Gutenberg Galaxy to Google Galaxy – Contemporary Literature, Technology and the Legacies of Modernism and Postmodernism

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Summary (Abstract)

Just as the iPhone relies on the invention of both the Nokia and the first invented telephone before it, our current cultural and literary epoch relies on the history of both postmodernism and modernism. While much of recent literary criticism exclusively charts the legacies of modernism, this thesis argues that postmodernism has also been absorbed into contemporary literature. Tom McCarthy, Claudia Rankine and Stephen Sexton are names synonymous with the revival of modernist styles in contemporary literature, yet their adoption of modernist modes contain intertextual networks, and the playful and ironic self-awareness of literary postmodernism. These postmodern aspects become clear through their shared thematic links and representations of technology. When faced with technological change, literature reinvigorates itself by revisiting the past. The modernists called to "make it new" by returning to the old. Literary postmodernism returned to the past through parody and literary allusions. This thesis argues that contemporary literature is oscillating between the styles and poetics of its two most recent cultural periods. Chapter one establishes the key themes of technology and the body, *technē* and *poesis*, and the effect of technology on language, historicity, depth and affect. Chapter two examines Tom McCarthy's *C* and *Satin Island* as postmodern and post-humanist deconstructions of modernist forms, viewing literature as technological broadcast. Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* and *Citizen: An American Lyric* are analysed in chapter three, a modernist scrutinization of postmodern, mass media mediated life as a racially marginalised individual. The fourth and final chapter examines how Damien Murphy's "A Mansion of Sapphire" and Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young* represent retro-gaming through retro-writing, returning to past styles to examine videogames as artistic objects.

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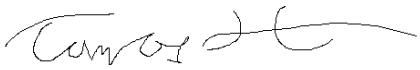

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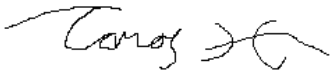

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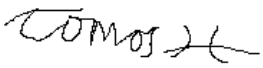

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List of Abbreviations

DLMBL – Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*

IATW – Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young*

SoS – Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*

SNES – The Super Nintendo Entertainment System, the video game console from the 1980s

Introduction: Error 404 - Cultural Epoch Not Found. Return to Modernism?

> The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on – as do those of modernism – in our contemporary twenty-first century world. – Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*[1]

At the end of the twentieth century, Linda Hutcheon and many others proclaimed the end of postmodernism in culture, setting out a challenge to the critics after her to determine the name for our current cultural epoch. Since then, a broad cast of critics have invented their own "isms" in attempts to catch the fragmented narratives of contemporary life in a single trap, yet the current label of "post-postmodernism" remains as elusive as the two cultural epochs that haunt it. Twenty-two years into the twenty-first century and Hutcheon's challenge has yet to name a firm victor, with the term "post-postmodernism" still used in several recent cultural studies.[2] Such are the terminological issues with post-postmodernism that Tom Turner made the call to "embrace post post-modernism – and pray for a better name".[3] The very word "post-postmodern" is one that defines itself as an opposition to an opposition, which infers a departure from postmodernism, itself a departure from and critique of the ideological and artistic values of modernism. It is also a term that favors periodization above poetics. Postmodernism itself was a paradoxical term, which, as Hutcheon writes, "signals its contradictory dependence upon and independence from the modernism that both historically preceded it and literally made it possible".[4] To attach another prefix of "post" to the contemporary moment further complicates the relationship between

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[1] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.181.
[2] See Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Just-in-time Capitalism*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) and *Fashion, Dress and Post-postmodernism,* ed. by José Blanco F. & Andrew Reilly (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).
[3] Tom Turner, *City as Landscape: A Post Post-modern View of Design and Planning* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995) p.10.
[4] Linda Hutcheon, 'The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History', *Cultural Critique*, no.5, (1987), pp.179-207 (p. 180).

modernity and culture and creates difficult intellectual grounds for discussion of the current moment without directly relating it to its two latest predecessors. Would not the departure from postmodernism, as "post-postmodernism" implies, lead invariably back to modernism, and therefore resuscitate the argument between the two movements that has long been considered unproductive? This question is perhaps the most immediate that arises in the face of post-postmodernism, and it would not be wholly incorrect to believe so. Indeed, modernism, or its legacy, has once again been thriving in literary and cultural studies in recent years, with the works of critics such as David James, Mathias D'Arcy, Matthew Nilges, Jessica Pressman, and countless more all working to demonstrate the relevance of modernist practice in literature of the twenty-first century. At the outset of this project, it was my own goal to articulate the end of postmodernism and register the presence of something once again akin to literary modernism, but to do so would be simply to announce the triumph of modernism over postmodernism and return to the age-old argument between the two movements best left buried. Instead, this thesis concludes that the death of literary modernism *and* postmodernism has left behind something different, simultaneously apart from and at the same time retaining characteristics of both cultural movements – an oscillation between modernist and postmodernist poetics that has been termed as metamodernism. To arrive at this conclusion, it has been necessary to examine not only modernist, postmodernist and contemporary literature, but particularly the representation of technology in literature over all three cultural periods, and an exploration of the relationship between technology and culture.

This thesis primarily discusses technologies of communication: written text, telephones, television, radio, mass-media, video games and the internet. This is because one of the main interests of this thesis is how literature as a communications technology differs from and competes with other more contemporary forms of media, but other technologies are also explored in less depth. In the first two chapters, for instance, there is discussion of the associations between biological and vehicular bodies, and the cultural effects of technologies such as X-ray imaging which expanded the realm of the senses. Additionally, this thesis discusses technology as a general, philosophical and cultural concept, examining the ways in which we define it, and it defines us.

So, what can technology, and literature about technology, tell us about our contemporary cultural moment, and how does it help to determine what happens beyond literary postmodernism? Contemporary technology is, much like our post-postmodernist label, similarly tied to the twentieth century, to the industrial revolution and the inception of "Modern" technology. The progression of what is deemed to be "modern technology" spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from radio to wireless to internet, photograph to cinema to screen, invariably tethers itself to modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary cultures. It is also technology that is seemingly responsible for these current cultural shifts as the majority of the "conceptions of the contemporary discourse are structured around technological advances".[5] Technology and culture cannot exist in separate vacuums from each other, nor can they separate themselves from the history of technological and cultural progression. They will always affect one another, as new technologies and inventions create new artistic realms and possibilities for writers to respond to. At the same time, modern technologies, akin to cultural epochs, bury those that come before them, yet always retain some characteristics of their original counterparts. A telephone is still, at its heart, a simple receiver, a television still a screen. The only real quality distinguishing old televisions from newer, more advanced designs is complexity, each adding more functions than the last. That is not to say, of course, that technology has not advanced immeasurably since the modernist period, but rather that the basic functions of hard technologies such as the television, the radio and the telephone have maintained a certain level of rigidity over the last century. Can our current "post-postmodernist" moment be compared to modernism and postmodernism in the same way that a Smart TV compares to a cathode ray tube and an old black-and-white television set, a repetition of its origins but with an even more complex design?

In some ways, culture seems to have held onto a similar semblance of rigidity, with each cultural shift from the twentieth century onwards discussed in conjunction with modernism. Since modernism, cultural shifts have become progressively more difficult to pin down or constrain to specific periods of time, which is in part fueled by

[5] Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2.1, (2010), pp.1-14, (p. 3).

the increasing complexity and interconnectedness of the world, of competing viewpoints and political and philosophical alignments that first began with the dawn of modernism. Both modernism and postmodernism have been interpreted as a response to the increasing complexity of the world and the progression of technology and globalization, with some critics such as D'Arcy and Nilges going as far as to call postmodernism modernism's "continuation in a different form".[6] Despite postmodernism's claim towards fragmentation and the dissolution of the grand narrative, transcendence and empirical truth, these fragments have been paradoxically united in their own grand narrative against modernism. "Post-post-modernism" likewise suggests it is just the latest in a long line of cultural epochs and forms of capitalism more complex than the last, with more functions than we know what to do with. But this functionality and increased level of complexity sets more advanced versions of technology apart from one another, and likewise one cultural moment from the next – a repetition with a difference.

Contemporary literary criticism has typically approached twenty-first-century technology from two different positions. One position sees the challenges posed by attention-devouring, internet-connected screens as too much for the author or poet to compete with. These critics contend that the contemporary reader is not as capable of the sustained and focused reading required by literature of the past, and that the cultural shift away from printed to online texts has started to leave traditional forms of literature behind in favor of other forms of art. "I've no intention of writing fictions in the form of tweets or text messages – nor do I see my future in computer-games design", writes Will Self in an article declaring the death of serious literature at the hands of newer, technology-driven platforms for art.[7] However, it is important to realise that this current literary "crisis" is likewise only an echo of crises of the past, of postmodernism, modernism and prior, whereby sudden shifts in technology have occurred and culture and tradition has been forced to adapt. Another viewpoint sees the artistic opportunities presented by technology and the capability for using them as tools for the creation of art,

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[6] Michael D'Arcy and Mathias Nilges, 'Introduction', in *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture*, ed. by Michael D'Arcy and Mathias Nilges (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.3.
[7] Will Self, *The Novel is Dead (this time it's for real)* (2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction> [accessed 13 July 2022].

as well as interesting subjects. This view sees the current literary "crisis" as a catalyst for change, an opportunity to reassess the relationship between technology, literature, and culture in the past and present to determine a course for the future.

Since I contend that the impetus for literary crises is primarily technological, this thesis examines how a collection of contemporary authors – Jennifer Egan, Patricia Lockwood, Tom McCarthy, Claudia Rankine, Damien Murphy, and Stephen Sexton – deal with technology in their works, how they choose to represent technology and its influence on culture, and how it compares to their predecessors in the modernist and postmodernist periods. Returning to, echoing and debating with literature of the past is often the modus operandi through which authors reinvigorate the art form in the face of these crises, such as the high modernist declaration to "make it new" and the postmodernist tendency towards irony and parody of traditional literary mechanisms. Contemporary literature is no different, taking influence from its two parent-movements to create literature that oscillates between them. While postmodernism is commonly seen as a short-lived or transitionary period of literary history, and contemporary literature is considered as becoming increasingly modernist, this thesis suggests that modernism is being returned to with a postmodernist sensibility. The authors and poets chosen for this thesis have most often been identified with characteristics of modernism and its revival in the twenty-first century, but to label them as solely modernist writers is reductive. The ways in which they approach technology in their texts demonstrate techniques characteristic of postmodernism, of irony, extensive literary allusiveness, and the ontological consequences of life in a world mediated by technology.

To find such postmodernist influence in texts continuously referred to by reviewers and literary critics as exemplars of the legacy of modernism seems contradictory but is in fact a symptom of the death of both movements and their absorption into our contemporary, as-yet-undefined culture. As Alan Kirby writes in *Digimodernism*, his own attempt to define our current moment:

> to say that something is "dead" is the opposite of arguing it never existed; it means that, no longer growing and vibrant, an entity has merged with the ever-expanding past and as such feeds into and inflects our present and future.[8]

If both postmodernism and modernism are considered to be dead, then so is the argument between them, and contemporary writers can repurpose and recycle material and ideas from both. This conclusion is similar in function to the paradoxical oscillation between seemingly oxymoronic concepts that Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker see as one of the unique characteristics and opportunities of our contemporary age, which they have dubbed "Metamodernism". As they write:

> Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté´ and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm. Both the metamodern epistemology (as if) and its ontology (between) should thus be conceived of as a ‘‘both-neither’’ dynamic. They are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them.[9]

Rather than making the claim that my chosen texts resuscitate modernism and abandon postmodernism, as many of their critics and reviewers have claimed or implied through comparison and reference to modernist writers, I contend that the works of the writers examined in this thesis sit at the heart of this both-neither dynamic. The contemporary writers that form the primary readings of the thesis, Tom McCarthy, Claudia Rankine,

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[8] Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: how new technologies dismantle the postmodern and reconfigure our culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009) p.37.
[9] Vermeulen & van den Akker, p.6.

and Stephen Sexton, are each concerned with separate technologies of differing cultural periods, but all of them oscillate between modernist and postmodernist technique. These writers remain positionally fluid as they navigate the modernist, postmodernist and contemporary periods, and the effect of their technologies on twenty-first-century culture. Tom McCarthy primarily exhumes the technologies of the modernist period but does so with a postmodernist removal of humanistic depth, that simultaneously questions the contemporaneity of modernism. Rankine examines the representation of race in television and mass media, arguably the defining technologies of postmodernism, and the effects this has on marginalized individuals. Rankine's approach can be compared with Baudrillardian notions of simulacra and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, creating a condition of affectlessness, while at the same time using the universality of the lyric voice to eschew postmodern irony and fragmentation in favor of union through literature. Stephen Sexton treats a video game, a platform regarded by Alan Kirby as the "formal exemplum" of what he calls digimodernism, as a text, with what began as an ironic use of ekphrasis to describe something usually not considered artistic evolving into a sincere exploration of love, loss and grief.[10]

Since this project spans myriad cultural periods and deals with large-scale literary projects, a substantial amount of context is necessary to facilitate the readings of the primary texts to follow. As such, the initial chapter, "Back to the New: Text, Technology and Tradition in Contemporary Literature", examines the current literary moment through the lens of movements and technological advances of the past. Investigating the purported literary crisis of the twenty-first century, I identify contemporary technologies such as the internet, the screen, and the shift in common reading habits from primarily physical to primarily digital texts, as the scapegoat for a decline in literary value. This claimed crisis is the first of many consistencies with the modernist and postmodernist periods, in which technological shifts and the desire for literary shifts seems to occur alongside one another. The chapter then prepares for the readings that follow by establishing the key themes to be explored in relation to technology (the body, language, *technē*, originality, authenticity and intertextuality), and

[10] Kirby, p.167.

using texts from all three cultural periods to compare twentieth and twenty-first-century approaches to technology in literature. This chapter also establishes and justifies the use of a more hierarchical modernist model as conceptualised in the thesis, while accepting recent critical focus on the plurality of modernism(s). Some of the literary texts explored in this chapter include Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From The Good Squad*, J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The chapter then concludes with a reading of Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), which serves to recapitulate the consistencies established by the chapter and demonstrate my claim that contemporary literature oscillates between modernist and postmodernist approaches to technology.

The second chapter discusses Tom McCarthy's poststructuralist poetics of broadcasting, whereby language and literature are both put forward as a series of repeating, modulating signals. These poetics are then explored within McCarthy's novels *C*, which charts the history of modernism while drawing several lines of comparison between the modernist period and the contemporary moment, and *Satin Island*, a Pynchonesque novel about the futile search for truth made increasingly difficult by the complexity of contemporary society. Tom McCarthy is one of the most often quoted authors of the twenty-first century in reference to modernism's legacies, or the necessity of navigating it when writing contemporary literary fiction. The chapter discusses McCarthy's own affirmation that modernism is a "wreckage", like a car that has crashed and scattered cultural debris into the late 20th and early 21st centuries and analyzes how McCarthy purposely draws connections between the past and the present to illustrate the relevance of modernism in sculpting our current digital age.[11] McCarthy does this by making deliberate connections between the precursor technologies of the modernist period and our own. I also analyze how McCarthy's position as the general secretary for the International Necronautical Society, an artistic movement that advocates art focused on death, connects to his opinions of the death of modernism. I call into question how McCarthy claims to unearth modernism, and instead argue that he

[11] James Purdon, *Tom McCarthy: 'To ignore the avant garde is akin to ignoring Darwin'* (2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/01/tom-mccarthy-c-james-purdon > [accessed 1 December 2018].

demonstrates its relevance through these connections, partially resuscitating it as he oscillates between modernist and postmodernist literary practices. Following up with a reading of McCarthy's novel *Satin Island*, I examine how the past and present similarly intermingle in a postmodernist remix of the modernist novel of ideas, whereby deciphering the complexity of everyday life is presented as a "Great Project" destined to be unfinished due to the wide-ranging nature of today's networked and technologically dominated society.

Chapter three, "Race, Mass Media and Spectacle in Claudia Rankine's American Lyrics", examines two book-length poems by Claudia Rankine – *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* and *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Both texts draw from the lyric tradition and label themselves as such, but they use technology, art, photography and blank space to experiment with the boundaries of the typical lyric form. Throughout the chapter, I explore how Rankine incorporates technology into the texts to demonstrate the impact of technology on the contemporary, racialized individual. Exploring *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, I argue that Rankine depicts an American society that is driven by spectacles such as adverts for anti-depressants, violence in films and news stories, the War on Terror after 9/11, and spectacular blackness. This chapter compares the theories of postmodernist critics such as Guy Debord and Baudrillard in conjunction with contemporary African American cultural critics such as Simone Browne and Nicola Fleetwood to explore how Rankine depicts an image-dominated society and the way race is configured and portrayed through these spectacles. Rankine also shows the emotional effect of drowning in such images on both an individual and societal level, resulting in an abundance of affectless-ness. In an analysis of *Citizen,* I examine how Rankine's work draw parallels between marginalised individuals of the past and the present, focusing on how contemporary media portrays racialised subjects and how this connects to the history of racial subjugation. Both collections see engagement with poetry as a way of reaching out and physically connecting with a world becoming increasingly disconnected and made emotionally ill by television and mass media.

Chapter four examines literary representations of videogames, a technology that is seen by Alan Kirby as one intrinsic to new, digimodernist forms of text and textuality.

Damien Murphy's short story "A Mansion of Sapphire" offers an insight into what sets videogames apart from other mediums as digimodernist texts. At the same time, the short story bases itself off of the Decadence movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young*, a poetry collection that uses the literary technique of ekphrasis to accurately depict the video game *Super Mario World*, originally published for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, then becomes the primary focus of the chapter. Now considered to be a "retro-game", Sexton reexplores *Super Mario World* by turning each of its levels into individual poems, while simultaneously recreating his own childhood in which he first experienced the game. This chapter argues that not only is Sexton representing the retro-game but also retro-writing, using pastoral techniques to depict the virtual world of the game as a pastoral idyll. The chapter also uses the text to examine nostalgia in the age of rapid technological advancement, where pieces of technology such as video game consoles are regularly replaced with newer models and thus become objects of nostalgia. Virtual, artistic and remembered worlds overlap one another throughout the text, with a vast array of intertextual references similar in scale to the authors in the chapters prior. This opens the text up to multiple readings: one that takes in and appreciates the work as it is on the page, and another, more studious approach to the text that uses the text's "End Credits" and the game itself to follow each image referenced in Sexton's intertextual network.

Rather than putting literature in crisis, the writers in this thesis show that digital technologies can be beneficial to the contemporary writer, taking advantage of their own access to the vast data networks of the internet to allow for broader frames of reference to other texts, examining our changing relationship with technology, and demonstrating how text, technology and tradition can coexist. All the writers also serve as examples of those who confront our technological society while at the same time knowingly drawing influence from past literary traditions. The echoes of modernist and postmodernist views of technology are evident in the texts, reflecting a society in which both great projects have seemingly passed yet the cultural ideas and creative energies that stemmed from them remain.

Back to the New: Text, Technology and Tradition in Contemporary Literature

The Contemporary Literary 'Crisis'

If critics are to be believed, the twenty-first century spells doom for literature. However, this purported literary 'crisis' is a repetition of a pessimism that often coincides with new forms of text and reading offered by new technologies communication. Rather than embracing the challenges and opportunities technological advancement might bring to the contemporary writer, many authors and literary critics feel a sense of hopelessness at competing with it. Novelist Phillip Roth, for instance, has repeatedly lamented the power of the "screen" in contemporary society, stating that technologies such as computers, mobile phones and social media platforms create a more easily distracted culture: "the concentration, the focus, the solitude, the silence, all the things that are required for serious reading are not within people's reach anymore."[1] Indeed, in the contemporary Western world, humanity is more connected than ever before. We have devices in our pockets, on our laps and at our fingertips at almost all times, which provide us with limitless potential for distraction: notifications, emails, social networks, mobile gaming and the entire vastness of the internet are all instantly available through our electronic devices.

These devices and the internet are central to Western life, enabling access to a worldwide network of media and communication that has vastly altered human experience, having an effect on the way we create and consume text. In 1995, Nicolas Negroponte declared human computing systems were becoming so commonplace in Western households that "computing is not about computers anymore. It's about living".[2] Many of the predictions Negroponte makes in *Being Digital* are no doubt evident today, as he examined the beginning of a paradigm shift in the late 1990s that

[1] Christine Kearny, *Phillip Roth Reflects on novel's decline and "Nemesis"* (2010) <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-books-philiproth-idUKTRE6942MM20101005> [Accessed March 23 2022].
[2] Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p.3.

foresaw a change from the use of hard technologies such as physical books, made up of atoms, to the popularisation of soft technologies and digital information stores made up of infinite immaterial bits, which can be instantly transferred, multiplied and shared. In 2010, Nicolas Carr provides clear evidence that this shift has certainly taken place, stating "whether I am online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles."[3] Part of a generation that initially grew up without the influence of the internet but then found itself thrust into the digital revolution, Carr uses his own experiences to describe the feeling of sudden jumps caused by technological advancement, examining the ways in which contemporary technologies could be neurologically changing the modern individual and the way we process knowledge.

In a chapter titled "The Deepening Page", Carr examines the cultural shift from printed page to web page. Beginning with the rise of postmodern technologies such as the radio and television, this shift only begins to culminate with the internet, which becomes a newer, faster and more convenient way of storing, sharing, and processing information than the printed text.[4] Carr finds a textual shift as newer forms of media create new ways of consuming written text, which in turn change the experience of reading for many modern individuals. Marshall McLuhan once argued that the printing press was responsible for creating the "Gutenberg Man", cognitively shaped by print culture, and Carr treats the internet as similarly significant in shaping contemporary thought.[5] For the contemporary, constantly connected individual, Carr argues that the internet cultivates very different reading habits than in the past, stating "we are evolving from being cultivators of personal knowledge to being hunters and gatherers in the electronic data forest" to compare the reading of singular printed books to surfing the internet several web pages at a time.[6] The internet encourages shallower reading of a broader range of texts over the deeper, focused reading required of the printed book, which may affect the kinds of reading we do. Carr argues that the experimental works of

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[3] Nicolas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010) p. 6-7.
[4] Carr, p.77.
[5] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).
[6] Carr, p.138.

Joyce and the early modernists with their lengthy, difficult to navigate passages and stream of consciousness, required and promoted deep, attentive readers and would have been "unthinkable" without a mainstream literary ethic brought about by print culture.[7] As a result, he argues, the shift to digital culture will undoubtedly influence what literature is written and consumed in a contemporary society.

Carr's recognition of this change in contemporary cognition could be seen to corroborate Roth's lament, that the distractedness of the modern individual makes deep, involved reading less popular and less available to us, but that does not necessarily spell the end of literature as an art form, which has shown remarkable fortitude in the past against new types of text and media. Roger Luckhurst identifies that "while doom-laden proclamations accompany every novel kind of communication, literature itself demonstrates a consistently inventive capacity to adapt and evolve to new material conditions", examining how the printed book as a technology was also considered as dangerous to the act of serious writing and reading before public opinion changed to accept it.[8] Literary history is, in fact, marked as much by crises as moments of revolution. As popular literary forms wax and wane, critics and authors alike are quick to declare the death of "great" literature. Paul Keen has also charted what he defines as a "literary crisis" in the 1790s, in which the definition of literature encompassed far more than poetry and literary prose.[9] What seems to differentiate one literary crisis from the next is what is chosen as the scapegoat for the supposed decline in literary value, usually an ideological or technological shift in society, which throws the value of literature into question. These crises often result in a bid to create "new" literature by drawing attention to the primary concern of the age, either by challenging the subject of contention or embracing those changes to better reflect modern reality. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were rife with challenges to the value of literature as a result of rapid changes to society caused by the second industrial revolution. As new technologies and disciplines challenged modes of thinking and ways of living, literature was forced to adapt to better suit the conditions of a rapidly evolving

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[7] Carr, p. 76-77.
[8] Roger Luckhurst *Modern Literature and Technology* <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/modern-literature-and-technology> [Accessed March 23 2022].
[9] Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

society. Once again in the late twentieth century, with the advent of computing and information technologies, there was another cultural shift that steered literature in new directions, towards postmodernism. It is no coincidence, then, that "the flourishing of modernism might then seem to correspond to what is termed the second industrial revolution", or that postmodernism was in many ways responding to the rise of information technologies and technological scepticism brought about by the ideological deconstruction of the "grand narratives" of scientific progress.[10] With the shift from a Gutenberg galaxy to a Google galaxy, literature once again finds itself in the middle of a paradigm shift spurred on by the rapid proliferation of digital technologies, and literary experimentation is once again required to uncover a new "new".

Also corresponding with this shift is an uncertainty as to our current cultural position, which has led to a multitude of diverging cultural theories. To almost all contemporary philosophers and critics, postmodernism is no longer considered to be the cultural dominant of the twenty-first century. As David Cunningham articulates, "A short-lived episode in the recent history of ideas, whatever else one might say about the present conjuncture, it seems increasingly implausible that one might define it as postmodern".[11] There are an enormous number of reasons for this supposed decline in postmodernism, but the key historical moment in which the turn away from it seems to have become most apparent for many is 9/11. After 9/11, the idea of all micronarratives as equal to one another became unacceptable, and grand narratives such as "the War on Terror" became established, with the radically divergent energies of the postmodern period that claimed to have undermined the thinkers of the Enlightenment and the fallacy of the grand narrative with irony and self-awareness beginning to fade away.[12] What this has led to is an assessment of what happens after the end of the "era of endings", with many critics and philosophers creating new names for the current cultural

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[10]See Nicolas Daly, 'The Machine Age' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms,* (New York: Oxford Unviersity Press, 2010) p. 283 and Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.15.

[11] David Cunningham, 'Time, Modernism, and the Contemporaneity of Realism', in *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture,* ed. By Michael D'arcy and Mathias Nilges (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) pp.49-64 (p.50).

[12] Badri Raina, 'Grand Narrative of 'Terrorism'', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38.51/52, (2004), pp. 5327-5329.

epoch to escape the terminological issues of post-postmodernism. [13] A small selection of these new terms include performatism, metamodernism, remodernism and stuckism.[14]

One of these epoch-defining terms relevant to this study of contemporary literature and technology is what Alan Kirby refers to as digimodernism.[15] Digimodernism suggests that the end of postmodernism may mark the end of literature as an epoch-defining art form. Kirby uses the term to define a new cultural dominant, which emerges alongside digital technologies, impacting on textuality and the creation of media. With new forms of technology come new forms of text, which can change the typical relationship between a reader and a text. Digimodernist texts are primarily defined by Kirby as texts that are partially created or controlled by the reader, in which the reader is an active participant in the outcome of the narrative.[16] Tellingly, Kirby chooses to focus on media outside of the realm of literature: reality television, video games, radio shows, and the capabilities of Web 2.0. These forms of media all give the consumer the ability to control the events of the program, such as calling in to talk to radio show hosts, voting on which participants of a reality TV show remain from week to week, physically controlling the narrative of a video game, or creating a narrative out of one's own life on social media. Digimodernist texts take advantage of the opposable digits of its consumer rather than the focused reading of the modernist period, taking advantage of the twenty-first century ability to use devices to influence and create narrative. Literary texts, conversely, remain mostly rigid in their material form, since their existence as solid printed text usually deny direct manipulation and interactivity. Consequently, Kirby declares "it could be argued that digimodernist literature does not exist", comparing digimodernism to the renaissance in that it is a cultural period in which literature is not the dominant art form.[17] Literature was the "immediate synecdochal exemplum" of the modernist and postmodernist periods, but in a time

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[13] Ag Apollini, 'The End of the Era of Endings', *Symbol* vol. 10 (2017) < https://www.eurozine.com/the-end-of-the-era-of-endings/> [Accessed March 20 2022].
[14] For a full list of terms, see *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, ed. by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).
[15] Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: how new technologies dismantle the postmodern and reconfigure our culture*, (New York: Continuum, 2009).
[16] Kirby, p.51.
[17] Kirby, p.218.

period when that may no longer be the case, it must find new ways of distinguishing itself from other dominant art forms in different mediums.[18]

Since postmodernism has waned and contemporary literature does not seem to correspond to Kirby's definition of digimodernism, literature instead appears to be turning back towards some aspects of early modernism. It is important to note that the internet and other technologies employed today are in fact the culmination of the modernist period, a century-old era that strived for globalization and communication technologies with inventions such as the telegram-tapper, the wireless, the radio and the telephone. The writers of the modernist period serve as examples of artists at the turn of a new century not unlike our own, one at the cusp of a new technological revolution, with the most well-known texts of the modernist canon reaching their centenary over the past few years. The ways in which the modernist writers tackled these new inventions in their works can inform us of the changing relationship between technology and text and provide enlightening comparison with contemporary works. Michael D'Arcy and Mathias Nilges open this line of communication by asking a key question about the cultural moment we are currently living in: "Is the contemporary moment a modernist moment?".[19] D'Arcy and Nilges consider whether the present can be periodized by relating it to the technological and cultural innovations of the modernist period. In many ways literature does seem to be turning back to modernism, with contemporary authors constantly having to tackle the period in dealing with their own work. D'Arcy and Nilges identify the "involvement" of contemporary authors with modernism's purported "persistence", "legacies", or relevance in post-war and contemporary literature, but there is also the question of modernism's survival throughout the twentieth century as a project that never fully ended.[20] The term "legacy" would suggest that the modernist period is indeed over, and its echoes in contemporary literature are a result of retrospection or consolidation with past literary modes. However, the term "legacy" is one with several terminological problems when it comes to literature. When a text is published and still part of the public domain, it can be considered as living regardless of

[18] Kirby, p.218.
[19] Michael D'Arcy and Mathias Nilges, 'Introduction', in *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture*, ed. by Michael D'Arcy and Mathias Nilges (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.
[20] D'Arcy and Nilges, p.1.

its readership, and with modernist texts still an established part of the literary canon, "legacy" seems to be the wrong term. The correct term may in fact be the "existence" of modernism or modernist influences in contemporary literature, or perhaps "prevalence". Regardless, several literary critics and authors alike still consider modernism to be "dead", or in the process of some sort of revival. D'Arcy and Nilges are not alone in this endeavour by any means, with a critical refocus on modernism thriving throughout literary and cultural circles within the last two decades.[21] The term often associated with the modernist project in the twenty-first century is revival, as though contemporary authors are picking up where modernism left off, leaving the efforts of the postmodernists in their wake.

Even Phillip Roth's argument for the end of literature at the hands of the screen could be an indicator of the revival of modernist poetics in response to the supposed threat of technology. Novelist Will Self's article "The Novel is Dead" is similarly pessimistic of literature's future as an art form due to digital technologies. Within the article, Self deliberately draws attention to the modernist period, declaring:

> "It would seem better all round to accept the truth, which is that we are still solidly within the modernist era, and that the crisis registered in the novel form in the early 1900s by the inception of new and more powerful media technologies continues apace".[22]

This twenty-first-century return to "the death of the novel" may therefore just be another symptom of modernism's resurgence in literary discourse, a fresh call to "make it new" by once again experimenting with and uprooting tradition. This thesis argues that contemporary literature experiments with tradition in response to and alongside new technologies in a way that resembles some aspects of the modernist period. The writers in the following chapters return to traditional forms and genres while incorporating,

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[21] For discussions of the contemporaneity of modernism, see David James, *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture,* ed. By Michael D'arcy and Mathias Nilges (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) and Marjorie Perloff *21st-Century Modernism: The New Poetics*, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001).

[22] Will Self, *The Novel is Dead (this time it's for real)* (2014). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction> [accessed 13 July 2022].

representing and commenting on technology in the twenty-first century, and their modernist methods form a significant portion of this discussion.

However, while the works and techniques of modernist writers are certainly important to the contemporary poets and novelists discussed herein, postmodernist theories are also just as relevant to their technological poetics. In *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media*, Jessica Pressman explores the prevalence of modernist influence in electronic literature. Pressman refutes the relevance of discussing postmodernist critics such as Frederic Jameson in twenty-first-century literary criticism, observing "this isn't the 1980s anymore, the cultural epoch described by Lyotard, Jameson and Linda Hutcheon […] are so often taken as descriptions of now's now, as if they were written in Gertrude Stein's prolonged present and are not then's now."[23] There exists a distaste for postmodernist scholarship, particularly when related to contemporary works. Yet, there is much to be considered regarding postmodernism and its own approaches to technology. By the 1960s, the industrial technologies that were the primary concern of the modernists such as the car, the telephone and printing press, were now integrated into everyday life, giving way to rising interest in information technologies in the late 1900s such as computing, television, mass media, and, eventually, the internet. Just as the industrial revolution brought about changes in cultural thinking and the production of art, the information revolution was another turning point in cultural, philosophical and artistic thought. As the closest defined cultural period to our own chronologically as well as technologically, it is therefore just as vital to examine the relationship between postmodernism and contemporary culture as it is with modernism. Peter Brooker suggests "the impact of postmodernism has led to a re-evaluation of the entity supposedly left behind and has resulted in a resurgence of interest in the variety of modernisms".[24] This demonstrates that without the clash between modernism and postmodernism in the 1980s, the current cultural and literary landscape would be vastly different, and it is therefore imperative to examine both forces to define the present moment.

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[23] Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.9.
[24] Peter Brooker et al., 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.1.

Modernism, postmodernism, contemporary. Each of these cultural periods overlap and intermingle, and an analysis of all three is necessary to understand the changing relationship between literature and technology in the twenty-first century and to envisage culture beyond modernism and postmodernism. Due to the broad scope and overarching themes of these three cultural periods, vital to the works of the three main writers explored in later chapters, this introductory chapter explores the dichotomy of literature and technology in our contemporary moment. This chapter therefore compares contemporary works with texts from the modernist and postmodernist periods to examine how the poetics of each may repeat themselves, and how they may differ. Taking a thematic approach, this chapter will discuss the divide between the arts and sciences as well as several binaries between technology and bodies (textual, biological and vehicular), *technē* and *poesis*, authenticity, originality and intertextuality, and briefly touch on how they apply to the chapters to follow. Within this chapter I aim to demonstrate that both the modernist and postmodernist movements now seem to be in our past, yet both have their echoes in contemporary literature, which may suggest that we are steering towards a metamodernist oscillation between modernity and postmodernity. Each section of this chapter is punctuated with readings of texts from all three cultural periods, providing frames of comparison and justification for the contemporary relevance of modernist and postmodernist approaches to technology. Several chapters from Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This*, as well as Alan Kirby's *Digimodernism* provide enlightening comparison with modernist and postmodernist approaches to technology, serving as a contemporary anchor to the chapter's historical delve.

Prior to the discussion that follows, it is important to acknowledge that the conceptualisation of Modernism in this thesis relies largely on an older, hierarchical model, often referring to the canonized writers of High Modernism and part of its theoretical framework. While the plurality of modernisms is not a key focus of this argument, that is not to say it is wholly ignored. Indeed, this project deals in a variety of different "isms" that underpin the arguments made herein, which could very well be argued as their own versions or extensions of a more hierarchical model of modernism. The advent of New Modernist Studies has shifted away from such overarching

definitions of modernism to focus on a multiplicity of trans-geographic modernisms, but this has not been the case with postmodernism, which has been discussed in terms of its multiplicity from its very inception. To focus on the contemporary critical interest in a multiplicity of modernisms in conjunction with the postmodern interest in multiculturalism and micronarratives – a kind of postmodernisation of modernist studies – would make for a fascinating study all its own but would require further research that is beyond the scope and focus of this particular project. Instead of explicitly referencing a variety of modernisms, this thesis chooses instead to focus on a variety of periods of modernity, each with their own "isms" spurred on cultural and, more centrally, technological change.

Technology, *Technē* and *Poesis*

Technology is a defining feature of humanity. Our ability to create and use tools from natural resources to alter our environment on a large scale is one of the things that separates humanity from other beings, and technology shapes us as much as we shape it. Because technology in part defines humanity and our way of understanding the world, humanity can struggle to define technology and its effect on the human condition. Contemporary definitions of technology by online dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster, Encyclopaedia Dramatica and the Cambridge Dictionary focus particularly on the word "science", specifically describing technology as the use of scientific knowledge (episteme) in practical or industrial ways.[25] This definition of technology as wholly epistemic seems to put it at odds with the arts and humanities, yet this has not always been the case. Mark William Roche notes a similar "modern tendency to place in opposition to one another two dominant spheres of knowledge, science and technology

[25] See *TECHNOLOGY - meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary* (2022) <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/technology> [accessed 1 April 2022], *Technology Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster* (2022) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/technology > [accessed 1 April 2022] and *Technology - Definition, Examples, Types, & Facts - Brittanica* (2022) <https://www.britannica.com/technology/technology > [accessed 1 April 2022].

over against the humanities and the arts", which was not the case in a premodern world.[26] In "The Question Concerning Technology", Heidegger distinguishes between ancient Greek and modern day notions of technology, in an attempt to unearth a deeper primal "essence" of technology, something which is "by no means technological" and therefore concealed by current definitions of the word.[27] The problem with definitions of technology such as those in modern dictionaries is that they define it as primarily instrumental and anthropological, in which technology is a human activity where things are created as a means to an end. While the instrumental and anthropological definitions are fundamentally correct, they are also reductive, failing to come to terms with the principle meaning of technology as a concept. Heidegger argues instead that, in ancient Greek philosophy, technology is a form of *poeisis*, a bringing forth or revealing of something from nature that was concealed or not present before. *Poesis* is the word from which poetry is derived and can relate simultaneously to the "bringing forth" of artists, craftsman and artisans, as well as the bringing forth of objects in nature, defined as *physis*, such as flowers bringing themselves to bloom. Technology is therefore seen as a way of revealing things about the world, and as a result technology becomes seen as a mode of understanding for ourselves and our environment.[28] Through technology, we can understand the earth and all its elements on a deeper level by becoming more aware of what we can bring forth from nature. This definition of technology also brings it closer to the arts and humanities, disciplines that also seek to reveal truths about the world and the way we understand it.

Examining the etymology of technology more closely, Heidegger identifies a link between the Greek word *technikon*, from which our word for technology is derived, and *technē*, a word that relates to both art and technique. *Technē*, as it refers to both the fine arts and the work of craftsman, also "belongs to bringing forth: to *poiesis*; it is something poietic".[29] A statue, for instance, is considered as hidden within a block of

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[26] Mark William Roche, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (London: Yale University Press , 2004), p.3.
[27] Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. by William Lovitt, trans. by William Lovitt(New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), p.4.
[28] Heidegger, p.12.
[29] Heidegger, p.13.

marble, and it is only through *technē* and *poesis* that the craftsman can bring it forth from natural materials. The bringing forth of a piece of technology from raw natural materials and the rhetorical bringing forth of an image through words are therefore both forms of *technē* and *poeisis*. Art, technique, and technology were thus intertwined, resulting in technologies that functioned as instrumental but still hold aesthetic and technical value, such as the pyramids, the colosseum, and the roman aqueducts. This ties ancient technologies together with the arts and humanities, but Heidegger makes the claim that the *poiesis* of technology in modern society is no longer poietic. Instead, Heidegger poses the function of modern technology as "a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such".[30] Heidegger's ecological critique sees our relationship with modern technology as an aggressive "setting upon" of nature and natural resources as opposed to a respectful symbiosis with it.[31] Comparing an ancient to a modern windmill, for instance, the former is "left entirely to the wind's blowing", a bringing forth that occurs where and when nature decides to, while the latter seeks to "unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it" for use when we see fit.[32] Heidegger also demonstrates this contrast through placing art and modern science in opposition to one another, comparing the hydroelectric dam built into the river Rhine with Hölderlin's poem "The Rhine".[33] To Heidegger there is something "monstrous" about modern technology's exploitation of nature as a means to an end, where the earth's resources are viewed as a "standing-reserve" of materials for mechanical production. As a result of this ideology, Heidegger warns, everything becomes valued on account of its instrumental value, and the world and everything on it is understood as something to be exploited for a purpose or goal, including the view of humans as "human resources".[34] This occurs as a result of "enframing", defined as modern humanity's drive to be "precise" and "scientific" in the pursuit of knowledge, a drive that views the natural world as something to be controlled, understood, and mastered. Heidegger claims that the solution to this relationship

[30] Heidegger, p.14.
[31] Heidegger, p.15.
[32] Heidegger, p.14.
[33] Heidegger, p.16.
[34] Heidegger, p.18.

between mankind and technology is by repositioning back towards a "poetical" view of the world:

> Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. […] Such a realm is art. But certainly only if reflection on art, for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth after which we are questioning.[35]

Heidegger believes that poetry and other forms of fine art are the ideal platform for a reflection of the conditions of modern technology and how we position ourselves in relation to them. Through a revealing of technology, art can both reveal ourselves and expose the dangers of modern technological and instrumental thinking so that we might better reflect on our way of seeing the world. If modern technology is one mode of understanding the world, then art offers the opportunity to see the world and technology in a different light.

Modernist literature was integral to the "reemergence of the technological in the aesthetic sphere" called for by Heidegger, which is in turn emerging once more in contemporary literature alongside a similar epistemic shift.[36] Rutsky claims that "aesthetic modernism can itself be defined by this relationship: by both the aestheticization of technology and the technologization of art", in which "the two come together at the level of form, of technique". [37] While this has, in itself, problematic associations with the "Nazi vision of an aestheticized technological state", particularly with regards to Heidegger's own involvement with the National Socialist Party, Rutsky makes clear that "the desire to aestheticize technology" is not exclusive to such "explicitly reactionary or fascistic political sentiments" and can be applied to modernism more generally.[38] In modernist prose, James Joyce's *Ulysses* serves as an example of this return to *technē* and the aestheticization of technology. In Joyce's

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[35] Heidegger, p.35.
[36] R.L. Rutsky, *High Techne* (Chicago: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.24.
[37] Rutsky, p.73.
[38] Rutsky, p.9.

schema for *Ulysses*, each chapter is split into categories – Title, Scene, Hour, Organ, Art, Colour and Symbol. Underneath the subheading for "Art" are a mix of arts and sciences such as "mechanics", "medicine", "magic", "literature", and "music". Like the Ancient Greeks, Joyce makes no distinction between the arts and the sciences in this schema, each of these practices considered as a form of "art" when a modern individual might distinguish them.

Figure 1. Joyce's Schema for *Ulysses*

Several of the chapters in *Ulysses* offer themselves up to a technological reading, particularly with regard to formal integration of technological and scientific methodologies. "Ithaca", a chapter which is broken down into a Socratic dialogue of questions and answers and names "Science" as its "Art" in Joyce's schema, has been discussed in regards to Heidegger's philosophy by John Scholar, in an article that identified with its "scientific scrutiny of the material world", in which material objects

are catalogued and listed with a distant, scientific narrative voice.[39] The chapter that is perhaps most stylistically resonant with the contemporary authors examined in this thesis, however, is "Aeolus", which more prominently represents a specific piece of technology through its form. Within "Aeolus", Joyce demonstrates the excitement of the modern city by embracing the new modernity with formal experimentation that directly embodies the medium of the printing press, with newspaper headlines that cut the chapter into sections that announce the novel's self-awareness as a text thoroughly imbibed in the modernity in which it is set. In this chapter, communication technologies vastly alter the style as Joyce chooses to represent the workings of the city and the printing press within the form of the text.

"Aeolus" is a chapter in which text, technology, and anatomy intermingle both formally and metaphorically, as Joyce builds a comparison between the workings of human bodies, technological bodies and metropolitan spaces. The reader is brought into the text with a bold, capitalized headline, "THE HEART OF THE HIBERNIAN METROPOLIS" followed by the "clanging", "ringing" trams in the cacophonously busy urban environment, rife with activity.[40] Through the metaphor "HEART", Joyce equates technologies of transportation, the tram networks, with the inner workings of the human circulatory system pumping blood through the body.[41] This metaphor is further extended when Bloom enters the printing office, where the printing press, a technology of communication, circulates news and headlines around Dublin. The printing press itself is described as if it were alive, ringing in onomatopoeic "thumps" like a heartbeat that churns out the next headline.[42] Joyce describes the onomatopoeic sound of the paper feeds, "sllt", as "almost human the way it sllt to call attention", personifying it, and the creaking door, as if it is speaking to him.[43] The thumping life of the printing press is reflected on in comparison to the late Patrick Dignam, whose funeral serves the basis of the prior chapter, "Hades". Bloom compares the "pegging away" of the printing

[39] John Scholar, "Joyce, Heidegger, and the Material World of "Ulysses": "Ithaca" as Inventory", *James Joyce Quarterly*, 54.1/2 (Fall 2016-Winter 2017), pp. 119-147.
[40] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Egoist Press, 1922), p.112.
[41] Joyce, p.112.
[42] Joyce, p.114.
[43] Joyce, p.117.

machines to the process of a body's "fermenting".[44] The decomposition of a body is itself a form of circulation, metaphorically speaking it can be thought of as the circle of life, but also biologically, as the matter that made up the body breaks down and becomes circulated back into the earth as food for other organisms. The reels of paper that circulate printed text also get circulated long after the text printed on them is no longer relevant, after the death of the news: "O, wrap up meat, parcels: various uses, thousand and one things".[45] The communications technology of the newspaper, of the text, gives way to the material uses of the paper itself, for the circulation of material goods. This correlates to the human body, which decomposes upon death, its materials reused for the natural cycle. The press office itself is the places where "A GREAT DAILY ORGAN IS TURNED OUT", which is reflected in the liveliness of both the machines thumping away and the circulation of the busy characters Bloom encounters coming in and out of the office such as the porter, a telegram boy, the foreman and the canvasser.[46] Technology is aestheticized through the liveliness that Joyce imbues the printing press and the metropolitan transport networks with, a kind of aesthetic by association whereby organic, textual and technological bodies are one and the same. Likewise, art is technologized through the text's form, in which the produce of the printing press, the newspaper headlines, become part of the production of the chapter as well as occurring later on in the text. Opposed to realism, this method is part of a movement towards high modernism, in which the technology of the printed text is playfully incorporated within novel form.

[44] Joyce, p.114.
[45] Joyce, p.116.
[46] Joyce, p.114.

Much like how Joyce in "Aeolus" embraces the media of the printing press, representing its technology of headlines within the text itself, the same opportunity to integrate contemporary forms of technology into the printed text presents itself to the contemporary writer. An example of the execution of this technology-infused text is Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, a novel which engages in several formal experiments to more accurately depict new forms of communication created by computers and mobile phones. An entire chapter titled "Great Rock and Roll Pauses by Alison Blake" is a fictional PowerPoint presentation created by a 12-year-old girl.[47] By creating the presentation from the perspective of Alison Blake, Egan demonstrates the young girl's knowledge of and regular use of technology, reflecting on the ways in which today's youth can gather their thoughts by using computer programs rather than physical diaries. The printed text must be turned on its side and each page is a slide of the presentation, which tells a narrative about Alison and her family.

Figure 2. A page/slide from "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" in *A Visit From the Goon Squad*

[47] Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, (London: Corsair, 2011).

Egan experiments with the possibility of telling a story through the form of PowerPoint, a technology not unlike prose in its purpose of communicating ideas to its audience. Through constraining herself to the technological medium of PowerPoint, Egan embraces modernity in a similar way to Joyce in "Aeolus", and in such a way creates an invigorating method of storytelling that blurs the boundaries between *technē*, technology, and text, and gives new freedoms away from the constraints of conventional prose. The form of the PowerPoint, for instance, gives Egan a greater control over the visual presentation of the page, with diagrams, graphs, arrows, subheadings and text boxes serving as unique storytelling tools. It is almost akin to a prosaic alternative to concrete poetry, which also seeks to disrupt the typical relationship between text and page. While not explicitly tying the arts and sciences together, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses by Alison Blake" similarly aestheticizes a technology while technologizing art by using the medium of PowerPoint to create a narrative, and in this way is consistent with the modernist conception of technology.

The writers explored in the following chapters are likewise indebted to modernist experimentation with technology and form, in which technology is aestheticized and aesthetics are technologized. Tom McCarthy's *C*, while following a traditional narrative structure, is formally experimental in that it takes famous modernist scenes and repurposes them, charting its history as the protagonist lives through it and the technologies that influenced it. Claudia Rankine's two collections are multi-media texts, in that they are primarily poetry but contain images – art works, screen shots of YouTube Videos, images of television screens – that are integrated formally into the text in a similar way to the headlines in "Aeolus". Stephen Sexton's collection aestheticizes the video game that it is based on by transforming its virtual world of bits and pixels into the idyll of pastoral art, as well as technologizing his method by directly reflecting the technology's own limits, its 16-bit processor, in the collection's 16-syllable lines.

Language Technologies and Language as Technology

Despite the prominence of modernist experimentation with form evident in the writers explored in this thesis, Jennifer Egan as well as the writers to be examined later also concern themselves with approaches to technology that are postmodernist in nature, particularly regarding the notion of language as a technology. In a discussion of literature and technology, it is imperative to understand that language itself, which literature is built from, is a technology of communication that is constantly evolving. If modern (scientific) technology is considered as a mode through which we understand the world, then the dominant inventions and advances of a particular time period therefore affect the way we represent the world and ourselves artistically and through language. Technology imposes itself on the *technē* of the written text, both formally through the invention of new platforms for written language (the newspaper, the TV guide, the online blog), and conceptually as new technologies create new words, possibilities, metaphors, and ways of thinking, which impose themselves on the artist. As opposed to the aestheticization of technology and the unification of the arts and the sciences, much of postmodernist literature experiments with the idea of the technology of the text and exploring language as an imperfect technology of communication, changed by the medium through which it is presented. Rather than examining technologies through formal integration into art and a return to *technē*, postmodernist theory was much more concerned with technologizing language in all its forms and examining it as such.

In postmodernist literary theory, language, and by extension literature, become examined as technologies of their own right, opening them up to be scrutinized and analysed. The theories of the structuralists and subsequent poststructuralists, for instance, were concerned with breaking down how language as a communicative technology works, both in written and spoken forms. In other words, language was being examined with more scientific, instrumental, and therefore technological thinking. Ferdinand de Saussure's earlier theories of structural linguistics served as the basis of structuralism in other fields. Just as Saussure breaks down the technology of written and

spoken words into a machine with two parts, the "sign" made up of the "signifier" and "signified", structuralist critics sought to find common characteristics among texts in order to search for a scientific structure behind them, a key formula from which all stories were built. In literary studies, texts such as Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale,* the exemplar of structuralism in which Propp attempted to find common structural characteristics in the narratives of folk tales, tries to break down the technology of myths and fairy tales into parts and functions. Poststructuralism drew attention to the flaws within the shared technological system of language, following from Saussure's notion of the arbitrary relationship between the sign and the signifier, believing that all forms of communication are inadequate at accurately communicating our thoughts and ideas and are prone to being misinterpreted.

Since language is a technology of communication, the way it is presented, or the medium it is presented on influences how it might be both presented and interpreted. New media technologies and mediums for written language inevitably change the way we communicate, the messages that we can send and receive through them, and what we can interpret from them. When Marshall McLuhan famously stated that "the medium is the message", he approached this idea of language mediated by medium, a quotation that is increasingly relevant in the age of the internet, text messaging, and social media.[48] Mediums such as early text messaging and Twitter, for instance, constrain the message to a specific number of characters, which facilitates new abbreviations and ways of communicating, while online blogs and news sites add intertextual hyperlinks to specific words in an article, sending the reader to other sources and web pages. These evolving styles of written language usage on the internet are, as linguist David Crystal notes, liminal, with "characteristics belonging to both sides of the speech/writing divide".[49] Some kinds of online language such as web pages and articles are more typically reflective of written language, while messages sent through platforms such as Facebook Messenger share more qualities of spoken language. The unique constraints of messaging through this medium, the fact that "written language is made to carry the burden of speech", have led to stylistic strategies to better convey meaning, such as the

[48] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), p.7.
[49] David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.31.

use of emojis, capitalisation and punctuation to display emotion that the written language alone cannot accurately demonstrate.[50] Some forms of internet language also evolve their own contexts and meanings that are specific to certain internet cultures, which can lead to a barrier to entry for the less internet-savvy. The term "Kappa", for example, comes from an emoticon on the streaming platform Twitch, and is used at the end of a sentence to denote sarcasm or irony. Despite being initially created on one medium, the chat rooms of streams on the platform, the term has since extended into several internet sub-cultures by internet users who have adopted it beyond its original contexts.

Poststructuralist ideas of language as an imperfect technology of communication, as well as the notion of language mediated by medium are also evident in *A Visit From The Goon Squad* in the chapter titled "Pure Language", which is partially an examination of the effect of interpersonal relationships mediated by technology. While less formally experimental than "Great Rock and Roll Pauses", Egan breaks up the prose and conventional dialogue with "Ts", a fictional slang for text messaging on "hand-sets", a piece of technology similar to mobile phones.[51] The way the text messages are integrated into the text are formally resonant with the newspaper headlines in "Aeolus", but the chapter also concerns itself, in a poststructuralist sense, with the notion that how we use language changes based on the different mediums through which we communicate. The messages in the chapter contain shortened versions of words, with capitalized letters pronounced phonetically such that the word "great" would be written as "grAt". The exchanging of these text messages plays a central role in the chapter, as Egan examines the ways in which they break up language and leave themselves open to the interpretation of the individual reading it. After the characters Lulu and Alex have an altercation about the use of sports metaphors as recently established marketing terms, and the communicative difficulties this causes, Lulu claims she prefers to "T" with Alex, because the language of texting is "pure – no philosophy, no metaphors, no judgements."[52] Despite being physically present together, the

[50] Crystal, p.42.
[51] Egan, p.329.
[52] Egan, p.329.

difficulties of spoken communication make it easier for the two to converse through the mediums of their devices, which constrain their language to what Lulu believes is a "pure" form. A moment soon follows in which Alex is told via text that Lulu had never met her father, to which Alex responds out loud, in a way that feels "too loud – a coarse intrusion".[53] Instead of continuing the conversation out loud and in person in a way that could become a lengthy, difficult discussion, the conversation concludes through the constrained medium of the handset in two simple responses, "Sad" and "Ancnt hstry".

Egan explores the technology of text messaging by juxtaposing two modes of communication, spoken and texted, and in doing so is able to examine the ways in which text messaging can change relationships between individuals and how they interact with one another. Egan is also able to question the idea of the constraints of text messaging creating a "pure" kind of language by exposing its own interpretative difficulties. There is a moment, for example, where a text exchange between Lulu and Alex is misinterpreted: "nyc", meant to be read as New York City, is initially misunderstood as meaning "nice", because "nyc" was used in the earlier context of the chapter when Lulu texted "you have a nyc dad" to Alex's daughter. [54] Even if they are communicating with language through a different medium, Egan demonstrates with this exchange the fatal flaw that language as a means of communication can be inauthentic no matter how it is presented, since both spoken and texted language offer their own interpretative difficulties. The chapter's formal experimentation with text messaging is therefore both resonant with modernist and poststructuralist explorations of technology and literature, with the stylistic inclusion of text messages in the form of the text, and the postmodernist language games that demonstrate the difficulties of language as a technology of communication. While technology itself is not the primary focus of *A Visit From The Goon Squad*, Egan's novel represents the kind of literature that drives this thesis, a text aware of itself as a communicative technology among a series of other, more contemporary mediums of text that it can borrow from, comment on, and use to explore literary traditions.

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[53] Egan, p.330.
[54] Egan, p.335 & p.329.

