity of history and reality, somehow endures despite the death of history taught by the Party.

Indeed, the central refrain of the novel involves Winston’s single-minded belief that he has discovered a historical fragment which proves that the manufactured versions of history consecutively endorsed by the Party are in fact fabrications, nothing more than lies. The Party is ruthlessly efficient at destroying expired records of official history and replacing them with stories that fit their current desired narrative, but Winston coincidentally comes across a piece of obsolete newsprint that has escaped the process of erasure. This, he is confident, ‘was concrete evidence; it was a fragment of the abolished past, like a fossil bone which turns up in the wrong stratum and destroys a geological theory. It was enough to blow the Party to atoms.’[179] Winston’s crusade against the tyranny of the Party is fuelled by his ‘ancestral memory’ of his abolished past, and by his conviction that he has seen proof that exists, proof that he has tangibly held in his own hands.[180] But as the story unfolds, his faith in the capacity of evidence to prove the reality of history gives way

[177] Ibid., p. 42.
[178] This Party slogan appears twice in the novel, once in Book One, Chapter III, when Winston is thinking about the Party’s control of history and memory, and once in Book Three, Chapter II, when Winston (now a prisoner in the Ministry of Love) talks to O’Brien about the nature of the past.
[179] Ibid., p. 82.
[180] Ibid., p. 100.

to a despairing recognition that such evidence is no weapon against the power of the state to manufacture the past as it sees fit.

It is not difficult to locate thematic similarities between *The Circle* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with the most obvious parallel being the Party and the Circle mutually operating as a political, economic, and sociocultural panopticon. Although the ability to re-write history and control the exchange of information is occurring in both novels, the motivation behind such a will to power—and the implementation of such informational control—is nonetheless quite different between the two narratives. Such a distinction is made clear when we take a closer look at the individual characters rather than the general leitmotif of panopticism within the novels.

As Winston Smith's insurrectionary activities come to the attention of the Party, he eventually is locked away by the thought police, with the main interrogator being the propagandist, O'Brien, an individual that is part spin doctor, part intellectual, and part henchman. O'Brien tortures Winston into compliance with the state, but his aim in correcting Winston is not simply to force him to recant his claims of government corruption, but, instead, a particular kind of re-education, the sole purpose being to make him understand that his belief in the material reality of history is unfounded, that it is crude and dogmatic. In a surreal way, the torture scene at the close of the novel mirrors a university seminar—an impartial inquiry into the philosophy of history—in which O'Brien seeks to dextrously relieve Winston of his ignorance (or, self-imposed naïveté), his belief in *common sense*.

O'Brien (like Bailey) navigates the interrogation through a series of questions: '"Is it your opinion that the past has a real existence? […] Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?"'[181] As these questions are asked, Winston is overcome by a 'feeling of helplessness', a draining of historical conviction (a familiar feeling to undergraduates when first exposed to postmodern thought) that allows him to genuinely consider O'Brien's denial of the objectivity of reality and history. "You believe," O'Brien tells a disoriented Winston,

> …that the nature of reality is something objective, external, existing in its own right. You also believe that the nature of reality is self-evident…But I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else…Whatever the Party holds to be truth, *is* truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party.[182]

[181] Ibid., p. 261.
[182] Ibid.

The narrative of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* plots the weakening of Winston's resistance to the historical regime led by the Party, and his eventual, broken acceptance of the credo that the past has no real existence, that no one lives 'in the old', that the narrative mechanisms of the present produce the past retroactively. But if Winston weakens under the agony of O'Brien's plausible insanity, Orwell's novel asks the reader to stand firm, to remain historically sane. The implied reader feels, with Winston, the absurdity of the idea that truth and reality are constructed rather than given and shares his intuitive sense that memory and experience are grounded in something solid, something non-contingent or distilled through the filter of information media. The mantra that Winston repeats throughout his interrogation—a chant which, albeit, fails Winston in the end, but which the reader is asked to uphold—is that, *two plus to equals four*. Our systems of measurement and expression, experience and memory, this mantra insists, are grounded in an objective reality that precedes and determines them (cause and effect). Two plus two cannot equal five, because such a statement does not correlate with the world that we seek, in language and remembrance, to record.

Is it possible to read Mae Holland as a contemporary literary version of Winston Smith? Are there possible associations to be made between O'Brien and Eamon Bailey or Stenton? Certainly, the implied call to the reader in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* encourages a kind of attempt to maintain a sense of historical positivism in the face of a gathering sense of the fictionality of history. In Orwell's narrative, '…Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth. Just once in his life he had possessed—after the event: that was what counted—concrete, unmistakable evidence of an act of falsification. He had held it between his fingers for as long as thirty seconds.'[183] Here, we see that Winston feels confident that, despite the Party's control of information, he alone had possession of evidence to prove the Party's wrong (at least in his memory). But in *The Circle*, the ultimate goal for Bailey—and for Mae—is to offer unfettered access to everything that is presently happening, and that has happened, to *everyone*. In Orwell's dystopia, 'The two aims of the Party are to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought.'[184] Can we say the same of Eggers' dystopia, i.e., does the Circle have the same goals as the Party? If Bailey's final aim is achieved, history *is* an objective reality in that it can be accessed digitally—at any place and at any moment in time—through recorded video and sound. Viewed from this perspective, Bailey's stated intentions for the corporation, to make the mirror whole and

[183] Ibid., p. 11.
[184] Ibid., p. 194.

complete the circle, are, ideologically, more in line with Winston than O'Brien. Through the Internet and the information technologies that the Circle alone can provide, Eamon wishes to accomplish a worldwide understanding of history which is grounded in a sense of the self-evident reality of the past.

