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Modernist Interference: Inhuman Frequencies between Modernism and Media

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ABSTRACT

This project argues for the existence and role of an idiosyncratic tradition of media theory within modernist aesthetic practice over the course of the twentieth century. This tradition in modernism and media theory is organized around the concept of interference. Modernism and media theory interfere with each other in ways that amplify or diminish each other across high and low culture and across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mainstream media theory focuses on the ways media and technology either enhance or diminish our human capacity, while the new tradition I am calling “modernist media inhumanism” highlights how the modernist interpretation of media and technology engenders modes of analysis that challenge this dialectic entirely. Instead of doubling down on the debate over the human, these idiosyncratic engagements call for new modes of reading and gesture toward the need to revise media studies’ continuation of the Cartesian enlightenment project of the human subject as such.

This dissertation thus moves away from accounts of media and media theory that follow or imply enlightenment technologies of progress and betterment and it treats modernist writers as media thinkers, whose aesthetics are engaged in incorporating the challenges of media into their practice. Instead of offering aspirational stories of utopic possibilities, the media archive I explore here interrogate breakdowns, disruptions, noise, ephemera, failure, groundlessness, and the undead as ways that media frame ways of understanding. From the hybrid and transmedia possibilities explored in Virginia Woolf’s late prose to the dark horizon of mass communication as biopolitical horror presented in George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, this dissertation’s century-long engagement with new media offers a grim view on the possibilities of media and technology. This dark drift is not altogether nihilistic, but instead seeks to appropriate a set of media-informed concepts that expand and complicate our modes of analysis. This project considers moments of failure and breakdown as object-lessons that critique the expansive promise of new media. Further, this project charts a recursive relationship between modernism and the contemporary, through which modernist media thinkers offer ways of critiquing contemporary media theory, and contemporary concepts in media theory offer new vantages onto the modernist literary archive.
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INTRODUCTION
Inhuman Approaches to Modern Media Studies

“Do not seek the old in the new, but find something new in the old.”

– Siegfried Zielinski

There is an idiosyncratic tradition of media theory within modernist aesthetic practice over the course of the twentieth century. This tradition in modernism and media theory is organized around the concepts of disruption, incoherence and failure. Modernism and media theory interfere with each other in ways that amplify or diminish one another across high and low culture and across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mainstream media theory focuses on the ways media and technology either enhance or diminish our human capacity, while the new tradition I am calling “modernist media inhumanism” highlights how the modernist interpretation of media and technology engenders modes of analysis that challenge this dialectic entirely. Instead of doubling down on the debate over the human, these idiosyncratic engagements call for new modes of reading and gesture toward the need to revise media studies’ continuation of the Cartesian enlightenment project of the human subject as such.

This tradition thus moves away from accounts of media and media theory that follow or imply enlightenment technologies of progress and improvement and it treats modernist writers as media thinkers, whose aesthetics are engaged in incorporating the challenges of media into their practice. Instead of offering aspirational stories of utopic possibilities, the media archive I explore here interrogate breakdowns, disruptions, noise, ephemera, failure, groundlessness, and the undead as ways that media frame ways of understanding. From the hybrid and transmedia possibilities explored in Virginia Woolf’s late prose to the dark horizon of mass communication
as biopolitical horror presented in George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, modernism’s century-long engagement with new media offers a grim view on the possibilities of media and technology. This dark drift is not altogether nihilistic, but instead seeks to appropriate a set of media-informed concepts that expand and complicate our modes of analysis. Thinking about moments of failure and breakdown become object-lessons that critique the expansive promise of new media. Further, this project charts a recursive relationship between modernism and the contemporary, through which modernist media thinkers offer ways of critiquing contemporary media theory, and contemporary concepts in media theory offer new vantages onto the modernist literary archive.

The new media relationships that I focus on are inhuman. Here, however, the tension between the human and the inhuman is not strictly antagonistic, nor is the term “inhuman” meant to evoke a discrete form of biology (Homo sapiens as such). In the context of this study, the inhuman speaks to objects of thought that transform our idea of the human as autonomous liberal subject in the tradition of mid-to-late century theories of postmodernism. Jean-François Lyotard uses this notion of the inhuman to explore ways that the project of humanism has changed. For Lyotard, “inhumanism” describes what the project of humanism looks like after the subject of the human is made meaningless due to a host of scientific, technical, and social transformations. Lyotard focuses on scales of time, expanding population demographics, and the failures of twentieth century politics as forces that make the individual human feel meaningless. Lyotard looks to avant-garde art and literature as a site of resistance to and critical inquiry of these forces. Such Modernist artists as Marcel Duchamp, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Barnett Newman provide

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1 Ashley Woodward frames Lyotard’s particular engagement with technology and aesthetics as “aesthesis” and argues that subject of the inhuman must be read as a confluence between technologies of communication and ideas of self expression and understanding. Ashley Woodward, “Aesthesis and Techne: New Technologies and Lyotard’s Aesthetics,” *Lyotard and the Inhuman Condition*, 135.
the aesthetic backdrop of this study. Lyotard’s inhumanism thus describes the reconciliation process that humanist discourse goes through when trying to parse concepts of stable and unified subjectivity within the advent of media and technology that constantly challenge the possibility of any form of stable subject. As Lyotard argues when he identifies the role of media in the advent of postmodernism and the postmodern subject, “this hypothesis is not only suggested by the convergence of tendencies animating all the sub-groups of contemporary activity, it is the very argument of the discourse maintained about their researches by the scientists, the technologists and their accredited philosophers to legitimate, scientifically and technologically, the possibility of their development…it results from a process of development, where it is not mankind which is the issue, but differentiation.” Here, Lyotard’s project doesn’t seek to write over the history of humanism, but instead seeks to frame it within the context of twentieth century cultural, aesthetic, and scientific production. At the same time, Lyotard’s reference to media’s role in the advent of postmodernism is short-lived insofar as it doesn’t develop or appear in much of his other work; he sometimes refers to media when describing other modernist and contemporary figures, but he often glosses over the specific ways that these writers were responding to challenges of new media and technology. This tradition within modernism attends to this lack of description by positioning modernist writers as media thinkers who both critique and incorporate ways of thinking about media into their work.

The focus of new media criticism seeks to address this gap, but in a way that often misses the interplay among media experience, cognition, and interpretation. Roughly speaking, all media operate in two modes, transmission and storage. New media speak to “new” ways that by

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2 The positive and negative valences of “inhuman” are a central feature within Lyotard’s work. Woodward frames these two valences as “dehumanizing,” but also a “creative form of resistance,” 166.
which we either transmit and distribute communications (for example radio, global broadcast networks, or the internet) or new ways to store communication (mass printing, digital archives, cloud-based computing). The focus of new media criticism is to examine how media transforms human life. Mark B.N. Hansen, for example, has criticized the way that theorists are not paying enough attention to how technology radically transforms human experience. For Hansen, this transformation is so radical that it makes any kind of logocentric phenomenology irrelevant. Hansen calls this fallacy “technesis,” a superficial embrace of the idea or interpretation of technology over the actual phenomenological or affective experience of technology. Hansen’s solution is the discourse of embodiment, with a special focus paid to media that engage and transform our sensorium. Hansen’s form of embodiment is underwritten by the idea of “intermediation,” which treats the actual body as a vanishing point for fields of media and technology. The argument is less about bodies and more about hyper-mediated extensions where there is no clear distinction between body and technology. This new media argument doesn’t acknowledge cognition as a form of embodiment. Instead, it operates by upholding a mind/body dualism in order to play the two modes of being against each other. Situated against this brand of technesis, my project treats the experience of media and technology as sites for disruption. The media thinkers in this study highlight ways that the experience of media is often interrupted and imperfect. The new imaginaries that media and technology engender through disruption, imperfection, and noise create the conditions of possibility for future interpretations of media, technology, and culture.

Cultural objects today have never been more permanent through means of digital storage, nor have they ever been more ephemeral through means of networked production and

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distribution. The term “digital storage” itself is an oxymoron that has deeply embedded itself into how people imagine something like “cloud computing.” Contrary to the materialist fantasy of “digital storage,” when codes and programs are lost or revised, the material disappears. Encoding drops any co-present link. In this study, every chapter considers an inhuman media-specific challenge to notions of subjectivity, history, aesthetics, memory, and political life. Scale is a persistent challenge across all these domains. The media-enabled experience of mass culture, the ability of radio to touch different continents in an instant, and the promise of the digital archive to store the entirety of human knowledge all fail to deliver on their utopic promise and possibilities.

The interface between aesthetics and media is crucial because media technology act as a catalysts for rethinking literary production. Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves* is read as an exploration of subjectivity in the wake of radio and broadcast technology; Ezra Pound’s use of the ideogram attempts to reconcile hypermediated cultural production; Tom McCarthy’s INS project turns the digital archive into a cryptic ideology of data-storage; the figure of the zombie becomes a monstrous form of an autoimmunitary teletechnicity. These classically modernist concerns with new subjectivities, uneven global development, and the massification of culture stretch the modernist project forward in time and cut across high and low cultural objects.

*Modernist Media Cultural Techniques*

I call this treatment of modernism and media studies is an idiosyncratic tradition because it represents a different and delayed path within the critical reception history of media theory. This tradition differentiates itself from a critical dialectic between Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler, the media theorists who constitute the first wave of theoretical thinking about
media and technology as its own discursive literary practice. This dialectic is as follows: media either enhances (McLuhan) or restricts (Kittler) our human faculties of perception and cognition. Both McLuhan and Kittler represent a transitional generation that oversaw the midcentury shift from literary studies to media studies.

It is no coincidence that McLuhan’s media theory first developed during his study of modernism under I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. This connection between his study of modernism and his media theory are apparent in the ways that he sought to reconcile the form and the function of media, which lead to his most famous declaration: “The medium is the message.”

During his professorship at Toronto he taught Hugh Kenner and engaged in correspondence with Ezra Pound. He helped develop the Toronto school of Communication Theory with Northrop Frye. His celebrity status and rhetorical style made him a pariah among his colleagues. Douglas Coupland’s observes in his experimental biography of McLuhan that “most of [his] colleagues…viewed him as a nutbar.” Today McLuhan’s work is widely taught in anglophone media studies and communications departments, but his first serious and sustained reception was in Germany:

There is a cultural milieu in which his puns are all but excised—and his “direct, declaratory, and conclusive tone” tempered—via a language less inclined to polysemy, indirection, and euphemism than English. There is a setting in which he appears as a man without a popular past and in which his dalliances with Hollywood and Madison Avenue are largely unknown. It is a context where, in the midst of the doctrinaire 1960s, he was pronounced dead on arrival and in which he has subsequently experienced a resurrection

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6 McLuhan collaborated with Kenner on a number of projects, including McLuhan’s *The Mechanical Bride*.
more miraculous than in dot-com America. Perhaps improbably, this place is the heart of the Eurozone: Germany, Austria, and, to a lesser extent, Switzerland.\textsuperscript{8}

Norm Friesen points to the way that McLuhan’s rhetoric was too outlandish to be taken seriously in the time that it was written; however, however when rendered in German the context and rhetoric was lost and the work was read more seriously. While McLuhan may have found a serious reader in German communication and literature departments, it was nevertheless his hyperbolic language that future American generations would point to as an early prophecy for the internet.

A generation behind McLuhan, but contemporaneous in style and approach, Friedrich Kittler studied German literature and philosophy at The University of Freiburg and was on track to take up the mantle that Martin Heidegger had established in the early decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and resituate the University of Freiburg as an institutional centerpoint for literature and philosophy. Kittler’s reputation for inventing “medienwissenschaft” (media studies) at Freiburg while writing about Pink Floyd, Thomas Pynchon, and such German modernists as Gottfried Benn and Conrad Meyer lives on through the myriad students he mentored; however, he never found a true home in Freiburg. The university was too focused on traditional versions of literary criticism and philology. The university kept Kittler in an adjunct status, not sure what to do with the young iconoclastic critic. He took the long road to the Humboldt University in Berlin, with appointments at Berkeley, Kassel, and Ruhr.

The similarities between McLuhan and Kittler are more striking than the differences. Both were intellectually formed around a notion of modernist aesthetic practice, and both tried to rewrite that aesthetic into something that attended to the ways that media and technology were

\textsuperscript{8} Norm Friesen, “Marshaling McLuhan for Media Theory,” 6.
changing the production, distribution, and storage of culture. Both Kittler and McLuhan struggled to reconcile academic institutions of classic humanist study with what they observed in popular culture. Both men used the discourse of media and technology to transform a discussion about aesthetic practice into one about media conditions. These similarities suggest that the quarrel and dialectic between the two men is not nearly as extreme as it sounds. In the final analysis both spoke to radical ways that media were transforming ways humans could understand or experience the world. As the history of media theory continues to be written, the terms of this dynamic broaden to include different sets of assumptions and approaches for thinking about media.

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, a student of Kittler during his Freiburg years and later a translator and champion of Kittler’s work in the anglophone world, has described the aftermath of this work as “The Kittler Effect.” The Kittler effect speaks to how this generational shift played out first in Freiburg and Toronto and later in Berlin, New York, and the rest of the academic world. Winthrop-Young names this “Kittler effect” as such because the field of study was taken up in a more systemic practice in Germany than in Canada. The European interest in social systems theory and the experimental culture in Berlin gave critics the opportunity to explore new ways of thinking about how culture was transforming in spite of and because of new technologies and new sensibilities. In Winthrop-Young’s remembrance of the late Kittler he writes

Kittler was indeed a lot like McLuhan. On the one hand, both were—simply, indubitably, and irrevocably—right; it just took the *cum tempore* world an average of fifteen years to catch up. Many formerly outrageous assumptions have turned into everyday phenomena too obvious to discuss...What sets their texts apart is the lack of any middle ground
between center and periphery, the obvious and outrageous. An abyss separates that which technological evolution has changed into quotidian doxa from the verbal spasms flickering across the outermost fringe of commonsense…The truth is that neither McLuhan nor Kittler subscribed to reasonable arguments or rational discussion.9

While the discourse between the two is rich, there is also much more to be said about how notions of media and technology engender modes of thinking outside of the humanist tradition of the universal subject. The assemblage of writers and critics in this study owes much to recent turns in the field of “German media theory,” which has less to do with the country and more to do with the sensibility that the generation of Kittler and McLuhan engendered.

Bernhard Siegert, for example, describes “German media theory” as a cacography, a sloppy or bad form of writing, because it not only has little with do with the country of Germany as such, but also is not strictly “theory” because it involves the history of media, the analysis of media, and the production of objects via media technology. Siegert points to the emergence of the term “cultural technique” as a broader and more fluid concept that evokes more of these traditions. For him, the practice of studying an object necessarily comes after the object first emerges. Writing happens before people ask the question “what does it mean to write?” While this might be strictly true, the core observation within this tradition is that we can never separate questions from the object. For critics writing under the aegis of media theory or cultural technique, the important dynamic here is not about what came first, but rather to identify that one cannot exist without the other.

Siegert continues to explore this relationship as a parasitology, borrowing the concept of the parasite from Michel Serres, an issue in the first chapter of this study. For now, it is enough

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9 Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, “A Freiburg Scrapbook in Memory of Friedrich Kittler,” 370.
to say that Siegert invokes the parasite as a way to open up a third term within media theory. Its focus is neither on the media object nor on discourse around that object, but rather on the ever-evolving interaction that opens up once these two modes of communication enter into a communication system with one another. “The parasite that attaches itself to this relation assumes the position of the third…In Serres’s model of communication it is not the sender-receiver relationship that is fundamental but that between communication and noise. This corresponds to the definition of the culture-technical turn outlined above…media are code-generating interfaces between the real that cannot be symbolized and culture orders.”

Looking outside of that specific dialectic bridges modernist aesthetic concepts with new media paradigms. New Media theorist Lev Manovich offers a similar call to surmount the staid dialectical thinking that has characterized modernist media theory when he focuses on the computer as the logic for understanding media in a digital age: “New media in general can be thought us as consisting in two distinct layers—the “cultural layer” and the “computer layer.”…The ways in which the computer models the world, represents data, and allows us to operate on it…influence the cultural layer of new media, its organization, its emerging genres, its contents.”

The issue with Manovich is that he establishes a hierarchical system of meaning through which the computer conditions the possibility for the cultural. In contrast to Manovich, the figures and objects of study lay the groundwork for a feedback loop between the cultural and the computational. When left unchecked and unchallenged, this feedback loop can produce dire consequences, as evinced through the media-informed biopolitical monster of social media I explore in chapters three and five. The newness of new media speaks to the opportunity for

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10 Bernhard Siegert, “Cacography or Communication? Cultural Techniques in German Media Studies,” 32.
11 Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media, 46.
experimentation and exploration that these thought-figures present to critics and artists. Understood within the feedback loop between the aesthetic and the technical, Vilém Flusser’s work on the technical image constitutes both a figure for new media image production in an era of digital media and as an aesthetic object that emerged from a set of early twentieth century challenges to the production, distribution, and interpretation of images. For Flusser the technical image not only describes a form of media, it describes an entire social logic that informs culture, politics, philosophy, and art. This logic is not only image-based, it is non-linear. Understood in this way, the emergence of the technical image is not conditioned by the computers that make it possible, but rather the technical image describes the kind of society that makes room for the logic of the computer as a sine qua non for cultural life. Social media, especially photo-sharing services such as Instagram, are the most visceral example of this relationship. Cities and townships endorse and sponsor public art based on their “grammability,” or their ability to serve as perfect backdrops for Instagram photos. Similarly, these platforms exist in order to create fantastic renditions of everyday life.

This tradition of media theory is thus more in line with the work of Siegfried Zielinski. Zielinski is representative of a much broader movement within media studies. Sometimes referred to as German Media Theory, such writers as Zielinski, Vilém Flusser, Bernard Siegert, Bernard Stiegler, Michel Serres, and other 20th century contemporaries haven’t yet enjoyed the same overwhelming reception as Friedrich Kittler and Marshall McLuhan. Zielinski, a Berlin media theorist, director of the Vilém Flusser archive, and author of Deep Time of the Media: Toward and Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means, uses the idea of geological time, or deep time, to challenge enlightenment theories of media and technology that trace narratives of progress and development onto their overall view on the development of media. In
Zielinski’s argument, the science of deep time reveals that the lifecycles of the earth do not trend in one direction, but instead rise and fall. Extinction events, local and global climate change, and the rise and fall of civilizations all point to a more complex history of human development. He takes these long geological cycles and views them through the lens of cultural history: “These ideas result in a very different picture of what has hitherto been called progress. The notion of continuous progress from lower to higher, from simple to complex, must be abandoned, together with all the images, metaphors, and iconography that have been used to describe progress.”\(^{12}\)

Moving away from the enlightenment idea of progress means moving away from traditional notions of the human, in so far as humanist narratives are often wrapped within the discourse of progress. Contrary to that notion, technology reveals something very unhuman about human life. “Technology is not human; in a specific sense it is deeply inhuman. The best, fully functioning technology can be created only in opposition to the traditional image of what is human and living, seldom as its extension or expansion.”\(^{13}\) Put simply, technology is not human. It may enhance or impoverish our sensory capacity, it may become a necessary and contingent feature of human life, but it is not human. The difficulty of this argument is that technology is so entrenched within our understanding that it is difficult to separate the human from the technological. Bernard Stiegler, in Technics and Time Volume One, speaks of an “originary technicity,” which argues in a post-structuralist fashion that argues that the human is always already technological.

The tension between these two positions is reconcilable through the notion of the inhuman. Originary technicity, as a way to describe how human cultural life is founded through technical means, can exist alongside a thesis that that argues for a fundamental gap between the

\(^{12}\) Sigfried Zielinski, Deep Time of the Media, 5.

\(^{13}\) Sigfried Zielinski, Deep Time of the Media, 6.
human and technology. The fecundity of the inhuman speaks to the ways that technology is un-
human as well as the ways that technology is in-humans. Zielinski’s view is relevant to this
project because it focuses on moments when media and technology cause a defamiliarization
through breakdown, failure, incoherence or some other unexpected event that causes one to
become aware of the fast-growing media technology system that developed over the course of
the twentieth century.

While Zielinski encourages the abandonment of the notion of continuous progress, he
notes that the history of media and technology primarily concerns two realms: space and time. In
this context, space refers to the ways in which media and technology facilitate the transformation
of space through travel, engineering, mapping, etc. Time refers to how we collect and store
knowledge and pass that on to others. Zielinski pulls these notions together in order to establish
the connective function of media: “Media are spaces of action for constructed attempts to
connect what is separated.”14 His use of the word “attempt” here is important, for many of the
objects of study in Zielinski’s work are failed experiments. They are interesting for the ways that
they attempt to make some sort of connection, even if that connection is failed from the start. As
Zielinski describes it, “The goal is to uncover dynamic moments in the media-archaeological
record that abound and revel in heterogeneity and, in this way, too enter into a relationship of
tension with various present-day moments, relativize them, and render them more decisive.”15

A Metamodernist Archive

This project’s literary archive cuts across genre, period, and nation. All of these writers
are modernist media thinkers because of the way that they respond to emergent and dynamic

cultural transformations across the twentieth and twenty-first century and because of the way that these responses provide occasions to reevaluate contemporary modes of thinking about the conditions of possibility for communication, culture, and politics. The purpose of the breadth of this archive is to capture a recursive relationship that modernist aesthetics has in relation to its subject: modernity. This recursivity is not arbitrary or whimsical; rather, it is the critical aesthetic response to observed breakdowns in the understanding of media. This relationship does not belong to a specific period or nation or genre. It is found instead through a process of critical inquiry wherein status quos and conditions of possibility are challenged and rewritten.

This project also attempts to relate to popular forms of inquiry, such as the zombie or the internet meme, in the same way that modernist aesthetic practice looked to popular culture as a site for critical inquiry. Popular culture has a special relationship with new media because the widespread distribution of new media is often occurs on the back of popular culture. As such, the popular figures and functions as its own kind of avant-garde, a tip of the spear for thinking about how aesthetic objects interact with new media technology. Seeing modernism as media critique thus highlights the relationships that modernist literary practice had with popular culture and media and to carry those same kinds of relationships forward in order to further extend the boundaries of its critical inquiry.

David James and Urmila Seshagiri have referred to this conception of modernism as metamodernism, “Metamodernism regards modernism as an era, an aesthetic, and an archive that originated in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.” James and Seshagiri use the classic historical archive of modernism in order to amplify the kind of modernist work they observe in the contemporary:

Redefining modernism merely through its transhistorical proliferation blurs the technical achievements and affective character of early-twentieth-century art. Finally, we fail to do justice to contemporary literature if we approach it as either a belated iteration of modernism or the outgrowth of a movement that never receded. Periodization, therefore, amplifies, rather than constrains, scholarly discourse about modernism, its several legacies, and the moment of contemporary literature.¹⁷

As James and Seshagiri have it, metamodernism seeks to contain modernism within the contemporary as a subordinate set of questions, gestures, and aesthetic responses that sit alongside other styles and movements. The term tries to have its cake and eat it too by wanting to make a strong claim about the importance of the historic period, but also wanting to defend the contemporary as a continued site of modernist inquiry.¹⁸

In contrast to this metamodernist attempt to justify the modernist period as such, the broadly historical timeline in this project shows how formal questions of modernist aesthetic practice persist in different contexts and with different kinds of cultural objects. I can call a zombie modernist, but that claim doesn’t help explain what a zombie is or what modernism is. More important than the ontology of modernism (what counts as modernist) is the critical practice of modernism as methodology for understanding our relationship to cultural objects. This approach deemphasizes notions of human progress that underwrite metamodernism, instead highlighting the ambivalent cultural forces, often enabled by media, that challenge and undermine any notion of stable subjectivity. By paying attention to moments of breakdown and disruption as a catalyst for reinterpretation, this dissertation posits the history of modernism as a

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¹⁸ James Brunton, in his study “Whose (Meta)modernism?,” has emphasized the role of failure within all metamodernist texts. For Brunton failure is a key axis through which the metamodernist critique of contemporary culture operates, 61.
sustained engagement with defining modernity through the very breakdown rather than a moment and movement of progress and achievement.

The era, the aesthetic, and the archive all exist in relation to media transformations that create the conditions to critique and reimagine dynamics of self, society, and culture. The media dynamics that this inhuman modernism first attended to are as relevant as ever because the dynamics live on through new media transformations. Radio and contemporary social media rely on different technologies and scale differently, but both are equally disruptive in relation to a classic notion of the human subject. The reason that so many media theorists have pointed to the archive of modernism is because modernism is the first sustained critical response to the advent of a hyper-mediated landscape. That archive still has much to offer critics in the 21st century. Metamodernism, then, is a term meant to capture the various ways that the legacy of modernism has continued to live on into the 21st century. Rather than situating modernism as a historic period, the metamodernists contend that the issues of modernism persist, that the fundamental aesthetic categories of modernism continue to act as a base code for exploring and understanding the contemporary:

Metamodernism considers that our era is characterized by an oscillation between aspects of both modernism and postmodernism. We see this manifest as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism, a moderate fanaticism, oscillating between sincerity and irony, deconstruction and construction, apathy and affect, attempting to attain some sort of transcendent position, as if such a thing were within our grasp. The metamodern generation understands that we can be both ironic and sincere in the same moment; that one does not necessarily diminish the other.19

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The oscillation that Luke Turner describes is an interference effect between different cultural sensibilities. Luke Turner and other contributors to *Notes on Metamodernism* refer to Plato’s metaxis as their reference point for the meta in metamodernism. Metaxis, for Plato, describes the condition of being in between—an interference effect—as a characteristic of the human. The particular metaxis that the metamodernists point to is between a modern commitment and a postmodern detachment. The cultural wave function that the metamodernists point to in contemporary art and literature is the latest afterlife of this inhuman interference effect within modernist media thinking.

The era of modernism, thus, has many afterlives. Tracing those afterlives through the new set of pressures brought about by new relationships to media and technology, opens the field of modernism to new decades and to new forms of cultural production. The spirit of this gesture is found in modernist practice itself. Woolf and Pound commented upon and engaged freely with the popular art of their day. The popular was, for them, a site of cultural critique and celebration. The lesson of their practice is found in the care and consideration that they brought to any object of study, regardless of its origin or its popular perception among the intellectual class. Walter Benjamin is the most sterling example of this practice, who leveraged his method of critique on everything from childhood books on rainbows, to toys, to café au laits. For Benjamin each object serves as a vector through which cultural concepts are at work. In an essay called “The Program for Literary Criticism,” he describes the function of criticism as “to life the mask of pure art.”

In his approach to popular culture, film, and mass produced images he succeeded in breaking down the barrier between worthy and unworthy objects of criticism. In that same essay he

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describes criticism through the metaphor of replanting plants as a way of thinking about the different contexts that one can transfer a work.

These modernist afterlives are not straightforward and clear. The feedback loops that exist between modernism and the contemporary are especially apparent when considering the critical engagement with media and technology. Woolf’s engagement with aesthetics in light of media shaped the conditions for our future understanding of self in a hyper-mediated world. In turn, the more we understand about the dynamics of hyper-mediation, the more profound we can engage with Woolfian media aesthetics. The narrative of twentieth century literary production doesn’t lead from modernism, to post-modernism, to a dialectical unity of the two. Instead, the development around this period is cyclical. Emergence of new critical occasions reevaluation of the past. Metamodernist critics identify a certain interest that early 21st century culture has with early 20th century culture. We see this, for example, in Tom McCarthy’s interest in the early 20th century as a common setting for his novels. This may be merely the coincidence of the observer. But more accurately it is a form of selection bias. Revealing the dynamic between how the contemporary reshapes our understanding of historical modernism and vice versa is the reason that this new modernist tradition seeks to cast a wide net regarding what constitutes a reflexive critical practice.

This process involves, as Zielinski describes in his methodology of media archeology: “not to find the old in the new, but the new in the old” (7). This is to say that there is a diachronic and transformative process at work within the project of metamodernism. The classic modernist archive has been transformed several times and will continue to transform as it reiterates itself within different methodological constructs. Ironically, this sensibility was always at the heart of modernist literary production. T.S. Eliot offered the analogy to the scientific method in
“Tradition and the Individual Talent: “It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and Sulphur dioxide.”21 Eliot goes on to describe this process as “continual self-sacrifice.”22 Eliot and Zielinski leverage a methodology that is not defined by its contents, but rather by its exposure to the possibility of transformation. Rather than resist this transformation by appealing to notions of nostalgia, the media thinkers in this study attempt to embraces these transformations with both eyes open.

As an archive focused on the afterlife of modernist critical practice, this idiosyncratic tradition challenges the rise of the digital humanities as the heir-apparent of humanities scholarship. The purpose of this challenge is to identify the pitfalls and blind spots that believe our new digital media can reveal a deeper truth in the past. The reverse is likely more accurate. This project considers modernism as a form of praxis, or an undertaking that both creates and critiques culture objects.

One contemporary afterlife of this practice within modernist studies is the field of digital modernism, which seeks to unite the practice of digital humanities with the methodology of new modernist studies. Unlike metamodernism, digital modernism speaks more to the methodology and composition of media objects and multi-media studies of literature than it does to a specific critical field. In a special Print + edition of Modernism/Modernity, Gabriel Hankins argues that “[w]e are all digital modernists now,” a claim that plays off of the related thesis from Geoffrey Little that “we are all digital humanists now.” The digital modernist movement seeks to connect the practice of new media informed scholarship and the digital humanities with the practice of

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new modernist studies. The specter behind all of this is the literature itself: namely, the extent to which modernist cultural practice both encourages and discourages new media practice.

Digital modernists are interested in how the ways that new media technology can inform the research program of modernist literature. Jessica Pressman defines the project of digital modernism in these terms: “Digital Modernism seeks to build bridges between modernism and digital literature, print textuality and computational technologies, literary criticism and media studies.” Pressman considers how modernism is remixed through new media technology. Her journey from New Criticism to New Media is a largely one-directional study. This exemplifies the biggest blindspot of digital modernism as it stands today. It only looks at how the present looks back on the past, rather than on how the past prefigures the future. Digital modernists want to take advantage of how a global media architecture can help map a globalized literature. The field of digital modernism is entrenched within the traditional dialectic of media studies, but as a forward-looking research program the digital modernists are firmly on the side of McLuhan in their practice. Their desire is to harness new media technology to enhance our ability to read, study, and archive modernist literature. As it relates to this brand of digital modernism, this traditional within modernism seeks to complicate modernism’s relationship with media. While modernist writers embraced new technologies as means for exploring expression and aesthetic practice, they did so in a way that was highly sensitive to the various ways that these new media impeded their abilities as much as they encouraged them. Read chronologically, this process develops downward with increasing amounts of cynicism toward the humanist ideal of progress.

23 Alan Kirby offers the term “digimodernism” as a way to describe the advent of electronic media as the primary mode of textual creation and preservation. He offers this term as an alternative to the term “postmodernism” in order to emphasize the import of the digital in an understanding of late 20th century culture. Alan Kirby, “The Possibility of Cyber-Placelessness,” 72.

24 Jessica Pressman, Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media, 22.
and enlightenment. Nevertheless, this tradition underscores the value of modernist practice as a set of critical tools for analyzing and understanding media.

Chapter one describes how Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves* uses media-informed notions of noise and disruption to complicate her aesthetic practice. Disruption is the sine qua non of Woolf’s aesthetic, beginning with her first published short story, “The Mark on the Wall,” and continuing through her late work, as displayed in her novel *The Waves*. Michel Serres’s media-theory concept of the parasite, a channel disrupting noise that engenders new signals, shows that through her engagement with forms of interruption, Woolf developed a notion of experience and identity based upon disruption. Disruption is a crucial concept in this history of media theory in so far as it highlights the ways forms of communication are often miscommunicated between senders and receivers. This is especially true as media landscapes become more and more dense with more and more signals. Noise becomes a defining feature of Woolf’s modernism, as well as our own. Woolf’s prose offers a way to appropriate noise as a generative feature within our media understanding. She uses the image of chatter in order to capture fields of subjective experience that are fuzzy and porous.

Chapter two examines Ezra Pound’s engagement with the ideogram and the ideogrammic method for writing. Canto 116 famously confesses “I cannot make it cohere,” which raises important questions about the function and efficacy of the ideogram for poetic expression. These concepts form the bedrock for Vilém Flusser’s work on the “technical image”—what we think of today as a digital image. Pound was drawn to new media forms but wanted them grounded in a cultural history, fearing that mass culture would unravel cultural values and traditions. Flusser redeployed Pound’s notions in his work on the technical image and reworked them through his idea of groundlessness. He does so in order to address the problem of cultural ownership and
origin, which exclude and delineate proper and improper uses of culture. Flusser’s appropriation of Pound’s concepts, when read back through Pound’s work, bridge the incoherence of Pound’s aesthetics into a media-specific understanding of his poetry as a testing ground for the limits of language and expression.