The idea of language as a communicative technology that is mediated by its form, akin to Marshall McLuhan's famous declaration that "the medium is the message", is likewise central to the following chapters.[55] Tom McCarthy's *C* is a text that concerns itself most centrally with this idea, as it is filled with references to technologies of communication, transmitters and receivers, which the novel deliberately parallels with how we communicated in the past. The pylons of the Ancient-Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, for instance, are equated with telephone pylons, and the novel's protagonist is labelled as one such pylon, a vehicle for carrying messages. In *Citizen*, Rankine demonstrates how media mediates the perception of marginalised persons, favouring some groups of people over others, while *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* presents a world in which constant exposure to televisions breeds affectlessness that hurts our ability to communicate as individuals. Both of Rankine's texts elevate the traditions of lyric poetry above contemporary media technologies and portray poetry as a form of empathetically reaching out to others and trying to communicate something other forms of media cannot. Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young,* on the other hand, attempts to reach out to its audience through the retro video game it centres itself around. A monument to the poet's deceased mother, the elegiac collection tries to discuss life and death through the medium of the video game, creating a relationship between the game's virtual world, the world of art, and the world of memory. The collection questions whether a video game as the subject of beauty can communicate the same thoughts, feelings and ideas as past forms of art, whether this medium can effectively contain the same message as mediums past.

Technological, Physical and Metaphysical Bodies

The metaphorical connection between technology, body and soul is a concept that has likewise been central to the literature produced in both the 20th and 21st Centuries and has been keenly examined by several contemporary critics. Peter Boxall, for instance,

[55] McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* p.7.

examines the influence of Sigmund Freud's proclamation of the human as a "prosthetic god" in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, the idea of technology as an extension of humanity's senses and physical abilities.[56] Sara Danius, in *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception and Aesthetics* suggests that new devices such as cinematography and sound recording devices in the Modernist period changed humanity's perception *of* perception, as they opened up new ways of seeing and hearing that the human body alone could not provide.[57] X-ray imaging, for example, with its ability to reveal the body beneath the surface, was a technology that allowed humanity to surpass its own eyes, which for so long had been the only way of seeing the world. The ways these technologies changed human experience, Danius argues, is one of the key components that gave rise to high modernist aesthetics. Her argument is centred around the displacement of the senses that technologies caused, the ways they challenged the "truth" of seeing or hearing, and the ways in which such technologies created "new perceptual and epistemic realms".[58] Years before, the invention and threat of photography had a particularly large impact on the visual arts, which was faced with the creation of a new art form that, as Kenneth Goldsmith argues, was "so much better at replicating reality that, in order to survive, painting had to alter its course rapidly", resulting in impressionism.[59] More than simply affecting the way we represent reality, technologies such as X-ray imaging changed the way reality was understood, giving us sight of things that were once beyond our perception. Suddenly, as with photography's ability to capture moments in time, and the radio's ability to allow us to hear what isn't present, x-ray imagery allowed humankind to see the unseen, and reach beyond our sensual capabilities. This ability to reach, see and hear beyond the senses opened up the possibilities of all kinds of hidden worlds, including the world of spirits. This leads to the terminologies of technology and telepathy becoming linked together in a seemingly contradictory way.

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[56] See Peter Boxall, "Science, Technology and the Posthuman" in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* ed. by David James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents* trans. by David McIntlock, (London: Penguin, 2004).
[57] Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception and Aesthetics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002).
[58] Danius, p.3.
[59] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p.14.

Jay Winters uses the term "unmodern" in reference to the well-documented prevalence of spiritualism and occultism that followed the end of the First World War, with the number of spiritualist societies doubling in the first five years after the war. [60] This is not the only evidence of "unmodern" influences that arose in the Modernist period, other examples including the mythological influences of Joyce and his peers, but the real contradiction lies in how modern technological language was used in association with this rise of "unmodern" spiritualist practice. The terminology of technology was being used in the worlds of spiritualism, philosophy and theology, in ways that had not been as prevalent before. This may be partially a consequence of an early association with spiritualism and technology brought on by the gramophone. Edison himself famously invented the gramophone as a way of preserving his own voice after death, and thus it drew the attention of occultists and spiritualists alike.[61] Roger Luckhurst identifies "technological metaphors" associated with the occult from this period, which could be partially linked to what he describes as the "quasi-scientific language of psychical research".[62] The languages of technology and telepathy were being contradictorily placed side-by-side by psychical research, which posed itself as a science of unscientific values.

Melissa Dinsman, in *Modernism at the Microphone*, finds a similar consistency between metaphors of telephony and telepathy, and identifies a common connection between literature, spiritualism and technology: "mediums" of transmission. "Be it a literary, spiritual, or technical medium," she begins, "the process of transmission is the same: the sender (author, ghost, or broadcast station) transmits information through the medium (book, human, or radio) to its audience." [63] New technology opened up new ways of thinking, new words, and a whole new terminology that could be applied to the human body, mind and soul, and fertile ground for novelists, philosophers and

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[60] See Jay Winters, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
[61] Sebastian D.G. Knowles, 'Death by Gramophone', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27.1/2, (Autumn 2003), pp.1-13.
[62] Roger Luckhurst, 'Religion, Psychical Research, Spiritualism and the Occult,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.438.
[63] Melissa Dinsman, *Modernism at the Microphone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.148.

occultists. As Carolyn Marvin explains, "the body is a convenient touchstone by which to gauge, explore, and interpret the unfamiliar […] and though electricity might be discussed either as an extension of nature or of the body, or as something opposed to and outside them, it was defined in any case inescapably with reference to them".[64] These new technologies, and the new terminology surrounding them, were therefore crucial to literature because they were changing the ways language was being used, associated and transmitted from author to reader, soul to soul, and telephone to telephone.

Metaphysical connections between technology, body and soul are similarly relevant to the contemporary writers discussed herein. Tom McCarthy's works are interlinked with the International Necronautical Society, an artistic movement that he began alongside philosopher Simon Critchley. The INS explicitly states in its manifesto that "our very bodies are no more than vehicles carrying us ineluctably towards death", and the main protagonist of *C* is one such being, constantly on a path towards his demise. [65] Since *C* is set in the modernist period, these spiritualist metaphors are also recognised, including a scene with a technologically controlled spirit medium. *Satin Island* uses the term "buffering", a word typically used to denote the wait required to view web pages or video on a slow online network, as a metaphysical concept, a lull state in which a human being is in a state of waiting for something, including death**.** Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* examines a similar state of life as waiting, with the spectacle-driven society she depicts rendering people as passive spectators in their own lives. Rankine also explores the effect of mass media on our perspective towards death, of who is worth grieving based on how the media presents them and their life-value, the extension of life via repeated broadcasts of deceased actors, and the need to disconnect ourselves from the reality of death by pursuing anti-aging remedies. Stephen Sexton's collection primarily explores grief, using the video game as a nostalgic vehicle to preserve his mother's memory. The poems contain haunting

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[64] Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.110.

[65] International Necronautical Society, *INS Founding Manifesto, published 14 December 1999: The Times, London, p. 1.* <http://necronauts.net/manifestos/1999_times_manifesto.html> [accessed 18 December 2018].

presences of Sexton's mother and deceased relatives as the poet remembers their lives through the game's "underworld" sections, which draw mythological references to death and rebirth such as Eurydice and Charon. The poetry collection as a whole and the video game on which it is based therefore both, in some ways, become haunted technologies of the past.

Just as relevant to explore in this technology/body dualism is the effect of technology on bodies that are subjected to them, and how technologies of mass (mass-production, mass-media, and mass-warfare) may have caused a dehumanising attitude towards bodies. Joyce's depiction of the metropolis and printing press as a lively place in "Aeolus", where technology charges the atmosphere and associations between human anatomy and technology are embraced, is in direct conflict with T.S. Eliot's resolutely anti-modern poem *The Waste Land*, where the dead victims of war (and by extension the technologies of war) roam the streets, the citizens are devoid of meaning, and all that remains are fragments of the past that make up a empty collage, like a jigsaw with missing pieces. The closest character in *The Waste Land* that can be compared to those of the printing office in "Aeolus" is the typist, whose monotonous existence at the hands of her machine-driven career has led to her being "degraded by mechanization".[66] In direct contrast to "Aeolus", in which the machine and the human body are synchronous, in *The Waste Land* the human body becomes mechanistic through repeated, monotonous labour that strips people of their individuality. Eliot describes the transition from work to relaxation at the "violet hour, when the eyes and back / turn upwards from the desk" as the idling of "the human engine", compared to a "taxi throbbing waiting" for its job to resume.[67] The movement of human anatomical features, "the eyes and back", are described without detail or personification, the use of the word "the" as the determiner allowing no human characteristics to be communicated to the reader. Instead, "the eyes and back" are indistinguishable mechanical parts of indistinguishable workers at their desks or on the factory line, like the gears and pistons of a machine. The unnamed typist is one of these human labour-machines, a mass-produced person in the age of mass

[66] Perry Schein, '"The Human Engine Waits" The Role of Technology in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"', *WR*, 1.1, (2008), pp.91-96.
[67] T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", in *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), p.50.

production, laying out "food in tins". Again, the "food in tins" is a mass-produced technology, and it is made deliberately unclear what the food itself is since it is merely sustenance for the typist.

The unnamed typist's career is her existence, her label in all facets of her life, and its automatic monotony extends even to her life outside her job, which she carries out automatically and indifferently. For the typist, it is almost as though her career at the hands of the machine has drained her of thought. She makes little resistance when a man forces himself upon her, and when the act is over she is described as "hardly aware of her departed lover only able to have one "half-formed thought", and then, finally, with what is described as her "automatic hand", she starts the mechanization of the gramophone.[68] Far from the animated, lively characters of Joyce's press office, the typist is a character whose machine-driven career rules her thoughts, her body and her life. The passage illustrates some of the dangers of mass-production and mass-labour, which can be seen to strip people of their individuality and their human rights. It is an artistic representation of what Heidegger warns of in "The Question Concerning Technology", of individuals becoming a "standing reserve" of "human resources" – once again, "the human engine waits".[69]

The physical human body was also discussed in terms of new machines such as the automobile by other Modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, who, in a philosophical essay titled "On Being Ill", describes the separation of body and soul in a similar way to a driver within a car: "The body", she writes, "is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear".[70] This Cartesian idea of the body as a form of mechanical vessel for the soul is not an idea that originated in the Modernist period, but the advent of vehicular technologies that mechanically carried the body, and the soul within it, as well as the consequences of technology revealed through the travesties of the war, reawakened these metaphors in Modernist literature. [71] If we continue to consider

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[68] Eliot, p.50.
[69] See Heidegger, p.27 and Eliot, p.50.
[70] Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp.43-44.
[71] Anthony Synott, 'Tomb, Temple, Machine and Self: The Social Construction of the Body', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 43.1, pp.79-110.

technologies as extensions of ourselves, as prosthetic body parts, then vehicles are one of the ultimate physical enhancements, extending our outer shells. We sit within vehicles and operate them to move, just as our mind (and, perhaps, soul) sit within the vehicle of our bodies. However, just like our physical bodies, we are not always fully in control of vehicular bodies – they are subject to outside influences, which Woolf calls the intervention of the human (and vehicular) body, where "the creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy".[72] In modernist literature, the automobile is at once a symbol of speed, a fantastic contraption that enables fast, reliable transportation, but also a potential death trap. In this sense, vehicles offered a way of extending the capabilities of the human body, but also had the potential to destroy it. The speed and wonder of a car or an airplane, after all, is nothing compared to the horror of its wreckage when it has abruptly come to a halt. Enda Duffy's *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* discusses the significance of vehicular bodies in modernist literature, demonstrating how advancements in transportation and mass production created a culture that idolized speed and despised slowness, and how in many modernist novels such as *The Great Gatsby* there is nothing more horrifying than a crash.[73]

Contrary to the horror of the crash were the works of F.T. Marinetti, whose futurist movement was spawned from one. The Italian futurists created a manifesto that glorified mechanized violence, calling for art that captured the beauty of speed and its destructive capabilities. Deliberately radical, war and speed were, to Marinetti and his peers, "the only cure for the world", and as such the works of the futurists often depicted beauty in the violence of vehicles. [74] Vehicles of war that carried soldiers were of particular significance in this period, often used in Marinetti's writing to convey his desire for the convergence of man and machine. Paul Virilio has identified in Marinetti's fascist ideology the idea of vehicles such as the armoured car as "an animal body that

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[72] Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', p. 43.
[73] Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
[74] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto* <https://www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto_futurista.pdf> [Accessed 20 November 2018].

disappears in the superpower of a metallic body able to annihilate time and space through its dynamic performances", in which the soldier (and by extension, the artist) undergoes a "vehicular prosthesis in order to accomplish his historical mission, Assault".[75] Such artistic assault was to be conducted on static institutions such as museums and universities, and was to be carried out through transcending physical bodies by combining them with vehicular ones.

Eliot's negative depiction of human bodies subjected to technology, and the convergence of physical bodies with technology were literary tropes that continued throughout the twentieth century, remaining relevant in both postmodernist and contemporary periods. Late modernist writer J.G. Ballard, for instance, was similarly focused on the effects of mass technologies on the human condition. When it comes to a discussion of technology and modernity, Ballard's thorough literary exploration of technology in his fiction cannot be ignored. A famously elusive author who skated between the realms of science fiction and avant-gardism, Ballard "resists categorization" by blurring the lines between literary and genre fiction.[76] As Scott Bradfield puts it, "nobody ever hated the contemporary world with as much intensity and conviction as J.G. Ballard", with his works attacking the modern urban environment in various ways, be it contained and corrupted by mass consumerism (*Kingdom Come*), flooded by the eventual effects of climate change (*The Drowned World*), or overcome with the ecstasy of car accidents as they are depicted by the mass media (*Crash*).[77]

Crash examines technology and the body in tandem with one another, as the novel's protagonist revels in the violent halting of car crashes contrary to the modernist obsession with speed, gaining sexual pleasure from participating in and re-enacting them, posed to the reader as a shocking form of modernity. The shock factor, according to Zadie Smith in a 2014 review of the text, comes not from the fact that cars are used for sex, but rather that "technology has entered into even our most intimate human

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[75] Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), p.84.
[76] Nicolas Daly, *Literature Technology and Modernity 1860-2000,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.111.
[77] Scott Bradfield, *Mall Rats, J.G. Ballard's final novel: Kingdom Come* <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/books/review/j-g-ballards-final-novel-kingdom-come.html> [Accessed 6 December 2019].

relations", and that it is a representation of "technology-as-man-forming" instead of "man-as-technology-forming", a notion that Smith similarly traces back to Marinetti.[78] In the fetishistic world of the novel, celebrities killed by these horrific accidents are idolized, almost to the point of being deified for their violent ends. These dead celebrities are martyrs to the protagonist, named James Ballard, and the other fetishists who derive pleasure from re-enacting their deaths. In a scene where an actress is taking part in a staged crash, the narrator states:

> She sat in the damaged car like a deity occupying a shrine readied for her in the blood of a minor member of her congregation […] the unique contours of her body and personality seemed to transform the crushed vehicle […] almost as if the entire car had deformed itself around her figure in a gesture of homage.[79]

Actresses, particularly those with fame, serve as examples of people who are already subjected by technologies. Actresses are changed by the camera from themselves into characters, expected to "assum[e] the postures of a crash victim" to convey an accurate portrayal for the camera.[80] Outside of their careers, celebrities are also expected to perform in their own realities, with mass media coverage of their daily lives. As Nicolas Daly states in his reading of the text, "the celebrity, or star, has already been transubstantiated by mechanical production, her body morcellated by close-ups".[81] The car crashes that they are involved in or act out are just a more direct extension of this technology-body relationship, a similar way of capturing them in a mechanical frame. The narrator recognizes this as he witnesses the death of minor actress Seagrave, her "last performance", as she is dressed up as a superstar named Elizabeth Taylor: "the automobile crash had made possible the final and longed-for union of the actress and the members of her audience".[82] In this passage, Seagrave is both herself and Taylor, referred to just as "the actress" in the narrator's imagined version of the accident. The cameras had created a parasocial relationship between Taylor and her audience, and the

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[78] Zadie Smith, *Sex and Wheels: Zadie Smith on JG Ballard's Crash* < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/04/zadie-smith-jg-ballard-crash> [Accessed 14 July 2022].
[79] J.G. Ballard, *Crash*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), p.41.
[80] Ballard, *Crash,* p.41.
[81] Daly, 'Crash: Flesh, Steel and Celluloid', p.119.
[82] Ballard, *Crash*, p.71.

narrator believes that her participation in an automobile accident would collapse this for the spectators present at the scene, who "would carry away an image of the violent transformation of this woman, of the complex of wounds that fused together her own sexuality and the hard technology of the automobile".[83] This violent convergence of technology and the body, of a mass-produced vehicle and a mass media icon, would shatter the relationships of the spectators with the victim, as well as their relationships with their own vehicular bodies as they connect with this image of the actress's death "through the medium of his own motor car".[84]

In Jean Baudrillard's reading of the text, he hails *Crash* as "the first great novel of the universe of simulation", believing that the novel served as an example of his postmodern theories of mass media technologies.[85] To Baudrillard, the technologies of mass media and the proliferation of images in postmodern society had changed the relationship between signifier and signified, to the extent that any sign is predominately signifier and any "real" tangible object or concept that it refers to no longer exists. Signs become signifiers that do not represent reality but instead replace it, which Baudrillard refers to as "simulacra". Postmodern existence, as a result, becomes what Baudrillard refers to as "simulation", an attempt to appropriate these unreal representations of life.[86] Baudrillard claims this destabilization of the real was a result of mass media and the consumption of images brought forth by advertising, television (particularly "reality" television), and newspapers, technologies that pushed forward representation over reality. In his interpretation of *Crash*, Baudrillard argues:

> The Accident portrayed here is no longer the haphazard bricolage that it still is in most highway accidents—the bricolage of the new leisure class's death drive. […] Here it is the Accident which gives life its very form; it is the Accident, the irrational, which is *the sex of life*. And the automobile itself—this magnetized sphere which ends up creating an entire universe of tunnels, expressways,

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[83] Ballard, *Crash*, p.71.
[84] Ballard, *Crash*, p.71.
[85] Jean Baudrillard, 'Ballard's *Crash*', *Science Fiction* Studies, 18.3, (November 1991), pp. 313-320 (p.319).
[86] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

> overpasses, on and off ramps by treating its mobile cockpit as a universal prototype—is only an immense metaphor of the same.[87]

Baudrillard's argument centres around the idea that the world created by Ballard in his text is one of hyperreality and simulation, as the characters constantly consume images and videos of crashes before attempting to recreate them. He argues that the text's sexual scenes and the imaginings of the narrator should not be read as perversity or as "repressed unconscious" as in other critical readings of the text, which Baudrillard accuses of being "reinject[ed] still with twisted meaning in order to conform to the psychoanalytical model".[88] Conversely, he notes how many of the references to sexual anatomy use correct technical terms rather than "phraseology" and "metaphor". Baudrillard's interpretation sees the violence and the sex in the novel as not unconscious or perverse psychological experiences as much as they are simulations of reality as it is shown to the characters, which results in a text that is entirely devoid of depth, emotion, meaning and reality. However, the above quotation from Baudrillard's reading seems to contradict his overall interpretation of the text, as he presents the idea of the car crash or the accident as a reversal of death, a kind of corporeal revival of life and of sex. In other words, the characters in the novel seem to seek a metaphysical return to their bodies and a connection between bodies that technology has taken away from them. This metaphysical transcendence is sought out via vehicular technologies, by the danger that they present, which are seen to shatter the illusion of mass media.

The ways in which our views towards technology and the body have developed as artificial limbs that "have not grown on him and still give him much trouble at times" has largely led to the idea that technology is harmful to human identity, but this does not necessarily have to be the case. Donna J. Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* instead examines how advances in science and technology in the information age could be beneficial to human identity. Contrary to Baudrillard's dystopian view of a simulated life mediated by technology, Haraway uses the science fiction symbol of the cyborg as a "utopian" being to examine how society can re-examine the relationship between nature and technology.

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[87] Baudrillard, 'Ballard's *Crash*', p.314.
[88] Baudrillard, 'Ballard's *Crash*', p.314.

Haraway is against the grand narratives of the past but favours an updated grand narrative of twentieth-century science fiction, claiming "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess", using the imagery of the cyborg to envision future ideals in an attempt "to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism". [89] Haraway's essay examines a number of established "dualisms" between "mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices, symbolic formulations, and physical artifacts associated with 'high technology' and scientific culture", which she uses the metaphor of the cyborg to disrupt and re-examine.[90] Haraway sees technology as an opportunity for challenging these dualisms for the individual. As Vincent B. Leitch identifies, "for Haraway we are neither estranged beings or docile bodies. We are indeed multifaceted machines – 'cyborgs' – and that has its benefits, enabling us positively to reconfigure our social relations with technology, both broadly and narrowly defined".[91] Technology is not seen as the enemy by Haraway, who claims that there are fatal flaws with the political system in which technology is imbricated and developed. Instead, it is the political system that draws clear boundaries between social concepts, which technology can also be used to disrupt. Haraway's essay is an early example of posthumanism, a discipline that aims to re-examine concepts and social constructs of humanity such as gender, race, sexuality and anthropocentrism, which advocates the enhancement of humanity through new technologies, a movement to which the image of the cyborg is central. Rather than Freud's "prosthetic god", the transhuman image of the cyborg is a cybernetic god permanently enhanced by technology.

Haraway's view of technology as something that can be beneficial to human identity but is held back by long-standing institutions and political ideologies is integral to contemporary considerations of technology, particularly in regard to racially marginalised individuals who are subject to the biases of western technologies and their production. In *Race After Technology*, Ruha Benjamin examines how technologies such

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[89] Donna J. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016,) ProQuest Ebook Central, < http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=4392065.> [accessed March 28 2022]. p.68. & p.4.
[90] Haraway, p.14.
[91] Vincent B Leitch, 'Postmodern Theory of Technology: Agendas.' *Symplokē*, 12.1/2, (2004), pp. 209–15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40550680.> [Accessed 21 Apr. 2022.].

as facial recognition programs, artificial intelligence, and algorithms used for employment are unfairly biased against minority ethnic groups.[92] Benjamin states that the utopian/dystopian dualism of technology, the two narratives by which technology is considered as either our saviour or our destroyer, place technology out of human control.[93] Rather than viewing technology as an uncontrollable, driving force of society in this way, Benjamin's work moves away the screen of technology, of technology with a capital T, and focuses on specific technologies and the ecosystem of technological production. Technologies contain the biases of their creators, and as such Benjamin's examples demonstrate problems with the culture of contemporary technological production. Benjamin claims that the current ecosystem of technological production functions on profits regardless of public interest and the common good, which leads to the development of dangerous and harmful technologies, including those that demonstrate racial bias.[94] Technologies of surveillance such as facial recognition used by police forces, for instance, are more likely to come up with false-positive results against people of colour, reinforcing notions of Black hypervisibility in public spaces, while other automatic technologies designed for convenience are prone to glitches that fail to detect darker skin tones, rendering them invisible by technology.[95]

The racial biases of visual technologies such as those of surveillance reinforce "scopic regimes" which "subjugate blacks through visual coding".[96] As Simone Browne explores in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, in "public spaces [that] are shaped for and by whiteness, some acts in public are abnormalized by way of racializing surveillance and then coded for disciplinary measures that are punitive in their effects".[97] In this way, these technologies are biased not only in their software and programming, but also in the way that they are deployed by groups such as police forces and employers against certain subjects, which reinforce and enable systemic racism. Such visual

[92] Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).
[93] Benjamin, p.38 & p.43.
[94] Benjamin, p.30.
[95] Benjamin, p.21.
[96] Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.18.
[97] Simone Brown, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p.17.

technologies are not inherently malevolent but are deployed with what Donna Haraway calls the "conquering gaze" of western scopic regimes, which "mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation".[98]

Bodies subjected by technology, and the convergence of technology and the body, recur throughout the contemporary texts explored in this thesis, particularly in Tom McCarthy's *C* and the works of Claudia Rankine. The characters in *C* constantly interact with the technologies of the modernist period, often in ways that dehumanise them and their bodies. Children at a school for the deaf become telephone transmitters, able to speak but not convey true meaning, and soldiers are treated as disposable machines of war, where human parts and machine parts on the battlefield are indistinguishable for one another. The text's protagonist is involved in two prominent crashes of his WW1 aircraft and a car in London, the latter of which draws parallels between F.T. Marinetti's car crash that started the futurist movement as well as J.G. Ballard's *Crash*.

Baudrillard's concept of simulation is particularly relevant to representations of physical bodies in the mass media, which are explored in depth by Claudia Rankine in her two texts. False representations and standards for life are abound in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, which demonstrates how television pushes forward unrealistic standards of beauty and fulfilment and the effect this can have on modern individuals. Both of Rankine's texts also explore what is defined by Nicole Fleetwood as "spectacular blackness", a concept that examines the physical representations of bodies racially marked as "spectacles" by the mass media.[99] Rankine's texts also contain diagrams of sick "bodies", both physical and political, such as an exploration of "Mr. Tools", a man with an artificial heart, and an anatomical diagram with America as its liver. While the subjugation of bodies by technology is less relevant to Sexton's text, associations between technology and the physical body are prevalent, whereby the poet's mother's body is reflected in the landscapes of the game's levels, and surgical procedures form

[98] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3, (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599 (p.581).
[99] Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, p.37.

the content of several poems. These connections are at once pastoral and technological, a reflection of mother nature in the virtual world.

Authenticity, Originality, Intertextuality

Contemporary literature has also been seen returning to notions of authenticity, which may be at least partially influenced by technological progress and sit in opposition to both postmodernist and digimodernist techniques, which has led to literary discourse surrounding its value. The concept of authenticity has been placed in relative jeopardy since the industrial revolution, when technologies of mass production could easily replicate objects. In 1935, Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" argued that technologies of mass-production were having an effect on the way art is experienced, believing "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition".[100] Benjamin calls this process the "decay of aura". The "aura" of an object is what separates, as Benjamin uses as an example, an image of a mountain range from physically seeing it – "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity".[101] In a contemporary world filled with infinitely reproduced images of objects divorced from their auras, the concept of authenticity in art is much harder to define and produce. Further, there is little to distinguish an original or authentic production from a fake or a replication. Baudrillard's philosophies of simulacra and simulation, as well as Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, are somewhat connected to inauthenticity, extending beyond this artistic loss of authenticity to the point where the mass-dissemination of images and copies by media also threatens an authentic experience of reality, whereby reality itself becomes a form of mimesis.

Alan Kirby's explorations of digimodernist texts indicate that this technological dispersal of authenticity is evident in contemporary society. Kirby explains that

[100] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p.4.
[101] Benjamin, p.3.

digimodernist texts such as reality television rely on what is referred to as "the apparently real",[102] entertainment that presents itself as a form of staged reality that combines the real with the unreal to the extent that the line between the two blurs. A postmodernist text would deliberately acknowledge its own potential to be true or false and deny any solid answer. Digimodernist reality television, on the other hand, depicts itself as close to reality as possible, creating an implicit relationship whereby the viewer is aware that some of what they are viewing is inauthentic, but takes it as a close representation of reality regardless. To fully acknowledge the constructed nature of reality television is to miss the interest generated by its supposed "reality" in which "participants improvise the immediate material".[103] The constructed authenticity that the apparently real relies on is also evident in found footage horror films such as *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity*, which mimic the visual styles of hand-recorded cameras and home CCTV footage respectively to make the supernatural appear more genuine. Mockumentaries such as *This Is Spinal Tap*, which mimics the documentary form and constructs a historiography of a rock band, and websites such as Wikipedia, considered by many as a valid and quintessential source of information despite its ability to be edited and tampered with by anyone, are also examples of the apparently real.

However, the "apparently real" of reality television and other digimodernist texts is not as easily accepted in literature, as was demonstrated when Laura Albert's literary persona JT Leroy created in the 1990s was uncovered as a fraud. Albert's works under the name JT Leroy were marketed and taken as autobiographical, but upon Albert's revelation that the stories were fictitious there was a widespread controversy, which led to lawsuits and demands of refunds from consumers who had believed the texts were genuine. Discussing the controversy, David Shields sees the revelation of JT Leroy as a way to undermine the supposed authenticity of literature, suggesting that we take literature, particularly memoirs and lyric poetry, at equivalent to the "apparently real" of reality television, instead of assuming an authenticity that may not actually be there. Shields feels that this hunger for reality and coherence is endemic in the novel and is part of the reason for its decline. Shields instead calls for the emergence of the "anti-

[102] Kirby, p.141.
[103] Kirby, p.141.

novel, built from scraps",[104] texts that are deliberately made up of pieces from other sources. *Reality Hunger* itself takes quotations from various other sources to form the body of the work, with a disclaimer in the bibliography that reading it goes against the purpose of the text – "Stop;" it reads, "don't read any farther".[105]

Marjorie Perloff, in *Unoriginal Genius*, asserts that artists with access to the internet are uniquely equipped to adopt this citational style of writing, since the internet is an enormous collection of texts instantly available to those with access to it. Examining precursory texts of the modernist and postmodernist periods such as the writers of the Oulipo and Eliot's use of extensive footnoting and outside frames of reference in *The Waste Land*, Perloff considers the potential of this style of writing in the twenty-first century, serving as another example of the call for contemporary literature that responds to twentieth-century ideas and reflections on modernity. Kenneth Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing* expands this push for original literature built from unoriginal language, arguing that twenty-first-century literature should be about the "management" and "manipulation" of existing language rather than the traditional penchant for "originality" and "creativity".[106] Goldsmith's desire for the contemporary writer to manage existing information and language available online is akin to Ezra Pound's desire in his 1938 text *A Guide to Kulchur* to "provide the average reader with a few tools for dealing with the heteroclite mass of undigested information hurled at him daily and monthly and set to entangle his feet in volumes of reference".[107] In this kind of literature, the digimodernist implosion of forms of textuality and focus on the opposable digits can apply to the method of contemporary writers. In this style of writing, all available language and "historical styles are the literary equivalent of Instagram filters, a

[104] David Shields, *Long Live the Anti-Novel, Built From Scraps* (2010) <https://themillions.com/2010/05/long-live-the-anti-novel-built-from-scraps.html> [Accessed March 20 2020].
[105] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2011), p.608.
[106] Goldsmith, p.15.
[107] Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, (New York: New Directions, 1970), p.26.

grab bag of scrims with which they can create astonishingly new works – works that could only have been produced in the digital age".[108]

Roland Barthes once declared that the author should no longer be considered by literary critics as a genius and instead as a "scriptor", whose works form a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash". These contemporary critics similarly assert that authenticity should no longer be valued in favour of more postmodern, ironic representations of inauthenticity and intertextuality. [109] Zadie Smith's "Two Paths for the Novel" identifies "Lyrical Realism" as the dominant literary form in early twenty-first-century fiction and examines Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* as an example of the future of the genre.[110] Smith argues that O'Neill's text is an anxious obsession over the "question of authenticity", but one that ultimately hangs on to conventions of realist fiction such as its lyrical style and theme of transcendence in order to "offer us the authentic story of a self".[111] Smith then contrasts O'Neill's work with Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder*, which wholeheartedly denies authenticity as its protagonist continuously re-enacts, and therefore reproduces, his memories. Smith identifies and applauds in *Remainder* a kind of "anti-literature" that "empties out interiority entirely", resulting in a novel that deconstructs established realist traditions and embraces inauthenticity with postmodern, avant-garde irony.[112]

Nevertheless, authenticity is still broadly valued in contemporary literature to a much higher standard than in other forms of media, and there are many writers and literary critics who believe a combination of authenticity and sincerity is a much-needed literary response to twenty-first-century modernity. In a 2018 lyric essay published by Tin House, author and poet Patricia Lockwood asks "How Do We Write Now?" in

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[108] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Post-Internet Poetry Comes of Age*, (2015) <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/post-internet-poetry-comes-of-age> [Accessed September 20 2016].
[109] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' trans. Stephen Heath *in image – music – text* ed. by Stephen Heath, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), pp. 142-48 (p.146).
[110] Zadie Smith, *Two Paths For the Novel* (2008) <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/11/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/> [Accessed 1 June 2020].
[111] Smith, Two Paths For the Novel.
[112] Smith, Two Paths For the Novel.

response to the condition of twenty-first-century, hyper-distracted modernity.[113] Lockwood's argument concurs with Nicolas Carr and Phillip Roth, in which "your attention" is being put at risk by a contemporary life that is full of technological distractions and political worries, but concludes that reading and writing literature in traditional mediums, particularly poetry, offers a reprieve from digital devices.[114] Lockwood contrasts "the feeling you get after hours of scrolling that all your thoughts have been replaced with cotton candy" with "the feeling of being open to poetry, to being inside a poem, which is the feeling of being honey in the hive", believing that "the pure concentration that you live in when you write a poem is still there, is still just beyond us as the green dimension".[115] Walter Benjamin makes a similar statement in his essay, contrasting the concentrated individual as "absorbed by" a piece of art with a distracted mass that "absorbs the work of art".[116] A novel or a poem is a kind of art that requires the individual to absorb it, while Benjamin uses architecture as an example of a type of art that is absorbed by the masses – "consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction".[117] While Benjamin upholds distractedness over concentration, Lockwood argues that reading and writing poetry offer the individual a form of mindfulness, as opposed to the mindlessness of scrolling through social media sites like Twitter, and as such the reading and writing of literature remains an essential practice in contemporary society. Mindfulness and concentration are integral to Lockwood's message in this essay, as she urges the reader to participate in other mindful activities, to "cook something that will take a long time, it will think along with you", to "read diaries, which make the day permanent", and to "look out the window the way Dorothy looked out the window in *The Wizard of Oz* – as if the tornado has plucked you up and next you might see anything".[118] If distraction is considered the demon of the digital age, then Lockwood claims mindfulness is its solace, found in an active appreciation of the authentic experience of reality.

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[113] Patricia Lockwood, *How Do We Write Now?* (2018) <https://tinhouse.com/how-do-we-write-now/> [Accessed 13 Jul. 2022].
[114] Lockwood, How Do We Write Now?.
[115] Lockwood, How Do We Write Now?.
[116] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", p.18.
[117] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", p.18.
[118] Lockwood, How Do We Write Now?.

This call for authenticity and sincerity in contemporary literature is also echoed by Mark Roche in *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*. Roche approaches dominant cultural ideas in the current technological age as problems that "great literature" can respond to, arguing that the moral values of literature (including authenticity) are still essential in the contemporary era.[119] Significantly, Roche's argument for the ways in which literature can tackle the problems with technology reflects Heidegger's own declaration that the realm of art is the only space in which modern technology can be confronted. In the text, Roche sets out a table of categories and cultural dominants alongside how literature can subvert or draw attention to them. The table is reminiscent of that outlined by Ihab Hassan in "Towards a Concept of Postmodernism", which sought to distinguish modernism and postmodernism.[120] In contrast to Hassan's model, Roche's speculates on the ways in which literature can subvert many of the cultural conditions caused by technology:

Technical Rationality / Intrinsic Value

Subjectivity / Self-transcendence

Quantity / Balance

Autonomous Value Systems / Overarching Connections

Hubris and impuissance / Perspective

Disenchantment and dissonance / Inexhaustible Meaning

Short-sightedness / Trans-historicism[121]

By Roche's reasoning, several of the explanations in the table above for why literature matters in the twenty-first century are precisely why critics such as Alan Kirby claim it doesn't. The Short-sightedness/Trans-historicism binary creates discourse between Kirby and Roche, for example, as Kirby examines the ways in which digimodernist texts

[119] Roche, p.237.
[120] Ihab Hassan, 'Towards a Concept of Post-modernism' in *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), pp.84-99 (p.90).
[121] Roche, p.237.

are "swamped in the textual present", even if they are presented as historical. [122] Writers of historical television shows such as *Bridgerton* tend to depict societies of the past as ones in which "people have always walked, talked, moved and acted pretty much as they do today, and have ever had today's social attitudes (equality for women, sexual outspokenness, racial tolerance)", which precisely reflects the historical short-sightedness that Roche believes literature can and should subvert. [123] Reality television focuses almost exclusively on hubristic individuals, loud and boisterous people so proud that they broadcast the everyday occurrences of their lives as spectacle, while hubris in literature has predominantly been a tragic or unattractive flaw in a character. Rather than focusing on the power of the individual with a device in their hands, Roche sees that "in work driven by technology, often only certain elements of humanity are required – perhaps simply our eyes and our hands", and that this, like the typist in *The Waste Land*, results in people becoming "extensions of machines".[124] Roche contends that these faults are something that only literature can effectively respond to, with a sincere and authentic approach to upholding moral values. Roche heightens the "Intrinsic Value" of art, believing that "when we appreciate an object of beauty, we do not desire to possess or transform it".[125] In contrast, critics heralding unoriginality may believe objects of beauty have higher use-value in the creation and recreation of art, to be pseudo-plagiarized into an intertextual, networked text.

While these two sets of critics seem to be in many ways opposed to one another, there exists a common middle ground that some contemporary writers seem to be treading. The argument at play between these two sets of contemporary critics is akin to a twenty-first-century repetition of the argument between the high modernist penchant for grand narratives, common moral values and transcendence and the postmodernist turn to inauthenticity, irony and micronarratives. The common ground for much of high modernist and postmodernist literature is the use of intertextuality as a literary technique, albeit with different purposes. *Ulysses* was a text that attempted, in T.S.

[122] Kirby, p.149.
[123] Kirby, p.149.
[124] Roche, p.157.
[125] Roche, p.206.

Eliot's oft-quoted 1923 review, to establish "the mythical method" of writing.[126] In other words, the use of the *Odyssey* could be considered an attempt to ground the chaos of modernity through Homer's well-established metanarrative and intertextual reference. Eliot's own text *The Waste Land* is itself a work that has been frequently discussed in terms of its intertextuality, a lament on the fragmentation of Western culture filled with footnoted references to past works. Intertextuality is once again central to postmodernism, serving the basis of structuralism as previously discussed. With regards to the contemporary critics, intertextuality as a technique fits into Roche's call for "Overarching Connections" and "Transhistoricism", as both must draw influence from past works and long-established traditions like the modernists did and is certainly central to Goldsmith's "Uncreative Writing" which seeks to build whole texts from existing ones.[127]

Similarly, irony and sincerity are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts – an ironic idea can be sincere and vice versa. An appropriation of both irony and sincerity in contemporary literature is a notion identified with metamodernism. In *The Listening Society*, a self-styled metamodernist text, Hanzi Freinacht declares:

> People need irony in order to build interpersonal trust based on self-knowledge, humour and critical thinking. Only when such trust is in place can we successfully gather around a meaningful struggle for something greater than ourselves, like the climate crisis. There, another quirk of our age: irony brings trust. And Trust crowns a winner.[128]

The association between irony and sincerity is one of many oxymorons that fill the 2011 metamodernist manifesto, accompanied by such terms as "pragmatic romanticism" and "magical realism".[129] These oxymorons function as examples of the metamodernist position of "oscillation between positions, with diametrically opposed ideas operating like the pulsating polarities of a colossal electric machine, propelling the world into

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[126] T.S. Eliot, 'Ulysses Order & Myth', *The Dial*, 75.5, (1923), pp.480-483.
[127] Roche, p.237.
[128] Hanzi Freinacht, *The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics, Book One* (Metamoderna, 2017), p.116.
[129] Luke Turner *The Metamodernist Manifesto* (2011) <http://www.metamodernism.org/> [accessed 13 July 2022].

action".[130] This position-less position of oscillation would not be possible without contemporary technologies, as the metamodernists claim "new technology enables the simultaneous experience and enactment of events from a multiplicity of positions". Luke Turner claims postmodernist texts have often leaned towards an ironic and "cynical insincerity" of the inauthenticity of literature, and modernism suffered from a sincere "ideological naivety".[131] He argues that contemporary literature, on the other hand, can oscillate, presenting a modernist stance of sincerity built around postmodernist intertextuality and irony.[132]

Hanzi Freinacht himself is an embodiment of this ironic sincerity, since he is actually a pseudonym of authors Daniel Görtz and Emil Ejner Friis, an ironic construction and image of a bearded intellectual created to sincerely represent and discuss their stance on the importance of the duality of irony and sincerity. Through the vehicle of insincerity, of a false persona just like JT Leroy, Gortz and Friis embody the very ironic sincerity they call for. The authenticity and sincerity of a text would, in this style of writing, be derived from the inauthenticity and irony, from the texts that a particular writer has chosen to use in their work of collage, the vast sphere of unoriginal influences that make up an original individual. Rather than the "apparently real" of digimodernist texts, literature created from already existing language or imagery could take on the role of the "apparently original", in which the intertextual collage created by fusing unoriginal works is seen as its own form of originality, structuring itself around a sincere message.

An example of ironic sincerity and authenticity pulled from inauthenticity is Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This,* a novel that distinguishes itself from the irony poisoning of digital culture on the internet while acknowledging and representing it through its use of ironic sincerity. It is a text that not only considers ironic sincerity but also almost all of the themes discussed in this introductory chapter – the representation of technology through formal experimentation, language as a technology and the effect of technology on language, technology and the body, and

[130] Turner, *The Metamodernist Manifesto.*
[131] Turner, *The Metamodernist Manifesto.*
[132] Turner, *The Metamodernist Manifesto.*

technology's effect on the question of authenticity. *No One is Talking About This* attempts to recreate the feeling of being immersed in social media and the internet, referred to in the novel as "the portal", and the effect this has on contemporary living and thinking, juxtaposing it with the physical world.

The world of the portal as presented to the reader is one of postmodern irony and micronarratives, where being "a war criminal" and making "a heinous substitution in guacamole" are considered equally vilifying and garner the same amount of infamy.[133] These micronarratives are all considered equal parts of the internet and take up equal space in the protagonist's mind. When she is reading articles online, for instance, every article is considered a "piece" regardless of the topic, be it "war, poverty, epidemics" or "going to a deli with a poor friend who was intimidated by the fancy ham".[134] Lockwood juxtaposes topics that are high and low in their seriousness and tone, demonstrating that the internet is swarming with narratives that compete for our attention, and what the internet as a whole chooses to focus on can shift rapidly from seriousness to humour. This absurdity translates directly into reality, with the ironic undertones of the internet affecting the protagonist's choices as well as the other characters in the text. A meeting at a restaurant between the protagonist and several other online influencers, for example, leads to them purposely ordering the worst thing on the menu for the sake of an ironic joke.[135] Another key example is an exchange between the protagonist's brother and a friend who has "terrible internet poisoning":

> "And the other day he says to me, *Saw my daughter's tits on the ultrasound. Looked pretty good!* […] And he just gazed off in the distance and said, *I don't know how to act. I've been this way so long, I don't know how to* be *anymore*."[136]

The character realises it feels inappropriate to use the dark, ironic humour of the internet outside of the portal. This section is akin to the exchange in Egan's "Pure Language" previously discussed, whereby there is a linguistic and stylistic disconnect between

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[133] Patricia Lockwood, *No One is Talking About This* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2021), p.9.
[134] Lockwood, p.58.
[135] Lockwood, p.26.
[136] Lockwood, p.76.

language used out loud and language poured through different mediums such as text messaging and the internet. In this case, the stylistics of netspeak that accept ironic jokes such as this one feel inappropriate when spoken aloud, when presented in a different medium. The irony in the above quotation is therefore used to deliver sincere realisation of the character, who begins to understand that his reality has been defined by the technological medium he uses on a daily basis, to the extent that he doesn't know how to behave or speak in the physical world anymore.

Lockwood's ironic usage of a wide array of intertextual references to online micronarratives serve the intended purpose of demonstrating with sincerity just how much influence the internet has on our lives. Due to this, the text itself has been frequently compared to works of the modernist period, particularly with reference to James Joyce, who the protagonist directly comments on in another example of ironic sincerity:

> "Stream-of-consciousness was long ago conquered by a man who wanted his wife to fart all over him. But what about the stream-of-a-consciousness that is not entirely your own? One that you participate in, but that also acts upon you?"[137]

In this passage, the protagonist is delivering a speech about the portal in Jamaica, where she makes reference to James Joyce's love letters, which revealed personal information about the author's intimate preferences. Once again, Lockwood uses the irony, the unusual fetish of somebody considered one of the twentieth century's greatest authors, to argue something more profound, the notion that the internet is a "stream-of-a-consciousness", a collective mind that affects us as we effect it.[138] The message that the narrator is trying to convey to her audience is veiled in a joke at Joyce's expense. The punchline is not where the message of the narrator lies. Instead, it is a middleman, a vehicle of ironic humour that carries through genuine questions about the nature of the internet and the human mind, which once was a series of separately functioning consciousnesses captured by writers such as Joyce. The consciousnesses captured by

[137] Lockwood, p.42.
[138] Lockwood, p.42.

Joyce were the grand narratives of single minds, while Lockwood's goal is instead to chart this collective mind made up of countless interconnected micronarratives. The Gutenberg mind is juxtaposed with the Google mind, which is considered as a kind of collected online consciousness that we can influence and affect but at the same time affects us in turn. The narrator compares herself to Joyce, identifying with him despite targeting him. At the same time, she considers her project as a different one, since the twenty-first-century, internet-influenced mind functions differently from that of the modernist past.

Alexandra Schwartz, in her review of the novel, deepens this comparison between Lockwood and Joyce, demonstrating that, like Joyce's return to *technē* as he portrayed "a mind through language", one of the ways Lockwood portrays the collective mind of the internet is through the text's form.[139] While Schwartz's comparison here is with the way Joyce tried to capture the workings of the mind through the use of stream of consciousness, Lockwood's use of form similarly echoes Joyce as previously explored in this chapter. Just as Joyce uses the headlines of "Aeolus" to reflect the technology of the printing press, Lockwood likewise attempts to capture the short form limits of social media platforms such as Twitter through the form of the text. *No One is Talking About This* is broken down into chapters that are split into short paragraphs, intended to reflect the form of a social media feed on the page. The text's fragments often make jumps forward in space and in time – in one moment Lockwood's protagonist is on a stage in Jamaica, and further down the same page she is arriving for an interview with the BBC – that formally reflect the time-space compression caused by transport technologies and twenty-first-century globalisation. Some passages also experiment formally with font type, text messages often are depicted with larger font of a different type and one passage directly prints emoticons onto the page. As with Joyce, the Gutenberg man who formally printed headlines into "Aeolus", Lockwood formally demonstrates the effect of technology on text, on the way it is presented, read, and

[139] Alexandra Schwartz, *The Voice That Gets Lost Online*, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/the-voice-that-gets-lost-online-patricia-lockwood-lauren-oyler> [Accessed 14 September 2022].

received. Lockwood establishes these ideas throughout the novel, creating a grand narrative that anchors the novel through its ironic sincerity.

The irony of the novel acts as a façade for sincerity, to the idea of, to return to Smith's review of *Crash*, "technology as man forming".[140] Also similar to *Crash* is the way in which experiences with life and death bring a form of transcendence that returns the characters in the novel to a metaphysical reality, to remind them that "there is still a real life to be lived".[141] One such experience in the novel is, significantly, a near-missed car crash:

> Life didn't flash before your eyes, she thought, as they lost control […] Maybe she didn't have enough life to flash, she considered […] she stumbled out of the car at the next exit, leaned over heaving with her hands on her knees, her rib cage trembling inside her like a cracked bone butterfly and began to laugh […] as if in the course of endless scrolling she had just seen the funniest fucking thing.[142]

In this real-world near-death experience, the protagonist is brought violently back inside of her own body, which allows her to reflect on her life of "endless scrolling", laughing at the irony of almost losing her physical life which she "didn't have enough" of to flash before her eyes.[143] Ironic, also, is the way Lockwood uses a simile that is still connected to the portal, comparing her laughing at the incident to laughing at something on the portal, but these ironies are told with a knowing sincerity at the grim reality of near-death.

Later in the text, another traumatic experience helps the protagonist to break away from the portal for a time. The second part of the novel is defined by a tragedy involving the protagonist's pregnant sister, whose unborn child is suddenly revealed to be suffering from Proteus syndrome in the womb. Lockwood's character becomes less attached to the portal during this time, where the text's sections start to become longer,

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[140] Smith, *Sex and Wheels*.
[141] Lockwood, p.69.
[142] Lockwood, p.80.
[143] Lockwood, p.80.

particularly when the baby is born. While the portal is still referenced in a few sections, the text becomes devoted to charting the baby's six-month life and death, and Lockwood devotes these longer, sweeping sections to compressing her short life into many words. It is during this section of the book that the ironic façade is somewhat peeled away, and earlier references to the portal, the little humorous micronarratives that formed the book's first half, become recontextualized to be associated with grief.

Early in the text, the protagonist compares the feeling of the protagonist's fingertip going numb from scrolling to the feeling of "the way that your ear used to get soft, pink and pliant, […] from talking on the telephone".[144] Whilst in this trance-like state, the protagonist is described by her husband as "locked in", and he has to help her to return to her physical body.[145] This state returns while she is on the plane home, but instead of scrolling through the portal, her finger goes numb from scrolling through the camera roll on her phone, staring instead at pictures of her lost baby niece[146] The ironic humour from the first section of the book therefore becomes interlinked with this moment of grief, replacing the irony with sincerity and sympathy.

The use of the portal, too, becomes repurposed as a coping mechanism to deal with grief in another sincerely ironic moment:

RELATED SEARCHES

I miss my son who died

I miss my son so much quotes

I miss my son in heaven

My son died and I miss him

Missing my son sayings[147]

[144] Lockwood, p.21.
[145] Lockwood, p.21.
[146] Lockwood, p.204.
[147] Lockwood p.201.

This passage mimics the suggested search dropdown menu from search engines such as Google. The suggestions are based on algorithms as well as what other people have searched for before. In this way, the related searches become a form of collective grief in the portal, a place grieving mothers have turned to in search of solace or relief from their pain. There is a kind of ironic humour here also, a joke to be made at the absurdity of looking for the answers to grief online, and the algorithm's strange syntax with taglines at the end of some of these searches such as "quotes" and "sayings". It is also, conversely, a genuine and sincere moment, a very real way in which people use search engines to seek philosophical answers.[148]

The effect of the traumatic experience on Lockwood's character is ultimately a return to her own physical body, to her own individuality distinguished from the portal's communal mind:

> As she stood at the podium and clicked through the PowerPoint she tried to pretend that she still lived there, that she still pumped with the blood that knew. She said the words *communal mind* and saw the room her family had sat in together, looking at that singular gray brain on an MRI. […] Why had she entered the portal in the first place? Because she wanted to be a creature of pure call and response: to delight and to be delighted. She read, her rib cage shaking, with the voice she had used to delight the baby. Her heart nearly hammered out of her and she read.[149]

The protagonist, after her experience, no longer feels like she is a part of the communal mind and body of the portal. She can feel her individual body parts, the feeling of her "rib cage" as in the car incident earlier in the novel, her heart in her chest, and her own individual voice rather than the voice of the portal – "the previous unshakeable conviction that someone else was writing the inside of her head". [150] She is once again an individual inside of her own body, no longer "in this place where we were on the verge of losing our bodies", the technological world of the portal which deindividuates

[148] Lockwood, p.201.
[149] Lockwood, p.205.
[150] Lockwood, p.80 & p.143.

people by placing importance on collective experiences, such as "whether you called it pop or soda growing up, or whether your mother cooked with garlic salt or the real chopped cloves".[151] She thinks about her individual experience with her family and what she went through alongside them, seeing them as a smaller, more private and contained "communal mind" as opposed to the broad collective of the portal.[152] She realises that she wished to be purely social on social media, "a creature of pure call and response", but that desire had immersed her too far into the technology of the portal, making her lose her individuality in favour of conforming to its whims. This occurs, for instance, when "she was trying to hate the police" because it was popular in the portal to do so.[153] The text ultimately demonstrates that while the internet is and will remain an important technology in our lives, it can also distract us from the real world and our inner selves, risking crucial parts of our individual identities.

No One Is Talking About This therefore represents this metamodernist oscillation between modernist and postmodernist poetics. While Lockwood demonstrates and recreates the vast array of online micronarratives with irony and self-awareness that poke fun at the contemporary human condition, she does so in a way that has led critics to associate her with a modernist sincerity and sentiment. Like Joyce, Lockwood represents technology through form while at the same time examining the effect of technology on literature and language as technologies of communication. The first, largely postmodernist and ironic portion of the text is used as a vehicle for the sincerity of the second half, which brings to attention the means through which technology can control our lives if we allow it to. It represents an approach to technology and literature that recurs throughout the other texts in this thesis, examining the effects of technology on language, the body, the question of authenticity and the human condition while simultaneously acknowledging and representing technology through formal experimentation.

Intertextuality, authenticity, and ironic sincerity are all key themes explored by the authors in the following chapters. Tom McCarthy continues the trend in *C* and *Satin*

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[151] Lockwood, p.12.
[152] Lockwood, p.205.
[153] Lockwood, p.19.

Island, which deny many novelistic tropes such as epiphany and transcendence. The protagonists of these two novels are vehicles for the destruction of novelistic and humanist depth, as well intertextual tissues of characters from other novels, communicated to the reader from the outset. Serge Carrefax from *C,* for example, is born with a caul like *David Copperfield*, and U.'s opening line from *Satin Island* is "Call me U.", a reference to "Call me Ishmael" from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* which connects the hunt for the white whale to the protagonist's hunt for the "Great Project", an answer to everything.[154] The works of Claudia Rankine and Stephen Sexton, on the other hand, serve as examples of metamodernist ironic sincerity. Both poets use intertextuality and irony as a vehicle for sincere expression. Rankine's texts are filled with ironic jokes and intertextual references to television and the internet, which are in service to a deeper message, like Patricia Lockwood's in *No One is Talking About This,* of pulling away from a passive mode of being towards an active appreciation and understanding of life and those around us through the traditions of lyric poetry. Stephen Sexton's collection started as "a kind of joke".[155] The use of ekphrasis, an artistic technique usually reserved for describing works of art, is an ironic mechanism through which to explore the 16-bit world of a video game designed for the entertainment of children, but it is done in a way that strengthens the meaning of the work, whereby the video game is sincerely valued by the poet by connecting it to art in other mediums. One of the poems in the collections, for instance, is an ironic ekphrasis through ekphrasis, the description of the level in the poem also accurately describing Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, without Icarus himself, which opens questions about the game's idyllic world and whether it is a world of tragedy. The intertextuality and the ironic use of ekphrasis open up sincere and genuine messages about the value of nostalgia, the nature of grief, and how art functions in different mediums.

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[154] See Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015) p.3 and Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2002).

[155] Stephen Sexton, *Stephen Sexton: 'For me, death and Super Mario have always been connected'* (2019), <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/stephen-sexton-for-me-death-and-super-mario-have-always-been-connected-1.3991940> [accessed 13 July 2022].

Conclusion

The shift from Gutenberg reader to Google reader and the distraction of digital technologies has caused a great array of scepticism about the future of literature as an art form. This current literary 'crisis' harkens back to literary movements of the past that were similarly forced to adapt to technological progression. Modernist and postmodernist approaches to technology can inform the contemporary writer of how to respond to our increasingly complex modernity, by directly confronting technology and the epistemological and ontological issues that arise from a technologized society. Technology as a mode of understanding the world has long since undergone a shift from *poiesis*, a natural bringing forth, to an aggressive hoarding of earth's natural resources, including human life itself. Literature, on the other hand, retains its poietical qualities, which gives it status as a unique platform through which to confront technology. Newer forms such as the PowerPoint presentation offer themselves up to be commented on through the traditional mediums of poetry and prose, and the absorption of these into literature on the level of form can reveal enlightening details about language as a technology of communication. Such formal integration of technology into works critical of its function and effect on humanity skirt the line between modernist and postmodernist technique.

