

THE VIRTUAL TURN:  
NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, AND GERMAN MEDIA ART PRACTICE  
IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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A commonplace in digital-literary studies holds that narrative, connected to the binary logic of symbolic representation, exists in tension with digital culture. Digital media modes privilege interactivity, simulation, and the epistemological paradigm of “the virtual,” understood as the interconnectedness of culture, symbolic systems, material reality, and experience. The dissertation argues that, despite its connection to structuralist binaries, narrative form remains important to identity and cultural memory in complex ways. This complex connection is imperative to investigate in a global, digital age, where cultural memory seems increasingly fragile.

The theoretical framework in Chapter One argues that digital texts reject the Oedipal desire for mastery, certainty, or closure, invoking instead a simple desire for connection. The appearance of narrative desire in such texts, because of narrative’s association with pastness, implies a desire for connection with an historical other as such—with some “archive” of shared memory. This theoretical framework informs close analyses of the tensions between narrative representation and the virtual modes of new media in three digital and literary texts. These tensions mark the texts’ conflicted engagements with history; here, specific conflicts between individual and public memory in Germany from 1945-1998. The chapters analyze a Jewish narrator’s attempt to create a public, non-representational art of Holocaust memory

in Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Tynset* (1965); the interplay of *Ostalgie* and destabilized media-memory of DEFA *Indianerfilme* in the western-dominated cultural imaginary of unified Germany in artist pair Nomad's DVD-ROM *The Last Cowboy* (1998); and the feminist inversion of Derrida's *Archive Fever*, based in the artist's intimate experiences as immigrant and mother, in Agnes Hegedüs' virtual database *Die Sprache der Dinge* (1998). These artworks all construe the limit of narrative possibility as an archive of cultural memory, but also as an agential human other. Within the interactive logic of the virtual, the narrative limit these figures embody becomes a zone of ethical engagement, negotiation, or struggle.

Offering a nuanced combination of literary and digital analytical methods and modeling a strong orientation to humanistic concerns of cultural memory, history, identity, and ethics, the dissertation contributes to the growing field of digital humanities scholarship.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Madeleine Casad was born in Lawrence, Kansas, on January 30, 1975, to Robert C. Casad, legal scholar and dustbowl New Deal Democrat par excellence, and Sarah M. Casad, whose lineage and worldview combine the best and spookiest strains of Great Lakes, Central European, and Irish folk mysticism. Madeleine's education began at home, in the hands of three older brothers far too clever for anyone's good—except, perhaps, that of their baby sister, who has always been grateful for their early tutelage in music, political debate, self-reliance, and appreciation of the absurd.

In 2001, Madeleine received a BA in Cinema and Comparative Literature from the University of Iowa. In 2005, she received an MA in Comparative Literature from Cornell University, with field concentrations in German literature after 1945, globalization and identity theory, and digital media art. Since 2002, she has worked as Assistant Curator of Cornell University's Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art. She has also taught undergraduate and graduate-level courses at Cornell and Ithaca College in literature, film, video games, German language, and composition.

*For my first family: Robert and Sarah, Ben, Joe, and Bart.*

*And for my husband, Jefferson, who helped me complete this undertaking with love.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE VIRTUAL TURN: NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, AND GERMAN MEDIA ART PRACTICE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The title of this study, “The Virtual Turn,” points to a transition, a phase change or transformation of public culture and the epistemological models we use to understand it. The subtitle, “Narrative, Identity, and German Media Art Practice in the Digital Age” connects this “virtual turn” to the rise of digital media, and suggests that the emergence of immaterial and interactive media technologies has had some bearing on how we conceptualize identity and its relationship to narrative.

This project aims to recast the terms of narrative analysis, focusing particularly on the play of narrative energy and narrative desire about the limits of narrative representation, in order to better understand how contemporary artworks engage with political and ethical terms of individual and cultural memory in an age where the very concept of “cultural memory” seems to be up in the air, thrown into question by the “flattening” or universalizing forces of global capitalism and by the fact that the dominant media of our age are immaterial, volatile, and do not stably substantiate memory in the way of physical documents. As I argue in my first chapter, “Literary Theory after the Virtual Turn,” understanding the role of narrative structure in contemporary media art requires a nuanced and flexible theoretical framework, as well as a more complex understanding of narrative and narratology than might first seem to be the case.

Describing the increasing interest in the category of the “virtual” in the past decades as a “turn” alludes to an earlier epistemological moment, the “linguistic turn” of the 1980s and

1990s.<sup>1</sup> I understand these “turns,” “linguistic” and “virtual” as two overlapping, related, but distinct movements in postmodern intellectual history. As I elaborate in my first chapter, structuralist thought implies clear binaries and limits. The mode of poststructuralist thought associated with the linguistic turn sought to interrogate the terms of representation by identifying—and often politicizing and problematizing—those binaries and limits. Critical methods associated with “the virtual,” however, suggest a rejection of the very binary framework itself.

“The virtual” is a term we associate strongly with new media and their blurring of the boundaries that once seemed to cleanly separate public from private, truth from fiction, reality from representation. But the epistemological effects of the virtual have broad reach. We should note that, rejecting structuring binaries, “the virtual” does not exist in a binary relationship with the ‘real’; rather it points to the inextricable intertwining of material and cultural experience. We may see evidence of the rise of the conceptual significance of the “virtual” in the recent emphasis in humanistic and cultural-critical discourses on the many realms of communication, cognition, knowledge, and interaction that elude the terms of rational representation, for example: bodies and embodiment, place, event, affect, or complex forms of interdependence between agents, objects, and forces that might previously have been thought to be autonomous.

Narrative form itself, however, still strongly implies a binary division of representation and real, of past and present. Though digital media clearly complicate this binary, narrative form

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<sup>1</sup> See my discussion in Chapter One, but see also Sean Cubitt, “The Chronoscope: The Ontology of Time in Digital Media,” in *Screen-Based Art*, edited by Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 63-72, and “Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines: Why Narrative is Marginal to Multimedia and Networked Communication, and Why Marginality is More Vital than Universality,” in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, edited by Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp (London: BFI, 2002), 1-13.

persists in digital culture, and often elicits—consciously or unconsciously—structuralist modes of reading, along with structuralist assumptions about narrative pleasure or narrative desire, especially as these relate to Oedipal models of subjectivity and to the presumed “psychodynamics” of the reading moment itself.<sup>2</sup>

These models often look to narrative as a prosthesis or supplement designed to convey a sense of ontological stability or mastery, a confirmation of identity conceived in terms of the mirroring or affirming “gaze” of another. Many theorists and critics of the digital-narrative intersection have argued successfully that digital media, immaterial, volatile, and capable of interactively engaging with the entire sensorium of a networked “reader,” greatly complicate any such theory of prosthesis as separate from the subject yet necessary to the subject’s sense of completeness or cohesion. Instead, the subject of new media is seen to be, in the sense of Donna Haraway’s “cyborg,”<sup>3</sup> *partial*—that is to say, neither complete in itself nor objective, always embedded in networks and situations where it has an active stake, intrinsically interdependent, and therefore placing no premium on the fantasy of wholeness or autonomy or mastery that underlies an Oedipal understanding of narrative desire.

In response to this understanding of the digital subject, many theorists of digital culture regard the continued play of narrative pleasure within digital culture in terms of simple desire for interaction or play. But this approach downplays the larger cultural stakes of narrative and identity at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Narrative is not merely entertainment; it remains one of our most powerful vehicles for cultural memory. New media may change the ontological

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<sup>2</sup> “Reading” here serves as shorthand to describe any kind of media engagement.

<sup>3</sup> See Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

assumptions and power structures associated with narrative representation, but not, I argue, our need to experience and express a connection to the past and to feel our own place in history.

Chapter One, “Literary Theory after the Virtual Turn,” argues that digital media shift the burden of ontological stability away from the text itself or from the frameworks of interpretation that guarantee its meaning, and locate it instead in the embodied moment of reading, the sensorium, the sense of presence, the connections felt or actualized by the networked reader at that reading moment. Narrative desire *can* therefore be seen as divorced from a desire for ontological stability, pointing instead a desire for connection, the simple pleasure of engagement. However, as I argue at the end of Chapter One, because narrative implies a kind of pastness or temporal displacement, we should understand this desire as being inflected with history; it is not a desire for connection with any “other,” but desire for the historical other as such, a desire for connection with an “archive” of shared memory. I describe this as a desire to “know” the archive—not to possess or to master, but simply to enjoy a relationship with it, to be in contact with it. If narrative brings this desire into play, I argue, then narrative analysis still has much to teach us about cultural memory in the digital age. My methodology here involves a kind of deconstructive narrative analysis informed by digital media theory and postmodern theories of selfhood and subjectivity.

Chapter One presents a critique of deconstruction; this should not be taken as a totalizing rejection of deconstructive methods, however, but merely as a caution against any claim for its universal applicability. Deconstruction remains an extremely useful tool for understanding the containment and play of energies within symbolic systems. A flexible theory of the virtual does not supplant or exclude either symbolic systems or deconstructive methods, but attempts to keep them in perspective as one kind of influence and one kind of tool among many that have an

impact on and might help us understand our lived realities. I understand deconstruction as a tool that is tactically, not universally, appropriate. It is best used in combination with other methods, in order to investigate the broader social, cultural, historical, and political dynamics of particular contexts and moments.

Deconstruction is not a universal tool, but it is a tool appropriate to the structured and representational aspects of narrative and therefore very useful for understanding how and where a text construes its own narrative limits. This study uses deconstruction as a starting place, asking first how the texts analyzed invoke narrative desire at the limit of narrative representation, in order to ask the crucial follow-up question: what else happens at that limit? My hope is that this focus on narrative, in combination with keen attention to the play of interactive, virtual textuality, can help us investigate the grey areas between identity and ideology, connecting them to real social forces we might have the power to change. This study, then, emphasizes the importance of social history in general and focuses on one historical context in particular—that of Germany between 1945 and 1998. There are many reasons for this focus on Germany, the most salient of which I will illustrate with a personal anecdote about writing and reading.

My own first recognition of something like a “virtual turn” came to me as I was reading David Wellbery’s Forward to the English version of Friedrich Kittler’s *Discourse Networks 1800-1900*.<sup>4</sup> Kittler’s materialist-poststructuralist take on the interaction of material technologies of media and the symbolic operations of communication was deeply intriguing, but it seemed too fatalistic, too solipsistic; it did not seem to leave any space for solidarity, for nonlinguistic or paralinguistic forms of relation and communication, it agreed too much to a

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<sup>4</sup> See David Wellbery, forward to *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, by Friedrich Kittler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), vii-xxxiii.

modernist, binary vision of the limits of language and seemed to dismiss any human desire to creatively overcome such limits as romantic or ideological. This response to Kittler's analysis might have seemed naïve to me at the time, but I noted in the foreword that Wellbery describes Kittler's chronicle of the rise of modern media as marking the start of "the world we live in now." The dateline for Wellbery's introduction: Berlin, October, 1989—just a few weeks, at most, before the collapse of the Berlin Wall. This space-time marker, the "now" of which Wellbery so confidently wrote, pointed to one of the most fragile institutional moments in recent history; Wellbery wrote from within a binary world-system, that of Cold War geopolitical blocs, which was already attenuated to the point of bursting, and would not survive the next calendar month.

He wrote as well from within a few miles of a geographical, architectural, historical, but also powerfully metaphorical manifestation of this world-system in the Berlin Wall itself.

This story highlights a few of the ways in which Germany has grappled with the continual enfolding of experience, identity, communication, and cultural memory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Metaphors drawn from German history have become so increasingly commonplace and powerful in the global imagination that their meanings crystallize quickly in given contexts, such that they seem to need no explanation: some obvious examples of this phenomenon would be Nazism, the Holocaust, the Cold War, the Berlin Wall. This illustrates an important point about the complexity of the virtual. With these figures from German history, we see how ideology—an abstraction—has been enacted in material human lives, inflicted on real human bodies as violent events, which linger then in the social consciousness as traumatic haunting, first inspiring metaphor then serving as metaphor, as violence tears apart and is then folded back into the warp and weft of cultural memory. More particularly, the events and realities of Germany's 20<sup>th</sup>

century history have been embraced on a global scale to mark paradigmatic phases of postmodern philosophy: the absolute horror of a world where no ethical or humanistic limits held true, the desire for containment propagated through an overemphasis on binaries and boundaries, the eventual dissipation of these limits and the extreme difficulty of envisioning what should come next, the “end of history.”

Throughout the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Germany has faced the task, certainly not uniquely, but perhaps more consciously than other places, of creating a functional society from within the very thick of these material, cultural, ideological “folds.”<sup>5</sup> Since the end of WWII, Germany has been a place where public claims about social identity were more fraught and less certain than in other major powers—at least in the West, where the legacy of Nazism left deep uneasiness about strong identity claims, particularly nationalist ones. Then, after 1990, the decades-long disconnect between West and East Germany needed to be renegotiated somehow, even as borders grew more and more open and the very idea of ‘nationality’ itself became more and more fluid with the growing recognition worldwide of the permeability of the state’s own boundaries and authorities, its openness to transnational communities and the presence of minority, immigrant, and transnational populations. I would like to argue that Germany has been an especially fraught and compressed testing ground for many urgent questions of public memory and social identity throughout the postmodern era, and that awareness of the interrelationship between German history and public discourse *about* German history can help us understand the ways in which “the archive,” and desire for connection with the archive, exerts a powerful influence on identity and action in the present tense.

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<sup>5</sup> I discuss the concept of the virtual “fold” at greater length in Chapter One, but see Timothy Murray, *The Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

The chapters that follow analyze artworks that combine the strategies of narrative representation and virtual simulation to stage an archival “fold” about particular, urgent, problems of identity, agency, and contested public memory. They analyze how these artworks depict a protagonist’s own narrative desire, understood first and foremost as the need to historicize experience within a broader social discourse, and how they locate the limit of narrative representation that shapes and frustrates this desire. In particular, these readings ask how “the archive” itself figures at that horizon, as both the focal point of narrative desire and the limit of narrative possibility. They investigate the other forces that come into play at that limit. In each of these texts, “the archive” appears as a person, yet the psychodynamics of the protagonists’ desire for this other directly contradict the narcissistic, Oedipal framework that is still often presumed to underwrite our experience of narrative pleasure itself.

Chapter Two, “The Art and Ethics of Virtual Memory,” analyzes Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s 1965 book *Tynset*, in which the problem of representing history in the absence of any coherent or reliable shared public imagination is especially urgent. Hildesheimer’s book (a long work of prose fiction not customarily described as a “novel”) tells the story of a traumatized and deeply melancholic narrator, a German Jew living in exile in Switzerland, haunted by his unmasterable knowledge of the Holocaust. This narrator lives alone in an inherited house that, itself, is a database of sorts, filled with ghosts and memorabilia, and perambulates through various memories and musings, dangerous, philosophical, political, and banal, during a single insomniac night. Typical psychoanalytic readings of *Tynset* cast Hildesheimer’s narrative emphasize themes of trauma and melancholy and suggest that the book’s complex narrative structure points to the narrator’s inability of achieving the narrative closure on his own traumatic history that he would need to be an effective psychological subject. I argue instead that

Hildesheimer's narrator finds himself caught at a disadvantage within a historically located network of power, memory, and communications systems. He feels, and obliquely acknowledges in himself, a need to mourn, but also to confirm the reality of his loss within a social network, a community of memory that understands it as he does. His tragedy is that no such community exists. His initial effort to create one is arguably a form of network-based media art before its time: he attempts to circumvent the terms of symbolic or narrative representation, using the West German telephone system to intervene in his (amnesiac) local memory culture as directly as he can, and potentially creating a non-representational art of memory in the process. This effort is quickly suppressed, however, by powerful national forces. The situation leaves the narrator more isolated than ever, trapped in the limbo of Swiss exile and incommunicative isolation; trapped in the delayed temporality of writing. Within this scenario, the only other character he encounters is his housekeeper, Celestina. I analyze his relationship with the housekeeper as a microcosm of the scene of reading and by extension an ethical interaction with the other of history.

My third chapter, "Rescreening Memory Beyond the Wall," analyzes the 1998 DVD-ROM artwork *The Last Cowboy*, created by the artist pair Nomad. This artwork, occasionally claimed to be the first ever to utilize the random-access technology and rich memory capacity of the DVD as a medium, describes the experience of an unnamed East German protagonist after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In the most literal sense, the narrator's journey westward after the Wall's collapse may seem to present a clear and linear narrative. This narrative of westward journey is interspersed, however, with found footage, impressionistic media memories of an East German mediascape that was formerly the shared foundation of national imagination. In particular, the artwork rescreens images from the East German *Indianerfilme*, popular cinematic

fantasies of Native American life, which were a popular and significant focal point for expressions of East German cultural identity. The apparently clear narrative journey depicted in *The Last Cowboy* is complicated, therefore, by its relationship to conflicting codes of narrative genre cinema, as images from the *Indianerfilme* vie with images of the Western Marlboro Man for primacy in the imagination of this post-communist subject. I argue that the artwork critiques such projections of identity by interrogates the underlying media and ideological systems that substantiate them; these rely on an inert projection “screen,” the “utopia” of the Indian other.

Again, in *The Last Cowboy*, the object of narrative desire and the “screen” for narrative memory are figured as one and the same: as an “Indian, a cowboy too” whom the protagonist finally encounters in a karaoke bar. In the linear, screening version of the artwork, this encounter occurs at the very end of the protagonist’s journey westwards; the man stands in a karaoke bar, performing for others according to a prerecorded track, wearing brand-name commodity clothes that identify him as a Cowboy as well as an Indian. Agential and irreconcilable, this figure seems uniquely able to navigate the space of this new media frontier. In her encounter with this figure, narrative becomes useful to the protagonist once more, not as a way to objectify this figure or use him to substantiate her own sense of selfhood, but as a framework that allows for mutually instructive comparison.

The refutation of the Oedipal framework is most explicit in my fourth chapter, “Mother Archive, or, Remembering, the Matrix,” an analysis of Agnes Hegedüs’ 1998 CD-ROM artwork *Die Sprache der Dinge*. Part of a CD-ROM “magazine,” *Artintakt*, published by Germany’s Zentrum für Kunst und Medien (ZKM) museum in the mid-1990s, Hegedüs’ artwork interrogates digital technologies’ reconfiguration of traditional archival institutions; among these institutions is that of identity itself. The artwork is an interactive digital database of the artist’s

personal affects: souvenirs, memorabilia, various and sundry memory-objects, presented as fetishistically high-definition 3D scans. Taken together, they seem to offer a theory the individual, yet their interactive, digital presentation and the layering of multiple stories from multiple perspectives blurs any boundaries that would safeguard this individual's coherence. In her take on memory and identity, and the institutions that preserve both, Hegedüs foregrounds the figure of the maternal body. No longer the focus of archival desire, as for an Oedipal subject caught between two traumatizing mothers, Hegedüs' maternal body is subjective, agential, and itself actively desiring of memory. Here, the limit of archival possibility is not externally imposed, but consciously created as part of an intersubjective ethical negotiation between mother and infant.

All these works entail a changed relationship to other; the other that exists at the limit of selfhood. The violence of the symbolic, the exclusion that creates ontological stability in regimes of representation, the presumed stability of symbolic that guarantees (and precludes) the possibility of communication, all entail a limiting way of thinking subjectivity and intersubjective communication. Where the material and political realities of these exclusion and othering, which underwrite structural realities of disempowerment and inequality, meet the bigger questions of collective identity, collective agency, that the ethical and intersubjective aspects of reconsidering our relationship to the archive become most urgent and most obvious. I argue above that new media transfer the burden of ontological stability away from the text object and into the body, the sensorium, the networked and historically located perceptive apparatus of the user itself. The close readings in these chapters demonstrate the frictions, but also the ethical possibilities, that become apparent we start to investigate questions of identity and public memory in that moment of encounter, as well. The importance of these questions suggests

powerful reasons, not to preserve, but, in keeping with the digital idiom of our times, to *refresh* our critical vocabulary for discussing human experience, embracing affect, ethics, poetics, and narrative itself.

## CHAPTER ONE

### LITERARY THEORY AFTER THE VIRTUAL TURN

In 1996, media artists' collective Mongrel used the existing, if relatively new, data structures of the Internet to create their anti-racist artwork *Natural Selection*. The aims of this artwork were simple; the process less so. As the artists announced in a description of the work on the Institute for the Unstable Media website:

Mongrel has hacked a popular internet search engine. When any searches are made on that engine for racist material the user gets dumped into a parallel network of web-sites set up by Mongrel. This parallel network has been made in collaboration with a vast global network of collaborators. It is the nightmare the whites-only internet has been waiting for.<sup>1</sup>

Within this "parallel network of web-sites," as Verena Kuni has written, "stories about experiences of everyday racism were woven together using multimedia."<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the artwork was a compendium of personal stories, an illicit archive of counter-histories created to invert the racist narratives ostensibly sought by the kind of internet users who would enter racist search terms in the first place and oppose these stories by documenting the human experience of the people such racist terminology would objectify and exclude. At the same time, artistically, *Natural Selection* was the shape of things to come: net-based and expansively collaborative, it was the fruit of an unregulated but certainly multi-ethnic collaboration among huge numbers of contributors, resolutely multimedial. In discussions of *Natural Selection* since its appearance,

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for the Unstable Media, "Natural Selection," *Institute for the Unstable Media*, <http://www.v2.nl/archive/works/natural-selection>.

<sup>22</sup> Verena Kuni, "Mythical Bodies II. Cyborg configurations as formations of (self-) creation in the imagination space of technological (re)production (II): The promises of monsters and posthuman anthropomorphisms," *MediaArtNet*, [http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/cyborg\\_bodies/mythical\\_bodies\\_II/8/](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/cyborg_bodies/mythical_bodies_II/8/).

any narrative content of Mongrel's counter-archive has been eclipsed by the boldly interventionist guerrilla tactics of its search engine hack and by the memorable images associated with the action, themselves so powerful that they seemed perfectly to encapsulate the artwork's message—or at least one part of it. As Kuni writes, Mongrel:

put out animated images and posters in which the facial features of people of different ethnic groups were stitched together. In the tradition of a culture which regards the idea of the 'whole' white man as the crowning glory of creation, voluntarily imagining, recognizing or even creating one's self as a "patchwork" is connoted with fear.<sup>3</sup>

Kuni here emphasizes an increasingly common idea of what contemporary critics might call "posthuman" identity—a belief, closely associated with cyberfeminist theory and criticism, that selfhood is multiple, spliced, networked in ways that pose a direct threat to an older paradigm of human identity that is wrapped up in a set of ideas about wholeness, limits, self-presence, and transparency. These ideas have been foundational to modern Western definitions of selfhood and subjectivity; they are intrinsic to what N. Katherine Hayles describes as a "liberal-humanist" perspective, one that defines the "human" in narrowly defensive and exclusionary terms.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly Mongrel's ongoing project, apparent even in the group's name, opposes any "liberal-humanist" idea of identity as whole, complete, or pure, offering instead a celebration of the multiplicity and hybridity that are present within individuals but also dispersed across huge, unrepresentably complex networks of people and technologies. At the same time, by targeting racist users of the "whites-only internet", the group highlights the persistence of popular interest in identitarian "purity" even within the vast unregulated network that is the internet. The fetishization of reified identities remains a serious cultural problem connected to the perpetuation of real inequality and violence, even a media climate that ostensibly privileges a more flexible,

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<sup>3</sup> Kuni, "Mythical Bodies II."

<sup>4</sup> See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

more expansive, and more egalitarian understanding of the self.

An additional irony is apparent in the comments of Matthew Fuller, one of *Natural Selection*'s co-producers. "Along with porn," Fuller remarks, "one of the twin spectres of 'evil' on the internet is access to neo-nazi and racist material on the web. Successive governments have tried censorship and failed. This is another approach.- ridicule."<sup>5</sup> Fuller's remarks point to key tensions within digital cultural studies. If digital technologies provide the complex communicational infrastructure that emphasizes the paradigm of selfhood as multiple and situational, networked and "distributed"<sup>6</sup> across many different connections at once, they also allow older, objectifying discourses like pornography and racist material to persist—even proliferate—in the face of any attempts at official regulation. The extent to which the diffusion of connections and networks online affords new expressions of identity and affiliation is precisely the limit of the power any authoritative body like a nation-state (a concept already part and parcel of a "liberal-humanist" understanding of agency) might wield to protect or guarantee those new expressions. Online information is mutable; it leaves no material records. It resists editorial rule and censorship and seems to eschew authoritative standards in favor of flash and instantaneity. These facts are often seen to exponentially exacerbate a negative dialectic between mass media and mass politics, where public knowledge seems a diffuse field of myth that is shaped, to a frightening extent, by forces that cater to ideology and id.

The informational content and processes we use to form and perpetuate our social identities are very much at stake in a work like *Natural Selection*, but, on a more fundamental level, so is the nature of public knowledge itself, and our relationship to it. With the emergence

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<sup>5</sup> See Mongrel, "1996 Natural Selection," *Mongrel*, [www.mongrel.org.uk/naturalselection](http://www.mongrel.org.uk/naturalselection).

<sup>6</sup> See Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.

of digital networks, we have a newly concrete, if not exactly material, figure for the field of public knowledge. Manifest as internet, this body of thought and information is a pool of ideas, overlapping networks of understanding and interest, a repository and forum and ceremonial (re)iteration of all that we collectively know. Mongrel's *Natural Selection* points out some of the frictions between this new, flexible, limitlessly expansive model of information storage and retrieval, and an older set of assumptions about identity and power. But Mongrel's more important intervention is to focus on the questions we ask of our contemporary archive of public knowledge, and on the structural terms of the interface, the place where our questions take form. *Natural Selection* makes it impossible to ignore the non-neutrality of the search engine, the primary point of contact between the individual user and the vast body of knowledge that is the dominant archive of our time. Mongrel demonstrates that the terms of this connection are in fact highly constructed, calling attention to the unseen programming that shapes our queries and their outcomes, algorithms styled as transparent windows that turn out to be opaque screens, the potential for ideological spin, mass rule, and oversimplification, and the need for active intervention to counteract the regressive tendencies such a situation invites. If digital media make such intervention easier, they also raise the cultural stakes of the conflict: the alternative to Mongrel's vision looks like endless variations (or ossifications) of the "whites-only internet" scenario, a world marked by rampant inequality and isolationism, a cultural imaginary increasingly divorced from real human experience, a specter of humanity adrift, lost in an ahistorical and endlessly recursive cul de sac of immediate gratification and cheap ideology. This makes it more important than ever before to ask the fundamental question, as Mongrel indirectly does with *Natural Selection*: What is it that we need or expect from the archive? What do we ask of it, and how does the form of our questions both reflect and amplify our desires?

What the racist internet user addressed by *Natural Selection* asks of the archive is one (perverse) variation of what we, as humans, have always asked. We ask the archive to mediate between individual and collective, between past and present. We also ask it to overdetermine, to confirm and substantiate a body of experience and a sense of social identity that are, as Mongrel clearly demonstrates, all too often all too narrowly defined. We might think of the ideological recursivity Mongrel interrupts as being a problem of the archive giving a too-easy answer to a poorly-stated need, a genuine human need for identity and place, a need that, we should note, might be stated well or poorly in any medium.

But for many scholars the poverty of the answers we receive has to do with the structure of our dominant media themselves, specifically their orientation to instantaneous interactivity and simulation and their deviation from the expectations of writing and narrative representation. Although its influence may be fading now, as the binary orientation associated with structuralism gives way to theoretical frameworks more commensurable to the nonbinarism of the virtual (and, less laudably, as the traditions of rigorous critical theory give way to more social-scientific approaches to digital culture<sup>7</sup>), the discourse of digital media theory has been powerfully shaped by the notion that the media modes of symbolic representation and digital simulation are mutually exclusive. For many years it was practically a truism that the very form and structure of narrative—understood as a linear progression of events oriented to some ending or closure—had been rendered defunct, displaced by the ascension of new media and their alternative logics of form and structure. A profoundly influential version of this viewpoint came on the scene in 2002 with Lev Manovich’s *Understanding New Media*. In this treatise, Manovich famously

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<sup>7</sup> As, for example, Geert Lovink argued at a 2009 conference called *Spatialized Networks and Artistic Mobilizations: A Critical Workshop on Thought and Practice*. Geert Lovink, “Network Cultures” (lecture, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, October 24, 2009).

opposes the random-access “database,” the fundamental structure of new media, to the serial progression of narrative, arguing that this structural transition from one informational mode to the other precipitates a major shift in how we express and experience our cultural lives. He writes that,

after the novel, and subsequently cinema, privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate—the database. Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end; in fact, they do not have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other.<sup>8</sup>

For Manovich, it is the new media objects’ resistance to any single ordering schema, organizational logic, or stable interpretive framework that distinguish them from the rationalist hierarchies of narrative causality and symbolic representation. Though this is a perfectly valid and useful observation, Manovich extends the argument too far, resulting in a much quoted, clever quip that unfortunately reinforced a terribly reductive binary opposition between the two media systems. He continues:

As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world.<sup>9</sup>

The sense of mutual exclusivity that looms so large in Manovich’s account now seems dated, almost naïve in its oversimplification. But the problematic he establishes continues to resonate in digital-narrative studies, and points to an underlying binarism, common to structuralist analytical practice, that arguably *must* persist in any critical discussion of narrative. It continues, for example, even in the most rudimentary and sympathetic definition of narrative offered by

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<sup>8</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 2001), 218.

<sup>9</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 225, emphasis mine.

Marie-Laure Ryan, the groundbreaking and utterly meticulous theorist of digital-narrative intersections, in her editorial introduction to the 2004 volume *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. This was a collection of essays on “transmedial narratology”; as such, Ryan’s definition is explicitly intended to be flexible, in order to bring within the purview of narrative analysis acts of storytelling that might or might not involve written texts. Yet even this most basic and flexible definition suggests that, quite apart from the complex analytical frameworks of formal narratology, our most basic underlying assumptions about narrative are nearly impossible to disengage from the divided, binary structure of symbolic representation itself. Ryan writes that anything that might be called “narrative” entails the following demands:

1. A narrative text must create a world and populate it with characters and objects. Logically speaking, this condition means that the narrative text is based on propositions asserting the existence of individuals and on propositions ascribing properties to these existents.
2. The world referred to by the text must undergo changes of state that are caused by nonhabitual physical events: either accidents (“happenings”) or deliberate human actions. These changes create a temporal dimension and place the narrative world in the flux of history.
3. The text must allow the reconstruction of an interpretive network of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations around the narrated events. This implicit network gives coherence and intelligibility to the physical events and turns them into a plot.<sup>10</sup>

The first term of Ryan’s definition points to the narrative text’s representational capacity to “create a world” that is implicitly *different* from the one the reader inhabits. The second term of the definition, insisting that “[t]he world referred to by the text must undergo changes of state that are caused by nonhabitual physical events,” points to the hierarchical organizational logics of temporal order and causality. And the third term, emphasizing the “reconstruction of an interpretive network of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations” relates both

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<sup>10</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, “Introduction,” in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 8-9.

this world and its causal, temporal order to “intelligibility,” the perspective of a rational human subject. To put it differently, the first two factors of Ryan’s definition have to do with creating an alternate space and alternate time, respectively, that are distinct from the reader’s habitual experience and marked as such; the third has to do with establishing a connection between the reader’s everyday experience and that of the text world. These three factors first postulate a gap between representation and reality, then invoke a relatively stable framework of interpretation to bridge that gap. Narrative appears here as a mediated binary, neatly illustrating a structuralist view of communication according to which meanings are understood to be socially negotiated—and socially disciplined—phenomena that span an inexorable divide between signifiers and signifieds.

This notion of narrative as a mediated binary has always been essential to the structuralist practice of narratological analysis. In her online essay “Narrating Bits: Encounters between Humans and Intelligent Machines,” N. Katherine Hayles first outlines these longstanding binary premises, then attempts to think beyond them. Hayles writes:

The binary established by the Russian formalists of *fabula* and *sjuzhet* followed the distinction, dating back to what Gerard Genette calls the “pre-history” of narratology, of story and plot. Mieke Bal defines *fabula* as the “material or content that is worked into a story,” while the story itself is “defined as a series of events.” This definition is more or less echoed by Genette, Seymour Chatman, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and others. The *sjuzhet*, on the other hand, is the order of appearance of the events in the work itself, or as Chatman, quoting Boris Tomashevsky, puts it, “how the reader becomes aware of what happened.” Different theorists transpose these older terms into binaries with slightly different inflections.<sup>11</sup>

Even if “these examples show...there is no consistent terminology” across the field of narratology for the concepts Hayles denotes as *sjuzhet* and *fabula*, the binary motif itself is remarkably consistent: all rely on the foundational premise of a story space split between,

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<sup>11</sup> Hayles, “Narrating Bits: Encounters between Humans and Intelligent Machines.” *Vectors*, [http://vectors.usc.edu/narrating\\_bits/](http://vectors.usc.edu/narrating_bits/), lex. 10.

on the one hand, an imaginary world where narrated events take place in their own real time (*fabula*), that dream time and imaginary event sequence that is ‘real’ in the world represented by the narrative, and, on the other hand, the ‘real time’ and sequential experience of the reader who encounters story events in the order of their presentation (*sjuzhet*). The study of narrative has, practically speaking, always meant study of the *sjuzhet*—as Hayles notes, “[v]irtually every major theorist of narratology has emphasized that only the *sjuzhet* is literally present in the text; the *fabula* is a contingent construction created by the competent reader.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the *fabula* remains essential—presumably—to the imaginary construction of narrative itself; projecting or extrapolating *fabula* from *sjuzhet* is an act of imagination accomplished by the competent reader as the fundamental work of narrative reading.

This is where narrative’s seemingly inherent potential for ideological oppression becomes clear—where narrative engages and amplifies the questionable operations of ontological stabilization and foreclosure associated with symbolic representation itself and the structuring of subjectivities and psychic energies these operations suggest. This is also, unsurprisingly, where the anti-narrative position of many 20<sup>th</sup> century artists and critics begins. The very structure of narrative representation ensures, as Hayles writes, that:

Whatever a narrative’s content...its form implies a stable ontology for the arena in which it operates and in this sense generates a more or less stable ontology expressed through the reader’s construction of its *fabula*.

Moreover, the inextricable entwining of *fabula* and *sjuzhet* guarantees that this will always be an ontology constituted through, and indissociable from, the subjectivity (or subjectivities) “seeing” and “saying” the world.<sup>13</sup>

Some kind of normative subjectivity here guarantees the ontological stability of the *fabula*, suturing its connection to the necessarily limited and finite symbolic representation of the

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<sup>12</sup> Hayles, “Narrating Bits,” lex. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Hayles, “Narrating Bits,” lex. 13-14.

sjuzhet. Because the relationship between these three terms (sjuzhet and fabula, mediated through the human subject) seems like a heightened and especially insidious version of the process whereby arbitrary signifiers come to function as signs, narrative here becomes exemplary of the problems with symbolic representation itself. Critical methods for analyzing the ossification and consolidation of power through regimes of representation have often focused on narrative as symbolic representation par excellence.

We could consider, for example, the commonplace “master narratives” critique, which uses the concept of narrative, in particular the linearity and teleology of narrative structure and its powerful inculcation of a shared “fabula” in the popular imagination, to describe the domineering discursive forces that define the contours and the acceptable parameters of public knowledge and social identity. This critique recognizes narrative’s structural capacity, discussed by Hayles above, to project a stable ontology and a fabulous “truth” from a highly constructed and fundamentally exclusionary *sjuzhet*, and to make agreeing with this stable ontology the *only* litmus test of functional—or anyway socially acceptable—human subjectivity. Beyond this, the “master narratives” critique emphasizes narrative’s teleological focus, its propensity to totalize, its foreclosure and exclusion of alternate stories from the accepted imaginary fabula.

Digital theorist Sean Cubitt argues that this kind of critique defines narrative too narrowly, placing too great an emphasis on rationalism, causality and linearity as narrative’s essential—and essentially problematic—features. Cubitt even suggests that the anti-narrative position of many early postmodern critics derived less from the overbearing ideological impact of the informational structure itself, and much more from the critics’ response to the ways that structure had been used and idealized in very specific historical contexts for particular ends; this anti-narrative position is, Cubitt suggests, not so much a matter of structural critique as of

political and intellectual history. He ascribes the popular rejection of the ideal of linear narrative progress among key Western theorists in the decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to “the bitter [post-1968] anti-Marxism of key post-modern theorists like Lyotard, Baudrillard, Virilio and Deleuze.”<sup>14</sup> Cubitt argues that this bitterness “does not validate the attempt to ascribe to modernity an exclusively and uniquely narrative foundation,” nor, by extension, does it validate any attempt to critique or resist modernity by rejecting narrative. Nor, for Cubitt does this connection validate this critical viewpoint’s “insistence of the failure of the form.”<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, taking a far less dichotomized approach to the problem, Cubitt argues that narrative form may still have much to offer, even in our postmodern digital era. But understanding the terms of narrative’s persistence and continued value in media art of the digital age is no simple task. It demands appropriately flexible and nuanced critical models and, above all, a willingness to reconsider narrative’s relationship to literary analytical frameworks that have long connected the media mode of symbolic writing with the functioning of a properly “human” subjectivity. What I outline here is a humanist but pragmatic approach to this problem that seeks to understand transhistorical human needs by interrogating the ways in which different communicational structures and media modes channel the needs differently in different social and historical circumstances.

Here I return to my earlier suggestion that the conflicted relationship to narrative in much critical theory of the postmodern era has been less about representation per se, and more about a

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<sup>14</sup> I am less interested here in Cubitt’s conclusions about these theorists’ underlying motives (which is very much open to debate) than in his effort to connect their anti-narrative position to their historical and political contexts. See Sean Cubitt, “Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines: Why Narrative is Marginal to Multimedia and Networked Communication and Why Marginality is More Vital than Universality,” in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, ed. Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp (London: BFI, 2002), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Cubitt, “Spreadsheets,” 4.

struggle to understand what is genuinely “human” in the zones of interaction between “liberal humanist” and “posthuman” modes of subjectivity. For many of the early postmodern critics Cubitt cites, the problem with postmodern media culture was arguably not exclusively about the moral, ideological, and ethical failures of narrative form, but had just as much to do with the *practical* failures of symbolic representation in a social, economic, cultural, and mediatechnological milieu that was rapidly moving away from the logic of representation and toward that of simulation. The frustration bordering on despair of many critics associated with the early postmodern moment emphasized especially the dissipation of the limits that bound and guarantee the coherence of the “liberal humanist subject,” the limits on which representation itself, and by extension, and especially, narrative depends.

Before elaborating further, I should say more about the material and medial aspects of new media in tension with narrative expectations. To return to the basic narratological frameworks discussed above, the projected ontological stability of the fabula depends—and insists—on the relative *material* stability of the narrative text itself, the “sjuzhet,” variously conceived, as a discrete *object* of exchange. Beyond the limit that separates fabula from sjuzhet, the representational structure of narrative relies on other limits that define, contain, and preserve the object-identity of the text. This emphasizes narrative’s role as a fungible object of exchange, its function as a coherent “body of information.” It moreover inscribes a clear limit between the parties involved in this exchange—subject-limits, so to speak, around the teller and the receiver of the story. The subject in this case is presumed to maintain a separation both from other subjects and from the text itself, in part because of the text’s own object-limit, its own coherence, and also because of its temporal displacement; it is always-already or a priori to the subject’s own moment of apprehension. We might also consider here the binary separation of sjuzhet and

fabula itself, and the clear separation of both *sjuzhet* and *fabula* from the lived moment and the reality of the reader; the temporal displacement of the “story world” from the “real world.”

In a structuralist view of the system of representation, narrative occupies the middle range of an intricate and far-reaching fractal structure, wherein limits complexly beget and bespeak other limits. To the extent that these limits are presumed to be essential for human communication and cognition, the informational structure of narrative becomes inextricably associated with “human” values that ultimately have little to do with storytelling: critical thinking, independent thought, temporal mapping, historical agency, self-knowledge, shared community.

This helps to explain the conflicted relationship to narrative that has marked much critical theory of the postmodern era. We might understand the tensions around narrative within late-20<sup>th</sup> century critical theory as an effort to preserve these values while acknowledging the ideological limits of representation—that is to say, the exclusionary violence, foreclosure, and objectification that inhere in the structural limits of the symbolic system—as well as the pressures placed on these limits by the emerging structures of new media.

The pressures of greatest concern to the “key postmodern theorists” Cubitt invokes above include: 1) The ubiquity of audiovisual media flow; television, radio, advertising, etc (Baudrillard, Jameson); that is to say, the lack of spatial or temporal limits. 2) The infusion of media spectacle into every aspect of material life, the reconfiguration of material life after the fact of an instantaneously updated yet a priori media spectacle (Baudrillard, Virilio); that is, the lack of material, object, or ontological limits. 3) The instantaneity of media transmission, promoting a general acceleration of life’s pace, the reduction of temporal experience to a single dimension, the impossibility of reflection (Virilio, Lyotard); the lack of temporal limits, subject

limits, critical distance. 4) The impossibility of disengaging from this constant flow long enough to track one's own history, understand one's own relation to the whole, the impossibility of consolidating thereby a subjectivity generally capable of establishing causal relationships and anticipating future events (Jameson); the impossibility of creating a specular limit, of construing these other limits as a mirroring surface.<sup>16</sup> All in all, these add up to an inability for the postmodern subject to recreate for itself, in a media cultural context that so consistently and so insistently blurs them, the limits, binaries, and temporal order that are seen as necessary to narrative form.