Chapter three considers how the 21st century avant-garde group The International Necronautical Society (INS) criticizes the way that archives, digital or analog, become imbued with metaphysical power in a new media landscape where archives are always sites of failure and misunderstanding rather than progress and accumulation. This misunderstanding may be generative of new ideas and new modes of expression, but it does so at the expense of any notion of archivable truth. Failure is the keyword in the world of the INS. The failure that they identify is a foundational experience for media studies. Technology breaks down as much as it enables connectivity—this is the lesson of the INS, which is also a theory of modernism and media. The INS tries to turn failure into a productive form of art by creating an archive that is everything that an archive shouldn’t be: incomplete, incoherent, and illegible.

Chapter four examines how the figure of the zombie exemplifies the digital modernism’s methodology, as understood through elucidated through Jacques Derrida’s work on autoimmunity and biopolitics. The zombie is a version of mass media and transmission turned into a monstrous form. The zombie reveals how new media culture the drifts toward regularization and standardization. Like the moth in the work of Virginia Woolf, the zombie is a hybrid figure. An uncritical eye that simply embraces hyper-mediated culture, the zombie becomes subject to “repetition without difference;” in other words, the loop forecloses the possibility of new ideas or modes of thinking to emerge.
All the idiosyncratic thinkers in this project share is an unrelenting commitment to the possibility of something new that is born out of something disruptive and imperfect. Interference can confuse distinctions, but it can also amplify. Their engagement with media show how this possibility is often messy and unexpected, but nevertheless new and different. This difference is not always determinable, but it is distinctly inhuman; a figure caught between a modernist humanism and a postmodernist critique. This version of the inhuman is not anti-human or anti-humanist in nature, in fact it overlaps with humanism in the most critically important way: a shared commitment to laying bare the dynamics that shape our culture and our perceptions of the world.²⁵

²⁵ Humanism in this sense is a “critical humanism.” Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley have described this version of humanism as a “practice of becoming.” Their point is to emphasize that the human should never be taken as such, but should always be understood in the context of being made, shaped, and defined by various social, political, and cultural forces. Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, “Existential Humanism,” 40.
CHAPTER ONE

The Waves and Parasitic Media Relations

“And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die.”

—Virginia Woolf, “Craftsmanship” (1937)

Virginia Woolf’s Disruptive Aesthetics

Virginia Woolf’s literary aesthetic begins with a disruption. 1917’s “The Mark on the Wall” was her first published story. The protagonist is reading a book when she is interrupted by noticing a mark on the wall: “I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn’t be able to say for certain; because once a thing’s done, no one ever knows how it happened.” The story lingers in this state of disruptive intermediacy. Not quite one thing, nor another, the protagonist is able to explore a host of thoughts that are made possible both by the disruption of the mark and the refusal to resolve the disruption by defining what the mark actually is. This early story lays out the two registers in which disruptions operate in Woolf’s work: first the disruption causes a rupture, a breaking of order that causes an awareness of a set of relations between objects, subjects, and ideas. Second, the disruption invites a state of hybridity, an opportunity to allow for an experience or a moment in time to become multi-valent. The mark on the wall is not one thing or another thing—it represents a host of potentialities.

The mark on the wall acts as a catalyst. When the observation of the mark joins the narrator’s self-reflection, a set of relationships opens up between the narrator and her thoughts about history, matter, space, nature, time, and knowledge. The mark complicates; it does not clarify. Instead of revealing a stable and unified subjectivity, it acts as a locus for set of chaotic

26 Virginia Woolf, The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf.
thoughts which range from the previous tenant’s decoration whims to the lived-in experience of being a tree. These thoughts offer a context for understanding the character of the narrator, but the image of character that it creates is messy and filled with unpolished, incomplete ideas.

The mark is a medium, quite literally in the sense that it is “in the middle” of things. Disruptions such as the mark represent an important frame for understanding media and media relationships in Woolf’s work. Media have both a storage function and a transmission function. Different media store and transmit information differently, but they all fulfill these two functions. If media are understood as the technology of storage/transmission, then media aesthetics refers to the specific ways in which the medium stores and transmits information. A published novel, a poetry reading, and radio address all present different aesthetics that attend to the media technology of language. Language, and the aesthetic products of language, are always disruptive forces in Woolf’s work. She begins her 1937 radio essay “On Craftsmanship” by asserting:

“Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations – naturally. They have been out and about, on people’s lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And this is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today – that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages.”

The storage and transmission properties of language, argues Woolf, are first and foremost disruptive. Rather than ignore or corral the disruptive nature of language, Woolf’s work provides a sustained engagement and embrace of disruption. To engage with disruption is to become disrupted, but disruptions create breakages that incite observers to become more aware of the media technologies that are acting as conduits for information. Disruptions reveal the
architecture of a media system and they point to how the media aesthetics are constitutive of meaning and experience. Woolf’s literary aesthetic makes use of the ways that media and subjectivity both share in this disruptive tendency. In this way, in the context of Woolf’s aesthetics, every theory of subjectivity is also a theory of media, and every theory of media is also a theory of the subject.

Disruptions play an essential role in understanding Woolf’s literary aesthetic because they reveal both theories of media and theories of subjectivity. Disruptions serve moments of intense scrutiny and analysis, moments when subjects are allowed to reflect on how their identities are shaped and constituted through the various media technologies and aesthetics that they participate in. Disruptions also create opportunities for change, moments when characters might become more than a mere subject to their media technologies, and through breakages to create different and more complex states, which involve themselves and their community. This aesthetic project engages notions of self, other, and environment which work on each other in multiple ways and are revealed through moments of disruption.

Within Woolf’s long literary project that considers many images of disruption, the image of the moth stands out as a persistent and often-present figuration. It is tempting to overvalue an image that her work revisits throughout her literary project – to consider it the key to unraveling the entire aesthetic – but it is also easy to undervalue its import, to treat it as merely another type of disruption or a convenient placeholder, which she would later revise into something else. From the perspective of her writing process, it appears that Woolf found inspiration for her work through the image of the disruptive moth. In journal entries and early drafts, the title of Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves* was *The Moths*—an anecdote about a moth interrupting a dinner party had inspired Woolf to write *The Waves*. Woolf scholars have mentioned the first title without
much commentary, but it was more than a mere placeholder, as she used this working title for the better part of two years. In the essay “Reading,” Woolf describes her childhood pastime of hunting moths, and Leonard Woolf called her first posthumous book of essays The Death of the Moth [and Other Essays], after a short essay that interrogates her observation of a moth’s lifecycle. This study treats the image of the moth as a particular kind of disruption, one that focalizes how the aesthetics of disruption reveal an inhuman and external quality to language, a quality that must be interpreted, but cannot be owned, controlled, or “pinned-down.”

The image of the moth perfectly captures the two registers of disruptions that are evident in Woolf’s early fiction: a realization made from a broken social order and the emergence of a hybrid state. In her work, moths often stand in for states of hybridity and appear as disruptions, existing in the middle of things or in states of flux. In an early sketch of The Waves, Woolf describes these disruptions by invoking the image of the moth: “A man & a woman are to be sitting at a table talking. Or shall they remain silent? It is to be a love story: she is to finally let the last great moth in. The contrasts might be something of this sort: she might talk, or think, about the age of the earth: the death of humanity: then moths keep on coming.”

The party is interrupted, momentarily suspending the social hierarchy and dynamics, and the image of the moth is an image of an entity in various states of hybridity and change. Moths figure throughout Woolf’s life, and images of moths help her coordinate ideas about perception, communication, and relative scales of time and experience. Woolf’s moth is representative of a medium, quite literally “in the middle,” and its spectral role in The Waves marks the ways that the novel engages with questions about media, especially when they serve as vectors for social connection and identity. Woolf describes in her journal that each character in The Waves is a

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28 Virginia Woolf, The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, ed. Leonard Woolf.
moth, which is to say that each character was its own vector of disruption for other characters. Whereas Woolf’s early fiction often involves one primary subject and one primary disruption, *The Waves* features layers of disruptions upon disruptions, which constitute a noise and complex frame. Late aesthetic projects like *The Waves*, “The Death of the Moth,” and “On Craftsmanship” build upon the early exploration of disruption by expanding the concept into an operational logic that shapes an understanding of media and character around reciprocal disruptions.

*“The Mark on the Wall” and the Ambiguity of Language*

Virginia Woolf’s 1917 short story “The Mark on the Wall” presents the reflections of a narrator whose Sunday afternoon tea is interrupted when she sees something on her wall:

I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece.29

The narrator is grateful for the interruption because it leads her thoughts away from the “automatic fancy” of idly thinking about castles and knights. The story’s opening paragraph, then, sets up a tension between different kinds of thinking and reflection: On the one hand there are the automatic and idle thoughts that pervade our consciousness, passing through culture and, according to this paragraph, originating in childhood experiences; on the other hand there is a more deliberate, critical, and self-questioning form of thinking that seeks to understand the

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underlying conditions and motivations for any idea. The indeterminable mark is a catalyst that helps the narrator reflect on what it means to have thoughts, where they come from, and what they mean. The themes and motifs present in this story, especially those that consider the functions of the disruption itself, raise fundamental concerns and questions that haunt Woolf’s literary aesthetic throughout her career, namely how the modes, means, and purpose of language and expression underpin a sense of order and worldview that explains the tragedies of early 20th century history. Written in the immediate aftermath of World War I, this story tries to imagine a form of thinking and experiencing the world, self, and other in a way that won’t invariably lead the nation back into war. In later work, like *Mrs. Dalloway*, these differences in thinking and perceiving are drawn out in a post-war context to show a fundamental irreconcilable set of perceptions and subjectivities. Before, during, and after the war her work relies on disruptions to mark these shifts and to emphasize these fundamental breakages. As a catalyst for thinking, the images of disruptions in Woolf’s work reveals cultural and cognitive blindspots and offers a different, more idiosyncratic, logic for describing how we experience the world.

As the opening passage above suggests, the principle subject of “The Mark on the Wall” are-the relationships among reflection, meaning, and culture. The story weaves the three kinds of discourse together and presents them among a noisy tableau that includes history, politics, literature, nature, and self-consciousness. The narrator describes this internal scene as a swarm of insects: “How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it.” The image of the swarm of ants is simultaneously an image of collaboration and cooperation and also an image of unfinished and incomplete work. All ideas surround a topic and help it toward a unified goal, but from the perspective of the narrator, the project seems to start and stop abruptly. Rather than present this
as a failure of thinking, the story offers an image of a chaotic, interrupted, and incomplete project as a more apt description of what it means to think. The story itself proceeds in an ant-like fashion, feverishly swarming one set of ideas and then abruptly shifting to another set. In this way each thought acts like an interruption for the previous thought. Taken as a whole, the story proceeds as a system of sequential interruptions and offers the interruption itself as a more accurate descriptor for how thinking happens.

The narrator’s idiosyncratic, interrupting thoughts are set against more formal ideas of meaning and intentionality. While reflecting on the mark and whether or not it is a trace from the previous renter, the narrator recollects:

They wanted to leave this house because they wanted to change their style of furniture, so he said, and he was in process of saying that in his opinion art should have ideas behind it when we were torn asunder, as one is torn from the old lady about to pour out tea and the young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa as one rushes past in the train.30

The severity of the word “asunder” marks this passage’s critical engagement with how disruptions, as a primary mode of experience, stand in opposition to essentialized ideas of art, history, or self. If a person’s experience of the world is best understood through a series of idiosyncratic disruptions, then the meaning of something like a piece of art cannot be merely reduced to one idea. More than a mere difference of opinion, the previous renter’s ideas about art tears-apart any possibility of collegiality between the narrator and the former renter. The difference between these two ideas about art are as irreconcilable as the relationship between a passenger on a train and a person playing tennis nearby.

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Art, as inferred from the narrator’s reflections about the former tenant, should not have ideas behind it. It is not the ideas themselves that appear problematic, but rather the way that a singular idea or interpretation of an art object will always reduce the object and sever the blurry and multivalent ways that individuals can freely understand art, in relation to their own personal experience. The “Ideas” behind art turns an indeterminate thing into a determined thing, thus reducing the overall meaning or potential that an object can have, whether it is a piece of art or merely a mark on the wall. Shortly after the narrator describes how her relationship with the previous renter was torn asunder, she reflects:

I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn’t be able to say for certain; because once a thing’s done, no one ever knows how it happened. Oh! dear me, the mystery of life; the inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have—what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization—let me just count over a few of the things lost in one lifetime, beginning, for that seems always the most mysterious of possess—what cat would gnaw, what rat would nibble—three pale blue canisters of book binding tools?….Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one’s hair!

Here the narrator identifies a common confusion between meaning and origin. She insists that knowledge of an origin does not equal knowledge of a thing. The origin is merely one part of a much more dynamic and complex process. In this passage she also presents her insistence on indeterminacy and inaccuracy as, ironically, a more accurate way of understanding both an individual’s life as well as the history of a civilization. Instead of a narrative with a distinct beginning, middle, and end, this presents humanity as a history of lost things. The loss of written
knowledge and history at the hands (or fangs) of the natural world translates to an individual’s experience of being blown through the tube. On both the level of the individual and the level of the social, humans capture experience more accurately through the experiences of randomness, interruptions, disruptions, and non-sequiturs.

Thus, the narrator is not without a sense of loss for the comfort of simple, unified meaning and history. The story begins with an admission that these thoughts have a child-like simplicity, but the connection between the kind of simple thinking that is communicated to children is not necessarily pejorative. Later in the story she clarifies these desires:

I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciously, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts. To steady myself, let me catch hold of the first ideas that passes…Shakespeare…Well, he will do as well as another.31

The passage captures two contradictory impulses. First, the narrator expresses her desire to “think quietly, calmly, spaciously, never to be interrupted.” This is the desire to repossess the same kind of idle thinking that had captured the narrator before she noticed the mark on the wall, but her challenge is to think in that way while also not becoming beholden to the kind of surface-level, fact-based, historical narratives and ideas that force her thoughts into containers like “history,” “politics,” “war,” and “government.” Her second impulse is a challenge or an exercise for herself: to take the first thought that crosses her mind and to try and accomplish her goal of thinking without the burden of fixing origins or absolute meaning. Her mind turns to Shakespeare, but very quickly she finds that she cannot escape the unruly and disruptive

dynamics present in the kind of thinking she is assiduously trying to avoid: “But how dull this is, this historical fiction! It doesn’t interest me at all. I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a track indirectly reflecting credit upon myself, for those are pleasantest thoughts.”

Despite her best efforts, she cannot avoid the various ways that facts and other “surface level” ideas interject and interrupt her pure thinking. After failing to escape into pure, uninterrupted thinking, she reflects on what this says about how we imagine ourselves and how we imagine other people:

   Indeed, it is curious how instinctively one protects the image of oneself from idolatry or any other handling that could make it ridiculous, or too unlike the original to be believed in any longer. Or is it not so very curious after all? It is a matter of great importance. Suppose the looking glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only the shell of a person which is seen by other people—what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in minibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror: that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted.32

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This passage moves from a consideration of conceptions of self and other into laying out an entire literary aesthetic and challenge for the novelists of the future, a project that Woolf, too, would continue to pursue over the course of her literary career.

In drawing from the experiences of contemporaneous and modern London, namely the ability to encounter people through mass transportation in the hustle and bustle of London, the narrator observes that the same vague, glassy, and empty look in the faces of others is also the face that those others would observe in her. She rejects a version of solipsistic interiority, one that presumes that an individual’s depth of character is somehow special or unique in comparison with the experiences of the faceless masses. Instead, she extends whatever depth that she may find in herself to the experience of the other; so too, does she extend the same kind of shallowness and idiosyncratic thinking from herself to the other. She later refers to these everyday idiosyncrasies as “generalizations:”

Generalizations bring back somehow Sunday in London, Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons, and also ways of speaking to the dead, clothes, and habits-like the habit of sitting all together in one room until a certain hour, although no one liked it. There was a rule for everything.” Generalizations are both what is lost and what the narrator yearns for. In its place is what the narrator refers to as the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker’s Table of Precedency, which has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where phantoms go, the mahogany sideboards and Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and
so forth, leaving us all with an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom—if freedom exists.33

The world of ideas, which tends to fix specific objects to specific meanings is the “masculine point of view.” This worldview is all well and good, if not for the fact that it led Europe into the most deadly and brutal confrontation since The Thirty Years War. The stakes for the narrator’s aesthetic program, one built around generalities, indeterminacies, and interruptions couldn’t be larger: the fate of Europe and the lives of young men and women around the world. The solution she offers is more than a new idea, for all ideas—from the mythic tales of knights and castles that occupied the narrator’s mind at the beginning, to the modern and mechanized war machine of Europe during World War I—invariably lead to the same end: conflict and strife. Instead, the narrator seeks to imagine a form of thinking that is not built on fixing objects and meaning and then battling over what idea is right, but rather one that is built on an appreciate of variation, indeterminacy, and possibility.

Her image for thinking about herself is a looking-glass, but she imagines the consequences of a “smashed” self-image. The image that she builds relies on a sense of looking-glass as both a mirror and a lens: it reflects back to the author her method of thinking and it puts into focus the modes and means of thinking that belong to the “masculine point of view.” In smashing the image, the narrator seeks to smash the over-determined ways of categorizing people or ideas within distinct categories. The work of the novelist, thus, according to the narrator, is to capture the idiosyncrasies, the myriad interruptions and disruptions, that shape each individual separately. The aesthetic project, defined in this passage, moves away from stereotypical ideas of history, culture, identity, personality, and identity and toward disruption,

33 Woolf, “Mark on the Wall,” 26
idiosyncrasy, and variance. If not for the mark on the wall, which in the conclusion of the story is revealed to be a snail, the narrator might simply continue to stare into the fire. The disruption, the mark, which in form and content is minuscule and unremarkable, serves as a catalyst for idiosyncratic thinking that turns into an aesthetic project organized around the act of disruption itself as a more accurate engine for describing how individuals perceive the world and how communities are both formed and dissolved.

*The Death of the Moth; The Birth of the Parasite*

The image of the moth presented in “The Death of the Moth” is a sophisticated and complex image of disruption; one that also coordinates a wide range of themes and questions around experience, character, perception, and temporality that were central to Woolf’s work at the very beginning. The sophistication and nuance in display in this late essay is the result of a life’s work dedicated to thinking about the significance of disruption and how it coordinates and conditions a sense of consciousness and community. Reading the moth as an image of disruption puts it in conversation with a larger milieu of images and figures that evoke the act of disruption and its significance. The image of the moth prefigures later ways of thinking about the relationship between identity, self-knowledge, and communication, namely the ways in which individual intentions are undermined through the various communication networks that structure and enable discourse and self-reflection. Whereas Woolf scholarship historically frames these themes around ideas of interiority and subjectivity, Michelle Serres’s 1980 text *The Parasite* deploys these same thematics, notably the disruptive image of the parasite, to frame a theory of media and communication. Serres’s work is helpful insofar as it shows how the genealogy of modernist subjectivity frames a media studies engagement with theories of communication.
In the five short paragraphs that make up Virginia Woolf’s essay “The Death of the Moth,” she describes watching a moth die. This event hardly seems worthy of being the subject of the first and titular essay in Virginia Woolf’s posthumous publishing career. Yet the essay’s interest in the thresholds between life and death and between observer and subject as well as its own liminality in the Woolf canon raise questions about form and mediality within Woolf’s work. Leonard Woolf provides little insight in his “Editorial Note” about the choices he made in selecting the essays for The Death of the Moth. He notes that Virginia would have heavily revised all of the pieces numerous times before their publication and that the first four essays were particularly unrevised when he discovered them. Reading the essay in 1942, only a year after her death, it would be hard not to draw a connection between the moth’s demise and hers, and perhaps this somewhat heavy-handed allusion is the only reason why Leonard gave “The Death of the Moth” such a prestigious place in the posthumous publication. Yet, as is often the case in Woolf’s late work, reducing the prose to simple, unrecognized cries for help can only come at the expense of missing some of the most dynamic thinking about the relation between form, content, subject, and observation within the Woolf corpus.

The unrevised state of “The Death of the Moth” when Leonard Woolf found it suggest that it may have been the seed for a larger project or perhaps merely the kernel of some grander image, a lost fragment meant for The Waves. The essay describes a parasite but also exists as a parasitic text within Woolf’s work insofar as it raises a question of mediality that, when read back through her fiction, suggests a reconfiguration of our understanding of Woolf’s poetics. The essay’s ambiguous position within Woolf’s prose raises a question of liminality that the essay itself is interested in: “Moths that fly by day are not properly to be called moths; they do not excite the pleasant sense of dark autumn nights and ivy-blossom which the commonest yellow-
underwing asleep in the shadow of the curtain never fails to rouse in us. They are hybrid creatures, neither gay like butterflies nor somber like their own species.”

This first observation about the moth returns us to a familiar scene for writing in Woolf’s prose—at a window, looking outward, thinking inward,—yet here the process is interrupted by a moth. Its hybridity emphasizes its medial state. Belonging neither to the day nor to the night; being neither simply inside nor simply outside, its existence appears to be caught between sets of forces that are beyond the threshold of its observation.

More than an avatar for the Woolfian subject, the moth appears to be about mediality. Unlike Woolf’s earlier interest in film or other specific “new” media technologies, this focuses on a more media-theoretical questions, namely what is at stake in thinking through a system of mediated experience? A system where even the forces of life and death are merely signals that are run through various channels of mediation:

The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed down, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane.… Watching him, it seemed as if a fibre, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into this frail and diminutive body As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible. He was little or nothing but life.

Very little, almost nothing, except a channel for an energy that can be scaled upward and similarly recognized in the activities beyond the window pane. Woolf marvels at the cohesiveness of this scale variance. Her thoughts suggest that life—whatever that may mean—can be abstracted into the activities of this moth as well as into the activities of her own thoughts.

34 Woolf, “Death of the Moth,” 1.
35 Woolf, “Death of the Moth,” 2.
The emphasis on the activities of the moth and her insistence on reading the moth as a vessel for an energy that works through the moth place the question of form and experience at the essay’s center. As the moth succumbs to its own death, Woolf realizes a strange equivalence between life and death:

Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead. I lifted the pencil again, useless though I knew it to be. But even as I did so, the unmistakable tokens of death showed themselves. The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death. As I looked at the dead moth, this minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist filled me with wonder. Just as life had been strange a few minutes before, so death was now as strange. The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.36

The positioning of life and death as both strange states of being, neither more preferable to the other in the eyes of the narrator, makes it difficult to read the essay as a romantic exploration of the power of life’s energy. What we’re left with is simply the moth, the vessel of a strange, “pure bead,” and the question of mediality. As a parasite in the tradition of Michel Serres, the moth is what interrupts the mechanism of life–death energy and instead draws the essay’s attention to the process itself. The moth stands for the channel, and as such its object of mediation is media itself, revealing to the narrator that the observable relations of visible and conceptual objects are first and foremost determined by media-specific possibilities. The power of the moth, as one such possibility, is that it is so simple a thing that it can isolate only its own function of being a channel of energy for the narrator to observe.

In the same way that the scene in “The Death of the Moth” begins with a kind of literary epoche, a bracketing of system–environment complexity in order to observe a very small process, the essay highlights a strange, minor note within Woolf’s later prose. The object of interest appears as a hybrid between insights born out of physics and astronomy and a new modernist investigation of media forms and apparatuses. Caught between these is the idea of the subject, but in this frame the subject under hybridity is not necessarily human. Instead, the subject seems merely to occupy the space of multiple fields and forces of communication.

Disruptive Parasites

Michel Serres, the 20th century French theorist of science and literature, often uses literary and mythic devices to explore the relationship between such discourses as the sciences and the arts. His 1980 book The Parasite uses the image of the parasite as a metaphor to understand media relationships. The “parasite” is the term for the unexpected and unanticipated noise that emerges between two figures of communication (what he calls the host and the guest; the sender and the receiver). The parasite is a figure of disruption. It reveals, for Serres, how every act of communication is an act of miscommunication, and how the intentions of the sender are always morphed through the act of communication and the role of the parasite.

Virginia Woolf’s “The Death of the Moth” is a strange literary fragment that reconfigures a discussion of life and death into one about medium and form. This reconfiguration is not about building a different structure, a new addition to the discourse of “life”; rather, it focuses on the hybrid/mediated experience of energy and electricity. Despite the pastoral frame of the essay, the narrator describes not only light and energy, but also buzzing and vibrations, as if the whole scene is charged with current. Just as Woolf’s narrator shifts her focus from the complexity of
the field outside the window to the threshold of observation on the windowpane, “The Death of the Moth” suggests a mode of reading Woolf’s writing that pays special attention to moth-like figures in her work. In Woolf, the moth is not a moth; it is a parasite. As Michel Serres writes in *The Parasite*:

> “But who expels him [the country rat]? Noise. One parasite chases another out. One parasite (static), in the sense that information theory uses the word, chases another, in the anthropological sense. Communication theory is in charge of the system; it can break it down or let it function, depending on the signal. A parasite, physical, acoustic, informational, belonging to order and disorder, a new voice, an important one, in the contrapuntal matrix.”

Here the term “parasite” names both the channel or medium of communication and the relation between communicative acts. The relation between guest and host (or host and parasite) is “parasitic” because the relation itself changes the meaning of communication by adding excess (noise, static, form, medium). This is Serres’s version of the modernist collapse between form and content. For Serres, that collapse produces an excess, which establishes a baseline for the discovery of new communicative horizons.

Serres’s writing, idiosyncratic, multidiscursive, and ouroboric as it is, introduces two important ideas with the parasite. First, “parasite” describes a necessary perversion within any theory of communication. “Parasite” names the channel, the noise, the medium that is both the condition for the possibility of communication and the very thing that will change, altering how that communication emerges. These changes can be tracked through the transformations of the parasite itself (physical, acoustic, informational, and so forth). Second, parasitic relations are

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governed by a logic of excess, a logic of semantic complexity and chaos. “Parasite” names the extracommunicative surplus that is generated in the act of communication. From this surplus, new relations and new communicative horizons emerge. It is unclear whether Serres is familiar with The Waves, but he is certainly familiar with Woolf. His essay “Feux et Signaux de Brume: Virginia Woolf’s Lighthouse” examines the thematics of entropy and animism in Woolf’s novel To the Lighthouse. His reading of the lighthouse itself offers an interesting counterproposal to the figure of the parasite as the noise in the channel that makes us aware of the channel itself:

By its glow, the Lighthouse protects the coasts; by its light it dominates the reefs; by its rays it saves the lives of vessels and their sailors. Soft and weak, its flashes effectively oppose the hard, unrelenting power of mountainous waves that sweep boats onto rocks. *Brilliance against force—that is the principal and poorly understood lesson of this light and, in general, of all navigation signals: the soft can mount an opposition to the hard.* It reverses entropy. Weak as the figures measuring the quantity of information contained in its pencil-shafts of light may be, they have the force—qualitative, rare, or miraculous?—to counter the relentless movement of powerful storm surges, to reverse direction on the entropic scale. The Lighthouse shines in the tempest; the sound and sense of the horn pierce the fog; they save.38

In this passage, light is what interrupts the channel of entropy, thereby occupying the space of the parasite. These instances underscore the importance of the figure of the moth, the parasite, and the wave as relative images. One observer’s message can be another observer’s parasite, and so on.

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38 Michel Serres, “Feux et Signaux de Brume: Virginia Woolf’s Lighthouse,” 123.
Serres’s theory of parasitic relations is far from widely accepted by thinkers in science and literature studies. While some point to the text as one of the foundational pieces in posthuman theory, others, such as Katherine Hayles, can’t resist pointing out the absurdity of the emperor’s new clothes (to use a favorite image of Serres’s). Hayles summarizes her skepticism about *The Parasite* as follows:

If we think about what is happening at this point in Serres’s argument, we can see that he is trying to make the rectification of noise into a principle that can explain, language, human psychology, the universe, and everything. The irony is that in transforming equivocation in this way Serres has made it univocal, for it no longer speaks of diversity but of a nostalgic unity recoverable only in myth. Projecting this no-longer equivocal equivocation onto an imagined scientific “we,” Serres dreams that it can fuse the deep shadows of the unconscious with the clear sun of mathematical equations, just as he dreams that his discourse is at one with the scientific texts he discusses.39

Hayles’s own appropriation of Serres-like wordplay around “unequivocal” and “univocal” speaks to a blind spot in her analysis of the parasite, which is that she reads it as a theory of science rather than of media and aesthetics. To be fair, Serres often places his work within the context of scientific and mathematical discourse, and Hayles is right to question his rigor in the context of science and epistemology. However, the difficulty that Serres presents to his reader is similar to a difficulty that Woolf presents to her reader: ideas are often wrapped in a formal aesthetics that is better suited to the critical reading practices of literature. Placing *The Parasite* next to *The Waves* not only underscores the deep aesthetic resonances shared by the two key images; it also shows how the figure of the parasite works more like a poetics than a theorem:

39 Katherine Hayles, “Two Voices, One Channel: Equivocation in Michel Serres,” 11.
not as an equation, but rather as a motif that evolves and changes throughout the course of the novel.

Woolf sets forth a display of thematic hybridity in *The Waves*, similar Serres’s figure of the parasite. To use Serres’s idiom, *The Waves* is a parasitic novel. Through a kind of semantic excess and imagistic over-burdening, it emphasizes ideas of complexity, noise, and chatter. Reading *The Waves* within a parasitic frame elucidates the kind of theoretical media-thinking that Woolf’s work has developed since “The Mark on the Wall.” Additionally, the logic of the parasite provides a way to understand the critical reception of the novel, and Woolf’s late prose in general, by reading the attempts to unify the novel’s multiple discursive investments (in science, technology, and so forth) as a means of producing noise and chatter. From the perspective of *The Parasite*, the purpose of Woolf’s text is not to ferret out which discourse trumps all other discourses; but instead to produce a system of wave-like resonances across parallel sets of images that both resist and conform to critical attempts at unification. Second, as a model for thinking about communication and form, *The Parasite* offers a way to introduce the problem of media theory in modernist studies that is organized around networks of concepts and relations, rather than being grounded within specific material relations between subjects and apparatuses.

*Reading The Waves as an Aesthetics of Disruption*

The Waves contributes to Woolf’s aesthetics of disruption in two ways. First, the novel offers a way of thinking about language, communication, and conversation as means of constituting identity while also dissolving its uniformity. Second, the novel presents an atomistic and discrete form of fictional biographical writing, one which resists the kind of historical
thinking that the narrator from “The Mark on the Wall” criticized. In The Waves, isolated experiences that focalize observation and multitudinous thinking, like those explored in “The Mark on the Wall” or “The Death of the Moth,” function like discrete atoms, which when framed through recollection and through conversation take on the appearance of a life. Instead of presenting characters as unified subjects, characters develop through layers of discrete experiences. The novel unfolds as a set of interlocking soliloquies between six different characters. These narrations capture the experience of life from infancy to old age and death. Each character exemplifies a different style or approach to perception and experience. Some are more self-centered, others are more self-less. Some tend toward experiences of nature, others tend toward experiences of cities and society. There is no straight path from childhood, to adolescence, adulthood, and death. Instead characters resonate through experiences and conversations. They are influenced by their world and they influence those around them. The novel focuses on minute details and interior observations and feelings, but it also makes sweeping gestures that run through decades of characters’ lives.

The character Bernard most directly picks up the theme of disruption as a generative linguistic and cultural practice. Bernard provides the voice that addresses the resonances, ambiguities, and textual hybridity that make up the novel’s engagement with disruption as a kind of media practice. Specifically, Bernard’s shifting attitude toward language enacts his ideas of individual identity and communal identity. Language, conversation, noises, and interruptions frame the novel’s engagement about media and experience. As has been the case from the beginning of the novel, the answers are not so much a direct line, but more a constant working and reworking through a set of problems without conclusion. The novel ends with the image of
waves breaking on the shore, both an acknowledgement of the end of life, but also the ongoing processes through which experience and understanding are mediated.