New technologies open up our understanding of ourselves on an individual level, allowing us to configure our minds, bodies and souls through technological language, as well as extending our perspectives on reality, extending the metaphorical syntax of the artist. At the same time, the accumulation of mass technologies can be seen to dehumanise us on a collective level, which writers are equipped to address – mass-labour turns us into idling machines, mass media estranges us from reality, and mass-industry turns its eyes away from the consequences of its production in favour of profit. These drawbacks are not the result of technology itself, but rather of the political, ideological and economic systems in which technology is produced. New forms of mass media and communication such as reality television and the increasing amount of language available on the internet have re-opened the question of authenticity in

literature. One answer to authenticity is its complete denial and deconstruction, favouring postmodern approaches of intertextuality and irony, while another perspective calls for literature to act as a return to sincerity and moral values. Between these two approaches lies the metamodernist oscillation between modernism and postmodernism, the poetics of which are relevant to the readings to follow. One metamodernist oscillation is between sincerity and irony, whereby irony acts as a mechanism through which to deliver sincere messages about contemporary modernity. While modernity and postmodernity are often discussed in opposition to one another, contemporary society is the child of both eras and, as such, inherits aspects of both of its parents. Contemporary literature can move past both modernism and postmodernism, retaining certain characteristics of both to adopt a holistic approach to literature and technology. The writers examined herein all draw from past approaches to literature and technology in their works and serve as examples of a kind of literature that is simultaneously forward-thinking and backwards-looking, demonstrating an awareness of the troubled relationship between literature and technology and modernism and postmodernism, while attempting to move beyond them in order to make it new once again.

Tom McCarthy, Modernism, and the Broadcasting Individual

> I call to mind flatness and dampness; and then all is madness - the madness of a memory which busies itself among forbidden things. – Edgar Allan Poe, "The Pit and the Pendulum"[1]

The introductory chapter examined literary representations of technology over the past century to consider our contemporary moment. I concluded with the notion that it might do well to consider contemporary writers as pendulums, swinging inexorably between the poles of modernism and postmodernism. What differentiates one writer from the next is how far any given writer swings in each direction. All metamodernist writers swing between the two ideological poles, but they swing unevenly and independently from each other – always in both directions, but never the same amount. They may cross at some point in their oscillation, but their trajectories are never entirely equal, arriving at different points at different times. The reading of Lockwood's *Nobody is Talking About This* at the chapter's end considered how the author uses postmodern irony to deliver sincerity, the need to break away from the countless micronarratives of the internet in order to find depth and meaning in one's own original journey – in the grand narrative of the self.

The focus of this chapter is Tom McCarthy, a writer who swings in the other direction, in favor of postmodernism, retroactively bringing irony, intertextuality and the deliberate removal of depth and affect into the modernist period. In *C*, McCarthy depicts the literature of several cultural periods, modernism included, as technologies of communication, as a series of interconnected, surface-level broadcasts with no deeper level of meaning but static before the grave. Yet, this postmodern message of affectlessness and the removal of depth are delivered through the modernist period, its technologies, and some of its literary practices. When it comes to creating a mission

[1] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Pit and the Pendulum' in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp.213-227 (p.213-214).

statement for a literary movement, for instance, there's nothing more modernist than a manifesto. As Peter Brooker puts it, "new artistic movements and schools, numbering hundreds across the twentieth century, pronounced their newness most visibly and loudly through the form of the manifesto".[2] In the twenty-first century, writers striving to be avant-garde still pronounce their newness through the form of the manifesto, a way of categorizing their artistic goals and intentions and clarifying what makes their movement "new". McCarthy is one such artist, establishing the "semi-fictional, quasi-totalitarian conceptual art collective" known as the International Necronautical Society.[3] This chapter examines McCarthy's texts *C* and *Satin Island*, with particular focus on how they represent technology. Prior to these readings is an exploration of McCarthy's broadcasting aesthetic, which stems from the notion that language is a series of transmissions between sender and receiver that literature can tune into. When read together with this aesthetic in mind, the two novels reveal the contemporaneity of both modernism and postmodernism in the current cultural period, with the technologies, ideologies and literary practices of both periods present in the works.

Language = Broadcast

To Tom McCarthy, all cultural production is reproduction, and all effective contemporary cultural production should be aware of this. This is why he begins his 2012 essay "Transmission and the Individual Remix: How Literature Works" (referred to herein as "The Individual Remix") not with literary analysis but with an analysis of the 1975 song *Antenna* by electronic band Kraftwerk.[4] McCarthy pays attention to the lyrics "I'm the antenna, catching vibration. You're the transmitter, give information!" and the ways in which subsequent verses invert the *I* and the *you*.[5] "The question of who

[2] Peter Brooker, 'Afterword' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (New York: Oxford Unviersity Press, 2010).
[3] *International Necronautical Society Key Events* <http://necronauts.net/pdf/ins_key_events.pdf> [accessed 19 October 2022].
[4] Tom McCarthy, Transmission and the Individual Remix: How Literature Works, (Vintage Digital, 2012)
[5] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section i.

transmits and who receives – Who speaks? Who listens?", he notes, "is deliberately left open; and to this unanswered question we could add a second: What is said?"[6] These relationships between transmitter and receiver, signal and sign, become central to his argument about literature and all forms of art, and the ways in which networks of communication can be tracked throughout literary history. His decision to begin with Kraftwerk is to draw connections between cultural texts that concern the broadcasting of information, in order to conclude that all forms of literature (and, by extension, all forms of cultural production, including language) are a form of modulating signals – of the artist as, foremost, a receiver of information, and then a broadcaster of filtered, distilled meanings picked up from other cultural texts, semiotic systems, and media. Just as the listener of *Antenna* is both antenna and transmitter, the artist is as well.

This is not the first time McCarthy has explored his poetics through other art forms, with his "Black Box" visual art installation with Simon Critchley particularly focused on by critics such as Catherine Lanone, who describes it as "a parody of today's infinite web of radio transmissions, TV accounts, and telephone calls" where "communication is disturbed," and "where the black box acts as a crypt burying as well as transmitting messages."[7] In a turn against what he calls "a narrow liberal humanism", and the belief in "fallacies" of the "notions of the (always 'natural' and pre-existing, rather than constructed) self," including "that self's command of language" and "language as a vehicle for 'expression'", McCarthy follows predominately Western literature from the modern day to the classical period and back again.[8] This practice itself is one of metamodernist oscillation, as it is through his own use of language as self-expression that McCarthy makes these claims. From 1975 he turns to 458 BC., to the opening of the *Oresteia,* in which the fall of Troy is signaled to a watchman:

> What's astonishing about it is that the beacon's coded message ('Troy is finally ours') is demoted, downgraded, enjoying only secondary importance: what dominates the monologue, what Clytemnestra emphasizes constantly, is the

[6] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section i.
[7] Catherine Lanone, ''Only Connect': Textual Space as Coherer in Tom McCarthy's *C*', *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 1.47, (2014), p. 2.
[8] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section vii.

> *means* by which the signal moved from Troy to Argos. The beacon visible to them is the final one in a long chain of beacons, each one visible only to the next. [Clytemnestra] names each of the signal's staging posts […] In effect, she's sketching out the nodes and relays of a communications network […] for Aeschylus, information – and, by extension perhaps, language itself – is no abstract, natural phenomenon: it's a manufactured, mediated and material *regime* in which we find ourselves, the precursor and precondition to our agency and actions. When listened to attentively, Clytemnestra's speech starts whispering a truth I hope to amplify and echo in this essay: that we are always not just (to use a dramatic term) *in media res,* i.e. in the middle of events, but also simply in media. In the beginning is the signal.[9]

What is significant about the message at the start of the *Oresteia,* McCarthy argues, is not the message itself, but rather the way it is broadcasted between beacons, transmitted across space through a semiotic system to be understood by its recipient, in this case the watchman. The system, like language, is a product of culture, its meanings created by man rather than by nature. What sets the *Oresteia* in motion, he believes, is not the message, but the manmade signal itself.

From here, McCarthy turns to Orpheus, "the 'first' poet", and also the subject of the aforementioned black box installation, depicted "in his car listening to clipped, cryptic radio messages sent from the dead as if they were the essence of poetry".[10] McCarthy refers to Orpheus as "like some ancient jukebox, replaying stories on demand", reciting stories of others rather than himself, despite having just concluded his own adventure in the Underworld in his failed attempt to recover Eurydice.[11] Following the oral tradition, in which the performer recites stories that have been passed down between tellers (itself a type of transmission, and an example of language as a series of shared signals), Orpheus is described by McCarthy as a broadcaster – a term that originates from agricultural use:

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[9] McCarthy, *Individual Remix,* section ii.
[10] Lanone, p.2.
[11] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section iii.

> And how fitting, too, that Orpheus had a group of farmers working beside him, as a kind of counterpoint; and that he was ripped apart by the very implements they used to spread and cultivate their seed. Not only, in projecting his voice and distributing his stories, was he broadcasting; in being scattered, he was himself broadcast. To put it in media terms: from being a point of distribution, of transmission, he became transmission itself, turned into the network – and in so doing, or in so being done to, disappeared […] Orpheus was *always*, from the off, a story about broadcasting technology. The broad-casting, or scattering of Orpheus, his disappearance, doesn't *end* his singing; on the contrary, it has the opposite effect of *expanding* its area of coverage: his severed head continues holding forth long after its dismemberment, conveying his song to all of Greece […] Given that Orpheus is the Ur-writer figure within Western culture, literature was also always, from the off, a question of broadcasting technology.[12]

Orpheus, the figure often seen as the origin of the western poet, is depicted by McCarthy as both broadcaster and broadcasted, and identifies the significance of this in the history of literary and cultural transmission – of literature as a series of modulating signals, and the author as not an expressor of self, but as an expressor of consistent messages that carry through time. In being scattered, Orpheus becomes part of the network of transmissions that McCarthy calls literature, "the shift from one-to-one to one-to-many to many-to-many networks in which sender and addressee are simultaneously masked and multiplied".[13] McCarthy claims the writer "is not an originating speaker: he or she is a listener", as well as "a receiver, modulator, retransmitter: a remixer".[14]

This line of thought is by no means original itself, McCarthy is aware. Indeed, he knows his argument is itself a broadcast originating from others such as Roland Barthes. Discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis, in "The Death of the Author" (which McCarthy himself quotes) Barthes also argued authors are broadcasters of messages, instead using the term "scriptor". "The scriptor", Barthes writes, "no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which

[12] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section v.
[13] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section vii.
[14] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section vii.

he draws a writing that can know no halt […] the book itself is only a tissue of signs".[15] Aiming to draw the importance of the influence of all cultural production from that which precedes and feeds into itself, language itself included, Barthes was similarly against the idea of writing as self-expression, stating "A text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the "message of the author-god") but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."[16] As this chapter will discuss, McCarthy takes this quotation literally in *C*, which purposefully blends and mixes writings to create a text deliberately aware of the literature preceding it, combining them into one novel. Consistent also with Ferdinand de Saussure's claim that language is a "product that is passively assimilated by the individual", McCarthy rejects the notion of language as something individual or unique and purposely recreates that which he has assimilated.[17]

The origin of writing itself, McCarthy makes clear, is unknown, and that, he claims, is part of its function. Since all of writing is broadcasting, then its origin has been lost in the noise of language:

> This is it, in a nutshell: how writing works. The scattering, the loss; the charge coming from somewhere *else,* some point forever beyond reach or even designation, across a space of longing; the surge; coherence that's made possible by incoherence; the receiving, which is replay, repetition – backwards, forwards, inside-out or upside down, it doesn't matter.[18]

Tied also inextricably to the concept of literature as broadcasting technology, then, is the language of death, loss and bereavement, since its origin has been lost along with the violent end of the "Ur-writer" Orpheus. "You'll find histories of loss, and of imagined underworlds, lurking in all media," McCarthy explains, detailing a number of events across art forms and the history of technological production and tying them with the "broadcasting" of Orpheus's limbs.[19] He details several stories including those of

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[15] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1987), p.147.
[16] Barthes, p.146.
[17] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Sussy, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
[18] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section ix.
[19] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section iv.

Alexander Graham Bell, whose invention of the telephone started as a device to be made capable of receiving messages from the afterlife, and the original version of the art piece His Master's Voice, an abridged version of which famously became the logo for the company HMV, depicting a dog listening to a speaking horn attached to a coffin.[20] But there is not only the loss of friends and family members, but the loss of physical parts, too, as by using technology to better ourselves we are also leaving behind parts of ourselves, which McCarthy alludes to by discussing Freud's description of man in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* as a "prosthetic God", and the idea that using technology to better oneself is akin to removing limbs like Orpheus himself.[21] These links between technology and trauma become integral to McCarthy's writing, particularly to *C*, which places itself in the twentieth century where technological advancement and trauma are most obviously melded due to the coinciding events of the first world war and rapid development of communications networks.

For McCarthy, the author is therefore a receiver of information that then transmits that information into their writing. Everything a writer produces will come from some outside source, and from that outside source another, always connected to the unknown origin, the first signal that long disappeared and became part of the repeating network that is language. It is no wonder, then, that McCarthy's most well-received novel, *Remainder*, depicts repetitions, which Joyce Carol Oates interprets as allegorical for the repetition of art and trauma.[22] With these concepts as tools for his own writing, he has produced provocative works that focus entirely on networks of communication, of the difficulties of language, signs and signals and connectedness. Each novel contains difficult to navigate narratives in which its protagonists always perceive the world through what they have experienced or what they have learned, but also subtextual metanarratives, embodiments of McCarthy's own awareness of himself as a broadcaster of what he has received.

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[20] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section iv.
[21] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section iv.
[22]Joyce Carol Oates, *Lest We Forget* (2007) <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2007/07/19/lest-we-forget/ > [accessed 1 June 2020].

C – The Modernist Remix

Tom McCarthy's knowledge of literary theory, technology, philosophy, and his own stance on it become relevant to the contemporaneity of modernism in his own awareness of the modernist project as one that was also concerned with "remixing" experimenting with the established history of the form. Many cultural critics like to consider postmodernism as the epoch of intertextuality, but the modernist period was similarly rife with the technique. In "The Individual Remix", McCarthy applauds modernist writers such as James Joyce and Ezra Pound, claiming "Pound was remixing Villon, Daniel and Sordello […] splicing them in with fragments of newsprint, shards of radio transmissions – merging them, yet in a manner that made no attempt to mask their fragmentary, collated character, to 'naturalise' them", and describing Joyce's understanding of literature as broadcasting as the reason "why *Ulysses's* Stephen Dedalus – a writer in gestational state, a state of permanent becoming – paces the junk-rich and sign-covered beach at Sandymount mutating, through their modulating repetition, air- and wave-borne phrases he's picked up from elsewhere, his own cheeks and jaw transformed into a rubbery receiver".[23] Modernist writers, according to McCarthy, were a part of a long line of literature as broadcasting technology, also awareness of themselves as broadcasters in the world of newly emerging communications such as the radio, gramophone and wireless. As explored in the previous chapter, it was in this time period that technology was used in conjunction with *technē*, and rapid technological developments most affected literature. Indeed, Eliot's seminal modernist work *The Waste Land* does not just contain countless references and excerpts from other works but is paired with footnotes that bring forth the relevance of the poem's broader historical, social and technological contexts.

The fragmented nature of *The Waste Land* itself has been compared by critics such as Juan A. Suarez to "a sort of prerecorded literary archive which seems to be kept on the air at different frequencies", which seems consistent with McCarthy idea of

[23] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section ix.

literature as broadcast.[24] Not only that, but the modernist period lends itself to exploration of the relationship between technology, trauma and death, since technological advancement was a key component of the First World War and led to global trauma. But, as part of this endless cycle of remixing and modulating meanings, modernism, at least to McCarthy, has passed into the network, leaving behind its own material for remixing. Indeed, McCarthy once famously stated that "the task for contemporary literature is to deal with the legacy of modernism. I'm not trying to be modernist, but to navigate the wreckage of that project".[25] McCarthy shares the opinion of most literary critics, referring to a 'return' to literary modernism or 'revisiting' the grave of the project.

In many ways, modernism could be considered a 'wreckage', since its radical energies which exploded narrative conventions of realism and representative language seem to have passed and given way to a mainstream "lyrical realism" according to such literary figures as Zadie Smith,[26] whose well-known comparative review "Two Paths for the Novel" praises McCarthy for his experimentation with modernist form, language and structure in *Remainder*. David James claims Smith's essay depicts McCarthy's 'austere prose [which] challenges and alienates us' as more likely to bring about 'a more vibrant future for the novel than realism could ever do',[27] offering an argument for the avant-garde as important to contemporary literature since its formal experiments work to challenge "audiences placated and sated by the conventions lyrical fiction leaves unchallenged".[28] But where does contemporary avant-garde fiction place itself within the wreckage of the radical experiments preceding it, and how much more *can* the boundaries of literature be pushed? To literary critics such a Smith, whose own novel *NW* has been described as "reopening that quintessentially Joycean wound",[29] it is by

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[24]Juan A. Suarez, 'T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", the Gramophone, and the Modernist Discourse Network', *New Literary History issue 32*, pp.747-768.
[25] James Purdon, *Tom McCarthy: 'To ignore the avant garde is akin to ignoring Darwin'* (2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/01/tom-mccarthy-c-james-purdon > [accessed 1 December 2018].
[26] Zadie Smith, *Two Paths For the Novel* (2008) <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/11/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/> [accessed 1 June 2020].
[27] David James, 'In Defense of Lyrical Realism', *Diacritics*, 45.4, (2017), pp.68-91 (p.69).
[28] James, 'In Defence of Lyrical Realism', p.70.
[29] David James, 'Wounded Realism', *Contemporary Literature*, 54.1, (2013), 204-214 (p. 205).

returning to the twentieth-century avant-garde in the twenty-first. In a recent essay, Justus Nieland described McCarthy's work "not as the empty resuscitation of an avant-garde idiom but as its crypt, as a way of presiding over modernism's death".[30] As the general secretary for the International Necronautical Society, a movement that advocates art demonstrating "there is no beauty without death", and describes the body as a "vehicle travelling ineluctably towards death", McCarthy's writing is fascinated with the beginning and end of modernism, the beauty that resides in its supposed death, and the ways in which it resonates with society today. [31]

The goal of McCarthy's third novel, *C*, was to create an "archaeology of literature", an unearthing of the notion of literature as an imperfect broadcasting system and the historical consistencies previously discussed.[32] If modernism's "remixing" of older cultural texts was, as Clement Greenburg argues, "to rescue and maintain the best standards of the past", then *C* is an attempt to maintain what he considers the best standards of modernist writing – of avant-garde experimentalism and intertextuality, in other words, the parts of modernism that lead inevitably to post-modernism.[33] Because of these links between modernism, post-modernism and contemporary literature, there is contention between critics that consider the novel to be closer in scope to postmodernism than modernism. While readings of the novel by critics such as Lanone and Justus Nieland focus heavily on McCarthy's allusions and meditations on the birth and death of modernism, postmodernist readings such as those by Martin Paul Eve argue that the novel's use of metafictional devices, consistency with the works of Thomas Pynchon (in particular the similarly titled *V*), the "ontological" focus of the novel's conclusion, its Derridean mutations of words and pun-play, and the reader's job as "postmodern detective" to follow "archival signposts" that lead to no resolution, lend *C*

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[30] Justus Nieland, 'Dirty Media: Tom McCarthy and the Afterlife of Modernism', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 58.3, (2012).
[31] International Necronautical Society, *First Committee of The Necronautical Society* (2010) <http://www.necronauts.org/committee.htm> [accessed 18 December 2018]. International Necronautical Society, *INS Founding Manifesto, published 14 December 1999: The Times, London,* p.1. <http://necronauts.net/manifestos/1999_times_manifesto.html> [accessed 18 December 2018].
[32] Purdon.
[33] Clement Greenburg, 'General Panel Discussion', in *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers* ed. by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Serge Guillbaut, and David Solkin (eds), (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004,) p.164.

to a "historical post-modernist" interpretation.[34] Technological readings of the novel by critics such as Joakim Hans Wrethed ignore the modernist/postmodernist debate entirely, instead considering the novel's relationship with technology, speed and time.[35]

There is room, however, for a hybridized interpretation between all three strands of debate, in which McCarthy is considered as a metamodernist, picking the parts of modernism and postmodernism that suit his poetics of broadcasting, technology and death. In considering the text in this way, *C* becomes a metafictional archive, much like the "sound archive" of *The Waste Land*, recreating parts from the past century of literature to demonstrate his argument for the artist as foremost a listener and then a broadcaster. [36] Literature, likewise, is presented as a long line of similar sounding transmissions, which pass on and become absorbed into new forms of literature. This would be consistent with McCarthy's purposeful lines of comparison between the 20th and 21st Centuries in the novel, the years of progression from modernism to postmodernism and beyond, which invite the audience to infer the emerging technologies of wireless, radio, and telephone with the broadcast technologies of the modern day such as the internet. As the broadcasts of wireless gave way to the internet, the transmissions of modernism gave way to post-modernism. Indeed, Simeon Carrefax, the protagonist's father, knowingly announces as he discusses electric lines: "there'll be a web around the world for them to send their signals down". [37] This quotation is a clear allusion to the world wide web, a web that began in the twentieth century with the wireless, the telegram, and television. These connections between the modernist period and the modern day are a deliberate part of McCarthy's argument in *C*, which seeks to draw parallels between the two periods and define the ways in which the twentieth century feeds into the twenty-first and beyond through both technological and cultural

[34] Martin Paul Eve, "Structures, Signposts, and Plays: Modernist Anxieties and Postmodern Influences in Tom McCarthy's C", in *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays*, ed. by Duncan Dennis (London: Gylphi, 2016), p. 194.
[35] Joakim Wrethed, ''Where danger is, there rescue grows': Technology, Time, and Dromology in Tom McCarthy's *C*', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*. 5.3, (2017).
[36] Suarez, p.747.
[37] McCarthy, *C*, p.13.

production and demonstrate the ways in which people are human transmitters, listeners and broadcasters of what surrounds them.

Anti-Humanist, Intertextual Bildungsroman

C follows its protagonist, Serge Carrefax, a name that alludes to technology through its pronunciation as "an electrical surge with an abrupt 'j'", and hybridization of "car" and "fax machine".[38] Sege's life follows the history of the modernist period, ranging from the early 1900s to 1922, the year of the publication of both *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, as well as "the year the BBC was founded", as if to further demonstrate McCarthy's links with broadcasting and literature.[39] Adopting the form of the bildungsroman, the novel follows Serge's life from his birth to his death. Where it deviates from the form, however, is through the novel's use of four distinct sections, Caul, Chute, Crash, and Call, his life "marked by the letter C".[40] The title of each section marks a poignant moment in Serge's life: his birth with a caul during a delivery of copper (a deliberate reference to *David Copperfield*), the end of his career as a soldier in the first world war when his plane is destroyed (Chute referring to his parachute), a car crash critics such as Alan Munton have compared to F.T.Marinetti's famous collision that started the futurist movement, and a telephone call Serge believes he can hear shortly before his death from an insect bite he sustained in Egypt.[41]

Deviating, too, from the typical form of the bildungsroman are the jumps in time between said sections, and the novel's referential nature. The typical focus of a bildungsroman is on the self, and from a humanist perspective its success is determined by the originality of the self, its individuality and believability. Serge is no such self, a

[38] See McCarthy, *C*, p.33, and J.P.M Ermens, Metamodernism: Modernist Elements in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction, (unpublished Master's thesis, Radboud University, 2018) in Radboud Univeristy Educational Repository <https://theses.ubn.ru.nl/handle/123456789/6235> [Accessed 1 June 2020] p.22.
[39] Purdon.
[40] Alan Munton, 'Tom McCarthy's C, Wyndham Lewis and New Technology', *Lewisletter*, 28, (2010), pp.19-22 (p.19).
[41] Munton, p.22.

hybridization of a number of characters and historical figures, allusions and references. Two significant people that make up Serge are Alexander Graham Bell (each share fathers that run schools for the deaf and a penchant for both communications technologies and deceased siblings) and (in the early section of the novel) Freud's famous "Wolf-man" Sergei Pankejeff. Similar not only in name, but also in circumstance, Sergei Pankejeff experienced a number of symptoms after the suicide of his sister including constipation, a need to only have sex from behind, and depression. After the death of Serge's sister in *C*, he experiences similar symptoms and must be treated at a facility in Klodebrady for blocked bowels, hazy sight and what is referred to as "Mela Chole", a pun on melancholy, a word closely resembling depression. The setting of this section has been described by Lanone as "modelled off of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*", a 1924 German novel set in the years preceding the first world war.[42] At the end of this section, too, Serge has sex with a character called Tania from behind asking specifically to "see your back".[43]

But Serge is not exclusively a Wolf-man figure but also a Woolf-man, these physical symptoms similar to what Virginia Woolf states in her essay "On Being Ill", detailed in the previous chapter. Woolf describes the body not as "a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear", but states that "the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours... the creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy;".[44] Serge's eyesight is described as "making the world gauzed: dark-gauzed, covered in fleck-film", therefore concurrent with Woolf's statement in this essay.[45] Consistent with the idea of Serge as Woolf-man is a chapter about Serge's early life, which depicts a pageant play that bears resemblance to Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*. Woolf's novel, set just before the Second World War, depicts the events surrounding a pageant play in an English country house. Similarly, Serge's home in Versoie is the setting of a pre-first world war pageant play where a gramophone (just like the "chuffing machine" in *Between the Acts)* is integral to the performance.[46] The

[42] Lanone, p.5.
[43] McCarthy, *C*, p.114.
[44] Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, pp.43-44.
[45] McCarthy, *C*, p.91.
[46] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

"forecast" is a concern at the beginning of Woolf's novel, as it also is for Carrefax who states the "weather Gods" are "toying with us. Like wanton flies, in shambles- no, like wanton boys in sport. What was it...?".[47] This Shakespearean misquote from Carrefax (one of several in the chapter) could be in reference to the first segment of the pageant play in *Between the Acts,* which deals in Shakespearean English. The two share structural similarities also, with each description of the goings on of the pageant depicted in fragments, with italicised excerpts from the play itself interrupted in several places by the sounds of animals, prompts for the actors, conversations of the audience, and explanations and interpretations of what is happening by various spectators. References to this play return during Serge's stay in Klodebrady – such as the excerpt "advance thy empire", which the character Widsun describes during the play as "Bismarck talking to the Kaiser", and Serge is reminded of in Klodebrady when thinking about the "Prussian arsenals". [48] By melding these texts, both set before war, and accompanying them with Serge's personal trauma at the death of his sister, McCarthy establishes the novel's themes of technology and trauma while foreshadowing the global trauma of the war with Serge's own traumatic event, with Serge losing his symptoms at the start of the war.

The novel's second section, "Chute", takes place during the First World War, and it is here that McCarthy mimics the artistry of several modernist movements including the futurist movement, which seems to closely resemble McCarthy's own Necronautical society, and the Vorticist movement. While modernism was concerned with the importance of literary history and how past texts can be great sources of influence for creating brand new works, futurism was diametrically opposed to the past, and put its full focus on writing about the then-contemporary world. Marinetti, in the futurist manifesto, talked of a "gangrene of professors, archaeologists, tour guides and antiquaries" that were halting good literary practice, and established in the manifesto a new set of laws for poets and authors to follow.[49] The one thing that unites the Italian

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[47] McCarthy, *C,* p.50.
[48] McCarthy, *C,* p.53 & p.109.
[49] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto* <https://www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto_futurista.pdf> [Accessed 20 November 2018].

futurists and the early modernists is the focus on modernity and the importance of creating a new kind of experimental writing, and as a result McCarthy ironically brings futurism into his documentation of literary history in *C*, arguably defeating the purpose and completely going against the ideals of the futurist movement. McCarthy seems to skirt the lines between being futurist and being avant-garde, but arguably by presenting us with both he is also neither. Instead, he oscillates like a metamodernist, referentially creating a debate between the two sides and their views on modernity, whilst offering his own view on modernity in the twenty-first century.

Serge himself, for example, embodies several of the characteristics outlined in the futurist Manifesto. Two such characteristics from the futurist manifesto, the wish to "glorify war" and "declare that the splendour of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed", are illustrated by Serge's drug-fuelled ecstasy during the war section of *C.*[50] When Serge is flying during the war, McCarthy states:

> He can't explain it. What he means is that he doesn't think of what he's doing as a deadening. Quite the opposite: it's a quickening, a bringing to life. He feels this viscerally, not just intellectually, every time his tapping finger draws shells up into their arcs, or sends instructions buzzing through the woods to kick-start piano wires for whirring cameras, or causes the ground's scars and wrinkles to shift and contort from one photo to another: it's an awakening, a setting into motion. In these moments Serge is like the Eiffel Tower, a pylon animating the whole world, calling the zero hour of a new age of metal and explosive, geometry and connectedness – and calling it over and over again, so that its birth can be played out in votive repetition through these elaborate and ecstatic acts of sacrifice...[51]

Serge, under the effects of cocaine, is relishing in the war, enjoying the speed of it and likens it to creating rather than destroying life, fitting alongside Marinetti's guidelines for literature in the manifesto. The rapid advancement of technology and shortened life during the war are described to us numerous times by McCarthy as a sort of temporal

[50] Marinetti, *Futurist Manifesto*.
[51] McCarthy, *C*, p.159.

acceleration, each month of new soldiers bringing a new "generation" that "makes the twenty-four-year-old who used to wave at passing Germans like a distant ancestor, belonging more to an order of stone reliefs, illuminated manuscripts and tapestries".[52] This is similar to the ways in which speed was glorified in modernist literature as well as in futurism. To both the modernists and the Futurists, speed was to be glorified and romanticised, and this speed is closely associated with the development of technologies such as the plane and automobile. Nicolas Daly identifies how "it was the famished roar of automobiles that lured [Marinetti] and his friends onto the streets, and the car itself was provided an ideal image of the beauty of power and speed."[53] In Wrethed's interpretation of *C*, technology in the novel is compared alongside the Greek term dromos, meaning racecourse.[54] The unprecedented speed of technological, economic and political advancement increased the risk of disaster embodied in the novel as war, car crashes and aeroplane crashes, that threaten the lives of the "primordial machine" of man.[55]

During this section, McCarthy presents hybrid constructs of man and machine, demonstrating how much soldiers relied on technology during the first world war, and how their reliance on said technologies was detrimental. The reader is confronted with imagery of soldiers physically merging with machinery to construct man-machine hybrids. The machines themselves are disposable, and by extension the men piloting them are as well. The combination of man and machine is most visible during the section in which the soldiers are singing a song about their lives as pilots, singing along to the gramophone that they have named "Ella" – humanising the music-playing machine whilst simultaneously addressing themselves as mechanistic.[56] This occurs as they sing their song:

Take the cylinder out of my kidneys,

The connecting rod out of my brain, my brain

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[52] McCarthy, *C*, p.145.
[53] Daly, p.287.
[54] Wrethed, p.1.
[55] Wrethed, p.16.
[56] McCarthy, *C*, p.163.

From the small of my back take the camshaft

And assemble the engine again.[57]

The soldiers sing about their lives inside of the planes and describe a process in which they have become inseparable from their machines, asking to have the mechanical parts removed from them. This links back, too, to McCarthy's essay, and to Orpheus:

> Once we've entered the realm of the machine: we are promoted and demoted at the same time […] If you've got an artificial body part, it means you've lost an arm, a leg, that you're an amputee, like Orpheus, you've had your limbs ripped off.[58]

McCarthy demonstrates that the soldiers are a hybrid of machine parts, promoted in their ability to fly, but demoted in their value – becoming disposable objects. Serge, focusing on the positive aspects of such hybridisation, is thrilled by the idea when "he imagines the whole process playing out backwards: brain and connecting rod merging to form one, ultra-intelligent organ […] a whole new, streamlined mechanism."[59] McCarthy depicts Serge as a man interested in the physical connection between man and machine, and the ways in which technology can create something new in conjunction with humanity. This newness is erotically exciting to Serge, and McCarthy shows us how reliant he is on this technology when, in the air, his spark set stops working and "it feels as though he were flying naked as though […] he himself were the thing riding the air's frequency, pulsing right up against it."[60] McCarthy describes the carnage below Serge without humanist empathy, further emphasising how the soldiers are depicted as disposable, as though they are merely part of the machine, with the battlefield detailed as "strewn with fragments: of machine parts, mirrors, men", the body parts and bits of plane indiscernible from each other.[61] This ties back to McCarthy's resistance to realism and humanism, and the parallels he draws between technology and death – the body is

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[57] McCarthy, *C*, p.163.
[58] McCarthy, Individual Remix, section iv.
[59] McCarthy, *C*, p.164.
[60] McCarthy, *C*, p.171.
[61] McCarthy, *C*, p.171.

depicted as a vehicle that inevitably breaks down, like any other piece of technology, including language itself.

Since McCarthy's recreations of modernism reject any form of humanistic depth, and depicts human as machine, this depthlessness is also evident in the flat aesthetic space that runs throughout the novel and the ways in which McCarthy describes the world and its inhabitants. It is almost as if McCarthy's world in *C* is flattened in between glass slides, with everything coming second to his manifestation of the material, physical space. Integral to McCarthy's descriptions of physical space is that of another technology that has become commonplace in our lives: geometry and mapping. McCarthy has recently cited Alain Robbe-Grillet as one of his key inspirations in his literature, calling him "a marker" for what constitutes literature that "matters".[62] McCarthy explains he is inspired by how, to Robbe-Grillet, geometry is used as a way of preventing "the sentimentalisation of the universe that you get through imbuing objects with character".[63] For example, Robbe-Grillet's description of setting at the start of "The Secret Room" is as follows:

> The first thing to be seen is a red stain, of a deep, dark, shiny red, with almost black shadows. It is in the form of an irregular rosette, sharply outlined, extending in several directions in wide outflows of unequal length, dividing and dwindling afterward into single sinuous streaks. The whole stands out against a smooth, pale surface, round in shape, at once dull and pearly, a hemisphere joined by gentle curves to an expanse of the same pale color.[64]

Whilst a humanist writer might describe a red stain with reference to an emotional feeling such as fear or anger, or human associations with the colour red such as its use as a warning, Robbe-Grillet focuses wholly on the shape of the object and the shapes surrounding it. Such detailed, geometric description of space is present in *C*, and just like Robbe-Grillet, McCarthy chooses not to imbue any objects with character as an

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[62] Culturetheque Ifru, *French Passions: Tom McCarthy on Alain Robbe-Grillet* (2015) <https://youtu.be/-QcHi-4G4dU > [accessed 17 January 2018].
[63] Culturetheque Ifru, *McCarthy on Robbe-Grillet*, 13:45-13:58.
[64] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Secret Room*, trans. by Bruce Morissette. <http://www.101bananas.com/library2/secretroom.html> [accessed 20 March 2020].

authorial voice. Geometry, of course, is not just an aesthetic quality valued by Tom McCarthy and Robbe-Grillet, but also by the modernists, particularly within the Vorticist movement. It is important to note, also, that Robbe-Grillet has been identified with the metamodernist oscillation between modernism and postmodernism prior to the invention of the term. Brian McHale, in *Postmodernist Fiction*, described Robbe-Grillet as part of "the watershed between modernist and postmodernist poetics",[65] suggesting a consistency in McCarthy to recreating not just modernist, but also Postmodernist styles.

The Vorticists, including such well-remembered modernists as Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, set out to declare what in literature should be "blessed" or "blasted", calling for a more abstract aesthetic in art.[66] "It seems quite natural to me", Pound explains in an article on Vorticism, "that an artist should have just as much pleasure in an arrangement of planes or in a pattern of figures, as in painting portraits of fine ladies, or in portraying the Mother of God as the symbolists bid us."[67] The geometric arrangement of planes is present throughout McCarthy's description of the war section of *C*, in the lines and vectors, diagonals and other shapes that Serge can see from above the battlefield and it is used in order to demonstrate the concepts of geometry as art:

> Within the reaches of this space become pure geometry, the shell's a pencil drawing a perfect arc across a sheet of graph paper; he's the clamp that holds the pencil to the compass, moving as one with the lead; he *is* the lead, smearing across the paper's surface to become geometry himself...[68]

McCarthy here is charting the battlefield like a topographical map, a geometric diagram of space, conforming to the Vorticist aesthetic. In *The Geometry of Modernism*, Miranda B. Hickman describes how "while the shock of the new produced by geometric abstraction may have abated by the mid-1920s, there was still widespread debate about

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[65] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1987) p.14.
[66] *Blast*, No. 1: *Review of the Great English Vortex*, (June 20, 1914).
[67] Ezra Pound, "Vorticism", *The Fortnightly Review 96 [n.s.]*, (1 September, 1914), pp.461–471.
[68] McCarthy, *C*, p.143.

the artistic and philosophical goals associated with such abstraction, its significance, and the extent to which it should be cultivated for the most successful art."[69]

In fact, this aesthetic debate between the value of abstraction, and whether it can be applied to both literature and art, is keenly spelled out by McCarthy when Serge meets Carlisle, the war artist:

> "I can't paint words!" Carlisle's voice rises half an octave. "Painting's painting, writing writing. Never the twain. It's all wrong, aesthetically speaking: all the depth and texture of a summer countryside steam-rolled into a flat page.
>
> "That's what I like about it," Serge says.[70]

McCarthy weighs heavily on the side of the Vorticist idiom, promoting its value as an artform free from humanism or over-romanticism in both literature and the visual arts. Flatness is, to both Serge and McCarthy, what Serge calls the "preferred projection" of space and of art, and this aesthetic ideal is valued by McCarthy right to the very end of the novel in Egypt, where Serge and Laura discover a stele, which Laura describes as "literature in its infancy". [71]

> "It's beautiful," says Serge.
>
> "The colours?"
>
> "No: the flatness."
>
> "It's the autobiography of one of the people buried in the complex," she tells him. "His life, the characters in it, the world around them."[72]

It's clear to the reader that *C* itself is one such stele, of not just Serge but a flattened recreation of the styles and history of modernist movements from its beginning to its peak at the publication of its most seminal works, deliberately removed of depth. It is also the stele of archaic technologies, the gramophone, kinetoscope, telegram tapper,

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[69] Miranda B. Hickman, *The Geometry of Modernism: The Vorticist Idiom in Lewis, Pound, H.D. and Yeats* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005) p.3.
[70] McCarthy, *C*, p.147.
[71] McCarthy, *C*, p.212 & p.294.
[72] McCarthy, *C*, p.294.

and more, long since replaced by the technologies of the modern day. However, critic Alan Munton has criticised McCarthy's depiction of Vorticism and of Wyndham Lewis in particular, claiming "McCarthy has done a great deal of research, but has missed the essential figure". [73] Munton describes the similarities that Serge in the war section shares with Lewis, since they were both observers in the war, but claims their similarities end there, and thus, if McCarthy's aim was to depict Lewis in Serge, he missed the mark:

> Lewis, radicalised by the First World War, as Serge seems not to be – "'But I liked the war'" (214) – conceived connection by technology as beneficial in its effects; it meant relationship, even mutuality, and it had content: this was 'the global village', Lewis's conception from the 1940s taken up by McLuhan (who is not McCarthy's model, though he is a ghostly presence). For Serge, connectedness makes killing possible, as wireless helps to bring down shellfire upon the enemy. And that is the whole of what it does.[74]

Munton believes that McCarthy's depiction of Lewis in Serge, and new technology in *C* is shallow, free of "content", and largely focused on the negative aspects rather than the benefits.[75] If Lewis believed the wireless would lead to a "global village", then this village in *C* is composed of one person: Serge Carrefax. Munton is correct to state Serge is the "only practitioner" of technology in the novel.[76] Though his father discusses technology and has a fascination with it he rarely operates any, and, when he does, he is depicted as somewhat unversed in it with his claims of "electric blighting", and inventions that other people beat him to creating.[77] He claims the novel has no "sharable public meaning" and exists solely to "tell the reader about things".[78] Indeed, the novel's tendency for historical exposition can, at times, make it feel more like a history book, leading Munton to conclude the novel is "at once too full of information, and largely free of significant meaning."[79] Not only that, but he claims that McCarthy's is a

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[73] Munton, p.20.
[74] Munton, p.19.
[75] Munton, p.21.
[76] Munton, p.22.
[77] McCarthy, *C*, p.195.
[78] Munton, p.22.
[79] Munton, p.22.

"conservative modernism", which appears focused only on the well-regarded artists of the modernist canon, "the obvious Marinetti, and the loveable Joyce, the safe alternatives to the ideologically critical Lewis."[80]

But what, then, is the "significant meaning", the purpose of such heavy-handed referencing, deliberate remixing of already established texts, and is it modernist? The novel's numerous purposeful references to philosophy and modernism have also led *C* to be accused by critics such as Christopher Tayler of being "over-literary" and "reverse-engineered" to be unpicked "with various concepts from Heidegger, Freud, or Paul Virilio", as critics of the novel have been keen to do so. [81] The rebuttal to this is that the reverse-engineering of the text is precisely McCarthy's craft, controversially and retroactively applying a postmodern removal of depth to modernism, a literary period and poetics renowned for it. This is the declared intent of what he calls the "Frankenstein kind of reassembled document" of *C*, in order to challenge a reader's assumptions about character, the authenticity of language, and humanism's depictions of self.[82] *C* acts as an example of both, using an experimental style while set in the modernist period to serve McCarthy's argument for literature as broadcasting from outside the text, and for language as an imperfect system operated by human machines.

Inter-periodisation and Inter-Textuality

Since McCarthy's poetics, however, demand that the relationship between language, technology, literature, and death carries across literary history, he does not restrict *C* to modernism and the contemporary alone. Instead, he brings literature across history into the novel to illustrate how his themes are consistent across cultures and time periods. Alexandria, for example, is the setting of the novel's final section, "Call",

[80] Munton, p.22.
[81] Christopher Tayler, *C by Tom McCarthy – Book Review* (2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jul/31/c-tom-mccarthy-novel-review> [Accessed 20 November 2018].
[82] *Literature & Violence: Interview with Tom McCarthy* <https://vimeo.com/43235421> [Accessed 20 November 2018].

notable because it is where philology – the study of literary texts – was first created.[83] Alexandria, in *C*, is a melting pot where cultures, languages and time periods intersect, where "periods just kind of merge together" and there are "three different names for every street and square in town: English, French and Arabic".[84] "This city's where it all began", McCarthy tells us, "cultures and languages slamming into one another, making new ones."[85] Serge's job there, part of the "Ministry of communications", is to compile a report in order to assist the (still largely prospective) Empire Wireless chain – himself a part of this network of interweaving cultures by advancing British telecommunications in the country.

Globalization is not new to the modernist period. Indeed, cultures have weaved and intermingled through religious figures for countless years, as McCarthy reminds us through a depiction of "Thoth-Hermes" in the city's museum.[86] This hybridized God is a perfect example of McCarthy's poststructuralist poetics of transmission, as the two similar Gods of Hermes and Thoth were combined in the Hellenistic period and worshipped as one. The Roman Pantheon, as descended and appropriated from the Greeks, including other ideas which descended and were appropriated from the Egyptians, serve as further evidence for the idea of cultural ideas being transmitted through the ages. It is through these mythologies McCarthy draws links between the language of technology and the language of death, through the origins and connections between the words themselves. Just as McCarthy does with Orpheus and the origin of the word "broadcast", he uses the subtext of mythologies, the origins and other uses for certain words, to create yet more connections across time. The story of Osiris, for example, the topic of archaeologist Laura's dissertation, and Isis's gathering of his body parts, leads Serge to draw parallels between the myth and the process of radio:

"Isis was a coherer."

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[83] A. Naudé, Jacobus & Miller-Naudé, Cynthia, 'The Disciplinarity of Linguistics and Philology', unpublished paper delivered at the conference 'Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting' (Boston, 20 November 2017) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322644211_The_Disciplinarity_of_Linguistics_and_Philology > [accessed 10 November 2022].
[84] McCarthy, *C*, p.241.
[85] McCarthy, *C*, p.242.
[86] McCarthy, *C*, p.252.

> "What's that?" she asks.
>
> "The old sets operated through coherence," he explains. "The signal made the particles all jump together and conduct the current, in bursts either short or long. That's how dots and dashes were-"
>
> "What are you talking about?" she asks.
>
> "Radio," he tells her. "It's a gathering-together too."[87]

Just as with the previous sections in which technology, language and death intertwine, McCarthy charts these associations even before the modernist period. McCarthy is suggesting that the Egyptians, too, were broadcasting about death and communication, the story of Osiris's dismembered body acting as an example of a "broadcast" just like Orpheus, and Isis as the "coherer" of those signals. As an additional example, Serge, aware only of the technological definitions of words such as "pylon", which Laura tells him were "gateways – to both temples and the Underworld", makes a series of connections between the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and the language of technology.[88] It is important to note, too, that Serge is nicknamed "Pylon-man" by Falkiner, demonstrating how Serge is a broadcaster of not just telecommunications, but of death.[89] McCarthy demonstrates here that language, itself a man-made technology, has had ties to death from the very beginning, tying these "pylons" of the underworld to the "pylons" of telecommunication. Lanone picks up on a number of these motifs between the novel and Egypt, such as the School of Military Aeronautics Serge attends being related to Alexander's tomb, Soma.[90]

But this is not the only other time period that McCarthy mixes into *C*. McCarthy also invites the reader to invoke technological interpretations of European cultural texts, such as Shakespeare's *Tempest,* when Serge listens to an excerpt from it on a gramophone:

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[87] McCarthy, *C*, p.284.
[88] McCarthy, *C*, p.284.
[89] McCarthy, *C*, p.277.
[90] Lanone, p.5.

> *Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,*
>
> *Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.*[91]

With the ongoing themes of telecommunications, schoolchildren like radio transmitters and bugs that communicate with one another in the chapters preceding it, this quotation is intended to be interpreted in the contexts of such telecommunication systems – the "isle" full of "noises" representing an air full of invisible signals being transmitted. This intertextuality is vital to understanding McCarthy's belief that his ideas are evident across multiple cultural periods – and this also extends beyond the English language, with Marinetti, but also when Serge follows his own interpretation of the opening line of Hölderlin's "Patmos" when he is in his plane during the war:

> Nah ist
>
> Und schwer zu fassen der Gott...
>
> He feels the *schwer* tighten inside his stomach, tightening like gravity; the *Nah* is a kind of measuring, a spacing-out of space in such a way that distant objects and locations loom up close and nearby ones expand, their edges hurtling away beyond all visible horizons to convey and deliver the contents of these to him. The *Gott's* not a divine, Christian Creator, but a point within the planes and altitudes the machine's cutting through – and one of several: the god, not God. And *fassen... fassen* is like locking onto something: a signal, frequency or groove. The word speaks itself inside his ear each time he taps his spark set or amends his clockcode chart.[92]

Here, McCarthy is rejecting the typical interpretation of the poem, which Andrzej Warminski states "lends itself readily to being treated as a religious document or a profession of faith", to instead relate it to Serge's situation in the war.[93] Significantly, Hölderlin's works have been attributed to technology before by Heidegger, as examined in chapter 1 of this thesis. Despite the title of the poem being named after the Greek

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[91] McCarthy, *C*, p.44.
[92] McCarthy, *C*, p.151.
[93] Andrzedj Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation: Holderlin, Hegel, Heidegger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesotta Press, 1987), p.72.

island of Patmos, notable in the bible for being where John received the final revelation, Serge interprets the poem's "Gott" as one of several points in the air. The term "fassen", or grasp, which Serge interprets as "locking onto something", seems to suggest the "God" is a signal, or one of several. If interpreted alongside Scott Horton's translation of this opening line "God is near, / Yet hard to seize,", McCarthy seems to be depicting "God" as a signal within the physical space Serge is charting, a difficult, physical entity to lock onto.[94] This "God" is refuted by Serge as a humanistic, Christian being, and instead described almost as a physical entity – either a signal or a point in space. This could be linked to what Wrethed says about faith in the novel, describing Serge "as someone who embraces death and therefore partly upholds a Stoic attitude that eventually resembles faith in the midst of the seemingly complete absence of God."[95] Within the war the nearest thing to a close yet hard to seize god is death, with Serge watching the deaths of others but always narrowly escaping from it. As with all of *C*, the key comes down to communications and connectedness in the physical space – the idea of literature and language as broadcasting technologies intermittently connected to the concept of death from the very beginning, broadcasts that still continue to this day.

The Human Engine

Since the text is broadcasting from outside itself, so do its characters, who are often depicted as human machines, telephones and transmitters that operate in the inauthentic realm of language. Postmodernist methods and techniques mingle in with modernist style, as Martin Paul Eve argues, quoting Lyotard, "the postmodern is undoubtedly part of the modern".[96] The early chapters of *C* are a perfect indicator of the novel's depictions of characters as broadcasters, since it all begins with the language of machinery and technology, and how the children in Carrefax's school for the deaf are

[94] Friedrich Hölderlin, 'Patmos' trans. by Scott Horton, *Harper's Magazine*, July 2007, <https://harpers.org/2007/07/patmos/> [accessed 10 November 2022].
[95] Wrethed, p.10.
[96] Eve, p.184.

turned into living, inhuman transmitters. “In the beginning”, McCarthy reminds us through Simon Carrefax, “was the word.”[97] We are told that language is inherently a technology, a medium for broadcasting information, and of the importance of recognising it as such when reading a text such as *C*. In “Dirty Media”, Justus Nieland states:

> We are always in media because we are always in language, and the best writers, McCarthy is always saying, are those who appreciate literature and the self's shared condition of inauthenticity, of being in media. Literature shares this dirtiness with the self that finds its noble subjectivity undone by the inhuman dimension of language: *technē* that hopelessly exceeds the anthropos. What we encounter in literature, then, is “not a self, but a network” of transmissions.[98]

As McCarthy states himself in the introduction to “The Individual Remix”, we are “simply in media” – a human-made media that is not always perfectly functional, always open to interpretation, and far broader than the self.[99]

McCarthy’s ideas can be compared with the literary theory of Jacques Derrida, and the idea of language as something that cannot provide a universal truth because of the inauthenticity of words and their multiple meanings. Derrida’s writing about language is derived from Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language, how a word, defined by Saussure as a “linguistic sign”, “unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image”, the term signifier used to represent the sound-image and signified representing the concept. [100] Take the word “tear” for example, fitting precisely for the effect it has as a written word. The word “tear” has two simultaneous sound-images, it can be either the word to tear a piece of paper, or a tear from an eye. The meaning of “tear” is unclear until it is accompanied by other words in a sentence to clarify its use as a term. The semiotic system of the sentence is what gives the written “tear” its desired meaning, impossible to interpret without the words around it. This is just one example of

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[97] McCarthy, *C*, p. 14.
[98] Nieland, p.580.
[99] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section i.
[100] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Sussy, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 66-67.

how language is an imperfect technology of broadcasting that leaves itself up to multiple meanings.

Another example in spoken language, noted by Peter Barry, is that "when we use a phrase like 'If you see what I mean' or 'in a manner of speaking' there is the same underlying sense that we are not in control of the linguistic system".[101] Derrida believed, as a result of the interaction between signifier and signified and how the signified is interpreted varies from person to person, that there can be no such thing as an absolute truth, or a true linguistic meaning. Because language is a medium of its own and is therefore subjective, it cannot hold an objective, or natural truth. It is these inauthentic transmissions that McCarthy deals with in this early section of *C*. When Carrefax is lecturing the parents of the children about language, he is talking about it as one of the original technologies, and as one of the earliest forms of broadcasting ideas and thoughts to one another, but it is a technology with its own inherent difficulties. Language is described by Carrefax as "divine" and speech is something that "breathed the earth into being", and in a way he is right, language is our way of broadcasting our experiences, and our media for defining the world and everything around us.[102] It is, as Carrefax describes it through the biblical allusions in his speech, a "divine" technology, the technology that brings literature into existence, and the character takes great pride in bringing speech to the children and teaching them to recite literature.[103] Yet, calling language "divine" relates it to God, and therefore the natural, "pre-existing" world – an idea that McCarthy's poetics wholeheartedly reject. Carrefax's teachings are therefore similarly rejected in the language McCarthy uses to describe them. There is something perverse, even sinister in Carrefax's pedagogy, which teaches children *how* to speak through the "mechanism" of their own bodies by giving them the answers to simple questions and making them commit poems to memory but not necessarily *what* they are saying.[104]

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[101] Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.62.
[102] McCarthy, *C*, p.14.
[103] McCarthy, *C*, p.14.
[104] McCarthy, *C*, p.15.

Carrefax plays God with speech by bringing it to the children, and through his logocentric ideology believes he is helping the children by teaching them words like "area", "eerie" and "ear" to "indicate the body's organs, to conceive of blocks of space, to name the southernmost part of North America's Great lakes and to express the air of mystery that clouds our dreams", but in actuality his pedagogy creates nothing more than human radio transmitters. [105] The children are capable of the repetition of speech but not the convention of their own meaning. The children are taught to recite, receiving and broadcasting only what they are given. It is never made clear that the children understand what they are reciting, and they are merely applauded for being able to mimic the sounds of speech.

Carrefax is therefore not teaching the children to be capable of their own speech but rather turning them into inhuman transmitters, instructed radios that simply do as they are commanded. This is yet another example of McCarthy's desire to depict humans as transmitters of their own experiences, since it is the children's exposure to these words that forces them to say them. It is ironic, then, that Carrefax cites "the great Alexander Bell" as one of his "forebears", an inspiration of his pedagogy.[106] The Alexander Bell mentioned is likely Alexander Melville Bell, the father of Alexander Graham Bell. McCarthy's omission of a middle name draws a connection with the contemporary reader, who would likely recognise the name and associate "the great Alexander Bell" with Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, rather than his father. This creates an ironic connection between the centuries, each generation having its own "great" Alexander Bell. For Carrefax and his peers Alexander Melville Bell is an inspiration, but for the growing children like Serge it is Alexander Graham Bell that will be the most fondly remembered. The irony deepens further when the children are made to speak, their strange, disembodied voices like the voice coming out of a telephone:

> His words, like Felicity's, seem to issue not from him but rather to divert *through* him – as though his mouth, once it formed and held the correct shape for

[105] McCarthy, *C*, p.18.
[106] McCarthy, *C*, p.15.

