# UNIVERSITA' DEGLI STUDI DI VERONA

*DEPARTMENT OF*

*Foreign Languages and Literatures*

*GRADUATE SCHOOL OF*

*Human Sciences*

*DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN*

*Languages, Literatures and Foreign Cultures*

Cycle / year (1st year of attendance) XXXII / 2016-2017

TITLE OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

## Performing Identity: The Literary, Technological and Digital Evolution of the American Self

S.S.D. L-LIN/11 – Lingue e Letterature Anglo-Americane

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Tesi di Dottorato
Verona, Dicembre 2019

Abstract

This research aims to analyze how the concept of the American Self has changed starting with technological advancements in the 1880s, and then demonstrating how literature and identity have been challenged by technology and the New Media today. The research will specifically focus on the evolution of American Identity, altered by technological interaction, and the consequent redefinition of concepts such as individualism, privacy, freedom and selfhood. As such, the project will look at those novels in American literature that illustrate the evolution and consequent redefinition of identity through technological and digital change. As literary analysis demonstrates, this thesis will examine the complex alteration of identity through technological advancements, ranging from one of the first means of communication, the telegraph, to the Internet. The novels that will be analyzed are: *Wired Love- A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (1879) by Ella Cheever Thayer, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) by Mark Twain, *The Broom of the System* (1987) by David Foster Wallace, *Chronic City* (2009) by Jonathan Lethem and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). The trajectory of this project, from the late 19th century to our contemporary age, will trace an arc from the origin of communication technologies to modern digitalization.

Examining technology and identity through the lens of literature, this research will attempt to demonstrate how communication technologies have shaped a new concept of American identity, rewritten in front of the screen and repositioned in the dense network of virtual interactions.

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## Introduction

Reflections on identity have always wavered among various images of the Self and its relationship to the social environment. More broadly, identity is the consequence of a social process, and its meaning can be understood in the interaction between Self and Other. In a society enmeshed with new technologies, this relationship is mostly represented by the Self and its contact with the machine, the technological medium. For this reason, the dualism identity-technology has taken on an increasingly pervasive importance. Today, the problematic issue of personhood is at the forefront of our technophilic culture. The ambiguous concept of the Self and, more prominently, the "virtualization of identity," represents an extremely topical concern of our present. With technological interaction, individuality is transformed into a real resource through which to reconfigure the new modern personality. On this point, scholars have recently argued that technologies "can foster, constructive, flourishing thought, a diversified sense of self and other, a wider view of ourselves, and a new, deeper form of subjectivity" (Scharff 10-11). As such, identity, through its close relationship with communication systems, becomes an essentially artificial construct and its fragmentation has turned into one of the main concerns of our modern world.

The goal of this work is to consider identity in its interaction with communication technologies reframed within the context of American literature. Through a literary-cultural approach, this issue will be addressed using a corpus of five novels, from the late 1800s up to the present, which will allow us to trace a literary trajectory through the ongoing challenges to identity developed in interplay with the machine. Research has been developed through a historical and sociocultural framework that looks at the evolution of the concept of "virtual identity," examined through the advancement of telecommunications. The working methods used were the selection of texts and the interpretation of the works under study. The novels analyzed (from chapter 3 to 5), have been chosen for their apt ability to illustrate the challenges to identity through the advancement of communication systems, from the telegraph through the telephone to

the Internet. The discussion ranges from the late years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the new millennium.

In this vein, the novels examined follow the improvement of communication technologies with the aim of outlining the evolution of an American identity jeopardized by its relationship with the technological medium. Given the assumption that the project follows the development of telecommunications, from the beginning of the 1900s, with the telegraph and the telephone, we will then move on to their evolution in the 1980s following their transformation in the digital age. The intentional lapse from the 1890s to the 1980s is purposefully chosen to highlight the development of the telegraph into modern systems, then replaced by the use of telephone which did not improve until the 1970s and was consequently followed by digitalization. Literary works we will draw upon purposefully pertain to different genres, from novellas through historical narratives to postmodern dystopias, so as to indicate how alterations of identity through communication technologies in American literature have been discussed by different genres. The novels that will be analyzed are: *Wired Love- A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (1879) by Ella Cheever Thayer, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) by Mark Twain, *The Broom of the System* (1987) by David Foster Wallace, *Chronic City* (2009) by Jonathan Lethem and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). All texts show the construction of a "virtual identity" which was first developed with telegraphy and then evolved into its modern version with the Internet.

Drawing from the simple assertion that Anglo-American texts across the twentieth-century and onward have explored the inescapable progress of technology and that literature can fruitfully be considered as a transcription of the complex human dynamics with the machine (Goody 8), the work develops as follows.

Aiming at discussing the current state of theory of the research, the first two chapters analyze the concepts of identity and technology, considered separately and then in relation to the central part of the thesis. Chapter 1 addresses the myth of identity first from a philosophical perspective, re-iterating the general ponderings on its rather elusive meaning. This discussion serves to describe the changes of personhood from

ancient theorizations to more recent views. The following part of the chapter narrows the scope of analysis, re-iterating the concept in the American field. This section will consider the notion of the Self first within the spectrum of American Transcendentalist philosophy and then shifting the attention to its challenges in the United States, questioned by different elements throughout history and still charged with extreme ambiguity. The final section of this introductory overview of identity ends with its representation in American literature. As this part will show, identity is a term that recurs with insistence in literary texts that have illustrated its changeable aspect. Its variable nature leaves open an incessant debate on our understanding of it while the concept is continuously subjected to re-definitions and manipulations. However, it is not the purpose of the present study to define identity rather to let emerge aspects of its complex alteration through technological systems. Drawing from Foucault's definition of identity, considered as the interplay between Self and Other, this work will look at the concept through this approach. Further elaborating his theory on the performative aspect of selfhood, the project will consider identity, in Foucaultian terms, as the exchange between the Self, the "I", and the Other, technology. As analysis will show, communication systems – in different ways – produce an individual performance of the Self constantly alternating between presence and absence, realism and artifact.

Following a similar structure, Chapter 2 focalizes on the role of technology in America. Given the importance of technical progress as an essentially American trope, the first section delineates the historical roots of innovations. As Thomas Hughes so eloquently insisted, America developed through a genesis of progress, an age of unprecedented technological enthusiasm, that began around the 1870s and persists even today (3). Furthermore, America's national identity can be classified as part of a cultural need to be imbued with machines and achievements, transforming the wilderness into a compendium of technical advancements (Hughens 1). After a historical and chronological analysis of technology, the chapter proceeds to consider its cultural impact on American society. This study leads us to examine the incursion of the machine and its conflicted reception in literature, drawing from an earlier sense of techno-enthusiasm to a general pessimism. This part then concludes with and overview

of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century fiction and its persistent development of a technologically based aesthetic, thoroughly illustrated by the elusive transformation of the human body, reconfigured and re-elaborated by means of the machine. The porous boundary between technology and the human body in 19<sup>th</sup>-century narratives determines a re-formulation of the concept of personhood. Given these considerations, the next section will prove how literature illustrates the complex identity-technology dynamic.

A statement to this effect opens the discussion developed in Chapter 3, which considers the telegraph as the first means of experimentation of a virtual identity. Considered for its functions an equivalent of modern communications, this system proposed a re-consideration of individuality and, as Goody has claimed, a disruption of "the conventional notion of individual" (187). On the basis of this premise, the analysis proceeds, introducing the little-known genre of "Telegraphic Literature," which – although modest in number– has contributed to the representation of the challenges to selfhood through a form of disembodied corporeality which allowed us to mask, play and encrypt, a new image of the Self.

We then move on in the literary analysis by looking at complications of identity in Ella Cheever Thayer's *Wired Love*. Thayer's narrative offers an example of encrypted identities, recounting the virtually-mediated experience between two operators who mysteriously intercept each other over the wire engaging in a virtual exchange that can be compared to modern online dating. The potential of the telegraph in the novel serves to exemplify the immateriality of the Self, offering an example of modern technology through those false and multiple identities that characterize our way of communicating in the digital age. In a similar way, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthurs' Court* illustrates the problematic concern of personal identity through the employment of telegraphic communication. In a technological performance of the Self, Twain considers communication machines as the elements that serve to develop a concept of identity. Through the story, that of a modern Yankee transported through time to 6<sup>th</sup>-century England, Twain constructs a humorous example of how communication technologies such as the telegraph and the telephone, make it easy to

be mistaken for another or have your identity usurped, and then to perform a new one modelled through machine interaction.

Following the historical progression of communication technologies in their innovative shift from the 1950s to the 1990s, Chapter 4 proceeds to reframe the impact of electronic means as they gradually evolved toward digitalization. Drawing from the new image of American society in the late 1970s when identity shifted from a general materialism to a progressive artificiality this section outlines the new postmodern society, that of "Simulacra" and simulation (Baudrillard 1997), and the consequent control of the machine, distorting perceptions of human subjectivity. As such, in the postmodern age the Self becomes multiple and fragmentary. The broad discussion on postmodern narratives and their preoccupation with understanding a new culture rooted in a disquieting conception of the individual, leads to the examination of the work of David Foster Wallace and, in particular, his debut novel, *The Broom of the System*. Offering an exhaustive example of identity challenges via communication technologies in the 1980s, the novel (as does most of Wallace's writing), aptly illustrates the failures of subjectivity in the post human and post-modernist reality. This time, complications of self-identity unravel through the psychologically-fragmented personality of Lenore Bedsman, a telephone operator, following her attempt to define her(self) as she is endangered by the pervasiveness of technological systems. As analysis will show, the difficulty in defining identity comes from the struggle to relocate personality within the modern, complex articulation between Self and Other. Wallace's interest in the narrative is thus based upon these binary oppositions illustrating the dichotomy between personal definition, the Self, and its social relocation, the Other, being technology.

Chapter 5 concludes this study by discussing digital technologies in their modern development within cyberculture. Introducing the new society of multi-screens and our present addiction to the digital, this part opens by considering the widely-debated concept of virtual Self, re-elaborated by our constant interaction with the network and its multiple platforms. As Sherry Turkle has observed, the Web becomes a "laboratory for the construction of personal identity" (1997), where users suspend physical

presence for the sake of a virtual one. People are thus present on multiple platforms constructing a personality that is, per se, extremely fragmented. Users become, as Giroux claims, victims of a narcissism out of control (180). The system, this time the digital one, creates a need for self-performativity through our addiction to the screen which allows us to create an identity masked and then reproduced in new idealized versions of ourselves.

Implying a general loss of privacy and control, this mechanism, which is also the subject of cyber-fiction, recurrently depicts the self-performatory aspect of media and the system's over-surveillance. The two post- postmodern novels conclude this analysis illustrating the problematization of subjectivity and the impossibility of establishing an authentic sense of identity reframed within the technophobic digital scenario. Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* offers an example of our complicity with the technological system, through a convoluted narrative trajectory which confuses the reader, enmeshed in a world of simulation where it is difficult to distinguish reality from artificiality.  As analysis will prove, dealing with the notion of "platformativity" (Dinnen 2018), the text outlines the vulnerability of selfhood through Lethem's complicated distortion of reality (the setting is that of a dystopian urban scenario). The notion of complicity, as the metaphor of a society which is entangled within a mediated personal experience is what informs the narrative. In a similar way, Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* further extends the scope of this investigation. Her characters struggle to formulate a new concept of identity. The novel's protagonists, worried and yet addicted to the screens of techno-culture, engage in selective self-presentations, each trying to develop an artificial, and thus narcissistic image of his Self. What both narratives show is an identity split between realism and artifact through the difficulty of understanding the liminal boundary between these spaces.

The ultimate aim of this research is to demonstrate the progression of technology and its impact on identity through the lens of American texts. The choice to follow the historical advancements of telecommunications, from the telegraph in the late 1800s to the age of digital computers, serves to demonstrate how alterations of subjectivity by means of the machine began to take place long before our modern approach. From early

forms of communication, identity has taken shape from technologies, becoming distorted, fragmentary and changeable, progressively masking itself into the virtual space.

As the research aims to show, the binomial identity-technology goes way beyond its philosophical and sociological ponderings. American literature has represented the human-machine interaction through its ongoing challenges to individualism, establishing a new concept of the American Self reconfigured through electronic interactions and developed though constant interconnections with technological means. With this statement in mind, there is hope that this work will extend interest in the fascinating, elusive and ever-changing dynamics of identity, technology and literature in American culture.

# 1. The Myth of Identity: The Philosophy of the Self

## 1.1 The Ethics of Personal Identity

A clear premise about the ethical and philosophical components of personal identity is the necessary basis for the understanding of its significance. At the very least, a coherent outline is needed in order to be able to draw a possible definition of the term.[1] The issue of personal identification has produced an ongoing debate around its interpretation. Changeable, elusive, indefinable these are the terms used to describe identity today, thus making it the continuous object of study at the core of a current, unresolved dilemma. In consideration of the difficulty of defining the true nature of identity, in the first part we will try to offer an introduction to the concept through philosophical and socio-cultural reflections of what is known as "the philosophy of personal identity." It is necessary to clarify, however, that the purpose of the present work is not to define the concept, but rather to let aspects of its complex alteration emerge, so as to portray it in its relationship to some examples of communications technologies as seen through the lens of American literature. In this first chapter, we will trace the nature of identity following a theoretical perspective.

The study of the protean term of the Self, using its socio-psychological definition, has been underway since the origins of Western philosophy. The significance of the concept responds to those personal examinations arising from our human condition or, to put it simply, from our definition as cognizant beings. The existentialist questions about the nature of personhood are only some of the inquiries that help us trace the

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[1] We will refer interchangeably to the concept of identity using the following terms: Self, selfhood, Ego, personhood, individuality, selfness, singularity, oneness. Considering identity as an umbrella term, often generalized with a univocal meaning, we will not refer to the concept in general, but rather to its meaning in relation to the subject.

epistemological meaning of self-identification.[2] But first let us consider the traditional connotation of the term "Self." Scholars have proposed various definitions, which converge in turn into one general meaning. Semantically, identity is defined as the set of characteristics that differentiate individuals, such as culture, society, gender and politics, just to mention a few. In this way, we always mould our sense of a Self into a collection of traits, so that each person's identity is determined by the networks of their own social affiliations. However, identity corresponds to a state of belonging, prominently ascribed to fixed socio-cultural parameters. Whatever our assumptions about the true nature of personhood, the difficulty in responding to the persistent question, "Who am I?," gives selfhood a meaning, which is ambiguous and, as we shall see, unstable. As such, identity can generally be considered as an extremely variable concept altered by external agents.

If the notion of Self is generally understood as the unity of the person who gives the idea of an individual, its interpretation has led to a plurality of approaches and multiple perspectives. In a more recent view, identity is an intimate and an abstract concept, represented by a sense of continuity and self-awareness as an entity distinct from others. It is a continuous process, which we as individuals build upon, merging the dynamics of mirroring with the socio-cultural context of belonging. Indeed, thinkers such as Peter Burke and Jan Sets, seem to agree that a concrete identity derives from a specific role within society. Drawing from so-called "Identity Theory,"[3] they assert that, "An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a specific role in society" (3).

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[2] The study of the persistent questions as the fundamental inquiries needed to excavate the meaning of personal identification brought into question the notion of time. There is a long tradition of scholars who consider the changing nature of the Self over time. This idea considers identity to be divided into two distinct dimensions: synchronic and diachronic.

[3] With the term "Identity Theory" we refer to the sociological approach that interprets and understands identity through social interaction. For a deeper understanding of this, see Burke, P. and Sets J. *Identity Theory*. Oxford University Press: 2009.

Through social interaction with individuals, we form the sense of our own Self. David Glover fully supports this statement, claiming that, "Our natural belief that a person has invisible unity is mistaken [...]. Being a person requires self-consciousness through social interaction" (14). It would therefore be easy to claim that identity is the product of the interplay between Self and Other, and that each person is defined by their relationship with someone else. Identity per se is a term full of conflicts and contradictions, and to define it or at least to sketch an approximate idea of it we always need an "otherness," something with which to differentiate it. Furthermore, some scholars argue that by looking at identity in its formation process, namely within the social context in which the notion grew, the role of the Self can also be interpreted through the relationship between "Me and the Other" (Burke and Sets 121); that is, myself in relation to a collective "We."[4] Social and cultural identities, which reflect the interiorization of fixed social categorizations (such as gender, ethnicity, and culture) or a mixed background of aspects (for instance, values, language, and customs), are strictly tied to the interrelations with "the Other." Moreover, relatively recent criticism has argued that identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself (Hall 1989). In this way, the idea of our Self comes from the awareness others have of us and consequently from the perception we have of our identity as shaped by social interrelations. In this sense, the dynamics of the construction of personhood produce a strong dualism of identity-otherness. We will return to this categorization in the final part of this introduction.

In a similar vein, through cultural interaction with external agents, we learn the roles, rules and repertories of behavior that allow us to frame our own self-image, internalizing practices that inevitably shape our perception of ourselves as human beings. Therefore, we may consider culture as that complex system of meanings, knowledge, language and traditions, through which we inevitably construct our own

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[4] National identity is strictly linked to those collective identities, which foster the conformity to a group. That "We" derives from a collective and cognitive orientation. As we will see in the following part of this chapter, the notion of identity in America is deeply rooted in the collectivity of a "We," which still struggles to belong to a national exclusivism.

identity. Indeed, the more that socio-cultural factors change and evolve, the more the nature of the Self is re-framed and questioned in different ways.

Over the centuries, "The Myth of Identity" - the term used here to define the study of individualism - has involved the examination of art, literature and society. However, the founding question in the formation of personal identity originates from the ancient Greek aphorism "Know thyself," inscribed on the wall of the forecourt of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. This dictum, which is often considered the first reflection on identity, has been used as a metaphor for the quest of the self from ancient philosophy to more recent literary inquiries and philosophical ponderings. [5]

Although "The Myth of Identity" has deep roots, it has more recently become a recurrent subject of study in the philosophical field. Philosophers have long debated a technical understanding of the implications of the issue of selfhood. Recently, critics such as Wilson and Lenart have agreed that "Philosophical work on personal identity has involved answering two related questions: 'What is the nature of persons?' and 'What identifies a person over time?'" (424).[6] The first question references the identitarian issues which can be found in Classical Greek writings. Although Aristotle had marginally introduced the concept with reference to its substance, given the scarce presence of discussions concerning the conception of personhood, it would be easy to argue that Greek philosophers were not particularly interested in defining the nature of individuality if not in letting emerge a possible meaning through the constitution of the Greek polis. Therefore, in classical Western philosophy we do not speak of personal identity, but rather of a general and collective sense of identity, as linked to the political

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[5] This maxim has been used recurrently by Aeschylus, Socrates and Plato. It later became a literary epigraph among authors such as, for example, Emerson and Coleridge.

[6] Given the intense interest of philosophers in questions concerning identity and the wide variety of studies conducted in this field, we cannot here offer an extensive compendium of all philosophical theories concerning identity. We will therefore outline the most important, aiming to offer an overview and a general perspective on the nature of personal identification.

structures that originate within the social community and are thus defined on the one hand by religion and on the other by a communitarian ideology.[7]

The first modern thinker to understand the main concern in the definition of personality was Descartes, who considered the distinction between mind and body a crucial problem for the interpretation of the individual. For him, the Ego corresponds to the mind, and therefore coincides with its capacity for cognition. As he famously asserted, "I think therefore I am" (Descartes 33), I am endowed with reason and conscience and therefore I am aware of my own Self. Following the history of philosophy, it is therefore clear that a certain interest in the ethics of identity, in a strict sense, arose first within the British Empiricist philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries.

For this reason, in order to sketch the true nature of individuality one has to go back initially to the study conducted by the English philosopher John Locke. Locke defined the substance of identity as being forensically and intrinsically tied to the notion of personhood, implying a deep understanding of the image of the self. Locke first examines the intersubjective nature of personality through its relationship with memory. At the core of this interpretation, consciousness is considered an agent, which synchronically and diachronically follows the changes of identity over time.

Rationality also becomes a crucial capacity in the formation process of a personal identification. In Lockean terms, identity is based upon a certain organization of the matter, a sort of balance between space, time and memory. The true concept of the self is therefore given by substance, which presupposes the possibility to create an individuality that is able to present itself as a single substance.[8] In this classification,

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[7] References to identity in relation to the structure of the Greek polis can be found in Arisotele, *Scuola di Atene*. Rizzoli, 2012.

[8] Locke argues that what determines the sense of a species at a given time is the "Principium Individuationis," famously outlined by Schopenhauer, which claims that any existing individuality presents itself as such or better as a single individuality. We will not therefore deepen this aspect in this thesis. For a thorough discussion on this see Locke J. *Saggio sull'intelletto umano*. XXVII, "Identità e diversità." Bompiani, 2004.

however, the temporal aspect of identity emerges, and so does its capacity to subsist and consequently change at different times. As Locke observed, something as it exists in a certain time and place, and that we can compare with the same thing that exists at another time, can be defined as identity (387). To clarify the nature of personhood and its temporal alteration, Locke provides a solid example, "Consider, for example, an oak that grows from a particle, or an atom, to become a large tree and is then pruned; it is always the same oak. This means that time alters the substance, but not identity" (389).[9] Taking this concept further, Locke then shifts the focus to "personal identity" (which is also the main argument of the present work), defining the concept on the basis of the idea of "person." In this sense, everyone is for himself what Locke defines as "I," or the "Ego" in Freudian terms. In his view, this necessarily presupposes the existence of a thinking and intelligent being endowed with the capacity for reflection. Personal identity, which culminates in what Locke considers as the "Self," depends heavily on reason and consciousness. The "I" is therefore that thinking subject shaped by substance.[10] At this point, it would be easy to assume that any rational or thinking spirit might therefore represent the idea of humankind and consequently the notion of selfhood.

Following the path of identity through its philosophical interpretations, we then move to the treatment of the Self detailed by David Hume. Hume went as far as to suggest that, "There are some philosophers who are conscious of the moment of what we can call our self" (338). Although in line with Locke's theory, Hume contends that

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[9] This claim is in part re-elaborated by the protagonist of Jack London's novel, *The Star Rover* (1915). Serving a life sentence for murder at San Quentin, Darrell Standing goes through an emotional state of trance that ultimately forces him to consider how his identity, in this case considered as the Spirit, exists even after death reincarnating itself and maintaining an original sense of selfhood. "Only the flesh dies and passes […] the Spirit alone endures and continues to build upon itself through successive and endless incarnation […]" (London *SR* 322).

cognition alone is not able to give us a definite perception of our Self, thus assuming that identity itself is essentially defined by the external means which build our sense of awareness.

In this light, Hume divides the issue of identity with a further classification, namely the distinction between identity (understood as a general concept) and personal identity (considered as the subject's individuality). This categorization considers the former as the perception we have of ourselves concerning the idea we build toward society and others, whereas the latter is seen as the interest we take in ourselves. The difficulty in justifying the meaning of identity lies, for Hume, precisely in this contrast. While addressing the temporal problem in the conception of individual identity and its capacity to change over time, Hume proposes another metaphor on the relationship between time and individualism, stressing its ability to remain unchanged. He states that, "A ship, of which a considerable part has been changed by frequent separations is still considered the same; nor does the difference of materials been ascribed to it" (Hume 345).

This example, otherwise commonly known as the "Paradox of Theseus' Ship," expresses the metaphysical question of the actual persistence of an original identity, in an entity whose parts change over time; in other words, the question of whether a whole really remains itself (or not) after all its component parts has been exchanged for equal or similar ones over time.[11] In this way, identity is attributed to a variable of interrupted objects. For Hume it is merely a quality that also depends upon external perceptions, or rather, on the capacity individuals have to define their own selfhood through recognition. These agents can be interpreted as society and culture. The relation of ideas produced by external perceptions generates the entity we define as identity. This implies that, in Hume's words, "Identity depends on the relation of ideas and these relations produce some kind of identity" (351). This concept, per se, leads to a problem

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[11] Although Hume takes up a classic paradox in his treatment of identity, the history of this metaphor has been used recurrently in philosophy to express the metaphysical question of the actual persistence of the original identity.

of significance in which the Self is interpreted in its alteration through time, in the influence of external agents, but not in its intrinsic meaning. Drawing from these philosophical assertions, Hume concludes that the perception of identity is insufficient to trace a comprehensive definition of the term. Every time we reflect on our own Self, we are faced with perceptions that are constantly defined and redefined by external parameters, which therefore limit a clear perspective on the true nature of personhood. In arguing the elusiveness of the concept, Hume propounds that, "All questions about identity can never possibly be addressed and decided" (351).

In the early 1900s, however, psychoanalysis further contributed to defining individuality with regard to the dynamics of gender. Freud in fact used the myth of Oedipus to explain the problem of the individual's formation process linked to the construction of a gendered personality.[12] In a larger sense, he asserts that individual impulses become synonymous with identity, and thus the development of a person's character allows the definition of the Ego. Gradually approaching more recent perspectives, in *Ecce Homo* (1908), Nietzsche expresses the construction of identity through the path to becoming what one is. By addressing the question "How One becomes what One is?," Nietzsche contends that it is a certain set of values which defines the true sense of the Self. The struggles of life, as Nietzsche defines them, based upon knowledge, values, desires, and what is not known by experience, give us the meaning of our own person. The individual who recognizes his own identity, the Superhuman in Nietzschean terms, is the Overman who fights against established values and manages to overpower these steps to define himself.

If the above mentioned can therefore be considered as some of the classical theories of the philosophy of personal identity, history and, above all, recent culture have also contributed to reframing its conception. As we have seen, the classical view of identity is deeply embedded in social stereotypes, we might define as categories which determine the recognition we have of ourselves as individuals, being produced by

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[12] Here it is essential to recall importance of Psychoanalysis that redefined the concept of a monological identity, in the 1950s and 1980s, and further parodied by the postmodern.

collocation into specific social classifications. However, in the second half of the 20th century, political experience led to the emergence of new social identitarian groups. For this reason, the 1980s have been defined as a period of "Identity Politics." The attribution of new models (black, white, Native, gay, feminist) led to obstacles which further endangered the issue of identity, and the term itself became extremely controversial. Minorities claimed exclusive identities through their association to groups, which had been formed through social oppression, and its attribution of cultural stereotypes which collectivized and excluded certain categories. In this sense, modern identity is characterized by the inner voice and the capacity for authenticity (Taylor 1994).[13]

Firmly supporting this claim, Foucault proposes a reinterpretation of identity, rejecting the view that a person defines herself through a prefixed general inner essence. He instead sees the self as being continuously shaped by the shifting interrelations of Self to Others. In his socio-philosophical masterpiece, *Technologies of the Self* (1988), Foucault investigates the social dynamics of personhood referring to a certain "performance of identity" (a concept we will discuss further on in relation to the technological field) which is played out within "specific" categories. He considers identity as a form of power over some individuals, producing a specific sense of belonging so that they can conform within fixed boundaries. Claiming that no one should be ascribed within socio-cultural parameters, Foucault introduces the notion of power as a strategy some exercise over others in order to impose a collective sense of identity. In a sort of hierarchical construction, ruling classes oppress other members of

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[13] The analysis of minorities and identity in relation to the use of technology is out of the scope of this research. For a thorough understanding of this see Pedro J. Oiarzabal and Andoni Alonso. (2010). *Diasporas in the New Media Age. Identity, Politics and Community* and Benjamin, Rutha. (2019). *Race after Technology*. An excellent and extremely recent overview of the topic can also be found in André Brock's *Distributed Blackness: African-American Cybercultures* (2020), discussing the impact of platforms such as Instagram and Twitter in their ability to reconfigure the sense and the meaning of blackness in America in the age of digitalization.

society, who are then forcibly categorized within prefixed canons of identification. The re-organization of society in the 1980s subverted these standards with the formation of identitarian groups such as the second wave of feminism and the gay and lesbian liberation, all of which jeopardized the ethics of individuality.[14]

Contemporary philosopher Amatrya Sen has given a perspective on the current state of individuality, which today firmly diverges from its traditional profile. In the present condition of hypermodernity, parallel to a global and cultural model, instances of reclaiming of identity emerge, producing a re-discussion of its traditional significance. The modern speed of change, fluidity, and the pervasiveness of technology all contribute to the questioning of those prefixed social standards which determine the meaning of selfhood. Within an extremely topical context, Sen speculates that our present is rich in examples linked to political and cultural issues revolving around conflicting claims of identity (VIII). In this respect, the identity of the individual today is defined in a more cumulative sense. Sen notes that current religious conflicts tend, through the imposition of violence, to empathize the pluralism of collective identities. Yet violence, associated with identitarian struggles, "is fomented by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities" (Sen 4). Today, the concept has become a problematic issue, which is highly susceptible to violent manipulations.[15]

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[14] In this regard, an essential text is Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). This book, one of the milestones of queer studies, considers sexual orientation in the 1990s as a crucial definer in the identity formation process. The impact of sexuality in the 1990s subverted the parameters of identification, which had until then been associated to gender as a stereotype of identity. See also Susan Jefford's *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994). Jeffords' work considers the American film industry in the 1980s, in the post-Vietnam era, as a period of definition and re-negotiation of identity. According to Jeffords, the film industry offered the image of characters who embodied a sense of mythical heroism and national pride. This age defined masculinity promoting a new image of American identity.

[15] Sen's debate continues widely, taking as example the deployment of Islamic identity and terrorism, which exploits a sense of collective identity by condoning violence. For a thorough discussion on this see Sen A. *Identità e Violenza*. Laterza, 2006.

Following this thread for an analysis of the Self in the modern age, Zigmaut Bauman suggests that the main problem of postmodernity is its need to reject a certain sense of personal freedom for the sake of a collectivism which characterizes our present. By coining the term "liquid modernity," Bauman describes modern society as a fragile, uncertain and unstable system that presents the crisis of the concept of community for the sake of an unbridled individualism. This generates what he thus defines as "the discontents of postmodernity" (Bauman 1997) causing a sense of loss and instability, which in turn transform the perception of individualism and lead to the replacement of personal with collective identity. In Pirandellian terms, the modern era generates a loss of identity in which one is both "none and a hundred thousand." Given the centrality of the concept in the contemporary age of hypermodernity and, as we will see, because of technology and new forms of communication as well, in his conception of personhood the contemporary individual is inevitably conformed to a collective sense of otherness.

At the end of this introduction, we might conclude that identity is a human construction, a fictitious concept, almost a myth. The term has no precise definition, but multiple and different theories, which make it varied and almost devoid of one exclusive meaning. A lot has been said about the nature of identity, and still, the concept leaves open a constant and unresolved debate, about its interpretation. It certainly remains a difficult issue in the philosophical debate and even more so in modern society, which still defines it as an intensely equivocal and controversial concept which entrenches a number of different discourses.

## 1.2 The Theory of the American Self: Politics, Challenges, Paradoxes and Controversies

Attention now shifts to the notion of selfhood in the American context, widely debated and even more problematic. Indeed, American philosophy has conducted an intense discussion to the question of identity through what can be defined as "the theory of the American Self." In this regard, it can be asserted that "despite having no core of defining features, American philosophy can be seen as both reflecting and shaping a collective American identity over the history of the nation" (Boersema "Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy" 2009). What is most remarkable, however, is that subjected as it is to philosophical ponderings, identity is one of the core issues of American thought. As we shall discuss further, originally related to the country's religious ethos, the meaning of identity in America has undergone several interpretations. Thinkers such as Emerson, James and Thoreau,[16] emphasized the importance of self-confidence, which helped shape an emerging sense of individuality. In the second half of the 1800s, American social thinker William Graham Sumner argued that national culture is essentially rooted in a general sense of self-authenticity and self-reliance, asserting that "Every man and woman in society has a big duty to take care of his or her Self" (98). Following this interpretation, illustrating the importance of identity as a social obligation, Emerson's concept of the Self reframed the notion of personhood as essentially tied to social norms. Considered as the architect of American thought and the father of Transcendentalist philosophy, Emerson was the first to point out the national quest for a sense of identity, which would eventually become a source of inspiration for American narratives.[17]

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[16] Further on, we will later discuss Thoreau in his analysis of the frontier as an essential moment for the formation of an American Self.

[17] One may see a prominent example of this in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). In this sense, Ahab and Ishmael have often been classified as Transcendentalists, in Emersonian terms, yet they are

From a Transcendentalist perspective, promoting the individual's experience in his constant interaction with society, Emerson further proposes that we consider identity as the core of a mechanism for which all things exist for a perpetual transformation of being. As the subject undergoes personal changes so does his identity within the social context to which he belongs and through which he should enhance an innate sense of self-reliance. The important relationship between Self and identity, to a certain extent, leads us to value self-trust, following inner motivations which, for Emerson, correspond to the highest level of self-awareness.

Further still, in one his most respected essays, "Self-Reliance" (1841), Emerson exhorts us to follow the so-called "aboriginal Self," through which a sense of personal determination can be established. On this point, he asks himself,

> What is this aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded? […] The inquiry leads to the source at once essence of genius, of life and virtue which we call Spontaneity or Instinct (Emerson 30).

Popularizing the individual search, this image of identity determines a sense of self-reliance prominently ascribed to America's core values of individualism, self-responsibility, personal freedom and instinctivity. In Emerson's view, self-confidence

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described through their inability to cope with nature and society through a personal failure. As such, Ahab's Transcendentalist attitude can be seen through his seeking of the whale that he never reaches, as that of Ishmael is manifested in his attempt to solve the conundrum of Ahab's figure. Through its illustration of individual's failure and a general sense of disillusionment, Melville's novel can essentially be read as a critique of Emerson's Transcendentalist philosophy. The concept has been also re-elaborated in the literary works of Hawthorne and Whitman. Emphasizing the theme of individualism from the above-mentioned perspective of philosophical Transcendentalism, Walt Whitman's "Song to Myself" (1892) praises the theme of individuality referring to a preconceptual knowledge of personality focusing on the importance of a universal identity developed through social interaction with difference. The famous incipit, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" offers an example of poetic identity represented through innate personality, inner experience and an intimate relationship to the soul.

produces a general sense of independence and to men is left the human freedom to discover the true nature of their own Self.

In a similar vein, but from a more pragmatic angle, William James advanced a more psychological analysis of identity. Developing a theory of the Self, James considered personality as divisible into the classification split between "Me" and "I." As the distinction denotes, the "I" represents the individual and, to a certain extent, his personality, distinct and separate from concrete actions. Yet the "Me," refers to what James defines as the "pure Self," the Ego, the cognizant being who is aware of his acts (the thinking subject in Cartesian terms). For this first categorization, illustrating the stages of Self-identity, a further analysis follows based upon those external agents that reframe the nature of personhood. First, society, which James associates with the social implications that construct a sense of individualism. Then the Spiritual Self, designating the inner essence of ourselves, our internal emotions addressing moral concerns and finally, the material Self enforced by external factors (such as clothing) that further shape a visible sense of identity. To all this is added the "Pure Ego" that creates a personal continuity, connecting, or rather, relating the above-mentioned aspects, constructing a national and social sense of selfhood. As such, identity is the compendium of the feelings that define an individual existing in the stream of what James defines as "subjective consciousness" (336). With respect to this claim he further explains that,

> Resemblance among the parts of continuum of feelings (especially bodily feelings) experienced along with things widely different in all other regards, thus constitutes the real and verifiable personal identity which we feel. There is no other identity than this in the stream of subjective consciousness. (336).

Given these interpretations, American philosophical discourses on identity have presented an image of individuality and self-authenticity which is still at the core of an exclusive national creed. The trail of the argument now leads us to more broadly consider the notion of self-identification as part of an exclusive American ideal. If, as

noted, the contours of identity are rather difficult to map, when it comes to a discussion of this issue in the American context, the concept becomes even more problematic. Clearly, the question of identity resounds restlessly in American culture. Although always considered one of the founding values of Americanness, identity is a complex term which also questions and limits the sense of personhood in this country. Being a people constantly comprised of other peoples with a spasmodic quest for national exceptionalism, Americans do not know much about their own identity, but they constantly and obsessively try to delineate it.

For this reason, it can be easily claimed that American identity or rather its perception in the United States, is certainly not well- or stably- defined.[18] When we allude to an overall image, we refer to a cultural or national sense of individualism deeply embedded in America's socio-cultural history. However, today identity is an ever-expanding context wherein future analysts will find it hard to identify what is American and who "belongs" in the country itself. Even though the discussion of national identity need not detain us here, a premise of its problematic reception is necessary in order to introduce the subject and narrow the scope of analysis for the following part of this research.