This situation is unquestionably exacerbated by the emergence of digital media. Marie-Laure Ryan outlines the five most salient characteristics of digital textuality, highlighting the digital text's:

Reactive and interactive nature. By this I mean the ability of digital media to respond to changing conditions. *Reactivity* refers to responses to changes in the environment or to nonintentional user actions; *interactivity* is a response to a deliberate user action.

Multiple sensory and semiotic channels, or what we may call "multimedia capabilities," if we are not afraid of the apparent paradox of talking about multimedia media.

Networking capabilities. Digital media connect machines and people across space and bring them together in virtual environments. This opens the possibility of multi-user systems and live ("real-time") as well as delayed communication.

Volatile signs. Computer memory is made of bits whose value can switch back and forth between positive and negative. Unlike books or paintings, digital texts can be

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage Books, 1998) and *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Frederic Jameson, *Late Marxism* (London and New York: Verso, 1990) and *Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, transl. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) and *The Postmodern Condition*, transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Paul Virilio, *Lost Dimension*, transl. David Mohrenberg (New York: Semiotexte, 1991).

refreshed and rewritten, without having to throw away the material support. This property explains the unparalleled fluidity and dynamic nature of digital images.

Modularity. Because the computer makes it so easy to reproduce data, digital works tend to be composed of many autonomous objects. These objects can be used in many different contexts and combinations, and undergo various transformations, during the run of the work.<sup>17</sup>

These attributes overwhelmingly point to the ontological status of the digital text in itself. In contrast to the material stability of the printed page, and the relative stability of interpretive frameworks for making meaning of written texts, the digital text is volatile, reactive, and radically open to input from multiple sources. In itself it is immaterial, mere flashes of pixels and electrical impulses. At the same time, it is ultimately inseparable from a material “reading machine,”<sup>18</sup> and through its use of “multiple sensory and semiotic channels” – for example, gesture, touch, and sound as well as vision—it relates directly to the embodied user and his or her sense of material situatedness. Precisely because of the technological apparatus that permits them to eschew any independent or permanent material form of their own, digital texts privilege the embodied moment of reading and thereby shift the burden of ontological stability away from either the text’s object-identity or its content, placing this burden instead on the sensorium and the embodied memory of the individual reader.

Note that this marks a shift of ontological emphasis from the projected “fabula” to the embodied moment of interaction between reader and text (an underacknowledged element of the “fabula” in the first place). The digital text is neither prosthesis nor supplement, nor even an<sup>19</sup> extension, of “man”; instead human and text alike become networked, integrated parts of a

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<sup>17</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, “Will New Media Produce New Narratives?,” in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 338.

<sup>18</sup> See Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman, or Writing Machines* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London and New York: Verso Books, 1983).

distributed memory system. This presents a very different way of thinking about how texts operate in creating and sustaining public memory, one that may better be likened to pre-literate, immaterial oral cultures than to archival cultures of writing and document preservation. I will return to this point later in this chapter; for now it is enough to note, as have many theorists of digital textuality before me, that digital texts make no promise, and permit little fantasy, of the “fabula,” that imaginary projection presumed ontologically firm, that, certainly since Benedict Anderson, has been assumed to ground the shared sense of history and experience that underwrites collective identity and a sense of community.

If the fantastical stability of the fabula is the point where narrative structure becomes ideological, becomes personal, so to speak, because it “generates a more or less stable ontology” that proves difficult to question and furthermore “guarantees that this will always be an ontology constituted through, and indissociable from, the subjectivity (or subjectivities) ‘seeing’ and ‘saying’ the world,”<sup>20</sup> the corollary instability of new media has proven to be a major focal point of popular optimism—even idealism—about new media’s potential to develop new modes of storytelling.

For this reason, many critics have embraced the hope that new media textualities would offer a possibility of storytelling, even an alternative mode of historiography, that could thematically counter, without structurally endorsing, the self-serving fantasies of dominant cultural narratives, counter the messages of objectification and domination without replicating the structures of object limits and hierarchical organization. This would be the hope, already expressed by feminist film theorists in the 1970s, that new media might engender (or un-gender) subjects who recognize that the mandate for subject limits, for possessive and object-oriented

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<sup>20</sup> Hayles, “Narrating Bits,” lex. 13.

critical distance, was a selective, questionable, and ultimately grim privilege to begin with. This would also be the hope that new media could meet Homi Bhabha's call, in his brilliantly subtle and narratologically complex essay "DissemiNation" for a "new kind of writing" that could negotiate the complexities of postcolonial and transcultural experience and memory, shaped by powerful and often conflicting cultural forces but not reducible to a neat binary<sup>21</sup>—or to what Leslie Adelson critiques as the static catch-all category of "between."<sup>22</sup>

Some version of this hope hovers over art historian and theorist Söke Dinkla's online article "Virtual Narrations: From the Crisis of Storytelling to New Narration as Mental Potentiality," her key introductory essay for the "Narration" section of the website *MedienKunstNetz (MediaArtNet)*. This website, funded in part by Germany's Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (Federal Ministry for Education and Research), provides one of the most conceptually sophisticated media art compendia publicly available. Its early presence on the web as an online archive testifies to its motivating premise and to its own operating theory of new media textuality: that "media art—by definition multimedia, time-based or process-oriented—cannot be sufficiently mediated in book form."<sup>23</sup>

In "Virtual Narrations," Dinkla connects this view of new media textuality to the hope that digital media hold the capacity to reach beyond the ideological confines of narrative in order to "tell new stories" that would have otherwise been excluded by the patriarchal, domineering structure of symbolic representation. She describes a "virtual Renaissance" of narrative in late-20<sup>th</sup> century cultural practice, a development that, she writes, appears "with particular intensity in

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<sup>21</sup> See Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation," in *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> Leslie Adelson, "Against Between: A Manifesto," in *Zafer Şenocak*, ed. Tom Cheesman and Karin E. Yeşilada (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> See *MediaArtNet*, <http://www.mediaartnet.org>.

the electronic media.”<sup>24</sup>

Practically speaking, as Dinkla notes, this led to a resurgence, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, of media artworks, particularly digital works, that used or utilized narrative. Of this shift, Dinkla asks the following crucial, if familiar, questions:

Do these narrative practices really constitute a Renaissance of storytelling... do they represent the hope that, after the collapse of the great utopias in the seventies, a new form can be found with which to render narratives viable once again? Is this change in attitude eclectic... does it represent a step back in time to the era prior to post-modern criticism and before widespread questioning of representation as an acceptable means of reflecting social reality? Or, rather, is a new narrative form emerging, one that is in a position to reflect on the history and stories of the modern era and make an incisive statement on the state of our reality?<sup>25</sup>

Dinkla’s question is deeply idealistic, but perhaps it speaks to a sense of cultural pragmatism as well—a growing sense throughout the 1990s that *some* form of storytelling might be culturally necessary after all, and an increasing willingness to experiment with narrative form—despite its strong associations with the outdated media mode of symbolic representation and a clear awareness of its ideological drawbacks; a sense that the tradeoff might ultimately be worthwhile, or indeed that the aversion to narrative form was itself a kind of binarism.

To me, Dinkla’s question above has to do with narrative, but more so with how we, as readers, recognize and respond to narrative in various textual forms within our lived social realities. So I will bracket the idealism of Dinkla’s question for the moment, and delve deeper into the technological changes and epistemological shifts that made the question possible to ask.

It would be foolish and impossible to try to isolate specific cultural causes for the resurgence of narrative in media artworks during this period; however, it is worth dwelling on

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<sup>24</sup> Söke Dinkla, “Virtual Narrations: From the crisis of storytelling to new narration as mental potentiality,” *MedienKunstNetz*, [http://www.mediaartnet.org/themes/overview\\_of\\_media\\_art/narration/](http://www.mediaartnet.org/themes/overview_of_media_art/narration/).

<sup>25</sup> Dinkla, “Virtual Narrations.”

two interrelated cultural shifts around the same moment: the continued expansion and transformation of digital media technologies themselves, and a concurrent phase change in prevalent epistemological paradigms and interpretive frameworks.

The moment to which Dinkla refers saw the rapid rise of personal computers, increasingly widespread familiarity with their modes of textuality, and the emergence of related forms of interactive competence or literacy. At the same time, technological limitations placed huge constraints on the complexity of programs that could be run.

An overview of this situation may be found in Dieter Daniels' introduction to a compiled volume, published in 2002, of the CD-ROM magazine *Artintakt*, originally published from 1994-1999. Daniels remarks on the "transitional" nature of the optical disc as storage medium. The CD-ROM, he suggests, marks a moment in passing from print media to a world in which "we can acquire similar data structures on-line via electronic networks";<sup>26</sup> a moment in between the material stability of printed texts and the immateriality of networked information flows. Even in this early period, the digital text reflected the characteristics outlined by Ryan, above, in its "reactive and interactive nature....Multiple sensory and semiotic channels. Networking capabilities....Volatile signs.... Modularity."<sup>27</sup> Yet processing speeds, information storage capacities, and networking were still primitive enough to place real limits on the digital text's complexity in this period. Despite the many ways in which digital textuality already challenged the presumed ontological stability of writing, the primary storage medium for programs themselves remained the optical disc for many years.

Referring back to the discussion above of structuring limits as a point of contention and

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<sup>26</sup> Dieter Daniels, "Ars ex machina," *Artintact* 1, CD-ROM (2002), republished in *The Complete Artintact*, DVD-ROM, ed. Astrid Sommer (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Ryan, "Will New Media Produce New Narratives?," 338.

conflict between symbolic representation and new media simulation, between “liberal humanist” and “posthuman” subjectivities, it is interesting to note that the material localization of digital programs in disc format upheld, for a time, the notion of a certain object-limit around the digital text. This in turn corresponded to an effective containment of the “reading machine” that ran the program: in the most literal, material way, the reading machine would be limited to a local network consisting of computer terminal, program, and interacting human. This points to the relative finitude of digital texts before the rise of much more expansive high-speed, high-bandwidth information networks with the explosion of the web in the (late) 1990s. After the rapid expansion of the internet, after bigger networks become the norm, these cultural paradigms would shift radically as reading possibilities came to seem more and more expansive, but in this earlier transitional era, the “text” of the program was still relatively contained and stable, and still held a great deal of projecting power to define reading possibilities in a direct way.

Hayles suggests the term “possibility space” to describe what becomes of the *fabula* in the intersection of narrative and increasingly open-ended database formats, adding much-needed complexity to Manovich’s opposition of narrative and database. In her discussion of narrative and digital textuality in “Narrating Bits,” Hayles presents an “alternative interpretation of the narrative/database configuration as a dynamic between narrative and a new term that I call possibility space”<sup>28</sup>:

As long as narratology is dominated by the theoretical dyad *fabula*-*sjuzhet* (including the variants discussed earlier of story, discourse, narrative, narrating, etc.), it retains an almost unavoidable presupposition of realism embedded in narrative form (whatever the narrative content), for the *fabula* is related to the *sjuzhet* through the assumption that the *sjuzhet* takes place within the storyworld expressed through the *fabula*. Of course, although the *fabula* logically precedes the *sjuzhet*, the *sjuzhet* factually and chronologically must precede the reader’s construction of the *fabula*. Nevertheless, according to the testimony of the innumerable readers and most writers, the construction of

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<sup>28</sup> Hayles, “Narrating Bits,” lex. 2.

the fabula remains an indispensable aid in creating, representing, and interpreting the sjuzhet.

What happens, then, if the sjuzhet is understood to be generated from a possibility space rather than a fabula, as in the (admittedly extreme) case of the hypothesized books in the Library of Babel? Readers may and probably will continue to construct a fabula (as the narrator in Borges' fiction does to explain the existence of the Library), but the power of this construction to convey an ontology is weakened. Underwriting the existence of the sjuzhet is not the assumption of a prior storyworld, with its more or less convincing ontology, but merely the operations of a possibility space running through all possible permutations, some of which are understood as being realized in the sjuzhet. Consequently, as the possibility space cooperates, competes, and otherwise engages with narrative to create fictions, readers move from the relative ontological security of the fabula↔sjuzhet inference to the more ontologically unstable progression: possibility space↔sjuzhet(↔fabula). Unlike trying to imagine an infinite storyworld—a project before which the imagination trembles-- it is quite easy, as Borges shows, to imagine an infinite possibility space.<sup>29</sup>

In terms of structural models for understanding narrative and digital textuality, we might think the “transitional” nature of the optical disc as indeed promoting a possibility space rather than a static, ontologically stable fabula, but a *limited* possibility space, quite distinct from the seemingly limitless possibility space that emerged with the explosion of the internet and its widely dispersed, largely immaterial mode of information storage. The notion of “possibility space” behind the instantaneous manifestation of the sjuzhet suggests a different way of thinking the text's virtual horizon as a “closed” or an “open” infinity, and of reading more structural complexity into this horizon than a straight narratological model would allow.

Even without appropriately complex analytical models, the simple fact that RAM and free interactivity existed, (and that the textual modes it supported, the multimedia and multisensory interactivity, were becoming increasingly familiar), was enough to overturn many assumptions about narrative structure—for example, those assumptions pertaining to the ontological stability of an a priori “text” presumed to exist before and persist after the reader's

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<sup>29</sup> Hayles, “Narrating Bits,” lex. 22-23.

engagement with it, those pertaining to the clear ontological relationship between *sjuzhet* and *fabula*, or to the necessary linearity of textual organization and reader experience alike. This transition was a moment when, from a literary perspective, new media seemed excitingly unstable, yet still contained in ways familiar to literary structuralist analytical frameworks. Digital textuality seemed to offer an answer to the liberatory dream of the creative and agential reader postulated by Roland Barthes, for example,<sup>30</sup> a reader unbound by allegiance to the “metaphysics” of the authoritative ontology of the written text. This association underlies Dinkla’s placing of new media narrative experimentation in the tradition of literary modernism;<sup>31</sup> digital media seemed to expand the technological possibilities for formalist literary aspirations. We might note that some of the great early hypertext novels emerged at about this time, along with the user-friendly hypertext writing platform *Storyspace* in the mid-to-late 1980s, which supported the creation of classics like Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon: A Story* (1987, published 1990), or Shelly Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995).

Such experiments supported the sense that digital textualities made manifestly clear and impossible to deny several difficult literary-theoretical ideas that had been around for quite a while. Even the idealism of Söke Dinkla’s argument about new media and narrative possibility in “Virtual Narrations,” discussed above, comes in part from the fact that she situates the “virtual Renaissance” of narrative within a distinctly literary historical framework, presenting new media technology as a happy solution to a longstanding literary problem. Dinkla contrasts the narrative Renaissance of new media to the near-century-long “crisis of storytelling,” that preceded it, exemplifying this crisis with the tensions and experiments of literary modernism in general and James Joyce in particular. These experiments culminated, she argues, in “the [anti-narrative]

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<sup>30</sup> See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1974).

<sup>31</sup> Dinkla, “Virtual Narrations.”

nihilism of the 1970s and early 1980s,... the radicalism of ‘Stop making sense’ (the denial of coherent meaning contexts),” but now, “in this light,” of contemporary digital media, such nihilism “now itself appears as a totalizing gesture”<sup>32</sup>—an expression of the very binary ideology it hoped to avoid.

Throughout this period, the expansion of digital technologies themselves and of popular familiarity with them made it possible to imagine more and more complex negotiations of this binary, more nuanced and more sophisticated ways of thinking the “possibility space” between text, reader, and world, a situation that did not so much resolve the problems of literary theory and narrative representation as transpose them to a subtler register of investigation.

In her 1995 study *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle described the “phenomenon... of computer-mediated experiences bringing philosophy down to earth.” Turkle writes,

One of my students at MIT dropped out of a course I teach on social theory, complaining that the writings of the literary theorist Jacques Derrida were simply beyond him. He found that Derrida’s dense prose and far-flung philosophical allusions were incomprehensible. The following semester I ran into the student in an MIT cafeteria. “Maybe I wouldn’t have to drop out now,” he told me. In the past month, with his roommate’s acquisition of new software for his Macintosh computer, my student had found his own key to Derrida. That software was a type of hypertext, which allows a computer user to create links between related texts, songs, photographs, and video, as well as to travel along the links made by others. Derrida emphasized that writing is constructed by the audience as well as by the author and that what is absent from the text is as significant as what is present. The student made the following connection:

Derrida was saying that the messages of the great books are no more written in stone than are the links of a hypertext. I look at my roommate’s hypertext stacks and I am able to trace the connections he made and the peculiarities of how he links things together....And the things he might have linked but didn’t. The traditional texts are like [elements in] the stack. Meanings are arbitrary, as arbitrary as the links in a stack.”<sup>33</sup>

Although Turkle describes this as an illustration of “philosophy” brought down to earth

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<sup>32</sup> Dinkla, “Virtual Narrations.”

<sup>33</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 17.

by the experience of digital technology, her anecdote emphasizes that the “philosophy” most of interest to her, and to many at this moment, was that of post-structuralist literary theory. This observation underscores the prevalent sense at the time of the universal applicability of theories related to writing and the textuality of writing; the so-called “linguistic turn” in critical theory.

I’ll note here as an aside that, at the same general moment when Turkle was writing about digital technologies making the complex ideas of Jacques Derrida materially accessible and obvious to broader audiences, Derrida himself was asking, in his 1995 lecture and essay *Archive Fever*, if his deconstructive methods—critical of, but ultimately indissociable from structuralist binarism and obsession with limits—were not, in the end, incommensurable with digital culture.<sup>34</sup> Hayles has argued that it was precisely the mis-fit between structuralist assumptions about language and the everyday experience of new media that made deconstruction such a popular and apparently all-powerful theoretical model in the first place. She writes that, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writing’s fundamental

dialectic between absence and presence came clearly into focus with the advent of deconstruction because it was *already being displaced as a cultural presupposition* by [the proto-digital informational axes of] randomness and pattern. Presence and absence were forced into visibility, so to speak, because they were already losing their constitutive power to form the ground for discourse, becoming instead the *subject* of discourse. In this sense, deconstruction is the child of an information age, formulating its theories from strata pushed upward by the emerging substrata beneath.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, Cubitt explicitly notes a decline in the importance of deconstruction as a critical approach throughout the 1990s, pointing to 1995 as a somewhat-arbitrary date for a shift in dominant epistemologies and major trends of critical theory that we might call a “virtual turn” to distinguish it from the “linguistic turn” of the earlier era. Since this shift, Cubitt writes,

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<sup>34</sup> See *Archive Fever*, a work I discuss at much greater length later in this chapter. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, transl. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 43-44.

no longer concerned with the binarisms of representation and deconstruction theories....our central concern...is with the reality we inhabit and construct, and which in turn inhabits and constructs us.”<sup>36</sup>

This is in no way to deny that some concept of “the virtual” was a major concern for Derrida as well, but rather to indicate a widespread change in how we imagine that virtual to be construed, the conceptual models and analytical tools we use to interrogate it, and where we look for it in the fabric of our cultural lives. We might think this turn away from deconstruction in terms of the “closed” and “open” infinities I associate with Hayles’ “possibility space” above. It marks a shift of emphasis from a “contained” virtual, one that exists as the “in-between” term of a binary system and is limited to the play of *différance* within the structural laws and limits of language, to a more “limitless” virtual, one that emphasizes more the existence of mutually-influencing fields and forces in a broadly inclusive and only partially differentiated system and emphasizes the qualities of emergence and evolution rather than systemic control and overdetermination.

It is worth pointing out again here that the binarisms of this first, “contained,” virtual remain foundational to much narrative theory—a fact that attests once again to the close relationship that intellectually binds structuralism and narratology just as closely together as structuralism and deconstruction. And this is indeed part of the danger. The appearance of narrative codes in new media artworks may have something important to suggest about informational structure, identity, and “posthuman” experience. But we, as critics, may fail to grant them the importance they are due, or click too quickly into analytical modes that remain oriented to the media logic of writing and to an implicitly literary “liberal humanist” subjectivity. We should remember here Dinkla’s idealism about the narrative Renaissance of new media in the 1980s and 1990s and the literary framework she uses to describe it; the suggestion that, for

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<sup>36</sup> Sean Cubitt, “The Chronoscope: The Ontology of Time in Digital Media,” in *Screen-Based Art*, ed. Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 65.

many artists of the time, using the spatialized, “database” format of digital media to counteract the rigid teleological linearity of traditional narrative structure was a way to avoid narrative’s worst ideological drawbacks. The critical writings around such artworks often celebrated digital media’s capacity to recuperate narrative form and unlock the liberatory potential of truly interactive and nonlinear storytelling. Early celebrations of hypertext narrative, like those of David Jay Bolter, provide examples of this critical tendency.<sup>37</sup>

It is true that the fragmentary and nonlinear form of hypertext highlights and makes vastly more conspicuous an interval—the “contained virtual,” if you like—that had always existed within the written text. But this merely focuses and does not by any means resolve the tension between “liberal-humanist” and “posthuman” models of subjectivity that come into play in virtual intervals like these.

Too often, critical approaches to narrative in interactive media take for granted that the psychic orientation of the reading subject who encounters this virtual interval will still be conditioned by the psychodynamics of symbolic representation. They assume, for example, that the presence of narrative codes within a text will invoke a subject who is desirous of narrative pleasure, desirous of an ontologically stable fabula, desirous of epistemological mastery, and desirous of these things at every juncture or branching of linear movement forward through the interactive text; they assume that the process of navigating even an expanded, multiple, multi-faceted narrative form will necessarily titillate these desires. Too often it is taken as given in these readings that, though the technological apparatus, the material form, and the ideological limits of narrative may change, the subject’s *desire* for narrative engagement remains the same.

A far more interesting approach to the reading of narrative in new media artworks is to

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 1999).

rethink the psychodynamics of the reading moment itself. Instead of reading narrative codes as projecting ostensibly transhistorical “human” drives into the new media moment, we should attempt to understanding the persistence of narrative as one part of the adaptive emergence of “posthuman” identities and socialities, and learn to reconsider narrative desire in terms of the real cultural and historical needs of the moment.

Fortunately, epistemological frameworks associated with the “virtual turn” provide flexible and nuanced tools for analyzing the persistence of narrative codes without snapping into binary frameworks—either the ones that support various narrative-anti-narrative conflicts or the ones that structure narrative representation itself.

In the opening of his chapter “Digital Impossibility: Cruising the Aesthetic Haze of New Media,” Timothy Murray reiterates that “the ‘interactivity’ of digital aesthetics is commonly understood to shift the ground of the artistic project away from ‘representation’ and toward ‘virtualization,’ away from ‘resemblance’ and toward ‘simulation.’ Rather than celebrate the art object’s imitation of nature... digital aesthetics can be said to position the spectator on the threshold of the virtual and actual.”<sup>38</sup>

This “threshold” is not a static place, but a dynamic and diverse process; for Murray, the key concept here is not so much the stasis of similitude as the speedy interface of difference and divergence... Already in 1968, Gilles Deleuze was articulating just such an aesthetic when he theorized those ‘elements, varieties of relations and singular points [that] coexist in the work or the object, without it being possible to designate a point of view privileged over others.’<sup>39</sup>

Murray argues that this vision “might be understood, at the beginning of the new millennium, as having come to material fruition in the interactive aesthetics of CD-ROM and digital

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<sup>38</sup> Timothy Murray, *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 195.

<sup>39</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 195.

installation.”<sup>40</sup> I will return to the complexity and usefulness of this “threshold” as an analytical model later in this chapter; for the moment it is most important to recognize here the concept of the digital “impossible” itself—the coexistence of disparate elements within this aesthetic field, and the emergence of a framework of understanding them that does not resort to hierarchy, sublimation, or any other reconciliation or erasure of their differences.

If the nature of digital impossibility reminds us, with Dinkla, that the anti-narrative rigor of “‘stop making sense’ (the denial of coherent meaning contexts)” is indeed a “totalizing gesture,”<sup>41</sup> it also requires us to acknowledge, as Cubitt writes, that “narrative is only one among several modes of organization characteristic of new media.” As Cubitt also notes, this observation “has an impact on certain universalist claims for narrative analysis, and that one crucial measure of value, the relation to narrative models, therefore does not hold good in assessing new media texts and practices.”<sup>42</sup> A valid critical practice should therefore neither deny nor universalize our ideas about narrative models.

Yet so many other ideals and values are powerfully embedded in our thoughts about narrative representation. And for several decades a critical practice oriented to interrogating the form and resonance of such narrative models has vastly expanded our ways of thinking in other arenas as well: the tensions between structure and variation, the focus on regimes of representation and repetition, their relationship to knowledge and fantasy and pleasure, to the play of identificatory and epistemological desire.

No one would claim that these cultural forces cease to exist simply because the dominant media mode of our society has changed. Nonetheless, they exist in a close relationship to the

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<sup>40</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 195.

<sup>41</sup> Dinkla, “Virtual Narrations.”

<sup>42</sup> Cubitt, “Spreadsheets,” 4.

media mode of symbolic representation. Critical theorists today must grapple with a much slipperier understanding of the interrelationship between media technology and social selfhood (and by extension its effects on community, on cultural or political agency). At the same time, they must face the suspicion that one of our most powerful tools for investigating the subtler operations of this relationship, the practice of deconstructive close reading, is now irretrievably dated, no longer valid, less and less viable as the structuring limits it illuminated seem less and less culturally and mediatechnologically relevant.

Judith Roof describes this situation as the “foreclosure of representation” – that is to say, the closing-out of representation itself as a focus for critical energy; the loss of analytical methods associated with deconstruction. Roof laments this loss, associating the fading of such clear-cut critical methods with a general lack of intellectual rigor and stamina within the academy. In the process, however, Roof reveals deeply rooted presumptions about structuralist methodology and the structuring of “human” psychic drives. She writes,

the foreclosure of representation as a complex ambiguous, uncertain, yet material (in the sense that it can produce the operative yet immeasurable) force may well be an effect of grief over the loss of the kinds of indexicality that represented presence, the fading predominance of structures (and structuralist ways of thinking) that signaled control and regularity and the rapid dissolution of even airline-based gauges of temporal/spatial relations, among other epistemological warpings. Or the evacuation of representation may compensate for the nearly incomprehensible complexity of science—of cellular biochemistry in league with quantum theories, for example. The more non-figurable these processes become, the more transparent we believe the figurative to be.<sup>43</sup>

Roof makes an excellent point here about a critical atmosphere that is stymied by the apparent atavism of its own primary tools and all too willing to accept as tautology the “given-ness” of the world around it. Nonetheless, there is a certain circularity to her argument that proves telling for the project of rethinking narrative representation in the digital age. Note that Roof discusses the

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<sup>43</sup> Judith Roof, “The Poetics of DNA: The Evacuation of Representation,” email to *Empyre—Soft-skinned-space* list serve, October 5, 2007.

critical response to the loss of “structuralist ways of thinking” in psychological terms that are *themselves* inextricably related to a structuralist mode of analysis. More specifically, Roof upholds the idea that a system of loss and compensation is *the* foundation of universally human psychological drives; she presumes here a transhistorical, unstated desire for conceptual mastery through “figuration,” and a notion that foreclosure, denial, and symbolic substitution are essential, and essentially structural, grief responses.

The relationship between these presumed psychological drives and symbolic representation—most especially narrative representation—has been well speculated; this is the very process, for example, of the “symbolic drama” of the famous “Fort-Da” game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a micro-narrative form of play that, Freud argued, allowed his toddler-aged subject and grandson Little Hans to symbolically master the disabling anxiety and helplessness he felt at his mother’s departure.<sup>44</sup> Storytelling, mastery through figuration, and compensation for disabling loss are here the prime operations of consolidating selfhood and of symbolic representation both.

These psychological operations are part of the backdrop for Hayles’ understanding of the transformation of subjectivity in the age of new media and the connections she draws between different media logics and the contrast between “human” and “posthuman” subjectivities. On the most fundamental level of signification, Hayles differentiates between the “floating signifier” of Jacques Lacan and the “flickering signifier,” a concept I will revisit later in this chapter.

Hayles’ discussion of Lacanian psycholinguistics reminds us that “the dialectic between

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<sup>44</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, transl. James Strachey (New York and London: Norton, 1961).

absence and presence is central to Lacan's theory, as it is to much of deconstruction."<sup>45</sup> For Lacan, she writes,

a double reinforced absence is at the core of signification—the absence of signifieds as things-in-themselves as well as the absence of stable correspondences between signifiers. The catastrophe in psycholinguistic development corresponding to this absence in signification is castration, the moment when the (male) subject symbolically confronts the realization that subjectivity, like language, is founded on absence."<sup>46</sup>

In contrast, the “flickering signifier” illustrates the fact that no such loss or absence lies at the heart of virtual simulation, a recognition that sets the scene for an entirely different understanding of communication and subject formation.

Marie-Luise Angerer notes that (like Derrida), Lacan himself was attuned to the pressure placed on his structural theory by the different material and psychological apparatus of new media. “At the end of *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*,” Angerer writes,

Lacan surprisingly mentions what he says we can call the ‘mass media.’ He indicates that it is tempting to see these media as augmenting the society of the spectacle, to use Guy Debord's term. Instead, he claims, they contribute to a diffusion of the gaze and the voice, but he makes no further comment on this matter."<sup>47</sup>

The gaze here is understood to be a singularly coherent force that consolidates the subject from the outside by postulating the subject's ego-ideal, the ideal of the “liberal humanist subject,” defined in terms of its coherence, wholeness, autonomy. The notion that this gaze itself is diffused in a new media environment suggests that, even within Lacanian terms, a more complex dynamic of constitutive and disciplinary forces give rise to the new media subject, and shape that

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<sup>45</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, “The Seductions of Cyberspace,” in *Rethinking Technologies*, ed. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 186.

<sup>46</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 30-31.

<sup>47</sup> Marie-Luise Angerer, “New Technology and its Subject,” in *Screen-Based Art*, ed. Annette W. Bakema and Henk Slager (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 14.

subject's narrative desire.

If the ego-ideal in Lacan's framework is understood as a fantasy of wholeness designed to mask an internal experience of division, incoherence, and lack, it is not particularly difficult to grasp the reasons why new media disrupt this fantasy. Indeed, the fantasy of wholeness that masks and compensates for internal division, suppression and repression, and absence forms the main foil for Hayles' argument in *How We Became Posthuman*. Throughout *Posthuman*, Hayles emphasizes that human subjectivity and agency are not containable as neatly self-present forces wrapped in a physical and psychic package we might call "the individual." Instead, they operate (and not just in the digital era) as part of a distributed network that also includes material substrates, machines, and other persons. Partiality and fragmentation are intrinsic aspects of Hayles' posthuman "splice." Though this "splice" plainly undermines the assumptions of the independent modern "liberal humanist" subject, Hayles writes, "when the human is seen as part of a distributed system, the full expression of human capability can be seen precisely to *depend* on the splice rather than being imperiled by it."<sup>48</sup> To be a virtual subject is to be neither whole nor lacking, but simply to be networked, intrinsically; the network here is neither supplement, nor substitute, nor prosthesis. It does not function as such and therefore does not support a structuralist "psychodynamics" that would view it in this way.

Cyberfeminist theorists have long recognized the fact that the "lack of a lack"<sup>49</sup> that describes the posthuman subject shows us a path away from pervasive gendering of questions of boundaries, consolidation, and selfhood that have shaped much critical theory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>48</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 290.

<sup>49</sup> Here I consciously quote Mary Ann Doane's phrase to describe the experience of the female spectator of cinema; see Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

If anything, Hayles' model of posthuman subjectivity un-genders and universalizes a model of subject constitution that had been relegated to the "feminine" position in classical psychoanalytic (and psycholinguistic) theory and actively queried by feminist psychoanalytic theorists from the 1950s onward. The idea of the subject as networked and partial, neither wholly complete in itself, nor ever wholly disengaged from its Others, whether these are other humans, animals, machinery, was radical when Donna Haraway first published her *Cyborg Manifesto* in 1985, setting the scene for a utopian hope that new media technologies might alter not only our sense of our own selves' boundaries, but our sense of how we relate to others. If this relationship is classically understood as a gendered push-and-pull between contempt and desire, as Hayles writes, the blurring of subject and object limits in a new media context can change this psychic dynamic.

I will take a moment to say a little more here about subject-limits, gendering, and the desire for the other in the construction of "liberal humanist" subjectivity, particularly as it pertains to the concept of shared identity and narrative desire. A posthuman view of subjectivity emphasizes intersubjectivity, emphasizing that the relation between self and other is virtual, interdependent, and interpenetrating, and moving away from the "liberal humanist" subject's emphasis on limits and the pervasive gendering of the polarities of self and other that ensue.

Hayles writes that,

in their negative manifestations, the self's boundaries act as symbolic structures that attack and denigrate whatever is outside and therefore different from the self, as if they were immune systems projected outside the skin and left to run amok in the world. When these dynamics prevail, the Other is either assimilated into the self to become an inferior version of the Same or remains outside as a threatening and incomprehensible alterity. So women are constructed as castrated men or Medusa figures; blacks as inferior whites or cannibalistic devils; the poor as lazy indigents or feral criminals. Conflating self and Other, the Mirror of the Cyborg brings these constructions into question.... One can imagine scenarios in which the Other is accepted as both different *and* enriching, valued precisely because it represents what cannot be controlled and predicted. The puppet then

stands for the release of spontaneity and alterity within the feedback loops that connect the subject with the world, as well as with those aspects of sentience that the self cannot recognize as originating from within itself. At this point the puppet has the potential to become more than a puppet, representing instead a zone of interaction that opens the subject to the exhilarating realization of Otherness valued as such.”<sup>50</sup>

Yet, despite the exhilarating potential of Hayles’ vision here, the older objectifying framework persists—a fact recognized only too well by artist group Mongrel whose targeting of racist users of the “whites-only Internet” I discussed in the opening of this chapter. To say, as does Lacan, that the gaze is “diffused” in a new media context does not automatically free us from powerful modeling of our ideas about how the gaze structures and orients our pleasure and desire—nor from the material effects this modeling has had on the power and experience of real people in real historical moments.

I’ll return here, briefly, to questions I raised in reference to Mongrel earlier in this chapter: What is it that we need from the archive? What do we ask of it? How does our desire for it relate to our sense of identity and memory? And what, if anything, changes with a shift from “liberal humanist” to “posthuman,” from structural to virtual understandings of selfhood?

Again, the changing role of structural limits proves crucially important here. In traditional psychoanalytic models of subjectivity, the figure of the mother looms large at the boundaries of the self. Hayles writes that:

Whereas Freud identified the male child’s fear of castration with the moment when he sees female genitalia and constructs them as lack, Wolfe (following Bergler) places the anxious moment considerably earlier, in the series of ‘splittings’ and separations that the infant experiences from his primary love object, the mother. Given this scenario, the catalyst for anxiety is not woman’s lack but the ambiguity of boundaries between infant and mother. The mother is the object of projected anger for two contradictory but paradoxically reinforcing reasons. When she withdraws from the infant, she traumatizes him; when she does not withdraw, she engulfs him.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Hayles, “Seductions of Cyberspace,” 187-188.

<sup>51</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 124-125.

By comparison, as Angerer writes,

According to Lacan, in the relation between the mirror image and the child a third element intervenes, the gaze of the mother. In the same way, according to Baudry, in the relation between the screen image and the spectator a third element is involved, which Baudry, like Lacan, identifies as a gaze. This third element makes possible and guarantees the identification between the child and the mirror image as well as that between the spectator and the screen image.<sup>52</sup>

She continues,

Whereas the relation with the other is imaginary in the sense that the self resembles the other, the relation with the Other is symbolic, that is, depends on the structure of language. Symbolic identification is identification with the Other, the place from whence we see ourselves as likeable. This place of the Other, the symbolic order, carries within it a kernel, a Thing (das Ding), a void which the subject must conceal. That is, this gaze from the place of the Other is not a gaze in a full sense. Rather, it is an empty gaze, by which the subject is haunted and feels itself observed, but nevertheless *for whom* the subject wants to “play a role”, as Žižek points out. Both identifications—the imaginary and the symbolic—are not strictly separable because imaginary identification is always an “identification *on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other*.”<sup>53</sup>

Here, as an a priori understanding that becomes a counterpoint to the concepts of posthuman subjectivity, we see the common conviction that selfhood, identity, and subjectivity are based in an irreconcilable but fluctuating binary of anger and desire. This assumption is foundational to Derrida’s argument in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, which is to say that Derrida throws it dramatically into question.

One of Derrida’s many tasks in *Archive Fever* is to attempt to pick apart the interrelationship between Freud’s powerful discourse of the unconscious, material technologies of communication, the underlying binarism of even Derrida’s own poststructuralist theory, and the turbulent advent and rise of digital (virtual) technologies. Derrida writes that,

the moment has come to accept a great stirring in our conceptual archive, and in it to cross a “logic of the unconscious” with a way of thinking of the virtual which is no longer limited by the traditional philosophical opposition between act and power.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Angerer, “New Technology and its Subject,” 14-15.

<sup>53</sup> Angerer (quoting Slavoj Žižek), “New Technology and its Subject,” 16.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 67.

Throughout *Archive Fever*, Derrida emphasizes the connections between material communications technology and Freud's figuration of the psyche; he writes that, now,

it is at least possible to ask whether...the structure of the psychic apparatus...resists the evolution of archival technoscience or not. Is the psychic apparatus *better* represented or is it *affected differently* by all the technical mechanisms for archivization and for reproduction, for prostheses of so-called live memory, for simulacrum of living things which already are, and will increasingly be, more refined, complicated, powerful than the 'mystic pad' (microcomputing, electronization, computerization, etc.)? ....if the upheavals in progress affected the very structures of the psychic apparatus, for example in their spatial architecture and in their economy of speed, it would be a question no longer of simple continuous progress in representation, in the *representative* value of the model, but rather of an entirely different logic.<sup>55</sup>

Or, put slightly differently, "Does it change anything that Freud did not know about the computer? And *where should the moment of suppression or repression be situated in these new models of recording and impression, or printing?*"<sup>56</sup>

Hayles, of course, taking her place among the canon of feminist theorists of identity, would argue that this "moment of suppression or repression" was never a structural necessity in the first place, and need not be located *anywhere* in these new models of subjectivity.

Nonetheless, Derrida's analysis is fascinating and instructive—especially for any attempt to understand the play of narrative desire against the logic of the virtual in contemporary digital and literary texts.

For Derrida, "the archive" stands as a figure for the body of shared discourse, of collective history and identity, for the past, for the social imaginary—a foundation and touchstone for identity both individual and collective. It becomes material, in the most literal way, as an authoritative collection of information: documents, papers, manuscripts, etcetera.

This literal (but never just literal) "archive" Derrida describes as a *place*, a place that is notably

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<sup>55</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 15.

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 26, my emphasis.

external to its subject: “there is,” Derrida writes, “no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.”<sup>57</sup>

Whether literal or conceptual, this archive of shared imagination is, like Freud’s unconscious, structured “like a language,” and almost indissociable from structuralist assumptions related to the technology of writing. As noted above, the archive has an ostensible “outside”; Derrida connects this to the gesture of inscription that externalizes and objectifies graphical representations of speech, thus introducing the structuring limits of ontological difference and temporal displacement that prove so important to Derridean (post)structuralist thought. As Derrida argues, these same gestures also characterize the division or partitioning of the unconscious for Freud, a premise that gives rise to the idea of the divided self, the separation of ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ experience, the division of the individual into incomprehensible interiority and over-determined social selfhood. This theory of identity formation at the most basic level lays the foundation for subsequent discussions of castration and loss, the binary of presence and absence, truth and falsehood, within the psyche itself. As Derrida points out, these gestures of inscription and externalization are themselves, in Freud’s figuration, intricately bound to the materiality of a specific writing technology—that, for example, of the “mystic pad,” which, for Derrida, encapsulates the very principle of writing as supplement, the notion of the “exteriority of the *memory aid*.”<sup>58</sup>

This notion of textual exteriority and memory prosthesis is an important concept I will revisit in my conclusions; for now it is enough to point out that Derrida explicitly connects a

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<sup>57</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 14, referencing Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” transl. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 74-117.

model for understanding human subjectivity to a model of communications technology, and both to a theory of language that binds subjectivity and mediatechnology together into a single, rather totalizing, conceptual framework:

this ‘mystic pad,’ this *exterior*, thus archival, model of the *psychic* recording and memorization apparatus, does not only integrate the inaugural concepts of psychoanalysis.... Taking into account the multiplicity of regions *in* the psychic apparatus, this model also integrates the necessity, inside the *psyche* itself, of a certain outside, of certain borders between insides and outsides. And with this *domestic outside*, that is to say also with the hypothesis of an *internal* substrate, surface, or space without which there is neither consignation, registration, impression nor suppression, censorship, repression, it prepares the idea of a psychic archive distinct from spontaneous memory, of a *hypomn-esis* distinct from *mn-em-e* and from *anamn-esis*: the institution, in sum, of a *prosthesis of the inside*.... The theory of psychoanalysis, then, becomes a theory of the archive and not only a theory of memory.”<sup>59</sup>

Grounded in the subject’s ambivalent relationship to power and social authority, this understanding of the archive corresponds to a very particular (if incalculably influential) understanding of how psychic energies are mobilized and given direction in relation to the past, to history, to memory. The gesture that constitutes the relationship between subject and archive of memory is an expression of authority, as well, and the primary expression of this power lies in the construction and preservation of a limit and an exteriority. As Derrida writes, the root of “archive,” “Arch-e,”

names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates the two principles in one: the historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law—*there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given—nomological principle.<sup>60</sup>

In his discussion of the archive’s self-replication, Derrida intimates a complex pattern of obedience and desire that governs humans’ relationship to the archive, to themselves, and to one another. For Derrida, the subject of the archive stands at the archive’s own spatiotemporal

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<sup>59</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 18-19.