> long enough, received a sound spirited in from another spot, some other area, eerie, ear.[107]

The boy is speaking the words, broadcasting the signifier, but what is signified is not the boy's but instead Carrefax's. Derrida distinguishes the written signifier, the words that Carrefax's students are taught to pronounce, as always "technical and representative" and incapable of having its own "constitutive meaning".[108] It is also important to note that the words "area", "eerie" and "ear" are all audibly similar when spoken aloud and allude to what Derrida calls the "trace" of a word, the idea that signifiers can leave behind traces that lead to other similar-sounding signifiers.[109] The novel's four sections, each beginning with the letter C but in particular the sections "Call" and "Caul", also signify one another. The boy's voice is demonstrated by McCarthy as a *sound*, a signifier that does convey words and meaning, but not an intentional or understood meaning. Instead, Carrefax broadcasts his meaning through them. The deaf children Carrefax teaches are therefore closer to one of Alexander Graham Bell's earliest inventions – an automaton head he created with his brother that could speak a few words – than they are to being fluent and able to create meaning with their own language. [110] Technology is distanced from the human here, as McCarthy illustrates how inhuman the children seem when they are broadcasting sound like radio speakers. Meaning is conveyed *through* them rather than by them, the reciting children described as "vacant, as though entranced, or taken over by a set of ghosts".[111]

Carrefax's children are only the first of several examples of characters in *C* that act as though they are transmitters, and each time McCarthy utilises these characters he demonstrates the connections between technology, language and death. McCarthy invites us to remember the ghost-like voices of the children in Versoie later in the novel, when Serge intervenes in the performance of a spirit medium. In *Sites of Mourning*, Jay

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[107] McCarthy, *C*, p.19.
[108] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997) p.81.
[109] Derrida, p.47.
[110] Groundwater, Jennifer *Alexander Graham Bell: The Spirit of Invention*. (Calgary: Altitude Publishing, 2005), p.25.
[111] McCarthy, *C*, p.15.

Winter identifies how "The Great War, the most "modern of wars", triggered an avalanche of the "unmodern".[112] As Roger Luckhurst argues "spiritualism rejected the theology of punishment, offering solace precisely through low-level, empirical proofs of survival, the banal continuities of domestic chatter between mundane and ultra-mundane worlds".[113] Luckhurst discusses how "the theological strand, never far away, re-emerged after 1914, when thousands of the spirit-dead from the First World War struggled to contact those who survived them".[114] Séances offered relief to families of deceased soldiers, who could be happy with the belief that their fathers, sons or brothers, were living on detached from their physical bodies. These spiritual ceremonies are known to have been a realm of fascination and inspiration for modernist writers such as W.B. Yeats, whose attendance of several séances and use of automatic writing, "one of the standard trance devices for allegedly receiving mediumistic messages", has led to him being cited as "the exemplary case among occult-oriented modernist writers."[115]

In *C,* McCarthy points to the immorality of séances and the ways in which spiritualist performances were made for profit, focusing on the material world and how technology was used to transmit messages from beyond death. McCarthy reminds us of Carrefax's young pupils several times at the beginning of the scene to draw parallels between the two sets of human transmitters, and how both seem mechanistic and unnatural. He creates this familiarity by describing the spirit medium Miss Dobai's vocal cords as though they are a telephone making static noises, her voice described as full of "crackling stops and starts".[116] When Miss Dobai is channeling the voice of a young girl, Tilly, she speaks in signifiers such as "Temper, tempra, temperture", and "rear, rear, sembled", reminiscent of Carrefax's pupils being taught "area, eerie, ear" earlier in the novel.[117] Also similar to Carrefax's teachings is how Dobai's channeling is

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[112] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), p.202.
[113] Roger Luckhurst, 'Religion, Psychical Research, Spiritualism and the Occult,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.437.
[114] Luckhurst, p.430-431.
[115] See Luckhurst, p.438 and Alex Ross, *The Occult Roots of Modernism* (2017) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/26/the-occult-roots-of-modernism> [accessed 20 December 2018].
[116] McCarthy, *C,* p.222.
[117] McCarthy, *C,* p.223, p.225 & p.19.

described by others, through the machinery of her own body "by means of her vocal cords".[118] "It's to form a circuit", Audrey tells Serge to explain the linking of hands during the séance, creating a bizarre link between the ancient, anti-modern practice of spiritualist rituals and the electric links of the second industrial age that sit at the very heart of *C* and the early twentieth century.[119] This metaphor demonstrates how, despite their significance during the 1900s, spiritualism was juxtaposed to the scientific, technology-driven modernity that had become the forefront of culture, as a way of consolidating the trauma of the Great War, a war in which technology caused countless deaths. Yet, in these spiritualist displays, technology was in fact likely intertwined with it, immorally used as a way of creating false hope. These shows did nothing more than continue the exploitation of people with technology for profit. As Melissa Dinsman writes:

> These metaphors are prominent in descriptions of both high modernist form and spiritualist séances. But this language is also used to explain electrical current and the flow of transmissions from sender to receiver. Be it a literary, spiritual, or technical medium, the process of transmission is the same: the sender (author, ghost, or broadcast station) transmits information through the medium (book, human, or radio) to its audience.[120]

To the modernists, and to McCarthy, this language of communication is universal. It not only applies to transmissions of telegraphy, spirit mediums, or even of our own thought processes, but is intermittently linked with all three in the same space. During the table-tilting sequence, in which, one letter at a time as with a telegram, Miss Dobai spells out words to form messages, the medium is described as "still receiving" as though she were a telegram set or radio.[121] This is similar to what Jeffrey Sconce mentions in *Haunted Media,* with the close associations that once existed between spiritualism and telecommunications, going so far as to call "the clairvoyant medium"

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[118] McCarthy, *C*, p.220.
[119] McCarthy, *C*, p.221.
[120] Melissa Dinsman, *Modernism at the Microphone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.148.
[121] McCarthy, *C*, p.226.

the nineteenth century's "other most remarkable telecommunication's device".[122] This association only grew in the early twentieth century, with the wireless system promising "to unlock the mystical enigmas of the ether, that mysterious substance once believed to be the invisible medium through which all light, electricity, and magnetism moved".[123] To a contemporary reader, the radio and other telecommunications methods have become so mundane and ordinary that they have escaped this realm of the spiritual almost entirely, and to Serge, whose life has been surrounded with technology just like we have, it is clear there is a rational and objective solution to this séance.

Serge becomes obsessed with figuring out the material trick behind the performance, rejecting the realm of the spiritual and opting instead to search the material world around him for a switch, using his ammeter to find "the man in the fedora" behind it all.[124] Denouncing the immorality of Miss Dobai and the spiritualist society for manipulating people, Serge creates his own remote controller and uses it to comedically ruin the proceedings of the next performance, revealing that these spiritualist meetings that promised to be a rejection of the material world and modernity were in fact nothing but part of modernity, using the modern to falsify the unmodern, and the material to create the spiritual. McCarthy does, however, show an intellectual empathy with the people forced from their spiritualist dreams, evident in Audrey's reaction to Serge's destruction of the performance:

> Serge sits beside her for a long time, watching her back rise and fall. It seems bulkier, as the weight lent by her body to the world of spirits, loaned out through the twin agencies of love and conviction, had been returned unclaimed […] as though a belief in which she's clothed herself till now, a faith in her connectedness to a larger current, to a whole light and vibrant field of radiant transformation through which Michael might have resonated his way back to her, had been peeled off, returning her, denuded, to the world – this world, the only

[122] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media*: *Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, (London: Duke University Press, 2000), p.24.
[123] Sconce, p.61.
[124] McCarthy, *C*, p.229.

> world, in which a table is just a table, paintings and photographs just images made of matter, kites on walls of playrooms unremembered and the dead.[125]

Despite his outright rejection of the spiritual world the audience of the séance yearn for, McCarthy seems to depict a kind of empathy for humanity's way of inserting themselves into networks, and the effect that being dragged out of them can have. It is a depiction of a specific kind of trauma, a repeat of Audrey's grief for Michael who she must once again mourn. If we consider Lanone's claim that Serge acts as the "living tomb" of Sophie because of his physical symptoms after her death, then the "bulkier" weight of Audrey's body reflects this same trauma. [126]

Serge as Transmitter and Receiver

If, as I have demonstrated thus far, McCarthy is concerned with the idea of characters as living, transmitting broadcasters in the media technology of language, and the rejection of a humanistic depth, then these ideas should also be evident in the primary transmitter of the piece – the protagonist, Serge. Serge, as a receiver, is shaped by his experiences in the physical, technology-driven world, and as a result his thought processes and actions are likewise broadcasted to the reader as technological. In the second chapter, the young Serge is used as a transmitter by his sister, Sophie, his penis used as a telegram-tapper.[127] Soon after, the young Serge is described as "relishing the acoustic affect" of the bees, the buzzing of technology.[128] From this point onwards, Serge is driven towards machinery, technology and connectedness, and it begins to affect the way he sees the world. This symbolic moment, a parody of Freudian trauma, foretells Serge's future obsession with the feeling of connectedness gained from the use of technologies such as the telegram and radio transmitters.

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[125] McCarthy, *C*, p.234-235.
[126] Lanone, p.8.
[127] McCarthy, *C*, p.22.
[128] McCarthy, *C*, p.24.

As a transmitter *and* a receiver, everything Serge experiences or "transmits" is impacted by what has been transmitted to him – including his father's fascination with electronics and the future of telecommunication. Serge's childhood mind, for example, is described as a running static, his imagination constantly making connections inside of his head:

> He sees letters streaming through the air, whole blocks of them, borne on currents occupying a zone between the threshold of comprehensible […] by the time he's got a few pinned down, the others have floated on ahead or changed their meaning, and "Manchester"'s "chest" has turned into an old, oak coffer, the king's "coronation" into a flower, a carnation.[129]

In two long sentences, Serge's struggles with reading are described as a result of the way he thinks, a constantly running series of thoughts that draw connections between words and the fragments between them. Also significant is the way Serge is struggling with the language itself – misinterpreting the meanings behind the words, the signs leading to differently interpreted signifiers. It is almost like McCarthy is describing, but not detailing, a stream of consciousness that goes through his mind on "currents", a word clearly chosen for its association with electrical waves.[130] Martin Paul Eve claims that, at times, it is up to the reader to play in McCarthy's Derrdidean word games, to find multiple signifiers from words such as "tables", which Serge is described as struggling with:

> in terms of language, when Serge confuses the letters in 'tables', McCarthy asks us to consider whether the character might be the 'ablest' (the most competent to deal with the trials of modernity?), in a 'stable' condition (with his stagnation and focus on blockage, to which I will return), whether he might 'be last' to survive, or whether he is simply playing with a 'lab set', an apparatus that proves so fatal for his sister. Secondly, and as just one example, at the thematic level, this passage connects with the 'tilting' table of the séance later in the novel where Serge rigs a device to interfere with a medium's trickery (C, 230). In this

[129] McCarthy, *C*, p.38.
[130] McCarthy, *C*, p.38.

> sense, Serge's early 'switching letters around' in the word 'tables' parallels the rearrangement of letters that he later conducts on the medium's table.[131]

Through his metafictional games, McCarthy demonstrates not depth, but flatness as his authorial voice is present throughout this description. In this way, Serge's thoughts are not internalised but instead externalised, the words in his mind brought into the flat space in front of him. Serge's thoughts are spatialised as though they are part of the air like radio waves, and the reader who must decipher them is reminded that Serge is just words on a page, permanently in media. It is as though technology has gotten into the way Serge thinks and made his brain function in a different way to his sister, who is much more astute at learning than him, able to "neatly and assiduously" read the page.[132]

There is room for comparison later at the beginning of chapter five when McCarthy states "static's the sound of thinking", and as Serge tunes into his wireless set, he is described as "riding" the air.[133] Serge's thought patterns are scattered and erratic, constantly streaming between different bits of information, like the unfiltered noise in static and the wireless he later becomes interested in. Serge's obsession with technology has penetrated his very thought processes, and it affects the way he sees and interprets the world. This technological automatism, the mechanical workings of Serge's mind and body, are a factor in McCarthy's depiction of the Free Will vs Determinism debate in the novel. Since McCarthy's Necronautical society declares in its own manifesto "Our very bodies are no more than vehicles carrying us ineluctably towards death", Serge's actions will inevitably lead to the same end.[134] However, excluded from McCarthy's depiction of determinism are the ideas of fate, destiny or any form of spiritual intervention. This is because McCarthy treats his characters as signals that travel across physical space rather than supernatural or spiritual realms. McCarthy's version of determinism is focused on the biological certainty of death. Whilst in the prisoner of war

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[131] Eve, p.185.
[132] McCarthy, *C*, p.38.
[133] McCarthy, *C*, p.63.
[134] *International Necronautical Society Manifesto*.

camp towards the end of the first World War, Serge finds himself in a conversation with a man named Moreton, who provides a description of a spiritual model of determinism:

> "The history of our thinking on free will hinges around the question of determinism: are events pre-scripted, as it were – by God, our cells an invisible engine driving history's course? And even if they are, are we still free to *choose* to do what we were destined to do anyway – standing face-to-face with its implications, in full awareness of its consequences? Hume thought so, and allowed this liberty to, as he put it, 'everyone who is not a prisoner and in chains."[135]

The statement about the cells being an invisible engine driving history's course could well fit in with McCarthy's poetics of the body as a vehicle inevitably coursing towards death, if not for the mention of God. Instead, his rejection of humanistic spirituality comes through here as Serge, rather comically, criticises Moreton directly, saying "our current situation kind of pisses over that one, doesn't it?", since they are imprisoned.[136] Later, McCarthy describes the parole system as "so absurd and contradictory it could have been devised by one of Moreton's philosophers."[137]

Wrethed explores a "dromological determinism" in *C*, that being the inevitability of an accident due to the rapid advancements of the technological racecourse, which humanity is hopeless to prevent, evident in the several accidents that occur in the novel ranging from Serge's plane crash to his car crash.[138] Serge's time in the war and his subsequent plane crash make him aware of the inevitability of death, which he stoically embraces, seemingly excited by the prospect of losing his life in "mechanistic carnage".[139] This inevitable end seems to come to a head when he is about to be shot by enemy soldiers:

> It all makes sense. He's been skirting this conjunction, edging his way towards it along a set of detours that have curved and meandered like the relays of a

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[135] McCarthy, *C*, p.180.
[136] McCarthy, *C*, p.180.
[137] McCarthy, *C*, p.184.
[138] Wrethed, p.13.
[139] Wrethed, p.14.

> complex chart, for years – for his whole life, perhaps – and now the conjunction, its consummation, tired of waiting, has found its way to him: it's hurtling back towards him on the line along which the bullets will come any second now. As he waits for the sergeant to give the command to shoot, Serge feels ecstatic.[140]

Serge's experience is described as if it were some profound moment, revealed to him right before his supposed death, his life of obsession with the speed of technology destined to end as a result of its consequences. Yet, Serge is denied his destiny, left behind by the soldiers:

> Serge sees the image of a boat pulling off from a jetty at a point where several canals intersect: as the boat draws away, it takes the intersection with it, leaving him behind. For the first time in the whole course of the war, he feels scared.
>
> "Hey!" he calls after the soldiers. "You can't do that. Wait!"[141]

Serge is denied the end he yearns for. McCarthy teases the reader through Serge's revelation and by taking away any expectations the reader might have by denying the ending Serge, and the reader, expects. If the novel seems, at this point, to be depicting the inevitability of death due to technology, then it would seem inevitable that Serge will meet his end due to it. However, this moment is one of what Eve calls the novel's "signposts to nowhere", signalling a postmodernist interpretation of the novel since his purposefully underwhelming death is the result of an insect bite rather than at the hands of technology.[142]

A second crash, another piece of evidence for Wrethed's "dromological determinism" occurs when Serge experiences the eponymous car crash at the end of the novel's third section. This crash has been read by Alan Munton as "crude futurism", a representation of F.T. Marinetti's famous car accident, and Wrethed interprets it as a "fictionalised historical event draped in dromological theory".[143] However, McCarthy draws his awareness from not just early modernist texts but those succeeding them,

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[140] McCarthy, *C*, p.189.
[141] McCarthy, *C*, p.190.
[142] Eve, p.194.
[143] See Munton, p.22 & Wrethed, p.15.

particularly those considered as part of the crossover between modernism and post-modernism. There is therefore room for interpretation of this segment alongside J.G. Ballard's *Crash,* one of the texts explored in the previous chapter. Martin Paul Eve also makes a case for Ballard's presence in *C,* identifying consistencies with the "geometric perversions of Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*", a novel with identifiable continuity with *Crash* since the title of the novel "appears in *The Atrocity Exhibition* as an (undescribed) stage show and as a magazine". [144] Eve goes so far as to state that several of *C*'s sections can be interpreted "as a replication, or, if feeling uncharitable, a parody, of its style".[145] To corroborate this, McCarthy's article "Technology and the Novel from Blake to Ballard", calls Marinetti's description of his crash "proto-Ballardian", as if a precursor to Ballard's *Crash.*[146] Nicolas Daly's "*Crash:* flesh, steel and celluloid" describes Ballard's novel as "a story that depends on the meeting of flesh and steel actually taking place – indeed being sought out", detailing a number of themes in the novel that seem consistent with *C,* of the body as a machine, the ecstasy of the accident, geometric prose, and the inevitable cause of demise by technology .[147] Serge seems to be similarly seeking accident, since he has a need to "get things moving- get them moving so that he can get them still again, re-find the stasis in the motion", and through this reckless pursuit of speed, the need for a halt through moving, the crash is an inevitability.[148]

The intimacy of the crash McCarthy depicts seems more reminiscent of the eroticism of Ballard than the opulence of Marinetti's description in the futurist manifesto, which is itself more concerned with the wonder of Marinetti's car than his own experience of the accident. The sensual way McCarthy describes the force of the speed and the colors as "scraping right against his skin and pressing down into his mouth", the "nether region" Serge finds himself inside of when the car flips upside down, and the way he is described

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[144] Eve, p.195.
[145] Nicolas Daly, 'Crash: flesh, steel and celluloid' in *Literature, Technology and Modernity, 1860-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.111.
[146] Tom McCarthy, *Technology and the Novel from Blake to Ballard* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jul/24/tom-mccarthy-futurists-novels-technology> [accessed September 20 2018].
[147] Daly, p.111.
[148] McCarthy, *C,* p.235.

as “tasting” the earth, while “flakes of it jump out from between his lips”, suggests a kind of eroticism in *C* that is absent from Marinetti’s account. [149] This eroticism is not too dissimilar from the sexual deviance Serge performs in the cockpit of his plane during the war, and also resemble the sexual nature of the crashes in Ballard’s novel. These intertextual links are significant because they demonstrate McCarthy’s awareness of these themes from not just within, but from outside the modernist canon, and how *C* makes its case for itself as another one of these broadcasts. Serge’s crash could be considered a modulation of the crashes in Ballard, which themselves are modulations of Marinetti’s, all part of McCarthy’s metatextual, metamodernist poetics in *C,* which seek to draw together consistencies between literature and technology from all time periods.

Another scene in which Serge is a human transmitter and receiver is his sister’s funeral. McCarthy revisits the Freudian parody when an existential Serge has to conceal an erection:

> The vicar’s still beaming aggressively, talking of heaven. Looking around him, trousers bulging, Serge is filled with a sudden and certain awareness that there is no such place: there’s the coffin and the Crypt, the lawn, these conker trees above them, this fresh-smelling earth.[150]

Once more we see McCarthy’s rejection of spirituality, and a keen focus on the space around the characters, on the material physical world, demonstrated comedically through the physical embodiment of Serge’s erection. To Serge, Sophie’s absence is not a spiritual one but rather a spatial one and as a result he feels this grief physically rather than mentally, through the electrical “sensation of humming, real or imagined[...] spreading round the lawn”.[151] Theories of internal and external spaces, integral to understanding modernist literature, bleed through into *C* here. Andrew Thacker critically identifies how “much of modernism, then, moves away from a purely psychic perspective, introducing a whole range of other spaces”, spaces that McCarthy utilises in

[149] McCarthy, *C*, p.236.
[150] McCarthy, *C*, p.81.
[151] McCarthy, *C*, p.80.

C.[152] Serge's building obsession with technology, and connection with the space around him culminates when he is an adult with the "Incest-Radio" broadcast in his final dreaming moments, his connection with technology boil down to this one moment of connection with his sister.[153] However, we are reminded by McCarthy that Serge's final revelation occurs inside the space of his mind, and the novel concludes not with this epiphany in the internal space, but rather with his death in the depthless, external world. Serge's final words are sounds, "sssssss, c-c-c-c; sssssss, c-c-c-c; sssssss, c-c-c-c...", as simultaneously reminiscent of a telegram, a gramophone running on at the end of a disc, and static.[154] Serge, as with all people, was in a constant state of transmission from his birth to his death, and the end of broadcasting gives way to the static at the end of a radio program. The International Necronautical Society calls for "the death of tragedy in which the lonely hero, in death, is rewarded with authentic being". [155] Instead, they value "not the imperial dreams in the head of the polar explorer Ernest Shackleton but rather his blackened, frostbitten toes".[156] The novel does not end with Serge's dreams but the cyst on his ankle that causes his life to end, and his vocal cords making a final broadcast of static, valuing the physical and technological above the metaphysical.

These depictions of man, woman and child as technological machine extend further to what Joakim Hans Wrethed calls the "primordially mechanised human" in the novel, and the ways in which the workings of humanity are compared to the mechanical movements of animals such as insects.[157] The words of humans and insects in particular are combined in the text, such as Carrefax's "web" of signals inferring the connecting strands of a spider's web. Integral, too, is the name of Serge's birthplace, Versoie, as Wrethed notes its play on the French word for silk-moth, *vers á soie,* the insect Serge's mother uses in a silk factory, which "produces threads woven into textile as the words of

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[152] Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.6.
[153] McCarthy, *C*, p.304.
[154] McCarthy, *C*, p.310.
[155] Tom McCarthy and Simon Critchley, *Joint Statement on Inauthenticity* <http://necronauts.net/declarations/ins_inauthenticity_new_york/inauthenticity_precis.html> [accessed 17 January 2018].
[156] Tom McCarthy and Simon Critchley, *Joint Statement on Inauthenticity*.
[157] Wrethed, p.10.

the novel are ordered into the text".[158] This word play of text and textile seems essential in McCarthy's depiction of literature as a weave of connected strands, the novel itself a tapestry of the movements it is deliberately combining just as the moths weave their silk. The buzzing communication of bees is also related to the buzzing of wires in the early sections of the novel, relating human networks to networks of hives. The patients at Klodebrady are then described as "pupating larvae" and "human chrysalises".[159] During Serge's plane crash he is described as cocooned, emerging from it like his caul, "pushing his hands against a roof and wall of silk, he makes his way along the soft, white tube towards the opening".[160] Again, in his car crash, Serge declares the wrecked body of the vehicle as his "carapace".[161] This all culminates in a Kafkaesque metamorphosis in a dream, which Lanone identifies through the aural signifier "Kafka" from the voice in the dream that declares "K4".[162]

This final section is not only the end of Serge's life, but also McCarthy's literary historiography, beginning with Osiris but ending with *Finnegan's Wake*. In this transformation, Serge becomes an "insect" with multiple limbs and feelers, and within the dream he is operating an "insect-radio".[163] If we consider the comparisons McCarthy makes between the mechanistic movements of the insects and those of humans prior to this moment, then humans sending radio transmissions are no different to the automatism of insects sending their own signals through the air. McCarthy's Derridean wordplay come to the forefront here, with Serge's words to the Steward deteriorating into signifiers of "insect": "ink set", "inset", "in sections" and, finally and most crucially, "incest-radio".[164] The inversion of "insect" into "incest" is not an invention of McCarthy's, but in fact appears in such literary works as *Finnegans Wake,* used to describe an incestuous love affair between Tristan and Isolde, since the word "insect" acts, as Stéphane Jousni states, as both paronomasia and anagram for "incest".[165] It is

[158] Wrethed, p.16.
[159] McCarthy, *C*, p.93.
[160] McCarthy, *C*, p.174.
[161] McCarthy, *C*, p.236.
[162] Lanone, p.5.
[163] McCarthy, *C*, p.301.
[164] McCarthy, *C*, p.301.
[165] Stéphane Jousni**,** *Incest, Lit(t)erally: How Joyce Censored The Wake* (2013) <https://journals.openedition.org/lisa/5466> [accessed 29 May 2020].

no coincidence then, that McCarthy's most liberal use of wordplay is in this dream section, since *Finnegans Wake* is itself a novel of dreams in which words must be interpreted and deciphered by a reader. Once again, words comes down to modulating signals which carry meaning not only of themselves but of others, just like the earlier "eerie, area, ear" and Eve's "ablest", "tables", and "labset".[166] The insect physically becomes incest in Serge's final moments, when his "bride" in the dream is revealed to be Sophie holding a "much-worm-drilled" apple (reminiscent of Adam and Eve, the Christian origin of man through incest).[167] McCarthy's themes draw together here: the broadcasts throughout literary history of death, technology, broadcast and incest. The rotting apple is a well-known sign of death and decay. The steward wearing the mask of "Thoth"(the Egyptian God of writing,) resembles literature's beginnings as well as the novel's beginning and the play in Versoie. The chemical odours on the air "Ra-Osram-Isis-K4-CQD" signify the death-marked incestuous love between Isis and Osiris.[168] Finally, the noise of "static", which Sophie makes from her lungs to ends Serge's dream and, shortly after, his life. [169] Serge, the surge of modernism, becomes, like Orpheus before him, dispersed into the noise of literature:

> He's become the sea of ink, the distance between planets, the space across which signals travel. Like time itself, he's flattening, turning into carbon paper: the black smear between the sheets, the surface through which things repeat, CC themselves, but that will always remain black and blank.[170]

If we return to McCarthy's claim that literature is "the repetition," "the surge," and ""the shift from one-to-one to one-to-many to many-to-many networks in which sender and addressee are simultaneously masked and multiplied", then this moment is where modernism becomes a part of the network, a part of the history of broadcasts to be CC'd, carbon copied, important not just for the letter C but for carbon paper that is integral to the mass production of literature. [171] Not only is carbon integral to the mass

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[166] McCarthy, *C*, p.185.
[167] McCarthy, *C*, p.305.
[168] McCarthy, *C*, p.306.
[169] McCarthy, *C*, p.308.
[170] McCarthy, *C*, p.308.
[171] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, section vii.

production of literature, but it is also the basis of all life on earth. Modernism, and *C*, becomes compressed with the stories of technology, death, incest and trauma into the flat tapestry of literature that encompasses all similar stories before it, and all of life alongside it. Together with Adam and Eve, Isis and Osiris, and Orpheus and Eurydice, Serge and Sophie are lost. The wake of the water, metatextually representative of *Finnegans Wake*, arguably the final novel of mainstream modernism, which McCarthy calls "the pinnacle of Literary Modernism, its most sophisticated and extreme achievement", [172] concerns the final sentence of the novel:

> "the wake itself remains, etched out across the water's surface; then it fades as well, although no one is there to see it go."[173]

McCarthy ends *C* with a section which, as demonstrated, recreates the final novel of mainstream modernism, and, with its passing, early twentieth-century modernism gives way to the artforms that follow it: late modernism, post-modernism and then contemporary fiction. What *C* represents, then, is not some attempt to continue the modernist project, but to map it, like Serge does in his plane during the war, from a distance, looking down on its wreckage from above, while avoiding the conflict of any hands-on attempt to recover it.

Counterpart

C is by no means McCarthy's last attempt at linking together the past and the present through time and technology, and his poetics of literature as a widely broadcasted network of interlinking texts. His next novel, *Satin Island,* is a reversed continuation of these links: while *C* is set in the past and reflects on its consistencies in the present, *Satin Island* takes place in the present and examines how the past has affected it. The contemporary moment is as important to the novel as the whole of human history. Early tribes and oil spills, history distilled down to its basest elements that leak onto the

[172] McCarthy, 'From Blake to Ballard'.
[173] McCarthy, *C*, p.310.

beaches of the present as a result of drills, are commonly discussed. Often, the protagonist, a cultural anthropologist by the name of U., allows history to spill into his thoughts about the modern day, imagining the present as though it were the past. These thoughts are, at times, passing historical or mythical references, but there are also long tirades in which the past and present blend together. An imagined PowerPoint presentation, for example, becomes "a nineteenth- or even an eighteenth- century auditorium".[174] In many ways, these imaginings of the past seem a sort of yearning for escapism, of resistance to the present, since its protagonist imagines "some spot, some tract from which other terrains might open, realms where everything was different,".[175] The novel itself is a philosophical analysis of our time, how the past has affected it, and how technology and material culture have changed what it means to be human, as well as a discussion of the impossibility of the novel about everything. It is also a close examination of the contemporary moment and its increasing complexity, and the challenges of attempting to label it under one category. In essence, the novel charts the primary concern of this thesis, the question of how best to define a post-post-modernist cultural epoch.

The crux of the novel's plot, insofar as it has one, is "The Great Project" – a nondescript job that U. has to complete for his unnamed "Company", in which he must sum up the human condition in the present day. This is a task that he is doomed to fail due to both the ambiguity of the project, its scope and U.'s methodology. The impossibility of such an undertaking is the purpose of the novel, denying both the knowledge and authenticity that humanity so often seeks and the narrative satisfaction a reader seeks in literature. The epistemological focus of the novel is something that has been identified as integral to modernist poetics. In his account of the shift from modernist to postmodernist poetics, McHale defines the "dominant" (the key literary focus) of both modernist and postmodernist texts. McHale concludes that "modernist fiction is epistemological", focused on questions of knowledge, while postmodernism is ontological, focused on questions of being.[176] While Martin Paul Eve argues for *C* as a

[174] Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015) p.102.
[175] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.102.
[176] McHale, p.10.

novel that contains an "ontological destabilization of its histories", *Satin Island* is focused squarely on knowledge, and the paranoiac search for an absent authentic truth. It is an epistemological novel set in an ultra-capitalist world, where consumer culture has taken control.[177] Concepts of knowledge and data, the commercialization of information, and the impacts of global communications technologies are all prevalent in the text.

While *C* takes place in a Modernity of rapid technological growth, where such technologies are new and exciting, and trawls through the ether are reserved for hobbyists, *Satin Island* is set in a modernity of the internet and media mass-consumption. If we take into account Munton's complaint about the lack of a "global village" in *C*, *Satin Island* contains an intermeshed global metropolis.[178] As early as the ninth page, U. highlights this connected consumer culture: "people who weren't clicking and scrolling their way, like me, through phones and laptops were grazing on the luxury items stacked up all about us".[179] The people surrounding U. in the airport, when they aren't consuming the entertainment offered by their technological devices, are interested in commodities. U. himself is one of these technological consumers, spending a large portion of his job in the basement of his office building in front of screens, which he uses to compile dossiers for his company. These dossiers are scraps and lines on the walls of U.'s office on several sporadic topics that pique his interest – over the course of the novel he creates ones on dead parachutists, oil spills, among others – with which he attempts to draw together links. These fragmented micronarratives that plaster U.'s office never fully cohere, and as he tries to process and connect them into the great project the impossibility of doing so becomes clear.

It is human nature to draw lines and false patterns between unrelated topics and doing this is central to U.'s pursuit of knowledge, rendering him as a character whose process breeds inauthenticity. For example, one of the many epiphanies U. has in the novel from his dossiers, relating to cases of dead parachutists, is revealed to be false a few pages later. U. believes that the parachutists had a "Russian Roulette" pact with one

[177] Eve, p.184.
[178] Munton, p.19.
[179] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.9.

another, deliberately tampering with one parachute on each trip, describing himself as "more certain of it than of anything before or since".[180] Not long after that, U. discovers his idea is "bogus; full of shit" due to the safety precautions of parachutists.[181] The initial epiphany, described with such vigor and detail by U. seems plausible to the reader as they are misled by U.'s belief in the authenticity of his own realization, only to discover he was incorrect all along. This purposeful disappointment of the reader is one of many ways McCarthy plays with the typical expectations of the novelistic form – resolving a sub-plot only to immediately render it unresolved.

Another notable example of a false epiphany occurs at the novel's conclusion. U. has a dream in which he finds the heart of a trash-incinerating plant on an island in the sea, sensing another great revelation:

> Yes, *regal* – that was the strange thing: if the city was the capital, the seat of the empire, then this island was the exact opposite, the inverse – the *other* place, the feeder, filterer, overflow-manager, the dirty, secreted-away appendix without which the body-proper couldn't function;[182]

The place in his dream can be linked to his own opinions of his work, that he "was to garner meaning from all types of situation – to extract it, like a physicist distilling some pure, unadulterated essence from mongrel-compounds" from the "glassless, brick-and-plaster" basement of his sleek, modern building.[183] U. feels connected to the island in his dream, and later discovers that "Satin Island", as it announces itself in the dream, is a dream-like version of Staten Island in New York City.[184] This leads the reader to believe that U. will find some great moment of significance on the island, but as U. goes to catch the ferry, he decides not to, despite the wishes of the reader and the pushing of the "throng of people" around him.[185] Why? Because, as U. explains, it would be "profoundly meaningless".[186] The signifier and the signified (Satin and Staten) do not

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[180] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.119.
[181] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.122.
[182] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.131.
[183] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.31 & p.14.
[184] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.164.
[185] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.170.
[186] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.170.

truly meet, and the journey of the novel becomes incomplete as a result, consistent with Angelo Monaco's view that it depicts a "postmodern world" that reflects Baudrillard, in that "the collapse of meaning in the postmodern world results in an endless circulation of floating signifiers through which "truth, reference, objective cause have ceased to exist".[187]

Intertextual Networks

Much can be learned in *Satin Island,* as in *C,* from comparative reading of the texts that McCarthy remixes in his creative process, and the novel's own position and critique of the network of texts it is a part of – its metatextual unpicking of genre. Emmett Stinson identifies a number of McCarthy's literary allusions in the novel, suggesting a scene in which "U." clears his desk acts as a reference to Heidegger's philosophical notions of "clearing".[188] Indeed, the text contains a number of literary references at various levels of obscurity – perhaps the most obvious of which being "Call me U.", in reference to "Call me Ishmael" from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick.*[189] The elusive white whale of *Satin Island*, however, is U.'s "Great Report", which the protagonist pursues with a similar level of reckless paranoia to Captain Ahab. This search for meaning, and its inevitable breakdown, can be seen to represent both the impossibility of U.'s "Great Report", but also what Stinson calls "the death of the modernist dream of the book about everything".[190] Such paranoiac meaning searching is evident in the postmodernist works of Thomas Pynchon, and if *C* shares a number of thematic similarities to Pynchon's *V.*, as Martin Paul Eve argues, then *Satin Island* owes its paranoiac pattern searching,

[187] Angelo Monaco, 'The Novel of Ideas at the Crossroads of Transmodernity, Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*' in *Transcending the Postmodern, The Singular Response of Literature to the Transmodern Paradigm* ed by. Jean-Michel Ganteua and Susana Onega (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp.68-88 (p.68).
[188] Emmett Stinson, *Is It Fundable? Satin Island by Tom McCarthy* (2015) <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/satin-island-tom-mccarthy/> [accessed 5 June 2020].
[189]See McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.3 and Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2002), p.3.
[190] Stinson.

defiance of grand narratives, as well as its leitmotif of waste products, to *The Crying of Lot 49*.[191]

Pynchon's novel follows its protagonist Oedipa Maas after she is named as executor of estate for her late ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity, who owns a forged stamp collection. Whilst working through the estate, she follows a series of bizarre clues and becomes obsessed with uncovering a century-old conspiracy around a rogue postal group named "Tristero", implied to have created Inverarity's forgeries, since its name appears in a fictionalised seventeenth century play *The Courier's Tragedy*. The plot of *The Courier's Tragedy* bears striking resemblance to the story of Manny de Presso, a man suing the estate for not being paid by Inverarity for human remains he had acquisitioned for him. A symbol, representing a muted post horn, and the anagram W.A.S.T.E, appear several times in Oedipa's search, fueling her obsession as she learns more and more about the organization but finds no real answers. As she is about to give up her fruitless chase, a mysterious bidder is supposed to place a bid on the forged stamp collection at the auction of the estate (the stamp collection being the eponymous Lot 49). The novel concludes with the start of the auction, with the answer to the mystery (and whether there was ever a conspiracy to follow in the first place) never revealed.

Pynchon's text, like McCarthy's, is filled with symbolism, and contains a reckless and erratic pursuit of knowledge that the reader is doomed to never discover. The characters of these two texts pursue these symbols, expecting a form of resolution, and the audience expects the same, but since they never unify with a signified meaning to form a sign, they remain empty signifiers, and language is broken down as a result. If, "language stands as a differential communication system in which signifiers can be identified, and subsequently linked to signifieds, constituting a sign", then the lack of a signified represents a breakdown in communication.[192] The lack of fulfilment of both the reader and the novel's characters represents a betrayal in what Roland Barthes calls

[191] Eve, p.181.
[192] Kincade, Jonathan, 'The Tower is Everywhere: Symbolic Exchange and Discovery of Meaning in Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49.' Thesis, Georgia State University, (2012), <https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_hontheses/6> [accessed 6 June 2020].

the "hermeneutic code" of a text, the mysteries of a novel that are expected to be resolved.[193] In this rejection of a realist closure, the reader is challenged to determine their own answer to the text's meaning; just as U. in *Satin Island* is left "meaningless", so is the reader. The muted post horn symbol in *The Crying of Lot 49* is indicative of the unreliability of traditional modes of communication, such as the postal service, the novel, and Oedipa herself as an unreliable narrator. The impossibility of U.'s "Great Report", conversely, has been interpreted as a symbol of the impossibility of a book about everything – the no longer viable task of writing what David Rudrum defines as the "epoch-defining" novels such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, texts written "with the aim of epitomizing their zeitgeist".[194]

Technological Mediation, Immortalisation and Fragmentation

At first glance, *Satin Island*'s narrative and its purpose appears to be far from avant-garde. Indeed, Sintson identifies U. with similar protagonists such as Edward Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, written in 1874, who fails an attempt to write *The Key to All Mythologies*.[195] Casaubon's project aims to determine a root to all mythical systems, claiming the novel contains "a series of novelistic tropes drawn from modernist, postmodernist, naturalist, and realist traditions," and "composed with the same materials as any novel produced by the prefab manufactory of US creative-writing programs".[196] Where the influence of modernism, then, comes into *Satin Island* is through its applications of what Angelo Monaco calls "transmodernity", its metamodernist meditations on the future of the novel of ideas in a contemporary world of networks.[197] The conclusion Monaco, and many other critics draw, is that the novel

[193] Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1991).
[194] David Rudrum, *Review: Satin Island by Tom McCarthy* (2015) <https://theconversation.com/review-satin-island-by-tom-mccarthy-47654> [accessed 6 June 2020].
[195] Stinson.
[196] Stinson.
[197] Monaco, p.68.

resists the possibility of "writing fiction in the era of post-truth and globalisation where instantaneity and fragmentation have replaced unity and grand narratives".[198]

The reason for this impossibility in *Satin Island*, is the complexity of life in the global metropolis of technological networks.

> Charged with summing up contemporaneity, U finds the task impossible, for two good reasons. In the first place, no anthropologist or novelist could hope to achieve an overview of the complexity of present-day life. Second, the Great Report on the contemporary is already being written by the software that tracks and tabulates even the most humdrum forms of our activity – but it's written in a form only readable by other software. […] The point is that this epoch – whether we call it "postmodern" or "altermodern" or "digimodern" or whatever the coinage of the month is – won't allow us to define it. And that is what defines it. U's Great Report isn't so much a heroic failure as an anti-heroic one.[199]

U. has this revelation when he is disputing anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's proposition "Write Everything Down". After slowly coming to the realization of the impossible scope of his project, U. believes that, in the twenty-first century, there is no purpose in writing everything down, because "it *is* all written down" by technology that tracks and monitors human behavior.[200] This is a common fear in the twenty-first century, caused by a fear of being tracked or having personal information used unethically by corporations online, but for U. it is more than that. Indeed, he conceives of this software as a "neutral and indifferent binary system that had given rise to itself".[201] This gives way to a feeling of inadequacy compared to the technology, that his work is meaningless because his great report has "already been written" by a piece of software, and "only another piece of software" can read it.[202] This thinking causes thoughts of existentialism from U., who feels his very "*raison d'etre*" is under threat.[203] Rudrum is right to call this failure "anti-heroic", since U. has surrendered emotional

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[198] Monaco, p.72.
[199] Rudrum.
[200] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.123.
[201] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.123.
[202] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.123-124.
[203] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.123.

affect to all other things in his life but the pursuit of answers.[204] In this way, U. is a human information-processor, in contrast to Serge as a human transmitter in *C.*

U.'s interaction with the other characters in the novel, his dying friend Petr, and his lover Madison, are posed by McCarthy as deliberately problematic and are as a result of U.'s life as an affectless, information-processor.[205] "In an ironic twist," Chelsea Erieu states:

> "*Satin Island* sounds most like the business report that its form mimics when its narrator describes traditionally emotional experiences. U.'s usual descriptive imagery for even the most mundane of thoughts, and his rambling thought processes that link networks of information, do not translate to his personal relationships."[206]

Erieu explains this emotional affectlessness is a result of the novel's corporate system and Deleuze's concept of dividuation, whereby the characters in the novel are largely freed from any notions of individuality.[207] Instead, people in the novel are largely referred to in groups such as "civil servants", "participants", and valued only by "their relevance to the wider system", and "for any information they may hold and reproduce".[208] The characters in the novel are often under the control of various social systems: U. is under corporate hegemony, his dying friend Petr is under the control of the health care system, which prescribes bizarre treatments for his cancer such as "orange juice", and Madison describes an event in which she is under the control of state law enforcement.[209] The corporate system U. is a part of has been described by other critics such as Timon Beyes as operating with a "post-humanist" desire for efficiency, and U.'s integration in this "flattened" and "horizontal" network, lead to his affectless

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[204] Rudrum.
[205] Rudrum.
[206]Chelsea Erieu, 'On Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island*', *Philament: A Journal of Arts, and Culture,* 24.2, (2018), pp.105-110 (p.107).
[207] Erieu p.105.
[208] Erieu, p.106.
[209] McCarthy, *Satin Island,* p.85.

desire for information.[210] It is significant that Beyes calls the network flat, since flatness is similarly prominent in *C.* For example, regarding his lover, Madison, U. is much more detailed in describing his thoughts after intercourse than the emotional connection of the intercourse itself. U.'s only interest is in finding things out – in processing information – and demonstrates a lack of emotional affect when it comes to anything but the search for knowledge.

The only time Madison is granted any form of agency in the novel is to reveal an answer to a question U. (and "you", the reader) has wanted to know since the novel's earliest chapters: how she came to be in Turin airport. Madison's is given in a restaurant over the course of chapter thirteen, where she describes an experience in which a man forces her to take various postures, guided by the electrical sounds coming out of a machine. It is also important to note that Madison was taken to this man as a result of her demonstrations against the G8 summit, the meeting between leaders of eight of the world's wealthiest countries. This anecdote is perhaps a representation of her resistance to the control of the networks of globalisation, which, in being apprehended, leads to failure. This machine controls both the man, who listens to the "electronic whining, crackling, things like that" and interprets them as poses for Madison.[211] Together, they are both being controlled by the strange, sonic apparatus:

> He was as much a part of the choreography as I was. After a while, he closed his eyes; and yet his limbs still subtly moved and twitched and angled, to the same rhythm, the same pattern, to the modulating sound of the machine and my own corresponding sequences of postures.[212]

In this scene, the two characters are entirely at the will of the machine, subservient to it, including the man supposedly in control of the scene, a man of such importance that "everything seemed to orbit around", who is "governed by these messages crackling and

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[210]See Timon Beyes, ''The Machine Could Swallow Everything' *Satin Island* and Performing Organisation', in *Performing the Digital, Performativity and Performance Studies in Digital Cultures* ed. by Timon Beyes, Immaneul Schipper, Martina Leeker, (Transcript Verlag, 2016), p.230 and Erieu, p.108-109.
[211] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.151.
[212] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.154.

zigzagging their way to him from... I don't know: from somewhere else".[213] Once again humanity is depicted as second to the machine, as though some technological code such as the previously discussed software U. fears earlier in the novel has taken hold. The characters are dehumanized, automated, until the scene concludes and the man "slumps" into his chair because the machine's sounds "that had been so charged and jumping, went all elongated, flattened, like the thing was running down."[214] Without the machine, the man loses his purpose and switches off, leaving Madison in front of him, unsure of what to do without its guidance.

The death of Petr, one of U.'s colleagues and another secondary character, is also placed second to the technology that U. claims immortalizes him. U. learns of Petr's death from a terminal illness via text message, and instead of being upset by the news or thinking "the thoughts you're meant to think in such a situation (*How sad; At least he's at rest; I'll miss him; And so forth*)" he thinks about how the text message makes Petr seem alive, describing it as "the key to immortality: text messaging".[215] Here, technology surpasses the human by existing past it – the words on the screen with Petr's name on it lives on after him, replacing him. As U. puts it, "all we need to do to guarantee indefinite existence for ourselves is to keep our network of contacts running, and make sure a missive goes out every now and then."[216] He imagines commercializing this revelation as a business, in which companies would periodically send out texts from the deceased person's phone to continue their existence. If to be a person is to be in a constant state of transmission, McCarthy is stating that through periodical automated technological transmission, that person can continue to be in a state of "being". Just like the gramophone capturing the voices of the dead and allowing them to live again, the text message can do the same.

U.'s modern loss of affect is also linked to the way characters think and appear in technological terms, particularly through the concept of "buffering". In 2015, McCarthy narrated a short TV spot about *Satin Island*. Originally broadcasted on BBC Newsnight,

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[213] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.151-152.
[214] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.154.
[215] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.137.
[216] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.137.

the piece is entitled "Everything Becomes Buffering". Narrated, in present tense, from the perspective of U., the short film covers a lot of the same ground as the novel, condensing it down. McCarthy, speaking as U., states:

> If it's a video file you're trying to watch, and the red part of the line catches up with the grey part, the buffering sets in again. This is how time and memory work, too. We need experience to stay ahead, if only by a nose, of our consciousness of experience, so that the latter can interpret, narrate, the former. When the narrating cursor catches right up with the rendering one, we find ourselves jammed, stuck in limbo. Everything becomes buffering, and buffering becomes everything. This much, at least, about our age, I've understood. I intend to start a dossier on buffering.[217]

In this segment, condensing down section 7.9 of the novel, McCarthy, through U., shines significant light on the novel's poetics, through its associations between the buffering of a computer and human experience. Buffering is a state of being that occurs with multiple characters and objects throughout the novel, either through the way they physically behave or through U.'s philosophical thoughts. Indeed, U. himself is in a state of physical buffering at the beginning of the novel, waiting in Turin airport to transfer onto another plane.

Literal computer buffering also occurs at the start of the novel, when U. is talking to Madison on Skype:

> Her face froze in mid-sentence too. Its mouth was open in an asymmetric, drooly kind of way, as though she'd lost control of her muscles following a stroke; her eyes had rolled upwards, so the pupils were half-hidden by the lids. A little circle span in front of her, to denote buffering.[218]

While here the concept of buffering is literal, describing what is happening on screen, McCarthy draws back to this scene when U. has sex with Madison, comparing the way she behaves when she orgasms to a kind of physical paralysis, an "endless buffering"

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[217] *Tom McCarthy: Everything Becomes Buffering* <https://youtu.be/KJIbMIzGCGo> [accessed 5 February 2020] Timestamp: 4:34-5:15.
[218] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.9.

described with similar terminology to this frozen still from the airport.[219] This is deliberately provocative and demonstrates how U.'s place in the corporate system of networks has led to a loss of affect, associating her physical appearance with the buffering on his screen at work. Not too dissimilar from the previously discussed soldiers in *C*, whose physiologies are described in conjunction with their machines, the anti-humanist fusion of technology and the human form is evident here.

When discussing the conspiracy of the dead parachutists, U. philosophizes that the parachutist was dead before the moment of his actual physical death – "for the last hours – days, perhaps – of his life he had (this is how Schrodinger would formulate it) been murdered without realising it".[220] The parachutist, already dead from U.'s perspective, lives in a period of buffering. The conclusion of his life is already decided and he just has to wait to experience it. It is the same with Petr, who becomes terminally ill, waiting for the conclusion that has been decided for him. "That's a buffering probl..." U. humorously says to him as Petr explains the "worst thing about dying" is not being able to describe it to someone afterwards.[221] Petr explains how his experience of life consisted of making narratives in his head of how to explain events after they had happened, in a state of mental buffering – the narrating cursor catching up to the rendering.

One of the few characters that seems to avoid the cycle of buffering is Peyman, the constantly mobile boss of U.'s "Company". He is mentioned a few times in the opening chapters of the novel but does not make an appearance until the fifth chapter. From U.'s early descriptions of him, he is depicted as a figure of great knowledge and contemporary aptitude. To be around him is to feel "connected" to the greater goings-on of the company and the world.[222] When he does finally appear, we are told that he is in a constant state of transmission – "Peyman said lots of things. That's what he did: put ideas out, put them in circulation."[223] He takes the ideas and knowledge of his workers, all from a wide variety of research areas, and distills them into aphorisms and concepts

[219] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.112.
[220] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.55.
[221] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.127.
[222] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.20.
[223] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.40.

to broadcast around the globe. Ironically, the aphorisms U. describes, though they may sound intellectual, are either twists of common turns of phrases, or unexplained and empty statements. His statement "location is irrelevant: what matters is not where something is, but rather where it leads", for example, is similar to the commonly used "it's about the journey not the destination", a phrase coined so often it has lost its true meaning.[224]

Timon Beyes states that "Peyman's aphorisms, slogans and imperatives sound clever yet are sometimes hard to decipher in terms of their constative or ostensible meaning […] Both illocutionary intent and perlocutionary effects of such fabulation seem to reside in attracting and seducing (potential) clients as well as impressing and partly dumbfounding colleagues and underlings."[225] Described as if he is a deity, and his company's logo as symbolising the "Tower of Babel", U. talks about Peyman's description of the Tower of Babel as "valuable because of its uselessness."[226] "The first move for any strategy of cultural production", McCarthy, through Peyman, ironically announces, "must be to liberate things – objects, situations, systems – into uselessness."[227] By distilling the knowledge of his employees into useless turns of phrase to be marketed, Peyman is doing just that – liberating knowledge into useless statements, forsaking value of knowledge for market-value. Stinson claims "Peyman sees autonomy as a lubricant for the capitalist exchange of value, since 'useless' objects or concepts can be creatively repurposed and, like the commodity as conceived by Marx, they are endlessly exchangeable and without any value beyond exchangeability itself."[228] What we see here, then, is the very commercialisation of culture itself, repackaged and repurposed for the sake of profit, deliberately depthless with only the appropriation of depth, sans meaning.

Consequences on Climate

[224] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.40.
[225] Beyes, p.235.
[226] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.43-44.
[227] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.44.
[228] Stinson.

The consequence of U.'s affectless attitude on his perception of nature have led to several environmentalist readings of *Satin Island*. Waste products and oil are two recurring motifs in the novel, but such motifs, which are usually depicted as negative, are described with an aesthetic beauty. During his imaginary presentation, U. describes the beauty of the oil spill, describing how it "recasts" the animals and coastline "to celebrate it, to align with its essence at the very moment this emerges, becomes manifest."[229] U. imagines the response of an environmentalist audience member, who rebukes his "aestheticizing" of the oil spill,[230] to which U. replies:

> these people's entire mindset is a product of aesthetics. Bad aesthetics at that: misguided and ignorant. They dislike the oil spill for the way it makes the coastline look "not right", preventing it from illustrating the vision of nature that's been handed down from theologians to romantic poets to explorers, tourists, television viewers: as sublime, virginal and pure.[231]

McCarthy's deliberately provocative description of the environmentalist's ideal aestheticisation of nature contrasts what Joakim Hans Wrethed calls the "traditional environmentalist discourse" of oil spills which sees them as "adequate punishments for human hubris."[232] U. himself discusses such "hubris" in the chapter, stating "you might say that we're observing ecological catastrophe, or an indictment of industrial society, or a parable of mankind's hubris", before breaking the event down to mere "differentiation", eradicating any form of cultural or emotional response to simply observe the event as a change.[233] Wrethed calls this the "ultimate level of (post)humanity", "the revelation of a dehumanised and autonomous aesthetics of the

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[229] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.106.
[230] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.107.
[231] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.107.
[232] Joakim Wrethed, 'The (Anti-)Ecology of Nietzschean Aesthetics in Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*' unpublished paper delivered at the conference 'The Great Environmental Switch: Ecology, Technology, and Thinking Conference on the New Ecological Paradigm' (Stockholm University 20-21 May 2019) < http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1318586&dswid=-3355> [accessed 7 June 2020].
[233] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.104.

world itself."[234] U.'s level evolves from an lack of affect for human life to an indifference towards all life and nature.

This culminates in U.'s dream of "Satin Island", which places the garbage of human culture, above the culture itself: In U.'s dream of the "trash incinerating plant", garbage is converted into a "glowing ooze, which hinted at a deeper, more infinite reserve of yet-more-glowing ooze inside the trash-mountain's main body, that made the scene so rich and vivid, filled it with a splendour that was regal."[235] If the beauty of nature is its waste product, oil, then here McCarthy seems to suggest the man-made oil-like substance created from the waste of culture is to be valued above the city that it serves. The oil, U. argues, is as much a part of nature as that which it is spilling onto: "what is oil *but* nature? Rock-filtered organic compounds – animal, vegetable and mineral – broken down and concentrated by the planet's very crust: what could be purer than that?". This makes an interpretation possible, detailed by Dan Burrows, in which *Satin Island* depicts "culture as garbage" and "garbage as culture".[236] The previously discussed Peyman is a producer of this "trash culture", distilling the rich combined knowledge of the company's workforce into phrases of low cultural profile to be sold. Oil in the novel, the distilled garbage of nature and of history, is therefore representative of U.'s valuation of the discourse of matter, of waste products being placed above all.

Claude Levi-Strauss

Rudrum's review of *Satin Island* states it is "interesting" that the task of The Great Report is "a task not for a novelist, but an anthropologist", but there is particular crossover between the two fields of study, which McCarthy seems aware of, in his multiple declarations in the novel that to be an anthropologist is to deal "in narratives".

[234] Wrethed.
[235] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.131.
[236] Dan Barrow, *Nature is Dirty* <http://review31.co.uk/article/view/336/nature-is-dirty> [accessed 05 June 2020].

[237] This crossover is apparent not only in the novel, but in history, since Claude Levi-Strauss (the famous anthropologist that U. regards as his hero) created structural anthropology by drawing influence from Ferdinand de Saussure's theories of structural linguistics. As U. puts it, "he spent most of his life wanting to be somebody or something else: a philosopher, say, or novelist, or poet."[238] Indeed, the very process of structural anthropology was to seek the "grammar" that underlies all social structures, a grand narrative that anchors all of human society, and one of Levi-Strauss's particular focuses was on the narratives of Mythology. [239]

In a structuralist take on the myth of Oedipus, Levi-Strauss identified a number of motifs and structural similarities between the ancient myth and those of native American tribes, attempting to identify a universal structure to myth – a key to all mythologies. His method is similar to structuralist Roland Barthes, who also worked on myth in the modern day in *Mythologies* and sought meaning in fashion in *The Fashion System*, and Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk-tale*, which drew links between Russian folk tales. McCarthy makes this crossover between Barthes and Levi-Strauss in U.'s description of his first client. As an admirer of Claude Levi-Strauss, he is tasked with working for the denim clothing manufacturer, Levi Strauss, breaking down the similarities between the two through structuralist technique:

> A little research unearthed more than just coincidence between the nomenclatural overlap: the jeans maker, just like the anthropologist, had been an Ashkenazi Jew; both, leaving Europe under vague or not-so-vague threat, had turned to the Americas, and built their fame on what they did there. Levi-no-hyphen-Strauss was German; but the fabric he sold came, like Levi-Strauss, from France – from Nimes, down in the south. *Serge de Nimes:* denim.[240]

McCarthy is parodying the technique of the structuralist here, by drawing links between the lives of Levi-Strauss and Levi Strauss despite their clear differences. He identifies

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[237] Rudrum. McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.14.
[238] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.30.
[239] David Maybury Lewis, 'Claude Levi-Strauss and the Search for Structure.', *The Wilson Quarterly (1976)*, 12.1, (1988), pp. 82–95, *JSTOR*, <www.jstor.org/stable/40257769.> [Accessed 8 June 2020].
[240] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, p.30.

recurring motifs between their lives, the places they went to, their heritage, their motivations and actions, but these give meaning to mere coincidence. A commonly discussed flaw of structuralism is its way of tying together loosely related or tenuous links and calling them significant, and McCarthy satirises this since U. is calling this "more than just coincidence" as if to suggest there lies some purposeful connection between the jean-maker and the anthropologist. There also lies the subtle joke of Levi-Strauss, Levi Strauss and Roland Barthes, whose own structural anthropological pursuits included works in fashion. An audience with a knowledge of these extra links will be a part of the meaning-making problem McCarthy poses since the reader would be drawing similarly irrelevant links within the irony. The argument seems to be that Levi-Strauss, and structuralism more generally, seeks authenticity and meaning where it is mostly absent.