As Peter Spiro suggests, in America it is hard to penetrate the meaning of personal identification (4). Being American, or at least to considering oneself as such, one must ask "Who is the real American?" and, undoubtedly, the answer to this question is further complicated by the factors which make the response even more ambiguous. In this regard, the discourse on personal identification has been set by a cluster of shared values which form the basis for a national ideal. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that the quest for identity in America has deep roots; the concept was in fact one of the prominent factors in shaping the nation's history. The Anglo-Protestant culture that saw the pledge of John Winthrop's covenant, "A City Upon a Hill" (1630),

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[18] It is important to point out that although in this chapter we refer especially to American identity, that is, that set of shared values that outline the sense of identification in America, in this research we will instead examine the concept of identity in America in its relationship with technological innovation.

and the self-categorization of America as an exceptional land, introduced the nationalistic ideology containing the initial traits for the creation of a unique sense of individualism, primarily conceived of in religious terms.

In this respect, it is implicit to mention here the classic myth of the "American Jeremiad," widely discussed by Sacvan Bercovitch. In simple terms, the Jeremiad is a unique American way of thinking about the nation. This ideal is strictly embedded in what Bercovitch defines as a "proto-national religious theology" (XIV). In this sense, the image of Americans as a "chosen people" originates within the Christian ethics of Puritanism and is tied to specific ideals forged by the country's theocratic creed. Drawing heavily on "the Puritan origins of the American Self," he propounds that a diffused sense of identity, which still permeates the lives of Americans today, gets its legacy from a Puritan ethos. Within this analysis, Bercovitch refers to the transmission of America's symbols and myths produced by a combination of rhetoric, history, and its literary tradition, which still occurs today as part of an overall sense of nationalistic and, by some means, "sacred" image of identity.[19] Therefore, the first need to determine a sense of personal identification arose from the first settlers who, in the second half of the 18th century, were eventually forced to define themselves as "Americans," forging a new conception of identity after winning their independence. In this sense, the American Colonists underwent a process of self-identification.

However, the origin of the concept is firmly based as well on those founding principles also contained in the Declaration of Independence.[20] The founding document, per se,

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[19] Applying the theory of the Jeremiad to literature, Bercovitch considers American authors as "prophets in the wilderness" (180), or American Jeremiads celebrating the National ideal and thus able to illustrate the American way through the tensions between God and the faith in the Nation. The author who best describes this bipolarism is, according to Bercovitch, Melville who somehow simultaneously illustrates the two sides of American Individualism. In this way, a work of American literature becomes a version of the National Myth. For a thorough discussion on this, see Bercovitch, S. (2011). *The American Jeremiad* and *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*. Yale University Press.

[20] Identity in America is also expressed in symbols, landmarks and traditions such as the US flag, the bald Eagle and the Statue of Liberty. Along with these symbols there is also the importance given to

can be considered an example of identitarian statement, containing the components of the national creed and producing, to some extent, an expression of identity. Questioning the script's ambiguous validity of power, in the well-known essay "Declarations of Independence" (1976), Derrida considers the people as the sovereigns and the guarantees of the constitution. Pointing at the unstable signification of "We, the People," to whom the document attributes the legitimacy of constituent power, Derrida classifies the general authority of the state having a retroactive affirmation. In his words,

> The people do not exist as an entity, the entity does not exist before this declaration, not as such. If it gives birth to itself as free as an independent subject, as possible signer, this can hold only in the act of the signature. The signature invents the signer (Derrida 49).

Reframing the concept of constitutional democracy through America's foundational act, Derrida questions the existence of people before this written evidence interrogating whether American citizens had already liberated themselves or they rather became independent through their signature. Affirming the nonexistence of a juridical order without legal autograph and retroactively including the people as the depositaries of legitimate sovereignty and thus advancing groundbreaking assumptions on the founding of institutions, this interpretation ultimately considers the Declaration's structure in shaping the formation of a national identity.

Still, the first true hint of a national individualism came from the Founding Fathers, who constructed the democratic and liberal image of the country. It is only through their quest for national integrity and the prophetic association of America with a promised land, where individualism and freedom were finally possible, that they

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home, family and community. In this sense, part of the general image of the country's identity is grounded in domesticity and in the relationship between home and nation. For a discussion on domesticity and American identity, see Carlson, A. (2003). *The American Way: Family and Community in the Shaping of the American Way.*

shaped the first image of individuality cultivating an exclusive sense of identity and constructing a new way of re-thinking about the Self. These theories planted the seeds for an exclusivism that defines American culture and the country's identitarian controversies, up to the present day. No wonder then that the American Creed that mindset of values including the special fate also known as "Manifest Destiny,"[21] which has accompanied the nation from its foundation encompasses the true essence of individualism.

Following the historical path of American identity development, it was the French-American author John De Crèvecoeur who, in a volume of narrative essays entitled "Letters from an American Farmer" (1782), speculated upon the true nature of the American self, asking "What is an American? This new Man?." [22] Sketching the traits that characterized the new individual after the Independence, Crèvecoeur described the traditional American as an individualistic, self-reliant, hard-working individual, who conformed to the nation's founding principles. Although this image reflects many of the traits of American identity, the concept became much more definite in the second half of the 19th century. Frederick Jackson Turner's canonical work, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), brought to light a new idea of the American

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[21] Even though John O'Sullivan's phrase "Manifest Destiny" is still considered as a fundamental aspect of American political creed legitimizing core values such as the need for expansionism and the spread of democracy, this ideology has been widely contested. Its expansionistic mode has undergone divergent interpretations, for instance, the push Westward with the extermination of Native Americans and Lincoln's severe opposition to the Mexican war. For a broad perspective on a relatively recent critique of the concept, see Thomas R. Hietala's seminal text *Manifest Design. Anxious Aggrandizement in Jacksonian America*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

[22] This is certainly the basis for consideration of the true origin of a sense of identity in America. John de Crèuvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) illustrated the meaning of identity in America, introducing concepts such as "the American Dream" and the idea of the "melting pot," which became quite popular at the beginning of the 20th century as a way to define the country as an intertwining of cultures and ethnicities that build a shared collective identity.

self. With this "Frontier Thesis," Turner considered the unexplored land as the place through which American identity evolved, insisting on the impact it had for those people, commonly known as pioneers, who entered the frontier of America's borders. For Turner, by "taming the wilderness," colonists were eventually able to leave space for civilization, shaping a new form of individuality. In this way, at the turn of the 20th century the frontier was considered a place for personal self-realization and its ethos produced the American citizen par excellence.

Although Turner's idea is essentially based on white-centric data, a consideration of the concept today without taking into account the perspective of Native-Americans would be unavoidable. By basing his research on realistic oral accounts and significant evidence, Wilbur Jacobs has set forth the point that despite its white-centric pioneering ideals, the frontier should be re-viewed from the Indian context. In this sense, given its impact as a significant event in American history, its development should be essentially reconsidered as a former, crucial moment of contact between white and Native, blending aspects of both races. This closeness of different "breeds" of Americans consequently determined the emergence of a new society, involving minorities, joined by the frontier as a point of contact for two distinct cultures (Jacobs 43). As such, valuing the importance of the Indian-white relationship as a fundamental moment in American history, the frontier should also serve to reconfigure the place of the Indian in American culture, reexamining the pioneers' viewpoint from the Natives' perspectives.[23]

Overall, however, the colonization of the great American West and the advance of the frontier, which also signified freedom one of the founding values of Americanness, represented the implementation of American identity and its dual nature, namely the contact between the wilderness and civilization. This abstract (or sometimes literal)

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[23] For further discussion on this, that we cannot extend here, see Wilbur R. Jacob's essay "The Indian and the Frontier in American History- A Need for Revision," *Western Historical Quaterly*, Vol. 4, N. 1, 1973.

sense of the frontier nurtured a new form of individualism.[24] Aligning with this theory, Marco Sioli has recently considered expansionism as playing an essential part in the creation of identity in America. Alluding to the Westward explorations promoted by Thomas Jefferson between 1803 and 1806, prior to the frontier era, Sioli considers this period having been an ideal moment for the exaltation of the "Manifest Destiny," and therefore for the establishment of a true sense of identity. This drive toward individualism is thus evidenced in the travel diaries of the frontier's explorers and the gesture of hoisting the flag as a reclaim of self-identification.

If these ideologies correspond to some of the first demonstrations of a sense of individualism, the history of the United States as it progressed toward modernity has expressed the dissolution of its national identity. Indeed, ethnoculturalism and modernization have contributed to the erosion of the sense of person. Towards the middle of the 20th century, America was a profoundly different country, in which the increase of both population and immigration altered the true nature of the nation (Roberts 14). The presence of these historical and cultural factors has further contributed to the problematization of the notion of identity, which although, in itself an extremely vague concept, in the United States today assumes an even more subtle connotation. Now it cannot be plausibly assumed that the concept of American identity solely maintains the traits shaped by the nation's creed. The first and perhaps most obvious of the elements that compromise the sense of identity is the country's increasing ethnic variety. We can certainly agree that the in the early 20th century America was a multifaceted gateway for the hybridization of its populace.

A crucial text in this respect is Samuel Huntington's highly provocative *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004). Huntington's perniciously influential interpretation questions the very nature of identity, from its problematic

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[24] With the passing of the frontier emerged a new concept of American life, and Turner's thesis was often questioned. The greatest re-discussion came in defense of minorities who, according to Turner's theory, were excluded from this hypothesis which does not explain the evolution of identity for minority groups. Despite its falling out of favor, Turner's ideology, embodied in the legacy of the "moving American," remains one of the pillars in the concept of American identity.

foreign character. His explicit concern lies in what he terms the impossibility of building a clear and exceptional image of the Self in a country rooted on pluri- and multicultural personalities. As he claims, "Through the centuries Americans have, in varied degrees, defined the substance of their identity in terms of race and ethnicity" (XV). For this reason, Huntington goes on to argue that "America's identity problem is unique and multiculturalism over the years has eroded the legitimacy of this country" (21). The nation's assimilation of ethnic diversity, commonly referred to as the "Melting Pot," suggests how difference, conveyed also through immigration at the turn of the 20th century, soon became a fundamental aspect of modern American society. As such, the overall heterogeneity of ethnicities, mostly blended through multiculturalism, becomes one of the core aspects of American identity.

He furthermore contends that identity in America has a deeply Anglo-Saxon matrix. Even so, the first settlers who exhibited the primary traits of individualism were in fact immigrants themselves. Yet, a certain sense of selfhood in America only began to develop in relation to another country, Britain. It emerges then, that the American identity is actually transplanted from a European one, and descends, per se, from a different culture. Nevertheless, its full decline dates back to the 1960s, when the increasing presence of manifestations of ethnic diversity began to erode the cultural meaning of an American identity. This challenge was followed in the 1980s by the linguistic problem and the intrusion of bilingualism as an identitarian statement for those minorities who claimed the existence of multiple racial identities.[25] In this scenario, America today is a nation of conformity which entrenches different characters who contribute to the problematization of the existence of a pure American Self.

As Huntington captured the dissonance between identitarianism and cosmopolitanism, in a similar way, James Robbins refers to the persistent presence of the so-called "hyphenated identities" (African-American, Italian-American, Irish-American and so on) that inevitably nurture a sense of indefinite Americanism. Today, we therefore refer

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[25] See Donaldo Macedo's essay, "The Ethics of Linguistic Democracy in Schools and Society." *Iperstoria- Testi, Letterature e Linguaggi*, Issue 8, Fall 2015.

to a system of subnational identities and plural-citizenship, in which society becomes the one common membership that holds these ethnic, potentially conflicting identities together (Spiro 116). For this reason, however, as Peter Spiro affirms, in America today we prominently refer to the presence of collective group identities, belonging to racial dynamics and subordinated to an exclusive national identity in a process he defines as "the politics of difference" (152). Almost unfailingly, America today has great difficulty orienting itself as a nation and "the increasingly unstable sense of identity leaves the community floundering on immigration's premises" (Spiro 153).

If in the early 20th century America welcomed immigrants on the basis of "Americanization" for personal self-realization, today the country is grounded on a foreign legacy that leaves no space for individualism. All such attributions imply a persistent "social fragmentation" (Hackney 15) and a search for cohesion which culminates in a misguided conformity of identity. Referring to today's conception of an American identity, Jack Citrin and David Sears suggest that "We conceive multiculturalism as an alternative formula to the individualist conception of American identity […]" (XIV). The enduring presence of ethnoculturalism is an expression of how deeply this pluralism has penetrated American individualist ideology and considerably re-defined the significance of identity. It would therefore be easy to claim that, in America, the concept of identity can be classified into categories or group identities, stigmatized by racial distinction.

For this reason, John Michael feels compelled to argue that the comprehensive sense of identity in the United States involves two distinct and yet similar sorts: an inclusive one, based on the American Creed, and a classist image that involves social classification prominently ascribed to ethnic stereotypes (3).[26] Drawing further on this

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[26] In *Identity and the Failure of America: From Thomas Jefferson to the War on Terror* (2008), John Michael points out that from Douglass to Du Bois, through feminists such as Stowe or subversives such as Nat Turner, all these figures claimed a sense of identity bound up to the meaning of a similar national discourse. In other words, they all appeal to the same universal claim for justice. In so doing, the historical struggles for individualism have always highlighted the failures of identity in America. In this sense, the fear of the country's catastrophic collapse comes from its own conflicts of identity.

distinction, he also notes that often in America the concept entails ideals of brutality and injustice in which constructions of identities are bound up to social classification within the hierarchical categories of victimizers and victimized (Michael 4). Indeed, American history is rich in examples of conflicts of identity and violence, most commonly for racial supremacy, from the first slave rebellions in the 1820s to the campaigns for the recognition of the civil rights of Blacks in the 1960s. Simply put, the incessant presence of multiple identities and the country's ethnic origin contribute exponentially to the magnification of the political complexities of personal identification.

The crisis of identity in the 21st century was furthered by the tragic events of September 11,th a day that brought into question and eventually reshaped America's sense of itself. Despite the presence of the aforementioned dilemmas and their persistent concerns, the terrorist attacks of September 11th represented a key moment in the re-definition of America's national identity. Considered one of the most massive threats to the very heart of America, and the one rare example in the nation's history of foreign "war" 's repercussions on America's own soil, in its aftermath, 9/11 eroded the shared faith of the country and destroyed America's sense of invulnerability. [27] As a consequence of the atmosphere of danger and uncertainty, the country was marked by a sense of immense fear, and the exposure to a collective trauma in a symbolic display of unity that characterized the period following the attacks. The event represented the first real defeat and the consequent re-discussion of America's core values endangered and threatened by external forces. The tragic effects of this fact swept away American values of freedom, individualism, and privacy, and the country suddenly became a place that epitomized America's vulnerability to terrorism. For the first time,

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[27] A similar event was that of Pearl Harbor which somehow differently- it took place on America's distant naval base in the Hawaiian territory- because was another rare example of external foreign attack. The terrorist incursion at the World Trade Center represented for many the destruction of America's values at the very heart of the nation.

Americans saw their nation as endangered, deprived of a sense of individualism, with a dismantling of its exceptionalism.

In this sense, September 11th was "totally un-American" (Margulies 121), against the principles of identity, challenging the nation as a free country. Since then, American foreign wars have often been sold to the public as an effort to promote democracy for the making of an identity. The institutionalization of democracy abroad, as one important factor of America's foreign policy which also intensified after 9/11, has been one of the fundamental facets of contemporary identity. The relevance of foreign policies eventually fostered the promotion of democracy strengthening the meaning of national identification. It is thus evident that American individualism, deprived of its own nationalistic matrix, was further weakened. For this reason, "9/11 is an example of national identity under threat" (Brewer and Li 728). The event is generally considered as a "play of cultural identity," that consequently generated an unimaginable breach which controverted America's nationalistic basis. In Huntington's words, "The tragic events of September 11th dramatically brought identity back to the fore" (XV). Anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly noted that "September 11th and its aftermath have provided an occasion for re-thinking and re-working cultural identity" (1).[28] Given these views, concepts such as nationalism and patriotism, two other essential components of American identity, began to emerge as a response to the threatening consequences of the events. In this way, "the period of intense national identification, uncertainty, and emotionalism that followed September 11th created an unusual set of conditions to test the implications of different meanings of American identity in a meaningful context" (Brewer and Li 729).[29]

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[28] For a relatively recent discussion on recovering 9/11 in New York through a reflection of the local impacts of terrorist attacks, see Fanuzzi, R. and Wolfe, M. (2012). *Recovering 9/11 in New York*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

[29] For a discussion of patriotism, nationalism and American identity after 9/11 see Qiong, L. and Brewer, M. "What does it mean to be an American? Nationalism, Patriotism and American Identity after 9/11." *Journal of Political Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2004.

A certain significance of identity was also expressed by the architectural presence of the Twin Towers themselves, which symbolized a set of ideals of Americanism (Leach 76). This attribution considers the tragic event at the World Trade Center a massive attack on one of America's emblems of capitalism, economic autonomy and power.[30] Indeed, scholars such as Neil Leach agree that September 11th was a war on symbols, a war on the effects these images have on national identification (91). Taking as a reference the traditional theory proposed by Walter Benjamin according to which architecture becomes an essential medium to impress a sense of national identification (quoted in Leach 77), the buildings can be considered along with others in the United States as symbols for the meaning of identity in America. The consequent fall of the Towers concretely epitomized the decline of American values and the loss of an identity that had begun to waver and proved to be fundamentally unstable.

Their absence led to the nascent new identity reconfigured after the destructive events of September 11.th In Jonathan Hansen's words, the tragic attacks of September 11th have provoked a "clash of excellence of Americanism" (40). In view of this, we can therefore consider the threat of terrorism as one crucial component that has destabilized the American sense of self over the last 18 years.

At this point, one question arises: Does a sense of identity in America really exist? In response to this despairing inquiry Huntington provocatively contends that,

> Americans face a substantive problem of national identity epitomized by the subject of this sentence. Are we a "we," one people or several? If we are a "we" what distinguishes us from "thems" who are not us? Race, religion, ethnicity, values, culture, wealth, politics, or what? Is the United States, as some have argued, a "universal nation," based on values common to all humanity and in principle embracing all peoples? Or are we a Western nation with our identity defined by our European heritage and institutions? Or are we unique with a distinctive civilization of our own, as the proponents of "American

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[30] The construction of the World Trade Center complex, in 1973, was conceived as an icon of innovation, economic power and capitalism.

exceptionalism" have argued throughout our history? […] These questions remain for Americans in their Post-September 11ᵗʰ era. They are in part rhetorical questions, but they are also questions that have profound implications for American society […] (9).

As we have seen, the conception of the Self, per se, is rather problematic and even more so in America where the debatable influence of external, cultural and historical factors, has gradually eroded its perception. The notion of identity in America is therefore characterized by a certain dynamism, which leads to the inconsistency of its meaning. America's common goal, even today, is paradoxically to define and understand the significance of identity, whether in personal or nationalistic terms, as it remains undoubtedly elusive and certainly unique. The progress of culture and history in the United States leaves open many unresolved tensions that make identity an extremely vague and unstable concept.

## 1.3 The Quest for the Self in American Literature

The notion of self-identity has also been recurrently classified as one of the most prominent themes of American literature. Overall, however, narratives have often expressed the individual's search for a sense of individuality, illustrated through a personal quest. In her reflection on the topic, Nathalia Wright has alleged that "[…] the prominent core of American literature has been the question 'Who am I?" (39). The nurtured search for the meaning of individuality and the potential definition of a sense of Americanness are the essential tropes on which 18ᵗʰ and early 19ᵗʰ-century narratives mostly develop. The American novel, per se, has aimed at discussing either the search for national integrity or the emotional concerns of shattered selves. In the 1800s especially, the literary canon made a recurrent attempt to address the rather paradoxical and problematic issue of personal identification.

Symbolizing the struggles of early America, Washington Irving's classic historic tale, Rip *Van Winkle* (1819), represents one of the foremost examples of the search for individualism illustrated through the symbolic struggle to forge a national ideal. The

protagonist's aim to establish an identity before and after the American Revolution is exemplified in the image of the Self divided between pre- and post- Independence America. Awaking after a twenty-year sleep in the newly independent country, Rip epitomizes the frustration of the loss of his identification. As the tale's narrator reports, "He doubted his own identity," Rip adds further, "I'm not myself - I'm somebody else - that's me yonder - no - that's somebody else who got into my shoes...I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!'" (Irving 66). Illustrating personal adaptation within the new American society, Irving forces his character to question a former sense of identity, realizing that the original, the English one, no longer exists. To Rip is left no choice but to accept an identity deeply rooted in the nation's new individualistic drive. Exposing his protagonist to a personal crisis complicated by this historical moment of national change, Irving portrays America's need to discard its past establishing a new exclusive sense of personhood. Considered as an allegory of the American Revolution, as it discusses the narrative quest for the Self, the story epitomizes the establishment of an American identity before and after the Independence.

However, from a broad perspective, the concept of identity as a recurrent image of American fiction has taken different forms. In his extensive consideration of Henry James's definition of selfhood as a recurrent motif of his works, Fessenbecker observes that the novelist's image of identity offers a new dimension of literary subjectivity (70-71). Portraying the concerns of personality essentially outlined through Euro-American contrasts, most of James's literature relies on the establishment of a "typical" American character. Foretelling the transnationality of individuals moving between opposing continents, James's novels usually encompass the problematic quest for personhood playing a substantial role in devising a sense of Americanness of figures affected by the destabilizing impossibility of defining their true Selves. As it is well known, just as the author who spent most of his life abroad, James's characters also struggle with the impossibility of placing a sense of identity, which remains split between two culturally different realities. In this way, the problematic conception of selfhood for the author is generally devised in the contrast between past and present, Europe and America, old and new values. This sense of personal displacement is often delineated in the figure

of the expatriate, the non-American, the European, who frequently reappears on the American scene in search of a new Self, recreating a complex personality split between conflicting worlds.[31]

In line with this former aspect, a dominant role in the Jamesian conception of personhood is certainly played by the female figures, eager to build their own presence in the world. Often exemplified through self-responsibility and a personal drive toward freedom from social constraints, his heroines are often enveloped in the illusion of shaping a new social identity. Indeed, this is the case of Isabel Archer's quest for independence in *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), and that of the strong personality of the subversive feminist Verena in *The Bostonians* (1886). As such, these characters endorse self-freedom, retaining a sense of personal independence. "What we shall call our 'Self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us and back again" (James *Portrait of a Lady* 223) states Isabel Archer at a crucial moment in the novel. Recent scholarship has thus concluded that through attentive investigation, the Jamesian identity "composes and reinvents itself, remaining wishful for the sort of stability that would obliviate the need for self-invention" (Bersani in Feesenbecker 94-95). Like all his work whose purpose, as James has often claimed, has been "to give shape to the doubt about who we are" (Cagidemetrio 9),[32] his narrative of identity becomes a rather complicated issue, hardly disentangled and remaining extremely convoluted.

In a similar way, the concept takes a significant meaning in the works of Melville, who illustrates the different facets of American identity through divergent examples. Studies

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[31] Further analysis on this aspect in James's fiction is out of the scope of this research. However, it is essential to mention two important texts on Henry James's critical scholarship: Armstrong, P. B. (1983) *The Phenomenology of Henry James.* The University of North Carolina Press, and Sigi Jottkandt's *Acting Beautifully: Henry James and the Ethical Aesthetic*. SUNY Press, 2005.

[32] My translation. For a broad analysis on James's critical interpretation see Alide Cagidemetrio's introduction to *Henry James La Passione del Dubbio- Cinque Racconti*. Letteratura Universale Marsilio, 2016.

on his narratives production tend to stress the importance of a general quest for individuality, which becomes a recurrent subject in most of his works. As Thomas Horton has recently noted, the sense of identity for Melville is constructed in different ways (2). It would be rather implicit to confirm that his stories become deeply concerned with the perpetual formation of a sense of individualism. With respect to this claim, critical approaches to *Moby-Dick* have observed how the notion of identity rebounds restlessly within the plot. As mentioned previously with reference to Emerson's influence on American literature, Melville's novel can certainly be considered as a moment of self-awareness in Anglo-American history (Markels 1). As the story discloses, Ishmael observes that "No man can ever feel his own identity […]" (Melville *Moby-Dick* 56). However, despite the wide variety of themes that come into play in the narrative, among which the most prominent are: fate vs free choice and good vs evil, Ahab mostly recognizes his Self in the identification with the Other, Moby-Dick. Epitomizing the ominous Transcendentalist conflict between Self and Other, revealed by the complex relationship between Ahab and the white whale, the novel portrays the moral collapse of individual experience through a destructive image of selfhood. As such, here identity only exists in consideration of a constant confrontation with an otherness. Through the imposition of personal sovereignty over nature, Ahab represents the dominating aspect of personality primarily individualistic in its actions. Within the rather vast spectrum of his literary production, the popular figure of the apathetic scrivener in "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) also emerges, considered as one of Melville's most famous and successful characters. Bartleby's official motto, "I would prefer not to," symbolizes the emotional conflict to maintain a sense of integrity, this time associated with an insistent personal refusal to act. This unusual image of the Self offers an example of personality torn between the problematic decision to maintain a sense of individualism based on a denial of responsibility or, on the contrary, to create a personality based on total submission to his superior's request. As the ending proves, the protagonist becomes enveloped in a true search for identity, preserved through a tragic sense of personal independence.

Conversely, in "Benito Cereno" (1855) the question of identity is further tackled through the problematic issue of race. The difficulty in understanding the text, defined as one of Melville's most sophisticated works, lies in acknowledging the characters' personalities or rather, in recognizing the true identity of Babo. In fact, the character personifies the figure of the black slave who turns out to be the author of the mutiny on the ship of American captain Amasa Delano, contrasted by the presence of the Spanish Benito Cereno. Conflicts about racial integrity occur through a prejudicated view of race. To the reader is left the possibility of associating the specific discriminative identity to Babo, who is interchangeably stigmatized either as victim and perpetrator, or faithful servant and cruel Negro. These views, as the individual emphasis illustrated in novels such as *Pierre* and *Mardi*, support Melville's presence of a perpetual, emotional drive toward individualism in narratives that offer multiple ways to look at the notion of Self-identity.[33]

If this is the treatment of identity for canonical authors, there is another example that must be considered within the wide scope of American literature, namely the problem of the black Self in slave narratives. Tackling the discriminated personality of minorities covered by texts dealing with the stigmatization of difference, "autobiographies and slave narratives provide dramatic models of the textual construction of American identity" (Drake 91). In her analysis on cultural anxiety and narrative form, Priscilla Wald has explained that the dis-inclusive "We, the People" contained in the Declaration of Independence, first questioned the limits of an exclusive American identity (23). In this sense, difference took shape as the symbol of a literary anxiety which began to emerge from early slave narratives, such as those of Frederick

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[33] We will not dwell further on the analysis of these authors so as not to digress too much in the argument of the present work that might otherwise become too broad. For an excellent study on Melville see the following texts: Rountree, J. (1972). *Critics on Melville: Readings in Literary Criticism*. University of Miami Press., Markels, J. (1993). *Melville and the Politics of Identity*. University of Illinois Press and the most recent volume, edited by Marrs Cody. *The New Melville Studies*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Douglass, and was then further enhanced within the canon of African-American fiction. This genre has powerful implications, for illustrating those marginalized selves trying to relocate their place within American society. Particularly relevant in this perspective has been the issue of African-American identity in works of fiction by female authors. The stereotype of racial inferiority as witnessed in recent literary examples, and most conspicuously ascribed in social and historical discrimination, has become the subjective mode of African-American narratives discussing the issue of personhood, mostly embedded in the stigmatization of difference. The concern of self-identity as a burden in the history of slavery can be counted among the tropes of American fiction illustrating the problematic concerns of identity in America through multiple angles.[34] At the end of this first section we can conclude that identity is a human construction, a concept that presupposes a continuous search for a definition and at the same time leaves room to ongoing controversies on its real nature. Identity is a term that reoccurs with insistence and becomes an essential issue on which converge a multiplicity of problems. Defined and then constantly denied, the quest for the meaning of the Self, in its broad sense, leaves open an inexhaustible debate, especially in the United States, about its true nature.

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[34] For more on this, see Drake K. "Rewriting the American Self: Race, Gender and Identity in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs," *Ethnic Autobiography*, 1997 and Priscilla Wald. *Constituting Americans. Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Although the analysis of this issue has been widely debated by critics, recent studies on American fiction have proposed to re-consider black identity in recent novels, such as those of Toni Morrison, looking at its problematization from a contemporary perspective.

# 2. Technological Utopianism: The Myth of the Machine

## 2.1 Technology: An Essentially American Trope

The word "technology" can be used rather loosely as an umbrella term, often inappropriately meant to characterize, in a broad sense, innovation. A series of technical and scientific disciplines such as, for example, science and cybernetics, converge in the real meaning of the term. Traced to its origins, the history of technology, broadly defined, dates back to prehistory where there was already an establishment of a "machine culture" centered on systemized production (Mumford 240). It is essential to note, however, that the significance of the word technology, has changed dramatically over the last twenty years, intersecting with various other kinds of innovation, and thus becoming one of the cornerstones of postmodern society. In a more restrictive sense, in the following chapter, we will therefore refer to the machine,[35] as the technological medium per se is commonly defined, in its ability to challenge, shape and alter, the individual's identity through the lens of literature.

Scholars who have studied the social impact of innovation have pointed out that "Technology is, after all, one of the definitions of what it means to be human" (Pursell IX). What this claim conveys is the close relationship to identity, which becomes, as we shall see, the point of contact between the machine and the Self. Due to technology's entrenchment in our lives, it is clear that technical knowledge plays a decisive role in its ability to shape the way in which we express ourselves within society (as we will discuss extensively in the chapter on digitalization). As a consequence of our obsessive use of technologies, our identities are constantly being manipulated and

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[35] In this chapter we will use the term "machine," coined by Lewis Mumford in his seminal study on *The Myth of the Machine* (1967) and referring to the so-called "megamachine" as the convergence of science and technics, with reference to the technological means of communication in question.

even threatened by interaction with the machine. Although the present research refers to communications technologies and their challenges to personal identity from a literary perspective, an introduction to the development of technology in the American context is nevertheless essential. We need briefly to recapitulate the evolution of technology in order to understand its unprecedented impact on American society.

To explain more clearly the effects of technical progress, we shall have to return to the importance of technology as an essential concept in the definition of the American way of thinking. In the United States, technical and scientific innovations have played a fundamental role in redefining the nation through the profound social, historical and cultural changes they have brought. As such, "America, through its technological enthusiasm, strived to transform wilderness into a highly-developed and ultra-technological country" (Hugens 2).

## 2.1.1 American Genesis: From Early Innovations to the 1980s' Technological Enthusiasm

The first true impact of technology began to emerge in colonial America, brought by the first large-scale production of agricultural innovations, such as windmills in the 17th century, which not only helped create one of the greatest enterprises of textiles and cloth manufacturers, but also became one of the first innovations that completely altered the American landscape, from its pastoral ideal to a vision of modern innovation.[36] The Colonists' manufacture of arms led in the late 1700s to the employment of technologies in America for communication needs as well. This was followed by the first transportation revolution which opened the era of steamboat traffic

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[36] The impact of technology on the American landscape, even more pronounced in the second half of the 19th century, has significantly altered the American pastoral ideal. As widely discussed by Leo Marx, this formerly untouched landscape was contaminated by the intrusion of the machine into the space of the American wilderness.

connecting the Eastern and Western parts of the country. Indeed, technologies in this period began to frame large crucial objectives (Hugens 39).

However, in the nineteenth century America's technical progress took a different turn and was soon associated more closely with economic purposes. Between 1800 and 1830, thanks to the rapid advancement of technologies, the nation faced a period of extraordinary transformation that fostered prosperity and turned America into a nation of privilege. Indeed, the country's substantial economic resources were related directly to its technical progress. The boom of technological development considerably changed the second half of the nineteenth century, which was also characterized by important technological achievements. This age opened an era of technological fervor in the United States, which critic Thomas Hugens recently termed "American Genesis" (2), outlining its path and the country's remarkable interest in technologization.

This first Industrial Revolution brought to an age of mechanical productivity and technical growth. With the insurgency of the infrastructure system and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, new routes expanded America's horizons, fostering both expansionism and the establishment of new cities.[37] The economic and imaginative potential caused by these innovations was enthusiastically praised by Walt Whitman who, in "A Passage to India" (1870), sang the great achievements of his days, acknowledging technical novelties and the marvels of engineering exemplified by the innovative construction of the Transcontinental Railroad.

At the same time, the opening of the Erie Canal, with its economic and innovative effects, fuelled construction all over America, which soon demonstrated its unparalleled technological potential. In the late 1830s, technology became one of the fundamental traits that defined the country's cultural ethos. Thanks also to this innovation, Americans began to identify as a unified collection of individuals, thus nurturing a single, national ideal. In line with this sense of progress, Marcus and

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[37] The railroad system is considered fundamental in America's expansion towards the West and the discovery of its wilderness through the crossing of its frontiers.

Howard note that in this period, "Technology was used to homogenize America and further to unify its people" (71). During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the technological system became one of the landmarks that defined the growing sense of a uniquely American society, marked by rapid industrialization and the impact of the Technological Revolution.[36]

## 2.1.2 Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century America: Electrification, Telecommunications and New Urbanisms

Following the historical roots of technologies, the late 1840s saw three major technological advances destined to substantially change and effect American culture emotionally the development of the railway system, the invention of photography and the telegraph line. Photography and more specifically its predecessor, the daguerreotype, reflected a changing America and the popularity of Daguerre's portraits became the symbol of a nation rapidly proceeding toward technologic modernity. In turn, photographic technology has shaped the way in which we perceive and understand history and the photograph has become an inventive symbol of America's need for self-expression.[37] In *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Hawthorne captures the essence of the daguerreotype, leading us to travel through the kaleidoscopic mind of his modern daguerreotypist character, Holgrave, for whom photography plays a strategic role in the narrative while still being viewed with ambiguity. Of parallel significance, then, is the eulogy of the early development of photography, as an unprecedented form of innovative technological achievement, described by Edgar Allan Poe, who considered

[36] "Technological Revolution" was the name given to the Second Industrial Revolution. If with the First Industrial Revolution in the 1850s America passed from an agrarian to an industrial economy (despite its development following that of Europe), the Second Industrial Revolution opened an era in which America was dominated by technological change.

[37] For more on how photography has changed the course of American history, see A. Trachtenberg. *Reading American Photographs*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1989.

the daguerreotype "[…] the most important and perhaps most extraordinary triumph of modern science" (Poe 37).

Perhaps the greatest novelty of this period, however, was the first form of technological communication, namely the American electromagnetic telegraph, to be fully discussed in chapter 3. Telegraphy was born from the collaboration between Samuel Morse, inventor of the encoding scheme employed to send messages, and Alfred Veil, who built instruments for its technical design. The telegraph soon became one of the most powerful means of communication available, allowing a system of fruitful contact over the wires strung from the East to the West of the country. In the late 1850s, America proposed the creation of a system to transport telegraphy and information across continents. Anglo-American investors eventually succeeded, and the first transoceanic telegraph line was finally completed and inaugurated in 1861. In the following period, it was then the Singer Sewing Machine Company, founded in Boston, which targeted the traditional American woman in the late 1850s and helped introduce technology into the homes of American families in the form of individual sewing machines.

A fundamental event in the diffusion of technological innovation was The Great Exhibition of 1851, the first in the United States, held at the Crystal Palace in New York City. As Marco Sioli points out in his recent analysis of the historical resonance of the first American Expo, this event aimed at expressing the intention of the United States to help the world rethink its centre of gravity, with a new focus, no longer Eurocentric but oriented towards the North Atlantic coast (14). Modernity and progress were thus highlighted by this celebration of technology and innovation, considered essential in the development of Western society, beginning an "Americanization" of the world that continues today. Technology in the 1850s thus became the means by which to direct the world's progressive modernity towards the United States. Soon after, the Civil War which afflicted the country brought advancements in industry, thus increasing America's technological experience in the South through the manufacture of weapons. This productive economy led to the industrialization of the South, which only intensified after the Civil War, and brought the southern focus on agriculture to

more modern developments in production. The War ensured America's military-technological superiority in the sector of new types of weapons as well.