<sup>60</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1.

threshold. It occupies the boundary of the *there* in which memory is inscribed, identity performed, and social authority enacted; and the *then*, the moment of archivization, repetition, reiteration, reproduction. The archive's power to shape the horizon of imaginative possibility at this threshold is immense: Derrida reminds us with respect to the contemporary "so-called news media" that "the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future."<sup>61</sup>

Yet this power does not result from simple determinism, the notion that everything must mimic what came before, but rather from much more complex operations of identity constitution and desire. Derrida notes the archive's capacity to project its own terms and structures into the future and likens this both to the subject's "deferred obedience" to paternal law in Freudian psychoanalysis and to the promise in Judaic mythos, the projection of a covenant of the law into the future.

It is in this latter sense that the temporal complexity of Derrida's archive emerges: the promise proposes a relationship with the future, but also a power over the future; it proposes to the future, *on behalf of that future*, the repetition of structures, power, and identity; it proposes an effectively contractual relation of identity and ethical responsibility between future and past. Derrida writes that, this "injunction, even when it summons memory or the safeguard of the archive, turns incontestably toward the future to come. It orders to promise, but it orders repetition, and first of all self-repetition, self-confirmation in a *yes, yes*."<sup>62</sup>

The archive therefore offers many positive things. In the repetition of its covenant with the past it ensures a connection with history, continuity, a source of identity, a continuation of faith, a source of empowerment and agency. Not

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<sup>61</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 79.

coincidentally, it offers a stable ontology as well—indeed, it makes its other positive offerings contingent upon its own ontological stability as both authoritative and apart; it clearly proscribes the ways and means by which its subjects may draw strength from, participate in, reflect or take part in its power. In this sense, the archive is regulation, restriction, law. It encompasses a threat of violence. In the most basic terms, the archive is bounded by two kinds of violence that are polar opposites of one another: the violence of forgetting—the exclusion of the past—and the violence of repetition—the exclusion of new possibility. Coursing between these poles, as Derrida argues, is the energy of the death drive, an energy of opposition and excess, which cannot be contained by either term of the structuring binary. As Derrida writes,

if repetition is thus inscribed at the heart of the future to come, one must also import there, *in the same stroke*, the death drive, the violence of forgetting, *superrepression* (suppression and repression), the anarchic, in short, the possibility of putting to death the very thing, whatever its name, which *carries the law in its tradition*: the archon of the archive, the table, *what* carries the table and *who* carries the table, the subjectile, the substrate, and the subject of the law.”<sup>63</sup>

Here the death drive is synonymous with both the drive to archive and the flaw in the archive; it is the “*mal d’archive*,” or “archive fever” that makes the archiving gesture desirable and necessary, indulgent and imperative, possible and untenable, all at once.

We might compare the power and the flaw of the archive here to the gaze and its emptiness in Lacan, recalling the Lacanian subject’s simultaneous desire to ‘play to’ this gaze, resentment of its power, and deep but denied suspicion that the gaze is, in fact, empty after all. We might also liken it to the “liberal humanist” subject’s conflicted response, cited by Hayles above, to any confusion of its boundaries with its mother. Here, too, individuation and power

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<sup>63</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 79.

are construed as both reflections of and oppositions to a coherent, singular “other.”

Interestingly, each of these models provides more than a suggestion of analogy between the power of this external, objectified, a priori ‘other’ and the maternal body—even Derrida notes that the *law* of the archive is distinctly patriarchal, the archive itself feminine or feminized. My final chapter, “Mother Archive, or, Remembering, the Matrix” explores the implications of this gendered and familial figuration. For now, I wish merely to emphasize the ambivalence of the subject’s response in these scenarios and the idea of the death drive itself as an energy of individuation, split between the two binary poles of obedience and destruction.

Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot*, describes the psychological pleasure we take in narrative as a version of this same energy. Narrative pleasure, for Brooks, is a variation of the death drive: a deep psychic energy held in suspension and allowed to play between again two polarized and seemingly exclusive desires. The first of these would be desire for the dissolution of self into the fantasy of imagination, allowing the fabula to supercede one’s real-life experience; this would be the desire for an alternate reality, for ontological blur, the immersive and escapist aspect of narrative pleasure. The second pole would be that desire for the ontological stability and certainty offered by narrative closure.<sup>64</sup> As is the case with Derrida’s *mal d’archive*, Brooks’ version of the death drive polarizes our relationship to the imaginary law of the text: we valorize the fantasy world of the narrative as living and real in our imagination; we simultaneously yearn for and abhor the moment when we can foreclose it as past-tense, over, dead.

It bears mentioning that Deleuze (whose engagements with narrative tend to be rather oblique, but whose expansive and non-binary understanding of the virtual has

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<sup>64</sup> See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

proven much more useful than Derrida's for understanding digital aesthetics), with Felix Guattari in *The Anti-Oedipus*, rejects the very notion of the death drive as a "ridiculous fiction."<sup>65</sup> This may serve as a reminder as well that this concept, though immeasurably influential, is nonetheless only one conceptual tool among many we might use to analyze the play of desire in digital texts.

The easy elision to be avoided here is that of an assumed correlation and overlapping between the structuring of psychic energy and a structuralist idea of temporality—that is to say, the interrelationship between present, past, and future—based in limits and lack. Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, describes the death drive in terms of a desire to return to an earlier state of being. It is a response to a deep loss, a "structural trauma" presumed constitutive to the human subject. For Freud, the death drive is manifest in the repetition compulsion related to traumatic loss or lack, in the subject's attempt to exert control or power or mastery over loss, to return to an earlier state of wholeness, a state before lack is instated or acknowledged, to return, if only virtually, via substitution and repetition, the repetition compulsion and the fetish both being virtual pathways of return to wholeness, to a present fantasy of past-tense wholeness, a return of something lost.

What does this have to do with the nature of archival desire? We can understand the archive as commemorating a lost moment in time, the fetish of identity and the fetish of narrative here both mobilizing an eternally-frustrated desire to restore that loss. But this is not the only way to understand the functioning of the archive, and certainly not the only way to understand the play of desire in a virtual framework.

I return here to Sean Cubitt's observation about the relaxing of anti-narrative taboos and

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<sup>65</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

the resurgence of narrative tendencies in media artworks. For Cubitt, this relaxation clearly demonstrates that, in the virtual era, “narrative is only one among several modes of organization.” While this does make narrative form once again available for aesthetic expression without quickly raising the ideological suspicions that might have attended it in an earlier moment, it also insists that “that one crucial measure of value, the relation to narrative models... does not hold good in assessing new media texts and practices.”<sup>66</sup> We should therefore interrogate these narrative models—not only as models for how we organize information, but for how we structure our desire for and the pleasure we take in knowing a virtual moment apart from our own.

One cue for how we might do this comes from Murray’s writing on the Digital Baroque. Above I briefly discussed the concept of digital impossibility and Murray’s observation that the emergence of virtual frameworks of interpretation mark the “deeply significant archaeological shift from *projection* to *fold* that is emphasized, if not wholly embodied, by the digital condition.”<sup>67</sup> The “fold” provides an exceptionally useful conceptual model for approaching the nonbinary virtual with precision and analytical rigor. Murray quotes Deleuze’s explanation of the fold as

a flexible or an elastic body [that] still has cohering parts that form a fold, such that they are not separated into parts of parts but are rather divided to infinity in smaller and smaller folds that always retain a certain cohesion. Thus a continuous labyrinth is not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds or separated into bending movements, each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surroundings.<sup>68</sup>

The fold “embodies the elasticity of seriality and the continuous labyrinth of single points (1’s

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<sup>66</sup> Cubitt, “Spreadsheets,” 4.

<sup>67</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 5.

and 0's),”<sup>69</sup> and is a figure common to “both Derrida and Deleuze (two philosophers often at odds),” who both use it to describe “the machinery of intersubjectivity and inter-activity.”<sup>70</sup>

It may be best to illustrate this concept within the terms already outlined in this chapter by discussing the comparable, and more explicitly literary, figure of the “flickering signifier” of N. Katherine Hayles. This figure is the counterpoint, for Hayles, of the “floating signifier” of Jacques Lacan. She writes:

Lacan, operating within a view of language that was primarily print-based rather than electronically mediated, not surprisingly focused on presence and absence as the dialectic of interest. When he formulated the concept of floating signifiers, he drew on Saussure’s idea that signifiers are defined by networks of relational differences between themselves rather than by their relation to signifieds. He complicated this picture by maintaining that signifieds do not exist in themselves, except insofar as they are produced by signifiers. He imagined them as an ungraspable flow floating beneath a network of signifiers, a network that itself is constituted through continual slippages and displacements. Thus, for him, a double reinforced absence is at the core of signification—the absence of signifieds as things-in-themselves as well as the absence of stable correspondences between signifiers. The catastrophe in psycholinguistic development corresponding to this absence in signification is castration, the moment when the (male) subject symbolically confronts the realization that subjectivity, like language, is founded on absence.<sup>71</sup>

By contrast, she writes,

In informatics, the signifier can no longer be understood as a single marker, for example an ink mark on a page. Rather it exists as a flexible chain of markers bound together by the arbitrary relations specified by the relevant codes. As I write these words on my computer, I see the lights on the video screen, but for the computer, the relevant signifiers are electronic polarities on discs. Intervening between what I see and what the computer reads are the machine code that correlates alphanumeric symbols with binary digits, the compiler language that correlates these symbols with higher-level instructions determining how the symbols are to be manipulated, the processing program that mediates between these instructions and the commands I give the computer, and so forth. A signifier on one level becomes a signified on the next-higher level.<sup>72</sup>

Hayles means the “flickering signifier” to emphasize the many-layered complexity of the digital

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<sup>69</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 6.

<sup>71</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 30-31.

<sup>72</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 31.

text and underscore its instability; she concludes the passage above by stating that “precisely because the relation between signifier and signified at each of these levels is arbitrary, it can be changed with a single global command.”<sup>73</sup> But there is an additional suggestion in her description of the “flicker.” In the case of Lacan, the floating signifier’s arbitrariness and disconnection from any real-world signified are fundamental, as is the ‘healthy’ human subject’s denial of this disconnection. In this binary case, the disconnection between signifier and signified is “true,” the social fiction that sutures the two back together “false.” But unlike the floating signifier, which can only be void and owes its aura of fullness to a social fiction, the flickering signifier must have the functional capacity to be void in one moment and present in another. That is to say, the digital text promises no ontological stability or relationship to the real world, yet its elements must be granted a functional, and (if only instantaneously) provisional stability. This is a very different view of how language operates than that of Lacan, and a key example of digital “impossibility”: here the flickering signifier must be allowed to “mean” in a way that occupies both terms of, but entirely overflows, the binary machinery of structuralist meaning-making.

We might understand this as a collision or simply a co-incidence of symbolic and non-symbolic systems. Murray asks, “is it even possible to distinguish the digital / the deictic from the digital / the algebraic?,”<sup>74</sup> referring to exactly this “*Zweifältigkeit*,” or two-fold nature, of the digital, present in the multiplicity of the word “digital” itself: the “deictic” digital of a pointing finger, the “algebraic” digital of numerals and mathematical operations; the poles of absolutely concrete and absolutely abstract modes of interfacing with the material world. The digital, the virtual, must be able to occupy both of these poles at once, without coalescing into the structures

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<sup>73</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 31.

<sup>74</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, ix.

of either dialectic or binary suspension.

It is notably challenging to understand the terms of this “*Zweifältigkeit*” as impossible and co-present, not “dialectical nor metaphysical”, and to apply this concept in ways that genuinely help us understand the dynamics of real human situations, embedded in social and historical contexts. The urge to contain or reconcile this impossible heterogeneity as a critical concept by reifying, systematizing, and dehistoricizing it is powerful. Among theorists of the digital-narrative intersection, Hayles is unique in her political engagement, her sharp awareness of changing cultural regimes and how they affect questions of agency and identity in the real world. By contrast, even Ryan, who is often quite attuned to the liberatory potentials of new media configurations, seems to illustrate this interplay of narrative and digital media as narrative’s dialectical adaptation to the technological parameters of any age; the essays in *Narrative Across Media* often suggest that this cultural process is in flux at the moment and cannot be adequately interrogated, but, in a quasi-messianic way, that a more ‘settled’ form of the narrative-digital intersection will eventually emerge, resulting in a more stable, more reliable interpretive framework.<sup>75</sup>

On the level of textual criticism, this vaguely dialectical presupposition lends itself to readings that are oriented more toward the complexities of technological exchange themselves. In this sense, much writing on the digital-literary intersection opens itself to the criticism that its analytical praxis focuses too much on the structural and technological process itself, in a kind of techno-formalism, rather than on the cultural needs of any particular historical moment or context. This presents a danger that critics will simply mark and suspend this digital-narrative “impossibility,” or else subsume it within the terms of a progressive, if not precisely

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<sup>75</sup> See Ryan’s argument in “Will New Media Produce New Narratives?”

teleological, dialectic between technoculture and human experience. Ironically, by attempting to describe a process of historical change, this framework removes such texts from the specific contexts of actual human history, emphasizing too much their abstract or structural aspects rather than the real human needs they address or articulate. This is the crux of Dinkla's hope for "a new narrative form emerging, one that is in a position to reflect on the history and stories of the modern era and make an incisive statement on the state of our reality?"<sup>76</sup> It should be clear by this point that the success of such a new narrative form requires as well an appropriate critical apparatus to recognize and make sense of it.

Here again I return to the "fold" as a figure for impossible and nondialectical digital temporality and the play of desire that emerges around the appearance of narrative "codes" in digital texts. Quoting Deleuze, Murray writes that

the two-fold, or the *entre-deux*, also is a conceit of the fold that embodies for Deleuze the most fundamental operation of time:

Since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to split the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past.<sup>77</sup>

This allows us to rethink the nature of digital time and the play of desire within digital textuality.

Murray writes that,

rather than position us simply in the pull of teleology's dialectical future or the romantic dazzle of technology's past, the Digital Baroque will be discussed as enfolding the user in the energetic present, as articulated in relation to the analog past while bearing on the digital future.<sup>78</sup>

This is not merely a philosophy of time, but a way of thinking about how time, and our understanding of time, play into our engagement with aesthetic texts. In digital aesthetics,

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<sup>76</sup> Dinkla, "Virtual Narrations."

<sup>77</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 6-7.

the past and its divergent epistemologies call on the future for their inclusion, whether as haunting articulations of visions previously unmaterialized in the baroque past or as critical revisions of those dialectical and romantic new media paradigms on which modernism so confidently relies.<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, one of the central ironies of the Digital Baroque for Murray is the prevalence of such “critical revisions” of “dialectical and romantic... paradigms,” the fact that, “while opening the artwork to the virtual dimensions of the digital threshold, a substantial number of electronic artists are just as dedicated to the refashioning of past codes of similitude and resemblance.”<sup>80</sup>

For Murray, this often means visual codes of resemblance associated with Enlightenment thought—Renaissance perspective, cartography, later the mechanical processes of photography and film. The “refashioning” of these codes belongs to a much broader epistemological project of teasing away their simple instantiation in the aesthetics and textuality of contemporary culture from the interpretive frameworks and assumptions that would lock them into a program of representation, with all the temporal structuring, the psychodynamics, and the ideological blind spots this would entail.

In this sense, we might include narrative among these “code[s] of similitude and resemblance” that contemporary texts are refashioning. But the project of teasing the appearance of narrative codes in media artworks away from the assumptions of representation presents a uniquely difficult challenge. As I have suggested above, our most powerful critical tools for interrogating the nature of narrative desire are deeply embedded within literary disciplinary frameworks that are themselves closely affiliated with structuralist practice and paradigms. Moreover, precisely because *time* is the main subject of narrative’s “code of similitude,” narrative necessarily entails *some* theory of past and present, postulates *some* relation between

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<sup>79</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 196.

the a priori and the future, and promulgates this theory by engaging deep wells of pleasure and desire in the present moment of its ‘readers.’ Even if we acknowledge, with Cubitt, that narrative persists as but “one mode among many” in new media art, its appearance necessarily invokes a particular, and particularly pleasurable, way of engaging an other time within imaginative fantasy.

Some idea of “the archive” is still very much at stake in tensions surrounding narrative in contemporary artworks, then, even if we agree that the primary textual apparatus of the archive has changed, along with its ontological nature and its power to steer the dominant configurations of psychic energies. We can argue that, because of its very structure, the narrative text—*any* narrative text—*analogically* stages a relationship to the archive and mobilizes therefore a particular kind of pleasure and desire for the archive that are both closely related to subjectivity and identity.

This mobilization is still tinged with danger: it carries with it the subtle (or not so subtle) threat that this energy of desire might yet metastasize into the ideological structure of possession and domination so closely connected with an older framework of binaries, exclusion, objection, domination, the rising specter of the “whites-only internet,” or some variation of that institutional inequality, at once virtual and very real. But this is precisely why narrative offers a uniquely valuable symptom to scrutinize in contemporary digital and literary artworks about history, identity, and power. It enables us to see more clearly the tensions and tectonic shifts that play out between longstanding ideological forces in the present tense, as these are translated to the subtle and complex field of virtual textuality.

Murray writes that the Digital Baroque illustrates the ways in which “the past and its

divergent epistemologies call on the future for their inclusion.”<sup>81</sup> When confronting the Digital Baroque—or any comparable echo of past “codes of similitude or resemblance,” narrative included, we must ask: why does the present moment feel this interpellation so keenly, and what does it have to do with the data-structures and the epistemologies of the past? To properly address this question, we need a better and subtler way of understanding the “haunting” of narrative in the digital era, and how it marks a change to the nature of the psychodynamics of this interpellation, the confrontation with an historical “other.”

Here I recapitulate and reframe a few main ideas from this argument so far before outlining the main tenets of my own analytical practice and the close readings that follow this chapter. In Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, the archive itself stands in for the maternal body; the energy of archive fever strains against the constituting yet disciplining gaze of a powerful and seemingly monolithic other. Yet the psychodynamics of the digital virtual operate differently; as Angerer argues, the “diffusion” of the gaze in a contemporary mass media context makes it difficult to sustain any belief that the Lacanian model holds true for contemporary subjects. The subject of new media is networked, not specular; it finds confirmation of its presence in the world not through a unified, coherent reflection in the eyes of one elevated object of desire, but in many such “reflections,” none of which claims to be anything but partial. The nature of the confirmations these “reflections” offer changes as well, digresses from the system of visual interpellation and objectification so important to Lacan; instead, they become thinkable as simply: points of connection. And these points of connection open a space of virtual interaction—one that is still shaped by *some* power dynamic of identity and desire.

As I argue above, this virtual dynamic is understandable in terms of what Derrida

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<sup>81</sup> Murray, *Digital Baroque*, 7.

describes as “archive fever,” the conflicted simultaneous desire to possess, destroy, preserve, escape the powerful other represented by the concept of the archive itself. But with the dispersal of this singular “other,” the psychodynamics of desire in this virtual moment change.

Rethinking the virtual psychodynamics of this interaction reveals the extent to which the structuralist critical framework settles into and crystallizes an ineffectual configuration of abstraction and specificity. It defines the dynamics of desire in far too specific terms (as in the most specific Freudian and Lacanian framework, longing for an always-already lost sense of completeness represented by the maternal body). Yet it universalizes this specific illustration and insists that all subsequent dynamics must follow from this initial image, erasing the particulars of any other encounter in favor of the prior representation. The “distributed subjectivity” of the posthuman makes it possible to avoid the near-arbitrary specificity of the initial model, instead allowing the configurations of identity and desire in any given interaction to emerge as part of particular and *historically locatable* circumstances that may be resisted, altered, or overcome.

I would like, somewhat controversially perhaps, to grant that constructions of human identity and society are based in an experience of desire that is universal. But we should understand this universal not as a perverse and unresolvable binary desire to destroy and to obey, nor even as a desire for completeness, but as a desire to *know* the archive, simply. That this phrase “to know” suggests connotations of sexual and epistemological possession is noteworthy and inescapable, and has indeed shaped the past century of critical thought on the subject, but the meaning of the phrase need not be wholly defined by those connotations alone; it is possible to understand this longing to know the archive in far more general terms.

In terms of cultural criticism, this is one of the major insights that the distinct

psychodynamics of the digital virtual have to offer. Rather than interpreting narrative structure as a symbolic drama, marking a desire for epistemological control, substitution for loss, or return to an earlier state of being, we can instead imagine that narrative mobilizes our desire for connection, highlights or marks this desire, and, moreover, tints it with a sense of the past. This desire for connection need not be contained within a larger system of limits like the Freudian death drive; it can remain unspecified, and deterritorialized. Yet the intimation of limits and temporal structure implied by narrative form inflects this desire with a sense of history. The desire at play here is not a general desire for connection with *any* other, but a particular desire for connection with the *historical* other as such.

This supposition allows us to rethink narrative desire as an intersubjective “fold” that allows the participation of all the temporal and representational complexity of the archive, individual, and other at once. Rather than a binary tension or predictable oscillation or a structurally determined suspension between polarized extremes, narrative desire should be seen as an impossibility—one that is negotiated in particular moments in particular ways that are themselves not removable from history.

Acts of storytelling express a desire, and not merely a desire but a genuine need, grounded in historical circumstance, for connection with the archive of public memory. Using the insights and critical frameworks opened up by the advances of digital media theories of virtual subjectivity, the close readings that follow analyze situations where the desire to “know” the archive is frustrated by real social contexts; situations of disempowered or minority experiences and contested public memory in real historical contexts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE ART AND ETHICS OF VIRTUAL MEMORY: ENCOUNTERING THE ARCHIVE IN WOLFGANG HILDESHEIMER'S *TYNSET*

In the previous chapter, I suggested that, looking back on 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theory, we might think about the tensions and conflicts surrounding narrative representation as an ongoing struggle to identify and understand what is genuinely “human” across a decades-long transition between two dominant modes or epistemological models of subjectivity—the transition from “liberal humanism” to “posthuman.” I argue that a robust theory of the virtual gives us flexible models and nuanced conceptual vocabulary for describing the interpenetration of material and informational life, the diffusion and blurring of intersubjective limits, and the resonance of narrative desire in 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century literature and media art. Structuralist and poststructuralist theories focused on regimes of representation may be useful for helping us, as critical readers, identify the ways such texts construe their own limits of narrative possibility, but deconstructive analysis should not take precedence over the goal of understanding moments when narrative marks a desire for historical connection to a community of memory—particularly in texts and contexts where public memory and identity are contested or in question.

The literary text I analyze in this chapter, Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Tynset*, may at first seem an unusual choice for this project. Written in 1965, well before the advent of popular discussions of the “posthuman,” but at a moment when concerns for the fate of “the human” in postmodern society were already keenly felt, there is nothing futuristic, nothing particularly tech-savvy or forward-thinking in *Tynset*'s themes or plotting. The questions this book addresses, however, are among the most urgently human questions of the last century: the continued possibility of memory, faith, and community in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and the challenge

of finding an art of memory commensurable to the traumatic extremes of this history.

*Tynset* is often analyzed in terms of its “modernist” literary experimentation—especially with its play of narrative energy about structuring limits—and in terms of the archetypically melancholic psychological state of its solipsistic, insomniac, unnamed narrator. What rarely registers for *Tynset*’s critics is the extent to which Hildesheimer’s deep interest in modern technologies—telephones and trains, especially—and textual or informational modes other than narrative prose—databases, timetables, phone books—equal his apparent aversion to narrative closure. This suggests that Hildesheimer sees symbolic representation—with its promises of mastery and foreclosure—as but “one mode among many,” as Sean Cubitt says of the attitude toward narrative in epistemological environments more attuned to “the reality we inhabit and construct, and which in turn inhabits and constructs us” than to “the binarisms of representation and deconstruction theories.”<sup>1</sup>

My analysis here focuses on the traumatic limit of representational possibility in *Tynset* and its relationship to narrative desire and to the desire (both the narrator’s and the reader’s) to know the archive—not to master the information it contains, but to feel a connection to the historical other and the community of memory it implies. Though a powerful limit of understanding shapes *Tynset*’s narrative, Hildesheimer seems to reject any idea that this limit might be understood as transhistorical, deterministic, structural trauma. Instead, Hildesheimer seems to suggest that all trauma is historical, belonging to specific social contexts and circumstances, and requiring a conceptual model able to describe its effects through history better than the binary, limit-oriented frameworks of symbolic representation. The alternate model that emerges from Hildesheimer’s text is synechochal, rhizomatic, and distinctly virtual—

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<sup>1</sup> Sean Cubitt, “The Chronoscopic: The Ontology of Time in Digital Media,” in *Screen-Based Art*, ed. Annette W. Balekma and Henk Slager (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 65.

that is, it encompasses the terms of material life, communication systems and their particular logics, systems of power, affect, and imagination, all at once. Throughout *Tynset*, Hildesheimer's narrator engages an active struggle to keep this limit open as possibility, as a living question rather than a foreclosed "answer." In this struggle, he remains deeply attuned to the virtual and pragmatic possibilities of media logics and informational orders other than those of symbolic writing and narrative representation.

The complexity of the interplay between these forces in *Tynset* is apparent, already, in the following passage:

...jede Reise ist eine Bestätigung der relativen Verlässlichkeit dieses Buches, dem kein anderes Motiv zugrunde liegt als eben diese Verlässlichkeit, ohne die es, wie es sehr wohl weiß, sinnlos wäre—,—aber im norwegischen Kursbuch steht mehr, wenn man es recht zu lesen versteht. Zwischen den Zeilen breiten sich die großen Entfernungen aus, weitet sich ein spröder, windiger Spielraum, den die Daten einer Ankunft oder einer Abfahrt nur ungefähr umreißen, ohne ihn zu nennen oder ihn zu erfahren; sie stecken nur die Grenzen ab zwischen diesem Ort, der im Nirgendwo liegt, und dem anderen Ort, der ebenfalls im Nirgendwo liegt, aber in einem anderen Nirgendwo, in dem man die Sage des ersten Ortes in einer Abwandlung erzählt, günstig dem zweiten Ort, dem ersten abträglich, und im dritten Ort, der wieder in einem anderen Nirgendwo liegt, ist eine andere Sage angesiedelt, die anderer Orte Sagen Lügen straft, der vierte Ort ist Schnellzugstation, ihm ist die Sage schon lange abhanden gekommen.<sup>2</sup>

[...every journey is a confirmation of the relative dependability of this book, which has no other motive at heart but this very dependability, without which, as it very well knows, it would be useless—,—but there is more than this in the Norwegian railway timetable, if one understands how to read it properly. Between the lines, the great distances spread themselves out; a thin, windy latitude expands itself, which the facts of an arrival or a departure only approximately outline, without naming it or experiencing it. They merely mark out the boundaries between this place, which lies in Nowhere, and the other place, which lies equally in Nowhere, but in another Nowhere, where they tell the myths of the first place in modified form, complimentary to the second place, detrimental to the first. And in a third place, in yet another different Nowhere, another, different mythology has settled that self-righteously gives the lie to the legends of other places. The fourth locality is an express train station; for it,

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<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Tynset* (1965; repr., Frankfurt: Surhamp Taschenbuch, 1989), 11-12.

mythology has long since gone missing.]<sup>3</sup>

This passage encapsulates something of the strangeness, the poetic density, the complexity, and indeed the turbulent structure of Hildesheimer's book. We see the narrator's deeply romantic—even mystic—investment of imagination in some small detail, which quickly winds its way to irony, cynicism, dark humor. It's worth pointing out the non-mimetic functionality of the book in question here, a Norwegian railway timetable that might, or might not, eventually guide the narrator to his desired destination of the city of Tynset. Even here, "between the lines" of this informational, indexical database, an interval of imagination opens up for the invested reader—a "Spielraum," a space of play. By contrast, the narrator associates "facts" with closure, endpoints (arrivals and departures), answers, and boundaries. These boundaries give rise to a kind of narrative trouble, as a parochial, small-scale version of the archive of shared public knowledge, "folklore," becomes a focal point for expressions of identity and otherness. The notion that advanced technologies of speed (the express train in the last sentence of the quotation above) could neutralize such parochial conflicts by erasing any need for this "folklore" can offer little comfort to someone in this narrator's situation, however. Throughout the book, he attempts to understand and engage with his knowledge of the Holocaust and his memories of murdered friends against the grain of a postwar social context committed to official silence and amnesia.

First published in 1965 and winner of the 1966 Büchner prize, Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Tynset* has long inspired and confounded its critics. Variouslly described as novel, literary collage, dramatic monologue, tone poem, or literary "fugue," this densely woven book comprises

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<sup>3</sup> This and all subsequent translations are mine, unless otherwise noted. In translating *Tynset*, I have attempted to preserve the typography of the original as much as possible.

a complexly recursive but almost directionless narrative: it describes a single, sleepless night in the life of its unnamed narrator as he lies waiting for sleep in his winter bed and wanders the rooms of his large, inherited house where he lives alone, except for ghosts, storied objects, and his elusive housekeeper. Too carefully structured to be true stream-of-consciousness, *Tynset*'s present-tense, first-person narrative nonetheless closely traces its narrator's thoughts as they flicker and drift among the folds of multiple temporal layers: distant past, personal memory, present-tense philosophical speculation, and questions about the future, both immediate and remote.

Though no real plot emerges from this kaleidoscopic text, the turbulent flow of the narrator's consciousness is structured around very clear limits. First is the limit of representation and understanding, the narrator's fairly comprehensible psychological response to his traumatic knowledge of the Holocaust, his loss of an entire Jewish community, things that cannot be thought because they are too big, too horrifying. There is also the geographical or narrative limit of a destination, the Norwegian city of Tynset, which the narrator contemplates visiting, and the intersubjective limit of his encounters with his housekeeper Celestina, the only other human character in the book's topmost narrative layer. These limits are not isolated or distinct for *Tynset*'s narrator—they overlap, fold into one another, in a relationship that might best be described as rhizomatic or synecdochal. This rhizomatic figure applies as well to the ways the narrator thinks of these limits—both individually and in their interrelationship to one another, he describes them as an “enigma” (Rätsel).

The ethics, or even the possibility, of pursuing conceptual mastery of such “enigmas” proves a major concern for Hildesheimer and his narrator in *Tynset*, and opens directly into his concerns about public memory and narrative representation. Throughout *Tynset*, Hildesheimer

focuses readers' attention and narrative desire around specific questions in want of answers—the story's "hermeneutic code," in the terminology of Roland Barthes. Curiosity about the resolution of two questions in particular keeps readers engaged with *Tynset's* rambling flow of thoughts. The first of these involves the narrator's past and the identity of a mysterious woman who haunts his memory. The second involves his future: whether or not he will finally end a seemingly interminable process of deliberation and actually visit the city of Tynset.

The narrator's long refusal to offer any resolution of these questions, his suspension of any closure, like his haunting and indecision, have commonly been interpreted by *Tynset's* critics as signs of his troubled psychological state, his crippling melancholy. Though Hildesheimer invites this connection with frequent allusions to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, he also makes the historical circumstances of his narrator's spiritual crisis absolutely clear: like Hildesheimer himself at the time of *Tynset's* writing, the narrator is a German Jew living in post-1945 exile in Switzerland, with no desire to return to the country of his birth. The insistent thoughts that trouble his peace and keep him from sleeping through the course of *Tynset's* single night overwhelmingly relate to the Holocaust: he is kept awake by inchoate memories of murdered friends, a suggestion that the mysterious woman of his memory might also have been a victim, and specific, *social* anger about the failures of justice and the suppression of Holocaust memory in postwar West Germany.

Despite this clear connection between the narrator's psychological state and his historical circumstances, *Tynset* is not usually seen as Holocaust literature. Instead, many critics have disregarded its historical interventions and focused instead on its "modernist" literary style. This modernist style is often located in the book's form—its turbulence, its play with narrative space and time, its structural focus on a seemingly meaningless enigma—the narrator's deferred visit to

the city of Tynset. It is found as well in the book's themes: the melancholy and absurdist orientation of its solipsistic narrator, his obsession with the limit of death, and his apparent, cynical conviction that "alles [ist] Willkür"<sup>4</sup> (everything is arbitrary).

In the last decade, critics have begun to focus more on relating *Tynset*'s form to the bigger problem of historiography it poses. Stephan Braese has argued that readings that emphasize *Tynset*'s "modernist" experimentation, assimilate Hildesheimer's historical concerns to more abstract aesthetic or philosophical questions—questions about the fate of the modern subject, for example, or the human condition in general—and thereby ignore the extent to which *Tynset* addresses a specifically Jewish counter-memory of the Holocaust. More recently, Katja Garloff, attempts a subtle understanding of how *Tynset*'s historical and literary self-consciousness interrelate in ways that do more than merely perform the impossibility of "mastering" an historical trauma as enormous as the Holocaust through narrative representation.

Garloff makes an excellent case that *Tynset*'s literary play and its historical or historiographical intervention are inextricably related. *Tynset*'s particular play with language, she argues, invokes an "enigmatic signifier" in the riddle of Tynset itself, a "structure of reference [that] complicates the distinction between historical and structural trauma made by LaCapra." Garloff summarizes this distinction thus:

Whereas structural trauma, such as the Oedipal crisis, is an expression of transhistorical conditions, historical trauma is rooted in specific events; whereas structural trauma is often experienced ambivalently, as a source of pain as well as enjoyment, historical trauma is a source of suffering alone; and whereas structural trauma can be borne but never overcome, historical trauma can be worked through even to the point of preventing further repetition.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 268-269.

<sup>5</sup> Katja Garloff, "Expanding the Canon of Holocaust Literature: Traumatic Address in Hubert Fichte and Wolfgang Hildesheimer," *New German Critique* 96 (Fall 2005): 76.

This working-through depends on the stable reliability of a symbolic order—that is, on an acceptance of the terms of structural trauma, privileging, as Garloff says of LaCapra, the “cognitive aspects” of the process, “for instance, the historical knowledge that allows for ‘the specification and naming of deserving victims.’”<sup>6</sup> But as the passage I quote above suggests, a stable symbolic order is not the only passage to such indexical “reliability” in *Tynset*, nor is it the only answer to such an “historical imperative.” For Hildesheimer, the production and reproduction of such historical knowledge remains a problem, as the author himself remains deeply skeptical and critical of the motives of any symbolic order stabilized by the exercise of power within a social system.

It is all the more interesting, then, that *Tynset*’s ambivalent literary narrative should circulate so plainly about a clear structuring limit, the “enigma” of *Tynset* itself, which figures in the book as, among other things, an imaginary and continually deferred destination and so, Garloff argues, as a screen for the narrator’s traumatic memories. Garloff argues that *Tynset*’s narrator overlays his traumatic historical knowledge of Nazi persecution of the Jews onto an earlier traumatic “enigma”—the Biblical story of God’s arbitrary rejection of Cain—and that “the novel channels the traumatic energy of this first enigma into a modernist play of language, epitomized by the riddle of *Tynset*... a pure signifier and index of a riddle around which the text revolves.”<sup>7</sup>

For Garloff, the riddle or enigma of *Tynset* introduces the “modernist play with language” that distracts from and substitutes for the more primal enigma, the “erste Rätsel” of God’s rejection of Cain’s sacrifice. In Garloff’s reading, this traumatic enigma is structural, in

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<sup>6</sup> Garloff, “Expanding the Canon of Holocaust Literature,” 51, quoting Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 69.

<sup>7</sup> Garloff, “Expanding the Canon of Holocaust Literature,” 68.

the sense that it is original, primary, a foundational cultural myth that establishes the subsequently repeated pattern of arbitrary exclusion. She writes that “the...passage suggests that the historical persecution of the Jews is just another instantiation of this primal injustice.” In this sense, the enigma invokes both structural and historical, trauma at once. Though she insightfully relates the function of *Tynset* as riddle and “pure signifier” to the “enigmatic signifier” of Jean Laplanche, Garloff does little to explore the implications of this connection. She ultimately concludes that *Tynset*’s message is one of hopelessness, its “modernist narrative strategies” both cynical or fatalist and backward-looking, a trait and a failure she ascribes to the “historical moment of [*Tynset*’s] writing, a moment in which the erasure of literary tradition appeared more attractive, or feasible, than the recovery of its lost strains.”<sup>8</sup>

It is possible, though, to find a more intricate relationship than this binary of “erasure” and “recovery” between *Tynset*’s self-conscious literariness and its clear sense of the pressure of its own particular moment of historical transition. We should bear in mind Hildesheimer’s skepticism about the book itself as an art of memory. Hildesheimer famously stopped writing narrative fiction soon after completing *Tynset* and the stylistically and thematically related *Masante*; he was convinced that the age of literary fiction was already drawing to a close in the 1960s. In this sense, *Tynset* places both the “literary tradition” and the specific historical knowledge it invokes in a moment of precariousness, destabilized by a fear of forgetting.

This certainly does not mean, however, that *Tynset*’s main purpose is simply to preserve or “recover[] lost strains” of either historical knowledge or literary practice. On the contrary, *Tynset* consistently problematizes the terms of preserving such cultural knowledge. In the passage I quote above, for example, Hildesheimer describes, and treats with dismissive irony,

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<sup>8</sup> Garloff, “Expanding the Canon of Holocaust Literature,” 76.

first the careful guarding of such cultural knowledge, “Sage” or “folklore,” that leads to defensive, closed, parochial identity constructions, but also the loss of traditional cultural knowledge, the amnesia that accompanies the space-time compression of postmodern experience, designated in the passage above by a technology of speed, the express train. These alternatives neatly replicate the binary of “recovery” and “erasure” of tradition that closes Garloff’s essay, and the dismissive irony and wry tone Hildesheimer’s narrator adopts here indicates that neither option satisfies him.

A more interesting question to ask, and one that, I argue, Hildesheimer earnestly engages in *Tynset*, is how we connect with this imaginary cultural landscape that stretches out “between the lines” of represented information, and how it is shaped by actual historical events, social forces, and ideology. Or, even more urgently for Hildesheimer’s—and his narrator’s—project of insisting that this imaginary landscape of imagination include memory of the Holocaust at an historical moment when public amnesia was the dominant tendency of the West German mainstream—what kind of art of memory could keep the traumatic knowledge of the Holocaust alive, in all its historically and ethically traumatic force, without lapsing into the recuperative ideology of a stabilized order of representation?

To address this question, I return to Garloff’s claim that the enigma of *Tynset* presents an “enigmatic signifier” but also introduces the “modernist play of language” that substitutes for a more primal, “structural” enigma, God’s arbitrary rejection of Cain. By casting the Cain story as a persistently troublesome enigma, the narrator permits no closure of this foundational primordial myth, which should not be understood as a “structural trauma” in the sense outlined by LaCapra above. In his description of this first enigma, the narrator invokes a “structural trauma” par excellence, the Oedipal myth, and directly undermines its structuring power. He

thinks,

warum erhörte Gott es nicht? Dieses Rätsel ließ mich lange nicht ruhen.... Es war das erste Rätsel, das mir entgegentrat, es ließ mich stolpern und hinfallen.... ich ging weiter...mein leichtes Hinken nach Möglichkeit verbergend.... Es grinst noch heute unter all den grinsendedn Rätseln, aber es war das erste, der Anfang aller Rätsel. Es ist aber auch der Anfang aller Unrechts, Anfang der Schuld Gottes, der aus keinem Grund Kain nicht gnädig ansah und sein Opfer aus Früchten des Feldes verschmähete...”<sup>9</sup>

[Why did God not acknowledge Cain’s prayer? For a long time, this enigma would not let me rest. It was the first enigma to confront me, it made me trip and fall... I walked on... concealing my slight limp wherever possible. It grins still, today, beneath all the grinning enigmas, but it was the first, the beginning of all enigmas. It is however also the beginning of injustice, beginning of the fault of God, who for no reason viewed Cain without mercy and disdained his offering of fruits from the field...]

Many critics have commented on the resonance in *Tynset* of the Biblical figure of Jacob, who wrestles with God and is transformed. In its insistence on the primordial nature of this “beginning of all enigmas,” however, and most especially in its description of a partitioning of the subject between private and public selves, between a privately-experienced wound and its aftermath, a “leichtes Hinken” (slight limp), and an external shaming, idealizing social order that makes the narrator want to hide this wound from public scrutiny, this story resonates as well with the Freudian myth of castration and the Oedipal order. Yet the narrator insists on keeping this story open to interpretation, insists on the question *why*, and proves unwilling to deny his wound, rather than holding it open in the quasi-private space of his imagination. If this scene invokes an Oedipal partitioning of the subject, the narrator presents this partitioning as incomplete, refusing the customary accession to the symbolic order that would deny, normalize, or accept as necessary—or even simply given—the terms of this foundational trauma. Instead, the narrator emphasizes the extent to which this enigma, unresolved, grins out at him beneath the surface of every other enigma he encounters.

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<sup>9</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 108.

In this only-partial differentiation and the continuity of one enigma within others, we see a structure of multiplicity that Hildesheimer explicitly comments on elsewhere:

[Das Schreckliche] hat sowohl einen als auch viele Namen. Der eine Name ist eben einfach, daß das Furchtbare der Welt sich nicht nur im Humanen, sondern in allem nähert, und das vielfache Element sind die Figuren, die das Unheil herbeiführen.<sup>10</sup>

[[The Horrifying]] has as much one as many names. The one name is simply that the horror approaches the world not only in the human, but rather in all things, and the multiple element is the figures that bring disaster about.]