As the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston Smith attempts to fight against the forces of oppression and tyranny, to reveal the truth of the reality: that Big Brother is always watching and changing the past through the manipulation of the information made available to the proles. This type of resistance, or ideological divergence, is not to be found in the protagonist of Mae Holland, she is not fighting against the Circle's digital arms race for human attention, against the monopolistic intentions of Stenton, or the utopian visions of Eamon Bailey. Indeed, she is helping them, she 'loved Big Brother' from the very beginning and believes in Bailey's call for total informational clarity.[185] However, there still remains the final Wise Man, and as *The Circle* rapidly unfolds in Book II and III, the role that he plays in the average users' capacity for 'the possibility of independent thought' becomes apparent through the character of Mae Holland, as she continues to relentlessly climb the company ranks.

At the start of Book II, Mae has gone completely transparent, and her occupational responsibilities shift to meet this fact; she now works almost exclusively as a real-time public relations specialist through the combined technologies of SeeChange and her personal, first-person point of view recordings, which can be accessed by anyone, at effectively all times. As a result of Mae's transparency, she has gained 2.1 million followers, 'is averaging 845,029 unique followers to her live footage in any given day,' and is in the top-ten of PartiRank.[186] Mae also signifies a shift occurring in Washington, as ninety-percent of the country's elected officials have now gone transparent in a process the Circle dubs "Clarification."[187] It is at the point in the novel that Eggers' analogies between the Circle and the social media corporations in the real world become admittedly heavy-handed, as Mae's opening day in Book II demonstrates. She is instructed (by way of her now dual-functioning earpiece) by AG, or "additional guidance," to broadcast for her viewers Stenton's new personal project, an outdoor aquarium or "wildlife exhibit." Mae is assigned to show the feeding of a previously unknown species of shark, one which has a physical anatomy so transparent that one can see even the food it eats being digested and processed in its body.

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[185] Ibid., p. 311.
[186] Ibid., p. 312.
[187] Ibid., p. 325.

The translucent shark, by insatiably devouring everything that is dropped into its tank, from salmon and jellyfish to crustaceans and a Pacific sea turtle, symbolizes the Circle's own unrelenting headway in the financial markets of social media and information technology. Stenton's adventurous pet project is more about what he represents as one of the company's three CEO's than any actual desire to benefit the scientific community. Here Eggers is plainly soliciting his readers to consider the reality of their present digital situation, asking them: when this kind of capitalistically motivated information technology corporation is able to operate without regulation within the free-market system, what is the result? Or, as the author contemplates himself during an interview with Mimi Lok in 2015: "What is the trade-off when everything is filtered through or being decided on by one central organization?"[188] The opening of Book II, with the shark-tank scenario being recorded and live-streamed by Mae's transparency, speaks unambiguously to this enquiry: like a shark, everything in the Circle's path is consumed; everything is engulfed and processed through the Circle's social media systems.

The oceanic environment in which a predatory shark exists is nothing new, but Stenton putting this specifically adapted class of shark into contact with alien ecosystem makes it able to absorb anything that is thrown into the tank, afterwards dispelling its prey as a uniform grey ash.[189] In a similar way, the Circle takes in start-up firms, venture capital, even political lobbyists, through a monopolistic process, subsuming the competition while homogenising outside influences, forcing them to accept their corporate ideology. The translucent shark is the fictional literalization of Kevin Kelly's aforementioned (chapter two) "ever-ripening superorganism," the technium in this instance being ruled over by the Circle. Lest we forget, the Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest often comes at the cost of the elimination of one species for another. Adaptation, if not efficient enough, loses ground to the processes of extinction. Eggers urges us to recognize what is lost in our digital saturation, while Kelly—much like Eric Packer—views it as an inherent feature in both biological and technological evolution.

The scene also makes evident that any government, corporation, or member of the general clientele that does not accept the Circle as a constructive humanitarian movement is simply of the past, from an obsolete generation that is no longer required for the betterment of society. As the Pacific sea turtle is about to be dropped into the tank, Mae thinks:

> Feeding this kindly creature to the shark, no matter the necessity or scientific benefit, would not please many of Mae's watchers. Already zings were coming through her

[188] "An Interview with Mimi Lok"
[189] Ibid., p. 318.

> wrist. *Please don't kill that turtle. It looks like my granddad!* There was a second thread, though, that insisted the shark, which was not much bigger than the turtle, would not be able to swallow or digest the reptile, with its impenetrable shell. But just when Mae was about to question the imminent feeding, an AG voice came through Mae's earpiece. "Hold tight. Stenton wants to see this happen."[190]

The turtle, like everything else, is hastily and violently eaten and digested by the shark, which recalls the imperative of the emergent digital economy earlier discussed by Kelly, Rushkoff, and Terranova: that of continual *growth* and unrelenting *expansion* into new marketplaces and commercial territories. The times they are a-changin' for Mae, that archaic intensifying prefix being replaced in our own hypercapitalistic technological reality over the past decade with the *i*: i-pod, i-pad, and i-phone—the transcendent merger of the "*i*nternet" and the "*i*ndividual" with personal gadgetry that Steve Jobs was adamant about branding into Apple's digital products.

A few days following Mae's shark-tank broadcasting, her second interaction with Dr Villalobos occurs, only this time the good doctor has some troubling news for the young protagonist. Of the sixteen SeeChange cameras monitoring Mae's father, twelve have been disabled, prompting Dr Villalobos to instruct Mae to visit her parents in order to remedy the situation.[191] During her initial visit home while transparent, Mae's followers were able to view first-hand how the Circle's medical treatments had been affecting her father. They witnessed that his health was steadily improving, but, that he still struggled with intense physical exertion, watching in real-time as he fell awkwardly while walking upstairs. After that fall, Mae was inundated with "thousands" of concerned messages and zings and smiles from her followers, 'Mae cried reading the messages; it was a flood of love. People sharing their own stories, so many living with MS themselves…Mae had been forwarding the messages to her parents, but after a few days decided to make their own email and mailing address public, so her parents could be emboldened and inspired by the outpouring themselves, every day.'[192] What Eggers makes clear is that Mae does not ask—or even consider—asking her parents for permission before making their private contact information available to her two million-plus viewers.

