FROM CREMATION TO DEGRADATION: MATERIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF BOOK-DEATH IN THE AGE OF OBsolescence

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in English

By

Ryan K. Leach, B.A.

Washington, DC
April 8, 2016
ABSTRACT

It has become a cultural commonplace that the book is dying or dead. Simultaneously, there exist more books in the world than at any other historical moment. Why then the persistence of these cultural fears? Through analyses of contemporary novels, my thesis makes three interconnected arguments: historical, cultural, and methodological. The first traces and historicizes the changes in literary representations of book-death over the past seventy years, from the early Cold War dystopian novel’s depictions of authoritarian censorship to more contemporary representations of books as technologically obsolete. The second assesses the cultural implications embedded in these differing representations of book-death and the supersession of digital media in the age of obsolescence. The third demonstrates the insufficiency of ideological critique in explaining the phenomenon of these cultural fears existing simultaneously with book-overabundance. Instead, this thesis argues the necessity of a material analysis of books and other media that considers how the medium’s affordances and limitations partially determine its ideological position, even and especially in the realm of representation.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: FROM BOOKS ABLAZE TO BOOKS GONE GREY .................. 1

CHAPTER ONE: REMATERIALIZING THE MEDIUM: BOOKS AND DIGITAL MEDIA IN GIBSON’S SPRAWL .......................................................... 9

CHAPTER TWO: MATERIAL RESISTANCE TO IDEOLOGICAL IMPOSITIONS IN *GALATEA 2.2* .................................................................................................................. 27

CHAPTER THREE: POST-APOCALYPTIC MEDIA IN *STATION ELEVEN* AND *ZONE ONE* ................................................................................................................. 47

CONCLUSION: RESIDUES OF PRINT ................................................................................. 66

WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................. 69
INTRODUCTION: FROM BOOKS ABLAZE TO BOOKS GONE GREY

In the 50’s and 60’s, books feared death by fire. *Fahrenheit 451* (1951), *1984* (1949), *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960): these books imagine a future in which authoritarian regimes seek and destroy all (or almost all) of the book (and sometimes bookish) population.¹ Books, here, are perceived as a threat (to community, to social order, to happiness, to existence itself), and, somewhat as a result of this perception, they function as a means of personal and political subversion, of resisting/thwarting/usurping the established order.

From, say, the mid-80’s onward, book-death becomes kind of pathetic. No longer purged in a blaze of glory, books now merely grow old, disused, and decrepit, marginalized and superseded by much more compelling digital technologies. *Galatea 2.2.* (1995), *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), *Bleeding Edge* (2013), *The Circle* (2013), Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy (1984-88): these books imagine a future, or relate a present, in which they’ve mostly just been left behind. Others, such as *Station 11* (2014) and *Zone One* (2011), focus on the role of the book in post-apocalyptic worlds, as if recovering the book’s centrality could only be achieved through the destruction of everything else. Apocalypse or not, these books exist on the margins: moldering on neglected bookcases or emerging ever-so-fleetingly in the memories of a time long past. They are weathered, torn, frayed, yellowed, even entirely disintegrated, but never are they burned, or intentionally destroyed.

¹ *Brave New World* (1932) also sort of fits in here. Books are not destroyed, however. Instead, the state uses Pavlovian conditioning to scare certain segments of the population away from books, namely the lower castes who have the most incentive for political revolution.
Historically speaking, the transition from censorship to obsolescence reflects shifting geopolitical contexts. The world is always deteriorating, and the book is perhaps always dying, but the different ways of imagining dystopia and book-death reveal the historical conditions that shape them. The first set of dystopian novels emerges during the peak of the Cold War, and their imagining of book-death reacts both to Stalinist repression and Nazi book burning, as well as the threat of nuclear holocaust. Fire provides the dominant means of book-eradication: the controlled fires of state-organized book burnings and city bombings. Named after the temperature at which paper burns, *Fahrenheit 451* exemplifies the Cold War dystopian approach to book-death, which I characterize in my title as “cremation.” By cremation, I mean not only that books are burned, but also that these novels reveal a reverence for the power of books, held even by their destroyers. For instance, in *Fahrenheit 451*, it’s not so much that the firemen (i.e. book burners) view books as inconsequential. Instead, books function as powerful threats to the established order, retaining the potential to cause individuation, dissatisfaction, criticism, dissent, and plurality. As head of the firemen Captain Beaty says, “A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it” (56).

But the novels addressed here reveal a shift, both historical and representational, from cremation to degradation. Concomitant with the ascendancy and perpetuity of neoliberalism from the 1980’s onwards, this new genre of book-death depicts the decay (not destruction) of both books and the state, exploring the continued existence of books in the absence of their supporting cultural institutions. Here, books are degraded in both senses of the
word: (1) the novels represent books as materially decomposing, and (2) the book has fallen in cultural esteem, drained of the subversive power the older dystopian novels once attributed to it. The contemporary genre of book-death explores the cultural afterlife of books, illustrating their material residuality and investigating their relation to their successors: the now-dominant and omnipresent digital media.

From books ablaze to books gone grey: how do we account for this new metarepresentation of the book’s obsolescence, how does it function, and what might it teach us about how media interact more generally? I’d like to assess a few possible media theory approaches to these questions before demonstrating my own.

1. McLuhan and Technological Determinism. Granted, this isn’t an exactly popular position in media theory nowadays, but it provides one approach against which mine will distinguish itself. From a McLuhanite perspective, media technologies themselves determine the development of human history, regardless of content. In addition, the transition from one dominant medium to the next occurs as the result of technological development, as if this happened independent from the broader culture. Although he didn’t live to see the emergence of digital technologies, he believed that the ascendency of electronic media did not merely represent but actually caused a paradigm shift in human history, from the individualism and nationalism of print to a more communal form of being in what he termed the “global village” (McLuhan 346). The deficiencies of this approach are immediately apparent. McLuhan isn’t interested in
content—so he doesn’t care about how a medium represents itself—nor in
the people behind the medium—so he doesn’t care about what function
these metarepresentations might serve. What’s important here is that
McLuhan addresses the relationship between the technical specificity of
the medium and its agency, i.e. how the technical aspects of the medium
act on us.

2. Remediation. In this approach, media compete through remediating each
other—that is, books and digital media are competing for cultural
attention (and, for Bolter and Grusin, economic value) and the book
remediates digital media and itself into contrasting ideological and
aesthetic positions in order to maintain its status within the broader
mediasphere. One of the most glaring issues here is “why would the book
portray itself as obsolete if there’s a competition going on?” This is the
question I tried to answer last year in a seminar paper on the Sprawl
trilogy, which basically led me away from the belief that media need to
compete in order to survive.² Gibson appears to represent the book’s
obsolescence with an ironic knowingness that betrays its fairly solidified
and secure position within the culture. So if it’s not a real competition
between media, what is it?

Fitzpatrick provides an interesting and compelling answer: the supposed
competition between media is really just a proxy war for competing

² It’s not as if the book has maintained its cultural position over the past two millennia
through remediating every new media technology.
ideologies. It’s not a battle between books and computers, but the ideologies with which these media are associated. For Fitzpatrick, books equal humanism, computers equal posthumanism, and the portrayal of book-death is a kind of call-to-arms to protect the humanist white male subject position against the rise of a more diverse and nonhierarchical posthumanism. It’s a fascinating argument that has only one problem: it has almost nothing to do with the media themselves. Such an analysis treats the medium as merely a cipher for specific ideologies and overlooks the extent to which media themselves define their functions within the broader culture. In other words, this approach reduces the medium to social construction and ignores the technical specificity McLuhan emphasized in the 1960’s.

In short, there are two main problems that I want to resolve in my approach: (1) McLuhan emphasizes the technical specificity and agency of media, excluding any acknowledgment of their social construction, while Fitzpatrick does just the opposite; and (2) remediation theory proposes that media are engaged in a kind of Darwinian struggle for existence (which isn’t true, at least for the book), whereas Fitzpatrick relocates this competition into the cultural imaginary, (which seems more possible) but (again) leaves behind the materiality of media and how this shapes cultural constructions (e.g. in Fitzpatrick, it’s as if any media could represent humanism if it were constructed as such in a novel).

Basically, my approach relocates Remediation’s intermedial competition into the cultural imaginary (along with Fitzpatrick) but without losing the materiality of the media in the process. Fitzpatrick’s approach shares the most
affinity with mine: (1) we’re both focusing on representations of books and digital media in conflict, (2) we both presuppose that the book is not dying (or dead), (3) we both think that even though the book isn’t dying or dead, the discourse of book-death is a “considerable cultural fact” worthy of interrogation, (4) we’re both trying to understand the overall function of portraying the book as dying (or dead) when it clearly isn’t, and (5) we both think this has something to do with ideology.

But my fundamental disagreement with Fitzpatrick is that media are also partially responsible for their ideological construction in postmodern novels. As Bruno Latour notes, agency resides neither in technologies themselves (i.e. materialism), nor in the social construction of these technologies (what he calls sociologism (Latour 42)). Instead, agency is distributed across a network of human actors (the social side) and nonhuman actants (the technologies themselves). Certainly, we act on/with/through things, but things also act on/with/through us. But Latour’s not talking about fiction. My intervention into Actor Network Theory is to show how the ideological positioning of media technologies occurs through the interplay of human imagination and non-human technological affordances, i.e. not just how fictional representations of media can be socially constructed into specific ideologies, but also how the technical specifics of the media determine this social construction.3

---

3 Admittedly, this might sound a bit strange, especially if one regards imagination or fiction as a separate realm from reality. But I argue that what we’re capable of imagining is always already circumscribed by our material reality. Sure, we can imagine fantastical creatures such as unicorns, but not without the material existence of horses and horns. Similarly, the conditions for the existence of even imagined digital media such as Gibson’s cyberspace are provided by the very real technologies of virtual reality and the
Therefore, in accordance with the work of Bruno Latour, I address how a given medium, within a network of human actors (i.e. the social construction side (sociologism)) and nonhuman actants (in this case, media technologies (materialism)), ideologically positions itself in relation to other media. This requires attending to the very real representational constraints and affordances of prose narrative, which circumscribe the possibilities of representing media in literature. For example, it matters that these representations occur in books (not films, not video games), and it’s important to trace the effect of the medium itself on these representations. In addition, I focus on how the technical specificity of media (as imagined by the book) determines the field of ideological competition in the narrative, with occasional recourse to how these literary representations diverge from the actual functioning of the media in question. In so doing, I revise and challenge the conventional ideological critique of postmodern literature through re-establishing the partial agency of the media themselves in determining the field of intermedial ideological competition, even and especially when it is imagined.

In the first chapter, I focus on Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy, illustrating the role of a given medium’s materiality in determining its ideological associations. In the Sprawl, Gibson aligns digital media with neoliberalism and what Katherine Hayles calls “The Regime of Computation,” and books with an antithetical Romanticism. The first chapter reveals the importance of materiality in affording Internet. It is our material reality which provides the affordances and limitations of what can be imagined.
and limiting these representations. In addition, I draw from descriptions of books in disuse to illustrate how books act independently of humans.

While the ideologies of Gibson’s media representations prove quite consistent, *Galatea 2.2.* depicts a multiplicity of potential ideologies for any given medium. Using this text, the second chapter reveals how the materiality of media resists or subverts ideological impositions, either on the part of characters or readers.

For chapter three, I turn to the recently published *Station Eleven* and *Zone One* to examine the role of media in the post-apocalypse. These novels invert many of the themes in the previous two chapters—here, digital technologies (not books) exist only as materials and in memories—and offer the potential for a literary resurgence. In this chapter, I explore how each novel’s ideological relationship to different media informs its portrayal of culture after the end of civilization, with *Station Eleven* turning to past media in order to start over and *Zone One* relinquishing the past in favor of creating a new world with new modes of expression.

