

their business. As far as these two particular white limousine movies go, *Holy Motors* may have earned the lion's share of attention, but it is *Cosmopolis* that speaks to the perplexities faced by our species at the present moment, careening toward nothing good.

## THE DEATH OF THE READER

PIP THORNTON

The Author is dead. Long live the Reader! So (in not quite so many words) declared Roland Barthes in 1968. Destabilising the structural and hierarchical foundations of classical literature, Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' argued that interpretation and meaning should no longer be chained or limited to the perceived intention or biography of the writer, but should be set free, and instead released into the fluid space occupied by the reader. 'A text's unity lies not in its origins but in its destination', he wrote, hailing 'the birth of the reader at the cost of the death of the Author'. It was a juncture in literary criticism which fed into poststructuralist debate – a liberating, fresh and perhaps creative approach which gave control to the reader, with the freedom to respond to a text, a book, a poem or a work of art without constraint or any other baggage than their own unique internal perspective.

But this postmodern literary idyll did not last. Computers came and digitised our words, and with digitisation came monetisation. Language on the web becomes material in ways very different from both print and spoken word: its physicality represented in bits, bytes and circuitry, and its limits and variations mediated and governed by the processes that order, sort, move and index it. These linguistic logistics turned digitised words into controllable and tradable commodities, valuable even when detached from their narrative context. Realising the value of words as data, and as advertising streams, technology companies became the brokers and gatekeepers of our information and the custodians of our texts. We live today in an age of linguistic capitalism, and companies such as Google and Facebook monopolise this new linguistic market place. Like coal or steel transported by railway or canal in the industrial revolution, in the information revolution words are the new raw materials, moved around by algorithms, gaining in value the further they are moved from their source and the quicker and wider they are circulated. Digitised words have become tools for the flow of capital, their literary or linguistic value negated in favour of their exchange value, and their primary audience is increasingly unlikely to be human. But the language which flows through proprietary platforms,

social media and networks of communication has paratextual agency which reaches far beyond ontological uncertainties of the traditional reader and author. Monetised words sell products, spread (perhaps fake) news and redefine what we mean by privacy and security. Once words become data, they lose their autonomy; they become circumscribed by the economic and perhaps political capital that their privileged access to the human psyche affords.

It is of course impossible to guess what Barthes would have made of electronic literature (he died in 1980), of text produced by (ro)bots or algorithms, or of search engine optimisation techniques which force writers to use the most popular keywords or recycle dull content in order to attract the spidery eyes of the web crawlers. I suspect it would warrant a rewrite of his essay. Today, words belong to the webpage as well as to the paper one, and are increasingly produced by and for the consumption of non-human agents. Barthes may have celebrated the birth of the Reader, but today's texts are perhaps more likely to be 'read' by the algorithms that return our search results, police our essays for plagiarism, or scrape our email messages or other interactions for criminal activity or money making opportunities.

Just as you are constantly followed around the internet by things you Googled months ago, when you send an email in Gmail your message is 'read' by algorithms for the purposes of targeted advertising. If you organise a camping trip with your friends via Gmail, adverts for tents and hiking boots will appear on the advertising tabs, triggered by the keyword 'camping'. The limitations and motives of these 'reading' algorithms can be both amusing and horrifying. An experiment by US artists Mimi Cabell and Jason Huff showed how the graphic and misogynistic scenes from the Brett Easton Ellis novel *American Psycho*, when fed through Gmail, served adverts for instant soup while Patrick Bateman cooked a woman's head in the microwave, and recommended face tightening and pest control products when he dismembered and skinned other victims and violated them with rats. This is what a Google algorithm sees when it reads *American Psycho*.

If the Reader is dead then so is the slow-read. An algorithm doesn't care how long a text is – it's just a database, a corpus of decontextualised linguistic data to be searched, ordered or exploited. Language committed to computation is processed by an army of algorithmic 'Bartleby's' (Melville, 1998) that do not *read*, but merely *copy*, thereby reproducing – in exponentially magnified proportions – what Walter Benjamin called the 'empty phrases' which he saw being produced by the flood of cheap journalism and unqualified writers in the early 20th Century. 'The empty phrase', he wrote, in his 1936 essay 'The