After preparing a seemingly impromptu dinner with her parents, 'They made lasagna [*sic*], with Mae adding a few ingredients Additional Guidance had asked her to bring and display to watchers,' Mae quickly approaches the topic of the disconnected SeeChange cameras: '"How can anyone provide you with good health care when you don't allow them

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[190] Ibid., p. 317, italics in original.
[191] Ibid., p. 358.
[192] Ibid., p. 362.

to see how you're doing? It's like going to see a doctor and not allowing her to take your pulse."'[193] Her parents readily agree with Mae's arguments, complimenting her powers of persuasion and logic, to which Mae thinks, 'It was odd; they were being far too cooperative.'[194] Mae, encouraged by her parents obliging attitude and the fact that she is enjoying a rising number of viewers, decides to make an uncharacteristic toast: '"Here's a toast to you two…And while we're at it, a toast to all the thousands of people who reached out to you guys after the last time I was here."'[195] To which Mae's mother responds, '"Well, we sure did get a *lot* of messages"'

This small moment is of crucial importance to the overall narrative, as it is the only instance of non-Circler interaction that Mae has after she has gone transparent. It reveals Mae's distorted sense of personal identity, as her individual behaviour is constantly under scrutinization, not only by her live viewership, but by Additional Guidance. Such perpetual observation alters her behaviour, even during instances stereotypically associated with notions of being in a safe and familiar space (one's family home), where she could be unconcerned with being (mis)judged. The scene is also of paramount significance in demonstrating the manner in which individual's outside of the Circle's target demographic (unfettered by the hypnotic sway of the company's digital dogmas) might be reacting to the panoptic surveillance and data-mining being effectuated. Mae's mother insists that they are grateful for the outpouring of support from her watchers, but also gestures towards a sense of information overload, a psychological condition based not on Luddite sympathies, but on inherent human limitations. As she explains, '"…Even if we spent one minute on each response, that's a thousand minutes. Think of it: sixteen hours just for some basic response to the messages! Oh jeez, now I sound ungrateful."' Mae, once again, cannot comprehend this kind of riposte to the Circle's social media networks, as, in her mind, her parents are, 'complaining about people caring about them,' a response that she believes is entirely irrational.[196] The dialogue highlights that Mae has become incapable of any worldview not filtered through the lenses of the Circle.

Mae's father politely asks for a cessation: '"Just…send your good wishes, your good vibes, our way. No need to email or zing or anything. Just good thoughts. Send 'em through the air. That's all we ask."'[197] At this point Mae begins to lose her temper and the stark differences in interpretation emerge between daughter and parent. Mae, with her

[193] Ibid., p. 363.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid., p. 364.
[196] Ibid., p. 364.
[197] Ibid., p. 365.

unsuspecting and sanguine attitude towards the Circle, attempts to correct her father's request: '"I think you just mean to say…that it'll take you a little while to answer *all* of the messages. But you'll get to them *all* eventually."'[198] Mae's supercilious gratitude for winning a job at the Circle—and her resultant ascension within the company ranks and her ever-growing public popularity by way of full transparency—readily warps itself into aggressive subservience to the Circle's corporate whims.

Mae's father remains unbending in his appeal, which fundamentally rejects the digital imperative for the instantaneous, obstinately looking directly into Mae's transparency camera—an action that he and his wife had been explicitly told not to do—he articulates his argument:

> Well, I can't say that, Mae. I don't want to promise that. It's actually very stressful. And we've already had many people get angry when they don't hear back from us in a given amount of time. They send one message, then they send ten more in the same day. "Did I say something wrong?" "Sorry." "I was only trying to help." "Up yours." They have these neurotic conversations with themselves. So I don't want to imply the kind of immediate message turnaround that most of your friends seem to require.[199]

At first, the healthcare provided by the Circle was seen as miracle, with Mae's father undergoing the finest treatments available for his MS. Now, with the corporation instilling its obligatory SeeChange technologies and the public exposure of their personal contact details and data, Mae's parents assert that their stress-levels have been *increased* as the Circle's demands for informational clarity have exacerbated their anxiety. Eggers' "trade off" (the exact phrase used by Mercer) has clear implications: in a digital world governed by the Circle's social media technologies, information becomes the new currency, and personal privacy is the very liberty that is bartered to these new captains of industry.

The second half of Book II runs the risk of jeopardizing the sense of realism that Eggers had established, as the Circle introduces with break-neck speed an ever-expanding barrage of products, applications, and social media features. Mae returns to the Circle, where, the following week, she is asked to participate in a "Gang of 40" meeting, an unprecedented request as Mae will—through her transparency—broadcast the famously private and confidential assembly to the general public in real-time. During the meeting, Mae receives the highest viewership of her transparency yet, as over seven-million people watch the events unfold. In this scene, Mae's popularity lends itself directly to a new sense of power, as she has the audacity to interrupt Bailey with a suggestion of her own regarding the topic is electoral participation. Bailey is putting to the floor a proposal: '"What if your

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[198] Ibid., my italics.
[199] Ibid., p. 365.