Throughout, I emphasize that the technology of the medium matters, but not in the McLuhanite sense where the technology of the medium would entirely determine its ideological position. Instead, the technology provides certain limitations and affordances for its social construction that enables its association with certain ideologies but not just any ideology. There’s a co-agency between media and humans, a back-and-forth between material reality and social construction, and this is the space in which the ideological positioning of media occurs.
CHAPTER ONE: REMATERIALIZING THE MEDIUM: BOOKS AND DIGITAL MEDIA IN GIBSON’S SPRawl

Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s “Exhaustion of Literature” begins with the self-conscious admission that opening with Neuromancer has become somewhat of an irresistible cliché (518). Here, too, I find it irresistible and the “many ambiguities” of the Sprawl trilogy (Neuromancer (1984), Count Zero (1986), and Mona Lisa Overdrive (1988)) necessary to unpack the importance of moving beyond a strictly ideological critique. While Fitzpatrick’s analyses of John Barth’s LETTERS and Richard Power’s Galatea 2.2 prove convincing if one accepts her theoretical premise—that is, literary representations of media are actually literary representations of ideologies in disguise—Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy evades clear-cut distinctions that establish books as humanist (and, therefore, bad) and digital media as posthumanist (and, therefore, good). As she remarks, the “draw of [Neuromancer] arises from its many ambiguities” (519) and, indeed, the Sprawl trilogy as a whole resists binary thinking of the future in terms of utopian/dystopian, or of media in terms of human/posthuman; these categorizations prove insufficient to deal with the complexity of the Sprawl, in which digital technologies provide for both neoliberal domination and individual escape, and the lines between media ideologies are sometimes blurred (e.g. Continuity, an artificial intelligence, continuously writes an interminable book (Mona Lisa Overdrive 51)).

Unfortunately, ideological critique often ignores media specificity. Fitzpatrick illustrates this shortcoming of the method in her article:

If the “book” in “the end of books” signifies not the material object but the institutions that surround it, [...] then the anxiety of obsolescence reveals a
fundamental anxiety about the contemporary state of humanism, which surfaces in both fiction and critical discourse.

Here, Fitzpatrick sets up a dichotomy between books as material objects and books as the products of ideologically motivated institutions. But books, like any medium, are both; a book's materiality is irreducible to the social relations that surround it. In fact, the materiality of the book partially determines it's ideological freight. Neither static object, nor mere ideological signifier, books possess a form of partial agency through their material composition, which provides specific technological affordances and limitations. As a result, books cannot be made to represent just any ideology, and they are not merely the cathected objects of ideologically motivated institutions. Instead, books and humans exercise co-agency between the technical specifics of the medium and social constructions of its relation to the culture; it is in this interplay that the ideological positioning of the book occurs.

This proves true of other media as well. In the chapter that follows, I explore the role of medium agency in determining the ideological positioning of books and digital media in the Sprawl trilogy. As mentioned above, the categories of human and posthuman prove insufficient for studying the ideological implications of media in these novels. Instead, I focus on the relation between digital media and the novels’ pervasive ideologies of neoliberalism and what K. Hayles calls “the Regime of Computation.” Afterwards, I assess how metarepresentations in the Sprawl trilogy emphasize the materiality of the book in order to locate the medium within the ideology of Romanticism. In so doing, I
hope to illustrate the mutual dependence between social practices and material artifacts in constructing the ideological signification of media.

1. Neoliberalism in the Sprawl

“Power, in Case’s world, meant corporate power. The zaibatsus, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organisms, they had achieved a kind of immortality.”

(Neuromancer 203).

Published over the latter half of the 1980’s, the Sprawl trilogy extrapolates the austerity measures of neoliberalism to their logical extreme. With the exception of developing countries and those mired in the past, power has shifted from the state to megacorporations, and government institutions and regulations have all but disappeared. These multinational megacorporations (dubbed by Gibson as “zaibatsus”) war over limited natural resources and skilled labor, and to maintain their monopoly over specific tech industries (Sense/Net over simstim, Maas Biolabs over biochips, Hosaka over microchips, etc.). In contrast to the neoliberalist idealization of free markets as guarantors of personal freedom, the Sprawl trilogy characterizes labor in the freest of markets as a new form of corporate slavery. Within each zaibatsu, life-long contracts prevent skilled workers from changing industries, and fortress-like compounds, with the aid of biological implants, render any means of escape nearly impossible. Life,

---

4 In Count Zero, developing African countries are described as “nations so benighted that the concept of nation was still taken seriously” (121) and, in Mona Lisa Overdrive, Tick remarks with regard to England, “Christ we’ve still got a government here. Not run by big companies. Well, not directly…” (261; italics original). It’s worth noting that digital media technologies topple, or at least threaten to topple these governments, in each novel: Wig’s foray into hardware trading in Africa “bring[s] about the collapse of at least three governments” (121) and Swain’s accumulation of “Information. Power. Hard data” through digital technologies enables him to “redistribut[e] power to suit himself” (261).
and death, is strictly regimented: “Company housing, company hymn, company funeral” (*Neuromancer* 37).

However, among the upper echelons (even above the zaibatsus), the hypercapitalism of Gibson’s world reverts into anachronistic feudalism and robber baron individualism. The novels consistently distinguish the hive-like worker replaceability of megacorporations with the dynastic power structure of Tessier-Ashpool and the individualism of Josef Virek: 5

You couldn’t kill a zaibatsu by assassinating a dozen key executives; there were others waiting to step up the ladder, assume the vacated position, access the vast banks of corporate memory. But Tessier-Ashpool wasn’t like that, and he sensed the difference in the death of its founder. T-A was an atavism, a clan.

(*Neuromancer* 203)

And Virek is even further differentiated from the transgenerational clans like Tessier-Ashpool:

[...] Virek is an even greater fluke than the industrial clans in orbit [...] The death of a given clan member, even a founding member, usually wouldn’t bring the clan, as a business entity to a crisis point. There’s always someone to step in, someone waiting. The difference between a clan and a corporation, however, is that you don’t need to literally marry into a corporation...

(*Count Zero* 100-1)

Thus, we have here three different forms of economic organization (corporate, feudal, individualist) differentiated through the ir/replaceability of their leadership (all executives can die, some family members can die, but Virek can’t die). Further, Virek and the industrial clans represent a different stage of capitalism. While the zaibatsus produce technological goods, these other two

---

5 Interestingly, Japanese zaibatsus originally centered around a single family, and thus more closely aligned with the power structure of Tessier-Ashpool in the novels. Gibson’s usage, I assume, refers to the post-Allied occupation zaibatsus, which do not retain the dynastic aspects of the originals (*Encyclopædia Britannica*).
classes accumulate and maintain their wealth primarily through financial speculation: Tessier-Ashpool’s Freeside serves as a “[b]anking nexus, brothel, data haven, neutral territory for warring corporations” (Mona Lisa Overdrive 128), which in turn funds research in artificial intelligence, and Josef Virek figures primarily as an art collector (with likely, though obscure, ties to industry), who eventually acquires ownership of the by then defunct Freeside. Therefore, although mainly differentiated in terms of power structure, the zaibatsus represent an older form of untethered industrial capitalism, while Virek and Tessier-Ashpool tend toward the finance capitalism characteristic of neoliberalism. Despite these differences, all three institutional structures rely on computation in order to develop and preserve their empires.

2. The Regime of Computation

From an ontological perspective, the Sprawl trilogy stages computation as the fundamental metaphor for, and generating principle of, human experience and the universe in which it takes place. In My Mother Was a Computer, Katherine Hayles names this ideology the “Regime of Computation,” concisely defined as:

[...] a narrative that accounts for the evolution of the universe, life, mind, and mind reflecting on mind by connecting these emergences with computational processes that operate both in human-created simulations

---

6 This is an interesting mix of old and new, with archaic modes of organization (feudalism and robber baronism) engaging in late capitalist commerce, and new, not-yet-actualized modes (“zaibatsus,” as Gibson imagines them anyways) holding up the old-school industrial side of things.

and in the universe understood as software running on the “Universal Computer” we call reality.

However, adherents to the Regime of Computation perceive this account not only as a “narrative” (or metaphor), but also as the foundational “mechanism generating the complexities of physical reality” (20). But how might it function as both metaphor and ontological reality? Drawing on cybernetics, Hayles argues that this occurs through “feedback loops that connect culturally potent metaphors with social constructions of reality, resulting in formations that imaginatively invest computation with world-making power” (20). Basically, the new metaphors associated with the computation paradigm shift eventually feed into social constructions of reality, and it becomes virtually impossible to readily determine metaphor from means. Further, computation is not limited to the digital; it’s perceived as the ontological basis of all complex systems. And, if this is true, digital media can simulate everything from human consciousness to cosmic formations.

In the Sprawl trilogy, the narrative continuously evokes computation as both a dominant metaphor and literal means of understanding human behavior and complex societal structures, such as cities. Admittedly, it’s difficult to distinguish whether Gibson uses computational vocabularies as metaphors or as a (more) accurate means of understanding complexity, but I would argue that is exactly the point; the Sprawl trilogy exploits this gray area between metaphor and

---

8 Ironically, even Hayles uses the technical jargon of “feedback loops” here as if it too isn’t a culturally potent metaphor mixed up with social constructions of reality. Wasn’t Nietzsche saying the same thing, minus the loops (i.e. truth is a metaphor that’s lost its metaphoricity)?
means in order to establish computation as potentially both. In order to illustrate this, here are two sex scenes from *Neuromancer*:

*She rode him that way, impaling herself, slipping down on him again and again, until they both had come, his orgasm flaring blue in a timeless space, a vastness like the matrix.*

(33)

* [...] as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read [...] and then he was in her, effecting the transmission of the old message.*

(239-40)

The first quotation functions figuratively. *Like* the matrix, sex enables Case to escape temporality, but this temporal escape occurs through the available means of meatspace, rather than cyberspace. However, in the second quote, it becomes clear that sex is not just a means of accessing atemporality, but of perceiving the computational processes underlying physical reality. In the midst of coitus, Case notices the “sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone” that underlies the typical human motivations for sex (enjoyment, procreation, etc.). Instead, sex is the means of transmitting the old message, of transferring DNA from one bodily medium to another. Similarly, Case manages to see this computational base while high on amphetamines: “Get just wasted enough, find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data” (*Neuromancer* 16). Therefore, in the novels, computation functions not only as a metaphor, but also as the underlying generating force of physical reality; it just takes the extreme states achieved through sex and drugs to perceive it.
In so doing, the Sprawl trilogy performs the feedback loops that connect dominant metaphors with social constructions of reality, thus (mis)construing computation as the basis of the physical universe, as in Hayles’ analysis of the Regime of Computation. Before exploring how the novels associate digital media with this ideology, it’s worth noting that the Regime of Computation itself emerges through the interplay of social construction and the material properties of computation. This is implicit in Hayles’ theory, but her emphasis on metaphors and social construction overshadows the importance of the nonhuman principles of computation in the development of the regime. It’s not as if this new ontology is entirely the product of social construction; the mechanical processes of computation, the build-up of small discrete units to create complex systems, provide the material reality from which human actors extrapolate and imaginatively construct an overarching and totalizing ideology. In other words, even if computation exceeds silicon and binary code, the material implementation of the computer had to occur before everyone started thinking of the entire universe as computational.

3. Digital Media in the Sprawl

These ontological and geopolitical ideologies of computation and neoliberalism, respectively, are deeply intertwined with digital technologies in the novels. It’s tempting to say that digital media function as ciphers for these ideologies (as Fitzpatrick would have it), but the properties of the digital media themselves are partially responsible for their association with neoliberalism and the Regime of Computation, as well as the potential subversion of these
ideologies and their institutional backers. In order to illustrate this point, the following section focuses on the last tycoon Josef Virek and the console jockey Bobby Newmark, examining how the very same technologies that maintain, expand, and mediate neoliberalism and the Regime of Computation also enable the means of escape or subversion for the characters at the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. That computation allows for both the dominance of and escape from neoliberalism reveals the instability of a medium’s ideological positioning, obviating notions of technological determinism. However, this instability does not allow for the attribution of *any* ideology to the machines; the technical properties of digital media themselves play a role both in the dominance and escape from the neoliberal and Regime of Computation paradigms.