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1	against	£1.71
1	ruins	£1.00
1	ile	£0.32
1	fit	£0.25
1	hieronymo's	£0.00
1	mad	£0.05
1	again	£0.00
3	shantih	£0.00
	SUBTOTAL:	£1738.57
	TAX:	N/A
	TOTAL:	£1738.57

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 (poem).py

Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 'is an abortion of technology... the expression of the changed function of language in the world of high capitalism... the label that makes a thought marketable'. The empty phrase today is a symptom of digital capitalism, the search engine optimisation industry and web-based advertising. And it is not only commercial websites that have to adopt optimisation strategies – it is newspaper articles, blogs and headlines, which also have to tailor their text to court the algorithms. And this text and those keywords will necessarily be reflective of the already popular; they can't be new, or creative, or challenging otherwise they just wouldn't serve their purpose. This kind of practise, which is in effect mandatory if you want your site or your words or profile to 'exist' online, can only result in the clogging up of the searchable database with repetitive, unimaginative copy. Empty phrases read just fine to an algorithm.

Today, Optical Character Recognition (OCR) is the new reading. OCR software is the means by which Google planned to scan every book on the planet, but the software could not 'read' some of the text. So Google asked us for help. They bought the reCAPTCHA program, an extension of the CAPTCHA system (Completely Automated Public Turing Test To Tell Computers and Humans Apart), designed to prevent bots gaining entry to or interacting with websites. We have all seen it – the distorted word in the box you have to decipher before you can complete a transaction or sign up to a service. If you solve it, you have proved yourself to be human. But the other side to the security function of reCAPTCHA is that the distorted words, often in an old-fashioned font, are words from texts which Google's OCR algorithms have been unable to read due to blurring, typeset or because some pesky human dared to annotate them. While this method might be a small victory for human cognition over computer analysis, each time we successfully decipher a reCAPTCHA code, we have unwittingly become part of Google's free labour force in its mission to digitise (and therefore monetise) the literary archive. More recently, Google have enlisted our unknowing help in reading the street signs and door numbers which its Streetview cameras failed to pick up clearly, and to label photographs to assist with Google Images.

OCR is also responsible for the circulation and mutilation of literature though the medium of 'print on demand'. As Lisa Gitelman identifies, the OCR software that digitises text 'chronically "misreads", not because of any hardware malfunction or programming error but precisely because scanning is not reading'. Of course copies of all kinds of text have always deteriorated, varied or been open to corruption through translation, plagiarism and bootleg-

gers selling cheap pirate copies. But the way language is valued online is not the same as that of a knock-off paperback, the column inch, or the 'price-per-word' method of the telegram, where words are valued more by the physical space or effort they take up, rather than any individual outside reference or signification. The value of digitised text is neither in the space it takes up nor in its inherent narrative value, but instead it gains another, more dominant value as a commodity to sell often semantically unconnected products. The algorithmic reproduction of language by reduction and reconstruction through binary code has consequences for the integrity and evolution of language and discourse which reach far beyond the relative stability of a printing press cliché. Print capitalism may – as Benedict Anderson wrote – have given 'a new fixity to language', but linguistic capitalism is far less stable, and it is in this flux of money and words that new forms of power and influence flourish. The spread of fake news, for example, and its frightening capacity to influence world events such as the US election, has been almost exclusively facilitated through the exploitation of Google's digital advertising platforms.

Perhaps more successful in deciphering digitised language are the firewalls and anti-virus software which fight a constant battle with spam. This algorithmically constructed nonsense text, which makes just enough sense to trick either the human or robot reader into clicking through to the darkest places of the Internet, can have serious consequences for non-normative language such as poetry, however. The magazine *Poetry in the Waiting Room* issues advice to contributors to send in their submissions in the body of an email rather than as an attachment, lest their creative writing be mistaken for a virus. On the internet, disease has become more communicable than poetry.

Even if we – as humans – are the audience for digitised text, it is no longer a leisurely pursuit. Online news sites have started listing articles in terms of read time, often publishing the 'LONG READ' caveat just in case you might accidentally become engrossed in an article you are physically unable to complete without risking the loss of your job, baby, sanity or otherwise. Articles or posts considered too long are labeled 'tldr' – too long, didn't read. Even if we try to read digitised language at our leisure, there are hidden forces at work. If you are reading a novel on a Kindle, for example, the words you are reading are merely on loan to you, a tough lesson learned by one student whose version of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* vanished from his e-reader along with his careful annotations due to a licensing issue.