Circle profile *automatically* registered you to vote?"' Mae takes this idea even a step further: '"Why not *require* every voting-age citizen to have a Circle account?"'[200] This is an entirely logical extrapolation to both Bailey and Stenton, as they endorse Mae's suggestion by enumerating other government articles, regulations, and edicts that are required by law. If users—who are now legally obliged to have a Circle account *and* to participate in the electoral process—fail to vote, the Circle will freeze their Circle account. Meaning, one essentially has to use "Demoxie" (the brand name for this tool), as the Circle advances itself as a digital replacement for all governmental requirements and services, from paying taxes to qualifying for a driver's-licence. To be an active and law abiding citizen of the USA, one now has to maintain an up-to-date Circle profile. Stenton articulates: '"It would eliminate the guesswork…Eliminate lobbyists. Eliminate polls. It might even eliminate Congress. If we can know the will of the people at any time, without filter, without misinterpretation or bastardization, wouldn't it eliminate Washington?"'[201]

The Circle not only wants to exercise total informational power moving forward, it also wants to obtain a working history of each individual user through a system called "PastPerfect." Annie, being openly envious of Mae's success in the corporation through her transparency, volunteers as the first Circler involved in the program. PastPerfect works to find any and all information concerning one's family history, looking hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of years into one's genetic, familial, and digital timeline. Annie discovers not only that her British ancestors owned and sold Irish slaves, but that her American family also traded and owned African slaves in the USA, and fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Days following this realization, PastPerfect reveals that Annie's parents had once witnessed a man fall off of a pier in San Francisco, but had not helped or dialled 911, and the individual was found dead on the shore the next morning. All of this information and historical content is being uploaded and released on Annie's Circle profile in an attempt to know her completely, "perfectly."

PastPerfect is wreaks havoc on Annie's family, and, as she explains to Mae in an unaired bathroom conversation, she, '"need[s] to shut it down,"' and that if PastPerfect does not stop, '"[She] will go into some kind of coma."'[202] Again, Eggers is rather heavy-handed here towards the end of the novel, as Annie, from the sheer amount of stress and emotional pressure caused by the exposure of her family history to the general public does, indeed, fall

[200] Ibid., pp. 384-88.
[201] Ibid., pp. 391-92.
[202] Ibid., p. 436.

into a coma by *The Circle's* conclusion. Mercer, in his final letter to Mae before his decision to go "underground," exhorts her to persuade Annie to quit PastPerfect:

> We are not meant to know everything…Did you ever think that perhaps our minds are delicately calibrated between the known and the unknown? That our souls need the mysteries of night and the clarity of day? You people are creating a world of ever-present daylight, and I think it will burn us all alive. There will be no time to reflect, to sleep, to cool. Did it occur to you Circle people, ever, that we can only contain so much?[203]

Mae, continuing in her spellbound confidence of the Circle, neither understands, nor heeds, Mercer's warnings, and Annie's resultant coma can be read as symbolic of Mercer's "ever-present daylight" form of psychological and neurological exhaustion. It also gestures towards Mae's own loss of empathetic connection, as Annie's plea to shut down PastPerfect, and her resultant zinging—'*I don't know if we should know everything*'—is met by Mae stone-heartedly calling Annie's behaviour a 'terrible glitch.'[204]

The concluding unveiling presentation in the novel is directed by Mae herself, the new technology being introduced on this occasion being called "SoulSearch," a crowd-sourcing social media application that guarantees the location of any individual on the planet in less than twenty minutes.[205] Mae demonstrates the power of SoulSearch by attempting to find a person that she has not seen or spoken to in months, and that is intentionally living outside the Circle's social media networks: Mercer. He is located by a group of locals in less than eight minutes, many recording his actions with SeeChange cameras. Mercer flees to his truck, but one of his pursuers attaches a SeeChange camera to the passenger side window. While driving, Mercer discovers the camera, dislodges it, and throws it out his driver-side window. In order to document the success of SoulSearch, Mae sends SeeChange drones to give her presentation a live-video feed. The drones are equipped with microphones, and Mae yells to Mercer repeatedly to cease driving, '"I just wanted to say hi."' Mercer shows no signs of stopping, and begins to drive over a bridge at ever-increasing speeds. Mae shouts, '"stop the car and surrender…You're surrounded,"' hyperbolically mimicking the commands of the police.[206] At this point, 'Mae saw something come over Mercer's face, something like determination, something like serenity' and Mercer—quite literally—drives his truck off the bridge, crashing onto the rocks below.[207]

The extreme nature of these plot developments, and the incredible pace at which the story proceeds in Book II and III (Book III is only three-pages long), is a narrative device

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[203] Ibid., pp. 430-431.
[204] Ibid., p. 435.
[205] Ibid., p. 447.
[206] Ibid., p. 458-59.
[207] Ibid., p. 461.

that allows Eggers to reflect on, and effectively mimic, the wild acceleration of our own cultural digitization. With both Annie's coma and Mercer's suicide bordering on the farcical, the tone of the novel reveals Eggers' own digital anxieties and less a coherent conclusion to an otherwise relatively believable sequence of events and technological evolutions. The story is saved from dystopic absurdity through the final conversation, a subterranean server-room encounter between Kalden—now know to Mae as a doppelganger for the inventor of TruYou, the original Wise Man, Tyler Alexander Gospodinov—in which Ty/Kalden attempts to convince Mae to read his manifesto to her audience, "The Rights of Humans in a Digital Age" with the hope of preventing the completion of the circle.[208] Mae ultimately decides to reject Ty/Kalden's request, his last-ditch effort to kill the translucent shark that is the Circle. Why? Mae's answer exposes the complicity embedded in our own usage of social media and digital networking applications, and speaks to an age-old existential yearning for communal recognition.

Ty/Kalden urges Mae to open her eyes to the reality of the Circle's goals for total informational transparency, '"who wants to be watched all the time?"' To which Mae responds:

> I do. I *want* to be seen. I want proof I existed…Most people do. Most people would trade everything they know, every*one* they know—they'd trade it all to know they've been seen, and acknowledged, that they might even be remembered. We all know we die. We all know the world is too big for us to be significant. So all we have is the hope of being seen, or heard, even for a moment.[209]

Mae's overstated insistence on the Circle's digital imperative is evocative of Eric Packer's own techno-ideology in *Cosmopolis*, which is to say, this longing for acknowledgement is a feature inherent to the human condition, and longing on a large scale, according to DeLillo, is what makes history. To historicize is to remember: a person, a place, the words written, the language spoken, the story. Cultural digitization allows one to historicize their own existence, to catalogue in the ether of the Internet the ordinary reality of their day to day lives. For Mae, the value of this digital register is worth more to her than anything else.