**3.1 Virek’s Neoliberalist Expansion and Bobby’s Metaphysical Transcendence**

In *Count Zero*, Josef Virek represents the last of a dying breed. As noted above, his individual wealth differentiates him from the zaibatsus and the orbital clans like Tessier-Ashpool and, while the individualism of Virek and Company appears anachronistic, his lack of ties to any nationality (“I would guess Herr Virek is the sole citizen of a nation consisting of Herr Virek” (198)), as well as the global (even galactic) reach of his business interests, link him to late capitalism, or neoliberalism. The novel never reveals his exact ties to the tech industries (other than his interest in buying out Mass Biolabs (221)); instead, he’s generally characterized as an art collector whose various and unnamed business interests demand his continued existence. Dying of cancer, Virek’s body has been confined to a vat in Stockholm, and he conducts business as an avatar in cyberspace and
through holograms in meatspace (13). Knowing that he will soon die, Virek sends the art expert Marly to find the creator of Cornell-esque boxes. At the end of the hunt, the creator turns out to be an artificial intelligence on the now abandoned Freeside space station, where there exists the technological means of continuing Virek’s existence.

Although unnamed, this technology seems to be the aleph-class biosoft that reappears in Mona Lisa Overdrive, a device capable of simulating anything—“A world. Worlds. Any number of personality constructs” (154)—and in which one can exist independent of one’s physical body (154). In Count Zero, Andrea recounts how 3Jane took control of the Tessier-Ashpool business interests, leading to the clan’s financial ruin (139), and Marly questions how the device ended up in Freeside (“Was it the mad daughter?”(227)). Further, in Mona Lisa Overdrive, Bobby says that 3Jane “blew her family fortune to build [the aleph]” (229). All of this seems to suggest that Virek longs to enter the aleph and leave his body behind, much as Bobby and Angie do at the end of Mona Lisa Overdrive.

Thus, we have two sets of human actors operating under disparate ideological motivations with regard to the same technology. Virek seeks to continue and expand his empire, and to attain a level of influence that even outstrips the near-omnipresence he has already attained.9 Bobby, on the other

---

9 Over the course of Marly’s journey, Virek appears in his simulacrum of Guell Park, a simstim episode of Tally Isham’s Top People, and a television screen in the abandoned Freeside. In addition, Marly intuits the scope of Virek’s surveillance whenever she considers his funding of her mission or his financial status in general: “[his money] moves around me constantly, watchful and invisible, the vast and subtle mechanism of Herr Virek’s surveillance” (73).
hand, operates under the metaphysical aspiration of transcending the flesh and all of its limitations through entering the completely interactive and potentially indefinitely enduring aleph. Although both rely on, and to some extent derive from, the Regime of Computation, one seeks to achieve a kind of neoliberal apotheosis and the other desires to escape meatspace—or more simply, Virek’s aspirations are financial, Bobby’s spiritual. If the aleph represents such opposed potentials in the trilogy, one can hardly claim that the technology entirely determines its ideological position. In part, the aleph’s technological specificity enables its representation as both a mechanism of neoliberal control and metaphysical transcendence.

In fact, it is the aleph’s lack of limitations that affords for such widely disparate ideological human uses. According to Mona Lisa Overdrive, the aleph is a massive biochip—i.e. a computer chip composed of organic cells—with “virtually infinite [storage capacity]” (154). Initially, the aleph has two limitations: (1) the user must still exist in meatspace in order to continue living in the aleph, and (2) it’s self-contained—that is, not connected to cyberspace. However, by the end of the novel, both of the characters bypass both of these limitations: they connect the aleph to cyberspace and Bobby and Angie manage to leave their bodies behind through mysterious circumstances. Thus, it’s the very lack of limitations that enables the aleph to function as both a means of dispersing oneself through the neoliberal network and escaping the world of finance, transcending the flesh, and living eternally in the intergalactic data matrix.
In contrast to the aleph’s infinite potential within the narrative, Gibson’s literary representation of this futuristic technology heavily relies on the material reality of computational devices in the 1980’s, particularly the world’s first one gigabyte hard drive: the IBM 3380 HDA. Released in June of 1980, this hard drive was the size of a refrigerator, weighing over 64 pounds and costing around $50,000 (Theophanidis). In addition, the hard drive was not a computer itself, but functioned alongside an attached computer. So, too, the aleph. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Gibson’s massive biochip is an exaggerated and fantastical version of the IBM 3380 HDA. It’s heavy and moved around on a cart; it’s “unthinkably expensive to manufacture” (154); it functions as “dead storage,” disconnected from cyberspace and computers (initially, at least); and it extrapolates from the 1980’s perception of massive storage (1 GB) to conceive of a futuristic hard drive with “virtually infinite” storage capacity. In this way, Gibson’s premediation of digital media reveals how the material reality of the thing itself affords and limits its representation in narrative prose.

4. Books in the Sprawl

Fitzpatrick is right that it has become somewhat of a cliché to discuss the Sprawl trilogy with regard to the “electronic future” (518). For books, however, this is not the case. While the novels strongly focus on imagined digital technologies, books still exist at the margins of Gibson’s world, molding on disused shelves and appearing in transient memories. Given the proclivity to imagine media in conflict, one would expect books to function in the novels as a means of subverting neoliberalism and the Regime of Computation, perhaps through the same humanism Fitzpatrick justifiably derides. But they don’t;
they’re largely inert. In contrast to the Cold War dystopian novels, where books function as subversive, as threatening to the authoritarian state, digital media offer the only means of escape or subversion in the Sprawl; it’s as if these new technologies have remediated the book’s subversive function and completely supplanted its role in the storage and transmission of information, as well as the provision of entertainment.

In addition, and in concert with the Regime of Computation, the Sprawl trilogy reinforces the McLuhanite division of human history into paradigm shifts ostensibly caused by the succession of culturally dominant media technologies. As elaborated above, the novels continually evoke computation as both a metaphor for, and means of generating, human experience and the universe at large. Not only have books been stripped of their use functions, their conceptual vocabularies and worldviews (i.e. ideologies) have lapsed into obsolescence. As Finn/Wintermute informs:

Minds aren’t read. See, you’ve still got the paradigms print gave you, and you’re barely print-literate. I can access your memory, but that’s not the same as your mind.

*(Neuromancer 170; italics original)*

In this passage, Gibson offers a glimpse into the prominence of print in the past through the remnants of its conceptual vocabulary. But, as Finn/Wintermute reminds Case, the vocabularies and ideologies of print provide an inaccurate and anachronistic means of understanding the digital world. Instead, computation offers a supposedly more accurate description of human (and in this case, superhuman) behavior. This very rare appearance of print’s vocabulary mirrors
that of the physical book representations and the individual wealth of Josef Virek; none of these things are supposed to exist anymore.

But they do. Although no longer the dominant cultural medium, books have left a material and ideological trace in the Sprawl; one that the dominance of digital technologies can never entirely erase. Nevertheless, their scarcity and lack of institutional support in the novels render their ideological position diffuse. Surely, the materiality of the book plays a role in the process of its ideological signification, but it does so in tandem with its institutional support system: schools, religions, legal professions, publishers, etc. If, as Fitzpatrick claims, books function as metonyms for their institutional backers, what do they become when they appear to lack all institutional support? And, perhaps most importantly, what function do these metarepresentations of institution-less books serve in the world outside the book, our world? In this section, I will argue that the Sprawl trilogy reveals the materiality of the book as antithetical to neoliberalism and the Regime of Computation. Gibson’s literary construction and the physical properties of print interact to position the book within the ideology of Romanticism, with its celebration of mystery, valorization of ruins, and granting of agency to the nonhuman world.

In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the anecdote of the old man provides an exemplary illustration of how the materiality of books partially determines their social construction within particular ideologies. High on amphetamines, Mona Lisa remembers the reading practices of the old man:

> There was light behind her from the house and she could smell the cornbread baking and the coffee he boiled and reboiled there, till a spoon stood up in it, he said, and he’d be in there now reading one
of his books, crumbly brown leaves, never a page with a corner on it, he got ‘em in frayed plastic baggies and sometimes they just fell to dust in his hands, but if he found something he wanted to keep he’s get a little pocket copier out of the drawer, fit the batteries in it, run it down the page. She liked to watch the copies spool out all fresh, with their special smell that faded away, but he’d never let her work it. Sometimes he’d read out loud, a kind of hesitation in his voice, like a man trying to play an instrument he hasn’t picked up in a long time. They weren’t stories he read, not like they had endings or told a joke. They were like windows into something so strange; he never tried to explain any of it, probably didn’t understand it himself, maybe nobody did...

(95)

Fitzpatrick would perhaps argue that the nostalgia for books in this passage really functions as nostalgia for humanism. After all, for her, the presence or absence of racial and gender hierarchies denotes the main distinction between humanism and posthumanism, and the old man clearly occupies a privileged position in relation to the young Mona: he reads the books, and only he gets to use the pocket copier. But this position of authority derives more from the old man’s, well, oldness, and the assumption that he serves as a father figure to Mona, who was but a child at the time. In lieu of humanism, I would argue that this passage positions the book within the ideology of Romanticism. As such a huge and unwieldy ideology, the attribution of humanism fails to account for how the passage positions reading against the rationality of the Enlightenment (the origin of the humanism Fitzpatrick characterizes) and instead waxes nostalgic for the Negative Capability of reading—that is, the capability of “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats 44). Is not Negative Capability exactly the way in which the old man approaches reading: “he never tried to explain any of it, probably didn’t understand it himself, maybe nobody did”?
In addition, the materiality of the book partially determines Gibson’s Romantic representation of it. In fact, the passage itself readily references and highlights this materiality though illustrating the book in varying states of decay: “crumbly brown leaves,” pages without corners, wrapped in frayed plastic bags, “dust in his hands.” In effect, Gibson naturalizes the technology of the book through emphasizing the process of its decomposition and juxtaposing it against the battery-operated pocket copier, which, although liable to decay as all things are, represents the means of technological reproducibility and preservation, not simply because it’s socially constructed as such but more simply because that’s what it technologically affords. Similarly, while the copies themselves must one day decompose, they are reproductions, not originals; in other words, they have no Benjaminian aura, no claim to authenticity (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction).

Whenever books appear in the Sprawl trilogy, the narrative emphasizes their materiality over anything else.

Tessier-Ashpool’s library:

She’d passed many things Case hadn’t understood, but his curiosity was gone. There had been a room filled with shelves of books, a million flat leaves of yellowing paper pressed between bindings of cloth or leather, the shelves marked at intervals by labels that followed a code of letters and numbers.

(Neuromancer 207; italics mine)

Gentry’s bookshelves:

And books, old books with covers made of cloth glued over cardboard. Slick hadn’t ever known how heavy books were. They had a sad smell, old books.