As the progress of technology advanced, it was Philadelphia's industrial exhibition in the 1870s which demonstrated unparalleled technological improvements and offered the image of America as a mechanized/technocentric society. By the late 19th century, it had become clear that the machine occupied a central position in the United States and its presence systematized the country's social fabric.[38] We now refer to what has been recently defined as "the machine aesthetic" (Hugens 11), alluding to the technological mean as a crucial factor in the development of American society. It was in the 1920s that the image of the modern American innovator began to take hold, promoting the myth of the heroic American inventor, an ideal which we are certainly familiar with today. The ingenious talent of Thomas Edison, the American inventor par excellence, who pioneered practical electric lighting and was awarded the title of "Inventor of the Age," maintained his legacy as being the founder of modern innovation in America.[39] As Randall Stross notes in his detailed biography of Edison, "Before Edison, darkness. After Edison, media- saturated modernity" (1).

As the first genius of the modern world associated with technology, Edison embodied the figure of the experimenter able to represent the country's technical ability, and he greatly captured America's imagination. Also known as "the Wizard of Menlo Park," Edison became a contemporary hero of American progress and, more importantly, one of the first examples of a public figure who deeply influenced modern experience and thus built a new inspiring paradigm of a modern American identity produced by

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[38] From Thomas Hugens's perspective, at the dawn of 20st century, the systematization of the country through the development of the machine in diverse social environments became one of the hallmarks of Modern America.

[39] To know more about Edison's impact on the American imagination, see Stross Randall E., *The Wizard of Menlo Park. How Thomas Alva Edison invented the Modern World*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2007.

technology.[40] In relation to this innovation, electrification significantly marked the technologic ascent of the country. With the power of electricity and dynamos, soon electric streetcars transformed American urban landscapes into futuristic scenarios.

In the path towards modern technologies, the demise of the telegraph led to the experimentation of the telephone, born from the evolution of the harmonic telegraph, which soon became a powerful new means of communication that was decisive among innovations in America, and also redefined gender roles, opening new occupational prospects for American women. As the telegraph had done before it, this new form of communication at the turn of the century redefined the social role of women and officialized the image of the woman as operator, starting with the telegraph, and then expanding to the telephone system. This period saw the development of what can be defined as "a taste for progress," which led to the implementation of research laboratories and the birth of famous schools of technologies, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), officially inaugurated in 1876. This institution, which soon became a prestigious enterprise, prompted the creation of the field of academic research in technology.

Between the 1870s and the 1920s, America substantially changed its urban aspect, with the development of large metropolises. These "New American Cities" were characterized by suburbanization and avant-garde architecture, which also facilitated urban expansion, enriched by the image of the skyscraper as the symbol of progress and, as Henry James firmly declared, of the new technological capitalistic culture of modern America.[41] The essence of the new American city was effectively captured by

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[40] A contemporary example, perhaps more representative of this paradigm of identity, as produced by technology, has been represented recently by the brilliantly creative talent of Steve Jobs who has used his personal image and inventiveness to advertise new forms of technology.

[41] This is well evidenced in the literary reportage *The American Scene* (1904) by Henry James, who returned to the United States with the perspective of the Europeanized American, criticizing the urban evolution produced by progress that would, from his perspective, merely represent an ostentatious form of capitalism.

Walt Whitman who, in "Mannhatta" (1855), offers an exaltation of the mechanics of the modern metropolis characterized by "The countless masts, the white shore-steamers, the lighters, the ferry-boats, the black sea-steamers well-model'd" (Whitman 1999). These new urban scenarios, which would become the setting for most of postmodern American fiction as exemplified by authors such as Don DeLillo, Jonathan Lethem and Paul Auster, were followed by the desire to rationalize home design and home activities, systematizing domesticity. This period witnessed a general "technologization" of America, which from a broader society, already potentialized by the diffusion of technical knowledge, spread to the domestic environment as well.

This age of unprecedented industrialism and suburbanization introduced another technological novelty the automobile. This innovation not only spread within a heterogenous clientele, in effect creating an American middle-class, with the innovative production process and consumer model introduced by Henry Ford, but it also brought with it a new concept of the journey from adventure to comfort. Literature has thoroughly illustrated America's obsession with the car, framing the automobile as a dynamic concept. Capturing the effective liaison between technology and the American imagination, Cagliero notes that "The car romance, a combination of pastoralism and nineteenth-century travel literature, becomes the 'car novel'" (576). This is the development epitomized by those narratives set in the period in which the car became the symbol of the progress of modern America, containing in itself a sense of adventure, mystery and enthusiastic imagination. As evidenced in Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Cruise of the Rolling Junk* (1924), a realistic recounting of a road trip to the American South with his wife Zelda, the car becomes a metaphor for a new concept of "journey" on unpaved roads, using a modern, fascinating form of innovation, moving from the geography of the technologically-developed "heaven" of Connecticut to the retrograde decay of the South. The car, which populated much of

20th century American literature, outlines a classic profile of the imaginary America characterized by two major themes: the automobile and the road.[42]

The car then evolves, representing the ephemeral liquidity of the modern world, fleeting and unstoppable, in the journey of the protagonist in *Cosmopolis* (2003), in which DeLillo turns the automobile into a metaphor for a postmodern journey. Through the figure of the financier Eric Packer, DeLillo recounts a contemporary odyssey on board the car, in which the protagonist is trapped for the whole space of the narration, proceeding at a walking pace in the urban setting of New York City. Here then the automobile, actually a luxurious limousine, transcends the boundaries of space and time, summarizing the pace of technological change in an overwhelming itinerary through the modern metropolis. As such, the journey loses its traditional meaning turning into a rather pointless experience in which the car does not lead to a destination and never reaches its final stop. For DeLillo the modern car shifts from mobility to immobility, demonstrating how mankind is somehow immobilized by the technological environment.

## 2.1.3 Systematizing American Life: Technology as a Social Solution from the 1950s Up to the Present

At the beginning of the 1920s, in the heart of the Modernist age, technology in the United States also took on a central role in industrial production, accelerating the manufacturing process and thus creating a new concept of work. The increasing use of tools in industrial production system gave rise to a new concept of labor, which was now almost entirely mechanized. Thus, the factory began to function as a technologically-based system. The new relationship toward appliances in system production blurred the boundaries between the human and the machine, altering their relationship and thus making the worker almost an extension, or rather, a part of

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[42] For a thorough discussion of the car's ambiguous and complex literary significance, see Casey, Roger N. (1997). *Textual Vehicles: The Automobile in American Literature*. Garland Publishing.

technology itself as a whole. This vision of the machine in the portrait of mass production is outlined by the little-known pamphlet, "The American Worker" (1947), in which the machine and its central role in the factory is described as an almost brutal force in the workplace, capable of de-humanizing the ethics of labor.

Furthermore, the progress of transport in the 1930s led to a considerably expanded and increasingly efficient railway system, and to the subsequent growth of commercial aviation. In this sense, historians have come to the conclusion that technology in 1930s' America had an exciting, liberating potential which extensively captured the public imagination (Marcus and Howard 240). Further, the late 1930s have also been acknowledged as the dawn of the Computer Age in the US. The Atanasoff-Berry computer, designed by Clifford Berry at Iowa State University, was the first primordial digital computer of purely American origin. Although the machine could fulfil only modest objectives with its limited memory unit, its birth contributed to affirming American primacy in innovation and paved the way towards the new Information Age being firmly located in the US.

However, at this point the notion of technology had moved into realms that were both destabilizing and ambiguous. The First World War substantially subverted the social impact of progress which had originated in a sense of techno-optimism and had first been seen as a social solution because of its the need to optimize society in a functional way. Shifting to a techno-pessimistic view, technology was then used for the creation of weapons of warfare. In this sense, machine guns became a popular form of innovation and military technologies grew into promising tools for success in military goals. It was in fact in the early 1940s that the perception of technology, once idealized and associated with the positive aspects linked to human progress, assumed an extremely negative connotation, shifting from social force to cultural curse. The evolution of innovation then became subordinate to that of scientific knowledge, which found in the atomic bomb its most dramatic example. These tragic perspectives on the War and the consequent danger of technological advancements become the backdrop for Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Here the atomic holocaust creates an apocalyptic scenario in which technology represents the destructive force

and the threat of the present, which has evolved toward an almost completely mechanized society. However, the most thrilling aspect of the novel lies in the presence of a thinking machine including an artificial memory, which eventually questions the human's utility in light of an artificial/mechanical one.

A little later, Thomas Pynchon with his groundbreaking novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), used a similar analogy to illustrate the dramatic aspects of war technology, in which the rainbow used is a mere reference to the curve traced by the V2 missile, employed during World War II which follows the weapon's trajectory towards the target. Here, the dichotomy between war and technology is therefore described as a mere performance of the threatening exaltation of technics:

> It means this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted…secretly it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology…by a conspiracy between human beings and technics, by something that needed the energy-burst of war (Pynchon 630).

Indeed, the Second World War potentialized America's technological talent through the development of aviation, which was now electronically powered and thus capable of being employed as a system for combat. In the decades following World War II, technology proliferated in multiple measures and America became a model for modern progress and social change. Hugens convincingly argues that, in the postwar period, there was a rediscovery of America due to its technological potential (284). Large mainframe computers, with their human programmers being used previously for the military goals of breaking codes and directing bombs, now allowed new creative processes to be utilized to generate ideas about the future. Assembled to solve problems and execute large calculations, after WWII computers became new machines simply designed to think.

It was during the 1950s and 1960s that America saw the development of new forms of technology which directly involved the American public, as evidenced by the birth of television as a form of engaging entertainment. Within such a scenario, "television

became a technology of isolation and separation" (McBride 542). This new concept of progress became a way to give voice to the individual's expression though public amusement, promoting an unprecedented drive toward individualism. The socio-cultural environment produced by television launched a new innovative culture based on distinctiveness and success. The 1960s gave impetus to a new entertainment-based society, which then inaugurated a new American era, known as the "TV generation." The besieged culture of television becomes the key literary topic to which the narrative trajectory of DeLillo's postmodern satire of media, *White Noise* (1985), gravitates. In this case, the electronic tool becomes the means of aggregation of the family and the symbol of a technological modernity which produces an almost unheard sound. Here, the voice of the TV and of the new media, termed "white" for its disturbing and monotonous aspect, seems to represent the deeply disconcerting feeling created by a means which destabilizes and determines an uncertain present as well as the emptiness of an unstable society itself captured by the new media. In simple and more recent terms, what television programs and the American film industry have proposed is a new model of entertainment based upon the re-articulation of stereotypes of individualistic performances.[43]

Indeed, it can certainly be argued that the 1960s were a time when the merging of science and technology was conceived as a single new form of progress employed to prove the innovative potential of the United States, in the so-called, "Space Age." The space race and America's challenge to the Soviet Union, characterized by the geopolitical rivalry of the Cold War, led, in the 1970s, to the affirmation of America's

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[43] The relationship between individualism and entertainment was well represented, in the early days at the beginning of the century by Frank Baum's commercially successful novel, *The Wizard of Oz* (1900). The novel's endorsement of individualism typified the ability to use fiction, amazement and wonder, to introduce a new form of entertainment, illustrating the instability of the present and captivating a public overwhelmed by America's socio-cultural changes. *The Wizard of Oz* became a text capable of dominating innovation and offering, in a certain sense, a perspective of wonder to the miracles of technology that had overwhelmed the modernist reality of the first decades of the 19th-century.

technological supremacy, showing the country to be a global superpower and played out in its mechanical potential, thus challenging the expectations of the rest of the world in high-tech development. The Apollo mission and the moon landing represented unprecedented technical achievements for the United States, for which technical progress became the means needed to challenge the world's expectations in terms of technological hegemony. The gesture of planting the American flag on the moon represented the symbol of an exclusive primacy extending the frontiers of America's space exploration and even the country itself, which even today advances by experimenting new sophisticated forms of high-tech novelty.

In an arguably more evident way, technology in the second half of the 20th century, progressing towards a strong digital framework, was conceived as a rather individualistic system, as evidenced by the birth of the first personal electronic devices such as the IBM personal computer, which fostered individual autonomy and a personalized use of electronic means. In the 1980s the tendency to humanize the machine grew, with the birth of robotics, leading to a considerable development of artificial intelligence powered by the usage of computerized robots. Information technology in the United States had such a strong impact that it was used to computerize, and we could almost say, digitalize, American manufacturing through computing systems.

This immoderate, almost excessive, use of high-tech innovation substantially reformulated the concept of individualism and individualization, powered not only by the personal use of computers, but also by the employment of computerization in the field of bioscience. The extreme development of this "science of technology," mostly in the 1970s and the 1980s, brought to the creation of genetic identities through artificial reproduction and the phenomenon of cloning, thus questioning the most fundamental meaning of identity, individualism and technological thinking. This system, known as the "technology of life," or, more commonly, biotechnology, included bio-reproduction and high-tech development as forms of genetic manipulation as well as the merging of computer technologies and their employment in medical

laboratory science. (We will thoroughly discuss the mechanized nature of electrical bodies in the following section of this chapter).

The history of the computer in America including its development in a more properly mediatic sense, led to the creation of processing machines for personal use at an affordable cost. In the 1980s, the growing prominence of this novelty in daily life transformed work, the economy and visions of society, which became dependent upon an almost entirely automated system of relating through what has been defined as "a user-friendly machine." Towards the end of the 1980s, smooth screens and mainframe processors dominated America's information economy. The new usage of accessible and more properly, electronically programmed technology, whose undisputed primacy has a typical American origin, led to the identification of the computer as the 20th century innovation destined to mark a new era moving toward a predominantly digitalized world.[44]

Moreover, the presence of the Internet completely revolutionized the user-machine relationship and the way of communicating through an increasingly large network. As we will see in the analysis on computers, social networks and new forms of communication, the Internet has produced superficial interactions, thus trivializing human relationships, and calling into question the realism of identities for the sake of a public performance. Computers in the 21st century have become even more important as machines, suspending the need for physical presence and thus creating an "extension of the operator's unique personality" (Marcus and Howard 380).[45] Modern society has

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[44] This electronic innovation gave rise to figures destined to represent the creative ethos of America's communication technology, such as the pioneers of personal computing represented by the visionary potential of Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, who not only developed a new concept of the computer, but also improved its functionalities towards an exclusively individual use. Both used their abilities to implement the role of technology in the field of marketing.

[45] This concept will then be analyzed in depth in the final chapter dedicated to the computer and identity in the digital age.

therefore led us to reconsider the machine, as the necessary, indispensable means for developing an information society.

Upon thoroughly analyzing progress in general and, more specifically, the role of the machine in America, we can see quite easily how technology has played a pivotal role in the evolution, formation and development of a society which, today is firmly based on strong digital/technophobic politics. Put simply, as technology progressed toward its modern development, society oriented toward a generally technological phobia, in a system that is so advanced to give rise to an overall sense of concern. In considering the implications of what has been previously asserted, the reciprocal intersections of identity, progress and society lead us to consider technology as an essential American trope. At this point, our line of inquiry proceeds to examine progress and the American imagination, thus allowing us to consider the role of innovation in American literature and then looking at the relationship between the machine and personal identity.

## 2.2 Technology, Emotion and the American Imagination

A preliminary discussion on the social impact of technology in America is essential to the consideration of its cultural approach and consequent focus on its presence in American literature. According to a recent body of criticism, in 20th century America, emotions have also been driven by technologies (Malin 20). Innovations would therefore have produced an interaction with a diffused sense of emotional intensity, also defined as technological utopianism,[46] understood in an equivocal sense and not necessarily in an exclusive positive logic. In his compelling essay on "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1962), Thomas Kuhn captured the paradigmatic nature of science, which has consequently challenged the imagination of both history and society. For Kuhn, each scientific revolution is the consequence of a crisis that brought

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[46] For more on the concept of technological utopianism, see P. Segal et al. (2005). *Technological Utopianism in American Culture*. Syracuse University Press.

upon a double historical and social repercussion, containing both enthusiasm and pessimism. In this sense, the phases of scientific development create a paradigm which leads society to be attracted by new innovations yet at the same time considering progress as a worrying experimentation with the unknown. In so doing, society cyclically follows the course of innovations until it reaches the crisis of the paradigm and therefore of a scientific revolution, which has profound implications on social and cultural forms of imagination.[47]

This perspective implicitly highlights the repercussions of technology on American society. There is little doubt, however, that Americans have given conflicting responses to progress (Cross and Szostak 2000). In this sense, attitudes towards technology are ambivalent. They either refer to a sense of "enthusiastic delirium" (Hugens 452), a sort of techno-positivist ideology, or they attribute technological development to a widespread cultural threat rooted in a pessimistic mindset. However, the overall sense of enthusiasm leads to a further interpretation between society and the reception of technology according to what critics have termed the "technological sublime" (Nye XIII). This concept considers American exceptionalism as a consequence of those technical achievements that have contributed to the creation of an expression of the country's sense of specialness. This image clearly represents the emotional value of technology considered in an essentially American setting. In the country's opposing attitudes toward progress, the landscape has played a crucial role in redefining its effects on culture.

Leo Marx's seminal work, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), examines the incursion of the machine into the pastoral ideal and the conflicted reception of technology within both American literature and society.[48] The term pastoral here refers to a rural and

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[47] Despite numerous debates and criticism following its first publication, Kuhn's theory is still considered to be one of the fundamental texts for interpreting the nature of science in the modern age.

[48] The image of the "machine in the garden" is a clear Biblical reference to the uncontaminated garden of Eden and, as Marx points out, it can also be traced back to the metaphor of the Elizabethan garden

unspoiled landscape, now contaminated by the presence of the machine. Within such a scenario, it is therefore possible to consider the pastoral ideal in America as a disparity between contrasting aspects or, more accurately, a sort of "semi-primitivism between the opposing forces of civilization and nature" (Marx 2000, 23), argumented by the intrusion of technology. The interruption of the bucolic imagery, prominently advanced by America's industrialization in the 19th and 20th centuries, also considers the machine as a new form of technology (the example par excellence is that of the railway crossing the Western wilderness). Even more, it becomes the symbol of a new culture and of a modern society rooted on the machine ideal. In other words, in the age of progress, "as technology advances wilderness retreats" (Tonello 6).[49]

Taking up this thread, Marx highlights in fact that literature, and more specifically American literature, has illustrated the cliché of the machine's entrance into the pastoral, emphasizing the contradictory nature of the vanishing of a bucolic landscape, no longer authentic and therefore uncontaminated. The march of the machine across the rural represents the perfect epitome of the merging between innovation and the pastoral or, more concretely, the present which incorporates and eventually obliterates the past. In his quest for an intimate relationship with nature in *Walden* (1854), Thoreau firmly criticizes the disruptive presence of the locomotive and this new technology which represents a false idol of progress. For him, the machine primarily offers a market image and constant disillusionment as well as a cultural detachment from tradition. The dismembering of the wilderness and the threatening intrusion of technology is therefore described as follows: "The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard" (Thoreau 150). Seen from this perspective, technology becomes a

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with reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and its paradisiacal, unspoiled landscape, illustrated in the play by the image of the uncontaminated island.

[49] My translation.

disquieting image of change that imperils a harmonious ideal and thus offers a new, bothersome image of progress.

However, as Marx has most famously pointed out, the recurrent motif of the machine in the garden has been used repeatedly by American authors, as exemplified also in the work of Hawthorne and Emerson, who generated rich evocations of the dichotomy between natural and artificial in their praise of technology.

The sense of hostility toward innovation is also encompassed in the modernization of American metropolises with the construction of their artificial and destabilizing urban scenarios. This new urbanization was firmly disapproved by Henry James, who in *The American Scene* (1904) criticized the new architecture of the modern cities. It is no coincidence then, that the protagonist of his novel *The Jolly Corner* (1908) happens to see a New York in transformation or already changed, with the eye of the external observer firmly disapproving this new urbanization.

For more than a century, the imaginary ethos of progress has defined the contradictory emotional boundary between the rural myth and the technological incursion. In this sense, we can certainly draw the conclusion that the landscape represents one of the emotional reactions to technology, thus producing conflicting responses to its impact on the American scene.[50] Clearly, the imaginary potential of technological advancement has been essential in order to embody the rupture with the past tradition and the opening of a new era of emotional intensity that has characterized Americans' keen interest in establishing a strong bond between technology and society.

For Marx, this new "mechanized America has certainly influenced the writers' vision of the past" (115) and has thus changed their perceptions of the present. And yet, in a more significant sense, the recurring motif of the machine shifts emotions from a general sense of loneliness and alienation brought by the railway, erupting into the silence of the wilderness, to the excitement about rapid communication through the

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[50] As previously discussed, the American cultural imagination is also defined by the car, which not only fits into the uncontaminated landscape of the wilderness but also changes the perception of that landscape by redefining the concept of private space.

telegraph's annihilation of space and time. Undoubtedly, "Americans enthusiastically endorsed the machine power" (Marx 133), which also gave momentum to a widespread fervor, captivating America's public imagination.

This overall sense of technological eagerness was accompanied by the transition between the traditional and the modern. In "The Dynamo and the Virgin" (1918), Henry Adams described the boundary between the changes in the new American society and the abandonment of a conventional world for the sake of modern improvement. Comparing the opposing forces of traditional vs. modern here the Virgin and the dynamo, we see these two symbols as representing the historical shift in innovation from the contrasting metaphor of Western Europe. In this interpretation, the traditional icon of the Virgin Mary is now replaced by the generator of electric power, representing the epitome of the modern world.[51] The supremacy of science on the cultural scene and the rupture with tradition, both of which paved the way for the modern, led to the ambition to merge humans and technology into an ideal in which the machine itself becomes an object of desire. The almost libidinal attraction towards machines, which recalls the Deleuzian concept of body as a "machine *désirante*" (1), desiring machine, was examined by Freud in "Civilization and its Discontents,"[52] and it is illustrated in fiction by Pynchon in *V* (1963). The trope of the mechanical body portrayed by Pynchon, offers an example of the erotic impulse for technology and thus a parodic image of the machine as a desirable force.

In this respect, through their interaction with machines, humans have formed a very distorted picture of themselves (Mumphord 14). Individuals who relate through

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[51] Similarly, although in a different context, C.P Snow captured the influential resonance of technology and the distinction of intellectual power thanks to the progression and the development of science within intellectual culture, which then became polarized into two different cultures, literary and scientific.

[52] In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud denounces technology's libidinal satisfaction produced by the machine, which generates an overall sense of lust for the machine which he defines as a sense of technological eroticism.

technology become an ensemble of human-machine components. In a technologically-dominated culture, this determines mankind's self-transformation involving personal experimentations of the Self and the body as suitable for merging with the technology. The spectacularism of electrical circuits, and the transformative sense of alienation produced by human interaction with the machine, remind us of the mechanical girl protagonist in the dystopic future of Fritz Lang's early science fiction film, *Metropolis* (1927). The creation of an android with feminine features and a mechanical body eventually capable of replacing the human represents the cinematographic potential of the machine in the collective imagination, affirming the myth of technology as a central theme at the core of the modern age. This cinematic example was then followed by another science-fiction film classic, *The Colossus of New York* (1958), in which a human brain is transplanted into a giant anthropomorphic robot and, through a mechanical body, acquires a hybrid identity as it comes back to life. Here the machine assumes a generating, almost maternal function that eventually gives rise to a new form of life, mechanically produced.

In response to this diffused sense of "technological vocation" (Abruzzese 65), Abruzzese contends that the machine enters the social and cultural imagination through new literary forms of communication. Narratives become a product of the cultural industry, used to express this overall atmosphere of technological enthusiasm. As he further suggested, technology has inspired the creation of the science fiction genre and the consequent mediatic suggestion of collective imagination.[53] From the first prototypes, literature has tried to reconcile the function of the machine with the text, which has become the most concrete means of expression of technical progress in popular culture. The machine has become the fantastic image of the production of beauty.

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[53] Abruzzese opens the debate on the relationship between technology and science fiction with the image of King Kong, which, in popular culture marks the connection between the myth and technology. As Abruzzese explains, Kong would have a double nature: that of the humanized body and that of the technology of war. This symbol of technologic development wreaking havoc on the modern metropolis marks the decline of Western civilization.

Further still, fiction continues to evolve into a collective imagination, shaped in part by technological advancements. Given this view, emotions began to intersect with technologies in a general, collective enthusiasm, illustrated in part by literature, establishing a profound relationship to the myth of the machine as the driving force of the 20th century. To a certain extent, the recurrent relationship literature-machine highlights the human propensity to build a firm bond between bodies and the experimentation of virtual and thus unrealistic Selves.

## 2.3 American Literature and the Machine-Based Aesthetic

As shown above, authors who foretold innovation summarized the pace of change, either repudiating a machine-based aesthetic or, on the contrary, enthusiastically endorsing the speed of progress. Despite arousing the contrasting feelings of fear and fascination, technology can undoubtedly be counted as one of the classic tropes of American literature. The new wave of change over the second half of the 19th century produced a literary image of technology, illustrated by American narratives in the dichotomy between the devaluating potential of innovation and the exciting power of technical novelties (exemplified by the combination of pastoralism and technological intrusion). Having noted the relevance of the recurrent presence of the machine contained within American narratives, Cecelia Tichi sees American literature as the fertile context in which technology could be represented (17).

Indeed, the technological revolution has coincided, in some sense with the emergence of a new form of fiction, which arose on the verge of the new century and thus described an ideal, that of the machine destined to become one of the canonical images of modern and, to a greater extent, postmodern American fiction. Through the love-hate relationship to the technological medium, illustrated throughout the 19th and the 20th centuries, American narratives portray either the concern for a disturbing reality or the captivating potential of technological faith. It would therefore be easy to argue that, by symbolically and esthetically representing innovation, American authors perpetuated

the modern symbol of change, the machine, stressing the physical relationship with the technological tool and eventually illustrating the challenges to personal identity.

Looking at the ways in which narratives express these implications leads us first to consider the literary illustration of the complex interconnections between the human body and technology. In describing the recurrent presence of metaphorical images of what we shall define as "bodily electricity" within the context of Modernist literature, Armstrong perpetuates the belief that "Electrical metaphors create from a literary perspective a new sense of the body" (18). The application of technology as an extension of what we can venture to define as a sort of pre-post-human ethic had begun to populate modernist literature since the first technological experiments of the mid-nineteenth century. Interest in new forms of technology stimulated the creation of hybrid bodies enhanced by technical progress. The canonical literary example in this sense, from its European incarnation, is the the first and most widely-recognized electric image of the body, created by Mary Shelley in her primordial science-fictional classic, *Frankenstein* (1818). In this notable example, the machine becomes a complex metaphor of the symbolic pairing of creator vs. creature, in which a corpse is assembled and then through the usage of the machine is monstrously brought to life via electricity. An implicit reference is made here is to the technique of mesmerism, widely discussed by American authors such as Poe and Hawthorne, deriving from a form of electromagnetism which penetrates the mind through a sort of mental electrification of the body.

A more traditional and yet typically American metaphor is the poetic image created by Walt Whitman in "I Sing the Body Electric" (1855). Through a vividly exhalated corporeal image, a praise to the physicality of the body is illustrated by a sort of electrification of its component parts in a machine-like image. In the index of American narratives, an engaging and almost unusual reference to an artificial body replacement is found in the mechanical, de-humanized corpse in Poe's satirical short story "The Man that Was Used Up" (1839). The story describes an archetype of hybrid identity through the funnily decorated caricature of eminent General John Smith, dismembered in war and eventually stiffly reassembled in a body whose components have been

almost entirely mechanized, and which is, for the most part, composed of protheses. Through the assemblage of the general's prosthetic appearance, here Poe seems to acknowledge the importance of technology as the backdrop of the artificial remaking of the body, claiming that,

> We live in a wonderful age, parachutes and rail-roads- man-traps and spring-guns! […] And who shall calculate the immense influence upon- social life- upon arts- upon commerce-upon literature- which will be the immediate result of the great principles of electromagnetics! Nor, it is this all let me assure you! There is really no end to the march of invention (Poe 262).

Through an unusual perspective on the cultural industry of the time and a mechanical body assemblage in a pre-post human figure, Poe's story suggests how modern technologies lead us to a perpetrated, questioned de-humanization. In so doing, through the devaluating potential of progress, authenticity is substituted with artificiality. Poe's narrative trajectory certainly represents a valid example of a physical collage through the advancing of a technological system in which the protagonist is eventually un-manned and un-made.

To contextualize this image along with many others illustrated within the context of American literature, Alessandra Calanchi sees the relationship between humans and machines as converging in an ambiguous game of alterity (Calanchi 40).[54] In this way, to a certain extent, technology leads to a mutilation of the body, recomposed in grotesquely fragmented elements. Moreover, Solomon observes how these corporeal disfigurations appear in most of American fiction during the Great Depression (4). This statement therefore provokes a reconsideration of mutilated, oddly re-formed bodies as symbols of a gruesome otherness, in which human beings are eventually reshaped by means of the machine. One can therefore assume that the continuous assimilation of

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[54] My translation, as are the following ones from the same author unless otherwise indicated.

the human into the machine leads to a sense of semantic fragility and abstract identity, as a consequence of this ongoing mechanization.

The nature of the body which comes from a theorization rooted in psychoanalysis and which, in its most intimate conception, also concerns gender sexuality, lead in the second half of the 20th century to the emerging presence of a new post-modern image in its relationship to the machine. In the 1980s "the body became enriched with a sort of futuristic materiality" (Iuliano 24) linked to a technological impulse.[55] In her seminal study on hybrid bodies from a gendered perspective, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Donna Haraway questions the traditional image of the body. From a postmodern perspective, the body becomes deeply shaped both by the historical and cultural reality, or even more prominently by the technological influence on society, creating new corporeal entities defined as *cyborgs*, beings composed of mechanical appendages. As she observes,

> The cyborg is a creature in a post-gendered world; it has no truck with bi-sexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions through an organic wholeness, through a final appropriation of all the powers of parts into a higher unity. (Haraway 150)

It is in this way that, according to Haraway, the *cyborg* body is formed, representing a corporeality which is continuously assembled, modified and produced by the machine, in a regular re-fragmentation of bodies. This state of physical dissolution reminds us of the Lacanian body in fragments. For Lacan, the body can be considered as a set of detached pieces, developed through the well-known "mirror stage," according to which the child, observing his own reflected image, recognizes his own body, which until then had been immersed in a primitive state of fragmentation in his self-concept.

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[55] An interesting perspective on the body in its American conception is widely expressed by Fiorenzo Iuliano who in *Il Corpo Ritrovato. Storie e figure della corporeità negli Stati Uniti di fine Novecento* (2012) seeks to offer a new perspective on the role of corporeality and a new image of the body by looking at the recent political and historical events over the last ten years. The translation in the quote is mine.

All this recalls the potential of the machine to blend together the human condition and the inhuman technical status. In this way, in a post-human ethic, the body is enclosed in the collective image of a single machine made up of hybrid components, concretely de-humanizing the ethics of corporeality.

However, from a more recent perspective, Anne Balsamo describes "the cultural conjuncture in which the body and technology are conjoined" (2). In a literal sense, she considers how machines assume almost a maternal function and corporeality is redesigned through the influx of high-tech innovation. In his pioneering study on media, Marshall McLuhan suggests how bodies, in the post-modern age, assume a dual form that is both hybrid and realistic. In other words, technology becomes an extension of the human (McLuhan 1964), and thus, the machine turns into an unconscious projection of the physical structure. In this mechanism, defined as "the body-machine model" (Lake 79), through a technologized body, identity is no longer corporeal but linked to a virtual image and a substantial condition of incorporeity. The overall concern based on the boundary between human and machine reminds us of Pynchon's critical reflection in "Is It Ok to Be a Luddite?" (1986). In this case the expression of Luddism represents the merging between the real and the technological, identifying the contact with the machine as a perpetual mechanization driven by technophobic persuasion.[56]

Given the aforementioned chronology of texts, it is be implicit that postmodernist narratives prominently reveal the disturbing consequences of the body manipulated by electrification, which involves both the empowerment of a new artificial self and at the same time exhibits the dangers of mechanical transcendence. Indeed, a prominent section of post-modern American fiction is based on this premise. From an overwhelming and unsettling perspective, Pynchon describes the almost erotic impulse of one of his characters in *V*, who fantasizes about the image of an almost entirely mechanical female body, composed of artificial parts eventually dismembered and

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[56] Among the images that most represent this sense of Luddism, for Pynchon are figures such as Frankenstein and King Kong that mark the contact between the body and the machine.

reassembled if needed: "Someday, please God, there would be an all-electronic woman…Any problems with her, you could look it up in the manual. […] Remove and replace that was all" (Pynchon 1963, 3-61).[57] Once again, this example not only offers a perpetrated sense of lust for technologization, but it also suggests the sexualized role of technology as a seductive force. Following a similar analogy, problematizing the doctor-patient relationship through the usage of a techno-medical machine, DeLillo's main character's illness in *White Noise* is diagnosed through a scientifically developed technology. Through the electronic tool doctors see a body that is eventually scanned and transformed into data, thus making it an artificial extension of the machine in question. In view of this, it should be clear that American literature expresses the identification processes of the binomial *homo-machina*, or even better, *homo ex machina*, in the American process in which the individual is transformed into an artificial corporeality becoming almost "un-manned" (Calanchi 41).[58]

Although in any literary debate on humans and machines it is necessary first to consider the relationship with the body and then to refer to the post-human as the dominant literary genre, we shall now analyze the psychological dynamics of identity in relation to technology. Such a statement, to some extent, leads to the conclusion that when we examine the literature of the machine, we inevitably encounter the artificial nature of personhood. As witnessed through previous examples, the machine inevitably fragments the Self for the sake of an ambiguous otherness which takes place beyond the material human experience. As we have seen previously and we shall examine in the following section analyzing the role of communication technologies, the ethics of personhood are constantly being manipulated by the direct contact with the machine.

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[57] What is also thought-provoking in the novel is the perspective of the body described by Pynchon through the employment of plastic surgery by Dr. Schoenmaker who is passionate about using cosmetic surgery to eliminate personal war mutilations.

[58] My translation. For a broad debate, from a recent perspective, on the relationship between humans and machines, see *Uomini e Macchine - ACOMA*, no. 15, Fall-Winter, 2018.

In this sense, metaphors of electricity figure subjective, unmaterialistic Selves, showing the disembodied force of technical innovations.

In his study on aesthetic materialism, electricity and American romanticism, Paul Gilmore contends that electricity has served a variety of writers as a vehicle for imagining the aesthetic experience as in scientific sociopolitical and spiritual terms of unrealistic identities (5). The subject's automatization, through the mesmerizing potential of the first communication technologies, led to the construction of a sense of an artificial Self, filtered by the machine. This mechanism implies the abandonment of oneself for an unrealistic reality, and therefore, creates a thread in which identity becomes a game of ambiguities produced by the interaction with technology. Following this logic, Hawthorne's twist of equivocations in *The House of the Seven Gables* depicts an ancestral family lineage in which innovations become the broader backdrop of the complex dynamics of identity, evidenced in part by progress, which represents, as Hawthorne seems to demonstrate, the limit between the real and the unreal. In the aforementioned description of the electric body, also Whitman also empathizes the production of an identity that we could almost define as electric and that, in a certain sense, incorporates body and soul in an otherness which profoundly questions the nature of personhood.

Focusing for the moment on nineteenth-century American narratives, the potential of the early means of communication gave rise to the original artificial experience of the Self, torn between technologization and reality. Considering Katherine Biers' definition of virtual self in relation to writing and technology in the progressivist era, it could be easily asserted that the term virtual, per se, oscillates between the opposite poles of fake vs potential (Biers 2). Comparing this statement to early systems of communication and their use in the digital age, we witness a splitting of the Self, created in an artificial dimension and thus counterfeit, alternated with the realistic personality of the user, who also maintains his concrete individuality by his mere approach with the communicative tool. As Biers argues, identity wavers between a copy of the realistic one and the potential created through intercommunication with the machine. In this mechanism, the Self is converted into a mere form of representation

and the mean becomes a way to evade reality, offering the possibility to develop a masked personality.