Although many readers might finally come to see Mae as a literary amalgamation of protagonist and antagonist, hero and villain, the novel's conclusion accomplishes a reorientation of existential perspective, as, for Eggers, Mae Holland is representative of the average American citizen. Is it the digital technology that is responsible for Mae's selfish behaviour and loss of emotional connection to other human beings, or is digital technology itself simply an extension of human desire? Did her digital immersion and the designs of

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[208] Ibid., p. 485.
[209] Ibid., italics in original.

the Circle's Wise Men cause her loss of identity? Recalling Victor's pronouncement from *Underworld*, '"once they imagine in the beginning, it makes everything true…Nothing you can believe is not coming true,"'[210] Mae's decision to abandon everything in her life for the chance of being recognized reminds us that it is our shared imagination, our communal beliefs, which ultimately drive the success or failure of a technology.

The Circle implores the reader to consider the motivations behind their own digital inclinations, with the hope that, in the end, one does not have to depend on social media and the Church of the Holy Internet to experience a sense of communal value or personal significance. *The Circle* strikes a chord with an epiphanic moment from Eggers' own life, written more than fifteen years ago—after the author experienced the tragedy of the death of his father and mother—that we are all, 'the bright new stars born of a screaming black hole, the nascent suns burst from the darkness, from the grasping void of space that folds and swallows—a darkness that would devour anyone not as strong as we. We are oddities...We capture everyone's imagination.'[211] Eggers asks us to remember our most basic human element, that—even in the absence of social media reification—every individual has worth, and that it is our relationships with other human beings which assists us in recognizing and confronting the "grasping void," and which continually reawakens our collective and subjective imaginations.

[210] Ibid., p. 801.
[211] *A Heartbreaking Work*, p. 96.

Conclusion

Making Small Leaps: Innovative Epigones

I've spent an entire week without reading any books or talking about them too loudly. I'm learning to work my äppärät's screen, the colourful pulsating mosaic of it, the fact that it knows every last stinking detail about the world, whereas my books only know the minds of their authors.

-Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story*[1]

I conclude with a brief recapitulation: this thesis began with the assertion that the contemporary American novel has been (and is currently being) transformed by the dynamic processes of cultural digitization. In examining the writings of Don DeLillo and Dave Eggers, I have demonstrated through various fictional examples the manner in which this claim can be substantiated. But when it comes to the question of literary periodization, I am hesitant to say that this thesis has *proven* anything concerning the expiration of the postmodern aesthetic. Indeed, open up any novel from the past twenty years published in the West and one is destined to encounter at least one of the main features of the postmodern—the proclivity for pastiche, the ironic self-referentiality and recursive "looping" structures, the problematizing of representation, the Lyotardian "incredulity towards metanarratives," a sceptical outlook towards totalizing scientific, economic and political systems, and the list could go on. Although I do contend repeatedly throughout the past four chapters that the stylistic and epistemic features of postmodern fiction are—at times—repudiated by DeLillo and Eggers, because of the sheer scale and scope of thematic agendas, characterizations, and plotlines that one might call "postmodern fiction" it becomes next to impossible to claim an empirical (a dirty-word for the postmodernist) shift or superannuation of one literary period for another. As a humble participant in this scholarly discussion, what I *have* accomplished in this thesis is, instead, illustrating the variety of ways in which these two authors depart from the traditional understanding(s) of what makes a novel "postmodern," with the main engine driving the contemporary narrative *away* from the postmodern categorization being the ubiquity of digital technologies in the American cultural milieu, and the precipitous speed in which this digital saturation has taken place.

Don DeLillo, assiduously working as a canary in the coal mine for over forty years, speaks vicariously through the protagonist of his most recent novel *Zero K* (2016): 'This is what I do to defend myself against some spectacle of nature. *Think of a word*.'[2] Others have attempted to describe this movement away from the literary schemata of postmodernism, to name this emergent "spectacle of nature": Alan Kirby's

[1] *Super Sad True Love Story*, (Granta Books: New York, 2010), p. 76.
[2] Don DeLillo. *Zero K*, (Scriber: New York, 2016), p. 230, my italics.

'digimodernism,'[3] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker's 'metamodernism,'[4] and Gilles Lipovestsky's 'hypermodernity,'[5] are a few examples. These attempts to define what is happening *now* and where we might be *heading* are—at the point of my writing—over five years old. But how much can really change in half a decade? The answer is reflected in the writings that this thesis has explored, as the novels of Don DeLillo and Dave Eggers attest to a generalized acceleration of cultural transformations through the widespread use of digital and information technologies. Although the theorists cited above also contend that digitization is the main conduit for cultural, and therefore literary, renovation, the digital technologies which they employ to articulate the main thrust of their theories have *themselves* already been made obsolete. Through this course of hurried obsolescence, Eric Packer's individual longing for digital metempsychosis and his frustration with the antiquated language and technologies of his time has materialized as a culture-wide phenomenon.

Even distinguished literary critics of Don DeLillo, postmodernism, and contemporary fiction, such as David Cowart, appear to be missing this key ingredient in their theoretical observations. For example, in Cowart's most recent contribution, *The Tribe of Pyn*, he writes: 'Supremely comfortable with the new technology and the new science, the postmodern ephebes are the literary equivalents of kids who can program the DVD player to interface with the stereo system, the cell phone, the digital camera, the camcorder, and the MP3 device.'[6] This book was published in 2015, only a year ago, but, like Eric Packer and Mae Holland, I cannot help but become agitated by his use of outdated analogies. Although his point might be accurate, most Millennials have subsumed the various technologies that Cowart describes into a single digital tool: the smartphone. In fact, the physical nature of the technologies portrayed, such as the DVD player, have been incorporated into the cyberspatial marketplace, one entirely reliant on the user having a secure and continuous Internet connection, and this online dependency itself is typically bolstered by the fact that the average user relies on only one or two telecommunication companies to provide such Internet access.