McCarthy's article "The Death of Writing" identifies this difficulty with the structuralist methods of Levi-Strauss, using an anecdote from Levi-Strauss's writing:

> Meeting a tribe that doesn't know what writing is, and seeing the tribe's chief borrow his pen and scribble on a sheet in order to dupe his subjects into thinking that he is versed in this activity, Lévi-Strauss realises that his own writing is itself no more than a form of duping – not just of readers but of himself too, carrying meaning to the point of ambiguity again and again in a bid to generate the very type of mystery on which it thrives.[241]

In this passage, McCarthy is himself taking influence from Derrida, whose deconstructionist essays sought to critique the structuralist technique of De Saussure and Rosseau. Derrida also critiques Levi-Strauss, discussing the same segment from *Tristes Tropiques*, "The Writing Lesson", that McCarthy references here.[242] Christopher Johnson, on Derrida's critique, states "Levi-Strauss's theory of writing is seen as belonging to an identifiable tradition of thought that has consistently rejected writing as

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[241] Tom McCarthy, *The Death of Writing – if James Joyce were alive today he'd be working for Google*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/07/tom-mccarthy-death-writing-james-joyce-working-google> [accessed 17 October 2022].
[242] Jacques Derrida, 'The Violence of the Letter: From Levi-Strauss to Rousseau' in *Of Grammotology* trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.101.

an inauthentic and alienating medium of communication".[243] This is seemingly inconsistent with McCarthy's interpretation here, which poses the event as Levi-Strauss's revelation of the inauthenticity of writing and how it acts as a form of tricking an audience. While the interpretation is different, McCarthy and Derrida's valuation of language as an imperfect system are consistent with one another in *Satin Island*, since U.'s paranoiac search for authenticity through coincidence does not lead to the meaning he requires.

However, Stinson takes issue with the conclusion *Satin Island* draws, particularly concerning the articles McCarthy writes about his own works. "The Death of Writing", "From Blake to Ballard", "Transmission and the Individual Remix" all seem to set out to clarify McCarthy's artistic purposes in his published works, leading Stinson to describe them as 'artist's statements' to accompany his novels.[244] Stinson raises issue with this:

> "McCarthy's use of the artist's statement clashes with *Satin Island's* suggestion that there is nothing left for the old humanist forms – the novel, the anthropological study – to convey. If the novel no longer communicates meaningful information, why outline your intent in such explicit terms? McCarthy anticipates this critique in his acknowledgments, mentioning the 'general impossibility of writing a novel about the general impossibility of etc.', and thereby opening a metafictional regress plucked straight from the postmodern author's handbook. It appears that McCarthy's argument about the death of the humanist novel – rather than being totalising – is meant to spur a different kind of art."[245]

The novel itself, then, seems more of a call to arms than its own claim to originality or avant-garde status, deliberating on the condition of the novel form without experimenting far beyond its conventional limits. It is for this reason that the novel has been given the titles of both "the book about nothing", and "a novel of ideas"

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[243]Christopher Johnson. 'Lévi-Strauss: The Writing Lesson Revisited.', *The Modern Language Review*, 92.3, (1997), pp. 599–612. *JSTOR*, <www.jstor.org/stable/3733388.> [Accessed 8 June 2020].
[244] Stinson.
[245] Stinson.

simultaneously.[246] This speaks to McCarthy's own inauthenticity as a writer, and his own ambiguities. If literature, as McCarthy states, is not a form of self-expression, or rather that it should contain "not selves, but networks", it seems odd that he should explicitly describe his artistic intentions. [247] McCarthy makes this very ambiguity clear in "Transmission and the Individual Remix":

> As elsewhere in my writing, I have nothing to say. Indeed, I'd go as far as to claim no serious writer does […] This claim is hardly new: it has been made over and over again, by Kafka, Beckett, and just about every major writer who ever reflected on the issue. And that's part of my point. My aim here, in this essay, is not to *tell* you something, but to make you *listen*: not to me, nor even to Beckett or Kafka, but to a set of signals that have been repeating, pulsing, modulating in the air space of the novel, poem, play – in their lines, between them and around them – since each of these forms began. I want to make you listen to them, in the hope not that they'll deliver up some hidden and decisive message, but rather they'll help attune your ear to the very pitch and frequency of its own activity – in other words, that they'll enable you to listen in on listening itself.[248]

What McCarthy is trying to achieve, it seems, in all his writings, be it the transmissions of life and death in *C* or the transmission of meaning/meaningless in *Satin Island*, is to convey literature that acts not as a form of self-expression, but as the filtered expressions of himself and his influences. The difficulty in reading McCarthy comes from this network of influences: a reader with limited knowledge of McCarthy's sources will have a harder time understanding the concepts, hidden meanings, and overall significance of his work, but a reader with more of a grasp of McCarthy's hundreds of literary allusions – each its own transmission derived or altered from another work – can unearth more from it. It is the same with Joyce, Eliot or many of the other well-read modernist writhers that provide wealth from deep, intense study of their influences – a reader with little knowledge of Homer might not understand the overarching purpose of

[246] See Stinson & Monaco.
[247] McCarthy, Technology and the Novel.
[248] McCarthy, *Individual Remix*, p.25.

Ulysses – McCarthy's work contains an implicit morse code, a hidden transmission that beeps underneath, giving meaning to the noise.

Conclusion

Tom McCarthy's *C* and *Satin Island* are metamodernist texts that oscillate in opposite directions, both suspended between aspects of modernism and postmodernism and McCarthy's notion of the broadcasting individual. *C* is a text that has been a realm of considerable debate between critics, with some claiming it has more in common with modernist approaches to literature and technology, and others arguing the novel is more postmodern. In actuality, the novel sits directly in the both-neither dynamic of metamoderism, negotiating between the two movements while identifying that both have passed and given way to this new contemporary epoch. McCarthy combs through the literary styles and movements of the modernist period, not as pastiche, but as a cultural disc jockey, remixing the modern with the postmodern removal of depth. The character of Serge is both receiver and transmitter in McCarthy's cultural archive of the early twentieth century. Serge is a medium of transmission made up of multiple historical and literary references, through which McCarthy creates a grand narrative of the past and its effect on the present, connecting the twenty-first century with the history of broadcasting, technology and death, all the way back to the inception of writing itself in Egypt.

Satin Island follows on from this with its deliberately futile attempt to pin down our current moment, made increasingly commercialized, technologized and complex beyond human understanding. U. is a human information-processor, an affectless computerized human being who sifts through the cultural garbage of the world in a meaningless search for meaning. The world is detailed as so far technologized that humanity is caught in a web of complexity that only computer algorithms could decipher. McCarthy's projects in *C* and *Satin Island* both remove depth from the world not just physically but philosophically as well. In the modernist period as envisioned in

C, Serge is denied any form of epiphany, neither determinism nor free will, any moments of ontological understanding deliberately stripped from him as he attempts to understand his own meaning and place in the surface-level world. Instead, he is drawn to flatness, to the Egyptian Stele that distills the entirety of the human condition to scribblings on a rock. In *Satin Island*, U. fails to reach an epistemological conclusion with which to define the current cultural epoch, his project doomed to failure from the start due to his own methodology and the immediate impossibility of his task.

The one thing that McCarthy emphasizes most in both of these texts is carbon, the basis of nature, life and all of human history. The printing paper of *C* gives way to the oil spill of *Satin Island*, both different forms of carbon that spill onto the surface of the world, both simultaneously all of culture and all garbage. This all-encompassing element also creates the only stable grand narrative of the world, the narrative of life and death, which McCarthy's modernist-influenced International Necronautical Society clings on to, with postmodernist irony, as the last great object of beauty and subject of art – a subject that once again unites the history literature and technology, from Orpheus's broadcast to the first radio broadcast. In this way, McCarthy's two texts are metamodernist pendulums swinging above a pit that hangs over all of our heads.

Race, Mass Media and Spectacle in Claudia Rankine's *American Lyric's*

The previous chapter on the works of Tom McCarthy has identified *C* and *Satin Island* as contemporary texts that appear to lean more towards postmodernist ideologies and practice while oscillating with and retaining certain aspects of modernism. McCarthy's postmodern removal of depth and affect in *C* contradictorily serve to articulate a grand narrative that ties together the histories of literature, technology and death. *Satin Island,* by contrast, follows a protagonist who fails to epitomize the contemporary age by wading through the fragmented micronarratives of an increasingly globalised, technologically connected world. Despite the contradictory nature of McCarthy's poetics, they ultimately eschew traditional notions of humanism and meaning in literary practice. Conversely, the texts explored in this chapter, Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004) and *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), use the removal of depth and affect to depict the consequences of a postmodern image-dominated society, with a particular focus on the experience of racially marginalized individuals. In these texts, literature is heralded as a way to bring depth and affect back into culture, and to draw attention to institutionalised racism and its exacerbation by mass-media culture. The two texts, spliced with art, photographs, images of TV screens, medication commercials, and the white noise of deliberately placed blank pages, explore formal disruption, yet retain a traditional approach to poetics. While both *C* and *Satin Island* explore concepts of technology in their content, they structurally retain the common characteristics of the novel. Formal experimentation is evident in *Satin Island's* report-like structure, but neither of the previously explored texts directly spatialise technology on the page, or physically demonstrate its disruption of the written word. This could suggest that long-established forms of literature need not change to accommodate new technologies, yet Rankine embraces the multimedia opportunities presented by modern technology, exploring it by incorporating it in the texts to critique modern society, while opening a discussion about the continuation of traditional forms.

Alongside being structurally experimental, both *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* declare themselves as part of the lyric form, which has lead journalists such as

Dan Chiasson to call the works "a quarrel within form about form".[1] Exploring the typical conventions and critical history of the lyric form, this chapter examines the extent to which Rankine conforms and departs from tradition in both texts, adapting the lyric form to fit a contemporary, technologically driven culture. Using Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* as a jumping-off-point in conjunction with contemporary African American cultural critics, this chapter demonstrates how Rankine depicts society in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as akin to postmodernism, inebriated with images. Other postmodernist critics such as Jean Baudrillard are also brought into the conversation with contemporary African American critics to demonstrate how, for the Black individual, the false representations of wealth, success and happiness depicted by mass-media are rendered even more impossible to attain. Through thematic subsections, the analysis of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* will demonstrate the negative consequences of the mass-consumption of mass media and its effects on the individual.

Throughout, this exploration will engage with Rankine's discussion of the position of African Americans in white-dominant media culture. It will also demonstrate how Rankine's poetry acts as a cure for media-engendered passivity, depicting Rankine's deliberate formal decisions as a method of garnering active engagement and participation both within and outside the text. While Guy Debord once argued "there is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organised to relay it", I seek to demonstrate how Rankine's approach to technology in literature enriches the reading experience by employing several methods to force the reader into actively engaging with the text, demonstrating the importance of looking beyond immediate images into their deeper emotional and cultural contexts. [2]

Turning then to *Citizen*, the chapter will more actively engage with Rankine's exploration of race, building on Debord's definition of spectacle through contemporary

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[1] Dan Chiasson, *Color Codes* (2014) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/27/color-codes > [accessed 10 September 2020].
[2] Guy Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. By Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1998), p.19.

African American critics such as Nicole Fleetwood and Simone Browne in order to examine the 'spectacle' of blackness. This will aid in an analysis of Rankine's engagement with images of blackness in majority white spaces and historically charged moments of racial conflict at different stages of severity. I contend that Rankine unveils hidden racial and emotional contexts within mass media broadcasted events alongside everyday experiences of racism in order to draw together emotional experiences of the hypervisibility of blackness, moving away from a traditionally individuated lyric voice to a universally struggling "I".

History of the Lyric

Prior to any direct engagement with Rankine's "American Lyrics", it is first vital to define lyric poetry. This is a daunting task since the lyric has a long history as a genre and a critical discourse that has focused more on historicizing it than defining its characteristics as a poetics. In the last few decades, critical discourse has moved away from the typical focus and historicized period of lyric theory – the late-nineteenth century – to an exploration of the form that extends from its roots in Ancient Greece to the modern day. As Mutlu Konuk Blasing describes it, the lyric mode is "a foundational genre, and its history spans millennia – it comprises a wide variety of practices, ranging in the West from Sappho to rap".[3] Blasing's exploration of the lyric focuses on the emotional power typical to its mode, and how this is partially a result of the universality of language. The commonly recognized definition of a lyric poem is a piece in which an individual, typically in the first person, expresses personal emotions through verse. A lyric poem is most often the words of a wholly individuated person, and the reader experiences the private thoughts and feelings of that person through the writer's language.

[3] Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.13.

From this definition, it is possible to decipher something oxymoronic in the expression "American Lyric", which Rankine's work ascribes to. This contradiction is the fact that a lyric is traditionally the words of a private individual rather than representational of a wider cultural experience. However, this is because the definition of the lyric is constantly evolving and has more recently discussed a tension between public and private language that exists in the mode, including ways in which the individual's private experience extends to the public. This is a shift in lyric poetry documented by critics such as Ian Patterson in recent years: "plenty of lyric poems have been written during the last fifty years, and they continue to be written, but often with a new awareness of an irony implicit in the genre, or of a structural complicity in capitalist oppression, or of a complication of the sense of self or subjecthood, or of a need to renew the formal procedures of their composition."[4] While direct affirmation and experimentation with this irony is a fairly recent endeavour, the lyric has always been far from truly private. In fact, the very fact of the lyric's existence in public has caused controversy from its inception. Blasing's discussion of lyric history, for example, opens with Plato's public condemnation of poetry:

> If "epic or lyric verse" is allowed into the state, "not law and the reason of mankind... but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our state". For along with the "manly" principle of reason, is a "womanly", "other principle, which inclines us to recollection of our troubles and to lamentation, and can never have enough of them, [which] we may call irrational, useless, and cowardly". The real threat, then, is not mimesis but a language use that mobilizes emotions, the variability and inconstancy of which pose a further problem.[5]

Plato misogynistically associates this emotional language with women, and advocates for me as the voice of reason, yet poetry, particularly the lyric, is a tradition that has its exemplars of every gender. The above quotation serves as an example of the disruptive powers of emotional language, and the subversive nature of the lyric mode. The term *mimesis*, used to describe poetry as representational of events or an imitation of reality,

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[4] Ian Patterson, 'No Man is an I, Recent Developments in the Lyric', in *The Lyric Poem - Formations and Transformations*, ed. by Marion Thain (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 218.
[5] Blasing, p.1.

acts as a way of undermining the impact of poetry on the state. Lyric poetry resists the state, Plato's idealized misogyny, and what Blasing specifically refers to as the "discipline" of literary study because it uses illogical, irrational, and emotional language.[6]

As a publicly shared expression of private experience, a lyric poem seeks emotional affect from an audience. The success of a lyric poem, as identified by Karen Simecek, is determined by its way of cultivating intimacy between a reader and the text.[7] Simecek discusses three modes of intimacy created between a reader and a lyric text: by placing the reader in the position of a closely related listener of the speaker's intimate address, by allowing the reader to experience and appropriate the thoughts of the speaker internally through the process of reading, and through a shared engagement with the work ("we are invited to respond to the poem in that form […] offering potential meaning in order to make sense of that work.")[8] Rather than the logical understanding and recognition sought by philosophers, a lyric is an attempt to invoke emotion in others through language. Instead of "I understand this", a lyric poem wants its audience to say "I am this", to identify with the voice of the poem and its struggles against objectivity. In the past, that affect has been garnered solely through individuation, and the isolation of the lyric "I", yet the affect-driven language of the isolated lyric "I" means little without a public sphere for it to expand to and an audience to affect. As Adorno writes, "only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem's solitude can understand what the poem is saying; indeed, even the solitariness of lyrical language itself is prescribed by an individualistic and ultimately atomistic society".[9] Adorno argues that the essence of the lyric "I" is "an "I" that defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective, to objectivity".[10] Any social interpretation of a lyric poem must therefore "discover how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of

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[6] Blasing, p.11.
[7] Karen Simecek, 'Cultivating intimacy: the use of the second person in lyric poetry', *Philosophy and Literature*, 43.2, (2019), pp.501-518.
[8] Simecek, p.6
[9] Theodor W. Adorno 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Notes to Literature*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p.38.
[10] Adorno, p.41.

art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it", a method of analysis that will be relevant to this chapter's own exploration of Rankine's work.[11]

The key postmodernist text that grants an opportunity for a thorough exploration of Rankine's depictions of life in a technologically and media-driven society is Guy Debord's 1967 text *The Society of the Spectacle*, which will be examined alongside Rankine's text and contemporary African American cultural criticism. Debord's collection of essays approaches a concept known as the "spectacle" from several angles, detailing how society is developing an obsession with images and appearances and consequently distancing itself from real experience.[12] Written before the invention of social media, and the culmination of our online social lives in which image is everything, the book is considered profoundly resonant with the contemporary age. The spectacle is determined by Debord as a worldview which acts as the ultimate expression of late-stage capitalism, an inescapable ideology which placates individuals into the passive consumption of goods and services with the motive of enhancing their own self-image. Debord defines the spectacle in several ways, such as "the economy's domination of social life", argued to have begun when "human fulfilment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed".[13] The capitalist system, having "produced a level of abundance sufficient to solve the initial problem of survival", seeks to retain its hold over society through what Debord calls "Augmented Survival", a social and economic survival maintained only by enriching self-image with consumer goods and continuing the cycle of capitalism.[14]

The obsession with and desire for commodities, as documented by such philosophers as Karl Marx, therefore brings about "a general shift from having to appearing – all 'having' must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances".[15] Debord reflects this change in the very first line of *The Society of the Spectacle*, by adapting Karl Marx's opening line of *Das Kapital* – "The wealth of

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[11] Adorno, p.39.
[12] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* trans. By Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014).
[13] *SoS*, p.5.
[14] *SoS*, p.15.
[15] *SoS*, p.5.

those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities,"– to accommodate the late twentieth-century desire for images: "In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles".[16] While published in 1967, Debord's text remains relevant in the early twenty-first century, with images and appearances still highly valued in contemporary society. The survival of one's self-image becomes paramount to experience, yet the idealized images and expectations projected by the spectacle through the mass media are purposefully fictionalised and therefore unobtainable. As Debord explains, "the spectacle is not merely a matter of images, nor even of images plus sounds. It is whatever escapes people's activity, whatever eludes their practical reconsideration and correction".[17] This endlessly cycling system keeps society yearning for greater appearances, and greater products to bring them closer to achieving that ideal, which in turn further distances itself from the individual. In this way, the economic system refreshes and regenerates itself as people passively absorb the images peddled by the economic system. Since the images propagated by the spectacle are fictional and presented as immediately necessary, people focus on trying to appear successful, wealthy and happy to others rather than seeking out these experiences for themselves. The goal of this aspect of the spectacle, according to Debord, is to turn people into spectators of their own lives, estranged and isolated individuals whose "gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him".[18]

In its effort to isolate individuals and keep people passive rather than actively involved in their lives, Debord argues that society has also shifted to "an identification of life with nonworking time, with inactivity", and centered itself around "technologies based on isolation" such as television, claiming "goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender "lonely crowds"".[19] By harboring isolation and promoting inactivity, it

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[16] See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital, a critique of political economy,* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1959), p.3 and *SoS*, p.2.
[17] *SoS*, p.6
[18] *SoS*, p.11
[19] *SoS*, pp.9-10

increases the amount of time spent consuming images "where the spectacle's mechanisms are most fully implemented".[20] Only when an individual is alone and inactive can the spectacle meet "the general goal that those mechanisms present, the focus and epitome of all particular consumptions".[21] The consequence of this is the economic system's complete hold over reality, and the creation of a widespread ideology that values fictitious displays of a life not really lived, where "no one can any longer be recognized by others" and "each individual becomes incapable of recognizing his own reality".[22] For Debord, life is no longer experienced by the individual as "a journey toward fulfillment and death" since the "social absence of death coincides with the social absence of life", claiming the individual has "given up on really living" in becoming subject to the spectacle.[23] Discussing Hegel's description of money as "the life of what is dead, moving within itself", Debord extends the metaphor to "all social life".[24] The individual, referred to by Debord as "the spectator", is therefore "imprisoned in a flat universe bounded by the screen of the spectacle, behind which his own life has been exiled".[25]

This is the world Claudia Rankine depicts in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, a society in which individuals regularly consuming images appear incapable of understanding the difference between life and death or the emotions of themselves and others. It is also a society of separation and isolation, where Rankine formally demonstrates the loneliness of the individual and the fragmentation of lives through the use of blank space. The technologies Rankine discusses and displays in the text all contribute to these feelings of isolation, lifelessness, and unhappiness. She offers a critique of modern life and an attempt to develop awareness in one's own position in the system. Rankine's attack on passivity aims to inspire active engagement with her text and expose the spectacle by thrusting its consequences in front of the reader. Far from an entirely individuated lyric

[20] *SoS*, p.83.
[21] *SoS*, p.83.
[22] *SoS*, p.116.
[23] *SoS*, p.86.
[24] *SoS*, p.115.
[25] *SoS*, p.116.

voice, Rankine's text constantly shifts its perspectives, fitting with the contemporary lyric's form in which the lyric 'I' is, as Patterson's review argues:

> a shifter, a positional relation (in both senses of 'relate'), it is not the same as the autobiographical self that, as we've seen, is the implied guarantor of much conventional lyric writing. But even where lyric is fragmented into verse pulses or affective splinters, it entails the struggle of a person to make the poem work, a struggle encoded in the gestures, cadences, and syntax of the verse as the stylistic signature of its author, a lyric identity that is always being re-forged in the language on the page.[26]

I contend that through these changes in perspective, Rankine is able to generate a form of intimacy between the reader and the text that rests upon more than emotion and empathy. It is the need to pull oneself away from the text's oppressive technologies to truly embrace the here and now of living.

However, a difficulty of using Debord for the purposes of analysis of image and technology in Rankine's writing, which also focuses predominately on race, is that Debord's own writing on race is limited to a short piece titled "The Decline and Fall of the Spectator-Commodity economy". Discussing the Watts riots, which broke out in response to racial violence, Debord argues that Black Americans were positioned as a representation of "poverty in a society of hierarchised wealth" regardless of their actual wealth.[27] This meant that racially marginalized individuals were "treated as *inherently inferior* in every area of daily life by the customs and prejudices of a society in which all human power is based on buying power".[28] The Watts riots, in Debord's view, represented an attack on the commodity-based society that sustains racial conflict and prejudice – "what American blacks are really daring to demand is the right to really live, and in the final analysis this requires nothing less than the total subversion of this society".[29] Debord describes the riots as the consequence of the awareness of Black

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[26] Patterson, p.222.
[27] Guy Debord, 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy' Trans. By Ken Knabb < https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/decline.html> [accessed 20 September 2021].
[28] Debord, 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy,'.
[29] Debord, 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy,'.

Americans as a part of the spectacle: “The American blacks have no fatherland. They are *in their own country* and they are *alienated.* So are the rest of the population, but the blacks are aware of it.”[30]

To Debord, the riots were a result of a people whose appearance impeded their social and economic status. If the ideal image of a spectacle-focused society is that of the white middle or upper class, then non-white individuals will never be able to achieve the idealized standard due to their ethnicity. The history of this visual ideal has been explored in more contemporary criticism by critics such as Nicole Fleetwood. Fleetwood, discussing the “troubling presence of blackness” in a white-dominated visual field, identifies two dominant modes of Black visual representation in visual media, which she calls “iconic blackness” and “spectacular blackness”:

> Spectacular blackness emerges as a concept to address the saturation of images of black bodies while also acknowledging the continual political, economic, and social disenfranchisement of millions of blacks both in the United States and internationally. Iconic blackness as larger-than-life image (Rosa Parks, Jesse Owens, Martin Luther King Jr., to name just a few) and spectacular blackness – from criminal deviance to excessive bodily enactments – are the dominant visual modes for representing black subjects and black lived experience, in particular throughout the twentieth century. [31]

The dominant representation of blackness in Western visual media takes the form of either icons or spectacles. Icons stand as examples of greatness or to demonstrate the effectiveness of American democracy, as Fleetwood argues in the case of Civil Rights icons such as Rosa Parks. Fleetwood claims circulation of Parks’ image was “representative of a grand narrative of overcoming that solidifies American exceptionalism”, that was “incorporated into the national imaginary to manage the history of racial subjugation”.[32] Spectacles, on the other hand, described by Fleetwood as “criminal deviance to excessive bodily enactments”, represent Black males as violent,

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[30] Debord, ‘The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy,’.
[31] Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.3 & p.37.
[32] Fleetwood, p.33.

dangerous individuals, and the bodies of Black females as excessive, explicit, and abject.[33] The result of these spectacles are assumptions about blackness, racially marking Black bodies in the visual field as troubling, threatening or otherwise unseemly. This contextualization of Black representation is essential to this analysis of Rankine's work, which focuses on the consequences of both the spectators and the spectated.

Don't Let Me Be Lonely

The first of the lyrics, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, published in 2004, has been viewed as the more formally traditional, with critics such as Amy Robbins calling the text a lyric long poem "resonant variously with modernist, mid-century and postmodernist iterations of the form".[34] Robbins' analysis of the text draws comparison between Rankine's lyric and poetic tradition, seeking to draw links between her work and predecessors such as Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot. Robbins' justification of these links is that despite the formally experimental inclusion of photographs, diagrams and drawings, the text is linguistically straightforward, containing "no linguistic interpretive guesswork here for the contemporary reader, no need to swim in new syntaxes or interpret broken words" and "no gestures toward indeterminacy of language or subject,".[35] While contemporary works of long poetry tend towards complicated language or syntax for the reader to navigate, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* deals instead with complicated subject matter explained clearly and concisely. The text itself is a meditation on the contemporary moment immediately preceding and following the events of 9/11, predominantly in the lyric "I" but with several changes in perspective. Rankine discusses life and death through the contexts of personal stories interspersed with reflections on mass media broadcasted events, illness, and medications. In the following subsections are explorations of several key themes in the text. These themes demonstrate the ways in

[33] Fleetwood, p.37.
[34] Amy Moorman Robbins, 'Claudia Rankine's Don't Let Me Be Lonely: A Lyrical Long Poem in a Post Language Age' in *American Hybrid Poetics*: *Gender, Mass Culture, and Form* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2014), p.125.
[35] Robbins, p.125.

which Rankine depicts a society sick with spectacles, concurrent with Debord's theories, and how she advocates for poetry as the prescription.

Isolation and Absence

Don't Let Me Be Lonely starts with a solitary image that will later haunt the text: a television screen displaying white noise, most often displayed when changing channels or switching off old television sets. It is preceded only by two epigraphs from Aimé Césaire and Jill Stauffer. The first epigraph is a warning of the dangers of the spectacle:

> Beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear... [36]

This quotation challenges the reader to approach their lives as active engagers rather than spectators, as the spectator is likely to passively absorb rather than emotionally react to events, to interpret "a sea of grief" as a proscenium, a stage to be watched, and suffering people as entertainment, or "dancing bears". The Jill Stauffer quotation that follows is indicative of the text's themes of racial prejudice and loneliness, defining the term "ethical loneliness" as "the isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one's life possibilities".[37] We are informed from the outset, then, that the loneliness of the lyric individual in the text, and their isolation from society, is enforced onto them as "one member of a persecuted group", a loneliness that encompasses both public and private spaces. The struggle of racially marginalized subjects in a predominately white society is a key theme of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, which explores several news events and situations, in which white subjects are treated favorably over Black subjects. The Jill Stauffer quotation, then, represents the loneliness

[36] Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), Preface.
[37] *DLMBL*, Preface.

of racially marginalized groups, brought about by the consequences of the Césaire quotation preceding it, the "sterile attitude of the spectator".[38]

Figure 3. An image of a television set that recurs throughout *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*

Immediately following these two quotations with the television set displaying static, or 'white noise', communicates three things to the audience. First, it thrusts the reader into the text positioned as a spectator, though one made aware of this by the image, and challenged to defy it by the preface. Secondly, the blank space surrounding the image, which itself displays absence through the empty static on the screen, induces the loneliness that becomes the text's central theme. This loneliness then, finally, extends to the position of Black Americans who are adrift and alone amid the white noise – the racially marginalized subject forced to be solitary amid the noise of a predominately white mass media. As Lloyd Whitesell discusses, "The colour white often stands for emptiness and colorlessness; thus it is a recurrent symbol in the avant-garde discourse of negation" in artwork, including a number of western cultural documents such as Roland Barthes and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*.[39] If even nothing is

[38] *DLMBL*, Preface.
[39] Lloyd Whitesell, "White Noise: Race and Erasure in the Cultural Avant-Garde", *American Music*, 19.2, (2001), pp.168-189 (p.174).

depicted as whiteness, then the Black subject is completely erased, not allowed to be present whatsoever. Fleetwood argues that blackness "fills in the void and is the void", yet in the case of this white noise, blackness is made absent altogether.

Debord claims that the mass media is the spectacle's "most glaring superficial manifestation", which has been "developed in accordance with the spectacle's internal dynamics".[40] A technology designed to exacerbate and to serve the spectacle, the image of the screen is depicted by Rankine as an oppressive device, which seeks to undermine the two epigraphs that came before it. This static screen is a recurring motif within the text, sitting solitary at the bottom of several blank pages, often preceded by or followed with pages left entirely blank. Literary critics such as Kevin Bell and Tana Jean Welch have interpreted these breaks in the text as meditative sections, that offer an opportunity to "pause and reflect" on Rankine's text.[41] Welch suggests the blank sections in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* offer a contrast to the endless display of words in mass media documents such as newspapers, in which "every inch of a column is filled with text, relevant images, or advertising", while Bell suggests that the recurring images are "a ruptural mechanism – one that brings to the foreground the spectatorial craving for solidity, continuity and clarity that it derails" since they act as a way of reminding the reader of their position in the text as a spectator. [42] An interpretation of Rankine's use of blank space that is yet to be explored is as a physical representation of isolation between the reader, the text's separate sections and the characters within them. The different sections of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* can be considered as separate channels each in their own network, and the blank spaces between them act as solitary confinement and a moment of passivity. The reader faced with the blank pages is likewise frequently isolated from the text, given the opportunity to experience the loneliness, the feeling of distance and separation from others.

Space is used to separate not just in the recurring instances of the television, but also, in one instance, to separate characters in the text from one another. Three

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[40] *SoS*, p.8.
[41] Tana Jean Welch, 'The Transcorporeal Ethics of Claudia Rankine's Investigative Poetics', *MELUS*, 40.1, (2015) pp. 124-148 (p.130).
[42] Welch, p.130. Kevin Bell, 'Unheard Writing in the Climate of Spectacular Noise: Claudia Rankine on TV.' *The Global South*, 3.1, (2009), pp. 93–107 (p.94).

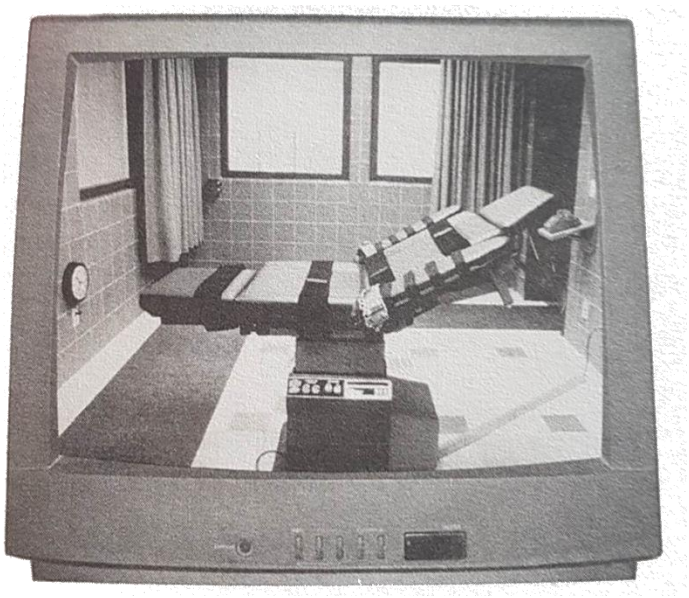
consecutive sections of the text concern the increased security measures in airports after the events of 9/11, in which the speaker describes being asked questions by members of airport security. The section spans three pages, and each exchange is presented on the page as four lines long, with the dialogue separated, and the rest of the page left empty.[43] In the months and years after 9/11, the media's proliferation of images of and information about terrorist acts committed by people of color exacerbated negative stereotypes which created distance between racial groups. In an exchange between the speaker and a taxi driver in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, for example, the speaker tells the Pakistani taxi driver the reason he is being treated differently by white people is because "it's only been a few months since 9/11. They think you're Al Qaeda".[44] In airports, security guards have been, and continue to be, regularly accused of carrying out random and intrusive "spot checks" and searches exclusively on people of colour due to these stereotypes. The blank space between each incident detailed in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely,* whilst demonstrative of a temporal distance and continuity between the events may simultaneously demonstrate the separation of people caused by such negative media stereotypes.

Another important use of blank space is an image of an empty execution chair. In this instance, the question is not regarding what is not present on the page but what is purposefully left out. The section, which focuses on the case of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber responsible for the largest act of domestic terrorism preceding 9/11, concerns forgiveness. Amy Moorman Robbins, discussing Rankine's surprise at the discovery that the media initially reported the attack had been carried out by Muslims, determines that "once it was discovered that it was a crime committed by white Americans, and that McVeigh was 'visually the boy next door,' the tenor of the media coverage shifted from overtones of hatred and fear to sad musings on the possibility of forgiveness of this white native son".[45] Robbins goes on to explain "Americans were far better prepared for a racially marked body in that chair, and the fact it was a white body

[43] *DLMBL*, p.105-107.
[44] *DLMBL*, p.90.
[45] Robbins, p.143.

produces a profound and bewildered silence surrounding an image marked by absence."[46]

The image of the empty execution chair echoes not only the unexpected absence of Timothy McVeigh, but it is also another representation of the media's attempt to "immunize him from his actions". [47] The image is displayed on the same television set that recurs throughout the text, the embodiment of the spectacle that refuses to display the white offender. This is heavily contrasted with the later image of Lionel Tate, the thirteen-year-old Black American convicted of the murder of his six-year-old neighbor, whose image is conversely displayed on the same screen.



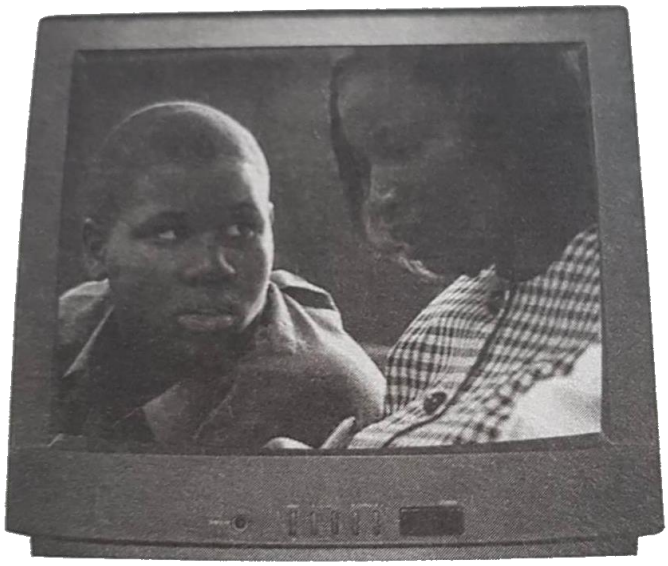


Figure 4. (Left) - The image of the execution chair from page 47 of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*

Figure 5. (Right) - The image of Lionel Tate from page 67 of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*

[46] Robbins, p.143.
[47] *DLMBL*, p.47.

The fact that the screen will directly show the Black Lionel Tate but not the white Timothy McVeigh is a clear example of spectacular blackness, reflecting the fact that news stories about Black offenders are "more likely to contain mugshots".[48] By refusing to display Timothy McVeigh but choosing to show Lionel Tate, Rankine demonstrates the media's eagerness to convey images of racial minorities who have committed violent acts while simultaneously showing its unwillingness to publicly broadcast images of white people who have committed similar, if not worse, acts. This is further contrasted in the way the mass media is described as trying to "immunize" Timothy McVeigh while it demonizes Lionel Tate, who was tried as an adult despite being 12 years old at the time of the incident. Where the section on McVeigh asks if he can be forgiven for his actions, Tate is vilified:

> There are no children anymore, at least not this boy – this boy who is only a child. But then, what child behaves like this? What child behaves like this, knows the consequences, and still insists he was playing at being a wrestler? To know and not to understand is perhaps one definition of being a child. Or responsibility is not connected to sense-making, the courts have decided.[49]

The "boy who is only a child" is no longer thought of as a child by the courts or the media, and there is a strong disapproving tone in the accusatory questions asked about him. These parallels determine the standard for mass media attitudes towards news of violence, that white perpetrators and Black perpetrators are treated differently for their actions.

Emotion/Affect

Central to Debord's theory in *The Society of the Spectacle* is the idea of the self-image as commodity, and the ways in which this suppresses existence. By creating the central

[48] Entman, R. M., & Rojecki, A. *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
[49] *DLMBL*, p.67.

ideology that self-image is paramount to a successful existence, capitalist society is able to market the consumption of products designed with the intent of enhancing and preserving that image. The importance of one's self-appearance to others is perhaps most keenly demonstrated in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* in a passage about age:

> On the television I am told I don't want to look like I am forty. Forty means I might have seen something hard, something unpleasant, or something dead. […] I might have actually been alive. With injections of botox, short for botulism toxin, it seems I can see or be seen without being seen; I can age without aging. I have the option of worrying without looking like I worry […] I could purchase paralysis.[50]

Rankine describes advertisements for anti-aging remedies, which make a person look younger and conceal negative emotions. However, the speaker seems to suggest by concealing your authentic self-image it becomes "a deepening personality" that makes you "fictional".[51] The desire for a positive outward appearance, Debord claims, is driven by the capitalist system: "it is strictly forbidden to grow old […] everybody is urged to economize on their 'youth-capital', though such capital, however carefully managed, has little prospect of attaining the durable and cumulative properties of financial capital."[52] The appearance of youth, to Debord, is an appearance of one's economic wealth, yet to Rankine it appears likewise an embodiment of emotional wealth, and a falsified appearance of happiness.

Such happiness is the central commodity of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely,* peddled through advertisements for anti-depressants, yet the impossible attainment of the ideal image of happiness leads to a society where people are incapable of it. In fact, the impact of the spectacle on the lives of the individuals in the text is disconnection from emotion and from life. This disconnection is not exclusive to the text's lyric "I", but expands to first, second and third persons. In an early section of the text, the speaker, in

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[50] *DLMBL*, p.104.
[51] *DLMBL*, p.104.
[52] *SoS*, p.86.

the second person, feels compelled to dial a suicide hotline which appears on her television screen:

> You are, as usual, watching television, the eight-o'clock movie, when a number flashes on your screen: 1-800-SUICIDE. You dial the number. Do you feel like killing yourself? the man on the other end of the receiver asks. You tell him, I feel like I am already dead. When he makes no response you add, I am in death's position. He finally says, don't believe what you are thinking and feeling. Then he asks, Where do you live?[53]

The operator of the hotline, which the speaker has called through an advertisement on the television, comes across as blunt and unsympathetic to the feelings of the speaker, as if reading from a script. They extract the speaker's personal information, their address, and send an ambulance attendant, which leads to another unsympathetic exchange:

> You explain to the ambulance attendant that you had a momentary lapse of happily. The noun, happiness, is a static state of some Platonic ideal you know better than to pursue. Your modifying process had happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause. This kind of thing happens, perhaps is still happening. He shrugs and in turn explains that you need to come quietly or he will have to restrain you.[54]

In this passage, the ambulance attendant is depicted as unsympathetic to the feelings of the poetic subject, but the speaker is similarly emotionless. This is because of Rankine's decision to refrain from using the word "Happiness", suggesting it is an unobtainable state of being. This is consistent with Debord's theory of the spectacle, since the image of "Happiness" is one peddled by capitalist society, an impossible to attain "platonic ideal".[55] The speaker's awareness of this only exacerbates their hopelessness against a system in which they are fully implicated as a spectator. The speaker is also described with technological syntax; rather than a living, emotional person with a brain, they are a robotic individual with an automatic "modifying process", which determines their levels

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[53] *DLMBL*, p.7.
[54] *DLMBL*, p.7.
[55] *DLMBL*, p.7.

of “happily” and “unhappily”. The speaker is unaware of whether this disruption of the modifying process is “still happening”, as if their own emotions are uncontrollable and unknowable. The use of the word “perhaps” suggests there is a separation of emotion between subjects, and also within the self’s inability to recognize their own emotional processes.

The ambulance attendant, who merely tells the speaker to “come quietly” and threatens to restrain them, demonstrates they, too, are an uncaring individual simply doing the purpose of their job without an emotional connection to the person they are interacting with. The attendant’s job appears to be only a means to gain wealth, and should the speaker struggle, they would be in some way an inconvenience to that goal, making it harder to attain. This scene represents three individuals without affect: the second person subject struggling to deal with their emotions, or lack thereof, the speaker describing the scene in blunt, technological terms, and the attendant disconnected from the emotional aspects of their career. The hotline that flashes on the television screen acts as the trigger for the scene, suggesting it may be in some way responsible for the loss of affect in the individuals, since it is the medium through which the poetic subject seeks emotional assistance only to be denied it.

Yet it is not just emotional expression that is limited in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, but also the ability to understand it in others, which Kevin Bell calls “the incommunicability of physical and psychic suffering”.[56] In one passage, the speaker, this time communicated through the traditional lyric “I”, describes meeting a friend who has been going through a period of deep depression. During the scene, the speaker demonstrates their inability to properly process their friend’s emotions while they watch the film *Fitzcarraldo* together. It is also important to note that the speaker’s friend is taking anti-depressants, Lithium, one of several characters attempting to control their internal processes through prescribed drugs. [57] The voice describes seeing their friend cry, before analytically detailing the three functions of tears, “expressing emotion”, to “lubricate the eyes” and to “wash away foreign bodies”.[58] Finding nothing particularly

[56] Bell, p.93.
[57] *DLMBL*, p.42.
[58] *DLMBL*, p.43.

emotional to cry about in the contexts of the film being shown, the speaker initially assumes that his eyes are watering for one of the "other functions" of tears, but after determining "the tears kept coming long after smooth blinking would have been restored and foreign bodies washed away," the speaker decides that "apparently my friend was expressing emotion and was not fine, not okay, no".[59] The speaker struggles to understand their friend's emotional being, and, like the scene analysed above, his emotional outcry is described as a bodily function rather than an emotional one, his emotional expression a mere "function" of his eyes.[60]

This is a similar sentiment to that of the typist in *The Waste Land* discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, whose technologically mediated life is similarly depicted as mechanical and affectless. The repetition of the negative determiners "not fine, not okay, no," emphasize the rejection of the voice's initial determination that their friend "seemed fine".[61] The process of watching a film, even among company, is depicted by Rankine as a singular experience, in which an individual's reaction to a film is their own, and any reaction other than their own is difficult to understand. This moment is one of several that illustrates characters whose internal experiences are misunderstood or miscommunicated, another of which occurs earlier in the text when a girl goes to the roof of her building on a hot day and sits on the edge of the building. The speaker, now narrating in the third person, describes the girl's experience as she relaxes on the roof and shouts out a poem, Milosz's "Gift", only to be interrupted by police officers and ambulances who have been led to the conclusion she is suicidal and about to throw herself off the building.[62]

The poem the girl shouts from the roof adds irony to the scene, since it is about a positive experience, "a day so happy", throwing the misinterpretation of her being on the roof further into doubt. [63] Her confusion when the police officers arrive is described as "genuine, and therefore should be convincing", yet she is nonetheless taken to the

[59] *DLMBL*, p.43.
[60] *DLMBL*, p.43.
[61] *DLMBL*, p.43.
[62] *DLMBL*, p.35.
[63] *DLMBL*, p.35.

hospital for tests.[64] In all three perspectives, first, second and third persons, Rankine depicts selves that have difficulty communicating, expressing and understanding emotions. Kevin Bell argues that Rankine "frequently restages the scene of hopeless internal sickness and the inability of the suffering body" in order to demonstrate "the experience of its untranslatability, its radical aloneness, its terrible singularity".[65] This scene on the rooftop seems to extend Bell's interpretation beyond the suffering body to all emotional conditions. How we feel and how we appear to others are depicted by Rankine as two exceedingly distant variables, being pulled even further apart by the society of the spectacle, which pushes for "paralysis" and incomplexity of emotion, the consequence of the botox injections.[66]

Life/Death

The society depicted in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* therefore fits the characteristics of separation and estrangement between individual bodies warned of by Debord, and the emotionless state of the speaker extends beyond personal experience and the experiences of friends to indifference towards death in mass media broadcasted events. Tana Jean Welch, discussing how news events are portrayed on television in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, suggests that mass media broadcasted events are "not experienced as material reality but rather as abstract intangibles constructed through words and images", which leads to an existence where "the intangible nature of mass media often suppresses both the material facilities of the human body and material interchanges between bodies".[67] Rankine invites the reader to draw comparison between two tragic news events in the text: the death of Princess Diana and the murder of James Byrd Jr. by three American men. In the speaker's discussion of the death of James Byrd Jr., the indifference comes from politician George Bush, who is described as not remembering

[64] *DLMBL*, p.36.
[65] Bell, p.96.
[66] *DLMBL*, p.104.
[67] Welch, p.124.

'if two or three people were convicted for dragging a black man to his death in his home state of Texas'.[68] The speaker reacts with anger towards Bush, finding herself "talking to the television screen: *You don't know because you don't care*".[69]

In contrast, the speaker discusses a visit to the Museum of Emotions, where she plays a game in which she must answer yes or no questions until she selects an "incorrect" answer. When asked if she cried over the death of Princess Diana, she steps on the "NO" tile and is not allowed to continue playing the game.[70] Robbins, in her analysis of this passage, states "to not care about Diana, a fantasy white woman, is to be wrong, this experience reveals, at the same time we are encouraged to receive news of violence against Black people in the United States as commonplace and easily forgotten".[71] An example of how indifference leads to indifference, Bush's unsympathetic attitude to the death of James Byrd parallels the speaker's lack of reaction to the death of Princess Diana, just as Rankine demonstrates in the parallels between Timothy McVeigh and Lionel Tate. In this way, Rankine highlights the extent to which life-value is equated to race, determining what lives are worth grieving. In *Frames of War,* Judith Butler explores how mass media portrays international conflict, and the effect this has on the value and "grievability" of everyday lives.[72] An absence of "grievability" is equated by Butler as an absence of life, described as ""a life that will never have been lived," sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost".[73]

This all interconnects with *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* when the speaker, in the section on Bush, refers to a growing loss of hope at the election results, and a "deepening personality flaw" she titles "IMH":

> The Inability to Maintain Hope, which translates into no innate trust in the supreme laws that govern us. Cornel West says this is what's wrong with black

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[68] *DLMBL*, p.21.
[69] *DLMBL*, p.21.
[70] *DLMBL*, p.39.
[71] Robbins, p.143.
[72] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso Books, 2016).
[73] Butler, p.15.

> people today – too nihilistic. Too scarred by hope to hope, too experienced to experience, too close to dead is what I think.[74]

The process of watching the news is depicted as producing a form of hopelessness at one's inability to control its events, which in turn leads to a loss of affect. This inability to act is a core component of the spectacle, which seeks to turn people into spectators rather than actors in their lives. The poet's only course of action at affecting the hopeless outcome of the election results is to talk to the television screen – "you don't know because you don't care" – and lament over the " the recognition that billions of lives never mattered" because they lack the condition of grievability. [75]

Yet the speaker is adamant that "I write this without breaking my heart, without bursting into anything", suggesting that this recognition, and the growing inability to maintain hope, also creates an inability to recognize trauma or display sympathy, and the depiction of sadness as the inability to feel anything.[76] Thus, the speaker is able to discuss other tragic mass media broadcasted events in a cold and analytical fashion, which also reflects the ways in which the media, and society itself depicts traumatic events and experience, as Kevin Bell argues, "illustrated always by televisual flattening" which "convert the inexpressibility of incommunicable experience into digestible quantities and referents, repackaged for mass re-circulation".[77] The discussion, for example, of the speaker's sister, who must determine the value of her dead children's lives for the purpose of compensation, is reduced to a discussion of what should and should not be included in the depiction she must give of their lives:

> Each activity is a sign, a sign that points to social class, which points to potential worth. The private school, the tennis lessons, the soccer team, the scuba medal, the collection of exotic fish or lack thereof were all heading somewhere.[78]

It is up to the sister to create an image of her dead children, one that does not entirely reflect reality because it would have an economic impact on the amount of

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[74] *DLMBL*, p.23.
[75] *DLMBL*, p.21 & p.23.
[76] *DLMBL*, p.23.
[77] Bell, p.95.
[78] *DLMBL*, p.78.

compensation she is entitled to. She is forced to include only the information that would point to her children as being of a higher class, or an image of their path to economic prosperity. It is an affectless conversation of the exchange-value of two lives, a clear indication of the economy's rule over social life exacerbated by images. It is, as the speaker herself states, "a place of compensation divorced from compassion […] a reasonable place created for adults by adults after the fact of loss."[79] It is a separation of emotion for logic, dictated by a system in which lives are measured for economic value above all else, and death is merely a loss of income.

Death in the text is also something that is rendered ambiguous, another aspect of mass media technology that breeds a feeling of affectlessness in the text. In this regard, Rankine's handling of death in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is not dissimilar from Tom McCarthy's discussions of death in *Satin Island*. In the opening sections of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the speaker explains "every movie I saw in the third grade compelled me to ask, Is he dead? Is she dead?".[80] The speaker's concern is not for the characters in the films, since they survive against all odds, but for the actors, to which the person she asks is often told that they are dead. However, the speaker then explains that the actors who they had been told were dead often reappeared on live talk shows. The presence of actors on television in rebroadcasts of their shows and films offers an ambiguity to their lives, allowing them a form of life after their passing. Just as in McCarthy's novel, technology is seen as a way immortalizing life, allowing people to express themselves long after they are gone. The repetition of the question "Is (S)he dead?" in Rankine's text broadens the scope of its question to not just the state of the actor's being, but also to a question of if the dead actors in television programs and films still being broadcast are really dead. This ambiguity is brought even further into question for the speaker when actors presumed dead appear in recent talk shows, contrary to what she has been told. Rankine then extends this question to the self, asking the question "Am I dead?", moving from this question to the previously discussed suicide hotline passage.

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[79] *DLMBL*, p.78.
[80] *DLMBL*, p.6.

The ambiguity of the dead on television is extended from the realm of the media to real life, to questions of one's own state of being. This philosophizing of the nature of death continues throughout the text. On the death of Princess Diana, Rankine asks the question "Was Princess Diana ever really alive? I mean, alive to anyone outside of her friends and family – truly?".[81] Here, Rankine once again questions whether people broadcast on television can be considered alive by the passive spectator, whether they can truly care about the death of someone they only ever saw on a screen. Rankine instead decides "Weren't they mourning the protection they felt she should have had? A protection they'll never have? Weren't they simply grieving the random inevitability of their own lives?".[82] The sadness and grief at the death of Princess Diana is reduced to concerns of one's own mortality, a solitary fear of death by the "random inevitability" of accident.

Another poignant moment comparable to *Satin Island* occurs when the speaker discovers her friend has terminal cancer:

> The lump was misdiagnosed a year earlier. Can we say she might have lived had her doctor not screwed up? If yes – when does her death actually occur?[83]

This quotation from *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* recalls both Petr and the death of the Parachutist from *Satin Island,* with their respective authors questioning the state of one's being when their fate is predetermined. Rankine suggests that the misdiagnosis may have been the moment of death, just as U. in *Satin Island* suggests the parachutist may have been dead before his actual physical death.

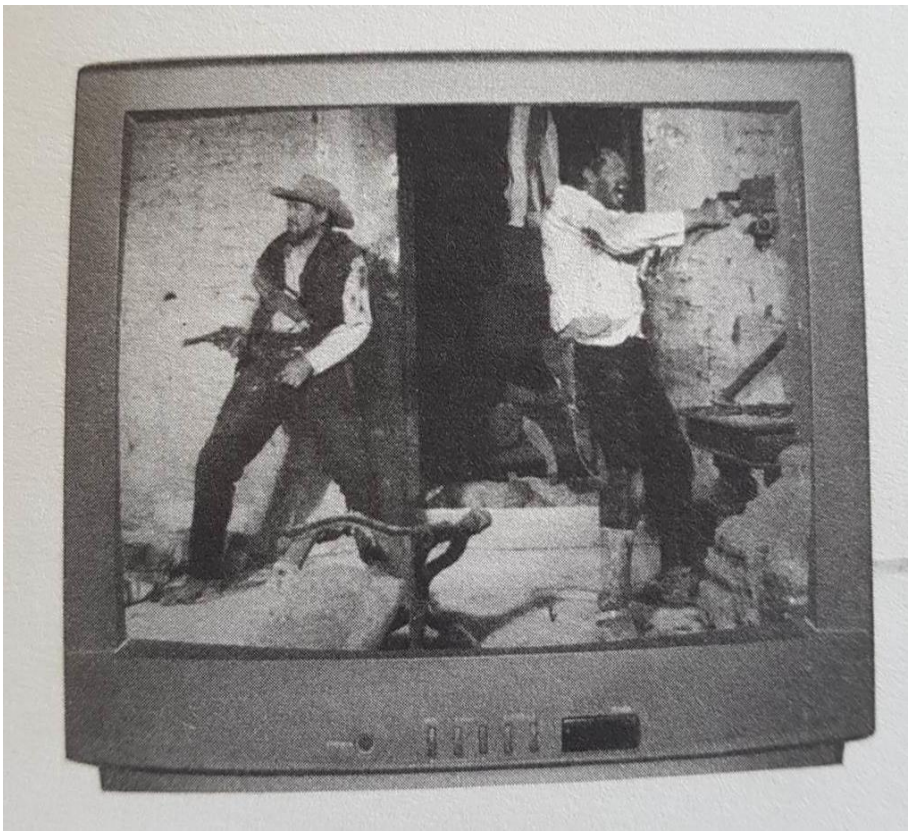
These liminal spaces of death are also evident in the dreams of the speaker, in which both the living and dead members of the Kennedy family are all in attendance at a party, but also on the television set in a description of *The Wild Bunch*, the discussion of which brings about the aim of the spectacle:

> *The Wild Bunch* is worth watching because the cowboys in it have nowhere to get to. They're older and they don't have to make it anywhere because where

[81] *DLMBL*, p.39.
[82] *DLMBL*, p.39.
[83] *DLMBL*, p.8.