And it is not surprising that reading has become so frantic. Digital technology has initiated a time

warp whereby more content is being uploaded than can ever be read, seen or heard. The scale of the content online does not adhere to our timeframes. There are 400 hours of YouTube tube footage uploaded every minute. The volume and speed of digitised information exceeds human computation, yet algorithms trained to 'read' the signals of markets all to often 'misread' them. In 2013 the price of oil jumped when an Israeli Twitter account commemorating the Yom Kippur war referenced an historical strike on Syria. The trading algorithms could not tell the difference between current and historic news. With the advent of an age of fake news and alternative facts, this algorithmic illiteracy becomes even more frightening. Some of Donald Trump's more incendiary tweets about nuclear missiles and Russia have such impact and exposure online that experts are concerned of the diplomatic and economic consequences that algorithmic reading might have.

High Frequency Trading (HFT) algorithms were also blamed for knocking 6% of the value of the pound last year in a 'Flash Crash' which apparently stemmed from algorithmic readings of Brexit news reports. And then there is the 'Hathaway Effect', the jump in the share price of Warren Buffet's company Berkshire Hathaway whenever the actress Anne Hathaway makes the headlines, which is believed to be due to algorithms picking up on Internet chatter and applying it to the stock market. On a more serious note, decisions made in an instant, by an algorithm, have no means of redress. Our ethical, and indeed moral, codes cannot catch up with the speed and detached precision of algorithmic decision-making.

How then, do we counter this linguistically irreverent algorithmic interpretation and exploitation of words? How can we slow language back down, reclaim it from the clutches of the market, and return it to the gaze of the human eye? Unfortunately, apart from shunning the internet and going off-grid, there is little we can do. Digitised language, with all its hidden and exploitative paratextual motives, is now ubiquitous in almost all aspects of life, and perhaps the scariest thing about that is that one company – private and virtually unaccountable – is in control. In today's discourse, Google holds the monopoly on language.

In an era of linguistic capitalism, much of the language which flows around the web is merely a vehicle for advertising dollars. In Google's AdWords platform, words are auctioned off to the highest bidder; their value to the buyer is less literary than economic. As the artist Christophe Bruno writes, 'every word of every language has a price, which fluctuates according the laws of the market'. And in this linguistic market place, deals are made in split seconds; al-

gorithms decide the worth of words, stripping them of all contexts save the most lucrative. If you search on Google for the words 'cloud', 'crowd' or 'host', for example, the results you are served do not relate to how Wordsworth imagined them in his poem 'Daffodils', but to cloud computing, crowd funding and web hosting. Google makes little money from poetry.

But there is one form of resistance still open to us: we turn the algorithms back on themselves, making the workings of linguistic capitalism visible through new forms of digital and analogue art. Following Cabell and Huff's *American Psycho* lead, my own contribution to this reclamation of language is a project called (poem).py, which is a play on the fusion of poetry and code (.py being the file extension for Python code used in the project). What I do is copy and paste a poem from the web and feed it through Google using the AdWords keyword planner, which gives suggested bid prices for words to advertisers who want to compete in the AdWords auction. If they win the auction, the advertisers then pay Google the winning bid amount (in effect this is 1 cent more than the second highest bidder) each time the advert is clicked on. Having no value to them other than as a revenue generator, Google's algorithms order the words by search volume rather than in the order they were inputted, so I then use python code written by a colleague to reconstruct the poem in narrative order and print the poem out as a receipt on an old-style receipt printer. As well as being little scraps of analogue art in themselves, commenting on the 'value' of creative language in an age of machine learning and artificial intelligence, the poem-receipts also help reveal the politics lurking beneath the algorithms. The more popular a word is for its price, the more likely it is to be used in advertising copy or in any text which is 'optimised' for search engine algorithms. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is big business, and efficient keyword planning is often based on intense scrutiny of geopolitical or temporal contexts, which in turn has an effect on the words being uploaded into the database available to be searched for on the web. It is this – often distorted – reflection of society which rewards and compounds repetitive and stereotyped language at the expense of diversity and creativity.