The novel opens with a set of fragmented images, each one narrated by a different character. These images form the foundation for how the characters prioritize their experiences. Bernard observes: “I see a ring…hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.” His next observation: “Look at the spider’s web on the corner of the balcony…it has beads of water on it, drops of white light.” These two shapes, the circle and the web, frame an oppositional tension that develops through Bernard’s narrations. The circle stands in for a blankness, a null set that defies categorization, while the web indicates a desire for connection and the ways that language can “fill in” the blank spaces that make up one’s experiences with other people. Similar to the narrator of “The Mark on the Wall” and “Death of the Moth,” Bernard’s story attempts to develop a mode of thinking and perceiving that isn’t bound by fixing absolute meaning to things.

Neville, one of the six main characters whose soliloquies make up the bulk of the novel, comments on the satisfaction and lack that is always present in Bernard’s stories: “Bernard’s stories amuse me, said Neville, at the start. But when they tail off absurdly and he gapes, twiddling a bit of string, I feel my own solitude. He sees everyone with blurred edges.” Neville’s observations further develop Bernard’s initial images, the empty circle and the web, into a gaping mouth and a bit of string. The circle is more directly connected with Bernard’s silence, or inability to finish the story, whereas the string points to a desire to make a connection
or to tie two things together. The result, according to Neville, is blurry. Later, Bernard develops this concept of blurriness as an understanding of how language operates:

> But if I find myself in company with other people “words at once make smoke rings”—see how phrases at once begin to wreath off my lips. It seems that a match is set to a fire; something burns. An elderly and apparently prosperous man, a traveler, now gets in. And I at once wish to approach him; I instinctively dislike the sense of his presence, cold, unassimilated, among us. I do not believe in separation. We are not single. Also I wish to add to my collection of valuable observations upon the true nature of human life. My book will certainly run to many volumes, embracing every known variety of man and woman.”

This passage marks the first moment in the novel where Bernard’s ideas of perception are directly connected to a practice of language. Words make smoke rings. Blurry, ephemeral, and empty, language expressed nonetheless fixes meaning. Notably, Bernard’s desire to “assimilate” the old man by bringing him into their conversation is a practice of disruption. Like in “The Mark on the Wall,” language is a medium which establishes a fixed relationship between two ephemeral and multivalent things, its injection has the power both to disrupt and unify. In this passage, Bernard both submits to and resists this tendency. His assertion that “I do not believe in separation. We are not single,” speaks to ways that language and shared experience can create a common basis for understanding. In the strictest sense communication is not possible without a common code, like a language, which can facilitate mutual understanding. Despite this singularity, he also admits that his project to collect observations on “the true nature of human life” will span many volumes. These two gestures, the ring which encircles and unifies

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all of human experience, and the web that connects all the disparate elements remain in
dialectical opposition without any indication of synthesis; language’s power to both disrupt or
separate and its ability to connect and contain remain as a paradox.

Bernard’s reflections on how he makes observations adds additional layers of
complication to this paradox. Later, in the same soliloquy, Bernard draws out specific
observations about the person he is about to engage in conversation:

“Now I feel by imperceptible signs, which I cannot yet interpret but will later, that his
defiance is about to thaw. His solitude shows signs of cracking. He has passed a remark
about a country house. A smoke ring issues from my lips (about crops) and circles him,
bringing him into contact. The human voice has a disarming quality—(we are not single,
we are one). As we exchange these few but amiable remarks about country houses, I
furbish him up and make him concrete… “The fact is that I have little aptitude for
reflection. I require the concrete in everything. It is so only that I lay hands upon the
world. A good phrase, however, seems to me to have an independent existence. Yet I
think it is likely that the best are made in solitude.”

As Bernard’s narration progresses, he returns to the image of the smoke ring to signify the
practice of conversation, a practice which brings together two people with different perspectives
around some sort of shared understanding. The disarming quality of the stranger’s voice brings
Bernard back to his thesis about language’s unifying, encircling capacity. In this sense “making
concrete” is about creating a common ground for communication. Over the course of this
passage the image of the smoke ring turns into the image of concrete. The ephemeral and
undefinable object of language becomes solid, an experience of internal reflection is exchanged

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for a process of concrete observation. This process weighs on Bernard. He admits to himself that it is only through concrete observations that he can experience the world.

Bernard’s final admission, “A good phrase, however, seems to me to have an independent existence,” offers a way toward resolving this paradox. His observations do not belong to himself, nor do they belong to the subject of his observations; instead they have an “independent existence.” This idea of independence offers an environment in which the phrase can exist freely. Bernard is happy to make the observation, however concrete it may be, but he refuses to assert absolute finality or objectivity; instead these observations are allowed to exist independently. This is Bernard’s version of resisting the intentional fallacy. By making room for the practice of independent interpretation, he opens up a space between his observations and the subject of his observations. This middle space is language, communication, and community. Bernard’s claim toward independence concerns the ownership of this middle space. In describing it as “independent” Bernard acknowledges that although the words may come from him, he does not wholly determine their meaning. For Bernard to be able to maintain both the circle and the web, he cannot assert absolute control or meaning over this space. Instead, it becomes a channel or a space for interpretation.

Bernard’s early meditations on language as an independent medium reach a critical moment at the end of the novel, when these ideas are turned toward his own process of self-understanding. Bernard is a writer and storyteller, and his awareness of language as a medium echoes throughout his awareness of other media that condition and structure his life and those of his friends. The ninth and final section of the novel retells the entire story from Bernard’s perspective. In Bernard’s words, “But meanwhile, while we eat, let us turn over these scenes as children turn over the pages of a picture book and the nurse says, pointing: that’s a cow. That’s a
boat. Let us turn over the pages, and I will add, for your amusement, a comment in the margin.”\(^{45}\) The conceit of this chapter is that Bernard is addressing a person who occupies the perspective of the reader. Over the course of a meal Bernard launches into a lengthy summary of the entire novel, its characters and themes, and attempts to add some form of closure to the narrative.

Bernard begins the summary of his life with a problem posed in the form of an image of a globe. The problem is one of appearance: “The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed. This, for the moment, seems to be my life. If it were possible, I would hand it to your entire self, I would break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes. I would say, ‘take it. This is my life’.”\(^{46}\) The round image of the globe gestures back to sections four and eight, in each of which the characters were gathered at a round table. In section four, the gathering was in celebration of Percival, while in section eight, the gathering was a reunion of the friends after many years apart. In section four, there is a melding of voices and personalities and a youthful vigor that informs the identities of the characters; as Bernard says, “But we roar on. We are about to explode in the flanks of the city like a shell in the side of some ponderous, maternal, majestic animal. She hums and murmurs; she awaits us.”\(^{47}\) The noise and chatter in this section contrast with the awkwardness of the gathering in section eight:

It is uncomfortable too, joining ragged edges, raw edges; only gradually, as we shuffle and trample into the Inn, taking coats and hats off, does meeting become agreeable. Now we assemble in the long, bare dining room that overlooks some park, some green space


still fantastically lit by the setting sun so that there is a gold bar between the trees, and sit ourselves down.48

In section eight, the party is organized as a line instead of a circle, and the line image is repeated in the gold bar that streaks across the sky. Whereas, there are images of wheels, circles, and round tables where everyone comes together in section four, section eight is defined by a row and ends with the group walking off arm in arm, like a phalanx marching into darkness. The communal dynamics from earlier in the novel transform. There is still community, but now its organization is less about the melding of voices and more about the unified arrangement. This arrangement is “uncomfortable” and “ragged.” It takes time for members of the group to shed their awkwardness, which speaks to the way that time has drawn them apart.

Bernard’s final soliloquy captures the tension between these two images, but the potential dialectical power that arises from these contrasted images is undercut by Bernard’s own uncertainty. He presents the image of a globe, but then suggests that it is only an illusion. He notes the round shape “full of figures,” but then situates himself and his interlocuter as sitting across from one another (similar to how he sat in section eight). He wraps up this presentation with a general frustration:

How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half sheets of notepaper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement. I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and undeniably. Lying in a ditch on a stormy day, when it has been raining, then

48 Woolf, The Waves, 211.
enormous clouds come marching over the sky, tattered clouds, wisps of cloud. What delights me then is the confusion, the height, the indifference and the fury. Great clouds always changing, and movement; something sulphurous and sinister, bowled up, helter-skelter; towering, trailing, broken off, lost, and I forgotten, minute, in a ditch. Of story, of design I do not see a trace then.”

This passage appears to undermine the entire project of the novel thus far. Bernard, the author figure, the voice of language who has attended so carefully to the use of language as a tool for constructing reality, would in this moment give up the entire project for an experience of fragmentation and chaos. The language that he seeks is not universal, but rather intimate and fragmented (the language of lovers), and the shape he seeks is not a highly crafted narrative, but more akin to the chaotic movements of wind and water vapor.

From this moment Bernard retells the entire novel to his dinner companion. He summarizes the telling midway through his narrative by saying:

Nevertheless, life is pleasant, life is tolerable. Tuesday follows Monday; then comes Wednesday. The mind grows rings; the identity becomes robust; pain is absorbed in growth. Opening and shifting, shifting and opening, with an increasing hum and sturdiness the haste and fever of youth are drawn into service until the whole being seems to expand in and out like the mainspring of a clock. How fast the stream flows from January to December! We are swept on by the torrent of things drawn so familiar that they cast no shadow. We float, we float….

The phrase “Tuesday follows Monday” becomes a refrain for this whole section as he likens the experience of time and life to machine-like operations by establishing a parallel between the

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experience of time and the operations of a clock. The clock and the body both serve as markers of mediations. Reminders of how forces work themselves through biological and social bodies provide moments of lamentation and celebration in this last section. Bernard is stuck with a problem of significance. Having had a set of experiences, he finds himself at a loss about what it all means. The one tangible object of his thought is the paradox of his own perspective. He realizes that his only vantage point for the world of experience is his own limited set of tools. He is a first-person-limited narrator who has some sense of the possibility of a third-person omniscient narrator. However, he understands the inherit flaw in the possibility of omniscience:

But how to describe the world without a self? There are no words. Blue, red—even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through. How describe or say anything in articulate words again?—save that it fades, save that it undergoes a gradual transformation, becomes, even in the course of one short walk, habitual—this scene also. Blindness returns as one moves and one leaf repeats another. Loveliness returns as one looks, with all its train of phantom phrases. One breathes in and out substantial breath; down in the valley the train draws across the fields lop-eared with smoke.  

In this moment, Bernard discovers that the promise of omniscience is mere fantasy. Even the most universal concepts, like color and form, are only intelligible through some sort of mediated experience. Furthermore, he recognizes a universal principle of change or transformation that forecloses any possibility of an omniscient perspective. Whereas the arc of his own narration was directed toward a mastery of language and medium to access some sort of universal set of truths and experiences, he realizes in the final moments that no such transcendentodal viewpoint exists.

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His narration works to uncover the underlying dynamics of mediation that both reveal and conceal forms of meaning. Bernard’s personal reflections about the significance of his own self-understanding are reflected through a quantum world view, one that embraces the fundamental ambiguity between particles and waves.

*Disruptions, Parasites, Moths, and Waves:*

*A Noisy Theory of Character and Communication*

Although Woolf changed the title, *The Waves* is never truly rid of the image of moths. The novel’s last uses the image of a moth to capture a crystalized moment of ambiguous time: “[A]ll for a moment wavered and bent in uncertainty and ambiguity, as if a great moth sailing through the room had shadowed the immense solidity of chairs and tables with floating wings.”

The image of the moth in this passage epitomizes what is so provocative about Woolf’s use of moths throughout her writing in the late ’20s and early ’30s: she uses the moth to introduce concepts of ambiguity, relativity, and temporal variation, so that the image of the moth is bound up with Woolf’s engagement with scientific and media thinking. Through her recovery of this image in *The Waves* and essays such as “The Death of the Moth,” Woolf’s critical engagement with physics plays out as an emergent media theory that emphasizes disruption as a contingency for communication and perception. As discussed earlier in the context of “The Death of the Moth,” this emergent media theory of disruption appears in Michel Serres’s media theory book *The Parasite*. Serres’s work is widely viewed as a fundamental text of posthuman media theory, and reading Woolf in the context of Serres’s work situates her writing as a moment of transition from a highly stylized literary aesthetic that is classically concerned with ideas of language and

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expression to a new media theory that emphasizes contingency and context rather than the supremacy of an individual human subject.

Woolf’s engagement with contemporary notions of science and media that figured prominently throughout the composition period for *The Waves*. Questions of media, technology, and science were always at the forefront of Woolf’s thinking about *The Waves*, even early on when she still referred to the novel as *The Moths*. She describes the inception of the novel in 1927 as follows:

Slowly ideas begin trickling in; & then suddenly I rhapsodised (the night L. dined with the apostles) & told over the story of the Moths, which I think I will write very quickly, perhaps in between chapters of that long impending book on fiction. Now the moths will I think fill out the skeleton which I dashed in here: the play-poem idea: the idea of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night &c, all flowing together: intersected by the arrival of the bright moths. A man & a woman are to be sitting at a table talking. Or shall they remain silent? It is to be a love story: she is to finally let the last great moth in. The contrasts might be something of this sort: she might talk, or think, about the age of the earth: the death of humanity: then moths keep on coming. Perhaps the man could be left absolutely dim. France: near the sea; at night; a garden under the window. But it needs ripening. I do a little work on it in the evening when the gramophone is playing late sonatas.  

In her first ideas about the novel, Woolf figures the characters as moths, and it appears that one use of the image would highlight the contrast in forms of temporality. Our perception of time and the life cycle is to moths as geological time is to the temporality and life cycles of humans. In

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this early diary entry, Woolf also introduces the form of a multimedia text (a play–poem), and describes the style as a continuous stream, which evokes not only ideas of consciousness and thinking but also new forms of communication such as the radio or gramophone, which she mentions at the end of the passage. The image-level shift from moths to waves parallels a concept-level shift from the experiences of individual lives to the macro-level experience of time itself. Woolf draws out this concept more forcefully in later diary entries, where she refers to the novel as “a mystical eyeless book.”  

The following spring, she introduces experiences of intimate objects and describes her struggle with wanting to portray a unified common experience among all things (both human and nonhuman) and the discrete experiences of people and objects within their own time streams:

They might be islands of light— islands in the stream that I am trying to convey: life itself going on. The current of the moths flying strongly this way. A lamp & a flower pot in the centre. The flower can always be changing. But there must be more unity between each scene than I can find at present. Autobiography it might be called. How am I to make one lap, or act, between the coming of the moths, more intense than another; if there are only scenes?

Here moths stand for individual experiences, but they are drawn against forces and perspectives that homogenize the experiences according to some unifying force. All of these fragments add up to the mythic status of The Waves as some sort of aesthetic achievement, but of what, exactly, no one really knows.

In 1929, Woolf refers to the novel as The Moths for the last time: “Six weeks in bed now would make a masterpiece of Moths. But that won’t be the name. Moths, I suddenly remember,

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54 Woolf, Diary, vol. 3, 203.
don’t fly by day. And there can’t be a lighted candle. Altogether, the shape of the book wants considering—& with time I could do it.” Moths are curiously abandoned because they’re not diurnal. The importance of light suggests that light waves should figure prominently in how we understand the various images of waves throughout the novel. Woolf’s consistent pairing of moth images with images of light are more than a creaturely “moths to flame” phenomenon. The diary entries allude to new notions of time, space, light, and quantum dynamics, suggesting that Woolf is attempting to render these new notions of physics into a literary form. Diary entries about The Waves specifically address notions of quantum dynamics. She wonders whether the soliloquies could be read simultaneously: “The thing is to keep them running homogeneously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves. Can they be read consecutively?” As discussed above, Woolf also posits a similar experience between humans and nonhumans: “The current of the moths flying strongly this way. A lamp & a flower pot in the centre. The flower can always be changing. But there must be more unity between each scene than I can find at present.” Her frustration in this last passage strikes to the heart of the paradox of quantum theory: How can the universe be organized around fields of probability and relative time while also appearing to us as unified and consistent? Her determination to discover the “unity” that is beyond her perception concerns her desire to capture the paradox itself, that is, rather than write a novel that simply embraces or rejects quantum theory, she seems intent on finding a way to address the nature of the paradox itself.

The shift from moths to waves signals a more seismic shift in Woolf’s writing. The Waves evinces this shift through its attempt to parse out human experience against a backdrop of

56 Woolf, Diary, vol. 3, 204.
57 Woolf, Diary, vol. 3, 204.
58 Woolf, Diary, vol. 3, 228.
new scientific insights, namely, quantum mechanics, general relativity, and the attendant technologies that served to expand human perception and communication. Despite this shift, the figure of the moth—more precisely, for my reading, the figure of disruption—reveals the balance that Woolf’s writing strikes between an increasingly mediated human experience, on the one hand, and a new paradigm of scientific thinking that was challenging the stable relations of the physical universe, on the other. In relation to these two ends, *The Waves* offers a theory of media that shows how perception and communication are functions of disruptions. The expanded universe that the technologies of seeing and hearing make available underscore how every act of communication is one of miscommunication—how, like the moth, we find ourselves as a hybrid caught between discourses and experiences.

Woolf was exposed to quantum theory and general relativity during the late 1920s and early 1930s, mainly through the work of Arthur Eddington and James Jeans. Woolf explicitly mentioned Jeans’s popular text on astronomy to her friend Ethyl Smyth while she was composing *The Waves*, namely, his book *The Mysterious Universe*. References to Eddington and Einstein are scattered throughout background discussions in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, and there are numerous references to particle–wave concepts in her diaries and in *The Waves*. The core concept that preoccupies Woolf’s attention is the loss of fixity. In 1929, when she was just about to begin the principle writing of *The Waves*, she wrote:

> Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on for ever; will last for ever; goes down to the bottom of the world—this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous. I shall pass on like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change, one flying after another, so quick, so

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59 Woolf, *Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, 266.
quick, yet we are somehow successive and continuous we human beings, and show the light through. But what is light?\textsuperscript{60}

Neither a simple rejection nor acceptance, this passage begins and ends with a question. Her exposure to new scientific theories presents a contradiction in being that evokes the contradictions that inspired her earlier work: is Mrs. Dalloway identical with her memories or merely a by-product of them? Is the difference between the interior and exterior life of the elderly woman on the train in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” reconcilable?

Critics have focused on how Woolf’s work wrestles with the perceived loss of objective knowledge and looks to the idea of the aesthetic as a redemptive force that reframes the loss of objectivity into a field of multiplicities. Gillian Beer interprets this period of Woolf’s writing as a sort of recouping project. On this reading, Woolf levers the loss of perceived stability in the physical world into a larger project of criticizing realist writing in favor of a more expressive and subjective mode of storytelling:

Why then did she need physics? As a medium of poetry?… What she needed was the power of speaking in chords. She needed sounds and speech and the processes by which we experience sound. She needed “the sound of the bell” and the realization that “the sensation which I describe as hearing the sound of a bell … actually … is feeling the effect of waves of condensation and rarefaction of the air inside my ears.”\textsuperscript{61}

This concluding passage from Beer’s essay includes an extract from James Jeans in which he describes the experience of hearing a bell ring. Beer’s emphasis on Jeans’s aesthetic refrain lays the groundwork for the complementary features of a writer of science and a writer of fiction.

\textsuperscript{60} Woolf, \textit{Diary}, vol. 3, 218.
\textsuperscript{61} Gillian Beer, “Physics, Sound, and Substance: Later Woolf,” 120.
Similarly, Holly Henry argues that *The Waves* prefigures feminist scientific writing, which “would interfere with, and disrupt, critical discourses on aesthetic unity and scientific objectivity.”\(^6^2\) In mapping out Jeans’s influence on Woolf’s work, Henry argues that the chief concern for Woolf is the loss of objectivity. Henry notes that Woolf refers to *The Waves* in her diaries as autobiography, but it’s unclear whether she’s aspiring toward a new form of autobiography, where the self-writing takes the form of personae, or whether the novel’s composition is an attempt to altogether distance herself from the very idea of autobiography. Henry surmises her reading by emphasizing the project shared between artist and scientist: “A reading of *The Waves* as it intersects with the work of Jeans, Fry, and Russel points up Woolf’s exploration of the positive possibilities for a decentered aesthetic vision that might demystify the pictures artists and scientists create.”\(^6^3\)

Beer and Henry exemplify a trend in engaging with Woolf’s presentation of scientific knowledge that draws a sharp distinction between the scientist and the artist.\(^6^4\) This trend repackages an earlier engagement with Woolf’s writing that presents modernism as an elegy for a lost subjectivity. Whether the ur-concept is existential or scientific, the general relation persists: Woolf’s writing traverses a perceived gap in the world by positing a difference between the theoretically observable world and the experienced world. Although writer and scientist have availed themselves of different tools, the critical tendency shows how the projects of modernists like Woolf grapple with but ultimately share a vision of the universe presented in the astronomy and physics of the later 19th and early 20th centuries.

\(^6^2\) Holly Henry, “The Riddle of the Universe,” 97.
\(^6^3\) Henry, “Riddle,” 107.
\(^6^4\) Other notable engagements include Katy Price, *Loving Faster than Light: Romance and Readers in Einstein’s Universe* and Ian Ettinger, “Relativity and Quantum Theory in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves.*”
How does one resolve the paradox of the world as experienced vs. the world as understood through modern scientific and technical thinking? *The Waves* uses images of media and technology in order to make this paradox apparent. More than a literary device, Woolf’s use of images of technology and media show that she is developing an aesthetics through a media-technical frame.

With regard to the science of her era, the aforementioned Woolf critics look at how Woolf found a thinking that paralleled her own attempts to portray a more complex reality, where entities and moments could paradoxically occupy multiple states at once and where space and time were inexorably linked. For Woolf, aesthetics was the vehicle for managing the gulf between everyday experiences and complex states of being. Or, as she described in her essay “Modern Fiction”:

> Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.65

The imperative to “record” and “trace” evokes not only the popular science writers of her day, notably Eddington and Jean, but also an awareness of a broader multimedia spectrum, where writing is connected to the same sort of processes that are deployed in sound recording and print making.

At the same time that science writers were upending classically held notions of the world—in much the same way as their literary brethren were attempting in literature—a more immediate and available revolution was happening in the modes and means of distributing

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information through electronic media. References to radio appear throughout Woolf’s diaries around the composition period for *The Waves*, as well as in the novel itself. It’s likely that Woolf was exposed to some of Eddington’s and Jeans’s ideas, especially the former’s, through BBC radio broadcasts. In 1937 Woolf recorded her essay “Craftsmanship” for the BBC series *Words Fail Me*. Woolf begins her essay by observing two antithetical ways that the word “craft” is used:

In the first place *making useful objects* out of solid matter…. In the second place, the word “craft” means *cajolery, cunning, deceit*. Now we know little that is certain about words, but this we do know—words never make anything that is useful; and words are the only things that tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Therefore, to talk of craft in connection with words is to bring together two incongruous ideas, which if they mate can only give birth to some monster fit for a glass case in a museum.66 (my emphasis)

Woolf then goes on to overturn both notions. The craftsmanship of writing as “making useful objects” is rendered increasingly less about words and more as belonging to the domain of visual signs, signals, and orders. Woolf pushes the telos of this argument to imagine a world where the communicative/practical function of language has rendered the very use of language an administrative chore—one would be fined for using too many words or for using them improperly.

On the flip side of the paradox, the craftsmanship of writing as telling truths remains problematic because of how elusive meaning is. “[Words] combine—they combine unconsciously together. The moment we single out and emphasize the suggestions as we have done here they become unreal; and we, too, become unreal—specialists, word mongers, phrase

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finders, not readers.” Woolf goes on to further her reading of how this process of combination works for a reader: “This power of suggestion is one of the most mysterious properties of words. Everyone who has ever written a sentence must be conscious or half-conscious of it. Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations—naturally.” Words may tell truths, but the truths they tell evaporate in the wind or are recombined according to another’s associations.

Woolf’s essay on the craftsmanship of language resolves the question of “what words are” by focusing on what words do. As a form of media thinking, the essay emphasizes the processes and contingencies through which the medium of language disrupts and resists definition. Woolf establishes a practice for the use of language that resists tying utterances to clear and specific meanings. Instead, she argues for a multimodal approach to language and writing, one that makes a productive use of the paradox between their communicative function and their aesthetic function by playing them against one another. The result is a sort of negative dialectic; instead of synthesis, disruptions engender more combinations, more valences, more possibilities, in short: more noise. Whereas Eddington presented his studies of particle–wave theory and general relativity to mass audiences via radio broadcasts, Woolf presents her ideas about language and communication in such a way as to call into the question the very practice of communication.

Woolf’s essay ends with another touchstone reference to the image of the moth:

Perhaps then one reason why we have no great poet, novelist or critic writing to-day is that we refuse words their liberty. We pin them down to one meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass

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the examination. *And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die.* Finally, and most emphatically, words, like ourselves, in order to live at their ease, need privacy. Undoubtedly they like us to think, and they like us to feel, before we use them; but they also like us to pause; to become unconscious. Our unconsciousness is their privacy; our darkness is their light.⁶⁹ (my emphasis)

When words are pinned like one pins moths to a frame, the stake of limiting the capacity for linguistic complexity to merely one order is life itself or, if not life, then a sort of reverse metamorphosis that ends in death. In lieu of death, Woolf deploys an image of the unconscious as a hybrid state. True to the ideas of her essay, she does not render hybridity strictly in terms of a binary of life vs. death or meaning vs. poetry or even writing vs. technical media; rather, Woolf calls us to a darkening of these associations, searching for a hybrid state that engages multiple forms of meaning and communication to be simultaneously deployed.

The pairing of scientific and media/technical thinking in Woolf’s work is part of a broader shift in modernist studies that situates the subject of modernist culture among systems and forces that operate with a certain disregard for individual experience, whether they be large political forces marshalling millions to war, new notions of time and space that render human history comparatively meaningless, or new notions of the psyche that make our thoughts, feelings, and desires byproducts of operations of the mind that are by definition beyond our understanding.

Woolf’s “new media” thinking concerns the various ways that ideas of technology create cause for rethinking perception, knowledge of self, and knowledge of other. New media studies theorists like Katherine Hayles and Mark Hansen have responded to this “new media age” by

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⁶⁹ Woolf, “Craftsmanship,” 190.
giving voice to the relationships that emerge from the thinking that happens in and among media technological innovations in the 20th century. Often shorthanded as posthuman, this tradition attempts to recapture hybrid experiences between humans and technology through the concepts of embodiment, affect, and incorporation. In contrast, media-inflected new modernist studies texts from writers like Jessica Pressman (Digital Modernism), Mark Goble (Beautiful Circuits) and Julian Murphet (Multimedia Modernism) take an altogether different tact in emphasizing “medium specificity” and delving into the granular histories around media objects in order to show how modernist literature practice was simultaneously both a product and a producer of media technology.

Woolf appears to acknowledge and resist both of these trajectories. The Waves is invested in thinking through various human and nonhuman imbrications, but the overwhelming indifference toward everything sets the stage for an altogether different form of posthuman theory. Rather than being recaptured and redeemed through media-technological appropriation, the novel abandons this classic concept of the human subject as such. Moreover, while the world in the novel is increasingly beset by the forms and strata of new media, technology, and social invention, the novel is less about origins or histories and more about disruption. This new world of hypercommunication is defined by its ability to interrupt, disturb, and shock. These disturbances may be moth-like, that is, they may appear small and inconsequential, but as Woolf observes in “Modern Fiction” and “Craftsmanship,” these moments of apparent inconsequence are where the forms and variations of experience and understanding are revealed.

The Waves opens a productive rift between new media theory and new modernist studies, which parallels the historically modernist tension between the ideas of art and science and their

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70 Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman; Mark Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media.
71 Jessica Pressman, Digital Modernism; Mark Goble, Beautiful Circuits; Julian Murphet, Multimedia Modernism.
paradoxical relations. A merely unified portrait of the artist as a scientist obfuscates the ways that Woolf was content—even inspired—to present the paradox in all its complexity. It is at the impasse between the observational field of the artist and that of the scientist that the image of the moth comes roaring back. At the end of *The Waves*, the moth interrupts the fields of existence that shape both human and nonhuman life: “All for a moment wavered and bent in uncertainty and ambiguity, as if a great moth sailing through the room had shadowed the immense solidity of chairs and tables with floating wings.”72 The moth appears at the twilight hour, a hybrid moment between day and night, and it is in this sense that the image of the moth mediates the space between two different media, its appearance making us aware of the medium through which we’re observing the passage of daylight into evening. The solidity of the chairs in this passage isn’t challenged by awareness of the particle-wave theory, rather the dimming of light engenders new ways to see.

The moth image appears in the seventh of the novel’s interludes that chart the passage of the sun as it rises and sets over the ocean. The interludes capture a rhythm of time that is utterly indifferent to human life and culture. The sun rises and sets and has done so for far longer than humans have been around to observe it. Ruminating on the work of James Jeans, Woolf says of geological time: “You know what Jeans says? Civilization is the thickness of a postage stamp on the top of Cleopatra’s needle and time to come is the thickness of postage stamps as high as Mont Blanc. Possessiveness is the devil.”73 These interludes capture the experience of deep time by connecting the movement of the earth to the sun in order to emphasize sets of rhythms that are completely indifferent to a human scale of time.

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73 Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 4, 65.
The hybridity that the moth introduces also concerns the status of the novel as a novel—to use some of Woolf’s other phrases, *The Waves* is a “mystical eyeless book,” a “play-poem,” an “autobiography,” or “a mind thinking.” One distinguishing feature of *The Waves* is that throughout its composition, Woolf is never really sure about what it is; moreover, she rarely seems convinced that it is a novel at all. Woolf’s play of terms regarding the form of the novel highlight how, as a media object, it *feels* like more than a novel. The careful attention to formal construction and the use of rhythm at all levels of expression (from rhyming morphemes to parallel sections and nested images) emphasize qualities of aurality and visualization that make *The Waves* markedly different from Woolf’s earlier novels. The novel’s engagement with notions of media has less to do with specific material forms of media and more to do with the idea of media itself. What happens when one becomes aware of the vast field of media systems that shape human experience?

David Trotter describes the effect of this awareness as the emergence of a new conceptual faculty:

Cinema’s example enabled modernist writers to discern in the process of mediation itself, in the original and recoverable neutrality of the new medium’s approach to existence as such…. The will-to-automation was the instrument with which writers and film-makers explored the double desire at once for the presence to the world and for the absence from it.74

The phrase “the process of mediation itself” describes the trace that the image of the moth leaves behind. Woolf’s engagement with different media forms in and around the composition of *The

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74 David Trotter, Cinema and Modernism, 89.
Waves speaks to her desire to better understand the systems and apparatuses of meaning making in which we are immersed.

Woolf’s use of moths is often wrapped up with terms that evoke ideas of mediation, communication, and broadcasting. Moths are read according to “channels,” “streams,” and “currents.” In “The Death of the Moth,” the narrator describes the moth as “a pure bead” and “a thread of light.” This language suggests another valence for thinking about moths in the context of The Waves and provides a fuller sense of why Woolf may have thought that The Waves was an appropriate title for The Moths: They both provide images of relation and communication that are built around moments of disruption. The novel offers a more deliberate working through of how an aesthetics of disruption can frame a way of understanding a life’s experience.

The Waves is always caught between two concepts: the particle and the wave. “Particle” describes the concretizing moments in the novel, moments when characters seem to discover a sense of reality and certainty about themselves, while “wave” describes the process of erosion that makes such certainty dissolve. Similar to the early twentieth-century discovery of the particle–wave duality, the novel’s goal is not to synthesize these modes into one singular product, but rather to provide an account in which both modes can be equally exist. As such, The Waves is a great epic of consciousness and subjectivity, but it is also an epic of things meaningful and inhuman; it is the story of many minds and it is the story of one mind; it follows the solar progress of a single day as its characters narrate their experiences during their entire lives; it builds a complicated web of interrelations; and its structure gives one time to forget the very details that arrange that constellation. The cognitive layering of voices, poems, letters,

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75 Virginia Woolf, “The Death of the Moth,” in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, 3.
descriptions, and soliloquies makes for a noisy discursive frame that is made even noisier by its constant, rhythmic lyricism.

The novel’s signature noise is chatter, evinced time and again in the periphery of the characters’ soliloquies and in the static sounds of the ocean. There are the whispers of people talking, but the character Bernard notes that there are also “hums,” “roars,” and “murmurs” that can be heard while walking around London.76 He later remarks that “the roar of the traffic, the passage of undifferentiated faces, this way and that way, drugs me into dreams; rubs features from faces. People might walk through me … the growl of traffic might be any uproar—forest trees or the roar of wild beasts.”77 The wash of noises and voices signifies for Bernard an environmental condition that pervades any given temporal or spatial position. Noise is everywhere. For Bernard, these noises evoke a possibility of meanings. They signify a plethora of locations within which he is always imbricated. Chatter here designates a form of sound that moves in and out of intelligibility. The Waves washes over its readers with something caught between a signal and a noise, and it is between these two terms that the novel finds its form, something more akin to the foam between the waves and the shore.