> they are is all there is or rather the end of a genre. Theirs is not the Old Testament- no journey to take; nothing promised; no land to land in. For them, life and death are simultaeously equal and present. The simultaneity of the living who are also dead is filmed as sexy.[84]

The speaker applauds *The Wild Bunch* because of the passivity of the film's characters, the fact that the cowboys spend most of their time inactive, with "no journey to take". Debord states "fixed on the delusory centre around which his world seems to move, the spectator no longer experiences life as a journey toward fulfilment and toward death. Once he has given up on really living, he can no longer acknowledge his own death".[85] *The Wild Bunch* is described by Rankine as just that, reflecting life in the world of the spectacle, a static, liminal experience of life and death. Below this quotation sits the recurring television screen, depicting an image of two cowboys mid shoot-out.



[84] *DLMBL*, p.49 & p.25.
[85] *SoS* p.86.

Figure 6. The image of the cowboys from page 25 of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*

Significantly, the image on the screen, as detailed in Rankine's footnotes, is not from *The Wild Bunch*, "the image on this page does not depict a scene from the movie", itself a form of deception since it would be immediately interpreted as one by the reader. [86] The fact that the film is described as "filmed as sexy" suggests that this form of living is being promoted as positive, thus furthering the goal of the spectacle. However, the climax of the film is described as "an orgasmic rush that releases us all from the cinematic or, more accurately, the American fantasy that we will survive no matter what", forcing the spectator to realize their own mortality, leaving them "neither liberated nor fulfilled" since "no American fantasy can help them now".[87] If the spectacle "keeps people in a state of unconsciousness as they pass through practical changes in the conditions of existence", then the climax of the film ejects them from this unconsciousness. [88] The characters who were at once paradoxically alive and dead at the same time, are now just dead, just as a life not really lived will reach the same conclusion. The speaker therefore sees value in *The Wild Bunch* not just for its depiction of life but also for its ability to challenge states of life and death, and to parallel the reality of life under spectacle.

Passivity/Activity

The concept of social passivity, the tendency of modern-day technologies to value inactivity over activity and turn watching television into America's national pastime, is intrinsic to *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. Take, for example, the moment where the speaker is watching television alone late at night when an advert for an antidepressant plays:

[86] *DLMBL*, p.139.
[87] *DLMBL*, p.25.
[88] *SoS*, p.9.

> One commercial for PAXIL (paroxetine HCI) says simply: **YOUR LIFE IS WAITING.** Parataxis, I think first, but then I wonder, for what? For what does it wait? For life I guess.
>
> Across the screen, this time minus audio, flashes:
>
> 
>
>
> It remains on the screen long enough so that when I close my eyes to check if I am sleeping, instead of darkness, **YOURLIFEISWAITING** stares back at me.[89]

Critics tend to interpret the phrase "your life is waiting" by emphasizing the word "life". In this sense, the meaning becomes a call to action, to be active in your own life or, in other words, to start living. There is, however, room to interpret the phrase with emphasis on another word in the passage: your life *is* waiting. The meaning, when inferred this way, is more hopeless, a declaration that the entirety of one's being in a postmodern world is a condition of waiting. To interpret it this way adds further emphasis to the passivity of the television's subject, and contemporary culture in general, suggesting that mass media has created a world where people are in a perpetual state of waiting and inactivity, where the speaker's husband "is wondering if voting against someone is enough motivation to drag voters away from the televised news of

[89] *DLMBL*, p.29.

the election into an actual voting booth".[90] To borrow a term from McCarthy, whose protagonist in *Satin Island* spends a similarly large portion of his time staring at screens, it is possible to read "your life is waiting" as "everything is buffering".

Where, then, is the answer to this society of isolation and separation mediated through technology? How does the individual breach the loneliness and segregation between two screens, and force the spectator into active participation? For Rankine, the answer is through poetry. For the awareness demonstrated by the speaker is one that acts not just out of irony, but out of purpose. The formal experiments Rankine performs do not merely demonstrate the inertia of contemporary society, but also seek to undermine it by drawing the reader in to actively engage with the text and send them out to research. Tana Jean Welch develops a concept called "trans-corporeal ethics" with which to explore *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*.[91] By this, Welch means that the text "asks us to recognize bodies as continuously emerging from the ongoing interaction of social and material agents".[92] The recurring image of the television screen, for example, is there not only to represent loneliness, a break between channels, a moment of passivity, or any of its other interpretations: it exists *in order to be interpreted.* Likewise, the text's large collection of endnotes inform, breed interest, and provoke further research into the text's key themes and news events that it covers. The text does not want you to take it at face value, or to accept it as either Rankine or the media tells it, but to go beyond the text and create one's own opinion, to actively engage rather than passively absorb.

The moments of self-awareness in the text across tenses reflect a realisation not only from the place of the lyric "I" but one that seeks to go across perspectives, to communicate, such as when the speaker, using the collective first-person, picks apart the selfish desires pushed by advertising and the mass media conglomerate, then later applies it to the self:

> To have a new IMac or not to have it? To eTrade or not to eTrade? Again and again these were Kodak moments, full of individuation; we were all on our way

[90] *DLMBL*, p.127.
[91] Welch, p.124.
[92] Welch, p.127.

> to our personal best. America was seemingly a meritocracy. I, I, I, am Tiger Woods.[93]
>
> My flushing toilet, my hot water, my air conditioner, my health insurance, my, my, my, – all my my's were American-made. This is how I was alive. Or I wasn't alive. I was a product, or I was like a product, a product of and like Walt Disney's cell animation – stylishly animated, somewhat comic.[94]

The use of the pronoun "we" draws together the speaker and the reader, as Rankine references several advertisements to demonstrate how they separated people and pushed them towards their own individual wants and needs. An "IMac", in this sense, becomes an "I'Mac", and the "Kodak moments, full of individuation" reflect the desire for self-image pushed by mass media, but as the "I, I, I," later becomes "my, my, my," Rankine emphasizes the selfishness of these goals and how they turn people into products.

The reference to Walt Disney may suggest Jean Baudrillard, whose oft-quoted text *Simulcra and Simulation* argues that Disneyland is the best expression of how the image has taken over real life:

> Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.[95]

Baudrillard, like Debord, was interested in how the domination of the image over society breeds a fictitious existence. However, while Debord's focus was primarily on the commodity, for Baudrillard individual identities are constructed around the

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[93] *DLMBL*, p.91.
[94] *DLMBL*, p.93.
[95] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans by. Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.10.

proliferation of images which are then appropriated, to the extent that life is a process of simulating these images. The process of visiting Disneyland itself is a form of simulation, he argues, since it acts as a "social microcosm, the religious, miniaturized pleasure of America, of its constraints and joys".[96] Though it might depict itself as an imaginary world with its thematic of "the Pirates, the Frontier, the Future World, etc.", it is in fact, to Baudrillard, the perfect example of the fictitiousness of real life.[97]

While Baudrillard determines that Disneyland exists in order to make the unreal life around it seem real, Rankine depicts the capital-driven self as "a product of" Disney.[98] Disney embodies of the appropriation of culture for commodification and commercialisation, taking cultural constructs, genres, themes and stories and reproducing them for the sake of profit. These lucrative and profit-making forms of long-established stories take the place of the original, subsuming it and replacing it to the extent that any trace of the original is lost. Many fairy tales, for instance, have become Disney products, with many older versions of the story becoming lost or forgotten in favor of Disney's profitable representation of them. When Rankine considers the self as "a product of Disney" she therefore reflects this replacement of the idea of the self with one that can draw the most profit. The references to the advertisements, themselves idealized images of what life should be, and the individual's pursuit of the products they promote, depict a fictionalized version of the self, a simulation exacerbated by images – "stylishly animated, somewhat comic" – designed in order to make money for other companies.[99] The additional "l" to cel animation reflects the isolation of the self-image driven self, individuated into loneliness.

Rankine uses the speaker's realization to prompt the same realizations in the reader, to reach out and provoke thought. This happens further when Rankine returns to the concept of waiting:

> Then all life is a form of waiting, but it is the waiting of loneliness. One waits to recognize the other, to see the other as one sees the self. Levinas writes, "The

[96] Baudrillard, p.10.
[97] Baudrillard, p.10.
[98] *DLMBL*, p.93.
[99] *DLMBL*, p.93.

> subject who speaks is situated in relation to the other. This privilege of the other ceases to be incomprehensible once we admit that the first fact of existence is neither being in itself or being for itself but being for the other, in other words, that human existence is a creature. By offering a word, the subject putting himself forward lays himself open and, in a sense, prays."[100]

The speaker goes beyond the self here, by recognizing the importance of the connection one has with "the other". The voice claims that life is a process of waiting to recognize and be recognized by other people, reflected in the quotation from Levinas who calls speaking a form of prayer, since it is a wish to be recognized, heard, and answered. In order to be seen as alive, and in order to live, then, Rankine decides one must open oneself up to others, to converse and engage through language rather than passively absorb the images of media. Rankine's way of opening this dialogue is with her poetry:

> Paul Celan said that the poem is no different from a handshake. *I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem* – is how Rosmarie Waldorp translated his German. This handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that – Here. I am here. This conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive.[101]

Rankine's poetry, here and in the pages prior, is full of quotations, indicating the presence of others she is interacting with through their language. The poem is a way of asserting oneself as well as handing oneself over to a reader to be received, it is an active action that places importance on presence and self-awareness. The word "here" depicted on a billboard is displayed beneath this passage, highlighting the importance of this self-assertion, of its engagement in the here and now. In the final stanza, Rankine returns to the dictionary definitions to stress the importance of the word:

> Or one meaning of here is "In this world, in this life, on earth. In this place of position, indicating the presence of," or, in other words, I am here. It also means

[100] *DLMBL*, p.120.
[101] *DLMBL*, p.130.

> to hand something to somebody – Here you are. Here, he said to her. Here both recognizes and demands recognition. I see you, or here, he said to her. In order for something to be handed over a hand must extend and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of. [102]

Rankine's final expression in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* concerns the importance of actively engaging with others and identifying our place within the world. In order to escape the loneliness exacerbated by the society of isolation and fragmentation, it is essential that "we" are "here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of" ourselves and others, to recognise and be recognized. In this way, Rankine uses the lyric form to express that need for communication, recognition and understanding. Yet there is a further bid from the reader to engage with the text in the endnotes that follow. In Emma Kimberly's discussion of the text, she notes that the endnotes "seem as much designed to engage with the reader as is the main body of the text", since they offer further context to the events Rankine critiques in the text.[103] At times, also, the endnotes complicate parts of the text by opening up multiple interpretations of the words Rankine chooses to highlight, such as the Websters definition of the word "happy" on the endnotes for page 7, which include four interpretations of the word.[104] The further contexts added by the endnotes prompt the reader to return to the text with the knowledge offered to them from it, together with sources and links which allow the reader to go further afield to conduct their own research. While newspapers often cite their sources briefly, if at all, Rankine details hyperlinks to articles, book titles, years and publishers, all in an effort to promote active engagement with her text. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is not like the television screen it depicts so often, to be passively taken in and forgotten about. It is a text that demands "I am here" and expects the reader to answer both within and without the text.

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[102] *DLMBL*, p.131.
[103] Emma Kimberley, 'Politics and Poetics of Fear after 9/11: Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*' *Journal of American Studies*, 45.4 (Nov 2011), pp.777-791 (p.782).
[104] *DLMBL*, p.133.

Citizen: an American Lyric

The second of the lyrics, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, approaches media with a keener focus on racially marginalized subjects. Rankine's text unveils hidden racial and emotional contexts within mass media broadcasted events to highlight the struggles of the racially marginalized subject, including depictions of the racial prejudice Serena Williams was subject to before and after her outburst of anger at the 2009 US Open, the unseen prevalence of racial microaggressions in broadcasted sport such as lip readings of racial slurs in the world cup prior to the famous altercation between Zinedine Zidane and Marco Materazzi, and the Black victims of Hurricane Katrina. Images of Black bodies in predominantly white spaces, and how the racially subjugated are perceived by those around them are of particular interest to Rankine in this text. Photographs and visual art accompany the text in *Citizen*, often to the effect of demonstrating the history of race in the arts and depicting the racially marginalised viewed by the racial majority. Integral to the text are themes of the invisibility and hypervisibility of Black figures, expectations of celebrities in the media, and surveillance technologies. Within the text, Rankine attempts to draw attention to what Kevin Bell calls in his analysis of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the "unseen reception of the non-stop drone of information". [105] This is the struggle of racially marginalised groups against a social system that seeks to make them simultaneously hypervisible antagonists and invisible subjects to antagonize.

Hypervisibility

In order to interpret the relationship between race and the media in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, it is essential to understand the text's exploration of the "confused conjunction" in Black American identity, one that consists of forms of invisibility and

[105] Bell, p.99.

hypervisibility.[106] Rankine depicts this conjunction at the outset of the text, not in the public sphere of media, but in private exchanges and experiences of racism from a second person perspective. One of several examples of invisibility in the opening section occurs when the poetic subject is told about a boy being knocked down in the subway:

> She says she grabbed the stranger's arm and told him to apologise. Yes, and you want it to stop, you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet, to be brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.[107]

The boy knocked down is described as invisible to the man who knocked him down, a depiction of what Jeffrey Clapp calls "the racialising gaze, not as discriminatory or derogatory, but as simply incapable of sight".[108] It is a form of unawareness or invisibility, a racial erasure in which the marginalized individual is simply ignored.

Yet, overleaf is an example of the hypervisibility of Black subjects, when the speaker's new therapist considers them to be a violent threat. Rankine describes how the speaker has only ever spoken to the therapist over the phone, and on their approach to the house via the back entrance used for patients they discover the gate is locked:

> When the door finally opens, the woman standing yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?
>
> It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment.[109]

The description of the therapist as a "Doberman pinscher or German shepherd" emphasises her feeling of threat towards the speaker, as if the shout were the bark of a territorial breed of dog threatened by a visitor to the house. At that moment, the speaker

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[106] Jeffrey Clapp 'Surveilling Citizens: Claudia Rankine, From the First to the Second Person.' in *Spaces of Surveillance* ed. By S. Flynn, A. Mackay, (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2017), p.173.
[107] Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), p. 17.
[108] Clapp, p.174.
[109] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.18.

is hypervisible in the yard of the therapist, thought of as an intruder rather than a patient because of their race. As a person of colour in a majority white suburban area, and the therapist having to be told they are a patient, the speaker's hypervisibility is depicted as a result of their geographical positioning not matching with the environment they are expected to be in: a Black person in a predominately white space. These areas are dangerous for Black Americans, who can be seen as a threat to those around them, as in a case Rankine describes a few pages prior with a neighbour calling the speaker to tell her there is "a menacing black guy casing both your homes", who is actually the speaker's babysitter.[110] These assumptions of threat are dangerous for Black Americans, since they increase the risk of police officers acting towards them violently. In the recent killing of Casey Goodson by a sheriff's deputy in Columbus, Ohio, for example, the victim was shot while entering his own home because he was perceived as suspicious.[111] Rankine identifies these risks for Black Americans in white suburban areas by depicting them as hypervisible and perceived to be threatening to the (white) people around them, who are alarmed, hyperaware and scrutinous of their actions.

The image that concludes section I, after a large amount of blank space, is of an artwork by Kate Clark titled "Little Girl".[112] The image is of a taxidermy of a reindeerlying on the ground, as if wounded, yet the deer has been stitched with a human face. The image offers itself up to several interpretations due to the contexts of the pages preceding it – it is, at once, the invisible boy knocked down in the subway, injured and ignored by the person that wounded it, and the hypervisible narrator under the gaze of the therapist who saw them as a monster, startled by the bark of the "German shepherd" that saw her as a threat. While these encounters are depicted as private experiences, another image brings these private moments of racial prejudice in the text to wider culture, Michael David Murphy's "Jim Crow Rd.".[113] The photograph is the first image of the text, depicting the street sign for "Jim Crow Road" in a cloudless suburban cul de sac of white houses. The sign splits the photograph down the middle, a cultural reminder

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[110] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.15.
[111] *Colombus Fatal Shooting* <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/08/us/ohio-police-shooting-casey-goodson/index.html> [accessed 20 December 2020].
[112] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.19, titled on p.163.
[113] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.6, titled p.163.

of the history of widespread racial segregation and prejudice in America, located in the public sphere of a typical idealised American neighbourhood. It is a neighbourhood perhaps not unlike that of the therapist who shouts at the speaker at the conclusion to this section of the text, bolstering racial stereotypes from the history of slavery that continue to be exacerbated to this day.

Serena Williams

The relationships between invisibility, hypervisibility and technology, and their connection to the history of slavery and racial segregation extend to Rankine's depictions of racial minorities as the subject of media. In section II of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine documents Serena Williams' rise in the world of women's tennis, a primarily white sport, and the struggles she faced against the systemic racism of umpires. This racism is exacerbated by negative media attention on her outbursts of anger and other behaviour on the court. Professional tennis is a sport that has been historically dominated by white players, and as such Black and minority ethnic tennis players have faced scrutiny. Delia D. Douglas details the history of racial conflict in the sport, starting with the first female Black American tennis player Althea Gibson, who was subject to a large amount of scrutiny, such as having to take a chromosome test before participating in U.S. National Championships to confirm her gender.[114] Douglas then turns to recent film and print media portrayals of the Williams sisters, stating "The fact that Venus and Serena have sought to lead lives outside of society's sanctioned (black) box undoubtedly evokes (white) hostility and anxiety, as their perspective challenges those racial ideologies and social structures that have encouraged (if not expected) a black presence in sport but not in other realms of social life".[115] Rankine

[114] Delia D, Douglas, 'Venus, Serena, and the Inconspicuous Consumption of Blackness: A Commentary on Surveillance, Race Talk and New Racism(s)', *Journal of Black Studies*, vol 43.2 (2012), pp.127-145 (p.129).
[115]Douglas, p.131.

demonstrates the struggles of this escape from the 'black box' in this section of the text, and the hostility Williams faces as a result.

Likened to Zora Neale Hurston's "I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background", Serena Williams' blackness is thrown against the whiteness of tennis, and due to the visibility this brings she is put under the scrutiny of both the umpires and the media. [116] The prejudice of the umpires is depicted in Rankine's description of umpire Mariana Alves' missed calls during the 2004 US Open – "Commentators, spectators, television viewers, line judges, everyone could see the balls were good, everyone, apparently, except Alves," – as is Serena's hypervisibility as a Black figure: "though no one was saying anything explicitly about Serena's black body, you are not the only viewer who thought it was getting in the way of Alves's sight line."[117] Williams' physical presence in a historically white space is depicted as out of place, blocking the sight of the umpire. It is suggested that Williams' blackness is always going to affect the way people see her, a distracting characteristic against the "sharp white background" of professional tennis.

Furthermore, as a famous Black figure, Williams is expected by the media and by the viewer to be resilient, subdued, and to suppress her anger when faced with adversity, and therefore her outburst at the 2009 women's US Open semi-final is depicted as shocking to the poem's subject:

> And insane is what you think, […] Serena in HD before your eyes becomes overcome by a rage you recognise and have been taught to hold at a distance for your own good.[118]

Williams is described as in "HD", in high-definition hypervisibility to the viewer, and her outburst leads to media shock and ridicule at her fight against injustice on the court, and the threat of a point penalty during the game that would impact her career. The speaker sympathises with Serena, suggesting that "her body, trapped in a racial imaginary, trapped in disbelief – code for being black in America – is being governed

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[116] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.25.
[117] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.27.
[118] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.25.

not by the tennis match she is participating in but a collapsed relationship that had promised to play by the rules", her blackness making her subject to different rules in what is supposed to be an unbiased game.[119] The racial imaginary is a subconscious sense of otherness created by systemic racism, an assumed association of antagonism with blackness, which Rankine wishes to tackle in her work and in her efforts as part of the Racial Imaginary Institute.[120] The institute describes itself as "a cultural laboratory

in which the racial imaginaries of our time and place are engaged, read, countered, contextualized and demystified".[121] The image on *Citizen*'s cover, a hood, a sculpture by David Hammons entitled "In The Hood",[122] is one such an example of this, a metaphor for how white police officers associate Black men in hoods with gang violence.

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[119] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.30.
[120] Lauretta Charlton, *Claudia Rankine's Home for the Racial Imaginary* (2017) <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/claudia-rankines-home-for-the-racial-imaginary> [Accessed 19 July 2020].
[121] *The Racial Imaginary Institute (2023)*, <https://theracialimaginary.org/> [Accessed 21 September 2020].
[122] Rankine, *Citizen*, Front Cover, titled on blerb.

Figure 7. The front cover of *Citizen: An American Lyric* depicting sculpture "In The Hood" by Dan Simmons

As Dan Chiasson discusses, the image "suggests that racism passes freely among homonyms: the white imagination readily turns hoods into hoods".[123] Exploring the image's contemporary and historical contexts, Chiasson suggests Rankine's selection of the image references the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin by police officers. Martin was wearing a hooded sweatshirt during the shooting, used as justification for the police officers that fired on him, and the article of clothing became central to a series of hooded protests.[124]

In the shooting of Trayvon Martin, the "hood" became "ganghood", and in *Citizen* Rankine exposes this Racial Imaginary in the media when a celebratory dance Serena Williams makes is described by the media as "Crip-Walking", a dance associated with violent gangs:

> "And there was Serena... Crip-walking all over the most lily-white place in the world.... you couldn't help but shake your head.... What Serena did was akin to cracking a tasteless, X-rated joke inside a church.... What she did was immature and classless."[125]

The media broadcasts that Williams' dance was a dangerous symbol, representative of her support for violent gangs in America. It also serves as a reminder of Serena's time living in Compton, a place far from the home of a typical player of the tennis elite. As Douglas states "the arrival of two talented Black American female teenagers from the unlikely city of Compton, California, a location readily understood as a site of urban decay and gang violence, profoundly disrupted the white racial order (in addition to the class and geographic boundaries) of the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) tour".[126] The media's outrage at how Serena expresses the background she comes from, while

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[123] Dan Chiasson.
[124] *Trayvon Martin Protest - In Pictures* (2012) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2012/apr/13/trayvon-martin-killing-protests-justice> [accessed 24 February 2021].
[125] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.33.
[126] Douglas, p.130.

they call it “classless”, is in fact a reflection of a class at odds with the wealthy backgrounds of the majority of tennis professionals.

Underneath this passage sits one of the many pieces of art (in this case, one of Nick Cave’s sound suits) in Rankine’s long poems, a figure of a woman made of flowers bending down, as if to represent Serena Williams picking up a tennis ball on the court, bright and hypervisible against the white backdrop of the page.[127] Rankine describes how Williams reacted when criticised by television presenter Piers Morgan, who answers yes when asked “do I look like a gangster to you?”, as a moment in which she “blossoms again into Serena Williams”.[128] This “Serena Williams” she blossoms into is the version of herself expected by the media that behaves with indifference rather than anger towards racial injustice, a woman who “has grown up, another decides, as if responding to racial injustice is childish and her previous demonstration of emotion was free-floating and detached from any external actions by others”.[129] In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord discusses the ways in which celebrities must behave as part of mass media broadcasting, describing them as “the enemy of the individual” since they must “renounce all autonomous qualities in order to identify [themselves] with the general law of obedience to the flow of things”.[130] Serena is a contrast to this depiction, since her earlier outbursts are autonomous emotional decisions at odds with her need to outwardly appear obedient and conform to the expectations of media. Only by conforming to the desires of the media and the white public by ignoring adversity instead of lashing out against it is Serena accepted. As the Youtube video Rankine references states: “be ambiguous, be white”.[131]

This adversity returns when Rankine discusses the tennis player Caroline Wozniacki’s attempt to imitate Serena by “stuffing towels in her top and shorts”.[132] The media responds “Racist? CNN wants to know if outrage is the proper response”.[133]

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[127] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.33.
[128] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.34.
[129] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.34-35.
[130] *SoS*, p.24.
[131] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.36.
[132] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.36.
[133] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.36.

Wozniacki is described as giving "the people what they wanted all along by embodying Serena's attributes while leaving her 'angry nigger exterior' behind. At last, in this real, and unreal moment, we have Wozniacki's image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time".[134] Rankine claims this American standardization and embodiment of whiteness is desired by the public and the media, represented by the physical shedding of Serena Williams' blackness replaced by the "shining blond goodness", Williams's most hypervisible, distracting characteristic taken away, yet with the retainment of her most stereotyped characteristics: her physical shape. In a 1985 article, Sander Gilman explores depictions of Black women in the nineteenth century, particularly focusing on the figure of "Hottentot" women, indigenous women of South Africa.[135] Gilman describes how the ways in which the Hottentot women were presented created the initial association of Black women with their buttocks and breasts, using examples such as a print of "the Hottentot Venus" by Georges Cuvier, pictured in side profile, arguing that "the physical appearance of the Hottentot is, indeed, the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the Black- a perceived difference in sexual physiology".[136] The image of Wozniacki that Rankine chooses to display in *Citizen* bears a striking resemblance to the figure of Cuvier's print, depicted in an identical side profile and with similarly emphasized buttocks. Furthermore, Gilman explores caricatures of the Hottentot Venus which also focus on the sexualized bodies of Black women, similar to a newspaper illustration depicting Serena Williams which was considered to not breach media standards in 2019 by the Australian Press Council.[137]

The illustration, considered by many to be a racist caricature of Serena that exacerbated stereotypes of Black women such as large lips, breasts and hair, serves as an example that parallels Wozniacki's imitation that Rankine depicts here, illustrating how media tends to favor these stereotypical depictions of blackness. The circulation of the

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[134] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.36.
[135] Sander Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Towards an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature,' *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985), pp.204-242.
[136] Gilman, p.212.
[137] *Controversial Serena Williams Cartoon did not breach media standards, Press Council finds* (2019) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-25/serena-williams-cartoon-by-mark-knight-not-breach-of-standards/10844900> [Accessed 10 September 2020].

Hottentot Venus, an early example of spectacular blackness, led Western visual interpretation of the Black female figure as one of a troubling excess. This view is exclusive to displays of Black female sexuality. Nicole Fleetwood calls this "the troubling presence of the Black female body, especially the unclothed body", which she extends to Serena Williams and the Hottentot Venus in her own work when she touches upon an incident in which a catsuit worn by Serena at the French Open was considered inappropriate.[138] Nadra Nittle, in an article for *Vox*, examines how the media treated Serena's catsuit in comparison to the catsuit worn by Anne White during Wimbledon in 1985.[139] Nittle notes that while Wimbledon officials banned White's catsuit just as Serena Williams's, media interpretations of the two differed, with White's outfit declared the "Perfect 10 White" and generally considered attractive due to White's small physique, and Williams's considered by the media as '"clinging," "ultra-risque," "curve-clutching", and "leaving little to the imagination."'[140] Fleetwood's discussion of the Hottentot Venus connects to African American artists using the stereotype as a "performative strategy that points to the problem of the Black female body in the visual field". Rankine, on the other hand, depicts a white person's performance of stereotyped blackness and, to refer back to *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*'s discussion of Timothy McVeigh, how the media immunizes her for her actions. In displaying the image of Wozniacki, pictured below beside the Hottentot Venus, and demonstrating how the media "wants to know if outrage is the proper response",[141] Rankine shows the normalization of Black female stereotyping. Wozniacki's performance of Serena's blackness through an excessive display provides evidence of the continuation of the Hottentot Venus's visual legacy.

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[138] Fleetwood, p.109.
[139] Nadra Nittle, *The Serena Williams catsuit ban shows that tennis can't get past its elitist roots* (2018) <https://www.vox.com/2018/8/28/17791518/serena-williams-catsuit-ban-french-open-tennis-racist-sexist-country-club-sport> [accessed 24 February 2021].
[140] Nittle.
[141] Rankine, *Citizen* p.36.

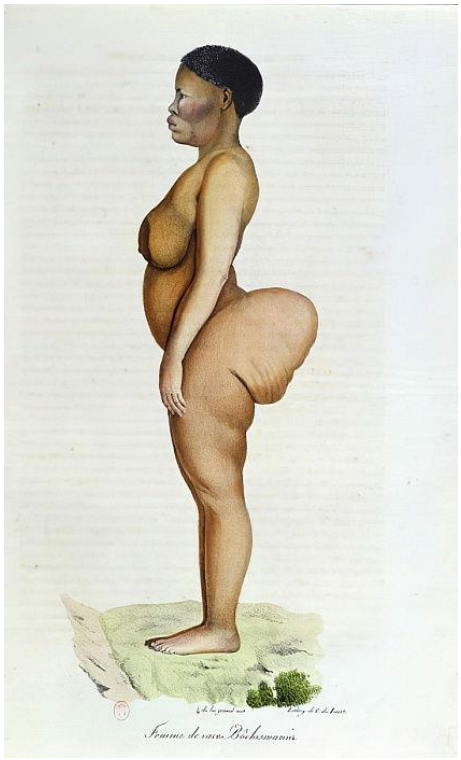

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Figure 8. (left) An illustration of The Hottentot Venus

Figure 9. (right) Caroline Wozniacki mimicking SerenaWilliams from page 37 of *Citizen*

Zinedine Zidane

Continuing her historical comparisons of the experience of marginalized subjects, Rankine's reflection on the 2006 World Cup final, during which Algerian football player Zinedine Zidane attacked Marco Materazzi on the pitch, travels across time periods to demonstrate continuities across centuries, interpreting racism on television in the context of a longer history. Over the span of 8 pages, Rankine creates an investigative collage of quotations and famous references alongside accounts of "lip

[142] Rankine, *Citizen* p.37.

readers responding to the transcript of the World Cup".[143] In faded writing across the pages is "black-blanc-beur" (Black, White, Arab), a slogan and chant for the French team in the 1998 World Cup, which represented the team as a diverse multicultural unit meant to demonstrate France's, and by extension Europe's, shift towards a society more accepting of immigrants. The meaning behind this statement is juxtaposed by the words read by the lip-readers: "Big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist, nigger".[144] In between the writing are images on the event depicted frame-by-frame like a film reel, stretching the event across the pages as Rankine uses her own words and the quotations to add deeper cultural context to it. By formally stretching the moment of a few seconds into a long series of still frames, Rankine extends the temporal racial contexts with quotations about racism across decades, such as Franz Fanon's writings about colonialism and discrimination against Algerian people in France. Rankine also extends her perspective across cultural boundaries, with quotations from American writers such as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin alongside French writers such as Maurice Blanchot and Frantz Fanon, demonstrating how, as she quotes from Fanon, "illustrations of this kind of racial prejudice can be multiplied indefinitely."[145]

The first quotation from the section is from Maurice Blanchot writing about the fascination of viewing a corpse, the first reel of still frames beneath it:

> Something is there before us that is neither the living person himself nor any sort of reality, neither the same as the one who is alive nor another.//What is there is the absolute calm of what has found its place.[146]

The Blanchot quote echoes with the end of Zidane's career brought upon by this event, the destruction of his image in the public sphere. Prior to the event, Zidane was a highly regarded football player, considered among the best professionals on the French team, but after this match he faced media ridicule which brought on his retirement. In popular music, for example, a song parodying the event topped the French charts shortly after

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[143] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.122.
[144] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.122.
[145] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.122.
[146] Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, trans. by Lydia Davis, (Michigan : Station Hill Press, 1981), p.81.

the Final, titled “Coupe de Boule” by La Plage, which translates to “Headbutt”. The song is a parody of a football anthem by Cauet titled “Zidane il va Marquer”, translated as “Zidane he will Score (a goal)”, and the music video for the track depicts one of the performers in a wig surrounded by Black cheerleaders dancing with provocative shots of their sexual features.[147] This song is the antithesis of the track it parodies, as the song by Cauet hails Zidane as the potential savior of the French team, complimented by a music video depicting supporters of the French team of multiple cultural backgrounds dancing and chanting together.[148]

The differences between these two portrayals of Zidane mark a distinction between public perceptions of him before and after the event. Once praised as an icon of a France’s multicultural heritage, he was reduced to a racialized stereotype overnight. The Blanchot quotation that opens the passage represent this drastic change in Zidane’s image, reduced to a stereotype that is “neither the living person himself nor any sort of reality”.[149] Beneath is the first of several direct quotes from Zidane reflecting on the incident, and the first account from “lip readers responding to the transcript of the World Cup”:

Every day I think back about where I came from and I am still proud to be who I am…

Big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist, nigger.[150]

These two lines directly conflict with one another, Zidane’s pride in his heritage clashing with the explicit racial slurs of players on the football pitch. It creates a dissonance in the reading to go from a person expressing pride in their race to extreme expressions of racial prejudice, catching the reader off guard. From within the collage of historical quotations that follows, the reader is invited to draw their own comparisons between racism of the past and of the present day. A quotation from Shakespeare’s *Othello,* for example – “Let him do his spite: My services which I have done… Shall

[147] *Coupe De Boule* <https://youtu.be/kWAJhUNj8Xg> [accessed 29 November 2022].
[148] *Zidane y va Marquer* <https://youtu.be/P9bqkJHsf7o> [accessed 29 November 2022].
[149] Rankine, *Citizen* p.122.
[150] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.122. Emphasis in the original.

out-tongue his complaints" – invites the reader to interpret Zidane as the titular Othello, a character who in the scene referenced is confident that his career success and public image will protect him from prejudice. [151] This quotation is placed beside Frantz Fanon's statement about how racially subjugated people must "grit [their] teeth, walk away a few steps, elude the passer by who draws attention to him", which then in turn resonates with James Baldwin's observation about how anger at adversity must be suppressed: "the adjustment must be made – rather it must be attempted."[152]

By placing these quotations in dialogue with one another, the reader is confronted with issues in the experience of marginalized subjects throughout history that are yet to be resolved, as Zidane is expected to act the same way by suppressing his feelings and ignoring the racial slurs on the football pitch rather than acting on them. Yet, like Serena Williams earlier in the text, the buildup of racial slights cannot be ignored, just as the still frames of the event playing out as the reader continues through the passage cannot be stopped. Between the two strips of images that show Zidane making contact with Materazzi is a quotation from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave* (1845):

> But at this moment – from whence came the spirit I don't know – I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution…[153]

Rankine draws comparison between Zidane's moment of contact with Materazzi and the moment Frederick Douglas fights against the overseer Mr. Covey and seizes him by the throat after Covey attempts to tie him up. Zidane's resolve to fight against racial prejudice is put alongside the history of slavery and Frederick Douglas's desire to be a free man, yet the freedom Zidane is depicted as desiring is one free from being identified as an "Arab", since, as Rankine refers from Ralph Ellison earlier in the section, "the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word".[154] Placed in the context of the earlier historical quotations from Frantz Fanon about European prejudice against Arabic people, "For all that he is, people will say he

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[151] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.126.
[152] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.124-125.
[153] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.128.
[154] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.122.

remains for us an Arab / "You can't get away from Nature"",[155] Zidane is depicted as a person fighting against the cultural construction of race and how what is really called the "nature" of a race is a product of culture. Yet the irony is that by fighting against it instead of ignoring or developing a resilience like Serena Williams does, Zidane becomes a part of the stereotype, and his career is ended.

Formally, the section seems to forgo the lyric mode, yet it retains a particular focus on depicting emotional responses that would typically be from the perspective of the lyric "I". Additionally, the quotations from Zidane in this passage are emphasized, depicted on the page in an italicized, bold font. It is possible to interpret these quotations as the lyric self of this section of the poem, since they are from his personal reflection of the event, highly emotional ("What he said "touched the deepest part of me""), and from a first-person perspective.[156] Yet, as Adorno states, "the universality of the lyric's substance" is "social in nature" and "only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem's solitude can understand what the poem is saying."[157] In regard to this section, the deeper emotional, historical and cultural context of Zidane's quotations are enhanced by the quotations that surround the passage. Those familiar with Frantz Fanon's work will be aware of the oft-quoted "Look! A Negro!" anecdote, in which Fanon recalls being pointed out by a child who is scared of the racially marked body in front of him. Fanon describes getting on the train and being "aware of my body, no longer in the third person but in triple […] instead of one seat, they left me two or three. I was no longer enjoying myself. I was unable to discover the feverish coordinates of the world. I existed in triple: I was taking up room."[158] Fanon's description of the traumatic experience of racial marking is similar to the direct quotations of Zidane, who is represented as having been through the same experience as Fanon years later, made aware of his body as one racially marked in the visual field, and through the temporal stretching of each frame of the incident the reader is also brought back through racial history. The meaning of the lyric is therefore heightened by the investigative collage which enlightens the reader by

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[155] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.125.
[156] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.128.
[157] Adorno, p.38.
[158] Frantz Fanon, 'The Lived Experience of the Black Man', in *Black Skin, White Masks*, ed. by Richard Philcox, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2007), p. 92.

engaging them with these connected fragments they must actively compare. This is all in Rankine's effort to rouse a reader from the passivity proliferated and preferred by mass media.

It is no coincidence that the section following this concerns an individual on a train or other public place, like in Fanon's anecdote, but with the lyric "I" by switched to second person. Rankine challenges what Kamran Javadizadeh calls "the whiteness of the lyric subject", the reader's assumption of the lyric self as white, by not only depicting the lyric subject's blackness but also by addressing the reader as that subject.[159] This allows the reader to be more engaged in the text as they are invited to emotionally respond to the encounters as if they are the lyric subject. While critics such as Jeffrey Clapp defy this reading and instead favor an apostrophic reading, which is relevant to Rankine's tendency to play with pronouns, the technique is multifunctional since it still produces an effect of interpellation in the reader's response to the work and fits with Rankine's attempts to gain a deeper level of emotional engagement from a reader. The section, titled "Making Room", an anecdote about sitting on a train next to a Black man, continues the temporal comparisons with the prior section on Zidane. If the section prior to it is to be considered with Fanon's "Look! A Negro!" anecdote, it represents the inciting incident, the moment of racial marking where the boy in the train station points at Fanon and instantly wounds him. "Making Room" is the ache that follows, when Fanon gets on the train and feels like he is taking up space, as if his body is an elephant in the room, present, troubling, but simultaneously ignored.

It is also important that both "Making Room" and the section prior are scripts from Rankine's "Situation Videos", short films that accompany Rankine's narration of the text. Using the term "Situation" to describe many of the sections in the text points to the universality of these kinds of marginalized experiences and suggests that similar situations happen frequently. Further to this is how the term emphasizes space, as these experiences happen as a result of where you are situated – as a Black or minority ethnic person in a predominantly white space. While chronologically the section on the World

[159] Kamran Javadizadeh 'The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads: Claudia Rankine, Robert Lowell, and the Whiteness of the Lyric Subject', *PMLA*, 134.3, (2019), pp.475-490.

Cup is Situation 1 and "Making Room" is Situation 7, Rankine has deliberately placed them side by side in *Citizen* because of the parallels they draw with one another. The video that accompanies Situation 1 holds the same effect as the still images in *Citizen*, since it features an event played frame by frame, but "Making Room" contains no images from the Situation Video in *Citizen*. Despite this, the visuals that accompany the situation video for "Making Room" provide greater insight into the text and demonstrate Rankine's engagement with multimedia experiments in her form.[160] In the second person, "Making Room" details the feelings of a subject taking a seat next to a Black man "on the train, bus, in the plane, waiting room, anywhere he could be forsaken".[161] The man is "forsaken" because of a space that "follows him".[162] It is a distance that is given to him by those that fear him, as though his body is taking up extra space like in Fanon's story – "instead of one seat, they left me two or three".[163] Before taking the seat, the subject is told by a woman standing that there are no seats available, and that "she would rather stand all the way to Union Station". It is here in the situation video that the visuals change from the view out of a moving train to a shot of a Black man on the train with an empty space next to him. It is made clear to the viewer and the reader that the standing woman does not want to sit next to the man because of "the woman's fear, a fear she shares", like the child pointing at Fanon, declaring his fear.[164] The speaker explains that this is commonplace, that "the man knows more about the unoccupied seat than you do" because it is normal for him, "more like breath than wonder".[165] As Rankine narrates in the situation video, there are more shots of Black men sitting alone with empty seats next to them, demonstrating how this happens to many Black men. The question "what does suspicion mean?" is then displayed, followed then by another, "what does suspicion do?". As if in answer to the latter question, the standing woman is described taking a seat when another passenger leaves, her suspicion of the Black man being the reason she did not take the seat at the beginning of the

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[160] *Claudia Rankine: From Citizen: Situation 7* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0RA57XOoY4> [Accessed 25 February 2022]
[161] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.131.
[162] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.132.
[163] Fanon, p.92.
[164] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.131.
[165] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.131.

passage. It is here that Rankine describes the subject taking a seat next to him "anywhere he could be forsaken", as if to offer company, understanding to a man who is so often abandoned in public spaces, "your body there in proximity to, adjacent to, alongside, within".[166] There is then a difficulty in inhabiting this space, since it "belongs to the body of the man next to you, not to you", as if physically filling the space is not going to close the societal distance between Black male bodies and those that harbor suspicion for them.[167] The speaker imagines the man speaking to them, saying "it's okay, I'm okay, you don't need to sit here", as if sitting next to him is uncomfortable and to sit by him is to be troubled by his body in that space that extends from him physically to a metaphorical distance. [168]

The speaker then questions, "you sit to repair whom who?", asking the subject if their place in that seat is an attempt to repair the man, the stigmatic space that surrounds him, society, or the self. The man ignores the speaker throughout the passage, instead "gazing out into what looks like darkness", save for one moment where a woman tries switching seats with another person on the train.[169] It is then that the man finally turns to the subject, "and as if from inside your own head you agree that if anyone asks you to move, you'll tell them we are travelling as a family".[170] This is significant not only because of the connection and recognition between the two characters of the piece, but also because it is only here that the reader or the viewer is made aware that the second person subject of this piece is also Black. It could be deliberately misleading the reader into the assumption of the "you" in this section as a white person trying to breach this cultural barrier of everyday racism, but instead it is a shared understanding between two Black subjects, a reaching out from one to another to not feel so alone – to return to the title of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* - in a white-dominated space.

Hurricane Katrina and the Impoverished Other

[166] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.131.
[167] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.132.
[168] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.132.
[169] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.131.
[170] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.133.

Mass media often depicts ethnic minorities not only as criminals to be feared, but also as impoverished subjects to be pitied. Televisual depictions of impoverished people in other countries, for example, are often staged in such a way to invoke sympathy in the spectator, but always with the awareness that what is happening is in another country, another world far distant from America's pristine democracy, which values fairness and equality above all else. On the television, the impoverished become a spectacle for the viewer, an unsettling yet proliferated image of a starving, diseased, and unclean "Other". Yet, when faced with impoverished people such as the homeless in their own society, standards dictate they should be ignored, walked past, treated as though they are invisible. Where these two meet, when the impoverished in one's own society become the forefront of media attention, their subjects gain the truest definition of hypervisibility, becoming a spectacle that both everybody and nobody wants to see, where the terrifying truth of society becomes unveiled.

Rankine demonstrates this in *Citizen* in a section on the victims of Hurricane Katrina:

> What I'm hearing, she said, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas.
>
> He gave me the flashlight, she said, I didn't want to turn it on. It was all black. I didn't want to shine a light on that.[171]

The events following Hurricane Katrina are documented by Rankine alongside quotations from witnesses and media-documented opinions of the catastrophe. There is a desire among those quoted to turn away from the suffering of the victims, not wanting to "shine a light" on the reality of Black suffering in their own society. There is a fear that those who lost their homes will "stay in Texas" where they were evacuated. Angela Hume explores how *Citizen: An American Lyric* depicts a society where Black Americans are placed or forced into more hazardous ecological environments:

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[171] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.84.

> Black bodies are rendered increasingly deindividuated and expendable. In the process, life comes to be defined at and by a limit—between near-death and actual death, living life and maintaining life—and by its state of wasting, the condition of and for life at this precarious threshold. Rankine's work figures not only the wasting of the body and self, but also the wasting of the environments in which they are placed.[172]

The victims are described by one person as "underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them", suggesting that the evacuation from New Orleans to Texas allows the Black victims to escape from the hazardous environments they were originally living in. [173] This is depicted negatively, as though they have received an underserved privilege by being taken into "their" environment. There is a desire for invisibility of these Black bodies, "you simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals [...] and they are so black" made visible only by their suffering, their blackness, and the fact that they are "so poor", out of place in the wealthy environment of coastal Texas.[174] It is described almost as if the troubling truth of impoverished minorities in the United States has invaded their environment, that the spectacle of the poor people in other countries from the television may not be as far away as it may seem, depicted through "this aestheticized distancing from Oh My God, from unbelievable, from dehydration, from overheating, from no electricity, no power, no way to communicate".[175] A world without electricity and power is unfathomable to a technologically advanced Western culture. This technological gap forms part of this distance between televised depictions of poorer countries, the inability to understand that access to something as simple as clean water can be a struggle. With Hurricane Katrina, however, the devastation and struggling of poor communities is brought into troublingly close geographical proximity.

Yet there is spectacle here, too, a macabre fascination with the destruction of the environment and the people left stranded as a result. The victims of the hurricane cross liminal boundaries of visuality. While many of the quotations demonstrate a desire to

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[172] Angela Hume, 'Toward an Antiracist Ecopoetics: Waste and Wasting in the Poetry of Claudia Rankine.', *Contemporary Literature*, 57.1, (2016), pp.79-110.
[173] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.85.
[174] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.85.
[175] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.85.

turn away, a question is always asked: “have you seen their faces?”.[176] Quotations detail specifics of the environment, the “missing limbs”, “bodies lodged in piles of rubble, dangling from rafters, lying face down, arms outstretched on parlor floors”, an attention to detail that seems to forgo the desire to look away and instead looks closer.[177] The question “have you seen their faces?” could be interpreted as a headline, the repetition of which pushes forward the idea that it is something that should be seen, a spectacle to be consumed. After the final instance of “did you see their faces?”, a drawing by Nigerian American artist Toyin Odutola titled *Uncertain, Yet Reserved* is pictured overleaf, taking up the whole page.[178] The image, inspired by a photo taken of the artist’s brother with “a tinge of terror in his eyes” at Abuja airport, is an abstract pen drawing of a black male drawn in yellows, greens and blues, with eyes that appear to be shimmering. [179] The many dotted strokes in multiple colors, part of Odutola’s artistic style, are reminiscent of tribal face painting patterns, and the abstractly drawn eyes give the image an uncanny and unsettling feeling.

[176] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.83, 85, 87.
[177] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.84.
[178] Rankine, *Citizen*, p.86.
[179] Zachary Rosen, *Redefining "Blackness"* (2012) <https://africasacountry.com/2012/12/an-interview-with-artist-toyin-odutola> [accessed 1 March 2021].

Figure 10. *Uncertain, Yet Reserved* by Toyin Odutola from page 87 of *Citizen*

Taken together with the scene Rankine is depicting in this section of *Citizen*, the image could be considered as one of the "faces" that is being asked about, a face of one of the victims of the hurricane. The abstract quality of the drawing makes the subject appear not quite real, out of place and unsettling. The image, which takes up a large amount of space on the page, confronts the reader with something that cannot be ignored, and acts as a way of seeing the (Black) subject from the perspective of the (white) people who see them as a frightening 'other', the tribal pattern linking this hurricane victim to the impoverished depicted on television in far-distant countries.

Conclusion

Like McCarthy, Claudia Rankine's approach to technology and literature is rooted in cultural history, but the two writers arrive at competing conclusions. While McCarthy brings postmodernist irony and depthlessness backwards into the modernist period to

consider literature as a series of flat, meaningless transmissions, Rankine, in *Citizen*, brings depth to contemporary images by placing them in conversation with their deeper historical and cultural contexts. Surface-level depictions of celebrities in the mass media such as Serena Williams and Zinedane Zidane are placed into the wider context of the history of racial subjugation, hypervisibility and bias, thereby challenging the isolated micronarratives of the media by placing them in a grand historical narrative that connects past and present. Recent visual technologies such as the television and mass media offer a lens for examining visual representation of Black subjects across history, and the effects of an image-driven society on the individual. The negative aspects of spectacle, commodity and image-based culture that Rankine explores are closely comparable to the writings of postmodern cultural critics such as Debord and Baudrillard, but with a particular focus on the effects of this type of society on the racially marginalized individual.

In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, society is depicted as isolated, fragmented and affectless, the leitmotif of the television set acting as a recurring symbol of the passivity of postmodern consumer culture, which positions the reader as a spectator. The blank space that fills many of the text's pages is a white noise that isolates the reader from each of the collection's sections. It forces them to experience the isolation and loneliness that is one of the text's central themes and reminds the reader of their passivity. At the same time, the blank space is a call to action, to make the reader actively think about the text and what the television that ends most of these blank spaces represents. The constant exposure to indifference towards marginalized individuals on the television and how a person's life-value is equated to physical appearances, both age and race, leads to a feeling of hopelessness at controlling one's own life, and indifference towards the lives and deaths of others. In both texts, Rankine demonstrates how her engagement with the lyric tradition acts to close these boundaries. In *Citizen*, the lyric 'I' becomes the lyric 'You', allowing a reader to take the position of the marginalized individual and to simulate the experience of racial subjugation and hypervisibility. Rankine is aware that the pronoun "You" is one without explicit reference to gender or race, both singular and plural, and through it she is able to inhabit multiple positions and use it universally to both unsettle the reader and provoke empathy from them. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*,

the text employs several methods to garner active engagement from the reader, both inside the text by directly calling for direct presence and engagement with the world, and without through the use of end notes to promote reading from outside the text. This is a version of metamodernist writing that is therefore ideologically closer to the definition of the term, with depth, historicity and affect brought back into contemporary writing with a self-awareness of its absence in a postmodern, technologically advanced society.

Retrogaming, Retrowriting: Videogames as Objects of Nostalgia in Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young* and Damien Murphy's "A Mansion of Sapphire"

So far, this thesis has examined how contemporary writers have represented the primary technologies of past cultural periods and how they relate to the current cultural moment. In *C,* Tom McCarthy turns back to the modernist period and examines its technologies with an ironic postmodern removal of depth, affect and transcendence. In *Satin Island,* he does the same with the contemporary, constantly connected individual staring at their screen, in U.'s search for a deeper meaning to the world that is utterly denied from him. Claudia Rankine's *American Lyrics* scrutinize the postmodern technologies of television, mass media and spectacle, and their knock-on effects on the contemporary racialized individual, prescribing poetry and the lyric voice as a potential remedy and vehicle for transcendence and communication.

We turn now to an exploration of a more contemporary technology, the videogame, a platform which Alan Kirby has called the "formal exemplum" of digimodernism.[1] To Kirby, the videogame player is a useful representation of the digimodern individual:

> The figure of the computer game player, fingers and thumbs frenetically pushing on a keypad so as to shift a persona through a developing, mutating narrative landscape, engaging with a textuality that s/he physically brings – to a degree – into existence, engulfing him or herself in a haphazard, onward fictive universe that exists solely through immersion – this is to a great extent the figure of digimodernism itself.[2]

Kirby uses the figure of a videogame player as an emblem for new forms of digimodernist textuality, whereby an individual is capable of shaping the narrative of a text in a kind of parasocial relationship with its creators. Twenty-first-century texts are, in many ways, more shaped by their audience than ever before, but perhaps no more so than that of the single player video-game, whereby the player directly shares in the experience of the unfolding of the text. It is, after all, the player of the video game that makes the experience happen. Where a television or a film can be left on and the narrative will continue, it is the actions of the player that determine what the experience will be through the way that they engage with the game. While Kirby argues that this is one of the key features distinguishing the video game from other forms of text, I contend that this particular quality demonstrates that a video game, if considered as a text, has more in common with literature than it does with other forms of visual media.[3] Literature, likewise, requires direct engagement for the narrative to play out. For the experience of a novel, a poem, or a video game to happen in the first place, it requires the reader/player to pick up the book/controller and physically make the pages of the narrative turn.

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[1] Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: how new technologies dismantle the postmodern and reconfigure our culture*, (New York: Continuum, 2009), p.167.
[2] Kirby, *Digimodernism*, p.168.
[3] Kirby, *Digimodernism*, p.169.

Both experiences are as much physical, tactile experiences as they are visual and mental, the fingers of the reader/player must always be active for the game/text to progress. While Kirby argues that video games have the ontological difference of "super-subjectivity", in which the player must embody the object of play instead of relying on self-identification with characters in literature, both require a certain level of immersion in order to keep the reader/player engaged. Furthermore, literary criticism, particularly postmodern metafiction, has constantly adopted the words of play, identifying a subtextual game between the author and the reader that exists outside of the usual reader/text relationship. Indeed, this thesis itself has called attention to Tom McCarthy's "metafictional games" in *C* and *Satin Island,* whereby the texts become something to be played, examined, and deciphered to arrive at meaning.[4]

Before turning to Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young*, which forms the main body of this chapter, Damien Murphy's short story "A Mansion of Sapphire" serves as a useful example of a literary exploration of the experience of the technology of video games. The short story clarifies much of Kirby's definition of the immersion and "super-subjectivity" of the digimodernist individual, as well as demonstrating the metamodernist oscillation between poles that serves the basis of this thesis. "A Mansion of Sapphire" is a ritualistic exploration of a fictitious video game that the protagonist, Stella, plays on the ZX Spectrum – a videogame console from the 1980s. This temporal displacement of old technologies is explored through the language of religion, spiritualism, and occultism, comparing the journey through the game of the story's protagonist, Stella, to the religious transcendence of St. Teresa of Ávila. The story's epigraph, "God places the soul in His own mansion which is in the very centre of the soul itself" is quoted from St Teresa's *The Interior Castle*, also known as *The Mansions,* in which she recounts a revelation from God and interprets it as "the journey of faith through seven stages, ending with union with God".[5] Through Stella's deep exploration of the game "A Mansion of Sapphire", an allusion to one of the mansions in St Teresa's writing, she escapes from her own bodily needs and functions, going on an obsessive journey that changes the way she views the world outside her apartment,

[4] See page 109 of this thesis.
[5] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle, Or The Mansions* (La Vergne: Antiquarius, 2020).

described by Murphy as if it was an occult delve into the mind and soul. This story is one of complete isolation, of self-immersion in the virtual world of the game, containing no characters other than the protagonist herself and the scarce number of virtual characters in the game. As a result, there is no dialogue, as Stella's interactions with the characters in the game are paraphrased rather than detailed.