The contrasting nature of identity vacillating between materiality and artificiality, is well described in Henry James's novella *In the Cage* (1898). Although set in Victorian England, the narrative illustrates the virtual experience of a telegraphist, confined within the intriguing possibilities of the new communication technologies, deciphering clues to her clients' personal identities over the circuit. Offering the image of an identity trapped in the wire's potential, the protagonist eventually finds herself cornered and encoded at the dawn of the virtual age. In this sense, James's tale seems to suggest how technology generates what Biers has defined as "disturbing subjectivism" (7), questioning subjectivity and thus providing a concrete experience of the virtual. Evoking the art of the novel in the pre-multimedia age, James's narrative account seems to offer a compelling example of the modern novel, enriched with a sort of virtual potential. The self becomes a mere object of the machine, no more authentic but instead suspended and trapped in a technological and artificial reality. From the origin of the first forms of communication technologies, we witness a virtual turn in 19th-century American literature which, as we shall see, has been able to represent the complex manipulation of personal identity through contact with the first machines in what could be defined as the poetics of the virtual.

Through the blurred relationship between bodies and their contact with the communicative tool, a casual survey of American literature illustrates an incessant preoccupation with hybrid identities, challenged by technological means through the extension of the human condition. As we shall see, there is a persistent re-negotiation of the concept of identity and a reformulation of the notion of personhood, both physical and virtual. The idea of unrealistic forms of identity is represented in most part of American literature as the essence of a machine ethos. Tracing the complexities of this view, American literature reveals the hyperrealism produced by forms of communication as well as the complex identity-technology dynamics culminating in a literary performance of unrealistic identities. Recurrently elaborating the thematic trope of mechanical interconnections, literature has illustrated the achievement of a

version of the self that "forces us to ask questions about the materiality or not of consciousness and the status of identity in time and space" (Goody 158). As following sections will show, American fiction has often outlined the dangers of electricity and the psychological challenges to individualism.

Let us now draw our attention to the evolution of the concept of personal identity, beginning with the telegraph. This will allow us to consider this means as the first form of communication which outlined the consequent redefinition of the Self by technology, as seen through the lens of American literature.

# 3. Challenges to Identity: Bodies and Telecommunications in Late 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Literature

## 3.1 Communicating with Bodies and Machines: The Case of the Telegraph

If we think today of the binomial technology-identity, an implicit reference to the Internet and to the digital age seems almost inevitable. However, the concept "virtual identity" (which in the case of early forms of communication we would define as artificial), resting as it does in prominent association to the digital domain, in its original conception, evolved through the first examples of telecommunications, and for this reason, it demands further investigation. As has been explained, "By 'virtual self' we are referring to the person connected to the world and to others through electronic means […] where virtuality is a state of being, referring to a particular way of experiencing and interacting with the world" (Agger 1).

In his analysis on "Victorian Technoculture," Goody observes that the destabilizing relationship between the Self and technology "begins a long time before the networked age of global communication; the many innovations of the Victorian era, that the twentieth-century inherited, served profoundly to disrupt" the conventional notion of individual (9). Recent scholarship has witnessed the increasing proliferation of studies focusing on the role of the Internet and the New Media, yet has somehow underestimated the fact that the problematization of personal identity in relation to technology originated from one of the first forms of innovation, the electromagnetic telegraph, whose usage was very similar and certainly comparable to the functions of today's Web.

In order to gain perspective on what lies beneath the telegraph's technological potential, we find evidence of its unprecedented innovative capacity in Tom Standage's

remarkable study on the resonance and the influence of this technological means. Significantly, he observes that,

> In the nineteenth-century there were no televisions, airplanes, computers or spacecraft; nor were there antibiotics, credit cards, microwave ovens, compact discs, or mobile phones. There was, however, an Internet. During the 19th century a new communication technology was developed that allowed people to communicate almost instantly across great distances, in effect striking the world faster and further than ever before. […] Romances blossomed over the wires and a technological subculture was establishing itself. Does all this sound familiar? […] Modern Internet users are in many ways the heirs of the telegraphic tradition. (Standage XVII-XVIII)

Categorizing a "telegraphic subculture," Standage points out its similarities and the repercussions of this tool, a precursor to modern information instruments, which contributed to the anticipation of many of the convoluted concerns prompted today by digital technophobia.[61] Although by this time the electromagnetic telegraph had been broadly experimented, also in Europe, in the United States it was rapidly embraced, altering the perception of space and time, connecting immense distances with the speed of its messages, exchanged instantaneously. For this reason, it is necessary to consider that "though its business was the sending and receiving of messages, much like e-mail today, the actual operation of the telegraph had more in common with an on-line chat room" (Standage 64-65). The exchange of information carried out by the two operators, connected via cable lines, represents a first and crucial parallel with 21st-Century communication technologies in which the user personally interacts with the machine in the exchange of messages.

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[61] Even though the official birth of the telegraph, with the invention of its code by the American Samuel Morse, is historically rooted in the 1800s, pioneering forms were initially developed in France in the 18th century, as suggested by the origin of the term "*télégraphe*," meaning: a system of instruments sending messages for long distances.

The new reality of the telegraph was characterized by the construction of an artificial, almost virtual space of "secret messages" exchanged through the cryptographic language deciphered by its operators. In this sense, there is ample reason to believe that, at the turn of the 20th century, a new American technological community had sprung up around this innovation and was virtually connected by the potential of instantaneous communication and immediate interconnections.

Moving towards the concern of personal identity, at this point it is essential to consider the role of the machine with reference to the body and, more specifically, to the interaction between technology and identity. As Laura Otis elegantly explains in her compelling study, "Since the 1840s, electronic communications networks have profoundly changed the way we see our bodies and thereupon the implications of communicating through the machine" (Otis 2). As previously mentioned, until relatively recently, the idea of the body as a machine has been repeatedly used by neuroscience to refer to the mechanics of the human organism as a compound of mechanical functions.[62] Whitman's description of the electric body illustrated this image, showing the construction of an electric identity, which inevitably involves mind and soul. It is significant then to say that in the second half of the 1800s, the signals sent by means such as the telegraph and the telephone were compared to the impulses transmitted by the nervous system. In a prominent lecture in the 1850s, German electro-physiologist, Emil Du Bois-Reymond[63] asserted that,

> The wonder of our time, electrical telegraphy was long ago modeled in the animal machine.
> But the similarity between the two apparatus, the nervous system and the electric telegraph,

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[62] As mentioned before, this image of Whitman's in "I Sing the Body Electric," compares the function and the mechanics of the body to those of an organic machine.

[63] Mostly known for his experimentation in electrophysiology, Du Bois-Reymond's works, which include studies of nerve impulses and electrical discharges were also based on the study of animal electricity.

has a much deeper foundation. It is more than similarity; it is a kinship between the two, an agreement not merely of the effects, but also perhaps of the causes (quoted in Otis 11).

Mark Twain addressed this issue in the short story "Mental Telegraphy" (1891), referring to the notion of telepathy as the interrelation between brain and pulses. The exchanges of what might be regarded as mere coincidences are associated by Twain with the immediacy of the transmission of telegraphic impulses to the nervous system, eventually being defined as "mental telegraphy." Raising scientific questions about the direct communication of thoughts, Twain's story considers "the telegraph as a model for the mind" (Otis 191). In this sense, his narrator suggests that "the telegram has gone straight to your brain to the man it was meant for, far outstripping the wire's slow electricity" (*MT* 108). The mind's telepathic abilities are thus equated to the machine's potential for instant communication system. In the following tale, "From the London Times of 1904" (1898), Twain recounts the invention of what he defines as "telectroscope." Again, the tool here offers the possibility of engaging in a mental voyage representing an evolution of the telegraph, producing simultaneous interconnections with different parts of the world. In his deeply ironic tones, both anecdotes inspired readers "to reexamine the body's ability to transmit information" (Otis 193-194).

Following the logic of embodied electrified transcendence, in the travelogue *Mardi* (1849) Melville seems to follow a similar concept, referring to the telegraph's sense of physical embodiment described by one of the characters as the means that for him, "[…] keeps up the perpetual telegraphic communication between my [his] outposts, toes and digits, and that grandee up aloft my [his] brain" (Melville 538). As such, in the late 19th century, the telegraph imitated the biological transmission of thoughts and the mind's capacity to process information was equated to the wire's ability to form and elaborate messages.[64]

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[64] An ample section of Otis's compelling study, *Networking* (2013), is devoted to the relationship between the telegraph and the body exercising two similar functions transmitting immediate impulses

By further investigating this concept, we see how from the 1850s onward, this means became a model associated with the body's ability to function as a machine, thus illustrating the marvel of this technology and its capacity to produce immediate impulses. All such attributions imply that, as we shall see, bodies and the new technical novelties in the 1800s to a certain degree, redefined the notion of personhood and therefore questioned the concept of the Self, filtered by the machine and then suspended in or endangered by an artificial realm. As Otis further explains,

> Like our own comparisons of brains to computers, these early alignments of bodies and technologies altered people's sense of identity. […] Then, as now, sending electronic messages challenged the traditional notion of a bounded, delimited individual, then one is defined through his connection to others, with an identity that is better represented by a vector diagram than by a bounded cell. (10)

This statement implies a reconceptualization of the body by the telegraphic means, suspending the physical presence and questioning the ethics of personhood via instantaneous communication with the elusive presence of an "Other" produced by interconnectivity over the wire.[65] In *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan makes clear that the telegraph, anticipating sophisticated technologies, proposed a concrete sense of personal fragmentation which came over the circuit and consequently opened an age of unprecedented anxiety, gradually moving towards the age of wireless communication. This attribution suggests how this system of communication, as did other forms of innovations, imposed a new sense of subjectivity produced by direct physical interaction with the machine.

In a similar way, Paul Gilmore remarks that "the telegraph challenged individual boundaries through its ability to detach words from the presence of actual bodies and gestures […] and it contributed to the spiritualization of electricity" (85). The intriguing performativity and the challenging attitude prompted by this novelty, which seemed to

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[65] We will eventually broaden this analysis in the final part of this research with reference to the digital age.

offer the possibility of a "freedom of constraint" (Stubbs 91) from the limits of the body and a sense of enthralling anonymity, converged in producing enduring misinterpretations of identity, suspended, masked and encrypted. Given this, the thrill of uncertainty generated by the telegraph exemplified the ethics of in-betweenness, exposing the Self to the dichotomy of reality vs artificiality, disarticulating and eventually disembodying corporeality through a mediated technological experience. According to this view, early forms of communication formed what Sherry Turkle later terms "laboratories for the construction of identity" (Turkle 1997). At this point, it is essential to consider this technological machine as a virtual vehicle which offered the possibility of playing with the issue of selfhood, and consequently, developing what media critics tend to define as an "Identity Masquerade," or as Stubbs asserts, "Some kind of meditation in the ways communication technology can be used to negotiate embodiment" (99).[66]

Seen from this perspective, the telegraph, as well as more developed forms of digital technology, did in fact provide a distraction from material contingencies and an escape from the limits of reality to take refuge in another world, far from the tangible concertedness of everyday life. In fact, this machine offered the possibility of constructing an unrealistic masquerade of the Self by translating the actual into the virtual and, as our first example of literary analysis will prove, it also raised complicated issues regarding the status of the body and personal identity, for the first time jeopardized by the potentiality of telecommunications.

Despite the fact that all operators could in fact read messages in the cryptographic language utilized to communicate, there was a persistent sense of ambiguity prompted by the telegraph's impossibility of verifying the identity of the sender. As the first means which mapped forms of intersubjectivity, this device exposed users to a new unrealistic conception of personhood. Indeed, people engaged in a covert form of

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[66] In *New Media, 1740-1915* (2004) Gitleman and Pingree broaden the analysis by following the course of development in terms of communication in the field of telecommunications and, more specifically, early forms of communications technology.

physical transcendence, trying on a new body and a new version of the Self, unraveled by the language of anonymity employed by the machine's persistent use.

However, if distant writing produced the enthralling excitement of receiving signals from an unknown entity at the other end of the circuit, it also created a sense of deep frustration caused by the limits of communication marked by the use of the code, which dictated the time and duration of the conversation. In this sense, media theorists have further suggested that this technology lead to an unprecedented enhancement of emotional development (Malin 198), inspiring disconcerting feelings of anxiety and enthusiasm and producing an overall sense of excitement.[67] The circuit, or the wire as it is more commonly known, turned into an unrealistic space in which to construct a new concept of identity. To a certain extent, telegraphists saw their bodies as extensions of the machine, moving towards the formation of what we might term a "technologized subject," referring to the construction of a virtual persona who eventually became an appendix of the medium.

Further still, this system implied the production of what Stubbs defines, from an intersubjective point of view, as "technologies of the Self" (103), alluding to the duplicities and vertigo of personhood threatened by the electric device, changing the way in which individuals understood the nature of their identity in relation to this machine. As the first technological means offering the experimentation of new identities through the creation of an artificial reality, the telegraph (as well as subsequent forms of communication technologies such as the telephone and the computer) challenged the complexity of selfhood. The sense of ambiguity and the possibility of masking a new performance of the Self, captured by the new artificial reality produced by subject-machine interaction altered patterns of human communications establishing a new sense of individuality.

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[67] In his recent analysis on the relationship between Media and emotion in America, Brandon J. Malin has broadly discussed the limits of the telegraph categorizing its impact on American society which, in his perspective, has produced an emotional response to its usage. The telegraph, along with other modern forms of digital communication technologies can therefore be defined as a technology of excitement.

## 3.2 Telegraphic Literature: Electro-Mechanical Narratives

The culture that developed around this novelty, marked by a general sense of excitement, led, towards the end of the 19th century, to the birth of a new literary genre which revolved around the endangering presence of the telegraph, exposing its users to amusing misunderstandings and humorous stories in the employment of this technological instrument. "Telegraphic Literature" was characterized by the recurrent presence of romantic narratives born over the line through the exchange of encrypted messages.[68] In a book published this year, Yoshiaki Furui argues that,

> In the wake of the invention of the telegraph, the United States in the 1870s and 1880s witnessed the emergence of what is generally termed *telegraphic literature*, a constellation of popular fiction written by or about telegraph operators about their works and lives (135).[69]

These stories focused, in fact, on telegraphic connections from a considerably different perspective, using the machine as a tool to create dramas of mistaken identities. Foreshadowing cases of identity mix-ups typical of the Internet age and yet actually unusual for the late 1800s, novels tended to use the telegraph to create a peculiar narrative tension exploring the potentialities of technology through its dangers and the overall sense of enthusiasm which came with the usage of this machine. Drawing from the rather limited presence of telegraphic exchange contained within American narrations, David Hochfelder observes that "The telegraph and electricity served as metaphors and plot devices in nineteenth-century fiction, poetry and essays" (97).

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[68] Although the presence of romantic narratives is more common than fictional accounts directly concerning the telegraph, in our analysis we will focus on the literary analysis of two examples of identity alteration in which the telegraph plays a part.

[69] For a recent perspective on telegraphic literature see Furui, Yoshiaki. *Modernizing Solitude. The Networked Individual in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. The University of Alabama Press, 2019.

Despite little attention being given to the genre, this literature has had much to say on the importance and the dangers of technology in relation to the status of personhood. The telegraph was therefore chosen for this analysis from among the tropes illustrated by American fiction in the late 1800s, as being the means that most epitomized the rapid ascent of progress with its system of immediate decoding and instantaneous connection. Further, this means had also reshaped the literary voice, which somehow condensed into the rapidity, conciseness and schematic aspects typical of electronic communication.[70] The linguistic register employed by such canonical authors as Ernest Hemingway and Emily Dickinson, "defined as telegraphic for its linguistic compression" (Hochfelder 98), became a valid example of how narrative style was shaped by the telegraphic immediacy. Indeed, the communicative language of intense condensation proposed by the machine influenced literature in two distinct ways: in writing, and in the creation of stories that dealt with its employment.[71] The more intriguing aspect of this tool from a literary standpoint manifests itself in the enthralling perspective offered by narratives that depicted the interconnections of body, identity and technology.

From a rather broad angle, the telegraph - although in a marginal way and not always at the forefront of the innovations illustrated by American fiction - can be considered a rather constant presence in 19th-Century novels and short stories. By its very nature, the medium often acted as the backdrop for events, and thus became an essential tool for narrative turns that eventually changed the course of narration itself. In the much-loved novel by Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868), the telegraph becomes the

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[70] The transformation of the literary voice by technology is even more evident today with postmodern and transhuman narratives in which not only do novels portray the schematic nature of modern technology, but they also increasingly incorporate it as an important part of the narrative, as evidenced in dystopian fiction and in the contemporary novels of Jennifer Egan.

[71] To know more on the close relationship between the language of the telegraph and the narrative voice of 19th-Century American authors, see Hochfelder, D. *The Telegraph in America: 1832-1920.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

instrument of contact with the dramatic reality of the war. For this reason, the received message carrying the news of Mr. March's combat-related injuries is categorized by the women as "One of them horrid telegraph things" (Alcott 168). Significantly, in *Pierre, or, the Ambiguities* (1852), Melville uses the telegraph to concretely materialize the perpetual sense of ambiguity as the text evolves. Delineating a sense of spiritual electricity carried through the body, Melville builds a conversation between the two highly-elusive protagonists, Pierre and Isabel, in which the alternations of equivocal glances are eventually described as, "vile, falsifying telegraphs" (Melville 157). This visual interchange refers to a transposition of impulses producing certain "telegraphic misreadings" (Goble 88), which in this case contribute to enriching the narrative's strongly enigmatic sense.

Much more relevant for the purposes of our analysis are those stories that illustrate the close relationship between subject and machine, reality and immateriality. All such dynamics are exemplified by Henry James's most sustained and discussed consideration of the telegraph, in the novella *In the Cage* (1898). Through the examination of the melancholic confinement of an unknown telegraphist, the reader is presented with a technological parable. The narrative's tension lies deep within a telegraphic framework, illustrating the power of the medium to wander and isolate body and mind in a parallel reality created through information exchange. The means' poignant resonance and the operator's physical and emotional condition, extending the limits of the body through the machine, is then described "as if she had bodily leaped, cleared the top of the cage and alighted on her interlocutress" (James 155).

The female operator is in effect confined either to the cage at the telegraphic office or enclosed in the unrealistic space of the wire, where she fantasizes about the romantic affair between the two lovers James's protagonist connects over the circuit. The narrator's description of her routine leaves no doubt as to her position in the narrative being respectively enclosed inside the office and outside tangible reality. The presence of artificial interconnectivity offers an escape from monotony, thus allowing her to dream about emotional involvement in the love affair between Captain Everard and Lady Brandeen through a completely virtual experience. The plot, therefore, unfolds

on a very simple scenario, highlighting the dichotomy between real and unreal, materiality and hyperreality, in which the telegraphist's identity is torn between a technologized self and her realistic material role at the telegraph office. A closer inspection of the character would therefore suggest how the story sheds light on the divisions of social class and work possibilities through technology for American women in the 19th century. It further ratifies the presence of technology as an alternative escape on which to project an evasion from material constraints, stimulating people's imagination, re-envisioning the position of the Self in an unrealistic space. For this reason, James's protagonist believes that, "her framed and wired confinement produces a certain expansion of her consciousness" (James 117), as she gains interest in her clients' affair.

Stories by and about telegraphists offered examples of the exciting dramas this system created, triggering the concept of privacy, producing conflicting feelings of alienation and thus exposing subjects to the mediated personal experience of performing the Self over the wire. The figure of the woman as operator, recurrently present in most of these stories of romances, certainly deserves brief mention. The telegraphic girl became a narrative choice of this genre, depicting women with a split identity torn between physical presence, through their role as distant receivers, and virtual appearance, mentally wandering over the line in their connection with an elusive entity at the other end of the cable. Female telegraphists also reflected the preoccupation with women as operators, considered inferior to their male cohorts. The anxiety of the position of women and their vulnerable function from a gendered perspective determined a strict dichotomy between the electrical threat and the technological promise that means prefigured.

The telegraphic office, widely criticized by James and defined as "the cage" (with reference to the electric enclosure in which most operators worked) was often domesticized by the new figure of the working woman, who made it far more accommodating and hospitable by transferring a sense of home to a functional and technological environment. A fictional response to the construction of a sense of domesticity through the woman's social position as operator is well exemplified by

Josie Shofield's romance "Wooing by Wire" (1875). Published in the Canadian journal *Telegrapher*, the story epitomizes the socially-committed position of women as telegraphists, marginalized and alienated, thus portraying their need to confer a domestic ethos onto the confined physical space of the office.[72]

Similar fictions, inaugurating the genre of telegraphic literature, include the humoristic volume of anecdotes *Lighting Flashes and Electric Dashes* (1877). As the volume's preface advises,

> To the general reader, however, into whose hands may be well to say that the telegraph business of late years has made such rapid progress, and the numbers of its votaries became so great, that the art seems to demand a literature of its own. (Johnson 3)

Collecting both realistic and fictive recountings of the telegraph's perils and excitements, these stories focus on the machine as the mechanical tool that creates identity manipulations and romantic comedies of errors, anticipating misinterpretations of subjectivity typical of the Internet age. "A Perilous Christmas Courtship; or Dangerous Telegraphy" contained within this volume of humor, fun, wit and wisdom (as the preface suggests), highlights such a scenario portraying the erotic encounter of two telegraphists who engage in a flirtatious exchange over the wire. In a similar way, the following story "What came of being Caught in a Snow-Storm," depicts the unusual meeting between two operators, Fannie Osborne and Fred Thorne. Seeking shelter from a blizzard he encounters during a long journey on Christmas Eve, Thorne accidentally knocks on the door of the Osborne's family house, discovering with surprise that the daughter of the warmly welcoming couple is also a telegraph operator. At the end of this unusual encounter the two, now back at work at the telegraph office in the following days randomly intercept each other over the wire decoding their respective identities, and start an exchange of messages and then a courtship via telegraph. In an

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[72] For more on the role of women as telegraphists in the late 1800s see the relatively broad and recent analysis in Jepsen Thomas, C. *My Sisters Telegraphic: Women in the Telegraph Office, 1846-1950.* Ohio University Press, 2000.

attempt to decipher the identity of the woman in the virtual space of the machine through encoded communication, the narrator asserts,

> A few more remarks on either side sufficed to establish the identity of both; Fred remarking that his surprise was greater from the fact he understood she was only a pupil, when she really proved to be a fine operator. [..]. It was surprising how many times during that and succeeding days, our pressman found time to run over to that way wire, and chat a few minutes with FO (117).

The world of liaisons created by this technology leads us to categorize this literary genre, as "Techno-Romance" (Goble 41), characterized by the exchange of virtual communication and the construction of hyperrealistic personae. These fictions, as Richard Menke has recently made clear, narrate "the power of the telegraph to connect people, to increase mutual sympathy, to transmit human thought aimlessly" (35). We can certainly draw the conclusion that these texts highlighted the technicalities of communication and therefore illustrated effective examples of personal manipulations through one of the first forms of communications technologies. In examining this dynamic, recent scholarship has argued that,

> Although the telegraph has disappeared, its memory lives on in the admiring accounts of journalists, media scholars, and sociologists who have variously hailed it as a prototype of all electrical communications, media and the harbinger of all the present-day Information Age. (Richard 2)

More broadly, the aim of this chapter's following section is to consider the telegraph as the first example of electronic communication and consequently as the starting point from which to analyze the first alteration and the redefinition of personal identity by means of technology. The two literary examples that follow, even though similar in their illustration of the means' challenges to identity, are diverse in their description of its usage and will shed light on the problematization of personhood and therefore on the capacity of early machines to expose identity to the hyperrealistic/dangerous space of technology.

## 3.3 Wired Confinement, Virtual Subjectivity and Encrypted Identities
## in Ella Cheever Thayer's *Wired Love* (1879)

When reference is made to telegraphic literature, a prime example usually offered is the little-known novel by Ella Cheever Thayer, *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes* (1879). In the narrative, Thayer envisages the power of the telegraph, recounting the deliriously mediated relationship between two telegraphists who fall in love, "overcoming some melodramatic hurdles consuming their courtship over the wire" (Goble 398). The narrative trajectory of the story offers an exhaustive example of the protagonists' masked identities, not only obscured and suspended by the telegraph, but also threatened by the potentiality of this means. Using the trope of the machine, Thayer cleverly illustrates how telecommunications in the novel operate at a very personal level, challenging the notion of the Self, cornered in the artificial space of the circuit, endangered by the total suspension of physical presence.

The plot unfolds, illustrating the mistaken interception over the circuit between telegraphists Nattie Rogers and Clem Stenwood. In a way similar to modern online chats, through telegraphic communication the two begin an exchange of messages, ignoring their respective physical identities, consummating their courtship through the machine, and then meeting in person only at the end of the story. In a twist of ambiguities typical of this form of communication, Nattie expresses her enthusiasm for the thrill of uncertainty in telegraphic dating, asserting that "It must be very romantic and fascinating to talk with someone so far away, a mysterious stranger too, that no one has never seen […] there is something so nice about anything with a mystery" (Thayer, *Wired Love*[73] 24). As evidenced by the enciphered language employed in the telegraph system and the elusive nature of their realistic selves, the protagonists' identities are eventually encoded by the machine and their names are merely identified with the simple initials of "N" and "C." Even the question of their gender is expressed by the narrator, "She [Nattie] then

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[73] Hereafter cited as *WL*.

scolded herself for caring whether that distant individual was a man or a woman" (*WL* 11).

Evidence of the characters' encoded identities is shown by Thayer in the description of their unknown personalities: "[…] And all this time it never occurred to them that excepting 'N' was for Nattie, and 'C' was for Clem, they knew really nothing about each other, not even their real names" (*WL* 22). The "encrypted Self," as we will henceforth define it, represents the suspension of a realistic social identity superseded by the construction of a virtual one. For this reason, as Stubbs suggested, Thayer's novel portrays the space of telegraphy as a place that "enables corporeal and social plasticity" (*WL* 99). Given the fact that the two operators establish a private conversation in the artificial space of the machine, this disembodiment of personality allows them to play with the issue of selfhood in the technological space generated by their electronic intercourse. The two, unaware of their respective identities, use technology as a tool for disembodiment, through a hyperreality that produces unknown and factitious personalities. In this way, the circuit becomes the vehicle used to establish what we can define as a new technologized image of the Self. In addition to the intriguing escape provided by this communicative tool, one can also consider the space described by Thayer as divided between the virtual reality of the circuit and the parallel world of the wire. The first description of Miss Rogers highlights her clear inbetweenness,

> Miss Nattie Rogers, telegraph operator, lived, as it were, in two worlds. The one her office, dingy and curtailed as to proportions, but from whence she could wander away through that slender telegraph wire, on a sort of electric wings, to distant cities and towns; where although alone all day, she did not lack social intercourse, and where she could amuse herself as she chose, by listening to and speculating upon the many messages of joy and sorrow, of business and of pleasure, constantly going over the wire. (*WL* 9)

This passage points out the contrast of reality vs artificiality, generated by the machine, which produces a sense of virtual confinement. For this reason, these essential problems

of technological subjectivity are evidenced by Thayer's female protagonist who sees this instrument as a personal social distraction and an escape from material life.

Following this logic, the novel's criticism proposes that, in the narrative, the telegraph enables self-abstraction, dismantling reality for the formation of a non-identity detached from the material body (Stubbs 103). Far from true reality and closer to a virtual one, the technological medium described by Thayer recalls the function of the telegraph as an identity formation "apparatus," elaborating the cliché of the machine as an instrument that dehumanizes the body and constructs a sense of artificial subjectivity. For Thayer's protagonists the telegraph highlights the vulnerability of the human body problematized by the construction of the technological realm that Nattie and Clem use as a private, and we could also suggest, intimate space, for communication. Even so, the author solidifies this point by using telecommunications as the metaphorical vehicles used to disentangle the nature of personal identity. Therefore "in *Wired Love* it is difficult to distinguish minds and bodies from machines; they somehow perform the same function and offer images in which psychological and technological systems merge" (Otis 155).

Seen in this light, the novel suggests the efficient assimilation of operators' bodies with the technological appliance as they eventually become an extension of each other. The close relationship between telegraph and operator and their union, or rather the body, as an appendix of the machine, is well represented in Nattie, when the narrator reports that "[…] she was conscious of holding in some slight contempt the possible abilities of the human portion of this machinery" (*WL* 1). Bestowing a sense of humanity on the electric tool, we therefore witness a realistic upheaval in the distinction between humans and technologies which, as Thayer points out, do not simply merge but become almost indistinguishable from each other in their functions. In this way, Nattie and Clem become a whole with the communicative device and at the same time are able to abandon themselves to the virtual space. If body and machine therefore combine, as Thayer shows, the Self remains suspended and therefore trapped in the parallel universe of the electric circuit. These essential problems of virtual subjectivity are fully embraced by her protagonists who, through technology, alternate reality with artificiality and consequently, truthfulness with performativity.

In this sense, the notion of performance deserves specific attention. Nowhere is this concept better distilled than in Thayer's novel. One of the most exciting aspects of the narrative lies in the unfortunate misunderstanding generated by Clem's hidden identity. As the story develops and the news of their virtual exchange becomes public, another operator uncovers their hidden intercourse, appearing at the office proclaiming the identity of the true Clem. What would happen, in fact, as suggested by Nattie's friend, if "[…] suppose- just suppose, your mysterious invisible shouldn't be – just what you think you know" (*WL* 24). Nattie therefore presupposes another identity for Clem, who is cunningly blackmailed by the anointed impostor who appears at the telegraph office. Hence, our shy telegraphist, almost failing to associate the identity of the unknown, impertinent figure with that of the charming Clem, deludes herself that the machine has been able to confer a sense of materiality to the mysterious "C," which so far has merely identified himself as an entity. The narrator remarks,

> At these words, that explained the previous incomprehensible difference between the distant "C" and present person, the realization of the companionship, the romance, the friendship gone to wreck on this reef of musk and bear's-grease came over Nattie with a rush, and for a moment so affected her that she could hardly restrain her tears. And yet, after all, was not "C," *her*[74] "C," the "C" whom she knew by his conversation only – "picked out of books" – an unreal intangible being, and not this so different person who claimed his identity? (*WL* 49)

The appropriation of an unknown personality, whose real aspect is hidden behind the machine, anticipates a recurrent problem of modern technology, namely identity fraud and the confusing dynamics of technological/cyber security.[75] This concept, taken to the extreme today in our use of the digital, leads us to consider the telegraph, at the

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[74] Emphasis in the original.

[75] We will not dwell now on the concept of privacy and surveillance, but instead we will deal with it extensively in the part of our analysis devoted to 21st -century technologies, the Internet and the digital domain.

core of the narrative, as the means of production of what becomes the "Other Self." It seems therefore clear that telegraphers or users, as they are commonly defined today in the computer age, employed these technologies to produce a second subject, artificially forged by the machine. The presence of a second personality, in *Wired Love* wooed through the wire, endangers in different ways the notion of personhood. As such, this image points to the scenario created by Thayer. The flow of a virtual language in the encrypted space of the telegraph (much like the Internet today) leads to a sense of mystery which causes the disassemble of realistic bodies, producing a consequent struggle for self-expression, undermining the nature of individuality.

Nattie and Clem's true face-to-face meeting, which Thayer leaves with clever suspense until the end, turns into a personal recognition. The hyperrealism produced by technology concretely materializes when the two meet by chance, and Clem persistently tries to convince Nattie of his identity. To answer the woman's enduring doubts about the man's real status, Clem materializes his own Self, now realistic, alleging: "What! I am not believed? […] What more shall I do to convince you of my identity? You accepted our red-haired friend readily enough" (*WL* 79). The culmination of Clem's asserted Self brings from Nattie the acknowledgment that "It isn't a dream! You are 'C', the real 'C'" (79). To a certain extent, our ingenious operator has been victim of identity theft. Having detected the fraud, Clem forcibly re-appropriates of his identity outside the context of the machine, interrupting telegraphic connection in order to exteriorize his personality.

Although at this point in the novel the notion of personhood has taken on a material form, far from the status of virtuality produced by technology, reality deprives itself of that sense of mystery that enabled the exchange of cryptographic messages and the presence of unmaterialistic personae. Nattie and Clem, in fact, after recognizing their respective characters seem, as Thayer shows, to regret their use of the virtual immateriality of the telegraph. Indeed, the novel ends with the two in an attempt to restart telegraphing their love. A few pages later Nattie in fact observes that "It is nicer talking on the wire isn't it? […] We ought to have a private wire of our own, since a wire is so necessary to our happiness!" (90). As this scene clearly indicates, the role of

the machine and the sense of mystery that still leads us today to hide behind a technological means of communication (whether it be a telephone, a telegraph or the computer), is the necessary condition to establish social relations in the modern era. In this sense, there is a true performance of selfhood enforced by the machine and the space of the circuit that menaces personal integrity, realistically non-existent, and thus predominantly artificial.

Simply put, the telegraph requires consideration for its capacity to produce, although in a less sophisticated way, most of the problems we live today. Thayer's novel represents the first true literary example of threat to identity through one of the early forms of communications, inaugurating this "literary journey," as this work could be defined, and illustrating the advantage of technology as the medium used to endanger, question, threaten and perform, the status of personhood.

The narrative's uncontested capacity to anticipate our contemporary age is illustrated in the following quote, which prophetically anticipates the evolution of electronic tools and at the same time suggests how technology in the late 19$^{\text{th}}$ century was merely evolving toward a more modern techno-optimism.

> And what with the telegraph and the telephone, and that dreadful phonograph that bottles up all one says and disgorges at inconvenient times, we will soon be able to do everything by electricity; who knows but some genius will invent something for the especial use of lovers? Something for instance to carry in their pockets, so when they are far away from each other, and pine for a sound of 'that beloved voice', they will only have to take up this electrical apparatus put it to their ears and be happy. Ah! Blissful lovers of the future! (*WL* 27)

Drawing an astonishing parallel with modern technologies, this anticipation of artificial identity encourages readers to think of where telecommunications are eventually heading. This premonition, extremely topical and rather unusual for the period in which the story is set, suggests how the telegraph can certainly be considered as the technological means at the origin of potential problems related to identity and the machine. As the passage prophesies, written when thoughts, words, minds, and bodies

began to become wired, Thayer's novel anticipates the problems of our digital age, offering an insightful case study on the way in which identity had been challenged by technology long before its modern development. *Wired Love* becomes the early example of networked identities, aptly offering an image of the machine as the threating force that, on the way to its modern evolution, unravels reality for the sake of an immaterial space which disembodies and disintegrates the notion of subjectivity. Capturing these dynamics, Otis vividly argues that "In *Wired Love* the modern technology of the telegraph presents delicious means of subverting physical and social obstacles of communication" (153).

As seen in the novel, here one can join other scholars in suggesting that the telegraph, exemplifies an image of the machine as an identity construction device, and which enables physical plasticity so that the body is ready to lose its real subjectivity to abandon itself, almost entirely, to the machine. Given this, *Wired Love* is a fruitful literary example which inaugurates the dichotomy of technology-identity in the canon of American literature.

## 3.4 Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* (1889) and the Technological Performance of Self-Identity

As the investigation of identity-technology progresses, when we refer to communication technologies in late 19th-century American fiction, an implicit reference certainly points to Mark Twain and his intriguing interest in the development of modern innovations. Given that no author has better illustrated the appearance and consequent evolution of progress, the full scope of Twain's literary production dealt with the image of technical advancements fictionalized in the pages of his works with realism and humor. In this sense, the theatricality and performativity of his prose is

quite evident. In the detailed criticism on humor in Twain, James Cox[76] writes that "Because he was a humorist, the response was laughter a vocal yet non-verbal approval not at the end of the performance but all through it" (IX). Indeed, the author is essentially considered as a performer acting his own identity as a writer (he was known by the pseudonym of Mark Twain), developing his prose based upon comical scenarios. Often intrigued by the power of telecommunications and the possibility of transferring immediate information at long distances, his narrative production often recounted the power of innovations to transform the limits of the human. Drawing from Twain's legacy as the quintessential 19th-centrury writer of science fiction and technology, Stephen Crabbe recently noted that his style can also be considered as an example of "technical writing, displaying clarity, consistency and conciseness" (141). On this point, general criticism has further observed that "To Mark Twain, technology performed miracles in liberating men from material and moral poverty" (Blues 52). As seen in the opening of this chapter, few authors besides Twain found the telegraph and technological novelties sufficiently intriguing to explore their literary possibilities.