The Waves compounds Serres’s notion of the parasite by also articulating a problem regarding the status of the singular and the multiple that Serres explores later in his book Genesis: “We are as little sure of the one as of the multiple. We’ve never hit upon truly atomic, multiple, indivisible terms that were not themselves, once again, composite.… The bottom always falls out of the quest for the elementary. The irreducibly individual recedes like the horizon, as our analysis advances.”78 The Waves questions the stability of the atomic through its

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76 Woolf, The Waves, 111.
78 Michel Serres, Genesis, 2–3.
development of six characters whose soliloquizing voices move between states of unity and disunity. The identity of each character coalesces around a proper name, but each character marvels at the way that his or her own structural integrity is constantly beset by environmental and interpersonal pressures that complicate the character’s sense of unity. Regarding how the characters assert a kind of unity in mutely, the character Neville spitefully says, “Yet these roaring waters … upon which we build our crazy platforms are more stable than the wild, the weak and inconsequent cries that we utter when, trying to speak, we rise; when we reason and jerk out these false sayings, ‘I am this; I am that!’ Speech is false.” The falseness of speech is directly connected to how one asserts a stable position of being: “I am this.” Instead of this falseness, Neville appeals to the roaring waters, the noisy and unknown environmental context, as a space that provides more stability for the experience of the character as a multiplicity. This moment typifies how the novel searches for an understanding of the multiple that does not reduce to an assertion of a singularity.

The English translation of The Parasite grapples with the French term parasit, which connotes a bug as well as static interference. Leaning on the idea of noise as it relates to the parasite opens a third way to think about the parasite, namely, as a form of chatter. Parasitic relations first and foremost challenge a sender/receiver model of communication by emphasizing the generative role that noise potentially plays within a communicative system. The parasite occupies the space of the channel, between the sender and receiver. Serres argues that the parasite always interrupts, always transforms the message. The logical necessity of the parasite means that senders and receivers don’t communicate with each other; instead, they interact with the channel itself and with the parasites that structure the possibility of communication.

The leap from the structure of the parasite to the problem of multiplicity in *Genesis* concerns how the parasite challenges the stable unification of any system. The parasite designates a dynamic that explodes the binary into a multiplicity. Like *The Waves, Genesis* renders this as a problem of observation: “The multiple. Water, the sea. Perceptual bursts, inner and outer, how can they be told apart? How am I to tell, any environment I’ve entered, become immersed in, that this wood I’m confronted with doesn’t go on forever, that I’ll get to the edge of the forest some day? I can’t see the trees of this forest. A murmur, seizing me, I can’t master its source, its increase is out of my control.”  

Like Bernard and Neville, Serres is concerned with the way that his observation and participation within an environmental system always contaminate his ability to understand the system as such.

The communicative system defined by chatter—or the chattersphere—addresses the ontological uncertainty in *Genesis* by proposing a dynamic, recursive system of communication that incorporates aspects of both the singular and the multiple. Importantly, the function of this system is not to pit the singular against the multiple; rather, it functionalizes each structure within a co-constitutive system of meaning making. Like the particle/wave in quantum theory, characters function as both singularities and multiplicities. As a theory of communication, the ontological question is contained within a discourse of representation. The function of chatter in *The Waves* offers a way to read characters as dynamic nodes within an ever-changing communicative system. In Michel Serres’s theory of parasitic relations, the sender/receiver model of communication is pulled apart by the inclusion of a third entity, the parasite, which conditions the possibility of the binary relation and paradoxically precedes the binary exchange. Rather than simply assert that the parasite is what interrupts communication between two

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subjects, Serres argues that it is the awareness of the interruption that allows the system to become aware of itself as a system—the parasite is the structure that enables the possibility of communication in the first place. By addressing the nature of bivalent relations, Serres demands a rethinking of all binary articulations, from communication theory to ontology and aesthetics. In *The Waves*, this rethinking most dramatically concerns an understanding of character that cannot be contained in a discourse of either unity or multeity.

*The Waves* offers a way to understand the subtleties of how parasitic relations avoid ontological paradoxes through their emphasis on communication and knowledge. As an expression of a chattersphere, *The Waves* creates a space in which characters are constantly caught in a world of chatter that they paradoxically produce and attempt to overcome. The novel’s fluctuating movements, between characters and within specific environments, reframe how subjectivity and time were imagined in Woolf’s writing and in modernism at large. This shift is dramatically demonstrated in the way that the concept of character evolves in the novel.

**Character as Parasite: The Transformation from Unified Subject to Parasite**

A description of the voices in *The Waves* as aspects of a single voice or consciousness would too quickly simplify how the voices arrange themselves topographically. Each voice is its own frequency, and these frequencies both resonate and cancel each other out in equal force. As Bernard says of his college years, “It becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many. Bernard in public, bubbles; in private, is secretive.”81 The drift toward an ever-complexifying system of transmissions is reflected in the characters’ observations of a cultural drift toward a global communication complex. The characters thus reflect on how cars,

81 Woolf, *The Waves*, 76.
telephones, telegraphs, and armies move and expand and reframe their conception of time and space. These reflections often question the distinction between self and other that makes any ontological claim possible. Regarding temporality, as in Bernard’s musings above, the characters also marvel at the ways that they themselves change through time yet remain persistently recognizable to themselves as a self.

_The Waves_ mourns the loss of a unified, stable subjectivity through the death of the character Percival. Percival acts as an anchor point in the first half of the novel against which other characters are able to moor their identities. The characters’ last encounter with Percival occurs exactly in the middle of the novel. Over the course of the evening, the mood and tenor of the soliloquies change in a way that promotes a more fecund notion of character. At the farewell dinner, Rhoda remarks: “He is like a stone fallen into a pond round which minnows swarm. Like minnows, we show had been shooting this way, that way, all shot round him when he came. Like minnows, conscious of the presence of a great stone, we undulate and eddy contentedly.”82 Bernard later remarks that “Percival is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives,”83 and also that “We have proved … that we can add to the treasury of moments….We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time. We too … stride not into chaos, but into a world that our own force can subjugate and make part of the illuminated and everlasting road.”84 These three moments chart the emergence of an understanding of character that is not wedded to a notion of stability and simple unity. First and foremost, the characters in _The Waves_ are anchored to a notion of Percival as a stable reference who grounds the wavelike characters; this is epitomized by the

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82 Woolf, _The Waves_, 136.
83 Woolf, _The Waves_, 229.
84 Woolf, _The Waves_, 146.
relation between the minnows and the stone. Later, this image transforms into a correlated image of the anatomy of a flower. At this stage, the relation between the multiple and the unified is rendered less violently. Percival is not put upon the other characters like a stone is put upon minnows in a pond; rather, the seven figures coexist with Percival as a central feature. Finally, Bernard notes at the end of the meal that this new notion of character retains a creative power that can contribute to an understanding of character. Now no longer “sheep,” Bernard’s appeal to creativity speaks to the ways that the wavelike flux that characterizes their experiences is more attuned to a notion of modernity that casts off the very idea of a grounded, metaphysical unity.

The transformation of character occurs in the novel through a series of wavelike images. If Percival is a stone, then the other characters are waves. The important distinction is how character turns from a discourse of ontology toward one of communication, transmission, and understanding in Serres’s work, which paves a path between ontology and communication, emphasizing how ontological problems must always be symbolically framed through language. For this reason, the dominant discourse of the parasite is communication, and the dominant image in the *Genesis* is the ocean as a repository of sound and noise. It would be a mistake to apply a particle/wave heuristic to *The Waves* in a way that foregrounds being. In the novel’s particle/wave model, the particle represents an understanding of character that is contained within the singular and atomic, while the wave represents an understanding of character that exists in an ever-expansive flux of moods, subjectivities, and gender formations. Although it is true that the image of flux better corresponds how the characters are formed in the novel, it’s important to underscore how the image of the wave correlates with a set of discourses, such as in *The Parasite*, that situate ontological questions within a system of signification, representation, and meaning making. In this light, Percival’s death represents the decline of character as
ontology. In the language of Woolf’s essay “Modern Fiction,” the death charts the transition from a description of reality as ontology toward a description of reality as a representation, toward, in Woolf’s words, “the recording of the atoms” rather than the veracity of the atoms as such. Percival’s death dramatizes this transition through a series of nested parasitic relations in which the parasite is expelled and then later turned into the host who expels future parasites:

He is dead, said Neville. He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown. The sails of the world have swung round and caught me on the head. All is over. The lights of the world have gone out. There stands the tree which I cannot pass. Oh, to crumple this telegram in my fingers—to let the light of the world flood back in—to say this has not happened! But why turn one’s head hither and thither? This is the truth.86

The news is noteworthy because of how unremarkable Percival’s death is. The use of irony underscores how the expectations put upon a unified subject as a sort of agent of history are foiled by the sheer randomness within the universe. The structure of the death is parasitic: the horse throws off its human parasite; Neville throws off the telegram; the “sails of the world” throw off Neville’s sensibility. The rural context of Percival’s death is played against the global system of electronic communication that allows for information to be rapidly broadcast around the globe. Neville’s gesture of crumpling the telegram is a feeble attempt to wash away the events. Neville parasitically interrupts the communication network. According to Serres, parasitic relations always work in one direction, like an arrow shooting through time. In Serres’s logic, a host discovers a parasite and the parasite must flee, only to become the host to something else. These relations are meant to show that there is no natural natural, that states of being are always relatively defined within a network of relations. Viewed in this light, Percival being

86 Woolf, The Waves, 151.
thrown from the horse was neither a freakish accident nor simply a symbol of the declining empire, but was instead a model of the ur-dynamic of parasitic relations, the center of which engenders all the chatter by its very opaqueness: “The flower,” said Bernard, “The red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives.” Topographically, the chattersphere, here contained within the network of global electronic telecommunication as well as in the chatter of the characters sitting around the table, organizes a set of parasitic relations that condition the flux of characters as they move through different states within a parasitic model.

Chatter as an operational logic for character balances its most complicated relationship between the geographic and the temporal, or between the diachronic drift of change and the synchronous strata of voices, sounds, and technologies that appear both stationary in time and simultaneously fleeting or changing from the passage of one epoch to the next. Bernard, who functions on the frequency of an artist, puts it most pointedly: “They have come together already. In a moment, when I have joined them, another arrangement will form, another pattern…. I feel the order of my being changed.” Like the six-sided flower, Bernard observes the dual existence of the community according to a kind of swarm structure, the problem of the one and the many which remains a problem, as Serres is wont to remind us, because we can’t actually be sure of the actuality of either. In such moments it would be easy to slip into a discourse of Heraclitian change, to think about the supreme role that dynamism, configuration, and assemblage play in the poesis of this novel, but doing so would risk forgetting how chatter itself is a highly limited and mediated form of discourse. It has just as much to do with the elimination of complexity through the designation of noise as it does with the emergence of complexity through the

designation of signal. This phenomenon becomes all the more evident in the experience of diachronous time:

Change is no longer possible…. We have chosen now, or sometimes a choice is made for us—a pair of tongs pinched us between the shoulders. I took the print of life not outwardly but inwardly upon the raw, the white, the unprotected fibre. I am clouded and bruised with the print of minds and faces and things so subtle that they have smell, color, texture, substance, but no name…. It was difference once. Once we could break the current as we choose. How many telephone calls, how many post cards, are now needed to cut this whole through which we come together, united, at Hampton Court?89

The two forces that collide in this passage are media and time, and the drift into a mediated and medial existence is the slow awakening to a world that is conditioned and constructed but not transcendent. This drama plays out not only through the various forms of media technologies that emerge in this passage, but also through the retrospective realization that the freedom that one perceived as a youth is only produced after the fact in the moment of adulthood. The chatter in the beginning of the novel slowly evolves from its early interest in language and form to more specific historical, social, artistic, and psychological concerns; the logic of chatter thus persists, but its process is always one of increasing complexity through specification. Complexity is thus paradoxically produced by the elimination of complexity. The novel’s final image, with the waves crashing against the shore, recaptures the backdrop of chatter as noise that follows the signal yet also provides the field through which the signal can be understood. The thick strata of soliloquies engender a model of character that maintains itself through an attempt to maintain the

possibility of communication while also giving up on the belief that an unmediated or
transcendent communication is possible.
CHAPTER TWO

Ezra Pound’s Incoherent Media Theory

“Originally, critical thinking meant the criticism of images. It was directed against the image, it was directed against pictorial thought: it was iconoclastic thinking.”


*The Ideogram and Technical Image*

The most honest sentence Ezra Pound ever wrote appears in Canto 116: “I cannot make it cohere.”

Published 58 years after he began working on The Cantos—at the end of a life that witnessed two world wars (one from the front lines), crossed continents and wits with the greatest minds of his age, attempted to coordinate a western/Greek cultural poetics with an eastern/Confucian poetics, seduced by Mussolini’s fascism, charged with treason, incarcerated at St. Elizabeth’s psychiatric hospital for over a decade, and self-exiled to Italy for his last years—to say “I cannot make it cohere” is also an understatement. Similar to Virginia Woolf’s interest in figures of disruption, coherence is a media concept insofar as it concerns the transmission of signals and information, whether in verse or in prose, diachronically and synchronically.

Apart from the contradictions in politics, cultures, religions, and personalities, Pound’s self-described failure to cohere is endemic to the ideogrammic method itself, which as a mode of writing, derives meaning through the simultaneous layering of images. Pound describes the ideogram in The ABC of Reading as “It MEANS the thing or the action or situation or quality germane to the several things that it pictures.”

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Ideogram, which Eisenstein explores in his 1929 essay “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,” Pound suggests that the ideogrammic method reveals poetic language as both transcendental and empirically grounded. Disparate images aligned in a certain way produce a more unmediated form of communication, as if the signifier/signified relationship can be short-circuited. Dialectical in a broad sense, empirical observation grounds the ideogrammic method—disparate concepts overlay each other and the tension between these concepts produces an entirely new meaning. The particular arrangement of symbols, visual or aural, when observed, creates a new kind of meaning.

Although Pound himself never rejected the ideogrammic method outright, Canto 116 provides a context to explore the failure of coherence as it might relate to Pound’s poetics and ideas about media, communication, and culture. The project of 116 was never really finished. Pound, in a 1962 interview with Donald Hall, Pound outlines the work that remains for him after writing Canto 116: “I must clarify obscurities; I must make clearer definite ideas or dissociations. I must find a verbal formula to combat the rise of brutality—the principle of order versus the split atom.” Despite whatever he wanted the ideogrammic method to accomplish, the work of understanding culture in an era defined by the nuclear age and the predominance of electric media is never-ending.

Insofar as the ideogram speaks to concerns about images and communication, the legacy of these questions are taken up by a younger, but somewhat contemporary, European media theorist in Vilém Flusser. Pound’s engagement with the ideogram brought the concept into the world of modernist aesthetics and media. The failures that he reflects on in Canto 116 illustrate the gap between what Pound desired from the ideogram against formal constraints of written, poetic language. Flusser, for his part, carries these same dynamics in the context of what he calls
the “technical image.” Although the most important connection between Pound and Flusser is their shared engagement in theorizing how technical modes of expression and writing construct cultural meaning, the biographical similarities and differences evoke a Janus-like relationship and merit some general remarks.

Flusser, born in Prague in 1920, was raised with an early exposure to multiple languages. In Flusser’s case German, Czech, Latin, English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. Similar to Pound, Flusser borrows freely from other languages, and he would often revise essays simply by writing them in a different tongue. Stylistically Pound and Flusser share a peripatetic style—their writing not only moves from place to place, but also arrives in short bursts, condensing large and unwieldy ideas into brief essays or polemics. Although Flusser’s career as a media theorist rises in prominence after Pound has died, he remains closely connected to early 20th century modernist aesthetics, and in fact refers to his first exposure to the Moderns in London as “his first productive age.”

Like Pound, Flusser was both a refugee and an exile, though the circumstances are diametrically opposed; whereas Pound was famously attracted to Mussolini’s fascism, Flusser was a victim of nazi anti-Semitism. Jewish in provenance, Flusser fled Prague to London and then São Palo as a university student, studying philosophy. During this time, most of his family was murdered in concentration camps and it would be many decades before he ever had an occasion to return to Prague. Flusser uses the term bottomless (“Bodenlos,” the German title for his autobiography) to describe his worldview after learning of his family’s murder: “One could never rid oneself of the conviction—totally irrational, but appropriate for the times—that “actually” one should have perished in the gas ovens; that from this point on one is leading an “unforeseen” existence; that through emigration one is responsible for separating oneself from
one’s home, to throw oneself into the yawning abyss of meaninglessness...a life in bottomlessness had begun.” Flusser is both an unyielding optimist and pessimist. His theory of bottomlessness is both a description of his despair, but as we’ll later see, becomes a new foundation for thinking about the legacy of ideogrammic writing.

Flusser’s European cosmopolitanism, his sense of exile, and his fascination with new modes and means of electronic writing and imaging fueled an intellectual career that presents in no uncertain terms two versions of a utopia: one describes a new form of hyper-mediated totalitarianism; the other describes the formation of a new kind of benevolent, telematic cosmopolitanism. For Flusser, the future’s uncertain potential is bound up within a new form of writing and reading what he calls technical images, digitally or electronically produced symbols. Both the formal analysis and the uncertainty it reveals also operates throughout Pound’s engagement with the ideogrammic method.

_Incoherence: The ideogram and the palimpsest in Canto 116_

Canto 116, first published in 1962, is reflective, remorseful, thematically unified and internally coherent; these are rare traits in the Cantos, which merits careful consideration. It is the only canto that uses the word “confess.” As such, the Canto reads as a conclusion or coda to the entire work. Coherence, or the lack there of, is its chief theme. Although there are no literal ideograms in the Canto, the allusions to misalignments, wrecks, and errors in meaning and understanding point to the fragmented aspect of poetic language that the ideogrammic method was supposed to solve.

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92 Flusser, _Bodenlos_, 28.
The Canto’s first six lines evoke the ideogrammic method while also establishing the ground for the failures that the poem will later explore:

Came Neptunus

His mind leaping

Like dolphins

These concepts the human mind has attained.

To make Cosmos –

To achieve the possible –

(116/1-6)

The original 1962 Paris Review publication omitted the reference to Neptune, which Pound later added for all future publications. The reference to the Roman god ties the poem back to the trope of the first Canto: Odysseus’ voyage home. In Canto I Tiresias predicts that Odysseus would “return though spiteful Neptune, over dark seas, ‘lose all companions’” (1/66-7). The subject/predicate inversion (“Came Neptunus” instead of “Neptunus Came”) shows that this is not merely the closing of a narrative loop, instead something is fundamentally inverted or altered.

The first three lines work ideogram-like as a single image that coalesces through and beyond its disparate parts. The image is quite literally divine, which speaks to its status as a perfected or idealized form. The wave-form in lines 1-3 accomplish two things on the level of ideogram. First, they establish a surface/depth relationship as in relation to the activity of the mind; the god’s mind moves leaps above the surface and, as inferred, dives beneath the surface. Second, as a presentation of an ideal form (literally an image of the divine), there is a sense of repetition, multiplicity, play, and community. The sense of process and multiplicity comes from
both the gerund form of “to leap” as an ongoing practice and the sense of play and community from the pod of dolphins themselves.

Surface and depth play an important role in understanding what Pound means by “ideogrammic method.” In Guide to Kulchur he writes: “The ideogrammic method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader’s mind, onto a part that will register.”

A couple details from this passage speak directly to the images in the opening of the canto. First, the repetition of presentation, like the mind as a pod of dolphins ceaselessly moving forward in a wave-like manner. Second, the explicit evocation of the reader, who will eventually break through the “surface” and access a deeper form of thinking.

The role of the reader and the act of reading are featured heavily in this Canto. In lines 4-6 the human mind (as opposed to Neptune’s) “attains” two concepts from the opening ideogrammic image: “To make Cosmos— / To achieve possible –.” These two lines rely on a tension between the verb and the noun. The everyday verb “to make” is paired with the extraordinary object “Cosmos” and the aspirational verb “to achieve” is paired with the unremarkable noun or adjective “possible.” This tension speaks to one of the fundamental objects of the ideogram: to make the ordinary extraordinary; to make the extraordinary ordinary. One of the original fascinations of the ideogram was the way that its formal elements were based on everyday observations, which when presented together could elevate meaning beyond the symbolic; In Guide to Kulchur Pound looks at the word “red” and notes how the elements of rust, iron rose, cherry, and flamingo are all present. Redness is a part of all of these examples and yet the category of redness exceeds these examples. Pound describes method as “reading by

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juxtaposition” in “The Teacher’s Mission.”

Sergei Eisenstein, in “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,” describes the juxtaposition as “two hieroglyphs of the simples series is to be regarded not as their sum, but as their product.” Eisenstein identifies how the collision of images produces something greater than their sum. His montage technique creates emotion, tension, and captures a sense of time—famously put together in the film Battleship Potemkin. In both Pound and Eisenstein’s account of ideograms, the juxtaposition coordinates the reader/viewer, whose interpretation accesses the “higher meaning” of the text’s disparate elements.

Canto 116 does not offer a clear way to understand these early juxtapositions around making or achieving because the next line undercuts both activities by naming the first failure: “Muss., wrecked for an error.” The poem presents “wrecking” of Mussolini as the result of an error, or a mistake. The following five lines turn the challenge of this wrecking to a problem for those that follow in the wake of an error:

But the record

The palimpsest –

A little light

In great darkness –

Cuniculi –

The assonance between “wrecked” and “record” connects the two concepts and suggests that the “wrecking” has to do with the “recording.” The ideogram represents a theory of writing that Pound developed and deployed throughout his career, but here the invocation of a palimpsest represents another. The differences are striking. The ideogram operates through the juxtaposition

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of everyday observations, where meaning is greater than the sum of the parts. In contrast, the palimpsest describes the act of writing one text over another. The past is all but erased, except for “a little light” that can shine through. The poet’s refusal to name Mussolini’s error is deafening, but not all together indefensible. The effect in the text turns a discussion of political failures into a discussion of poetic failures and suggests that there is an intractable connection between the mode of expression, the aesthetics of communication, and the meaning – the “rightness” or “wrongness” – of what is expressed.

The disparity between the object or intention of expression and the technique or medium of expression comes out forcefully in the Canto’s most memorable sequence:

I have brought the great ball of crystal;

Who can lift it?

Can you enter the great acorn of light?

But the beauty is not the madness

Tho’ my errors and wrecks lie about me.

And I am not a demigod,

I cannot make it cohere.

The poet’s work, the Cantos itself, is imagined here as both a “ball of crystal” and a “great acorn.” Walter Baumann, in his analysis of Canto 116, frames the image of the crystal as one of the most highly developed images in all of the Cantos. W Walter Baumann, “But to Affirm the Gold Thread in the Pattern: An Examination of Canto 116,” Paideuma, 12:2, 206. The crystal and the acorn are another set of juxtaposed concepts of poetic language. The crystal ball, as a fortune teller’s tool, offers a version of communication that is immediate and immanent, but also esoteric. A medium can look into a crystal and tell you your future, but the process is idiosyncratic and spiritual. By reading
the crystal as an immanent form of communication, a medium convening with the world of the
dead, the verb “to lift” suggests a usage of theft. Lifting an object like a pick-pocket will “lift” a
wallet. Both senses are operative, who can lift (and carry onward) this weighty tome, and who
can “lift” my grift?

Alternatively, the acorn, while equally mysterious in its transformation from small seed
to mighty oak tree, is observable and measurable. It also takes a long time. The acorn marks the
beginning of a lifecycle that spans a longer life than an individual and therefore points to a
project that is bigger than a single person. A few lines down the speaker names Linnaeus, the
botanist, as someone who he has learned from. The acorn, viz., Linnaeus, represents a different
version of “directness.” Whereas the basis of the crystal ball is found in the mystical
interpretations of the speaker, the work of botanist is grounded in careful evidence. One can
study the development of the acorn and take careful notes, one can also share ones findings and
others can replicate the study. This kind of grounded empirical study calls back to Pound’s
famous first rule of imagism: “direct treatment of the “thing” whether subjective or objective.”

As two distinct images that are wrapped up with different ways of seeing the future, the
crystal and the acorn present two modes of poetic expression. One is not presented as superior to
the other, but the failure to resolve this tension is the central form of incoherence in the poem.
The next two lines present another inversion, this time a hypotaxis: “But the beauty is not the
madness / Tho’ my errors and wrecks lie about me.” The second line modifies the first, namely
by developing “the beauty.” The beauty is beautiful (and not an act of madness) despite the
poet’s errors and wrecks (here the use of wreck indelibly ties him to Mussolini, a man also
“wrecked” by error). On the level of biography there seems to be some admission, however
indirect, of guilt, or at least of having made an error (many), in the past. But more importantly,
the poet asserts that neither madness, which according to the text is clearly present, nor errors and wrecks are the cause of the beauty. These lines border on tautology, almost saying: the beauty is beautiful because it is beautiful; the errors and wrecks are errors and wrecks because they are errors and wrecks. While the logic may be facile, the meaning is not. These two lines call for a disentanglement of texts and discourses, which in the context of the ideogrammic method underscores the need to identify the disparate elements clearly for the proper alignment of meaning and message.

Somewhat pessimistically, the poet indicates that only a demigod (which he is not) could manage setting straight the beauty from the errors and wrecks and madness. Instead he is left with this simple admission of defeat: “I cannot make it cohere.” The operative word in this admission is “make.” Poetry (poesis) is an act of making. To make something is to force something into being; there is both a sense of artifice and a sense of violence in the verb “to make.” Coherence is the object and making is the process through which one arrives at a state of coherence.

Notably, when the “cohere” appears again it is as a verb: “it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere” (55-6). The differences in the second and third usage of coherence as opposed to the first are more than grammatical. The last third of the poem, lines 45-79 mark a shift in overall tone. While the first half of the Canto evokes images of Mussolini, old cranks, unprepared young, and the poet’s own madness, the second half, around the line “Disney against the metaphysicals” (36) takes own a more gratifying and gracious tone. The poet expresses gratitude to those that have taught him (the symbolist poet Jules Laforgue and the botanist Carl Linnaeus), and the language evokes a kind of letting go. It’s too much of a stretch to say that poet suddenly forgives himself of his past errors, but lines like “a nice quiet paradise / over the
shambles, / and some climbing” (49-51) speak to a kind of acceptance in old age. It’s in this context that the speaker comes back to the idea of coherence. As noted, the second instance is as a verb “it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere.” The distinction that “it” (the quiet paradise over the shambles) coheres, even if his work does not marks a reaffirmed commitment to the ideogrammic method, as a mode of coherence, which the poem, as an attempt to utilize the ideogrammic method, cannot perfectly capture. This notion of ultimate coherence from the poet is not especially convincing because it relies on some “deeper truth” to which language, paradise, and society can cohere to. While the argument leaves something to be desired, the basic gesture is understandable. 58 years of working on this project, through good moments and bad, there is still much to be done and it falls to others to “lift it.”

In this final gesture of both looking back and looking forward to the work that is to be done, the poet reinvokes the image of writing and reading as engagement with palimpsest. The palimpsest reimagines the opening image of surface and depth. If the palimpsest becomes the dominant model for reading, then our only hope is found in the “cuniculi” or ancient drainage shafts, dug under the earth. These five lines at the beginning of the poem, which move downward from light to darkness to drainage shafts, read almost like a lament for the possibility of learning from the past. Two lines later the poem describes “unprepared young burdened with records,” again evoking the unhappy work that future generations may have to undertake to salvage the meaning of the wrecking and the record. Here, at the end of the poem the Cantos themselves appear as a palimpsest:

And as to who will copy this palimpsest?

Al poco giorno
Ed al gran cerchio d’ombra⁹⁶

But to affirm the gold thread in the pattern

Again, the canto implies a certain amount of unfinished work, this time in copying. The purpose, “to affirm the gold thread in the pattern,” appeals to an earlier reference of Ariadne, the mythic daughter of Minos (architect of the labyrinth of Crete), whose gold thread was the only way that one could enter the labyrinth and safely return. Read in the context of Pound’s own biography, this line appears self-serving: future generations will affirm that despite all of his errors, there was a “gold thread” that contains the possibility of leading one away from Pound’s own errors. It may be self-serving, but it is also hopeful that some future scholar will do to Pound what Pound did to so many forgotten cultural figures. These last lines read a little simply, but also with humility. “To confess wrong without losing rightness” (75), marks the only time the word confess is used in the Cantos, but the line wants to have its cake and eat it to (I’ll admit my wrongs, so long as I can hold onto the things I got right). Humbly though, the speaker reaffirms the central lament at the end of the poem: “I cannot make it flow thru” (77). This final iteration contains a particularly melancholic tone as it stands out sorely in a generally upbeat and positive section. The acute admission is a belief that there is something to be gained from the ideogrammic method, but the speaker is not the one to finish the work. More important than the speaker’s own desire for some future redemption is the way the poem appears to give up on the ideogrammic method, in favor of images like the palimpsest or the gold thread, a more linear form of writing and reading that are meant to, in the last line, “lead back to splendor” (79).

_Ideogrammic Writing: Metaphysical Immanence or Everyday Symbol?

⁹⁶ The Italian refers back to Canto V: “In the small hours with the darkness describing a huge circle.”
Sergei Eisenstein’s opening line in the essay “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram”⁹⁷—“It is a weird and wonderful feat to have written a pamphlet on something that in reality does not exist”—couldn’t be a more spot-on description of the fate of the ideogram as a concept within modernist poetics. The nonexistent element with its relational negativity, that gives the ideogram its conceptual power. Defined and understood through a long history of mistranslations and misunderstandings, the ideogram appears in weird and wonderful ways for the duration of the twentieth century as a solution to the problem of form and content, as a mystical and transcendental extravagance that pushes language to exceed itself, as a cryptic prefiguration of dialogical montage, and as an embarrassing chapter in cultural appropriation. In its basest translation, the ideogram is simply a symbol that represents a concept without sound. This simple concept is supercharged in the writing of Eisenstein and Pound to take on a metaphysical characteristic. Eisenstein was trying to convey how cinematic communication carries complexities that are easy to overlook. Pound uses the concept to reify what he sees as important in the language of poetry and poetic images. Pound’s reification calcifies the ideogram into something incoherent. Pound’s incoherence presents an opportunity for such media thinkers as Marshall McLuhan and Vilém Flusser to repurpose the ideogram in accordance with their analyses of media. McLuhan stands as an important intermedial figure between a tradition of modernist aesthetics and a tradition of media theory. McLuhan was introduced to Pound through his student, friend, and sometimes co-author Hugh Kenner, author of The Pound Era. McLuhan’s engagement with Pound and the ideogram provides a critical crossover point between modernist aesthetics and media theory.

While the ideogram may function as a totemic barometer for measuring the historic highs and lows of modernist cultural production, it anachronistically charts a path to an emergent modernist media aesthetics by presenting a nonrepresentational system of representation. Pound, Eisenstein, and later Flusser focus their attentions to the dialectical way in which the ideogram works. The effect is to capture something ineffable about language and communication. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Marshall McLuhan’s interest in the ideogram in his letters to Pound recasts the figure of the ideogram from the Eurocentric vision of ancient futurity in favor of what media theorist Vilém Flusser would describe as a “technical image,” a shift that not only places the ideogram properly within the locus of a hypermediated culture, but also underscores the second-order system of relations as the primary function of ideogrammic writing and thinking.

Questions about media, representation, and form drew Marshall McLuhan to the ideogram in his correspondence with Ezra Pound: “You and Eisenstein have shown me how to make use of the Chinese ideogram to elicit the natural modes of American sensibility.”

“Natural modes” highlights how both Pound and Eisenstein approach the ideogram with the same paradoxical blend of science and mysticism. Pound uses the language of experiments and suggests a taxonomic method that enables the ideogram to access the “truth” of a thing, while Eisenstein appeals to the logic of structural linguistics and physics to describe the near-infinite number of ways that meaning can emerge through conflict. It is unclear what these “natural modes” mean for a thinker like McLuhan, who often blurs the classic distinction between the natural and the artificial in order to explore the processes of extension that, for him, are emblematic of mediated experience.