As Dave Eggers meticulously examines in *The Circle* (2013), once online, the user is almost instantaneously bottlenecked into a specific kind of Internet, as social media

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[3] Alan Kirby. *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture*, (Continuum: New York, 2009).
[4] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker. "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Volume 2, pp. 1-14, 2010.
[5] Gilles Lipovestsky. *Hypermodern Times*, (Polity Press: 2006).
[6] David Cowart. *The Tribe of Pyn: Literary Generations in the Postmodern Period*, (University of Michigan Press: 2015), p. 19.

networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and information technology corporations, such as Google, Intel, Microsoft, and Apple, provide the vast majority of both software and hardware capabilities, from the applications and web-browsers, to the smartphones on which they are downloaded.[7] If one wishes to contemporaneously trace canonized American fiction, as Cowart so brilliantly does in his writing, s/he must be cognizant of the fact the literary history is itself speeding up to match the processes of cultural digitization. When Cowart (2015) asks—'Does even genius get only fifteen minutes?'[8]—he applies a rhetorical analysis which is nearly fifty-years old, as Andy Warhol made his prophetic decree in 1968. Today, the average Vine video runs for six seconds, the average Snapchat video ten seconds, and the average YouTube video clocks-in at four minutes and twenty seconds. To answer Cowart's question: it is not that the Great American Novel has been forsaken; it is simply the case that we may no longer have the time, attention span, or cognitive proficiencies in our digitally saturated atmosphere to give these writers their due.

While many have been proclaiming the downfall of the American reader since the 1980s, recent studies reveal that—although numbers are declining—the losses are is less precipitous than once imagined, with the readership actually increasing for the young and within the female population (Rainie & Perrin, 2015).[9] My thesis, however, is interested in the changing topography of the American novel, the specific *types* of narratives that the "serious author" tends to be writing. Quotation marks are utilized due to the fact that such designations tend to be attributed only after the narrative is deemed worthy of canonical consideration by academics, whereas the individual reader might disagree—or come to the very same conclusion—far before academia has had time to reckon either inclusion or exclusion (this university-level educational latency is also something that will have to be remedied in the near future order for academic institutions themselves to sustain relevancy in the digital age). In 1964, Ralph Ellison wrote, '[o]ne function of serious literature is to deal with the moral core of a given society.'[10] We must reflect on, with Ellison's parlance, exactly what we are "dealing with" in the contemporary American novel, the variety ways in which the "moral core" of the nation is brought to light through recent publications in US fiction.

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[7] Dave Eggers. *The Circle*, (Penguin Books: 2013).
[8] *The Tribe of Pyn*, p. 21.
[9] Lee Rainie and Andrew Perrin. "Slightly fewer Americans are reading print books, new [Pew-Poll] finds," *FactTank*, October 19th, 2015. Available online at: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/19/slightly-fewer-americans-are-reading-print-books-new-survey-finds/
[10] Ralph Ellison. *Shadow and Act*, (Random House: New York, 1964), p. 182.

Over the past decade of critical thinking and writing on this subject, one thing has been made clear by the majority of scholars evaluating the current literary scene: the ephemerality of truth that postmodernism so vehemently endorses, its representation of the unmitigated collapse of Modernity—both scientific and technological progress—is *no longer* the cultural or literary dominant. As previously mentioned, it is not that the postmodern project itself has been entirely debunked; rather, a growing consensus is disparaging of its paralysing self-reflexivity, its ontological emptiness, its disingenuous use of irony, and its relativistic approach to historiography. If one believes, as I do, that the novel works as a DeLillian "counter-narrative/history," that it has the power to affect change in the real world, the philosophy of postmodernism does not inspire confidence in its capacity to usefully address the salient and urgent problems of the 21st century.

As discussed in chapter one, when the tenets of postmodern uncertainty (aporia) were being recognized as the prevailing cultural disposition, neoteric technological systems and computational gadgetry were simultaneously being to be taken for granted as a quotidian part of the American experience. Certainly, postmodern authors and philosophers took their shots at the rarefied schools of Science and Technology—the Virilian notion of the "New Occupation" of the technoscientific project—unmasking the hypocrisies and capitalistic motivations behind many political, philanthropic, and academic entities. It was not until September 11th, 2001, with the merger of *digital* technologies and the ubiquity of *Internet access* that the postmodern aesthetic truly began to depreciate in cultural, and therefore literary, value. The American experience was profoundly altered with this unification, this marriage of the omnipresence of the Internet and the intermediality of our digital devices.

Don DeLillo has the unique ability to describe our digital subconscious (if such an account is even possible), as we read from *Zero K*, through the central character of Jeffrey Lockhart: 'I maintain myself on the puppet drug of personal technology. Every touch of a button brings the neural rush of finding something that I never knew and never needed to know until it appears at my anxious fingertips, where it remains for a shaky second before disappearing forever.'[11] The "neural rush" of this "puppet drug" resonates with the language of addiction that Jonathan Franzen applied in the opening quote to chapter three. Yet, in questioning exactly what substance Jeffrey it hooked on, the principal distinction between the postmodern episteme and the contemporary literary aesthetic is revealed. Like Mae Holland, the object of desire for Lockhart is total *knowledge* and *information*. The

[11] Ibid., p. 55.

scene also gestures towards the prevalence of digital technologies and the Internet in the banal American experience, rendering this dependence on informational awareness as an underlying cultural condition, a systemic permeation of danah boyd's "always on" psychology.[12]

With the advent of the amalgamation of digital technologies and the pervasive nature of Internet availability came not only the subjective ideological reorientation of the individual user, but an extensive change in the general attitude of the American public. At the very core of this culture-wide change in perspective is *trust*, a reestablishment of stable beliefs in the reliability, candour, and benevolent motivations of people working in the economic and academic sectors of science and technology. When mathematicians, computer engineers, neurologists, technological entrepreneurs, and modern physicists are once again making headline news, the typical American citizens faith in the technoscientific endeavour is reinvigorated. When eccentric characters such as Elon Musk, Ray Kurzweil, Neil deGrasse Tyson, and Brian Greene regularly appear on late-night talk shows and sitcoms—or when they produce well received and popular television programmes in their own right, such as Tyson's contemporary reintroduction of Carl Sagan's *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*—the atmosphere of instilled cynicism and intellectual wariness begins to diminish, and in its place a new kind of confidence is inspired in the practical and humanistic application of the scientific method.