As earlier mentioned, in "Mental Telegraphy," the narrative expresses the power of telegraphic technology both in terms of enthusiasm for it and skepticism. The direct transmission of thoughts or rather, the relationship between mind and language pushes readers to reconsider the function of the body in relation to the machine. Other stories such as "The Loves of Alonzo Fiz Clarens and Rosannah Ethlethon" (1878), the first work of literature to describe the telephone, emphasize the power of technology as a medium that far from simply reconsidering the boundaries and the limits of the human, tackles a strong relationship between the function of technological communications

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[76] The critical production of Twain can essentially be summed up in three fundamental texts: Albert Paine's four volume *Mark Twain: A Biography* (1912), Bernard De Voto's critical analysis in *Mark Twain's America* (1932) and Van Wyck Brook's psychological study in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920). To these it is worth adding two later volumes: James Cox's *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* (1966), an analysis of humor as a strategic narrative trope, and more recently, Cinzia Schiavini's clear and concise narrative exploration in *Leggere Twain* (2013).

and the impulses sent from the mind through the body. Sam Halliday aptly examines Twain's persistent praise of innovation asserting that,

> In his novels with the description of the telegraph and the telephone, we see how both means of communication make it rather easy, although in different ways, to be usurped, exchanged, abused and confused, endangering the individual's personality (88).

Among the great narratives that follow this literary trope, Twain ironically expands his stylistic evocation of automation in *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* (1889). Despite De Voto's popular interpretation of the novel, considering it as a narrative failure, the tale has always received positive attention among Twain's work for its apt mixture of civic conservatism[77] and technological praise. For this reason, *A Connecticut Yankee* has been officially classified as a "utopian fantasy novel" (Cox 203), displaying a combination of techno-scientific knowledge and political maneuvering both illustrated in a mixed narrative which is still rather difficult to categorize. Although not generally considered part of the canon of "telegraphic literature," and differently from Thayer, the novel is a valid example of identity challenges portrayed through technological interaction. Given its general interest in innovations the narrative can be more generally labeled as a "fable of progress" (Kehelenbach 92).

The investigation of the relationship identity-technology proceeds by interpreting the role of innovations (specifically the telegraph and the telephone) as the mediums that for Twain inevitably contribute to modifying the protagonist's rather complicated sense of Self. The story is quite well known: Hank Morgan, a modern Yankee mechanic from 19th-century Connecticut, finds himself mysteriously transported back in time to

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[77] The term is generally defined as a sense of concern toward the state and individuals whose relationship implies a certain political interest. In this case, the protagonist Hank Morgan tries to colonize the Arthurian past through a civic conservatism to spread American democracy.

Arthurian England.[78] After an initial state of confusion, Morgan is eventually able to colonize the underdeveloped world of King Arthur's reign through his knowledge of modern technologies. His technological ability is eventually diffused to modernize the Arthurian kingdom causing the Court to consider him as a skillful magician.[79]

Considered a satire on the underdevelopment of European society, Twain's novel reflects remarkably on the relationship between the United States and Europe, which are concretely contrasted in their relative technological developments. In this respect, it would be rather implicit to consider progress as the metaphor for a symbolic return to a past of barbarism. The protagonist's knowledge and his ability to use modern forms of communication allow him to have immediate control of the past through his expertise in technical means. Haunted by nostalgic feelings for the present, Hank Morgan epitomizes the strong tension between these two worlds: the mediaeval past and the technological present which, as Strout has recently suggested, "become polarized in the novel" (337). In this sense, the narrative contrasts two different realities: the march of civilization against the inevitable looming threat of progress. To a certain extent, Twain also expresses how the protagonist epitomizes a certain addiction to technologization that ultimately becomes a fundamental element of his self-definition. This concept, typically American, is essentially linked to the philosophy of "Manifest Destiny" which, as examined, partly shapes the American sense of identity.

Following the plot's narrative twists, Twain admittedly captures a certain relationship between the technological machine and the identity of the average American strikingly defined by his knowledge of modern innovations. Even though Twain's novel seems a banal juxtaposition of humorous episodes and historical ambiguities, personhood also

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[78] In the novel's opening, the narrator works as an employee in the Colt arms factory in Hartford. This feature represents another curious reference to technology. The protagonist is not only a product of American society of the late 1800s, influenced by the advance of progress, but comes into close contact with technology in his manual work in the factory.

[79] The reform implemented by the protagonist is not only technological but also political and economic.

plays a rather relevant role. The identity of the modern technological being is, per se, divided between past and present, innovation and tradition. Indeed, what Twain seems to problematize here is the ethical, trans-human and trans-historical transplant of an American identity, partly endangered by the usage of early technologies. The body of our protagonist is therefore uprooted into a different epoch and merely redefined by the promotion of modern machines. The Yankee's identity is in effect suspended in a parallel reality, the Middle Ages, massively influenced by the presence of progress. Much like *Wired Love*'s telegraphists users and their extra-corporeal experience, Hank Morgan takes part in a technological path of self-reformation.

A deeper significance emerges, however, if we consider that Hank is divided between two opposingly-linked realities (Europe and America), and he is also forced to adopt another personality in order to use telecommunications in the past. This is how, undermining Merlin thanks to his technical knowledge, the Yankee is defined by the Court as "the Boss,"[80] passing himself off as a skillful magician. Illustrating the re-appropriation of an inexistent identity in order to exploit technology, as Lerer notices, "The novel stands at the centerpiece for dramatic role plays and for a culture of performance" (471).

Seen from this perspective, the narrative trajectory of the story displays an example of impersonation through the exploitation of technological potential. Hank's behavior reminds us of the figure of the modern American entertainer, P.T Barnum, created on the premise of a social performance in the wake of a new form of public appearance (one of the core issues of modernity). From this, then, emerged an interest in human zoos, removed from collective memory, which displayed "savages," primitive and non-technological forms of humanity. This spectacularization of "the Other," in this case

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[80] The use of the term "Boss" reminds us of other references in the use of the word. The term was often used by slaves to refer to their masters, whereas today it often refers to the political maneuverings of corrupted politicians. These allusions reconfirm the role of the Yankee in imposing his authority and power on European medieval society.

forced to perform a stigmatized personality, would then recall the debate of identity and the categorization of human beings into races.[81]

Yet, through an analysis of Twain's sarcastic reconceptualization of a personal role-play in *A Connnecticut Yankee*, Cinzia Schiavini sees this satirical mimicry as a representation of the increasing materialism of American culture at the turn of the 20th century (97). Following Twain's narrative construction, the reader is encouraged to participate in the dual contrast between "performer" and "reformer." However, we can easily associate the figure of the performer with both functions produced by the same identity being merely transferred and reformulated through innovation and social change. Hank Morgan is, in fact, even as he is a reformer, a performer using his ability to stage a masquerade of modern identity in the past through the dissemination of progress. Captured in this interpretation, Twain's parodic illustration of the age of chivalry, through the farce of a satirical impersonation of the modern Self, highlights the technological success of the present in contrast to the failures of the past. As such, identity becomes an essential subterfuge needed to play a part in the past becoming the stratagem with which to interact with technologies.

Through the frequent recurrence of the ethics of personhood jeopardized by technical novelties, we witness a "narrative transmutation" (Lerer 472) in a story centered on a comic transformation based on a theatrical impersonation, once more shaped and thus reconfigured by technology. As reflected in the plot, innovation becomes the necessary means for survival, turning into a salvific element indispensable for the modern individual, unable to adapt to the retrograde society of the past.

The accomplishment of this "technological design," implemented by innovations, is described as follows:

> Slavery was dead and gone; all men were equal before the law […] The telephone, the telegraph, the phonograph, the typewriter, the sewing-machine, and all the thousand willing and handy servants of steam and electricity were working their way into favor. We

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[81] For thorough investigation on this, see Deroo, Eric. *Zoo Umani: dalla Venere ottentotta ai reality show*. Ombre Corte, 2003.

had a steamboat or two on the Thames, we had steam warships, and the beginning of a steam commercial marine; I was ready to send out an expedition to discover America (Twain *A Connecticut Yankee*,[82] 343).

As this passage clearly demonstrates, Hank Morgan aims to create an ambitiously technological project. At a critical moment in the narrative, on the verge of civilization, Twain's narrator reminds us of his innovative plan, "We had another large departure on hand, too. This was a telegraph and a telephone; our first venture in this line. […]" (*CY*, 73). This scene exemplifies the pattern of a technological innovation leading to the envisioning of a great democratic reform, aiming to ameliorate the conditions of underdevelopment of Arthurian society. Such a view is easily supported by Hank's accurate description of his intention,

> Wherefore being a practical Connecticut man, I now shoved this whole problem out of my mind 'til its appointed day and hour should come, in order that I might turn all my attention to the circumstances of the present moment, and be alert and make the most out of them that could be made. […] I would boss the whole country inside of three months; […] I'm not a man to waste my time after my mind's made up and there's work on hand (*CY* 20-21).

In this passage readers are encouraged to sympathize with the Yankee's apparently successful project, colonizing the past through the power of high-tech development. Hank Morgan is indeed the mechanical man par excellence combining a lust for self-authenticity and individualism that, in modern 19th-century America, were noticeably fostered by technical ability. There is no doubt that Hank himself is a product of the Industrial Revolution, eager to share his know-how of modern advancements.

However, as the analysis discloses, another interpretation emerges. Although Twain ambiguously presents the successful outcomes of the Yankee's colonizing plan, his dramatic conclusion illustrates the failure of innovation. At the end of the story, in a

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[82] Hereafter cited as *CY*.

massive scene of carnage, Hank is mortally wounded, punished by Merlin who condemns him to a trance of 1300 years with the promise that he will awaken at the end of the 19th century. The apocalyptic final scenario highlights the disappointment in the technological ideal and the collapse of a society that, although modernized, does not seem to be able to resist change. In this way, if Twain on the one hand tries to represent the image of a modern American capable of acquiring an identity in the past thanks to his industrial knowledge of the present, on the other, the tragic ending suggests the ultimate failure of his technological plan.

The observant reader would therefore detect a double tendency in Twain to idealize progress, which does not triumph here from a positive standpoint, but instead culminates in the decline of a medieval society reorganized and resettled on the premise of modern progress. Technology therefore becomes the tool used to avoid a social downturn which becomes almost inevitable. In the name of change, Hank gives impetus to a mechanical "New Deal" that aims to create an empire of progress, eventually epitomizing the perceived recession of Western civilization.

If this is therefore the general conduct through which the narration unfolds, in paying a sharper attention to the nature of identity we witness a real transformation of Hank's sense of Self. At this point, it is clear how the protagonist undergoes a significant personal change both in attitude and in his unique approach to the past's retrograde manners. As reflected in his arrival in the 6th century, Morgan initially feels disoriented, out of space, as if he had lost his identity as a modern American, reacquiring a sense of Self merely in the disclosure of progress. He remarks,

> I saw that I was just another Robison Crusoe cast away on an inhabited island, with no society, but some more or less tame animals, and if I wanted to make life bearable, I must do as he did- invent, contrive, create and reorganize things; set brain and hand to work, and keep them busy (50).

Despite its re-adaption and redefinition, Hank's identity never loses its nurtured sense of individualism. By engaging with this interpretation, the protagonist immediately confirms

his American character: "I am American. […] I am a Yankee of the Yankees" (9-10) and, as he further declares at the conclusion of his social revolution, "I had adopted the American values exclusively" (101).[83] The contemporary Yankee, characterized by contrasting attitudes, from skillful colonizer to fragile product of social advancements, stages a construction of modern identity deeply rooted in the promise and the consequent employment of technology. The protagonist's experience, from modern American to courtier in Camelot, turns into a path of personal transformation, through which the nature of the Self configures in a different world and into a diverse social reality of underdevelopment. As the protagonist observes, referring to his personal and trans-temporal adventure, "It was a transformation. I no longer resembled my former self" (323).

Identity is important as the strategic narrative device used to illustrate the approach to modern technologies; complications of personality also indicate how the concern for the notion of personhood, as convoluted as it might be, is constantly evolving, being almost totally indefinite, or rather, redefined in different epochs and contexts. The protagonist for Twain encompasses that sense of personal fragmentation brought on by the usage of early forms of communication. In a larger sense, in losing his personality as a modern American, the character's sole stratagem to determine his Self-authenticity lies in the possibility to "boss" and technologically modernize the feudal world though the choice of a public performance of false identity. Therefore, no one knows the protagonist's true Self, as it is prominently modified to employ the use of machines. This narrative downturn contributes to building a game of alterity and ambiguity that re-discusses the condition and the nature of personal identity. Hence, a solid critique of the novel's dramatization of personhood would imply Twain's construction of an erosion of personality induced by a modern lust for technologization.

Following the plot's narrative trajectory, shifting from the promise of innovation to the disillusionment of its optimistic presence, identity crumbles, decomposes, deteriorates,

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[83] Twain also seems to be looking here, in a certain sense, at the contemporary affirmation of US power in Europe, determined in part by colonization through modern technological development.

deforms and ultimately perishes. So does the technology that destroys the fictitious unrealistic society created by Morgan based on the model of an industrial America. Through the staging of a modern identity readapted to the past, Twain warns his readers about the fundamental role of history and society in the evolutive process of revolutions, as Kuhn has suggested in reference to the paradigmatic process of the transformation of science and innovation. This mechanism originally based upon an initial techno-optimistic paradigm then in turn causes a revolution that leads to a sense of unstoppable threat and, consequently, to a cultural crisis. The *mise-en-scène* of a social decline portrays democracy as a mere illusion, envisaging the electronic advancement as an unavoidable force leading to violence and social destruction. The role of technology and, consequently, of identity, turns into a lust for revenge and a warlike desire to use progress to reaffirm modern democracy in Camelot. Capturing the disparity between progress and an ideological identity formation, Twain turns his American protagonist into a harsh dictator who, thanks to his seizure of power as a modern colonizer, ultimately generates the strong social hierarchy of oppressor vs oppressed. As he proudly states,

> To be vested with enormous authority is a fine thing; but to have the on-looking world consent to it is a finer […] (all this) solidified my power and made it impregnable […] I was no shadow of king; I was the substance; the king himself was the shadow. My power was colossal. (*CY* 56-57)

By taking over a mediaeval society and the empire of workers at his service, Hank Morgan reconfirms himself as both autocrat and dominator, civilizing, or rather "Americanizing," the uncivilized European society. As Twain shows, the Yankee's identity is re-adapted and re-established between places and temporal distances. In this sense, his personhood takes different forms. Twain's protagonist embodies the American Self, the modern man, and that of the "Boss," the democrat, the colonizer. In the plot's recurrent twists and ambiguities, technology becomes a performance strategy, which also figures as the essential element used to determine a concrete personality in the modern age. For Cox, the fictive construction of the Self in the Arthurian world implies that "The presence of a

theatrical identity converts the humiliation of the past into a genuinely pleasurable performance" (122). In other words, innovation becomes an instrument for disembodiment in a trans-material experience of self-definition in a performance acted out through space and time.

The political implications behind the lines of a humorous plot undermine the character's need to spread democracy- a distinguished, typically American trait. As such, the protagonist's political plan corresponds to "a need to democratize the country with a democratic arrogance" (Strout 102). The basic assumption that technology expands from the telegraph to the telephone and, consequently, to the construction of weapons denotes the Yankee's intent to develop his knowledge of progress to reaffirm a sense of Americanness while at the same time democratizing and colonizing society. It is therefore Hank's scientific expertise that allows him to transcend his own identity. His lack of a realistic character is then prompted by the need to use technology in a traditional, undermodernized past. This choice determines the construction of a second fictional personality re-adapted to the conditions of a pre-technological world. The comical struggle for survival and adaption to the traditions of the medieval past offers an image of technology that, unlike the positivist conception to which it was related at the turn of the 20$^{th}$ century, culminates in the tragic collapse of the feudal world. Most notably, the destructive force of mechanization endangers both identity and society. As a technocrat who believes in the power of modern innovations, Hank Morgan encompasses the identity-technology dualism as well as the limits of progress, which serves here as a means for self-definition and for the social democratization of European society.

The persistent juxtaposition of comic and tragic tropes as a key narrative device, contributes to threatening the limits of the human, whose identity is physically and emotionally transfigured through time travel. Supporting this view, in her compelling linguistic analysis of the novel, Lydia Cooper sees the narrative as "a dramatic exploration of an essential humanity consistent throughout history and place" (68-69). She furthermore argues that, "the novel fuses time, place and ultimately language, in order to demonstrate the consistency of human nature" (69). There is, in fact, a constant need in Hank Morgan for personal redefinition, to outline and determine his condition as a human

being in a past to which he does not belong and that does not consider him, in the conception of modern individual, as such. In this sense, the final battle illustrates a brutal massacre eventually displaying the conflict of two dissimilar cultures suppressed by the expansion of technological change. In *A Connecticut Yankee*, time is therefore the essential narrative element that re-doubles history and identity in an ambiguous game shaped by the proliferation of technologies.

Characters in this sense are allowed by Twain to play with the issue of selfhood, changing, switching and then transcending, the concept of personhood through the empowerment of their high-tech knowledge. Whether examined as an example of ironic narrative (the scene of King Arthur's court in battle riding bicycles is memorable), or as a parable exalting the power of innovation, the book can certainly be classified as a direct attack, from an American perspective, on England's feudal past (Allen 435). Twain's satire has therefore a double interpretative edge, directly denouncing pre-industrial modernization and at the same time staging a failure of the society it was meant to celebrate. In this way, Hank's dream[84], as he often defines it, promises to replace injustices and the social immobility of the feudal past, with his own utopian vision of American progress.

For this reason, it is necessary to consider Twain's Yankee as the embodiment of modern American identity, characterized by the enthusiastic impetus of progress, and thus sharing the unprecedented technological enthusiasm that characterized late 19th-century America. The fakes and consequent failures of personhood (recreated, destroyed and somehow lost) serve as a way to solidify the monopoly of technical knowledge. Considered in their broad outline, Hank Morgan's vicissitudes offer one of the first examples of powerful technological disillusionment, unravelling the nature of individual human identity. In turn, Hank's technology is essentially powerful enough to transform society, reestablishing an American character, and at the same time it is "powerless to combat the real enemies of his utopian vision" (Allen 445). Also Merlin, as the skilled magician and political

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[84] It could be seen here as a real "American dream" related to the concept of a "Manifest Destiny," based upon a necessary sense of colonization and the spread of democracy, both of which are almost entirely inevitable.

strategist Twain depicts him to be, conjures a different identity disguising himself as an old woman and exposing the Yankee's false personality, forcing him to return to the century to which he belongs. The reader is almost left with a sense of suspense in his attempt to fathom the realistic personality of the protagonist, caught in the dream of technologization and then brought back to his modern origins.

Despite the overall mixed ambiguities surrounding the character's problematic concern for the Self, the role of technology remains undisputed. It becomes the necessary element for self-definition, constructing an identity in a past based on the imposition of innovation. At this point, it is rather clear how the telegraph and the telephone here became identity-formation technologies. Exposing his modern protagonist to the failures and the limits of progress, Twain's novel displays the utopian vision of progress and the creation of a dilemma either to participate in the evolution of technology or to be exposed to its failures, destroying society's main ideals. Quite simply, the relation with the Self is essential to interpreting the novel.

Crucially, however, identity becomes an essential way to document the evolution and the expansion of telecommunications, representing a synthesis of the technological machine and its undiscussed capacity to form a sense of identity by transcending the limits of the body. In such an interpretative approach, the novel becomes an example of an "Electro-Mechanical" narrative, indicating how technics have helped redefine the nature of personhood. Twain, albeit in a humorous way, ironicizes the relationship between humans and machines, illustrating and even anticipating, a performance of self-identity typical of the modern era presenting the distortion of personality through a digital/technological role play. The European past becomes a space in which to construct a fictitious persona, which in turn is kept alive by the presence of machines.

From a general reading, we can therefore classify *A Connecticut Yankee* among those narratives illustrating the rising presence of innovations, a retelling of the experience of personal identity being threatened and manipulated by telecommunications. Twain's novel can be located into the broad spectrum of technological narratives. It re-shapes the nature of the human in relation to the machine in recounting the story of the evolution of

the modern Self and the permeability of that identity adapted, transplanted and consequently re-shaped, by the genesis of modern technologies.

# 4. New Media: Hyperrealism, Simulations and the Loss of Identity, in Postmodern American Fiction

## 4.1 Communications Technologies in the 1960s and 1980s: An Itinerary toward Hyperrealism

Drawing on the progressive shift in telecommunications as it approaches the evolving digital revolution, it is essential to point out that relatively recent studies on New Media[85] have offered valuable insight into the magnified problems created by the rise of electronically-mediated communication. In his compelling cybernetic analysis in *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950), Norbert Wiener reframed our understanding of the unprecedented impact of information technology,[86] in the aftermath of World War II, as it progressed along with the dominant control of the machine, contending that,

> Modern society can only be understood through the use of messages and the means of communication related to them; and in the future development of these messages and means of communication, the messages between man and machines, machines and man and between machines and machines are deemed to play an increasingly relevant role (21-22).[87]

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[85] We use here, intentionally, the term "New Media" in reference to the mass media, as dating from the first half of the 20th century, where it refers to the recently developed devices based on new communication technologies.

[86] The term "Information Technology" (IT) is generally used to commonly indicate the mass electronic media, including telephone, television and telecommunications equipment in general.

[87] My translation.

The concept, which defines the modern vision of technological communication in the second half of the 20ᵗʰ century can essentially be understood as the exchange of messages, whose role has shifted from necessary need-based to extreme efficiency in communicating information of all kinds. The expertise of the new machines, as Wiener points out, drastically limits the condition of the human being who is eventually reduced in his functions by increasingly sophisticated electronic novelties. These new electronic tools, mostly conceived to elaborate and process data, force users to face an increasingly automated and mechanized culture.

The postwar period condensed the convergence of means of communication such as the telegraph and the telephone. One in fact suppressed by the evolution of the other, thus resulting in a general assemblage consisting of the advancement of these means that was in turn further implemented by the presence of personal computers. The function of new forms of electronics between the 1960s and the 1980s, however, can essentially be related to McLuhan's innovative definition of "Media"[64], the technological medium that evolves, inevitably creating extensions for the human senses. For him, the focus of the exchanged message is therefore the technology that, evolving toward its sophisticated development, has also been able to reshape and change the way we perceive reality. The subsequent creation of a network of telecommunications (in the 1970s and 1990s this consisted of the telephone and early computers), determined the official construction of a society dependent upon communication at a distance and eventually proposed the use of common definitions for structures such as: networks, personal computing and the information community. More than ever, the modern user had become immersed in the parallel, hyperreal world promoted by telecommunications, and thus was being ultimately embroiled in the vicious mechanization of society.

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[64] Although the current definition of digital has evolved towards the posthuman with the cyborg theories of Haraway and Hayles, the study of the concept of "Media," proposed by McLuhan in his groundbreaking analysis of the evolution of technology from the 1960s to the advent of the computer age is still extremely relevant today.

Drawing from the concept of hyperreality, it is most useful to clarify with Baudrillard's theory, regarded as one of the most effective analyses documenting the impact and shift of technologies in the late 1970s. As he clearly demonstrated, the age of information transmission (ranging from the second half of 1960s to the end of the 1990s, that is, prior to the digital revolution), has been characterized by an overall sense of hyperrealism. Simply put, material reality no longer exists but has instead been literally supplanted by the constant presence of an artificiality, which originates from the increasingly frequent use of new forms of communication. We do not refer to mere hyperrealism, rather to a necessity to consider simulation a representation of reality in order to substitute "the real for the real" (Baudrillard 1997, 2). Borrowing from McLuhan's terminology, in Baudrillard's perspective, realism is governed by simulation, caused by the quasi-obsessive use of new media, staging a sense of non-realistic illusion.[88] The culture of "Simulacra," as Baudrillard defines postmodern society with reference to its counterfeiting ethos in the late 1980s particularly, is mostly constituted by the reproduction of a sense of authenticity in the process built by media, which gives life to an artificial mindset of illusion.[89] While once it was therefore possible to distinguish between the real and the unreal, now the two concepts merge in a synthesis linked to artificiality. Society, as Bauman would claim, becomes liquid. The real decomposes and loses its meaning, allowing space for a pervasive sense of immateriality.

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[88] The term "Media" here refers to the modern computer and the advent of the new digital technologies from a more general standpoint.

[89] An example of this sense of hyperrealism according to Baudrillard is Disneyland, seen as the perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra, presented as a play of illusions, portraying America as a realistic place and therefore characterized by hyperrealism. The purpose of the theme park is therefore actually that of making us believe that what surrounds Disneyland is real, when it is almost completely characterized by technological simulation. See also Baudrillard, Jean. (2009). *Cyberfilosfia. Fantascienza, Antropoligia e Nuove Tecnologie*. Mimesis Edizioni.

Following this logic, the modern world turns into the "essential dissolving, dissuading action of information […]. Whoever is underexposed to the media is dissocialized or virtually asocial" (Baudrillard 1994, 55). Following McLuhan's formula, new means of communication develop a state of unsocialization. As a consequence, the penetration of innovations into reality generates, as analysis has shown, an alteration of subjectivity as well as what Baudrillard defines as a "hyperreal nebula" (57), referring to society's tendency toward unrealism as it becomes almost fully dependent upon a constant, artificial interaction with technology. In her wide-ranging investigation on the age of the Internet, Sherry Turkle observes that,

> In the 1980s people looked at technology and saw beyond a constellation of cultural associations […] this moment began the personal manipulation we see today, with computers and videogames in the 1980s these systems generated the first forms of cyberlives and cyberselves" (1997, 46).

Given this, it goes without saying that culture in the second half of the 20th century and, even more, on the verge of the 21st, was permeated by the inextricable conjunction of the masses and the media. Electronic components not only manipulated the social structure but also caused a general sense of malaise, deconstructing the meaning of human subjectivity within the new, problematic scenario built upon the eruption of high-tech novelties. In this impact of counterfeiting technologies, the notion of identity plays a central role. Indeed, this new social system based on mockery, imitation, hyperrealism, and a collective spectacle of personhood further voids the Self of its albeit complicated meaning.

In her groundbreaking analysis of advancements in the 1990s, Katherine Hayles theorized that the perspective toward the development of cybernetics (the control of communications, humans and devices) led to the emergence of the popular "Age of the Posthuman," seen here as the condensation of the blurred relationship human-machine

from the 1970s.[90] The interpretative edge of posthumanism, grounded in the theories of the above-mentioned Donna Haraway and subsequently apprised with those of Katherine Hayles, reframed the body as the fundamental medium subjected to technological control. By addressing this later issue, Hayles contends that,

> The posthuman subject -manipulated by technology- is an amalgam, a collection of heterogenous components, a material informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction (8).

This simple yet broadly essential assertion implies that the subject, necessarily related to the machine, is therefore prominently forged by appliances which are, to a certain extent, compulsively employed. With the advent of the digital age the image of a natural/realistic Self became even more questionable and difficult. Media scholar Bruce Mazlish defined the superimposition of the machine in postmodernist culture as a symbol creating an immense gap between what is perceived as human and what is therefore considered as mechanical.

> Man is on the threshold of breaking past the discontinuity between himself and machines. In one part this is because man can now perceive his own evolution as inextricably interwoven with his use and development of tools, of which the modern machine is only the furthest extrapolation. (quoted in Porush 92).

From 1980s technological breakthroughs (including personal computers, cellphones, graphic interfaces, CDs and so on), a socio-cultural shift from traditionally human to essentially mechanical took place, identifying the subject mostly with its machine components. This predominantly electronic scenario led to the construction of an inconsistent image of personhood, focused more and more on hybridization and producing highly distorted forms of subjectivity. As a result of the increasing

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[90] The term will eventually become even more suitable when used to define the "Digital Age" and the growing imposition of the machine on the human.

proliferation of screens and electronic machines, physical embodiment lost its corporeal concreteness indefinitely, leaving space for a continuous downplay of disembodiment through cybernetics.

The posthuman era, bridging the gap between materiality and hyperrealism, human and virtual, massively subverted, either physically or emotionally, the conditions of the human. Its main concern, however, was produced by the multi-sensory interaction of being part of the machine. It creates the illusion that we are all submerged or rather embedded in this eagerness for technology, being almost mentally and physically absorbed by any form of electronic tool. In an arguably more evident way, the presence and constant use of these innovations dating from the late 1960s, created a sort of unreal illusion which allows the user to be systematically embedded in the machine's ideology, negotiating the human function in that artificial realm obsessively produced by technology's compulsive omnipresence. In line with this inquiry, Antonio Pieretti's recent volume *Il tramonto dell'umano? La sfida delle nuove tecnologie* (2016), considers the human dimension today as fundamentally hybrid. In this sense, the posthuman is now the interpreter of a new aspect of the human through an approach to reality essentially linked to new technologies.[91]

In such an interpretative approach, one can presume that the high-tech revolution has created a strong alternation between presence and absence, as we have in part seen in the previous analysis of the telegraph, and this dichotomy becomes more evident with the escalation of other evolved forms of communication. Later on, as society began to be enmeshed within networks and information systems, new media from the 1970s onward, initiated innovative modes of signification. As Hayles suggests, considering the nature of the human who is per se an embodied being, his compulsive immersive interaction with the machine would simply imply an evolution of the concept of the individual, oriented toward a more nonmaterialistic and thus technological dimension

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[91] For a recent perspective on the erosion of the human and the current approach to the Posthuman see *Il tramonto dell'umano? La sifda delle nuove technologie* (2016), edited by Antonio Pieretti. The volume, a collection of essays, sheds light on the current meaning of the human being as ontologically hybrid.

(287). As never before, technology in this period led to the symbiotic relationship *homo-machina*, with both parties entangled in this mutual contact. As such, electronic simulation produced a re-conceptualization of the Self, deeply challenged by new means. Merely questioning the meaning of the term "human" with intelligent machines (Hayles 290), the post-human age reframed the essence of the individual by means of sheer technical improvement. Identity's potentially dubious definition went hand-in-hand with the increase in the power of communications systems. Looking at technologies in this period, we can see how this historical moment changed the intrinsic meaning of subjectivity, paving the way for the digital contagion, inaugurating the era of postmodernism and posthumanism.

## 4.2 Postmodernist Fiction: Fragmentation and Technological Disillusionment

The overall sense of bewilderment caused by the presence of this disturbing and yet discomforting technologic reality formed the backdrop for much of postmodern fiction, usually encompassing the destabilizing presence of new media and the social aesthetics of a cultural instability. Narratives have consequently laid the foundations for the consideration of the trope of the machine as the core of all postmodern/cybernetic literature. Still, current views of this American genre look at postmodern novels providing,

> Readily identifiable stylized analyses of what could be called postmodern culture inflected by notions of self-referentiality, the fragility of human identity, or the blurring of the line between reality and culturally pervasive, manufactured representations of it […] (Green 730).

Indeed, the increasing proliferation of postmodernist texts, from the early 1960s to the 1970s and onward, ratified the true essence of computing and information machines through a sort of technological determinism permeating the narrative trajectory of

novels. In this way, the recurrent trope of subject-media depicted the subject's immersive experience in the techno-drenched reality of electronics. Tracing the progressive ideological shift of technology in America after World War II, Leo Marx considers the postmodern period rooted in a general sense of "technological pessimism" (1994, 11). He observes that,

> In many respects, postmodernism seems to be the perpetuation of – and on acquaintance in – the continuous aggrandizement of technology in its modern institutionalized systems guises. In their hostility to ideologies and collective belief systems, moreover, many postmodernist thinkers relinquish all old-fashioned notions of putting the new systems into the service of a larger vision of human possibilities. (Marx 25)[92]

This view causes what he considers as a dangerous proto-totalitarian view (Marx 25). In other words, it produces a society based upon the excessive domination of technological systems, incorporated in a general pessimistic view.

In the face of this, it might be well to acknowledge how from the 1960s until the late 1990s the machine in literature generated a powerful vertigo as an instrument of lust and attractiveness producing lurking fascination and at the same time creating an unfathomable distance from the role of the human, almost essentially displaced by intelligent machines. Following this logic, as Porush puts it,

> Postmodernist fiction, devoted in part to an examination of how it came to be (self-reflection), is forced to address the notion that not only man, but the literature he produces and the language he uses, may be nothing more than a machine (93).

The literary works of undeniably postmodern authors such as Pynchon, Barth, Barthelme, DeLillo and later, Foster Wallace challenge conventional storytelling,

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[92] Howard Sigal's text *Technology, Pessimism and Postmodernism* (1994), which contains in full the above-mentioned essay by Leo Marx, offers a broad perspective on the contemporary view to technologies in the modernist age from a literary and cultural approach.

offering new modes of signification illustrated through an unconventional and audacious prose. In John Barth's *Giles-Goat Boy* (1966), an example of the sub-genre of cyberfiction[93], the story is recounted through a mechanical computer tape that rapidly defuses demystifying the presence of the human in relation to an archaic form of artificial intelligence. In a recent survey on postmodern American fiction, Daniel Green claimed that "Barth must be given credit for keeping up with the technological times and for a willingness to explore the narrative of newly emergent (and directly competitive) media and cyberspace" (738). Calculators and mainstream computers become the essential trope of postmodern cyber-narratives portraying the power of new machines as the ultimate technological evolution.

Conversely, for Pynchon,[94] technology mainly relates to science, becoming the source for the existence of the perplexing concept of "entropy" (derived from thermodynamics and information theory). Pynchon's vision of an entropic tension inside reality is essentially comparable to the consumerism of modern society which follows a similar process, shifting from an initial state of heat-spread to a final collapse.[95] Obviously pointing to the oversaturation of media, his narratives reflect the compulsive difficulty in coping with the imposition of an electronic society eventually based on this

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[93] Cyberfiction has often been categorized as a sub-genre of a more prominent literary trend, classified as post-postmodernist.

[94] From these authors we will only mention a few texts so as not to digress too much into the argument that otherwise would become too broad. For a critical discussion of Pynchon see Douglas Fowler's (1980) *A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow*, Tony Tanner's (1982). *Thomas Pynchon*, George Levine and David Leverenz Eds. "Essays on Thomas Pynchon." *Twentieth-Century Literature*, vol. 21, May 1975.

[95] Deserving of specific mention is Ilya Pregogine and Isabelle Stenger's *Order out Chaos* (1984), a powerful influential critique and reconceptualization of the disorienting landscape of scientific knowledge. The success of the book essentially came from Pregogine's theorization of a new concept of thermodynamics analyzed together with Stenger's philosophical perspective to show a new image of the modern man and his position in the universe.

mechanism. From a cybernetic standpoint entropy, as Wiener suggested, can also be associated with the transfer of a message, for instance via telephone, which, in the circulation of information, might lose its significance with a certain "entropic tendency" (Wiener 21-22). This notion, according to modern cybernetics symbolizes the distortion of the message through communication machines. This conception is then expressed in Pynchon's short story of the same name, "Entropy" (1960), encompassing the entropic instances of both thermodynamics and information theory and thus offering a pessimistic view of progress. Pynchon's characters, reflecting a general sense of concern, constantly trying to counter the action of entropy in the so-called tranquillized '50s (the ambiguous post-war period in which the economic recovery was counterbalanced by the nuclear terror of the Cold War). The perplexing relationship between humans and thinking machines is quite well portrayed in one of the protagonist's shocking assertions, in which he denounces his wife's worried attitude toward computers that process information, as she fears their becoming like humans. "I made the mistake of saying you can just as well turn that around and talk about human behavior like a program fed into an IBM machine" (Pynchon "Entropy" 90). Indeed, in his scenario, advanced forms of electronics and humans process functions similarly.

Pynchon elaborates persistently, in part through this entropic tension, the preoccupations of finding an equilibrium (as expressed by the temperature of the apartment in "Entropy," monitored to remain stable), between the looming presence of technology and the related human condition. As such, his narratives vividly mirror the postmodernist quest for a personal stability displaying an immense craving for machines. As previously discussed, the image of the dehumanized man in *V* who addictively expresses the desire to be incarnated into a robotic, mechanical body is well-known. In *Gravity's Rainbow* technology, which in this case serves in part for military goals, becomes a necessary instrument for the modern man, who is almost inured to the presence of war machines, somehow transferring similar characteristics in his human behavior. In his groundbreaking analysis of the novel, Fowler supported

this claim, asserting that "All of Pynchon's fiction presents to us a War of the Worlds" (10).