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McLuhan’s reception of the ideogram captures to the letter his thesis of media as a phenomenological formation that fractures the dialectic between nature and culture to the letter. While blurriness, fuzziness, and fast-and-loose theoretical thinking are hallmarks of McLuhan’s popular reception, the ideogram highlights a more nuanced attempt to develop a nonbinary way of thinking about media and communication. McLuhan expands on his interest in ideograms in a 1948 letter to Pound:

The American mind is not even close to being amenable to the ideogram principle as yet. The reason is simply this. America is 100% 18th century. The 18th century chucked out the principle of metaphor and analogy—the basic fact that as A is to B so C is to D. AB:CD. It can see AB relations. But all relations in four terms are still verboten. This amounts to a deep occultation of all human thought for the U.S.A…. I am trying to devise a way of stating this difficulty as it exists. Until stated and publicly recognized for what it is, poetry and the arts can’t exist in America. Mere exposure to the arts does nothing for a mentality which is incorrigibly dialectical. The vital tensions and nutritive action of the ideogram remain inaccessible to this state of mind.99

The transhistorical moves that McLuhan makes foreshadow his work in The Gutenberg Galaxy, where he draws a sharp analogical link between Gutenberg and 20th-century media networks and society. The analogical structure binds and provides the means for McLuhan’s thinking. The four-term “verboten relations” suggest a different way to situate the ideogram. This multiterm approach signals the various ways in which both Pound and Eisenstein fall back on images of immanence, silence, dialectic, and tautology to capture what animates their interest in the ideogram. As Pound writes in The ABC of Reading:

Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing; of a thing in a given position or relation, or of a combination of things. It MEANS the thing or the action or situation or quality germane to the several things that it pictures.\textsuperscript{100} Yet Pound sells short the relational aspect of the ideogram because his example, the color red, does not emphasize the relational dimension of ideogrammic thinking; instead the images he offers highlight the experience of seeing and experiencing something red: rose, iron rust, cherry, flamingo. The immanence of the image almost becomes a tautology “red is red is red,” the intention is to derive the power of the ideogram from the ways the relations of experience don’t actually relate to one another. Each relation is individual, but they all occur simultaneously. An earlier poetic figure for these relational non-relations can be found in his poem “An Object”:

This thing that hath a code and not a core,
Hath set acquaintance where might be affections,
And nothing now
Disturbeth his reflections.\textsuperscript{101}

The first line inverts everyday thinking about objects. The poem uses the word “code,” as the logic through which one derives meaning, as the essential trait of the object. It’s nominal function, “the core,” the poem disregards its material presence as a thing, “not a core.”

Enjambment/punctuation of the last two lines creates a tension, similar to the tensions later explored in Canto 116. Either nothing disturbs his reflections, or “nothing now” is what disturbs his reflections. This tension defines the fault line of the imaginary relation in Pound’s interpretation of an ideogram. Writing in the form of immanent experience means that nothing

\textsuperscript{100} Ezra Pound, \textit{ABC of Reading}, 21.
\textsuperscript{101} Ezra Pound, \textit{Ripostes}, 236.
will now disturb one’s reflections, but also that the absence of the relation is precisely the negative form of writing that disturbs one’s concept of writing and communication.

Eisenstein’s reading approaches the figure through silence:

As the ideogram provides a means for the laconic imprinting of an abstract concept, the same method, when transposed into literary exposition, gives rise to an identical laconism of pointed imagery. Applied to the collision of an austere combination of symbols this method results in a dry definition of abstract concepts. The same method, expanded into the luxury of a group of already formed verbal combinations, swells into a splendor of imagist effect.102

Similar to Pound’s reading, the quality of absence through silence that enables the ideogram to “imprint abstraction.” Eisenstein, however, finds that this silence produces a near-infinite possible set of relations and meanings:

Just as the two outspreading wings of a hyperbola meet, as we say, at infinity, so the principle of hieroglyphics, infinitely splitting into two parts (in accordance with the function of symbols), unexpectedly unites again from this dual estrangement, in yet a fourth sphere—in the theater.103

There we have it. The ideogram, sitting comfortably between tautological immanence or infinite relationality. McLuhan tries to contain these poles by appealing to an everyday communicative and social practice, phatic communion:

But the arrest of the flux of thought and speech which is the written page permits that prolonged analysis of thought processes from which arise the structures of science.

Pictographic Chinese culture, for example, would seem to stand midway between the

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extremes of our abstract written tradition and the plenary oral tradition with its stress on speech as gesture and gesture as “phatic communion.” And it is perhaps this medial position between the non-communicating extremes of print and pictorial technology which attracts us today to the Chinese ideogram.  

The everyday communicative space as a proliferation of image-based hypermediation is central to McLuhan’s continued interest in the ideogram. Whereas the ideogram functions for both Pound and Eisenstein as a “special case” for rethinking aesthetics, McLuhan’s continued interest in the ideogram leads him to a general theory of Poundian discourse:

Mr. Pound seldom translates himself into ordinary prose. And anecdotes and reported conversations which enrich his essays are, in the same way, never casually illustrative but ideogrammatic. In the language of the schoolmen, for whose precision of dissociation Mr. Pound has so frequently expressed his admiration, the ideogram represents the “copula of agglutination.” That is to say, the copula of existential reality and not the copula of connections, ennunciations, and conceptions in rationalistic discourse. And it is the consequent solidity and sharpness of particularized actuality... that baffles the reader who looks for continuous argumentation in Mr. Pound’s prose and verse alike.  

(“Pound’s Critical Prose”)

In this analysis McLuhan identifies Pound’s writing and his use of the ideogram as an “agglutination,” a clump of images and invocations that are too dense to parse. McLuhan’s blind spot is that he accepts the ideogram as such. He names the incoherence and moves on. What McLuhan fails to connect is how the ideogram fits within a larger poetics, media, and communication engagement within Pound’s work. Passably true for the speaker in the Canto

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116, the work presented in that Canto looks forward, to a new generation of thinkers to “lift” the work into the next age.

_Vilém Flusser’s Technical Image: The Promise of Two Utopias_

McLuhan’s continued interest in the ideogram takes us from “picture-writing” to a “phatic copula of agglutination.” Despite his popular role as “new media guru,” McLuhan could not parse the technical significance of the ideogram in an era of electric media. Vilém Flusser repurposes the ideogram by challenging the relation between foreground and background as a means of establishing hierarchy within the critique of visual culture. In Flusser’s analysis, the technical image is an ideogram that exists in a non-linear and non-sequential system of images.

In this non-linear and non-sequential sense, we might say that Pound’s new media theory begins with Vilém Flusser. Pound’s work on the ideogram and the ideogrammic method thinks through non-linear symbolic writing as an alternate form of thinking. Flusser’s work theorizes these modes of writing according to a rough schema of civilization development. From symbolic writing on cave walls to computer generated images, Flusser considers the relationship between forms of writing and forms of thinking. The polylingual media theorist describes his engagement with Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and other European modernists as his “first productive age,” and the published version of Flusser’s autobiographical “philosophical self-portrait” notes that this period of his study was about an intensification of language and ultimately drew him more properly into the field of philology. An unpublished and untranslated version of this work in the Flusser archive expands his idea of modernist language with the claim that “I began to see image-art as language; began to see music (classic and electronic) as language” and further notes that he began to think that “the region/domain of language is too wide” and that in fact “there is a

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dangerous beauty in language.” Here Flusser is describing a moment in his career when he began to understand the need for a media-specific theory of media. The post-structuralist critique of speech over writing can be best executed in practice through a varied ontology of media and the modes of thought that emerge within specific mediated forms.

Flusser’s reception of Pound tells a well-known, yet incomplete story: modernist aesthetic formalism became the language of the arts in the same way that 20th-century modernism is understood as an uneven, yet persistent global homogenization. However, to understand why the drift of the poetic is not a simple process of media homogeneity—at least for Pound’s iteration of modernist aesthetics—we need to reintroduce the Flusserian model of the “technical image” into Pound’s poetics.

The technical image describes all forms of image-making in a hyper-mediated, digital culture. Similar to the ideogram, technical images are writing with images (TV, film, photography, social media); however, Flusser emphasizes the nonlinear and relational aspect of this form of communication:

Technical images arise in an attempt to consolidate particles around us and in our consciousness on surfaces to block up the intervals between them in an attempt to make elements such as photons and electrons, on one hand, and bits of information, on the other hand, into images. This can be achieved neither with eyes nor with fingers, for these elements are neither graspable, nor are they visible. For this reason, apparatuses must be developed that grasp the ungraspable, visualize the invisible, and conceptualize the inconceivable.108

107 From an early draft of “Philosophical Self Portrait”
The ideogram is the antecedent to Vilém Flusser’s work on the technical image. For Flusser, “the technical image” denotes mechanically reproduced imagery: photography, film, and electronic media. More than a list of media forms, “the technical image” refers to a material absence in the new media formation of the image. The rise of the technical image forms a trace of the telematic society, which is antithetical to the history of writing and the script culture. Writing, to Flusser, is coincident with linearity and linear time. The process of writing is the process of becoming temporal. Friedrich Kittler was quick to dismiss the distinction that both McLuhan and Flusser make between linear time/writing and the atemporal potentiality within the technical image; although Flusser often insists that the two forms of writing and communication represent breaks and fissures, as well as layers and strata. As a late twentieth-century ideogram, the technical image is structured more through its relation to ground than it is through linearity/nonlinearity.

Flusser’s theory of the technical image is grounded in a theoretical-historical analysis of writing and time. In his historical analysis, the emergence of writing coincides with linearity. The practice of reading – whether hieroglyphics or letters – creates a line that organizes thinking according to past, present, and future. In his essay “the codified word” he describes the situation like this:

“If one wants to decipher (“read”) a text, one must let the eye glide along the line. Not until the end of the line does one receive the message, and then one must attempt to bring it together, to synthesize it. Linear codes demand a synchronization of their diachronicity. They demand progressive reception. And the result is a new experience of time, that is, linear time, a stream of unstoppable progress, of dramatic unrepeatability, of framing: in short, history. With the invention of writing, history begins, not because writing keeps a
firm hold on processes, but because it transforms scenes into processes: it generates historical consciousness.”¹⁰⁹

Linear writing creates a synchronic experience of time. This temporal experience produces a sense of history that is defined by progress, the constant demand to push forward, to create new things, to appreciate everything as “unique.” Flusser’s enlightenment notion of writing as a demand for progress contrasts with his assessment of an earlier, prehistoric form of writing, more akin to the ideogrammic method, where symbols are pictorial:

“For people programmed by images, time flows through the world the way the eye wanders across the image: it diachronizes, it orders things into positions. It is the time of the return from day to night to day, of sowing to reaping to sowing, of birth to death to rebirth, and magic is the technique that is called for in this experience of time. It orders all things in the manner in which they relate to each other within the cycle of time.”¹¹⁰

Image-writing, for Flusser, is non-linear and it reveals relationships between objects in a cyclical, rhythmic way. There is certainly a spark of pre-historic romance here, but the purpose of the analysis is descriptive, rather than prescriptive. In pre-historic, image writing Flusser finds a concept of relationships and time that are absent in world defined by progress, development, and advancement.

It’s within this overall historical framing that Flusser positions the technical image. Flusser’s reading of the technical image is ambivalent, often edges toward an overall pessimistic view. In the technical image Flusser finds traces of earlier, pre-historic modes of communication, but these modes are also hyper-mediated and alienating. However, insofar as they allow

¹⁰⁹ Vilem Flusser, Writings, 39.
¹¹⁰ Vilém Flusser, Writings, 38.
individuals to imagine new worlds and create new kinds of relationships, there may be some possibility of breaking from the strictures of historic society:

“And the telematic society would distinguish itself from earlier societies only insofar as its cerebral-net character has become conscious, enabling us to start consciously manipulating the net structure. The telematic society would be the first to recognize the production of information as society’s actual function and so to systematically foster this production: the first self-conscious and therefore free society.”

This passage describes a positive utopian potential, if and only if individuals operate freely within a world of technical images could the information culture of a historical age combine with the relational characteristics of a prehistoric age. The test by which we might know if we’re living in such a state has two parts. First, there must be individual freedom to manipulate the structure of the media and second, there must be a shared purpose in the pursuit of information as an end or a good in itself. Flusser is quick to note that the current culture of technical images, dominated by corporate media conglomerates and pursuits of capital, is far from this ideal: “As long as images operate as they do today, our society is a miserable superbrain” (92). The emergence of technical images represents, for Flusser, a new era in the history of writing and culture. Flusser balances his skepticism about the current state of hypermediated, networked life by acknowledging the formal potential for a new kind of “telematic” society to emerge. He draws this potential carefully through an analysis of what he describes as the “groundlessness” of the technical image. In contradistinction to Pound, Flusser finds hope in the very thing that was most disturbing to Pound.

*The Ideogram and the Technical Image: Finding New Ground in Groundlessness*

In the era of the technical image, the production of information is the dominant mode of cultural life. In Flusser’s lexicon, this moment is utopian in form because it has no ground, no process, and no dimension (he calls this “zero-dimensionality”). Groundlessness is neither a positive nor a negative valuation in Flusser; it describes an emergent and self-referential subject formation that is only possible in the wake of a globalized media-communication network. Groundlessness encapsulates his autobiographical philosophy of the migrant and is his critical rewriting of Heidegger’s notion of “ground” for *dasein*. For Flusser, groundlessness is the only available mode for being in the era of the technical image. In an age where commerce is defined through global trade and social identity is manufactured and curated online, everyone is already “groundless.” Rather than temporality, ground, and subject, you get what Alexander Galloway has described as an “interface effect,” where the technical image produces the appearance of an instantaneous, completely connected, decentralized social network.

Grounded vs. groundlessness is the key faultline between Pound and Flusser, catalyzed by McLuhan’s transliteration of the ideogram as a hypermediated, multidimensional object. Both Flusser and Pound are preoccupied with figures of wandering, and in all instances, these figures grapple with what it means to be “groundless.” In Pound’s poem “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,” a cycle of verse about an experimental poet and translator of classic poetry who retreats from the world: “I was / “And I no more exist; “Here drifted / “An hedonist.” Pound’s subject is groundless, literally on a boat, and disconnected from a historical culture. Adrift and lost in disappointment, Flusser situates this same sense of cultural loss and groundlessness within the dynamics of the technical image:

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The disappointment we currently experience in every explanation, interpretation, and reading of the world leads to a revolutionary new attitude toward the world. Disappointed we stop bending, straighten ourselves up, and stretch out our arms against the world to point an index finger at it. From now on all pointers, signs, and indicators point eccentrically away from us, and nothing more points toward us. We are the ones who project meaning on the world. And the technical images are such projections, whatever they are they have the same meaning: to give absurdity a meaning.\textsuperscript{114}

The quality of self-reference within the technical image—that it always highlights its own mediated state and poses questions about its own perspective, authorship, and phantasmagoria—introduces a logic of reflexivity into the method of ideogrammic writing. These signs point outward toward an outside, and yet that “outside” is defined from within. The distinction between inside and outside, between system and environment in Flusser’s analysis places the ideogram in a post-Gutenberg galaxy. McLuhan rightly identified a nonlinear form of writing in the form of an ideogram, but his commitment to a binary between natural and artificial and an analogy between the past and present prevented him from defining the set of relations incumbent within the ideogram according to a nonrelational network. Such work, which is based on the dynamics of second-order observation, has only recently begun—or, as Pound wrote in a letter to McLuhan: “yr/crit/writing will become a lot livelier when you start looking for credits rather than depts./not matter where a man GOT what, but what he did with it (or without it) AFTER he got it.”\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{114} Flusser, \textit{Into the Universe of Technical Images}, 16.
\textsuperscript{115} Ezra Pound to Marshall McLuhan, 14 January 1949, 89.
The media-theory implications for the ideogram as interface with the technical image and Flusser’s analysis of writing emerge from Pound’s ideas about poetry generally. The technical image describes the way that the strata of culture can be layered onto a text in such a way as to hyper-mediate it. Pound’s Cantos exemplify this technique through small gestures or references to people, places, and things; Canto 116’s reference to Carl Linnaeus is therefore biographical in one sense, but also a representation of an entire system of organization and categorizing knowledge. Pound attempts to parse the linguistic with the cultural by finding a new ground for cultural value. This value isn’t merely an abstract metaphysical gesture toward something like “western culture,” but rather directly connected to Pound’s ideas about poetry. In a letter to Harriett Monroe, Pound wrote:

Poetry must be as well written as prose. Its language must be a fine language, departing in no way from speech save by a heightened intensity (i.e. simplicity). There must be no book words, no periphrases, no inversions … there must be no interjections. No words flying off to nothing … rhythm must have meaning … there must be no clichés, set phrases, stereotyped journalese. The only escape from such is by precision, a result of concentrated attention to what is writing…. Objectivity and again objectivity, and expression: no hindside-before-ness, no straddled adjectives, no Tennysonianness of speech; nothing—that you couldn’t, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say…. Language is made out of concrete things. General expressions in nonconcrete terms are a laziness; they are talk, not art, not creation. They are the reaction of things on the writer, not a creative act by the writer.116

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What does Ezra Pound mean by “poetry” in his letter to Harriet Monroe? Theories of “the poetic” have followed Pound throughout his reception, the most notable being how the chain of aesthetic signification, from poetic language to the role of the image, the relation of the image to language, the relation of language to history, and the relation of history to culture, remains entangled within an aesthetic that appears both invisible and opaque. Perhaps inscrutable by design, there is nevertheless a medium-specific impulse within this poetic that makes a simple claim: poetic language is visible; it is an image. The importance of the image on the one hand, and the importance for prose-like simplicity on the other is an incoherent tension. This incoherence is central to Pound’s poetic practice, which agglutinates in the way that McLuhan described the ideogram. The search for something to ground the poetic (whether that something is history, tradition, form, or culture) motivates Pound’s work, but that search is ultimately what unravels it.

Pound chases this conservative notion of ground in the poem “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly”:

“The age demanded an image / of its accelerated grimace, / something for the modern stage, / Not, at any rate, an Attic grace; … The ‘age demanded’ chiefly a mould in plaster, / Made with no loss of time, / A prose Kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster / Or the ‘sculpture’ of rhyme.”

The speaker describes his commitment to an aesthetic form that meets the demands of the age (in the form of an image, here using a favorite analogy for imagism, i.e., sculpture), despite knowing that those very demands will be misunderstood by the very age that demands them. Mauberly’s temporal impropriety, being a subject that is both before his time and after it, means that perhaps the age to which his demands belong is ours, or at least that ours is an age that can revisit Mauberly’s temporal oddity from a new critical perspective. Mauberly, along with all of Pound’s

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poetic vectors and characters, points toward a post-machine-age culture, where technical images dominate and the emoji is the lingua franca.

John Espey identifies the first problem for the reception of “Mauberly” in its modulation between autobiography and artifice: Does “Mauberly” read more in the tradition of “The Prelude,” in charting the biographical twists and turns of the growth of the poet’s mind in 1920, or “Prufrock,” in producing a psychological production of an impersonal and radically separate persona?118 Hugh Kenner’s (earlier) observation that the poem “at its deepest levels … is unread” speaks directly to this problematic but smartly opens this problem with Pound’s concern with the withering significance of poetry in an increasingly dense field of mediation.119 Espey’s indeterminacies, which follow a narrative from the more strictly autobiographical to the more strictly fictive, are produced in equal measure in the poem itself. In its constant rephrasing and requoting of its own textual “life and contacts,” delving into the desires of what “the age demanded,” the poem becomes caught in a generational nexus between antiquity, the modern, and the contemporary.

It’s no surprise, then, that the reception of the poem reproduces the exact same trajectory as the poem itself, which begins by celebrating poem and poet: “For three years, out of key with his time, / He strove to resuscitate the dead art / Of poetry; to maintain ‘the sublime’/ in the old sense. Wrong from the start—” ends with an image inscribed on an oar: “I was / And I no more exist; Here drifted / An hedonist.” The subject of the poem and its fictional or historical contacts distracts the process of the poet. The poem describes a shift from the discourse of the sublime to an engraving on wood. The object of inscription, the oar, is beset on all sides with images of mediation, navigation, direction, drift, and exile.

118 John J. Espey, Ezra Pound’s “Mauberly”: A Study in Composition, 15.
“Mauberly” was composed in 1920, five years after the composition of Cathay, a slim collection of Chinese and Anglo-Saxon poems that Pound translated into English based on notes left to him by Ernest Fenollosa. Biographically it was Pound’s encounter with Fenollosa that first introduced him to the concept of the ideogram. Read in this way, “Mauberly” was written after Pound made his first attempt to theorize poetry as a site of new media composition, a discourse that could operate on the level of surface and appearance, through the ideogrammic method. The work of this “new media” Pound, which coalesces around the development of the image and its essential relation to poetry, concerns how the poetic can function as the site for informing a networked aesthetic, one that finds its form within a process-oriented logic. The intellectual development around Pound’s engagement with the ideogram occurs in tandem with modernism’s new media infatuation. However, the role of new media technologies in printing, distribution, production, and medium composition (film, radio, music) does not determine the horizon of possibility for the poetic in Pound’s work; rather, these technologies become sites for media-specific theories that re-image what kind of communication poetry presents.

*Groundless Ideogram as 21st-Century Media Theory*

The emergence of the technical image in Pound’s poetry begins with the ideogram and his translation of Chinese poetry based on translation notes left to him by Ernest Fenollosa. The dynamic between symbolic and pictorial communication continues to animate cultural media discourse today. On the one hand you have the oversaturation of symbolic meaning, while on the other there is an attempt to reconcile that meaning with a fantasy of a forgotten, but better past. Although these stages of development are largely historical in Pound’s analysis, the development is temporally porous, with different stages of development overlapping and preceding one
another at different moments. The temporal strata that Pound compresses into a poetics is acutely rendered in *The Cantos* and also in his literary essays, notably *ABC of Reading* and *Guide to Kulchur*, both composed in the 1930s.

In *ABC of Reading*, Pound describes Fenollosa’s essay as:

perhaps too far ahead of his time to be easily comprehended. He did not proclaim his method as a method. He was trying to explain the Chinese ideograph as a means of transmission and registration of thought. He got to the root of the matter, to the root of the difference between what is valid in Chinese thinking and invalid or misleading in a great deal of European thinking and language.120

There is a common trope in Pound’s influences: people who are out of time and outside of culture. He adds, “to the method of abstraction, or of defining things in more and still more general terms, Fenollasa emphasizes the method of science, ‘which is the method of poetry’, as distinct from that of ‘philosophic discussion’, and is the way the Chinese go about it in their ideograph or abbreviated picture writing.”121 To Pound the ideogram represented a new possibility for language: language could be media specific according to a different media logic. As an extension to this project, Pound’s efforts with imagism became an attempt to render the effect of ideogrammic writing in an English lexicon. Much has been written about Pound’s erroneous understanding of the Chinese written character and how preposterous it was that Pound’s book *Cathay* was a book of poems translated from a language that he arguably didn’t know. However, it is his erroneous understanding of the ideogram that makes his work poetically interesting, because it suggests a new register for thinking about the medium-specific modes for understanding communication and temporality, one that operates under a different logic than that

120 Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 19.
121 Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 20.
of translation. Eisenstein found similar inspiration in the ideogram as it relates to cinematic montage. Although Eisenstein understands the ideogram as cinematic while Pound claims that it is poetic, both are making the same claim regarding the formal dynamics of the technical image: achieving meaning through a dialectical process. The “prose kinema” that “Mauberly” describes is a montage effect. Understood as a technical image, the ideogram is important for both Pound and Eisenstein because it introduces a dynamic of complexity within the appearance of surfaces in a way that also flattens the communicative medium onto a two-dimensional mark that can be read instantly. Flusser describes the effect as a hallucinatory power, a hallucination not too dissimilar from the effect of the image layers that define Eisenstein’s filmic style. The key difference is in how they’re produced. The hallucinatory effect that Flusser describes emerges because the meaning of the technical image are both rendered and interpreted with computer apparatuses—without a program the images are simply strings of code. Eisenstein’s montage-editing may produce a hallucinatory effect, but the images themselves are all real things captured on film. In Eisenstein’s case the hallucination is an aesthetic effect, in Flusser’s case it is the very nature of the images themselves.

The ideogram viz. the technical image reveals a fundamental paradox in Pound’s poetics: words and pictures are different, yet we are constantly asked to collapse them in order to understand his poetry. Beyond the formal limitations between symbols and codes, the question that Pound’s work presents is paradoxical. Like in Canto 116, Pound wants to offer both the crystal ball and the acorn as images for poetry, which is to say that the demand on poetic language is both mystical and ephemeral and also grounded and rooted in experience. This paradox emerges from a need for language to express something like the empirical and also something like the metaphysical in the same utterance. The ideogram provided ground zero for
the resolution of this paradox and led to further developments within the discourse of imagism proper. This kind of paradox is the product of an impossible coincidence of meaning. The paradox is simply that the observed and the observation are simultaneously identical and nonidentical. Pound resolves this paradox through the image, specifically through imagism, a poetics of images—first through the ideogram, then through imagism proper. These concepts are transmedial attempts to theorize poetry as a visual medium, with time and the modes of temporal experience—historic, ancient, and future—on display.
An Incoherent Research Program

Flusser’s embrace of groundlessness doesn’t solve for the problem of incoherence. Ideograms and technical images are a mess of contradictory meanings and gestures. Flusser’s work on the technical image may provide a more accurate description of cultural life, but it doesn’t change the fact that a groundless and meaning-rich array of technical images continue to challenge our linear sensibility. Flusser’s work suggests that incoherence may be the only way forward, in this sense Pound becomes an unlikely precursor to digital media aesthetics.

The 21st-century ideogram may demand a research program similar to what Bob Perelman describes as artifex: “Pound must be read as artifex [which means] that distinctions between the literary and the extraliterary become difficult to draw: the supreme social importance of a highly specialized conception of literature is the spur that drives him out into public space”¹²² Pound’s work itself, however, remains the largest obstacle to that project. The most difficult challenge is that Pound’s poetic style radically collapses and multiplies meaning in ways that makes the language indistinguishable from the object: at a certain point the meaning of the Cantos becomes the Cantos themselves and an entire cottage industry of critics emerges to notate and explain all of the internal references and images. Exemplifying the first impulse, the first two tenets of imagism are “direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective” and “use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.”¹²³ However, this stylistic imperative appears to fly in the face of a totalizing social and aesthetic program that simultaneously reads in multiple temporalities and personalities. These hypocrisies are on full display in “Canto 13,” where Kung is asked to adjudicate between his advisors on how to best

rule the province: “And Kung smiled upon all of them equally, / And Thesng-Sie desired to know: / ‘Which had answered correctly?’ / And Kung said, ‘They have all answered correctly, / ‘That is to say, each in his nature.’”  

The demand for exactitude withers in the face of multiple speakers and listeners. Meaning and understanding have less to do with universal values and more to do with the individual whose task it is to understand and interpret. In Guide to Kulchur, Pound returns to Kung and elaborates what he means by “each in his nature”:

Kung: “To call people and things by their names, that is by the correct denominations, to see that the terminology was exact…. If the terminology be not exact, if it fit not the thing, the governmental instructions will not be explicit … that is why an intelligent man cares for his terminology and gives instructions that fit. When his orders are clear and explicitly they can be put into effect. An intelligent man is neither inconsiderate of others nor futile in his commanding.”

In practice, Pound might not be as intelligent as Kung’s own “intelligent man”; Pound’s appraisal of Kung modulates between the version in The Cantos and the version in Guide to Kulcher. Importantly, the “seeing, noting, accepting” dynamics of this “intelligent man” find their form in language, not in action. The Kung described in The Cantos evokes a stronger sense of an individual’s worldview and the pragmatic politics that follows it, whereas the The Kung described in the Guide is more deeply connected to the lost art of philology as a sort of universal corrective to political, social, and aesthetic problems. While Pound’s poetic manifesto endorses a style that would appear sparse and imagistic, his political worldview suggests a kind of radical individuality in which an individual can only be judged according to his or her specific circumstances and contingencies. Despite this, Perelman asserts—and I agree—that “Pound’s

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passion for justice, his humor, his megalomania, his commitment to each word, produced an idiosyncratic language that we learn by reading his work and his sources. As conflicted as it is now for us, the entire language hangs together, somewhat as if it were a holograph.}\textsuperscript{126}

The ideogram and the technical image—as poetic research praxis that absorbs the political, historical, and philosophical—more firmly return us to the problem of thinking about modernist style along the axis of the paradox of imagism. Although Pound demonstrates that style and content are fundamentally inseparable, he also shows us that traversing one discourse into another does not always produce coherence; in fact, incoherence seems to be the necessary condition for meaning. The risk of incoherence is the first and most important axis for thinking about imagism as a transmedial project. The threat of the incoherent and of the unintentional is perhaps what inspired Pound’s aphoristic exclamations such as those in his 1915 letter to Harriet Monroe: “Language is made out of concrete things. General expressions in non-concrete terms are a laziness; they are talk, not art, not creation. They are the reaction of things on the writer, not a creative act by the writer.” Julian Murphet’s analysis of Blast speaks to how the dialectic between concreteness and nonconcreteness engenders “one of the Avant-Garde’s great attempts to materialize the word and dematerialize simultaneously, in an undecidable relationship to painting that is really a profound ambivalence toward the ‘orchestra’ of new media pushing literature and painting both toward an uncomfortable relationship with the industrial world.”\textsuperscript{127}

However, these contradictory forces, at least from Pound’s perspective, are more than a dialectical wash. As a kind of already paradoxical totality, poetic discourse is the discourse that allows “the news that stays news.” The bifurcation that Pound establishes between his free, direct prose and his polysemous, temporally complex poetry is an iteration of the modernist problem of

\textsuperscript{126} Perelman, The Trouble with Genius, 38.
\textsuperscript{127} Julian Murphet, Multimedia Modernism, 124.
poiesis and techne. Here there are two separate, but intertwined, systems of making. The salient point of this conflict has to do with the making itself, which is neither an explanation nor a justification of any political or social practice; instead, it is the mere facticity of human practice.

The opening gambit of *Machine Art* perfectly captures Pound’s thinking about techne/poieses as intertwined, yet paradoxically founded systems of making: “You can no more take machines out of the modern mind, than you can take the shield of Achilles out of the *Iliad*.”128 This image describes a certain unabstractable substrate that nonetheless must be abstracted in order to be understood. The canniness in Pound’s analogy is that it understands modernity as a dynamic system that is analogous to the workings of an interpretation of the classical world. The shield is more than a cornerstone image in Western culture; it is also a cosmology. Achilles’ shield has nine concentric circles, each of these images contrasts at different scales of perception. One circle shows the Earth along with other heavenly bodies; another documents a wedding, a court scene, and a battle, and yet another shows the harvest of a vineyard. The grandiloquence inherent in Pound’s own ideogrammic method seems clear: the stakes of these social and aesthetic systems are of a global order, specifically, because the orders of cultural meaning and production are inextricably linked. Pound’s point is to emphasize the aesthetic and ontological over the historical, and his analogy draws a direct line from the dynamic machinations of the classical world to our own preoccupation with technical images. Pound helps us shift our emphasis from the nodes—the historical pieces that distinguish one age from another—to the transhistorical system of networked relations. This shift is importantly founded on a paradox: the meaning and observation of the system are both radically cut off from our, the observers’, operation, and yet it is our observation that initiates this closure. This is why

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the paideuma must be both an inrooted complex and also a process in action. The koan-like contradiction is meant to shift attention to the process of observation itself or, in Pound’s language, the work of the intelligent person, which is thought in action.

The visual trace of an image in writing, a necessary condition when the antecedent media formation is an ideogram, suggests a different way of understanding the image: rather than being visual, it becomes technical in the Flusserian sense because it is organized around the production of telematic information:

Technical images are at the center of society. But because they are so penetrating, people don’t crowd around them; rather they draw back, each into his corner. A technical image radiates, and at the tip of each ray sits a receiver, on his own. In this way, technical images disperse society into corners … the scattered society forms no amorphous heaps; rather the corners are distributed according to a structure that radiates outward from the center. These rays structure the society as a magnet structures iron filings.\(^{129}\)

The ideogram emphasizes the “technical” side of the technical image as a form of techne, or making. The mode of this making is scalar; it primarily concerns the organization of social life according to fluxes of information and process. The subject for both Pound and Flusser, the subject who exemplifies the figure adrift in the world of technical images, is the exile. Flusser doubles down on the Poundian hero-in-exile by arguing that the world of technical images only produces exiles: a thousand Mauberlys adrift, etching on oars, instagramming MOMA paintings. For Flusser, this is not a lamentation but rather an opportunity for recoding the social and political dynamics that inform subjects, one that is ideogrammic in the sense that a tension between objects, images, and processes yields a new understanding of cultural knowledge.