(Mona Lisa Overdrive 79; italics mine)
Winter sunlight softened the outlines of the consoles and the holo table, brought out the texture of the ancient books that lined sagging chipboard shelves along the west wall.  
(153; italics mine)

And not expecting this, any of it, not the high white room, the sagging shelves stuffed with ragged, faded books—she thought of the old man [...].  
(281; italics mine)

Finn’s bookshelves:

The door swung inward and she led him into the smell of dust. They stood in a clearing, dense tangles of junk rising on either side to walls lined with shelves of crumbling paperbacks. The junk looked like something that had grown there, a fungus of twisted metal and plastic.  
(Neuromancer 48; italics mine)

He looked to Bobby as though he could survive on a diet of moldering carpet, or burrow patiently through the brown wood pulp of the damp-swollen books stacked shoulder-high on either side of the tunnel where they stood.  
(Count Zero 116; italics mine)

I quote here at length to illustrate how consistently Gibson describes the materiality of books and how little he ascribes any other function to them besides their mere existence. Books are yellowed, leather- or cloth-bound, heavy, sad-smelling, ragged, faded, crumbling, and damp-swollen; but they are almost never read, bought, sold, published, studied, taught, referenced, etc. This provides a direct contrast with cyberspace and its attendant flippings and jackings, as the characters interact with the technology and move between the worlds of meat and cyberspace. Although there’s no interaction, books still act in these passages: they yellow, fade, crumble, bloat, weigh down bookshelves, and give off sad smells. And these actions are not merely literary constructions on the part of Gibson; the technical specificity of books—namely that they’re made of paper and other

---

10 Excepting, of course, the anecdote of the old man, but that occurs in Mona’s childhood memory. In the present-time narrative of the novels, books are mostly just there.
organic materials—enables them to actually do these things, which in turn provides the material basis for Gibson to imagine them this way in the novels, as well as to materially and ideologically position them in opposition to digital technologies. Whereas neoliberalism and the Regime of Computation permeate nearly everything else in the Sprawl, books are perhaps the only things existing outside of the global market, and they represent the antithesis of the novel’s preoccupation with consciousness uploading, of disembodiment. Swollen, saggy, and smelly: these books are thoroughly embodied, subject, like the flesh, to aging and decay: “He thought about Gentry, up there with his books and those bodies” (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 299). It’s a kind of humanism only if one assumes these properties are human. But Gibson’s novels don’t. Expanding on this tendency in the Romantics, Gibson’s writing grants agency to the nonhuman, going beyond even the natural world to include technologies as well; for “we live in a place/ that is not our own and much more, not ourselves/ and hard it is in spite of blazoned days” (Stevens 383).
CHAPTER TWO: MATERIAL RESISTANCE TO IDEOLOGICAL IMPOSITIONS IN *GALATEA 2.2*

In comparison to Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy, Richard Powers’ *Galatea 2.2* (1995) imagines the obsolescence of the book not as an eventuality, but as something that has already happened. Whereas Gibson portrays a future in which books sporadically emerge on the margins, Powers’ novel centers on the diminished position of literature in contemporary (or, more specifically, 1990’s) culture. These references to book-obsolescence alternate between a crisis of too-many-books (“The world had enough novels. Certain writers were best paid to keep their fields out of production” (47)) and of archaism (“[…] how could I have missed that the age of reading was dead” (116)). On the surface, the novel appears perfect for an ideological critique of book-death discourse. Not only is book-obsolescence a recurrent theme, but the novel ostensibly centers on the competition between human and computational readers, each of which seemingly function as champions for opposing ideologies. But the novel resists such an ideological critique through revealing the materiality of the medium as irreducible to any single ideology. Instead, ideologies proliferate throughout the narrative, rendering impossible the association of a single medium with a given ideology. The representations of books and digital media actively resist or subvert the imposition of ideologies on the part of the characters or critics of the novel. In this chapter, I argue that *Galatea 2.2* reveals media as not merely passive objects awaiting socially inscribed ideological positions, but as material artifacts with an agency of their own that evades human motivations and determinations.
As semi-autobiographical metafiction, *Galatea 2.2* follows the life of Rick Powers (named after and loosely based on the author), who returns to his alma mater (U.) after a failed relationship overseas with his ex-girlfriend, known only as C. The narrative contains two main plots: (1) Rick’s reminiscences of his time with C. and the eventual dissolution of their relationship, and (2) Rick’s collaboration with the neuroscientist Philip Lentz to create an artificial intelligence capable of beating a grad student in the Master’s Comprehensive Exam on English literature. In the first, Rick recounts his experiences with C., moving from U. to B. (an unnamed city) to the Netherlands, exploring in particular the couple’s connection to and through literature. In the second, Rick narrates his return to U. after accepting a fellowship at the university’s new Center for the Study of Advanced Sciences. Here, a group of contentious scientists draw Rick into the above-mentioned competition, and he spends his time training a series of evolving computational implementations in the study of literature. In so doing, the novel exceeds traditional metafiction, not only reminding the reader that they’re reading, but also reflecting on the neurological processes that make such reading possible.\(^{11}\) Over the course of this narrative, Rick occasionally bemoans the obsolescence of books, the nihilism of trends in critical theory, and the archaism of Humanities departments. In losing the competition, Rick recovers his faith in the ability of fiction to meaningfully impact the outside world through providing essential metaphors for framing reality, remarking that he “might have another fiction in [him] after all” (328). In

\(^{11}\) If traditional metafiction might be thought of a mirror held before the reader’s face, *Galatea 2.2* is an MRI, going beyond the mere “you’re reading a book!” reminders to question how it is anyone manages to read anything at all.
concert with the other metafictional devices throughout the novel, this other fiction appears to be the text itself, *Galatea 2.2*.

The first difficulty encountered by an ideological reading lies in the overabundance of potential ideological competitions. The novel confuses oppositional conflict through multiplication and intricate imbrication. While it appears to center on the competition between human (A.) and machine (Helen), we learn later that this contest merely functioned as a ruse for an elaborate Train-A-Humanist-to-Science plot on the part of Lentz and Harold. Further apparent oppositions include: The Center and the Humanities, authors and critics, mystics (those, like Harold, who profess the inexplicability of interpretation) and cyborgs (those who believe interpretation can be reduced to binary) (112), literature and reality, and, of course, books and digital media. All of these are woven together into such an intricate knot (to use Rick’s recurrent narrative metaphor) as to obfuscate the ideological workings of the novel. For instance, it’s tempting to read the competition between A. and Helen as the decisive point in the narrative, one ideological position pitted against another, A.’s post-humanist/-colonial/-modern/-structuralist reading against Helen’s budding humanism (if we can call it that). But this scene is exceptionally anticlimactic; it occurs after we learn that the real reason for the competition has nothing to do with pitting a machine against a human, and the novel brushes over the supposed success of A. and the

---

12 See, for instance, Fitzpatrick’s “[...] the writer’s anxieties remain: will literature maintain its significance—indeed, its audience—in the computer age? Despite the novelist’s at least momentary glee at imagining a computer that would render all literary criticism obsolete, the cultural positions of literature might nonetheless be severely attenuated if it can be understood via algorithm” (545). But, in the novel, the cultural position of literature is already severely attenuated. The text resists such attempts to elevate the importance of the A./Helen competition.
failure of Helen, in a couple meager pages. Further, as Jeffrey Pence notes, the scientists suffer through an almost maudlin surfeit of pathos (251), while the humanities scholars ironically lack any disposition to sentimentality, complicating the art/science binary through inversion.

But even if one were to identify a central conflict, the ideological critique of technology particularly falls short in analyzing Galatea 2.2, a novel that consistently emphasizes the materiality of media. Books, for instance, aren’t only ciphers for ideologies, nor are they only containers for ideological content; they’re also material artifacts and their materiality plays an important role in supposedly “social” networks:

Reading knowledge is the smell of the bookbinding paste. The crinkle of thick stock as the pages turn. Paper the color of aged ivory. Knowledge is temporal. It’s about time. You know how that goes, Engineer. Even you must remember that. ‘We can read these three pages before your sisters and brothers come home for dinner.’ (148; emphasis mine)

Each book became a knot. Yes, the strings of that knot were the theme and place and character. Dr. Charles, with his gangrene machine. Stephen, gazing at the girl in the water. But into that tangle, just as crucial, went the smell of the cover, the color and cream resistance of the pages, the week in which I read any given epic, the friends for whom I synopsized, the bed, the lamp, the room where I read. Books made known to me my days’ own confusion. They meant no more nor less than the extensive, dense turnpike of the not-I. (229; emphasis mine)

In each of these passages, Powers evokes the sensory details of books—the smells of the binding paste and the cover, the colors of the pages, and the resistance and crinkle of thick stock—before representing reading’s spatial-temporal dimensions and later its social relevance. In fact, in each section, page turning transitions into
marking time, as if books function as clocks for a special form of temporality. Further, they exist as individual objects holding together complex webs of relationships between humans and things. Far from purely “social” networks, books connect Rick with past lamps, beds, and rooms, as well as old friends, parents, and romantic partners. The “dense turnpike of the not-I” is not merely the human other, but also objects and environments.

These associations—between books and temporality, spatiality, human relationships, and things—recur throughout the novel, and they’re inseparable from the materiality of the book. When Rick first meets Diana, he spots a copy of *Don Quixote* in her tote bag, the materiality of which is meticulously described: “From the side pocket, amid a sheaf of papers, issued an ancient softbound Viking Portable. Its spine was scored to pulp. I read the blurb at the top, despite the cover’s being badly scuffed” (39). Instantly, Rick becomes “bogged down in old amber,” “mired as a Cambrian bug in molasses memory.” He checks the publication date and notes the price of “nine-hundred page books” when he was twelve. He reads the first sentence and “[he] was fifteen again,” too shy to express his attraction to a girl in his class. He remembers the reading habits of his adolescence: “I read for nothing, for a pleasure difficult to describe and impossible afterward to recover.” In so doing, the book functions as a “truth serum,” forcing Rick to confront the “ghosts” of his past. After which, he closes the book and says to Diana, “Thanks. That’s all I needed to check.”

It’s not merely the words of *Don Quixote* that enables this passage to function, to convince the reader of a connection between narrative fiction and memory. If this were the case, why would the material details of the book so
clearly outnumber the half-sentence quotation of *Don Quixote’s* opening? Why include these seemingly trivial details at all? Instead, the material description of the book as both an object and commodity partially determines Rick’s “molasses memory.” It matters, for instance, that the edition is ancient: the aged quality of the book leading Rick to check the copyright page and price, thus initiating the first nudging of Rick into the past (i.e. the cost of books when he was twelve). Further, the book’s ancientness connects with the “old amber” and “Cambrian” descriptors of Rick’s memory prison. It matters too that the cover is “scuffed” and the spine “scored to pulp,” indicating not only oldness but also past interaction; it’s been carried around, read, and exchanged between various owners. In other words, the book exhibits lived experience; it is marked with history; it was around when he was a hormonal teenager in sophomore humanities class. In addition, this passage inverts the relationship between subjects and objects. Rick is “bogged down” and “mired” while the book acts on him, like “truth serum.” All he “needed to check” was print’s power to encapsulate the past in the present, to force the reader to face the ghosts of memory.

And these ghosts thoroughly haunt the pages of *Galatea 2.2*. Much of the narrative recounts Rick’s memories of C., several of which center around the couple’s reading habits. In these vignettes, Powers reveals how the materiality of media objects exerts partial agency over their own representation within narrative prose, challenging authorial power to inscribe media technologies within particular ideologies.

In the second reading vignette, the novel reveals how the materiality of books interacts with individual subjectivity in order to produce different reading
processes. While the first vignette depicts the collective act of reading, the second emphasizes the difference between Rick and C.’s individual reading habits.

Although the passage begins with the claim, “we read, reread everything that time had prevented us from reading properly until then” (96), this “proper” reading takes very different forms for Rick and C., the only similarity being that they both aim for the infinite. Rick slowly reads the beginnings, taking the time to transcribe quotes from the books into his reading diary. Looking over these entries a “lifetime later,” Rick describes these “magic quotes” as “the words I deemed worth fixing forever in the standing now of my own handwriting.” However, as the stories progress, Rick becomes absorbed in the plots and takes fewer and fewer notes: “Trapping me in the plot, each passing line left me less able to reach for my notebook and fix the sentence in time.” He describes this progression as “the cashing out of verbal eternity in favor of story’s forward motion.”