This view problematizes any theory of symbolic representation, preferring instead a plainly rhizomatic figuration of the force of evil in the world. Each iteration of *Das Schreckliche* does not merely stand in for, replace, or merely repeat an a priori abstract principle or law at the expense of its own specificity; rather each iteration *in its uniqueness* manifests the full force of the whole—a limitless whole to which each iteration remains connected. To say then, as Garloff does, that “the historical persecution of the Jews is just another instantiation of this primal injustice” does not diminish the uniqueness of either injustice for Hildesheimer, nor the philosophical and epistemological crisis they pose, taken either singly or together.

Instead, even in the case of the Cain story, and despite the story’s mythical register, the narrator insists on the historicity of the event in its original context. He treats the story not merely as the symbolic or allegorical expression of an underlying historical trauma, but more as an historical account, subject to authorial bias and open to readerly reinterpretation. The question “warum erhörte Gott es nicht” (“why did God not acknowledge it”) leads him to an ethical and critical rereading of the myth itself, one that he grounds, notably, in a kind of rational historical speculation:

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<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Ich Wede nun Schweigen: Gespräch mit Hans Helmut Hillich* (Göttingen: Lamuv, 1993), 41-43.

Es steht da geschrieben, Kain sei von heftiger, eifersüchtiger Gemütsart gewesen, Abel dagegen sanft und fromm. Aber wer hat das geschrieben? Der eifersüchtige Bauer und der fromme Jäger und Schlächter: Kain böse und mißgünstig, Abel gut und rechtschaffen —, nein, das ist nicht gut genug, diese Ordnung nehme ich dem Schöpfer der beiden nicht ab, geschweige denn seinen Chronisten, ich wüßte auch nicht, wer sie abnähme außer den fragefeindlichen Abnehmerverbänden —, ich frage, und meine Frage hallt durch das Haus durch die Nacht, und auch Celestina soll sie spüren —, ich frage: was gab es zu Kains Zeit an Gegenständen der Mißgunst, der Eifersucht, der Bosheit, der Niedertracht, schlechter Gelüste, unsauberer Gedanken? Die Erde soeben erst erschaffen, bevölkert von nicht mehr als vier Menschen, zwei davon schon unrecht bestraft, ihr Leben verwirkt, was gab es da an Dingen und Gedanken, an denen das Böse sich hätte bilden können, was stand auf der Erde, an dem es sich hätte aufranken, in welchem Loch hätte es sich einnisten können? Wo war der Ansatz, an dem es sich eingefressen, sich ausgebreitet und weitergefressen hätte? Nirgends. Nichts da als ein trügerisches Paradies und Wüste und das schreiende Unrecht Gottes, dem es behagte, Kain zu verderben. Eine schwere Belastung, ein Makel, ein Zeichen an der Stirn, das haftet, nicht an Kain sondern an seinem Schöpfer. Los davon!”<sup>11</sup>

[It stands there, written, that Cain was of a powerfully jealous disposition, Abel by contrast gentle and pious. But who wrote this? The jealous farmer and the pious hunter and slaughterer: Cain evil and begrudging, Abel good and righteous—, no, this is not good enough, I will not accept this order from the creator of both, to say nothing of his chroniclers, I could not imagine who would accept it, aside from the unquestioning alliance of accepters—, I ask, and my question rings through the house through the night, and even Celestina should notice it—, I ask: what was there in Cain’s time that could be an object of mistrust, of jealousy, of evil, of perfidy, bad desires, unclean thoughts? The earth only just created, inhabited by no more than four persons, two of them already unjustly punished, their lives forfeit, what was there, what things or thoughts upon which the evil could have built itself, what stood on the earth for it to twine itself up, in what hole could it have nested? Where was the point of entry where it could chew its way in, spread out, and gnaw further? Nowhere. Nothing there but a deceptive paradise and desert and the screaming injustice of God, who found it pleasing to ruin Cain. A heavy burden, a stain, a sign on the brow that clings not to Cain, but to his creator. Away from this!]

In this passage we see, plainly, the narrator’s anguished loss of faith in God, but we see as well his strong emphasis on the arbitrariness of the story’s outcome. This sense of arbitrariness does not, however support a reading of the narrator as disengaged or simply absurdist. On the contrary, his deep sense of injustice derives from his recognition that this outcome was not

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<sup>11</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 109-110.

necessary from any perspective; that Cain's story *should* and indeed *could* have been different. Recognizing this moment of possibility entails a critical, even deconstructive re-reading of the Biblical story, in which the narrator refuses to grant any automatic legitimacy to God's authority as "Schöpfer" (creator) and rejects any interpretation of Biblical myth that would legitimize that authority, for example the idea that "Kain sei von heftiger, eifersüchtiger Gemütsart gewesen" (Cain was of a powerfully jealous disposition). The focus of the narrator's critical reading is rather to create, through historical and ethical speculation, a counter-history that, crucially, depends on elaborating the historical context of the event itself from a humane and empathetic perspective.

A more explicit and more contemporary refusal of the framework of structural trauma, and a similar intimation of a more just counter-history, arises in the narrator's recollection of a woman he knew, Doris Wiener, and her husband Bloch. The narrator recalls the example of:

...Doris Wiener, die sich ihre Nase verkleinern und ebenen ließ. Durch die manipulierte Schönheit ihres Gesichts schien immer die voroperative Unschönheit der Nase hindurch, nicht körperlich, gewiß, aber sie schien durch die Seele der Verschönerten, durch ihre Augen und ihren schuldigen Blick, der sich hilflos hinter ihrem Gegenüber an irgendeinem Gegenstand festzuhalten suchte, der haltlose Blick einer Entwurzelten, die ihren Makel entbehrte, mit dem ein festes Verhältnis sie verbunden hatte. So konnte—ja, ich erinnere mich—so konnte denn der Mann, den sie gehieratet hat, sie niemals recht kennen lernen, denn der kleine abgesägte oder auch nur abgefeilte Teil ihres Körpers hatte nicht einen entsprechenden Teil ihres Wesens mit sich genommen, sondern, im Gegenteil, dem Wesen noch etwas hinzugefügt: eine Beule in seiner Rundung beigebracht, das Gefühl eines Verlustes. Ich weiß natürlich nicht, ob der Mann sich dieser Kluft jemals bewußt wurde, ob er—

ob er überhaupt Zeit dazu hatte. Beide sind nämlich früh umgekommen.<sup>12</sup>

[...Doris Wiener, who had her nose made smaller and more even. Through the manipulated beauty of her face, the pre-operative un beauty of the nose always shone through, not physically, to be sure, but it shone through the soul of the beautified one, through her eyes and her guilty look that, behind her counterpart, helplessly tried to hold

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<sup>12</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 62-63.

fast onto any object, the anchorless look of one uprooted, who has dispensed with the very flaw that once bound her into a close relationship. And so could—yes, I remember—so could the man she married never rightly learn to know her, for the small sawed-off or even simply filed-off part of her body did not take a corresponding part of her being with it, rather, on the contrary, it brought the being something extra, a bulge in its roundness, a feeling of deficit. I naturally do not know if the man ever became aware of this cleft, if he—

if he even had the time. Both perished early, you see.]

Though this passage hints at imagery of castration to invoke a sense of universal or transhistorical structural trauma at the heart of human experience, the more powerful resonance here comes from the reader's gradual recognition of these characters as subjects of a specific social order at a specific historical moment. The narrator's description of Doris Wiener's "Kluft" (cleft), her disorientation and her sense of loss, seems to paint a distinctly Modernist, and Freudian, picture of the human condition as divided, wanting, exiled and alienated, haunted by a loss of wholeness. Yet the narrator undercuts this Freudian picture by framing this loss as a "*feeling of deficit*," not something taken from the being, but "something extra" grafted onto it. This ambiguity about the nature of wholeness and lack calls the very framework of Freudian "structural trauma" itself into question, and permits the reader to see that the much more important trauma depicted here is the one—historical, yet socially institutionalized—experienced by Doris Wiener and Bloch as Jewish 'others' in an anti-Semitic German society. As the reader quickly learns, the two "perished early" as victims of the Nazi genocide, but even before that, the narrator describes the simultaneous partitioning of Doris Wiener's body and her subjectivity not as a universal condition of entry into *any* social order, but as a concession this particular subject has undertaken in an attempt to assimilate herself to a very particular dominant culture and its historically located and racist standard of feminine beauty.

The "Kluft" that arises simultaneously within Doris Wiener herself and between the

woman and her surroundings also cuts her off from her husband Bloch. But here, notably, the narrator suggests that this would not have to be the case. The foreclosure of understanding between Doris Wiener and Bloch is not “structural,” not inevitable. It is not some transhistorical, existential limit—for example, the limit of death as such—but rather the violent disruption of an untimely death, the couple’s murder at the hands of a dominant social order. Here, too, the narrator gives the sense that the story’s outcome might and should have been otherwise, that these people would not have had to die without a better understanding of one another, that the fullness of a natural lifetime might have given them “Zeit dazu” (the time) to overcome in some way the alienating circumstances of the “Kluft” both within and between them, and to grow to know one another better. The passage presents a microcosmic and exceptionally intimate version of the pain and loss caused by the Holocaust: the murder of Doris Wiener and Bloch cuts off a gradual, temporal process of understanding between these two individuals that might have counteracted, somehow, the force of violent exclusion released by the “first enigma,” the pattern of cruelty and arbitrary exclusion that began with God’s punishment of Cain. Even as he insistently historicizes the suggestion of a transhistorical structural trauma in this passage, the narrator also makes it possible to read a universal human tragedy in the destruction of this potential in its specific context, the intimate, individual lives of these two people.

If his response to the Cain story may be understood as an act of historical reinterpretation, as critical *reading*, the narrator’s response to the fate of Doris Wiener and her husband Bloch exemplifies his ambivalence and frustration about the act of *writing*, about linguistic representation itself. Embedded in his illustration of the foreclosure of possibility imposed by these murders is the narrator’s critique of an ethically suspect use of language. His suspicion of linguistic representation suffuses his task of memorializing his own, deeply-felt historical trauma

as he attempts to account the murder of people he actually knew. He recalls:

Beide sind nämlich früh umgekommen.

Umkommen, ja, so nennt man es. Sie kam in einer Gaskammer um—installiert von der Firma Föttle und Geiser, an Firmen-namen erinnere ich mich unfehlbar und genau—und er, er hieß übrigens Bloch, er war, soweit ich mich jetzt erinnere, der einzige Mensch, den ich jemals gekannt habe, der sich buchstäblich sein Grab selbst schaufelte...<sup>13</sup>

[Both perished early, you see.

Perished, yes, that is what one calls it. She perished in a gas chamber—installed by the firm Föttle and Geiser, my memory for firm names is infallible and precise—and he, he was called incidentally Bloch, he was, as far as I can now remember, the only person I have ever known who literally dug his own grave...]

In this passage, the narrator courses through a number of different uses of language, which serve to emphasize its slipperiness and inadequacy for his memorial task. He first dwells on the polite and notably intransitive euphemism “to perish” (*umkommen*), language designed to mask the fact of industrialized genocide and the urgent problem of accountability it poses. This gulf between word and meaning continues later in the paragraph, where the narrator notes the extreme cognitive disconnect between the figure of speech *to dig one’s own grave* and the almost incomprehensibly horrifying fact that he can apply these words literally to a person he knew. The narrator dwells on the literalization of this cliché, filling out the abstraction with concrete details in imagination. The passage continues:

...Bloch, er war, soweit ich mich jetzt erinnere, der einzige Mensch, den ich jemals gekannt habe, der sich buchstäblich sein Grab selbst schaufelte, und zwar unter Aufsicht von Kabasta, der ihn dann, Gesicht grabwärts, vor das Grab stellte und ihn durch einen Genickschuß tötete, mit seiner rechten Hand, der großen, roten, blonden, dieser seiner Hand.<sup>14</sup>

[...Bloch, he was, as far as I can now remember, the only person I have ever known who

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<sup>13</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 62-63.

<sup>14</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 62-63.

literally dug his own grave, and this under the oversight of Kabasta, who then stood him, face graveward, before the grave and with a shot to the neck killed him, with his right hand, the large, red, blond, this his hand.]

The large, blond, red hand of the Nazi Kabasta that closes this passage is a synecdoche, as many *Tynset* critics have noted. This figure operates according to a representational logic of its own: a real human hand that pulls a trigger and commits one particular murder in the specific historical moment of Bloch's story, the hand stands in for but also remains connected to Kabasta the man, who in turn is both agent and symbol for a larger historical force, the Nazi party.

As a literary figure, the synecdoche reflects an logic of figuration very different from that of standard symbolic representation. Neither wholly metaphor nor metonymy—that is, neither drawing a figural connection between entities based in an essential likeness, nor in an arbitrarily contingent association—the synecdoche, a literary figure in which a part stands in for a whole, emphasizes the privileged, isolated detail as a point of entry onto a larger body or entity. The detail does not replace or supplant this larger entity—indeed, it *cannot* logically supplant the larger entity, for the two remain inextricably connected to one another. The structure of synecdoche exemplified throughout *Tynset* by the hand of Kabasta, describes very well Hildesheimer's rhizomatic idea of "das Schreckliche," the limit of comprehension and the proclaimed narrative limit of *Tynset* itself, as both historical and transhistorical trauma. I return, then, to Hildesheimer's comment about the Horrifying:

[Das Schreckliche] hat sowohl einen als auch viele Namen. Der eine Name ist eben einfach, daß das Furchtbare der Welt sich nicht nur im Humanen, sondern in allem nähert, und das vielfache Element sind die Figuren, die das Unheil herbeiführen.<sup>15</sup>

[[The Horrifying]] has as much one as many names. The one name is simply that the horror approaches the world not only in the human, but rather in all things, and the

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<sup>15</sup> Hildesheimer, *Ich Werde nun Schweigen*, 41-43.

multiple element is the figures that bring disaster about.]

Here the historical trauma is manifest in the deeds of specific actors, “Figuren,” who through their actions perpetuate and constitute the manifold character of a larger, transhistorical evil.

Hildesheimer notably describes these two aspects as the “names” of the Horrifying. Naming may seem to be an act of linguistic representation par excellence, but *Tynset* invokes several scenarios of names and naming that reflect a synecdochal, rather than symbolic relationship between names and identities. In this, Hildesheimer indicates that the value of names is to be found in their indexical function rather than their capacity for symbolic representation, a suggestion that has great bearing on his narrator’s attempt to find an ethical and effective art of memory.

The Doris Wiener section above begins, in fact, with the narrator reflecting that it is useless to change one’s name to mask an identity. Later in the passage, he clearly names the firm Föttle und Geiser, and remarks on the clarity with which he remembers this name. Here the valuable “indexical capability” of words becomes clear—the name designates an historical actor complicit in the Nazi machinery and culpable in Doris Wiener’s murder. But by wryly remarking on the clarity with which he remembers this name—“an Firmen-namen erinnere ich mich unfehlbar und genau”<sup>16</sup> (my memory for firm-names is infallible and precise)—the narrator also alludes, by implicit contrast, to the name he has forgotten—that of the woman from his past.

The narrator’s efforts to recollect and, precisely, to name this important figure exemplify the interrelationship between his memorial project, his psychological state, and the nature of narrative representation itself in *Tynset*. His inability to recall this woman’s name for most of the book is where his continual melancholic haunting by memory most clearly becomes a site of

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<sup>16</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 63.

tension and struggle, and the question of this woman's identity becomes an element of *Tynset's* "hermeneutic code" nearly as important to structuring the reader's engagement with the book as the question of whether or not the narrator will ever visit the city of Tynset. By comparing the forgotten name to the one remembered, the narrator demonstrates the usefulness of naming, the desired apparent endpoint of his troubled efforts to recollect, as a way to designate historical actors, honoring "deserving victims" and holding perpetrators accountable. For it is not simply the words "*Föttle und Geiser*" that are important here, but the fact that they designate or index an entity that remains continuous in time, the stabilized referent of this name permits a necessary connection to be drawn between the collaboration and complicity of this firm with the Nazi genocide and the postwar success of this firm in a reconstructed West Germany, which the narrator incidentally, offhandedly mentions elsewhere in the book. This assumption of continuity is an essential starting place for any hope of ethical reckoning in the present tense.

The narrator's inability, or unwillingness, to draw an explicit link between this mention of Föttle and Geiser—the corporation of murderers—and his own incidental mention of Föttle and Geiser—the postwar success story—may well reflect a traumatic loss of temporal coherence related to his psychological state conceived as a melancholic failure of narrative mastery. More to the point, though, is the fact that his two seemingly off-handed references to the firm, its Nazi past and its economically happy present, indicate his own knowledge of Föttle and Geiser's history, even if this knowledge never achieves narrative representation in the full rational light of psychologically integrated consciousness. The problem is not so much the narrator's psychological inability to integrate these two observations into a coherent story about the firm, nor any structural impossibility of extrapolating such a connection on the basis of the name itself. The problem for *Tynset's* narrator is rather the *irrelevance* of the firm's criminal history to the

social spheres he inhabits in the present. There is no way for him to give voice to these memories because there is no community to reflect, receive or occasion such communication. This situation is elliptically referenced in a famous scene in *Tynset* where the narrator recalls crowing to greet the dawn with a multitude of roosters, taking his part in a mass vocalization that spreads along an entire coastline and finding in it a deep, if fleeting, sense of comfort.

The narrator's isolation and disconnection from any memory community is evident as well in his continual juxtaposition of stories of Nazi criminals allowed to live out their lives in peace and the abrupt disappearance of entire Jewish communities, the loss of entire social networks. This devastated human network is figured in *Tynset* as a functional, indexical database suddenly made fictional, the "falsification" of the narrator's personal telephone book. The narrator recalls trying to write a telephone book of his own, from memory,

Aber ich gab es bald wieder auf, es war ein müßiger Versuch: nirgends ist man der Spur eines Lebens weiter entrückt als dort, wo man diese Spur zu imitieren sucht. Es war als wolle ich mit meiner Hand den Abdruck einer Fußsohle in den Sand prägen. Irgendwo machte auch ich immer die Rechnung ohne unser aller Wirt, der mir dann stumm und grinsend über die Schulter sah und mit einem knöchernen Zeigefinger auf eine Unebenheit deutete, eine geringfügige Unwahrscheinlichkeit auf meiner Karte, der beizukommen ich mich vergeblich bemühte. Ich sah wohl, daß da ein Fehler war, aber die Einsicht des Fehlers entzog sich mir, bis ich meine Aufstellungen mit denen des offiziellen Telefonbuchs verglich und mir der—in der Tat winzige, mit dem bloßen Auge kaum erkennbare—Irrtum entgegentrat: eine kleine Einzelheit inmitten lebensnaher Daten, die aber die Einheitlichkeit des Bildes schädigte. Nein, das ist nicht das rechte Wort, es ist zu schwach: das Bild wurde nicht geschädigt, es wurde vielmehr zerstört, oder, besser noch, vernichtet, ja, das ist das rechte Wort: vernichtet. Was einer sagt oder liest oder schreibt oder denkt oder druckt oder predigt, ist nicht entweder gut oder schlecht. Es ist entweder falsch oder richtig, und das galt auch für mein Telefonbuch: es war falsch.<sup>17</sup>

[But I quickly gave it up, it was an idle pursuit: the sign of life is nowhere more lost to one than there, where one seeks to imitate this sign. It was as if I were trying to use my hand to make a footprint in the sand. Somewhere I was always reckoning up without our

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<sup>17</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 57-58.

collective host, who then looked silent and grinning over my shoulder and with bony index finger pointed to an infelicity, a marginal improbability in my chart, that I struggled to overcome to no avail. I saw perfectly well that a mistake was there, but apprehension of the mistake eluded me, until I compared my own assembly with that of the official telephone book and the—in fact miniscule, barely recognizable with the naked eye—error finally confronted me: a tiny detail in the middle of data drawn from life, that nonetheless ruined the unity of the image. No, that is not the right word, the image was not ruined, it was more destroyed, or better still, liquidated, yes, that is the right word: liquidated. What someone says or reads or writes or thinks or prints or preaches, is not either good or bad. It is either false or true, and that applied as well to my telephone book: it was false.]

As in the passage about the Norwegian train timetable that began this chapter, this view of the phone book emphasizes its function as a tool that supports, underpins, and makes available a social and emotional network of people. The sudden, violent erasure of those people—which becomes undeniable when the narrator compares his personal phone book of memory to the “official” phone book of his German city in the late 1950s—evacuates the book’s use-value as a tool for accessing and participating in this network, effectively shifting it from the realm of functionality to that of representation—and “false” representation, at that. The narrator’s despair comes from the fact that a binary system of representations as “true” or “false” leaves no room for such “falsehoods” as his own remembered, but unrepresentable, sense of community.

It is this very situation that leads to the narrator’s first attempt at intervening in the dominant public climate of willful ignorance and forgetting. He recalls a time years earlier, “als ich noch in der Stadt wohnte, und in Deutschland” (when I still lived in the city, and in Germany), when he found himself compelled to test the “Verlässlichkeit” (reliability) of contemporary phone books, to probe their relationship to reality. He recalls that he began calling random numbers late at night, spurred by a desire to confirm the indexicality of the data in the books by hearing the person indicated performatively affirm, in real time and in his own voice, the correspondence between written name and living person, or rather, in accordance with the

synechdochal or rhizomatic logic of names in *Tynset*, between the person's name and "ein[] Teil seiner Identität"<sup>18</sup> (a part of his identity).

The relationship of name to individual here repeats the structure of synechdoche. The narrator clearly suggests that there will always be more to the person than the name alone can represent; he acknowledges an excess that the name cannot capture, but affirms as well the name's partial accuracy, its indisputable connection to a kind of reality, made manifest in the interlocutor's spoken affirmation, a confirmation performed in real time by an embodied voice.

Though this telephone "Spiel" as the narrator calls it, begins with a functional (though notably *not* narrative) written text, the phone book, it stands as a sharp contrast to the media logic of written communication, the logic of difference, of externalized signs, and temporal deferral. The mode of mediation here is the two-way audio channel of the telephone network. Involving voices grounded in bodies, instantaneous interpellations, and unplotted, emergent conversations in real time, the telephonic communication bears a privileged relationship to the virtual moment of the performative. Hildesheimer emphasizes this connection by having his narrator describe these nocturnal calls as a "Spiel": "play" in the sense of game or free movement, but also theatrical performance. Hildesheimer draws on the latter sense of play as theatrical performance throughout *Tynset* with frequent references to theatrical plays that dwell on the ambiguous line between script and reality—and in the case of *Hamlet*, the play most referenced in *Tynset*, the equally ambiguous line between memory and the present, death and life, that characterize both the prince's and the narrator's melancholic states, their indeterminacy and avoidance of closure. The narrator's telephone "Spiel", however, is even more open-ended than a theatrical performance, which remains relatively bound by its structured, a priori script.

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<sup>18</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 31.

And it is this openness of the telephone medium that give rise to the narrator's first attempt at a non-representational art of public memory develops. The attempt depends on elements specific to the telephone medium: its ability to convey voice in real time, and hence paralinguistic information, non-verbal registers of communication like tone of voice or expectant silence, but also its position as a technology at the threshold between public identity—figured in the published telephone book—and private life—seen in its capacity to reach into intimate domestic space and even interrupt the most personal sphere of sleep. Most crucially, the effectiveness of the narrator's calls depends on the medium's temporality, its operation in real time, which makes it possible for him to pressure his interlocutors for immediate, reactive decisions within this threshold space between public and private, and to incorporate developments that emerge spontaneously from interactions in this space—misrecognition, for example—into the cumulative development of the project as a whole.

And the calls do become the means of a larger intervention almost immediately after the narrator first successfully confirms the “reliability” of the telephone medium. Once an interlocutor grants him this goal by voicing his own name, the narrator reflects,

Plötzlich jedoch war mir dieses Ziel nicht mehr genug. Ich wollte mehr hören, wollte Unbekanntes prüfen...

...Ich wollte etwas von ihm wissen, ich war wach, war interessiert. Ich fragte, und zwar, wie mir schien, freundlich: >>Fühlen Sie sich schuldig, Herr Huncke?<<<sup>19</sup>

[Suddenly, though, this goal was no longer enough for me. I wanted to hear more, wanted to test some unknown thing...

...I wanted to know something from him, I was awake, was interested. I asked, and in a friendly way, no less, or so it seemed to me, “Do you feel guilty, Herr Huncke?”]

With this, the narrator transforms his nighttime prank into a direct confrontation with his local

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<sup>19</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 32.

memory culture, which, as he notes, is really a culture of amnesia, a place where the firm Föttle and Geiser enjoys economic success unchecked by its criminal past and where “verjährten und pensionierten Verbrecher” (criminals protected by statutes of limitations and retired with pensions) live out their lives calmly “im Kreise ihrer Schwiegerkinder und Enkel”<sup>20</sup> (in the circle of their children-in-law and grandchildren).

In this sense the project attempts a provocative and interventionist art of memory that never involves representation as such, but rather takes advantage of the particular attributes of the telephone medium. We might even read the telephone “Spiel” as a provocative media art intervention before its time. Key to its efficacy is the fact that it transpires in “real time,” as opposed to the deferred or belated time of writing. Each call draws a direct and instantaneous connection to some kind of social reality, and taken individually or cumulatively, the nature of the calls’ development in time is open-ended, emergent: the pathway of the narrator’s progress is not that of a linear solving of a mystery, the discovery of an answer, nor even the gradual uncovering of a coherent body of information, but rather a haphazard, symbiotic interweaving of data sets and interpellative events, as a name dropped in conversation, filtered through the phone book, leads to another conversation, and so forth.

The “Spiel” is no less virtual for this close relationship to real life. The narrator’s conscious role-play retains, for example, a quasi-fictive, imaginary element as he adopts different tone and characteristics to elicit responses from different interlocutors. The telephone medium supports a unique—and uniquely effective—*configuration* of this virtuality, however—one with a potential for social impact, as the continuation of the above passage suggests.

The narrator’s question “Fühlen Sie sich schuldig?” breaks through the veneer of

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<sup>20</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 30.

civilized amnesia and forces to light Herr Huncke's continued identification with the deposed Nazi regime and its ideology of hate. In response to his question, the narrator recalls that Huncke's

...Stimme zitterte...seine Schuld war aufgerufen, war plötzlich ins Unermeßliche aufgewachsen, er zischte unter dem Atem: >>Warte nur! Bald sind wir wieder da! Dann geht es Euch an den Kragen!<<<sup>21</sup>

[...voice trembled... his guilt had been called forth and had suddenly grown into something immeasurable, he hissed under his breath, "Just wait! Soon we will be back! Then it'll be your necks."]

The narrator threatens Huncke, pressing the advantage his real-time engagement offers in order to rupture the man's complacency and his sense of a stable future:

>>Herr Huncke, hören Sie mir jetzt bitte gut zu: es ist alles entdeckt. Alles, verstehen Sie? Ich möchte Ihnen daher raten: fliehen Sie, solange Ihnen noch Zeit bleibt!<<<sup>22</sup>

["Herr Huncke, please listen to me: everything has been found out. Everything, do you understand? I would therefore like to advise you: flee, while you still have time."]

Huncke is the narrator's neighbor, and the narrator is able to observe the effects of this telephonic exchange first hand. He recalls,

Er hängte ab, ich hängte ab, und sofort darauf leuchtete drüber ein...Fenster auf, dann ein weiteres und noch eines, das Hau wurde hell wie ein Opernhaus zur Zeit der Pause, und kaum eine halbe Stunde nach dem Gespräch fuhr ein Taxi vor, das Opfer meines Anrufs trat aus dem Haus und fuhr davon.... [niemand] löschte das Licht im Haus. Die ganze Nacht blieb es hell erleuchtet, und die nächste auch. Aber dann wurde es wieder dunkel und blieb dunkel, zumindest so lange ich gegenüber wohnte."<sup>23</sup>

[He hung up, I hung up, and immediately afterwards a window lit up across the way, then another and still another, the hall became light like an opera house during the time of intermission, and hardly a half hour after the conversation a taxi drove up, the victim of my call stepped out of the house and drove away... no one extinguished the light in the house. The entire night it remained brightly lit, and the next as well. But then it grew

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<sup>21</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 33-34.

dark again, and remained dark, at least for as long as I lived across the way.]

By linking the literal illumination that follows this conversation to a theatrical intermission, the narrator suggests an interruption of immersive collective fantasy, a return to reality. He also suggests a contrast between the emergent, open-ended role play of the call itself and the bounded, structured temporality of the more text-dependent performative of a conventional theatrical production. In contrast to the closed horizon of scripted narrative theater, the telephone *Spiel* opens a new horizon of possibility for clarity, even illumination, in the early postwar period—but connected as it is to the temporal reality of a specific social moment, this possibility is extremely time sensitive. Like the lights in Herr Huncke's abandoned house, this sense of possibility quickly fades. The narrator's frequent repetition of this "Spiel" suggests a potential for meaningful change to his West German memory culture. One can imagine him slowly creating, without advocating any specific mode of representational memory, a social environment where criminals are forced to acknowledge themselves, forced out of their complacency, a situation that could create a social climate not of memory or memorialization, but of *anamnesis*, unforgetting.

When the narrator calls Kabasta himself, the Nazi who murdered the narrator's friend Bloch, however, it becomes clear that this potential exists only in the margins of this social order, and only outside its dominant media logic and power structure of symbolic representation. Though it is the middle of the night when the narrator calls, Kabasta seems unfazed as he answers the phone. He takes the narrator for someone else; here the narrator wryly notes that "Keiner kann sich vorstellen, daß etwas Unvorstellbares geschieht, und sei das Unvorstellbare

auch noch so bescheiden, wie der nächtliche Anruf eines Unbekannten”<sup>24</sup> (no one can imagine that something unimaginable has happened, be it even so humble as the nightly call of a stranger). With this, the narrator identifies himself to Kabasta as Bloch.

How should we read the narrator’s identifying himself here as Bloch, a name that, as the reader later learns, belonged to a specific man, husband to Doris Wiener, who was murdered by Kabasta himself? Certainly the narrator’s half-conscious, spontaneous identification with Bloch suggests a stronger relationship between the two men than is revealed in the narrator’s explicit recollections. However, with this act of self-identification the narrator does not represent Bloch so much as spontaneously actualize that part of himself, that “Teil seiner Identität” that is also Bloch, in a virtual intervention that, despite its fictive, make-believe valence, has real-world impact, and not narrative disclosure, as its goal. Here the limit of identity, like the limit of the horrifying, is slippery; “es hat sowohl ein als mehrere Namen” (both one and many names). And the word Bloch emerges here spontaneously, without entering representational consciousness; the narrator recalls that, “dieser Name fiel mir gerade ein, er bedeutete nichts, zumindest nicht zu diesem Zeitpunkt”<sup>25</sup> (this name just occurred to me, it meant nothing, at least not at this moment). The transference reflected here is not that of melancholic identification. The narrator’s phone call explicitly does not repeat or represent any narrative structure from Bloch’s past. Rather it *simulates* a confrontation between Bloch and his murderer that could not have happened in Bloch’s life. In this sense, this is the conversation with the highest stakes for the narrator’s historical and memorial project. This is where a general intervention to create a culture of anamnesis becomes specific, as the narrator confronts a specific criminal in the name of a specific victim, and thereby tests the limits of whatever virtual justice the narrator’s

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<sup>24</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 44.

telephone project has undertaken as its aim.

What happens to the word “Bloch” during the narrator’s telephone encounter with Kabasta is key to the foreclosure of the narrator’s mourning process as a whole. After he speaks the name, the narrator remembers,

Ich hörte sein Schweigen, hörte die Notiz, die er auf seinen Block machte, Bloch schrieb er auf seinen Block, auf dem schon andere Namen standen und wieder andere schon durchgestrichen waren, ausgelöscht, erledigte Fälle, ehemalige nächtliche Ruhestörer, ein für allemal zur Strecke gebracht von einem geübten Jäger, der, selbst unsterblich, die sterblichen Stellen seiner Opfer kennt.<sup>26</sup>

[I heard his silence, heard the note that he made on his block, Bloch he wrote on his Block, on which other names already stood and still others were already struck through, erased, closed cases, one-time nocturnal disturbers of the peace, brought down once and for all by a practiced hunter, who, immortal himself, knew the mortal places of his victims.]

Though the phone system itself does not operate according to the logic of writing and symbolic representation—this, indeed, is what gives it so much positive potential for the narrator—Kabasta’s power does. Here Kabasta introduces the limits of differentiation—in the linguistically superficial but ontologically significant distinction between “Bloch” and “Block”—and deferral, a temporal lag between the narrator’s words and their impact, seen in Kabasta’s play for time against the narrator’s real-time confrontation, his request for “ein Moment” (one moment) as he reaches for a pen. Kabasta’s power rests in the simultaneous enforcement and denial of this limit, such that the word Bloch, written on a page, emptied of any ethical or semantic or human content, nonetheless becomes a unique and totalizing signifier for the mortal being on the other end of the phone, no longer “a part of his identity,” as the narrator elsewhere says of names, but the very encapsulation of all “his mortal places.”

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<sup>26</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 44.

In Kabasta's hand, such data as a name becomes a weapon. The representational order that subsumes mortal bodies to symbolic names is enforced by a material administrative order that holds real power over those bodies: bodies that can be localized, agencies that can thereby be contained, potential counter-histories that can thereby be silenced. After his failed conversation with Kabasta, the narrator recalls, "Schon am nächsten Tag knackte es in der Leitung, wenn ich der Hörer abnahm, in der nächsten Nacht telefonierte ich nicht mehr..."<sup>27</sup> (already the next day there was cracking in the line when I picked up the receiver, in the next night I telephoned no more).

If the narrator's nighttime phone calls represent a disruptive intervention on a political and social level as well as a personal working-through, they also, in some way, mark a moment of his willingness to engage with the postwar West German environment, in an attempt to make it psychically and morally habitable for himself. The conversation with Kabasta effectively closes this mode of engagement, excluding the narrator from any dialogue or any input into the future of West German society or its relationship to the past, and also shutting off what tentative progress his nightly calls might have made toward changing the local collective response to an individual and community trauma. The passage ends with the narrator accepting his disconnection from this Germany and its "public order" as both mutual and final. After he hangs up on Kabasta, the narrator reflects,

ich... war von diesem Augenblick an verfolgt, noch nicht einmal ganz zu unrecht, nicht ganz schuldlos, wenn ich es vom Gesichtspunkt der öffentlichen Ordnung betrachte, ein Gesichtspunkt allerdings, der mir wenig geläufig ist und zu dessen Anerkennung ich mich niemals entschließen würde.<sup>28</sup>

[I... was from this moment on persecuted, not unjustifiably, not entirely blameless, when I consider it from the point of view of the public order, a point of view that, for me, is

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<sup>27</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 44-45.

little exercised and to whose acceptance I would never commit myself.]

After this episode, the narrator, like Hildesheimer himself, leaves Germany for a state of voluntary exile in Switzerland. His isolation from real-time communications in this position is extreme; the telephones that once offered a promising, emergent medium for engagement with his local memory culture he now only uses to hear pre-recorded messages about recipes and weather.<sup>29</sup>

Reading an alternative vision for how traumatic memory might be processed and addressed in the narrator's telephone game, we might argue, again, that the deferral of symbolic and narrative closure that characterizes the narrator's melancholy and shapes *Tynset's* literary

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<sup>29</sup> The narrator's situation in *Tynset* provides an excellent illustration of the deep disconnect Stephan Braese identifies between German and Jewish memory of the Holocaust in his study *Die Andere Erinnerung*. Braese argues that postwar German public culture—and in particular German literary culture, in which Hildesheimer took an active part in the years between his return to Germany in 1946 (after emigrating to Palestine in 1933) and his re-emigration to Switzerland in 1957—actively suppressed and censored Jewish authors and Jewish memory of the Holocaust. For Braese, *Tynset* marks Hildesheimer's complex confrontation with this literary public sphere, his attempt to write concretely about his own experience of the Nazi Holocaust while simultaneously negotiating the demands of the West German literary public and, further, answering to his own artistic imperative to honor the concreteness and traumatic particularity of Jewish-German experience in a way that opened on to more universal, broadly human concerns. See Stephan Braese, *Die Andere Erinnerung: Jüdische Autoren in der Westdeutschen Nachkriegsliteratur* (Berlin: Philo, 2001), in particular Braese's references to Wolfgang Hildesheimer, "Die Vier Hauptgründe, weshalb ich nicht in der Bundesrepublik lebe" in *Die Andere Erinnerung*, 265, and to "Mein Judentum," in *Das Ende der Fiktionen: Reden aus fünfundzwanzig Jahren* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988).

Braese presents brilliant and invaluable analysis and historical contextualization, very much against the grain of previous Hildesheimer scholarship, and his arguments provide a starting place for my own analysis of the complex interplay of identity, otherness, and desire in *Tynset*. My purpose here has been to understand more precisely how the complexity of memory, experience, and identity in Hildesheimer's book exceed the systems, structures, and technologies of representation, and how *Tynset* suggests a reading practice that, like Hildesheimer's writing practice, is grounded at once in the particularity of individual experience and in a broader ethical relation that is universally human.

form do not illustrate inevitable aspects of human memory. Rather they mark the narrator's attempt, in the absence of any receptive community of memory in his real time, to adapt a necessarily intersubjective process of mourning and memorialization to written, textual form.

Throughout *Tysnet* we see the narrator struggle, in his mind and his memory, with the binary terms of symbolic representation. The spontaneous, performative, yet non-representational remembering of Bloch during his conversation with Kabasta stands in sharp contrast to his larger struggles to recall and represent another loved person, the mysterious woman who haunts his thoughts. In one passage, the narrator's immersion in a powerful visual image gives way to a conflict between his desire for closure—for an answer to his question “who is with me”—and desire to defer closure, to avoid accepting the reality of this woman's death, or the inevitability of his own.

....Eine Rostrinne zieht sich auf dem Weiß der Wand von der Ankertasche abwärts, die Ketten rollen, und Ladekräne und Karren—und ich—ich sehe das Schiff unter meinen Füßen und sehe das Schiff neben mir, ich stehe auf dem Kai und ich stehe auf dem Schiff, ich habe ein schaukelndes Deck unter den Füßen oder festen Boden aus Stein, ich bin im Bild und ich bin nicht im Bild, ich betrachte es mir von außen, ich bin allein, und ich bin zu zweit—zu zweit?—Aber mit wem?

Eine weibliche Stimme ruft mir etwas zu, obgleich ihre Trägerin neben mir ist, aber es weht ein Wind, er weht ihre Worte fort, ich sehe sie entschwinden, sich auflösen, er weht durch ihr Haar, es ist blond oder schwarz, die Möwen sind hellgrau, das Schiff weiß mit einer roten Rostrinne, der Himmel ist grau— -

der Himmel grau--, ja, diese letzte Banalität löscht das Bild aus: grauer Herbsthimmel. Früher, da war der Himmel blau, aber das Blau ist verwaschen, fadenscheinig geworden, abgenutzt von Leuten wie ich, und jetzt ist der Himmel grau. Ich verwerfe das Bild, ich lege es weg, ich bin wieder hier, in diesem großen Bett, meinem Winterbett, ich steige wieder ein in das Verstreichen der Zeit, es ist zwischen elf und zwölf Uhr nachts, ich erledige mein tägliches Pensum an Altern, ich nehme diese dünnen Fäden wieder auf, um ein Seil daraus zu drehen, ein Seil, das mich vorwärts zieht—vorwärts und abwärts und hinab, dorthin, wo mein Weg enger wird, immer enger, wo die Möglichkeiten welken und abfallen—Möglichkeiten?

--Die Rotwein-Flasche leer. Ich sollte mir eine neue holen, in der Küche. Später, später—ich sollte—

--ich sollte nach Tynset fahren.<sup>30</sup>

[...A channel of rust draws itself down the white of the wall from the anchor housing, the chains roll, and cranes and trolleys—and I—I see the ship under my feet, and see the ship next to me, I stand on the quay and I stand on the ship, I have a shaking deck under my feet or firm ground of stone, I am in the picture and I am not in the picture, I observe it from outside, I am alone and I am two—two?—But with whom?

A female voice calls something to me, though the woman who bears it is by my side, but a wind blows, it blows her words away, I see them disappearing, dissolving, it blows through her hair, it is blonde or black, the seagulls are light grey, the ship white with a red ladder, the sky is grey— -

--the sky grey--, yes, this last banality erases the picture: grey autumn sky. Earlier, the sky was blue, but the blue is washed out, grown threadbare, used up by people like me, and now the sky is grey. I discard this picture, I lay it aside, I am once more here, in this large bed, my winter bed, I am climbing back into the passing of time, it is between eleven and twelve o'clock at night, I am completing my daily quota of aging, I take these thin threads up once more, to spin a sail, a sail that pulls me forward, forward and downward and down, where my path grows tighter, ever tighter, where the possibilities wilt and fall away—Possibilities?

--The red wine bottle empty. I should get myself a new one, in the kitchen.  
Later, later—I should  
--I should go to Tynset.]