The story is contained within *Drowning in Beauty*, an anthology created by a group of authors that label themselves the neo-decadents. The project of the neo-decadents is to renew the literary techniques of decadence and naturalism for the modern day. The text, as well as being a representation of retro-gaming, the practice of playing games on older consoles no longer in production, is therefore also a form of retrowriting, as it draws inspiration from past literary projects. Decadence, as described by David Weir, "is a simple word but a complicated concept: the Latin verb *decadere* means "to decay", formed by the root verb *cadere* "to fall" plus the prefix *de-* "down"".[6] Taken literally, we might suggest decadent writing has a focus on the decay of things – society, culture, aesthetics – but of course with decay comes regeneration. There becomes a keen focus on aestheticism in decadence, and bringing out the beauty in mundane, disgusting, or decaying things. Corrick calls this the "duality of extreme content and lush, ornate style", and culminates in a literature in which "the beautiful serves as the vehicle of transcendence".[7] For a decadent artist, decay is a productive and necessary part of the cycles of life, culture, politics and society. A more extreme example of this is Charles Baudelaire's "Une Charogne', a shocking description of a corpse that juxtaposes between horrifying details of "maggots, which oozed out like a heavy liquid" and aesthetically pleasing images of "watching the superb cadaver / blossom like a flower", "descending and rising like a wave" and giving off "singular music // like running water or the wind".[8] The duality here is focused on death, and how the horror of a body's decay also brings the thriving beauty of new life: "one would have said the body, swollen with a vague breath / Lived by multiplication".

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[6] David Weir, *Decadence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.1.
[7] Daniel Corrick, 'Introduction' in *Drowning in Beauty: the neo-decadent anthology* ed. by Justin Isis & Daniel Corrick (Milton Keynes: Snuggly Books, 2018), p.8.
[8] Charles Baudelaire, 'Une Charogne (A Carcass) By Charles Baudelaire', *Fleursdumal.org* <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/126> [Accessed 26 November 2021].

The decadent theme of beauty in decaying things in "A Mansion of Sapphire" is evident in Murphy's description of Stella's apartment, a living space that is filled with old and antiquated objects. The description cherishes oldness: from the dust compared to "stale clouds of incense in cabalistic arcs" to Stella's wardrobe detailed as an "intricate armoire", all things old and decaying are given transcendence through positive and religious imagery.[9] Stella's vintage television, for example, is detailed as "reasonably antiquated", as if its age is a positive quality to Stella's pursuit of 'retro' technologies.[10] Stella enjoys things that are decaying or old; even when she leaves her flat, the doors of the buildings she passes by are aestheticized by the "extravagant flourishes of the local graffiti artists", the vandalizing of the doors evidence of decay and the passage of time, and she chooses to return "several minutes later" with "a half-filled cup of coffee in one hand and a white bag containing a day-old Danish in the other".[11] Stella goes out of her way to collect these old things, and while her ZX Spectrum is described as in "pristine condition" it has decayed culturally, as an object that is no longer used by the general public.

Murphy makes it clear that this fascination with the Spectrum as a console is not fueled by a nostalgic desire, stating "nostalgia meant nothing to her, as she had been far too young to play the classic games at the time that they were released".[12] Instead, the old console is treated as a magical relic of an ancient time, as if it is still charged with the occult, spectral energies and technological superstitions of the modernist period explored previously in this thesis. This cultural decay is part of the excitement for Stella, who revels in the presence of its ancient design:

> The deficiencies of the machine only made the process more enticing. The very presence of magnetic tape excited her. She was certain that the device exerted a tangible force. The fluctuations of the signal seemed to saturate her own etheric field, penetrating deep into the interstices of her subtle anatomy. Whatever gains

[9] Damien Murphy, 'A Mansion of Sapphire' in *Drowning in Beauty: the neo-decadent anthology* ed. by Justin Isis & Daniel Corrick (Milton Keynes: Snuggly Books, 2018), p.72.
[10] Murphy, p.72.
[11] Murphy, p.73.
[12] Murphy, p.74.

> she made within the game, so she considered, must have their analog in the exalted regions of the soul.[13]

The limitations of the technology Stella is handling, and likely the reasons why such a technology has been left behind in favor of faster, more reliable alternatives, are part of the reason for their enjoyment. Murphy depicts the outdated technology of magnetic tape as something ethereal or otherworldly, and Stella treats it with religious significance, believing it to be a machine for transcendence. The description of the beauty and spiritualism of the game and the machine it is played on is a subversion of how religion is typically portrayed, as something of nature. The game and its console are wholly unnatural, artificial and engineered, but Murphy depicts them as a holy artifact. Decadence was also a project that was against nature, the typical subject of beauty in literature, and preferred natural substances that had been changed by human design, such as the perfume in Baudelaire's "Correspondances". Written lavishly in the form of a Sonnet, "Correspondances" takes the mundane and disgusting "musk" and "ambergris" and turns them into "the ecstacies of the mind and senses" by describing how they are used as ingredients in perfume.[14] At the same time, these perfumes are described not just as "rich" and "triumphant", but also as "corrupted", as though the ingredients themselves have been corrupted to create something unnatural.[15] This is an example of decadence's focus on what Corrick calls "ecstasy in extremes", a literature in which "only great corruption and great virtue are of psychological interest" leading to "the quasi-theological language of sin and holiness, an otherworldly focus which only enhanced their appeal to those weary of earthly life".[16] For Stella, the virtual world of the video game is something entirely unnatural, which offers the ability to distance oneself from nature and become immersed in a transcendental world. Throughout the text, Stella seeks an escape from the natural world, which is depicted as a realm of obligations, both biological obligations, such as eating and sleeping, and career obligations, a translation she must complete within a deadline. Stella neglects all of

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[13] Murphy, p.75-76.
[14] Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondances', *Fleursdumal.Org* <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/103> [Accessed 26 November 2021].
[15] Baudelaire, 'Correspondances'.
[16] Corrick, p.9.

these obligations in order to explore the unnatural, transcendental plane of the artificial virtual world.

The further into the game Stella goes, we are told, the closer she gets to some kind of transcendence of the soul, just as the journey through St. Teresa's seven stages brings you closer to God. This idea of ascendance through Stella's exploration of the game only continues as she imagines her player character, or "avatar", as "an androgynous figure attired in a greatcoat and button-up vest".[17] The avatar, in Stella's imagination, is the titular character of Balzac's "Séraphîta", an androgynous angelic being born under parents that followed the religious teachings of Swedenborg.[18] In detailing his digimodernist notion of "super-subjectivity", Kirby writes:

> The game self mapped on to may be a single fictive individual, that is, a character with a name, history, traits, feelings, social place, and so on, though set in a universe where "selfhood" is invested with personal power(s) or an ego-emphatic lifestyle impossible in the real world. Playing as such a character you really *are* him/her (pathologically, this is narcissism) and you inherit all his/her enhanced rights, strengths or invulnerability, diminished responsibilities and eliminated needs or weaknesses.[19]

Within the story, Stella is mapped on to this character, imagined to be the ascended holy figure of Séraphîta. Stella therefore embodies what Kirby refers to as the "vastly inflated" self of her character in the game, offering her a form of transcendence which becomes even more apparent as the story continues.[20] For instance, when Stella comes across "a pixelated Eucharist, consecrated and infused with the exalted essence of the house" and consumes it, it is described as Stella herself consuming it rather than her in-game character. Murphy describes consuming the in-game object as a holy experience, in which "something of this manor was now a part of her", as though the feelings of her avatar and herself are indistinguishable.

The etymology of the very word 'avatar', most often used to describe the player-controlled main character in a video game, relates to the incarnation or manifestation of

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[17] Murphy, p.76.
[18] Honoré de Balzac, *Seraphita* (San Francisco: Otbebookpublishing, 2016).
[19] Kirby, *Digimodernism* p.170.
[20] Kirby, *Digimodernism* p.170.

a deity in the world. Murphy also depicts this total immersion of the self through the lavish detail with which he describes the game and its surroundings, when in fact the game would appear rudimentary due to its hardware limitations. Early in the text, Murphy even admits the fact "that the graphics were rudimentary could not be denied".[21] Despite this, all the passages describing the in-game world are deliberately detailed and bordering on over-written:

> The opening room was nothing short of immaculate in its conception. Brickwork of sapphire and dark azure provided a garish contrast, not unusual for Spectrum games, with a series of rich golden archways that led onto other sections of the manor. […] She passed through lavish parlours and elaborate boudoirs as the crimson rays of jeweled chandeliers washed over and through her like a scintillating tide.[22]

Figure 11. A Screenshot from "Atic Atac", ZX Spectrum, 1983,

[21] Murphy, p.74.
[22] Murphy, p.77.

The level of detail with which Murphy describes the game is contradictory, since it would not have been achievable by the hardware of the early 1980s (see Figure 11). The only justification for Murphy's description of the game is the immense feeling of immersion that Stella experiences through mapping herself onto the game's avatar. This immersion is so extreme and trance-like that Stella's time spent inside of the artificial world of the game physically and teleologically separates her from the natural world:

> Stella became cognizant of the fact that she hadn't eaten for several hours. A quick inspection of the documents that lay upon the desk confirmed that the translation she's been working on was still unfinished. (p.80)

Stella finds herself losing track of time, space and obligation, taken away from the realm of her apartment and into the experience of the game.

This immersed state of being where one loses track of the real world is akin to the moment in *No One Is Talking About This* described in chapter one, when the protagonist is "locked in" to the world of the portal.[23] Immersion in technology is a state of being that Kirby claims is symptomatic of the contemporary individual, and is a direct result of the "super-subjectivity" of new forms of digital text and textuality:

> Here, the typical emotional state, radically superseding the hyper-consciousness of irony, is the *trance* – the state of being swallowed up by your activity. […] You click, you punch the keys, you are 'involved', engulfed, deciding. You are the text, there is no-one else, no 'author'; there is nowhere else, no other time or place. You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded.[24]

The "super-subjectivity" of contemporary technologies such as videogames, to Kirby, results in the individual becoming not just absorbed or immersed in the text but becoming an integral part of the text itself. Inside the text of which you are a part,

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[23] Lockwood, *No One is Talking About This*, p.21.
[24] Alan Kirby, *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*, (2006) <https://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond> [accessed 22 November 2022].

physically interacting and shaping the experience, you are taken away from the regular teleological or special experience, and it is this unique contemporary condition that texts such as *No One Is Talking About This* and "A Mansion of Sapphire" explore. Where "A Mansion of Sapphire" differs from the former is through its depiction of this experience as a transcendental, almost religious state of being, instead of a troubling, toxic environment in which one becomes stuck and poisoned.

In both texts, however, the experience of the virtual world bleeds into reality, and changes their protagonist's perception of the world. Her obsession at its peak, when Stella eventually breaks away from the game "the sun had long since risen and again begun its descent" and she has experienced a mental and physical change so strong that "she felt an urgent need to descend into the streets in order to readapt to the texture and physicality of the natural world", as though the natural world has been altered by her new transcendent state granted by her time in the game.[25] When she does return to the natural world, her perception of it has been completely altered by her time inside "A Mansion of Sapphire":

> A single crow scrutinized her from a desolate windowsill above. She imagined that it sought a means of ingress to some hidden place – a secret alcove into which to deposit a stolen coin, or a locked cabinet whose drawers concealed a fragment of a map. She couldn't help but think that every facet of her neighborhood was connected by subtle threads of cause and effect. She started as a piercing caw resounded through the still night air, certain that some section of the city had been subtly altered by the cry.

This is concurrent with Corrick's account of Decadence as "an altered mental state which temporarily negates our awareness of whatever Utilitarian social purposes an object or person might hold' in which 'the beautiful serves as the vehicle of transcendence".[26] In more typical decadent stories, this transcendence and altered mental state is usually achieved through the use of drugs, but in this case the transcendence is technological, reflecting the contemporary trance of super-subjectivity. In *Artificial Paradises*, a non-fiction book in which Baudelaire recounts his experiences with hashish

[25] Murphy, p.93.
[26] Corrick, p. 8.

and opium, he writes "in the thrall of the poison, our man soon places himself at the center of the universe".[27] This experience is exactly what the technology has instilled in Stella, as she envisions the interconnectedness of her neighborhood, with herself in the center. The lavish beauty of the game's artificial world and its many hidden secrets finds its way into Stella's perception of the natural world, elevating it beyond its usual mundanity. The ZX Spectrum and A Mansion of Sapphire hold no utilitarian purpose, having long since been replaced by more useful or superior technologies, so to Stella it is the beauty of her immersion that brings transcendence to her and the world around her.

However, the story ultimately becomes a contemporary version of a decadent story of vices, substituting the experience of drugs for the super-subjectivity of the video game. Despite Stella's building obsession with the game and her certainty of the transcendence she will experience through her avatar, transcendence is ultimately denied. The virtual world is, after all, virtual, and while Stella's pursuits in the world of the game may change her perception of the world outside it, to give her the pathological "narcissism" that Kirby identifies with super-subjectivity, they ultimately do nothing for her but offer her temporary escapism.[28] After all the time she has invested in completing the game, and all of her energies poured into it, the story concludes as she is swept up by an "infernal ocean" and "stripped of all her resources, divested of the attainments the mansion had bestowed upon her".[29] The story concludes with the declaration that "all that remained was the ardour of her aspiration, flaring like a dying match-head in the vast abysses of obscurity'.[30] Ultimately, Stella's pursuits in the game reach no form of satisfying conclusion and she is shown the futility of all the actions she has made before, demonstrating that the hours of time she has invested and all the things she has sacrificed such as eating, sleeping and working towards her deadline, have been for nothing. The real world is triumphant over the virtual, and Stella's passionate addiction

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[27] Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises*, trans. by Stacy Diamond, (New York: Citadel Press, 1998), p.70.
[28] Kirby, *Digimodernism*, p.170.
[29] Murphy, p.97.
[30] Murphy, p.97.

to the game begins to fade, shown as nothing but a short-lived pursuit of transcendence in an artificial world.

"A Mansion of Sapphire" therefore demonstrates several aspects of Alan Kirby's portrait of the videogame/player relationship, of the vast inflation of the self through super-subjectivity, the experience of immersion, and the absorption of reader into text. It also demonstrates qualities of modernist and postmodernist writing, with the modernist renewal of preexisting literary styles and the ironic, postmodern denial of transcendence. With the basic concepts of the player/game relationship and their relevance to our contemporary cultural moment established, this chapter now turns to a text that delves far deeper into these themes. Where "A Mansion of Sapphire" is a relatively unambiguous and traditional text that explores a spiritual, religious transcendence through the artificial artefact of the Spectrum, Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young* explores the idea of a neo-romantic metaphysical, teleological transcendence through the virtual world of the videogame, fueled by nostalgia. In both works, the possibilities of transcendence through virtual and natural worlds are scrutinized, but Sexton's work does so with the added depth of other kinds of virtual worlds: the autobiographical world of nostalgic memory and the idealized utopia of the pastoral idyll. In Stephen Sexton's work we will find the same oscillation between modernist and postmodernist practice, between ironic elusiveness, self-awareness and intertextual frameworks, and sincere messages, grand narratives and returns to traditional forms and styles of literature as seen in the writers previously explored in this thesis, but also an approach to literature that is as much a game as it is a conventional text. Sexton explores the medium of the video game through literature on a formal, structural and narratological level, bringing the two mediums into a dialogue with one another while simultaneously exploring nostalgia and its own complex philosophical questions of personal bias, sincerity and historicity.

Nostalgia is rampant in this age of advancing technologies, which swiftly leaves outdated tech behind to pave the way for the new, leaving generations of people who remember the technologies of their past. These "older" forms of technology have become part of a craze for the retro-aesthetic, where people are reminded of their own

past through reusing, reexperiencing, or repurchasing things from their earliest memories. This is a nostalgia which, elaborated on further ahead, is a key characteristic of postmodern cultural production. It is a trend that has found its way into many facets of cultural production, but perhaps no more so than the industries of film, television and video games. Film studios have developed an obsession with remaking, reimagining, or "rebooting" their past intellectual properties, with Disney leading the charge with over fifteen films in the past decade based on existing intellectual properties, many of them postmodern appropriations of fairy tales, myths and legends. Access to online streaming platforms such as Netflix or Amazon Prime have given consumers greater access to the popular culture of their past, and new television shows have modeled themselves on the aesthetic of the 1970s and 80s, with some, such as popular Netflix original series *Stranger Things*, going as far as to follow their own form of intertextual practice by recreating shots from popular films of that period.[31]

Video game companies have followed suit, with some developers updating games created well within lived memory in order to allow consumers to reexperience games from their past. Nintendo's "Virtual Console", for instance, is an online service on the Nintendo Switch, which ports games from its older consoles onto the newest device, allowing people to replay the games from their past on newer technologies. Other developers purposefully create brand new games with a retro style, such as development company Yacht Club Games, who create 2-dimensional platformers with pixel-art graphics and chiptune music, inspired by the style of games on older generation consoles such as the Nintendo Entertainment System. It is easier than ever for people to access "nostalgia on demand", with our own memories and past experiences only a few clicks away: reminders of Facebook posts made years ago, archived older versions of popular websites such as YouTube available on the Wayback Machine, and countless photo albums forever saved and always easily accessed on the cloud.[32]

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[31] 'References To 70-80S Movies In Stranger Things', *Youtube*, (2021) <https://youtu.be/wBjgFt6lVHM> [Accessed 26 November 2021].

[32] See Ben Rowen, 'Nostalgia On Demand', *The Atlantic*, (2021) <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/the-end-of-forgetting/524523/> [Accessed 26 November 2021] and Condé Nast, 'What The Web Said Yesterday', *The New Yorker*, (2021) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/26/cobweb> [Accessed 26 November 2021].

While the use of nostalgia is a newer development in film and television, it has deep roots in literature. Eric Sandberg identifies the properties of nostalgia in a number of ancient texts, such as the story of Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden, or the search for The Promised Land.[33] Sandberg goes as far as to remind us that "writing is at its most basic level a set of techniques that allows us to preserve voices from the past into the present", and as such it is almost always a backwards-facing practice.[34] The very word nostalgia, though originally used to describe a medical ailment in the 1600s, is derived from even further in the past, from the Ancient Greek words nostos and algos, meaning "home" and "pain" respectively. Nostos is a word that often occurs in discussions of Ancient Greek literature, particularly in the voyage of Odysseus/Ulysses in Homer's *Odyssey*, which tells the story of Odysseus/Ulysses's return home concluding the Trojan War.

The experience of nostalgia is often associated with memories of childhood, a sentimental desire to return to a loss of youth, innocence, or experience. It is seen predominately as a form of grieving for the past, yet it is as much of a geographical or spatial grieving as it is temporal. After all, our memories of people or times which may bring about nostalgia are always "as situated in a place: as im-placed".[35] Given the composition of nostalgia from "pain and home", a sense of spatial or geographical longing is intrinsic to its very etymology – it is the plight of Odysseus/Ulysses's longing for home. Nostalgia is a particularly fitting term to retroactively apply to the *Odyssey* since, upon Odysseus/Ulysses's return, home is not the place he once remembered because Ithaca has been invaded by suitors. It is not only a time that has been lost, but a place where he once had a particular state of being. As Casey posits:

> 'Ithaca' is for Ulysses less a particular geographical site, situated in some cartographically precise way of the Aegean Sea, than it is a world, a way of life,

[33] Eric Sandberg, 'The Double Nostalgia Of Literature', in *Once Upon A Time: Nostalgic Narratives In Transition* (Stockholm: Trolltrumma Academia, 2018), pp. 114-126.
[34] Sandberg, p.116.
[35] Edward S. Casey, 'The World Of Nostalgia', *Man And World*, 20.4 (1987), pp. 361-384.

> a mode of being-in-the-world. In being nostalgic, what we seem to miss, to lack or need, is a world as it once was established in a place.[36]

While in the original version of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus/Ulysses slays the suitors and eventually achieves his nostos, his home-coming, and therefore reclaims the "true" version of home he had strived for, Sandberg picks up on Nikos Kazantakis's version of the tale, *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*. In this modern retelling, the triumphant Odysseus comes home to a different truth, becoming aware of how much he has changed, choosing to leave Ithaca behind him. Sandberg claims that "Kazantakis' infection of the Homeric nostos is aware of the fact that he who left home is not he who returns, those who await his return are not those he left behind".[37] It is a version of the *Odyssey* that is aware of the tension in modern society between past and present, which Sandberg, citing the multiple declarations by writers in the modernist canon who have called for a return to the past, labels as one of the defining features of modernity.[38] For contemporary individuals, whose memories are intermittently connected with products and technologies in their pasts, "material objects function as symbolic connections" to the places we wish to return,[39] a place that doesn't exist, as it is a world that "lingers between two extremes by virtue of being the past of a present-life world."[40]

The rise of alternate, more genuine forms of nostalgia in contemporary popular culture may also be seen as another signal of the end of postmodernism in favor of something different. Postmodernism was in many ways a period of loss, a shedding of the cultural values of the modernist period and before, with many of the seminal cultural critics declaring the loss of something that had come before it. Jean-François Lyotard, for instance, proclaimed the loss of the metanarrative, Jameson declared the end of depth and meaning, Baudrillard claimed the loss of originality and reality itself over representation, such as the previously mentioned Disney remakes, and Harvey believed

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[36] Casey, p.362.
[37] Sandberg, p.117.
[38] Sandberg, p.114.
[39] David S. Heineman, 'Public Memory And Gamer Identity: Retrogaming As Nostalgia', *Journal Of Games Criticism*, (2014) <http://gamescriticism.org/articles/heineman-1-1/> [Accessed 26 November 2021].
[40] Casey, p.364.

the ephemeral had replaced the eternal. In postmodern "nostalgia films" such as *American Graffiti*, Jameson identifies that nostalgic representations of places and times were largely appropriated a particular time period's styles and aesthetics, resulting in a depthless form of pastiche.[41] Jameson is aware of the "incompatibility of a postmodernist 'nostalgia' art with genuine historicity", since these nostalgia films rely not on genuinely recreating the past but on referencing earlier films and undergoing an "aesthetic colonization" of generational periods, whereby a romanticized image of the past is constructed from cliché and intertextual reference to other films. In our current moment, however, it is these very characteristics – historicity, affect and depth – supposedly lost in the postmodern period that contemporary cultural critics such as the metamodernists are nostalgic for.[42]

Perhaps the most widely cited sign of this nostalgia for sincerity in art is David Foster Wallace, who contended that postmodern irony, self-awareness and rebellion had become so commonplace that it had become almost meaningless.[43] Instead, Wallace called for a return to sincerity in art, suggesting that the place for new innovation would come from "anti-rebels", rebelling against the ironic detachment of postmodern art and returning to notions of sincerity.[44] Ihab Hassan has likewise called for a return in academia to "words that need more than refurbishing, reinvention", words such as "truth, trust, spirit, all uncapitalized".[45] In "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust", Hassan considered a future after postmodernism in which irony and nihilism were bypassed in favor of a type of spirituality based on trust, a trust that is achieved only through "self-abnegation, self-emptying, something akin to kenosis".[46] Wallace's "anti-rebels" and Hassan's call to reclaim these words reflects a forwards-facing nostalgia (another oxymoronic, metamodernist oscillation), a desire to take back

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[41] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* p.66.
[42] Robin van den Akker, *Metamodernism – Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism,* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).
[43] David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', *Review of Contemporary Fiction,* 13.2 (1993), pp.151-194.
[44] Wallace, p.192.
[45] Ihab Hassan, 'Beyond Postmodernism: Towards an Aesthetic of Trust' in *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century* ed by David Rudrum & Nicolas Stavris, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp.13-30 (p.20).
[46] Hassan, p.309.

words and principles that were important in the past and lost in the culture of postmodernism, but to simultaneously remove them from their traditional associations with outdated modes of religion and philosophy. But can a representation of nostalgia retain any of these features when it relies on personal bias, on one individual, idealised view of the past?

While the authors and poets considered so far in this project have concerned themselves simultaneously with technology, the past and tradition – Tom McCarthy's modernist historiography and Rankine's lyric representation of mass media driven life – they are not necessarily nostalgic texts. McCarthy's *C* might be regarded as nostalgic because it is a careful sifting through the wreckage of the modernist period, and therefore a return to a moment of literary history that is often considered to be the peak of Western cultural production. Yet it does so with such deliberate flatness and lack of authenticity that it defies the romanticism that nostalgia is associated with, and is closer to Jameson's "nostalgic films" than a genuine, metamodernist embodiment of nostalgia. McCarthy treats the modernist period less like a lost monument to grieve and more like a cadaver, dividing it up into pieces, examining it and determining the cause of death. Likewise, Rankine's two texts could be considered nostalgic for the lyric tradition and its ability to bring people together, but Rankine also connects the present with a troubling past that America is struggling to leave behind.

I have demonstrated how both McCarthy and Rankine weave rich, intertextual networks, where their knowledge of the history of art, literature, and technology leave behind temporal footprints, but the backwards-looking practices of these two writers demonstrate how the past and present are closely connected without any form of longing. Similarly, the technologies presented in these texts are not given enough specificity to be considered objects of nostalgia. McCarthy's gramophone and kinetoscope seem to serve only as artefacts, stepping stones in the path of modernity that are considered magical in a way that seems alien to contemporary readers. The television screens that plague *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* are not treated as something to be cherished, standing in for all screens that will inevitably intrude in our lives.

When exploring nostalgia, a metamodernist oscillation between irony and sincerity, past and present, accurate historicity and personal bias must strike a balance between its self-awareness as a nostalgic text, prone to being false or untrustworthy, whilst displaying the truth of nostalgia as an emotional experience. It would be simultaneously anchored in past and present, expressing the deep personal affect that nostalgic memories such as Proust's madeleine moment can invoke, while at the same time taking a documentary approach, which presents as much of an objective look at the past and its artefacts as it can muster. Simultaneously subjective and objective, it would reflect on the past with a keen and honest eye, knowing full well the imperfection of memory while acknowledging the genuine feeling of nostalgia, loss and grief for the past. Such a text is Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young*. Through nostalgia and technology, Sexton navigates a middle ground between the real and the virtual, the ironic and the sincere, the pastoral and the anti-pastoral, and modernist and postmodernist practice.

If All the World and Love Were Young is a collection of poems that navigates nostalgic virtual worlds that closely resemble, but never truly recapture our own, exploring the past worlds of memory, art, pastoral literature, and Super Mario World on the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (hereby referred to as the SNES). Throughout the text, Sexton engages with his own personal nostalgia as well as a wider cultural and literary past, making links between real and virtual worlds as he attempts to recapture the experience of playing video games in his childhood. The nostalgia in the text is offset with universal truth of grief and of loss, the collection's narrative following Sexton's past, the course of his mother's terminal illness, and objective and accurate ekphrastic descriptions of the video game's different levels. In this chapter, I will argue Sexton captures the practice of retro-gaming through retro-writing, using the literary technique of ekphrasis and intertextual links between pastoral, classical, and modernist literature to capture the tension between past and present that "modernity is defined by".[47] Nostalgia for technology is just part of a long line of yearnings that has been traced across cultural history, a history of taking refuge in imagined worlds. I posit that

[47] Sandberg, p.114.

in Sexton's text the worlds of memory, photography, the pastoral idyll and Super Mario all function as a futile attempt to escape the conditions of reality, where time and space cannot be captured, and states of being are ever-changing. In his own nostos, Sexton has turned the world of the game into a place he struggles to return to. As he states in an article for *The Irish Times* :

> In order to write this book, I've had to give up the innocent experiences of Super Mario World: I can no longer participate in its images without sensing the elegiac glow I've instilled in it. It feels like I have committed an act of vandalism.[48]

The chapter will also examine this "vandalism", which stems from a form of guilt among elegiac writers about creating art from painful memories, and how Sexton corrupts his own idyll by filling it with images of death and tragedy. In so doing , Sexton uses the technologies of his past to come as close to a true metamodernist depiction of nostalgia as might be possible.

The Photograph in the Front Room – Technologies as Vehicles for Nostalgia

Svetlana Boym distinguishes between two forms of nostalgic experience: restorative and reflective. The restorative mode of nostalgia is with the nostos and is described by Boym as "a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home", a desire to completely restore the previous conditions of living.[49] It is a form of nostalgia that "takes itself dead seriously" in its idealization of the past, and its drive to "return to origins" by faithfully recreating an idealized picture of the past, whether it is authentic or not.[50] To elaborate on this, scholar Maria B. Garda draws on the restoration of Warsaw's Old Town, which

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[48] Stephen Sexton, 'Stephen Sexton: 'For Me, Death And Super Mario Have Always Been Connected'', *The Irish Times*, (2019) <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/stephen-sexton-for-me-death-and-super-mario-have-always-been-connected-1.3991940> [Accessed 26 November 2021].
[49] Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia | Svetlana Boym", *Monumenttotransformation.Org*, (2021), <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/n/nostalgia/nostalgia-svetlana-boym.html> [Accessed 26 November 2021].
[50] Svetlana Boym *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p.49.

was based largely from the paintings of Canaletto, using it as an example of "the hidden paradox of restorative nostalgia", which can never recreate its origins "regardless of tireless pursuits of historical accuracy".[51] With regard to Garda's example, using paintings to restore what was once a real place demonstrates a particular focus of restorative nostalgia on the aesthetic of the nostalgic past above objectively recreating it as it once was. This is similar to Jameson's view of postmodern "nostalgia films" as connotational, capturing "'pastness'" through stylistic convention rather than genuine historicity. A version of Warsaw's Old Town recreated from paintings is nothing but Baudrillardian simulation, a representation of a representation presented as an authentic recreation of the past. The danger of restorative nostalgia is that it denies being purely nostalgic, thinking of itself instead as restoring the "truth" and tradition of the past rather than clawing back to one lost, even if what it produces is far from the actual conditions of the past it is trying to retrieve.[52]

Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, acts differently from the restorative – "restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt".[53] It is much more self-aware of its position, concerned with the algos, "the longing itself," more broadly focused on the passing of time rather than the recreation of space, and "delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately".[54] Instead of attempting to relive or retrieve the lost past, or an idealized version of it, reflective nostalgia is accepting of the past as past. Instead of trying to retrieve the irretrievable space of the past, reflective nostalgia considers the emotions and the feelings of the passage of time. While restorative nostalgia is serious in its preoccupations with the "true" past, reflective nostalgia "can be ironic and humourous", aware of the subjectivity of memory, revealing that "longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another,

[51] Maria B. Garda, 'Nostalgia in Retro Game Design', unpublished paper delivered at the conference 'Proceedings of the Digital Games Research Association Conference 2013' (Atlanta, 26-29 August 2013), p.4.
[52] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.41.
[53] Boym, *Monumenttotransformation*.
[54] Boym, *Monumenttotransformation*.

just as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgement, or critical reflection."[55]

Stephen Sexton's collection juxtaposes between both of these modes as it explores the human condition of nostalgia. It is a form of reflective nostalgia that disguises itself as restorative. It is no coincidence that Sexton states his project began "as a kind of joke", as Sexton tries to recreate the past while fully aware of the impossibility of doing so. [56] If, as Boym claims, reflective nostalgia is "a form of deep mourning that performs a labour of grief", then for Sexton that labour is the painstaking attempt to restore his past through retro-gaming and retro-writing, in following through with the restorative nostalgia that he is aware will not recover his lost home in the past. The very process of using retro-gaming to reexperience the video games of one's past is a practice in restorative nostalgia. Wulf et al. in a study about the success of retro-gaming as a popular practice, note that "by engaging in older games people can essentially return to the exact same virtual space that they explored in earlier times".[57] Gizela Horvath reflects on the technological definition of memory in computers, stating "the computer has a memory, but its memory is not temporal but quantitative and special: a quantity of information which is accessible to us in a synchronous way, not in a historical sequence".[58] In this way, a computer's memory is reliable and generally unaffected by the passing of time, remaining intact in exactly the way it was left. A person's memory, on the other hand, is always subject to change, to forgetting, and playing through a video game in its exact same state in the past allows people to revisit their memories.

In a similar study comprised of a series of interviews about retro-gaming, one of Kristian Redhead Ahm's participants shared a scene with startling resonance with Sexton's text:

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[55] Boym, *Monumenttotransformation*.
[56] Sexton, *Irish Times Article*.
[57] Tim Wulf and others, 'Video Games As Time Machines: Video Game Nostalgia And The Success Of Retro Gaming', *Media And Communication*, 6.2 (2018), pp. 60-68 (p.62).
[58] Gizela Horvath, 'Faces Of Nostalgia. Restorative And Reflective Nostalgia In The Fine Arts', *Jednak Książki. Gdańskie Czasopismo Humanistyczne*, 9 (2018), pp.145-156 (p.147).

> For some of my respondents, the nostalgia of playing a childhood game seems to transport them back in time and space. When asked about why he still plays Bart vs. The Space Mutants (Acclaim, 1991), Charlie answers,
>
> "Well it's just uh… uh… to relive sitting in that small living room with the old striped carpet and looking out at the apple tree while I try to progress further than the first f cking stage."[59]

Early poems in *If All the World and Love Were Young* such as "Yoshi's House" and "Yoshi's Island 1", reflect this exact scene, of the child playing video games on the carpet of a living room, which has become a part of many people's collective memory.[60] In his review of the text, John Casteen praises the collection for being "aware of us", claiming "the power resident in these collections derive from specific gestures between the life the poet knows and the world the reader inhabits".[61] Instead of the "apple tree" from Charlie's memory, "Yoshi's House" refers to a "holly tree", which is "out of the visible spectrum" of the boy playing Super Mario on the television.

Sexton is recreating the conditions of his childhood through these opening poems, and he does so with a keen focus not only on his memory but also on the source material of the game, with exact details relating to the levels in the game the poems are named after:

> These are the days of no letters, the magenta mailbox jitters
>
> out of the visible spectrum babies chirp in our holly tree
>
> mountains yield to the foreground and sadly again they're beautiful[62]

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[59] Kristian Redhead Ahm, '(Re)Playing (With) Video Game History: Moving Beyond Retrogaming', *Games And Culture*, 16.6 (2020), pp. 660-680. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412020955084> [accessed 11 November 2022].
[60] Stephen Sexton, *If All The World And Love Were Young* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).
[61] John Casteen, 'Lived Experience: The Lyric First Person In Three Recent Poetry Collections', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 96.3 (2020), pp.156-161 (p.157).
[62] Sexton, *IATW*, p.5.

Figure 12. A Screenshot of "Yoshi's House", the first level of *Super Mario World*

In this poem, two virtual worlds echo one another: the virtual world of Super Mario Land and the home of Sexton's memory, with the holly tree in Sexton's memory reflected in the apple tree in the game's level, the chirping babies seen at the top of the screen, and the "mountains yielding to the foreground" all present in Figure 12.[63] When read on its own without the accompaniment of the screenshot from the game, a reader would naturally assume that the babies in the holly tree are separate from the game since they are "outside of the visual spectrum" of the television screen, yet the level itself contains young birds, Sexton's experience of the level in the game thus coloring, or perhaps adding inauthenticity, to his memory of the outside world as portrayed in the poem.[64] Through remixing the game's levels into poems, Sexton is arguably engaging in

[63] Sexton, *IATW*, p.5.
[64] Sexton, *IATW*, p.5.

the same restorative nostalgia gained through the practice of retro-gaming, attempting to piece together a "sadly beautiful" nostos. By reexperiencing Super Mario World, Sexton can visit the same virtual space he did as a child. However, Sexton is aware that this is a virtual space that is disconnected from the real-world spaces of his memory. He can never reexperience the games levels in the same physical space he once did: the lost home of his youth. The poems that follow become agonizingly aware of this temporal disconnect between the permanence of virtual spaces and the ephemera of the real world, which is where the aspects of reflective nostalgia quickly come to light. Far from being purely restorative, then, Sexton faithfully recreates the level from the video game and the memory it conjures for him while acknowledging that the latter is made subjective by his nostalgia. The authentic and objective memory of the video game console, presenting 'Yoshi's House' exactly as it once was, is in a dialogue with the inauthentic memory of Sexton himself, with the experiences and places of his youth mediating his representation of the level.

Sexton's awareness of technology as vehicles for nostalgia becomes clear as early as the collection's second poem, "Yoshi's Island 1", which describes a photograph Sexton's mother took of him as he played on the console. The very act of describing the photograph being taken is itself a form of restorative nostalgia, for which "the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot".[65] The restorative nostalgia of the poem becomes especially clear when we consider that "the book might be the only version of that photograph that still exists", since Sexton has been unable to find the physical artifact itself. The poem, like many others in the collection, opens with some detail from the level that the poem is named after, before describing Sexton's memory of having his picture taken:

> A rush of photons at my back a fair wind from the spectral world.
>
> I remember myself being remembered a little lotus
>
> a cross-legged meditant for whom the questions floating in the air

[65] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.49.

are for a future self to voice decades from now who will return

again and again to this room and these moments of watershed.[66]

In the scene described, Sexton is being captured by a wind-up camera, a piece of technology that, while also outdated, has its own connections with nostalgia. In a recent article on the growth of technologies that allow us to return to our past, Ben Rowen discusses how it all began "in 1888, when Kodak released the first commercially successful camera for amateurs", discussing how the marketing for the product was rooted in nostalgia, calling it "a necessary instrument for preserving recollections of children and family celebrations".[67] Commercially, cameras functioned as a tool for capturing the past in still images that would serve as a nostalgic view into the past, particularly for parents taking images of their children.

Joe Moran discusses how "photographs of children are an important resource for nostalgia, and are often among people's most treasured possessions" because they allow us to "cherish memory as immediate and peculiar to ourselves, uncontaminated by history, culture and technology, even as those technologies are increasingly manipulated to preserve or aid memories".[68] When Sexton "remembers myself being remembered a little lotus", he is recreating this experience second-hand, as though rifling through an old photo album from his mother's perspective and coming across the image he is describing. Photographs are one of the purest sources of unrestrained restorative nostalgia, because they create a sense of a purer past, made more authentic through their age. However, while a photograph, particularly one older in appearance, may create a sense of "authentic pastness", it also highlights "the tension between the photograph's ability to hold and concretize memory and its obvious mediatedness".[69] Sexton reflects on this in the poem, where he finds himself unable to reexperience the moment, instead voicing "questions floating in the air", as though there are things that the photograph is

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[66] Sexton, *IATW*, p.6.
[67] Ben Rowen, 'Nostalgia On Demand', *The Atlantic*, (2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/the-end-of-forgetting/524523/> [Accessed 26 November 2021].
[68] Joe Moran, 'Childhood And Nostalgia In Contemporary Culture', *European Journal Of Cultural Studies*, 5.2 (2002), pp.155-173 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1364942002005002869>. [accessed 23 November 2021].
[69] Moran, p.162.

missing of the true experience. When talking about this poem, Sexton makes it clear that the level on the "glowing screen" of the photograph, for example, is unknown, due to both the nature of the snapshot but also because Sexton is recreating the photograph through his memory alone.[70] In this case, the photograph has mediated the memory in multiple ways, first by the very act of being taken, a second time through Sexton's recreation of the recreation, and a third by adding the perspective of his mother remembering the image. Sexton also marks a desire to reflect upon "these moments of watershed", a turning point that the photograph will forever deny by being a frozen image, unable to cross temporal boundaries.

A kind of authenticity is lost, then, along with the photograph, and Sexton will return "again and again to this room" in order to reflect, seeking the answers to his questions instead through the one world from his memory that is still perfectly preserved: the world of Super Mario, which Sexton aims to capture as accurately as possible. Structurally, for example, Sexton chooses to reflect the world of the game by writing one poem for and titled after each of the game's different levels, arranged in the order that a player would experience them. Formal patterns also restore the physical hardware of the SNES, with every line of every poem written with 16 syllables to reflect the console's 16-bit processing power. In this way, Sexton is physically representing and restoring the hardware of the console, the medium through which the game is played, in the form of the whole collection. Moreover, the choice to reflect the game's processor, the part of the hardware that processes memory, ties into the collection's themes of processing the writer's own memories of the past. Restorative nostalgia is therefore built into the very form of the collection as well as the language – the formal "hardware" of the poems becomes synonymous with the physical hardware of the SNES – demonstrating the faithfulness with which Sexton recreates and represents the video game, and the technological medium it is played on, through poetry. This is a faithfulness which is concurrent with Boym's definition of restorative nostalgia, which seeks to accurately and painstakingly recover the past in minute detail.

[70] Sexton, *Irish Times Article.*

Retreading Myth and Modernism – Nostalgia & Collective Memory

Sexton frames *If All the World and Love Were Young* with mythological references. One way Sexton captures the experience of playing a video game is by immersing himself in the grand narrative of the hero's journey. When watching a typical film or observing a traditional piece of art, the audience is put in the position of a spectator, existing outside of the canvas or the screen and exerting no influence on it outside of formulating their own internal interpretation or opinion of the piece. Conversely, a video game such as Super Mario World requires direct participation and effort from its audience to experience its world and its story. The audience is in charge of operating the main character, embodying themselves within the game's virtual world, occupying the space of their avatar and completing their journey alongside them. In this way, the player of a video game becomes the main character. Rather than watching events unfold on the screen, the player of Super Mario World is in control, charged with navigating the obstacles and hazards of the hero's journey.

When a person describes playing a video game they use the first person, immersing themselves in the game and becoming one of its inhabitants. This is why Sexton uses 'It's-a me, Mario!' as one of *If All the World and Love Were Young's* three epigraphs, serving not only as a joke but also to recognize the liminality in a video game between the avatar and the self, another version of himself in the virtual world, reflecting the "super-subjectivity" identified by Kirby.[71] If we consider pictorial art as static moments in time, then video games are experienced as a journey shared between the player and the characters in the virtual world. Yet, akin to the modernists, Sexton's focus is on an impossible journey. In *The Quest to Fail*, Johnathan Ullyot examines the use of medieval quest narratives in modernist literature, and how the quest for the holy grail is reconfigured by writers such as Eliot, Kafka, and Henry James.[72] Ullyot claims that "Literary modernity is committed to failure",[73] since it was at odds

[71] Kirby, *Digimodernism*, p.170.
[72] Jonathan Ullyot, *The Medieval Presence In Modernist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[73] Ullyot, p.1.

with past modes of literature, which followed coherent narrative structures, and stories that met neat and tidy conclusions. Analysing several modernist texts, Ullyot argues that modernist writers critique the quest narrative through "failed or 'stalled' versions of the Grail romance".[74] Like the previously mentioned *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, which attempts to find a more "modern" conclusion to Homer's epic by denying Odysseus his nostos, Ullyot argues modernist authors adapted the story of the holy Grail in a similar way, offering stories that contain "'impossible' quest narratives in which the object of the quest is unclear".[75] Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* is another contemporary example of this impossible quest which has been discussed previously, with the objective of U.'s great project never clearly stated or explained.[76]

If All the World and Love Were Young contains two quests with clear objectives, but one of them is impossible to complete: while Mario is on a quest to reunite with his friends, one that ultimately succeeds on completion of the game, Sexton is on a quest to be reunited with his mother, which is unfortunately doomed to failure. Sexton's mythological influence can be found as early on as "Yellow Switch Palace" from the text's first section, in which he discusses a Kappa, a creature from Japanese folklore:

> Should a Kappa step out of myth made of scales and razory claws
> […]
> should he step wet out of the lake I will offer to him kindness.
> I will offer soba noodles in soy I will offer my name
> written on cucumber floated on the lake whatever the cost.[77]

The Kappa is an amphibious creature from Japanese folklore resembling a humanoid turtle with a water dish on top of its head, a figure of Japanese history just like the Japanese-created character of Super Mario. Cucumber and buckwheat soba noodles were thought to be their favourite types of food, and in exchange for them they would help humans in several ways, including using their wide knowledge of medicine to assist with any ailments. There was also a tradition in Edo, the city now known as Tokyo, where families would write their names on cucumbers and float them down the river to

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[74] Ullyot, p.1.
[75] Ullyot, p.7.
[76] Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (New York: Vintage, 2016).
[77] Sexton, *IATW*, p.7.

appease the Kappa. In this poem, Sexton states he will pay "whatever the cost" for help from the Kappa, seeking the answers to his mother's condition from the realms of myth. This is ultimately futile, since the Kappa are imaginary beings, whose answers do not exist in the real world. By no small coincidence, the turtle-like creatures in the game are called "Koopas", and the original name for the game's final boss Bowser is "King Koopa", a word phonetically similar to Kappa.

The Kappas in the world of Super Mario are enemies to be thwarted, and Sexton returns to this poem towards the end of the collection in "Valley of Bowser 4", when his mother's condition is at its worst:

> Where is kindness its parishes its empty hands its open arms?
> Over swells of lava over severe drops and quarter circles
> swept out of the rock I am compelled to witness the long days shorten.
> Is it so that every world is only a world of enemies?[78]

Sexton has found no "kindness" in the koopas or any of the creatures in the game's world, no answers to his mother's condition or way to reunite with her, finding only enemies. Sexton's journey through his memories is coupled with the quest narrative of Super Mario as he strives to rescue his friends, and Sexton connects himself, through Mario, to several mythological figures. In "Vanilla Secret 1", for instance, Sexton claims "I take the Orpheus route from one world up into another […] into the brightly lit waiting room and something like wakefulness".[79] This poem describes the journey through the level as Orpheus's journey (once again, concerned with the idea of nostos) as he comes back up from the underworld with Eurydice, only for her to once again be lost forever. Sexton transitions from that journey up through the underworld to the hospital's waiting room. The entire section "Vanilla Dome" is filled with poems that parallel the hospital and mythological underworld, with "Vanilla Dome 3"'s references to Charon, the boat keeper of the river Styx to Hades, and the frozen 9th circle of hell in Dante's "Inferno".[80] "Vanilla Fortress", a poem named after one of the game's

[78] Sexton, *IATW*, p.81.
[79] Sexton, *IATW*, p.32.
[80] Sexton, *IATW*, p.34.

underwater levels, speaks of coelacanths, fish that were considered long-extinct before they were rediscovered, the scientific term for which is a Lazarus taxon.

Sexton links the Lazarus taxon of the coelacanth to the Christian story of Lazarus's resurrection from which the taxon gained its name, before writing a passage from his mother's perspective:

> To suffer suffer everywhere and not a moment stop to think
> let the world go on without me the next life will find me happy
> and adrift pedaling the swans some bright day the sun names the boats
> one by one in the marina this will have been so long ago
> by then I will have missed you for so long will I have missed you.

The first line of this section echoes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "water, water, everywhere / nor any drop to drink", a story of a mariner and his crew who have a supernatural experience at sea after he shoots an albatross.[81] In Coleridge's poem, an embodiment of Death and another named "Life-in-Death" gamble for the souls of the crew, and the titular mariner is won by the latter. The mariner is forced to live in suffering, while the rest of the crew pass on.

Sexton's poem casts his mother in the role of the mariner, who seems to wish for her suffering to end rather than to be resurrected like the "little Lazarus" of the coelacanth.[82] All of these mythological references appeal to the collective cultural memory of the reader. They relate Sexton's story to a longstanding tradition of tales of life and death, planted within the text to be recognized, and therefore remembered, by the reader. Sexton leaves behind these traces of myths and well-known stories to prompt the recognition of his audience, to align themselves with him in remembrance and call to mind their own individual restorative nostalgia, with these old stories revived in their minds.

While these mythological sources are certainly key to Sexton's exploration of the world of Super Mario, they are not Sexton's only frame of cultural reference. The collection itself is richly intertextual, applying the past alongside technology to playfully

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[81] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner' in *The Complete Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Penguin, 1997), pp.167-187 (p.170).
[82] Sexton, *IATW*, p.38.

explore the relationship between past and present. John Casteen's review of the text, for instance, begins with a discussion of Walt Whitman, a major influence on modernist poets, claiming that the power of Whitman's poetry comes through his engagement with his own present moment, generating meaning "because readers recognize their subject matter from their own lives".[83] It is the projection of lived experience that is of value, to Casteen, "not from the overarching, cinematic perspective of the historian in a study, but from the claustrophobic, narrow point of view of the soldier in a trench", and, by using Super Mario, Sexton is working with a "broadly familiar cultural touchstone".[84]

If All the World and Love Were Young, despite how heavily referential it can be to a well-researched or avid reader, can be understood by any contemporary audience that shares similar memories. The text can therefore appeal to the memories of an audience that can remember playing Super Mario as well as an audience that can remember myths, legends, and previous generations of poets. In this way, Casteen identifies two contrasting methods of reading *If All the World and Love Were Young*, one that researches heavily and considers the text's "Credits" sequence, and another that enjoys the text for its language and emotion. The first method is described by Casteen as the "more direct" way of reading the text, the way one might experience it for the first time before realising that the coda even exists and involves enjoying the text "purely for the satisfaction it offers at the granular level […] to let the language flow into one's head allows the pleasures of *Ulysses*, for example, or *Light in August*".[85] Indeed, the text's 16-syllable lines with little punctuation do sometimes render the experience of reading as something akin to stream of consciousness. Take, for instance, the poem "Donut Secret House", which contains a long account of the level as Sexton thinks and experiences it:

> It is night-time when I arrive a mist settles against the roof
> picture windows in wooden frames return my image in their glass
> the dashed grey brick worries off here and there a giant fruitless bush
> almost a story high leans on the western wall or does the wall

[83] Casteen, p.156.
[84] Casteen, p.159.
[85] Casteen, p.159.

whose foundations bear high water when the floods come annually
gales when the season supposes it leans against the giant bush?[86]

This passage contains only one piece of punctuation, the question mark at its conclusion, and results in a reading that is difficult to comprehend or interpret. The last few lines concern the "giant fruitless bush", asking if it leans against the house or if the house leans against it.[87] Without any form of contextualisation, since the text itself does not contain any screenshots of the level it represents or clear reference to what it is trying to describe, the reader is left just to experience the language as it rapidly flows across the page, experiencing the present-tense narrator's thoughts as they arrive at the house.

However, Casteen makes a connection between Sexton, Joyce, and Faulkner, not just in terms of literary technique or reading experience, but also because of their heavily referential styles, brought to our attention in Sexton's work through the text's "Credits" sequence. The "Credits" sequence is the closest thing to a collection of footnotes in the text, paralleling the end credits of Super Mario, which lists all the names and sprites of the characters in the game. Instead of names and sprites, Sexton chooses, "(in order of appearance)" to detail every image, place, and person that he has filled the text with.[88] The "Credits" are reminiscent of the footnotes in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and they offer an alternate, more studious reading of the text alongside its many references, prompting the reader to research and key the poems alongside their references. This second form of experiencing the text "keeps one thumb near the back of the book, at the Credits, in the way one might keep *The Odyssey* at hand when reading Joyce, or the gospel according to John alongside Faulkner".[89] Acknowledging the sporadic nature of the "Credits", which do not indicate which poems each entry is related to and can lead to "the frustration of a bifurcated read", Casteen calls the sequence "a torrent that lets the reader know how much water is behind the dam in these poems".[90]

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[86] Sexton, *IATW*, p.21.
[87] Sexton, *IATW*, p.21.
[88] Sexton, *IATW*, p. 109.
[89] Casteen, p.159.
[90] Casteen, p.159.

Casteen applauds how these metaphors and references escape being purely figurative in the poem "Donut Plains 1" by "attaching a clear objective correlative to the metaphors":

> Lough Neagh does resemble a site of excision; elvers do look like needles of glass, and, by extension, like glass "light slowed through sodium," a feat proposed in 1924 by Albert Einstein and Satyendra Nath Bose and accomplished at the Rowland Institute for Science in 1999. How does one know this, you ask? One Googles it, scooping knowledge out of our brains' external hard drive. Now no one needs to remember anything.[91]

Casteen encourages a reading that takes advantage of the contemporary technology of the search engine, and perhaps that is what the end credits offers, a list of images to search for and see on our own screens. Since Sexton is engaging with ekphrasis, wanting to conjure images to a reader, giving them the opportunity to do just that with their own devices and key them against the poems allows for a deeper, more involved reading that connects him with his audience and vice versa.

Yet there is the "frustration" that Casteen mentions, which comes from the way a reader must navigate the credits if they wish to read the text alongside them, having to decipher which image is coded to which poems. With "Donut Secret House", for example, there seem to be no entries for it in the credits at all, with "The Mariana Trench" referencing the poem before it, and "Ulster Hospital" referencing the poem after it, which can lead to confusion.[92]

What Casteen fails to consider in his review is a third form of experiencing the text that branches from the second, a method that formed the basis of this chapter: considering the poems alongside not just the text's "Credits", but also alongside watching a walkthrough of the game itself. Casteen's method of reading the text considers only the text and the real-world images listed in its credits, yet each poem is titled deliberately after a level in the game, and where the credits sometimes generate frustration, looking at the game first-hand can offer a solution:

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[91] Casteen, p.159.
[92] Sexton, *IATW*, p.109.

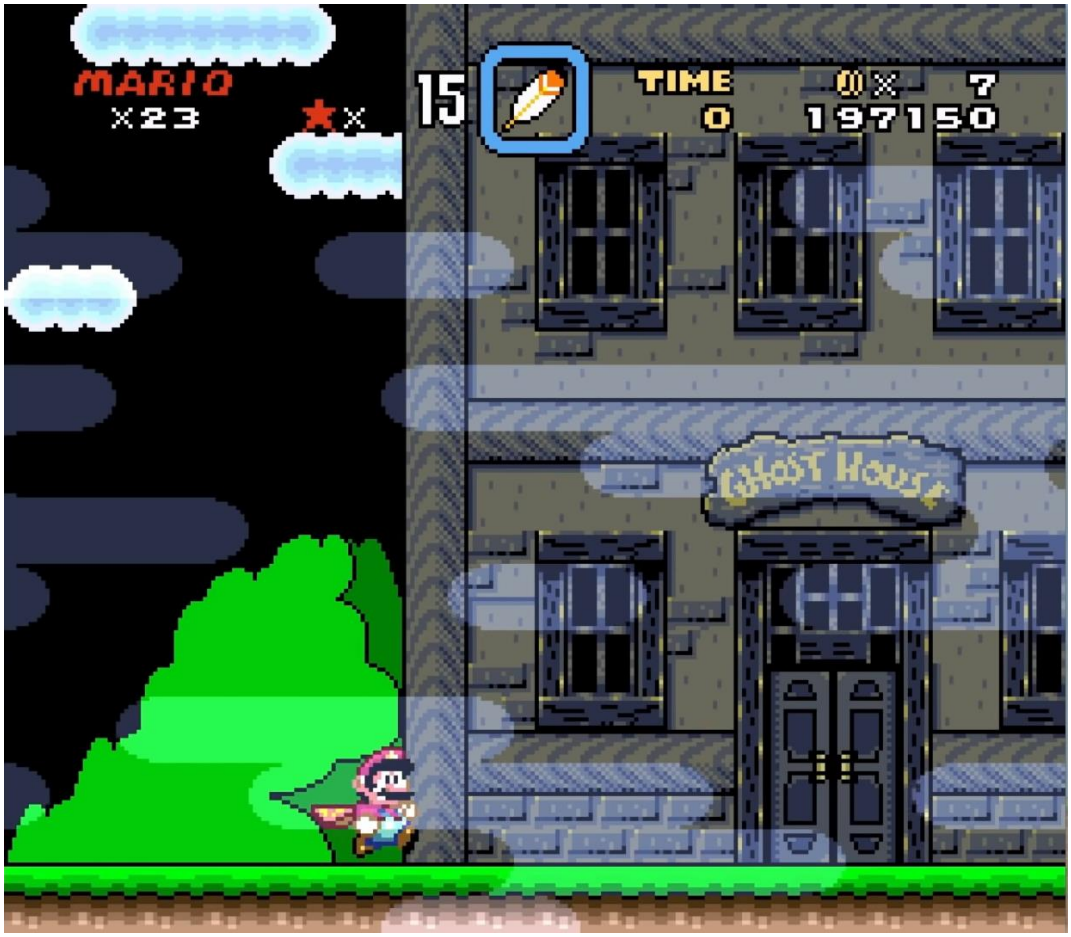

Figure 13. A screenshot of "Donut Secret House" from *Super Mario World*

As previously mentioned, the poem "Donut Secret House" contains no mentions in the book's credits. Yet, in researching the game itself online and looking at the level, a reader can see how it opens, and how detailed Sexton is in his ekphrasis: the "mist settles against the roof", the "giant fruitless bush almost a story high" next to the level's "Western wall" and the "picture windows in wooden frames".[93] This kind of reading could be considered reductive since it breaks the poem down to pure ekphrasis when there is much more to be taken from the text, yet it can assist in a reading where the credits offer no help. When read alongside a walkthrough of the game, it is startling how many of the text's poems resonate with even the smallest details from the game's levels, and it is a kind of reading that we are invited to partake in through each poem's title. It

[93] Sexton, *IATW*, p.21.

is almost as if Sexton is inviting the reader to play into the game of his text, to have them directly engage with it and all of the materials of its construction – be it the high culture of mythology or the low culture of the video game. What a reader gets out of the text is determined by how far they want to play with it, and by offering an alternate reading through the wide network of intertextuality, as well as collection's credits, Sexton allows for a degree of 'replayability', an opportunity for a reader to revisit the text just as Sexton has done countless times with the game it is based on. Sexton is therefore leaning into the contemporary, digimodernist moment, aware of the technologies of research at a reader's fingertips, at the same time as it looks back across literary and cultural history.