This is not to say that the suspicion and incredulity of postmodernism rhetoric cannot still serve an important function. Eggers and DeLillo are both well aware that, although the trust in the processes of scientific discourse may well be re-established, it is the marriage of digital technology and the Internet with the hyper-capitalistic motivations of present-day information technology corporations which still require the cutting eye of the deconstructionist. Now, the language of science—mathematics—is being appropriated and employed within the most lucrative spaces of the globalized economy, the computer engineering, software coding, and algorithm formulation of networked social media and info-tech conglomerates. As this thesis explored in chapter three and four, the dissemination of social media into the commonplace features of American life leave many psychologists, neuroscientists, anthropologists, and sociologists concerned about the next generation of digital natives. This unease is not only in regards to their rapidly changing mental faculties and interpersonal communications, but also their financial opportunities in a neoliberal

[12] danah boyd. "Participating in the Always-On Lifestyle," as found in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg, (NYU Press: New York, 2012).

political environment where anything and everything is co-opted for the perpetuation of the capitalistically stimulated free-market economy.

Towards the end of David Kirkpatrick's journalistic examination of the genesis of the world's largest social media network, *The Facebook Effect* (2010), Mark Zuckerberg is quoted articulating the company's "critical" axioms. With parlance almost verbatim to the "core beliefs" expressed by Dan early on in *The Circle*, Zuckerberg exclaims: "One of the things that is critical in my mind is that in some sense humans maintain mastery over technology, rather than the other way around. The value of [Facebook] economically, politically, culturally—whatever—stems from the idea that *people are the most important thing*."[13] Throughout Facebook's twelve-year existence, this rhetoric has only intensified. I opened this thesis with a quote from President Barack Obama from 2015, in which he explained the "necessity" of Internet access, and the UN's designation of Internet availability as a "basic human right." If we assume Zuckerberg is telling the truth, then Facebook's mission is to achieve this nascent humanitarian liberty of worldwide connectivity through its social media (Facebook, 2013).[14] As discussed in chapters three and four, this rosy disposition is not an uncommon outlook among theorists of cultural digitization (Wellman & Rainie, 2012).[15] As the technological determinist argues, social media permit new forms of networked social organization due to the fact that it has *always* been part of human nature to desire—or *long* for—connection to others. Thus, as Eamon Bailey and Mark Zuckerberg contend, the power of the Circle and Facebook lies in the hearts and minds of *humans* connected online, and *not* in the formal capacities of the medium; its power stems from the ability to realize eternal human longings in the material form of digital technology.

The vast majority of research on Facebook and social media in general—aside from some of the more Marxist readings of social media as 'free labour' (Terranova, 2004),[16] and the emerging perspective of 'software studies' (Grosser, 2014)[17]—reflects on the different ways in which networked media intervene in the daily life of human users and human institutions. Such research focuses on the myriad conditions that the Internet simultaneously enables—the pleasures *and* anxieties that people experience online while interacting on social media networks. These studies, which have been taking place since

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[13] David Kirkpatrick. *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World*, (Simon & Shuster: New York, 2010), p. 325, my italics.
[14] Statement made by Facebook in 2013. Available online at: https://www.facebook.com/isconnectivityahumanright
[15] Barry Wellman and Lee Rainie. *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, (MIT Press: MA, 2012).
[16] Tiziana Terranova. *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, (Pluto Press: London, 2004).
[17] Benjamin Grosser. "What Do Metrics Want? How Quantification Prescribes Social Interaction on Facebook," *Computational Culture: A Journal of Software Studies*, November 9th, 2014.

the very conception of social media, perpetuate "humanist" assumptions that underscore Zuckerberg's definition of Facebook's primary enterprise: that social media networking instigates *socializing*—and therefore subjectively and communally advantageous—behavioural precedents. Yet, the importance of human agency is an a priori assumption promulgated by the methods used to study social media, such as Sherry Turkle's employment of ethnographies and interviews in *Reclaiming the Conversation* (2015), which inherently give privilege to human actors.[18] As we approach the thirteenth year of Facebook's existence, however, the specific infrastructural attributes (data-mining, management algorithms, server farms, and storage "cloud computing" techniques) of the most successful social networking site in history call into question the role of digital technologies as subservient, free, and unrestricted assistants in the conservation of human connections.

We are, after all, examining some of the most profitable corporations on the planet. Chapter four of this thesis explored how Mae Holland's personal acclimatization to the Circle—her digitized psychology and the resultant "loud tear"—correspondingly involved the monetization of her every interaction, preference, and interpersonal communication. Within *The Circle*, access to information not only has to be free, it also has to be entirely unfettered, available to all, at any time and at any place. Eggers envisioned a world in which "privacy is theft" and "secrets are lies," an Internet-enabled ecosystem in which, "all that happens must be known." If we are, indeed, moving towards a new Digital Renaissance, some of the tactics of postmodernism can still be applied effectively.