The narrator begins this passage with a free and mobile subjectivity, immersed in a timeless, imaginary picture that he experiences from many perspectives at once. His response to the emergence of a second person in his memory provides a succinct outline of his melancholic quandry. To recollect this other person, to recall her words to memory, he must differentiate from her in his consciousness, must assign her an identity separate from his own, must accordingly localize his own identity in a way that will rupture the temporal suspension of his reverie and return him to his lived reality, a reality where time passes and where this woman is already irretrievably lost to him. The narrator's desire to retreat from this reality and defer the moment of accepting this loss is a key characteristic of his melancholy. His simultaneous and

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<sup>30</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 74-75.

impossible desire to discover the woman's identity, to remember her clearly and accurately, provides a major source of *Tynset's* narrative tension; as many critics have noted, the question of this woman's identity is central to *Tynset's* "hermeneutic code," in the terminology of Roland Barthes; the set of questions or mysteries posed by a text to compel a reader's narrative curiosity.

To answer the question of this woman's identity would, in theory, provide narrative closure to the reader and a kind of closure to the narrator's melancholia as well.<sup>31</sup> But the narrator's ambivalence reflects a connection between his melancholy and his critical or philosophical anxiety about the nature of the closure such an answer would entail.

His concern is not merely to remember this woman, but to remember her *effectively*, and to communicate this memory effectively within the limits of symbolic language. The difficulty of this project becomes apparent with the narrator's abrupt meditation, in the passage above, on the emptiness of words themselves:

der Himmel grau--, ja, diese letzte Banalität löscht das Bild aus: grauer Herbsthimmel. Früher, da war der Himmel blau, aber das Blau ist verwaschen, fadenscheinig geworden, abgenutzt von Leuten wie ich, und jetzt ist der Himmel grau.<sup>32</sup>

[--the sky grey--, yes, this last banality erases the picture: grey autumn sky. Earlier, the sky was blue, but the blue is washed out, grown threadbare, used up by people like me, and now the sky is grey.]

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<sup>31</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the theme of melancholia in *Tynset*, see Melanie Steiner Sherwood's 2011 dissertation, *Jean Améry and Wolfgang Hildesheimer: Ressentiments, melancholia, and the West German public sphere in the 1960s and 1970s*. Steiner Sherwood's analysis of *Tynset* examines the ways in which Hildesheimer's narrator ultimately strains against the limits of melancholia as a framework for ethical memory, but takes an approach slightly different from mine; where I focus on Hildesheimer's staging of alternate memorial modes and an active, ethical struggle for intersubjective understanding in *Tynset*, Steiner Sherwood investigates the role of affect in ethical public memory. Melanie Steiner Sherwood, "Jean Améry and Wolfgang Hildesheimer: Ressentiments, melancholia, and the West German public sphere in the 1960s and 1970s" (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 74-75.

This interjection places the entire passage firmly and self-consciously within the register of descriptive language. The narrator's concern here is specifically about the empty cliché—a threat of the evacuation of meaning through overuse. It is by recourse to the poetic, virtual dimension of metaphor that the narrator seeks to counteract this force of banality, finding possibility or new purpose in the words themselves. He thinks, “ich nehme diese dünnen Fäden wieder auf, um ein Seil daraus zu drehen,”<sup>33</sup> (I take these thin threads up again, in order to spin a sail from them,) insisting on the concrete poetic concept—*Fäden* (threads)—at the heart of the descriptor *fadenscheinig* (threadbare), and metonymically drawing together, in literary imagination, the absent blue of a sky that was and the sail that transports him on his journey of investigation.

But the narrative structure of his symbolic temporal engagement with this fantasy seems to point to a more definitive closure, to an answer, the final limit of the mystery's resolution, the story's end, the narrator's grave. His response to this limit suggests that the narrator's difficulty with naming the woman has less to do with his fear of her absence as such, and more to do with his fear of closing the question of her existence, of curtailing possibility. At the close of this section above, the narrator asks what possibilities might remain at the end of this journey, or if indeed possibility even exists, once he has committed himself to this narrative pathway. His shifts, after this question mark, first to an immediate practical concern (whether or not to retrieve a new bottle), and then to an even more abstract problem (whether or not to visit Tynset) at first read like a reflexive, panicked disengagement from this path of narrative closure, the path away from melancholic suspension and toward the grave. But the destinations his deflections suggest—the kitchen, the city Tynset—are limits themselves, synecdochally related to this

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<sup>33</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 75.

fearful limit of memory, narrative closure, and death, but construed by the narrator as places of possibility and ethical struggle.

The passage above ends with the narrator's obsessively recurring question of whether he will go to Tynset, a continually-deferred destination which, like the identity of the woman of his memory, constitutes a major part of *Tynset's* "hermeneutic code." But what *is* Tynset—how should we read its peculiar superimposition of imaginary destination, structuring limit, question to be answered, and deferred object of narrative desire? In her reading of *Tynset*, Katja Garloff argues that Tynset constitutes the narrator's attempt to substitute a "pure signifier," devoid of any historical association, for his traumatic memories. In this reading, the word Tynset thus "epitomize[s]" the "modernist play of language" that has been the focus of many of the book's critics. For Garloff,

What remains in Tynset of the modernist project is the attempt to defy this unspeakable horror [of 'das Schreckliche'] through acts of location, including the markation of a point on a line...the narration of a place, and the attribution of a name. But these acts of location open up neither the past nor the future, and it may have been this sense of stasis that induced Hildesheimer to ultimately give up the writing of fiction altogether.<sup>34</sup>

But, significantly, Tynset also exceeds and eludes and blurs limits, whether these are conceived as the typographical line exceeded by the tail of the 'y,' the in-between-ness of the vowel sound somewhere between "I" and "Ü", the fragile and contingent material vocalization of this "noch nicht einmal aussprechbar" (not even pronounceable) and difficult to conceptualize sound, or the openness of the word's sounds to metonymical association or to musical impact of their own.<sup>35</sup>

Certainly Tynset points to a particular kind of emptiness, a place where "Zwischenraum ist und sonst nichts" (in-between space is and otherwise nothing); it is the space between the lines of text in the Norwegian railway timetable at the start of this chapter, the "leere[] Raum

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<sup>34</sup> Garloff, "Expanding the Canon of Holocaust Literature," 73.

<sup>35</sup> See Garloff, "Expanding the Canon of Holocaust Literature," 68-70, but see as well, for comparison, the original passages of Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 26-27:

zwischen Bündeln, den Mengen, den Gruppen von etwas, von viel oder von zuviel, das Unsichtbare zwischen den Sichtbaren, das Loch im Himmel”<sup>36</sup> (the empty space between bundles, crowds, the groups of something, of much or of too much, the invisible between the visible, the hole in the heavens). Tynset also has a particular relationship to desire. The narrator also describes it as

das große Rohr, das meine Sehnsucht in den Himmel bohrt, das Verlangen, wie das Verlangen, das Celestina nach Gott hat, Verlangen nach dem Ort, an dem nichts ist und nichts sein kann und nie etwas gewesen ist, das treibt mich hinauf.<sup>37</sup>

[the long pipe [a reference to a telescope] that bores my yearning into the heavens, like the longing that Celestina has for God, longing for the place, in which nothing is and nothing can be and nothing has ever been, that drives me upward.]

Garloff suggests that the narrator wants, in this emptiness, a fantasy place unburdened by his traumatic memories, a “pure signifier” to substitute for and thus contain his traumatic thoughts. But Tynset is not a vacuum; in it a desired object may nonetheless take its place, it is: “der leere Raum, durch den man hindurchsieht auf Etwas”<sup>38</sup> (the empty space, through which one looks through to Something). As such, Tynset has a surprising relationship to history. The narrator notes that:

...soweit ich weiß... gibt es [in Tynset] nichts das sich aufzeichnen oder nachmalen läßt. Geräusch läßt sich nachmalen, Stille nicht, Sturm ja, aber ein leichter Luftzug, der Gras zwischen den Steinen bewegt, nicht. Eine Revolution, ja, keine Revolution nicht, was geschieht ja, was nicht geschieht nein.<sup>39</sup>

[...as far as I know... there is nothing [in Tynset] that could be recorded or represented. Sound can be represented, silence not. Storm yes, but a soft breath of air that moves the grass between the stones, not. A revolution, yes, no revolution not, what happened yes, what did not happen no.]

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<sup>36</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 181.

<sup>38</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 181.

<sup>39</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 92.

“Tynset” is the narrator’s name for a place where the thing that eludes representation can nonetheless be recognized, even after its moment has passed.

In his “Notes on Afterwardness,” Jean Laplanche considers the nature of the limit that separates us from the past, examining the complexity of the psychoanalytic concept of *Nachträglichkeit*—or “afterwardness”. Laplanche argues that this relationship to the past should best be seen as an intersubjective interface, rather than an impossible temporal limit of belatedness. Laplanche differentiates between a “hermeneutic” view of afterwardness, according to which an observer “reinterprets” the past “in terms of his present situation,” and a “deterministic” one, according to which a past event fundamentally shapes the framework of subsequent interpretations. Laplanche’s own view, “in no way a choice between these two options,” elaborates the presence of a “third term” at play in the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*: the trace of an other’s desire in the past, a “message.” For this reason, Laplanche writes,

even if we concentrate all our attention on the retroactive temporal direction, in the sense that someone reinterprets their past, this past cannot be a purely factual one, an unprocessed or raw ‘given.’ It contains rather in an immanent fashion something that comes before – a message from the other. It is impossible therefore to put forward a purely hermeneutic position on this – that is to say, that everyone interprets their past according to their present – because the past already has something deposited in it that demands to be deciphered, which is the message of the other person.<sup>40</sup>

In this understanding, desire is not based on the presence or absence of a desired object, but negotiated through an object, an enigmatic message, which is conceived as a zone of intersubjective encounter. With this model in mind, I return to *Tynset* and the complex negotiations surrounding the narrator’s encounter with his housekeeper, Celestina, who is closely related to the central “enigma” of *Tynset* itself.

Dogmatically Catholic, yet estranged from the official church, Celestina is both simple

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<sup>40</sup> Jean Laplanche, “Notes on Afterwardness,” in *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999), 252-254.

and elusive, and as solitary as the narrator himself, who can wander the halls his house for hours without seeing her. Meticulous and loyal, she is continually associated with acts of recording or record-keeping; she personifies a general idea of public information that the narrator both needs and finds vaguely contemptible. When the narrator has need of information about the local community, he thinks,

Ich werde also Celestina fragen, sie weiß es, sie selbst braucht nicht zu fragen, sie weiß, wer früh stirbt oder spät, wer nicht mehr viel Zeit hat, wer nicht fähig zum Leben ist, wer nicht weit kommt, und wer alt wird, wen Gott zu sich nimmt und wen er verschmäht. Sie weiß viel, Celestina.<sup>41</sup>

[I will ask Celestina, she knows it, she herself doesn't need to ask, she knows, who dies early or late, who has not much time left, who is not capable of living, who won't go far, and who grows old, whom God takes to himself and whom he scorns. She knows much, Celestina.]

The narrator's wry tone here underscores his mistrust of such "information"—he implicates Celestina's kind of knowledge in the promulgation of the Horrifying, connecting the certainty of such "knowing" to foreclosed acceptance by the faithful of the "first enigma," God's rejection of Cain. And, indeed, Celestina's relationship to this information is rigidly unquestioning; it takes the shape of a fervent, uncritical belief in Christian religious doctrine.

Yet the narrator also describes Celestina's feeling for God as a "longing" comparable to his own longing for Tynset, and both characters share a corollary longing for wine. This triangulation and proximation of their deepest desires eventually brings the two characters together for an enigmatic encounter in narrator's kitchen—the only moment in the book's main narrative frame where the narrator interacts with another person. In the passage I discuss above, where, thinking of the mysterious woman of his memory, the narrator questions what possibilities remain for him after his story has reached its end, his thoughts shift first to the

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<sup>41</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 263.

drinking habit he shares with Celestina and the site of his potential encounter with her, and only afterwards turn to Tynset:

Möglichkeiten?

--Die Rotwein-Flasche leer. Ich sollte mir eine neue holen, in der Küche. Später, später—ich sollte—  
--ich sollte nach Tynset fahren.<sup>42</sup>

[Possibilities?

--The red wine bottle empty. I should get a new one, in the kitchen.  
Later, later—I should—  
--I should go to Tynset.]

At this point in the book, Celestina is the only wine-drinker the reader knows of, and this sudden mention of an empty bottle is typographically marked as a vocal interjection; this might even be a shift to her perspective. At any rate, it marks one place where the narrator's subjectivity opens onto Celestina's, the site of their shared desire, localized and made manifest as both object (the wine) and destination (the kitchen), which in turn appears as an anticipatory echo of the greater destination of Tynset itself.

For the time being this narrator's meeting with Celestina is also deferred. When he does finally encounter Celestina in the kitchen, the narrator is surprised to find a carefully constructed scene, staged to reflect Celestina's own expectations and desires.

Ich betrete also die Küche.... Auf dem Küchentisch brennt eine Kerze.... Beiderseits der Kerze, an den Breitseiten des Tisches stehen Weingläser. Das eine Glas ist voll, das andere halbvoll, halbleer. Hinter diesem sitzt Celestina, hinter dem anderen sitzt niemand, hier wird wohl jemand erwartet, der Stuhl ist vom Tisch abgerückt, ein wenig nur. Aber ich bin es nicht, der erwartet wurde, das entnehme ich dem Blick, den Celestina von dem leeren Platz abwendet und mir zuwirft.... ich kann diesen Blick noch nicht deuten.<sup>43</sup>

[I enter the kitchen.... On the kitchen table a candle burns.... On both sides of the candle,

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<sup>42</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 74-75.

<sup>43</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 219.

at the ends of the table, stand wine glasses. The one is full, the other half-full, half-empty. Behind this one Celestina sits, behind the other no one, here someone is clearly expected, the chair is moved away from the table, just a little. But I am not the one, who is expected, this I see from the look, that Celestina turns from the empty place and throws to me... I cannot yet interpret this look.]

The trappings of this scene, and especially Celestina's looks, interrupt the narrator's vision of Tynset. He reflects that he enjoys the sight of Tynset, the distant goal, visible "dort hinten, wo nichts sich bewegt, kein Baum, kein Schatten zwischen den Häusern, // aber vorn nimmt mich etwas anderes gefangen, es sind Celestina und die beiden Gläser Wein, ihr Blick, der mich hält..."<sup>44</sup> (back there, where nothing moves, no tree, no shadow between the houses, // but in the foreground something else has captured me, it is Celestina and the two glasses of wine, her look, that holds me...).

The narrator's struggles to navigate this scene so overdetermined by Celestina's expectations are further shaped by his own desires. Most pressing among these is his "Große Lust nach dem Wein" (great desire for the wine), but also, and more relevant for the question of narrative curiosity in *Tynset*, his desire to learn about Celestina's mysterious past:

Jetzt—jetzt wäre der Augenblick gekommen, um Celestinas Geheimnis zu erfahren, hier habe ich sie vor mir, unter mir, halbnackt, sie könnte mir nichts verheimlichen...<sup>45</sup>

[Now—now would be the moment to discover Celestina's secret, here I have her before me, below me, half-naked, she could conceal nothing from me...]

In considering the scene and the course of action he should take, the narrator's words invoke, then explicitly refuse, an understanding of such curiosity that would connect narrative "Spannung" to a psychosexual desire for mastery. They also emphasize the ethical complexity of questions and answers:

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<sup>44</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 220.

<sup>45</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 229.

...ich werde das Geheimnis nicht erfahren, ich nicht, ich bin kein Frager, kein Nutzer des Augenblicks, keiner dieser Inquisitoren, die ihr Opfer entblößt an die Wand stellen, an den Pranger, und es so lange befragen, bis die Fragen ihm im Körper stecken bleiben, wie die Pfeile im Rumpf des heiligen Sebastian, ich bin kein Beichtvater, der seine Beichttochter ins Fleisch kneift, um zu erspüren, wo sie denn sitzt, die Todsünde. Ich bin kein heiliger Moralist, wie dieser Doktor Liguori, der ihr unter das Hemd greift und seine Finger zwischen ihre Schenkel steckt, um ihre Öffnung nach einer Unkeuschheit abzutasten—, nein...<sup>46</sup>

[...I will not learn the secret, not I, I am no questioner, no user of the moment, none of these inquisitors, that stand their victim bare to the wall, in the pillories, and question for so long that the questions stick in the body like the shafts in the trunk of the holy Sebastian, I am no father confessor, who pinches his confessing daughter in the flesh, in order to discover, where it then rests, the deadly sin. I am no holy moralist, like this doctor Liguori, who grasps her under her shift and sticks his fingers between her thighs, in order to gauge her opening for any unchastity—, no...]

The narrator refuses his own desire for an answer, his desire to pursue a question, because it would make him like the creators and policers of public doctrine, but also because, suspecting an element of sexual exploitation by such a figure in Celestina's past, he does not want to repeat her particular trauma, even metaphorically, in the process of discovering it. His desire to grant her dominion over her own secrets becomes an imperative to protect her from those who would not; "da kniet sie vor mir, zu meinen Füßen, ich muß sie behüten, sie beschützen, damit keiner von diesen Kerlen sich ihr unzüchtig näherte..."<sup>47</sup> (there she kneels before me, at my feet, I must shelter her, protect her, in order that none of these brutes approaches her lewdly). Reflecting on his own reasons for this refusal reminds him, however, of Celestina's unconditional acceptance of the very order from which he would like to protect her. He concludes with an ethically problematic decision:

Jetzt stelle ich fest: ich will ihr Geheimnis auch gar nicht mehr wissen, es interessiert mich nicht mehr. Was sollte ich damit? Und ich will sie ihrer Sünde auch nicht berauben. Da stände sie denn, noch nackter als zuvor, leer, zu alt, um sich Ersatz für ihre

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<sup>46</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 229.

<sup>47</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 230.

große Bürde zu schaffen, die ihr Leben war. Sie soll bleiben, wie sie ist, eine selbsternannte Sünderin, eine Heilige.  
Weg von hier!<sup>48</sup>

[Now I decide firmly: I do not even want to know her secret any longer, it no longer interests me. What would I do with it? And I will also not rob her of her sins. Then she would stand before me, even nakeder than before, empty, too old to find a replacement for the enormous burden that was her life. She shall remain as she is, a self-proclaimed sinner, a saint.  
Away from here!]

Granting Celestina her “otherness” here leads the narrator to a declaration of noninvolvement that seems to entail giving up on Celestina herself, declaring her, along with the public order she stands in for, a lost cause. But Celestina’s insistent interpellation again interrupts his solipsism. Apparently taking him for God, she again demands that he bless her. In a momentary reversal of roles, Celestina is the one who plays the part of Jacob here; in the pages that follow, she and the narrator struggle with one another, with no clear progress, toward some kind of communication or understanding.

Celestina’s desire for a blessing, the narrator suspects, relates to her sense of sin and shame; she wishes to be reconciled with the doctrine she idealizes but feels herself excluded from. The narrator recognizes that he can repeat the gesture of a blessing and thereby “heal” her, in her terms, but he refuses to mimic or even to recall, though elsewhere in the book he reflects on the memory of a photograph that depicts it, the kind of Christian blessing Celestina desires.

Wie segnet man einen Menschen? Gewiß, ich habe es ja gesehen, damals in Rosenheim, damals bei diesem Kardinal. Aber diese heilige Gestik beherrsche ich nicht, ich bringe dieses Zeichen nicht fertig, und selbst wenn ich fertigbrächte, so wäre mir Celestina zu gut für diesen billigen Dreh.<sup>49</sup>

[How does one bless a person? Certainly I have seen it, back then in Rosenheim, that time with the Cardinal. But I do not command this holy gesture, I cannot execute the sign, and even if I could, to me Celestina would be too good for this cheap art.]

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<sup>48</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 230.

<sup>49</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 225.

Instead, he blesses her sincerely but also stubbornly, withholding the gesture she thinks she needs to make the blessing real, refusing even to attempt these formalized gestures, replacing them instead with his own version:

Ich neige mich zu Celestina herab, nehme ihren Kopf zwischen meine beiden Hände, ich küsse ihre feuchte Stirn, streiche ihr über das Haar und murmele: >>Ich segne dich, mein Kind<<<sup>50</sup>

[I bend down to Celestina, take her head between my two hands, I kiss her damp forehead, stroke her hair and murmur: “I bless you, my child.”]

In the defiant noncorrespondence between the narrator’s blessing and the one she expects, Celestina recognizes the narrator as her employer, not her god, rises expressionless to her feet, and silently, ritualistically begins her work day. The narrator feels himself condemned and dismissed to wander the house in solitude, like a ghost.

In some sense, the narrator’s blessing stands as a failed performative. Celestina cannot receive the blessing, cannot even register it, the narrator notes that “ihre Augen haben keinen Ausdruck, sind nur leer”<sup>51</sup> (her eyes had no expression, were only empty), precisely because, he recognizes, “meine Stimme war nicht die Stimme Gottes, der Kuß nicht der Kuß Gottes, und meine Worte nicht die seinen, noch nicht einmal die etwas rechten Priesters”<sup>52</sup> (my voice was not the voice of god, the kiss not the kiss of god, and my words not his, not even those of a proper priest).

This awkward but basically well-intentioned encounter does not define the narrator’s relationship with Celestina—he will have other encounters with her, albeit encounters affected by this one; later he wonders, “wie wird sie mir heute morgen begegnen? Wie werde ich ihr

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<sup>50</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 230.

<sup>51</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 231.

<sup>52</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 231.

begegnen?“<sup>53</sup> (how will she encounter me in the morning? How will I encounter her?). In these subsequent encounters, it is implied, the tensions between the characters’ conflicting desires and the nonresolution between their frameworks for meaning-making will continue to struggle in a complex ethical negotiation that is not ultimately closed off or doomed by the apparent failure of the kitchen encounter.

The encounter in the kitchen is therefore not a defining moment, but it is an emblematic one. Significant—even traumatically so—in its provocation, yet open-ended in its impact, this encounter prompts the narrator to recall an early “große Krise” (great crisis) in his relationship with the housekeeper. Soon after the narrator’s arrival in his inherited house where Celestina had previously served his uncle, a long-dead apple tree suddenly began to bloom again. Terrified by the apparently supernatural dimension of this development, Celestina shunned or avoided the narrator afterwards. Yet, though she might easily have used her “Verdacht der Hexerei” (suspicion of witchcraft) as a way to re-ingratiate herself with the church, her main source of meaning in life, from which she had become estranged, Celestina never does this. Like the strangeness of the kitchen encounter, this episode was for the narrator

ein Rätsel. Oder zumindest: Teil des großen Rätsels- -  
-jetzt werde ich müde-  
Teil des großen Rätsels, das Tynset heißt.<sup>54</sup>

[An enigma. Or at least: a part of the great enigma- -  
-now I grow tired-  
Part of the great enigma that is called Tynset.]

In Garloff’s reading, Hildesheimer’s narrative “reproduce[s] the traumatic gap between experience and understanding, or the disjunction between addressee and referent in language.”

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<sup>53</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 263.

<sup>54</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 245.

As I discussed above, for Hildesheimer's narrator, this primary "traumatic gap" is the Biblical story of God's rejection of Cain, an arbitrary persecution that sets the stage for all acts of violence and persecution to follow. As the beginning of arbitrary rejection, this "Rätsel" is present in the many examples of cruelty that the narrator recalls throughout the novel. But it is present, too, complexly, in the kitchen scene with Celestina. Why does the narrator refuse to "heal" Celestina, who has cast him as her god, by producing the gesture she so urgently desires? The question also looms in his relationship with Celestina in the sense that it exemplifies her unquestioning attitude toward what she "knows," that is, "wen Gott zu sich nimmt und wen er verschmäht"<sup>55</sup> (whom God embraces and whom he scorns). This knowledge is precisely what makes Celestina a figure for a broader order of public information; her doctrinaire attitude toward this information is what prevents her from receiving the narrator's blessing. In this sense, "warum erhörte Gott es nicht?" (why did God not honor it?) is not merely a philosophical question that troubles the narrator. In a more literal, more literary way, it is the very question he needs Celestina to ask as well, if his attempted blessing is to be anything more than a closed sign of incommunication between the two. It is, abstractly and concretely, philosophically and narratively, the question at the heart of their enigmatic relationship, a figure for the archival relationship, which as the narrator notes, is but one part of the great enigma he calls Tynset.

Recognizing that Tynset is also *Tynset*—the narrator remarks at one point, "ich habe Lust, irgend etwas so zu nennen"<sup>56</sup> (I have an urge to name something or other that), how might we relate the enigmatic relationship between the narrator and Celestina to a broader question of narrative closure and historical representation?

Many readers focus on the apparent, if unsatisfying, closure of *Tynset*'s primary

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<sup>55</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 263.

<sup>56</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 25.

motivating questions in the book's final pages, particularly the narrator's closing assertion that

Ich werde Tynset entfliehen lassen, werde es vergessen, verdrängen, ja, ich werde das Spiel mit dem Rätsel sein lassen, werde so tun, als sei alles keine Willkür, alles in schönster bester Ordnung...<sup>57</sup>

[I will let Tynset escape, will forget it, suppress it, yes, I will leave the game [play] with the riddle alone, will do, as though it were no arbitrariness, everything in the best, most beautiful order...]

But the narrator's decision to let go of Tynset, on the book's final page, also emphasizes the material limit of the book itself. In a sense this reinforces the reader's position, which Hildesheimer has continually problematized, of belated understanding, of memorialization, of closure, and of struggling to avoid an "answer" that forecloses possibility.

Here again Laplanche's theory of the enigmatic signifier provides an instructive framework. Laplanche questions the Freudian differentiation between mourning and melancholy, the view that sees the "working of mourning as a process of 'detachment' (Ablösung) of libido from its objects," and that makes such detachment the distinguishing difference between healthy mourning and pathological melancholy. Detachment here marks the completion or mastery of traumatic loss, or agreement to a system of substitutions; Laplanche counters this framework with an alternate version of the process of 'working through' such loss, citing the Homeric scene of Penelope weaving and unweaving a great tapestry as she waits for the return of Ulysses:

We are told in the manifest tale: a faithful and wise spouse, she wishes to get rid of the suitors, and she weaves with the sole aim of unweaving, in other words to gain time until her Ulysses returns [or to melancholically defer the moment of accepting his death]. One can equally well suppose, however, the reverse: that perhaps she only unweaves in *order* to weave, to be able to weave a new tapestry. It would thus be a case of *mourning*, mourning for Ulysses. But Penelope does not cut the threads, as in the Freudian theory of mourning; she patiently unpicks them, to be able to compose them again in a different

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<sup>57</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 268.

way.... There is, however, one possible end. One can imagine that one evening the new cloth, for a while at least, will not be unwoven.<sup>58</sup>

In Laplanche's example, this textual work (that is, the work of textual representation) is an ongoing process. Whether she acknowledges or avoids awareness of his death is here irrelevant; Penelope's "patient[] unpick[ing]" of the threads demonstrates her continued investment in the "enigmatic message" of her lost other. This may result in closure, but the closure is only ever provisional, as the closing of *Tynset* itself demonstrates.

*Tynset*'s final pages finally reveal the answer to another enigma that has haunted the narrator from the start: the name of the mysterious woman of his memory. In the book's final pages, he suddenly remembers,

Jetzt fällt es mir ein: Vanessa hieß sie. Vanessa, ein guter Name. Und ich muß sie geliebt haben. Ich erinnere mich—  
ich erinnere mich, daß ich manchmal nachts im Dunkel, in jäher lähmender Angst um ihr Leben, über die Schlafende neigte, um zu horchen ob sie noch atme.  
Ob sie noch atmet?<sup>59</sup>

[Now it occurs to me: she was called Vanessa. Vanessa, a good name. And I must have loved her. I remember—  
I remember that sometimes, in the dark of night, in sudden, crippling fear for her life, I would bend over her, listening to hear if she were still breathing.  
If she is still breathing?]

The narrator finally remembers the name that has eluded him for much of the book. But this "answer" provides him no closure; on the contrary, the question of the woman's name opens immediately onto a new question, a fundamental question of care, an inquiry about her life, her state of being, her breath. Like an enigmatic message, this question exceeds the frame of belatedness: to recall it in memory is to renew it again in the present tense. For readers

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<sup>58</sup> Laplanche, "Notes on Afterwardness," 252.

<sup>59</sup> Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, 268.

necessarily relegated to the position of belatedness by the very media structure of Hildesheimer's book, this conclusion provides a critical reminder of the manifold nature of our own enigmatic archival encounter with this text. We stand as stewards, like Celestina, on the threshold between past information and future knowledge, admonished by her ghostly counterpart to let one question fold into the next in ethical pursuit of the larger, essential enigma of why.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESCREENING MEMORY BEYOND THE WALL

In the last years, a large percentage of our population has suffered due to the fact that around 50 percent of the knowledge they acquired during the course of a lifetime was rendered useless through sudden and unforeseeable events. The well-planned introduction of this board game will end this untenable situation! No one will laugh at you anymore if you can grab the price of a *Schlager* chocolate bar out of a hat, if you can tie a Pioneer [scarf] knot at lightening speed, or if you can name ten DEFA western films.<sup>1</sup>

The passage above comes from the instructions to a German board game called *Ferner Osten* (Far East), a successful trivia game, introduced in the 1990s, that involved precise but wide-ranging questions about everyday life in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) of East Germany. In its questions and gameplay, *Ferner Osten* offers a distinctly non-representational version of the widespread phenomenon of *Ostalgie*, or “nostalgia for the East,” a cultural response to the loss of cultural context, identity, and community experienced by East Germans after the (some would say) catastrophically abrupt transition from small-scale planned economy to advanced global capitalism with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

As the instructions to *Ferner Osten* announce, the game resurrects lost icons of everyday life: the “*Schlager* chocolate bar,”<sup>2</sup> one of many East German products discontinued after 1989 to be recreated a decade later with a slightly different recipe; the neck scarves of the Pioneers, the East German national youth organization to which nearly every school-aged person belonged; and, most importantly for the essay at hand, the popular westerns or “*Indianerfilme*” made by the East German film company DEFA in the years between 1966 and 1976.

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<sup>1</sup> Instructions to the board game *Ferner Osten*, translated and cited by Daphne Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present: Memory, longing, and East German Things,” *Ethnos* 64 no. 2 (1999): 203-204.

<sup>2</sup> Officially described as a *Süßtafel* or “candy bar” rather than a “chocolate bar,” supposedly because of meager and unpredictable cacao content.

*Ferner Osten* does not merely memorialize or re-present these icons as lost objects of nostalgia or desire, but deploys them in a social setting, a group of people (the rules specify team play), to reawaken the mundane skills of day-to-day social survival in a country and a culture that no longer exists—forms of knowledge—like tying a scarf knot—often based more in practice, familiarity, habitus, than in possession of “information” per se. The game’s instructions maintain a sense of humorous ironic distance from this knowledge and its original context—Daphne Berdahl comments on the instructions’ “tongue-in-cheek style that employ[s] much socialist lingo”<sup>3</sup>—yet address a genuine and deeply felt sense of loss and social handicapping—seen in the wry observation, quoted above, that fifty percent of many Germans’ lifetime knowledge had suddenly been rendered useless, and seen as well in the sensitivity to social and cultural ridicule, the implicit motivating desire the “no one will laugh at you anymore.” Above all, the game provides an occasion for players to resurrect this old knowledge and habitus—potentially creating an emergent community of shared memory, shared identity that, while fun and ironic, might still lead to deeper anamnesis and community building.

In so doing, the game suggests one potentially positive approach to the problem of making lost or threatened local identity visible and accessible in a broader global community, an issue that has been a concern in East German cultural studies for the last decades. Paul Cooke writes that “the need to place the local on the global stage in order to protect cultural diversity in the face of the homogenizing forces of global capitalism [that] is found in a number of texts by contemporary East German authors... is perhaps the dominant trend currently.”<sup>4</sup> This, however, is no easy task. To the extent that it is equally embedded in the dynamics of local power,

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<sup>3</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 203.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Cooke, “East German writing in the age of globalisation,” in *German Literature in the Age of Globalisation*, ed. Stuart Taberner (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham Press, 2004), 36.

identity, and memory structures and in more global epistemological frameworks associated with late capitalism, “liquid” modernity,<sup>5</sup> and “liberal humanist” subjectivity, we might argue that the particular frictions and tensions surrounding the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* mark an especially fraught struggle in the emergence of posthuman understanding. This chapter analyzes the way these themes come together through the trope of narrative as journey, the “utopia” of identity-constituting ideological fantasy, and the conflicting genre codes of cowboys and Indians in an artwork called *The Last Cowboy*.

Created in 1998 by artist team Nomad, the international partners Michael Tucker of the USA and Petra Epperlein of the former GDR, this artwork consists of three video channels on DVD. The most complex of these channels presents a seemingly stream-of-consciousness jumble of thoughts and memories that are rendered in English text and illustrated, in large part, with media imagery and stock video footage of everyday life in the GDR. The artwork’s melancholic tone and slowly chaotic flow speak to its East German narrator’s sense of loss and cultural and ideological disorientation after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The video presents few time markers, and the sequence of its images and textual reflections seems random, associational. Still, the ideological framework of narrative looms large in *The Last Cowboy*, present first in the work’s gestures to the narrative “codes” of popular genre cinema—especially the DEFA *Indianerfilme* mentioned above—and in the trope of narrative as pathway or journey, seen in the narrator’s memories of travel westward after the dissolution of the GDR.

As artists, Epperlein and Tucker have engaged the deep interweavings of media systems, political systems, and psychological dynamics for many years. In their work since 2000, they

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<sup>5</sup> This is Zygmunt Bauman’s term for a vision of late capitalism I discuss at greater length later in this chapter. See Georgina Paul, “The Privatization of Community: The Legacy of Collectivism in the Post-Socialist Literature of Eastern Germany,” *Oxford German Studies* 38 (2009): 289-290.

have taken advantage of digital speed, flexibility, and accessibility to challenge the consolidated structures of power in the global media landscape, “the homogenizing forces of global capitalism,”<sup>6</sup> especially in the area of news media and documentary. The team specializes in fast, cheap, high quality digital media production and distribution for humanitarian causes. At times, this has involved a kind of independent, almost guerrilla journalism: they’ve gone to war zones as independents and collected information there for the purposes of uploading counternarratives to the stories of the mainstream press, attempting to flesh out the oversimplifications that characterize our much-mediated access to global information. In 2003 and 2004, Tucker spent several months living with and filming a group of US soldiers in Baghdad, creating a documentary film that was released in 2004 as *Gunner Palace*; their follow-up film, *The Prisoner: or how I planned to kill Tony Blair*, was released in 2006. Before that, however, the artists won some regional acclaim on European independent film and media circuits with *The Last Cowboy* (1998), which is often cited as the first—or one of the first—media artworks ever created for DVD.

In principle, the new DVD medium provided enough memory storage and speed for artists to combine quick and intricate interactive platforms with high-quality, long-duration audio and video files. Cultural precedents already existed in 1998 that marked out the expressive and technical possibilities of combining high quality audio and video with richly complex and engaging interactivity; we could point, for example, to the rapidly expanding popular genre of interactive computer games, which were already impressively cinematic by 1998, or to the much earlier example of Lynn Hershmann’s interactive video artwork for laserdisc. It seems almost curious, then, that interactive narrative—or any great emphasis on the structural interface of

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<sup>6</sup> Cooke, “East German Writing in the age of globalisation,” 36.

interactivity, theoretically one of the most obvious aesthetic possibilities opened up by the DVD medium—should be so far from *The Last Cowboy*'s focus. Co-creator Petra Epperlein remarks on this point:

Es gibt noch den Begriff interaktiver Film.... Was da im Moment macht, ist, daß man in einem Film zu einer Situation kommt und vor die Frage gestellt wird, ob ich jetzt lieber das oder lieber jenes will, und entscheidet so über den Fortgang der Geschichte. Das war uns zu banal und uninteressant, weil das mehr an eine Spielmetapher als wirklich an Film erinnert. Wir wollten mehr eine intuitive Veränderung der Geschichte oder intuitive Interaktivität.<sup>7</sup>

[There is this concept of interactive film.... What that means in the moment is that you're in a film and you come to a situation and are posed the question, would I rather do this or that, and thereby decide the progression of the story. That was too banal and uninteresting to us, because it hearkens more to a game metaphor than really to film. We wanted more of an intuitive adaptation of the story or an intuitive interactivity.]

The result of this, by design, is an artwork that seems distinctly “low-tech”<sup>8</sup> for its historical moment. Structurally, *The Last Cowboy* resembles much more a multichannel video artwork on DVD than a complexly interactive digital narrative. The artwork is furthermore notably cinematic in its aesthetic character—so much so that a non-interactive ‘screening’ version of the artwork won prizes at film festivals soon after its production in 1998, and this festival version is the one contemporary viewers are most likely to encounter.<sup>9</sup>

Yet this cinematic aesthetic is essential to *The Last Cowboy*'s intervention. Rather than toggling from one story to another, or taking explicit action to change a building storyline, the user of *The Last Cowboy* moves from one video stream to another to explore different facets and

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<sup>7</sup> Petra Epperlein, as quoted in Wolfgang Neuhaus, “Experiment mit neuen Erzählweisen,” *Telepolis* (August 26, 1998), <http://heise.de/tp/artikel/3/3275/1.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Neumann, “Experiment mit neuen Erzählweisen.”

<sup>9</sup> Even in such an interactive media-friendly exhibition venue as Germany's Zentrum für Kunst und Medien (Center for Art and Media, or ZKM), where I encountered *The Last Cowboy* for the first time.

ontological layers of media culture and memory, all the while haunted and disoriented by the loss of GDR culture and contexts of meaning. The artwork offers three video streams, only one of which suggests anything that resembles a real narrative structure. This first channel, arguably the work's 'main' channel, offers a kind of stream-of-consciousness essay-video. Its video clips play against lines of English text that present flowing associations related to the images, or at times descriptions of the East German narrator's experiences in post-Cold War Europe and the United States after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Suffused with a strong sense of distance and pastness, this channel in particular has a powerfully melancholic tone, achieved in part through the non-synchronicity of the artwork's audio, visual, and written textual elements. Strains of personal memories emerge in the written titles in a way that feels spontaneous but not immediate; they seem detached, apart, and relatively free of affect. The images, for their part, seem impersonal; loosely but not directly illustrating the words of the written titles, they seem mostly to be commonplace archival footage from the GDR, the stuff of news stories, home videos, and popular cinema, mainly presented in small square inserts against that fade in and out of different spots on the mostly-black screen, sometimes overlapping, sometimes alone. The sound clips, thematically related to but not synchronous with the video clips, seem equally like stock, canned footage.

Despite their asynchrony, however, the artwork's words images and sound do not seem at odds with one another; rather they work together to convey the artwork's strong sense of melancholy, even solipsism. The viewer of the work is subjected to noteworthy amounts of darkness and silence. Images fade in and out of blackness, never occupying the full screen. Darkness is punctuated by light of images and text that fade in and out of vision, along with the white lines of English. Sound clips receive a similar treatment—they fade in and out of volume,

as periods of silence give way to dim and then recognizable motifs. Indeed, a sense of absence and solitude permeates the work, making the images and sound tracks seem all the more unsteady and unreal.

The viewer may move at any time to the second video stream, which shows the same images in full screen, with audio track but no text, or to the third, which shows the same images again, this time projected wanly against a brick wall. Here the projection surface of the wall is interrupted by a window in the center and a single spectator leaning out of it, neither of which seems to be part of the image projection, though the spectator occasionally seems to respond to events below the level of the window, which might or might not be the same as the ones dimly written in light on the wall. The effect is of multiple ontological layers, but also of disconnection and stasis, the spectator bursting through but also immobilized by the aperture in this projection wall, “real” but far from firm ground.

The ontological unsteadiness, the sense of solipsism and uncertainty in *The Last Cowboy*—as well as the artwork’s repetition of fragments of East German media-memory—all point to the broader cultural and political dynamics of East German memory and *Ostalgie*, a framework useful for understanding the currents and tensions at work in *The Last Cowboy*.

Martin Blum writes that, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of East and West Germany in 1989-1990—massive social and cultural changes often described in German as *die Wende*, the turning point or change—“an entire state, together with its institutions, cultural values, and individual hierarchies, has been swept away, leaving its former citizens with the formidable task to locate themselves in an unfamiliar society, complete with its own rules,

values, and hierarchies.”<sup>10</sup> The terms of unification entailed the “transfer of the economic, political and legal system of the Federal Republic onto the GDR,”<sup>11</sup> the veritable “colonization” of Eastern markets by Western commercial and media ventures,<sup>12</sup> and the “domination of West Germans and FRG social institutions over all domains of life in East Germany”<sup>13</sup>—political, economic, social, and cultural. The phenomenon of *Ostalgie* is commonly understood as the result of frustrations derived from this Western dominance, the patently “asymmetrical power relations” between East and West that prevailed in post-unification Germany,<sup>14</sup> and the fact that, as Dominic Boyer writes, the “FRG Cold War social imagination has become the inheritance of unified German public culture.”<sup>15</sup> This “unified” social imagination offered little to reflect, corroborate, or confirm the particularities of East German cultural memory. *Ostalgie*, “the longing for a nostalgically remembered ‘Heimat DDR’ [‘Homeland GDR’] which started to make its mark on literature and film from the mid-1990s”<sup>16</sup> is then seen as a “counter development” to a situation that Wolfgang Emmerich describes as “the West German refusal to acknowledge and respect the different habitus and the ‘cultural heritage’ and memory of the East German,”<sup>17</sup> and Boyer denounces as “the uncompromising campaign since 1990 to erase public symbols and signs of the GDR from the lived environment of the new federal states of eastern

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Blum, “Remaking the East German Past: *Ostalgie*, Identity, and Material Culture,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 34 no. 3 (2000): 230.

<sup>11</sup> David Clarke, “Introduction,” *Seminar* 40 no. 3 (September 2004): 187.