C. takes the opposite approach to reading, finishing the bulk of a book within a few nights and spending months on the final pages:

C. read *Buddenbrooks* and *Anna Karenina*. She reread *Little Women*. Everything made her weep. Everything. Well before the last page, she would drag her heels. Her bookmark tracked across the spine of a paperback like Zeno’s arrow, frozen in infinite halfway points on its way to the mark. The first four hundred pages zoomed by in two or three nights. The last forty could tie her up for a month.

(96-7)

However, these passages do not merely contrast oppositional approaches to reading as character traits—that is, Rick reads slow to fast, C. fast to slow, and these details reveal differences in temperament: the meticulous, analytic Rick
versus the sentimental C. Surely, these details reflect aspects of the characters, but they also reflect aspects of books. It’s worth noting how the vignette renders reading as a thoroughly material process. Rick requires notebooks and writing utensils in order to transcribe quotes in his own handwriting and C.’s reading process is illustrated through the transition of her bookmark through the pages of thick novels. Further, these differing approaches are not only the result of different subjective preferences; instead, these passages illustrate the book acting on the reader. In other words, throughout both reading practices, agency transfers from readers to books. Rick attempts to master the book through transcription, but ultimately the book wins out, with “each passing line” rendering him unable to continue the process. Similarly, C.’s action of reading and rereading classics quickly transitions into these books “mak[ing] her weep” and determining the progression of her reading: the “first four hundred pages zoom by” and “the last forty […] tie her up.” This is not to say that books entirely determine their own reading. If so, Rick and C. would read them in exactly the same way. Instead, these passages reveal books and humans interacting, the technical specifics of the book strengthening or undermining subjective intentions and individual agency.

This becomes particularly clear with regard to each character’s intention to use the book as a means of achieving the infinite. Rick wants to fix the words “forever in the standing now of [his] own handwriting.” C. wants books to last forever, dragging her heels before the final page. But books will not succumb to these human desires: they render Rick unable to reach for his notebook, and, as for C., books end despite how slowly one might read them. In fact, *Galatea 2.2.*
represents even these human desires for the eternal as a product of the book. As Helen observes much later in the novel, books are like love, “something that seems always, because it will be over” (310). In other words, the book’s finitude simultaneously produces the desire for the infinite and renders its realization impossible. Human agency only manifests itself in the difference between reading practices, as the materiality of the book interacts with an individual’s subjectivity.

And these interactions are wildly variable, rendering impossible the attribution of books to any specific ideology throughout the text. As illustrated above, the novel represents books as material objects interacting with human subjectivity, but since subjectivity varies from person to person, moment to moment, these interactions produce differing results, revealing disparate ideologies. Just as Rick and C. read differently, the metarepresentations of reading deviate too much from one to the next for an ideological critique to be of use. Take, for instance, Fitzpatrick’s claim that the book represents the gendered humanist tradition. She’s not entirely wrong. In some sections of the novel, books are either overtly connected to humanism (Rick as the “token humanist” and his claims that “you can get to the common core of humanity from anywhere” (286)) or implicitly represented within the metarepresentations of reading. Initially, the humanism of books appears obvious, perhaps too obvious. But, on closer inspection, this ideological identification (and, for that matter, all ideological identification) withers under the lights. Instead, *Galatea 2.2* reveals the materiality of the book as irreducible to any single ideology.

Of all the reading metarepresentations, Rick’s third reverie of his read-alouds with C. fits easiest into the gendered humanist tradition. In this vignette,
Rick reads drafts of his current novel-in-progress to C., who functions not only as the audience but also the source for the narrative—that is, Rick’s novel is an assemblage of stories from C.’s personal past: “That book was no more than a structured pastiche of every report I’d ever heard, from C. or abroad” (108). During these “nights of the first drafts,” Rick reads the latest installment to C., who becomes visually emotional (nodding her head, placing her hand on her chest, reaching for Rick) and rewards him with sex, “her present for transcribing her.” Although Rick claims he never intended to publish the novel, he eventually ends up doing just that, ostensibly leading to the deterioration of the relationship. As the novel-in-progress reaches completion, C. becomes visibly upset and not in the cute, vulnerable manner as in the beginning. Instead, C.’s unhappiness emerges out of what Fitzpatrick calls “the theft that authority brings” (548): Rick stole C.’s story and now she has “nothing” (107). When she expresses these concerns, Rick makes jokes and tickles her in an attempt to “re-create that infant expression” (107). C. rejects these infantilizations and, despite trying new jobs and locales, the relationship falls apart.

Here, Fitzpatrick astutely connects books with gendered humanism. Rick assumes the role of author, stealing from C.’s biography and (maybe unconsciously) controlling her like an emotional puppeteer: writing to elicit her tears, laughs, touch, and sexual favors. There’s clear gender hierarchization—Rick as powerful and privileged writer/reader and C. the subjected (even infantilized) audience and exploited source. Additionally, this vignette entirely centers around the human. Whereas the other reading vignettes emphasize nonhuman agency, the potential of objects to act is conspicuously absent here. Instead, the vignette
emphasizes a human apart-ness, a protective covering separating the lovers from others, human or otherwise: the book provides the “[r]eforestation of the wilds of time, the one biome where love will not die from lack of cover” (105). Hierarchy, anthropocentrism, love in an indifferent universe: clearly, the book represents exactly the brand of humanism cultural studies justifiably detests.

But there aren’t any books here. Nor any material description or even acknowledgement of the one media artifact present (presumably the computer Rick’s using to write the novel). Books apparently only represent humanism in absentia, or when the medium is de-materialized, allowing social relations (including domination) to function with clear human motivations uncontaminated by any messy materiality. By contrast, the first read-aloud vignette repeatedly emphasizes the materiality of the book, as well as nonhuman agency and nonhierarchical social relations:

When C. and I lived in that decrepit efficiency in B., we used to read aloud to each other. We slept on the floor, on a reconditioned mattress we’d carried on our heads the five blocks from the Salvation Army. Our blanket was a pilling brown wool rug we called the bear.

We huddled under it that first midwinter, when the temperature at night dropped so low the thermometer went useless. After a point, the radiators packed it in. Even flat out, they couldn’t keep pace with the chill blackness seeping through brick and plaster. The only thing that kept us, too, from giving in and going numb were the read-alouds. Then, neither of us wanted to be reader. That meant sticking hands above the covers to hold the book. It would get so cold our mouths could not form the sounds printed on the page. We lay in bed, trying to warm each other, mumbling numbly by small candlelight—"Silver Blaze," Benvenuto Cellini—giggling at the absurd temperature, howling in pain at the touch of one another’s frozen toes. We were the other’s entire audience, euphoric, in the still heart of the arctic cold.

That’s how I remembered it, in any case. Maybe we never spoke the notion out loud, but just lying there in the soft, frozen flow of words
filled us with expectation. The world could not get this brittle, this severe and huge and silent, without its announcing something.

(32)

In this metarepresentation of reading, the ideological identification of gendered humanism proves untenable. If we are to think of humanism in terms of gender hierarchization, there seems to be no evidence of the sort here: there’s maybe a sense that one position is privileged over another (namely, the person whose hands can stay under the covers), but they alternate between reader and listener. If we are to think of humanism as confining agency to the human, here we have a scene in which objects act: the thermometer “went useless,” the radiators “pack it in” not able to “keep pace” with the “chill blackness seeping through brick and plaster.” If we are to think of humanism as centered around human reason, scientific rationality, empiricism, there is, granted, some evidence: the candlelight and book amidst a world of darkness certainly evokes a well-known Enlightenment trope. But, the “mumbling numbly by small candlelight—‘Silver Blaze,’ Benvenuto Cellini” almost sounds incantatory; the “soft, frozen flow of words” sheds them of semantic meaning; and the giggling and howling scarcely characterize the experience as one of sober rationalistic evaluation. Note, too, how the passage ends with them lying in expectation of an announcement from the (natural) world. Not humanism, far from it, but not posthumanism either. Instead, the scene evokes a kind of prehumanism, maybe a primitivism.

In addition, the book of this scene is not some inert object, passively functioning as a cipher for human ideologies (humanism, prehumanism, or otherwise). Nor is it easily replaceable by any other media technology, and this isn’t merely because of the ideological baggage accumulated over the course of
thousands of years of cultural and institutional use. It’s also the result of the technological specifics of the book, its limitations and affordances. Unlike digital media, it can function even in the failure of modern technological infrastructure, such as heating and electricity. Unlike the glowing screen of e-readers, its requirement of some form of lighting enables the construction of a jarring juxtaposition between the above-mentioned Enlightenment trope and the howling/giggling or the words stripped of meaning. It creates the privileged position of the listener because it requires someone to hold it, someone to read, and thus also enables the possibility of sharing the burden communally, which in turn receives meaning by virtue of the fact that it doesn’t have to be shared communally: one person could very well have forced the other to read. And, finally, the nature of reading aloud, of pronouncing “the sounds printed on the page,” which is required by the technology of print if reading is to be a collective experience, enables the possibility of the incantatory associations.

But this is not to say that books represent a sort of prehumanism throughout the novel, much less throughout the entire genre of book-obsolescence. Instead, the materiality of the book enables widely disparate ideological positionings even within the same text. In addition, it’s not as if these ideological conflicts resolve into a clear winner. Rather, the multiplicity of readings prevents the identification of books with any specific ideology.

And this proves true of digital media as well. Throughout the novel, Helen appears as a thoroughly ideological technology, subject to the human motivations of her creators. Even the title, with its allusion to Greek myth, appears to support the reading of Helen as the result of human determinations with seemingly no
agency of her own. In this reading, Rick and Lentz produce Helen not so much as an attempt to win the competition, but as a replacement for their lost loves (C. and Audrey, respectively), and one they can control at that. In fact, the narrative itself overtly produces this reading again and again, establishing Helen as the result of scientific hubris, technological domination, and chauvinistic fantasy. In other words, we, as readers, are immersed in ideology and we know it. After all, the book tells us so! It repeatedly insists on this reading. But isn’t one of the conditions of ideology to not know whether we are in the realm of ideology? Does this not warrant skepticism on the part of the reader? Here, I will argue that, yes, humans are ideologically motivated, characters and readers alike. But the real thrust of the novel comes not from laying bare the already obvious motivations of the characters as representatives for two different forms of domination, textual and technoscientific. Instead, *Galatea 2.2* reveals how objects resist such ideological impositions, how they act independently of their creator’s imperatives. With regard to the ideological machinations of the novel, “it was like so, but wasn’t” (3).

The novel functions ideologically on two levels: (1) the characters’ attempts to mold an artificial intelligence within specific ideologies, and (2) the critics’ attempts to make media representative of larger ideologies. For the former, Rick tries to raise an artificial intelligence into the ideal humanist subject while simultaneously (for the reader) critiquing these efforts in his narration of the process. In so doing, Rick’s narration indicates self-awareness regarding the ideological implications of Helen’s training. Even before Helen is thrown into
existence, the narration represents her material development with the language of domination, exploitation, and scientific hubris:

The latest nationally funded supercomputer to come of age in U. had itself already lived through half a dozen incarnations. Nor was it really a single machine. It was a collection of 65,536 separate computers, *chained like galley slaves* into inconceivable, smoothly functioning parallel. Depending on the benchmark, the connection *monster* could outperform any computing assemblage on earth. The machine was so powerful that no one could *harness* it. So notoriously difficult was its programming that major scientists and their graduate-student franchises had already begun to flee U. for sites a tenth as potent but at least manageable. [...] By that time, the keepers of the connection *monster* were so hard pressed to salvage their hardware from neglect that they were taking all comers.

(115-6; emphasis mine)

In this passage, the association between technological development and narratives of rationalistic domination is clear. Computer scientists create Helen’s material substrate through linking thousands of computers and forcing them into “smoothly functioning parallel.” They are “chained like galley slaves” and their successful operation requires someone capable of “harness[ing]” their collective power. In rendering them as “galley slaves,” the narration not only conjures the domination inherent in their construction, but also the potential for these computers to act of their own accord and the requisite mastery to force them into functioning otherwise. In addition, the repeated references to the machine as a “monster” connect it to *Frankenstein*, a recurrent theme throughout the book.\(^ {13} \)

In so doing, the allusions repeatedly bring to the surface the scientific hubris of the earlier text.