Looking back to the original Renaissance era, the literature and philosophy of the time retrieved the emphasis on a single hero. This was the age of supreme individuals, such as Leonardo da Vinci's Godlike "Renaissance Man," and Faustus, who sought to transcend mortality. They restored and updated the ancient Greek notion of a heroic "self." This emphasis on the individual, in turn, supported the values of self-interest and competitive economics. Our Digital Renaissance, on the other hand, is characterized by innovations such as social media networking, computer gaming, and a ceaseless online presence through computational gadgetry. The contemporary narrative is less about individual authorship or heroes and more the collective entertainment of fantasy role playing games and fanfiction sites (*Game of Thrones* and *50 Shades of Grey* are some immediate examples). We no longer read vicariously about a single character enduring the "hero's journey"; we, instead, join a MMOG—massively multiplayer online game—and make our choices about how it

[18] Sherry Turkle. *Reclaiming the Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, (Penguin: New York, 2015).

will progress in the virtual company of thousands of others, or sign into social networking sites to discover the thoughts, actions, and "timelines" of millions of others. In the process, we train ourselves to make collective decisions concerning the most popular—or "trending"—digitally distributed fictions. Instead of technologically recovering the values of the philosophies Enlightenment thought, we retrieve those of the that are gaining the most "smiles" and "likes" on social media.

On the surface, it may seem contradictory to concurrently argue for the emergence of a new literary aesthetic while maintaining that the postmodern episteme lives on. This thesis has examined how we *have* once again ascertained trust in science and technology, but with the developments of cultural digitization, the "meanings we make in usage" have been radically altered since the zenith of postmodern sensibilities in early 1990s America.[19] How quickly the participatory culture of the digital age has transmogrified *trust* into *apathy*. This collective indifference to the effects of cultural digitization—as both DeLillo and Eggers warn in their novels—if left unchecked can manifest the 'end of skepticism': we simply accept things as they are with no questions asked, we accede to the "reality" of the hyperreal, the necessity of digital hyperconnectivity and hyperreflexivity within the always-connected milieu of social media networks.[20]

This is where the postmodern aesthetic can serve (and will always serve) its most important function. When äppäräts and iPhones can answer any query, when Google and Facebook promise constant connections to *other human beings*, all for free, what happens to our sense of imagination and creativity, our sense of empathy and individuality? What are the possible disadvantages or negative consequences to our digital communications and actions? Here, Baudrillard's refutation of the logic of representation—his overturning the hierarchy of original and copy—claims that the "real" itself has been reduced to an aesthetic effect. This resonates with Turkle's (2011) "performative self" and Wallace's (1993) "spectatorial self," which *still* teach us to continually question our digital surroundings. Derrida's notion of deconstruction also assists in this interrogation, as it stipulates the structural impossibility of transcendent signification, the indeterminacy of the process of reference (applied to both language/metaphor and the nature of reality through Lyotardian "language games" of power and legitimation). As John D. Caputo argues:

> Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell—a secure axiom or a pithy maxim—the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquillity. Indeed, that is a good rule of thumb in deconstruction. *That* is what deconstruction is all about, its very meaning and mission, if it has any. One might even say that cracking nutshells is what

[19] Paul du Gay, S. Hall, L. Janes, H. Mackay and K. Negus. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, (Sage: London, 1997), p. 85, italics in original.
[20] DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*, (Penguin: 1985), p. 27.

> deconstruction *is*. In a nutshell…Have we not run up against a paradox and an aporia [something contradictory]…the paralysis and impossibility of an aporia is just what impels deconstruction, what rouses it out of bed in the morning.[21]

At this time in human history, there are no perfect circles, all that happens simply cannot be known—not by a single individual traversing the Web, and not collectively through the participatory culture of social media networks. For our contemporary authors, in Caputo's terms, there is an ever present abundance of metaphysical nuts to crack.

My thesis ultimately suggests that an alternative, as opposed to an entirely predecessorial, genre of fiction has emerged over the course of the last ten years, as cultural digitization became a widespread phenomenon. The literary case studies presented demonstrate the various ways in which the postmodern aesthetic is disputed and appropriated within the contemporary American novel. By utilizing canonized literary figures, such as DeLillo and Eggers, my thesis explores how cultural digitization has changed, and is changing, the epistemological and ontological orientation of the authors working and writing "serious fiction" in real-time.

These authors continue to adhere to the "canary in the coal mine dictum" taught to us by Kurt Vonnegut in 1969. As a writer and teacher in the creative arts, Vonnegut was challenged by the technoscientific positivism preached by the high-literati of his generation, the prevailing technocratic attitude, "that scientists would have cornered God and photographed him by 1951." So, why waste one's time on "insubstantial" subjects such as "sociology, government, history…and literature?" Vonnegut offers an existential rejoinder:

> "I sometimes wondered what the use of any of the arts was. The best thing I could come up with was what I call the canary in the coal mine theory of the arts. This theory says that artists are useful to society because they are so sensitive. They are super-sensitive. They keel over like canaries in poison coal mines long before more robust types realize that there is any danger whatsoever."[22]

In our culture of digitization, authors such as Don DeLillo and Dave Eggers dutifully fulfil this artistic obligation, crafting stories that challenge the reader to consider their own digital situation and encouraging them to maintain their most human elements, even in spite of cultural, political, and economic pressures that may persuade otherwise. Hardly epigones, the next generation of authors will encounter the writings of their antecedents and realize that, as artists, their function is also to respond to—and create from—their interpersonal and cultural experiences. No coal mine is too complex to be surveyed or unavailable to literary interpretation. Subsequently, this engenders a new responsibility

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[21] John D. Caputo. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, (Indiana University Press: 1997), p. 32, italics in original.

[22] Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. "Kurt Vonnegut Speaks: Physicist, Purge Thyself," *Chicago Tribune*, June 22nd, 1969.

for readers of contemporary fiction; we must recognize the value of the unique social sensitivity of these artists, including their abilities to instruct and guide us through unfamiliar territories, and to shepherd us away from potential dangers. As these authors make their "small leaps," over time, one hopes, the next generation of readers and writers will have the courage to follow.

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