<sup>12</sup> See Winand Gellner and Gerd Strohmeier, “The ‘Double’ Public: Germany after Reunification,” in *The Berlin Republic: German Unification and a Decade of Changed*, ed. Winand Gellner and John D. Robertson (London: F. Cass, 2003), 57-76, or Dominic Boyer, “*Ostalgie* and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany,” *Public Culture* 18 no. 2 (Spring 2006): 361-381.

<sup>13</sup> Boyer, “*Ostalgie* and the Politics of the Future,” 372.

<sup>14</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 205.

<sup>15</sup> Boyer, “*Ostalgie* and the Politics of the Future,” 371.

<sup>16</sup> Georgina Paul, “The Privatization of Community,” 293.

<sup>17</sup> Wolfgang Emmerich, “Cultural Memory East v. West: Is What Belongs Together Really Growing Together?” *Oxford German Studies* 38 n. 3 (2009): 251.

Germany.”<sup>18</sup> Fueled by an understandable “sense of loss and dislocation that is at the heart of many feelings of nostalgia,” the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* can “easily be explained,” according to Blum,<sup>19</sup> but nonetheless marks a “severe challenge to East German social memory”<sup>20</sup> and to critical interpretation as well.

Debates and controversies abound about the nature of *Ostalgie* in relation to broader German—and global—society. Emmerich suggests that the phenomenon’s emphasis on resurrecting and preserving East German cultural memory is somehow transitional, a reflection of the culture shock experienced by near-overnight transformation of the world and nation that East Germans knew; he writes that “this assertion of one’s own connective memory and one’s own *habitus*, not to relinquish, but rather to preserve cultural difference, functions—as empirical studies about East Germans have meanwhile established—as an ‘*Stabilitätsanker*,’ while negotiating the new demands on behaviour.”<sup>21</sup> Recall here Paul Cooke’s more political interpretation of this assertion of East German cultural memory as “the need to place the local on the global stage in order to protect cultural diversity in the face of the homogenizing forces of global capitalism.”<sup>22</sup> Berdahl suggests that the varied expressions of *Ostalgie* might even be ‘potentially disruptive practices that emanate from the margins to challenge certain nation-building agendas of the new Germany,’<sup>23</sup> and that *Ostalgie* promotes “an identification with different forms of oppositional solidarity and counter-memory.”<sup>24</sup> (Berdahl, 203). Yet equally strong opinions link *Ostalgie* to dangerous currents of conservatism, isolationism, or escapism.

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<sup>18</sup> Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future,” 372-373.

<sup>19</sup> Blum, “Remaking the East German Past,” 230.

<sup>20</sup> Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future,” 373.

<sup>21</sup> Emmerich, “Cultural Memory East v. West,” 251-252.

<sup>22</sup> Cooke, “East German writing in the age of globalisation,” 36. Cooke refers here specifically to Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Storys*.

<sup>23</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 193.

<sup>24</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 203.

Berdahl also notes that “many western Germans and eastern Germans alike have been quick to dismiss such practices [of *Ostalgie*] as ‘mere’ nostalgia, ‘pseudo’ nostalgia, or ‘just’ another instance of German regionalism.”<sup>25</sup> Certainly the association of such practices with the word and concept *nostalgia* does not help this; Alison Landsberg writes (not specifically about *Ostalgie*) that “memory is not commonly imagined as a site of possibility for progressive politics. More often, memory, particularly in the form of nostalgia, is condemned for its solipsistic nature, for its tendency to draw people into the past instead of the future.”<sup>26</sup> In the case of *Ostalgie*, this past-orientation raises concerns that practitioners are wistfully romantic, ‘merely’ contrarian, or both. For Andreas Huyssen, “in the context of profound displacement following re-unification, reflected in the popular saying that we have ‘emigrated without leaving [home], *Ostalgie* can be an attempt to reclaim a kind of *Heimat* [home or homeland], albeit a romanticized and hazily glorified one.”<sup>27</sup> This suggestion of escapist fantasy becomes more problematic still when it is seen to solidify as a counter-identity that is insular, backward-looking, and removed from history; citing the work of Jonathan Grix, David Clarke notes that “*Ostalgie*... has been dismissed as the expression of a *Trotzidentität* [counter-identity] on the part of discontented East Germans.... In this interpretation,” he writes, “an engagement with the GDR past is described in terms of escapism; in other words, as an inability to face the post-unification present and future.”<sup>28</sup> Still other critiques of *Ostalgie* emphasize the extent to which the cultural systems in which it plays out—that of the western-dominated unified Germany and that of global capitalism more generally—find ways to co-opt or recuperate any expression of

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<sup>25</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 202.

<sup>26</sup> Alison Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory: the ethics and politics of memory in an age of mass culture,” in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 144.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 202.

<sup>28</sup> Clarke, “Introduction,” 197.

local identity, effectively neutralizing its potential for real political impact.

Part of the challenge of understanding the positive potential or implications of *Ostalgie* comes from the extraordinary complexity of the cultural, social, and historical forces at play in unified Germany at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and from the wide variety of arts, acts, and objects of memory that have received the label of *Ostalgie* in the past decades. In addition to nostalgic trivia games like *Ferner Osten*, examples of the “‘GDR Revival’ or... ‘renaissance of a GDR *Heimatsgefühl*’” include:

a disco in East Berlin that seeks to reconstruct GDR times with East German drinks, music, and the old cover charge; a local cinema that shows old GDR films; a self-described ‘nostalgia café’ called “The Wallflower” (*Mauerblümchen*) that is decorated with artifacts from the old socialist period and serves ‘traditional’ GDR fare; and several supermarkets that specialize in East German products, including one whose name seems to reflect a now-common sentiment: ‘Back to the Future.’<sup>29</sup>

In addition to these manifestations, Karen Leeder notes the “fixation on a plethora of genuine memory icons” from the GDR: “Everyday life is commemorated—one might say fetishized,” she writes, “in the obsessive preservation and iteration of everyday objects from the GDR.”<sup>30</sup>

Boyer notes that, in particular, “certain residual classes of objects like consumer goods (sometimes now manufactured by Western firms) have been seized upon and hypostasized as prosthetics of memory and identification.”<sup>31</sup> The most visible and globally familiar examples of *Ostalgie* fall into this category: for example the cult appreciation of the 2-cylinder East German car the Trabant or Trabi, or internationally popular films, like Wolfgang Becker’s 2003 hit *Good Bye Lenin!*, that celebrate the memory of GDR material culture and consumer products.

Indeed, this emphasis on brands and consumer products in discussions of *Ostalgie* has been extraordinary, and points to a telling misalignment or friction between the actual losses and

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<sup>29</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 197.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Leeder, “Introduction,” *Oxford German Studies* 38 (2009), 240.

<sup>31</sup> Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future,” 272-273.

memorial desire so keenly felt by East Germans and the cultural terms of identity, subjectivity, and representation in Western-dominated unified German public culture. Boyer, for example, describes his investigations of the magazine *Super Illu* and its Bavarian publisher, Hubert Burda:

Burda has explained in interviews that he developed *Super Illu* to help ease East Germans' transition to their life in a new Germany through a respectful yet forward-looking celebration of their cultural heritage in the GDR. What Burda means by 'cultural heritage' is, however, actually mostly an advertisement-oriented consumer heritage, since he focuses his comments extensively on the emotional resonance that East Germans have with GDR product brands and stars. What Burda's imagination of an 'East German culture' erases is the fact that East Germans' memories of the DDR tend to focus much less on brands and consumption (let alone on pop stars) than on the various kinds of creative and canny bricolage and networking in which they engaged daily in order to make do in a society plagued by material shortages. Burda's East German is no creative *bricoleur* or impresario, however, he or she is rather simply a *frustrated Fordist consumer*, one who gladly embraces West German consumerism so long as their beloved GDR brands and icons are also made available to them as a niche market. My research inside the *Super Illu* offices taught me that the magazine remains largely a West German enterprise: the management is mostly Bavarian, and former GDR citizens are employed only in more marginal positions to craft the authenticity and ambience of the features.<sup>32</sup>

Note that this West German enterprise construes and interpellates East Germans as "frustrated Fordist consumer[s]." Embracing this kind of *Ostalgie* therefore also means reorienting one's sense of identity and memory to the structural terms and conditions of a public culture that is powerfully overdetermined by a capitalist social system and its presumptions of "liberal humanist" subjectivity that grounds its selfhood in ownership, fetishization, and a symbolic system of valuation based on substitution and exchange. This points to a familiar gesture of abstraction and totalization—replacing a "creative and canny process" with a fetishized *telos*, relocating the center of identity and memory away from the embedded knowledge and practical skills of "bricolage and networking" and transposing it instead to real or virtual commodity ownership—to a version of identity defined through possession and, by

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<sup>32</sup> Boyer, "Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future," 375, emphasis mine.

extension, through consumption.

This is not the only way to think of the consumer product as memory object or fetish. We might also recall here the function of the fetish in Deleuze's *Coldness and Cruelty*—as an object that does not substitute for or supplant a 'real' desire so much as give it a focal point and starting place, permitting its further expressions and elaboration.<sup>33</sup> This seems a better way to understand the relationship between identity and consumer products in the GDR, as Martin Blum describes them. Blum argues that the loved and fondly recalled consumer products of the GDR "are not only the basis for individual acts of remembering, but... also signify a group identity for their former consumers: since all former citizens of the GDR were—by necessity—also consumers of its goods, they can find an exclusive identity as former consumers and purchasers of these products since they have all once shared the specific knowledge about these products."<sup>34</sup> The consumer product then is not an icon of memory, a reliquary of one's former self, but rather opens up onto memories of shared community and of "bricolage" both. Blum remarks here on the

fundamentally different nature of consumer culture under socialism.... Most Western consumers will distinguish one product from another first and foremost by its brand name, displayed prominently on its package, and only then by its actual content. Ideally, the brand name and the packaging design assure the consumer that s/he has bought a familiar product that will deliver the quality expected. Thus, an established brand name and a well designed package are invaluable marketing tools since both will instantly evoke the product's 'biography' that hopefully instills confidence in the consumer.... In contrast, to the consumer in a planned economy, this brand identity was frequently not available since branding and advertising in the East were subject to fundamentally different economic and ideological conditions. In the absence of these readily supplied brand identities, which are the key to capitalist marketing, Eastern consumers frequently had to construct their own product identities, often in the form of 'product biographies,' based on their own particular experiences with the products.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, in *Masochism and Coldness and Cruelty*, transl. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Blum, "Remaking the East German Past," 231.

<sup>35</sup> Blum, "Remaking the East German Past," 235.

Particularly in the light of the “material shortages” noted by Boyer, the implications of this difference for East German identity formation are great:

consumers in the planned economy...had to get to know their products and brands very well: not only was it important to know genuine quality products, such as Florena Creme, but it was also crucial to know of the products’ individual characteristics, such as Ata’s propensity to absorb moisture and to become rock hard in the process. In order to avoid ending up with a damaged or altogether useless product, consumers had to know exactly not only which individual package to pick off the shelf but also how to handle it. Issues, such as how to transport the notoriously fragile Narva light bulbs, to give an example (in their own carrier bag) or how to store a box of Ata (wrapped in a plastic bag) became integral parts of the GDR consumers’ knowledge. Thus, in contrast to Western consumers who can frequently rely on an everyday product’s branded identity to be assured of its quality, and who consequently do not waste much thought on them, their Eastern cousins had to develop these identities largely themselves and with a lot of consumer know-how. Due to the erratic nature of Eastern advertising that was more indebted to its historical and political situation than to the qualities of the advertised product, consumers often surrounded their products with a specific kind of knowledge that was rooted in their own experiences with the products’ strengths and weaknesses, and their appropriate handling and use. Thus, in the absence of the powerful corporate branding of the West, Eastern consumers frequently had to write their products’ biographies themselves—biographies that were often closely related to the actual biographies of their consumers’ everyday lives.<sup>36</sup>

Berdahl similarly emphasizes the importance of the processes of everyday life in her analysis of *Ostalgie* games. She writes that the creators of

the *Kost the Ost* card game, whose rules require fairly extensive and detailed knowledge of GDR everyday life, described their product as a kind of mnemonic device (*Erinnerungsstifter*). Indeed, many of these *Ostalgie* products seem to fulfill this purpose. After a small group of friends finished playing the *Überholen ohne Einzuholen* board game, for example, their two hosts, Andrea and Volker, brought out of storage boxes of GDR identity cards, *Junge Pioneere* and *FDJ* membership books, and other personal artifacts from the vanished state. The group spent another hour poring over these items together, recalling the various state-sponsored activities and groups they had participated in, poking fun at Andrea for dutifully pasting the tiny monthly membership stamps into her membership books, and reminiscing about the shortages of goods and materials that had dominated much of daily life in the GDR.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Blum, “Remaking the East German Past,” 241.

<sup>37</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 202.

The more successful, more embedded operations of *Ostalgie* focus therefore on renewing or reawakening an unspoken, embodied sense of shared identity and community that is arguably as unrepresentable as it is palpably real to those who experience it: “it’s not only the music,’ said one customer at an ‘Ost-disco’, it’s the shared memory. When the music is playing, people look at each other and just know, without having to say anything.”<sup>38</sup>

The problem comes with translating this felt, embodied, unrepresentable sense of community into real public identity and social agency within the spheres of Western-dominated German public culture. Berdahl finds reason for optimism in the case of *Konsum Leipzig*, “a regional supermarket chain in Leipzig and one of the few surviving East German enterprises in a landscape dominated by western discount stores.”<sup>39</sup> The store emphasized, and thereby helped to solidify and empower visible local networks:

‘We are sticking together and shop in *Konsum*’ reads one of its marketing slogans; ‘We’re from *here*’ declares another in an advertising supplement whose heading includes the five coats of arms of the New Federal States; and most of its store-fronts proudly proclaim ‘*Konsum Leipzig: One of Us.*’ Still functioning as a cooperative, *Konsum* stores specialize in products produced in the former GDR, often by re-privatized firms, including many ‘trusted old brand-names.’<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, the very success of *Konsum Leipzig* as a commercial venture leads back into the ideological and structural cul-de-sac of *Ostalgie* as regressive, nostalgic escape. Berdahl writes,

in a 1995 *Der Spiegel* cover story identifying the emergence of such oppositional practices throughout the former GDR, the former East German writer Monika Maron is quoted as ridiculing the notion that anyone who ‘buys Bautzener mustard or Thuringer wurst is a resistance fighter.’ Indeed, the marketing and consumption of *Ostalgie* represents a certain commodification of resistance, particularly when several of the supposedly eastern German products are now produced and distributed by western German firms. This framing of eastern German identities and of resistance to western German dominance in terms of product choices and mass merchandising entails a sort of *Ostalgie* for the present (to transform a phrase of Fredric Jameson’s [1989]: practices that

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<sup>38</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 203.

<sup>39</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 200.

<sup>40</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 200.

both contest and affirm the new order of a consumer market economy. In other words, to paraphrase DeCerteau, consumers of *Ostalgie* may escape the dominant order without leaving it.<sup>41</sup>

Even when they seem most promising, the fear remains that these expressions of East German memory and identity cannot effectively challenge the dominant Western paradigm without also affirming it; their energies are recuperated by the very system they hope to contest, at the very moment they engage with it. This may lead to easy dismissal of any political claims behind these expressions of memory—“for many,” Berman notes, “these nostalgia games and products are camp, proving Marx’s dictum true that history repeats itself as farce”<sup>42</sup>—or to a flattening and dispersal of the particularity and local identity they hope to preserve, as in David Clarke’s argument that “the GDR’s history becomes absorbed into a postmodern consumer culture, in which the past is recycled and reinvented as style and can potentially be enjoyed by Western as well as Eastern consumers.”<sup>43</sup>

The phenomenon of *Ostalgie* marks the importance of local identity and local memory as particular points of friction or turbulence in East Germany’s accession to a global social and cultural order. To the extent that we, as critics, are invested in making that global order as democratic as possible—in part by “protect[ing] cultural diversity,” as Clarke writes, “in the face of the homogenizing forces of global capitalism,” the particular tensions of *Ostalgie*, and the critical impasses that often arise around the matter of co-opting or recuperation of such attempts at preserving local identity and cultural memory, are both of enormous global interest. The situation suggests a need to employ multiple analytical frameworks at once, carefully interrogating their relationship to one another. I return, then, to the model of selfhood that

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<sup>41</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 206.

<sup>42</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 203.

<sup>43</sup> Clarke, “Introduction,” 187-190.

western brand-oriented consumer culture encourages, with its underlying themes of ownership or possession, teleology, symbolic substitutions. Above I suggest that this cultural and economic system presumes—even demands—from its participants a “liberal-humanist” model of subjectivity. Describing this social and economic subject of unified Germany as “liberal humanist,” should not be seen as any kind of totalizing statement about individual inhabitants of global Germany; on the contrary, the purpose of this framework is to identify the ways in which dominant precepts and presumptions shape the flows of power and the possibilities for individual and collective agency, in order that moments of resistance may be properly identified and acknowledged as such.

Contrasting the “liberal humanist” model of subjectivity to the more expansive and networked “posthuman” model, after Katherine Hayles,<sup>44</sup> may permit a more nuanced understanding of the cultural, sociological, and psychological impact of the dissolution of the barrier of the Berlin Wall. It gives us a point of reference for recognizing the alternative models of subjectivity and cultural orientation that still persist as not-yet lost and potentially valuable elements of East German habitus and cultural memory. It can also help us understand the cultural and historical forces specific to Germany that make this liberal humanist model an attractive element of western-dominated public culture after the *Wende*. And most importantly for the overall focus of this essay, it helps us to understand Nomad’s *The Last Cowboy* as a subtle but deeply engaged political artwork for a new medium and a new age.

I return then to the topic of a liberal humanist economy of identity. Georgina Paul describes the convergence of East and West Germany in overwhelmingly structural, economic terms. “Unification,” she writes,

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<sup>44</sup> See Chapter Two for a more extensive discussion of Hayles’ “posthuman.”

brought about a relationship of disjuncture, though: the integration overnight of a population of seventeen million citizens from a centrally planned state system based on collective principles into an advanced and pluralistic market-oriented system which had been developing its own dynamic over a space of some four decades. The non-synchronicity between the two systems in terms of their respective state of modernization was decisive in determining subsequent developments. Not only was the Federal Republic economically much fitter than the GDR, it was also far advanced towards the deregulated, accelerated, fluid phase of modernization which [Zygmunt] Bauman elsewhere terms ‘liquid modernity’ and which demands of the individuals who live in it a high degree of flexibility and capacity for self-reinvention. This was a daunting prospect for eastern Germans accustomed to a protected social system characterized by full employment, with state subsidies for basic living needs, and to paternalistically imposed ideological structures.<sup>45</sup>

To elaborate the assumptions and expectations made of this subject of “liquid modernity,” we should consider that

community is, according to Bauman, by definition utopian, temporally located in a putatively lost past or yet-to-be –attained future. As an ideal, ‘community’ signifies nostalgically remembered or hoped-for security, confidence, and mutual trust between a society’s members which stand in relation to a present defined by its lack of these qualities. While the impulse towards community can be understood as the drive towards security, ‘really existing community,’ is paid for in the ‘currency of freedom,’ since a ‘collectivity which pretends to be community incarnate, the dream fulfilled [...] demands unconditional loyalty and treats everything short of such loyalty as an act of unforgivable treason.’<sup>46</sup>

Paul notes as well that “‘freedom’ in Bauman’s reading, always means the freedom of the individual from collective constraint.”<sup>47</sup>

Some version of this tension may indeed be ‘endemic to being human,’ but the notion that the strengths of community and individual exist in a kind of zero-sum give and take, or that the individual’s role consists of a series of rational and self-interested calculations designed to balance between the supposedly mutually exclusive benefits of “security” and “freedom”—this ultimately economic viewpoint represents a very particular understanding of the human

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<sup>45</sup> Paul, “The Privatization of Community,” 289.

<sup>46</sup> Paul, “The Privatization of Community,” 289.

<sup>47</sup> Paul, “The Privatization of Community,” 289.

condition—one closely related to Western capitalism and to modernity itself—what Hayles calls the “liberal humanist subject.”

It is also somewhat telling in the passage above that Bauman describes “community”—any “community”—as “utopian, temporally located in a putatively lost past or yet-to-be attained future.” Temporally displaced from the here and now, such community cannot be “real,” in the symbolic conceptual model of the western-dominated liberal humanist framework; it is excluded from possibility from the start, as a matter of structure, and can only persist as fetishized telos or idealized past, a “no-place,”<sup>48</sup> from the perspective of the liberal humanist present.

In direct contrast to this viewpoint, Georgina Paul quotes Lothar Probst’s differentiation between West and East German values, “as identified in opinion surveys.” Probst writes that:

In general, East Germans place value much more than West Germans on social security and equality, close social relationships and a sense of community. West Germans, on the other hand, emphasize the preferences of a liberal society such as self-realization, individualism and political freedom. This commitment, he proposes, originates in a diversity of ‘value-oriented communities and opposition groups,’ the ‘everyday life communities and networks’ which enabled the experience of confidence, trust, and free communication in a localized collective culture opposed to and not to be confused with ‘the artificial collective culture which was decreed from above.’<sup>49</sup>

Note here Probst’s care to distinguish between the emergent camaraderie of everyday communities and networks, and the official, “artificial collective culture which was decreed from above.” The more important sense of identity was based in practice, local networks, habits—and not in the representations—or machinations—of identity in public culture. “In this light,” Probst continues, “the ‘public lament of many East Germans for the loss of ‘community’ does not necessarily express an ‘Ostalgia’”—that is, a longing for the GDR itself or for ‘East German’

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<sup>48</sup> See Boyer’s discussion of utopia as “no-place” in Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future,” 361-381.

<sup>49</sup> Paul, “The Privatization of Community,” 290-291, referencing Lothar Probst.

identity as such—“but a feeling for the loss of close interpersonal social relationships in a new individualistic environment.”<sup>50</sup> Ironically, the community remembered as “real”—and distinct from the fantasy of collective identity promoted by national propaganda—becomes “utopian” in a literal sense after all, and retrospectively difficult to disentangle from the labels of GDR national culture that become the only way to represent it in the post-unification present.

The political, “psychic” and “ethnological” terms of this situation and the power dynamics that inform it provide the crux of Dominic Boyer’s argument in “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany.” Boyer describes the structural conditions of post-*Wende* identity formation and historical agency in terms of the specific national historical traumas of Germany’s Nazi past.

Recall Boyer’s condemnation of “the domination of West Germans and FRG social institutions over all domains of life in Eastern Germany” and assertion that “the FRG Cold War social imagination has become the inheritance of unified German public culture.”<sup>51</sup> Boyer here uses the label “Cold War” to denote a subject model I describe above as “liberal humanist,” but emphasizes the historical, rather than structural, elements that inform that subject’s epistemological and psychic attachment to binary limits. The subjects of Boyer’s “Cold War” social imagination and Hayles’ “liberal humanist” imagination both constitute themselves through the expulsion of perceived negative or feared qualities from the self and projection onto an objectified other. Boyer argues that this process applied equally to national identity formation in both West and East in the decades before re-unification and had much to do with both Germanys’ coping with the burden of the past (*Vergangenheitsbelastung*)—attempting to form a functional sense of nationhood and national identity in the aftermath of the traumatically violent

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<sup>50</sup> Paul, “The Privatization of Community,” 290-291.

<sup>51</sup> Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future,” 372.

perversions of the idea of nationhood and cultural identity inflicted by Nazi Germany. The phenomenon of *Ostalgie* then takes place within a broader “politics of memory” that is both “ethnological” and “psychic” –with each nation, West and East, defining itself not merely as a present-tense political entity, but, in a deeper, ethnological, identitarian way, in opposition to the other and to the horror of their shared German past. Boyer writes that,

the existence of two Germanys provided a scale through which degrees of Germanness could be measured and calibrated. Positive and negative poles of cultural Germanness were distilled on both sides of the Wall and then ethnotypical traits were apportioned selectively to the East and the West. In the West, the GDR could become an instantiation of German ‘authoritarian traditions’ that threatened a return of dictatorial terror to Germany. Meanwhile, in the East, the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) represented German cultural qualities of aggression and intolerance honed by the imperialist imperative of international capitalism. The citizenry of each Germany was depicted by the opposing side alternately as being ‘more German’ in their authoritarian proclivities and as being relatively innocent victims of a criminal regime. In both cases, the ‘truly’ forward-looking Germany defined itself in opposition to the backward glance of the other Germany. For each Germany, the other represented the national-cultural past against which its ideal national futurity could be measured. Neither Germany, in the end, made sense without the other.<sup>52</sup>

In each case, “the other Germany had come to function, in essence, as a ‘prosthesis’ (in Derrida’s sense [1998]) of identification and origin. Although by no means a cure to the burden of national history, it stabilized a Germanness that kept a worse Germanness at bay.” Unification, then, “provided an unexpected crisis” –this prosthesis, “the ‘other Germany,’” was “forever lost.” Boyer argues that this loss provoked a “real trauma” for both West and East.<sup>53</sup>

This crisis and its close relationship to a traumatic history are of course particular to Germany. But it resembles Hayles’ description of the liberal humanist subject’s self-constitution, achieved by confirming a boundary of selfhood, postulating an Other at that boundary—an other construed entirely in terms of the self, objectifying that other, and expelling

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<sup>52</sup> Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future,” 369-370.

<sup>53</sup> Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future,” 370-371.

or expunging feared negative qualities from the self by projecting them onto the other as a inverted “screen” of selfhood. Hayles writes that:

In their negative manifestations, the self’s boundaries act as symbolic structures that attack and denigrate whatever is outside and therefore different from the self, as if they were immune systems projected outside the skin and left to run amok in the world. When these dynamics prevail, the Other is either assimilated into the self to become an inferior version of the Same or remains outside as a threatening and incomprehensible alterity. So women are constructed as castrated men or Medusa figures; blacks as inferior whites or cannibalistic devils; the poor as lazy indigents or feral criminals.<sup>54</sup>

One need look no further for a correlation between this model of self constitution and Boyer’s argument about the “other Germany” phenomenon of the Cold War years than Horst Sindermann’s official designation of the Berlin Wall as an “*antifascistischer Schutzwall*,” an anti-fascist protection wall, in 1961. For Hayles, however, the dispersed, interactive, networked screens of new media compromise and complicate the boundaries of liberal humanist selfhood, such that the surface or screen for self-constitution in the current media age is no longer the inert projection screen of liberal humanist paradigm, but an interactive “cyborg” screen, an interface and space of encounter that opens simultaneously onto broader networks and on to unpredicted elements of the self. “Conflating self and Other,” Hayles writes,

the Mirror of the Cyborg brings these constructions into question.... One can imagine scenarios in which the Other is accepted as both different *and* enriching, valued precisely because it represents what cannot be controlled and predicted. The puppet then stands for the release of spontaneity and alterity within the feedback loops that connect the subject with the world, as well as with those aspects of sentience that the self cannot recognize as originating from within itself. At this point the puppet has the potential to become more than a puppet, representing instead a zone of interaction that opens the subject to the exhilarating realization of Otherness valued as such.”<sup>55</sup>

It is possible to imagine that a scenario like this arise from the removal of the bifurcating

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<sup>54</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, “The Seductions of Cyberspace,” in *Rethinking Technologies*, ed. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 187-188.

<sup>55</sup> Hayles, “The Seductions of Cyberspace,” 187-188.

*Schutzwall* in the local contexts of post-*Wende* German national culture, that this scenario is already emerging in some small ways, or might yet emerge. Boyer, however, argues that, in the German context, this ‘Otherness’ has long been inflected with and associated with the historical legacy and cultural memory of Nazism, legacies and memories that are genuinely frightening to contemplate as part of the backdrop and constitution of the self. The phenomenon of *Ostalgie* then continues to keep this ‘Other’ at bay; we could think of it as effectively dispersing and maintaining the function of the *antifascistischer Schutzwall* even after the Berlin Wall came down, not just as a boundary and protection from the geographical and cultural ‘other Germany’ of the present moment, but from the much more frightening and dangerous ‘other Germany’ of history.

In Boyer’s argument, *Ostalgie* constitutes a key part of a “second...stage of postsocialist normalization;” its “essential social form...is a gift from the paternal west German to the now abject East German of a particular mode of rehistoricization....But as Marcel Mauss taught us,” he writes,

the social character of any gift enjoins both complicity and reciprocation. I would highlight two obligations that East Germans are now expected to fulfill in order to regain their historical subjectivity. The first is that East Germans coordinate their own knowledge of the past with the western utopia or ‘no-place’ of the GDR. The second, and more important, obligation is that East Germans make the past into a powerful object of identity and desire, one that will allow those gendered western to then point to *Ostalgie* as a natural effect of the allochronic character of the East.... In the end, East Germans are said to have the relationship to the past that they have simply as a function of the cruel legacy of their authoritarian socialization and not perhaps because the politics of identification and memory in united Germany cannot allow them to have a future.<sup>56</sup>

This “gift” is then part of a larger process whereby the complex folds of memory, identity, history, and community are refracted through processes of bifurcation and reflection. Even after

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<sup>56</sup> Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future,” 378.

the removal of the literal “protection wall” of the Berlin Wall and the creation of what might equally be seen a “zone of interaction that opens the subject to the exhilarating realization of Otherness valued as such,” this West German “gift...of rehistoricization” imports the protective logic of prosthesis and projection, creating again an Other at the margin of the self, and projecting onto it those traits of authoritarianism, xenophobia, nationalism, and a relationship to the past that is defined—negatively—by desire rather than disavowal.

Boyer describes this as “the dissolution...of East Germans as historical subjects, that is, as agentive human beings capable of making history.”<sup>57</sup> But, although this situation belongs to a unique and painful particular local discourse of history and memory and identity, it also should be considered alongside larger concerns about social and political cultural agency within the spheres of global capitalism, as it has some bearing on a more general problem of retemporalizing the folds of memory after the so-called “end of history.” Karen Leeder writes that:

In 1994 the commentator Iris Radisch published an article in *Die Zeit* which heralded “die zweite Stunde Null,” as she called it. As after 1945, she argued, much post-1989 German literature had dealt with the large issues of history—unification, the end of the GDR and collective memory. However, a closer look at the younger writers indicated that their preoccupations were very different. There had been a “Generationsbruch.” she claimed, and works by younger writers did not, it seemed, have any interest in remembering, reworking or revisiting the past: “Die dritte Nachkriegsgeneration klappt das Große Buch der Geschichte einfach zu. [...] Es gibt viele Geschichten, aber keine Geschichte mehr zu erzählen” [the third post-war generation has simply closed the great book of history. There are many stories, but no history to tell any longer].<sup>58</sup>

Radisch’s critique suggests an atomization of experience and dissociation from history familiar to critics of postmodernity, but perhaps it also illustrates the flip side of a cultural (or merely

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<sup>57</sup> Boyer, “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future,” 378.

<sup>58</sup> Karen Leeder, “‘Another Piece of the Past’: ‘Stories’ of a New German Identity,” *Oxford German Studies* 33 (2004), 128-129.

cultural-critical) situation in which, as Boyer suggests, one's possibilities for a relationship with history are split into two extremes: either entrapment within the cul-de-sac of "allochronism," or else "freedom" from the confines of history itself—in the liberal-humanist sense of "freedom" as jealously protected autonomy. Continuing her discussion of Radisch, Leeder writes:

It is important that these younger writers do not see themselves as a group with a specific generational experience, nor do they feel their literature should serve a representative function. Rather they offer different and individual perspectives. And the tone is not one of nostalgia, nor does it speak of a retrospectively constructed GDR identity. They are 'free', as Radisch claims, not to construct exemplary narratives in the model of post-war literature, but to express their own lives, liberated from any historical burden.... However, the effects of such freedom are not exclusively positive and these 'stories' also tell of an erasure of identity and history which leaves individuals anchorless in East and West."<sup>59</sup>

Here I would like to regroup slightly and make an associational leap sideways by relating the atomization of "stories" in Radisch's rhetoric to the mediatechnological passage from cinematic projection to the mobile, unfettered engagement of new media, a process that, globally, was accelerating rapidly throughout Germany's transformative decade of the 1990s. Margaret Morse writes that, "since the advent of electronic media, image projections have been increasingly liberated from the need for a physical surface or support and are more and more free to haunt everyday life. The canvas screen familiar from the cinema has been stripped away..." In this context, the "spectator, once chained like a prisoner in Plato's cave, has become a performer, free to make a path charged with meaning through space."<sup>60</sup>

Nomad's *The Last Cowboy* takes on all of these dynamics at once; this becomes unmistakably clear in one particularly striking moment of the DVD. In contrast to the ebb and flow of video images elsewhere in the first video channel, here the small box of video footage is

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<sup>59</sup> Leeder, "Another Piece of the Past," 130.

<sup>60</sup> Margaret Morse, "Body and Screen," *Wide Angle* 21 no. 1 (January 1999): 63-64.

clearly delineated as a television screen. Around it, we see a hand-drawn tv console and a blocky, animated human figure. This figure, presumably the narrator, is watching news reports of the Berlin Wall's collapse. The text on screen recalls her response to the news: she finds herself frozen until she imagines the "invitation" of a cowboy, who appears on screen as a classic Marlboro Man on horseback, seemingly spliced straight out of a U.S. cigarette ad. As the sound of hooves rings out, he leads her through the television screen, into the traffic jam at the border, and off into the sunset, so to speak. The text on screen reads: Westward Ho.

With this invitation, *The Last Cowboy* reiterates its version of an old paradigm, the trope of narrative as journey, and inflects this trope with the complexity and fraught cultural dynamics of the *Wende*. The journey west is in some ways comparable to journeys of exploration and conquest referenced elsewhere in the artwork. In addition to the conquest of the American frontier implied by the figure of the cowboy, we see images of Russian space exploration, a different but equally paradigmatic journey of exploration and progress, and hear about the protagonist's denied wish to be a kosmonaut. Playing on the trope of narrative journey, we could read the protagonist's travel westward in terms comparable to the atomization of history and the double-edged storytelling "freedom" described by Iris Radisch; the westward journey, too, might be seen as the atomization of a power formerly vested only in institutions; here, the protagonist's newfound power to create her own narrative of exploration.

She is free, then, "to make a path charged with meaning through space," but this merely begs the question of where this meaning might come from. She has lost most sense of cultural or ideological orientation and faces the threat of "an erasure of identity and history which leaves individuals anchorless in East and West." It is, furthermore, not at all clear if her westward journey is ultimately an act of freedom and agency, or an inexorable slide into the powerful

currents of a new cultural dominant.

Here *The Last Cowboy*'s "low tech" aesthetic and relatively low interactivity become significant. These attributes emphasize the fact that the operative narratives here are not ones that the narrator (or the artwork's user) chooses, but ones that inhabit her imagination, drawn from the codes of popular media and genre cinema. There is no way to ignore the fact that this character's travel "into the sunset" repeats the journey of westward expansion that is *the* ideological contest of the DEFA *Indianerfilme* of her memory. In the historical, cultural, and mediatechnological context of *The Last Cowboy*, such a journey can neither be wholly "free" nor wholly neutral.

Given the genre's importance for my interpretation of *The Last Cowboy*, let me backtrack slightly here and discuss the history and ideology of the DEFA "*Indianerfilme*" of the 1960s and 1970s. Many scholars and critics have commented on the irony that the German Democratic Republic was even capable of producing such seemingly bourgeois light entertainments in the first place: at the time, the GDR was "one of the most isolated of state-socialist countries," with such strict censorship and cultural controls that "often films from the other socialist countries, including the Soviet Union, could not be screened in the GDR because their content was deemed in violation with local cultural policy."<sup>61</sup> The GDR furthermore embraced a strongly worded policy of vehement opposition to the "manipulated *Unkultur*"<sup>62</sup> of the capitalist West. Nonetheless, between 1966 and 1976 the GDR produced some dozen popular films that directly followed Hollywood genre models. These were predominantly Westerns, and as such they were

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<sup>61</sup> Jon Raundalen, "A Communist Takeover in the Dream Factory—Appropriation of Popular Genres by the East German Film Industry," *Slavonica* 11 no. 1 (2005): 69.

<sup>62</sup> A favorite phrase of Erich Hönecker.

set in the North American frontier, but they placed a distinctly socialist twist on the genre's customary themes of conflict between white settlers and Native American Indians.

In their simple plotting, the films left ample space for ideological content, and fit neatly into the anti-capitalist, anti-Hollywood propaganda imperatives of the East German film industry. In addition to, as Gerd Gemünden writes, "criticiz[ing] the genocide of the North American Indians," they presented a collectivist, anti-imperialist counter-narrative to the classical Western's underlying themes of manifest destiny and Westward expansion, the capitalist exploitation of natural resources, the violent displacement or murder of native people.

The "*Indianer*" figures themselves were the films' main narrative focus. They were made to, first of all, become the bearers of East German ideological values like collective life and resistance to the incursions of capitalist expansion. For the *Indianerfilme*, "the idea was to place the Indian hero at the centre of the action and to depict how the West was *really* won, thereby exposing the brutal and cynical nature of capitalism."<sup>63</sup> And although DEFA attempted to justify the films as anthropologically accurate, historical correctives, the propagandistic agenda was also, explicitly, one of focusing and re-articulating national identity through the "Massenwirksamkeit" (mass appeal) of these genre films, an operation that required both broad appeal and careful self-differentiation. This differentiation began with the genre designation itself; as Raundalen writes, "the East German westerns were deliberately lauded as *Indianerfilme* and *not* as Westerns or cowboy films, which were [then] the current labels in other parts of the world."<sup>64</sup>

The *Indianerfilme* were also explicitly made to counteract the "popular products of a mediocre petit-bourgeois author, Karl May," still today the "most widely-read German author of

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<sup>63</sup> Raundalen, "A Communist Takeover in the Dream Factory," 78.

<sup>64</sup> Raundalen, "A Communist Takeover in the Dream Factory," 78, my emphasis.

all time,”<sup>65</sup> whose novels of the North American frontier, written in the 1880s-1890s, helped to define a longstanding German fascination and identification with a particular fantasy of Native American life. Seen as too bourgeois and too marked by association with the Nazi propaganda machine, which also exploited their racialized “noble savage” subtexts for nationalist ends, May’s novels were banned from distribution in East Germany on ideological grounds. Nonetheless, the author remained popular in the East—so much so that “when some of these books were brought to the big screen in West Germany in the early 1960s,” Jon Raundalen reports, “East German youth traveled in large numbers to cinemas across the border of Czechoslovakia to see their beloved heroes in action.”<sup>66</sup>

The layers of *Massenwirksamkeit* exploited by the DEFA *Indianerfilme* as a national propaganda initiative went deep, therefore, playing on a century-old (or older) mass desire among German audiences to admire and identify with the idealized *Indianer*. Hartmut Lutz dubs this longstanding fascination “German Indianthiasm,” and like many scholars makes it central to German national identity; Susanne Zantop, in her introduction to the collection *Germans and Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, argues that a fantasy of North American tribal life played an enormous role in the consolidation of German national identity:

Gerd Gemünden and I have established similar connections between a collective sense of inferiority, resulting from military and political defeat, and a collective identification with “the Indian” as the underdog—in the late eighteenth century, when the occupied German states were trying to redefine themselves against imperiali(ist) France as well as in the late twentieth century, when East and West Germany were attempting to situate themselves vis-à-vis the powerful capitalist- “imperialist” West, particularly the U.S. and particularly during the Vietnam era. Hartmut Lutz, in turn, sees a link between Germans’ quest for a national territory and national identity in the nineteenth century and their sentimental self-projections as the *Indianer* of Europe, colonized and oppressed by others

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<sup>65</sup> Hartmut Lutz, “German Indianthiasm: A Socially Constructed German National(ist) Myth,” in *Germans and Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, ed. Colin G. Galloway, Gerd Gemünden, and Susanne Zantop (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 175-179.

<sup>66</sup> Raundalen, “A Communist Takeover in the Dream Factory,” 74.

yet longing to be free. Not surprisingly, the clichéd image of the Indian freely roaming the prairie has more to do with national needs at specific historical moments in Europe than with Indian people and their experiences on the North American continent.<sup>67</sup>

DEFA's attempt at building a cinematic national mythos around the idealized figures of the *Indianer* was enormously successful, even after the *Wende*. Gemünden writes that

evidence suggests... that we should consider the *Indianerfilme* as part of what Bathrick calls a rejuvenated national culture: the reasons for success of the *Indianerfilme* in the 1960s and early 1970s, and for their remarkable return on German television and in fan books in recent years as part of a broad wave of "Ostalgie" (nostalgia for the East), lie, not so much in the successful appropriation of proven formulas, but rather in the way in which the films tap into broadly held notions of national identity, firmly appropriating the 'other,' that is, the North American Indians, as an 'us.' Coming from a long tradition of German fascination with Native Americans, the East German *Indianerfilme* derived their success from turning alien characters into figures of a decisively *German* national culture.<sup>68</sup>

One reason why the *Indianerfilme* were so successful in establishing a national identity—and why their appeal to popular *Massenwirksamkeit* seemed so necessary in the first place—had to do with the porousness of the boundary between East and West. With or without the Wall, East Germany was never fully isolated but always, as Jon Raundalen writes, "embedded[] in the transsystemic flow of popular culture." Raundalen refers here to the *lateral* flow of cultural dissemination through communications media that, in both East and West, were already increasingly immaterial before 1961: he remarks that "certainly the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 stemmed the flow of Western European and American recordings and related fan magazines, etc., but there was no stopping the boundless radio waves and television signals

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<sup>67</sup> Susanne Zantop, "Close Encounters: *Deutsche* and *Indianer*," in *Germans and Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, ed. Colin G. Galloway, Gerd Gemünden, and Susanne Zantop (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>68</sup> Gerd Gemünden, "Between Karl May and Karl Marx: The DEFA *Indianerfilme*," in *German and Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, ed. Colin G. Calloway, Gerd Gemünden, and Susanne Zantop (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 247.

emanating from powerful transmitters in West Berlin.”<sup>69</sup> These signals indeed found eagerly receptive audiences in the East, save for residents of the “*Tal der Ahnunglosen*,” the “Valley of the Clueless,” those dark areas of the East German map where Western radio and television broadcasts were not accessible. This lateral flow of immaterial media transmission is undeniable, but we should also consider the effects of a vertical flow of intergenerational cultural memory as well—seen in the continued popularity of Karl May in the East, despite decades of unavailability and official discouragement by the government.