CHAPTER THREE

The International Necronautical Society and the Archive of Failure

“Standing on the world's summit we launch once again our insolent challenge to the stars!”

— FT Marinetti, “The Futurist Manifesto” (1909)

In a storage facility on the outskirts of London there is a small unit filled with cardboard storage file boxes, maps, pictures, press releases, and lots and lots of memos. A server, location unknown, still holds the remains of a website, www.necronauts.org, where one can read some of the official documents from this institution, called the International Necronautical Society. The documents are titled with an official-sounding institutional flair: “INS Declaration on the Future,” “INS Declaration on Inauthenticity,” and their founding document, “INS Founding Manifesto.” And somewhere in outer space one might be able to pick up a very faint set of pirate radio FM broadcasts first transmitted from inside their offices. These small textual traces are all that is left of The International Necronautical Society, an avant-garde art movement that began in 1999 and faded away around 2016. The INS’s principle art form is the archive itself. The life cycle of some avant-garde movements moves from initial ideas and theories, then later to production, and then their final resting place is found in a museum or an archive. The INS has only ever been an archive; the final resting place of long forgotten art-objects is the only place the INS has called home. This early 21st century avant-garde movement challenges the logic of archives by making a cynical archive, one where everything is inauthentic and unoriginal. Despite their comical cynicism, their archive reappropriates the language of death and failure as objects and events that should be celebrated, not mourned. As a case study in practice, the novels...
of Tom McCarthy end with recursive images. For the INS, the end is not a new beginning, but merely an opportunity to rewrite and revise, again and again.

The archive of modernism is littered with failed projects. This is true of every literary age, but what is different in an era of mass-print culture, electronic media, and the institutionalization of cultural objects is the ability to archive these failures. The institutionalization of culture turns the practice of archiving into an art form. The International Necronautical Society attempted to make an art out of the failure of the archive. This examination of failure as an archival practice reveals the historical development of the modernist archive, and also to the recent critical interest in “digital modernism.” An August 2017 manifesto-like issue in a print+ edition of Modernism/Modernity declares “We are all digital modernists now, first, insofar as we organize our work, research, and scholarly fields though digital means.”¹³⁰ This issue aligns trends within digital humanities with trends in recent modernist studies in order to argue that modernism has always been concerned with the digital:

Modernist studies is already contiguous with digital methods and approaches along all its fractal boundaries. The next generation of work in the field might prefer to abandon “digital modernist” as a category altogether…the relationship between modernist studies and digital method would need be reinterpreted as a skein of weak ties, as I have argued elsewhere, that bind together specific modernist objects with particular approaches, models, paratexts, affective engagements.¹³¹ The “weak ties” that the article describes are so weak that they lose all connection to any notion of the digital. If there is an inherit “digital practice” within modernism, it must consider the transmission and storage of media objects. Siegfried Zielinski has shown in his Deep Time of the

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¹³⁰ Gabriel Hankins, “We Are All Digital Modernists Now,” 1.
¹³¹ Gabriel Hankins, “We Are All Digital Modernists Now.”
Media that there is a long history of conceptual apparatuses designed to expand our notion of transmission and storage. The INS practice of archiving shows that the biggest contribution that modernist aesthetics can make to the field of digital humanities is through its failure. Electronic media and digital humanities methodologies don’t perfect archival practice, instead they highlight its inherit and necessary failures.

Mapping the INS Archive’s Absurdity

The INS made its first public declaration in 1999 with its first manifesto, published in the *Times* of London:

We, the First Committee of the International Necronautical Society, declare the following:

1. That death is a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonise and, eventually, inhabit.

2. That there is no beauty without death, its immanence. We shall sing death’s beauty—that is, beauty.

3. That we shall take it upon us, as our task, to bring death out into the world. We will chart all its forms and media: in literature and art, where it is most apparent; also in science and culture, where it lurks submerged but no less potent for the obfuscation. We shall attempt to tap into its frequencies—by radio, the internet and all sites where its processes and avatars are active. In the quotidian, to no smaller a degree, death moves: in traffic accidents both realised and narrowly avoided; in hearses and undertakers’ shops, in florists’ wreaths, in butchers’ fridges and in dustbins of decaying produce. Death moves in our apartments, through our television screens, the wires and plumbing in our walls, our dreams. Our very bodies are no more than vehicles carrying us ineluctably
towards death. We are all necronauts, always, already.

4. Our ultimate aim shall be the construction of a craft* that will convey us into death in such a way that we may, if not live, then at least persist. With famine, war, disease and asteroid impact threatening to greatly speed up the universal passage towards oblivion, mankind’s sole chance of survival lies in its ability, as yet unsynthesised, to die in new, imaginative ways. Let us deliver ourselves over utterly to death, not in desperation but rigorously, creatively, eyes and mouths wide open so that they may be filled from the deep wells of the Unknown.

* This term must be understood in the most versatile way possible. It could designate a set of practices, such as the usurpation of identities and personas of dead people, the development of specially adapted genetic or semantic codes based on the meticulous gathering of data pertaining to certain and specific deaths, the rehabilitation of sacrifice as an accepted social ritual, the perfection, patenting and eventual widespread distribution of Thanadrine, or, indeed, the building of an actual craft—all of the above being projects currently before the First Committee.132

This blending of artistic, scientific, philosophical, and political tropes continues a long line of avant-garde manifestos, like F.T. Marinetti’s 1909 “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” “We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.” The INS, as with the futurists, defamiliarize a concept by putting it in a different context. The INS makes death the object of its understanding and the purpose of its project. Moreover, the INS use geographic language to introduce a different way to think about death. By framing death as a space they

132 INS Founding Committee, “Founding Manifesto.”
open up the possibility to archive death. This is foundational move of the INS, whereas death is often the trigger to begin an archival process, like in the case of an eminent figure dying and donating her letters to a university special collections, the INS seeks to make an archivable thing out of the event that often triggers the archive. They deliver their Herculean task archly, but this archness is equally serious and comical. Death is a ridiculous, unintelligible concept on the same order as “Truth” or “Reality,” but in their declaration to make an archive out of death they raise questions about what it means to be able to archive anything. This founding manifesto acknowledges that death is everywhere, by that same logic death might be the one thing that doesn’t need to be archived, because it is already “archived” through the everyday examples that they cite (everything from dying flowers on the kitchen table to butcher shops). The horizon of death remains withdrawn from the INS as long as their archive continues to produce, yet it the specter of the INS’s eventual demise continues to steer the INS’s output. While death remains a condition of being, the INS manifesto suggests a second order for death that questions our very inability to conceptualize death’s withdrawnness.

Taking up the theme of death within their artistic practice puts the INS in conversation with a long line of avant-garde movements. From the vantage point of the INS archive, the historical avant-garde looks like an oddity that died a long time ago. The fact that the INS, like many avant-garde movements, has died and faded into obscurity, does not mean that there is a single “historical” avant-garde. The avant-garde is a hotly contested space, movements come and go and split into subgroups and alternative organizations. This INS’s textual uniformity, the way that all references within their archive frame a single aesthetic reveal one of the chief problems of the archive: it is always offers an interpretation or shape to its archived subject.

In its capacity to resist archival gestures through ephemeral objects, perhaps nothing has
served the avant-garde better than its own death. In death, avant-garde movements escape the nostalgic and staid historical archival gestures. The anti-art aspect from some avant-garde movements has been absorbed by the art world, and its logics inform mass culture and high art alike: late night comedy on talk shows borrow equally from Dadaist impulses as well as vaudeville character sketches. Although the historical avant-garde failed to maintain its revolutionary achievements, the avant-garde logics continue to evolve and diversify across the entire cultural media landscape, from Dada to Monty Python and Saturday Night Live. Despite its death, the avant-garde style thrives in a cultural era overwrought with aesthetic and cultural cynicism, in part because it relies on its own playful form of cynicism. If a productive tension between its own cynicism and its revolutionary ideals energized the early 20th-century’s avant-garde, then the relocation of the avant-garde in the museum and in popular culture turns that tension into a perverse parody of “the avant-garde that was.” This is not true in all cases and in all examples, because the avant-garde itself is not one homogenous thing. It is a diverse field of impulses, most often these disparate impulses unify through their shared interest in defining themselves as the avant-garde. From today’s vantage point, the avant-garde seems to have cultivated a very real death wish. Its death was not stylistic or aesthetic but rather a failure to be. In the wake of its death, the object lesson of the avant-garde appears to concern the necessary failure of any project that sets radical forms of expression as its goal.

The INS archive offers a contemporary object lesson about the nature of the archive. The INS has made an art out of archiving itself and in doing so has been able to examine the meaning of the archive in the era of digital media. Their archive challenges theories of archiving that overly determine the role of history and their archive pushes against a tacit belief that the archive holds some kind of transcendental truth that can make a claim on the past and the present. This
lesson begins by separating the archive and the achievable. In the INS, the archive is the only thing that exists. The events, practices, pieces, and other historical errata come into being through the moment of archiving. For the INS, the avant-garde is more than a warehouse of techniques; it is a study in the relation between the practice and the institutionalization of art. The INS’s project, by challenging authorial intentionality and the idea that art is supposed to “mean” something in a normative sense, returns to the avant-garde’s original critique of a transcendental humanism. The INS often invokes Italian futurism as a way to get at this critique. In their 2010 “Declaration of the Notion of the Future” they offer a reading of the first futurist manifesto by concluding:

The straight path, the highway leading to the future, disappears; what remains is an imploded mulch of pasts and presents, a quite literal entrenchment; even more literally, what remains, precedes, and entirely encloses the event (while simultaneously being partially enclosed by it) is a document, a text—the real black liquid in which Marinetti’s impetus embeds itself, ultimately, is ink—a text that bears within it a catastrophe.133

In their interpretation, the black liquid that the Marinetti describes after a car crash is ink, not oil and mud. This reading connects the experimental and ephemeral gestures of an avant-garde movement with the process of writing and archiving. In this document the INS reject the notion of future because the dynamics of writing and archiving make any notion of the future obsolete. The nature of this interpretation takes the tone of a darkly comedic lament. Later they write:

Another trump card in a narrative of progress that presents itself as absolute, “objective”: the belief that art and literature can be “explained” by a discourse that has no bearing on them whatsoever. As though the endless complexity of thought and interpretation

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133 INS Founding Committee, “Declaration of the Notion of the Future”
demanded by Hamlet could be substituted by the act of taking a biopsy of Shakespeare’s
brain, or the interminable challenges and provocations posed by Inland Empire
neutralized by placing electrodes among Lynch’s strangely coiffured hair. Meaning takes
place in the symbolic, is constantly negotiated through language (be this spoken or
visual), through the dynamism of metaphor, structured by desire, power, gender, and the
rest. This process is open, ongoing, and—most important—contestable. That’s why we
have art in the first place.

In this way the INS position themselves between a rock and hard place. If the avant-garde
impulse to experiment will always be ossified through a process of writing and archiving, then
the process of writing and archiving, insofar as it promises “objective” insight, will always be
infected by multiple interpretations and contested ground. No one can own a text or an
interpretation, instead the archive is just a collection of contested arguments. By presenting two
impossible options, this document reads like a lament, but its tone is celebratory and comical.
The INS presents a type of celebration for the end of objectivity, but they do this ironically by
dressing all of their documents in a arch and serious style.

The INS accomplishes this critique by making fun of their own seriousness, by taking
themselves so seriously in their work that no one can take them seriously. For example, their
Declaration of the Future is interspersed with textual fragments from their pirate radio
broadcasts, “Listen: Babble of boices, 90.3 MHz, internal party dissonance. Several highs from
the Atlantic to the Baltic. Ring tones in commercials and screaming hosts of the new
generation.” Their document explains how they assemble these fragments:

In a series of carefully planned and executed media interventions hosted by institutions
such as the ICA, the Moderna Museet, Hartware MedienKunstVerein Dortmund, and
others that must remain anonymous, the INS has deployed Burroughs’s cut-up techniques to produce, by splicing together phrases harvested from newspapers, websites, meteorological reports, and other media sources, sequences that were then read over FM radio. These have been inserted at selected points throughout this Declaration. Burroughs believed that this process could give one glimpses of the future—this last term being understood as something not to come but rather already recorded on another point of the reel being worked over and savaged by the intervention.\textsuperscript{134}

The cut-up techniques are presented seriously and some of the media interventions really did broadcast on pirate radio, potentially subjecting the broadcaster to illegal broadcasting fines in the UK, but the mish-mash of phrases is not meant to mean anything at all. Presented here as a “glimpse of the future,” the vision that they offer is rather meaningless.

It’s through this stiff-upper lip absurdity that the INS offers an idiosyncratic critique of humanism’s indulgences, especially with regard to any form of a metaphysics of presence: every serious gesture that they make toward meaning with a capital “M” is immediately ridiculed and reveals to be accidental and arbitrary. The randomness and arbitrariness is what makes their archive an anti-archive. What one chooses to archive is meant to be meaningful, in the barest sense it is at least meant to be worthy enough to save. The INS’s archive is filled with things that they often remind you \textit{shouldn’t} be archived, or at least are not worthy to be archived, if what you want an archive to do is to preserve a past that is worth preserving. The archive is the INS’s primary mode of parody because the archive exists within the humanist imaginary as a sort of material fundament for thinking and being. The archive provides more than an apt trope for challenging long-held beliefs about the status of knowledge and truth; its recursive structure (a

\textsuperscript{134} INS Founding Committee, “Declaration of the Notion of the Future”}
ground zero for rereading and reanalyzing older ideas) challenges notions of temporality and
ontology that inform the most basic claims on knowledge production. In aestheticizing this
recursivity, the INS charts out its own version of a double finitude that is first, the knowledge
that our knowledge is incomplete, and second, the knowledge that our tools for knowing are
themselves always limited and flawed, and it offers a way to overcome the nihilistic threat that
this finitude portends through the very practice of the archive itself. The INS develops a set of
terms that engage with this struggle against finitude, against the lingering feeling that there is no
substrate beneath the archive that can shore up the shortfalls that our incomplete knowledge
leaves us with.

The INS uses an avant-garde aesthetic as an institution of oddities that allows the INS to
archly explore the archive as a crypt, a cypher, a transmission scrambler, and ultimately, a
failure. Their archive is a study in planned obsolescence. The textual traces in office filers and
old web pages carry a kind of lost prestige. To discover them now is a little like finding a lost
culture. The textual fragments and reports speak to something more, but the joke is that the
archive was only ever these little fragments. The aesthetic from the beginning was to create a
fragmented and forgotten style: a readymade lost avant-garde movement. These attempts to
manufacture a textual past, although flawed and failures, provide an alternative system for
thinking about the archive. The INS presents a bit like a prank, meant to feed off of an
intellectual’s desire to discover some lost cultural artifact. The INS’s use of the archive reveals a
countervailing desire within the archive toward quiescence. The INS shows that the energies
housed within the archive are a mesh of destructive and constructive forces, neither of which can
answer the question of meaning. Rather than giving up on the archive, the INS uses this impasse
to appropriate the idea of the archive as a joke that makes fun of our need to find a true and
authentic meaning in our experience of art.

These are grand claims to make about an institution that to most only appears to be a strange website\(^\text{135}\) that documents the events and publications of a society that the popular press describes as a “semi-fictitious” avant-garde network—and even grander, considering that the INS website archives an avant-garde group that is intent on its own self-effacement and destruction, modeled after some early 20th-century avant-garde movements such as the Futurists, the Vorticists, and the diaspora of Dada. The website itself parodies a kind of bureaucratic Cold War fantasy of underground operations bunkers managing a system of global intelligence in the shadow of total nuclear collapse. The website features pictures of men and women in an underground bunker, surrounded by maps and charts and filing cabinets. The organization releases documents that parody official-sounding declarations and policies.

The cold-war, bureaucratic style of the website encourages an aesthetic of paranoia and meta-analysis. The INS is quick to remind visitors to its archive that it has agents everywhere and that all readers are always, already a part of the INS—their joke is that you’re part of the joke, even if you don’t get the joke. Many discover the INS inadvertently through the bibliographies of either the philosopher Simon Critchley (the INS chief philosopher) or the author Tom McCarthy (the INS general secretary). The INS is an important touchstone that fuses the artistic and critical aspirations shared by the two thinkers. In so far as the INS claims that everything and everyone are already part of the INS, then we can read Critchley and McCarthy’s work as necronautical transcripts that chart out the ways and means of the INS worldview. Framing the INS in relation to either of these two thinkers raises a question of priority. Is the INS merely a pet project of two British friends who share a common affection for the avant-garde and

\(^{135}\) www.necronauts.org
contemporary critical theory, or is the INS a metadiscourse for unlocking the undercarriage in both thinkers’ work? This question asks us to make a claim about the logical priority of the archive and its relation to objects that exist outside the frame of the archive. The INS resists this question by turning the archive into the aesthetic act itself. By turning the archive into a piece of art, the INS makes the institutional structure of truth and knowledge a site of experimentation and play.

As an archive that is meant to parody archives, the INS excels at making little references or gestures that encourage you to delve a little bit further into their archive. The promise of truth feels like it’s always right around the corner. Every dead end might yield some new discovery, and every well-known truth might bottom out as a mere gag. In this regard, it’s better to think of the organization’s literary executors (Critchley and McCarthy) as heretofore unexplored areas in the INS archives rather than as the epistemic fundament for INS knowledge. A desire to turn McCarthy and Critchley into fathers of the archive is really a desire to nail down the law of the archive, master it through administration, and therefore transcend it, which is the very desire that the INS seeks to evade. The INS’s claim of infinite dominion does not represent a universal and transcendent declaration, but rather flattens and opens all things to the effects of its Archontic principle. To take the INS at its word, then, to pore over the myriad strata of communications as if the INS is not only “real” but presents an imminent threat to the archive and the avant-garde as such, may be the only means for approaching the question that frustrates every avant-garde: But what does the avant-garde actually mean, really? The INS cannot answer this question, but its archive develops a way of thinking that allows us to ask different questions, questions that are less interested in the truth or meaning of a thing and more interested in how to account for its variability and the impossible gap between our experience of the thing and our ability to
represent that experience.

If not for the INS’s insistence on encryption, the opened-up space of the INS archive might seem like a pointless postmodern exercise in multiplicity. The motto of INS is: “Tomorrow we shall (re)traverse the enormous space/sea.” The enormity of this space is the function of INS encryption, which attempts to render all things within the frame of its ever-expanding archive. Where does one begin to describe and how can one account for a system of aesthetic production that aspires to produce production itself? Vilém Flusser’s diagnosis of postindustrial production offers a useful insight. Flusser describes the advent of the non-thing in 20th-century production. In the world of non-things, information is more accurately understood as unformation, an exchange of the material world for the virtual as it appears through gadgetry and electronics. The non-thing describes late modernity’s transition from objects to processes, from hardware to software. Following Flusser’s insights, the INS might be best understood as an aesthetic that unforms its public. The INS wagers that the systematic process of taking away any sense of truth or certainty will produce, ironically enough, better art and better thinking—better because it incorporates a second-order level of thought. The first order engages with the problem at hand; the second order engages with the ramifications of that problem. Thus, for the INS, death means dealing with both the ever present reality of finitude and the simultaneous knowledge that we cannot understand finitude. This parallax view of the world prevents the first-order object from reifying into a transcendent form.

The codings and decodings of culture that are processed through the INS crypt explode in all directions, always foreshadowing collapse into a code with an as-yet-undiscovered key. As was broadcast in a London pirate radio address:

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136 INS First Committee, “Briefing Notes.”
137 Vilém Flusser, “Non-Thing 1,” The Shape of Things, 92.
Calling all agents. Listen, I repeat Message to follow.

Calling all agents. I repeat Message Following:

FLIGHT PATH Jealousy and discontentment will come to he or she who dreams of living beneath a flight path. A dream of planning flight paths drawing lines between cities, countries or continents of the world is a sign of restlessness.

When I land when the weather is bad, I pop up on the other side of the cloud. When you are in the cloud, you can see nothing.138

The tropic resonances in this broadcast flirt seductively with meaning. There is the promise of a message, but the message plays like a mix of word salad, bits of poetry blended with language that belongs to a pilot’s flight log. Blindness and insight, truth, knowledge, and elevation: these broadcasts, recorded and transcribed for filing within the INS, play off of the archive’s desire to collect and collate information. The INS revels in the production of chatter, a kind of noise that promises meaning just beyond the horizon. The lines and axes that crisscross between art and philosophy or meaning and nonsense can be broadly contained within two poles: the archive and the avant-garde. How the INS handles these institutional substrates exemplifies its return to the question of the aesthetic and mobilizes its critique of the dominant tendencies in humanities research today, which first turns to the archive as a locus of meaning and then temporalizes that locus around a historical narrative. The hope of this avant-garde—whether aesthetic, political, or playful—is always held on a promise of some other possibility. The oddity of the INS is that it produces a critical practice that productively perverts these institutions into a general economy that maps the practice of critique onto an aesthetic object. The archive is the only possible product for the INS because the archive relies on a double vision, one that sees its object and its

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trace in a way that makes them formally coincident and yet is impossible.

The Archive as Inauthenticity

The INS’s exploits, manifestos, collected reports, schematizations, novels, philosophical tomes, photographic records, and broadcasts go hand in hand with briefs, public statements, and notes that explain and clarify exactly what happened. So much of their archive is dedicated to explaining or defining what the INS is, but like the Wizard of Oz, after sifting through all the reams and folios, there is little more than a small man behind a curtain. This autoexplicating exchange between the thing and the commentary on the thing motivates one critical axis of the INS’s project, which attempts to short-circuit any gesture that essentializes the aesthetic as a source of truth. The INS’s commitment to blur the lines between art, art object, and criticism is part of its general goal of challenging epistemic connections that promise to ground meaning in something else (an author’s journal or the historical context of a piece). The INS defines this imperative under the rubric “failure of transcendence.” That failure can better be described as the failure to make good on the humanist project of enlightenment. The INS explains this humanist impulse in their first report, Navigation was Always a Difficult Art,139 by quoting Samuel Beckett in his famous line from Worstward Ho: “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”140 The INS wants to highlight how many are unable to cope with this failure in a substantial way by undermining Beckett’s last word in favor of the line’s more general sentiment: to continue despite the absolute promise of failure. In the general secretary’s first report the INS discovered that part of the reason for this failure was a

139 INS, Navigation Was Always a Difficult Art, 2.

140 Samuel Beckett, Worstward Ho, 7.
problem of ends. Transcendence fails because it is based on a logic of arrival or completion. The INS questions how one can ever know when one has arrived and also questions the knowledge coming from one’s “arrival.” Instead, it reads the topos of destinations and the discovery of new modes of knowing and being as bad-faith fantasies, and in response, it proposes a system of navigation with an attendant emphasis on reading, interpretation, journeying, and a ceaseless drive into that which will never be known.

The INS is thus a systematic working through of contemporary culture vis-à-vis the topology of the failure of transcendence through the metaphorics of death. The archive is essential to this project because it is where the trace of dead things is thought to live. To most, the INS appears merely as an archive—nothing but a collection of documentation on the web unified under a single voice and crest. The INS archive has a strange shape; rather than exhibiting an object–document relation in which the former precedes the latter, the INS archive looks like an institution filled with documents that gesture toward the possibility of an archivable moment. The produced effect is an archive that revises the move toward the archive as a validating substrate by pulling apart the archive’s own performance of a self-sustaining order. The ouroboros has finally had its fill. This order emerges from the illusion of a play between the law of the archive (the principle that grants membership to objects) and the materials housed within it (those things that represent the archive’s law), rather than through the logic of a general economy that would reveal the archive as what it is: a system where order emerges as an afterthought, retroactively through the administration and organization of things.

The INS reveals this retroactive emergence of meaning by disentangling the articulated relation between an object and the recording of the object. On the archive side of the relation, all published documents on the INS website end with “Issued by INS Department of Propaganda.
Official INS propaganda may be freely distributed, distorted, appropriated or adapted as the reader sees fit.” This statement nods to the logic underpinning Derrida’s Archive Fever, in which the very institution of the archive is constituted by a coupled desire to both expand and destroy the archive in the same move. Viewed in this light, the INS archly welcomes the knowledge that with the first archivist comes a series of misinterpretations that open the archive itself to an unending horizon of permeability and expansion. Every statement, every document, every brief and broadcast seeks to clarify a previous statement. To further confound the process, or at least guarantee that all of these efforts will unequivocally fail, every document ends with a footnote that invites the reader to misquote, misuse, and republish the statements in any way that they see fit. This invitation to distort qualifies all of the archived material as potentially distorted. The necessary presence of distortion, impurity, misinterpretation, or any other kind of signal noise is the only qualifying way for something new to enter the archive. Every text is a code to be decoded through every other text.

On the other side of this relation is the object to be archived, which in the logic of the INS doesn’t exist. Consider the “nonevent” of 25 September 2007. According to the documentation (published and authorized under “The INS Joint Statement of Inauthenticity”), the general secretary and chief philosopher presented the “Joint Statement on Inauthenticity,” a live performance of “The INS Statement of Inauthenticity.” All transcripts and recordings are available from the INS, but have been disavowed. Along with the documentation, there is a set of photographs that show McCarthy and Critchley look-alikes reading the statement and another set of photographs showing the real McCarthy and Critchley in another location entirely. Adding to this confusion is the similarity—there is an almost imperceptible difference—between the voices of the “actors” and the voices of McCarthy and Critchley. The INS went out of its way to make
the archivable into an impossible object while at the same time declaring its work in a positive and expansive production. Quoting David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*, the general secretary declared, “We’re in your house.”141 The concept of the archive, reified and utilized primarily as an institution and on behalf of institutions, therefore performs what the INS calls the “failure of transcendence.” 142 The INS presents itself as a serious institution that is the business of producing serious answers, simultaneously they go out of their way to show how all of their “answers” are inconsistent, contextual, and meaningless. These self-destructive gestures challenge any notion of “institutional knowledge” and reveal how all archives work according to similarly broken and failed archetypes. The effect turns back on the observer and asks a simple question: why must we rely on institutions and historical documents to “tell us” what something means? In one register, this failure addresses the impossibility of pure, unequivocal communication. After this failure—which is the conditional experience of modernity—the aesthetic split between form and matter becomes asymmetrically aligned with matter on one side and nothing on the other.

The INS explores the awareness of this experience through the topos of death; according to its first manifesto, “death is a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonise and, eventually, inhabit.” 143 It would appear that this first declaration, with its attention to the language of mapping as recording, is merely an attempt, at best to invert, or at worst to reconstitute the archive through the asymmetrical dynamic of matter over form. Because of its tendency to revise through inversion, the INS can only maintain its integrity by undermining the logic of the archive while at the same time feverishly archiving itself. The wager is not

141 INS First Committee, “Joint Statement.”
142 INS First Committee, “Joint Statement.”
143 INS Founding Committee, *Founding Manifesto*. 

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dialectical, but rather residual: “from the individual to the dividual, thence to the residual … and further to the residual, a laughable doubling.” This doubling is a doubling over, structurally made possible by making fun of the severity of the archive as an institution of truth. “The remainder that remains” is the unaccounted-for element that persists after the leveling of both the archive and the archivable. This residual thing contains both the mark of the archive and the mark of that which cannot be archived—the conditions for its possibility are also the conditions for its impossibility.

The INS shorthand for this thing is the sponge, a formless form that absorbs and oozes without any directive. This “form” recalls Flusser’s notion of the non-thing. For Flusser, the age of the archivable thing is over. Sounding its death knell is the accumulation of junk that piles up around people as they process the non-thing: in-formation (read: un-formation). The transformation is one that moves from accumulation (archiving) to processing (thinking). In this way, the INS archive is an attempt to map a particular experience of matter onto the topos of a process.

The archive makes matter matter differently and, as such, returns the prospective necronaut to the scene of death: the radical finality of matter. Our inability to understand both matter’s finitude and our experience of this finitude forms the two planes of death between which the INS’s impossible project comes into focus. The INS relies on miscommunications and incoherent fragments in order to connect a discourse of death and finitude with a notion of failure. Communication appears to be failing, and the failure of the archive to achieve its communication marks its death. The emergence of failure as a trope that may or may not collide with death brings the INS project in line with the same trials and tribulations as those of the

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144 INS First Committee, “Joint Statement.”

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Radicalizing the archive in its own impossible demand, the INS firmly grounds its project within an avant-garde tradition that establishes a set of aesthetic practices that operate within a logic that is antithetical to the major contours of aesthetic sensibility in the main. The INS makes the archive into an avant-garde art object and, in doing so, reveals how the “failures” of every avant-garde movement are an essential feature of how they challenge ways of seeing and thinking about art and experience. The INS shows that failure is not only intrinsic to the logic of the avant-garde, but also the very engine that legitimates and opens up the possibility for something like an avant-garde to have meaning.

Enframed in the avant-garde aesthetic is the concept of two orders of failure. The first order of failure takes place with embracing or admitting that the INS’s project is fated to fail. Hans Richter describes such a fate when writing about the early days of the Dada movement: “Its only program was to have no program…. [I]t was just this that gave the movement its explosive power to unfold in all directions, free of aesthetic or social constraints…. [T]he frailty of human nature guaranteed that such a paradisal situation could not last.” Richter’s celebratory tone praises Dada while admitting a frailty that doomed the project from the beginning. Thinking of failure in this way already reconfigures how the avant-garde has been received at the beginning of the 21st century. The failure that Richter admitted to is used today as a metaphor for the failure of the European intelligentsia to make good on its ideals in the face of a rapidly declining political world.

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145 Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-art*, 34.
The INS turns failure into success and thereby establishes a second order of failure. In a certain sense, the process of failure that Richter describes is bound up with a conception of the future or of a failure on the horizon of experience; it cannot but fail. Rather than lament what Richter calls “the frailty of human nature,” the INS celebrates avant-garde impulses by obsessively trying to capture and celebrate “the frailty of human nature.” Their embrace of death and their commitment to only revealing themselves through traces and archives of past events shows their fixation on the moments when the wheels come off. Richter deploys a logic of futurity that situates the avant-garde as a being unto death; the INS, with their statements and declarations about the importance of their archive, offer a similar kind of futurity, but theirs is always offered with a wink—there’s no future, just more archives. Part of this narrative places the avant-garde uncomfortably within a narrative that engages on some level with the idea of a telos. The avant-garde names the tip of the spear—the forward movement into the future. This underlying logic of progress until death is precisely the failure that the INS wants to reframe by turning death into a mode of production instead of a marker of completion. The INS’s failure is not the failure of an avant-garde but rather a failure to be an avant-garde, if what it means to be an avant-garde is wrapped up with the logic of progress.

The INS takes as an object lesson the first manifesto of futurism—specifically, how the event of futurism is bound up with its own writing and how that writing is itself the narrative of a car crash. For the INS, this catastrophic moment can only be understood as a rejection of “the idea of the future, which is always the ultimate trump card of dominant socioeconomic narratives of progress…. We resist this ideology in the name of the sheer potentiality of the past and of the way the past can shape the creative impulses and imaginative landscape of the present. The
future of thinking is its past."\textsuperscript{146} The avant-garde aesthetic that the INS cultivates is archival in that its attempt is paleofuturistic; it mines the past in order to not give up on a better version of it.

In the INS’s own words, “art is the annihilation of all positions.”\textsuperscript{147} Turning the failure of the avant-garde into the failure to be an avant-garde as an aesthetic practice allows the INS to capture the ephemerality of the avant-garde without giving up the responsibility to attend to the present as a site of aesthetic practice. The care of the now as a practice becomes the residual remainder of the INS’s engagement with the avant-garde aesthetic, and this recovers for the INS archive the secret code that validates its position within an idiosyncratic tradition of the avant-garde. Death is not synonymous with failure; rather, it is the INS’s answer to the avant-garde’s legacy. Death means embracing finitude in all its guises. The avant-garde’s claim to truth is one that is always ready to fail and change and fail again.