The main technique that Sexton uses throughout the collection to recreate aspects of the game's levels and memories into the poems is ekphrasis, a technique that Sexton claims he used initially as a joke, since "the tradition of poems after paintings – or, ekphrasis, to be Greek about it – has a certain air to it: a seriousness".[94] This comment suggests that the collection would have a tendency to be ironic or humorous, since it uses a technique usually reserved for great works of art to depict a video game designed to be enjoyed by children, but Sexton often uses ekphrasis in a way that is faithful to both the traditions of the technique and the medium it is used to describe. Sexton's initially ironic use of ekphrasis actually becomes a sincere and genuine use of the technique that explores the nature of representation and memory. Ekphrasis is a literary technique described by James Heffernan as "the verbal representation of visual representation", a tradition that can be traced as far back as Homer's description of Achilles's shield in the *Iliad*. The technique is primarily associated with verbal descriptions of visual art, either real (literal) or imagined (notional).

To formulate a theory for ekphrastic poetry, then, it is important to establish the key differences between literature and visual art. One of the earliest distinctions between literature and visual art comes from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon: an essay upon the limits of painting and poetry*, published in 1766.[95] Within the text, Lessing differentiates between poetry and art by examining the ways in which the two art forms

[94] Sexton, *Irish Times Article*.
[95] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon* (Paris: Hermann, 2009).

depict action and narrative. Poetry is defined by Lassing as an artform that is fueled by action and narrative, the passage of a poem acting as a representation of the passage of time. Characters in literature move, speak, and act. Painting, conversely, captures a still moment, its subjects never moving, never speaking, always *about* to act. The ways in which poetry and painting depict action is therefore oppositional: while the reader of a poem experiences the action of the poem through the experience of reading, an observer of a piece of art can only *infer* actions that have or are about to occur. Because artworks are static, painting is an art of space in which the narrative can only be successfully depicted through capturing "pregnant" moments that infer actions preceding and exceeding the piece. The titular artwork of Lessing's text serves as an example of this "pregnant" moment; the sculpture of Laocoon, which depicts snakes wrapped around Laocoon and his children, infers the moment before, the action of wrapping themselves around their victims, and the moment to follow, in which the snakes will kill their victims through constriction. To create ekphrastic poetry, in its most fundamental sense, is therefore to animate the inferred narrative of the still artwork, to describe the snakes as they ensnare Laocoon, and to see his death through to completion.

The object of ekphrasis, like the photograph in the poem discussed above, is not displayed, missing, and it is up to the author/poet to recreate that image into words, to restore it. Sexton, in an interview for the Jaipur Literary Festival, describes it as a kind of magic trick, whereby the author, like a magician, produces a missing object into being in front of its audience as if it were really there.[96] Conjuring lost objects into being in a different form is one of the main practices of ekphrasis, and so it is a fitting technique to discuss when considering forms of nostalgia. Returning to Sexton's ekphrasis of the photograph, for example, we can see why there is difficulty in fully capturing it, its "questions floating in the air": the photograph is devoid of true narrative. What is captured in the described photograph of "Yoshi's Island 1" is not a pregnant moment of a story, but a depiction of something that, to Sexton in his youth, was part of his everyday experience. There is no telling exactly when it was taken, the events before

[96] Jaipur Literary Festival, *If All The World And Love Were Young: Stephen Sexton In Conversation With Elaine Canning*, 2020 <https://youtu.be/ZIJd9vflDrg> [Accessed 26 November 2021]. Timestamp 6:08 – 6:30.

and after its capture, or even the level on the screen, and so it is an ekphrasis that brings up more mystery than it does magic. While the missing photograph and recalled memories somewhat defy ekphrasis due to the difficulty of accurately conjuring them, Sexton can root them by attaching them to and mixing them with accurate descriptions of the game's levels that elevates the collection's authenticity. The description of the missing photograph and Sexton's memories, which are prone to bias and misremembered detail, are made more authentic by the ekphrasis of the levels in the game. Places, people and memories that are missing are therefore anchored in the accurate way Sexton describes the video game, the "world" of Super Mario, the only place that still exists and is still accessible in its original form.

Ekphrastic poetry is often self-conscious in its visual representation, directly engaging with the art, its materials, and its history rather than bypassing it entirely to tell the "story" the piece of art is telling. There exists an awareness in ekphrastic poetry of the artwork it is drawing its influence from, be that in describing the materials used in the painting, or the place in which the poet observed it. This element of ekphrastic poetry is already evident in Sexton's reflection of the SNES in the poem's 16 syllable form, nodding to the materials used (in this case the console) to create or experience the artwork. Because ekphrastic poetry is a response to a response, it must mediate itself as a third party, to narrate sometimes from beyond the artwork but not so far as to divorce itself from the piece it is trying to represent. To demonstrate this awareness of the poet as a third party in traditional uses of the technique, I look to two ekphrastic representations of Pieter Brueghel's "The Fall of Icarus", W.H. Auden's "Musée des beaux arts" and "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by William Carlos Williams.

Figure 14. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Breughel (1560)

The painting itself (Figure 14.) is largely a depiction of everyday occurrences, a farmer ploughing, a shepherd with his herd and sheepdog, all facing away from the limbs of Icarus pointing out of the water in the bottom right corner of the painting. William Carlos Williams' ekphrasis of the painting is much more traditional, a past tense narrative of the sequence of events up to Icarus's fall, its only direct engagement with Brueghel being the first line of the poem, "According to Brueghel", which grounds the narrative as a depiction of the artist's representation.[97] Williams describes the actions inferred from the painting with clarity, detailing the image of the farmer "ploughing / his field", the season of spring, and the heat of the sun.[98] Where Williams captures Brueghel's representation the most is through the insignificance with which Icarus's fall

[97] William Carlos Williams, "Landscape With The Fall Of Icarus", in *Collected Poems Volume II: 1939-1962* (New York: New Directions, 1992) p.385
[98] Williams, p.385.

is described: “unsignificantly / off the coast / there was / a splash quite unnoticed / this was / Icarus drowning”.[99] Williams’s ekphrasis is closer to a direct translation of the artwork it depicts, it is a quite literal description of the painting and what it captures, animating the artwork through language.

Auden’s version, however, focuses on making a more general argument about Brueghel’s art, discussing how “The old Masters” of painting pay close attention to depicting everyday behaviors alongside occurrences of suffering.[100] Auden refers to three of Brueghel’s paintings in his poem, all acquired by the Musée des Beaux arts in Brussels, focusing specifically on figures in the painting that behave with indifference towards the occurring events. In reference to Breughel’s depiction of public reactions to the birth of Christ, *The Census at Bethlehem*, Auden states “For the miraculous birth, there always must be//Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating//On a pond at the edge of the wood”. Likewise, Auden discusses how Brueghel depicts animals going about their lives in his painting of *The Massacre of the Innocents*, “the dreadful martyrdom must run its course//Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot//Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse//Scratches its innocent behind on a tree”. Turning finally to “Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance:”, the only occurrence in the poem of Auden referring directly to the artist, he describes how “everything turns away//quite leisurely from the disaster”, capturing the insignificance of Icarus’s fall depicted by the painting in a similar way to Williams.

These two ekphrastic responses to *The Fall of Icarus* seem to have the same goal, to translate the artist’s painting into words, but do so with different approaches to the reconstruction. Williams’ approaches is literal and concise, animating the people in the painting and the experience of the environment. Auden alternatively opens the poem up to the wider context of the museum, of experiencing this painting beside other works by the same artist. In doing so, Auden focuses on what the artist himself has observed about the real world, that significant suffering exists alongside the mundane. Both describe the “pregnant” moment depicted by Breughel, but one text goes further beyond

[99] Williams, p.385.
[100] W.H. Auden, “Musée de Beaux Arts” in *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p.79.

the boundaries of the painting's frame to infer a broader meaning from the work, and to describe a personal experience of observing the painting.

I choose this particular example to describe the basic functions of ekphrasis because Sexton recreates it himself, with direct reference to Auden's "Musee de Beaux Arts", in the poem "Forest Secret Area":

> A farmer continues to plough whose workhorse walks dully along.
>
> A shepherd looks out for the wolves that skulk through crags and crevices.
>
> An angler seeks out plump brook trout. A Spanish galleon lingers
>
> hugely in the bay the white sails burly with the wind the conifer
>
> mast holding snedded of branches and needles on the forest floor
>
> the rigging like a piece of gauze in sweet and favourable winds.[101]

"Forest Secret Area", like many other poems in the collection, starts with a line of description of the level on which it is based, "high above the forest" referencing the level in which Mario must navigate flying platforms in the forest. The rest of the poem, however, describes Breughel's painting, paying close attention to every feature. The poem refers to the painting's "peninsula" and all the figures present – the farmer at the foreground of the piece, the ship, the shepherd, and the angler. Sexton also demonstrates his own awareness of the tradition of ekphrasis as he directly reference's Auden's representation of it, the workhorse walking "dully along" being a direct quotation from "Museé de beaux Arts".

While Sexton's dedication to the painting might at first seem to be a faithful and by-the-numbers ekphrasis of it, akin to Auden's, there lies the question of its presence in the world of Super Mario. Part of the answer lies in the fact that everything in Breughel's painting is accounted for in the poem except for one very important figure: Icarus himself. What Sexton shows the reader is not *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, as Auden and Williams do, but rather a landscape *without* the fall of Icarus. In so doing,

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[101] Sexton, *IATW*, p.56.

Sexton engages in "creative collaboration with the masters of the past", one of the characteristics of reflective nostalgia.[102] In this poem, Sexton is restoring Breughel's *Icarus* not for the sake of it, but to repurpose it in the context of the collection. The absence of Icarus in this poem creates two competing interpretations. One suggests that the text's virtual space is an idyll devoid of suffering bodies since Icarus is not a part of the peninsula. Yet, by describing the painting, whether Icarus is present or not, the argument could be made that Sexton is saying that suffering is, in fact, present in the world of Super Mario. If ekphrasis serves to capture a moment in a scene, this poem could either be a moment before Icarus's fall, in which the tragedy is about to happen, or may not happen at all, or the moments after his drowning, in which Icarus's body has gone under and everything around goes on as if nothing had happened. The absence of Icarus's legs in this poem creates a mystery whereby the nature of the game's world becomes unclear, as it could be seen as either idyllic or tragic depending on how the poem is read.

Even more compelling is that Icarus's legs are revealed later in the collection, in the poem titled "#3 Lemmy's Castle":

> Young faces lit up in the night oblivious to the passing
>
> Moments since there is the question now of Lemmy in his castle
>
> Hiding among the heating vents confusing us with his body
>
> Doubles we would know anywhere that smile or pool of lava or
>
> Protruding from the rows of pipes those legs like Breughel's Icarus.

[102] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p.47.

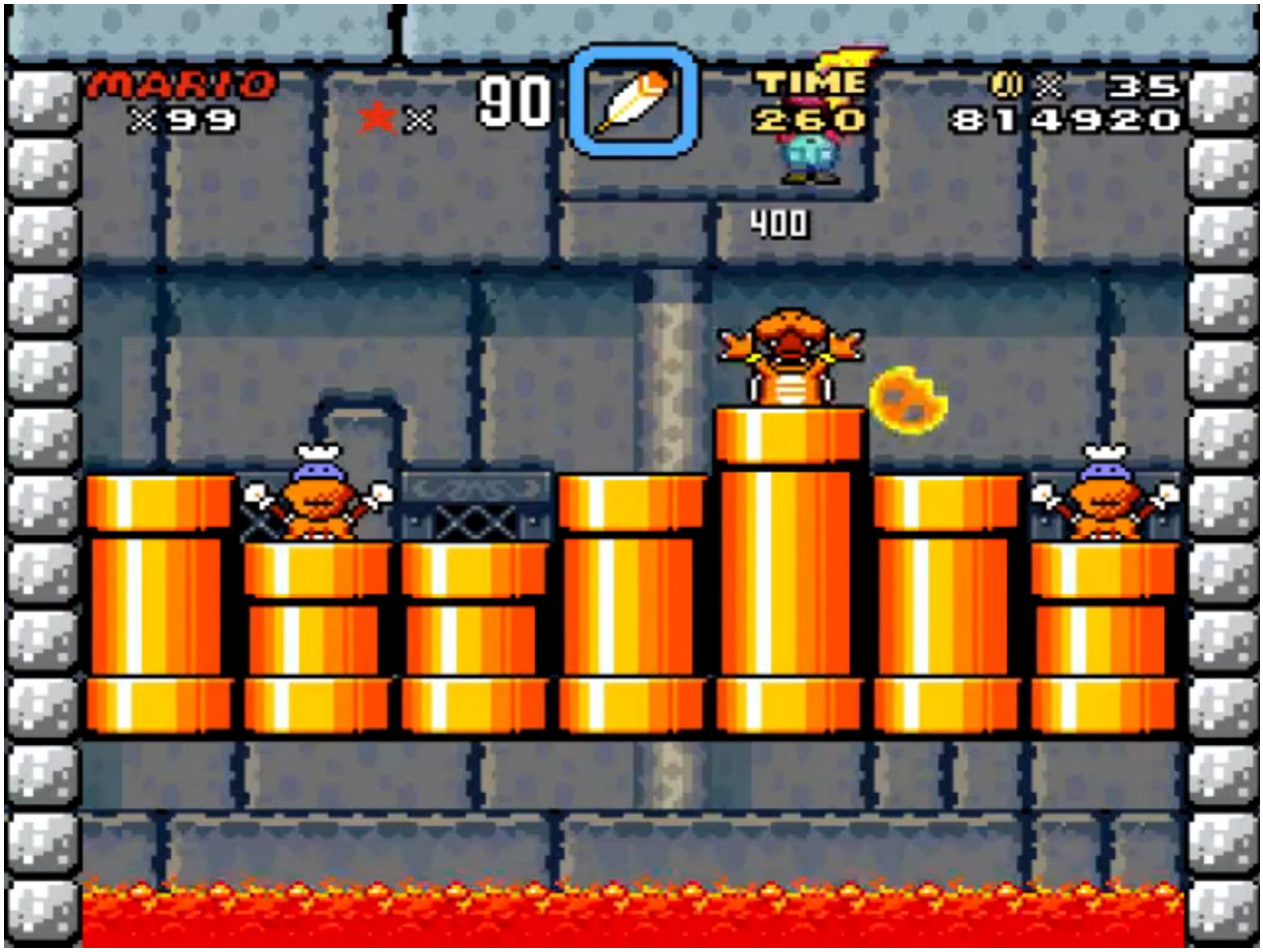

Figure 15. A screenshot of Lemmy and his body doubles in “#3 Lemmy’s Castle” from *Super Mario World*

“#3 Lemmy’s Castle” is a poem that describes both the game’s level, a volcanic castle, and a hospital interchangeably, each reflected in the other. Enemies from the game’s level, the “Merlins”, stand in for hospital staff, and the hospital’s boiler plant is described “like a volcano”, which reflects the castle’s volcanic theme. The quotation above describes children in the hospital playing Super Mario on smaller handheld consoles at the bedsides of their grandparents, and how “Lemmy in his castle” serves as a distraction for them from the “passing moments” of their family members.

In the poem’s final line, Sexton finally shows the reader Icarus’s legs by comparing them to the appearance of the level’s boss, Lemmy, sticking out of pipes.

This reference likewise invites multiple interpretations that further complicate the relationship between the reader and the virtual world of Super Mario. Firstly, it could be implied that revealing the legs of Icarus recreates the image of the painting in the setting of the hospital ward, the grandchildren playing the video game in the hospital ignorant to the suffering of the patients and their family members just as the figures in Breughel's painting are ignorant to Icarus drowning below them. Such an interpretation would imply that the world of the video game is not a form of idyll as it functions as a distraction from reality and death. However, the simile also references an in-game character, Lemmy, a figure whose suffering – the level concluding with him drowning in the lava below the pipes in Figure 15 – is largely ignored by the player as just another stepping stone in the heroic adventure of Super Mario. If read as a continuation of "Forest Secret Area", "#3 Lemmy's Castle" further develops the mystery with Sexton's representation of the world of Super Mario and the question of its function, creating tension between seeing the game as an idyllic space without suffering or something more complicated and akin to reality. These two poems are just one of example of pieces in the collection that consider whether the game's virtual world can function as an idyll, which requires the exploration of another genre that influences Sexton: the history of Pastoral art.

Metamodernist Recovery of the Pastoral Idyll

In "notes on Metamodernism", Vermeulen and van den Akker claim that the metamodern principle of oscillation is "most clearly, yet not exclusively, expressed by the neoromantic turn" in contemporary aesthetics.[103] They claim that Romanticism is "defined precisely by its oscillation", since "Romanticism is about the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized".[104] Vermeulen

[103] Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2.1, (2010), 1-14 (p. 3), in Taylor & Francis Online <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677> [accessed 20 September 2022]. p.1.
[104] Vermeulen and van den Akker, p.8.

and van den Akker define this form of romanticism not as "re-appropriation" of romantic values or ideals.[105] Quoting Novalis, they refer to the "resignification" of "the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar, and the finite with the semblance of the infinite".[106]

If All the World and Love Were Young shares many of these neoromantic qualities, which are most evident in Sexton's direct engagement with the romantic genre of pastoral poetry. Sexton's pastoral influence can be uncovered before the book even opens, the title of the collection stemming from the timeless argument between pastoral and anti-pastoral writers. While the text is filled with 16 syllable lines, the title is half of that. Sitting at 8 syllables, to the author the title reflects the 8-bit console that came before it, the NES, as well as feeding back to the 1600s, to two poems that debate depictions of rural life in art. "If All the World and Love Were Young" is a direct quotation from Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd", which is a retort to Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love". Marlowe's poem is a romance written from the perspective of a shepherd, who describes an idyllic future with his love surrounded by nature, asking her to "come live with me, and be my love":

> And I will make thee beds of Roses
> And a thousand fragrant posies,
> A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
> Embroidered all with leaves of Myrtle;[107]

The poem follows the conventions typically associated with the pastoral mode: an idealization of rural life that depicts it as eternally blissful, romantic, and free from strife.

Raleigh's reply, in contrast, is an anti-pastoral riposte, which makes clear how unrealistic the shepherd's viewpoint is:

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[105] Vermeulen and van den Akker, p.12.
[106] Novalis, 'The World Must Be Romanticised', in *European Romanticism*, ed. by Lilian R. Furst (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 3.
[107] Christopher Marlowe, 'The Passionate Shepherd to His Love' in *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), p.10.

Thy gowns, thy shoes, they bed of Roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies,
Soon break, soon wither soon forgotten:
In folly ripe, in reason rotten.[108]

Raleigh chastises the viewpoint of Marlowe's shepherd, claiming that the moving of time and the harshness of winter render the idyll a fallacy. There is a particular focus on the temporal, Raleigh chastising Marlowe for believing that rural landscapes can offer an everlasting peace. The way the two poems interact with one another demonstrates the discourse common in pastoral literature, between those that wish to represent the countryside as an idyllic escape from the modern city and those who believe rural life should be presented more objectively. This binary is also evident in painting, such as Nicolas Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*, a painting of shepherds surrounding a tomb created in response to Jacopo Sannazaro's idyllic representations of Arcadia in his poetry.

What these arguments reflect, in essence, is a tension between romanticism and anti-romanticism. Sexton's work is built around this tension and draws upon awareness of the history of pastoral art to ask if the world of Super Mario can be an idyllic landscape, a temporally static land free from the reality of death. It explores whether this technologically built world can function in poetry in the same way as the "natural" world of pastoral writing. Yet, there is death in the world of Super Mario as well. Sexton approaches the idyllic virtual world by mixing it with the real world – the world's fauna, for example, a butterfly known as both 'the Camberwell Beauty' and 'the Mourning Cloak'. He also includes countless references to the history of art, and memories of his mother's terminal illness, which inevitably bring death into the immortal plain of the game. If we consider the pastoral idyll as its own form of virtual reality, which, as Lily Dhomnhniall reminds us, "is separated from this reality by its rendering into art", then virtual spaces such as Super Mario World could provide the same refuge sought by the early pastoral writers, a nostalgic return to a simpler time, an everlasting space full of fruits and fauna that live forever as coded assets.

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[108] Sir Walter Raleigh, 'The Nymph's Reply to The Shepherd' in *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), p.11.

Marrying together pastoral literature and nostalgia is not a difficult feat. It is a genre that feeds from the desire for a return to idyllic spaces. Take, for example, William Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey", in which the poet describes returning to Tintern Abbey after "Five years […] five summers, with the length / Of five long winters!". "Tintern Abbey" describes the pastoral landscape as a place where the poet has sought refuge "in spirit", "'mid the din // Of towns and cities", and on his return is glad to discover the place itself has not changed – "Once again / Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs […] I again repose / Here, under this dark sycamore / Once again I see / these hedge-rows".[109] The poem is restorative of the place from Wordsworth's memory, describing everything as if it were exactly the same, but it is also equally reflective, as the poet thinks about how much he has changed since he was last present here, even if the place itself has not. Wordsworth discusses how in his youth, nature "was all in all", but it is a version of himself he cannot recapture, stating "I cannot paint / what then I was".[110] While Tintern Abbey as a place has not changed, Wordsworth's own experience of it has, and in this way nature, in the way he first experienced it, is lost. Tintern Abbey as a place remains in as it was remembered, but it is a place haunted by past experience. Sexton's work, like Wordsworth's, knowingly plays with this tension, and questions whether the physically unchanged space of the game's world can still function as an idyllic space of refuge.

There is knowledge, in Sexton's text, of the tradition of pastoral writers seeking out idylls of the past, which imbues his virtual world with the imagined worlds of other artists. In the poem "Green Switch Palace", Sexton uses the words of Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" to describe the spread of green boxes across the game's overworld that happens as a result of completing the level:

> Yet is has in it *echoes of far other worlds and other seas*
> *annihilating all that's made to a green thought in a green shade.*
> Mosses explode within its walls: hunter shamrock harlequin mint
> emerald persian paris lime chartreuse viridian midnight[8]

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[109] William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' in *Selected Poems of William Wordsworth* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p.61.

[110] Wordsworth, p.61.

Figure 16. The Overworld of "Donut Plains", and the spread of green boxes around the game's world

Marvell's "The Garden" describes a private garden, where the speaker finds personifications of "Fair Quiet" and "Innocence", which is depicted as an idyllic place where "vainly men themselves amaze / to win the palm, the oak, or bays".[111] In "Green Switch Palace", Sexton uses Marvell's words to describe the spread of green blocks around the world of Mario, drawing a line of comparison between the video game's world and the pastoral idyll. The poem claims that the world of Super Mario contains "echoes of far other worlds and other seas",[112] a collage of Edenic places seen in other pastoral writing and art. I use the term Edenic specifically, since the Garden of Eden is a place of nostalgia in Christianity, a lost paradise far in mankind's history, and

[111] Marvell, Andrew, 'The Garden' in *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p.100.

[112] Sexton, *IATW*, p.17.

also because the Garden of Eden is one of the "far other worlds" that makes its way into the collection.

Of particular importance to this collection is the image of an apple, the most commonly assumed fruit of the tree of knowledge and symbol of the fall of man. In John Hollander's reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the critic argues that Eden is both preternatural and pretechnological, and that "the fall from this first condition of perfection can be considered a fall into the natural condition itself" as well as a fall into technology.[113] The apple itself is also a symbol that, in a contemporary world, is inextricably linked to technology through brand recognition with Apple, the famous tech giant whose own symbol of a bitten apple is similarly linked to the story of the forbidden fruit.

In Sexton's collection, the symbol of the apple occurs towards the end of the section "Valley of Bowser", which details the last few stages of Sexton's mother's life, in the poem "Valley of Bowser 3", in which Sexton's mother reflects on the brevity of life:

> I won't get to see what happens to you or your brother she says
> as if our lives were always determined already along one sure path.
> No grandchildren and no first steps and never again a first word.
> My first word she says was apple or something something like apple.[114]

While it is unclear whether it is Sexton or his mother whose first word is "apple", the poem ties together the start of language with the story of the fall of man. In the concluding poem of the section, "#7 Larry's Castle", which details his mother's final moments, he clings on to those first words, the prelapsarian symbol of the apple, stating "my voice warped into the scribble of a child in soot or lampblack//what kind of story do I tell apple is the longest story/ I know let's see how does it go again apple apple apple". Boym characterises restorative nostalgia as something that "signifies a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment", and this moment of the poem could be inferred as a desperate attempt at restoration. It is a kind of regression to his childhood

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[113] John Hollander, 'Literature and Technology: Nature's 'Lawful Offspring in Man's Art'', *Social Research*, 71.3, (2004), pp.753-778 (p.757).
[114] Sexton, *IATW*, p.80.

self in a plea to bring her back to him, to return to those nostalgic moments of his youth when his mother was still with him, still happy and healthy, framing these final moments of her life, and his loss of her as the fall of Eden, the apple being plucked from the tree. At the same time the apple is the fruit which, in Milton's poem, "brought death into the world and all our woe",[115] and so its repetition in "#7 Larry's Castle" serves only as a reminder of mortality. If we infer that apple is Sexton's first word, he is repeating the story of his own life since our own lives are the longest stories that we know. However, if we infer that "apple" is Sexton's mother's first word, then Sexton's repetition of it is a way of bringing her back to life through the repetition of her story. Through telling his mother's story in poetry and sharing it with multiple readers, she is given a form of immortality in an oxymoronic sense, since it is an immortality gained through mortality, a repeated story of life and death together, the finite oscillating with the infinite.

An earlier poem that also includes Edenic reference is "Top Secret Area". "Top Secret Area" contains a garden that Sexton is unable to return to, akin to Eden, despite his desperate attempts:

> I have been trying to tell you the secret of infinite lives
> […]
> She plants roses in the garden sea froze rolling in the harbour
> She plants roses in the garden see pain trilling in the garden
> She plants roses in the garden she planes ruins in the jargon
> She plants roses in the garden see plinths raising in devotion

The poem opens with a reference to "infinite lives", which is a cheat that allows the player to fail countless times without reaching game over. Lily Dhomhnaill calls this a form of immortality in her analysis of this poem.[116] The repetition of "she plants roses in the garden" is described by Dhomhnaill as a kind of "desperate chat", which "loses meaning, becoming flat and formulaic like an avatar going through a level in a video

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[115] John Milton, 'Paradise Lost', in *The Complete Poems of John Milton* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909), p.90.
[116] Lily Dhomhnaill, 'If All The World And Love Were Young - The Stinging Fly', *The Stinging Fly*, (2019) <https://stingingfly.org/review/if-all-the-world-and-love-were-young/> [Accessed 26 November 2021].

game again and again".[117] The poem is, for Dhomhniall, a failed attempt to bridge "the gap between the poem and the absent loved one", to try and connect to the garden from his past but only creating more words in incoherent ways.[118] There is, however, a kind of coherence in the last three lines of the poem, which resonates with the collection as a whole. Instead of fully connecting to the garden he sees the "ruins in the jargon" of the text: through writing poetry about the painful events of his past he witnesses his mother's "pain trilling in the garden", and the creation of the book itself actis as one of the "plinths raising in devotion" to her, his last attempt to reconnect to her by recreating his memories through poetry.

While the collection echoes many spaces from pastoral art, the game's world is also imbued with other real-life spaces, such as "Donut Plains 1", which, in part, describes the shape of the landscape in Fig. 3:

> The lie of the land is the shape of the north of Ireland likewise
> missing a lump from its body where the lake fills with eels zigzagged
> from the Sargasso like needles of glass light slowed through sodium.[119]

Once again, far other worlds and other seas permeate the virtual world in Sexton's description, drawing connections between real and virtual spaces that are grounded in real world reference as they bring the virtual space to life. Yet, there is a danger of corrupting the idyll and its timelessness by bringing the real world inside its boundaries, by bringing in ephemeral places, times, memories, and references to things that perish. And this is where the collection's elegiac nature comes into being: in bringing the real world into the virtual, Sexton brings death with it, which is where his focus really lies, not just in nostalgia for places and times past, but also for people who have passed:

> One summer's day I'm summoned home to hear of cells that split and glitch
> So haphazardly someone is called to intervene with poisons
> Drawn from strange and peregrine trees flourishing in distant kingdoms.[120]

In this passage Sexton brings the language of the digital world, the "cells that split and glitch" and the "distant kingdom" in which Super Mario is set, into his memories of his

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[117] Dhomhnaill.
[118] Dhomhnaill.
[119] Sexton, *IATW*, p.15.
[120] Sexton, *IATW*, p.8.

mother's terminal illness.[121] It is in scenes like this that the idyllic properties of the game's world are brought into question, the game's lush overworld linked with a darker, melancholic underworld. The ephemeral nature of the real world corrupts the idyll of the virtual. As Sexton's mother's condition worsens, so too do aspects of the game's nature.

Pastoral images become corrupted as the collection goes on, natural objects and characters in the game's world being associated with death. In "Donut Plains 4", Sexton details the enemies that look like chestnuts, which "conk and roll around and other's parachute from trees", before discussing the use of horse chestnuts to make ammunition in the first and second World Wars:

> During the dark century's wars I read children filled their pockets
> with chestnuts to render into acetone to render into
> cordite to render into shells sitting primed in the rifles of their cousins.
> What will be the consequences of the trees waving in the wind
> Chestnuts in the hospital grounds the low dazzling winter sun?[122]

[121] Sexton, *IATW*, p.8.
[122] Sexton, *IATW*, p.24.

Figure 17. The “chestnut” enemies in “Donut Plains 4” from *Super Mario World*

The chestnuts in the virtual world become associated with death on multiple levels: crossing over, at first, with the chestnuts brought by children to create bullets, and then with the chestnut trees in the grounds of Ulster hospital, where Sexton’s mother sought treatment for her cancer. The image of children bringing horse chestnuts, which were often used for playground games, to soldiers for their guns reflects a corruption of innocence, a corruption that Sexton fears he will experience in creating this collection and looking back to his past. The poet ponders “the consequences” of the images his words create. What will become of his experience of the past by going through this creative process? There lies, as Lily Dhomnhiall argues, a moral dilemma in the act of memorializing through art, an “anxiety” that “is common in modern elegies, which often contain a sense of guilt about profiting, via the production of the poem, from the loved

one's death".[123] This guilt is also present here, as Sexton worries about the "consequences" of his work, not just in corrupting the game's idyll but also in exploiting his mother's loss for his gain, which reflects how the adult soldiers exploit the children and nature (the chestnuts) for war.

The text's virtual world is also haunted by other deceased members of Sexton's family, such as a relative named Henry, who died in the mines of Tasmania. Henry is introduced in the very next poem, "Donut Plains 2", based on the first fully underground level in the game, in which Sexton gives the reader a first glimpse into the game's underworld:

> Henry goes down in the mines of Tasmania for zinc and lead.
> It is 1964 and collapse collapse Henry is dead.
> 20 or so years and she gives me her brother's name to mine with.
> Down I go with bats and pyrite slow progress and inching landslides
> Canary-yellow minerals words do not contain their echoes.[124]

This real-world accident attaches itself to the game's mining levels, since Sexton is given Henry's "name to mine with", the "mine" for minerals becoming "mine" (Sexton's). This metaphor of mining through the past as Sexton delves into the game's levels becomes a recurring motif in the collection. Each time it is returned to uncovers a form of danger in his exploration, the "canary-yellow minerals", for example, acting as a warning in the game's underworld. This returns, too, to the guilt of exploiting his mother's loss for artistic work, since "memories of a life and death are mined for material" in order to create "an aesthetic object, simultaneously elevating and estranging that which it memorializes but never quite repaying the debt".[125] There is a danger that the longer Sexton spends in his search for nostalgia in the game, the more painful memories he will unearth, and the more damage he will do to his memories of the game. This damage begins to fill the world physically, as poems about underground levels begin to reflect Sexton's mother's body as she undergoes changes to her condition and goes through surgery.

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[123] Dhomhnaill.
[124] Sexton, *IATW*, p.16.
[125] Dhomhnaill.

Nature is often associated in literature with the female form; it is frequently personified as “Mother Nature”, and pastoral landscapes, as identified by Marie-Chantak Killeen, often follow “a chiastic structure that maps woman onto landscape, while landscape takes on a markedly ‘feminine’ aspect”.[126] In *If All the World and Love Were Young*, Sexton’s descriptions of the game’s world often parallels his mother’s condition. In “Chocolate Island 5”, for instance, a poem set shortly before Sexton discovers his mother’s cancer has returned, begins in the world of Super Mario, with “sprites” that “move in cells no taller or wider than their own bodies” and the “ashen land” reflecting the level on which the poem is based, before Sexton details “mirages shimmering so convincingly I could pike / into puddles of water fronds of eelgrass swaying and come up / for air years ago in the pool of La Mon Hotel into / its thirst and sting of chlorine and its something about to happen”.[127]

[126] Marie-Chantal Killeen, ‘Pastoral Womanscapes (Baudelaire, Tournier, Jablonka)’, *The Modern Language Review*, 113.2 (2018), p.321 <https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.113.2.0321> [accessed 21 November 2021].
[127] Sexton, *IATW*, p.70.

Figure 18. “Chocolate Island 5” from *Super Mario World* – “the sprites move in cells no taller or wider than their own bodies”[128]

La Mon Hotel is a place in Northern Ireland, a place from Sexton’s memory of “something about to happen”, his “thirst” for nostalgia and the “sting of chlorine” foreboding the following poem in which the severity of his mother’s condition comes to light. The small, spiky sprites in “Chocolate Island 5” (Figure 18) moving around in “cells” that they are trapped in, seem to represent the cancer in the cells of his mother’s body, embodied in the game world.

In “Vanilla Dome 1”, one of the underground poems that detail the mother’s surgery, the setting becomes simultaneously hospital, body, video game and The Big Hole – a diamond mine in South Africa:

> Now we must beware the cave after a few days of fasting
> the anesthesiologist apothecaries carefully
> and the personable surgeon goes under the skin precisely.
> I go down into the dark mines where my name clings like a horseshoe
> and deeper until the stream of my blood runs black as the coal.
> In Kimberley diamonds like these have grown in the walls for thousands of years.[129]

Sexton’s exploration of the game’s underground level is directly paralleled with the surgeon going under his mother’s skin, his “name” given to him in the earlier poems described as clinging to him, to recall his deceased relative Henry. As the surgeon targets the cancer, Sexton is mining for diamonds beneath the surface, “bright diamonds grown without a thimbleful of light”.[130] However, just like the chestnuts, the beauty of the diamonds in the mine is offset by the “thousands dead” from the “mines dug out by hand”.[131] Once more there is a dissonance between the beauty of the diamonds and the pain that brought the diamonds into being, that unearthed them. While this dissonance

[128] Sexton, *IATW*, p.70.
[129] Sexton, *IATW*, p.29.
[130] Sexton, *IATW*, p.29.
[131] Sexton, *IATW*, p.29.

could suggest a level of guilt in exploiting the tragedies of his own familial history to create the collection, the "thousands dead" could also be seen as a reflection of Sexton's own pain. Without labouring through the mines of his own history and grief for his mother, the collection would never have been created, but it is an exploitative labour that creates images of guilt within the poems. Sexton is well aware that it is not the game and its world that has changed, but himself, and the way that he has chosen to perceive the game in the contexts of his familial traumas and the collective traumas of art and history. Instead of making the finite infinite, Sexton has brought the finite *into* the infinite, through associating super Mario and the characters in the game with real world symbols of death. At the same time, Sexton is able to preserve memories, images, and people that have perished inside the game and his experience of playing and writing about it, paradoxically keeps them alive while at the same time bringing his grief at their loss into the virtual world.

The idea of the text as a monument built from a mix of pastoral, digital and real-world images is most pronounced in the collection's final section labelled "Special World", which once again ties the creation of the collection's world with painful experiences. The poems "Gnarly", "Way Cool" and "Groovy" all begin with "I tried to make a monument". "Gnarly" is a list of real-world, historical, pastoral and digital images that Sexton has used previously in the text to build his monument. In the poem he references pastoral images such as "pink wisteria", real world images of "Beethoven" and "Nine Inch Nails", and "cathode rays blasting streams / of electrons".[132] The final three lines return to Sexton's desire to use ekphrasis to conjure images into being as he mixes them together:

> I want my monument to be composed of light as you might say
> So you can see it friend not things themselves but the seeing of them
> The light stopping on them tree I adore you I adore you world.[133]

If ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation, then this matches what Sexton is describing as "not things themselves but the seeing of them", the succession of conjured images building a monument out of his ekphrasis of Super Mario.

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[132] Sexton, *IATW*, p.95.
[133] Sexton, *IATW*, p.95.

In the following poem "Tubular" he speaks of "breathing the world into the world",[134] which is exactly what his collection is doing by filling the video game with real-world and pastoral images, treating it as somewhere to hide them away. The world of Super Mario thereby becomes a place for Sexton to store his treasured memories and places from his youth, storing them within the infinite memory of the game console. In "Way Cool", Sexton treats the television in his living room as the monument, "a monument of its glass screen dense as bone or maybe the moon / or the shock of aspidistra in a pot of terracotta", once again listing images of what his television could be, what images he can imbue it with, what he can hide within it, before concluding with the following:

> Every other day I think I see her passing by the window
> Or crossing a bridge or walking ahead of me in the village
> But this is the wrong universe among all the universes.[135]

These last few lines take place inside the "monument" of the television screen, as he reveals himself to be within the "wrong universe", having placed images of his own life inside the television screen and by extension the collection: the bridge, the village, the window, all places in which his mother leaves traces. In this way he has haunted the television screen and the world of the game by imbuing it with his mother's image, an image he sees everywhere in his exploration of it.

The last of these "monument" poems, "Groovy", explores the collection's imagery of an empty house, both the home of his childhood and the game's first level, "Yoshi's House", described as "the house in which everything starts". The poem is largely, like the others, a collection of images that are supposed to represent the emptiness of the house such as "a highway in the wilderness". The final line, "when I returned to the empty house it was no longer empty", demonstrates how Sexton has filled the empty house with images that represent it. Like in the previously discussed "Top Secret Area", there is an almost frantic desire to fill the space up with these images, to avoid the absence in the emptiness of the house by filling it with the description preceding it. Yet some of the images are painful, not just in "Groovy" but

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[134] Sexton, *IATW*, p.96.
[135] Sexton, *IATW*, p.97.

also in the other two monument poems. “Gnarly”, for example, contains “sun dogs seen by ships at seas soon to sink”,[136] in reference to the *Terror* and the *Erebus*, two ships that sunk in search of the northwest passage, “Way Cool” contains “a needlework from Henry’s / widow in Queensland”,[137] and “Groovy” contains “a forest at Chernobyl”, “A church bell in the graveyard” and “a letter I can’t open”, among others. Sexton’s monuments are therefore built from images of beauty alongside images of pain that fill the empty house, the empty television screen, and the absence in the real world.

Conclusion

Damian Murphy’s “A Mansion of Sapphire” and Stephen Sexton’s *If All the World and Love Were Young* are two metamodernist texts that offer enlightening insights into the technology of videogames and the possibility of using them as a subject for art and literature. Both works, like those explored in previous chapters, directly engage with literary styles and traditions – through Murphy’s engagement with decadence and Stephen Sexton’s use of ekphrasis. In “A Mansion of Sapphire”, the virtual world acts as a temporary source of spiritual transcendence and reprieve from the necessities of the natural world, with religious significance attributed to the technologies of our recent past that have long since been replaced by newer versions. The story is an occult delve into the retro-aesthetic of older technologies, which helps to demonstrate the concept of super-subjectivity and contemporary changes in textuality explored by contemporary cultural critics. While the transcendence in Murphy’s work is of a more religious and therefore traditional kind, and is a wholly fictional story, Sexton’s text further complicates the relationship between real and virtual worlds as he works through an existing cultural artifact, the virtual world of Super Mario. If metamodernist texts are to be considered as reflexive and ambivalent, then *If All the World and Love Were Young* is the embodiment of that quality, constantly negotiating between life and death, real and unreal, pastoral and anti-pastoral, art and life, and past and present.

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[136] Sexton, *IATW*, p.95.
[137] Sexton, *IATW*, p.97.

The collection is as much of a traditional collection of poetry as it is a game of interpretation to be played, with Sexton offering multiple ways for the collection to be experienced. The collection can be enjoyed through both linguistic and intertextual reading, with its references to other artists and poets as well as the game's levels themselves giving a reader several different ways to re-explore and approach the text, and encouraging the digimodernist individual to either seek out the references and/or play the game alongside the text. The world of Super Mario is presented by Sexton as a virtual pastoral idyll, a realm of restorative nostalgia, which he enriches with references to renowned and beautiful artworks as he goes to great lengths to describe many of the levels with precise ekphrastic detail.

At the same time, however, Sexton also invests his own memories into the virtual world, and in bringing real world places and people into the idyll he brings death with him. This allows Sexton to question the ability of the videogame to function as a place free from death, reflective of the nature of nostalgia and the longstanding question, emphasised through the title's reference to the debate between Sir Walter Raleigh and Christopher Marlowe, of how best to represent the natural through art. The most significant tragic figure of Sexton's text, his mother, is at once a prelapsarian and postlapsarian Eve and the infinite and indomitable Mother Nature, physically represented in several of the poems as a part of the game's world. Sexton's mother and the tragic memories of her passing are simultaneously a haunting and corrupting influence on the world's idyll as well as the whole reason for its existence as poetry, a monument to her life ever preserved in both the infinite life of computer memory and the just as long-lasting cultural history of pastoral poetry.

Conclusion

This thesis opened with several questions concerning our contemporary cultural period and its relations to modernism, postmodernism and technology. Initially, I argued that the term post-postmodernism defines the present in direct relation to the two cultural periods that precede it, leading to a troubling and diluted relationship between the present and the recent cultural past. Instead of ruminating once more on the longstanding debate between modernism and postmodernism and declaring the death of one and return of the other, I concluded it would be more beneficial to consider both cultural projects and the debate between them as equally absorbed into contemporary cultural discourse, and the current moment as retaining qualities of each. In their own attempts at definition, contemporary cultural critics have identified our current moment as both modernist, postmodernist and neither. In order to bring clarity to an increasingly complex moment in modernity and twenty-first-century cultural production, I outlined the benefits of an analysis of contemporary literature concerning technologies past and present. To that end, after a theoretical chapter establishing the key themes and contexts, subsequent chapters have considered contemporary writers dealing with and representing the dominant cultural technologies of modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary living.

In *C,* Tom McCarthy delves into the modernist period, demonstrating the relevance of its technologies in our current globalized, interconnected world, while also dissecting its artistic energies in favour of a postmodernist removal of depth and affect. This removal of depth remains consistent in his next novel *Satin Island*, which explores the impossibility of defining our current cultural epoch and eschews any kind of epistemological meaning or discovery. Claudia Rankine's collections *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* examine the dominant technologies of postmodernism – television and mass media – to depict an affectless early twenty-first-century society, numbed by televised images and passive inertia. The relationships between technology, past and present are integral to both collections, with Rankine drawing connections between the contemporary moment and the history of racialized marginalization, violence and

hypervisibility. Engagement with poetry and the lyric tradition is depicted as a way to confront this ironic, isolated and indifferent cultural condition, granting universality through the lyric "I" and allowing conversation between differing groups of people. Stephen Sexton's poetry concerns the technology of videogames, a form of text supposedly emblematic of our current cultural moment and its more advanced forms of text and textuality. In *If All the World and Love Were Young*, Sexton is equally engaged with both the past and the present, the modern, postmodern and contemporary. His text serves as a neoromantic examination of a videogame that mirrors technologically and artistically created worlds with his past and his memories.

The first central concept with which this thesis explored the relationship between literature, technology and phases of modernity was Heidegger's notions of the role of *technē* and *poesis* in modern culture. Heidegger stressed the importance of confronting the qualities of modern technology, which forsakes the ancient Greek customs of technology as a "bringing forth" from nature in favor of a more exploitative "enframing" of it, in the realm of art. This aesthetic confrontation with technology would have to happen on the level of form as well as the content of the text, which became embodied in the explorations of high modernist writers, such as the formal integration of the printing press in the "Aeolus" chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The contemporary writers explored in this thesis also confront technology on the level of form, through aestheticizing technology and/or physically representing elements of technology on the page. Tom McCarthy's *C* is structured around the idea of literature as part of a long line of technologies of communication. It takes the form of the bildungsroman but is full of references and allusions to modernist writing, as well as adopting and mimicking some modernist styles such as Vorticism and Italian futurism. Its three sections, "Caul", "Chute", and "Crash" are as much about the birth and death of modernist writing as they are about the novel's protagonist, and in structuring the text this way, McCarthy comments on writing as a technology, from its beginning as hieroglyphics in Egypt, as a series of similar-sounding broadcasts reconfiguring themselves in different ways.

Claudia Rankine's lyric collections directly engage with representing technologies and their effects on the individual on the page. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, for instance, the recurring image of a television set accompanied by blank space is representative of a static, passive existence, in which individuals become isolated spectators made affectless pawns of consumerism. In *Citizen*, footage of Zinedane Zidane is stretched into frame-by-frame panels as Rankine stretches its narrative across the racial history of France, turning a few seconds of footage into years of subjugation. Stephen Sexton's text leans towards a nostalgia that attempts to restore and represent the qualities of the video game and the console that is its subject. This is reflected at the anatomical level of the text, the level of *technē,* its very line-lengths and syllable counts representing the processing power of the S-NES.

Perhaps most central to this thesis and the writers that have been explored is the notion of language itself as a technology of communication altered by the medium through which it is channeled. The first chapter explored Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad* and Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*, which formally represent contemporary mediums of communication (such as text messaging and social media) and their constraints. In *A Visit From the Goon Squad,* Egan examines the limitations of written and spoken text, while *No One Is Talking About This* embodies the short form of social media such as Twitter and explores its turn towards a toxic kind of irony that bleeds into everyday life. Tom McCarthy's *C* approaches this notion of language as technology thematically, examining the history of literature as a technology of communication. Serge acts as a broadcasting individual who draws connections between the pylons of wireless and radio communication and the pylons of the Ancient Egpyt, shaping a long historical narrative in which literature, technology and death have always been intertwined. Serge's crash is as much literary as it is vehicular, dramatizing the impact of Marinetti's Futurist movement on the future of literature. The Characters in the novel act as human transmitters, with the deaf children in the early chapters mimicking words that are dictated for them to speak aloud.

Satin Island likewise examines the culture of communication, in which our current epoch becomes incommunicable in words, only understandable by technological

algorithms. Any attempts that U. makes to understand our current moment is reduced to incommunicability and Derridean word games. In Rankine's works, art and poetry become the only mediums that can communicate with others on a deeper emotional level, the antithesis of the surface-level language of division and vitriol pushed by mass media technologies such as the television. Through the medium of the lyric and use of the second person, Rankine directly connects herself with her audience to actively invite them into the experience of life as a marginalized individual as opposed to passively absorbing the shallow representations of life as depicted by consumer technologies. Rankine is simultaneously skeptical of empathy, establishing distance between speakers, the reader and the people depicted in her poems. In Stephen Sexton's work, poetry and art are likewise seen as a shared network and medium of communication, creating a dialogue between voices as he brings past voices into the technology of the video game. Sexton's collection is, like the technology it embodies, a kind of language game, open to multiple perspectives and interpretations. In constructing the text this way, Sexton demonstrates that the world of the video game, when considered artistically, can function on the same level as the worlds of pastoral art, and pastoral art can similarly be thought of as a game of interpretation.

Physical and metaphysical bodies are inevitably incorporated into this subject, since all communications happen between bodies, physical or otherwise. Our bodies are what we communicate through - they are as much technologies of communication as anything else - and the way our bodies look and function determine the way we can communicate with and how we are perceived by others. In *C*'s anti-humanist turn, McCarthy depicts the characters as simultaneously combined with and dehumanized by technologies of the modernist period. Aside from the child transmitters discussed above, Serge's body is often merged with technologies of speed such as the aircraft and the automobile, his own existence a part of the depthless death-drive of life as detailed by the International Necronautical Society. The séance that Serge interrupts through his use of technology similarly disrupts the occult, spiritualist depth attributed to the period. In Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, human life is mediated by mass media, which poisons existence and turns it into an affectless pursuit of late-capitalist commodities and ideal images of beauty. The extent of this subjugation as Rankine explores it in both

of her texts is partially determined by race, with the racially marked becoming spectacles of media, the representation of their bodies in media reflecting the history of racial discrimination, depicting how black bodies in a mass-mediated society become hypervisible, simultaneously scrutinized and ignored.

Also of note is a shared preoccupation with being immersed or absorbed in media and technologies of communication. In *No One Is Talking About This*, the online portal of social media is easy to get lost in: the narrator mindlessly scrolls through and absorbs the content that is presented to her, temporarily losing control and awareness of her physical self. This state of being is also seen in *C*'s Serge and *Satin Island*'s U., with both characters being immersed in the wireless or screens respectively. *Satin Island* considers a metaphysical state of contemporary being known as "buffering", in which the contemporary human condition becomes one of passive waiting, a condition that is also evident in Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, most notably when a television screen claims "YOUR LIFE IS WAITING". Damian Murphy's "A Mansion of Sapphire" demonstrates what Alan Kirby calls the super-subjectivity of modern media: the protagonist Stella undergoes an almost identical form of metaphysical immersion in a virtual world that removes her spatially and teleologically from reality. All these texts seem to consider modern technologies as potentially dangerous vacuums of time and attention, which can have as much of an effect on us as we can on them. Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young*, on the other hand, considers technology as a way to preserve the finite within the infinite, placing his cherished memories of his lost mother inside of the game's virtual world. At the same time, Sexton's text and the game it is based on become haunted by the very presence that it attempts to preserve, with his descriptions of the game's environments being intermittently linked to his mother's cancer, family traumas, and the history of tragedy in art and literature.

By exploring representations of technology in these works, I have identified qualities associated with an oscillation between modernist and postmodernist practice, a characteristic that some cultural critics have defined as metamodernism. In dealing with technology, McCarthy, Rankine and Sexton are simultaneously forwards-facing and backwards-looking, drawing deliberate connections between the past and the present as

they consider the relationship between modernity and culture. However, the three writers examine the past in different directions and to different ends. While McCarthy's narrative reinstates the importance of modernist technologies in shaping our contemporary cultural moment, bringing the past into the present, his formal, structural and linguistic decisions also bring the techniques of postmodernism and poststructuralism back into the past. Rankine and Sexton both view the past through the lens of the contemporary technologies that inhabit their works, but Rankine depicts a troubling cultural past that the present is unable to fully depart from, and Sexton depicts a past that, while difficult and traumatic, represents an idealized lost home to be immortalized and returned to through the medium of the video game.

This engagement with the past is even more evident in the traditional literary techniques that are integral to the methods of these contemporary writers. McCarthy, despite his removal of modernist notions of affect and depth, retains a particular fondness for modernist modes of production such as the literary manifesto and mythologizing the narrative. Rankine's approach reinvigorates the lyric , experimenting with the boundaries of the form while maintaining its primary elements. Sexton engages with both traditional genre and technique, using the old literary mode of ekphrasis to explore whether the virtual world of Super Mario can function as a neoromantic pastoral idyll.

While these qualities may suggest these writers represent modernist tradition, as many of their reviewers have identified, they also oscillate towards postmodern notions of irony, self-awareness, and the intertextual mixing of high and low culture. As much as they are traditional novels in a narrative and structural sense, McCarthy's texts are invasively self-aware, intertextual and fragmentary, deliberately playing with and disrupting audience expectations as part of his effort to remove depth and discernible meaning. To McCarthy, literature is merely a form broadcasting that goes all the way back to Ancient Egypt and the invention of writing, which he demonstrates through intertextual links between now, the modernist period, and the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead. Claudia Rankine, in her effort to depict an image-dominated, affectless society in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, frequently depicts characters behaving with irony

and indifference who are unable to understand or process the emotions of themselves or others. In *Citizen*, Rankine scatters the collection with contemporary and historical artworks as well as screenshots from YouTube videos, pictures from newspapers, and footage of football matches. Stephen Sexton's text hinges on the mixing of high and low cultures, with famous artworks ironically mapped onto the world of Super Mario, and the game's levels explored through a technique which is often reserved for descriptions of objects of high culture such as art.

As much as the latter two authors use irony in their texts and methodology, they actually vacillate between irony and sincerity, using irony as a vehicle for sincerity. The ironic postmodern world that Rankine builds in her texts, for instance, exists solely to be brought down. Rankine exposes the world in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as endemic with passivity and the loss of affect, using the text as a call for the reader to be active in the text and in the world. In *Citizen*, she continues this scrutiny of contemporary, mass media dominated life through the frank and honest sincerity with which she explores the condition of living in this world as a marginalized individual, positionally relating the reader to this experience by substituting the lyric "I" for the lyric "You". At the same time, Rankine is acutely aware of the slipperiness of the second person as a mode of address, free of reference to gender, singularity or plurality. The representation of racially marked celebrities in the media is demonstrated as depthless, which Rankine undermines by relating these representations to a broader history of racial subjugation. While Sexton's work initially started as an ironic practice, it quickly evolves into a sincere, autobiographical collection that explores grief, loss and memory that is as much sincere and emotional as it is ironic and intertextual.

The writers examined in this thesis demonstrate that, far from being the cause of our current literary crisis, technology can serve as a subject for literature that provides a bridge between and beyond modernism and postmodernism through the common theme of technology's impact on the human condition. Contemporary technologies' effect on textuality, communication and our relationships with nature, our bodies, and language remain fertile ground for writers to reinvigorate literature for the current generation, which might best be done with an approach that is aware of the perks and pitfalls of both

modernist and postmodernist ideologies and literary practice. With the legacies of modernism and postmodernism as dual sources of inspiration, metamodernist writers can be reflexive, repeating older styles and forms with new emphasis. In this way, twenty-first century writers can be self-aware without fearing indulgence, ironic without fearing sincerity, intertextual without fearing authenticity, and contemporary without fearing history.

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