The *Indianerfilme* were DEFA’s attempt to control and direct these “flows,” when the boundary of the *Schutzwall* failed or seemed tenuous; they openly vied with the West for ideological control of the popular imagination, but also, importantly, for the “screen” of the *Indianer* as Other. Even as they idealize the *Indianer*, the DEFA *Indianerfilme* “participate in forms of ‘othering’ that involve strategies of domination, appropriation, and stereotyping,” writes Gemünden. In the *Indianerfilme* as in the novels of Karl May, “the history of the Other remains subordinated to one’s own agenda,”<sup>70</sup> a blank canvas for the projection of idealized narratives of selfhood and a utopia of national identity.

This ‘othering’ of the *Indianer* for GDR national ends is not lost on the creators of *The Last Cowboy*. In one section of the artwork, scenes from *Indianerfilme* play out to the sound of clichéd “Indian” theme music on a peppy cocktail lounge organ; the written titles here extol the virtues of the Indians’ culture and integrity: “Everyone loved the Indians. They were made to be part of us. Our long lost kin. They were the ideal.... with their culture.... their morals.... Their

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<sup>69</sup> Raundalen, “A Communist Takeover in the Dream Factory,” 71.

<sup>70</sup> Gemünden, “Between Karl May and Karl Marx,” 248.

rituals.”<sup>71</sup> Here the narrator hones in on the ideological message of the *Indianerfilme*, and the GDR film industry and cultural bureau’s official justifications for producing them in the first place. Yet Nomad’s critique of this viewpoint is apparent; very often, when clips of *Indianerfilme* are on display in *The Last Cowboy*, even in the first video stream, they are shown to be translucent projections; we see brick and mortar behind the moving images. The artists remind us that the western utopia these films fantasize is not available in reality; no one in the East may ride into the sunset while the Wall stands. The wild and “natural” West the *Indianerfilme* fantasize is available as mythical ideal precisely because it has been made a no-place in the most literal sense, closed out as an actual possibility by the impassable limit of the Berlin Wall.

*The Last Cowboy*’s narrator seems to recognize this. Though the titles in the sequence above parrot the official DEFA line on the positive and admirable aspects of the *Indianer* as socialist ideals, in the video’s next section the titles flatly declare: my hero was always the cowboy. This statement of admiration and identification with the cowboy arguably situates the narrator as an oppositional—or even slightly perverse—national subject, one who resists the ideology of “Indianthusiasm” and the well promoted polarization that went with it of Indians and their imperialist European adversaries, the capitalists and cowboys.

But the meaning of the cowboy figure within the closed ideological media landscape of East Germany becomes distinctly unstable after the fall of the Berlin wall. Wolfgang Neuhaus, in his analysis of *The Last Cowboy*, suggests that the cowboy figure might once have presented an alternative for the audiences of East German *Indianerfilme*, for whom “the eternal invocation of the good Indians’ collective life” was not entirely “satisfying.” After the *Wende*, however,

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<sup>71</sup> Text taken from Nomad, *The Last Cowboy*, DVD published by Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker, 2006.

“whatever counter-utopia the cowboy represented for many, it faded against the background of recent history. And in the West,” where the Marlboro Man mythos originated and dominated, this counter-utopia “cannot be (re)discovered.”<sup>72</sup>

Whether or not we accept Neuhaus’ claim about East German audiences in general, this conflict is very present throughout *The Last Cowboy*. In its visual presentation of the *Indianerfilme*, projected on the screen of the Wall, *The Last Cowboy* lucidly points to an ideological system that owes its stability to the exclusion of this Western perspective. If the cowboy formerly functioned as an oppositional ideal, a counterpoint to the “utopia” of the *Indianer*, this was because it was no less unavailable as a reality; like the West of the *Indianer*, the West of the cowboy was foreclosed as an actual possibility to residents of the GDR. The “counter-utopia” suggested by the cowboy “cannot be rediscovered” after the fall of the Berlin Wall because the western “utopia” he represents is no longer no-place; instead, like the advertisements for “West” cigarettes that “proliferated on billboards throughout East Germany after the *Wende*,”<sup>73</sup> it is *everyplace*. Following the path of the cowboy in this context is not merely a possibility, but arguably a necessity.

Moreover, *The Last Cowboy* also points to temporal and historical blurring around the powerful Western icon that undercuts the stability of the narrator’s claim that her hero was “always” the cowboy, making even the original “counter-utopian” context of meaning for her identification seem slippery and vague. Impressionistic and nonlinear, *The Last Cowboy* includes very few temporal or historical markers. Important dates and events are referenced obliquely, as in the Berlin Wall episode I discuss above. These references usually take place in the visual field only, without textual comment; any history or implicit timeline that emerges from

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<sup>72</sup> Neuhaus, “Experiment mit neuen Erzählweisen.”

<sup>73</sup> Berdahl, “N(O)stalgie for the present,” 197.

the work relies on the viewer's media-memory to suture narrative gaps and make historical connections. This is a precarious model of historiography, to say the least, and the artwork's disoriented, melancholic tone reminds us that the stakes here are high—something important may be lost—and the pull of ideological fantasy powerful. In one segment of the video, the narrator watches war reports from Bosnia-Herzegovina during a westward flight from Germany to New York. The visuals suddenly fade from news screen to a horse in a field, an image that may indeed be a detail from the news report, but one that has become familiar, by this point, to *The Last Cowboy's* viewers. The horse, with its connection to the cowboy and the ideological and identity disorientation he represents, is overlaid on reports of history unfolding, suggesting that this protagonist mythologizes the new media events even as she takes them in; world history passes quickly into ideologically unresolvable cinematic fantasy, shaped and overdetermined, like the narrator's own memory and her journey, by powerful western contexts of meaning.

If her desire for particular East German memory and identity—her sense of *Ostalgie*—relegate her to a no-place at the limit of western public culture, *The Last Cowboy* suggests that, taken globally, this no-place may yet be the grounds for community and encounter, a “zone of interaction that leads to the exhilarating realization of Otherness valued as such.” Near the end of the video, the narrator finally comes to a version of her own western utopia, a version of the place where her ideological and identitarian fantasies were screened: a bar in the thick of the American frontier. But the relationship here between agents and objects, actors and icons, “real” and “spectacle” proves interpenetrating and impossible to parse. It is, notably, a karaoke bar, convivial and commercial, where patrons are also performers and the entertainment is pre-recorded, live, and participatory, all at once. The narrator sees a man on stage; he is “an Indian,” she notes, “a cowboy nonetheless”—not a synthesis of her conflicting ideals, but an

impossible figure that embodies both at once. The narrator notes the carefully constructed elements of this man's costume, put together from brand-name consumer commodities like jeans and boots with recognizable labels. Everyone in this karaoke bar has come to see him, she observes; he is a spectacle as well as a patron. "He seems so at home," the narrator remarks. But she doesn't assume that this man is "native" to the spectacle in some essential way, or "born to be part" of her own, now conflicted, identity structures, like the mythic DEFA *Indianer* of her memories. She seems to ask how it is possible to be at home in the spectacle, as he is. But her questions do not relegate this man or this moment to the utopian "no-place" of either past, future, or spectacular present; instead they seek to demythologize, to seek out both the particularity of this man and this moment and their embeddedness in a larger history. "How did he get here?" the narrator asks. "Did he take the same highway I came on?"

The trope of narrative as pathway here becomes useful not as an icon of memory or identity, but as a navigational tool that helps to identify the "alterity within the feedback loops that connect [them] with the world, as well as with those aspects of sentience that the self cannot recognize as originating from within itself." *The Last Cowboy* suggests that GDR memory may find a place here, too, and that this may be a first step to creating genuine community in the "utopia" beyond the screen of the Wall.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MOTHER ARCHIVE, OR, REMEMBERING, THE MATRIX

At the intersection of the topological and the nomological, of the place and the law, of the substrate and the authority, a scene of domiciliation becomes at once visible and invisible... this archic, in truth patriarchic, function, without which no archive would ever come into play or appear as such.<sup>1</sup>

*The virtual object is a black-and-white photograph in a handmade frame. The frame is of rough untreated sticks. Primitive-looking, shamanistic, its construction seems to include pieces of metal and bone. Inside this border, the photograph depicts two women, one old, one much younger, both in traditional-looking Eastern European dress. Both bodies are frontally oriented, as if for a portrait, but their eyes and facial features are obscured.*

*The man says this could be “anyone’s grandmother, anyone’s sister.”  
The female voice tells a different story.<sup>2</sup>*

The story at hand is one of impressions and afterimages, of memory mediated, of identity and intimacy and archival desire. It concerns two investigations into the psychological nature of the archive itself and the future of public memory after the ascendance of digital technology: Jacques Derrida’s 1992 lecture *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, and Agnes Hegedüs’ 1998 CD-ROM artwork *Die Sprache der Dinge (Things Spoken)*. Created on either side of the mid-1990s, these texts document an early phase of what I have described as a “virtual turn” in critical theory. Of particular interest to me here are the tensions between these two works that rise up around the “scene of domiciliation” that Derrida describes in the passage quoted above, its relationship to archival desire, and its orientation to the figure of the maternal body.

Throughout *Archive Fever*, Derrida acknowledges this gendering without especially

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, transl. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Agnes Hegedüs, *Die Sprache der Dinge (Things Spoken)*, artwork on CD-ROM published in CD-ROM magazine *Artintact 5* (1998); republished in *The Complete Artintact*, DVD-ROM, ed. Astrid Sommer (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002). My description.

problematizing it. It is, after all, part and parcel of the “Freudian Impression” that is his subject in *Archive Fever*, and his motivating question in this work is not the rhetorical “what do women want” of Freud, but rather, “where should the moment of suppression or of repression be situated in these new [digital] models of recording and impression, of printing?”<sup>3</sup> In keeping with long traditions of women’s writing and feminist art, Hegedüs attempts to address both questions at once from within Freud’s psychoanalytic blind spot. Her investigation of power and memory and selfhood navigates much more complex fields of social, cultural, and technological energies than were anticipated by Freud, who—as Derrida and countless other theorists have noted—could no more imagine a world of digital microprocessors than he could theorize an agential female subjectivity. At the same time, the answers Hegedüs intimates provide nuance and edge—and arguably an underexplored humanistic depth, as well—to the vigilant-but-optimistic bent of many cyberfeminist theories of identity and digital technology.

Written just a few years before Hegedüs’ “feverish” artwork, and providing a backdrop for her investigations, Derrida’s *Archive Fever* outlines the deep interconnections between media-technological, institutional, and psychological forces in Freud’s still-powerful Oedipal model of memory, identity, and selfhood. Derrida’s project, in part, is

to ask whether, *concerning the essentials, and beyond the extrinsic details*, the structure of the psychic apparatus, this system, at once mnemonic and hypomnemonic, which Freud sought to describe with the ‘mystic pad,’ resists the evolution of archival technoscience or not. Is the psychic apparatus *better represented* or is it *affected differently* by all the technical mechanisms for archivization and for reproduction, for prostheses of so-called live memory, for simulacrum of living things which already are, and will increasingly be, more refined, complicated, powerful than the ‘mystic pad’ (microcomputing, electronization, computerization, etc.)?<sup>4</sup>

Of the field of psychoanalysis itself—and by extension, psychoanalytic theory, he asks “in what

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 14.

way has the whole of this field been determined by a state of the technology and of archivization.”<sup>5</sup> The question, he implies, is not merely interesting, but urgent in the current age, because of the way that electronic communications—Derrida singles out email in particular—are “transforming the entire public and private space of humanity, and first of all the limit between the private, the secret (private or public) and the public or the phenomenal.”<sup>6</sup> The transformation of this limit in modern and postmodern media societies has been a subject of heated debate for Western theorists at least since the first publishings of the Frankfurt school. For Derrida in *Archive Fever*, the question is: what do we do with the drives, with the deepest psychological impulses that give shape to this mediated limit between public and private, between self and society.

Hegedüs’ work on the same questions directly interrogates a gender ideology held over from Freud and present in the “scene of domiciliation” that is the moment of archiving in the passage from *Archive Fever* that opens this essay, a gendering that Derrida acknowledges but does not particularly problematize. But the sense of narrative urgency around her most fragile, most intimate, most secret memories—especially those of her eastern European childhood and her experience of childbirth and motherhood in Germany—suggests that a sense of archival necessity persists. Hegedüs’ artwork presents an opportunity to analyze the play of something like archival necessity, a need that is not a drive, to be distinguished from the “Freudian impression” that lies at the heart of Derrida’s “archive fever.”

In its CD-ROM format, the work was already part of a major institutional effort to address the transformation Derrida describes of the limit between the public and private space of humanity, the limit between the private, the secret (private or public) and the public or the

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<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 14.

phenomenal.”<sup>7</sup> For Derrida this entails the transformation of the archive itself, as an exclusive yet public institution. The archive, as he writes in the passage I quote above, is both topological and nomological—place and law—substrate and authority. The limit of the archive, Derrida writes, is the boundary that defines this place apart, the authority both polices this limits and operates from within it. This place is the home of those who wield the power, the “residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded” and who “do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate” but who “are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives.”<sup>8</sup> With the dissipation of this limit, archival authority itself has been seen to be in crisis. As I have argued, this crisis has been acknowledged in the world of visual arts and museum studies for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Hegedüs’ artwork is an example of what Timothy Murray has called the “transitional medium” of art on CD-ROM, and quite aware of its own transitional function. The CD-ROM version of *Die Sprache der Dinge* was published by the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, or ZKM, in English, the Center for Art and Media, which was at the time the largest and most influential institution in Germany for the exhibition of digital media art and theory. Hegedüs’ CD-ROM artwork was part of a “CD-ROM magazine,” a 5-issue publishing experiment called *Artintakt* (*Artintact*). In his introductory essay for the full 5-issue compilation collection of *Artintakt*, curator Dieter Daniels writes about the difficult relationship between art institutions and new media as the digital age emerges. Daniels describes a problem of cultural validity within the art world that we might well view as a manifestation of much broader 21<sup>st</sup> century crises of value, meaning, and identity. He describes the position of new media arts with respect

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 2.

to the conflicting demands made of artworks in the modern age, the demands of simultaneously *resisting* and *requiring* institutionalized contexts of meaning. He writes,

The success of electronic media is based on the ubiquity of its contents. Thus arises the tendency to do away with any culturally determined contexts. Artists working with electronic media use this tendency to destroy the context in order to be able to escape what is felt to be the narrow or ineffective, institutionalized framework of the fine arts. At the same time, however, media art suffers from the ubiquity of the media and tries to cling to sculptural and physical presentations..., so as not to lose its fragile background for discourse in the small and elite field of contemporary art.

Long before electronic media, this conflict characterized all attempts to find new forms of multiplication and methods of distribution of art. It has always been concerned with the problem of refusing the fetish of the original, without dropping out of the system of art.<sup>9</sup>

The “system of art” here is comparable to the archive of Derrida; it is the authoritative—and spatialized, in the museum—force that confers that sense of uniqueness or aura, that distinguishes the fetish of the original. As Daniels points out, this cultural force stabilizes meanings by standardizing a framework of valuation and interpretation. With the *Artintakt* series, the ZKM was attempting to intervene in a perceived trajectory of the dissipation and dispersal of the evaluative authority once wielded by “the system of art” explicitly by allowing the immateriality and apparent placelessness of the digital medium to carry the museum’s authority outside the boundaries of the archival “place.” The museum commissioned artists to translate works that were in most cases originally large interactive museum installations into digital versions, which it then distributed on CD-ROM along with a booklet of critical essays and artist information. It was a bilingual publication produced in collaboration with Hatje Cantz, from 1994-1999, and then re-released as a collection in 2002.

In effect, with the *Artintakt* series, the ZKM was attempting to create a new, international

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<sup>9</sup> Dieter Daniels, “Ars ex machina,” electronic article published in CD-ROM magazine *Artintact I* (1994); republished in *The Complete Artintact*, ed. Astrid Sommer (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 12.

public for new media art, by using a print media distribution pattern. By employing this kind of hybrid genre, the CD-ROM journal, the *Artintakt* project aligns digital media artworks—quite correctly, I would argue—with the quasi-intimate practice of reading rather than the mass audience reception model of broadcast media. This backdrop makes the role of narrativity in Hegedüs’ *Die Sprache der Dinge*, which I will return to in a moment, all the more interesting.

There’s a sense in Daniels’ essay that the CD-ROM medium presents a narrow window of opportunity; there’s almost a sense of urgency, a sense that the museum needs to create an audience for media art at home *while it still possess the institutional authority to do so*. On the one hand, CD-ROM technology is finally developed enough and familiar enough; people are accustomed now to buying CDs, running business, personal, and entertainment applications on them at home; why not ask them to run “high art” aesthetic applications, too? But Daniels also seems crucially aware that the CD-Rom is a transitional medium, a technology-in-passing as the archive of public information moves from object to immaterial formats. In his essay, Daniels, following Walter Benjamin, imagines the trajectory of the media artwork’s loss of aura as it becomes first mass-reproducible and mass-distributable, and then, eventually, instantaneously transmissible and immaterial. Of the works on the *Artintakt* CD-Rom, Daniels writes:

The consumer who acquires the data structure as an edition on a silver disc, and keeps it at home on his bookshelf, probably associates it with books or computer games more than with the museum where it was previously shown as an installation. And if in the future the CD-Rom proves to be only transitional, and we can acquire similar data structures on-line via electronic networks (which would eliminate nice accompanying printed publications such as this one)—to what context shall it be assigned?<sup>10</sup>

Here the materiality of the object itself is very much at issue. The CD-ROM on the consumer’s bookshelf is an object; its (physical and metaphorical) context is, if not stable,

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<sup>10</sup> Daniels, “Ars ex machina,” 11.

exactly, in the way of the fetishized, localized, and carefully guarded museum piece, at least palpable, demonstrable. A sense of tenuous balance exists here between the domestic recontextualization of the CD as object, (meaning as association, determined by the reader), and the continued authority of the museum as über-context (meaning as interpretive authority, signaled by the ‘nice accompanying printed publication provided by the museum itself to help the user make sense of the artwork he or she has purchased). This tenuous balance is then thrown completely to the winds once immaterial and radically unstable online networks replace the older object form of print distribution. Some hint of institutional authority may remain in the case of the home CD-ROM user, who determines the context of meaning by right of material ownership, but whose freedom comes bundled with the “nice” booklet from the publishing house. But as the art object transitions from being fetishistically situated in a place of authority, to being mobile outside the walls of authority, to being motion itself, plainly immaterial, whatever sense of proprietary control over context might have remained inherent in the institutionalized object then dissipates.

Although her artwork appears in the same collection as Daniels’ essay, Hegedüs’ treatment of these themes—objects, institutional authority, and individual contexts of meaning or identity—is markedly different from Daniels’.

*Die Sprache der Dinge (Things Spoken)* is an interactive, virtual database. In the opening to this chapter, I describe a virtual object, a photograph in a handmade frame. The reader—or user?—the visitor to Hegedüs’ database comes across this virtual object after scrolling through a wide band of high-definition digital scans of souvenirs, memorabilia, and other variously meaningful tschotchkes from the artist’s personal collection. Dramatically luminous and framed against a deep black background, these objects evoke gemstones on black velvet. Clicking on

any object with the mouse brings it in for closer inspection and makes it available for virtual handling, full rotation in all directions and investigation from any angle. Merely brushing the object with the cursor calls up a spreadsheet of more and less arbitrary information: the object's mass, its dimensions, the gender of the person who gave it to Hegedüs, a list of keywords. Beneath the object and its spreadsheet, at the bottom of the screen, is a split band showing two lines of German text. These remain stationary until the user touches them with the cursor; then, responding to this tactile indication of interest, the text begins to scroll, and a voiceover starts. One line offers the artist's own explanation of how she acquired the object and what it means to her; the other provides commentary from one of Hegedüs' friends—often someone who knows the object well, but occasionally someone who is encountering and interpreting it for the first time. Moving the cursor away from the line stills the moving text and the speaker's voice. There is no other sound; a museumlike, melancholic hush presides over the piece. Keywords from the spreadsheet above appear in the text band as hyperlinks, able to transport the user to some other item from this eccentric archive, selected by a process that remains obscure and a search term that seems laughably arbitrary.

The archive Hegedüs invokes in *Die Sprache der Dinge* is the archive of the museum, of the state, but also, explicitly the Derridean—that is to say, Derrida's "feverishly" Freudian—archive of selfhood and fetishistic obsession. Despite the strangeness of many of the objects on display, the elaborate detail of each object's presentation and the dramatic contrast between bright illumination and rich black backdrop speak of aesthetic authority and value. In *Things Spoken*, the institution consolidated and empowered by this archival presentation is that of Hegedüs' own identity: the objects represent aspects of her taste, her significant relationships, and perhaps most importantly, her stories, her memories, her version of her own history. In

statements about the artwork like the one available on the MediaArtNet website, Hegedüs herself has commented on the fetishistic character of these objects as extensions of identity and externalizations of memory.

At the same time, the ironic disparity between the museum-like display aesthetic of the work and the inconsistency of the objects themselves, which range from plastic souvenirs to kitchenwares to small found-object artworks, subtly undercuts the somber authority of the archiving institution, highlighting a capriciousness or whimsy that seems almost surreal in contrast to the dark velvet and rich visual detail of the artwork. Something nags, here, about the hubris of attempting to assemble a rational world in microcosm from these details, in the disparity between the randomness of the objects and the mock-sobriety of the classification systems advanced. The work in this way hearkens back, ironically, to early modern encyclopediac projects, the very first examples of the archival impulse, the drive to record and classify. But it's not merely that. Of all the archival archetypes we might link this work to, it resembles more a *Schatzkammer* (state treasures) than a *Wunderkammer* (cabinet of curiosities); the works are presented as unique, gem-like, valuable, yet the overall archive is not about celebrating the uniqueness of the items themselves, but that of their collector, their overarching archiving authority.

Nonetheless, these seemingly precious items are made available to the user, who may handle them virtually, manipulate them in six directions with the extension or prosthesis of the computer mouse. And the explanation of each object is multiple as well: materially and legally, these objects may belong only to the artist and the archiving authority implied by the *Schatzkammer* precedent she invokes, but they are known by many others, including the future other of the visitor to this virtual archive. The objects' meaning is emergent, determined

collectively by the multiplicity of voices and the various impressions of the user him- or herself. The work draws no hierarchical distinction between Hegedüs' story of the objects' meaning and those of her friends, some of whom know the objects from seeing them in Hegedüs' home, and some of whom see them for the first time on the occasion of recording their comments for *Things Spoken*. As relatively uninformed acts of interpretation, unprivileged vis-a-vis any phantom "knowledge" that *Things Spoken*'s archival format might intimate, these latter accounts flatten the artwork's aesthetic and institutional aura. These speakers hold the same position as the CD-ROM's user audience: they can do no more than describe their responses to the object in question, speculate about its possible value to the artist, and occasionally offer stories of their own that the object calls to memory. By including and endorsing these accounts, even in their disparity from the artist's own stories, the work promotes its own openness to the scene of its re-reading, and invites the user into an "ecological" network of intimacy that the objects constitute, a concept I will revisit later in this chapter.

The multiplicity of narratives attached to each object further undercuts any notion of stable identities and values, and also questions the conceptual separation of public and private whose primal division and singular, specular merging in the social subject informs Freud's understanding of identity and becomes part and parcel of his intellectual influence. We could easily, and convincingly, argue that the treatment of objects and narratives in this work evidences a shift in the cultural function of object and narrative both. Neither of these function here as self-standing, self-evident entities of their own; they are not fungible, but performative, not in fixed relationship to one another, but copresent, as nodes in an extended network of familiarity. If this virtual archive is somehow synonymous with the identity of the artist itself, the network it comprises—of things, of stories, of voices, of actions—offers a very different take on what

identity might look like from that of rationally modern theories of the self—a vision that departs from the traditional archive of Freud and the modern liberal subject.

This would be a good argument, one I will return to in a moment, and one very much in keeping with many theories of digital subjectivity. It would also provide a satisfying 'read' of the artwork. But this would not be the end of the story, and this is not the question I am most interested in asking here.

The question I am asking is rather: if the point of the *Schatzkammer* is to re-present the accumulated wealth of the leader, in a way that justifies or guarantees his power in the present, if the point of the personal narrative is to re-present the history of the person, in a way that justifies or guarantees his selfhood in the present, if the point of the museum as institution is that it combines these two forces—material wealth and cultural narrative—how shall we read the continued presence of *that* archive in Hegedüs' artwork? It is not simply ironic, as further investigation into the context of its original production demonstrates.

*Die Sprache der Dinge* was originally conceived as part of a trilogy, the first installment of which is *Memory Theater VR*, a large interactive installation that is now part of the ZKM's permanent collection. The next two works of the trilogy present similar approaches to the relationship between individual identity and the museum as cultural archive. And in fact these two works are intricately intertwined, in a way that confounds the identity-and-context assigning function of the name as well as that of the museum as cultural institution. Both works have the same German title: *Die Sprache der Dinge*, in English, the language of things. This repeated title points up, precisely by confusing, the assumption and aura of material uniqueness on which most artistic and art—historiographical institutions depend. (This aspect of the artworks is unfortunately missing from their English titles, *Things Spoken* and *Their Things Spoken*.)

Moreover, the museum versions of the two works had an enfolded, derivational relationship to one another: *Things Spoken* was exhibited as an integral part of the participatory artwork *Their Things Spoken*.<sup>11</sup>

Both artworks “trouble” our sense of the museum’s institutional authority through the conceit of random personal memorabilia being elevated to the level of museum exhibit via the technology of high-definition digital scanning and complex digital databases. *Things Spoken*, as I have described, is a deep and precious-seeming collection of the artist’s personal souvenirs. By contrast, *Their Things Spoken* is a more performative, interactive artwork that asked museum-goers to scan personal items of their own and record video testimonies about the objects’ history, significance, and value, submitting both scans and videos to a growing database of information far more inclusive and expansive than that of the *Things Spoken*. Hegedus writes:

The contributors to this archive [of *Their Things Spoken*] are museum visitors who responded to my invitation to bring their favorite objects with them and tell a story about its personal significance. These objects were digitized, the stories recorded, and photos were taken of each person holding their object. In the interactive artwork these elements together become an image, sound, and text archive, which are respectively presented on the screen within three interrelated windows. The user can choose one or other of these elements to navigate through and across the entries and in this way explore an emergent matrix of collective memories.<sup>12</sup>

The most obvious contrast between the two works lies in their enormous difference in style and affect. The “intimate archive” of *Things Spoken* is dark, personal, highly aestheticized, a deep and serious *Schatzkammer*. *Their Things Spoken* is bright, transparent, a public happening. The detail screens for the items in its “collection” are light, the video testimonials from donors chatty,

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<sup>11</sup> Note that my readings here refer to the DVD-ROM versions of both artworks. In addition to the version of *Die Sprache der Dinge (Things Spoken)* in *The Complete Artintact*, see Agnes Hegedüs, *Die Sprache der Dinge (Their Things Spoken)*, published in *[dis]Locations*, ed. ZKM and the Centre for Interactive Cinema Research, University of New South Wales (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Artist statement in *[dis]Locations* catalog; see previous note.

filled with a sense of the openness and bustle of a busy, working museum atrium on a school field trip day.

This contrast makes sense for the different focus of the two works. In *Things Spoken*, Hegedüs presents a collection of her own, personal memorabilia; in *Their Things Spoken* she creates an occasion—with *Things Spoken* at its heart—for museumgoers to add their own items to a collective database of memorabilia and memories. This second work was a participatory installation and action, enacted in a museum setting. The artist set up a high-definition scanner to make virtual versions of objects brought by museum visitors, then recorded information about them, as she had done with her own personal effects for *Things Spoken*. In a way, this action extended the blurring of the archival boundaries already begun with *Things Spoken*, further dissipating the uniqueness or ontological stability of the archival identity by opening it up to general public participation.

That blurrable archival boundary and its relation to identity are the very subject of these two works—individual identity the focus of the first, a collective identity, emergent phenomenon of a collaborative archive, the focus of the second. In addressing this boundary, both works place an emphasis on archival desire itself, a particular awareness of the archive's pull and a play of desire. This becomes especially apparent if we compare *Their Things Spoken* to other, similar artworks of the same transitional time period. The idea of individuals scanning personal items and adding them virtually to a collective museum archive was no stunning innovation on Hegedüs' part in the mid-90s. The scanning and data-entry technology existed, the interest in expanded, inclusive, interactive art existed, the future of museum and archive, the aesthetic possibilities of database, were all part of the current art discourse at the time; other artists and other installations asked similar questions about identity, digital technology, and institutions of

memory. But significant differences become apparent if we compare Hegedüs' *Their Things Spoken* to, for example, George Legrady's *Pockets Full of Memories*,<sup>13</sup> an arguably even *more* iconic example of ZKM-supported museum installation-based participatory digital archive art (and this is a discernible sub-genre).

Legrady's installation allowed museum visitors to scan and describe whatever items they were carrying. In theory this provides a spontaneous check of the state of visitors' personal effects, but in practice—and from the perspective of aesthetic critique—the archive thus gathered opened itself too much to the extremes of randomness and repetition—it had too much of the tone of statistical data collection. The absolute spontaneity of Legrady's work was one part of this, the limited space it provided for user comments another; as it played out, the work accumulated many, many, many scans of car keys and cell phones, for example, with little personal investment and few stories from its participants. The collection feels like a quick sampling scan for statistical averages; the accompanying stories often feel perfunctory, strained, or randomly fabricated.

Hegedüs' work, by contrast, had a planned, ceremonial feel. Participants brought items to the museum to scan and enter them, and told their stories about them on camera, in video clips that made it to the final DVD-ROM version of the artwork. Certainly the voice and image recordings raise the institutional and identitarian stakes of the project for its participants, capturing those very signifiers of identity that are so often valorized by our multimedia information society. A quick comparison to *Pockets Full of Memories* shows that the more ritualistic, less mechanistic aspect of Hegedüs' apparatus has a profound impact on the nature of the objects and stories users contribute. The construction of the piece itself plays on the desire of

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<sup>13</sup> Here too I refer to a CD-ROM version of this artwork: George Legrady, *Pockets Full of Memories*, CD-ROM published by the artist, 2002.

people to invest something of themselves and take part; it focuses on the archival function *as a relationship*. Indeed, a particular experience of desire is one of the terms of the artwork, like a rule in a game Hegedüs creates, not merely a structural element or limit, but one that triggers the play of deep psychic energies.

But this observation about Hegedüs' archive merely begs another, more important question: why then *would* one want to participate in such an archive? What is this desire it elicits? Is it a desire to become part of the artwork, and part of the archiving institution of the museum itself? Should we see this desire as licit, that is, as a wish to see oneself reflected in the place of power, or as illicit, a desire to sneak into the place of power, to undermine the authority that would hold that boundary firm? And what does this have to do with the shape of the stories Hegedüs tells as part and parcel of her archive? Following Derrida's analysis in *Archive Fever*, we might argue that *Die Sprache der Dinge* invokes desire to see oneself reflected in the archive, in this powerful institution, a desire to participate or contribute to it somehow and thereby make it one's own, a desire to achieve the kind of greatness or recognition that this institutional archive has traditionally reserved for the brilliant and talented and important and lucky. At the same time, perhaps it is a desire to destroy precisely this standard or law of exclusion that keeps any but the brilliant talented important and lucky from affecting the contents of this powerful, clearly delimited archive. Either of these options emphasizes the boundary itself, the line that separates the validated, the archivally-endorsed, from everything else; we could even associate these positions further with Derrida's archive and argue that the user's simultaneous desire to be mirrored by the authority of the archive and to undermine this authority completely is related to Derrida's *mal d'archive*, or archive fever, a version of the Freudian death drive.

Or is it something else—for example, a simple, uncomplicated desire to take part in a

group effort, to participate in something that is happening, regardless of any implications of cultural or social power it might entail? This second scenario refigures the archive as interface, as point and channel of connection, as rhizomatic and multiple.

The first scenario, more than ironically resonant in Hegedüs' database, emphasizes the user's desire to become the object of the archive's desire, to "play to" the structuring desire of the authority it represents, or else completely erase its desiring capacity. In this scenario, the scenario of Derrida's "archive fever," the "other" of the archive about which the subject's desire is oriented, maps neatly onto a traditional psychoanalytic schema, which Derrida captures succinctly:

...no one has illuminated better than Freud what we have called the archontic principle of the archive, which in itself presupposes not the originary *arkhe* but the nomological *arkhe* of the law, of institution, of domiciliation, of filiation. No one has analyzed, that is also to say, deconstructed, the authority of the archontic principle better than he. No one has shown how this archontic, that is, paternal and patriarchic, principle only posited itself to repeat itself and returned to re-posit itself only in parricide. It amounts to repressed or suppressed parricide, in the name of the father as dead father. The archontic is at best the takeover of the archive by the brothers. The equality and the liberty of brothers. A certain, still vivacious idea of democracy.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the foundational principle of the archive itself is not simply the existence of the 'origin' and a desire to preserve it, but rather a broad-reaching, structured process of compensating for the loss of this origin.

In terms of the archive and either collective or individual identity, this schema means perpetuating *in name* a state of consolidation and control grounded in Oedipal subjectivity by pledging future loyalty to paternal law, agreeing to wield authority in the name of the father, to approach the present with a sense of deference to an idealized identity of the past, with a promise to preserve and project that law and that identity into the future, and to repress the violence that

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<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 95.

constituted that ideal in the first place. This psychological action Derrida terms “suppression and repression, the refusal to remember or acknowledge either the act of parricide itself, the desire that led to the parricide, or the lingering desire for parricide. To rule ‘in the name of the father’ means to deny these desires, replacing them with the force of Oedipal obedience and memory.

To the extent that the instantiation of symbolic law means that a singular absolute authority can be made multiple, with responsibility and authority both spread amongst a community rather than being wielded by an individual, this diffusion suggests the “best” possibility for the archontic. Derrida describes it as “the takeover of the archive by the brothers. The equality and the liberty of brothers. A certain, still vivacious idea of democracy.”<sup>15</sup> Yet the fundamentally exclusionary and undemocratic truth of this archontic function persists, present one way or another in the “specter of the Oedipal violence” that dwells within and even defines the archive in its Freudian construction.

On its face value, we might take this “oedipal violence” to mean the violence that is depicted, then repressed, mimetically, in the Oedipus myth. As Derrida writes,

thus, as Freud might say (this would be his thesis), there is no future without the specter of the oedipal violence that inscribes the suppression into the archontic institution of the archive, in the position, the auto-position or the hetero-position of the One and of the Unique, in the nomological *arkhe*. And the death drive. Without this evil, which is also *archive fever*, the desire and the disorder of the archive, there would be neither assignation nor consignment. For assignation is a consignment.”<sup>16</sup>

Here archive fever, or the death drive, is the echo of this suppressed or repressed desire, the echo of the violence that instantiated the law. Yet it is also the desire to wield the full power of law unchecked by the limit of the law, to return to the originary state before the instantiation of the

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<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 95.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 81.

law. This desire is simultaneously to wield the law and to exist before, or beyond, the law. A desire both to wield and to transgress the limit of the law, which is understood here as a temporal limit, a material limit, is also the limit of Oedipal identity.

It is no coincidence, then, that ‘woman’ becomes the sign of that limit and the code for so many cultural responsibilities and charges. This hearkens back to early Enlightenment figurations of Nature, Knowledge, Justice, Liberty, all powerful and inchoate forces made comprehensible, tame, and desirable through processes not merely of anthropomorphism, but of feminization. “Woman” in these discourses figures something vague and unlimited; by virtue of the rhetoric used to describe it, this idea invokes a sense of possessive desire, but also a sense of custodial responsibility—the abstract thing becomes concrete and knowable, becomes *some* thing to be curated or controlled.

This is true of the archive as well, as Derrida repeatedly emphasizes by playing up the underlying patriarchy of the archival system and the femininity of the law. For example, in the context of discussing the archive’s function in Jewish identity and cultural heritage, he quotes Yerushalmi’s musings on

the Torah, the Teaching, the revelation, the Torah which in Hebrew is grammatically feminine and which is midrashically compared to a bride. It is over possession of her that Christianity, the younger son, came to challenge Judaism, the elder son.<sup>17</sup>

The desire for cultural authority is depicted here as desire for possession of the law, manifest in the figure of a female body that is desirable, but never fully available (a “bride,” the law is here a liminal, virginal figure). If “archive fever” is the feverish, compulsive version of this same desire, it is also, as Derrida writes,

to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 49.

archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.<sup>18</sup>

Where this place, this limit, and this law are all coded as feminine, in the context of the “Freudian impression,” this ‘origin’ is ultimately that of the maternal body itself.

This then is the other way to understand “oedipal violence” that haunts this concept of the archive. Not the violence of parricide and repression depicted in the Oedipus story (or in its variations), nor even the violence of exclusion enacted thereafter by the Oedipal role-play of identification and objectification, but the violence done by the story itself as a meme, the crystallization of cultural epistemology around a particular, powerful image, the instantiation not of limits themselves, but of the *expectation* of limits, and above all the undisguised polarization about these limits of equally mythological constructions of gender. The notion that such a myth could be universally true in abstraction, even if its details ring patently false; the notion that such details don’t affect our understanding of (or more pertinently, our pre-cognitive response to) these abstract ideas and arguments. Like the notion that rule by a small *group* of men, as opposed to only *one* man, may represent a viable form of democracy.

A fair interpretation of Derrida’s study must include this other ‘oedipal violence’ as part of the “Freudian Impression” he attempts to understand in *Archive Fever*. Derrida blocks out three meanings for this term. The first of these is the “*scriptural or typographic*: [the idea] of an inscription (*Niederschrift*, says Freud throughout his works) which leaves a mark at the surface or in the thickness of a substrate.”<sup>19</sup> This is the ‘impression’ that correlates to the act of writing, of externalization of memory in enduring, object form, the impression in a material substrate. The disappearance of this substrate, as information becomes immaterial, is much of Derrida’s

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<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 26.

concern; he queries, “Can one imagine an archive without foundation, without substrate, without substance, without subjectile?”<sup>20</sup> But he also interrogates the “Freudian impression” in the sense of a “concept in the process of being formed,” which, he argues “always remains inadequate relative to what it ought to be”, a sense of difference and disjuncture that is central both to Derrida’s concept of writing and to Freud’s concept of subjectivity.

The third meaning, “unless it is the first,”<sup>21</sup> has to do with

the *impression left* by Freud, by the event which carries this family name, the nearly unforgettable and incontestable, undeniable *impression* (even and above all for those who deny it) that Sigmund Freud will have *made* on anyone, after him, who speaks *of him* or speaks *to him*, and who must then, accepting it or not, knowing it or not, be thus marked: in his or her culture and discipline, whatever it may be, in particular philosophy, medicine, psychiatry, and more precisely here, because we are speaking of memory and of archive, the history of texts and of discourses.... If one is under the impression that it is possible not to take this into account, forgetting it, effacing it, crossing it out, or objecting to it, one has already confirmed, we could even say countersigned (thus archived), a ‘repression’ or a ‘suppression.’<sup>22</sup>

The expanded sense of “oedipal violence” appears here as an element of this last (unless it is the first) meaning of the “Freudian impression.” This involves the crystallization of entire discourses around the ostensibly abstract message carried by this Oedipal framework, with too little regard for how its casting shapes our assumptions, our expectations, or our ability to imagine other possibilities.