The quasi-obsessive search for a postal system in *The Crying of Lot 49* is structured on the insistent presence of automation in the form of huge electronics, ultimately showing how innovation inevitably challenges both humans and society. The concern for communication, as Tanner has explained, is the key concept for the understanding of the novel. In this way, "the novel is concerned with all aspects of communication – voices, portal systems, postage stamps newspapers, books, radio, TV, telephones" (63) and so on. Further still, "characters and identity are not stable in Pynchon's fiction [..] challenging the tenacious notion of individual" (Tanner 60). His essentially postmodernist heroes are intertwined in the neurotic, apocalyptic dilemma of coping with the new technologically developed social reality of machines.

In this regard, it is easy to understand how the first wave of postmodernist narratives has been followed by the essential presence of ultra-developed technological realms in later novels such as Joseph McElroy's *Plus* (1977) in which a disembodied brain, aimlessly orbiting in space, is controlled by an advanced computer which gradually deteriorates its sense of humanity. In a sort of "experimental mixing" (Tabbi 131) of science and technology, as Pynchon had already done, even if in a different way, McElroy's cybernetic narrative can be read as an attempt to symbolize the leading presence of the machine on the human. The electronic domination of the body exemplifies the ambiguous scientific manipulation produced by high-tech advancements. Indeed, all these fictions project the daring image of the technological tool as the destructive force of the pre-digital age.

The relentless presence of technological novelties and their evolution in the 1980s intensely informed the genre, followed by the rapid popularity of science-fiction and monumentally incorporating this sense of hyperrealism further and concretely illustrating the morbid complicity with technology. Immaterialism, simulation and personal fragmentation become the key words of the genre, with human characters addicted to the incessant presence of the machine endangering the role of the "user" himself (as we will begin to call it) questioning his function in an electronically-based

society. In this vein, literature in the 1980s expressed the discomforting feeling of vagueness and bewilderment that, to a certain extent, anticipated our actual approach to the digital. In his compelling study on the postmodern canon, seen as the point of contact between the absurd and the real, Charles Harris convincingly explained that society in the 1970s could be seen as "a lonely crowd of organizational men, growing up absurd… facing a loss of Self in a fragmented world of technology that reduces man to the operational and functional" (17). This assertion substantiates the thematic trope of most of the prose of postmodernist authors whose texts essentially became a condensation of emotional displacement enriched by new modes of representation expressed through daunting, meaningless reality and chaos.

To put it another way, though, recent criticism on American postmodernism has considered the genre as an expression of the human-machine relationship. Narratives thus illustrate new cultural shifts using the relationship with technology as the basis for the expression of a reality that is much more grotesque and it is no longer legible within the old categories. In an essay on postmodernist texts published in 2018, Savvas and Coffman[96] summarize the general traits of American postmodernism declaring that,

> Postmodern American fiction has increasingly valorized naïve literary qualities as a return to mimetic verisimilitude, a display of historical awareness and a preoccupation with the physical nature of the textual artifact as keys to the revitalization of a constructive textual authenticity, one that reinvigorates the exchange between reader and literary text (196).

In this way, postmodernists elaborate the disquieting preoccupations of the human condition enabling a textual relationship with readers absorbed in an intricate prose that bridges the gap with the past in a new reality in part reshaped by the human-machine trope.

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[96] For a clear recent perspective on American postmodernism and post-postmodernism see Savvas and Coffman's recent essay "American Fiction after Postmodernism." *Textual Practice*. vol. 33, no. 2, March 2018.

Among the literature that has most effectively illustrated the disquieting technological evolution of postmodernism in the 1980s, emerges the narrative production of Don DeLillo.[97] *White Noise*, published in 1985, condensates the proliferation of data, codes and images, envisaging that sense of disorientation in the period caused by a technologically-altered reality on the verge of a general tendency toward overall simulation and essential artificiality. The narcotic protagonist of the novel, a media expert, encompasses the fear of non-existence and the lack of Ego, informing us on the role of the human in the 1980s, submerged by the incursive presence of communications systems and grappling with an obsessive relationship with machines. The presence of television, as a means of aggregation that forces the protagonist's family to gather, almost compulsively, in front of the screen, represents the machine's emotional shelter, conveying a sense of identification to the family unit, mirroring America's postmodern addiction to new technologies.

Drawing heavily on the advantage of new media through morbid obsession and disquieting preoccupation, DeLillo's narratives provide an image of an America living, borrowing Baudrillard's concept, in a predicament, inseparable from television and digital screens, which are destined to become the means with which to relate and through which to look at reality. Already in *Americana* (1971), his debut novel, DeLillo tackled the concerns of contemporary American life, leaving space for intense reflections on the pathologies of culture and the general despair of American society in the early 1970s.[98] Later, the narration in *Underworld* (1997), a historical recounting of

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[97] For a current approach to DeLillo see Lewin, Katherine and Ward, Kiron. (2018). *Don DeLillo: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Bloomsbury Academic and Ruppersberg, Hugh and Engles, Tim (2000). *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*. Twayne Publishers.

[98] As the publication of *White Noise* coincided with the promulgation of the academic theories proposed by Baudrillard, DeLillo's fiction and the philosopher's theories of hyperrealism are often cited together as two different and yet similar visions of postmodernist society. The issues presented by DeLillo, mirroring the preoccupations of America in the 1970s and 80s, recall Baudrillard's *America* (1981), in which he sees the country as an oxymoron-society, therefore built upon paradoxes, but at the same time capable of materializing any potential dream, and therefore becoming the country of utopia par

America portrayed through the fate of the game of baseball ball, technology becomes the fil rouge used to reframe the historical scenario ranging from the 1950s to the late 1990s. Here the narrative documents the enormous progressions of electronic advancements and their repercussions on society and culture. DeLillo's characters exhort us to "Bemoan technology all [we] you want. It expands your [our] self-esteem and connects you [us] in your [our] well-pressed suit to the things that slip though the world otherwise unperceived" (DeLillo 89). In this sense, DeLillo's narrative strategy, as it occurred to his postmodernist contemporaries, can be summarized as the metaphor for an age in which the recurrent presence of electronic advancements somehow created "personal cracks, little holes, huge gaps" (Kraus 61).

Getting back to the core of our analysis, the personal struggle and difficulty in coping with the system further questions the very nature of the Self, now additionally compromised by an ideology oriented toward a strong hyperrealism. In her study on American fiction and popular media, Elisabeth Kraus remarks that the concept of personhood is seen as a discursive achievement, and in late modernity, with its diverse forms of mediated narratives, becomes even more crucial to reframing the complex evolution of the Self (62). Postmodernist texts increasingly outline the significance and the meaning of identity, describing the fragmented and thus confusing experience of selfhood. Through the human-machine nexus, "postmodern texts foreground the intricate dependency of past and present, history and identity" (Freese 44), menaced by the troubling imposition of new machines. In postmodern America, technology becomes an uncomfortable, obsessive presence, a means that is considered necessary, as at the same time it is capable of questioning the role of the human. Fictions of this genre mirror the troublesome crisis of identity and its consequent instability caused by the stultifying presence of electronic means, and thus becoming the conceptual sociological peril of the 21st century.

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excellence in the postmodernist era. America is, for Baudrillard, Europe's fault, but also a model for others and thanks to the looming presence of technology, Americans are a people of artificiality, both historical and social.

## 4.3 Introducing David Foster Wallace's Challenge to Posthumanism: Personal Dysfunction and Self-Disorientation

The narrative production of David Foster Wallace[99] is firmly located within this postmodernist premise made of technological immaterialism and the dismantling of the true Self. Being classified as a bridging author between postmodernism and what has emerged in its much-contested aftermath (Brady 8), Wallace is the quintessential author who discusses the historical conjuncture of human failure and the subsequent technological obsessiveness emerging from a destabilized reality. Analyzing the challenges of new media as a dominant cliché, his fiction deserves specific attention for his central concern about a self-definition typical of a postmodernist/technophobic scenario.

Through the complexities of narratives whose meanings are extremely difficult to grasp, Wallace provides convoluted plots that, within intricate prose and narrations charged with multiple significance, successfully illustrate the human anxiety toward technological breakthroughs in the pre-digital age. The peculiarity of his works offering an exhaustive example of identity challenges through communication technologies, is deliberately to describe the concerns of humans within the pervasive technological environment surrounding them in 1980s, in an electronically-compulsive America.

Although Wallace's production is essentially prolific, the convoluted narrative structures and the intrinsic significance of his works certainly deserve a brief preamble so as to understand the way in which his fiction, to a certain extent, has foreshadowed our current approach to digital technologies. Foreseeing innovations that eventually became landmarks of the 21st century, such as mobile telephones and the merging of computers and television (the "teleputer" as Wallace defines it in his masterpiece

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[99] For a preliminary critical understanding of David Foster Wallace see David Hering's *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (2010) and Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity and Resistance* (2016).

*Infinite Jest*), his fiction becomes an essential *trait d'union* that emphasizes the technological shifts of the 1980s.

Simply stated, Paul Giles argues that "Wallace envisages American space as a level playing field where electronic media operate in all zones simultaneously" (328). His narrative subjects are often entangled in the obsessive search for personal significance, while at the same time he shows humans being somehow passively immersed in consistently technological domains. In his manifesto on the postmodernist ethos, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" (1993), Wallace expresses his idea of the influence of TV screens in US contemporary narratives drawing from the simple assertion that,

> American human beings are a slippery protean bunch, in real life, as hard to get any kind of unequivocal handle on as a literary territory that's gone from Darwinianly naturalistic to cybernetic post-postmodern in eighty years" (Wallace 151).

As one of the first spectators of early screen technology, as he will explain, allowed to watch television alone at the age of 12, Wallace expresses the addiction of contemporary America to the screen. Visual and audio entertainment become, in his words, a "*deux ex machina* for voyeurs" (152) simulating reality and producing an immediate form of immaterialism that informs postmodern American fiction, illustrating the dependency on media and entertainment. Television becomes the first monitor to which the subject relates, being addicted or rather, narcotized, by the technological means of information. The reality of the screen, offering a quantity of stimuli to which humanhood is unable to react, becomes a way of self-identification evolving into a means of evasion of the Self troubled by new modes of entertainment. Indeed, much of this technological addiction is recalled in his masterpiece *Infinite Jest* (1996), in which a terrorist group uses the TV screen as the means to disseminate a video in order to subdue and threaten an entire nation (an almost prophetic vision of the danger of terrorism in the 21st century). Channeling individuals' obsession with electronic efficiency, in this case through the televisual medium, *Infinite Jest* typifies

Wallace's depiction of human consumption with a sense of automatization that suppresses the function of mankind at the expense of an information technology leading to a sense of manic dependence.

In this sense, his fiction aptly recounts the emotive collapse of a society that is compulsorily affected by new electronic means, at the same time the user becomes a passive spectator of a technology that annihilates the subject, destabilizing his nature as human being. In his last novel, *Pale King* (2011), incomplete and published posthumously, the protagonist embodies the modern example of a technophobic subject obsessed with the usage of the device, spending most of the day in front of the TV screen, being able to look at reality only through the artificial filter of the monitor. In a way, Wallace is unique in experimenting the incursion of mass media, ultimately becoming a prophet of hyperrealism, depicting the almost hypnotic and unconscious sense of attraction toward new technologies illustrated through the figure of the modern user. Declaiming the permeation of media, his texts generally reflect a condition of personal disorientation determined by the imposition of innovations, sharing extensively with Haraway and Hayles the concept of human fragmentation in the ethical challenge of posthumanism. From a more rather general angle, Wallace's portrayals of oversaturation with new media reconsider the phobias of American culture in the 1980s and 90s, further discussing the dialectics of the body, the Self and the sense of the human in relation to the ominous presence of electronic machines. Delving into the meaning of the subject and the intrinsic significance of its nature, Wallace points to the issue of self-authenticity, seeking to examine how "the grids of information technology and human identity can be explored" (Giles 341). Following this binary logic, his narratives are centered on the oppositional contrasts between system and chaos, stability and fragmentation.

Indeed, Wallace's writing conforms to the presence of an "Otherness," being either technology per se or the illustration of a neurotic society, with a persistent need to shed light on the problematic concerns of the human condition. As Wallace seems to imply, the difficulty and, in a certain sense, the fragility of the human being configures in a persistent self-identification with Otherness, in which "the Other" represents

technology itself, through direct interaction with the machine, or more broadly, the society of new media systems. Kaiser, to recall, expresses how Wallace relocates the sense of individual in "the post-deontic and post-human epoch" (54). His characters are constantly surrounded by the saturated technological environment, depending upon the opposing dualisms human vs. inhuman and determination vs. compulsion. However, the most prominent aspect of his complex prose lies in the lack of identity. To clarify this statement from a general postmodernist perspective, Wallace's texts cope with a sense of personal incompletion reflecting an emotional insecurity originated by the difficulty of interpreting contemporary reality, in part redefined through the human approach to electronic media. More striking, however, is that Wallace sought to transfer to readers themselves that sense of anxiety that came from isolated worlds of non-definition and a lack of self-authenticity.

In his study on *Infinite Jest*, Stephen Burns notes that "the beginning of the novel starts up a tension between an excess of information and the inexplicable sense of selfhood that is elaborated throughout the rest of the book" (quoted in Wouters 447). Considering the trajectory of the novel, as the circular narrative unravels, this assumption presupposes that Wallace is essentially trying to acknowledge the character's authentic selves lessened by the flow of electronic informational systems. The uncertainty that seems to recur in his work can be summarized into two, complicated questions: What is the nature of the human being, or in a broader sense, his identity? Is there a possibility to define it in a reality so immersed in an immoderate use of technology that it seems to leave no space for the human being to be considered as such?

In his entire oeuvre, Wallace leaves us with many doubts and very few answers to these concerns by denying the existence of a reality that becomes almost inaccessible and imperceivable by human investigation. Playing with a sense of personal anxiety and emotional uncertainty, weaving plots so complex as to leave space for psychologically introspective reflections, Wallace's prose thoroughly illustrates the concerns of self-definition in a deviant scenario. His reflections prominently philosophical and insistently psychological as witnessed in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, offer an image

of a society where electronic technology is the element that paralyzes self-consciousness leading the subject to mental masturbation and a crisis of personhood. Prefiguring the critical and cultural impasse of technical development from its early evolution to the 1980s electronic incursion, Wallace displays a personal disfunction as people feels dominated by new means. His fiction essentially grapples with twenty-first century information age-infused subjects, who in turn become compulsive users, carrying a persistent sense of self-disorientation. The usage of the machine is what undermines the human condition through psychological introspections, ultimately questioning and thus reframing the meaning of personhood.

In Wallace's world, the concept of identity to a certain extent demands to be related solely to electronic means. Through the discomforting, almost tragic feeling of estrangement and self-bewilderment, one must recognize the essential fragility of the Self in the 21$^{st}$ century as the main concern Wallace aims to elaborate. However, incorporating the strategies of postmodernism, his fiction exemplifies the cohabitational, complicated harmony between humans and data-driven information (Wouters 462). Wallace's work can be essentially condensed into an elegant/complex self-introspection that guides readers along self-construction reframing the role of personhood in 1980s compulsive America. Bridging the gap between postmodernism and contemporary post-postmodernist narratives, his plots encapsulate the essential disparity between effective reality and technological immaterialism.

## 4.4 David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System*: Identity and the Failure of Subjectivity in the Technological Posthumanist Rush

David Foster Wallace's debut novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), certainly deserves attention on its own. Here, the narration faithfully mirrors the complications of personal identity deriving from the technological invasion of media in the late 1980s. It is important to note that Wallace's text does not easily lend itself to categorization.

Many critics are reluctant to consider the novel as such, and they thus tend to define it as an "apprentice work" (Boswell and Burn 1), a pastiche and a postmodern parody of America's neurotic paranoias. Although direct interactions with the machine cannot be considered the novel's main concern, electronic components assume a fundamental value in it, interweaving with complex psychological reflections on self-authenticity in characters who find themselves opposing a personal failure generated in part by the progressive threat of media. As the narration proceeds, technology and identity fuse in an ensemble of self-examinations and personal complications.

In the novel, a switchboard telephone operator, Lenore Beadsman, interacts with the technologically-advanced world surrounding her, alternating her own "identity anxiety" (Wallace *BoS* 120) with the obsessive, compulsive personal failure of a society which is collapsing more and more into overall technological excess. However, recent scholarship has increasingly claimed that in this text, "Wallace navigates the relational terrain between the culture one inhabits, identities and emotions" (Brady 2). The perpetual sense of human failure Wallace portrays in the narrative represents a lack of self-authenticity. The novel charts the inability to cope with a fragmented personality in part generated by an overall compulsion for technical progress which destabilizes the human condition in a society essentially re-arranged by informational systems. Lenore's lack of personal completion in *The Broom of the System*[100], represented by her problematic relational attitude toward culture, does not allow her to determine her own subjectivity, constantly defined by others or by a social scenario, which is doomed to be rooted within the pervasive imposition of media.

The crisis of identity manifests itself in different ways for Lenore. Initially, it appears within the reality of the office, through her direct contact with electromechanical automatic telephone devices. Consequently, further questions arise with the disappearance of her grandmother, with whom she has an almost symbiotic relationship. Finally, there is the bizarre presence of a suddenly vocal parrot, subsequently used as an attraction for a television show. The themes of personal

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[100] Hereafter cited as *BoS*

confusion and identity loss mirror the complex articulation of the relationship between Self, identity, and the Other, technology. All this is portrayed by the quasi-obsessive need for personal definition produced by the "fundamental unbridgeablity of this gap" that of Selfhood and Otherness (Hayes-Brady 11). In a dynamic destructuralization of the system, its collapse and the problem of self-identity, the novel's interest is based upon the binary oppositions of Self and Other, that is to say, Lenore and society, her inner Self, and her role as a human, being part of a bigger social system. Lenore's problematic partner, Rick Vigorous, clearly underlines these contrasts when he remarks,

> Self and Other […] holds as a descriptive axiom the transparently true fact that for each of us the universe is deeply, sharply and completely divided into for example, in my case, me on one side, and everything else, on the other. This for us exhaustively defines the whole universe […] Self and Other. (Wallace 90)

The distinction of these blemished boundaries, as Agger contends, "leads to a more mature development of the Ego" (156). In light of this, referring to Foucault's definition, the inner core of selfhood comes from the acknowledgment of the individual's position that of lying between himself and the social world (quoted in Agger 156). Seemingly unable to understand these confines, the characters' emotional struggles can be detected through their impossibility of interpreting the nature of reality, and thus finding their role within a social scenario that consistently blurs the condition of being human into the emerging infiltration of technology. Indeed, *The Broom of the System* can be considered an intense emotional struggle between two poles, the Self and the Other, both interdependent, representing either identity or its relocation within or outside the system. In the light of this dichotomy, technology accesses the internal world of the subject (Antinucci quoted in Marzi 97), articulating the human capacity to envision his own intersubjective function within reality.

Pointing out the difficulty in locating personal subjectivity, illustrated through an intense psychological framework represented in the characters' long therapy sessions (recorded electronically), the narrative further illustrates Wallace's preoccupation with depicting a "system," that of the compulsively destabilizing and almost fully technologized society of the 1980s, struggling to define itself both culturally and socially. The author's Kafkaesque attitude in setting the novel in a postmodern scenario firmly settled within the widespread changes in modern America, culminates in a cultural crisis of the system and, consequently, in a personal failure of self-authenticity.[101] More broadly, as Marshall Boswell notes, "Wallace links the science of open and closed systems to the themes of identity, community and signification"[102] (51). Wallace grounds the toxicity of the symbiosis with technology, framed within the mass-consumerism of media and places it within a profound psychological uncertainty threatened by electronic dissimulation.

Therefore, the key to unravelling the narrative's contradictory image of the Self lies in considering mankind as a result of progress and, as the character of Lenore asserts, "[…] so many people in my [her] opinion do. Look like products of technology" (Wallace *BoS*, 224). Here, the main narrative concern is, as Brady notes, "to resituate the individual either within or without the system" (39). It is therefore this social crisis, characterized by humanity's co-dependence with the incursive threat of new machines that is at the core of the fragmentation of the Ego[103], dissolved in a sense of general disorientation destined to find correspondence in the problematic relationship with

[101] The term "system" explicitly refers to the novel's title, indicating the social entourage permeated by media and technology, and ultimately producing a cultural shift leading to a general crisis of self-authenticity.

[102] Drawing from the scientific implications that lie beneath the novel's general criticism of modern society, Boswell further notes that Wallace "updates Pynchon's exploration of entropy […] in such a way that this proposed that an open system emerges as the most viable model to combat solipsism and loneliness" (22).

[103] Here we purposefully use the Freudian term to refer to Wallace's psychological introspections.

electronic systems. This motif is easily perceptible in one of the characters' considerations that,

> The technological changes alone that they have stood witness to are staggering. How might one even begin to orient oneself with respect to such a series of changes in the fundamental features of the world? How to begin to come to some understanding of one's place in a system, when one is part of an area that exists in such a troubling relation to the rest of the world, a world that in itself changes, radically, all the time? System? (*BoS* 143).

In one of his many subtle and complicated statements, Lenore's therapist, Dr. Jay, describes the loss of function in a world of simulation where ultra-sophisticated devices dismantle and thus diminish the function of the human being, who in turn becomes passive, helpless and a witness to the expansion of technological automation with spasmodic despair. Dr. Jay asserts,

> I suppose I am trying to bring into the focus of our emotional attention the following features of the contemporary society we both enjoy. Genetic engineering. Artificial insemination. Quantum leaps in the technology of sexual aids and implements and prostheses. Perhaps, what most of us perceive as the centers of ourselves are simply no longer needed" (341-342).

In mankind's profound state of personal failure, Lenore, as well as other characters, is unable to relate to the features of a modern society which lacks authenticity, compromising the nature of selfhood. "She said she was seeing Dr. Jay chiefly for help with feelings of disorientation, identity-confusion and lack of control" (61), the narrator avers, speaking of Lenore. Gramma, an absent figure in the novel (her disappearance is what inspires the whole narrative), realizes the problem of self-incompletion or as Lenore reports, "[…] perceived loss of identity without function" (151). The search for the nonappearance of her grandmother, her namesake alter-ego, illustrates the complicated challenges to personal fragmentation which becomes abstract and semantically defined by Lenore's problematic relationship to the system. As recent

criticism has shown, "Lenore's search for Gramma is really an inverted search to find herself" (Bolger and Scott 166). The description of the grandmother who disappears and gets lost in the "Great Ohio Desert" becomes an implicit reference to the sense of bewilderment and emotional despair of an American culture on the verge of a digital obsessiveness.

However, when viewed from a different angle, the narrative encapsulates the presence of dualistic identities in constant conflict. To clarify this statement, borrowing David Hering's assertion referring to Lenore's double personality, reflected in her grandmother's elusive evanescence, it is as if "two Lenore's occupy a shared philosophical space" (26). Identity thus becomes an extremely complex issue in the novel, almost inexistent, indefinable and often represented by absence. Lenore is in search of her own identity through the figure of her missing grandmother who, as her shattered Self, is completely absent for most of narration. Her brother, John Beadsman, looks for his own Self through his possible participation in a game show and refuses to speak unless people believe he has been filmed and acknowledge his presence within the TV format. This pervasive personality disorder, which mainly affects Lenore, also touches Bombardini, the rich owner of the real estate agency that rents the building where the telephone company is located. He lives in the frantic desire to fill the universe (system) with his own ego. Even more disturbing is the odd parrot, at first unable to speak, and then when he does, defining Lenore as being essentially determined by technological means. "You will become a star in the electronic firmament" (275), he twitters.

In this sense, the operator's main concern is her lack of identity and the impossibility of establishing one as she attempts to fill the void of her own personality left by a society in rapid evolution. Yet, self-actualization is poised to become Lenore's unique goal. In this dramatic scenario, the protagonist's quest for Gramma is a clear reference to the pursuit of her own Self, whose meaning is "always in process and in part self-destructive" (Boswell and Burn 21). As convoluted as it might be, the disorienting and disruptive condition of the protagonist lends itself to the consideration that her condition is to be constantly determined by others or defined by means of technology.

As an operator, this position identifies her social role and even more, makes her a vehicle for self-identification. In one of his intense psychological sessions, Dr. Jay notes that Lenore,

> […] (I)s no longer merely inside a network, she is a network. Reality and identity rear their Siamese hands at the junction of Network. She is singing the Other, putting herself on, in, the Other who set her free through membrane-permeation. She puts herself inside a network" (Wallace 344).

The structure to which Wallace refers, a technological one in this case, is in fact an element of self-definition par excellence. The paranoid and more complex metaphor of the Self, here envisaged through the sense of belonging to the network of society (a potential reference to electronic interconnected circuits), materializes also in the direct relationship with the machine, in this case the telephone device. Indeed, the public switch organization Lenore works for lends itself, as telecommunications do in general, to cases of identity exchanges through the filter of the machine. By further compromising her role as operator and thus undermining her attempt for self-definition, her colleagues "keep[s] pretending its different people asking for you [her], holding his [their] nose, putting a hankie over the phone, trying this totally pitiful English accent, pretending it's outside calls for you [her]" (51). This form of masquerade becomes an example of virtual identity, unrealistic, composed of an emotional/social performance characterized by the overall sense of immateriality created by a distortion of selfhood. At this point, it is most useful to cite Avital Ronell's techno-philosophical project concerning the telephone's central role among other forms of communication. For her[104], "the telephone, in some ways, destabilizes the identity of self and other, subject and thing" (Ronell 9). Eliminating face-to-face meeting, it highlights the ambiguities

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[104] For more on this, see Ronell, A. (1986) *The Telephone Book. Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech.* University of Nebraska Press. From a philosophical and psychoanalytical standpoint, drawing from the theories of Freud and Heidegger, Ronell builds the text as a conversation between operators analyzing the implications of the "call" and its consequences.

of personhood exposed by the drama of communication at a distance. In her words, "[…] the notation of a Being that would enfold technology only by hesitant parasitical inclusion, has received expression by the other side of the line" (Ronell 19). This an example of how technology alters our way of communicating and our ability to convey the message. As McLuhan had suggested, through electronic tools we convey a message according to our needs. This creates a problem of conversation between human beings and machines, like the one illustrated by Wallace, based on a general sense of incomprehension.

Supporting this view, technological communication in the novel essentially contributes to the masking and the limitation of the authentic nature of the Self, and to its problematic definition as well. Attempting to construct a Being, an identity, through a persistent need for identification, the phone adds a register of inauthenticity where the liminal bounds between Self and Other and their consequent recognition vanish. Performing and inducing fraud, as Wallace's example demonstrates, this means further complicates the existence of a true Being, jeopardized as it is by technology's disconnection and physical suspension.

Seen in this light, the narrative seems to suggest in different ways a performance of identities, where everyone is in search of their own, but at the same time is also trying to regain a sense of self-integrity through direct interaction with the machine. The Self acquires a performative ethos, articulated in the identification with the Other, being either society, technology itself, or the relationship to other characters, such as Gramma for Lenore, or even Lenore herself for others. What Wallace does through the problematization of individuality is to illustrate mankind's spasmodic need to identify with a sense of Otherness that is almost completely unfathomable and unattainable and that provides doubtful interpretations of its real meaning.

For this reason, at the end, Wallace urges us to think of the Self as,

> The node of a fan-shaped network of emotions, dispositions, extensions of that feeling and thinking Self. Each line in the protruding network-fan may of course have an external

reference and attachment [...] to an exterior Other [that] is necessarily buttressed, supported, held; it thus becomes small, weak, flabby, reliant on Other. (351)

Scrutinizing the disturbing issue of identity, the novel insists on the unbridgeable void left by the incapacity to cope with a structure which, as Wallace points out, contributes to increasing the crisis of personhood in the postmodern age. The character's description leaves no doubt as to this interpretation, considering that contemporary society systematically decreases "the Self-component of the universe [that will] rush to fill in the void caused by that diminution of Self" (91). The gap left by the reduction of self-authenticity and, even more prominently, by the function of humanhood in the universe of electronic machines, loses its meaning, becoming largely unnecessary.

Following this reasoning, another important concept that frequently reappears in the novel is the idea of understanding, both in figurative and literal terms. The crisis Wallace depicts, per se, presupposes the impossibility of conveying significance to the liminal barrier between Self and Other, social universe and human function. The threat of technologic oversaturation plays a fundamental role in this, since, as Lenore claims "Technology does affect interpretation after all" (251). In this way, the novel provides a double perspective, centering on the emotional conflict between meaning and understanding. The importance of significance[105] weaves with the function of the human and his obsessive efforts to relocate his role within a social scenario affected by the porosity of media. As convoluted as it may be, the plot shows how both function and use become the contrasting dynamics on which the overall postmodern crisis of

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[105] Language and the Saussurean dichotomy between *signifiant* and *signifié* is also central to the novel. Wallace in fact devotes a large part of the story to the complex issue of meaning and its linguistic function. Notable is Gramma's pondering on the epistemological significance of "Broom" (a direct reference to the title), in which she encourages Lenore to reflect on the function of the object, depending on its usage: "She asked me which part of the broom was more elemental, more *fundamental* , in my opinion, the bristle or the handle." (Wallace 149). The sense of words also contributes to the definition of personality. In this sense, Lenore questions her condition as human being through the linguistic function.

personal identity is based. It is this role in context that determines the nature of personhood.

The general sense of instability on which the narrative revolves is articulated through the vulnerability of the Self within a structure undermining an ideological conflict between the individual and the social system. Offering extremely complex and intense introspections on this impasse, Wallace provides "a structural meditation to personal instability" (Brady 84), reflecting on its significance through the psyche's frustrations and the need for self-analysis. In this context, the technological environment creates a multi-layered set of anxieties within the sphere of emotional subjectivity elicited through the relationship with an essentially hyper-realistic culture.

Persistently showing a sense of emotional and thus personal entrapment, the narration clearly depicts the impossibility of establishing the authentic nature of the Self, whose troublesome understanding is also illustrated by the crossings of telephone lines. The problem becomes real when the electronic switchboard mysteriously drops, sowing panic among employees who feel lost and, to a certain extent, lack a part of their nature, being inextricably linked to the machine. On closer inspection, there can be no doubt of the overall absence of a clear significance of identity here. Its function unfolds in a process of self-recognition through a narrative crescendo that, as reflected in the novel's ending, does not contribute to defining the Self but instead insists on its problematic nature, depicting a hopeless sense of personal fracture. The nurtured path for self-delineation clearly depicts an image of female subjectivity, torn between presence and absence, being and not being.

The clash raised between people and machines represented by Wallace's literary extravaganza paints the over-complication of a social scenario firmly based on the imposition of technology as the dominating force in human life as it challenges the role of the Self within the community. As the narrative illustrates, one wonders about the limits and conditions for defining identity, a concern that, as Wallace shows, is essentially complex and repeatedly problematic. Proposing a remarkable perspective on posthuman ontology and the ethics of personhood, Wallace frames the plasticity of society in the 1980s, essentially fused in self-disorientation and emotional instability.

For this reason, technology poses a threat to the social and cultural ethos of personhood. In devising the character of Lenore, Wallace undermines the ideological conflict between humans and media, mirroring the imbalance of innovations with the human struggle to understand his function, being overwhelmed by the impending machine.

As such, *The Broom of the System* is a concrete literary example which stages the complications of identity by means of electronics, or rather, by a social reality, damaged by technological pervasiveness. Grappling with the essential boredom created by communications systems and the emotional void left by their proliferation, the narrative faithfully reflects on the human attempt to establish a sense of subjectivity. As seen in the two previous literary examples of Thayer and Twain in a different perspective, here the Self becomes an inexistent construct, shaped in part by technology, that increasingly dissolves leaving space for an artificiality culminating in emotional and personal complications. Hence, the novel's persistent image of disorientation, grounded in the incursion of new media, continues our debate on identity, magnified by the digital escalation that will be the concern of the following chapter.

# 5. The Self and the Digital World: The Fiction of Technological Complicity and Performativity

## 5.1 Networked Identity: Subjectivity in Cyberspace

In our literary-cultural approach to the evolution of the notion of Self through technological advancements, we have reached the digital age of computerization in which identity has a much more questionable meaning. In the face of this, media theorists[106] have observed that in our increasingly automated world it has become rather popular to talk about self-identity as a form of personal engagement with technology (Ching and Foley 1). Put simply, what critics tend to affirm is that contemporary society shares a sense of compulsiveness toward devices that alter perceptions of subjectivity, forcing users to abandon their realistic Selves, which are then reframed through the Internet and become part of the cyberworld. A question arises: what happens when identity is not simply challenged by its mere relationship to the machine, or questioned by technological proliferation? What then occurs when it is literally disentangled and rebuilt within the online platform of the Web itself?

It is now widely acknowledged that digital media, through its constant promotion of virtuality in exclusively artificial platforms, offer the possibility of an unrealistic type of identification, far from actual physical embodiment and developed in an exclusively online environment. This complex process of techno-identification, reflected, or rather

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[106] In his recent analysis of the incursion of the software as a fundamental strategy of replacement for an array of mechanical and electronic technologies in the 21st century, Lev Manovich's *Software Takes Command* (2013) urges us today to talk about software studies rather than media studies. As Manovich states, by far exceeding the 1950s' definition of "Media" inaugurated by McLuhan, between the 1990s and the 2000s media softwares have decisively replaced other technologies. The computer therefore becomes the metamedium that contains a whole series of already existing media.

shaped by virtual reality, first originated in the 1980s with personal computers, and was then enhanced with the use of the mobile phone, becoming a fundamental concern in the 2000s with the advent of the Web.[107] Such argument is made by Catherine Waite when she claims that "The digital domain alters our experience of individuality, Self and community" (14). If on the one hand digital platforms provide a great opportunity to relocate the concept of individualism through the virtual duplication of identity, on the other, this personal transfiguration implies "less freedom and personal control" (16).

As such, Internet and cyberspace,[108] through networked experiments, such as the relatively recent examples of social network sites, provide an opportunity for the construction of fictitious identities, leading to a new version of one's Self. Often described as "projective identity" (Ching and Foley 142), replicated through the screen or the Internet in the digital domain, this new personal play leads to the creation of an avatar of the Self, that is to say, the user's alter ego recreated in the virtual world. As Jonathan Berger recently reminded us, the possibility of constructing a new form of subjectivity behind the screen has a huge impact on the human-machine relationship, allowing the person "to engage in a selective self-presentation" (293) determined by the suppression of face-to-face communication for the sake of an unprecedented sense of anonymity. Overall, however, connectivity provides access to a new self-image.

In her seminal study on identity formation and networked technologies, Sherry Turkle has further explained that we see ourselves differently when we relate to the mirror that is the machine. In her words, "we somehow step through the looking glass" (Turkle 1997, 9), assuming a virtual persona of our own creation as we communicate through

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[107] For a preliminary discussion on the emergence and consequent evolution of the Internet and Social Media see the following texts: McIntyre, Karen. "The Evolution of Social Media." *Journal of Social Media in Society*, vol. 3, no. 2, Fall 2014 and Van Dijck, José. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

[108] The term, essentially popularized by William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984), which is the story of a computer hacker, is now used to describe the interconnected space of digital technology.

the artificial reality of cyberspace. Constructing or rather reframing identity in the age of digitization means confronting with a new form of electronic novelty (first the computer and more recently smartphones and digital tools) in which our Self collapses. It is thus torn between the reality, that exists outside the machine, and virtuality, produced within the artificial space of the device. As Turkle implies, windows on the network place the subject in several contexts at different times, allowing users to develop their own layered cyber-selves by being present throughout multiple online spaces. In this sense, identity in the cybernated[109] age becomes the sum of a distributed personal presence (Turkle 13). Contemporary users have thus become the product of a culture of simulation, limited to mere usage of the machine and eventually engaged in a personal interplay where selfhood becomes an act of artificial reproduction. In turn, the computer sets up the porous boundary between self and non-self, being and not being. Given this, multiple virtual connections today become the instrument of personal interaction in our contemporary computerized society.