The future is bright for neither the author nor the reader. Language has returned to code: strings of words which need to be deciphered to unlock their potential. Although the digital revolution has afforded unprecedented access and freedoms to online texts, and cultivated a new wave of digital creativity, this literary liberation is an illusion. This is no postmodern free for all; the metanarrative that binds digital text together is neoliberalism. As Franco Berardi writes, 'the economy is the universal grammar'. But

surely there should be more to language than deciphering, decoding and extracting the most economic capital? We should slow down. Read. Let the (web) pages fade, live, exist in a time scale we can reasonably consume, and without the ulterior motives and collateral damage of linguistic capitalism.

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## TIME TO KILL

ALEX BENNETT

### COLLAPSE

*It's the fastest thing in the world.*

*It's amazing to be abstract.*

*And now capitalism really controls everything.*

*But, the economy is most of all*

*How we go through the street,*

*Always with our relationships.*

*If you fight it*

*You will go to jail!*

*What is it really? Sometimes the best question*

*Seems most obvious, for children,*

*But is it mostly just a fear of the stupid?*

*Try Again*

Begin at a level: the street. Leave the incline for later. Repeat: '*But, the economy is most of all/How we go through the street*'. So, to begin at street level, a fact: financial mechanisms now subsume everything. But if the economy determines the way of *going through*, what is the role for the pedestrian?

It is a negotiation of distance, which can be understood through a swerve: from *formal* capitalist subsumption to *real* subsumption. For Marx, formal subsumption designates capital as an appropriative and extractive force that disentangles a surplus from labour processes. Real subsumption, however, eliminates any autonomy, meaning labour becomes directly organised in capitalist structures.

In Hardt and Negri's expanded redefinition of 'subsumption', it isn't just labour that is subsumed by capital, but all aspects of personal and social life. Affects and feelings, modes of cooperation, expressions of desire: all these are sources of surplus value. As Steven Shaviro writes: 'We have moved from a situation of *extrinsic* labour and subjectivity to its purposes, to a situation of *intrinsic* exploitation, in which capital directly incorporates labour and subjectivity *within* its own processes.' That fateful economic lynchpin, wide open like a lake: embodiment.

Come back to the street. See what is at work: a constant throwing off of reflections, bodies live and available, all easily turned on; effortless willingness, enjoying things as simply as they come. Gazes, shuffles, puddles, glass surfaces and revolving doors. Ex-

cesses flickering through exhaustion like a flock of birds shudders, astonished, into the air. It could be said that Bernadette Corporation began at the street, where it came to negotiate contemporary subsumption.

It was the early-90s. With a degree in economics, a young woman moved to Manhattan. Once there, she soon found her element. Along with students from Cooper Union, she started throwing parties at nightclubs, on the streets, in parking lots, in galleries. Peter Gaten asked her, Bernadette Van Huy, to host a weekly party at Club USA. Here, the street, or more specifically, the *opening*, became the essential channel for productivity. Bernadette put bodies to use, organising a kind of human décor that lined the legendary venue's Thierry Mugler room with young people, door-listing her friends to create the impression of nightlife that will bring in the paying crowd. The night lasted seven weeks in the spring of 1993, with Club USA announcing closure shortly after in 1994, and it led to the formation of Bernadette Corporation.

That moment is when Bernadette Corporation realised its project: to capture the present and amplify it. This very dailiness was essential to their enterprise; it is bound to their prickly sensitivity of bodies that populate the street and the economy in which they circulate. Time was their frame. Bernadette Corporation was a product of the time when 20-somethings could get by just showing up, paid to modify dead-zones as places of cool possibility. Initiated as a collective, the founding members, Bernadette Van Huy, Thuy Pham and Seth Shapiro understood how the city wanted to use them, and by initially delivering the topsoil for New York's gentrification, they knew that they could use the city back. Reflux.

*1 tuna salad sandwich on white, 1 roast beef sandwich on Italian, 1 small bottle of water, \$16.50. Dr. Bidi says blue is the color of war. Today the trees and posts turn blue in the sun... A creek the color of coke...*

*Hate is often fused with fear. Someone doesn't hate A person just because a person sucks more or less.*

*Wishing pain on their death is such a rarer feeling. Brute hate.*

*The present turns into a sort of long daily walk...*

New York lacks enigma; or rather its enigma has become so much that it now rests doltish, firm and resilient, like an indolent rhino. New York's blunt laterality fascinates. But if New York's epic lays plain and frontal, Bernadette Corporation's is involute, a heavy vortex with a perforated core. It is the epic as