\textit{Exhaustive and Exhausting Endings}

The torsion between death and failure is felt most strongly at the end of Tom McCarthy’s novels: \textit{Men in Space}, \textit{Remainder}, and \textit{C.} Considered as INS documents, these novels suggest the possibility of an un-ending, an ending that is always staging itself as an ending, as the final front for engaging with the desire for truth. These novels all feature a protagonist striving for some deeper truth and always just on the cusp of reaching it, but much like Wiley E. Coyote (another popular reference in the INS), the novels end with the rug always being pulled out from under them. In a strong sense, the end as a concept is diametrically opposed to the vivifying structure of what the novelist and philosopher are \textit{supposed} to do. The end doesn’t continue to inspire thinking or questioning; the end provides relief from the ever-failing attempt to know. The end, when understood as a kind of satisfying closure, fails because the text continues to

\textsuperscript{146} INS First Committee, “Declaration on the Notion of ‘The Future.‘”
\textsuperscript{147} INS First Committee, “Proclamation on Democracy and Art.”
generate despite being reshelved. Celebrating this failure to end is why the INS has the comic Wile E. Coyote triumph over the tragic Oedipus; only the comic sensibility of the former, who dies again and again, can embody the humor and wit needed to face the catastrophe of the material order, namely, that things merely are and go on without beginnings or endings. It’s not enough to claim the end of all things and the radicality of this finitude. A permanent diagnosis constantly needs to reproduce the conditions of that finitude. Taking a cue from Nietzsche, we (new and old members of the INS) must guard against the shadow form of the divine that lives on in countless caves around the world.

To this end, the INS directs its apparatus of thinking toward the world in a radical way. Reappropriating the past into its archive of unreason, the INS claims that you are always already a necronaut; you just don’t know it. This statement is both ridiculous (obviously not everyone is a necronaut, most people don’t even know what it means), but also meant to emphasize a broader thesis: their project is descriptive, not perspecrptive. They are not telling anyone how to be, but they are trying to offer a more accurate description of what it means to exist within a world of archives. In this world there is no truth, just more archives. As it relates to the topos of failure, this claim offers another way into understanding how the INS troubles the very idea of failure and death. It comes as little surprise, then, that General Secretary Tom McCarthy’s novels have fantastically bad endings. The collection of unresolved narratives has become a signature gesture in the general secretary’s work. *Remainder, Men in Space,* and *C* all portray characters who are driven in the wake of a catastrophic experience of materiality to quiesce into a state where form and content are radically coincidental.

Most emblematic of these characters is the unnamed narrator from *Remainder,* whose efforts to stage that coincidence of meaning take the form of increasingly elaborate reenactments
in which he can occupy the space of his imaginary within the material confines of the world. After suffering brain trauma and receiving a large sum of money, the narrator develops and erects elaborate installations that capture moments of deja-vu. He proceeds to live within these little moments because they give him a sense of sublime peace. These installations exemplify the INS performance program, they are similarly absurd and seem to exist for no one except people that are already in on the joke. The staging for these reenactments in *Remainder* always takes the form of repeating structures, infinite loops that try to exceed the conditions of their materiality by creating a perfectly closed system. “Matter,” the narrator remarks: “my undoing.”

McCarthy’s narrators exemplify a meta-ending that is really no ending at all. In *Remainder* the performances simply become more elaborate. Each performance raises the stakes, but no greater knowledge is discovered and the protagonist doesn’t grow or change in any way. In the final image the protagonist has inadvertently taken a plane hostage and is trapped in the air, making the pilot go around in figure-8s. The novel ends, but it doesn’t end, in fact it emphatically ends with a non-ending: an infinity sign. This is neither a proper ending, nor a “new beginning,” it’s simply a presentation of stasis. As with the archive and the avant-garde, simply inverting the underlying dynamic (turning the ending of endings into a beginning) or naming the negative as a positive for its own sake only reproduces the very thing that is decried. For the INS, the end might be read as the catastrophic experience that names modernity, but the inversion of that experience as a resistance to a tradition of closure would only affirm and reproduce the values it seeks to contort.

Sliding from death to failure and endings and all their attendant concepts leaves behind another remainder: exhaustion. The INS raises the stakes of its project by developing an

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exhausting aesthetic of the un-ending or the quiescent ending. The project never officially ended and by all accounts the INS continues to exist, the website continues on and shows small traces of activity. Quiescence is the death of death; it is the experience of stillness that follows a decline of energy, namely, entropy. More than a hyperbolic redundancy, thinking of quiescence as the death of death underscores the radicality of a radical finitude, a complete and totalized exhaustion that continues to exhaust. The death of death names a space where death, as a substrate of meaning, no longer organizes the principles or values for being. Being-onto-death withers, and along with it the promise of a horizontal futurity that promises something more.

Quiescence as a desire finds its form in Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle: “It is clear that the function [of the pleasure principle] thus described would be concerned with the most universal endeavor of all living substance—namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world.”149 Remainder compounds this universal endeavor because in being brought back to life after his brain trauma, the narrator experiences two distinct modes of quiescent desire. The first attempts to pull him back into history, while the second draws him toward infinity, the silence of a perfectly closed system. The performances he designs fall roughly between these two poles. He either seeks to recreate small moments in his past life that he can inhabit, or he seeks to create little time-loops that he can live within. In both instances the performances fail because of remainders, extras outside and in addition to the system, make quiescence an impossible act. These lines lead toward quiescence, but as quiescence becomes a category of near-infinite delay, the process itself, the static hum of the machine, functions in quiescent form as an exhaustion that haunts all of the codings and decodings in the INS archive. These novels end with ambivalent gestures toward a structure of silence found in the pause one

149 Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 76.
feels when falling from a building, like in *Men in Space*; in the figure eights of a hijacked plane while the police wait below, like in *Remainder*; or in the churning lines of a ship’s wake seen by no one played against the hum of a static transmission heard by no one, like in *C*.

The aesthetic of the quiescent end is an alternative to the reproduction/annihilation dynamic that opens up the possibility of an inhuman technology unto death, inhuman because of its commitment to a time horizon that will exceed human life. Quiescence in this sense is found in the archive itself, as a crypt or a tomb of knowledge. In this sense, the INS archives its most successful failure by archiving the archive. McCarthy’s novels end in cryptic silence, they engender a desire to rewrite and reconfigure the structure—there must be something *more* than what they offer, yet what they offer is very little. The permission to distort becomes the operating principle for the possibility of meaning. Distortion evokes Lyotard’s idea of modernity as rewriting.150 In Lyotard’s idiom, the failure of the postmodern is nothing but a series of attempts to exceed the limit of modernity while failing to recognize that modernity itself, as a result of its fluctuating relation to the “now,” always attempts to exceed itself. Lyotard instead wants to think of modernity as a series of attempts to rewrite itself. These reenactments appear in Lyotard’s second sense of “re-”: “*Durcharbeitung*, i.e. A working attached to a thought of what is constitutively hidden from us in the event and the meaning of the event.”151 *Durcharbeitung* (working through) is a search whose parameters are defined by the subject’s cathexis. The point for Lyotard is that modernity is engaged in a never-ending cycle of rewritings. At its simplest, the quiescent un-ending seeks to cathexitize experience into that which allows for thoughts disparate from and outside of the transmissions of what the INS calls the “mediasphere.” Un-endings as un-formation aim at Lyotard’s first concept of “re-”: the fresh start, passing through

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the death of modernism, modernity, and late modernity only to turn back in order to discover the quiescent as the deviant logic that structures the archive.

_Transmissions from the Crypt_

By now, the INS archive seems full of stuff yet also eerily empty. There are things to be saved, but those things aren’t supposed to mean anything, and that’s supposed to mean something. Does this non-thing archive the whence and whither of the avant-garde? It could only do so by having a belief in nothing, in a type of nihilism that is rendered as a productive technology in these moments of ending and un-formation. The work of the INS archive is about a demand to stage this question again and again. As a result, Critchley and McCarthy must repeat and rehearse the terms of their commitments, always appearing different, yet always the same. Repetition is not about a truer representation but about staging the question of the nothing that is and the nothing that isn’t.

The persistence of the end in the works of Simon Critchley and Tom McCarthy and throughout the INS archive at large demands a collaborative working through; these works are about a rift that opens in their writing around the problem of the end that cannot be answered solely within the framework of either thinker. The rubric of the end orients all things toward finitude. The beginning is the end. In _Remainder_, technology falls from the sky and kills the unnamed narrator. _C_ opens with a caul that portends the end of a humanist genealogy that can only “give and gives itself again” and the beginning of a distributed network of codes and signs that are constitutively indecipherable in the final analysis.152 _Men in Space_ ends again and again; the seams of the novel pull apart until the series of endings reads as the only thing that was

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152 Derrida, “Geschlect II: Heidegger’s Hand.”
holding the novel together. The final voice, channeling Beckett, finishes unraveling the narrative spool: “Soon I will stop. Soon….” The end of one cycle constitutes the beginning of another, ad infinitum.

Thinking about the vagaries of nothing fittingly begins where most of Critchley’s books begin: with disappointment. Philosophy, we are reminded time and time again, begins for Critchley after the onset of political and religious disappointment: there is no justice and there is no god. This reality precipitates into two flavors of nihilism, passive and active, that must be resisted to the very end in Critchley’s work. This version of nihilism affirms the nothing and allows itself to be consoled by meaninglessness. As Critchley said to McCarthy in a 2001 interview about the INS archive: “It’s the question of nihilism that I want to put at the center of my agenda…. It’s a question that’s been deemed to be almost indecent because in a sense we can ironize our way out of it.” Why indecent? Critchley correctly points to a cultural tendency to avoid nihilism either by manning the so-called barricades of meaning or by embracing and reveling in an ironic embrace of claiming a belief in nothing. These two slopes of nihilism establish a frame in which a third iteration of nihilism—one that is better understood as a posthuman technology of finitude—can be thought through as an answer to the demand of finitude, which expresses itself in necronautical declaration: we want to make matter matter differently.

The end, anecdotally read as the end of the novel and more “seriously” as finitude or as a personal experience of death that one does not experience, can only find a sufficient response in a nonrepresentational discourse that is not based on an epistemological metric of “more or less

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153 McCarthy, Men in Space, 280.
154 INS First Committee, “Interview with Simon Critchley by Tom McCarthy.”
155 Here belief is understood in its religious, rather than pragmatic, sense.
true.” To respond differently would be to write under the sign of romanticism, to supplement the fallout of the divine with a new, “truer” aesthetic reality. The final call, the call at the end of the novel or the end of the philosophical argument, is not toward an itinerary of actions, but rather looks like the final image in Walter Benjamin’s “On Language as Such and the Language of Man”: “comparable to a secret password that each sentry passes to the next in his own language, but the meaning of the password is the sentry’s language itself. All higher language is a translation of lower ones, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement made up of language.” Critchley and McCarthy’s collaborative work involves thinking through how meaning becomes formalized as the discursive substrate itself. Rather than writing a supplement to a divine order or announcing the futility of the project, the topoi of encryption, archives, and remainders describe a set of alternatives to the predictable set of problems brought about by knowledge of the end. These alternatives bracket out the problem of the end by pointing out and laughing at the absurdity of it all. The arched eyebrow of the suspicious necronaut is also the arched grin of the comic, who can frame the meaninglessness of the everyday as the source of humor. The INS does its best job in framing a set of alternatives when it tackles the problem of the nothing, or nihilism, itself.

Nihilism, the belief in nothing, is understood as a cipher for the available modes of finitude as they relate to a certain experience of nothing. The communicability of this nothing arrives in Serge’s fever dream in the key of C, a burst of static that erupts from Sophie:

“Sophie’s going to say the word that will complete the ceremony, bring about its climax, sealing his and her anointment…. [T]he word is welling, not so much in Sophie’s lungs and thorax as in space itself.” It arrives in the first wave as a pure signal, “a static that contains all messages

157 Tom McCarthy, C, 306.
ever sent, and all words ever spoken; it combines all times and places too, scrunching these together as it swallows them into its crackling, booming mass…. [E]verything is spilling … the dead being catapulted back out of the earth.”

The first promise of the cipher, nominalized through Sophie as wisdom itself, is pure potentiality, a fantasy of decoding: that all things can be translated, archived, known, and put to rest. Immediately, the image collapses through excess. There is simply too much signal for the available container; a cut is made, and the rest is spilled. The overflow of signal flips into a second burst of noise,

a second burst, heading the other way, like an enormous echo or the backrush from the first explosion…. [H]e feels himself rushing backwards, through a black and endless void. He’s merging with the void…. [A]ll these scenes and objects have been reproduced inwardly, as though injected through some kind of time-syringe into his stomach, in whose blackness they’re suspended like small, lit-up screens, contained by the walls of a new syringe that frames them and injects them further inwards, again and again, the scenes and objects miniaturizing more and more as they regress.

The urgency of both transmissions is rendered as the twinned faces of wisdom: Is the world to be decoded according to a divinity of potentiality, an infinitely complicated explosion of meaning that any being, in its finitude, cannot hope to contain? Or is it to be given up into a system of diminished returns, where the void disintegrates all things into an un-ending decay of meaninglessness? Neither is quite the answer; both models are incorrect answers to the demand that is given, but their incorrectness has nothing to do with the content of the transmission. What determines the semantic content of the signal in both cases is a certain kind of positionality, a

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159 Tom McCarthy, C, 308.
relation to static that allows the signal to be known as signal. Both responses are rendered in relation to a finitude that is understood as the constitutive structure of life. Carrefax’s last utterances, “ssss, c-c-c-c,” are perhaps a call for Simon Critchley to make sense of the last transmission, as he does in the “Last Words” of The Book of Dead Philosophers:

Human existence is limited. It is shaped by evolutionary forces beyond our control and by the movement of a desire that threatens to suffocate us in the clutches of its family romance…. [I]f we can begin to accept our limitedness, then we might be able to give up certain fantasies of infantile omnipotence…. [I]n speaking of death and even laughing at our frailty and mortality, one accepts the creaturely limitation that is the very condition for human freedom.¹⁶⁰

C gives shape to the forces that are beyond our control. As a response to finitude, the last two transmissions are important because they radically disposed of Carrefax; they are both iterations of an inhuman technology that allows the problem of finitude to be iterable, and that which carries the force of the human is then paradoxically rendered visible through that which is ultimately and importantly inhuman. The nihilistic texture of technology is death itself, that which is uniquely and completely ours but which we can only experience, following Critchley’s reading of Being and Time, through the death of another.¹⁶¹ This dynamic is motoric and enframing; it cuts equally between the first and second transmission and is echoed in Serge’s last words: “Dummy chamber, everywhere, what’s not, it came through, through me, the call: I’m being called.”¹⁶² Every code is a craft, a vehicle for understanding and delivering one over to an

¹⁶¹ Simon Critchley, “‘Death’ on Being and Time, Part 6.”
¹⁶² Tom McCarthy, C, 309.
experience of finitude. Every craft is therefore a crypt, a house for dead things, an archive.
CHAPTER FOUR

Undead Feedback and Cynical Biopower: Digital Modernism and Zombie Studies

Euretē moi he entolē hē eis zoēn, autē eis thanaton.

(And the commandment, which was ordained to life,

I found to be unto death.)

—Saint Paul

Biohorror: Skepticism or Kynicism?

Carl Grimes, the cowboy-hat-wearing son in *The Walking Dead*, gives his father Rick a cold reminder about the world they live in:

The costumes, the candy—everyone walking around, acting like nothing is happening around them. They’re all stupid. The roamers [zombies] don’t go away because you can’t see them. I hate this place, Dad. It doesn’t feel real. It feels like everyone is playing pretend…. I don’t want to get used to this. It will make us weak.¹⁶³

This cynical political philosophy—more “pragmatic than argumentative”—marks Carl as a member of Generation Zombie.¹⁶⁴ Unlike the adult survivors in his group, he barely remembers a world before zombies, harboring no idealistic nostalgia about “recreating” what once was. This is an example of what Peter Sloterdijk describes as kyncism, a tradition of cynicism that he traces from Diogenes to the contemporary. Sloterdijk’s formulation of the kynic is “enlightened false consciousness.” In *Critique of Cynical Reason*, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk describes the new generation of late 20th-century cynics (or kyncic) as those who understand that

¹⁶³ Kirkman, *Too Far Gone*, 16.
Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and unsuccessfully. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered\(^{165}\).

Sloterdijk continues to develop a notion of cynicism as the subject of the enlightenment who nonetheless realizes that the enlightenment has failed to deliver on its goods: “things must first be better before you can learn anything sensible.… Basically, no one believes anymore that today’s learning solves tomorrow’s ‘problems’; it is almost certain that it causes them”.\(^{166}\) Slavoj Žižek derives his signature concept from this zombified version of political reason: “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it”.\(^{167}\) In this regard, the cynicism present in zombie texts touches on an important political question: what does it mean to have a politics after a better, more reasonable world no longer retains credibility? This problem in turn concerns the existential contours of a world that is consensually shaped for a zombie-like aimlessness in which they know very well that they’re becoming more and more like zombies, but still, they are doing it.

Today the zombie is a out of fashion concept. Just a few years ago the zombie was everywhere, now the term is most often used to describe publicly traded companies whose debts outstrip their revenues. Fear not, the genre of the zombie is like the zombie itself: tough to kill and with an uncanny penchant to return. The most recent rise of the zombie in popular culture

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\(^{165}\) Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 7

\(^{166}\) Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xxix.

coincides with the advent of social media. Just like the zombie was used in the 60s to allegorize race relations and again in the 70s to allegorize consumerism, the early 00s engagement with the zombie allegorizes contemporary life. The zombie connects two forms of monstrous transmission and communication: the digital and the biopolitical. The logic of the zombie is the logic of the internet: everything becomes subsumed within a social media sphere to the point that entire careers are built on simply existing on the internet as a personality. The zombie is also an image of a biopolitical horror, a form of life that is defined through its massification. The population, as a zombie horde, becomes the object of governance and public management. The shared logic of transmission and communication as monster reveal that the heart of contemporary political cynicism concerns the methods and means of transmission and massification. Politics in an era of digital mass media is defined by the ability to mobilize masses through viral constructs. “Fake news” has always been a part of political discourse, but in 2016 it was weaponized through social media in an unprecedented way. Like the hordes of the dead, we retweet, share, like, and subscribe with little thought. That the zombie has faded from popular consciousness is not because the social issues it allegorizes are “solved,” but like racism and consumerism before, this monstrous formation of transmission and communication is simply taken for granted. In this sense, we’re all a bit like Carl Grimes: the cynic of the post-zombie universe.

Carl is not only a member of “generation zombie,” he is also a member of Generation Z, insofar as the logic of the zombie reproduces the logic of the internet. The zombie is a popularized form of a post-structuralist concept: repetition without difference. This concept is also wrapped up throughout the logic of the web: tweets and retweets, users copy and paste animated GIFs, and pseudoscientific claims run rampant and are presented on equal ground as a
The zombie animates a host of fears endemic to modernist cultural practice: the massification of mediated life, the uneven development of global capital, and a rudimentary technicity that reduces human life to bare life. In a “copy/paste” culture, where retweets and ratios become markers of political engagement, the metaphor of the zombie changes from a figure of post-colonial barbarism to a figure of mass-mediated monotony. Sloterdijk tracks how humanism’s lasting legacy lies in taming inhuman sensibilities in his essay “Rules for the Human Zoo:”

The label of humanism reminds us (with apparent innocuousness) of the constant battle for humanity that reveals itself as a contest between bestializing and taming tendencies. In the age of Cicero the two influences were easy to identify...for the bestializing, the Romans, in their amphitheaters, their animal-baiting, their battles to the death, and their public hangings, had established the most efficient mass-media net in antiquity. In the raging stadioums of the Mediterranean the unconstrained homo inhumanus came into his own in a way never seen before and only seldom afterwards...Ancient humanism can be understood only when it is grasped as one opponent in a media context.  

In this passage Sloterdijk makes a footnote gesture toward the contemporary, referencing the genre of “chain saw massacre” movies as a symbol of the ascension of this sensibility in mass-media consumerism. The same gesture can be extended to the zombie film, with its penchant for gore and its transformation of the human into a mindless drive for human flesh. Sloterdijk’s study does not offer a rosy outlook toward the traditional uses of transmission and storage devices as a means to keep in check the struggle between humanism and inhumanism. The importance of Sloterdijk’s critique is that it challenges the very terms of the debate. He shows,

through the example of Heidegger’s rhetorical practice in “Letter on Humanism,” that there is often something nascent and sinister at the root of the history of humanism. There is an unavoidable cynical dimension to this argument, however through popularized metaphors, like the zombie, there is an opportunity to name and describe these rhetorical operations in accordance with the kind of media relations that condition our social and political lives.

As Sloterdijk observes, cynicism is an essential feature of the modern political landscape. His formulation of cynicism as enlightened false consciousness goes a long way towards explaining how politics works once zombies are in the majority, as it were. The skeptical inability to make politics with zombies—to refigure what a zombie means in political terms, that is, whether it can be a person or not—trades on the cynical belief that zombies are by definition ruined for and thereby barred from political life. Thus, Carl-like cynicism also serves as a kind of nihilistic pragmatism: if we can’t hope for control, let alone influence, we might as well survive in spite of the brutal biohorror. That said, one may first have to suspend cynicism in order to begin to understand the living death of a political situation that presumes enlightened false consciousness as a given.

**Zombie as Biopolitical Horror**

The zombie, according to Rick Grimes in *Fear the Walking Dead*, is the final destination for all of us—both the living and the dead. Romero’s rules apply, and that’s the secret: everyone who dies, whatever the cause, comes back as a zombie. Instead of platitudes, Rick offers a powerful paradigm for zombie studies, a force field for rethinking the ontological difference between the human and the nonhuman other: “We are all infected.” As this secret was being concocted on the show, a spike of interest in zombies occurred in the “real world.” After the

headquarters of a *fictional* Center for Disease Control self-destructed in the final episode of the second season of *The Walking Dead*, the *real* Centers for Disease Control (CDC) decided to use this development as a “teachable moment” and published a mock preparedness guide for a zombie apocalypse on their blog: “You may laugh now, but when the zombie apocalypse happens you’ll be happy you read this, and hey, maybe you’ll even learn a thing or two about how to prepare for a *real* emergency.”170 *You know very well that you’re really becoming more and more like zombies, so here’s how to prepare for a real emergency.* Wink, wink.

The CDC’s itemized list is followed by a reassuring statement that the U.S. federal agency charged with disease control and prevention would do everything it could to investigate, control, and eventually break the cycle of *transmission* in the event of an actual zombie apocalypse. Insofar as this marks the moment when the cultural phenomenon of the zombie took over the government, it also marks the moment when biopolitics reached such a level of excess that it could no longer maintain the quarantine between fictional and real worlds. Ironically, as the real CDC stupidly proclaimed its willingness to learn nothing from the TV show about the ubiquity of zombie biohorror (assuring us that when the real zombies come, we’ll at last be able to see government research prove its real uselessness), the logic of infection fell out of the fictional zombie once and for all. This neatly highlights how the zombie has come to mean something more than a flesh-eating undead monster.

The zombie has always already been a biopolitical horror, an image of an out-of-control population rendered in a monstrous form.171 It pressures the constitutive structure of life and makes visible its own horde as an emblem of modernity and a site of strategic thinking about the

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171 Aaron Jaffe’s “Zombie Demographics” details how the zombie operates as a system of demographic monstrosity.
administration of life. In other words, it makes life/nonlife its theme, rewriting the terms through which something like life or politics can be thought or talked about. As Thacker writes, The swarm is distributed and horizontal, but also driven by an invisible, intangible life force—‘life’ is at once transcendent and immanent to its particular manifestations.

Something drives the swarm, but this something is also nothing—at least nothing that stands above and apart from the singular phenomenon of the swarm itself.¹⁷²

The zombie is thus inhuman in appearing to be organized by an intangible life force that is not dependent on an enclosed body. However, as a reflection of the human in a diminished capacity—evidenced in the way survivors routinely treat zombified friends and family members with a fundamental skepticism toward their status as nonhuman other—the zombie introduces this inhuman characteristic of life into life itself.

This co-implication of zombie life (life as transmission and continuation) and human life (the ideology of transcended experience) makes visible how the CDC’s fanciful operating procedure doubles down on many of the conceptual pitfalls that come with thinking through zombies or biopolitics, pitfalls that in both cases stem from their respective overburdening as allegorical and conceptual tools. Thinking about life or death—thinking about biopolitics and thanatopolitics—would appear fated to become a discourse of banal truisms or life philosophies.¹⁷³ While these frames of analysis usefully describe how systems of

¹⁷³ Timothy Campbell’s fear, as expressed in the opening of Improper Life, that biopolitics’ “pernicious proportions” might foreclose the term’s ability to stage a meaningful examination into the imbrication of life and politics seems to be finally realized. One version of zombie biopolitics is simply a reworking of neoliberal machinations, a world of risk management in the style of Ulrich Beck that now turns its gears toward another problem that it may or may not have produced. This operational system is found in equal measure in Maurizio Lazzarato’s “From Biopower to Biopolitics,” which understands Foucauldian biopolitics as a strategic relation of power for effectively managing the social body, and Max Brooks’ World War Z, which catalogues the oral history of the global zombie apocalypse as it’s experienced at all levels of the social body. Both of these texts analyze at the level of social systems without recourse to the underpinning theory of life that makes the social system appear as such. Lazzarato’s essay is great for thinking about Foucault on a large scale, but the formation of biopower drops out of his analysis. On the other
governmentality understand and operate vis-à-vis human or nonhuman others—the move that turns zombies into a free-floating metaphor or alternatively turns biopolitics into a strategic collection of tactics toward and within government—they rush over the constitutive terms and logics that allowed these theoretical frameworks to become visible in the first place.

The theoretical framework most often deployed for thinking about the zombie is Agamben’s division of life into bios and zoë. This division explains why and how the zombie lends itself so readily to allegorical thinking about the dialectics of the privileged and the marginalized. The zombie, of course, supplies a version of “bare life” that usefully illustrates a series of problems that emerge when life is classified into structured taxonomies concerning the proper and the improper. What becomes more and more pronounced across the Romero zombie saga (epitomized in the insurrectionist stirrings led by Big Daddy in Land of the Dead, for instance) are the ways in which the zombie—by becoming more than zombie—pressures the Agambenian notion of bare life. The all-too-neat human/zombie split, reproducing the division between proper and improper life, doesn’t hold. Again, “We are all infected.” The inhuman threat of zombie un-death already in-forms human life through a reciprocal identification that is always hidden in the open, as it were. To be or not to be a zombie is always only a matter of time and absolutely nothing more. This stark dichotomy—where the only choice is no choice—reveals a fundamental blind spot that a system of life/bare life or human/zombie life creates: to what form of being is this system tethered? The zombie as life’s final formation suggests that it is tied to both equally and as a result necessitates a mode of analysis that can understand how that

hand, Brooks’ novel, a cunning pastiche of Studs Terkel’s Good War: An Oral History of World War II, is a fictionalized ground-level account of a complexly administered, worldwide (and ultimately successful) technocratic biopolitical campaign, but it treats the zombie as any other generic global catastrophe. For Brooks, the zombie threat is, as the CDC preparedness guide suggests, nothing more than another instance of a global phenomenon that demands the creative and collaborative forces of global and local entities working in tandem to manage this threat.
tethering floats between two things that always appear as opposites. Furthermore, when the conceptual purchase of the human inexorably erodes, life appears more and more the exceptional state for the protection of mere matter, whereas horrific death is disclosed more and more as the vehicle for the posthuman critique.

At the beginning of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben, the contemporary Italian philosopher, invokes two definitions of life: “zoē, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and bios, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.”\(^{174}\) Just as there can be no single term for life, there is seemingly no single term to express what we mean now by the word “zombie.” Formerly, two terms were used that are semantically, morphologically, and folklorically different: zombie, which expresses the horror of living dispossessed of a soul—and thus being lost to the gods—and ghoul, which indicates an improper relationship between eating and death, i.e., the Chemel House buffet. The proliferating names for the animated corpses that still populate pulp fiction, B-movies, comic books, and video games speak to an exhaustion of “life itself” as an object of thought, where life is a means of thematizing plenitude, delimiting lack, or demarking everything in between. Efforts to qualify and distinguish modes of life and nonlife—efforts to erect taxonomies of quasi-life—are directly related to the horror of

\(^{174}\) Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 9. My appropriation of Agamben’s famous opening to *Homo Sacer* is meant to suggest that popular genres have been fostering biopolitics *avant la lettre* for well over one hundred years. The Greeks may have observed the unity of life only after death, but death itself isn’t what it used to be, and *pace* Agamben, what increasingly fails to appear as a unifying force after life is death itself. In this regard, recent theoretical work on these questions by a new generation of thinkers who pivot off Jacques Derrida, such as Eugene Thacker, Martin Hägglund, Ray Brassier, and Roberto Esposito, provides a crucial leverage point for biopolitical thinking because this work questions the fundamental assumptions and logics that would even allow a concept like life—and, more pointedly here, death—to be introduced into something like a contemporary political discourse. This study finds important contact points in Eugene Thacker’s work in *After Life* and *Dark Theory* as well as Martin Hägglund’s reading of Derrida in *Radical Atheism*, in addition to Derrida’s seminal treatments of politics and life in essays like “Faith and Knowledge,” *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, and *Rogues*, as well as Roberto Esposito’s positive biopolitics as evidenced in *Immunitas* and *Bios*. 
skepticism, a horror of the unknown at the heart of the presumption of life. The message hovering around zombies is that the experience of living may afford no wisdom about what it means to live.

The theoretical concept of biopolitics sheds light on fictions about the walking dead, but also follows the zombie turn into the discursive field of biopolitics to show how biopolitics and zombie theory might be productively intertwined. The “zombie turn” in biopolitics is enabled by an inhuman technicity at the level of media transmission. The difference between the kind of media transmission that was interesting to Sloterdijk in “Rules for the Human Zoo” and the kind of transmission that the figure of the zombie exemplifies concerns the rise of regularization through a repetition without the possibility of difference. Whereas Michel Foucault’s work on biopolitics lays out the socio-economic context for thinking through this new form of political life, Jacques Derrida’s analysis of autoimmunity, and most importantly his focus on the discourse of survival as a means for working through monstrous political possibility offers a form of thinking that does not fall prey to the cynical politics that Sloterdijk predicted. As is the case across this entire project, the solution offered attempts to reconcile classically antagonistic positions by reframing the terms of debate.

Biopolitics can be loosely understood as a concept of political power that developed in the wake of Foucault’s critique of sovereignty. In Foucault’s own words, biopower “is the power to make live. Sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power that I would call the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting

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175 The term “biopolitics” was first introduced by Michel Foucault in his lectures Society Must Be Defended (1975–76), Security, Territory, Population (1977–78), and The Birth of Biopolitics (1978–79). It names a theoretical field that thinks through how notions of life and death are understood and administered through modern systems of power.
In biopolitics, the revenant of sovereignty lives on in a different, often diffuse guise. When read biopolitically, the zombie pushes politics beyond its limits, highlighting the ways in which technicity, temporality, and a logic of autoimmunization dominate a political world once the idea of life has been conceptually undermined. In other words, the figure of the zombie sets in motion and thereby allows us to explore a set of biopolitical vectors, providing an axis for speculative biohorror.

However, before taking on the zombie as biopolitical subject matter *par excellence*, let’s shore up our fortifications by taking a look at how the discourse of biopolitics has “evolved” in the last fifteen years. The formative text after Foucault is Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, which draws together, deploying assorted feats of classical erudition, insights from the idiosyncratic German–Jewish critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin and the rogue German political theorist Carl Schmitt:

The principle of the sacredness of life has become so familiar to us that we seem to forget that classical Greece, to which we owe most of our ethico-political concepts, not only ignored this principle but did not even possess a term to express the complex semantic sphere that we indicate with the single term “life.” Decisive as it is for the origin of Western politics, the opposition between zoē and bios, between *zen* and *eu zēn* (that is, between life in general and the qualified way of life proper to men), contains nothing to make one assign a privilege or a sacredness to life as such. Homeric Greek does not even know a term to designate the living body. The term soma, which appears in later epochs as a good equivalent to our term “life,” originally meant only “corpse,” almost as if life in

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itself, which for the Greeks was broken down into a plurality of forms and elements, appeared only as a unity after death.\textsuperscript{177}

Situating biopolitics at the limit of life and death, Agamben defines the conceptual ground rules for undead political theory. He forces a field-defining question that is at the heart of all biopolitical and zombie thought today, namely: Is every kind of biopolitics necessarily thanatopolitics? Does the inclusion of “life” as a political category inevitably lead to the administration and management of death? If we were to maintain Agamben’s doxa, then the answer is a resounding yes. Agamben has become a lightning rod for biopolitical debate because of a certain rigidity in one of his analyses in which the Nazi death camp comes to epitomize conditions of the modern liberal state. When life becomes a category of political administration, death must, as it were, soon follow.