Data processing and communicating machines create what Turkle defines as a "Second Self" (43), providing a whole new way of thinking about personhood, since here it is forged and manipulated by the network. The anxiety toward the truthfulness of an unrealistic identity that completely abandons itself to the artificial space of computing machines leads to a crisis of subjectivity. This dilemma is constituted by an ever-dependent aggregation pushing users toward online platforms, where it is possible to access an enormous amount of personal information about any individual. Initially built as logic-bound and information processing machines, computers in the 2000s have become extensions of the subject, necessary devices that we can't do without. On one level, smart digital tools, as a result of Web proliferation, offer the promise of inventing a new, hybrid self-image. Nowadays we become "technobodies" (Turkle 177), shaped by the machine through a new form of personhood comprised of fragmentation, heterogeneity and flexibility. The Internet's essential capacity to alienate the user from

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[109] The word is often used as a synonym for "computerized," meaning electronically controlled by a computer system.

everyday life and then to encourage him to take shelter in a digital scenario that offers a recurrent personal play, introducing a new idea of the Self within the virtual community, determines the essential instability of an identity given away to different websites through multiple IDs. This sense of what can be defined as "personal self-multiplicity," helps us in adopting online personae, constructing a new concept of cyber subjectivity.

To perceive the real nature of identity today, endangered by the virtual space itself, is rather difficult if not impossible within the digital environment, where the technological Self becomes a mere replica of a realistic identity. Furthering this point, Anna Poletti and Julie Rak contend that social media and the Web create a specific cyber-personality which can be shared (5). Selfhood, manipulated through virtual space, becomes a form of public expression. In this sense, the computer generates self-representational structures, extensively re-thinking and reconceptualizing the nature of identification.

Simply put, identity today can be mostly expressed as "a media content contained in information machines that combine to define an individual" (Poletti and Rak 9). Drawing from the essential distinction between "online being" and "being online," media critics consider the Internet as a utopic space that promises to change the conditions of individuality and through which the Self lends itself to a virtual performance.[110] No wonder then that the Web 2.0 becomes a form of performatory media allowing users to play, modify and recreate their own Selves, establishing virtual profiles that act as mere tools in digital/social play. Simply put, the virtual community and its services becomes the place in which to articulate a new personal image.

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[110] New media critics use the term "digital storytelling" to refer to the performances of subjectivity mostly produced on social network websites, narrating virtual identity profiles through the online community.

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However, as seen in the introduction on personal identity, in Foucaultian terms,[111] the inner core of selfhood comes from the personal acknowledgment of the strong boundary between oneself and the world. The system's recent over-complication due to the establishment of technology as the dominating force of human interaction has consequently demystified the role of individualism within the social community. "Even more, 'Virtual Selves' use virtuality to burst through the screens of power, creating a three-dimensional public sphere" (Agger 162), producing an artificial form of social interaction which exists outside the realm of the tangible world. Saturating the unrealism of everyday life, the digital technologic obsession becomes the instrument that reconfigures American identity in the 21st century.[112] With regard to this statement, Waite's discussion is indicative of how "the digital domain challenges American norms by altering the ways in which culture expresses privacy and autonomy" (53). Given American democracy's fundamental support of a view of identity based upon autonomous individualism and personal experience, the threat of digitalization favors a collective experience of individuality which is less exclusive and more civic. This noted redefinition of American individualism hardly explains the role of the Self in the social world, now challenged by new modes of personal exposure and a new sense of collective identity.[113]

The overall postmodern concern for identification has now been replaced by networked disembodiment. In this scenario, today we are keen to experience the unreal, filling our lives with virtual friends and inevitably perceiving reality mostly through a display.

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[111] As we recall, for Foucault, humans develop the knowledge of their identity through the continuous relationship between oneself to others.

[112] For more on the rather difficult conceptualization of the Self in the virtual scenario, see Agger, B. (2014). *The Virtual Self, A Contemporary Sociology*. New York: Blackwell Publishing.

[113] For a broader discussion on this, see Waite, C. (2013). *The Digital Evolution of American Identity*. Routledge.

Taking this analysis further and focusing on the concept of "screen," briefly mentioned in the previous chapters, it is necessary to consider that the reflection of the Self in the so-called "black mirror" (the screen of a TV, a monitor, a smartphone), doubles personality and produces a sort of fondness for self-reflection. An early example of this splitting and reproduction of the Ego finds its foundations in the myth of Narcissus, infatuated by his reflected image, who eventually dies of self-love. In his theorization of media, pointing at the implicit technological amplification of the human we have widely discussed, McLuhan makes use of this mythical analogy, explaining how the mirror image, to a certain extent, "[…] constitutes a fascination" (13). In other words, humans are fascinated by extensions of themselves. However, as Stefano Tani further explains, putting the screen first among the essential symbols of the 21st century, the contemporary user is literally narcotized by his own impression in the technological monitor. Not recognizing his real Self in the means they have so far created, looking for an almost artificial projection of themselves, human beings inevitably develop a strong over-dependence on electronic tools becoming, as Tani evidences, a "servomechanism" (13).[114]

The technological culture produced in the digital age thus turns into a narcotic one. This new society constructs a system in which the Ego, reflected or relocated through the screen, falters and weakens to the point of becoming almost imperceptible, existing only as an integral part of the virtual. As such, the process of modern identification has a dual aim: observing the extension of personal identity through the display, and witnessing the personality's collapse into artificial manipulation. As such, this mechanism implies an identity fracture between face and reflex, inversion and reversal of reality. As McLuhan had most prophetically expressed looking at the first media, the digital screen, becomes a real extension of personality.[115] In this way, the monitor

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[114] My translation.

[115] Tani also identifies the "i" used by Apple as a trademark to define its devices and as a possible reference, in addition to the Internet, to the "I" used to label appliances with for personalized use.

masks until it obscures the evidence representing the sense of simulation that characterizes the vast hyperreality of contemporary cyber-society. With reference to this image, Tani asserts that,

> The relationship between the Narcissistic – "I" to the screen has now reached its greatest expression. The human Self looks at the celebrative representation of its identity made, by far, more of images than words, set up in its virtual domain, imposing it on those who have accepted his friendship navigating in a harem of friends. We thus live our Self as we would like it to be. (43) [116]

The network and, more specifically, the mechanism of the monitor's self-reflection, allows users to create a virtual personification of identity. This implies the possibility of constructing an archetype of personhood, through which users offer an image of their Selves as they would like them to be seen. In fact, as Marzi reminded us in an essay published last year, in 2018, "Every screen thus easily becomes a sort of visual aid capable of triggering a new field of play, a new virtual transitional place" (79). Today, we are forced to admit the existence of a new form of society, the virtual one, in which the human has modified the essence of what characterizes his sense of individuality, namely his own identity, rewritten in front of the machine and constantly exposed to the dynamics of the Web.

In the wake of digitization, an essential role in the fragmentation of self-image through the screen is inevitably occupied by "selfies," or photographs of oneself taken with a camera phone, expressing the epitome of a self-centered society. In his essay on the selfie culture in the age of corporate surveillance, Henry Giroux explains how this form of auto-celebration and personal narcissism is closely related to the notion of privacy. Today, thanks to the presence of online platforms personal information on identity is inevitably "sold" to the public through the virtual. Identity thus becomes indisputably both private and communal, hidden but at the same time extremely visible, real but fictitious. In this way, the subject has the freedom to choose the best way to represent

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[116] My translation.

his Self. The modern user easily renounces his own privacy, abandoning himself completely to a total psychological immersion within the virtual space of the Web. Crucially, the selfie becomes the tool for a public performance of identity, even more so by showing how the Ego, reflected or generated by technological interaction, turns into a matter of public interest (Giroux 315). The new culture of technological dependence, primarily seen as a commodification of personality, leads to a "Narcissism out of control" (318). Indeed, the digital system creates a sort of performative syndrome that offers the possibility to both mimic and transcend the real aspects of personhood. The recognition of identity in the means of consumption today becomes essential to the formation of the individual's self-awareness, subsequently dismantled by his relationship to the network. In his complex introspection of self-identity through the lens of literature, David Foster Wallace warned us about the initial interaction of the Self with a system out of control. In his view, humans of the 21st century are victims of a narcotic society and slaves to a commodification of identity within everyone's reach.

With reference to the enduring digital fraud of personality, trivialized by digital progress, critics have underscored the problem of privacy and surveillance, and the power of the Web to build global tech platforms in which users' movements and data are gathered by a socialist resource for companies. Essentially based on a sense of identity fraud and financial fear, the surveillance underlying data-collecting systems is essentially to be considered one of the defining aspects of current high technologies.[117] In his groundbreaking study, Gary Marx[118] recently observed that ultra-sophisticated

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[117] Roger McNamee's recent article in *The New York Times*, "A Brief History of How Your Privacy Was Stolen" (June 2019), discusses the current concerns of privacy and companies' financial threat to data being used as a capitalist resource. For further clarity on the dynamics of web surveillance and social capitalism, see Shoshana, Z. (2017). *The Age of Surveillance and Capitalism*. Public Affairs Publishing.

[118] Even though Gary Marx's studies are considered as groundbreaking in the field of technological surveillance, for a broader overview of the concept see Lyon, D. (2007). *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*. Polity Press.

systems become tools to gather personal information. Drawing from the fact that today, "we are an ever-changing surveillance society" (Marx 5), there is a need for the system to monitor and manipulate data. As the surveillance mechanism of the panopticon described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), cyberspace, in this case, shares a similar function of total visibility. The Web becomes a small theatre in which, borrowing Foucault's assumption, "Each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (200). As such, machines become "observatories of human multiplicity" (171). On this point, recent studies have demonstrated that surveillance today penetrates human life in profound ways exposing mankind to an unprecedented public threat. The technological danger to privacy and the risk of counteracting identity theft have become essential concerns of today's techno-obsession, limiting the condition of selfhood and its unprotected flow of data. Surveillance scholars further allege that the new incursion of the Internet's public circulation of information has shifted the essential nature of electronic tools and, in this sense, technology has changed. It has greatly curtailed our ability to ensure that we think of our privacy as being concealed from unwanted eyes (Warner 858). Still, the new aspects of computerization increasingly reduce our ability to control what others know about our Selves (859).

More striking, however, is the abiding preoccupation with identity fraud (already seen with the electromagnetic telegraph), and now increasingly potentialized by a virtual reality, capable of masking the real nature of personhood. The Self is then hidden beneath fake profiles generated to pretend and, we could certainly say, perform a counterfeit identity masked behind the power of a public technologic display. In this digital scenario, the notion of privacy and the possibility of re-manipulating artificial selves becomes more and more problematic. Putting it in Turkle's terms, the Internet turns into an unrealistic platform that wields the real essence of the Self. The subversion of privacy in which we, users of the Web 2.0, are always watched, controlled by softwares and constantly seen and monitored by virtual profiles endangers our private personal security based on a data encryption typical of social network sites. The absolute dichotomy public vs private, provides an image of personality in which the

subject understands himself though a shared social interaction with an artificial sense of otherness. This concept presupposes, in the socio-ontological foundations of modern privacy today, the clear distinction between the Self, the who, the real subject, and the thing, the what, the artificial ID we see through networked interfaces. Given the persistent fragility of identity in the cyberworld, the recurrent question is: What are we and what do we become in the Internet Age?[119] Such an inquiry is implicit in the presently-accepted view that the subject/object split and the public ethos of the Web offer different interpretations of an identity that, although enduringly materialized in digital performances, hardly identifies itself. The infringement on private property and the overall sense of the lack of protection today forges an image of the virtual Self[120] that becomes a mere unrealistic and consolidated version of a realistic personality. Put simply, the symbiotic relationship of user-machine today is essentially alimented by the strong human desire, almost a necessity, to establish a virtual socializing of identity. Most recently, "technology has allowed us to fulfill our dreams of omnipotence and omniscience by repealing the bounds of space" (Morpurgo quoted in Marzi 64). As Andrea Marzi[121] observes, the unforeseen development of cyber-reality

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[119] An excellent overview of this topic can be found in Capurro, R., Edred M., and Nagel D. (2015) *Digital Wholeness: Identity, Privacy and Freedom in the Cyberworld.* Boston: De Gruyter Editions. Through an extremely actual perspective, the book clarifies the meaning of identity in the cyberworld. Merging the notion of selfhood with that of privacy as two fundamental aspects of contemporary identity, the analysis essentially considers the Self today as a combination of reality and artificiality, or rather, as a concept based upon a "digital wholeness."

[120] It is necessary to make a distinction here between virtual and digital identity. Even though they are generally used with a shared meaning, the former refers to the potential, the possible, the imaginary identity, without a concrete manifestation, whereas the latter is the identity recreated on the Web.

[121] For a thorough and recent perspective on the subject, see, Marzi A. (2018). *Pyschoanalysis, Identity and the Internet- Explorations in Cyberspace.* Taylor & Francis. Offering a comprehensive, exhaustive and profound collection of essays on the concept of virtual reality, drawing from the conception of cyberspace as a digital mirror, the book sheds light on the most recent concerns about virtual identity determined by the simulation of an objective reality.

denotes a certain voyeurism or exhibitionism of personality (70), played out through the networks of digital communications. The development of an ultra-dimensional other, our identity reconstructed in cyberspace, is what limits the conditions of personhood materialized through a virtual exhibitionistic play of personality. From a psychoanalytical point of view,

> Today the subject has to take upon himself the Self-mirroring function, through his identification with the Other's gaze, so as to make it possible to transform that original non-place into a virtual space that can be integrated into the Self (Antinucci quoted in Marzi 99).

In this sense, the overall image of modern identity created online, or developed through a need for self-acknowledgement through the monitors of digital tools, is characterized by dislocation. In the digital screens to which modern users constantly relate, cyberspace turns into a mirror of self-exposure. As such, the essential de-humanization of the modern user is exposed to a hyperreal experience far from the tangible, the real, the effective. The digital brings new insights into who we are. Moved by a strong desire to become the "Other Self," we turn into players, virtual subjects scattered into the network. In sum, we are witnessing a new experimentation of identity, remodeled through online services which provide a new, potentially misleading interpretation of who we are and who we want to become.

## 5.2 Literature in the Cyberworld: Fictions of Self-Performativity and Over-Surveillance

Aligning with the performative aspect of self-identity, American literature in the 2000s has felt the need to grapple with the extreme challenges of the Web. It has been exposed to a crisis based on a self-centric virtual play. Writers of the new millennium, generally classified as post-postmodernist and aiming at illustrating a panoptic society, consider

technology as a traditional topic which becomes an essential part of their storytelling, allowing authors to run genuinely literary experiments. Indeed, current scholarship sees post-postmodernist American fiction, labelled under the titles of late postmodernism, digimodernism or cyberfiction, as "refocusing on certain neglected aspects of postmodernist literature" (Savvas and Coffman 195-196). Contemporary narratives thus exclude a radical break with the pre postmodern tradition, creating a thematical continuum. With respect to this premise, if one looks at the literature of computerization in the 2000s, dominant discourses are essentially techno-pervasive. Abandoning the initial optimistic technophilic images of technology, narratives in the cyberculture epitomize the general condition of complicity essentially caused by our neurotic relationship with ultra-sophisticated electronic devices.

Indeed, a recurring refrain of these fictions is certainly the shared representation of the dangers of privacy and the worrying scenario generated by the digital incursion. In this sense, contemporary narratives, portray the performative aspect of the Self online, forcing us to inevitably ponder the meaning of individuality. Last year, Zara Dinnen suggested that these fictions often reveal the "platformativity of Social Networks and the Web" (10). Interweaving new media with contemporary American literature from a very recent perspective, she furthermore argues that the current genre, informed by the digital and the actual use of high technologies, can be classified as "digital banal," referring to the daily habit of using electronic tools and somehow underestimating their effects on our relationship with media. In this sense, the digital today is considered an entirely obvious aspect that affects human life in an almost natural way. What this statement implies is that for users, and consequently for those texts narrating the digital implications of human experience, it is rather hard to register the potential negative effects of new media tools. Pointing out the limits of personal acknowledgment and the risks of digital proliferation, these texts portray both the limits and the techno-manipulative aspects of a selfhood, problematized by the system and literally sold to the public through the network.

This is certainly the case in A.M. Homes's *May We Be Forgiven* (2012), a novel centered on the spread of new digital media and its power to become an essential part

of everyday life by producing a sort of human symbiosis with electronic tools. Technology becomes an essential part of the daily routine through the figure of Harry, the protagonist, "an Internet idiot" (quoted in Dinnen 13), characterized by his inability to relate to the Web. The scenario depicted by Homes is one of a culture lost in its own sense of alienation partly caused by the spasmodic use of devices, constantly looking for Internet connection, fanatically checking the number of notifications on the screen or frequently consulting the emailbox. The description of digital technology here offers, as Dinnen points out, a kind of meditation on the co-constitution of us and the media (13-14).

Following this thread, Dave Eggers' acclaimed novel, *The Circle* (2014), offers one of the best literary examples of the incursion of digital platforms in our lives, documenting the consequences of the Internet's surveillance. As a cunning re-elaboration of Orwell's accurate predictions of the culture of monitoring and technological control, the narrative documents the effects of the loss of privacy and the excessive flow of data from networked sites. Based on the simple assertion that "SECRETS ARE LIES, SHARING IS CARING, PRIVACY IS THEFT" [122] (Eggers 228), the story chronicles the fearsome presence of a powerful Internet company, called "the Circle," that gathers its users' personal data in order to create a huge software of online identities. As the story discloses, an array of references points to the daunting public display of personality and to the software's technological ability to dismantle personal information - including identities collected, analyzed, stolen, processed and eventually stolen - as an economic benefit. Further on, Eggers refers to the presence of an account on the Circle's Internet platform, containing the entire spectrum of the digital life of the real person to whom it is associated. As such, data is freely accessible and accessed by anyone. On this, the narrator aptly tells us that,

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[122] Italic in the original.

All of every users' needs and tools, into one pot and invented TruYou- one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person. There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were and your one identity- the *TruYou[123]*, unbendable and unmaskable- was the person paying, signing up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen. […] One button for the rest of your life online. (22)

As the passage indicates, the management of online information gives rise to a general sense of personal dispersion. Although set in a dystopian future relatively close to our present, the novel portrays, in Orwellian terms, the exposure of privacy exploited by surveillance softwares. Eggers' mise-en-scène thus becomes a crude example of how information technology has been elaborated to control a user's personality from a digital profile, offering an image of the relationship with the machine that subverts the hierarchy *homo-machina*. In this sense, the novel illustrates how, if the human was initially able to impose himself on the technological machine, today we have moved instead toward a total submission in which mankind is dominated and, as Eggers suggests, fully overseen by virtuality. Technology here becomes a powerful mechanism to distort human life, thus turning identity into a matter of public interest. A little earlier, Ben Mezrich's pseudo-novel *The Accidental Billionaires* (2009),[124] not generally classified as a work of fiction, charted the roots of social control, analyzing the virtual creation of a web of interconnected identities, in this case Facebook,

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[123] Emphasis in the original.

[124] The novel inspired the award-winning film "The Social Network" (2010), directed by David Fincher, which traces the origins of Facebook. It is also important here to recall Mezrich's earlier book, *Bringing Down the House* (2003), the true story of six MIT students who manage to develop a technologically-advanced card counting system to win at blackjack. Through the sophisticated employment of facial recognition softwares in casinos for card counting, characters employ a new form of camera technology as a strategy to win at gambling.

pointing at its main goal, namely, the possibility of giving origin to a self-performance though the imitation of social life.

Expressing the re-meditation of culture though the digital (Dinnen 10), American author and computer programmer Ellen Ullman in *The Bug* (2003), set in a start-up company in 1984 (another potential reference to Orwell's compulsive representation of surveillance) and written from the perspective of a programmer, depicts the dramatic quest for the decoding in writing a software program - in informatics, "a bug." The techno-pressure to decipher unbreakable codes portrays the essential socio-dynamics of softwares as well as our essential need to come to terms with the language of computing.

In his latest novel, *Bleeding Edge* (2013),[125] Thomas Pynchon urges us to think of the Internet as a system of control developed through digital technologies violating the conditions of personality at the expense of a virtual presence. The narrative in part illustrates the phenomenon of late capitalism, the bureaucratic form of control that penetrates through media turning us into commodity subjects and thus causing our beings to be substituted by Internet interaction. Recounting the reality of the Web and the boost of attention it has recently received after the development of social network sites, the narrative documents the power of hypo-connectivity, illustrated through the creation of a software that offers the possibility of travelling in a virtual reality through an avatar. The narrator aptly reminds us that,

> Through the uncountable cross-motives of the cyberworld, the faces of unreflective click-happy users are related for the worse – systems crash, data are lost, bank accounts are looted all of which being computer-related you might expect, but then there are also the real world inconveniences […] providing the more metaphysically inclined further

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[125] Defined as an alternative example of historical fiction Pynchon's eighth novel, *Bleeding Edge*, tells the story of the protagonists' investigations into computer security. The narrative then illustrates the development of a software known as "DeepArcher," which through the creation of digital avatars, allows characters to travel in a virtual reality.

evidence that the Internet is only a small part of a much vaster integrated continuum (Pynchon 345).

Following the Pynchonesque themes we have already discussed, the genesis of the novel sheds light on the development of the so-called "Deep Web" operating beneath the surface. Zones of unrealism and cyberconnectivity induce the overall sense of control that comes from our embrace of digital technologies, signaling the possibility to be virtually "real."

More recently, Patrick Flanery's *I Am No One* (2016) further illustrates the concerns of technologic surveillance. Narrating the story of Jeremy O'Keefe, an esteemed academic who lives with the preoccupation of being watched, receiving anonymous printed copies of all his online activity, Flanery dwells upon the erosion of privacy, epitomizing the fear of the human condition rooted in the incessant phobia toward a system of ultra-surveillance. The narrator avers, "I felt the horror of being watched, of knowing that even if someone was not actively monitoring everything I did then, they were surely *recording for future use*[126] everything I read and wrote and viewed online" (Flanery 62). Clearly, the origin of this phobia lies in technology's over-incursion since, as the narrator claims, "The fact of digital surveillance was not itself a surprise" (62). Perceiving his identity loss as he wanders alone at night through the city completely unnoticed, Flanery's protagonist must interrogate himself on the nature of his personality, trying to understand whether he truly is "no one." In other words, the digital scenario has made him almost inexistent. His non-presence coincides with the full recognition of living in a society that constantly reconfigures the human experience through technological interaction. Identity crisis and fears of cyber incursion are masterfully combined in a narrative that condenses the uncontrolled relationship to a neurotic, technophobic society.

Addressing the concerns of contemporary culture and highlighting its extreme need to be electronically monitored, Jonathan Franzen exploits the essential tension between

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[126] Emphasis in the original.

self-authenticity and self-representation in the discomforting scenario of digitization. In *Purity* (2015), dwelling upon the contrast between personal identity and its public exposure, Franzen elaborately underscores the crisis of individualism framed by the digital scenario based on the simple assertion that, as one of his characters observes, "If you substituted networks for socialism, you got the Internet. Its competing platforms were united in their ambition to define every term of your existence" (Franzen 414). Digital media and the Web here become the primary forms of communication. The loss of identity and the incapacity for self-definition of Franzen's young protagonist, Pip, intertwine with the impending presence of the Internet that limits the possibility for a realistic form of individuality. Furthermore, young Pip is in search of her own identity, which has been mysteriously kept secret. As she asserts, "To have an identity you have to believe that other identities equally exist. You need closeness with other people" (257). This sense of proximity and social relationship today is obviously accomplished by the presence of the Web 2.0.[127] The negative ethos of the network and the obsessive attitude of its users seem evident for the author, who dramatically weaves a scenario including the issue of identity and its tragic contemporary complications.

Fictions of the 2000s, recalling Orwell and Bradbury's earlier dystopian settings, illustrate the ability of digital technology to control every aspect of human existence. As such, novels offer images of a society that displays the dangers of public exposure and the loss of privacy related to the question of selfhood (Papacharissi 248). Thoroughly exploring the excessive immersion within digital environments, American fiction in the age of hyper-connectivity offers glimpses of a changing system devoured by technology, in which digital control and communal exposure become the general norms and the essential concepts for the development of personal information. At this point, it is tempting to say that contemporary narratives of digitization somehow offer a new way to cope with the disturbances created by the digital revolution. Through the

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[127] This includes an array of programs among which are social networks, Wikipedia, Google, and so on.

lens of literature, the following analysis will attempt to illustrate the new, digital image of American identity.

## 5.3 Simulation, Virtual Subjectivity and Digital Complicity in Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009)

In line with the above-mentioned concerns, in *Chronic City* Jonathan Lethem[128] turns the entire narrative into a computer simulation that affects society, inspiring characters to an incessant quest for self-definition. Narrating the vicissitudes of the dynamic male duo composed of former child actor, Chase Insteadman and his artistic guru friend, Perkus Tooth through their complicated relationship, the text functions as a representation of a personal quest over-complicated by a media-dominated culture. Yet in the text, set in a roughly contemporary cityscape, the digital cannot be considered as a distinct realm (Dinnen 149) it becomes instead a combination of virtual complexity and emotional malaise. Describing Lethem's main goal, Zara Dinnen insists that in *Chronic City* "the characters' encounters with digital media are simultaneously delineated by screens and complexity everywhere" (152).

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[128] Novelist and essayist, Jonathan Lethem is considered one of the central figures of post-postmodernist American literature. Mostly known for his versatile literary style, characterized by different registers and narrative experimentations, Lethem becomes known with his attempt to rewrite what has been defined as "the great American post post-modern novel." This is the case of *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), his best-known work of fiction, which tells the story of the transformation of American youth, from the 1960s up to the present, ranging from science fiction to autobiographies and dystopias. However, it should be pointed out that mostly because of his eclectic style (often criticized for its non-linearity), scholarship on Lethem is rather limited. Critical interpretations on his work can be mostly found in articles, essays and interviews of his novels, rather than on his whole work. Moreover, for a preliminary and broad discussion on Jonathan Lethem see Matthew Luter's most exhaustive criticism: *Understanding Jonathan Lethem*. University of South Carolina Press, 2015. In addition, Zara Dinnen's *The Digital Banal* (2018), published last year, offers an original and extremely recent analysis of *Chronic City*.

It is in fact in this intricacy that Lethem's readers feel almost completely disoriented. They are forced to deal with a plotless narration and are eventually exposed to a reality in which everything, even the story, is dispersed in an elusive simulation of the real. Critical approaches to this novel have stressed that "Here, Lethem blends the fictional space to cyberspace pointedly blending the two together, simultaneously emphasizing the virtuality of New York City and the actuality of digital environments" (St. Clair 99). For this reason, it is necessary to remark the difficulty in interpreting the text which results, as does the genre to which it ascribes, problematic for its lack of a linear plot and for the author's digital-centric approach to the story, often too convoluted and excessively developed in a parallel dimension.

Indeed, the protagonists are in search of a new identity in the present after a past of glories now vanished. Chase is an actor who now lives on image rights, and Perkus is a former music critic who is famous for having wallpapered the metropolitan area of New York City with posters that have since become works of art. Shaping his characters though bizarre caricatures and odd ways of relating, Lethem forces them to develop their own search for identification through their constant immersion within the digital system.

In this way, the novel draws the reader into the simple assertion that reality per se is something we use, and to which we cling in order to manage a sense of virtuality that now represents a part of our individuality. In fact, unable to disentangle their Selves from the digital world, characters deal with a constant reconceptualization of their own subjectivity. In this way, the text reveals how the power of computing creates a sense of simulation that manipulates the human being, endangering the issue of identity reframed within virtual reality. As one of the characters remarks,

> It's common knowledge we could be living in a gigantic computer simulation […] You know we'll end up destroying ourselves with nuclear weapons, or become a giant hippie commune, or whatever. There might be trillions of these simulations going on at once. (Lethem *Chronic City* 267)

Moreover, characters find themselves embedded in a world of artificiality based on virtual projections and unresolved personal dilemmas, thus being effected by a sense of personhood increasingly compromised by the hyperrealistic space of the computer. Essentially classified as an "unconventional" novel for its lack of a clear and linear plot, the narration pulls the reader into a dystopic world filled with constant paradoxes and artifacts, where it is extremely hard to disentangle the real from the virtual. Following this classification, Susan Kollin observes that Lethem's plot implicitly refers to the definition of "system novel" employed by Leclair, offering a "fierce intellectual engagement with the large-scale structures and the networks that govern our contemporary life" (Kollin 255-256). Mentioning some of the most important theories of cyberrealism (such as those of Baudrillard and Haraway), the narrative depicts the human upheaval coinciding with technological development in the wake of DeLillo and Foster Wallace.

From the opening scene, we are thrust into a technophobic space populated by characters presenting an identity shaped by their essential immersion within digital spaces. The Internet, dating websites, Wikipedia and eBay are just some of the online platforms with which Lethem's protagonists are forced to interact. In his review of the novel, Darby M. Dixon suggests that here "the role of technology is that of exposing the abyss along the edge of which all people walk" (Dixon "Review of Lethem's Eighth Novel"). In other words, digitization is what exposes characters to introspections against the backdrop of a Manhattan portrayed through a general cultural decadence that lends itself to an inexplicable sense of unrealism. Rearranging the structure of urban space as the site of the Internet's postmodern over-saturation, as occurs in Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*,[129] Lethem's New York "is reconfigured by a series of digitally promulgated scenarios" (St. Clair 91). As such, the downtown area is shrouded in an impenetrable fog, besieged by a tiger who mysteriously appears at night to

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[129] The setting of Pynchon's novel is that of New York's hi-tech neighborhood nicknamed Silicon Alley. In both texts, the focus of the city is the toxicity of electronic systems and, for Lethem, the distortion of an urban space deeply embedded in an electronic setting.

demolish buildings, and attacked by eagles who sack apartments, driving out their tenants.

What is more, New York becomes the setting of the citizens' obsessive appearance of strange, transfixing objects known as "Chaldrons," virtual, vase-like creations. Technology soon materializes in these dramatic events disrupting Lethem's science-fictional scenario. The tiger thus becomes a giant mechanical tool, sowing panic and paralyzing life in the city. Subsequently, Perkus remarks that "the tiger is a machine […] a robot" (Lethem 192). "Chaldrons," we soon learn, function as elusive talismans. Exclusively sold on eBay, they contain a code for Internet access to an online reality. Ultimately, characters take part in a virtual game, creating avatars of their Selves played out and performed on the Web. In this way, the computer acts as a mere extension of the Self, no more seen as a logic-bound machine but rather as a tool of estrangement from real life, offering a virtual escape through a shared performance of self-identity.

In this almost catastrophic scenario, the characters' position is quite close to that of the readers. This digital reality, which disables and manipulates users, creating an almost inevitable sense of complicity, epitomizes the disquieting obsession for technology and the fears of our present. Hence, the fact of being compulsively addicted to the digital is the pivot on which the narrative rests and the element on which the author develops his theory of the alterations of modern identity. The victimization of the human battling against the digital incursion, and the consequent sense of dependence generated by the abiding presence of the Web, "instilling self-patrolling fear in the American mind […]," as the narrator avers, causes the fact that "some human freedom had been leveraged from view of consciousness itself. Liberty had been narrowed, winnowed […]" (Lethem *CC* 15). On the basis of this awareness, Lethem's narrator reports that "Complicity […] was the only doubtless conviction" (16). Illustrating the tension between technological consumerism and its compulsive usage, *Chronic City* looks at our constant and thus necessary need for participation with the over-technological world we, as users, have in fact created. Isaac Butler's analysis firmly supports this statement when he asserts that,

What we see through Chase's eyes is an age where we are spectators and consumers yes, but we are also performers. We are also the very ones making the very culture we're audience for. Via Youtube, Facebook, blogs, Tumbler, Twitter through Pinterest, Vimeo, Etsy and other outlets we are audience and performer at the same time. We can no longer claim- as David Foster Wallace did – that a culture has been imposed on us, one that's simultaneously delightful and infantilizing and isolating. We are both halves of the equation now. Whatever happens, we are complicit in it. (Butler "Your City's a Sucker: Chronic City, Complicity, and Internet Fiction")

Implicitly referring to the virtual reality to which they belong, Lethem's bizarre protagonists further acknowledge their excessive technological addiction by noting that, "[…] let alone our [their] complicity with any wider darkness. We [they] were, it turned out, a whole island of crimeless victims, survivors of nothing worse than a cream pie in the face, which, hey, tasted pretty good!" (Lethem 206). As a result, new media and digital platforms offer a sense of lust that generates a digital dependence from which it is impossible to abstain. It is our complicity with media that, as Lethem asserts, leads to the re-shaping of personality in the modern world. Representing the problematic tension between real and virtual, the narrative hinges on the recurrent personal involvement with our Web-driven culture.

Against the backdrop of this virtually-controlled environment, Lethem's New York is surreal, dystopic, tormented and, as the title suggests, chronic.[130] By addressing this issue, Barber notes that "Urban space here is made universal by the Internet – a hyper-urban chaos freed from the constraints of both geography and conventional notions of what's real" (quoted in Peacock 143). Thus, the author unfolds the belief that "Manhattan has reached a maximum amount of unreality" (Barber 145). In a recent interview Lethem claimed that he thought of the city as "[…] made of a chronic sense of unrealism" (quoted in St. Clair 95). His narrator genuinely avers,

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[130] We soon learn that "El Chronic" is also the name of an ancient herb with a narcotic power able to distort the sense of reality for those who use it. This is a clear reference to the narcosis of the virtual.

> To live in Manhattan is to be persistently amazed at the worlds squirreled inside one another, the chaotic intricacy with which realms interweave, like those lines of television cable and fresh water stream heat outgoing sewage and telephone wire […] We only pretend to live on something as orderly as a grid (Lethem *CC* 9).

As the description outlines, the urban space is as confused as the intricated mixture of wires representing man's struggle to cope with the complicated structure of the city's social system. Seen as a problematic urban environment that pretends to live within a sense of order, yet by contrast, suffering from technological bewilderment, Manhattan is transformed in a difficult context, unable to escape chaotic intricacy and collapsing in on itself with the recursive presence of digital systems. New York becomes a critical space representing, through a general sense of hyperrealism, the modern narcosis toward digital platforms. Michiko Kakutani observed that,

> Mr Lethem's Chronic City seems like an insipid, cartoon version of Manhattan, recognizable in its outline […] but garnished with odd details […] that feel more like whimsical embroiderings than genuinely interesting or illuminating inventions ("They'll take Manhattan, Isle of Whimsy and virtual reality" *The NYT*).

As the narrative unwinds, the narrator drags us into a world constantly poised between the plausible and the absurd, the ordinary and the unacceptable (Zappalà "Chronic City"). This world is populated by a rather complicated system of beings in constant conflict with the unrealism of which they are a part. Complex, detached, but at the same time gripping, users and active technological nerds, the tormented figures that compose Lethem's scene exemplify the disquieting force of the computer, mostly through the Internet, and its consequent ability to limit the boundaries of reality as it inflicts a general sense of subjective vulnerability on those who use it.

If these are the general conduits through which the narration flows, identity becomes a key concept illustrated through a general quest for self-perception. As culture becomes more and more entangled with media-oriented systems, we become blind, displaced of our own sense of traditional subjectivity, incessantly performing and selling our

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identity to technology. As the narrative suggests, characters declare themselves devoid of a sense of individualism. The name of the protagonist, Chase Insteadman, encompasses de facto the whole dispersion of a sense of personhood. Child prodigy, former actor, performer of an identity, he is spasmodically looking for a true Self that is completely inexistent, eventually abandoning itself to virtuality. Indeed, Chase can be considered an "instead man" or as he is mistakenly called with bitter hilarity, "Un-person [...] Chase *Unperson*[131]" (Lethem 216).

Investigating the rather complicated figure of the protagonist, Justin St. Clair notes that "Lethem's putative narrator, Chase Insteadman, holds the whole together" (93) personal identity and his social role as well as his self-display for technology. Furthermore, his personal mission, as Lethem shows, is that of "chasing," another implicit reference to his name, pursuing both the Self and digitization or, as Perkus declares, "always chasing a new connection" (Lethem 190) with technological tools. As expressed in the opening, he also shares his disturbing concept of identity, reporting that, from his childhood, he saw it as almost nonexistent as he started at his Self as a "ghost disguised as a twelve-year-old" (23). Later on, Chase will eventually remark on Tooth's lack of personhood, asserting that "[He] I saw Perkus crumble then, drained of spirit, sagging into himself, an imploded building in slow motion" (92). Seen from this perspective, Lethem's portrayal of the complex issue of identity takes place within a problematic urban environment in which Internet and the reality of media are the backdrop for the collapse of personal authenticity. Furthermore, the virtual obsession with Chaldrons is what allows the acquisition of a sense of identification through cyberspace. As the narrator suggests, "Immersion in the Chaldrons' light refreshed the notion of a gestalt[132] identity alive among us. The Chaldron's door might open to a place where selves dissolved and merged" (169).

