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.

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**THE DEATH OF THE READER**

**PIF 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 follows through proprietary platforms, in value the further they are moved from their source. Digested 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 recyclable durt 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 Cebell and Jason Hu showed how the graphic and misogynistic scenes from the Brett Easton Ellis novel *American Psycho*, when fed though 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 ‘Bartlebys’ (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
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 practice, 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 has 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 bootleggers 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 rather than as a product of a radically interconnected 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 be considered a necessary evil: the development 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 be considered a necessary evil: the development of computer 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.

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 ‘tl:dr’—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


ESSAYS
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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 too often ‘misread’ them. In 2013 the price of oil jumped when an Israeli Twitter account commen­ration stating that Israel had found a historical oil strike on Syria. The trading algorithms could not tell the difference between current and historic news.

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