Yet the pressing political stakes in Agamben’s work obscure the technological origins of the biopolitical substrate. For Foucault, the possibility of biopolitics and even the concept itself comprise first and foremost a set of technologies beyond good or evil. Agamben essentializes the ambivalence inherit in this technicity by structuring a first philosophy that derives its power from language: “Politics … appears as the fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the logos is realized.”\textsuperscript{178} Here, as in his famous discussion of \textit{bios} and \textit{zoē}, the constitutive structure between politics and metaphysics is language, and the suggestion, as in any first philosophy, is that redefining the terms of life would precipitate into a different formation of the biopolitical. In the Foucauldian trajectory, as well as in Sloterdijk and the present study, the stakes are much more

\textsuperscript{177} Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 42.
\textsuperscript{178} Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 8.
ambivalent. Never mind that Agamben’s own etymologies have been called into question;\(^\text{179}\) the absolute correlation between language and being makes meaning itself a blind spot that never stabilizes in the way that it needs to for Agamben’s purposes. He rightly gives importance to *homo sacer*—the body that is both sacred and killed with impunity—as a category that exists as an excluded inclusion, but his own methodology comes up short in managing the very terminological variance that he helped introduce.

Moving beyond Agamben and drawing on insights from Jacques Derrida’s late work, in particular, important contemporary biopolitical thinkers such as Roberto Esposito, Eugene Thacker, Martin Hägglund, and Cary Wolfe have attempted to develop a logic of life that does not rest on an appeal to a metaphysics of presence.\(^\text{180}\) In such appeals, “life”—like “truth” or “being” or “the divine”—readily stands in for the unexplainable. If the processes of modernity are set to the task of secularization, then “life itself” represents the latest site of resistance, a reactionary formation of “truth” that holds with it the promise of an enlightened future. Politics administers life in the same way that the Church administers the divine. But the reason why we attack “life” is the reason why we attack any formation of “truth”: it marks the possibility of experience in the world and designates a limited possibility for political and aesthetic imagination. Beyond that, however, there is an even greater project: an ontology without

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\(^{179}\) Laurent Dubreuil’s “Leaving Politics: Bios, ZÔÊ, Life.”

\(^{180}\) Zombies help us split the difference between a biopolitics that is based on an ambivalent bureaucratic technicity and one that is based on a crypto-vitalist first philosophy that emphasizes the crypt. They do this by underscoring the important conceptual work that the immunitary paradigm plays in modern critical theory. Roberto Esposito’s investment in the theory of immunization and autoimmunitary represents the most recent attempt to create a logical frame that can account for the ways in which Foucault and Agamben have opened up the biopolitical. Timothy Campbell’s introduction of Esposito in America through Esposito’s *Bios* (2007) and Campbell’s own *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben* (2011) use the logic of autoimmunity, first introduced in theoretical discussions by Jacques Derrida in “Faith and Knowledge” (1998), in order to move away from the terminological strictures that bind up Agamben’s work. Whatever the promise that an immunitary paradigm holds for the future of biopolitical theory, it allows for a rethinking of life, death, and transmission that sheds new light on the zombie as biopolitical monstrosity.
metaphysics, in other words, an understanding of being and experience without recourse to a substrate such as “life,” “science,” or “truth”—that is, life made bare from the ideology of life. In Thacker’s words, “What has gradually emerged is the idea of a life that is radically distributed and disseminated, both in terms of its spatial topography, and in terms of its temporal causality.”

Thacker’s insistence on an idea of life that calls for a constitutive relationship between time and space underscores the connection between theories of life and recent work by Hägglund on Derrida:

The arche-materiality of time follows from the structure of the trace. Given that every temporal moment ceases to be as soon as it comes to be, it must be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace is necessarily spatial, since spatiality is characterized by the ability to persist in spite of temporal succession. Every temporal moment therefore depends on the material support of spatial inscription … without temporalization a trace could not persist across time and relate the past to the future. Accordingly, the persistence of the trace cannot be the persistence of something that is exempt from the negativity of time. Rather, the trace is always left for an unpredictable future that gives it both the chance to live on and to be effaced.

Hägglund’s rendition of Derridean materialism points to an understanding of life that is entirely dependent on a reanimating force—the trace—that automatically and necessarily constitutes being with its opposite. Life is always inscribed in death. This way of thinking about the “undead” as co-imbrication marks how the power of life/death persists in objects of transmission and contagions of experience. It is at this moment that the zombie shambles out of the corner as

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182 Martin Hägglund, Radical Atheism, 270.
an autoimmunitary terror: life turned spectacularly against itself in its efforts to protect and sustain itself.

Derrida first uses the idea of autoimmunity in his analysis of religion and science in the essay “Faith and Knowledge,” where his point is that although religion and science appear to be opposites, each uses the other’s fundamental logic in order to continue. More urgently, Derrida uses this logic to analyze politics after the attacks of September 11, 2001. In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, he advances the autoimmunitary paradigm to suggest that the very political and economic structure that built the West always contains the possibility of turning against itself in acts of terror or political transformation. He writes,

> Here is the first symptom of suicidal autoimmunity; not only is the ground, that is, the literal figure of the founding or foundation of this “force of law,” *seen* to be *exposed* to aggression, but the aggression of which it is the object … comes, *as from the inside,* from forces that are apparently without any force of their own but that are able to find the means, through ruse and the implementation of high-tech knowledge, to get hold of an American weapon in an American city on the ground of an American airport.¹⁸³

The much noted resemblance between zombies and viruses conceals a similar biopolitical thesis. In zombie texts, transmission and continuation are always already contained within human life, even as they oppose it. Zombies thus do not signal viralism as much as the constitutive death/life structure of autoimmunism; in a classically Derridean fashion, they designate the autoimmunity of death from life and vice versa. Hägglund’s insistence on the status of the trace as a form of transmission and continuation (as opposed to being ontological or theological) is operationally ambivalent; it is neither good nor evil, but instead describes and

explains the necessary conditions for change itself, for what it means to be exposed to “an
unpredictable future.” More than a cute cipher for decoding Derrida, autoimmunity comes into
its own as a router between political, ontological, and existential imperatives. Thus, the stakes
and conceptual dynamics of autoimmunity need to be drawn out carefully. Provisionally, we can
say that the concept speaks to a certain undead potential for self-destruction, a potential inherit in
every individual or community to turn against itself from within. If Agamben revolutionized
thinking about life by introducing the two forms bios and zoē, then the discourse of
autoimmunity helps us understand how beings and communities traverse from one form to
another. Romero puts this point in an all too obviously tragic light at the end of Night of the
Living Dead: Ben’s greatest enemy was never the zombies; rather, it was the white posse
commanding sovereign power that couldn’t distinguish him from a zombie in the end.

If Thacker, Derrida, and Hägglund find a common cause in autoimmunity as a
necessarily contradictory impulse that allows something like life, the community, the body, or
the political to emerge and continue, then Esposito’s work in Immunitas: The Protection and
Negation of Life and Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy can be understood as an attempt to ground
this general principle in a formation that would allow for an affirmative biopolitics, a biopolitics
that would not necessarily slip into a thanatopolitical—or death driven—regime. The impulse
behind this work is to augment the set of terms that Agamben introduced without falling into the
specific philosophical quandary that Agamben dug himself into. Esposito thus attempts to think
not with the metaphor of a self-present “body” (and the attendant ideological trappings that scale
into a “body politic”), but rather with what he calls “flesh,” a materiality that is neither dead nor
alive and that in principle cannot be contained through the discourse of a body. He withers the
self and its imaginary construct of unity and hails the flesh as a “universal weave” for thinking
about a life that is thoroughly embedded in political and ecological systems. Here, life is strictly managed and controlled through political access. For Esposito, flesh is about community (or as he has it, “co-immunity”), and his interest in biomedical science is motivated by a universal communitarian impulse to survive.184

The impasse between negative and positive biopolitics helps to explain the popularity of zombies in popular culture. Zombies and biopolitics occupy disturbingly similar worlds in which life is mostly a target for skepticism and cynicism. In an era when all strategies of resistance to the forces of biopower and technologies of the self appear to be foreclosed from the outset, the zombie text offers what appears to be an ultimately conservative fantasy: a small community of survivors can barricade themselves from the onslaught of the population and remain safe, for a time, in a protected space of domesticity. The politics of zombie worlds are foremost biopolitical in how they address the need for a community to form and create a zone of immunitary protection, boarding up the house or shopping mall from any potential threat. This reading of zombie biopolitics makes sense of the oddly brightening arc of the Romero trilogy, which attempts to assert bios and zoë as co-implicated terms, from dusk until dawn and the day after following the extinction event. Zombies are increasingly used as tabula rasa for understanding human behavior (for example, in the laboratory scenes of Day of the Dead or the second and third seasons of The Walking Dead), while humans constantly resort to barbarism when faced

184 The rise of the flesh at the expense of the self in Esposito might be a tacit argument for becoming a zombie. Thought of differently, we might say that the question of biopolitics raises a set of complications that cannot be addressed or understood on the side of politics proper and that might be better suited for thinking alongside a cultural interest in the undead. Most treatments of biopolitics are quick to point out obvious ways in which life and politics are merging through stem-cell research, mass farming, oil and gas demands, pharmaceutical and health care policy, and the like. While it seems abundantly clear that ours is an age where the modus operandi is, in Foucault’s words, “making live and letting die,” the scalar totality of biopolitics intruding into the everyday experience of the world speaks to what Thacker has described as the “increasingly unthinkable” character of the world, which for Thacker necessitates the genre of horror as an attempt to think this fundamentally unthinkable character. See Eugene Thacker, In the Dust of this Planet, 1.
with the breakdown of political order. Taken together, the two films ambulate around a cynic’s appreciation of the radical way in which the human and the zombie cohabitate in a world of flesh.

Following Hägglund’s and Thacker’s leads, then, I propose that the zombie is itself a form of thinking and being, an analogical substrate that coordinates a web of thinking about life in order to better flesh out the stakes of biopolitical thought in the wake of an autoimmunitary paradigm. This form of thinking is media-specific in that speaks to the kind of hyper-mediation that social media engenders. Operating alongside any logic of “bare life,” there is also a constitutive structure of shared exposure to a radical mutability, be it radiation or a zombie plague, that gives any form of life its name. Thus, in order to clarify the autoimmunitary paradigm that connects zombies and humans, it is important to trace the ways in which both autoimmunity and zombies rely on forms and strategies of transmission. In what follows, I explore how the zombie logic positions itself between two antithetical versions of biopolitics, the first associated with Agamben’s insistence on a thanatopolitical drift and thus an unstable metaphysics of presence, and the second derived from Derrida and associated with a kind of ambivalent system of auto-immunization that destroys itself in order to expose itself to a different set of possibilities. One way to conceptualize autoimmunity is as a kind of miscommunication from oneself to oneself, and similarly, zombie kynicism hinges on the belief that the zombie is a human stripped of its communicative powers and all that remains is an angry mob of miscommunication. This co-constitutive, yet awkwardly communicative structure of transmission is what allows the autoimmunitary paradigm to produce a being without ontology and a time without temporality, thereby pointing to a different kind of politics altogether.
Autoimmunity and Zombie Technicity

The nihilistic pressure that the zombie places on life complicates temporality. The impossibility of finding the answer to infection through etiology instantiates a double bind on both past and future horizons. As such, zombie texts (usually) begin and end in medias res, with the world’s population locked in a never-ending struggle against (inevitable) zombification. The common commitment in these texts is an understanding of temporality that is not organized around either a single Archimedean point in history or through the coming of a universal event worthy of the name. Neither apocalyptic nor postapocalyptic, the zombie text goes beyond and before such temporal schema and looks more like what Derrida has described as a “politics to come.” For Derrida, this notion of politics would be more in line with what lets singular beings (anyone) “live together,” there where they are not yet defined by citizenship, that is, by their condition as lawful “subjects: in a state or legitimate members of a nation-state or even of a confederation or world state … it does require another thought and another putting into practice of the concept of the “political” and the concept “world.”\(^{185}\)

At issue here is how the idea of the impossible event demands a reconfiguration of the political body toward the radical possibility of an event to come that is itself impossible to formalize. The demand that this event puts on the community is a complete reconfiguration of the “body” as a stable and indivisible structure. Despite the radical and apocalyptic valences of zombie films, the rise of the zombie body is not an event in the properly Derridean sense of the term, because its operations are always already co-inscribed within the experience of the survivors themselves. As

a paradigm for biopolitical thinking, then, the zombie speaks to a kind of radical porosity, where
the inside is always radically exposed to and indeed indistinguishable from the outside.

The zombies’ designation of autoimmunity within life, a transmission that has always
already occurred, brings out their capacities for transmission and continuation, spreading from
here to there, from text to text, and manifesting everywhere. Zombies zombify everything, and in
doing this, they resonate with Thacker’s notion of swarm life. Part of the swarm character of
zombies entails the biohorror of ubiquitous banality, or un-death everywhere by routine. In this
way, zombies point suggestively to the nagging presence of an inhuman technical substrate, a
required contaminant in-forming life. The key tension for this autoimmune structure exists
between a notion of a properly human and natural community and a kind of vital technicity,
epitomized by the zombie, which tends to destroy as it preserves a different form of vitality.

“Becoming-zombie” consequently seems less about freedom and autonomy than about
rethinking the paradigm of life around issues of technology and community. The undead operate
in the service of life by conditioning the set of possibilities for what it means to live. Zombies
therefore become a horizon of finitude against which human life organizes itself, yet the anti-life
of zombies is paradoxically implicated in the powers of life that human life seeks to preserve. If
this horizon is understood in a merely temporal frame, then, as a homogenizing force, zombies
enact a compression of natural history, an entropic drift run completely amok.

This shambling version of temporality, slowly and irrevocably dragging itself into the
future frames a different interpretation of relation to Derrida’s event “to-come.” The zombie
horde as an immanent and radical modulation of inhuman swarm life portends the absolute end
moment of a certain structure of temporality inaugurated through the generation of the
community. The swarm as decentralized chaos is not only a reconfiguration of communal
organization, but is itself already inscribed in the community in terms of the very way that the survivors are conditioned to operate through a system of transmission, technology, and death; in short, they are forced to act in the service of the thing their community attempts to exterminate. Life is therefore always already organized around death and acts in its service. Derrida says of the two sources of religion and science in “Faith and Knowledge” (life/health, on the one hand, and death/technology/transmission, on the other) as they are inscribed mechanistically within the source of life: “Everything that binds the tele-technoscientific machine, this enemy of life in the service of life, to the very source and resource of the religious: to faith in the most living as dead and automatically surviving, resuscitated in its spectral phantasma, the holy, safe and sound, unscathed, immune, sacred.”

With zombies, death gets mechanistically vitalized. Never stopping, never available for revival, they are kynically immortal. Neither human nor nonhuman, zombies present humans driven to continue in their own extremity in a diminished capacity. Humans and zombies exist on a continuum organized by different degrees of immunization that always eventuate in a moment of autoimmunity, necessary insofar as every act of immunization necessarily risks misrecognizing itself as the threat that needs to be exterminated. From the vantage of the zombie, the human threat is immunized by consumption and transformation, while from the vantage of the human survivor, the zombie threat is immunized by killing zombies or retreating behind barriers. In both cases, though, death and transmission area form of suicidal autoimmunization, an only slightly more monstrous formulation that Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s declaration that England would simply embrace a “herd immunity” strategy in the battle against Covid-19. Autoimmunization cuts both ways but doesn’t pit life against death; in its own way, each entity

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186 Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” 84.
acts in the service of maintaining the division between life and death. Thus, instead of thinking about zombies through the valence of a proper form of life, this system of immunization always produces an autoimmunitary valence where zombies are not merely a form of human life turned against itself, but rather a formation of transmission, tele-technicity, decentralized control, and flesh turned against itself. In the name of the survival of the community, humans are forced to participate in their own form of zombification vis-à-vis this logic of transmission, technicity, and death.

The autoimmunitary paradigm makes sense of the zombie as a cipher of biopolitical thought that separates life from moral frameworks. The zombie as autoimmunization escapes the binary between human/zombie, life/death, and bios/techné, imagining instead a different sort of conceptual apparatus. This autoimmunitary valence finds its form in Derrida’s rendition of autoimmunization as a machinic function that opens a community to new possible energies and dynamics:

Community as common auto-immunity: no community [is possible] that would not cultivate its own auto-immunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection, and in this view some sort of invisible and spectral survival. This self-contesting attestation keeps the autoimmune community alive, which is to say, open to something other and more than itself: the other, the future, death, freedom, the coming or love of the other, the space and time of a spectralizing messianicity beyond all messianism.¹⁸⁷

For Derrida, autoimmunity begins with the community’s attempt to form itself, and this attempt at closure always fails and necessarily exposes the community to an outside. A necessary

mutability within the community exposes the community, from within, to a threat of change.

Zombie biopolitics shot through with an autoimmunitary logic exposes the zombie to a discourse where life, health, and the community are not understood as ultimate values, but rather as concepts that are always already constituted within a mechanistic vitality that imbues them with a specter of death and transmission. At the same time, imagining biopolitics through the zombie exposes biopolitics to something other than itself, to an idea of the political that is organized around autoimmunity rather than through a metaphysically charged idea of life itself.

This highly reflexive, creative, and destructive force is neither positive nor negative for Derrida, but rather is best understood as a phenomenological description that addresses the dynamics that are necessarily put into play in the fallout of a metaphysics of presence. The zombie as a limit case for a cultural imaginary’s rethinking of death and transmission becomes a biopolitical object in that it forces one to reconsider what can be thought of as political in an era in which the discourse of the “body” is shot through, at any and all scales, with explicit and implicit political possibilities. Specifically, the zombie points to a biopolitics of a mechanistic life and community, to the way that survivors are forced to reconcile themselves with a set of realities for which there is no institutional or properly political frame of reference. Romero’s films and zombie texts at large are therefore obsessed with borders, walls, and boarded-up rooms that are always improper transformations. A road is blocked, a window is boarded up, and systems of access become safe zones or quarantines of enclosure.

Imagining zombie autoimmunity through the idea of transmission offers a more specific way to think about the biopolitical paradigm that zombies place before us. Specifically, following Derrida’s analysis of technology in “Faith and Knowledge,” transmission can be understood as an outward movement that always exposes the immunized community to some
new threat or potential energy. In zombie texts, transmission is thematized through two media: radio/television, on the one hand, and flesh, on the other. The survivors use radio and television broadcasts in their attempts to gain knowledge about the zombie apocalypse and coordinate their escape plans. Johnny, Barbra’s fated brother in *Night of the Living Dead*, makes an important discovery about transmission just before he utters his famous line, “They’re coming to get you, Barbra.” Still in the car, he hears “We’re coming back on the air after an interruption due to technical problems” coming from the radio. Apparently, the radio was always on, but the station wasn’t transmitting anything but dead air. It is at this moment that the soundtrack swells with an ominous tone, and the transmission malfunction reveals the genre of horror.

Romero revisits this dynamic in *Dawn of the Dead*, which opens in a television studio during the chaotic opening act of the zombie apocalypse. As the state of emergency unfolds in real time, the protagonist Francine, a TV producer, must decide whether she should broadcast old, or “dead,” information about medical evacuations. Her producers want her to broadcast the old information simply for the sake of keeping the public calm, but in a moment when she realizes the dynamics of “making live and letting die,” she wipes away the old information and abandons the transmission room. That which ought to be signaling is not, and those who shouldn’t—the dead who now walk the earth—transmit without restraint. Besides staging the fundamental chiasmus of life/death and transmission/reception, these scenes speak to the fundamental exposure of all things within a system of communication. There was no signal, yet Johnny and Barbara were always exposed to the possibility of a signal. This exposure to the possibility of communicability is formalized in how transmission stages an interface between kinds of flesh.
Transmission through flesh occurs via the zombies themselves, once bitten you are incorporated into a new political body: the horde. In *Immunitas*, Esposito links the desire to incorporate a political entity into a body to an originary difference occurring on the level of flesh. The burden of his treatise is to rethink the dynamics of the body through a structure that doesn’t come part and parcel with all of the ideological compromises that are implicit in a unified, sovereign “body.” Accordingly, flesh is the technical element that escapes complete incorporation into a body: “Flesh is nothing but the unitary weave of the difference between bodies. It is the non-belonging or rather the intra-belonging, that prevents what is different from hermetically sealing itself up within itself, but rather, to remain in contact with its outside.”

The zombie is the monstrosity of flesh, a radicalized form of incorporation that produces flesh without a body proper. The entire pile—all innards, no outsides—represents an indefinable heap of waste with no internal or external borders. It messes with the formation of community with its uncanny swarm intelligence—fording rivers, for instance, in Romero’s *Land of the Dead* or scaling border fences in *World War Z*. If flesh marks, for Esposito, a threshold of nonidentity that is simultaneously “the way of being in common of that which seeks to be immune,” its entropic physical drift echoes the forming and reforming zombie horde, which incorporates without digesting.

The zombie horde remakes the tension between flesh and bodies into a new kind of mass-media body: that which it consumes is also that which resists incorporation into its body, and thus it always risks its own expulsion. In this register, the flesh is found on the side of the humans, yet the zombie, as a decentralized, massified swarm, is nothing more than a transmitting interface between different kinds of living and nonliving flesh. So much physics leaves a strange

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188 Esposito, *Immunitas*, 121.
189 Esposito, *Immunitas*, 121.
cryptometaphysical remnant. That zombies are waste that do not produce waste (that they seem to consume without physical need) points to how they stage a radical reduction of a body to nothing less than a locus of flesh with a drive to receive more flesh. Zombies do away with any idea of futurity, making them the death of death, the ultimate monstrosity, a vision of the last man, the absolute end of history, and therefore an exploratory space for the ever-present threat of thanatopolitics that appears equally in Romero’s world as the zombie horde or, for Ben at least, as a mob of trigger-happy yokels.

The zombie produces repetition without a difference, thus materializing Derrida’s horizontal limit of messianism that biopolitical thought seeks to overcome by negotiating the transformation of bios into thanatos. While Esposito uses flesh to weave the immunitary logic into a shared desire for immunization, the flesh of zombies attunes this idiom more precisely to a thematic of transmission and exposure. As humans, it’s easy for us to sympathize with the survivors and their flesh and to perceive the zombie as a radical evil that eradicates and fulfills the time of history; but what truly makes zombies a radical evil, pace Derrida, is how their mechanisms of exposure and transmission are always already inscribed through human tele-technicity. The critical challenge is to critique from a perspective that acknowledges that zombies aren’t real, that they’re nothing more than a theoretical substrate for thinking. The practice of biopolitics vis-à-vis the zombie wagers that there is more to gain through analyzing the concepts that underpin the phenomenon of the zombie than by translating it into a metaphor for an object of biopolitical thought. In this regard, the final analysis of an undead biopolitics uses an autoimmunitary paradigm to cultivate a certain kind of exposure in order to survive.

It is in this sense that we are all the walking dead; we are all compelled to participate within a new media landscape. Derrida’s rewriting of the eternal, the safe and sound, the holy,
the indemnified, boils down to an analysis of survival. According to Hägglund’s reading of salvation and survival in Derrida, “[w]e must therefore distinguish between salvation as immortality and salvation as survival. The religious idea of salvation as absolute immunity is necessarily an idea of immortality, since every mortal being is autoimmune.”190 Turning away from the religious, survivalism inscribes into itself a logic of finitude and death. Hägglund continues:

My argument, however, is that Derrida’s notion of the messianic without messianism follows the radically atheist logic that we traced in his notion of the salut without salvation. A radical atheism cannot simply denounce messianic hope as an illusion. Rather, it must show that messianic hope does not stem from a hope for immortality, but from a hope for survival (the negative infinity of time).191

In the zombie world, the discourse of the “survivors” becomes absolutely crucial. “Survival” names the process by which an individual or a community necessarily exposes itself to the vicissitudes of time. The zombie world is the system through which a logic of survival is forced to confront the dead in order to point itself toward justice. In other words, survival means dealing with the dead, the inheritance of history, before necessarily succumbing to the very forces that one struggles against. As Derrida writes in Specters of Marx,

To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as revenants who would no longer be revenants, but as other arrivants to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome … not in order to grant them right in this sense but out of a concern for justice.192

190 Hägglund, Radical Atheism, 130.
191 Hägglund, Radical Atheism, 136.
192 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 175.
In this complicated chiasmus, justice is served by welcoming the unwelcome and by making the dead alive through exposing the past to the mutability of time. Similarly, the zombie figures the question of life according to an inhuman life principle that is always and in all cases dependent on a set of contradictions. Thus, the evolution of the genre—which is deeply haunted by objects of burial—helps us situate the dynamic scope of biopolitical thought. The specters of history that haunt the survivors appear themselves as a scalar monstrosity. The struggle for survival has less to do with management of the population than with the founding of a community that is best able to deal with the radically scalar body that massifies everything. This survival is dependent on a community no longer grounded on a concept of life or politics in the proper sense. Rather, the zombie keeps the community on the move and moves the biopolitical onto a phenomenological substrate of now radically mobile notions of life, technology, and community itself.
CODA

*Toward an Ecstatic New Media Aesthetics*

The trajectory of this project’s archive moves toward increasingly larger scales of imagining human experience; increasing degrees of media-enabled sociality paradoxically produces greater levels of alienation and anonymity. Woolf’s early experimentations with self-perception, language, and history are later dwarfed by all-encompassing global media phenomena like social media and the internet. The scales change, but the logics remain the same; this means that the fundamental dynamics between individual experience and mediated experience operate through systems of distortions. Whereas Woolf explored small-scale distortions like a mark on the wall or a moth on the windowsill, today’s distortions occur through mass media events. The challenge of meaning and how any medium inadvertently contorts and imbues a message with extra content remains a fundamental question of media studies. This archive’s final study examines these contortions in their most monstrous formation, exemplified by the zombie.

In a contemporary moment defined by plagues, global supply chains, and mass media the appeal that this tradition within modernism makes is to think small. While governments, economies, and cultural institutions become larger, an equally pernicious downward pressure from media conglomerates makes the actions and activities of individuals feel less and less significant. Today, the resulting mass cynicism reaches a critical milestone in the United States around the social-political controversy of wearing masks. While the anti-mask community may dress their critique within the logic of freedom and choice, there is an acute sense of impotence at the heart of their protest. Although they draw fierce ire from their critics, at the root of their
rage is a sense of cynical helplessness. With national elections decided through technical machinations and faceless corporations filling in gaps of absent governance, there is distinct cultural mood of helplessness, frailty, and impotence.

Read in this light, we are currently living in the nightmare scenario of Flusser’s telematic society. The promise of a positive utopia, delivered through a new medium of digital imaging that would allow individuals to create a new cultural and truly cosmopolitan imaginary, appears to us in the formation of a weak consumerism. Rural grocery stores are filled with exotic spices, but the entire experience is overwrought with consumer demands and statistical analyses. Amazon will deliver the world to your doorstep in two days, but the objects are abstracted from their cultural context. Everything is convenience and nothing matters. Voters are micro-targeted through information harvested by social media and corporations use the same tactics to develop hyper-specific profiles in order to know what each kind of consumer will want and when they want it. Furthermore, our devices are always listening in order to push specific products that fit with what we’re privately talking about. In our time, perfect convenience undermines the unquantifiable value of happy accidents, failures, and mistakes.

The texture of the 21st century, brought about through these new formations of mass media and mass consumerism, is smoothness. Everything is designed to be effortless and easy. Like the digital renderings of a superhero’s cape in a film, our experience of the everyday – as designed and delivered through the various systems we interact with—aspires toward a vibrant but unreal experience. This is not an altogether bad thing. In an era of mass infection, having the ability to order groceries online and pick them up represents an advanced form of disease control. Smoothness is not in all cases negative, especially when it comes to navigating bureaucracy. However, as exemplified throughout this project’s archive, there is always a trade-
off between the advent of one media formation to another. An automated society may help us manage the disease, but if the level of automation undermines the very sense of self-efficacy and self-worth to such a degree that individuals no longer feel responsible to each other, then any gain within the system is for naught.

Despite this grim outlook, the aesthetic remains a vibrant and unaccountable force that always maintains the promise of a different sort of imaginary. Woolf’s work imagines new forms of consciousness in the aftermath of WWI; Pound, surrounded by his failures at the end of his life, composes his most durable Canto—itself a study of what it means to fail; The necronauts develop a sardonic style in order to make fun of themselves and the institutions that fund them; and the zombie, as a popular form of monstrous communication and statistics, lays bare the very dynamics that make something like mask-wearing protests possible. In all cases, the aesthetics of these objects reveal a vibrant and dynamic understanding of the contemporary. This archive argues for the importance of disruptions, outliers, and difficult questions. The value of these cultural objects is found within their attendant difficulties and unruly nature, not in the way that produce a smooth and seamless experience.

This idiosyncratic tradition, which considers the legacy of modernist aesthetics as a vibrant rejoinder to the mass media political economy, lives on. In an online issue of The Yale Review, the poet Roger Reeves tries to capture the sentiment of the contemporary by balancing the overwhelming forces of oppression and uniformity with the protests and demonstrations. Reeves takes up his study through an exploration of lyric poetry and the concept of ecstasy in order to understand the world today:

So, ecstasy—ecstasy as inhabiting a beyond that liberates from future and past through nonattachment. Ecstasy as that which can detach us from the teleological. Ecstasy ‘not
less of love but -expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation.’ Memory, for Eliot, allows the love or lover of the past to be recalled without desire for that love or lover. Conversely, an attachment to the past circumscribes and delimits the potential for a new pattern, a new truth to emerge as something beyond the moment, a greater love.¹⁹³

Ecstasy is an unaccountable experience; ecstasy exceeds and disrupts cultural notions of enjoyment, entertainment, and pleasure. Reeves focuses on the idea of ecstasy as the creation of a new pattern within a subsumed logic of exploitation or control. He then connects this notion with the coffle, the caravans of enslaved black people that were marched to the slave markets. When the bodies were put on display, they were forced to dance in order to display their physicality. Reeves continues:

enslaved Africans were told to dance joyfully, cavort for the master, or, in the case of the coffle, for the purchasing parties. Generally, dancing is thought of as an act of pleasure, or at the very least as an act that has the potential for pleasure. It is quite difficult to dance in a lively, expressive, or joyful manner if one is being compelled by a whip or a master’s surveilling eye—when the end result, as in the case of the coffle, is to be sold away from friends, family, and children. In the case of slave dances on the plantation, the master gave no consideration to the fatigue of the enslaved or whether they felt like dancing in the first place. They danced until the master tired.

Like in the climax of Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring, the slaves are required to dance themselves unto death. Reeves enframes this brutal and horrific perversion of dance within the context of the contemporary social unrest:

Yet what if we practiced a type of protest that deploys ecstasy in the middle of struggle—even in the middle of the grief of protesting police brutality. What if ecstasy were practiced publicly, employed as a liberating force, reminding both ourselves and those who would strip away agency through legislation and executive order that our joy and our bodies are our own?

Ecstasy, as a form of pleasure which resists normative categorizations, cannot be determined. Just as American slavers could not stamp out the experience of pleasure, so too the massification of our everyday experience cannot undermine the possibilities of our experience. While the dancing and celebration that takes place during peaceful protest captures one form of repatterning experience, for Reeves the most important stakes of the aesthetics of ecstasy emerge through an experience of mutuality. Ecstasy is form of pleasure that resists singular or individuated experience. Reeves concludes his essay by offering a vision of ecstasy as a form of mutual experience:

The writing of the other then, is the learning of what is beyond desire: “not less of love but expanding / Of love,” learning to braid, walk, talk, love, cry, run, and hurt like the other without usurping the moment. So liberation. So ecstasy. Ecstasy, then, becomes not a possession of the other but a mutuality, a recognition of a simultaneity such that “The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew--tree are of equal duration,” as Eliot writes. “If you can, get to it,” writes Gilbert. Another pattern, another love. Ecstasy.

This minor tradition within media and modernist studies shares in this particular understanding of ecstasy as a form of mutual experience. The disruptions and distortions within media are not, in the end, impediments to this mutuality, but in fact create the context for the very experience of mutuality to emerge. Contrary to the smoothness of mass media, the aesthetics of ecstasy as a
media practice are always fraught with misunderstanding, misinterpretations, and failed attempts. But practice and the promise remain vibrantly opposed to the uniform forces that seek to make all forms of experience the same.
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