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[131] Emphasis in the original.

[132] In psychology, "Gestalt" refers to a perceptual pattern or structure possessing qualities as a whole that cannot be described merely as a sum of its parts (Collins Dictionary). In this case the concept is related to the general notion of identity.

What is perceived is a sense of emotional void. This overwhelming emptiness, either emotional or physical, is quite well expressed by the unusual episode of Chase's fiancée, Janice, an astronaut trapped in space, unable to return to Earth. Their sentimental relationship receives an unprecedented boost of attention from the media. Opposed to public interest, Chase affirms that "[He] I wouldn't speak of my [his] astro-fiancée trapped behind her thin steel-and-tile skin against the unfathomable keening void" (34). In the reality constructed by Lethem we are deceived, much like Chases's girlfriend, by a sense of immaterialism that leaves nothing but an immense personal void. Referring to his sentimental relationship, the protagonist returns to Baudrillard's notion of "Simulacra," referring to the interconnection between culture and media, whose nexus determines the construction of a society of mere simulation in which everything is based on artificial imitation. With respect to this, Chase reports that "I might love Janice, yes, but what I have shown these people is a simulacrum" (41). Analyzing this concern further, Perkus explains that,

> Simulated worlds theory says that computing power is inevitably going to rise to a level where it's possible to create a simulation of the entire universe, in every detail, and populated with little simulated beings, something like avatars, who sincerely believe they're truly alive. If you were in one of these simulated universes you'd never know it (267).

In Baudrillad's terms, this simulation represents a mere imitation of the model and, in his words, "It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (2). Indeed, users such as Lethem's characters, are no more able to distinguish nature from the artifice. Imitation becomes so realistic that albeit offering an alternative to reality, it evolves, by itself, into the new real.[133] "Yet Another World" - that is the name of the computer game to which characters become almost addicted - transforms participants

[133] Refer to Baudrillard, Jean. (1997). *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press. Although Baudrillard's concept of simulation was developed at the end of the 1990s, it is still considered as extremely topical in the description of the digital world.

into players through a typical cyber-performance of identity allowing, as the name suggests, an emotional escape into a world far removed from tangible reality. On this point, Zara Dinnen points out the novel's contrast between "embodiedness" and "embeddedness" (152). Characters embody their Self through a virtual persona in cyberspace and their individuality is embedded within virtual avatars. We learn that,

> Yet Another World was, in itself, only a set of templates and tools, 'a place with stuff, a place where you can do things' […] You also made yourself there behind the screen, and the self you made was something Biller (the videogame programmer) called an 'avatar' […] digitally prettified versions of usual selves. (Lethem 263-264)

Voicing the contemporary image of personality, Lethem exemplifies the sense of personal despair, "stoned on media confusion" (Peacock 153). The perception of a subjectivity literally "sold" to virtual platforms that alter and relocate personality into the cyber-world, leads to the creation of a constant game of otherness between real and virtual. Yet, the obsessive behaviors of characters are captured with extreme verve and clear resolution, culminating in a compulsive lust for the virtual world depriving the Self of its meaning. As simulations of identity take place on online platforms and role plays are the core of narration, Lethem illustrates how the computer leads to a personal fragmentation, torn between presence and absence, material existence and virtual play. As such, identity in the novel exists recalling Dinnen's above-mentioned notion of "platformativity" where characters act, as they themselves suggest, "calling every waking – living - moment a kind of performance" (Lethem *CC* 75).

Essentially "bothered with self-reinventions" (37), the users who populate this dystopian scenario are players, virtual actors of digital technology unable to resist its charm, driven by the need to alter their identities by turning them into a digital personification. Selfhood is constantly changing, evolving, eventually filtered through the screen to be transformed into a purely digital construct. In this sense, the issue of personhood in the narrative, originally based upon reality, is consequently made up of false hopes, self-dreams of personal realizations inevitably facing the struggle with

immaterialism. In this narrative scenario, the artificiality of the Web allows people to transpose themselves on online platforms through the creation of cyber personae and where movie stars of a bygone era, such as Marlon Brando - so much admired by Perkus Tooth - become stars with a popular profile on Wikipedia. The unavoidable envelopment with cyberspace stages a real artificial community.

As witnessed in the novel's narrative scenario, in order to live and to develop a sense of identity, modern society requires an essential relationship to the screen, thus introducing users into an artificial world where self-reinvention is then possible. In other words, victims of the screen, like the modern users who populate Lethem's stories, develop that emotional fracture with their reflected Self, distorted from a reversal of reality to the detriment of the digital.

Given this interpretation, the symbolism in the novel is rather clear. Borrowing Lev Manovich's recent claim, it seems evident that in this case "The Software takes Command" (2013).[134] In the narrative, we are provided with many opportunities for considering that Lethem depicts what Susan Kollin defines as "the challenges posted by globalization, hyper-capitalism, digital labor and a widespread social decline" (152). Indeed, characters are "chronically under-employed" (quoted in Dinnen 149), stoned on media bewilderment and eventually attracted by what the Internet offers. As reflected in Lethem's plot, virtual worlds take over through computer interaction.

Summarizing the story's main concern, one can essentially note that the narrative is about making sense of one's own identity, as it occurs for Lethem's ludicrous protagonists, always chasing their own sense of identification reframed through online connectivity. With respect to this claim, Luter adds that "*Chronic City* is both a comedy and a tragedy, a eulogy and a madly encoded map of self-authenticity dealing with a personal tragedy navigating the real and the virtual world" (85). Recounting the comical and clumsy inability of characters to understand the nature of their

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[134] Developing a new discipline known as "Software Studies," in this book Manovich sets forth the proposition that software is what glues contemporary society together and thus controls the system through its invisibility beneath the surface of the accessible Web.

personalities the novel faithfully follows the path for the development of a second virtual persona. Read in this way, the story becomes an exhaustive combination of users and their necessity to live within identity simulations on the Web's virtual systems. Avatars, players and performers through personal simulations, Lethem's protagonists aim at valuing the virtual over the real.

Charged with extreme artificiality and science-fiction artifices, Manhattan becomes a mere extension of the cyberworld being controlled electronically, thus illustrating humankind's personal complicity with the machine in developing new modes of self-definition. Being entangled in fears of dispossession and displacement in a city over-controlled by a mysterious electronic power, characters cope with a shattered sense of subjectivity shifting from realistically unachievable to electronically transfigured. Indeed, in *Chronic City*, characters, as virtual consumers have the leisure time and enough of a safety net to become caught up in the Web, developing an obsession with video games. The "second life"[135] to which users are exposed has negative repercussions in their "real" lives (Kollin 263). Moreover, the fog enveloping the city represents the problematic and thus chronic confusion which comes from the demise of identity as reconfigured by electronic systems.

Recalling Foster Wallace's earlier investigation of America as a place of technological addiction - as we have previously analyzed - caused by media saturation, the narrative offers an extremely actual re-reading of digital dependence in terms of the need to experiment a new, predominantly virtual and trivial, identity. Offering an image of cyberspace that oscillates between individual complicity and media obligation, Lethem's narrative considers online and offline presence as visible and clear issues. Writing of this aspect in *Chronic City*, Lethem has asserted, "I burdened my characters with retro-stupidity on the whole matter of the Internet" (in Dinnen 151). In this sense, it is their naïve involvement with the Web and their quasi-unconscious usage of

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[135] "Second Life" is also the name of a virtual world created by an American company and that became popular online in 2003 with the aim of proposing a new Internet platform to simulate reality. Lethem's "Yet Another World" seems to be an implicit reference to this digital software.

technology that prevents them from building serious social connections and establishing a concrete sense of identity.

Living in a world surrounded by virtual simulations, Lethem's characters are the real protagonists of the digital system, acting their personal roles within cyberspace and eventually being played by the computer's hidden digital space. Outlining the vulnerability of traditional conceptions of the Self within the digital scenario through multiple profiles, the novel functions as a trenchant denunciation of America's personal involvement with computerization as an essential part of everyday life. Identity has no choice but to split between realism and virtuality, becoming either two- or three-dimensional, staged through the screen, achieved in Internet communities, or eventually played out in artificial realities existing within multiple platforms. The digital odyssey that subtly creeps into the lives of the protagonists for Lethem marks times and ways of narration charged with a virtual reality that replaces the real one.

## 5.4 Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010): Technology, Time, Nostalgia and Self-Transformation

Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011)[136] extends the scope of this investigation, representing the dissolution of the Self in the contrast between past technologies of the 1970s and the digital present. Egan was awarded the Pulitzer Prize "for the inventive investigation of growing up and growing old in the digital age" ("Pulitzer"). Considered "one of the most gifted writers of her generation" (Interview with Reilly), Egan's primary goal is to illustrate the vertigo of self-identity within our wired culture. However, *Goon Squad* is not really a novel as much as a collage of thirteen stories glued together by a common thread, digitalization. In his extensive analysis of the author's work, Gianluca Didino considers glimpse, technology, body and profoundness as the central themes in Egan's fiction. In this sense, the glance is that of the reader, projected into the technological environment as he is forced to follow the changes of identity marked by the passing of time. Depth is associated with the emotional relationships that arise from the difficult technological interaction, and finally, the body represents the human involved in the use of the machine (Didino 150).

With this interpretation in mind it is essential to recall that in *Goon Squad*, technology is represented through the music industry's transition from analog to digital and

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[136] Jennifer Egan has been considered by critics as one of the most talented American novelists of recent decades. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). As an author capable of staging the tensions of contemporary American culture, by experimenting with forms and contents of the narrative, Egan has published several novels and short stories. She has recently experimented with online fiction, writing a whole novel on Twitter. In 2018 she became the President of the PEN American Centre. As for Lethem before her, scholarship on Egan is quite limited. Her criticism can thus be found mostly in newspapers, magazine articles and interviews. However, for a broad overview on the critical approach of Jennifer Egan's work, see Didino, Gianluca. (2016). *Jennifer Egan*. In his analysis Didino considers Egan's prose as a set of different narrative weaves, in his words, "a mixture of Pynchon, DeLillo, Foster Wallace and Lethem" (26).

computers. In this scenario, characters anxiously try to formulate a concept of identity incorporated within their technological interest. At the core of a reconceptualization of personality are Bennie Salazar, former musician and now successful record executive, and his friend Sasha, a kleptomaniac with a difficult past. Alongside their stories there is a list of interrelated sketches shifting back and forth from past to present and shedding light on the self-imposition of the new media. Egan's protagonists all share similar traits, being solitary nerds coping with technological changes and keeping the pace with a different image of individuality. On this point, Didino has further observed that Jennifer Egan enriches her prose with the presence of metaphorical mirrors (151). In this way, the reflection of the Self on the screen has the twofold difficulty of affirming and challenging the image of identity.

Through this narrative approach, her characters ask themselves what has become of their own identity since, as Alex points out in the ending, the human being is but an envelope whose true essence has completely vanished. Thus, the confine between reality and artifact is the central pivot on which the concept of identity develops. Selfhood is thus envisaged through the dispersion of relationships and their digital surrogates. In this scenario, individuality as Egan shows, is extremely problematic and almost completely meaningless.[137]

The evolution of the music industry from the 1970s to the 2000s produces a perpetual longing for the past and, as Bennie remarks, implicitly referring to the novel's title, "Time's a goon, right? […] and the goon won" (Egan *Goon Squad*[138] 370). Even so, "the cultural malaise Egan associates with the 1990s and 2000s thus emerges as a problem of postmodern simulation" (Moling 62). As the narrative unfolds, technology

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[137] In 2001, in her first novel, *Look at Me*, Egan imagined an identity purposefully built through digital masks. In the book, written when social networks were still in an experimental phase, Egan imagined the creation of a social network known as "Ordinary People" in which it was possible to artificially construct new identities performed on the virtual space.

[138] Hereafter cited as *GS*.

is what dismantles time and self-consciousness. Moreover, Egan seems to be interested in detailing a present in which text messages, emails, social networks, and more generally, the digital setting structure the collective emotions on which the story develops. Hence, before the novel's publication, Egan declared,

> I wanted to explore the question of how reality as a concept might have changed – or needs to change – in light of all the new states of being and new experiences communication technology has created. My question was not so much to answer the question of what is real and what isn't but to make the question no longer matter. In other words, I wanted to create a world that was simultaneously real and not real" (Interview with Reilly).

The narrative's rather confused structure, recounted in non-linear flashbacks and a patchwork of unrelated stories, opens with Sasha's date with an unknown person she has met online who hardly recognizes her from her digital profile, faked on the Web with a different age: "The closest anyone got to guessing it was thirty-one and most put her in her twenties. […] Her online profiles all listed her as twenty-eight" (Egan 6). In a 2011 study on digital platforms and society's "robotic moment," Sherry Turkle has specified that online "We can re-write the profile that pleases us and edit our messages until they project the identity we want" (12).[139] As she adds further, we often create the fantasy of who we want to be (152), as Sasha here does, presenting a virtual persona as somebody else, playing with the Self and reworking a new personal image. In this sense, lies are the basic level of communication and identity itself becomes an artificial forgery. Through the use of technology, this mechanism encourages the development

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[139] Turkle's book is still considered extremely relevant today for its groundbreaking definition of the changes in American society, offering a description of the average American in the years following 2010. Turkle further describes the presence of what she herself calls "heroic narratives," literary texts through which contemporary authors praise technology for its contribution to the human progress. Her book is also a valid account of our current performance on the digital stage, following the progression of digital systems (the demise of emails in favor of the usage of social networks and instant messaging).

of a sense of narcissism in which Egan's characters wish to achieve their idealized self-images.

Drawing from the simple assertion that "You can find almost anyone on a computer" (Egan *GS* 97), the author introduces from the beginning the problem of virtual identity over-complicated by online interaction and social network sites. "You (Plural)," the title of one chapter, confirms the presence of diverse forms of subjectivity within digital scenarios. Indeed, that sense of emotional dispersion and personal displacement coincides with the disorienting progression of the plot in which Egan, with great ability, represents emotions and human connections through a difficult auto-recognition of the Self as produced by media interaction.

As we learn from the text, "Everybody sounds stoned because they're emailing people" (141), because of an uncontrollable need to be interconnected through technology and, following Lethem's vision, becoming accomplices to it. In this way, through a traditional post-postmodernist ethic, the novel depicts the current approach to identity as we navigate the Internet. In a recent interview, Egan herself has claimed that she aimed at creating "an investigation of the evolution of technology and its impact on people's lives" ("Author Q&A"). With respect to this, she further added that, "The music industry – so ravaged by digitization – became another lens through which to look at some ramifications of technological change" ("Author Q&A"). As we proceed in the novel, we perceive how both language and identity are fully immersed in the mutuality of a Web culture that is extensively plagiaristic and, in a certain sense, discomforting.

Attempting to resist digitization in many different ways, while not succeeding, characters know that,

> Ballads of paranoia and disconnection ripped from the chest of a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or profile or a handle or a handset, who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, now registered" (Egan GS 374).

The sense of nostalgia for a bygone past now essentially culminates in the inevitable relation to the network, where no one is cut off or forgotten but rather monitored and literally sold to digital platforms. Egan further declared she was "interested in how new media intersected with the 1960s counterculture, how it heightened its identity, and also in the 'out of body' nature of the media" ("Jennifer Egan by Heidi Julavits").

In this scenario, all seems false and de-structuralized: identities, people, old and new technologies. For Egan, the inexorable change of this disconnection is time. Significantly, an extract from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1927) opens the narrative.

> Poets claim that we recapture for a moment the Self that we were long ago when we enter some house or garden in which we used to live in our youth […] It is in ourselves that we should rather seek to find those fixed places, contemporaneous with different years. (Proust in Egan *GS* 1)

It is in our sense of selfhood, as Proust suggests according to Egan, that we must seek a sense of identity contrasted by a present that is too technologic and rapid. Developing this concern even further, Martin Moling seems to agree on the fact that "Egan's characters pine to recapture the innocent, blissful moments of their younger days" (54). Through their inevitable encounter with technologies, Bennie and his friends embark on a journey of personal transformation and self recollection. In Proustian terms, they try to collect the former sense of identity endangered by a time of technological prevalence.

A general sense of personal change and virtual interaction affects a society attempting to cope with digital self-performativity and the distribution of a new personal image on the Web. Bringing her critical eye to the digital and its complications, in both traditional and rather experimental forms of cyber-narrative, the author sees technology as an essential element for self-definition. However, identity is mostly illustrated through a sense of authenticity developed by its interaction with the digital that, as Egan's

narrative shows, substantially plays with perceptions of personality. In her system, users are subjected to and then "subjectified" by a system out of control.

As the narrator clearly indicates, "The problem was *digitization*, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh [...] *An aesthetic holocaust*!" [140] (Egan *GS* 26). As we understand from the novelist's words, the immersion within the technologically submerged world of computerization, has discretely established itself producing an interaction with the machine which has become necessary. In fact, toward the end of the story Rebecca, a young academic, shares her analysis of words she classifies as "word casings," which have become devoid of their meaning due to their excessive misusage on the Web. It is not a coincidence then that, in the list, the word "identity" is included as lacking its albeit complicated significance because of its excessive exploitation in virtual reality. The narrative reports that,

> Rebecca was an academic star. Her new book was on the phenomenon of word casings, a term she'd invented for words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks. English was full of these empty words – "friend" and "real" – words that had been shucked out of their meaning and reduced to husks. Some, like, "*identity*,"[141] "search" and "cloud," had clearly been drained of life by their Web usage. (360)

Following this logic, as musical performers per se, characters try to act and relocate their own identity in the present digital scenario. With reference to this, Sasha aptly remarks on her own personal transformation: "I'm changing, I'm changing, I'm changing: I've changed! Redemption, transformation [...] every day, every minute" (Egan *GS* 20). The extreme sense of narcosis toward computerization undermines the narrative when Sasha equates human beings with processing machines. He further

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[140] Emphasis in the original.

[141] Personal emphasis.

shares his concern for the dispersion of personal data and the presence of a virtual identity now completely surrendered to the Web.

> Here was the bottom line: if we human beings are *information processing machines*[142], reading X's and O's and translating that information into what people oh so breathlessly call "experience," and if I had access to all that same information via cable TV […] – If I had not only the information but the artistry to shape that information using the computer inside my brain (real computers scared me; if you can find Them they can find you, and I didn't want to be found) (Egan *GS* 110).

The possibility of being digitalized and virtually transfixed online creates a dominant preoccupation with selfhood. The human being and his sense of identity become part of a machine capable of processing and elaborating personal information, exposing the subject to a virtual presence accessible to everyone. In this sense, here Egan seems to follow Agger's contemporary view on the sociological aspects of the "Virtual Self," based on the assumption that "our media culture and information technology get inside our heads, position our bodies and dictate our everyday life" (1).

Portraying victims of virtual identity mash-ups, Egan shows the manic dependence on the screen as characters express their fear of a new digital tool, similar to a tablet and thus defined as a "handset."  In the final chapter, the potential use of this electronic device is described by Rebecca's husband, Alex. He struggles to educate their son without being too absorbed by new digital pads, expressing his preoccupation for a technological future that might further deform human subjectivity since, as the narrator recalls,

> He never could quite forget that every byte of information he had posted online […] was stored in the databases of multinationals who swore they would never, ever use it – that he was owned, in other words having sold himself unthinkingly" (Egan *GS* 351).

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[142] Emphasis in the original, as it is for the following quotes unless otherwise indicated.

Here again, we are presented with an image of the Internet as the insidious landscape on which personal information is played, collected and stored, lending itself to cybernetic manipulations. Still, Alex realizes that "What he needed was to find fifty more people like him, who had stopped being themselves without realizing it" (Egan *GS* 352). As Johnston has remarked, Egan's users somehow unwittingly become profiles of themselves "shifting from individuals to 'dividuals' – divisible - through technologies and economies of consumer surveillance" (169). The writer's discussion of the politics of data dispersion over Internet platforms seems to imply that "Egan's profile-fiction also interrogates the modes of ambient surveillance, sitting at the intersection of fiction and reality" (Johnston 156). Partly addressing the politics of what Johnston has recently defined as "positionality" (156) within the network with regard to the user's presence in cyberspace and the accessibility of metadata, the narrative discusses how virtual profiles reposition our personality within web systems. The novel eventually raises the question of control as a strategy to recapture the problematic issue of identity as a form of public experience de-privatizing personal information for the sake of public exposure. As the prose develops, it repeatedly illustrates contemporary ways to disassemble the notion of self-identity through digital systems.

Henceforth, for Egan's characters media usage creates a form of personal disconnection from reality. Alex's choice of protecting his child from the compulsive use of media, preventing his son from becoming an active digital user, represents the human concern about a digital symbiosis that exposes humans to a form of public visibility and manic dependence. For this reason, the protagonists of *Goon Squad* seem to be keeping an eye on the technological universe from a distance. To a certain extent, they cannot help but to get involved, looking at change with suspicion and with the anxiety of those who know that media inevitably effect the human condition. Including the novel among the canon of digital literature, Zara Dinnen rather vividly argues that "Egan's novel explores technology as an explicit social concern, imagining uncanny identities and relationships that arise from different mediated environments" (182).

Pivoting on Sherry Turkle's widely debated theory of virtual multiplicity,[143] Egan gives characters the chance to play with their own sense of Self. Illustrating the development of cybernetic exposure, the author points at that spread of individuality causing what Turkle termed "online personae" (261). The concept clearly refers to the construction of databases built online by collecting information, and instilling an overall sense of anxiety about the possibility of being "owned" by the virtual space of digital machines. Lost and never fully accomplished, identity in *Goon Squad* represents the modern user who, as Tani has suggested, becomes a Poesque man of the crowd (15), moved by an inexplicable interest toward something (in this case technology), and searching a potential sense of otherness with which he hardly identifies. Technological advancements, illustrated here through the lens of the music industry and thus altered by digital improvement, reflect the general plasticity of contemporary identity. In this sense, Sasha's kleptomaniac desire to steal has often been seen as a way to acquire a sense of individuality, appropriating things belonging to other people, exactly as the Web embezzles personalities.

Moreover, Chapter 12 suspends traditional narration with the use of a Power Point presentation. Technology here is used to illustrate the dialogue between a young girl and her mother, written in the form of slides with the schematic lines, graphs and bullet points typical of digital presentations. Hence, Egan's choice to draw from the digital as a trope to develop the crisis of personhood and to use a narrative strategy employed in written form, guides us through a literary experiment. Another example of this is illustrated by the employment of texting language in the novel, made up of abbreviations commonly used in mobile messaging, as shown in one of the many virtual conversations via SMS: "*U hav sum nAms 4 me*? He read on the screen. *hEr thA*

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[143] In a 2012 interview, Turkle explained the concept as follows. "In the case of people assuming online personas, people are aware of the lives they have created on the screen. They are playing different aspects of themselves […] and they are forced to think of their identities in terms of multiplicity. The Internet concretizes and makes more urgent the question of identity as multiplicity" ("Interview with Sherry Turkle" *Technology Review*, 2012 http://www.psychiatryonline.it/node/2033).

*r*, Alex typed. […] *GrAt. Il gt 2 wrk*" (Egan *GS* 357).[144] Digitization is not only the cliché on which the narrative rests; it becomes the language used for narrating the path toward a new form of subjectivity. As such, the novel's experimentation of a technological aesthetic becomes total. Digital codes used in this chapter and in the one entitled X's and O's (slang for hugs and kisses, traditionally used at the bottom of virtual messages), contribute to the enhancement of the digital fragmentation, based, as Moling explains, on the constant simulation of an authentic/realistic experience (63). We can assume that the girl who speaks in full language through Power Point is a product of the technological culture. This implies the construction of a new personality who knows how to incorporate digitization as part of her everyday life performing language through her presentation as the tool requires.

In her review in *The New York Times*, Janet Maslin defined *Goon Squad* as "an uncategorizable work of fiction, a collection of carefully arranged interlocking stories or simply a display of Ms. Egan's extreme ability to portray virtuality" (Maslin *NYT*). In line with this statement is the fact that each of her characters, in their most complicated emotional struggle, somehow seems to despise technology, collected in the memories of a pre-digital past. Users are eventually transformed into a compulsive product of the culture they initially despise and criticize. To a certain extent, "Egan radically distances herself from postmodern simulation and a digital culture which propagates sterility in the name of an artificial notion of purity" (Moling 73). The real essence of personhood in the tale is totally nonexistent, a fictitious construction determining an unrealistic identity manipulated by the computer network.

In the face of this, "her work clarifies the demand to seem un-self-conscious and also completely watchable" (Johnston 176), essentially expressing the vulnerability of identity in the public domain of virtual spaces. Henceforth, re-elaborating the sense of the susceptibility of personal data, *Goon Squad* illustrates the "Society of Control,"[145]

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[144] Abbreviations for: "You have some names for me?"; "Here they are!"; "Great I'll get to work."

[145] On this point two critics demand special mention. In "Postscript on Societies of Control" (1992) Gilles Deleuze developed a concept of modern society essentially based upon a general individual

undermining the image of identity through "platformativity"[146] and web dependence. Thus, the novel embraces the problematic issue of the Self, performed online and ultimately re-discussed by the complex encounter between Self and Other. The narrative construction leads to the impossibility of achieving the aesthetic of self-authenticity reframed within the digital scenario. Given the narrative's interest in the emotional and thus personal effects of browsing social media, in *The Aesthetics of Authenticity*, Funk, Groß, and Uber, claim that "Being thus fragmented, contested and performative, authenticity is constantly negotiated and infinitely (re)created and (re)discovered, always open to revision and reinvention" (13).

If we accept this claim, which considers authenticity as subject to performative and reinventive terms, we can assume that Egan is offering an image of identity, illustrated through a quest for self-authenticity. Given that the Web provides instances of "inauthenticity," allowing users to present an image of themselves masked and faked, the quest to reach a true sense of identity is rather implicit. This struggle leads to a new sense of personhood re-created in the present and reinvented, or rather, reframed, played out and ultimately compromised by virtual tools. The issue of selfhood according to Egan is a pure digital construct, artificially incorporated within a new sense of individuality.

On the basis of this literary evidence, we might conclude that both authors offer pure stylistic experiments, generic hybrids that do nothing but describe an identity torn between realism and virtuality, represented by disconcerting scenarios essentially disconnected from materiality. Imagining an audience of techno-dependent readers,

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enclosure. As Deleuze further explains, the Web and the interaction with the machine "self-deforms" (4) the human, controlled and thus enclosed in technological systems. In a similar vein, James Beniger's *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (1986) has offered one of the most important analyses of the progress of media shaping what Beniger termed "The Control Revolution." This social and thus technological transformation for Beniger led to a "control crisis" (220) played out by media and technological improvements.

[146] The term, recently debated, has been aptly discussed by Zara Dinnen in *The Digital Banal* (2018).

Lethem and Egan develop a concept of identity that shifts from realism to artifact and the difficulty lies in interpreting the porous boundary that separates these spaces. Furthermore, the narrative trajectories analyzed, offer an image of modern identity commodified, or rather, "sold" in a public performance entirely projected within the digital environment. If we take as general definition Robert Rattle's claim that "the Internet unlocks and exposes new opportunities for marketing, offering a new system to satisfy the consumer culture" (124), identity is indeed enhanced and stocked to online services. In our consumer culture, Internet and communication technologies contribute to commodifying the notion of the individual, producing many effects on identity formation (Rattle 126).[147] In this way, the need to re-invent and merchandise our Self to the digital world leads to a new image of identity re-framed through online platforms, social networking services and e-commerce sites such as the Ebay market depicted by Lethem. In effect, we are selling our Self to a system that, as both novels imply, makes us victims and accomplices of multiple digital platforms. Narratives partly become an example of this commodification suggesting how the digital environment is indeed the place to sell and re-develop personal information.

In line with the postmodern cliché, in both novels, characters regret the loss of a homogenous world and are forced to confront with a technological system, which sees identity manipulated and reconfigured. We become involved into a world in which everything becomes pure simulation and artificiality. Through this strategy, the narrative space becomes three-dimensional. The reader is transported from reality to an artificial scenario, witnessing the doubling of the real universe created by the author as a strategy to illustrate the complications of self-expression. The figures represented in these narratives, fully immersed in a world hypermediated and parceled by technology, develop a narcissistic image of their identities. As Didino contends, these characters eventually prove that, beneath a new cyber-mediated personality, any form of authenticity or truth has disappeared (605). In this vein, narration also becomes the

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[147] To know more on the commodification of identity and online platforms, see Mathur, Nita. (2014) *Consumer Culture, Modernity and Identity*. SAGE publications.

artificial space through which to represent a new image of the Self. Indeed, *Chronic City* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* illustrate the liminal conjuncture between reality and representation.

For Jennifer Egan the interaction with technology and the obsession with the digital, become a new stimulating universe for the writer and for literature in general. As she further observes, the American counterculture grew with the progress of mass media and human beings today are the result of this change (Tomasino "Intervista a Jennifer Egan").[148] These authors go way beyond the postmodern impasse. Indeed, they are rather forced to come to terms with a new literature which is artificialized, in the true sense of the term, experimenting new narrative strategies. The ultimate aim of these texts is to represent the distinction between real and unreal, rather attempting to highlight the liminal border between these two poles whose confine can scarcely be detected.

As both narratives imply, identity becomes the point of contact in this opposition illustrating an image of selfhood fully simulated and non-realistic. In our interconnected world, Lethem and Egan have been able to represent the kaleidoscopic aspects of a new identity trivialized by technologies, aptly describing the instability of the human condition. In so doing, *Chronic City* and *Goon Squad* offer an image of digital technologies as the means with which to define the individual in our present through a new commercialized and re-inventive version of American identity.

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[148] My translation.

## Conclusion

In this thesis we have presented a work that demonstrates the potential and effective liaison between identity and technology in the ongoing challenges that follow the evolution of technical progress through the lens of American literature. On the basis of this evidence, the work has shown fiction's need to illustrate the concerns of personal identity, encompassing its alterations through the interaction with the machine. What the analysis has delineated is literature's recurrent ability to depict an image of identity that is less stable and constantly subjected to artificial manipulations. Throughout this work, we have proven how American identity, widely described and thematized by narratives, follows the evolution of communication technologies thus leading to the development of a new concept of the American Self.

According to Alex Goody,

> As it transforms culture, manifestly in new forms of communication […], and implicitly by altering the human relationship to the material world, the effects of technology and its uncanny resonances profoundly alter (and impact) literature (20).

Partly supporting this claim, the study of texts has demonstrated how American fiction experimenting different narrative forms, from the late 1800s up to the present, has illustrated the threats the machine has posed to the complex meaning of personal identity. The texts considered in this study find coherence in their diverse and yet similar depictions of the Self as it progresses toward more complex challenges following technological progress toward more advanced forms of communication. Moving from the telegraph to computers, the progression of texts and advancements at the basis of this study has demonstrated how the concept of identity has followed an increasing transformation, originating from early means of communications. Their functions, although more obsolete, first gave rise to the notion of a "Virtual Self." In particular, the telegraph, which quickly encouraged shared enthusiasms and allowed its users to engage in artificial performances of identity, established the first example of

what Tom Standage defines as "A Technological subculture with its own costumes and vocabulary" (XVIII). Indeed, the Internet described today as an information superhighway, certainly has its nineteenth-century precursor, the electromagnetic telegraph, which "unleashed the greatest revolution in communication technologies" (Standage XVIII). In many respects, stories by and about the telegraph proposed a whole new way of thinking about personhood through the mediated experience of identity being enveloped in the artificial space of the wire. Challenging the boundaries between reality and artificiality, Self and machine, presence and absence, Thayer's *Wired Love* and Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee*, although differently, both depict examples of the electrification of the Self, as we wish to call it, re-located within the artificial space of the machine. Thayer's narrative, which purposefully opens our study, offers an incredible parallel with online communications today, considering the telegraph as a disturbing tool which produced new modes of interaction and changed instances of subjectivity. In a traditionally humorous way, Twain's historical and political tale sketches an image of modern identity, de-structuralized and recomposed, by means of the machine. The telegraph and its evolution the telephone become for Twain the means used to develop, play and perform, a new and thus modern American identity on the verge of the 20th century.

As communication technologies evolved toward digitalization, our analysis has further shown how postmodern literature in the 1980s, through the work of David Foster Wallace, has exemplified the complications of personality due to the digital communications system's over-saturation with media. In *The Broom of the System*, an original narrative experiment and a pastiche enriched with psychological introspections, the concept of identity is caught between the problematic concern of defining the liminal boundary between Self and Other. For Wallace, identity, the Self, struggles to be relocated in a society that prominently reconfigures the notion of Other within the technological medium. In a traditionally postmodernist approach, through the crisis of identity of a telephone operator, Lenore Bedsman, the novel expresses the instability of selfhood as it progresses toward further complications in the digital scenario. In this way, Wallace's narrative creates a strategic impasse between early

means to modern digitalization, representing human frustrations as the protagonist tries to integrate herself as part of the network.

The two final texts examined in this work illustrate the complications of identity in cyberculture. As the introduction to the final chapter has shown, the virtual experience of the Web in which identity is played out and reconceptualized through multiple platforms, allows us to be present within various digital environments, suspending a realistic presence for the sake of multiple personalities. In an environment where the clash between realism and artifact is mostly blurred, "cyber-narratives" such as Lethem's *Chronic City* and Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, exemplify our frequent complicity with computers. Re-discussing what Turkle classified as "a new reality of lives lived in continuous presence of screens" (2011, 167), both narratives express the character's need for personal reinventions and self-definitions, illustrating identities torn between realism and virtuality. The complexity in defining the authentic nature of the Self lies, for both authors, in the porous boundary between reality and simulation, in a society that proposes a sense of hyperrealism characterized by a falsified and performative image of selfhood. Furthermore, Egan and Lethem develop an image of identity which is completely "sold" to the digital domain and thus becomes an object of a public exposure of the personality represented, in both texts, through the characters' constructions of virtual personae on the Internet platform. The study of the interrelations between identity and technology also suggests a new desire for narrativity in post-postmodernist literature, which experiments new modes of narration. As a consequence, the reader 2.0 is involved in a three-dimensional narrative space, as he is divided between his real condition and that of the story, articulated in the dichotomy between reality and simulation.

In light of this socio-cultural, literary approach, the argument ultimately contends that American literature through stories about the alterations of identity by means of communication systems, delineates the contours of a new paradigm of the Self. As literary analysis has shown, through our human interaction with the machine, our culture encourages a new concept of the individual. Firmly supporting this assertion, Catherine Waite recently explained that as Americans have become increasingly

imbued with technological systems, "they are more connected and more isolated, and the concept of individualism is thus evolving as a consequence of technological changes" (120). Given the importance of essential notions such as privacy, freedom and individual autonomy (widely discussed in Chapter One), some of the core issues of American individualism, technology contributes to the fall of these pillars. The demise of the traditional notion of the American Self leads to a new concept of selfhood, mostly or at least prominently envisaged through technological interaction. Critics such as Waite[148] affirm that American culture is profoundly suffering the consequences of the digital revolution, since it is rooted on a foundational concept of identity, and this is certainly reflected in the literature. As this investigation has proven through the recurrent trope of examining humans and communication technologies, American literature – through different genres, from 19th-century novels to cyber-narratives – has illustrated the evolution toward a new American identity. From a general perspective, the texts considered in this study grapple with the notion of the American Self as it progresses toward a new sense of individuality.

Following the historical progress of technologies, literature reveals the deep concerns of subjectivity through the creation of a new sense of individualism. Communication technologies, reproduced through fiction give rise to a new concept of an American identity rewritten in front of the screen, repositioned and then sold to the dense network of digital interactions. Through the lens of American literature, this study demonstrates how a new concept of American Self can be traced. Identity deprived of its core values and therefore based upon an individual experience and necessarily imbued with a new sense of individuality, promotes collectivism and self-reinvention, as evidenced through texts that ultimately represent the evolution to a new American identity.

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[148] Waite's study is considered as one of the most sophisticated and essential accounts of the digital challenges to American individualism.

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