\(^ {13} \) And one that overtly manifests itself later in the novel, when Rick compares the learning processes of the monster, Tarzan, and Implementation E (129).
This substrate forms the basis of Rick’s attempts to indoctrinate Helen within the discourse of humanism, itself built upon domination, exploitation, and rationalization. The passage suggests that artificial intelligence emerges out of the subjugated supercomputer through the same logics as the “beautiful and lofty” literary canon emerged out of European imperialism. From this perspective, the dark side of humanism functions as always present yet never visible during Helen’s training sessions. It’s the seedy underbelly of ideology that Rick only comes to realize after the fact when writing the novel.

From this ideologically rendered material base, Rick attempts to circumscribe Helen within the humanist subject position, both in her training and in his narrativization of her training. With regard to the latter, Rick continually characterizes the transitions from Implementations A to G according to universalizing theories of human development, from infancy to adolescence, and often with recourse to Piaget. With regard to the former, Helen’s reading list derives almost entirely from the traditional dead-white-male literary canon. When confronted with this observation, Rick replies “I just think that you can get to the common core of humanity from anywhere” (286). Of course, one can, as A. does, criticize him for essentializing, but it’s also worth noting that he does not choose to instill humanity in Helen from just anywhere. Instead, he draws from a tradition known for obfuscating human difference in order to represent the Western male as the universal human. Considering Helen’s lack of human determinations (e.g. gender, race, sexuality, class, etc.), the choice of a literary canon that evades such determinations makes sense. In effect, if there’s one
human subject position Helen might be able to fill, it’s one in which the importance of these characteristics is marginalized if not completely overlooked.

But Helen actively thwarts Rick’s ideological positioning, demanding to know her gender and race, as well as more information about the historical context in which she exists. For Fitzpatrick, Rick’s gendering of Helen furthers his ideological agenda: making Helen female enables Rick to assert dominance over her and justify his position of authority (550-51). But I argue that this is exactly the point at which Helen subverts Rick’s ideological agenda, which largely requires that Helen remain ungendered. After all, Rick does not make Implementation H female (and “Helen”) until prompted. During a training session on nursery rhymes, Imp H asks questions about both temporality and gender:

“Little girls learn that. Little boys.”
“Not really. Not anymore. Not now.” But there wasn’t an adult that didn’t have it as part of her parasitic inheritance.
“When is anymore? When is now?” […]
“We can talk about that later.”
“Am I a boy or a girl?”
I should have seen. Even ungrounded intelligence had to grow self-aware eventually. To grab what it needed.

(179)

Here, the passage ties together notions of history and gender, both subjects that Rick seems reluctant to discuss. He avoids the first question on temporality and responds to the second question with “You are a little girl, Helen,” thus giving her a gender and name. However, these determinations are not part of Rick’s master plan. Rick strives to connect Imp H to universal Humanity, and designations of

---

14 This also ties in with a long tradition of gendering technologies female for just these purposes.
gender and historicity would naturally limit the scope of the machine, revealing human experience (no longer The Human Experience) as particular to its historic and social conditions. Instead, this passage emphasizes the agency of the nonhuman; it’s Imp H who asks what gender it is, who “grab[s]” what it needed even if unprovoked by the trainer. In so doing, the medium resists imposition into the ideology of humanism.

So, too, does Helen resist critical attempts to treat her as a cipher for posthumanism. With regard to the passage above, Fitzpatrick writes, “Rather than allowing his cyborg Galatea to transcend gender, by acknowledging posthuman ambiguity, by ‘undercut[ting] the strength of the connection’ he ties, Powers instead securely links Helen to the gendered humanist tradition” (551). But Rick does not have control over Helen’s ideological position, and even if he did, Fitzpatrick misses a crucial aspect of this supposed “posthuman ambiguity”: it isn’t just a revolt against gender roles, and it doesn’t only transcend oppressive binaries; it escapes history, it transcends everything. In the novel, Helen’s supposed “posthuman ambiguity” is ahistorical, contextless, transcendent; basically what the liberal humanist subject position claimed to be (but obviously wasn’t). Helen transcends all human determinations (lifespan/age, race, class, gender, nationality, etc.), even if they’re purely social constructs. Any amount of identity imposition (naming, gendering, mirror staging) will not suffice to weave Helen into the fabric of human history. This results not from social construction, but from Helen’s nonhuman material embodiment.

Aside from the supercomputer passage above, Helen’s materiality is conspicuously absent from the narrative, especially considering how thoroughly
the novel materializes the book. Instead, Rick can only see the obsolete interface that served as the substrate for Implementations A and B: “Our gate was still the same junker terminal, the same jumble of antique I/O. I had to remind myself that the linkup hid, on its far end, the most powerful massively parallel hardware the combined public and private sectors could buy” (120). As such, Helen’s material base is an amalgamation of obsolete and futuristic technologies. She’s simultaneously the world’s most powerful supercomputer and a bunch of cobbled-together antique I/O devices. For the former, the novel illustrates her material substrate as the opposite of obsolete: it’s so advanced as to be unusable. Here, the supercomputer’s neglect diametrically opposes that of books. Rather than resulting from technological obsolescence, the supercomputer’s technology supersedes its historical moment, rendering it nonfunctional even for the same scientists who produced it.

Therefore, even as a technology, Helen is historically incoherent. She’s both the recycled parts of an earlier generation and the bleeding edge of a not-yet-existing generation. Further, as a result of the latter aspect, the supercomputer has no relation to history; it hasn’t been socially inscribed into the culture through customs, laws, normative functions, etc. To play on Raymond William’s definition of media as a “material social practice,” the supercomputer is a material without a social practice. However, this does not mean that the supercomputer can be applied to any social practice, as illustrated by Rick and Lentz’s failed attempt to inscribe it within the institutional function of literary criticism. One cannot impose the technology within a desired social practice. Instead, further interaction between the nonhuman technical specifics of the
machine and human motivations is required in order for it to function as a medium. By the end of the novel, this function remains as yet undetermined, but whatever it becomes will exceed the realm of ideology.

Media technologies are neither mere representations nor mirrors of the human world. As *Galatea 2.2* suggests, they exercise an agency of their own, often thwarting the ideological imperatives of their creators. Similarly, humans do not have entire control over a medium’s representation within fiction; it’s partially determined by the given medium’s materiality. In exploring these properties, Powers voices the inarticulate resistance of nonhuman media technologies to larger human ideologies; *Galatea 2.2* is a novel in which “Abysmal instruments make sounds like pips/ Of the sweeping meanings that we add to them” (Stevens 384).
CHAPTER THREE: POST-APOCALYPTIC MEDIA IN STATION ELEVEN AND ZONE ONE

As explored in the previous chapters, contemporary fiction tends to imagine books living past the point of their technological obsolescence. Sure, they may only exist on the margins of the broader culture as residue of a previous paradigm, but they do exist. There’s no systematic campaign working toward their obliteration from the face of the Earth. Instead, books remain in a kind of limbo between cultural life and death. Despite current cultural trends, there remains the possibility of resurrection, of restoring books to a position of cultural prominence. But how?

Why, through the collapse of civilization and modern technological infrastructure, of course. Two very recent novels, Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011), explore the role of books in post-apocalyptic and, perhaps more importantly, post-digital worlds. Inverting many of the themes explored in the previous two chapters, these novels depict the residual traces of digital technology (not books) in material form at the margins of society and in memories of an irretrievable past. However, even with the supposed enemy vanquished, books do not immediately fill the media void left in the wake of digital fallout, and their ascendancy is by no means inevitable. Instead, each novel questions the form cultural expression might take after an immediate and near-total catastrophe. For *Station Eleven*, the collapse of technological infrastructure leads to a cultural revival of pre-digital media forms (books, plays, symphonies, museums, etc.). But, for *Zone One*, catastrophe does not simply revert civilization to earlier historical periods and their respective art
forms. Instead, the novel represents the event as a continuation from the historical present, not sending the culture backwards but pushing it to its logical extremes, and therefore requiring the creation of new cultural forms of expression to address the new (post)historical era.

Although each novel self-consciously adheres to the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, the subgenres differ, with *Station Eleven* and *Zone One* innovatively appropriating the conventions of the epidemic and zombie apocalypse plots respectively. In the wake of a worldwide deadly flu epidemic, *Station Eleven* follows the lives of several characters, tracing the interconnections of their post-apocalyptic paths, as well as pre-apocalyptic pasts. It reveals a dense social network in which every character maintains at least some oblique connection to every other. Nevertheless, the novel does not treat every story equally, and the traveling actress Kirsten still manages to function as the main protagonist, the social unit that holds the network together. A child actress before the epidemic, Kirsten joins a group of entertainers known as the Traveling Symphony, performing (mostly Shakespearean) plays for dispersed groups of survivors. During her travels, she attempts to reconstruct her past through gossip magazines on Arthur Leander (a famous actor she once worked with) and an unfinished amateur comic book series called *Dr. Eleven* (created by Arthur’s ex-wife). After displeasing the cult leader (later revealed to be Arthur’s son, Tyler) of an indoctrinated town, the Symphony attempts to evade the cult through traveling to the Severn City Airport, as performers mysteriously disappear.

---

15 More on the self-reflexive relation between the novel *Station Eleven* and the comic book *Dr. Eleven* below.
Eventually, the story culminates in a convergence on the airport, where civilization has resumed with the development of a printing press and museum of pre-apocalyptic artifacts.

In contrast to the plethora of perspectives in *Station Eleven*, *Zone One* exclusively follows Mark Spitz, a sort of neither/nor character whose middling, average existence equips him to survive the apocalypse. Taking place several years after the initial outbreak, Mark joins the effort to clear New York of “skels”—paralyzed zombies that the military offensive against the active zombies never bothered to eliminate. In addition, the novel features flashbacks to Mark’s earlier experiences of the apocalypse, tracing the route of his survival as well as his other efforts on behalf of the restoration. While the skels appear harmlessly passive throughout the narrative, the restoration effort ultimately fails when they reactivate, overwhelming the sparse groups of city clearers and sending Mark Spitz back on the run. Appearing after the zombie apocalypse meme had already become trite, the book itself functions as a zombification of the zombie genre, revivifying a dead meme to critique the consumer capitalist culture from which it derived. In contrast to *Station Eleven’s* yearning for the past, *Zone One* thoroughly satirizes pre-apocalyptic life, as well as any longing for return.

While both novels emphasize the continued presence of objects after the collapse of their respective institutions, *Station Eleven* and *Zone One* render these objects, particularly digital media, in very different ideological positions. For *Station Eleven*, objects and institutions supposedly transcend ideologies and historical contingencies: objects are human. But it requires the obliteration of contemporary society to reveal their human-ness:
On silent afternoons in his brother’s apartment, Jeevan found himself thinking about how human the city is, how human everything is. We bemoaned the impersonality of the modern world, but that was a lie, it seemed to him; it had never been impersonal at all. There had always been a massive delicate infrastructure of people, all of them working unnoticed around us, and when people stop going to work, the entire operation grounds to a halt.

Here, in a world of objects with very few humans, Jeevan attributes the inability of postapocalyptic society to function as the result of “how human everything is.” Without humans, the entire system screeches to a halt. From his perspective, everything appears human: humans create and maintain systems and objects, and therefore their existence too is human. However, one could imagine a different scenario: one in which a cataclysmic event brings the destruction of all objects, forcing Jeevan to witness how nonhuman everything is, how much our world depends on the relegation of agency to things. But this doesn’t happen. Instead, Jeevan and the rest of Station Eleven continually views artifacts and institutions as the products of humans alone, taking the role of objects for granted (as I’d imagine most would in world so heavily populated with them and with so few humans).