Feminist theory has protested this second kind of Oedipal violence from the beginning, closely investigating the connections between this disempowering Oedipal framework and current thinking about media, about writing, about language, about discourse and identity. If, according to the “Freudian impression,” the archival function, identity, memory and subjectivity all rely on a limit, a partition, this limit is explicitly constituted through the exclusion and

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<sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 30.

objectification of women. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler neatly summarizes a major thread of Luce Irigaray's feminist intervention when she writes that Irigaray's

effort is to show that those binary oppositions are formulated through the exclusion of a field of disruptive possibilities. Her speculative thesis is that those binaries, even in their reconciled mode, are part of a phallogocentric economy that produces the 'feminine' as its constitutive outside.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Butler writes, "Irigaray's intervention in the history of the form/matter distinction underscores 'matter' as the site at which the feminine is excluded from philosophical binaries".<sup>24</sup>

The 'feminine,' which cannot be said to *be* anything, to participate in ontology at all, is—and here grammar fails us—set under erasure as the impossible necessity that enables any ontology. The feminine, to use a catechresis, is domesticated and rendered unintelligible within a phallogocentrism that claims to be self-constituting. Disavowed, the remnant of the feminine survives as the *inscriptional space* of that phallogocentrism, the specular surface which receives the marks of a masculine signifying act only to give back a (false) reflection and guarantee of phallogocentric self-sufficiency, without making any contribution of its own."<sup>25</sup>

In this framework, women gain access to social subjectivity only through an even more elaborate system of substitutions than that of the properly post-Oedipal male subject. Mary Ann Doane also cites Irigaray, and Sarah Kofman, when she argues that the figure of the maternal body, which doubles as a figure for the law, for the archive, and for the matrix of inscription, supports a system of phallogocentrism. Excluded, this body serves to guarantee ontological difference and becomes the mirroring surface of identity for the male subject. It is, however, never fully "other" to the female subject; on the contrary, "this body so close, so excessive, prevents the woman from assuming a position similar to the man's in relation to signifying systems. For she is haunted by the loss of a loss, the lack of that lack so essential for the realisation of the ideals of

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<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex,'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 39.

semiotic systems.”<sup>26</sup> Doane argues that “female specificity is thus theorized in terms of spatial proximity,”<sup>27</sup> which denotes an inability to achieve the necessary distance of separation, an inability to draw that limit on which “semiotic systems” *and* the function of the archive so completely depend.

Through these interventions, it is possible to see how gender is implicated deeply in both the functions of the archive, not merely in the “nomological,” but in the “topological” as well; the patriarchal authority and “oedipal violence” are manifest not merely as the authority and power that police the limit, nor in the power implied by the drawing of the limit in the first place, but fundamentally in the presumed need for a limit and the objectification that accompanies it, the presumed objectivity and ontological stability of the material itself. It is small wonder, then, that the emergence of new, immaterial technologies of communication, and the accompanying media theory of “the virtual” should seem to hold great promise for cyberfeminist theorists, who see it as a opportunity to recognize virtual experience as a mode of social subjectivity founded not in limits and objectivity, but in interconnections and emergence.

As N. Katherine Hayles writes in the introduction to her influential, foundational book *How We Became Posthuman*,

the contemporary pressure toward dematerialization, understood as an epistemic shift toward pattern/randomness and away from presence/absence, affects human and textual bodies on two levels at once, as a change in the body (the material substrate) and as a change in the message (the codes of representation). The connectivity between these changes is, as they say in the computer industry, massively parallel and highly interdigitated<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 763.

<sup>27</sup> Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” 763.

<sup>28</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 29.

These “changes” hold profound implications for constructions of social identity—and gender—in the digital age. Donna Haraway, in her foundational cyberfeminist text “A Cyborg Manifesto,” uses the figure of the cybernetically mediated body to overturn these older structural limits that are grounded on the objectification and exclusion of “Woman,” observing that “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.”<sup>29</sup> The principle of boundary-blurring and hybridity extends, of course, to the limits that separated and guaranteed the separate facets of Freudian identity as well: “No longer structured by the polarity of public and private,” Haraway writes, “the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *okios*, the household.”<sup>30</sup> Especially if we want to think of this technological *polis* as a cultural and political one as well, understanding its transformation in the digital age demands a deeper understanding of the corollary revolution in the *oikos* at its most intimate, most ambiguous levels. This forces us to rethink dramatically the “scene of domiciliation” that is the archival moment for Derrida, questioning the structuring fantasy that keeps intimate life apart from public identity, yet makes it symbolically foundational to all aspects of social selfhood.

This is a major focus for Hayles, who explicitly presents a “posthuman” version of identity as a way to counter longstanding assumptions about public knowledge and memory based in “the desire for mastery, an objectivist account of science, and the imperialist project of subduing nature.” “The posthuman,” she argues, “offers resources for the construction of

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<sup>29</sup> Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); online version hosted by Stanford University, <http://stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html>, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 152.

another kind of account,”<sup>31</sup> which, for Hayles, focuses on the other not as inert mirror (nor, worse, desiring mirror) but as interface and “splice,” a horizon of possibility. Hayles writes that “when the human is seen as part of a distributed system, the full expression of human capability can be seen precisely to *depend* on the splice rather than being imperiled by it.” Foregrounding this splice leads, for Hayles, to a notion of “distributed agency” or networked subjectivity—a sharp contrast from the “liberal humanist” view of the subject, grounded in an illusion of wholeness, a “view of the self that authorizes the fear that if the boundaries are breached at all, there will be nothing to stop the self’s complete dissolution.”<sup>32</sup>

Even as they express hope for posthuman or cyborgian emancipation, both Haraway and Hayles urge caution about the persistence of older models, whose resonance must be felt in the fragile transition from past to future in ways we may not have the critical tools or the perspective to accurately recognize or interrogate. Hayles, for example, writes that her celebration of the “splice”

is not necessarily what the posthuman *will* mean—only what it *can* mean if certain strands among its complex seriations are highlighted and combined to create a vision of the human that uses the posthuman as leverage to avoid reinscribing, and thus repeating, some of the mistakes of the past.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most dangerous mistakes, for Hayles, is the subtle perpetuation instead of the boundary—“what is lethal,” she writes, “is not the posthuman as such, but the grafting of the posthuman onto a liberal humanist model of the self.”<sup>34</sup> This is to say, an ideological perpetuation of a system of boundaries and binaries even beyond the moment where they are conceptually useful or technologically applicable. This potentially lurks as a tension within

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<sup>31</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 288.

<sup>32</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 290.

<sup>33</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 288.

<sup>34</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 287.

Haraway's text as well, a decade earlier, when she observes that

The self is the One who is not dominated, who knows that by the [service]<sup>35</sup> of the Other, the other is the one who holds the future, who knows that by the experience of domination, which gives the lie to the autonomy of the self. To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many.<sup>36</sup>

Haraway acknowledges the difficulty of negotiating this new conceptualization of selfhood, necessarily a process—a process that begins with cultural criticism, questioning the tropes and memes whereby cultural reproduction itself takes place. Such criticism, she writes, entails

not just literary deconstruction, but liminal transformation. Every story that begins with original innocence and privileges the return to wholeness imagines the drama of life to be individuation, separation, the birth of the self, the tragedy of autonomy, the fall into writing, alienation; that is, war, tempered by imaginary respite in the bosom of the Other. These plots are ruled by a reproductive politics—rebirth without flaw, perfection, abstraction. In this plot women are imagined either better or worse off, but all agree they have less selfhood, weaker individuation, more fusion to the oral, to Mother, less at stake in masculine autonomy. But there is another route to having less at stake in masculine autonomy, a route that does not pass through Woman, Primitive, Zero, the Mirror State and its imaginary. It passes through women and other present-tense, illegitimate cyborgs, not of Woman born, who refuse the ideological resources of victimization so as to have a real life.<sup>37</sup>

The cultural tropes Haraway references here are literary but also theoretical; in her take on the Freudian subject and its relationship to memory and cultural reproduction, she emphasizes the narrative facet of “archive fever” as “death drive,” to recall Derrida's words “a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”<sup>38</sup> Haraway reminds us that the trope of this linear narrative is itself, and dangerously, “ruled by a reproductive [archival] politics—rebirth without flaw, perfection, abstraction.” Yet she leaves

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<sup>35</sup> This word reads “semice” in my “noisy,” garbled download of Haraway's text online.

<sup>36</sup> Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 178.

<sup>37</sup> Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 178.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 91.

open the question of whether finding “another route to having less at stake in masculine autonomy” must necessarily mean eschewing as ideologically loaded any temporalizing apparatus that would situate that “real-time” experience within a shared framework of temporal understanding and causality.

An alternate version of the public “archive” comes with Rudi Laermans and Pascal Gielen’s description of our current digital mediascape as “an ever-expanding and constantly renewed mass of information of which no representation at all can be made.” But that nonetheless informs our sense of cultural location and epistemic agency. Quoting Wolfgang Ernst, they argue that an archive thus structured inaugurates a shift away from an “old-European culture that privileges storage, towards a media-culture of permanent transfer.”<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere Laermans and Gielen cite claims about this media-culture from the organizers of a conference called *Information is Alive*: “we do not live in a society that uses digital archiving, we live in an information society that *is* a digital archive.”<sup>40</sup> This view emphasizes the immateriality, the instability, and the instantaneity of information in our digital age; in this context, “the archive” must be seen as an emergent, ecological phenomenon more akin to oral culture than to print culture. That is to say, its legacies are transmitted through an accumulation of ephemeral iterations, and not through the strictly limited replication of ostensibly stable text objects.

But my question here is not about the time of digital textuality per se, it is about the intersection of digital temporality and narrative informational structure—a specific and powerful mode of temporal organization whose orienting lodestar or zero point has been an imaginary

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<sup>39</sup> Pascal Gielen and Rudi Laermans, “The Archive of the Digital An-Archive,” *Image and Narrative* 7 (April 2007): 14. Gielen and Laermans here reference Wolfgang Ernst’s 2002 *Rumoren der Archiv*.

<sup>40</sup> See Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder, “Information is Alive,” in *Information is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data* (Rotterdam: V2/NAI, 2003), 6.

construction of the ‘archive’ as ontologically stable and limited. In his essay “Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines,” Sean Cubitt revisits this intersection of narrative and digital temporality with the flexible, non-binary critical framework of “the virtual” in mind.

As I argue in my Introduction, the idea of narrative representation has long served critical theory as a stand-in for representation in general; seen as totalizing, teleological, objectifying, resolutely linear, and insisting on exclusion of multiplicity. The question of narrative’s status as an overdetermining ideological and informational structure has been hotly problematized throughout the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, after the 1990s, Cubitt (and others) have argued that the rise of virtual paradigms, the loosening of the rigid insistence on symbolic binaries and limits that had defined the earlier moment of “representation and deconstruction”, makes narrative form available again as a way to conceptualize and communicate experience. The ideological resistance to narrative, for Cubitt, necessarily partakes in and perpetuates such rigid and spurious binaries, itself:

all these terms not only assume domination but define themselves exclusively in relation to it. Thus, *oppositional practices become dependent of the dominant they oppose*. This has two consequences. Firstly, narrative once again becomes universal by assimilating all aberrations from itself as merely oppositional. Secondly, the possibility of alternative forms, rather than simply oppositional ones, is elided. Put more formally, narrative/antinarrative is a binary opposition *incapable of producing a new term beyond their polarity*. The emergence of alternative media forms, by contrast, demands not dualism but a dialectical understanding capable of producing something new.<sup>41</sup>

For Cubitt, the problem with narrative lies not so much in the concept of linear progress, but in the “specific and historical expression of Western culture” that uses narrative form to spatialize temporal flow. As Cubitt argues, this spatialization reduces *time*, which would be better

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<sup>41</sup> Sean Cubitt, “Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines: Why Narrative is Marginal to Multimedia and Networked Communication, and Why Marginality is More Vital than Universality,” in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, ed. Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp (London: BFI, 2002), 5-6; my emphasis.

understood as the “plurality of modes of consciousness and discursive formations through which we experience the present,” to a two-dimensional “*timeline*.”<sup>42</sup>

In his analysis, Cubitt rejects the major suppositions of the argument about narrative that conceive it primarily as a rationalist modern chronotope.<sup>43</sup> The first of these is “the notion that almost any mode of human culture can be understood as narrative,” which entails an assumption of linear time, and an insistence that this universal narrativity “restricts itself to more or less chronological model of temporal experience [a linear and progressive ‘*timeline*’ of events].” Second is the association of narrative with the “master narratives” of power that mark hegemonic discourse, the notion that narrative must be “a necessarily teleological form.” And third, by extension,

the confusion surrounding the definition of narrative as a necessarily teleological form.... In this way, the critique of the *grand récit* misinterprets progressive politics as Aristotelian narratives with a beginning, a middle and an end....By thus deploying a narrative strategy to emphasize the twin issues of narrative’s centrality and its conclusion, the critique of the *grand récit* entered a circular logic that defeats its attempt to present itself as a philosophical account of the social world.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, then, to the rigidly “spatialising” form of this understanding of narrative, Cubitt suggests that narrative might instead be conceived as “ecological,” not insistently linear but time-based nonetheless, cumulative, and experiential. In the ecological fabula that accumulates in this kind of narrative conceptualization, we see something like the immaterial archive of digital imagination suggested by Laermanns and Gielen above.

Cubitt effectively argues that the concept of narrative time is not necessarily at odds with such an unrepresentable, fluctuating “archive,” nor does the mere presence of narrative form

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<sup>42</sup> Cubitt, “Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines,” 4; my emphasis.

<sup>43</sup> For further discussion of the digital chronotope also Sean Cubitt, “The Chronoscope: The Ontology of Time in Digital Media,” in *Screen-Based Art*, ed. Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Cubitt, “Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines,” 5.

immediately territorialize this field of information according to the “spatial” logic of modernity—or, for that matter, the “old-European culture that privileges storage.” In his reading of artist Daniel Reeves’ work *Obsessive Becoming*, Cubitt writes,

Narrative here serves neither to consign history to the past, nor to project a perfected moment of closure into the future, but to enact the present—of the artist’s making and the audience’s viewing—as a moment fully informed but at the same time charged with a task, in this instance not quite of healing, but of acceptance.<sup>45</sup>

Temporally and ethically, this “reader”’s perspective mimics that of the archiving subject in Derrida: constructed by a past, standing between that past and a future, standing in a position of responsibility—as curator, as custodian, as caretaker—between that past and an open future.

Cubitt describes this particular artwork’s “commitment... to forgiveness” in that temporal splice between traumatic past and unwritten future as something akin to Heidegger’s duty of care.” In this sense, for Cubitt, the narrativity of new media artwork opens up the possibility of an open yet ethical futurity; its narrative backdrop informs and points to a future horizon without rigidly foreclosing the range of actions possible in that horizon. Yet Cubitt projects the media artwork’s “duty of care” beyond the Heideggerian towards another, less spatial and more future-oriented mode of temporal awareness. And this is where the complexity of navigating such an immaterial archive becomes clear. Cubitt writes,

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<sup>45</sup> Cubitt, “Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines,” 8-9. Again, however, we should note the fragility of this present moment and its historical and future-oriented “folds,” and remain vigilant that “acceptance” of the past, in its impossible otherness, does not slide into either complacency or the foreclosure of alterity. In contrast to Cubitt’s somewhat romantic interpretation of *Obsessive Becoming* above, Timothy Murray argues that “Reeves’s painful chant of trauma nurtures emotive immersion rather than prompting critical examination.” Murray asks if, in its attempt to universalize the particularity of different personal and historical traumas, the artwork does not ultimately “reflect the essence of digital dialectics,” noting that “the synthesized blend of digital sameness here softens out the hard edges of analogical difference.” See Murray, *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 156-157.

Heidegger's care is essentially spatial: a reaching out and gathering in. Levinas' ethical 'first philosophy' also thinks of this ethical imperative spatially, in terms of the face-to-face encounter where, in its meeting with the Other, the I is bound to recognize its own finitude and the limitations to its freedom. Reeves however comes closer to what my mother used to call 'consideration'.

He continues,

When Mum asked us to show some consideration for others, the call was first of all for a kind of environmental awareness: to notice the world and especially the other people around us. However, stepping beyond this first spatial alertness, the being considerate asked us to anticipate—to put together the baby-buggy and the crowded escalator into an ordinary act of kindness. Thus, this alertness was not only to the present but also to the future states toward which it tended.<sup>46</sup>

The informing trope here is not merely "environmental" but explicitly familial; here, the unquestioned authority of "Mum" neatly supplements the textual wisdom of Heidegger and Levinas. If what is at stake here is the temporality, and in particular the futurity, of the ethical encounter with an Other, here the subject steps up and embraces its role in this futurity as a burden of culturally reproductive labor, according to a structure that is distinctly 'archic,' in Derrida's sense, and only nominally matriarchic. The spirit of Mum that inspires this action suggests the subject's desire to be both parent (responsible caregiver, autonomous authority) and child (dutiful executor of "Mum's" directive), all at once.

It seems distinctly unfair to Cubitt, an excellent and genuinely democratic theorist, to read *quite* so much psychological baggage into his offhand example of "consideration," which is ultimately a very useful, commonsense, and not necessarily ideological way of thinking our future-oriented, ethical relationships to one another. But the familial trope here is too striking and noteworthy to ignore. This moment of futurity, this virtual moment of creation and recreation, where past blurs into future, is terribly vulnerable. As Hayles and Haraway remind us, the repetition of old tropes here should not pass without scrutiny. So I forge ahead, with all

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<sup>46</sup> Cubitt, "Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines," 8-9.

due disclaimers, and note that here, along with the subject's desire to know its own identity and its own role in this encounter with an other, arises the pattern of obedience figured in terms of a "domiciliation," a common familial trope that potentially oversimplifies—as well as genders—the deep complexity of the temporal, ethical, and identitarian "folds" that inform this encounter. If the gendering of this concept is unnecessary, then why does this figuration persist; why do we find this radically unknowable, open future horizon "domesticated", figured as "Mum's" directive and its redeployment as good will toward a stranger with a baby buggy. This anticipatory good will might be entirely neutral, the "considerate" role the subject performs totally unrelated to the residual authoritative structure of the Oedipal drama. But it is also possible to read this aside as an example of a "Freudian impression," and a case in point of why we should be actively engaged in finding new ways to write the influence of such early "impressions" without sliding back into Freudian grooves.

We should therefore be equally aware of this concept of the "Freudian impression"—and of its limitations. By design, very explicitly for Derrida, the term "impression" associates this cultural function clearly with the technology of print. A major problem with this theory, also explicit for Derrida, is that the force of this "impression" persists beyond the age of print, and does not necessarily play by the rules of the symbolic, though part of Derrida's question is precisely how to interrogate an "impression" like this one in a technological climate of the virtual, where the rules of the symbolic—and the critical apparatus associated with them—no longer hold the currency they once did. That is to say, in a technological and epistemological moment in which, as Cubitt writes, we are "no longer concerned with the binarisms of representation and deconstruction theories"; and arguably no longer able to deploy those theories as confidently as we did to interrogate "the reality we inhabit and construct, and which in turn

inhabits and constructs us.”<sup>47</sup> If, as Derrida argues, the notion of an “impression” itself is inextricably bound up with the focus on binaries and limits that characterize structuralist theories of representation—the spatialization and objectification entailed by writing itself as a medium, the material objectivity of the inscribed ‘trace’—it makes sense to think of the Oedipal holdover as, rather than a “Freudian impression,” an example of what Lisa Nakamura calls an “after/image.”

Nakamura’s “after/image” is a comparable concept much more suited to the mediatechnological climate of the virtual. Nakamura describes this term, “after/image” as having two meanings. The first of these opens up the possibility that the “image” itself is not ontologically stable, not static, but in flux. In this situation, the “image” of identity, the very concept of identity itself, here, is questionable. Nakamura writes that

the rhetorical charge of the word “after/image” conveys a sense of the millennial drive to categorize social and cultural phenomena as “Post” and “After.” It puts pressure on the formerly solid and anchoring notion of “identity” as something we are fast on our way to becoming “after.”<sup>48</sup>

She notes the connection between this version of “identity and a “notion of the posthuman” that “has evolved in...critical discourses of technology and the body, and is often presented in a celebratory way.” At the same time, however, the second meaning she ascribes to the “after/image” notes the danger of the notion that we are somehow beyond identity, that the structuring *force* of identity becomes, like that of representation in Judith Roof’s critique, “evacuated” when the *concept* of identity loses its ontological stability.

Instead, Nakamura describes the after/image of identity as phantasmatic—an image that

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<sup>47</sup> Cubitt, “The Chronoscope,” 65.

<sup>48</sup> Lisa Nakamura, “After/Images of Identity: Gender, Technology and Identity Politics,” in *Reload: Rethinking Women and Cyberculture*, ed. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 321.

has power without material substance, one that comprises part of our perception of “the [virtual] world we inhabit.” This is the after/image as

the image you see when you close your eyes after gazing at a bright light, the phantasmatic spectacle or private image-gallery that bears but a tenuous relationship to ‘reality.’ ...In the bright light of contemporary technology, identity is revealed to be phantasmatic, a projection of culture and ideology. It is the project of a reflection or a deflection of prior, as opposed to after/images of identity. When we look at these rhetorics and images of cyberspace, we are seeing an after/image—both posthuman and projectionary—meaning it is the product of a vision rearranged and deranged by the virtual light of virtual things and people.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast, then, to Derrida’s view of the “impression” as an actual imprint, the “after/image” has a virtual relationship to the ontology of its stimulus—the “bright light,” in Nakamura’s metaphor. The after/image will eventually fade if the stimulus is not renewed, or else persist as long as the stimulus does, and then slightly longer. Whether the stimulus is present or absent, as long as the after/image persists it becomes a part of the “virtual light of virtual things” that comprise our sense the world we inhabit.

Nakamura’s argument is geared toward putting pressure on the ideological constructions of identity that inform these “after/images,” to locate the ways in which the stimuli that lead to ideological “after/images” of identity persist and perpetuate illusions that lead to structural or systemic inequalities, to locate and interrogate these methods without necessarily reiterating the terms of representation or falling into the trap of a worldview structured around binaries and limits.

I argue that Hegedüs does something similar with the presentation of the “archive” in her works. What is at stake in Hegedüs’ “scenes of domiciliation” is ultimately not a “Freudian impression,” but an after/image of archival desire that Hegedüs explores by deconstructing the Freudian frameworks of Derrida’s *Archive Fever*. Recognizing this permits us a much more

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<sup>49</sup> Nakamura, “After/Images of Identity,” 321-322.

nuanced analysis of Hegedüs' allusions to both Derrida and Freud in *Die Sprache der Dinge*, and of the tensions and ambiguities that surround these moments.

### ***Circumcision***

In terms of analyzing these details, we might look first at Hegedüs' treatment of the concept of circumcision, which for Derrida signifies “the trace of an incision *right on the skin*,”<sup>50</sup> an “intimate mark” or scar of an initial separation that sets the groundwork for other inscriptions to come and carries with it the covenants of law, identity, and memory. Derrida writes that the male infant “will have had to enter” a community, a Jewish collective identity, “already, seven or eight days after his birth.” “*Mutatis mutandis*,” Derrida writes;

this is the situation of absolute dissymmetry and heteronomy in which a son finds himself on being circumcised after the seventh day and on being made to enter again into a covenant at a moment when it is out of the question that he respond, sign, or countersign. Here again, the archived marked once in his body, Freud hears himself recalled to the indestructible covenant that this extraordinary performative engages—‘*I shall say “we”*’—when it is addressed to a phantom or a newborn.

(Let us note at least in parentheses: the violence of this *communal* dissymmetry remains at once extraordinary and, precisely, most *common*. It is the origin of the *common*, happening each time we address someone, each time we call them while *supposing*, that is to say while *imposing* a ‘we,’ and thus while inscribing the other person into this situation of an at once spectral and patriarchic nursling.)<sup>51</sup>

Earlier in *Archive Fever*, Derrida writes in more detail about the physical process of

circumcision as archival act:

A very singular moment, it is also the document of an archive. In a reiterated manner, it leaves the trace of an incision *right on the skin*: more than one skin, at more than one age. To the letter or by figure. The foliaceous stratification, the pellicular superimposition of these cutaneous marks seems to defy analysis. It accumulates so many sedimented archives, some of which are written right on the epidermis of a body proper, others on the substrate of an ‘exterior’ body. Each layer here seems to gape slightly, as the lips of a wound, permitting glimpses of the abyssal possibility of another depth destined for

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<sup>50</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 20.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 41-42.

archaeological excavation.<sup>52</sup>

In *Things Spoken*, Hegedüs relates the logistical difficulty of having her newborn son circumcised in Germany. Hegedüs' own outsider status is especially key here. Her story indicates that she fully expected to circumcise her infant son, but was not able to do so in the first week of his life. A religious circumcision was not possible, because Hegedüs herself was a Gentile, and to her surprise a medical circumcision was not possible either in the child's first weeks of life; it would have to wait until he was old enough to undergo general anesthetic. The circumstances of her child's non-circumcision point up disconnects between the expectations of his immigrant parents and the religious, medical, and implicit historiographical institutions they inhabit as residents of Western Germany. In the end, her son's foreskin was left intact, a decision that, Hegedüs reports, "we have never regretted." To compensate for this non-circumcision, a friend made the boy a simulated foreskin marked with a Star of David pendant, expressing some kind of covenant and identity, but with no foundational absence and no involuntary inscription; commemorating a tradition by celebrating a foreskin still connected to the child's body.

Derrida's theory of the archive is, as the subtitle—*A Freudian Impression*—announces, an extended riff on Freud's theory of the unconscious. In this light, the foreskin segment of *Things Spoken* becomes even more important. For Derrida, circumcision writes "*right on*" the body the covenant of secrecy and the promise of memory, constants of Derrida's archivization that also inform the "feverish" undercurrent of Hegedüs' artwork. The severing of the male subject's foreskin *in the name of the father*, in the name of tradition and historical identity, makes manifest the initial separation of self from self, the first division and constitutive limit

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<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 20.

necessary for Oedipal selfhood in Freud.

In Hegedüs, however, the foreskin-memento does not substitute for or externalize a lack, nor does it institutionalize that separation as the foundation of an archival—and identitarian—tradition. Instead, it is a token, a handmade gift that affirms the child's place in a community and a network of shared identity. In this sense, it offers a view of selfhood grounded not in limits, but in superplenitude.

All of this is what the object means to Hegedüs. But in this segment's alternate audio track, an American voice reports unease at seeing this juxtaposition of dried skin and Jewish star in the local context of western Germany. For this second speaker, the mere fact of his German geographical setting provides a powerful, overdetermining context of interpretation for the object: the most relevant story for this speaker is not a narrative of expanding and adapting traditions of Jewish identity in the contemporary age, but rather a narrative of Jews and Germans, of the Holocaust and its memorialization in the West. The stories told in this segment present a clear bifurcation, then, between the positive, inclusive, community aspect of Hegedüs' account, where the object offers community identity without a primary sacrifice, and the powerfully negative affect of the overdetermining binary narrative of the Holocaust indexed by the other speaker. Given the terms of *Things Spoken's* multiplicity, there is no way for Hegedüs to privilege her uncommon, personal understanding of the object above the other speaker's commonplace, negative one; these two stories must simply coexist within the artwork.

### ***The Photograph***

Indeed, for all its multiplicity, much of Hegedüs' artwork explicitly plays on the desire to rank the importance or validity of stories, to preserve one memory in opposition to another, to

utilize the archival tactics of secrecy, privacy, and fetishization in order to accomplish such preservation.

The most telling example of this tension arises in connection with the photograph I describe at the very opening of this chapter, the two women, old and young, their faces turned, the shamanic frame. The particular circumstances of this object, and the deep gulf between the narratives attached to it, demand a much closer examination of the operations of narrative desire within this database.

One of the stories attached to this object is spoken by Jeffrey Shaw, Hegedüs' husband and domestic partner, who, in his voice-over, reflects that he's never particularly reflected on the photograph before, even though for years it has been a part of the home he and Hegedüs have shared. He always thought of it as a found-object artwork, he says. As for the photograph itself, he notes that the obscured faces give it a level of abstraction that perhaps contributes to this interpretation: *it could be anybody's grandmother, anybody's sister*.

In contrast to the measured delivery of Shaw's abstract and open interpretation, Hegedüs' own voice-over in this segment gives one of the longest and most complex stories that *Things Spoken* has to offer, delivered with a rushed, urgent tone, as if the speaker were anxious to fit her entire story into the time allotted. She barely mentions the photograph itself, but relates instead the family history it triggers for her, a history that touches on industrialization, urbanization, war, and major shifts in political regimes, while focusing on a specific and deeply personal story of family alienation. Quickly, even feverishly, Hegedüs describes her parents' lives in early twentieth-century Hungary, their migration from country to city and back again, their transition from agricultural to white collar work, various events of marriage, crime, imprisonment, divorce, death, and eventually bitter family estrangement, concluding with the particular alienation she

herself felt as a child in her small Hungarian village, passing by close blood relations she did not even know well enough to greet.

Again, these two accounts present a contrast and a contest, here, between the *particular* histories expressed by Hegedüs—national, familial, and personal—and the hegemonic abstraction announced by Shaw. In acknowledging this difference, we realize that Hegedüs' story is somehow sacred to the speaker; for all these years she has held it apart from the most intimate of intimate circles, her partnership and domestic sphere. It is the structure of *this pseudo-authoritative archive itself*, her database, that finally provides the formal occasion for the story's revelation.

We might liken Hegedüs' preservation and secrecy of her story with the *secret* in *Archive Fever*; it is by maintaining silence about the story, by keeping it a secret, that she holds it apart from ordinary public circulation; not common knowledge, but a specialized kind of knowledge, elite and elevated. This, too, is in part what gives the story its aura of uniqueness, what makes it seem sacred and powerful. This secrecy is part of the *promise*, the promise to the past, to the ancestors of the past, that one will keep their legacy intact, preserve it for the future.

Both secret and promise hinge on the foundational exclusion that structures written language, in Derrida's reading: the secret establishes a separation, a difference between those who know and those who do not; the promise establishes both a deference to the law of the past, and a deferral of this law into the future. The story is not one Hegedüs can commit to her intimate domestic partner, for whatever reason. Yet the quasi-anonymous, public address of the archive provides an opportunity to give voice to it, at last. Telling this particular story is necessarily a public act—the networks of familiarity to which Hegedüs commits the meaning and interpretation of her other possessions are not enough, here, to sustain *this* history to her

satisfaction.

The photograph segment replicates the psychoanalytic underpinnings and the temporality of Derrida's understanding of the archival gesture as *writing*. Hegedüs' narrative functions most explicitly here as a fetish to commemorate but also refute the absence of lost objects; at the same time, the artist reaffirms this principle of absence in her artwork's discursive structure, by addressing her story to a future spatiotemporally beyond a delimited zone of unspeaking intimacy, she struggles to preserve this particular memory, implicitly privileging her own version over naive, uninformed, or "mis-" readings like Shaw's in this one instance.

The segment therefore reasserts the difference between intimate and public, exactly because Hegedüs' effort to bridge this difference provides the occasion for relating the story in the first place. It also implies a division within the domestic scene; her particular story an especially fragile counter-narrative to Shaw's tale of abstract meaning. This points up the irony of the artist's need to *refer* to the structure of institutional power in order to *protect* herself from this same power, a double-bind that feminist and minority artists have always faced. This irony is even deeper in Hegedüs' case, because when she was creating *Things Spoken*, Shaw's audio track spoke the voice of archival authority in the most literal sense possible: he was the artistic director of the ZKM at the time.

This segment, then, presents the tensions of intimacy and alienation, abstraction and power, as simultaneously present on intimate and institutional levels; it depicts a conflict even within the "scene of domiciliation" over possession of archival authority, highlighting Hegedüs' desire for the authoritative structure of archive, and more specifically, its limits, to clarify this virtual ambiguity and preserve the precious and fragile memory (specificity) from her own distant past.

### *Geburtsmumie*

In Hegedüs' *Die Sprache der Dinge*, we have the occurrence, if we dwell on these figures and their variously Freudian and Derridean associations, of the domesticated female body (Hegedüs' own) no longer stilled by its function as a limit, made active and vocal, yet needing to refer back to limits—to the patriarchal limits of the structure of the archive itself—in order to pursue its own desire for memory. This is never clearer than in the last segment I analyze in this chapter, concerning the set of memorabilia connected to the birth of Hegedüs' child.

The virtual objects in this segment are multiple: a handwritten chart detailing his earliest metabolic functions; a broken bracelet of light blue beads interspersed with the letters S-H-A-W, his father's surname; a phallic twig of skin identified in Hegedüs' voiceover as the desiccated remains of the child's umbilical cord.

In a voiceover rife with allusions to symbols, substitutions, severing, recording, and preserving, Hegedüs describes bringing her son home from the hospital after his birth. The last thing she does before they leave the institution is cut off the identification bracelet. In an earlier age, she implies, the parents would have cut the child's umbilical cord as a way of welcoming him to life; here the bracelet serves as a "proxy," a substitute cord to cut. This neatly reverses the standard psychoanalytic account according to which a child's connection to its mother is severed "in the name of the father"—here, the binding of the father's name is ritualistically ruptured, and the child enters private life with several inches of his umbilical cord intact. Neither extrinsic nor intrinsic to the child's body, the cord is a kind of supplement that seems a "wound" to Hegedüs. When it finally dries up and falls off, she saves it as a "birth-mummy." In this section's alternative soundtrack, a female friend is shocked into bodily anamnesis by the

miniscule scale of the objects. Referring presumably to her own children and her own experience as a mother, she says repeatedly, “You forget. You forget how small they are.”

In the fact of the psychoanalytic cues and anti-cues that Hegedüs offers, how are we to read this collection of objects, in particular the *Geburtsmumie* itself, the mummified umbilical cord? Twice-complicating any theory that would define human life by its endpoints, and, in its exhibition, defying conventions of abjection and taboo regarding birth and human remains, does it invite us into its virtual network, providing us with a figure for radical intersubjectivity, an icon for the principle of connectivity itself? Does it offer us another phallic symbol, a fetishistic marker of Hegedüs’ desire to recapture a moment of ideal connectivity now irretrievably lost, or a life-changing event now irretrievably past? Does its inclusion here in Hegedüs’ cabinet manifest a particular kind of archive fever grounded in the anxious recognition that even the maternal body can forget?

As elements of a database, Hegedüs’ virtual objects of memory represent one kind of virtual interval—one that may be figured as the passing between fragment and whole, private and public, memory and counter-narrative, present archive and future; a spatiotemporal interval shaped by a contingent and fluctuating continuum of necessity and desire. In the *Geburtsmumie* segment, Hegedüs presents a different kind of interval. As the work’s only composite entry, the birth materials constitute their own particular assemblage, their own data-set. In this segment, Hegedüs’ archive takes *another* archive as its object. In the most general Deleuzian terms, we could argue that there is no substantive difference between the object-interval and the abime-interval, that both manifest the work’s zone of movement and change, its horizon of becoming.<sup>53</sup> But *Things Spoken* has prepared us to think of the memory-object database in terms of identity

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<sup>53</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, transl. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

itself, and, while it has consistently problematized any theory that would relate identity to memory, narrative, or intersubjectivity in a stable way, it nonetheless draws a clear limit here, where the “archive” of Hegedüs’ son intersects with that of the artist herself.

Mediatechnologically, there is no reason why this sub-archive should be any more bounded—that is, any less accessible to user interaction or manipulation—than the overarching archive of Hegedüs herself. Yet it is not. Rather, it is rigidly defined as indivisibly composite and made available to the user only as such. In this way, Hegedüs maintains a certain intimate secrecy about the contents of this sub-collection. This is the zone of most explicit overlap between Hegedüs' own history and that of another—one who cannot speak for himself here. She presents this overlapping archive as part of her own history, but for all the "feverish" convolutions of her desire to recapture, assimilate, or memorialize the event of her son’s birth, her program takes the deliberate step of ensuring that the objects surrounding this one event remain apart, presenting it on slightly different terms than the rest of her archive.

### ***Conclusion***

In this, Hegedüs draws a limit that is voluntary and ethical. Some notion of privacy is essential here after all—not as a way to hold her own memories safe or preserve them from the ravages of time and forgetting, but as a way to acknowledge and respect the autonomy and difference of the other within herself. The maternal body that was objectified, rendered structurally inert through the “Freudian impression” is here both actively desiring and ethically agential, with an agency that involves expressing her own desire for memory and renegotiating the limits that would preserve these memories with her own needs in mind, but also those of the equally (if partially) autonomous other with whom she is interdependently networked.

The digital textuality of *Things Spoken* here underscores Hegedüs' foregrounding of a posthumanist and feminist take on identity that expands this concept to involve questions of archival desire and public memory. She respects the need for personal narrative, particularly in the face of hegemonic institutional discourses, but remains suspicious of the desire to preserve such memories at any cost, emphasizing instead the need to continually negotiate the terms of memory anew according to a shifting sense of difference in constantly changing intersubjective encounters.

## CONCLUSION

Though my study here has focused on historical conflicts and issues of public memory specific to Germany, I have attempted to frame these artists' interventions, and my analyses of them, in such a way that they might seem useful and informative in a global context as well, as negotiations between individual experience and desire for larger communities of memory and investigations into the dynamics of desire for history and resistance to the pull of ideology in the global, digital age more generally. Of particular interest are the dynamics of race and gender, which have been consistent sub-themes of all my chapters, if not always explicit, parts of my arguments. All of my readings here focus on narrators or protagonists who struggle to articulate their relationships to the broader archive of public memory. In every case a kind of "othering" comes into play that structural to the system or regime of representation these characters struggle to move beyond, but also foundational to their own experience as members of the German and global societies they inhabit. In my reading of Hildesheimer's *Tynset* in "Chapter Two: The Art and Ethics of Virtual Memory," the narrator's Jewishness, though referenced little in the text, is central to his extreme disconnection from mainstream postwar German society and its culture of memory (which, when Hildesheimer was writing, was really a culture of forgetting, if not active suppression, of Holocaust memory and Jewish experience<sup>1</sup>). It lies at the heart of his own keenly felt trauma at the murder of close friends and the violent erasure of a potential community of memory and mourning. It also informs his intense, and intensely frustrated, desire for an art of memory that could promote ethical reckoning and effective mourning without, as I argue,

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<sup>1</sup> See Stephan Braese, *Die Andere Erinnerung: Jüdische Autoren in der Westdeutschen Nachkriegsliteratur* (Berlin: Philo, 2001).

relapsing into the recuperative and exclusionary logic of representation. In Chapter Two, “Rescreening Memory Beyond the Wall,” I argue that Nomad’s early DVD-ROM *The Last Cowboy* interrogates and rejects the representational processes of identity constitution that objectifies an “other” to create a “screen” for one’s own idealized identity. In *The Last Cowboy*, this process is explicitly racist, focusing as it does on the consolidation of East German national identity through the Native American “other” of the DEFA *Indianerfilme*. Nomad’s artwork interrogates the relationship between this Indian “other” and the screen of cinematic projection, in an attempt to understand a role for East German cultural memory within the Western-dominated, global culture of unified Germany—a role that goes beyond regressive, escapist ideology or “merely” nostalgic expressions of *Ostalgie*. For *The Last Cowboy*, the mobile, interactive screen of digital media suggests a different role, agential rather than objectified, for the stories of the other, and a different role for narrative itself in exercising cultural memory in the age of globalization.

If *The Last Cowboy* suggests that cultural memory may come into play through interactions with an agential, interactive other rather than through projections onto an inert screen for identity, this theme continues in my final chapter, “Mother Archive, or, Remembering, the Matrix,” a reading of Agnes Hegedüs’ virtual database *Die Sprache der Dinge*, which focuses on gender and the maternal body in psychoanalytic constructions of archival desire. This chapter analyzes the customary figuration of “the Archive” as feminine, related to the maternal body as “origin” and object of desire in Oedipal psychic schemas. Hegedüs overturns these Oedipal assumptions by presenting her own maternal body as agential and desiring of memory on its own terms; she places her experience of domesticity, familial intimacy, and motherhood at the center of a nuanced understanding of the archival relationship that, rather than repeating

Freudian patterns of repetition and obedience, is based in an ongoing, ethical negotiation of autonomy and limits, selfhood and interdependency between mother and child.

In all of these examples, the conceptual framework of “the virtual” helps us understand how these artists use narrative in conjunction with other media modes and paradigms to express a desire for a community of memory in the face of real, historical and institutional structures of discrimination, objectification, and exclusion. By emphasizing the social categories of race and gender, the artworks examined here point as well to the usefulness of a theory of the virtual for navigating and unraveling the complexity of such identity categories, whether they are used as the basis for self-valorization or for discrimination. The categories of race and gender cannot neatly be explained by any argument for clear-cut determinism, whether it seeks validation from the apparently unassailable truths of biology or from the apparently inescapable power of cultural norms. It seems quite clear by now that race and gender are virtual constructions, both cultural and material, social categories and embedded cultural norms that often refer to bodily realities and that certainly become the basis for conditions and experiences of discrimination. These conditions involve institutional histories, perceptions of visual or morphological difference, genetics and biology, as well as the shifting but inextricably connected interplay of familial, cultural, ethnic, and social influences all at once. To investigate such dynamics in all their complexity, to understand the subtle operations of power, in order to push them toward more democratic, more humane operations, should remain a goal for cultural criticism in the digital age.

I have focused here on questions of identity, cultural memory and desire for interaction with what I have called the “historical other.” But it is the nature of the temporal “fold” of the virtual that the engagement with the past in such moments is necessarily an engagement with the

future as well. Throughout this study, I touch on the relationship between narrative, cultural memory, and the future; a further expansion of this project might include deeper philosophical investigation into memory, futurity, and digital temporality.

My critical practice here combines the methods, concerns, and theoretical frameworks of literary, visual, and new media studies. Understanding this study as a contribution to the new, growing field of digital humanities, I have explicitly attempted to model a humanistic orientation here as well. We may agree with Hayles (as I do) that the modern, “liberal” definition of “human” is limited, exclusionary, and grounded in institutions and historical circumstances bent on preserving relationships of domination and hierarchy; we may prefer in principle a more complex, more conscious terminology like that of the “posthuman.”<sup>2</sup> But, particularly in the areas of artistic and cultural expression, we should still be able to strive, unapologetically, for a mode of inquiry that is humanist and humane. That is to say, a mode of inquiry that is attuned to aesthetic, formal, philosophical, and historical dynamics, but, above all, concerned with understanding the situational particularities of every iteration of the human condition in all their uniqueness, and oriented to creating a more ethical and just future.

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<sup>2</sup> See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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