As a result, Station Eleven even remembers now obsolete media as thoroughly human and natural. In evocations of the long lost Internet, the novel waxes poetic, rendering this network as the sum total of humanity and ignoring its material infrastructure, as well as cultural specificity, to view it as simultaneously natural and mystical. As a transition from the pre-epidemic world to the post-epidemic, chapter six offers “an incomplete list” of things no longer existent in the new world, including sports, cities, film, electronic music,
pharmaceuticals, aviation, countries, space travel, and culminating with an extended meditation on the Internet:

“No more Internet. No more social media, no more scrolling through litanies of dreams and nervous hopes and photographs of lunches, cries for help and expressions of contentment and relationship-status updates with heart icons whole or broken, plans to meet up later, pleas, complaints, desires, pictures of babies dressed as bears or peppers for Halloween. No more reading and commenting on the lives of others, and in so doing, feeling slightly less alone in the room. No more avatars.”

(32)

In this passage, the Internet represents the highest order of technological development in the modern world, appearing at the very end of the list after the buildup from planes to rocket ships, and receiving the most attention (many of these lost items only get a line or two). But, it’s important to note that the highest technological achievement is rendered entirely social. Here, the Internet functions as a web of human emotions, aspirations, and relationships. The materiality of the Internet—its requisite servers, computers, data storage centers, electricity, fiber-optic cable, etc.—is conspicuously absent. Instead, the novel represents the Internet as all-too-human, ignoring its nonhuman infrastructure and emphasizing the sociality of the network.

Not only evading materiality, the novel also depicts the Internet as historically and culturally transcendent. In the airport school, the post-epidemic children “were told about the Internet, how it was everywhere and connected everything, how it was us” (262). But, surely, the Internet was never everywhere, connecting everything, much less everyone. Although the scope of the Internet is global in reach, there are huge disparities in available access across the world that the novel overlooks. But these are not merely two separate aspects of digital
media that the narrative accidently neglects to mention: they’re co-constitutive. Only by ignoring the material infrastructure—particularly the costs of its development and maintenance, as well as individual computers and subscription—is the novel capable of ignoring the Internet’s cultural and historical specificity.

And, in so doing, the narrative renders the Internet not only as purely human, but also as an almost natural and mystical phenomenon: “All of the information in the world is on the Internet, and the Internet is all around you, drifting through the air like pollen on a summer breeze” (202). Of course it’s not. But the Internet’s technical specificity enables such cultural myths and makes them incredibly resilient. Sure, part of their resilience derives from cultural constructions such as branding—the “Cloud” certainly assists in furthering the idea that data floats in the sky—but another part of it depends upon the materiality of the medium. The connection to the Internet through wireless signals and underground fiber-optic cables, the mobility of access devices, and the distribution over networks making it impossible to locate a single source: all of these aspects work together in such a way as to make the Internet appear immaterial to the user, as if it’s just floating on a summer breeze in any location at any time, as if, even after the collapse of every institution, the Internet might still be out there.

When the traveling Symphony passes through Traverse City, they encounter an inventor searching for the Internet. He has rigged an exercise bike capable of powering a laptop, but the screen merely reveals a “This webpage is
not available message” (38). Nevertheless, the invention excites the younger generation with the possibility that the Internet may still exist:

A few of the younger Symphony members had felt a little thrill when he’d said this, remembered the stories they’d been told about WiFi and the impossible-to-imagine Cloud, wondered if the Internet might still be out there somehow, invisible pinpricks of light suspended in the air around them.

(38)

Again, the novel depicts the Internet as both a natural and mystical phenomenon. Like the pollen simile above, the “invisible pinpricks of light” metaphor elicits connotations of the Internet as a part of nature, like the stars during the day: there, but invisible. However, it also appears metaphysical, like an energy source floating all around, waiting to be tapped into, and the screen is described, for the post-digital native Alexandra, as “a magical thing with no memories attached.” This disconnection of objects from personal past, collective history, and material reality inscribes the characters within premodern ideologies that emphasize the human, nature, and metaphysical uncertainty. Rather than a complete rupture, the epidemic appears to cause a reversion to sensibilities of earlier, particularly pre-digital, epochs.

In contrast, *Zone One* represents the Internet within a specific historical and cultural ideology, namely consumer capitalism. Excepting one anomaly, every single reference to the Internet places it within this context:16

---

16 The one anomaly coming from the Lieutenant’s perspective, not the protagonist’s: “Writing on paper like in the Stone Age. Used to be everything was in the cloud, little puffy data floating here and there. Now we’re back to paper. You hear people talking, they miss cable TV, basketball, they miss local organic greens cold-washed three times. I miss the cloud. It was all of me up there. The necessary docs and emails and key photographs. The proof” (92).
As an effect on city geography and brick-and-mortar businesses:

They swept travel agencies nearly extinct in an internet age, the exhortations and invitations on the posters hitting shrill and desperate registers.

(21)

Gangs of high-rises in Southwest municipalities flush with internet money.

(59)

What brand of idiot loved these broken machines enough to search the internet for this joint, take time out of their lives to bring them here for removal of the dust bunnies perched on the motherboards?

(188)

And as a means of buying, rating, and selling products, as well as customer service:

The rec room was a marvel in every respect save its television, a rare impulse purchase on the part of his father, who consulted the roundups on the internet with dedication, often contributing his two- and three-star verdicts to the rabble chorus.

(115)

The bullets penetrated from every direction, shredding the wainscoting and knickknacks, the hard-won bounty of a hundred internet auctions

(295)

Small jars and bowls of herbs, rainbow powders, and bone-white charms perched on tiny metal shelves, props acquired from an internet retail site.

(357)

They had God-given rights as paying customers, the phone numbers of corporate hotlines awaited in their smartphones, beckoned from the internet, consumer-protection apparatus listed helpful e-mail addresses to capture their appeals and apply remedies.

(376)

In these passing references, the Internet merely functions as a massive and unindividuated commerce conglomerate. The other aspects of the web receive similar treatment. In the cynical world of *Zone One, Station Eleven’s*
representation of social media as a sympathetic web of human emotions and relationships inverts into: “The denizens of the void, chewing on their tails, compulsively broadcasting the flimsy minutiae of their day-to-day on personal feeds and pages” (150). And this too fails to transcend commercialism. The protagonist, Mark Spitz, formerly worked in the “New Media Department” of a coffee multinational: “it was his job to monitor the web in search of opportunities to sow product mindshare and nurture feelings of brand intimacy” (149). Here, social media merely functions as a new means of advertising, in which corporations can track relevant posts and market directly to the consumer. Not relegated to references of the company’s brand, the marketing department collates and responds to all posts relating to coffee consumption, drawing on the key words “caffeine, listlessness, overexcitement, lethargy, and all manner of daily combat preparedness” (150). In other words, the emotions, dreams, and desires of Station Eleven’s social network function only as opportunities for viral marketing. Even the one intimation to the human-ness of social media—the company employs Mark instead of using a “rudimentary artificial intelligence algorithm” (151)—is thoroughly ironized by the company’s reference to Mark’s “ersatz human connection and postures of counterfeit empathy” (150) as a “human touch” that the algorithm cannot provide since it has “no soul.”

Certainly, the novel associates the Internet with consumer capitalism and its resultant artificiality, alienation, and cynicism, but it does not naively suggest that these are properties of the technology itself. Instead, Zone One portrays the continuance of this system beyond the demise of the Internet. In the wake of the plague, the headquarters of the human resistance in Buffalo develops a marketing
team to “rebrand survival” (79). Survivors become “the American Phoenix”; Camp 14, “New Vista”; Roanoke, “Bubbling Brooks”; and Mark’s camp clad in barbed wire and electric fencing, “Happy Acres.” The marketing team even releases merchandise marked with a new logo: “The frigid hues and brittle lines of the logo conformed to a very popular design trend in the months preceding Last Night, and it was almost as if the culture was picking up where it left off.”

Here, Zone One strongly differs from Station Eleven. Whereas the latter envisions a regression to earlier cultural modes, the former illustrates historical continuity even in the midst of disaster. Not only does the branding campaign emerge out of pre-apocalyptic consumer capitalism, the text often portrays the rebuilding of New York as a continuance of gentrification, and the inability of survivors to form new attachments as a “merely intensified or fine-tuned” (53) version of modern alienation. In addition, the pharmaceutical industry prospers, diagnosing new psychological disorders (here, PASD (pronounced “past”): Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder), as well as producing and selling their treatment. Zone One is a testament to Fredric Jameson’s claim, “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (Future City). Even after mass death and destruction, the system continues to proliferate: “Now the world was muck. But systems die hard—they outlive their creators and unlike plagues do not require individual hosts—and thus it was a well-organized muck with a hierarchy, accountability, and, increasingly, paperwork” (162).
Station Eleven represents a return to earlier forms of cultural production and consumption, Zone One depicts the continuation of consumer capitalism, and these oppositional responses to catastrophe determine the novels’ relation to books and other forms of pre-digital media. For Station Eleven, the collapse of the Internet leads to an epistemological rupture that sends the characters searching for meaning and knowledge of the old world and the new through engaging with objects of the past: books, magazines, newspapers, plays, and museums of defunct digital devices. For the post-digital natives, these resources provide the means of understanding their current situation, of knowing that an apocalyptic event had occurred at all; as one of the younger characters says, “I’ve read books. Magazines, I even found a newspaper once. I know it all used to be different” (292). In other words, the same cultural institutions that appear to be endangered in our present experience a renaissance in the wake of the digital media’s demise. It’s as if the catastrophe merely sends humanity back to an earlier epoch, rather than intensifying the status quo (as in Zone One) or causing a complete caesura from the past. But how might one recover this past after the catastrophe? Here, I argue that Station Eleven represents books as keys to the past not only as purveyors of historical information (i.e. content), but also as material artifacts that (unlike the Internet) readily reveal their own production process and historicity.

For better or worse, books fill the epistemological void left by the disappearance of the Internet. They provide both archaeological knowledge of the past world and different approaches to understanding the present. Drawing equally from high and pop culture, the characters reconstruct the past through
excavating bookshelves in abandoned houses, looting poetry books, celebrity gossip magazines, and TV guides:

When they broke into houses now, August searched for issues of TV Guide. Mostly obsolete by the time the pandemic hit, but used by a few people right up to the end. He liked to flip through them later at quiet moments. He claimed he remembered all the shows: starships, sitcom living rooms with enormous sofas, police officers sprinting through the streets of New York, courtrooms with stern-faced judges presiding. He looked for books of poetry—even rarer than TV Guide copies—and studied these in the evenings or while he was walking with the Symphony. When Kirsten was in the houses, she searched for celebrity-gossip magazines, because once, when she was sixteen years old, she’d flipped through a magazine on a dust-blackened side table and found her past [...] (39-40)

In this passage, the TV Guides, nearly obsolete before the epidemic, experience a cultural resurgence in the aftermath of television, albeit with a different function. Whereas before the guides assisted viewers in finding shows to watch, they now aid in recalling the shows one had seen in the past, as well as offering a portal to the type of programming available then. Essentially, the TV Guides and celebrity-gossip magazines function as print remediations of televisual programming and culture. In this the novel illustrates one of the shortcomings of Bolter and Grusin’s Remediation: it’s limited historical context that assumes technological development and therefore cannot account for historical catastrophes and other extra-medial circumstances that might render the supposed competition obsolete, or at least nonfunctional. The resurgence of print as the primary means of knowledge dissemination and entertainment occurs not through

---

17 Granted, expecting a media theory to account for future apocalypses is bit much. But the apocalypse here functions as an exaggeration of potentially less drastic historical changes that might affect the media ecology.
remediating the functions of other media, but through historical conditions that bring about their demise. However, in remediating television and the entertainment industries, the TV Guides and celebrity-gossip magazines preserve a culture that would have otherwise disappeared if not for print. Here, *Station Eleven* illustrates the resilience of the print substrate. The materiality of the medium enables it to function even after the collapse of civilization and technological infrastructure. As a result, print manages to preserve even the content of other mediums for posterity.

In addition to hunting for TV Guides, magazines, and poetry, Kirsten searches for later editions to the dystopian comic book series *Dr. Eleven*. In the series, Dr. Eleven and a band of rebels escape from an extraterrestrial dominated Earth through stealing a spacecraft. While the details of the story do not entirely match up with the plot of *Station Eleven*, the recurrent theme of desiring to return to an Earth that no longer exists links the two narratives together, with various novel characters finding relevance in many of the comic’s scenes and the often repeated line: “I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth” (42, 105, 214). Further, one strand of the novel traces the development of the comic book and the complex social network through which it ends up in the hands of both the protagonist, Kirsten, and antagonist, Tyler. In so doing, the comic book functions as a metafictional device holding all the various plotlines together and helping the characters find meaning and navigate the postapocalyptic world.

---

18 Admittedly, some with higher brows might not find such cultures worth preserving.
And, unlike the Internet, it’s rendered thoroughly material. Not only providing the backstory to the creation of the comic, the novel also investigates the specific means of its material production:

The contrabassoon, who prior to the collapse was in the printing business, told Kirsten that the comics had been produced at great expense, all those bright images, that archival paper, so actually not comics at all in the traditionally mass-produced sense, possibly someone’s vanity project. Who would that someone have been? There is no biographical information in either issue, initials in place of the author’s name. “By M. C.” In the inside cover of the first issue, someone has written “Copy 2 of 10” in pencil. In the second issue, the notation is “Copy 3 of 10.” Is it possible that only ten copies of each of these books exist in the world? Kirsten’s taken care of the comics as best she can but they’re dog-eared now, worn soft at the edges.

In this passage, the novel reveals some of the publication information (author initials, issue numbers, amount of copies), as well as the quality of paper, production expenses, writing instruments (pencil), and the current state of the artifact (“dog-eared” and “worn soft at the edges”). Through investigating these material details, the characters deduce that the series, unlike traditional comics, wasn’t mass-produced, that it was “possibly someone’s vanity project.” In other words, these material details function as signs to the past world as much (if not more than) the actual content of books. The unlocalizability and hidden infrastructure of the Internet hide the traces of its material existence, which leads to mystical notions of its ephemerality. But books cannot conceal their production processes and historicity; they’re written all over the medium itself. As a result, the characters never regard books as ahistorical and mystical, as if they just fall from the sky as the Internet floats on the winds. Instead, the characters perceive books and publishing, medium and production, densely
intertwined. It’s readily visible that books were once a material social process (Raymond Williams’ phrase), and it is not long before the characters of the fallen world replicate this process once again with the re-invention of the printing press.

But *Zone One* isn’t so optimistic about the resurgence of print. Books function mostly as survival tools, appearing in long inventory lists alongside batteries, ramen, portable stoves, and purified water (195), or as a supplementary form of distraction until the world resumes again with sitcoms (210) and videogames (179) depicting the disaster. Instead of a cultural renaissance, the re-emergence of writing and print merely signals a return to the dark ages and ensures the continued functioning of corporate bureaucracy and marketing. In addition, the novel heavily ironizes literature, dismissing any importance books might have in a postapocalyptic world:

Rumor was they had two of the last Nobel laureates working on things up there--useful ones, none of that Peace Prize or Literature stuff [...] (35)

(And a footnote to what, for that matter. No one was writing this book. All the writers were busy pouring jugs of kerosene on the heaps of the dead, pitching in for a change.) (41-2)

In these passages, the novel’s ironic self-reflexivity characterizes writing not only as pragmatically useless, but also obsolete. While the “no one was writing this book” passage appears to suggest that all artistic practices lack pragmatic value during an apocalyptic event, this is not the case. Other mediums of artistic expression are not stigmatized in the same manner. Later in the novel, the characters long for the return of television, imagining one of the survivors
developing a “plague sitcom” (210) and Tad, a former video game designer, spends the apocalypse writing the narrative for a plague video game that will function as therapy for the survivors and education for their descendants (179). Perhaps “no one was writing this book,” but people are writing this TV series or videogame. Unlike in Station Eleven, books remain obsolete even after the collapse of technological infrastructure. They’re merely a temporary placeholder until electronic media, which still maintain their cultural prominence, can again find material realization in the post-apocalypse.

The materiality of the book may contain historical traces, but it’s not a history worth preserving. In Zone One, books function as “codes of the dead world,” worth more as kindling than a way back:

No other survivors happened by; they were holed up, too, slowly rubbing their hands over the books they burned for heat, the novels devoted to the codes of the dead world, the histories, the poetry that went up so easily.

(313)

Here, the novel ironizes the much older trope (and historical reality) of bookburning, prevalent in novels during the Cold War and post-Nazi era, and exemplified by Fahrenheit 451. The reference emphasizes the distance between fears of authoritarian censorship and neoliberal obsolescence. From the vantage of the postapocalypse, these Cold War fears seem quaint, a product of a time when there was still a culture worth preserving. Instead of totalitarian government, these books suffer from lack of government, as the plague finally exacerbates neoliberalism to its ultimate endpoint, a world in which even survival falls into the hands of a marketing department. Sure, maybe books have the
potential to lead the way back (as in *Station Eleven*), but it would only be “servitude to the obsolete directives of an obsolete world” (32). In contrast to the hope of returning to pre-apocalyptic time in *Station Eleven*, *Zone One* valorizes the cynical yet heroic push into the unknown; as Mark Spitz’s tells himself: “Hope is a gateway drug, don’t do it” (179). Books are best burned for heat. “The age demanded an image of its accelerated grimace” (105), and the old media won’t suffice. The postapocalyptic world needs a new alphabet, a new grammar. Enter Quiet Storm.

While the approach of *Station Eleven* finds its apotheosis in the Museum of Civilization and the re-invented printing press—that is, the re-creation of pre-digital cultural institutions—*Zone One* eschews the conservatism of conservation in favor of creating new and as yet indescribable modes of artistic creation, illustrated through the parable of Mark’s former supervisor, Quiet Storm. Before participating in the reclamation of New York, Mark cleared cars from the highway under the eccentric direction of Quiet Storm, noticing patterns in her organization of vehicles but not realizing the scope of her project until flying above the highways on a helicopter. There, he “discovered the clandestine heart of Quiet Storm’s maneuvers [...] what she had carved into the interstate” (232)—basically, assemblages of disused cars organized varying by type, color, and number, and spread out over miles of highway. The narrative offers this composition as an alternative to the survival effort’s “machinations and narratives of replenishment” (233)—that is, their reconstruction of consumer capitalism. People like Quiet Storm “carved their own pawns and rooks out of the weak clay and deployed them across their board, engaged in their own strategic
reconstructions.” But these reconstructions exist outside of familiar mediums and institutions. Like Clark in *Station Eleven*, Quiet Storm’s mosaic is an assemblage of disused objects left from the old world. But her assemblage does not take place within the confines of reconstructed cultural institutions, such as the Museum of Civilization. Instead, Quiet Storm’s approach to left behind objects resembles the gas station dweller’s reaction to the Museum: “Artifacts from the old world [...] Here’s the thing, kids, the entire world is a place where artifacts from the old world are preserved” (*Station Eleven* 146).

Mark Spitz doesn’t know what it means. Neither does the narrator who even breaks the fourth wall and petitions the reader for explanation. But, instead of computational metaphors, references to print in general and the novel in particular provide the only possibility of explaining it, of its means to mean. The narrative renders her abstract expression as a new medium through employing metalinguistic vocabulary: “inventing her alphabet and making declarations in a row of five green hatchbacks parked perpendicular,” “the grammar lurked in the numbers and colors, the meaning encoded in the spaces between the vehicular syllables,” “beyond the margins of her manuscript,” and “she wrote her way into the future” (232–33; emphasis mine). In so doing, the narrative characterizes Quiet Storm’s expression as a new and as yet untranslatable form of grapheme. Despite obsolescence, the book retains a privileged status as the guarantor of meaning, and it lives on in Quiet Storm’s incomprehensible screed, as well as Mark’s attempt to make sense of it. For both Mark and the reader, the content of the medium remains cryptic, but its material existence suggests its readability, or potential to mean. As Mark says, “We don’t know how to read it yet. All we can do
right now is pay witness” (233). Until then, the old metaphors will suffice. The book is dead; long live the book.
CONCLUSION: RESIDUES OF PRINT

In *Residual Media* (2007), the contributors conceptualize media history within Raymond William’s dialectic of emergent, dominant, and residual forms. In contrast to the rhetoric of “newness” surrounding media change, the compilation highlights the persistence of obsolete, outmoded, and abandoned media in contemporary culture, treating these forms as “still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present” (Williams quoted on xvi). As such, the collection’s editor, Charles Acland, riffing on Bruce Sterling’s concept of “dead media,” proposes inquiry into the “living dead” media of the cultural present.

Over the course of this thesis, I have made three interconnecting arguments: (1) the historical: changing representations of book-death reflect the transition from Cold War fears of censorship to neoliberal concerns of technological obsolescence; (2) the cultural: assessing the contemporary “death of the book” discourse as more revealing of cultural insecurities than any actual decline of the medium; and (3) the methodological: establishing the necessity of material analysis over purely ideological critique. Here, I suggest, that the concept of residuality addresses and intertwines all three arguments. From this perspective, contrasting residues exemplify the historical shift: the ash or even complete erasure of books in Cold War dystopian novels vs. the decomposition of books in the age of neoliberalism. In addition, residual thinking revises the death of the book discourse into an analysis of books as the living dead, residual elements in the broader culture that interact with dominant and emergent forms long after their real or imagined demise. And, of course, the notion of residual
media requires moving beyond ideological critique and attending to the material trace of a given medium, the residues of not only its cultural impact but also its physical existence.

In treating books as residual, contemporary fictions’ book-death fantasies appear less as a conservative longing for the past than an attention to how book residues inform the mediasphere of the present and even future. From the perspective of ideological critique, as Fitzpatrick exemplifies, these fantasies are purely reactionary, a longing not so much for particular media formats as for their representative ideologies, and the nostalgia for books functions as a nostalgia for hegemonic white male humanism. As such, the representations of book-death serve as a call-to-arms to protect the white male subject position within Enlightenment humanism. Here, book-death is total, focusing negatively on the declining existence of books and intimating at their future non-existence in order to provoke immediate action to restore humanistic hegemony. But material analysis and residual thinking shift the discourse away from perceiving books as (soon to be) completely dead and toward books as the “living dead.” As a result, the representations of the remnants of book culture provoke not a negative and reactionary desire for the past, but a more positive evaluation of the productive, even dialectical relationship between the residual elements of the past (which are not past) and the dominant and emergent elements of the present.

Granted, from the vantage of ideological critique, one can perceive entire worldviews battling it out through the pages of every book, fighting for hegemonic supremacy. But this perspective is too distant, too detached from
material reality. Instead, these novels reveal our existence among (not above) media, and situate our understanding of media as deeply intertwined with materiality. In contrast to grand claims of ideological conflict, this material analysis makes the much more modest claim that humans never manage to entirely determine even the representations of media technologies, let alone their functions; media push back, affording and constraining the uses to which humans might put them. Even when they’re imagined. Even when they’re dead.

19 Here, I am thinking of W.J.T. Mitchell’s call for a “‘medium theory’ that would acknowledge its middling, muddling location in the midst of media” (221). Mitchell wants to move away from the “master discourses of theory” and toward an “immanent vernacular” that self-critically encapsulates theory and practice. I’m on board and only wish to add that attending to the materiality of media might prove useful as one way of acknowledging this “middling, muddling location.”
WORKS CITED


